Summary

It’s the final six months of their original five-year mission and Kirk is badly injured in a cave-in, requiring an 11-day stay in the medical clinic on Starbase 4. McCoy and Spock are at his side, while the crew enjoys the base’s shore leave opportunities.

Comfortable but bedridden, Kirk has time to reflect and scrutinize his decisions over the past 4 ½ years. Dozens of TOS episodes are referenced. Kirk’s neighbor in the med clinic, a telepath, learns of Spock’s plan to undergo Kolinahr and spills the beans to Kirk. Jim confronts Spock about it and learns what Spock really wants: a t’hy’la bond with him.

During a series of earnest conversations and intimate, late-night melds to discover if their minds are compatible, Jim and Spock slowly reveal their innermost selves and acknowledge a deep love for one another.

The story spans only two weeks, but there are lots of references to the past and future. Story is canon compliant with the episodes, but not with the movies, since Spock never goes to Gol.

Notes
Embrace the word count. You won’t want the delicious mind melding (and eventual body melding) to end! Trust me, k/s lovers.

I wrote this in 2019, during the sweltering Phoenix, Arizona summer, when it was too hot to go outside. Please comment if you enjoy it and want to talk about it! Thanks.
Chapter 1

Jim woke from surgery confused. His chest felt tight and his eyes resisted his first attempts to open them. The sound of his own heartbeat filled his ears. I’m in Sickbay… on a biobed, he reasoned, and forced his eyes open to confirm it.

He seemed to be alone except for a blurry figure in blue across the room. Bones, he thought at first. Then, after a few hard blinks, he realized it was Spock.

“Spock,” Jim called, not expecting his voice to be a raspy whisper. His first officer heard him, though, and turned. Jim tried lifting himself up on shaky elbows and discovered he could not.

“Captain,” Spock said, rushing toward him, “Dr. McCoy has you heavily sedated. Please lie still.”

Kirk nodded. Moving was clearly a bad idea. He laid his head back on the pillow to ease the wave of nausea his efforts had caused.

Anticipating his captain’s first question, Spock offered, “The ship and crew are safe.” That was always the best way to quell Kirk’s anxiety when he awoke disoriented in Sickbay. Spock and McCoy had both learned to deliver him that news as swiftly as possible.

Jim nodded his head gently, careful not to flare that queasy feeling that had gripped him when he moved. He gave a small smile of appreciation to his first officer for the information.

Spock looked concerned. No one else would have thought so, but Jim could read his Vulcan friend’s expressions like the back of his hand after 4 ½ years serving together. If the ship is fine, then it must be me, he thought. I must be hurt badly. Jim had to admit he felt like hell. He couldn’t remember what had happened to him, but judging by Spock’s face, it was serious. Jim wondered where McCoy was.

He didn’t trust his voice, so he cleared his throat a few times, then said with authority, “All right, let’s have it, Spock. Report.”
McCoy should be the one delivering medical news, but he was occupied and had asked Spock to brief Jim if he woke up enough to inquire about his condition. Spock judged Kirk able to receive the briefing, so he quickly organized his thoughts, clasped his hands behind his back, and launched in.

“Captain, you sustained multiple injuries: a concussion, lacerations, internal bleeding, contusions, and several broken bones. A shattered hip caused extensive nerve damage, which is why you cannot move your left leg.”

Kirk slowly tried to move his legs. This was news to him. “Oh. I hadn’t noticed that yet,” he told Spock. He’d only been awake for a minute or two. Frowning, he watched his right knee rise up under the orange and gold quilted sheet, while the left side remained still. “Hm,” he grunted with displeasure.

“Your orthopedic, vascular, and soft tissue injuries have been repaired surgically by Dr. McCoy,” Spock continued, “but he informs me that neither he nor Dr. M’Benga possess the requisite skill set to correct the nerve damage in your hip. Therefore, we are currently en route to Starbase 4, which has physicians qualified to perform nerve regeneration procedures.”

A flicker of worry shot across Jim’s face, prompting Spock to quickly add, “Under their care, your prognosis for a full recovery is very good, Dr. McCoy has stated.”

“Okay, then.” Jim’s tone of voice reflected his relief. One of his worst fears was a career-ending injury. It sounded like this was bad, but not anything that would jeopardize his position as captain of the Enterprise.

Spock paused to gauge his captain’s ability to process this information in his drugged state, but Kirk seemed to be following along.

“We are currently 2.1 days from Starbase 4, traveling at warp 8,” Spock informed him.

“Two days at that speed will strain the engines. Don’t get me in trouble with Scotty,” Kirk joked.

“Mr. Scott assures me we can maintain warp 8 for the duration, Captain,” Spock said, “and Dr. McCoy believes there IS a critical time factor.”
“Oh?” Kirk questioned.

“Results will be optimal if the nerve regeneration procedure can begin in under 72 hours from the time of injury, which was 21.3 hours ago.”

“I see,” said Kirk.

Spock continued, wanting to give his captain as much information as he could while he was alert, “Starbase 2 was 35.5 minutes closer at warp 8 and could also provide adequate medical personnel to perform the procedure, but I decided Starbase 4 was preferable because their shore leave facilities are superior to those of Starbase 2.”

“Good thinking, Spock. The crew could use some R & R.” Jim had been hearing subspace chatter for months about the newly refitted Starbase 4. The gardens were supposedly glorious and a new entertainment technology using solid-seeming holograms had everyone raving. The crew should have a good time there, even though it wasn’t a planetside base.

“It was Dr. McCoy’s suggestion,” Spock admitted, “He said it is what you would do.”

“Spock, when I’m incapacitated, the final decisions on this ship are yours and yours alone.”

“I know, Captain.”

“Bones is right, though,” Kirk said. “It is what I would have done,” Jim quirked a smile and a wink. “Good decision.”

Spock’s face remained impassive, but to Kirk, he looked pleased.

“So, how long will I be lollygagging… uh… convalescing there? Do you know?” Kirk asked.

“Dr. McCoy estimates a minimum of 11 days.”

“11 days?!” Jim balked, “What in the human body takes 11 days to heal?!”
“Nerves, apparently, Captain,” Spock replied evenly, “According to Dr. McCoy, they are ‘finicky things.’”

Kirk gave a little chuckle hearing Bones’ words come out of Spock’s mouth. “Well, the good doctor knows best, I suppose. Where IS McCoy, anyway? My head hurts,” Jim complained, discovering the goose egg on his forehead and dried blood that for some reason hadn’t been cleaned off yet.

“I will have the nurse bring you something for your headache,” Spock said, flipping the wall comm and speaking briefly into it. Turning back towards Kirk, he reminded him, “The doctor is currently occupied coordinating your care plan with the medical facility on Starbase 4.”

“Oh, right. You told me that already, didn’t you?” Jim realized, pinching the bridge of his nose in pain and fatigue.

The nurse came in then and pressed a hypospray to his neck. “I’m sorry, Captain. I’ve been busy with the Andorians,” she said. “Minor injuries, mostly, but the mental trauma they sustained… I can’t do much about that, sadly, but I’m trying to be of some comfort. I’m glad their homeworld is sending a ship to Starbase 4 to bring them home,” she said. “They’ve been asking to see you and Mr. Spock. They want to thank you.”

Before the captain could reply, Mr. Spock stepped in to handle it. “You may tell them I will meet with them in Conference Room 3 at 16:30, Nurse,” Spock said. “I put Yeoman Brecht in charge of assigning them guest quarters and seeing to their comfort.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ve been coordinating with him,” she replied, moving to clean the dried blood from Kirk’s head wound. “Has the hypo taken effect yet, Captain? How is your pain level?”

“Much better. Thank you,” he smiled appreciatively.

“If you have any more discomfort anywhere or need anything, Captain, please call me. Don’t try to get up; Dr. McCoy has your leg nerves blocked with a sedative to prevent pain and further deterioration. Oh, and you’re on a liquid diet for the time being.”

“Hm, lovely,” Jim sighed with a frown. “Thank you, Nurse,” he called as she disappeared through the doorway, leaving Kirk and Spock alone again.
“We have Andorians aboard?” Jim asked cautiously, not wanting to alarm Spock that his memory was not 100%.

“Captain, do you not recall the circumstances of your injuries?” Spock asked, raising an eyebrow and chastising himself for not inquiring sooner.

“Um, no, not completely,” Jim realized. Over the course of their five-year mission, Kirk had woken up on his back in Sickbay more times than he cared to count. Funny how this time he’d forgotten to even ask how he got here.

“There was a cave-in….” Jim began tentatively, flinching as he remembered the painful force of large boulders pummeling his body. He couldn’t get away. The ceiling was collapsing, burying him. *Spock! Spock, stay back!* He saw his First Officer running toward him, green blood covering his chest.

“You were hurt!” Kirk exclaimed suddenly, “Your chest was bloody.” He instinctively reached his hand out toward Spock, who was just beyond arm’s reach.

“No, Captain,” Spock quickly corrected him, “It was *paint*. My captors had been preparing me for ritual sacrifice. It was only ceremonial paint,” he repeated to reassure Jim. The captain had pulled his hand back, but his eyes were still wide from the glimpsed memory.

It seemed to Spock that more than 21.3 hours had passed since he’d been held prisoner in that damp cell, afraid for his life, shirt stripped off, at the mercy of primitive beings twice his size and strength. He had suppressed the emotional component of the experience temporarily to maintain his efficiency while in command. He would need to meditate tonight before sleeping.

“Ritual sacrifice? They were going to kill you?” Kirk asked, “Why? How?”

Spock opened the memories at Kirk’s request, “From the petroglyphs in the underground hallways and chamber where I was held, I surmised that the sacrificial victims have their throats ceremonially cut while hanging upside down. Their blood is collected and offered to deities in the hopes of favor. There are examples of cultures like this in both Terran and Vulcan prehistory.”

Kirk nodded, frowning.
“The Andorians,” Spock continued, “have no precedent for ritual sacrifice in their planet’s history, and were terrified beyond rational thought. I tried to effect a rescue but could not. Then, I was captured and moved to a separate holding area, where you found me.”

“I found you?” Kirk asked.

“Yes, Captain. You do not remember?”

“I remember receiving orders from Starfleet Command to investigate the disappearance of an Andorian research vessel…,” he paused for a few seconds, seemingly lost, so Spock continued.

“We proceeded to the last known coordinates of the vessel and sensors revealed it had crashed on a small, arid moon. The ship had a complement of 24, but we found no bodies or signs of survivors,” Spock prompted.

“They’d been taken underground,” Jim remembered, “by those large creatures.”

“Yes,” Spock confirmed. “We couldn’t beam them up through rock containing complex sulfosalts, so a team had to be sent in to get them. I led it.”

“It went wrong, though,” Jim ventured. The memory was there, but he needed Spock to help him bring it into focus.

“Yes,” Spock said, glancing from Kirk’s bruised face to the floor and back up again. He endeavored to be truthful and accurate with his captain 100% of the time, but he really didn’t want to be relating his mistakes and failings right now. He needed to concentrate on his duties, attend to a dozen things that were competing for his attention as the current commander of the Enterprise… but he couldn’t leave his captain alone with so many questions. He saw that it frustrated him to have holes in his memory, so Spock would do his best to fill them.

“I was in command of the landing party,” Spock explained, “which included Commander Scott, Lieutenant Uhura, and Ensign Chekov. Once we discovered evidence that the Andorian crew had been taken by force into underground tunnels, we investigated…,” Spock trailed off.
Kirk looked at him expectantly, so he continued. “Two hundred feet into the tunnels, we heard screaming. It sounded like a large group and some of the words being shouted were from an Andorian dialect. We drew closer and got a glimpse of their captors: hairy, ape-like bipeds, approximately twice the size of a man. They dwarfed the Andorians they were guarding.”

“The captured Andorians continued screaming. One of their crew was hanging by her ankles. Her body was painted with the same green paint you saw on me later. She was alive at that point, but I… I could not…,” Spock’s narrative tapered off. “Captain, may we continue this after I meet with the Andorians at 16:30? It is 14:15 now and I have many duties to attend to before then,” Spock said.

“Of course, Spock,” Jim granted, “I’ve kept you long enough. Go mind the store.” He could wait for the rest of the story. He wasn’t in command and it didn’t sound like he was going to be anytime soon. “I need to go back to sleep anyway; McCoy’s sedatives are tugging at my eyelids. I’ll call the nurse if I need anything.”

“Very well, Captain. Thank you,” Spock replied, and then he was gone.

Jim hoped he was holding up all right. He was glad that Spock had somehow escaped being injured in the cave-in, but it sounded like he’d had some harrowing experiences of his own.

Jim was tired. Engaging with Spock always held his attention, but with the room empty now and the rhythm of his heartbeat on the monitor, he let his eyes fall shut. I hope Spock gets a chance to rest soon, he thought before sliding into a peaceful sleep.

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Several hours later, Kirk awoke to Scotty whispering rather loudly from the Sickbay doorway, “Captain? Are ya sleepin’ or no?”

“No, Mr. Scott. Come in,” Jim answered.

“How are ya feelin’, Sir? I canna git anyone to give me an update on yer condition,” he complained. “Dr. McCoy is busy, Mr. Spock is busy…. So, I decided to just drop in an’ see for m’self.”
“I’m fine, Scotty,” Kirk smiled as his chief engineer came closer.

“We’re squeezin’ warp 8 outta the engines to git ya to Starbase 4 on the double, Sir.”

“Thank you, Mr. Scott. I appreciate it.”

“So, you’re needin’ surgery only a starbase can provide ya with, then?” Scotty asked, and Kirk realized he really was in the dark.

“A boulder crushed my hip in the cave-in. It caused nerve damage that McCoy can’t fix,” Kirk explained.

“Aye, is that so?” Scotty considered soberly, concern written across his face. Then he smiled and said, “Well, if our good doctor canna mend ya, I’m glad there are docs nearby who can. If I could git ya there faster, Captain, I surely would.”

“Thanks, Scotty,” Jim said, returning his smile. “The prognosis is good, as long as the nerve regeneration procedure begins within 72 hours of the injury. At least that’s what Spock told me McCoy told him. I haven’t actually seen Bones yet since I woke up from surgery. He sent Spock to brief me.”

“Well, since Mr. Spock’s memory is perfect, I reckon ya got as good a rundown as McCoy woulda given ya.”

“So, Bones has been really busy, huh? With the Andorians?” Jim probed.

“Aye, those poor blue devils. That young lassie, the one who dinna make it… she was their engineer,” Scotty said, hanging his head and shaking it slowly. “Andorians mourn hard. I dinna realize.”

“Scotty, can I tell you something, confidentially?” Kirk asked suddenly, frustrated at not understanding things at the level he wanted to.

“Certainly, Sir,” Scotty answered.
“Pull up a chair, Scotty. Only Spock can stand at my bedside that long.”

Scotty offered a little chuckle as he sat down, then put on a serious face again as he waited for Kirk to begin.

Jim cut straight to the chase. “Scotty, I don’t remember some of the events from yesterday. Spock was trying to fill in the gaps for me, but his duties pulled him away before I got a complete picture of what happened. Since you were there, I’m wondering if you could give me just a quick overview of events.”

“Aye, Sir.” Scotty’s eyes were full of sympathy, as they flicked briefly to the goose egg and abrasion on the Captain’s forehead. “It’s a wonder yer even alive, the way ya looked when Spock carried ya outta there.”

“Spock carried me out? After the cave-in?” Jim asked.

“Aye. He dug ya out alone, and carried ya nearly 500 ft to the mouth of the tunnel system. I’d already beamed up with the Andorians we’d freed and was mannin’ the transporter controls m’self, so the second you two emerged from underground, I could grab ya.

“Seein’ ya on the transporter pad was shockin’. Mr. Spock’s eyes were wild and you looked like a dead man in his arms... Beggin’ yer pardon, Captain,” Scotty bowed his head and looked embarrassed to have worded it that way, but continued, “Dr. McCoy left the Andorians with M’Benga and began emergency surgery on ya within minutes. Ya were in right dreadful shape, Captain.”

“Yes,” Jim said, his voice grave, “Spock gave me a laundry list of my injuries shortly after I woke up today.”

“I’m glad the doctor could heal most of ‘em at least,” Scotty offered. “Are ya in any pain right now, Sir?”

“No. Strong pain killers and sedatives are onboard.... If I nod off while we’re talking, don’t be offended,” Kirk joked.
Scotty chuckled.

“So, we rescued the Andorians on our second attempt, correct?” Jim asked.

Scotty nodded.

“How did we do that,” Jim asked, “and what went wrong on the first attempt?”

“Well,” Scotty gathered his thoughts, “ya sent the first landin’ party down to inspect the crashed research vessel after ship’s sensors had located it on that moon. We reported that it looked to us like the crew had been forced from their ship and marched away toward some caves, so ya ordered Mr. Spock to investigate.”

“Spock told me the landing party was about 200 ft inside the first tunnel when you started hearing screams,” Kirk said.

“Aye. Screamin’ like banshees they were, like they were dyin’. Well ya canna ignore that, now can ya? So we rushed toward the screams and saw an awful scene where the tunnel opened onto a chamber. That wee lass was hangin’ by her ankles from a kind of giant scaffold, and one of those hairy beasties near her was wavin’ a knife in the air.” Scotty paused, gripped by the memory. “Her crewmates were goin’ insane with panic. They were restrained and couldna help her. She was still alive, her upper body covered in a green paint.”

“The color of Vulcan blood,” Jim whispered grimly, remembering his visceral reaction to the memory of the paint on Spock’s chest.

“Um, aye,” Scotty confirmed, glancing sideways, a bit confused.

“The first person I saw with paint on his chest was Spock, and I thought that he… the color was so….” Jim explained with a tight mouth.

“Ah, aye,” Scotty said, “That musta been a shock.”

“So, what happened next, Scotty?” Kirk wanted to keep this ball rolling. He was starting to feel
sleepy again. These damn drugs.

“Well, the beastie with the knife started chantin’ and movin’ it toward the lassie’s throat and another one of those shaggies placed a large bowl underneath where she was hangin’… like they were gonna cut her head off or something!”

It brought to Scotty’s mind the planet Argelius and the lovely girl he’d been accused of murdering on that otherwise peaceful world. He buried the thought. Now wasn’t the time.

“Go on, Scotty,” Jim prompted. The next part of the story was what he was most eager to hear. Somehow, Spock had been captured, and the Andorian engineer killed. What had happened? Jim wondered.

“It was the most unfortunate thing, Captain. Our phasers wouldna fire! None of them! Mr. Spock had us fanned out along the dark walls of the chamber, waitin’ for his signal to fire. There was so much commotion and all eyes were on the… ceremonial proceedings,” the corners of Scotty’s mouth turned down in disgust. “We weren’t seen nor heard for a few seconds and Spock had the best position for the first shot, deep into the chamber. He was aimin’ for the knife-wieldin’ beastie from about 15 feet away and signaled for Uhura, Chekov, and m’self to cover him and stun whichever of those monsters became a problem after the first one dropped. I suppose Mr. Spock intended for us to stun as many shaggies as we had to. From our positions in the dark, they wouldna even know what was happenin’ to them or where it was comin’ from. Then, we could lead the Andorians out of there and beam up before the natives woke up. It was a good plan, but it all went south.”

“We had already realized our communicators were inoperative in the caves, but it really hadna occurred to me that our phasers might let us down, too. Mr. Spock fired and nothin’ happened. He fired again and nothin’. We all started firin’ at the main target and NOTHIN’… except a noise. Our weapons still made the typical phaser-fire noise and with all of us firin’ at once, even in the din of that cave chamber, the beasties heard us. Spock was surrounded right away, but the rest of us were close enough to the tunnel opening to make a run for it. Spock shouted for us to get back to the ship and report. We dinna know what those beasties were gonna do to him, and we still wanted to save the lass, but those creatures were twice our size and without phasers, we couldna do anything but retreat.” Scotty’s face reflected the defeat he had felt at the time. He hung his head. “You’ll have to ask Spock what happened after that, Sir. I hope he dinna have to watch that poor lass die. He dinna tell ya?”

“No,” Kirk said, looking troubled.

“I’m so sorry we left him there, Captain,” Scotty said, gripping his hands tightly together on his lap.
“Orders like that are hard to follow, Scotty, but you did the right thing,” Kirk reassured him.

“Thank ya, Captain,” Scotty said, looking straight into his face with a curious expression. “That is almost verbatim what you said to me in the conference room yesterday after we beamed up and reported to ya. Are ya beginnin’ to remember, Sir?”

“No,” Jim admitted. “I guess I’m just… still… me,” he said with a small, warm smile.

“Aye, Sir. Indeed ya are.” Scotty returned the affectionate smile, which said that he greatly admired the person his captain was.

“If you don’t mind me keeping you here a little longer, Scotty,” Kirk said, “can I ask you a few more questions?” Jim gave the most beautiful smile that he knew no one could refuse.

Scotty was now several minutes late for supper with Lt. Hartman and Ens. Xi from Engineering. They would understand, he decided.

“Certainly, Captain,” he said, settling himself more comfortably into his chair so his body language didn’t say, *I have somewhere else to be.*


“Well, the first thing ya should know is ya saved 23 Andorians! They are very grateful, despite their grief over their lost engineer. Uhura has been in contact with Starfleet Command and the leadership of the Andorian homeworld and word is there’ll be commendations,” Scotty winked.

“How did I get them out, Scotty?” Kirk asked.

There was a twinkle in Scott’s eye as he answered, “Well, there was a wee bit of Scottish ingenuity involved, if ya donna mind me boastin’ some, Sir.”

“By all means, Mr. Scott.” Kirk grinned and motioned that the floor was all his.
"Well, Sir, you know how anthropologists use duckblinds to study pre-warp cultures from a secret, tucked-away lab without bein’ seen?"

"A forcefield that simulates a natural rockface? Yes, I’ve seen those,“ Kirk replied.

"Well, I made a portable one!“ Scotty said, beaming with pride. “I made three actually, after testin’ me prototype to make sure it would function inside the tunnels. Each hand-held unit created the illusion of a rock wall about 18 ft long and 7 ft tall, so our people could move along the actual walls of the tunnels, projectin’ a false wall on their other side, renderin’ them essentially cloaked!” Scotty looked very pleased with himself.

"So why did your duckblind devices work down there if the transporter and phasers wouldn’t?“ Kirk asked.

"Oh, Sir,” Scotty looked dismayed at the prospect of having to explain that which non-engineers would have little chance of understanding.

"Okay, Mr. Scott,” Kirk conceded, reading his face, “Just tell me the rest of the story.”

Scotty took a breath and continued, “You beamed down with us this time, Sir, and usin’ these devices, we went back in stealthily, huggin’ the walls, to look for the Andorians and Mr. Spock. We found the Andorians first, all together. They’d been moved to a smaller room with steel gates, held together by chains.”

“We knew the creatures could smelt, because we’d seen that metal knife earlier, but we were a wee bit surprised to see metal gates and chains. They seem so brutish, like animals, but they are intelligent. We hadn’t seen any of the creatures so far this time, so you sent Chekov back outside to call the ship and have them replicate a good old-fashioned crowbar. When the laddie returned with it, you used it to break the chains. The Andorians said their engineer had been killed and they dinna know where Spock was bein’ held. We got them out and lined ‘em up single-file against the tunnel wall, behind the duckblind forcefields, and presto! Invisible.”

“It worked like a charm… until the first sign of a beastie. Then, the Andorians couldna be quiet to save their lives… literally. They started shriekin’ in fear. I thought our haggis was in the fire for sure, but listen to this part,” Scotty continued, “To those shaggies, it looked like the shrieks were comin’ from nowhere, from completely empty halls, and it scared the livin’ daylights outta them! So much so that they turned tail and ran down toward the deeper levels,” Scotty chuckled. “If that
wasna somethin’ to see! Their eyes were big as saucers. Maybe they thought the angry spirits of their victims had come back for revenge!”

Kirk chuckled. He was really enjoying being with Scotty. His miracle worker was funny and could tell a good story, even about such a serious topic.

Mr. Scott went on, “We kept the Andorians movin’ steadily along the wall, and when it was obvious we were gonna make a clean escape, you ran back down the tunnel with the crowbar to search for Mr. Spock, orderin’ me to get everyone to the ship and then stand by to beam you up as soon as you emerged with him. All I can tell ya from that point on is what happened up on the ship. You’ll be needin’ to ask Mr. Spock the rest,” Scotty concluded.

“Well, thank you, Mr. Scott. Now, go type all that up and submit it,” Kirk cracked a smile. “I’m joking. You know you have five days. I should probably give you seven since I made you do an oral report, too.”

Scotty’s eyes twinkled. He was always happy to help his captain, “I do hope yer memories come back, Sir. Mighty disconcertin’ feelin’, I imagine.” He thought again of Argelius and how his total lack of memory had made it impossible to defend himself against the murder charge.

“You don’t have to imagine, do you Scotty?” Kirk asked gently.

“No, Sir,” he admitted, eyes downcast. Captain Kirk had been so wonderful during that whole, miserable affair. How many people would believe a man was innocent who was holding a bloody knife, with a dead body at his feet, and saying, “I don’t remember what happened,” he wondered. James Kirk had believed him. Through all of the insulting theories that had been proffered, like he was secretly angry with women and had snapped, Captain Kirk stood by him, knowing him for the gentle, innocent man that he was. If Kirk hadn’t already had Scotty’s loyalty, he would have earned it on Argelius.

Thinking of their history made Scotty suddenly think to ask, “Are any of your memories missin’ from before yesterday, Captain?”

“No, just yesterday, I think,” Kirk shrugged.

“Well, that’s a wee blessin’, at least. A ton of rock fell on yer noggin, after all! I wouldn’a worry m’self too much about a few missin’ memories when you’re lucky to be with us at all,” Scott
“Well put, Scotty,” Kirk conceded. “I’ve got 11 days of convalescing coming up on Starbase 4. That should give me plenty of time to read everyone’s reports,” Kirk joked. “Go get some dinner, Scotty. I need sleep,” he yawned. “Thanks for stopping by. I’ll see you later.”

“Goodnight, Captain. Rest well,” said Scotty, scooting his chair away from the biobed, back against the wall where it had been when he arrived. That was Scotty. Such a stickler for order, almost as much so as Mr. Spock.

Spock, where are you? What are you doing right now?

Kirk was momentarily tempted to push the shipwide comm button and say with authority, “Mr. Spock, report to Sickbay.” He smiled at that notion, but quickly dismissed it. Spock would come immediately, of course, so would McCoy if Jim called, but the Enterprise was a busy ship right now and his officers had the burden of running it without their captain. He could wait. It was nice to see Scotty, and as the Sickbay door whooshed closed behind his engineer, Jim set his illumination controls to Night and let his eyelids slide shut.

Before he fell asleep, however, he heard a second whoosh, then some muffled voices from the other room.

“…yes, Doctor, he’s had 4cc of… the vitals have been… not that I’ve noticed…."

Either Bones or M’Benga was out there in the Sickbay office, conferring with the nurse.

“…and that’s damn lucky, isn’t it? I’m not a magician, just an old country doctor,” a gruff voice complained.

Bones. Jim smiled to himself in the dark and turned his illumination controls to 25%. “Bones,” he called out.

“Jim! How’re you feeling? Did I wake you up? I apologize for taking so long to get back here,” McCoy said in one breath, rounding the corner and hurrying to Jim’s bedside.
“Don’t worry about it, Bones,” Jim said, “Busy day for all, I’m told. How are our guests?”

McCoy rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head, “Those blue bastards really have their antennas in a bunch after the trauma they’ve suffered. I’m a surgeon, not a psychiatrist, but M’Benga and I and the nurses have been doing our best with them. God, man! The wailing. The wailing has really got my nerves on edge, let me tell you,” McCoy huffed, pacing a bit, “I couldn’t do an autopsy on their engineer, for obvious reasons, but since 23 people witnessed the cause of death…,” McCoy shrugged.

“23?” Jim asked, “Then Spock didn’t see it?”

“Oh, I don’t know for sure. I haven’t directly asked him, and the Andorian accounts are all over the place. There are almost as many different descriptions of events as there are Andorians, but most seem to agree that Spock had been knocked out by then. The Andorian captain, who got his emotions in check a bit quicker than the rest of them, told me Spock broke away from those creatures and even got control of the knife for a few seconds, trying to save her, but was picked up and thrown against the cave wall and didn’t get up.”

Jim winced reflexively.

“After I heard that, I found Spock and ran a scanner over him again, but he was fine,” McCoy said. “He denied ever being unconscious, so I’m not sure what happened really.”

“I’m not clear on a lot of things, Bones. I’m having memory trouble,” Jim told him.

“Oh?” said McCoy, coming closer and looking concerned.

“Just the events of yesterday. Some I can recall and some I can’t. Scotty says I shouldn’t worry about it,” Jim said.

“Oh, he does, does he? Maybe you should let the Chief Medical Officer and not the Chief Engineer decide that,” McCoy grumped. “That slight concussion was the least of your worries yesterday, Jim. It’s possible I overlooked something,” the doctor said, contrite. “Stay right there,” he instructed, as he ducked back into the Sickbay office.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jim called after him, good-naturedly.
Bones came back with a different kind of scanner and ran it carefully over Kirk’s forehead, crown, and temples. “Hm, your brain activity reads normal. If memory loss persists past tomorrow, we can have the Starbase 4 team give you a Level 12 scan.” He paused. “There’s a lot that we starship surgeons can do, but still a lot that we can’t, obviously. I’m sorry about that, Jim.” He looked sorry… and so, so tired. Leonard McCoy, with his endless compassion and devotion to his profession. Not being able to get the captain back on his feet like usual was quite a blow to him, Jim imagined.

“Your surgical skill saved my life, Bones. What’s a few days in a starbase med clinic?” Jim shrugged nonchalantly and shot him a grin.

McCoy had conferred with the experts on Starbase 4, discussing every aspect of Jim’s treatment plan, backward and forward. He had a solid plan to present to his captain.

“Did Spock tell you we’ll be there for 11 days?” he began.

“Yep.” Jim replied without complaint.

“I know you hate being laid up, Jim, and 11 days down is not going to be easy on you, but it can’t be helped.”

“I understand, Bones. ‘Nerves are finicky things,’ or so Spock tells me,” Jim chuckled.

“He said that?! Why that pointy-eared dictaphone!” McCoy laughed. “When he relays a message, you’re gettin’ a perfect transcript, aren’t you? Ha!”

Jim grinned, then asked seriously, “You two getting along okay through this, Bones?”

“Aw, yeah. Spock has been the very model of efficiency, and if I can say so myself, so have I. Everything’s as good as it could be, Jim. Don’t worry,” he reassured. “The trains will run on time, even with you down for the count.”

They both smiled broadly at each other. Suddenly, Dr. McCoy’s smile quivered and fell. He looked down, somber. “It was really touch-and-go with you during surgery, Jim,” he blurted. “I
almost couldn’t pull it off. When Spock gave you to me, I honestly think he believed you weren’t going to make it.”

Jim was taken off guard. “Oh?” he said. “When Spock briefed me on my injuries, they did sound bad, but he rattled them off so matter-of-factly….,” Jim trailed off.

“Spock estimated the boulder that crushed your hip weighed 300 lbs,” Bones began. “He said he had to use that crowbar you brought to get it off you. Even he couldn’t lift it! He knew you had multiple fractures and internal bleeding. No detectable pulse. I could tell by his face, he thought he might be bringing me a dead man.” McCoy stopped then, because Jim’s face looked like that was all he could handle right now.

“I’m sorry I worried you both so much, Bones. Thanks for the good work,” was all Jim could think to say. The thought of Spock carrying him all that way, thinking he might die, choked him up. He could picture Bones concentrating for all he was worth over the surgical table, trying to undo what a fluke accident had done to his captain’s body. He pinched his eyes shut.

They were both quiet for a few moments.

Then, partially to lighten the mood, Jim asked, “Can I have solid food now?”

McCoy laughed a little too loud as the tension left him, “No! Do you know how much blood I took out of your belly yesterday? Let’s not push it for another day or two. You’re getting all of your nutrients through the hypos the nurse has been giving you.”

“Oh, okay,” Kirk said. “I thought the reason for no food was because of my upcoming nerve surgery, maybe.”

“No,” McCoy corrected. “You can be on a normal diet throughout those procedures.”

“‘Procedures?’ As in plural?” Jim asked cautiously.

“I’m afraid so,” McCoy confirmed, “but it shouldn’t be bad… or at least that’s what the Mullovs are telling me.”
“Mullovs?” Jim asked.

“The husband and wife team who will be treating you, Elaina and Evgeny Mullov. Nerve repair and re-growth is their specialty. They say the treatments are non-invasive, so it’s not really surgery. They have to go a little bit at a time with a couple of days of natural growth in between treatments. By Day 9 or 10, they should be doing the final treatment, which they call ‘pruning’ the nerve overgrowth. Then, if all has gone well, they’ll release you to my care, I’ll certify you fit for duty, and we can hop back aboard our shiny ship and go find some more dangerous things to do.”

“Ha! Sounds good to me,” Jim said, then added more thoughtfully, “I don’t try to get hurt, you know.”

“I know, Jim,” McCoy said, his expression warm. “It’s just par for the course when you do what we’ve chosen to do for a living. You saved 23 Andorians and your first officer yesterday from sacrificial slaughter, for Heaven’s sakes! Let’s focus on that, shall we?”

As McCoy had been talking, he ducked into his office again and returned with a filled hypospray and a long syringe. The hypo he quickly pressed into Jim’s neck.

“This has everything you need to get through the night. You won’t feel hungry, you won’t feel pain, you won’t need to go to the little captains’ room,” he winked, “…because you’d fall on your face if you tried…, and you won’t lie awake mulling anything over because this is some strong stuff,” he concluded.

“What is that for?” Jim asked warily, his eyes glancing over to where McCoy had placed the long syringe.

“Well now, nothing gets past you, does it?” McCoy stalled. In 60 seconds, Jim wouldn’t care. “This is just a little something to keep what’s left of those nerves of yours plump and prepped for the re-gen procedure. The starbase doctors say that if the nerves completely die, and they have to start from scratch, you’d be looking at a longer recovery. So… this lovely needle is going in that lovely hip as soon as those lovely eyes of yours are closed.”

McCoy finished preparing the equipment and glanced up at Jim who had a silly, sleepy grin now.

“Bones?”
“Yes, Jim?”

“Nerves are finicky thi…” and he was asleep.

Smiling at his friend, McCoy said, “Goodnight, sweet prince.”

Syringe in hand, he gently pulled back Jim’s sheet and proceeded as the nerve experts on Starbase 4 had instructed.
Spock concluded ship’s business to his satisfaction at 20:47. After checking in on the captain and finding him asleep, he headed to his quarters. Following a sonic shower, he would meditate and sleep for a few hours. He’d visit Jim in the morning.

Spock stripped off his uniform and stepped into the shower. He tried to resist the urge to begin meditating as the warm sonic waves rolled over his body. His meditation was always more focused in front of his lighted candle. He would do it right tonight, as he had many emotional responses to examine.

When he’d finished showering, he combed his hair, cleaned his teeth, and put on a soft, dark robe. Kneeling comfortably on his mat, he lighted the candle. Peace came into his mind and he began to sort through the emotions connected to the events of the past two days. Over the years, he’d become adept at this. Emotions were real. Denying their existence was illogical, but they could be managed. Surak’s teachings provided the framework.

Spock had been taught from a young age how to control his emotions so they would not control him. These techniques had saved the Vulcan people from a violent past and led to centuries of peace and prosperity. Spock firmly believed in their value. But serving with humans, who followed a different philosophy, created a strain on him that most Vulcans never experience. The friendships he had formed with his captain and the other officers had enriched him in ways he hadn’t expected, but also created emotional difficulties for him that tortured his mind at times.

Concentrating on the flame, he began the exercise:

\textit{Fear}. He had experienced that emotion several times in the past two days. He would now examine the four spikes of this emotion, the instances where it grew beyond what he could reliably control.

The first instance was when none of the landing party’s phasers would fire and he realized he was trapped.

The second was watching helplessly with blurry vision as the Andorian woman’s throat was cut and the life drained from her body.
The third was enduring the ceremonial painting of his bare skin by the creature’s huge hands. He had noted the paint on the Andorian victim and concluded that he may be next in line for sacrifice.

The fourth…

Spock involuntarily pinched his eyes shut as he began to hesitantly examine the fourth. His captain, Jim, buried under rubble, one mangled hand all that was visible as he approached. Jim. Jim!

Spock remembered the unstable tunnels created by the Horta in the mines of Janus VI and the fear he had felt when he heard a collapse happening on the captain’s end of the communicator. That had been a near miss, but this time, Jim was buried, crushed. The feel of his captain’s broken body in his arms as he ran… No. NO! His racing mind had automatically supplied him with the approximate weight of the boulder he had just pried off Kirk and the likelihood of an average human male surviving such an impact. Multiple impacts. Jim, no. Please!

Spock breathed in and out slowly, trying to ease the intensity of the memory. He opened his eyes and concentrated on the flame, bringing his heart rate down. He had performed adequately, he decided, despite being compromised by intense emotion. Spock had learned slowly over his time in the service to give himself credit for this. While he still expected more from himself than from any other member of the crew, he had learned to recognize the illogic of denying his limitations. Doing a fair job of controlling his emotions had to be enough in times of severe duress. It was the best he could do. Perhaps a full-Vulcan could do better, but he could not. This must be acknowledged. He continued on, examining the other emotions he had felt since last meditating, then finished the session and snuffed out the candle.

Spock removed his robe and got into bed. Lying in the dark room, listening to the louder-than-usual hum of the engines at warp 8, a single thought allowed him to relax enough to fall asleep.

Jim will live.

***

Spock awoke 5.2 hours later. Vulcans rarely dream, but he had the distinct impression that his mind had been somewhere else a moment ago, some cavernous underground permeated with the feel of danger. Jim. He wanted to see him, wanted to make sure he was all right. Illogical. Jim would be asleep. It was… Spock checked his cabin’s chronometer… 04:10, two hours until ship’s dawn. If there had been any problem with Jim in the middle of the night, Doctor McCoy would have comm’d him.
The doctor was exhausted, though. Both doctors were. They were surely sleeping right now, leaving only one nurse posted. What if she weren’t physically checking on the captain often enough? What if Jim were having difficulty breathing and the biobed alarms didn’t go off until it was a crisis?

Spock got a large glass of room temperature water and sat back down on his bed in the dark. With the Andorians onboard and fewer than 30 hours until docking at Starbase 4, he anticipated a busy day of administrative duties. Someone was sure to want his signature on something by 06:30.
Perhaps if he wanted to check on the captain this morning it should be earlier rather than later. Maybe Jim wasn’t asleep and was lonely. Unlike Spock, Jim had a lot of social needs and didn’t like to be alone.

Nine minutes later Spock left his quarters for Sickbay. The corridors were vacant and dimly lit with a pleasant magenta light. It was still ship’s night. There would be some activity in Engineering, the mess hall, and the bridge at this hour, but the rest of the ship should be quiet. He walked alone with his thoughts to the turbolift.

The nurse was not at her station when Spock entered Sickbay. He slipped past the desk and into the treatment area to find her hovering over her sleeping patient, startled by his sudden appearance.

“Mister Spock,” she said, standing up straight and facing him.

“Nurse,” Spock inclined his head in greeting. “What is the captain’s condition?”

“I… I was just checking on him, Sir. Doctor McCoy gave him an unusually strong sedative last night and his vital signs have been low, but acceptable, as the doctor told me to expect. Still, I’ve been checking on him a lot all night. He has slept soundly and probably won’t wake for another two hours or so, Sir. You could come back th…”

“Thank you, Nurse. That will be all,” Spock said with his typical brevity.

“Yes, Sir,” she said, and returned to her desk in the other room.

Spock approached his friend’s sleeping form. The nurse was right, Jim’s breathing was barely noticeable, his face ashen. Spock’s first impulse was to grab his arm and try to wake him, but McCoy knew his job and if the doctor had induced this human version of a Vulcan tow-kath,
healing trance, Spock shouldn’t disrupt it.

There were tales he had learned in childhood about Vulcans from antiquity who could heal others when they were too weak from injury or illness to do it themselves. In his collection of books, he’d had an illustrated version of the epic poem Saret and Luken. Saret was a great warrior with a powerful mind. When his friend Luken fell in battle and was dying from a head wound and a fierce gash in his side, Saret had lain his hand on Luken’s body and with the force of his mind, pushed his friend into the tow-kath he could not achieve himself. Four days later, Luken awoke fully healed.

This was just a legend. Spock didn’t have this mythical ability. He knew that, but that didn’t stop his hand from reaching out to rest on Jim’s injured hip. *I would heal thee if I could, my closest friend, my comrade-in-arms*, he said in the privacy of his own mind.

Jim would recover, he told himself, in the way humans recover, in a medical facility with the best care Starfleet could provide. He and Spock would stand shoulder to shoulder again for the final six months of their five-year mission. But what then? He had thought of possibly returning to Vulcan. And Jim? What would Jim choose? They hadn’t talked about it. Doubtless there would be many options for Starfleet’s most decorated young captain. *Six months*. It was such a short time.

In the dim surroundings, Spock shut his eyes and unwittingly gripped Jim’s hip tighter. He wanted to hold onto his captain, hold onto this life they had together.

“Spock?”

Spock’s eyes flew open and shot over to the captain’s face. Jim was awake. Spock retracted his hand as though Kirk’s hip were suddenly 1,000 degrees.

“Don’t ever…,” Jim began, and Spock froze, fighting the urge to flee, bracing for the reprimand he knew he deserved for touching his unconscious captain that way.

The captain’s voice failed him again from several hours of disuse and shallow breathing. He had to clear his throat twice before he could continue.

“Don’t ever worry about touching me, Spock,” he said gently, barely above a whisper. “It’s fine. I don’t mind.” His eyes were so warm.
“I…,” Spock began, at a loss for an explanation.

“We’re friends. I’m injured. End of story, okay?”

“Yes, Captain,” Spock replied, relaxing imperceptibly.

“It’s… comforting,” Jim whispered. Then, after a pause he added, “for both of us.” Jim’s left hand had been resting on his chest and he slowly raised it out toward Spock in an unmistakable request for his first officer to clasp it.

Surrounding Jim’s offered hand quickly in both of his, Spock stepped closer to the biobed, so as not to create an uncomfortable angle for the captain’s arm. Spock’s hands were so warm. The protective cocoon they created around Jim’s newly-repaired hand caused a warm wave around his whole body. It was almost euphoric. The Vulcan was dear to him and he wanted to say so, but he settled for, “McCoy is right. You DO have a good bedside manner.”

Spock managed a tight nod. He clearly was uncomfortable expressing affection in the way Jim had silently requested, but the look on his face conveyed worry more than discomfort, worry for his captain who’d been so badly injured. Jim remembered the look on Spock’s face a few moments ago when he was holding his hip, the same gentle intensity with which he was now holding his hand.

Jim tried to convey with his soft, drowsy eyes and warm expression that he understood. Oh, he still felt so sleepy. “I’ll be all right, Spock.”

Jim couldn’t recall ever being injured beyond McCoy’s ability to repair. Perhaps he should be more frightened about his condition than he was. It was hard to feel frightened about anything with the Vulcan so close, looking at him with those fiercely protective eyes. He trusted Spock, trusted him with his life, with his ship and her 430 souls. “Is everything all right with the ship?” Jim asked.

“Yes, Captain. No problems. Still en route to Starbase 4, arriving in 27.8 hours. It is 04:37. I wanted to see you before my duty day began. It was not my intention to wake you.”

“S’all right, Spock. I’m glad you’re here. Thanks for handling everything. I hope it’s not too much of a burden on you.”
“No, Sir.” Spock answered. “Are you in any pain?”

Jim shook his head. “Quite the opposite. I feel very warm and content right now.”

“Strong pain medicines often create feelings of wellbeing in humans,” Spock ventured.

“Ah. That must be it, then,” Kirk smiled warmly. “I feel almost like I’m floating… I don’t think I can keep my eyes open,” Kirk whispered.

“Go back to sleep, Jim. The night nurse is doing an exemplary job of looking after you and I will return following the morning briefing, duties permitting,” Spock promised.

“Okay….”

A moment later, Jim’s breathing evened out and Spock realized he was sleeping. He stepped an inch closer to the biobed and pulled Jim’s hand, still clenched in both of his, closer to his chest. He bowed his head and allowed himself to remain like that for 21 seconds, contemplating the captain’s assertion that touching was a comfort to them both. He decided Jim was correct. He gently laid the captain’s hand back on his chest, and reluctantly left his side.

Commending the nurse for her diligence on his way out of Sickbay, Spock headed for the bridge.
Chapter 3

11 Days Down - Chapter 3

The Doctors Mullov had been specializing in nerve and tissue regeneration for 16 years. It was their passion. Working on Starbase 4, a crossroads for many Federation species, the married couple had earned a reputation for excellence in their field. Patients came from parsecs away to be treated here. In two hours, they would be welcoming a starship captain to their ward.

“I think it’s very exciting!” said their self-proclaimed favorite patient, 22-year-old Lwaxara Dirn. “We’ll probably get to meet his first officer, too, the son of Sarek!”

“We’re trying to keep this a little bit quiet, Lwaxara,” reminded Dr. Mullova. “I know it’s impossible to keep anything secret from you around here, but please try to respect Captain Kirk’s privacy. His injury is very recent.”

“Oh, I will, Doctor,” Lwaxara promised, “for a little while at least,” she winked.

Lwaxara’s own injury, plasma burns, had happened ages ago. She’d been sent by her parents from her home planet of BetaZed to Starbase 4 and had lived on this medical ward for 8 months, watching dozens of patients of all species come and go, while her lengthy recovery continued. That might sound sad to some, but Lwaxara loved it. People were her thing and she was learning so much.

“Go easy with the telepathy. Not everyone responds well to meeting a Betazoid,” the doctor warned her exuberant patient.

“Especially one as scarred up as me,” Lwaxara added.

“You know it’s not just your skin that startles people,” Dr. Mullova corrected her. “My poor husband nearly had you transferred somewhere else 7 months ago when you started spilling his secrets all over the place and trying to fix him.”

“It’s not right for people to be closed-off like that and keep secrets. It’s unnatural,” Lwaxara complained, as she often did when her open, empathic way of life was criticized.
“Betazoids may live that way, but non-telepaths, and touch-telepaths like the Vulcans, prefer to share their personal thoughts only with those close to them. Please don’t overstep other patients’ boundaries in this ward,” Dr. Mullova warned again gently. “I’ve spoken to you about cultural sensitivity many times.”

“Oh, the patients who hate me at first all come to love me,” Lwaxara said, waving her slim, scarred hand dismissively. “Just because they can bury their feelings, doesn’t mean they should. It’s unhealthy.”

“Well, I see I’ve gotten through to you,” Doctor Mullova said in mock frustration, rolling her eyes. “By the way, would you go and make certain room 112, Jeffry’s old room, has been cleaned and prepared, Lwaxara.”

“Sure, Doc. Hey, that room’s got a great view of Docking Port C. If the Enterprise docks there, Captain Kirk will have a perfect view of his ship…,” Lwaxara realized aloud.

Dr. Mullova’s back was towards her now, but Lwaxara could touch her mind as easily as reading any facial expression. “Ohhh, they are docking at C… and you knew that! Oh, you are so thoughtful, Doctor. I don’t know why so many people think you’re mean.” Lwaxara winked and laughed as she left.

Dr. Mullova chuckled and hoped the famous Captain Kirk would react kindly to an extroverted Betazoid neighbor. Hopefully, he truly enjoyed seeking out strange new worlds and new civilizations, because Lwaxara was a world unto herself, the only Betazoid on the starbase, the only person from that mysterious planet of empaths any of them had ever met. Dr. Mullova decided that if Captain Kirk’s personality was as it was portrayed on the news, he should get along fine with Lwaxara. She was less certain about the Vulcan, though.

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Mr. Sulu did a magnificent job guiding the Enterprise into place at Docking Port C, earning him an impassive, “Well done, Mister,” from Mr. Spock.

The crew had been very worried about their captain earlier, but after Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy made a joint shipwide announcement about his prognosis for a full recovery, the crew’s minds turned towards happy thoughts of planning their shore leave.
Starbase 4 offered so much and everyone had different ideas about how to entertain themselves. Shore leave rotations had been posted and the first wave could begin disembarking in 45 minutes, after the captain had been taken to the medical center and the Andorians had left the ship. Protocol required that Spock remain until disembarkation of the first wave of personnel was complete, but Dr. McCoy would be with the captain.

Drs. Mullov and Mullova and two orderlies were the first people aboard when the main portal was opened. Dr. McCoy greeted them warmly. They had conversed many times by subspace over the past two days and had developed an easy rapport.

“Welcome aboard,” McCoy said. “Right this way,” he told the orderlies guiding the anti-grav transport bed. They all followed Dr. McCoy to Sickbay, where Jim was awake and ready to get the show on the road.

“Captain, these are the nerve regeneration specialists, Doctors Evgeny Mullov and Elaina Mullova.”

“A pleasure to meet you both,” Kirk said cordially.

“Captain Kirk, we’re honored to have you here, but sorry for the circumstances, of course,” Dr. Mullova said, shaking the captain’s hand.

Her husband chimed in, “Our field and many others owe you and Dr. McCoy a debt of gratitude for uncovering the medical knowledge of the Fabrini on Yonada, Captain. It moved our research forward maybe 15 years!”

“It saved my life,” McCoy interjected. “Xenopolycythemia isn’t a death sentence anymore.”

Kirk gave Bones a warm smile. It was ironic that their chance discovery aboard that hollow world/spaceship had saved McCoy’s life and now would also help him recover as well. He didn’t have to wonder if Bones was thinking of Natira at this moment. Of course he was.

True to his word, Kirk had made sure the Enterprise was on hand for the arrival of the Yonadans at their new home, a mostly ocean planet, sporting one lush continent with resources more than adequate for the small population to thrive and expand.
Natira was pleased. She accepted the help the Federation had mustered in the year since Yonada was discovered traveling through space. The Federation offered to get the colony started farming and building an infrastructure. The Enterprise and the USS Resolute tractoried the hollow ball that had been the Fabrini’s home for generations into a stable orbit to act as a small artificial moon for the planet. Being hollow, it didn’t have the mass to affect the tides, but it looked pretty up there at night, as Natira had said. Bones and Natira had stood on a beach under that moon and Kirk was certain she had asked him again to stay with her. But his friend had chosen to remain on the Enterprise and Jim was alive because of it. Perhaps M’Benga could have saved him after the cave-in, but likely not, judging by what a close shave McCoy admitted it had been.

The orderlies were hovering like they wanted to transfer the captain to the transport bed and get moving. They were undoubtedly used to hurrying.

“Okay, Captain Kirk, if you’re ready…,” Dr. Mullova said, gesturing for the orderlies to move their patient. Jim found himself quickly and efficiently moved onto the surprisingly comfortable transport bed and covered with what could almost pass for a comforter. Nice, he thought.

“Spock to Dr. McCoy,” Spock’s voice broke in over the Sickbay comm.

“McCoy here,” Bones answered.

“You may proceed with the captain at this time. The corridors are clear,” Spock stated.

It was the mark of a good first officer to be nearly as protective of his captain’s image as he was of his captain. Spock was the best.

“We’re leaving Sickbay right now. McCoy out,” Bones replied. Then, to the doctors and orderlies, he said, “Follow me, please.”

***

To say Jim was pleased with his room at the clinic would be an understatement. He hadn’t taken his eyes off the Enterprise since he’d arrived. The picture window in his room was huge and from his bed all he had to do was turn his head to the left and there she was in all her glory. The first time he was alone in the room, he said on impulse, “Kirk to Enterprise” into the communicator that he had brought with him.
“Uhura here, Captain,” she said, putting him on speaker so Mr. Spock and everyone on the bridge could hear.

“Uhura, you wouldn’t believe the view from my room here! I can see the Enterprise from my bed.”

“Oh, wow, that’s great. You’re on speaker, Sir,” Uhura said.

“Somebody wave at me,” he joked.

“I have an idea,” Chekov said with a boyish grin, hovering his finger above the switch for the saucer’s nomenclature lights. “With your permission, Mr. Spock….”

Spock nodded and Chekov flashed the lights. NCC-1701 disappeared and reappeared, disappeared and reappeared again.

“Ha! I saw that,” Kirk laughed, delighted. Just gazing at his beautiful ship and knowing that his friends were inside made him feel so reassured. He would recover and be back onboard soon. “Thank you all for getting me here,” he said with true gratitude in his voice. “I hope everyone’s on the roster for shore leave.”

“Yes, Sir,” the bridge crew chorused.

“Spock? Did the Andorians get off all right?”

“Yes, Captain,” Spock replied. “The Starbase 4 Office of Andorian Affairs has taken control of them. A ship from Andoria will arrive in 2 days to take them home.”

“Good,” Kirk said. “Anything else I should know about? I’m going in for my first nerve re-gen treatment in a few minutes.”

“Everything is well in hand,” Spock assured him.
“I’ll be conscious for these procedures they tell me, so if you need to get ahold of me, don’t hesitate,” Kirk directed. “Have you changed to Starbase Time, yet?” It was protocol for ships docked at a starbase for longer than two solar days to synch their ships’ chronometers with Starbase Time.

“Yes, Captain,” Spock reported. “It is 13:25.”

“Well, if you have things wrapped up there by 18:00, Spock, come join me for dinner. Bones is finally letting me have a proper meal! My room is 112.”

The captain sounded in such good spirits, Spock almost smiled, “I will be there, Captain,” he confirmed.

“Good. See you then. Kirk out.”

Bones leaned through the open doorway to his room just then, “You about ready, Jim? Dr. Mullova is on her way.”


“Why are you grinnin’ like that?” McCoy asked.

“I just talked to the bridge. They flashed the nomenclature lights for me,” Jim explained.

“Okay, I don’t know what nomenclature lights are,” Bones said, “but let me give you a little overview of the nerve re-gen procedure before they come to getcha.”

“How can you not know what nomenclature lights are?” Jim asked, bewildered.

“I’m a doctor, not a starship designer. Now, like I said, you won’t be unconscious, not even sedated. It’s a totally non-invasive procedure. There is considerable heat, I’m told, as the re-gen stimulator probe is pressed into the skin of your hip and groin. If it gets to be too uncomfortable, say so and they can stop for a few moments. I’m going to stay and observe; this old doc can still learn a few new things. Any questions?”
“Will I be able to move my leg after the first treatment?”

“Some feeling might start coming back into your leg a couple of hours after the first treatment, but just ‘zingers’ and ‘prickles.’ Those are Elaina’s words,” Bones chuckled.

“How long does it take? Spock’s coming to eat dinner with me at 18:00,” Jim asked.

“Oh, you’ll make that easily,” Bones said, waving his hand. “The treatment takes about 40 minutes, then a 15 minute ‘cool-down’ and a scan to make sure all injured areas are beginning to re-grow. Then… it’s back to your fancy VIP room for more stargazin’,” Bones concluded with a loud hand clap and a smile.

Jim smirked, “It is a nice room.”

“So glad you like it!” said Dr. Mullova, just walking through the door. “You’re our first starship captain… at least on the Nerve and Tissue Regeneration Unit. Leonard told me the choice was between Starbase 4 and Starbase 2. I’m so glad he chose us for you, Captain!” She had an orderly with an anti-grav transport bed with her and said, “Shall we head to the treatment room and begin?”
Chapter 4

11 Days Down - Chapter 4

The treatment hadn’t hurt, but the tension of thinking it might any minute was wearing. Jim was happy to be back in his room under his almost-comforter with the inspiring sight of his ship through the window. Turning the lighting low on his bed’s control panel improved his view, but it also made him sleepy. He should try to stay awake the two hours until dinner with Spock. Although his leg still felt completely limp, no motion or sensation, Jim decided not to worry about it; he was in good hands.

“Captain James Kirk?” came a lovely, girlish voice just outside his door.

“Yes?” Jim replied, leaning over a bit in his large bed to try to see who it was, “Come in.”

“Okay, well…,” she said, staying out of sight, “I’m your neighbor in room 117 and first, let me just warn you that I am a burn patient with a lot of bad scarring that sometimes scares people the first time I pop in on them. I know you’re a brave starship captain and everything, but just as a courtesy, I thought I’d give you warning that I’m just a girl, not a monster coming to eat you.”

“Please come in, neighbor,” Kirk chuckled, bracing himself for her not to be as pretty as her voice.

“I’m Lwaxara Dirn, she said as she slipped through his door, giving him a full view of her. She was slim, wearing a green, knee-length hospital gown similar to his own. Below the knees, her light-colored skin looked fine, but her arms and face were a mass of strangely stretched bands of shiny skin, pinching and pulling her features out of symmetry. Most of her scalp was scars, with only a few long strands of hair to show that she was a brunette. Her raven-black eyes looked at him as she slowly came closer. Kirk kept his expression open and welcoming.

She appreciated the effort, though she could easily feel his revulsion and pity. He is kind, she discovered.

“How was your first nerve re-gen treatment, Captain Kirk?” she asked.

“Not bad. I have to have three more, I guess,” he offered.
“I’ve had 78,” Lwaxara revealed. “The nerve part is finally done; now Dr. Mullova is working on tissue re-gen. I had deep plasma burns. I’ve been here for 8 months.”

“Oh, wow, and I was complaining about 11 days,” Kirk said sheepishly. “Sit down, please,” he offered, gesturing to one of his two guest chairs arranged around a small table to his left. “How did it happen, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“Oh, it’s so embarrassing,” Lwaxara laughed, taking a seat.

“Embarrassing?”

“Oh, she said, rolling her dark eyes. “I’m not a citizen of the Federation. I’m kind of a charity case here. My planet is BetaZed. Have you heard of it?” she asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Kirk answered.

He’s being truthful. He doesn’t know, Lwaxara thought. “Well, we’re kind of isolationist, and I wanted to ‘see the galaxy,’” she made a large, sweeping circle with her outstretched arms and opened her eyes wide. “I’m from a rich family, but my parents wouldn’t give me the money to go adventuring, so like a spoiled brat I hitched a ride on a badly-maintained Eridanian freighter heading out to Federation space. They had an accident with their core near where I was bunking, and I woke up back on BetaZed two weeks later, covered in bandages with no memory of the incident. Our doctors tried to do what they could for me, but…” she trailed off with a shrug of her slender shoulders.

“How did you come to be here?” Kirk asked.

“My mother knows this uptight Federation ambassador and he got me in here. My treatment is supposed to take 14-18 months. So, now I live here, where such a fascinating variety of species pass through. I kinda love it! I ended up getting my wish to see the galaxy… the hard way, but still,” she laughed. She had a very pretty laugh.

“Now, you tell me your injury story, Captain Kirk.”
It seemed only fair, so Jim cleared his throat and gathered up his thoughts to begin his tale. Let’s see if he could be as interesting as Scotty.

She listened quietly, his feelings painting a rich tapestry over the scaffold of facts his words were providing. *How brave he is. How deeply he loves his friends.* She hadn’t ever come across a mind quite like his before and was lost in its beauty.

Vulcans can tell when a Betazoid is touching their mind, trying to sense their emotional currents. Humans cannot. She should tell him she’s an empath, but if she did that, all of this beauty would turn to suspicion and mistrust. She would bask a little while longer in this wonderful mind before telling him.

“…so then Dr. McCoy chose Starbase 4 for me, coordinated a treatment plan with the docs, and Spock rushed me here at warp 8,” Kirk ended his tale.

“Wow, what a story!” Lwaxara exclaimed. “Are they going to send anthropologists to that moon to study those giant ‘beasties’ as your friend called them?”

“I suppose so, yes,” Kirk said.

“Well, I hope you don’t have to go back and rescue them next year!” She laughed.

It was really too soon, but it felt good to laugh, so Jim gave up a little chuckle, “Let’s hope not.” Then he added softly, “Our five-year mission is up in six months.”

There was great sadness and uncertainty associated with that statement, Lwaxara perceived.

“You won’t be captain of the Enterprise anymore after that?” she probed.

“I don’t know. We’ll all have decisions to make soon. Spock is due for promotion; he deserves a ship of his own. Dr. McCoy, believe it or not, kind of hates space and has a beautiful high priestess who wants to marry him. Scotty is happy as a clam as chief engineer, but there are other opportunities for him in starship design and development…. He looked sad.
This train of thought brought him distress, that was clear. Especially over the Vulcan. His other
friends were dear to him, but Captain Kirk’s deepest emotional river ebbed and flowed around his
first officer, Spock. He did not want to be separated from him.

How sad, Lwaxara thought, that this wonderful person was so attached to a "Vulcan". She knew
Vulcans. While they weren’t as emotionless as they wished for people to believe, showing emotion
embarrassed them, shamed them. They pushed their feelings so far down that no one could reach.
They didn’t want to be reached. They made Betazoids feel like criminals for reaching out to release
them from their self-made prisons. Lwaxara had seen this when Ambassador Sarek and his
diplomatic party were guests in her parents’ house. What an aloof race of people, so disconnected
from anything worthwhile within themselves, offering nothing to others but dispassionate logic.
Her mother didn’t trust them, didn’t like them, and neither did she. All the galaxy seems to believe
the adage "Vulcans don’t lie", but their whole existence is a lie. They are intelligent but hollow
people with only their cold philosophy to fill them. Why would a beautiful, passionate person like
Captain James Kirk be so devoted to a Vulcan, who surely couldn’t return a tenth of the feeling the
captain had for him?

From her contact with the captain’s mind as he’d related the story of his injury, Lwaxara knew that
he believed his first officer cared about him, perhaps even loved him. Could it be true? She was
looking forward to meeting this Vulcan. Imagining stuffy old Sarek with a son who displays
emotion tickled her. Oh, the scandal.

She was torn from her thoughts by the sudden awareness that Captain Kirk was in pain. Not
essential but physical. He was grimacing and holding his hip, "Aagh."

“What’s wrong, Captain?” she asked.

“I think I just had one of those ‘zingers’ that Dr. Mullova told McCoy I’d feel. It’s over now.” Just
for fun, he tried to move his leg. No dice.

“Yeah, those can hurt, but usually only for a couple of seconds. You’ll get more as you heal; it’s a
good sign,” she reassured him. “The ‘prickles’ feel more like little insects crawling on you and
they can last for a long time. Not painful, just annoying.”

“Good to know. Thanks,” Jim said warmly. His stomach growled audibly. “I get to have my first
solid meal in almost three days tonight. Is the food here good?”

“Oh, yes. They have something for every taste,” she said. My favorite is Chicken Picata. We don’t
have chickens on BetaZed, but it’s very much like grudien meat. That’s my favorite back home.
“Do you miss your home?” Kirk asked.

He is so kind. I should tell him now. Tell him before his Vulcan does.

“Yes I do, sometimes. It is easier for me there. I don’t have to talk as much. Betazoids are empathic. We can read each other’s thoughts and feelings. Not a lot of occasion for speaking.” There! She had done it. He didn’t seem to be getting suspicious or weird about it… Wait. Oh… he’s had experience with empaths.

“You’ve met an empath before… not a Betazoid, though,” she ventured.

“Yes,” Kirk confirmed, “on Minara. We called her Gem. Never knew her real name. She couldn’t tell us because she was mute. The dress she wore had blue and purple gemstones around the neckline and Dr. McCoy got the idea to call her Gem. She was a captive of the Vians, a supposedly superior race,” he said disdainfully, “as were we when we met her. McCoy scanned her with his medical tricorder and found she didn’t have proper vocal chords for speaking. He said he thought it was natural for her race. She was very emotive in her facial expressions and body movements. The Vians didn’t hurt her, but they tortured and manipulated me, Spock, and McCoy to test her empathy. I don’t really want to go into that story now,” he said, feeling tired again suddenly.

“Just think it; that will be easier,” said Lwaxara, who knew the captain was tired, but really wanted to know the story.

Jim laid his head back into the pillow, and glanced left out towards his ship. It didn’t really feel like he was thinking about Gem, but when he looked back at Lwaxara, her eyes were wide and there were tears in them.

“Gem learned a lot from you three… enough to save her whole world!” she gasped. “Imagine having the power to heal someone’s injuries like she healed yours and Dr. McCoy’s! Betazoids don’t have that… and pain emanating from someone nearby can be terribly upsetting for us. Oh, if we had the ability to heal like Gem’s race does!” She clasped her hands together in joy and wonder. “I’d like to visit her. The Minaran sun went supernova, but the Vians relocated her people? Where?” she asked Jim.

“I don’t know,” Jim said, a bit stunned that she’d taken all that from his mind so accurately and quickly. “There are probably people who know at Starfleet Command, but I personally don’t,” Jim said.
“I’m glad you have good thoughts about empaths, Captain Kirk. Some people hate us,” Lwaxara sighed.

“Hate? Why?” Kirk asked.

“Secrets. We expose them. It’s our way of communication, but I admit it’s not for everybody. Dr. Mullov nearly kicked me out of here a month after I arrived, I made him so uncomfortable. He eventually got used to me, though,” she laughed. “Dr. Mullova has explained to me about emotional privacy and how it is different from deceit. We don’t conceal our thoughts on BetaZed, because we can’t. Other species have the option of keeping their thoughts and feelings private. Dr. Mullova and various patients I’ve met here have helped me understand better that this isn’t an attempt to deceive, just normal for their species. Some people here have said my empathy gives me an unfair advantage over them and makes them feel vulnerable, but it would only be an unfair advantage if I intended to exploit them, and I don’t!” she defended.

“I hope all Betazoids are so well-intentioned,” Jim mused. “Your gifts could be used as a weapon.”

“Yes, I know,” she admitted. “There have been some kidnappings on my world by aliens who hope to use an empath to make themselves rich or powerful. Even the Federation wants to exploit us because we can do what the Vulcans can’t. The Vulcans are touch-telepaths for the most part. Analyzing the emotions and weaknesses of an opponent on a starship viewscreen isn’t something they can do. But we can,” she inclined her head for effect. “You can see how that could be a great asset, I’m sure.”

“You say diplomatic envoys from the Federation have already been sent to BetaZed?” Jim asked.

“Yes. They sent Vulcans!” She laughed, “Talk about oil and water. My parents entertained an envoy at our house and it was a very frustrating eight days. We were all happy when those stiffs left!”

Captain Kirk burst out laughing, mostly at the clinic’s universal translator. It definitely had some nuances that his lacked. Might be time for an upgrade.

“Spock’s father is a diplomat,” Kirk said. “Was he…”

“Yes, it was Ambassador Sarek,” Lwaxara revealed. “He’s also my mother’s contact who got me in
here for treatment, so I shouldn’t be saying such things about him. Don’t tell Spock I called his father a stiff, or he’ll dislike me more than he’s probably already going to,” she rolled her eyes and made a funny expression. It was amazing how expressive she could still be even with the scar tissue distorting her face so badly.

“Mr. Spock should be here soon, if you want to meet him. I invited him for dinner at 18:00 and it’s 17:50,” Jim noticed. *Oh, it will be good to see Spock,* he thought.

Lwaxara smiled. “I’ll let you two have a nice dinner and I’ll meet your Vulcan some other time,” she told him as she started for the door.

“Nice talking to you,” Jim said. “Drop by anytime.” He meant it. She was smart and had a great attitude.

“Your adventures are amazing, Captain Kirk. Tell me more stories tomorrow?”

“Okay. See you then,” he waved as she left.

*Well, that was an interesting experience,* he thought. He lay back to digest it and have a rest, but before he had a chance, Bones was at the door.
“Jim, your color is nearly back to normal. You are really looking good,” McCoy said as he entered Kirk’s clinic room. “How is your leg?”

“Hi Bones,” Jim said. “I’ve had two ‘zingers’ since the treatment. Lwaxara, my neighbor in 117, says that’s a good sign.”

“Wow, that girl is a wonder! I met her. Like Gem with vocal chords,” Bones said. “Dr. Mullov suggested I might want to come ‘rescue you’ from her about ten minutes ago, by the way, but I told him you’re a big boy.”

“I liked talking to her, but yeah, she takes what she wants, doesn’t she?” Kirk observed. “The word ‘classified’ is gonna become a thing of the past in Starfleet if BetaZed is admitted to the Federation,” Kirk joked.

“We better make sure we get that planet on our side,” Bones added, only half-joking.

“We’ve already sent diplomats to BetaZed, she told me. I had never even heard of that planet, had you?” Jim asked.

“Nope,” McCoy shrugged.

“Guess which Ambassador the Federation sent?” Jim whispered like he had a juicy secret.

Bones immediately guessed, “No! Sarek on a planet of pushy empaths… Ha… well, THAT must’ve tested his diplomatic balm!”

“I’m sure,” Kirk laughed. “Lwaxara’s parents hosted the envoy and apparently things didn’t go so well. Her mother contacted Sarek after she heard about this clinic, though, for help getting her daughter in, and he obliged, so things must not be hopeless.”
“If you keep enjoying her company, maybe you can do a little Kirk-style diplomacy on behalf of the Federation. Just a small side-project to keep you busy while you’re down,” Bones winked. Jim didn’t like feeling sidelined or useless. This might be just the thing, Bones thought, rocking up on his toes then back on his heels like he did when he got a good idea.

“Spock will be here any minute for dinner”, Kirk said. “Are there any restrictions on what I can have or is the sky the limit? I am starving.”

“You can choose any dish you like,” Bones said, “but just go easy on the quantity for this first meal. The biowaste elimination unit works just like the ones in Sickbay; it will take care of everything automatically until you are ambulatory again, but your belly may still be tender, so start with small amounts of food until you know.”

“Okay, Bones. When will I be able to stand on this leg?” Kirk asked.

“Probably not until a day after the third treatment, so about 8 days from now,” McCoy estimated.

Kirk had been trying to stay positive, but that was a long time to be bedridden. He was hungry and could feel himself on the verge of getting grouchy.

“Hmm,” Kirk frowned. “Where is Spock? He’s five minutes late. That’s not like him.”

“He has to pass room 117, Lwaxara’s room, to get here, Jim. You don’t suppose…?”

“Go get him, Bones,” Kirk ordered, but before he had the chance, Spock walked through his door.

“Good evening, Captain. You are looking quite well,” he said. “Hello, Doctor.”

“Hi, Spock,” they chorused.

“Forgive my tardiness. I was delayed by a fascinating young lady, a patient here…”
“Lwaxara?” Bones asked.

“Why yes, Doctor,” Spock confirmed.

“She is something else, but she will chew your ear right off,” Bones warned.

“My ear, Doctor? Why would the young lady wish to…”

“Spock, you know good and well what I meant…,” the doctor started in before Jim nixed it.

“All right, you two, that’s enough. I’m hungry,” Jim complained. “Bones do you want to join us for dinner?”

“No, thanks. You and Spock can eat hospital food, Jim. I’m going dining with the Doctors Mullov,” he said with a Russian accent. “They’re taking me to a Russian restaurant on the promenade. Chekov will be so jealous.”

“I bet Chekov is already there!” Jim laughed.

“Negative, Captain,” Spock said. “Ensign Chekov’s shore leave rotation does not begin until 07:00 tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll give him my review of it,” McCoy offered, “Maybe he can take Martha there tomorrow.”

“If you are referring to Yeoman Martha Landon, Doctor,” Spock said, “their shore leave schedules do not overlap.”

“What?! Spock, they’re dating,” McCoy huffed. “Have a little sensitivity, man!”

Spock raised his eyebrows. “I was unaware of this fact,” he stated placidly.
Jim grinned.

McCoy rolled his eyes wearily. “Chekov and Martha have been a couple since before Gamma Trianguli VI, Spock! How can you have a brain like a computer and not know these things?!”

“Neither Ensign Chekov nor Yeoman Landon complained about their shore leave rotation assignments,” Spock argued.

“Well they wouldn’t, would they?” Bones had had enough. “Jim, can we replace Spock with a Betazoid?”

“Well, Lwaxara is the only Betazoid I know,” Jim played along, glancing at Spock, “and she has to stick around here another 6 to 10 months.”

“Damn. I guess we’re out of luck then,” McCoy sulked.

“Doctor, I see no reason to prefer a Betazoid to me,” Spock said.

“And I see no reason to still be here talking to you two, when Russian vittles and vodka awaits,” McCoy spun on his heel, but before he left, he pulled Jim’s computer screen arm across his bed, “Menu’s in here. Remember not to eat as much as I’m about to. Call me if you need me, Jim.” Then he was off.

“Close the door, please Spock,” Jim asked in the wake of McCoy’s exit, “I can’t handle any more socializing today.”

“If you’d prefer to rest, Jim, we can have dinner another time,” Spock offered.

“No, no, I didn’t mean you, Spock.”

“But will we not be socializing over dinner?”

Kirk smiled a warm, relaxed smile. “I hope so; I’ve been looking forward to it all day. I’m glad
McCoy had other plans.”

Jim switched on his screen and quickly found the menu. He beckoned to Spock to come look over his shoulder, “Come choose something, Spock. Ooo, look at this, they have Vulcan food.”

Jim scrolled slowly through the Vulcan cuisine choices, forgetting how fast his friend could read. Spock’s eyebrows crept up and Jim heard a slight inhalation of surprise by his ear.

“What?” Jim asked.

“I haven’t had predik cy’ta since I was a child. My father’s aunt used to make it.”

“Wanna give it a whirl?” Jim asked.

Spock nodded and Jim selected it.

“I feel like steak, but Bones said to keep it light, so I’m thinking a really thick soup maybe, with some bread,” Jim said as he continued to scroll. “There are a lot of choices. I bet Lwaxara has had everything on the menu by now,” Jim pondered aloud as he made his choice and submitted their order. “Delivered in 14 minutes. That’s not bad.”

Spock was still over his shoulder, even though the screen was dark now. Jim pushed it away on the pivoting arm, exchanging it for the wrap-around table. Boy, he was hungry. “You just wanted room-temperature water to drink, right Spock?”

“Yes,” Spock replied.

“Good. That’s what I got you… and I know you don’t eat dessert.”

“No.”

“Look at my view,” Jim said, suddenly realizing that Spock hadn’t seen the Enterprise from the window yet.
Spock didn’t say anything, but he walked toward the window, the Enterprise pulling him closer.

“All of our lives are in there,” the captain said wistfully. “Thanks for taking care of her while I’m down.”

“It is my pleasure, Captain,” Spock replied, still looking out the window, hands clasped loosely behind his back.

“Did you have any problems today? Need my advice on anything?” Jim asked.

“Actually, Captain, I was wondering earlier this afternoon how you would handle a certain written communication to which I must respond.”

“Okay, fill me in,” Jim said eagerly.

“The Andorian Research Institute is questioning the manner in which I recovered their downed vessel, or rather did not recover it. They have written a complaint to Starfleet Command asking them to pay the costs of recovery.

Kirk made a scoffing noise. “Wow, that’s some thanks for saving the crew from becoming human sacrifices!” Kirk said, shaking his head in disbelief. “What did you do with their ship, Spock? I never asked.”

“While the Andorian vessel was small enough to be towed safely by the Enterprise under normal conditions, Mr. Scott said we could not do it at warp 8, and we needed to use warp 8 to get you here within the 72-hour window specified by Dr. McCoy. The Prime Directive requires that all Federation equipment, including vessels, that pose a risk of cultural contamination, be removed from areas of potential alien contact as soon as possible. So, I tractored their damaged ship off the moon into a stable high orbit and left it there for recovery or repair at a later time. Then, of course, I placed beacons warning other ships of the moon’s dangerous inhabitants, and we left,” Spock explained.

“Sounds like exactly what I would’ve done. Just give Starfleet that exact account of your reasoning, with timelines and statements from Scotty and Bones to back it up. It should be fine.”
“Very well, Captain. Thank you,” Spock said.

“Feel free to ask me any questions that pop up over the next 11 days, Spock. I’m going to be sitting around here doing a whole lotta nothing,” Jim pointed out with a smile, “and I feel fine now… really good actually.”

“It is gratifying to see,” Spock said, recalling the deathly pale look of his captain’s face only two nights ago. “How is your leg? Do you have any sensation yet?”

“I get these ‘zingers’ as the nerves re-grow. It’s like a sharp pain around my hip, but only for 1-2 seconds, then it’s over. It’s happened three times since my treatment today. S’posed to be a good sign,” Jim shrugged.

“Indeed,” Spock acknowledged. “I have read a bit of the Mullovs’ published work on nerve regeneration. It is fascinating.”

“Did you know the medical knowledge of the Fabrini helped them?” Jim interjected. “It put them 15 years ahead of where they were, Dr. Mullov told me.”

“Interesting,” Spock remarked.

“Very fortunate for me, but even more so for my new neighbor, Lwaxara,” Jim said. “She told me Dr. Mullova’s new techniques are regenerating her deep tissue cells, and as they reproduce and replace the scar tissue, she may eventually look as she did before the accident! Isn’t that astonishing with deep plasma burns?”

“Lwaxara is quite fortunate,” Spock said, “She has a strong mind and a positive outlook.”

“She didn’t expect you to like her, Spock, but you do, don’t you?”

“Yes… but that may have been by design,” Spock added.

“What do you mean?”
“As I passed by her room tonight, she called out to me by name with her mind, just to see if I could hear her. She is a very inquisitive person.”

“That she is,” Jim quirked a smile.

“…and since I am, too, I accepted her invitation to converse telepathically. She already had knowledge of me from your mind. Scenes, memories, impressions from your mind were offered to me, to make me… comfortable. She knew intuitively that I would accept her if I saw that you had.”

“Wow, that’s something,” Kirk remarked. “She wanted you to like her. She said most Vulcans don’t. Did she mention she knows your father?”

“Yes,” Spock said. “When her mind first called to me, she said, ‘Greetings Spock, son of Sarek, friend of Captain Kirk. I am Lwaxara Dirn of BetaZed.’”

“She related to me that she was the first daughter of Gwenar and Lahvis Dirn, who had hosted the Vulcan diplomatic envoy my father led last year. Her feelings that the meeting had failed came through, but only vaguely. She is accustomed to sharing all of her emotions without censor, but she was courteous to my sensibilities. Her mind is surprisingly well-ordered and there was a discipline there that my father claims Betazoids lack.”

“Then your father told you about his time on BetaZed?” Jim asked, surprised.

“Yes,” Spock confirmed.

“Why didn’t you ever mention it to me?” Jim wondered.

“It didn’t seem relevant until now,” Spock said unapologetically.

Jim chuckled. That was so… Spock.

“Sarek got Lwaxara in here. Sixteen months of cutting-edge re-gen treatments on the Federation’s
dime for a Betazoid VIP,” Kirk said.

Spock considered. “Lwaxara knows that the Federation understands the value of her planet and its inhabitants.”

“She thinks the Federation and Starfleet in particular will seek to exploit Betazoid abilities. She understands us well. Too well,” Kirk observed.

“I think her people are too savvy to ally themselves with any political entity that is unscrupulous. They would see right through that,” Spock said.

“Yes,” Kirk agreed. “They know their worth in a galaxy of non-telepaths and they also realize they are ripe for exploitation. There have been kidnappings, Lwaxara told me. Federation protection would be welcome if they trusted us, but sending a **Vulcan** envoy apparently wasn’t the right first move. They found the Vulcans cold and closed-off emotionally, ‘hollow’ Lwaxara told me.”

Spock raised one eyebrow, “She feels differently about me.”

“Good. She saw you through my eyes, and now she’s met you in person. You’ve probably done more for diplomacy in 5 minutes than your father did in a week! Ha,” Jim was pleased. “You should be the diplomat in the family.”

Rather than acknowledging the captain’s compliment, Spock unexpectedly said, “She calls me **your** Vulcan. Is that the way you think of me?”

Spock’s expression was almost playful… for Spock… so Jim dared to say, “Well, you’re my first officer, and you’re a Vulcan, so I guess I **do** kind of think of you as my Vulcan. Is that all right?”

Before Spock could give the dry, witty comeback that Kirk knew he would, there was a knock at the door and a voice said, “Your dinner is here. May I come in?”

Spock opened the door for the server and she stepped inside with the trays. She was Orion. Kirk had never seen an Orion woman modestly dressed before. Most displayed their sexuality with unabashed verve, at least the Orions Kirk had encountered did. This woman, however was dressed in a sleek white and black uniform that concealed all but her lovely face, dark hair, and delicate, green hands.
“Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock,” she greeted them, “It is an honor to serve you. Welcome to Starbase 4.”

“Thank you,” the captain replied for both of them.

“I can guess who is having the predik cy’ta,” she said, setting Spock’s covered dish and water on the small guest table, “and Captain, you must be having the potato cheese soup with French bread and a citrus soda,” she said, laying everything out for him on his tray table.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” she asked.

“No, thanks. It smells great!” Kirk said.

“Enjoy your meals. You can select ‘Tray removal’ on your screen when you are finished,” she said as she exited.

Alone again, Kirk told Spock, “Captain McFarland of the Lincoln liberated 30-plus Orions from a cargo freighter in the Blentnar Corridor last year. I read they were granted asylum on Starbase 4. She must be one of them,” he speculated.

“A sound bit of reasoning, Captain.”

“She must have been given a pheromone-ectomy, though, because I’m not feeling particularly aroused. Are you Spock?” He asked his first officer.

Not even bothering to raise an eyebrow, Spock said, “Eat your food, Jim,” as he started in on his.

“How is it?” Kirk asked.

Spock looked pleasantly surprised, “It is acceptable,” he said.
“High praise from you,” Kirk said, picking up his own spoon, “Let’s see how mine is.”

“Oh, this is greaaat!” he moaned, biting off a piece of bread to go with the cheesy potatoes already in his mouth. “I could eat FIVE bowls of this!” It was so good to eat again, so comforting. “Thanks for having my first meal with me, Spock,” Jim said warmly.

“You are welcome, Jim,” Spock replied.

“Are you sleeping tonight?” Jim asked.

“Three or four hours perhaps,” Spock said.

“You should go see the gardens then,” Jim suggested. “During my treatment today, Dr. Mullova told me they project colored lights onto the fountains at night, so it’s almost as impressive at night as it is during the ‘day.’ The dome panels are opaqued for ‘day,’ but at night, they are clear and you can see the stars. By all accounts, it’s a not-to-be-missed attraction.”

Spock appeared disinterested. When he finished the bite he was chewing, he said, “The Office of Vulcan Affairs has invited me to a lecture at 09:00 tomorrow morning.”

“Well… go to the gardens tonight and the lecture tomorrow morning,” Kirk persisted.

Spock continued eating and said nothing.

“Look Spock, Vulcans appreciate beauty; I know they do, and you deserve a little beauty. I mean… things have been pretty ugly lately. Three days ago you were locked in a cage getting painted for human sacrifice, for heaven sakes. A little stroll through a garden would be good for the soul, don’t you think?”

“3.7 days,” Spock corrected.

“Oh,” Kirk breathed out in exasperation, shaking his head, “I guess you’re over it then.”
“Captain… Jim, I ‘get over’ negative experiences through meditation.”

“Have you meditated since that day,” Kirk asked.

“Yes,” Spock replied.

They both fell quiet for a bit, finishing their meals, each with his own thoughts.

Jim wanted to know what Spock had experienced during his captivity. He didn’t remember finding Spock or rescuing him. The only memory he had from that day was the image of Spock running toward him as the ceiling was caving in and he felt the weight of the rocks crushing his body. He wanted to know if, as McCoy had said, Spock thought he was going to die from his injuries… and he wanted to know Spock’s plans for after their five-year mission ended in six months.

“Aagh!” the captain groaned suddenly through gritted teeth. “Zinger,” he explained quickly, before Spock could ask. “It’s over now.”

“I hope those don’t disturb your sleep, Jim.”

“I’ll be fine,” Kirk said and then ventured, “Spock? Can you ever read my thoughts from across the room?”

“No,” Spock replied, “Why do you ask?”

“Often you seem to know what I am thinking,” Jim said.

Spock thought about that for a moment. “Our long association and familiarity allow me to interpret your mental state with better-than-average accuracy through traditional means: facial expression, body language, and vocal inflection.”

“Oh, I guess I provide ample external clues.” Kirk said, smiling, “You, however… don’t.”

“You may ask whenever you want to know my thoughts,” Spock said softly.
Jim smiled warmly at him. “I know, Spock. Thank you,” he said kindly. “I think I’m a bit jealous of Lwaxara’s abilities. She wields them so effortlessly. Imagine a whole planet of people who can communicate like that! They could rule the galaxy if they wanted to.”

“It is a powerful ability,” Spock agreed, nodding, “Used unethically, it could pose a great threat.”

“I was thinking the same thing… and yet, I didn’t feel threatened when she was in my mind,” Jim remarked.

“Nor did I,” Spock reflected.

“That surprised me a little. You’re so private…,” Kirk said.

“She only took what I offered her. Whether she could have taken more, I do not know. I will attempt to guard, in the future, against her probing too deeply,” Spock said. “I do not fault her for her inquisitiveness, or doubt her motives, but there are limits.”

“Yes,” Jim agreed.

“You will not be able to shield against her, Jim. If there are areas of your mind you do not wish to share, you should tell her immediately upon your next meeting,” Spock suggested.

“I don’t think I have ‘areas,’ Spock. Human minds are not as neatly organized as Vulcan minds… or so I’ve been told,” Kirk glanced sideways at Spock, grinning warmly.

“Indeed,” Spock confirmed.

“Starfleet has allowed her onto a starbase filled with personnel who possess classified military information; they must feel the risk is minimal,” Kirk pointed out. “I’m not going to worry about it… and as for my personal secrets, I don’t think I’m hiding any doozies. How about you, Spock? Any ‘deep darks?’”
Spock just raised an eyebrow and chose mysterious silence.

Jim smiled and didn’t push. “That sure was a good meal,” he said, patting his stomach, “but I’m already thinking about breakfast! Funny how important food becomes when you haven’t eaten in three days. I don’t know why you would do that by choice, Spock,” Jim wondered aloud.

“Our physiologies and nutritional requirements differ,” Spock said simply.

“Well, thanks again for eating with me tonight. I’m glad they had something you enjoyed,” Jim said, swinging his screen into reach and selecting ‘tray removal.’ He could talk to Spock all night, but he should probably let him go. “Well, I won’t keep you from the gardens any longer; I know how you’ve been looking forward to seeing them,” Jim coaxed one last time with a wink.

“Thank you, Captain, I shall go see the gardens.”

Kirk beamed, victorious. “Tell me all about them tomorrow, so I can live vicariously… I will see you tomorrow, won’t I?”

“Yes, Jim, although the time is indeterminate,” Spock said. “Four parties have requested meetings with me: two department heads, the quartermaster, and the Andorian captain.”

“…and don’t forget that exciting lecture at the Office of Vulcan Affairs,” Kirk reminded.

“Goodnight, Captain.”

“Goodnight, Spock.”

Their eyes met and they shared a friendly look as Spock slipped out into the quiet hallway and closed the door.

After Spock left, Jim just sat there smiling for a long time, going over their conversation. He was very lucky indeed to enjoy such a good rapport with his first officer. Spock was such an asset to him. Jim felt much stronger with “his Vulcan” at his side.
Since he wasn’t sleepy, Kirk decided he’d watch the ‘Welcome to Starbase 4’ video advertised on his screen. He dimmed the lights a bit, inclined his bed a few degrees for comfort and hit “start.” It began with outside views of the starbase. The place really was a marvel of modern engineering. Hanging like a welcoming ornament in space, it was aesthetically pleasing as well as efficient. Completely modified and updated over the past decade, it boasted 47 decks, 26 ports (six large enough for a starship), 720 guest accommodations, offices representing every Federation species, restaurants, gardens, shops…

…wait, what was that? Jim rolled the video back 20 seconds and the narrator said, “…expansive gardens featuring flora from around the galaxy and fountains lighted with soothing colors at night. Come in person or view by LIVE Gardencam.”

**Live Gardencam?** Jim searched quickly for it and found the correct screen. There were five cameras located in strategic places to cover the whole garden. He punched “Gardencam 1.” *Wow, beautiful. I wonder if Spock is there yet?* Jim thought. He didn’t see him on Gardencams 2 or 3 either, but when he punched “Gardencam 4”… *There he is!* Jim would know the back of that head anywhere. Spock was walking away from the camera, stopping to look at plants on either side of the path. Occasionally Kirk could see him in profile. He seemed to be enjoying himself, or at least finding it interesting. Jim knew he liked botany.

As Spock walked beyond the view of Gardencam 4, Kirk clicked around to find him with one of the other cameras. *There.* He had stopped, by the largest of the fountains. The lighting was better here and Jim could see his face as he gazed, expressionless, into the colorful blur of water. There was no audio, but the cascading water must be making a powerful sound, Jim imagined. Spock stood there like a statue, hands clasped together behind his back, watching as the lights changed from a serene blend of cool colors to a fiery melange of orange and red, then back again. To the casual observer, Spock looked unmoved, but Kirk knew he wouldn’t still be standing there if he were. *What are you thinking right now, Spock?*

The gardens weren’t crowded at this time of night, but there were *some* visitors. About half were in Starfleet uniforms and half in civilian attire. They all noticed Spock, but no one tried to speak to him. Whether they were noticing him because he cut such a striking figure or because they knew of him, Jim wasn’t sure. Two Vulcans in long robes came into view. They stopped about 12 feet behind Spock… *directly* behind him where he wouldn’t see them… and had a conversation that Jim suspected was about his first officer. Then, they walked on, leaving him to his solitude.

T’Pring had told Spock that he was a celebrity on Vulcan. No, a *legend* is what she’d said. Could that be true? Their missions were exciting, and some had been made public knowledge. Starfleet’s PR machine was always churning to keep the public’s opinion of the military high. Peaceniks and other naysayers had been calling for the dissolution of Starfleet ever since its founding. Every time there was a renegade captain, a terrible tragedy, or a damaging political incident, those voices would get louder. Kirk couldn’t blame Starfleet for wanting to shore up its reputation with brilliant
officers like Spock.

_There is zero chance Starfleet Command WON’T offer Spock his own ship. I’m kidding myself that we’ll have another five years together_, Kirk thought. Even if that’s what Spock wanted, Starfleet Command would surely insist he accept promotion. That familiar pang of panic ran through Jim. He and Spock made such a good team. What kind of first officer would Spock get? Would it be someone who understood him and helped him, or someone who followed his orders but wrote him off personally as cold and distant?

Spock looked so lonely standing there watching the fountain. Jim watched as his angular face changed colors with the lights. He knew there was so much beneath the surface of his friend. It had taken such a long time for their rapport to develop and deepen into a strong trust. Now that they had it, Jim would do anything not to lose it. He wondered how Spock felt. He’d gotten close to asking him a couple of times, but never quite did. What would it be like meeting up with Captain Spock or Admiral Spock many years down the line? Would they still have what they had now, or would it have evaporated with time and distance?

He was jolted from his thoughts by a knock at the door. “Tray pickup. May I come in.”

“Come in,” Kirk said, switching off his screen as though about to be caught doing something wrong.

It was a different worker this time. The skinny young man said, “I hope you enjoyed your meal, Captain Kirk.”

“I really did. Thank you,” Kirk said.

The man efficiently gathered up Kirk’s tray, then turned to clear the table where Spock had eaten. “Did Mr. Spock enjoy his Vulcan dish?” he asked.

“Yes,” Kirk answered, surprised. “How did you know that’s who had dinner with me?”

“Everyone knows Mr. Spock… and Captain Kirk!” he said as though it were obvious.

“They do? What do they know?” Jim asked to see what the young man would say.
“Well… the Organian Peace Treaty… stealing the Romulans’ cloaking device… liberating the
troglytes on Ardana… talking the Kelvins out of invading our galaxy… helping the Scalosians and
the Gideons… bringing the medical knowledge of the Fabrini to us…”

Kirk was stunned, “I had no idea civilians knew so much about our missions.”

“We’re really proud of our Starfleet. Having you all out there makes me sleep better at night.” He
finished gathering the dishes and headed for the door. “Thanks for your service, Captain. I hope
you’re better soon and back out there.”

“Thank you,” Kirk replied as the man slipped out.

Wow, Jim marveled, Spock and I have FANS. That is crazy.

He snapped his screen back on and searched the Gardencams again for Spock, but he was gone.
Chapter 6

11 Days Down - Chapter 6

The next morning, Kirk was awakened by the sound of a nurse moving around his room.

“Good morning, Captain. I’m your nurse, Virginia. I just need to check your numbers and familiarize you with some of our hygiene tools. Did you sleep well?”

“Uh… yeah. I don’t even remember falling asleep. Guess I was wiped out.” Kirk stretched and rubbed his eyes, taking a better look at his nurse. She was a grandmotherly older lady, her gray hair neatly piled on top of her head in that basket weave style his former yeoman used to wear.

“The data shows you had two episodes of nerve pain last night. You slept through them?” she asked.

“Guess so,” he replied.

“Dr. Mullova will be in to see you in about 20 minutes. I’ll just summarize this data for her… Your numbers look good.” Looking at her tablet, she said, “It says here that you sustained multiple serious injuries during your accident. We are monitoring all of your systems, not just nerve regrowth. Your ship’s physician did an outstanding job of repairing your other injuries and preserving what was left of your damaged nerves.”

“He’s the best,” Jim said matter-of-factly with a bit of undeserved pride.

“Are you still having memory loss?” Virginia asked.

“Yes, a little,” he admitted. “Events from the hours prior to the accident haven’t come back. My officers have filled in the gaps for me, but I don’t have the actual memories.”

“We could stimulate them with a level 12 scan, but that’s not always indicated. I’ll let you discuss that with Dr. Mullova and your Dr. McCoy.”
“Okay,” Kirk said.

“Have you learned about Starbase 4 and everything that is available to our patients yet?” she asked, gesturing toward his dark screen.

“I watched part of the intro vid last night, and ordered dinner,” Jim said. That made him think of breakfast… and Spock.

“Your starship’s Sickbay is pretty state-of-the-art, so you won’t be as impressed as some patients with our gizmos,” she began, “but let me give you an overview of some of the personal hygiene tools we have for our patients who aren’t ambulatory.”

She pulled open a drawer, “This one is like a portable sonic shower. It cleans the oils from your skin and hair. Just switch it on and run it an inch or so over the areas you want to clean. This one keeps your beard hair from growing beyond the surface of your skin. Do NOT run it over your eyebrows to see what will happen,” she joked. “This one will clean your teeth. Just hold the ball end in your mouth for 8 seconds and you’re done. Here are clippers for your fingernails, and yours truly will be in charge of your toenails,” she smiled. “Your screen can be a mirror. It’s one of the selections under ‘hygiene,’ as well as tutorials on all the gizmos in case you forget everything I’ve said.”

“Thanks,” Jim said.

“I’ll be your daytime nurse for the next five days. Just call me with the button on your bed controls if you need me. Go ahead and select some breakfast and play with the gizmos if you like. Dr. Mullova will be by in 15 minutes or so.”

“Thanks, Virginia,” Kirk said, raising his bed up and switching on his screen.

As she picked up her tablet and slipped out, Jim was thinking omelet! Scrolling through the egg dishes, he selected one with four cheeses and tri-color peppers, with buttered toast, orange juice, and coffee. 6 minute delivery. They’re fast in the morning! Jim thought. Not much time to use the hygiene devices. He pulled the drawer out and tried the portable sonic shower. Ooo nice! That feels better. Then he grabbed the ‘shaver’ and careful not to go near his eyebrows, he ‘shaved.’ The dental gizmo he’d save for after breakfast.
This being non-ambulatory was not bad. Not yet anyway. He stretched again and moved his right leg to get the blood pumping. His left leg still had no sensation. He nudged at it with his right foot just to reposition it a little.

“Jim!” Bones was standing in the doorway. “How ya doing?”

“Hi Bones. Come in. How was the Russian restaurant?”

“Oh, they lay on quite a feast there. Quite a feast,” the doctor said, patting his waistline.

“I just ordered breakfast. Have you eaten?” Jim asked.

“Just a cup of coffee in the mess hall. That’s all I felt like.”

“How’s the ship this morning?” Jim asked.

“Half empty and missing her captain,” McCoy said because he knew it would make Jim feel good.

Jim smiled because he knew that was why Bones said it.

“Did you see Spock?” Jim asked.

“No, but I had a request from him to sign a statement that I had told him we needed to get you here within 72 hours of your injury,” McCoy said, puzzled.

“Did you sign it?” Jim asked.

“Yes.”

“The Andorian Research Institute tried to send a bill to Starfleet for not recovering their ship,” Jim explained. “Spock tractored it to high orbit, but had to leave it there because Scotty said we
couldn’t tow it at warp 8 and warp 8 is what it took to get here in 72 hours.”

“Oh, if that doesn’t beat all!” McCoy scoffed angrily. “I think our captain is a little more important than their wrecked bucket of bolts.”

Jim grinned, “Thanks Bones. Spock told me last night and I suggested he get signed statements from you and Scotty. It should be fine,” Jim explained.

“I imagine those blue bureaucrats at the Andorian Research Institute will be feelin’ pretty small when they learn the details,” the doctor growled.

“Spock told me the Andorian captain wanted to meet with him today, so hopefully they’ll discuss it,” Jim said. “I hate that Spock has to worry about petty stuff like this.”

“That’s an exec’s job, Jim, and Spock is great at it. He deals with pettiness all the time that would drive you or me up a wall. You just don’t see it because he’s so good at doing it for you.”

“…and I get all the glory,” Jim said.

“…and the girls. Don’t forget the girls,” McCoy added playfully.

Jim glanced down shyly, then his head popped up as he remembered something, “Spock has a fan! Me too. Civilians on the base know a lot more about our missions than you’d expect. The kid who picked up our trays after dinner last night rattled off my log like he was there when I recorded it! He said, and I quote, ‘Everybody knows about Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk.’”

“I don’t suppose he mentioned the intrepid Dr. McCoy who has to patch them up?” Bones asked.

“You didn’t come up, no,” Jim teased.

“Breakfast is here,” a voice announced from the open doorway.

“Come on in,” Jim called.
The lady quickly set up the captain’s tray and left since he was with his doctor.

“Oh, doesn’t that look good?” Bones remarked. “Did you take my advice and go easy with dinner last night?”

“I did,” Jim replied, “potato soup and some bread. Spock had a Vulcan dish and liked it. They’ve got good food here and so much variety.”

“Not like hospital food back in my day,” McCoy commented.

“Pull up a chair, Bones,” Jim invited. “The nurse said Dr. Mullova would be stopping by soon.”

“Thanks. That really is one heck of a view you’ve got,” McCoy remarked, spotting the Enterprise out the window. I bet you never shut those drapes.”

“Nope,” Jim confirmed.

“Captain Kirk, good morning,” Dr. Mullova greeted as she whisked into the room. “Leonard,” she nodded a greeting at Dr. McCoy. “Keep eating, Captain, I just need to run my instruments over your hip to see if all of the nerve branches we stimulated yesterday are experiencing growth.”

“Go ahead, Doctor,” Kirk agreed.

She moved in, gently pulled his bed coverings aside, and did the scan. Then, as she reviewed the results, a smile spread across her face. “Results are what we expected. Very good.”

“Great,” Kirk said.

“How many sharp, shooting pains have you experienced so far,” she asked.

“Three yesterday, and the nurse said I had two during the night, but they didn’t wake me,” Jim
“No prickling sensations yet?” she asked.

“No.”

“Well, we’re on track. No treatments today or tomorrow, so just relax. Try not to sit up at a full 90 degree angle unless you’re having a meal. A gentle incline of 110 degrees or greater is best. Do you have any questions?” Dr. Mullova asked.

“I guess not,” Jim replied honestly.

“Leonard,” she said, “Would you like to join me for my rounds? That patient I was telling you about is next, and I have two other cases you would find interesting, I think.”

“Jim, do you mind?” Bones asked.

“No. Go ahead,” Kirk said, waving his hand in a shooing motion. “Stop by later.”

“Thanks,” he said and followed Dr. Mullova into the hallway.

Jim still had half an omelet and now he could give it the attention it deserved. He smiled to himself. *I’m doing well. I’m going to recover.* He thought of Spock. How differently this all could have gone had his first officer not gotten him out from under that rubble and up to the Enterprise so quickly. He owed Spock so much.

That reminded him that he’d forgotten to mention the possibility of a level 12 scan to Dr. Mullova or Bones. *Damn.* He could ask Spock to mind meld with him and share his memories of events, but he tried not to ask that of Spock unless it were absolutely necessary. Spock had told him the Vulcan mind meld was a terrible lowering of personal barriers. He would just ask Spock to tell him, next time he saw him. *Wait. Spock’s report. I wonder if he’s filed it yet?* Through his screen, Kirk found the Starfleet login and put in his password. His files opened up. There was a report from Chekov… Uhura… Scott… nothing yet from Spock. Curious. Spock’s reports were usually the first to be filed.
Jim would read the others’ reports after breakfast, he decided, but he wasn’t quite finished eating yet. They’d brought jam with his toast. Dessert!
Kirk was just finishing his last bite of toast and swig of coffee when Lwaxara appeared.

“Good morning, Captain. How are you today?” she greeted him from his doorway.

“That’s great. I see you’ve just finished eating and you look rested… Would this be a good time for a story?” she suggested.

“Apparently, most of my stories are a matter of record already, according to the young man who picked up my dishes after dinner last night,” Kirk chuckled. “It was crazy how much he knew about our missions. He was like….”

“That’s Jason. His parents are Starfleet communications officers. He lives with them on the other side of the base,” she said. “He knows everything about Starfleet, wanted to go to the Academy like his sister, but didn’t have the grades. You and Spock have a lot of fans here, you know. The Enterprise is the pride of the fleet. Everything you’ve accomplished! It’s the stuff of legend.”

“…a fan?” Lwaxara supplied. She could see in his mind who the server was.

“Yes.”

“Now, Captain, pick a tale and share it with me, please,” Lwaxara was nodding intently like she was going to start without him if he hesitated, so he launched in.

“Well, here’s one that maybe people haven’t heard about yet,” Kirk began. It involves life-energy
transfer. Have you heard of that?"

“No,” she answered wide-eyed, sensing that it was very diabolical.

“The Enterprise was called to planet Camus II where a group of scientists were studying the ruins of an ancient civilization. Many of the expedition had died of radiation poisoning, but it turned out not to be accidental. They had been murdered by the head of the expedition, Dr. Janice Lester. She had found in the ruins an ancient machine, still working, that could transfer the life energy of one person into the body of another and vice versa. She cooked up a plan involving me, because she had developed a terrible resentment….”

“Oh no! She stole your body! She wanted to be captain!” Lwaxara blurted. “She put you in her body and you were drugged up and couldn’t defend yourself! Everyone thought she was you at first. How scary for you. That could never happen on BetaZed. People would know right away! Spock knew,” Lwaxara guessed. “Spock had to know.”

“Yes,” Kirk said.

“You offered him to touch your mind. You said no one in the universe knew your thoughts better than he did, and asked him to confirm that it was indeed your mind in Janice Lester’s body.”

“He knew right away,” Kirk recalled, “right away.”

“You doubted for a moment that he would know it was you. Why?”

Jim considered. “None of us really understands Vulcan mind melds. Spock is the only Vulcan on the Enterprise and his telepathy is a mysterious thing. I did worry that maybe he wouldn’t be able to tell it was me.”

“Of course he could,” Lwaxara smiled. “He would know you anywhere. Dr. Lester was going to kill you to prevent the transfer from coming undone. Did Spock save you?” she asked.

“No, he didn’t need to. Janice and her accomplice came to the brig to separate me from my officers held there with me, but when I touched her arm, we returned to our own bodies,” Jim said.
“Oh, did she really scream ‘I want you dead! I want you dead!’? Oh, and you were so kind to her while she was yelling such awful things,” Lwaxara marveled.

“She was sick. She’s getting the help she needs now,” Kirk said.

“You loved her once. She said that the year you spent together at the Academy was the only time in her life that she felt alive. She had the same goals as you, but she was blocked from them and blamed you for it.”

“Yes,” Kirk said sorrowfully. “She let it eat her alive until I couldn’t stand to be with her anymore. Every one of my successes was like a blow to her.”

“Well that wasn’t a happy story, was it?” Lwaxara said in mock displeasure.

“I didn’t know you were looking for a happy story,” Kirk said. “You mentioned the Academy and I thought of Janice.”

“Every story has good and bad, I suppose. For instance, in that one you learned that Spock can recognize you in any form.”

“The Enterprise crew has had a few ‘out-of-body’ experiences,” Jim said.

“Think of them,” Lwaxara asked, excited.

Her eyes darted and danced as she pulled the recollections from Jim’s thoughts.

“Sargon, Thalassa, Henoch… half a million years old!” she gasped. “They liked your bodies and didn’t want to give them up. You were floating… floating where?”

“In the spherical receptacles that had held their consciousnesses for those thousands of years,” Kirk explained.

“Disembodied, unable to communicate. You were scared,” Lwaxara sensed.
“Yes.”

“…and yet you and Dr. Mulhall let them take over your bodies again so they could enjoy the feeling of being corporeal one last time together. Very gracious. Awww, and romantic,” she gushed. “Sargon and Thalassa left your bodies right during their kiss. You and Dr. Mulhall were so awkward,” she giggled.

“Well, we were a couple of feet apart when Sargon and Thalassa took over our bodies. Then, suddenly, we were lip-locked. A little disconcerting…,” Kirk defended with an embarrassed smile.

“You’re very diplomatic with alien species, Captain. Very forgiving,” Lwaxara remarked. “Thalassa caused McCoy a lot of pain and Sargon’s metabolism nearly burned you up.”

“…and those were the ‘good guys,’” Kirk said with a sideways smile.

“It’s too bad they felt the need to preserve their enemies after their cataclysmic war. All of those millennia of reflection and contemplation… and Henoch was still evil. He hadn’t learned anything,” Lwaxara shook her head. “He was going to keep Spock’s body and discard his consciousness like it was nothing,” she said, disbelieving.

“Yeah,” Kirk whispered.

“Sargon was well-intentioned, though,” Lwaxara saw in the captain’s mind.

“Yes. He wanted to offer us so much, live among us, teach us, help us not to end like his people did. He called us ‘my children’ and that’s how he felt about us.”

“Half a million years ago, Sargon’s race was traveling the galaxy, seeding it with humanoid life. I wonder if they were ever on BetaZed?” she considered. “What a shame how everything went down. I wish that Sargon and Thalassa could have made a different choice.”

“Me too,” Jim said reverently. “If the knowledge of the Fabrini helped our science advance 15 years, imagine what Sargon and Thalassa’s could have done.”
They sat thinking about that for a moment.

“What does ‘oblivion’ mean, Captain? Where did they go? Did they die?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Kirk said. “We once met a being who called himself a god, Apollo. He spoke of a ‘point of no return’ that even immortal beings can’t come back from.”

“Ah. I know from my recent experience with humans that many of them do not believe death is finite. Do you, Captain?” Lwaxara asked.

“I used to,” Kirk replied, “but the last 4 ½ years have shown me how many things are possible. I guess I’ll find out when I get there,” he joked. “Do Betazoids have afterlife beliefs?”

“Yes,” she replied. “They are varied. Some Betazoids claim they have followed their loved ones to the other side for a short time if they were empathically linked when they died. There are lots of stories,” she explained, “but no consensus… oh, you think you’re going to die alone.”

“Yes,” Kirk confirmed.

“Why do you think that?” Lwaxara asked with curiosity.

“Just a feeling,” Jim said.

“Do you think you’ll be old when you die?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve been old before. I didn’t like it,” Kirk chuckled.

“What do you mean…. Oh! You caught an aging disease. You actually got old! Your whole crew did!”

“Except Chekov. He was the key to the cure,” Kirk said.
“You became paranoid and spiteful. You accused Spock of trying to take your command,” she said.

“Because of his longer lifespan, Spock was aging slower than the rest of us. He wasn’t getting as forgetful. At the time, I thought he believed he was better able to command than I was. I said some awful things to him,” Kirk recalled.

“That was a disease. I don’t think real aging will hit you that way,” she reassured. “I think you will mellow into a lovely mature gentleman.”

That made them both laugh for a moment.

“You’ve said terrible things to Spock before… and he always forgives you,” Lwaxara said softly.

“He does,” Jim said with a sigh.

“You called him a traitor from a race of traitors,” Lwaxara gasped. “I don’t like the Vulcans much, but wow! Why would you say that?”

“I was trying to snap him out of something. He’d been infected by spores on an agricultural colony planet that made him lose all of his inhibitions. All of his Vulcan emotional controls were destroyed by the spores. He was smiling, laughing, frolicking….”

“Frolicking?!”

“Totally frolicking,” Kirk confirmed with a grin. “There was a botanist in the colony who he’d known on Earth six years before and she had fallen in love with him there and still carried a torch. She allowed him to be infected by the spores, so that he would be able to love her back… or she just wanted him to feel healthy and happy like all of the infected colonists did. I’m not sure.”

“Leila Kalomi,” Lwaxara said. “What a lovely name and a beautiful woman. I’d like to look like that. Spock loved her, under the influence of those spores?”
“Yes, he did,” Kirk said with emotion starting to creep into his voice.

“…and that’s why you wanted him to snap out of it, because you didn’t want him to love her?”

“No, no. That’s not it. I needed him to save the ship. He wasn’t himself. He’d lost all concern for the safety of the ship. The Enterprise could have plunged through the atmosphere in flames and he and Leila probably would have smiled like it was a shooting star.”

“Oh,” Lwaxara realized, “all hands had mutinied. Everyone was infected and had beamed down to the planet. You couldn’t pilot the ship alone. It sounds like the Lotus Eaters in the Odyssey. Have you read Homer’s Odyssey, Captain?”

“Yes,” he said. “You’ve read Terran literature?”

“Some,” she said. There is so much!”

“I did feel like Odysseus,” now that you mention it, “but I couldn’t physically drag my men back to the wooden ships, as it were, so I needed Spock to help me find another solution.”

“You, also, were infected for a short time, and almost forgot the safety of your ship,” Lwaxara said. “Then, you got so angry with yourself for that and the spores fled. You wanted Spock to free himself the same way… with negative emotions. So you said those terrible things to him hoping to make him angry.”

“Yes.”

“Spock is stronger than you, physically. It was a dangerous plan.”

“I needed him. I hated doing it.”

“Leila beamed up and begged him to come back,” Lwaxara said. “She cried so hard the spores left her, too.”
“I watched the transporter room recordings later…,” Jim recalled.

“You wanted to know how they had ended things without having to ask Spock.”

“Yes,” Kirk admitted guiltily.

“He told her that he was who he was and that was his purgatory to live in,” Lwaxara said sadly. “That is so Vulcan.”

“He told me and McCoy later, on the bridge, that that was the first time in his life he’d been happy,” Kirk recalled with deep sorrow.

“You feel like you ruined it for him.”

“We always seem to be in a crisis when Spock loses his emotional control; I can never just be a proper friend and help him.”

“It’s happened more than once?” she asked.

“Yes. Another time I’m thinking of wasn’t all peace and contentment. A lot of the crew went wild. It was an infection that was brought aboard the ship by a crewman who got careless with his biohazard protocols while down on a frozen planet. It spread quickly. Sulu was fencing in the corridors, people were painting graffiti on the walls, Lt. Tormolen stabbed himself, Riley sealed himself in engineering and turned the engines off….”

“You became irrationally resentful of your ship,” Lwaxara said, “for taking so much of your life, for demanding so much from you. Spock was crying and talking about his mother. He said he never told her he loved her…. He said when he felt friendship for you, he was ashamed,” she said. “Oh, poor Spock. He is so conflicted.”

*I shouldn’t be sharing this, Jim thought, I’m betraying Spock.*

“Spock’s mother is human?! I didn’t know that!” Lwaxara suddenly exclaimed. “Sarek has a human wife?! Are there a lot of Vulcan/human hybrids?”
“I believe Spock is unique,” Kirk said.

“Well, of course he is, but are there any other hybrids?” She laughed at her own joke.

“I’m getting tired, Lwaxara. Can we continue later?” Kirk asked.

A quick flicker of disappointment passed over her distorted features, before she said graciously, “Of course Captain. I draw energy from this kind of communication, but I know it can be draining sometimes for humans. Thanks for indulging me. You are the most interesting individual I have met here, and I have met a lot of interesting people,” she said sincerely. “I’ll let you rest. See you later.”

After she was gone, Kirk laid his head back on his pillow. Rolling his head left to see the Enterprise, he thought, *Forgive me, Spock.*
“Mister Spock!” Uhura called out loudly on the bustling Starbase 4 promenade.

Spock turned to find her waving and smiling from a storefront 13.5 feet to his left. Pivoting from his intended course, he strode over to her position on the shop’s stone steps, slightly above the crowd. The shop sold blown glass baubles that gleamed in the promenade’s realistic outdoor lighting.

“Miss Uhura,” he greeted her with a nod.

“Hello, Mr. Spock. This is some starbase, isn’t it?! What have you been up to this morning?”

“I just left a lecture at the Office of Vulcan Affairs,” he explained.

“Oh,” Uhura said, “What’s new with the Vulcans?”

“They are… well,” Spock said, unsure what Uhura was asking. “The lecture was on the latest techniques in molecular ore sampling and mineral micro-differentiation.”

“Hm,” she said. “Well, I found this blown glass shop. Don’t they have the most beautiful things?” She gestured over her shoulder to the colorful globes and teardrop-shaped ornaments hanging delicately from the store’s ceiling by transparent thread.

“They catch the light in a most pleasing way,” Spock agreed.

Uhura smiled. “I know it’s crazy having breakables on the ship, but I bought a little nightlight for my bathroom that I’m hoping survives the next six months,” she said, raising her small bag. “The shopkeeper wrapped it up so well for me, I can’t show you, but come in and you can see one just like it.”
Uhura turned back into the shop and Spock was obliged to follow. She led him to the display of nightlights, and pointing, said, “This is the one I bought… although no two are exactly the same, right Berto?”

The shopkeeper, a gray-haired gentleman with an Italian accent, heard her and said, “Thatsa right! Every creation isa unique.” Seeing Spock, the man drew in a breath of surprise, “Commander Spock! What an honor to hava you ina my shop!”

“Thank you,” Spock said simply.

“The lovely lieutenant was telling me your capitan will make a full recovery. Ima so happy to hear it!”

Spock nodded an acknowledgement.

“Please, Commander Spock, I want you to hava something to taka to the capitan. Somathing to brighten his clinic room. Pick anything you think he willa like, and itza on the house!”

“Oh, how generous!” Uhura exclaimed.

“We lova the Starfleet, and Capitan Kirk is her shining star. Bernini’s House of Glassworks isa proud to say grazie in thisa way.”

“How lovely. Let’s pick something out, Mr. Spock,” Uhura said, wandering toward the section marked The Best of Venezia.

“Oh, Mr. Spock, look at these wind chimes!” Uhura cooed, rushing over and gently touching the delicate blue and white glass pieces. She looked at Spock with a delighted smile. “What do you think?”

Spock’s face was impassive. “Miss Uhura, if I understand wind chimes correctly, they require something that neither a starbase nor a starship has… wind.”
“Well, how about these then?” She led him to a display of glass globes swirled with colors. Each globe was about the size of a large apple and had a tiny illumination chip inside. They were arranged to look like planets circling a larger, golden “sun.”

Some of the ‘planets’ were blue-purple, some green-yellow, others red-orange. “Why don’t we pick one of these?” Uhura said. “What is his favorite color?”

“I do not know the captain’s favorite color, Lieutenant,” Spock replied without inflection.

Uhura shot him a bit of a look he couldn’t interpret.

“He did mention once that he found the nighttime corridor lighting on the Enterprise ‘restful,’” Spock offered.

Uhura thought about that. “Okay, so maroon… magenta… violet… something in that pallet. How about this one?” she reached up for the one she’d spotted but couldn’t reach it.

Spock moved quickly to help her. He unclipped it from its hanger and presented it to her for an up-close inspection.

“Oh, I like this one!” She exclaimed. It’s got four colors in it if you look closely and they swirl around each other so artistically. It has a weight to it, too, and it’s so smooth. Feel it.”

She handed it back to Spock, who held it in his hand and ran his sensitive thumb over it. “It is aesthetically pleasing,” he declared.

“Do you think the Captain will like it?” Uhura asked.

“I do,” Spock concluded.

“Let’s have Berto wrap it up then,” Uhura said happily as they headed back to the counter.

“Berto, we’ve decided,” she called.
He was with another customer. It was Chekov! “Buying something for Martha, Pavel?” Uhura asked him.

“Yes,” he replied, surprised to see that Mr. Spock was with her.

“Hello Mr. Spock,” Chekov said.

“Ensign,” nodded Spock in greeting.

Turning back to Uhura, Chekov said, “Her birthday is een two weeks, eef I can hide eet tat long,” he joked.

“I’ll hide it for you in my cabin, if you want,” she offered.

“Oh, tank you! Tat is wery nice,” he said.

“Let’s see what you got her,” Uhura asked.

Berto was wrapping it, so Chekov pointed to a small lamp nearby, “Eets like dees but with a wiolet shade.”

“Beautiful. She’ll love it. We just picked something out for the captain. Berto said it’s on the house! He’s kind of a fan of the captain’s.

“Eweryone I’ve met here has been wery fond of Starfleet… and a lot of dem know wast amounts of details about our meesions,” Chekov said.

“I’ve noticed the same thing!” Uhura remarked, “I met a cute little girl in the gardens who came up to me and said, ‘You’re Lt. Uhura! You’re the communications officer on the Enterprise, aren’t you?’ She was maybe 8 or 9 and she knew all about me. She said, ‘You like to sing and Nomad wiped your mind because you were singing and you had to do school all over again. I hate stupid Nomad for doing that to you!’ It was so sweet, and very flattering. I told her I was all right now and
thanks for caring about me. She wants to go to the Academy.”

Berto, who had been wrapping both packages as they were chatting, handed them their padded parcels. “Your lady, I hope she lika the lamp,” he told Chekov. Then, turning to Spock and Uhura, he said, “and tella your capitan that Berto of Bernini’s House of Glassworks wishes him well.”

Uhura said, “We will, Berto. Thank you so much.”

Before the trio emerged onto the noisy promenade, Uhura asked, “Mr. Spock can we all go visit the captain right now, together? I want to see him, and I’d like to see how he likes his gift.”

“Me, too,” Chekov chimed in, “and I’d like to meet hees brilliant Russian doctors!”

“Is there a limit on how many visitors he can have at once?” Uhura asked Spock.

“I do not anticipate any objection. The clinic staff have been most accommodating thus far. I know the captain does not have any treatments scheduled for today. It is likely that he is currently, as he put it, ‘doing a whole lotta nothing.’”

Both Chekov and Uhura chuckled. When Spock was unexpectedly funny, it was the best!

“Were you headed to the clinic when I called to you, Mr. Spock?” Uhura suddenly thought to ask.

“I was not. However, I do not mind accompanying you there now,” Spock said.

“Okay, let’s go then,” Uhura said cheerfully. “I don’t know where the clinic is from here. Lead the way, Mr. Spock.”
Chapter 9

Lt. Uhura and Ens. Chekov followed Mr. Spock out the door of the blown glass shop, down the stone steps, and onto the faux cobblestone of the promenade. Spock walked very fast and his junior officers’ shorter legs had to work to keep up. It felt good to be out in what felt like the fresh air. The simulated blue sky and clouds above made them feel good.

After walking at a good clip for 3-4 minutes, they entered the first section of the medical clinic, Spock stopped suddenly and motioned for his officers to join him in a conversation alcove.

“There is a patient on the captain’s hallway from the planet BetaZed,” Spock began, “a young woman who has suffered badly disfiguring plasma burns….”

Chekov and Uhura winced in sympathy.

“Her name is Lwaxara Dirn. She is an empath and can read your thoughts and emotions. She is very friendly and inquisitive, and will likely want to meet you if she sees you. I thought you should know in advance.”

“Thanks,” Uhura said. “Is the captain bothered by her? He’s kind of trapped in here.”

“He likes her. She is enthusiastic and some might say ‘pushy,’ but she is generally respectful of humans’ boundaries. On her planet, total openness is the norm,” Spock explained. “It has been an adjustment for her to be with mostly humans for eight months.”

“She’s been here for eight monts?” Chekov gasped, “Poor ting.”

“Her attitude is surprisingly good,” Spock explained. “Although her nerve injuries have been healed, the tissue damage will take another six months to resolve.”

“She will look normal again?” Uhura asked.
“It is possible that she will,” Spock responded.

“Brilliant Russian doctors!” Chekov beamed. “Let’s go een.”

Spock led them down several more corridors until they came to the Nerve and Tissue Regeneration Unit.

“The captain’s room is #112 at the end of the hall,” Spock said. “Go ahead without me, give the captain his gift, and I will find his doctors and let them know I have a Russian Ensign who would like to meet them.”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Spock,” Chekov said.

“See you soon, Sir,” Uhura said, a little disappointed that Spock wouldn’t see Captain Kirk’s reaction to the gift, since he had helped her pick it out.

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Spock of Vulcan, you are so kind to give your junior officers time alone with their captain, Lwaxara said from her room. Come and visit me?

He turned into her room.

You were hoping I would be here. You wanted to see me alone. You may close the door so we won’t be disturbed.

Spock closed the door.

They are doing fine without you. We have time. Captain Kirk likes his gift and the company of his officers. He is laughing. He was upset earlier today, Lwaxara said telepathically.
Spock responded in kind, *Why was that?*  

*It was me,* she admitted. *I was in his mind all morning. It was glorious, but it wore him out. He shared some things he wished he hadn’t… about you. I will show you.*

Spock thought to refuse, but before he did, the images were already coming. Images, thoughts, feelings… *Jim’s* feelings. Missions, moments, experiences they had had together, but from *Jim’s* perspective. It was intoxicating.

*That… is… a very effective method of communication,* Spock marveled when it was over. His head was swimming. Lwaxara was much more gifted and practiced than he could ever be.

*You won’t leave him, will you?* she asked Spock. *He’s so worried that you will leave him. So worried.*

*I…don’t… I can’t…* Spock wanted to hide, but it was too late.

*What is Gol? What is Kolinahr?* she asked, *Think of Kolinahr.*

Spock could sense the storm coming, but he was powerless to stop it.

*Oh, Spock! Why?! Why would you want to purge your emotions, the very heart of you? You mean to endure that abuse for years only to emerge vacant, the best of yourself cut away?* Lwaxara couldn’t conceal how upsetting this was to her.

*It is one of many options. I have not yet decided,* Spock offered.

*Why would you even consider giving up everything you have for that?! Why is it appealing to you? Is Sarek encouraging it?* she asked.

*No,* Spock said. *It is my idea.*

*But… Jim. It would devastate him.* That was all she could say at the moment.
Spock was getting upset, too. His emotional controls couldn’t break. Not here. Not now. I need to explain it to you at another time. It was a plea for mercy.

*Of course,* she said. *I was judgmental. I’m sorry. We will speak again?* she asked.

“Yes,” Spock agreed, switching back to verbal communication. “Right now, I want to find one or both of the captain’s doctors. Our navigator wants to meet them. Do you know where they are?”

She always knew where everyone was; people didn’t realize this. “Dr. Mullov is in the doctors’ lounge, typing up some research notes. Dr. Mullova is with a patient in room 103.”

“Thank you, Lwaxara,” Spock said as he stepped into the hallway.

It was a 47-second walk to the doctors’ lounge and Spock slowed his pace so he would have a full minute to collect himself. He would not think of this again until tonight’s meditation. The door was open when he arrived and Dr. Mullov looked up from his work.

“Dr. Mullov, Ensign Chekov, our ship’s navigator, is here visiting the captain and would like to meet you, if you have the time,” Spock said.

Dr. Mullov smiled, “Of course, of course! I would love to meet him. Lead on….”

Before they arrived at the captain’s room, Spock mentioned, “Lt. Uhura, our communications officer, is also visiting.”

The mood in the captain’s room seemed good as they entered. Introductions were made and Chekov and Dr. Mullov stepped into the hall to chat since five people made the room a bit cramped.

“I cannot stay, Captain,” Spock apologized from just inside the doorway. “I am meeting with the Andorian captain and his first officer in 15.7 minutes. The ship coming to take them back to Andoria docks at 18:15 and is scheduled to leave at 20:00 hours. I will greet the ship and stay to see them off.”
“Very good, Mr. Spock. Give them my best,” Jim said simply so as not to detain Spock.

“I will see you tomorrow, Captain,” Spock said and turned to leave. “Miss Uhura,” he nodded to her as he departed.

Kirk and Uhura raised their eyebrows at each other after Spock left.

“I wouldn’t have imposed on his time like that if I’d known he was so busy,” Uhura said. “He did have a good time shopping with me, though, I think. What is your favorite color, Captain? Mr. Spock didn’t know it.” She said it like Jim should mind.

“Well, we’re not grade school friends…” Kirk said with a shrug.

“…and it’s not easy to tell by our clothing choices, is it?” she laughed. “Sometimes I get so tired of red I think I’ll scream,” Uhura complained.

“You look great in red. It’s a power color,” Jim offered with a smile.

“I like you in that green v-neck,” she said. “I think that’s your most flattering uniform shirt.”

“I feel good in that one,” Jim said. “They’re all quite comfortable… except those dress shirts that McCoy complains are like having your neck in a sling.”

Uhura laughed. “Where is Dr. McCoy?” she asked.

“Probably with Dr. Mullova,” Jim guessed. “He likes being at this clinic and she’s treating him like a visiting physician who’s here to learn new techniques. She takes him on rounds with her and lets him observe nerve regeneration treatments.”

“What are they like, those treatments?” Uhura asked.
“Not bad. Nothing invasive. Lots of heat, mostly. I’ve only had one treatment so far. As the nerves regrow, I have the occasional stabbing pain in my hip,” he explained, but it only lasts a moment, and so far they’ve been infrequent.”

“That’s good,” she sighed. “A lot of the crew would like to visit you. I think Scotty and Sulu are planning to come tomorrow.”

“Great. I get bored. The food is top notch, though, and look at my view!” He motioned for her to step up to the head of his bed and look out the window.

“Oh, Sir! That’s a prettier sight than the Butterfly Nebula!” Uhura exclaimed upon spotting the Enterprise. “I don’t see her from the outside very often.” Then, her face fell a bit and she said wistfully, “I’m going to miss her so much. It’s been the most exciting five years of my life.”

Kirk frowned, “Mine too.” It was easy to agree with a statement like that.

“I can’t help thinking that the rest of my life is going to seem painfully dull in comparison,” Uhura said. “I wish we could all stay together for another five. I can’t imagine ever having a better crew… or a better captain.”

Jim was touched, “Thank you,” he said sincerely. “We have been through a lot together.”

“You got us through. You and Mr. Spock,” she said.

“The whole bridge crew is exceptional… and engineering, and medical. Everyone,” Jim smiled sadly.

“Have you noticed a lot of civilians on this starbase know the details of our missions?” Uhura asked.

“I have noticed that,” Kirk replied.

“Berto at the glass shop said, ‘We lova the Starfleet, and Capitan Kirk is her shining star.’” Uhura said it with bravado, complete with the man’s Italian accent and hand gestures, which made Jim
laugh. He smiled sheepishly at the compliment, though.

“They do seem to love Starfleet here and follow our missions with interest,” he said.

“A little girl in the gardens told me she hated Nomad for wiping my mind just for singing. It was so cute,” Uhura said. “Odd to have strangers know so much about us, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Kirk agreed.

From the hallway, Lwaxara called, “Captain Kirk, I know you have company, but can I come in?”

“Of course,” Kirk said, “This is one of my bridge officers, Lt. Uhura.”

“I’m Lwaxara from BetaZed,” she said, extending her scarred hand to Uhura, who took it and patted it warmly.

“Nice to meet you,” the two women said in unison, then laughed.

Jim realized with appreciation that Spock must have briefed Uhura and Chekov on his unusual hall mate and her injuries.

“Lieutenant,” she said to Uhura, “I have a message from Ensign Chekov. He says Dr. Mullov is taking him to the hologram deck to see a program of Gorky Park and asks if you’d like to come?”

“Well, I have no idea what a Gorky Park is, but I’m game,” Uhura said. “Where are they now?”

“Two corridors over. Go right, then left. You’ll see them,” Lwaxara said.

“Nice seeing you looking so well, Captain. I’m glad you liked your gift,” Uhura said as she gathered up her things to go.
“Thanks again. Drop by anytime,” Kirk said.

“Nice meeting you, Lwaxara. Thanks for bringing me the message,” Uhura said, waving goodbye.

When she was gone, Lwaxara spotted the gift she was talking about on the captain’s wrap-around table and said, “Ooo, that’s lovely. Can I see?”

“Sure,” Jim said, and started to hand it to her, but she pulled her hand back.

“My dexterity’s only up to about 85%. You’d better hold onto it,” she said.

He held it up for her to look at. Noticing the tiny twinkling light suspended in the center, she said, “This will be even prettier at night.”

“Spock didn’t know my favorite color,” Jim blurted suddenly. “He helped Uhura pick this out for me, and told her he didn’t know my favorite color.”

“Well, you’re not grade school friends… whatever grade school is,” she joked.

“How easily you can read my mind,” Jim marveled, envious.

“You don’t have a favorite color, silly, so no wonder it never came up,” she laughed lightheartedly, determined not to bring up what she’d seen in Spock’s mind earlier.

Despite her reputation as a meddler, she was not an alarmist. No need to tell the captain something so upsetting until after she had more information from Spock. Perhaps she had misunderstood in some way; the Vulcans are such a strange people. If the captain were Betazoid, he would have known everything she knew the moment she entered his room, but he was ‘blind as a bat’ as humans say and she was confident that they could easily have a lovely chat without it ever coming up.

“Did you see Spock today?” Kirk asked.
“Um… no… yes,” she sputtered. Lying was not something she could pull off and she knew it. *Oh, why did he have to ask that?*

“Which one is it?” Kirk asked, smiling that adorable smile of his.

“Yes. I saw him. He brought Chekov and Uhura,” she said.

“Yes, I know,” the captain said. “I barely got to talk to him. He was busy and dismissed himself without ever really looking me in the eye. That’s not like Spock. I don’t know, he seemed stressed or upset even… I was just wondering if you’d talked to him while he was here?”

“Briefly. He asked me where the doctors were because Ensign Chekov wanted to meet them,” she stalled.

“He didn’t say anything else to you?” Jim asked.

“Not… not verbally,” she said. It was obvious now that she was going to have to tell him. Either that or flee, and fleeing was not her style.

“So you had a telepathic conversation. What did he say? Was anything wrong?” Kirk pressed.

She cracked.

“Oh, Captain! Spock wants to do this terrible thing. This terrible, terrible thing!” she sobbed.

“What do you mean?!” Kirk demanded, gripping his table and leaning forward, concern evident on his face.

“He wants to go through a Vulcan ritual that purges all emotion, so he’ll be like the ‘perfect’ Vulcan,” she explained.

“You mean in meditation?” Kirk asked.
“No! On Vulcan, in the mountains of Gol. In Spock’s mind, it looked like a monastery where Vulcans go to self-flagellate and punish themselves for having feelings. The ‘Masters of Gol’ guide them through a ritual that can take many years. They aren’t allowed visitors, and when they come out, they are barren, hollow… all of their emotions burned away,” she choked.

Kirk looked stunned. “You must be mistaken. Spock wouldn’t do that.”

“He tried to deny it,” she admitted. “He said it was just one of many options he’s considering, but I saw in his mind that he means to do it, thinks he needs it. Oh, Captain, he has such deep-seated scorn for himself. So much shame. He thinks he falls short of the Vulcan ideal… but he far surpasses it in my mind!”

“Mine too,” Jim whispered.

“The ritual is called Kolinahr,” she explained. “All Vulcans learn mental disciplines, how to control their emotions, but Kolinahr is for those who wish to purge them entirely and permanently.”

The captain looked as if everything he believed about the world had just been proven false. “Was he upset when he left your room?” Jim asked.

“Yes. No one noticed but you,” she said. “He’s good at concealing his emotions.”

“Too good,” Kirk said sadly. “He would leave all of his friends? He would leave me to go do that to himself?” He was shaking his head in disbelief.

“He loves you, Captain. He feels a strong attachment to you, but he sees it as weakness. He was educated to see it that way,” she said sadly.

Kirk didn’t know what to say. He was shocked and upset and didn’t want any of this to be true at all.

“Spock’s human mother,” he said, “I met her once. Her name’s Amanda. She seemed warm and personable. That time when Spock said he’d never told her he loved her, it was with such regret. When he said feeling friendship for me made him ashamed, it was with regret… I thought.” Kirk
chewed at his lip. “I thought we were passed that. I really did. And now he’s going to throw this curve ball at me…?” Anger was beginning to replace Kirk’s shock. “When was he planning to tell me?”

“I don’t know. You have to stop him, Captain. Command him not to do it!” she begged.

“I only command him for another six months. Then, he’s free to do as he likes,” Kirk stated matter-of-factly.

“Then convince him. Offer him something better!” she suggested. “I got the impression that there is something he wants from you, something he is afraid to ask you for. Find out what it is and give it to him,” she suggested.

“What could he want?” Kirk asked.

“I don’t know. We didn’t get that far. He sort of… fled,” she revealed. “He said we would speak again, though. If he comes to me before he comes to you, I will try to find out.”

“I wish I had your abilities, Lwaxara,” Kirk said slowly, “I feel blind and dumb.”

He looked desolate. She felt bad now for calling him ‘blind as a bat’ in her thoughts. It must be shocking to learn that your best friend has such secrets. His worst fear, realized: Spock is leaving.
Since his accident, Kirk hadn’t really minded not being able to walk… until now. He wanted to storm off and find Spock, corner him and read him the riot act, demand to know what in the galaxy he was thinking…. He wanted to pace around his room to dispel this anxiety, this suffocating fear.

The dinner hour came and went and he didn’t order.

Now it was 20:05 and he was watching one of the live exterior starbase cams on his screen as the Andorian ship slowly glided away from her docking port. The 23 Andorians they’d rescued on that arid moon were headed for home. Jim pulled his communicator out of the drawer. He’d been fluctuating between sadness and anger all evening and anger was flaring at the moment.

“Captain Kirk to Mr. Spock,” he said.

“Spock here, Captain.”

“Report to me at your earliest convenience,” Kirk said, his voice tight.

A few seconds of silence, then Spock replied, “Yes, Captain. Is there…”

“Kirk out.”

The Commander of Starbase Operations was standing next to Spock. “What did you do?” she asked.

“Do?” Spock queried.

“If I know my starship captains, and I think I do, he’s angry,” she stated, pursing her lips.
When Spock didn’t respond, she said, “He’s probably just irritated about being laid up in the med clinic, a person like the great Captain Kirk….”

Spock still didn’t answer and seemed lost in his thoughts, so she said, “Go on, better see what he wants. We’re done here. Thank you for helping with diplomatic duties.”

“You are welcome. Goodnight Commander Jensen,” he replied and took his leave.

_Jim knows. He knows._ That was all Spock could think on his way to the clinic. He had planned to tell the captain when he was fully recovered… or maybe in a month or two. He had imagined different ways of breaking the news and had thought to describe Gol as a Vulcan retreat of enlightenment. He could only imagine the nightmarish picture Lwaxara had surely painted for Jim. _What are you thinking right now, Jim? What will you say to me when we are alone face to face? Will you be able to talk me out of it? Please talk me out of it._

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Jim’s anger softened as he waited for Spock. What was he going to do? _Yell_ at Spock? Spock, who had saved his life more times than he could count? Spock, who was always at his side, always had his back? _Oh, Spock,_ his heart clenched, _why are you doing this? What do you need?_

When Spock arrived, he greeted Kirk with his typical, “Captain,” but didn’t approach.

Mustering a stern voice, Kirk said, “Shut the door.”

Spock did so, and stayed next to it, a good eight feet from Kirk. _Jim, I am sorry,_ he thought, but of course the captain couldn’t hear him. Spock wished Lwaxara would come in, help them somehow.

The room was dim. The clinic’s lights had gone to night mode over two hours ago and Jim hadn’t bothered to turn his room lights on. The magenta glass globe, sitting on his desk, was glowing faintly. That, and the starlight through the window, provided the only light in the room. Jim’s eyes were also dark. There was a storm coming.

“Captain… I… I have not decided,” Spock said truthfully.

“Why would you want to do something like that to yourself?” Jim asked. “Your emotions, just… gone?”

“You know the difficulties I have had controlling them,” Spock defended.

“So just destroy them? Burn them away so you won’t have to deal with them anymore? That’s your solution?” Jim asked. “That sounds like the coward’s way out to me. It’s unworthy of you, Spock. It’s… it’s not for you.”

“Captain…,” Spock began, but faltered, realizing his position was untenable. He agreed with what the captain had just said. His Kolinahr plans, that once had seemed necessary and unavoidable, now felt completely unjustifiable. How could he have considered hurting himself that way… hurting the captain?

“What is it you can’t handle, Spock? Tell me. Let me help.” Jim had been angry, but now his voice was softening and his expressive eyes had turned warm.

Spock fought to control his emotions. At light speed his mind searched in vain for the right words, rejecting possibility after possibility. He must have remained silent too long because his captain’s eyes were changing again. Spock saw the deep worry there, the rising panic.

“I don’t understand this, Spock. I thought you and I were… I thought we were…."

The captain’s voice caught and a sharp inhalation of breath led to a choked sob that he couldn’t contain. I’m losing Spock. I don’t know how to stop it, Jim thought desperately. Instinctively, he reached out.

Spock was at his side in three swift steps, taking Kirk’s outstretched hand. Spock clutched it to his chest and whispered in earnest, “Jim, I am sorry. I will not go.”

How could I ever have thought Jim might take this in his stride? Spock asked himself. The depth of his feelings for me still surprises me.
Relief swept over Jim. The immediate crisis was over. Spock wasn’t going. They could figure the rest out. He had expected Spock to be more stubborn. He must have wanted to be talked out of this terrible idea. Or he just couldn’t stand seeing Jim so upset.

Pulling himself together, Jim said, “I want our friendship to extend beyond the next six months. Do you?”

“Yes,” Spock said quickly and with conviction, still holding Jim’s hand.

“Well, what did you expect to happen when you ‘graduated’ from Kolinahr in a few years? Friendship doesn’t really work without emotions. Ours never would have been the same, if it would even have survived at all. Does it mean so little to you? Do I?”

*Jim is trying to hurt me now, like I hurt him,* Spock thought. It was only fair.

“I thought Kolinahr might be the only way to stop the pain,” Spock began.

“Pain?” Kirk asked, concerned. Spock was gripping his hand a bit too tightly now, but Jim didn’t wince.

“…the emotional pain of wanting… what I should not want.”

Kirk looked up into his friend’s anguished eyes and tried to divine what he might mean.

“Lwaxara said she thought there was something you wanted from me, but she didn’t know what it was,” Jim remembered. “What is it, Spock? If it’s something I can give you, it’s yours… anything.”

Tears sprang to Spock’s eyes; he knew his captain meant it.

“Oh, Spock. Please tell me,” Jim said, pulling Spock’s hand down to touch his face, offering a meld, “Tell me this way… if it’s easier.”
Spock caressed Jim’s face, but didn’t place his fingers in position to mind meld. “A meld it too dangerous when I do not have emotional control,” Spock whispered.

“Then just tell me with words,” Jim said softly. “No one has better command of words than you, Spock.” …a small compliment to encourage his friend. Jim was holding one of Spock’s hands now, gently stroking it with his thumb. Spock trusted him, trusted him with his life.

The starlit ambiance of the room suddenly seemed perfect for asking Jim what he’d been aching to ask him, the intimate request he thought he would never have the nerve to make. There would never be a better time.

Spock wiped at his tears before they spilled, “Jim,” he began, “I want to link our minds. Yours and mine, one and together, but more lasting than a mind meld… a t’hy’la bond.”

Jim didn’t understand, so he kept listening.

“Vulcans of antiquity bonded mentally with each other in a variety of ways for different purposes. Today, only the marriage bond is recognized as acceptable, but in the past, warriors who were close friends often chose to form a bond called t’hy’la. It is an archaic word now, but it translates as brother-in-war or comrade-in-arms. A t’hy’la bond between two close friends was advantageous on the battlefield, but also provided… emotional support. On modern-day Vulcan, needing someone who is not your mate for emotional support is considered a weakness and discouraged. There are a few who still choose to do it, but they do not advertise it.”

“What would it be like?” Jim asked.

“We would know each other’s thoughts, share each other’s experiences, and feel each other’s emotions,” Spock explained. “We would have full access to each other’s histories, talents, and knowledge.”

“And you want to do this with an emotional human?” Kirk asked, amazed. “You want me knowing all of your secrets? You want to know mine? I’ve always thought of you as so private….”

Spock’s dark eyes were looking at him with such intensity. “I no longer wish privacy from my t’hy’la,” he said. “I have long thought of you this way, Jim, but the bond is missing and I crave it.”
Kirk was silent, thinking.

Spock continued, “There have been many times during our missions that a bond would have helped me find you when you were lost, or helped you find me.”

Kirk asked, “I would always know where you were, if we had this bond?”

“If I were alive, yes.” Spock confirmed.

Kirk thought of all the times panic had threatened to choke him because Spock was missing and possibly hurt and he didn’t know where to look for him.

“So if you were, say, down a well,” Jim proposed, “and I couldn’t find you, all you’d have to do is speak ‘here I am’ inside my mind, and I would hear that and know where it came from?”

“Yes,” Spock said, smiling slightly at the ‘down a well’ scenario.

Kirk smiled, too. “That could be very helpful,” Jim acknowledged. “And I would be able to call out to your mind, too, even though I’m not a telepath?”

“Yes. You would have all of my mental abilities,” Spock said.

“My god, Spock. That is one hell of an offer. I am honored,” Jim said.

“I am certain it is I who would derive the greater benefit,” Spock said sincerely.

“I doubt that,” Jim said humbly.

“Then, may I take it that you are… interested?” Spock asked carefully.

“Yes.” What a wonder Spock is, Kirk thought. To know him at his deepest levels… to be inside that
“I’ve often wanted to be closer to you, Spock,” Jim revealed. “I’ve thought about suggesting a mind meld when things were quiet on the ship and there were no crises. We’ve never had the leisure to do it that way, and I wondered what it would be like. But you’ve called it a ‘terrible lowering of personal barriers’ and I thought you wouldn’t want to do it without a pressing need.”

“We can do a meld tomorrow,” Spock offered. “I need to meditate tonight. If we choose to bond, we must first do a series of mind melds to familiarize ourselves with each other’s minds. Tomorrow could be the first.”

“Okay,” Kirk agreed. “Could you show me your memories from the day of the cave-in? Mine still haven’t come back.”

“Yes, if you want, and I will teach you how to look for them in my mind, search out the information you are after.”

“Okay,” Kirk said. “…and can you show me more about t’hy’la bonds, so I can understand better?”

“The t’hy’la bond was first described in the epic poem The Chronicles of Saret and Luken, supposedly written by Saret’s nephew,” Spock said. “I had a copy as a child. That would be a good place to start. The Office of Vulcan Affairs would have it in their computer library.

“I’ll read it,” Jim promised.

“I have a relatively unscheduled day tomorrow,” Spock said. “What time should I come?”

“That reminds me,” Kirk said suddenly, “Did everything go okay with the Andorians tonight?”

“Yes, Captain. Uneventful.” Spock knew that the captain had been too upset to ask earlier. Spock was so relieved that they were back on good terms. Before he left for the night, though, there was one point he wanted Kirk to be completely clear on.

“Jim, I want to clarify that no matter what you decide about the bond, I will not go to Gol,” Spock said.
Jim smiled so warmly at his friend. “I know you’d never try to coerce me, Spock. You’re the most decent person I know.” Jim reached out his hand. He wanted to touch Spock one more time before he left.

Spock took his hand. The captain’s high regard was like gold to him.

“10:00 tomorrow?” Kirk suggested.

“Very good, Captain,” Spock said.

“…or maybe it should be late at night like this so we’re not interrupted,” Kirk said, thinking better of it.

“Yes,” Spock agreed. “I will come by at 10:00 for a regular visit, then come back at 20:30 for the meld.”

“Okay. Good. I’ll see you tomorrow then,” Jim said, reluctantly letting go of Spock’s hand.

“Goodnight, Captain,” Spock said as he moved toward the door.

“Oh… Spock! Thanks for this,” Jim called, holding up the glass globe. “Uhura said it’s from Berto, but you helped pick it out. I love it.”

“You are welcome, Jim. Have a good night.” Spock stepped quietly into the hallway and closed the door gently behind him.

Kirk exhaled and leaned back on his pillow. What a night! he thought. What a roller coaster of a night! What an about-face Spock had done, from wanting to go to Gol and expunge his emotions to wanting to share them with me.

Jim’s relief was immeasurable. He felt so happy… and hungry. His stomach was reminding him that he’d skipped dinner, and lunch. “I’m getting a chocolate malt and a cheeseburger… with
“fries!” he said to his empty room. He flipped his screen on and made it happen. Eight minute delivery. Not bad.

He searched the Office of Vulcan Affairs’ library for The Chronicles of Saret and Luken and was already engrossed when his food arrived.

***

After Spock’s emotional confession to Jim about his desire for a t’hy’la bond, he returned to the Enterprise. All was quiet onboard this time of night. The two or three crewmen who passed their commander as he strode stone-faced through the corridors had no idea that his mind was racing, rejoicing. *Jim wants me. He wants me in his mind.* Spock was still a bit surprised at himself for finding the courage to ask him. Jim had made it so easy, looking at him like that, beseeching him in such a tender way that could not be rebuffed.

His t’hy’la. His comrade-in-arms. They had been through so much, and now, just as Spock had thought their time together was growing short, they would have this new adventure, the exploration of each other’s minds, with the closeness and understanding that would bring. Spock had been denied that with T’Pring. He’d never had it with anyone, felt shame for even desiring it. All of his Vulcan training told him he shouldn’t want it, should strive to be stronger, try harder to deny this constant need. But Jim. *Jim.*

His captain’s mind was a marvel. It wasn’t until Amerind that Spock discovered how dynamic an individual he truly was. That mind meld was eye-opening. *How fiercely* Jim had fought to remain Kirok, to stay with his wife Miramanee in that lakeside paradise. When Spock had entered his mind to pull him out of it, bring him back to himself, Jim had met him with a vicious certitude that he was Kirok. Spock had intended to gently coax the captain’s mind back toward his memories of Starfleet and the Enterprise, guide him out of the amnesia, and restore his sense of identity. He didn’t consider that the captain might resist rescue, might rail against returning to his life of duty. How confidently Jim had yelled, “I am Kirok!” It had taken all of Spock’s mental agility to force a reckoning that he was indeed James Kirk.

Spock had felt terrible guilt for leaving Jim on that planet for four months to get so deeply invested in a false identity, an idyllic life that wasn’t his to keep. En route to the asteroid intercept point, Spock’s imagination terrorized him with ideas about what might be happening to Jim on that planet. He might be hurt, might be suffocating or starving inside the obelisk, might be captured or killed by the natives… but never *this.* Never did his Vulcan mind conceive that Jim could have amnesia and be falling in love and getting married. How Jim had screamed for Miramanee when Spock was kneeling over him at the base of that obelisk, trying to pull his mind back to reality. Even as Kirok, Jim loved deeply. He fought to stay with his wife. Spock wasn’t responsible for the death of Miramanee and the child she was carrying, but he felt like he had ripped Jim away from everything he’d ever wanted.
For a week following those events, back on the Enterprise, Jim had been flat emotionally. Then, in his resilient fashion, he gradually started acting more like himself. Ever-cognizant that a lengthy depression could jeopardize his command, Jim had snapped himself out of it and “put on a brave face” as Dr. McCoy called it.

Out of guilt and natural reticence, Spock had never gone to him. Instead, he pondered all of the ways a t'hy'la bond would have prevented the whole painful scenario. Spock could have retrieved Jim’s memories through their bond as soon as he emerged from the temple, likely even from parsecs away, and explained to him why they’d had to leave him. The four months of amnesia would never have happened.

Every time things went amok on a mission, Spock found himself contemplating how a bond would have either prevented it or remedied it sooner. It was the efficacy of a bond that Spock had intended to emphasize when and if he ever proposed the idea to Jim; but in the emotion of the moment this evening in the captain’s clinic room, he had told Jim the raw truth, that he craved it. He had actually said, “I crave it,” and Jim hadn’t cringed.

Spock arrived at his quarters and checked his messages. There were two, both non-urgent. He attended to them with his usual efficiency, then let his mind slip back to thoughts of Jim, his smile, his kind eyes. How good-natured Jim still was after suffering so much trauma, both physical and emotional. “The great Captain Kirk,” as the Commander of Starbase Operations had just called him, was expected to bounce back quickly from things that would psychologically demolish other men. Spock couldn’t remember his friend ever giving himself more than a week to grieve any of the losses he had sustained in the past 4 ½ years: the deaths of his brother Sam and sister-in-law Aurelan, the loss of his friend Gary Mitchell, and the deaths or serious injuries of crewmen serving under him. There were the tragic love affairs: Miramanee, Edith Keeler, Rayna… Spock had helped a bit after Rayna… “forget.” And the traumatizing times when Jim lost control of his body: Janice Lester, Sargon, Parmen. The time when the transporter split him into two Kirks had been traumatic, one good but meek and indecisive, the other a lustful brute, but both necessary to make Jim the person he was. Spock knew the revulsion the gentle half of Kirk had felt at taking his violent half back, but he had also shown that frightened, animalistic part of himself so much compassion. Seeing those two parts of his captain fused whole again on the transporter platform had been such a relief to Spock. At the time, Spock had tried to explain to Kirk that he suffered in the same way… his human and Vulcan halves, often at war, but forced to coexist. He had wanted to talk to Jim more about it afterward, but somehow never did. Now they would form two halves of a whole, two sides of a t’hy’la bond. They would be different but the same, both halves contributing to a whole that exceeded the sum of its parts.

Spock knew better than to try to meditate when his mind was churning like this. Best to let his thoughts run their course first. He needed to prepare his mind through meditation for the meld with Jim tomorrow night… but this was a kind of preparation, too. Recalling all of Jim’s traumas was a way of reminding himself that he would likely find just as many demons as diamonds in his friend’s mind. Was Jim’s outward demeanor as much of a façade as Spock’s was? Surely not.
Spock’s mind was well ordered, or at least it would seem that way to a human being. Another Vulcan would no doubt find the swirling undercurrents of emotion distasteful. *Jim will see so much of me tomorrow night, so much that I have always protected. I feel some apprehension,* Spock admitted to himself in the privacy of his quarters.

Jim had requested to see Spock’s memories of the day of the cave-in. He would show him… unedited. He would show him the undiluted terror and desperation he had felt when he thought his captain would die. He would show him the impotence he’d experienced when he couldn’t save the Andorian woman, and he would let him see the fear and revulsion he had endured while having his bare chest painted by that ape-like creature’s huge hands.

Jim would be upset, but there must be nothing less than total truth between them if they were to be t’hy’la. *He may succumb to emotion, but I must not. I am in control of the meld and must remain so. If he needs me to end it, I will do it with precision and not an abrupt rip caused by a loss of control,* Spock determined.

What else would Jim want to see? Spock couldn’t predict. Would he want to see his childhood, his Enterprise missions under Captain Pike, his intellectual capabilities? He was committed to allowing Jim free access to whatever he wanted to know. Spock thought of his personal history; there was a handful of things he had the impulse to shield Jim from knowing. Jim would find out later, though, when he became proficient at navigating telepathically. Hiding anything would just delay the inevitable and perhaps cause problems between them in the future. Spock wouldn’t do that. Besides, Jim didn’t have the ability to shield his thoughts or memories, so it wouldn’t be fair for Spock to hide his. Jim wouldn’t know how to go digging into the deep corners of his mind for awhile yet anyway, not like Lwaxara could do… did so effortlessly. It was like breathing for her. Spock had experienced envy today at the rapid-fire way she could transfer images and thoughts from Jim’s mind to his. The transfer had been so clear and detailed, yet so fast. It had left him breathless. She was a far more powerful telepath than he was and it had made him feel a pulse of envy. He would examine that in meditation.

Spock stood up from his desk and walked to the bedroom section of his quarters. He took his uniform off and put on his black meditation robes, but didn’t light the candle. He didn’t think staring into the flame and clearing his mind was what he wanted to do right now.

He had favorite passages from The Chronicles of Saret and Luken that he had memorized as a young boy. He wanted to lie on his bed, close his eyes and imagine those scenes as he used to enjoy doing. He would meditate afterward.
Chapter 11

11 Days Down - Chapter 11

The next morning, Nurse Virginia, Dr. Mullova, and Dr. McCoy came into Jim’s room together as he was finishing his grooming routine.

“How are you feeling Jim?” McCoy asked first.

“How are you feeling Jim?” McCoy asked first.

“Doing great, I guess,” Kirk said.

Virginia set about collecting numbers from his monitors, while Dr. Mullova inquired, “Any more zingers, Captain?”

“I had one very strong one that woke me around 03:30,” Jim reported.

“I see it here,” Virginia said, showing her med scan to Dr. Mullova.

“Wow! That is a sharp spike,” Dr. Mullova commented. “You had five others during the night, also, but not intense enough to wake you, apparently.” She stepped forward and uncovered his left leg, running her scanner from mid-thigh to just above his hip.

“Everything okay?” Jim asked.

“Looks good. By tomorrow, you should be ready for your second treatment. We’ve scheduled it for 14:30,” she said. “Two or three hours after that one, you should start to feel more of the prickly sensations we talked about.”

Jim nodded his understanding.
“Your linens should have been changed yesterday. Did someone come?” Virginia asked.

“Yes,” Kirk replied.

“All right, Captain Kirk,” Dr. Mullova said, “I’ll see you tomorrow morning and if everything looks good, we’ll proceed with the treatment at 14:30. Do you have any questions?”

“No,” Jim said.

“You are well-hydrated. Please continue to drink plenty of fluids,” Dr. Mullova reminded. “You can order from your menu any time, even if you only want a glass of juice or soda.”

“Okay.”

“Very good. Rest up,” she said as she and Virginia departed.

McCoy remained. “How’re you doing, Jim? You don’t seem very talkative.”

“I’m fine, Bones,” Jim reassured him, “just up late reading.”

“You need your sleep, Jim, while you’re healing. No pulling all-nighters like you’re some first-year cadet,” Bones admonished.

“It was a really good book,” Jim protested with a tired grin.

“You catch a little nap, after breakfast, okay?” Bones suggested.

“Yes, Doctor,” Jim said, knowing he probably wouldn’t.
“What were you reading anyway?” Bones asked.


McCoy scoffed. “That should have put you to sleep, not kept you up. I had to take a Vulcan Lit course. Bored me to tears, except Saret and Luken; the ancient stuff is pretty good.”

Jim perked up, “That’s what I was reading: The Chronicles of Saret and Luken.”

“Spock recommended that?!” Bones gaped.


“Well, to anyone with pointed ears, Saret and Luken is practically pornography, I thought. All of that emotionalism and intimate camaraderie, not to mention the savagery of war. The Vulcans disdain their past.

“Not Spock,” Jim said. “He has liked that book since he was a boy.”

“That’s ridiculous. Spock was never a boy,” McCoy retorted with a wink.

Jim smiled. The way his two best friends teased each other always made him laugh. Spock gave as well as he got. Just when McCoy thought he had the last word, Spock would swoop in with some wry comment and take back the upper hand, leaving McCoy to pout or stew. It was very entertaining. Jim wasn’t sure how Spock would feel about Bones knowing what they were planning. He decided he should keep it to himself for now.

“So Spock grew up on legends of magic warriors? Who would have guessed that?!” Bones had that same delighted look on his face that he’d had when Amanda told him about Spock’s “teddy bear” sehlot.

“Bones,” Jim said in a warning tone.
“What? This is gold. Spock believes in superheroes!” McCoy snickered, “ancient Vulcan superheroes.”

“Spock says the ancient warrior class really could do all of those things in Saret and Luken,” Jim offered. “Comrades-in-arms could form a mental bond where they could read each other’s thoughts all the time. It was very advantageous in battle.”

“Really?” Bones questioned. “My professor taught that it was a poet’s Romantic fantasy. Sure would be great to have Saret’s healing powers, though, wouldn’t it?” Bones mused. “That’s the part I mainly remember, Saret pushing Luken into a healing trance. Now that would be a neat trick.”

“I think you have plenty of healing tricks, Bones. I wouldn’t worry,” a little compliment to change the subject, “and you’re learning even more from the Doctors Mullov, I hear.”

“It’s crazy the things they can do, Jim! The things they’re doing for Lwaxara and for a Tellarite patient I met who was practically fried from the inside out by a lightning bolt in those horrible thunderstorms they have on Tellar, you know?” Bones was waving his arms like storm clouds, “Nearly every nerve fiber in his body was damaged and he’s expected to eventually have full function again!”

“Amazing,” Jim agreed. “I’m really glad I’m here. If I couldn’t walk again, that would be the end of our five year mission, six months early,” he pondered.

“Or… we’d get a new, less danger-prone captain, who didn’t get hurt all the time,” McCoy teased, good-naturedly.

“Your surgical skills might atrophy. Wouldn’t want that,” Jim teased back. It felt good to joke about such a close shave. It was nice to be at the point now where they could.

“What do you want to do when the mission is over, Bones?” Jim asked, suddenly serious.

“Well, I… that will depend on a lot of factors, I suppose,” McCoy tried to answer.

“Like what?” Jim probed.
“Well, if you and Spock go off on another five year mission,” Bones said, “I suppose I’d like to go with you… if you’d have me. Someone’s gotta look after you two.”

Kirk smiled warmly at his friend who’d already given the Enterprise and her captain five years of his life. It touched him that the doctor was willing to give another five.

“…and if Spock gets his own ship and I’m promoted to fleet captain or vice admiral? What then?” Jim wanted to know. “Would you sign on as CMO of another starship, take an assignment on Earth, work in a clinic like this… or maybe follow your heart elsewhere?” Jim winked.

Bones knew he was talking about Natira. He smiled sheepishly. It wasn’t easy to leave a beautiful high priestess who was head over heels for you. He had left her twice, and yet she still wanted to leave the door open for him. The last time he’d seen her, she had been happy and busy making a new home for her people. The Yonadans’ long space voyage was over and it was time to build the world their Fabrini ancestors had intended for them. The Federation was happy to help with offers of engineers, architects, city planners, agriculturalists, doctors, commerce specialists… but administrative decisions and political policies, were left to Natira and her circle.

“She’s essentially queen of a continent, Jim,” Bones said. “If I married into that, I’d have to start dressing a little snappier.”

Jim smiled, “I’m pretty sure she’d take you as is… and count herself very lucky, as well she should.”

“Thanks,” McCoy said, a bit embarrassed. “You trying to get rid of me, Jim?”

“No, Natira’s world will be much less despotic,” McCoy smirked. “You know, that reminds me… now you’re gonna tease me for being an old softie, BUT… Starfleet should really send someone out to check on Khan and his gang. There could be kids involved by now, and if Khan isn’t faring as well as Mr. Superior Intellect thought he would.…”

“Hmm, you’re probably right. Even prisoners in solitary confinement get a guard. I’ll talk to
Admiral Cresient about it.”

“Thanks, Jim.”

Kirk smiled, “…and yes, you are going soft on me.”

McCoy loved being with Jim. He loved serving aboard the Enterprise. He loved the crew, the adventures. Would marrying Natira be an adventure? Would he thrive or be bored to tears in two months? The Yonadans would need doctors. Humans entering an alien ecosystem… that was always fraught with dangers, even with all the bio-testing under the sun. How many times had the Enterprise’s sensors showed no hazards on an M-Class planet, and then *bam*?

The Yonadans would be hit with surprises like that and McCoy certainly had accumulated a lot of experience with medical troubleshooting. He could be useful there. Somehow making a life-changing leap like that for love alone wasn’t enough. He would need to feel useful, make a difference. *Wait, did I just admit to myself that I love Natira?* Bones asked himself, startled. He hadn’t really admitted that before. He acknowledged that she was desirable, strong, and wise. He’d never had anyone fall in love with him at first sight like that before and be so certain about it. Unbelievably, she had wanted him even when she thought he had only a year to live. He had agreed, joined with her people, and let her call him “husband.” Then, they had parted. It hurt. He thought about her often, when he was alone in his office, or falling asleep, or taking a hot real-water shower. He really thought about her way too much in the shower….

Jim was looking at him strangely now and McCoy realized that his thoughts had drifted. He blushed a bit and chuckled guiltily.

“Ah! She’s under your skin, isn’t she?” Jim teased. “I know that look.”

“Jim, look, I can’t just…”

“Bones! You can just. In six months, you can. Why are you fighting it? You’ve done your service. The five years we’ve had nearly killed us all several times over, but you made it. You made it, Bones! And now at journey’s end, you’ve got a beautiful woman waiting for you,” Kirk enthused.

“You are trying to get rid of me,” McCoy repeated with mock exasperation.
Kirk smiled, “I’m just saying maybe you should allow yourself some comforts. Maybe we all should.”

McCoy had been standing and he flopped down in one of the guest chairs. “I don’t like how everything’s so up in the air right now.”

“Neither do I,” Kirk agreed.

“You don’t even have an inkling how things might go, Jim? Starfleet Command hasn’t dropped any hints?” McCoy asked.

“Admiral Cho wants Scotty to help design the engines for the next generation of starships. That would be a ground assignment for him. Earth. I’ve talked to him about it.”

“Is he interested?” Bones asked.

“Yes,” Jim said. “Mostly because he and Mira want to get married and she’s stationed on Earth.”

“Right,” McCoy said. He knew how much Scotty loved Lt. Romaine. They were the cutest couple, truly moony-eyed over each other. Scotty was 12 years her senior, but he acted like a schoolboy around her. Mira’s dad was a retired Starfleet Chief Engineer and perhaps that is why Mira took to Scotty right away. They became inseparable two or three days into her temporary assignment.

She was an engineering specialist sent via the Enterprise to install new equipment on Memory Alpha, the library asteroid. Her short time aboard the Enterprise was fraught with some harrowing experiences which she handled very bravely for someone on her first deep space assignment, McCoy thought. When her work on Memory Alpha was completed, she had to go back to Earth, and Scotty moped around like you’ve never seen a Scotsman mope. Every time the Enterprise put in to a starbase or station, Scotty was always excited to see if he had any letters from Mira… and he always had dozens. Bones figured they probably had marriage plans. Space was in Scotty’s blood, but so was the girl. How could he resist taking Admiral Cho’s offer?

“Cho is a smart man from all accounts. Personable, too. Scotty would like working for him, I imagine,” McCoy said, “but the big draw of course would be Mira.”

“Yes,” Kirk agreed.
They were silent for a minute, then Bones ventured, “I can’t picture anyone but you as captain of the Enterprise, Jim.”

“Pike was her captain before me and she’ll have other captains after me,” Jim said matter-of-factly.

“Surely you want to hang onto her. I know you, Jim,” McCoy pressed.

“Of course I do. My request is in: same ship, same crew, another five years of deep space exploration.” Jim revealed.

“They’ll honor that, certainly. Won’t they?” Bones asked hopefully. He was relieved to hear that Jim had at least made the request. The way Jim was talking, he was beginning to wonder.

“There are a lot of factors. Some of the crew won’t be up for another five-year mission, I’m sure. There will be personnel changes regardless,” Kirk said.

“Well sure,” McCoy said, “but the lion’s share of the crew would opt to stay with you. The bridge crew could all be promoted a grade and still remain in their current positions,” Bones pointed out.

“Not Spock,” Jim said.

“Oh, right,” Bones realized with a frown. Then, he perked up and said, “Well, Spock’s gonna live to be 200! He’s got plenty of damn time to become a captain.”

That made Kirk chuckle. He hadn’t thought of it like that. “I don’t think Starfleet Command promotes based on lifespan, Bones.”

“Well they damn well oughta,” McCoy groused. “Will that hobgoblin fight to stay with you? Or will he just obediently go where they put him?”

“I don’t know, Bones,” Jim said wistfully. “We all have a duty to serve where we’re most needed,” he reminded the doctor gently.
Bones liked to pretend he didn’t care much about the military. His oath was to medicine. But he was also a soldier and he understood sacrifice.

“Bones, how old are you?” Jim asked suddenly.

“I’m still this side of 50,” McCoy said defensively.

“Not by much,” Jim pointed out. “Where do you see yourself at 60? Not with Natira. Not unless you go to her soon. She’ll choose someone else and how will you feel then?”

“Jim!” McCoy said, getting ready to argue, but Jim put his hand up, stopping him.

“Do you remember Omicron Ceti III, Bones? After we were free from the spores’ influence and had left orbit, you were waxing philosophic on the bridge about us being thrown out of paradise…?” Jim asked.

“Yes,” McCoy replied, “and you said we walked out on our own. I remember.”

“Spock said it was the first time in his life that he’d ever been happy,” Jim whispered.

“Yeah,” Bones said solemnly, recalling how it had affected him to hear Spock say that.

“I ruined it for Spock. Ruined his chance for happiness with Leila,” Jim said with regret. “She loved him and I tore him away from her.”

“Jim, he wasn’t himself. He was under the influence…,” McCoy began, but Kirk waved him off.

“I know. I know. I had to say some terrible things to him to snap him out of it. He was ashamed of how he’d acted. He didn’t have to be. You both are so loyal to me, and believe me it’s appreciated,” Jim smiled. “I just don’t want it to blind you to other options.”
McCoy considered. “Maybe we’ve all been together so long, I can’t picture living apart anymore. Am I just afraid of change? God! That’s so cliché.”

Kirk laughed, then looked down and his face went serious again. “Leila is married,” he said softly.

“Oh?” McCoy asked. This was news to him.

“Uhura told me a few weeks ago. She married a scientist in Sandoval’s new colony. Uhura received the subspace message for Spock. Leila told him she was going to marry in two weeks, giving him one last chance I guess, but he didn’t stop her, only replied with congratulations so she would know he’d received her message,” Kirk shrugged.

“Spock’s a class act. Decent to the end,” McCoy commented.

Jim nodded. “He could have been happy with her, maybe, but now it’s too late.”

“…and his Zarabeth is lost in time just like your Edith,” McCoy said, remembering the other woman who Spock had loved in her cruel, ice-age prison.

Jim ignored the mention of Edith Keeler. It wasn’t about him right now.

“I just don’t want you to get a subspace message like that from Natira one day and have regrets later, Bones, that’s all.”

“Thanks, Jim,” McCoy acknowledged his good intentions.

“You and Spock will be my dear friends for the rest of my life, no matter where you go or what choices you make,” Jim reassured. “You know that, right?”

“I know, Jim,” McCoy said, visibly touched.

To lighten the mood, Jim smiled and said, “I think I’d quite enjoy coming to visit King Leonard and Queen Natira of New Fabrine one day. Do you suppose they would give me an audience?”
“We’ll put you up in grand style and celebrate with a week of feasting and tournament!” Bones played along. “No jousting, though. Bad memories.”

They both laughed.

“Oh, and I don’t think her title is ‘Queen,’” McCoy added.

“A pity,” Jim said. “I was looking forward to doing my best deep bow for royalty.” Since he couldn’t bow sitting in bed, he did some hand flourishes and facial expressions that sent Bones into hysterics.

Just then, the door opened slowly and Scotty peeked his head in. When he saw that McCoy was there with the captain and everyone was having a jolly time, he came right in smiling with Sulu on his heels.

“Captain!” he greeted. “We came to cheer ya up, but I see the doctor is already doin’ that.”

“Ha!” Bones corrected, “Jim’s the funny one.”

“Scotty, Sulu! Thanks for coming to see me,” Kirk greeted.

“Wow, this is a nice place, Captain,” Sulu remarked.

“Check out my view,” Jim bragged, directing them to his window and waiting for their reactions.

“Oh, beautiful.” Sulu said.

“Aye! Now there’s a bonnie treat for the eyes!” Scotty exclaimed. “Lookin’ at her all day and night oughta be fixin’ ya up real soon, Sir.”

“That and a few nerve re-gen treatments, Scotty,” Kirk said smiling.
“Aye. How’re ya comin’ along with those, Captain?”

“The doctors think everything is going as planned. I have a treatment every third day for 40 minutes. The rest of the time I just sit around and heal,” Jim shrugged.

“Lots o’ time to catch up on yer readin’ and get some needed rest,” Scotty commented.

“Yes, and they have the best food here!” Jim said. “If I don’t watch it, Bones will have to put me on a diet plan once I get back to the ship.”

“Can’t have the great Captain Kirk getting pudgy,” Bones chimed in with good humor.

“Everyone on this base seems to know all about us, Sir, even the civilians. It’s eerie,” Sulu said.

“Yeah, I’ve had some food servers who could recite my whole log,” the captain said.

“Well, as for me, I’d rather be havin’ fans than critics,” Scotty said, and everyone agreed.

“Have you seen the hologram deck yet?” Kirk asked no one in particular.

“No,” all three said.

“Uhura and Chekov raved about it,” Sulu remarked. “They saw the Gorky Park program yesterday. That’s a place in Russia.”

“I had a wee look through their list o’ programs,” Scotty said, “and have me heart set on seein’ the Grand Canyon.”

“The Grand Canyon in Arizona, on Earth?” McCoy asked.

“Aye. I canna wrap me head around how those engineers could simulate that kind of distance in
such a small room. I’ve gotta see *that* for m’self,” Scotty said skeptically.

“What else is on the list?” Kirk asked, curious.

“Oh, they’ve got at least 40 programs of Earth locations and maybe 10 of Vulcan, Tellar, Andoria…” Sulu began.

“They have Vulcan?” Jim asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Sulu answered. “The only two Vulcan programs I remember were Mt. Seleya and the capital city.”

“I’m sure I can look them up on here,” Jim gestured to his dark screen pushed off to the side of his bed. “Spock might like that.”

“I wonder if they can simulate that heat?” Bones joked. “Nearly fried my brain last time we were there.”

“‘Hot as Vulcan.’ They don’t say that for nothing,” Jim joked. “There *are* some cooler areas, though. I was on an expedition there years ago and…”

Then, right on cue, in walked Spock.

*How did it get to be 10:00 already?* Jim thought.

“Speak of the devil…,” McCoy naturally said.

“Mr. Spock,” Sulu greeted formally. Scotty just nodded his hello.

“Join us, Spock,” the captain said, “Sulu and Scotty were just telling me that the new hologram deck here has some Vulcan programs: Mt. Seleya and Shi’Kahr. Have you seen them?”
“No, Captain. I have not.” Spock replied.

“Do you have any interest in it?” Kirk asked.

“I do admit to some degree of curiosity about the new technology,” Spock said. “Creating solid-seeming forms comprised solely of photonic energy is a remarkable accomplishment. I would like to experience it.”

“Come with us, then, Mr. Spock, if ya’d like,” Scotty offered. “I have me eye on the Grand Canyon program, then we can select some Vulcan vista, if that sounds appealin’.”

“That would be agreeable. Thank you, Mr. Scott,” Spock said.

“I’d like to see French Polynesia, I think,” Sulu said.

“Ohhh, they have tropical beaches to walk on?” the captain moaned. “If I can walk well enough before we leave, I’d like to go put my feet in the sand. Do you suppose they can simulate the feel of sand between your toes?” Jim ventured, doubtful.

“We’ll be lettin’ ya know, Sir,” Scotty said eagerly. “Doc, ya wanna come with us?”

“It sounds tempting,” Bones replied, “but Dr. Mullov asked me to come to a talk he’s giving at 10:30. You can tell me how it was later.”

“Shall we go now?” Scotty asked. “Did ya have any business with the captain, Mr. Spock?”

Jim piped up, “Go ahead Spock. I don’t want you to miss out.”

Spock moved closer to the bed in case Jim wanted to tell him anything else semi-privately.

“I’ll see you tonight as planned,” Jim told him. McCoy was the only other one close enough to hear.
“Very well, Captain,” Spock said.

Scotty gathered up Sulu and Spock, bid farewell to Jim and McCoy, and off they went.

“Boy, that sounds like something, doesn’t it, Bones?” Jim marveled, shaking his head. “What will scientists think up next?”

“God only knows,” Bones agreed.

“Too bad you couldn’t go with them. You’ll have to check it out later,” Jim suggested. “Gee, how did it get to be 10:08? I haven’t even had breakfast yet.”

“Oh, sorry Jim. I’ve been chewing your ear off,” Bones realized.

“No, I like the company. Stay until you have to leave for the lecture, if you want. I’m just going to place an order real quick. There are some apple crepes with my name on them.” Jim switched on his screen and searched for what he wanted.

“So, Spock is coming back tonight?” McCoy asked.

“Yes. Late, so that we won’t be interrupted,” Jim said.

“Interrupted?”

“We’re going to mind meld to try to recover my memories from the day of the cave-in,” Jim explained… partially.

“Oh, those still haven’t come back?” Bones asked.

“No, and I keep forgetting to ask Dr. Mullova about that… what did you call it?”
“A level 12 scan.”

“Right.”

“Well, I can go get her right now, Jim, and we can discuss it,” Bones offered.

“I’m sure she’s at her husband’s talk. Maybe you should get going, too, if you want a good seat,” Jim suggested.

“Do you think it’s a good idea to let Spock go rummaging around in there?” Bones asked, pointing at Jim’s head. “I mean that Vulcan mumbo jumbo is fine for emergencies, but just to retrieve a couple of memories? That seems...”

“I’m sure it will be fine, Bones. Spock is willing to help, and I am curious to know what happened,” Jim said.

“I don’t like it,” Bones said, shaking his head.

“What are you worried about? It’s Spock.”

“Yeah,” McCoy said, still looking concerned, “but you’re not at your strongest right now. Maybe you should wait until you’re back on your feet before letting Spock go rifling through your gray matter.”

Jim didn’t understand McCoy’s concern, but before he could pursue it further, he heard Lwaxara’s lovely voice at the door.

“Captain Kirk, may I come in?” she asked.

“Certainly Lwaxara,” Jim called. “I’m getting some breakfast in a minute, and McCoy is about to go. We can chat while I eat.”
“Hello Doctor,” Lwaxara said, sensing immediately that he was uneasy about something, “What is wrong?”

McCoy looked down. “Everything’s fine,” he said.

She looked at the captain and then back at McCoy. She said, “Mr. Spock is planning to mind meld with Captain Kirk to retrieve his lost memories and show him his own. You don’t want this to happen. Why?” She paused as McCoy squirmed under her scrutiny and Jim’s questioning gaze. “You think the captain could get hurt. You think mind melds are dangerous, painful, invasive. Why do you think this?” she asked the doctor.

When Bones failed to answer, Jim offered, “Spock usually only does them in emergencies, and sometimes they are upsetting for him.”

Then, Jim turned to McCoy and said, “This will be different, Bones. There’s no rush, no emergency. Spock wouldn’t offer unless it were safe. You remember the OK Corral illusion, how Spock helped us all believe that the bullets weren’t real. That wasn’t painful. That’s the only time he ever mind melded with you...”

“No, that wasn’t the only time,” Lwaxara said suddenly to McCoy. “There was another time that was painful. Very painful for you.” She could see it in the doctor’s memory. “Spock rose up from the biobed where you were treating him... he came at you menacingly, backed you against a bulkhead, and forced a violent meld!”

Lwaxara was appalled. This wasn’t the Spock she knew. Jim’s eyes were wide, too.

“He doesn’t care that he’s hurting you,” she continued. “You’re scared. You’re trying to resist him, but he wants information. He keeps probing for it. It’s painful! His mind is so strong. He wants to know... know what?” She shook her head. “I don’t understand this,” she said.

“Neither do I,” said Jim, shocked. “When did this happen, Bones?” He reached out to comfort his friend who was just beyond his reach.

“Oh, God, Jim,” Bones said, upset from what Lwaxara had uncovered. “That was Mirror Spock who did that! How could I have forgotten?”
“Mirror Spock?” Lwaxara asked, confused.

“Oh,” Jim said, understanding. Then he explained to Lwaxara, “It was Spock’s counterpart in another universe.”

“What?!” She asked, eyes wide. “How…”

“During an ion storm, in the Halkan system, a transporter malfunction sent me, Bones, Scotty, and Uhura into a parallel universe, a similar but violent, warlike one….”

Lwaxara took the rest of the story from his mind and McCoy’s in an instant. “Okay, I see,” she said. “That wasn’t Spock at all.”

“No, not our Spock,” Jim confirmed. “But, Bones, in your report you said Mirror Spock figured out on his own what had happened.”

“I thought he had, Jim,” Bones said apologetically. “He must have blocked my memory of the meld somehow, or else I did it myself from good old-fashioned trauma,” McCoy guessed. “Lwaxara, can you tell which it is?”

“No, not really,” she said. “Humans often have repressed memories, though, so my guess is you blocked it yourself. You were in shock from the attack.”

“Our Spock is not violent,” McCoy said, shaking his head, “but my subconscious was telling me that mind melds are dangerous and he might hurt Jim. I’m sorry, Jim.”

“It’s okay, Bones. I’m sorry that happened to you and I didn’t know about it.” Bones was within reach now and Jim grabbed his arm and squeezed it.

“Lwaxara,” Kirk said, “You’d make one hell of a psychotherapist.”

“You can say that again,” the doctor agreed. “Thank you, young lady. I owe you one. There ought to be one of you on every starship!”
“Indeed,” Jim said.

“Oh, you boys are making me blush. Can scar tissue blush? Well, my face is hot, anyway,” she joked.

“Breakfast is here!” the food service worker called from the door.

“Okay, a little therapy and now crepes!” Jim smiled, taking it all in stride so Bones would too.
“Come in,” he called.

As the food was brought in, McCoy said, “I have this sudden urge to run and apologize to Spock, but I guess I’d better get to Dr. Mullov’s lecture. Damn, it’s 10:35. I’ll see you later, Jim, Lwaxara.”

When Bones was gone, Kirk asked Lwaxara, “Will he be all right?”

“Yes,” she said, reassuringly, patting his hand. “How long ago did this happen, about two or three years?”

“That sounds about right,” Jim confirmed.

“He’s had a wariness of Spock’s telepathic abilities since then. He didn’t know why,” Lwaxara said.

Kirk shook his head slowly. “Imagine being attacked like that by someone with the face of your friend. I guess his mind just didn’t know what to do with that.”

Lwaxara frowned. “I suppose that’s right. I hate knowing there’s a universe like that where the Federation is cruel and there’s a Spock and Kirk who are cruel. I wonder what the Betazoids are like?”

Jim agreed. “It was a heck of an experience for the four of us. That’s for sure. Uhura was very
brave. She endured a lot of unwanted attention from Mirror Sulu, who was very creepy in that universe. She did her duty and held him off with flair,” Kirk remembered.

“Before you made it back to this universe, you talked to the other Spock, tried to inspire him to make changes in his Federation… uh, Empire, I mean. Do you think he did?” Lwaxara asked, hopeful.

“I guess we’ll never know. Will we?” Jim replied. He had often wondered the same thing. He had thought Mirror Spock to be rather decent compared to his crew mates of that universe, but now that he knew what he had done to McCoy, it made him realize he’d probably wasted a good speech.

“The next time I have telepathic contact with Spock,” Lwaxara said, “he will learn what his counterpart did. He will feel what the doctor felt and I predict he’ll have guilt about it even though he is blameless.”

“You’re probably right,” Kirk agreed. “I’ll tell him tonight when I see him. It will be less vivid with words, maybe, huh?”

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” she approved. “You are very thoughtful and protective of your friends, Captain Kirk.”

Jim smiled thinking of his two best friends, “No more so than they are of me. We’ve been through a lot together.”

“They ‘have your back’ as humans say,” she commented.

“Yes, they do.”

“Captain, as I came into the room, you were pondering whether Dr. McCoy’s qualms over you and Spock mind melding were born of jealousy. You were worried he would feel left out if you and Spock got closer… and you are planning to get closer, aren’t you?” she asked, looking straight into his eyes. Kirk didn’t answer.

A slow smile came over that disfigured face of hers that Kirk was finding increasingly beautiful. She had discovered their intention to bond. “Oh… yes,” she said softly. “Yes, that will be perfect for the two of you.” She approved.
Now, it was Kirk’s turn to blush.

“Then, he isn’t going to Gol to do the Kolinahr?” she asked just to make small talk; she already knew the answer.

“No,” Kirk said, “he’s not.”

“You took my advice; you offered him something better,” Lwaxara beamed.

“Yes. Thank you for telling me that he wanted something from me,” Jim said. “That was critical. Once I knew that, I was able to get him to tell me what it was.” She really is a remarkable natural therapist.

“Why thank you, Captain Kirk,” she said.

Kirk chuckled in amazement. Soon Spock would have this kind of access to his mind. What would that be like?

“I’m glad it’s something you can give him… want to give him,” she said.

“So am I,” Jim said. “He should have asked me sooner.”

Lwaxara looked sad suddenly, “He has a lot of shame. He is the best Vulcan I have ever met, but he is not satisfied with himself. I bet he was stunned that you found the idea of bonding with him appealing,” she guessed.

“He did seem… surprised.”

“He’d no doubt calculated the odds and decided they weren’t in his favor.”

“He’s offering me so much,” Kirk said, still amazed. “He said I would not only have access to all
of his thoughts and knowledge, but his abilities as well.”

“I wonder how he knows for certain that he can achieve a t’hy’la bond with a human?” Lwaxara wondered aloud. “He’s surely never done it before, has he?”

Kirk was shaking his head, but then realized he really didn’t know for sure. *Spock was with Pike for 11 years. Had they…?*

“Christopher Pike, his former captain,” Lwaxara read his mind, “They were close? Were they bonded?”

“It only just occurred to me that they might have been,” Jim said, considering it.

“Is Captain Pike… dead?” Lwaxara asked. She was unable to see clearly. There was some tragedy, some terrible injury, but Kirk was trying to stop her from seeing. She should respect that perhaps.

“No…,” Jim said, hesitant to explain.

“Delta radiation. Oh, his poor body! And he was so handsome!” she exclaimed. “He could only sit in his wheelchair, and being human, his mind had no way to reach out of that prison. Oh, that is awful!” Lwaxara squeezed her eyes shut at the image. She could relate to such a debilitating injury.

Kirk seemed lost in thought and didn’t speak.

“Spock saved him,” Lwaxara said finally. “Spock found a way to save him! He risked his career to do it.”

“Yes,” Jim said, “It’s… classified.”

“I can tell you’re trying to control your thoughts, so I won’t see,” she said. “It’s so cute.”

“Cute?” Jim laughed.
“I’m sorry. I should choose my words with more care,” she teased.

“What is Talos IV?”

“Lwaxara…” Jim tried.

“Oh!” She said in wonder. “Pike can live again there, but it’s all in his mind. Wow, the Talosians put my abilities to shame. They’ve completely forsaken reality in favor of the fantasies their powerful minds can create. So, they are caring for Pike and… Vina?”

“Yes,” Kirk said, giving up trying to protect information that he clearly wasn’t able to protect.

“…and neither of them can ever leave Talos?”

“No.”

“You think they might not be happy there, reliving old memories, creating fantasy scenarios, but I assure you, there is enough material in every sentient mind to devise nearly infinite possibilities,” Lwaxara assured.

“I hope they are happy,” Jim said. “Spock risked everything to take Pike there. Not just his career but his life.”

“The death penalty,” she realized suddenly. “Any Federation citizen going to Talos IV would be punished by death. Why was that?”

“The Talosians originally planned to breed a race of human slaves. They’d had Vina for 18 years and wanted a mate for her.”

“Ah. But things changed when they realized Pike and his crew would kill themselves rather than submit?”
“Yes,” Jim said. “That’s why Spock decided to take Pike back there. It took a lot of secret planning…”

“Spock deceived you.”

“He didn’t want me subject to the death penalty,” Kirk explained.

“You’re jealous of Pike.”

“No,” Kirk denied immediately.

“You’re used to having 100% of Spock’s loyalty. You don’t like that Pike had it before you,” she said.

“That’s not true,” Kirk said forcefully. He was sure that it wasn’t when he said it. Of course Spock would still feel loyalty to Captain Pike; he was under his command for 11 years. Jim thought of his favorite captain, Stephen Garrovick. There was nothing he wouldn’t have done for him. He was one of the finest men he’d ever known. Remembering his captain’s senseless death, with so many of his crew, still brought Jim great pain.

“What is the ‘cloud creature?!’” Lwaxara asked, fascinated by the images in Kirk’s mind.

“It was a spacefaring entity comprised of dikironium and other gaseous elements,” he began. “We were in the Tycho star system when it attacked us. It fed off red blood cells, leaving white corpses in a matter of moments. We lost two thirds of our landing party on Tycho IV, then it followed us to orbit. It killed 200 crewman on the Farragut, including the captain. I was an ensign then, like young Chekov is now.”

“You blamed yourself,” she realized. “You were in charge of the phaser banks and had a brief opportunity to fire the ship’s phasers at the creature before it came inside, but you were startled and waited too long.”

“Yes,” he affirmed. “For years I thought I could have killed it if only I’d fired sooner… but the Enterprise encountered the creature again a few years ago and we discovered that phaser fire was completely ineffective against it. We blasted away half a planet’s atmosphere with antimatter to kill the thing in the end, but we did it. Garrovick’s son helped me. He’s one of my ensigns.”
“You both enjoyed the revenge element of killing the creature,” she observed.

It was true. Might as well admit it. “Yes,” he said. “It was very satisfying.”

“The sickly sweet odor of the creature and the malevolent thoughts that you perceived from it had haunted you for a decade. The guilt. How did you function?” Lwaxara asked rhetorically, shaking her head.

“Humans function with a lot of guilt, or hadn’t you noticed?” Jim said with a little half-smile to lighten the mood.

“You are so hard on yourselves, and most of you try so hard... at least the Starfleet personnel I’ve met,” she said. “Don’t they give you any ‘therapy’ as McCoy calls it, when things like this happen?” she asked.

“You mean the Farragut?” he asked to clarify.

“Yes,” she said. “When the Farragut got to a starbase with her captain and 200 of the crew dead, what happened with the survivors?”

Kirk tried to recall. He’d been numb, angry, confused… afraid for his career. He was not found to be at fault, though, and was in fact commended for his conduct on the landing party when the creature first attacked them on the planet. The first officer, who had survived, wrote that he was a ‘fine young officer who performed with uncommon bravery.’ That was almost like a blow when Kirk was convinced it was his fault that the creature had gotten onto the ship to kill all of those people, his friends.

“I don’t actually remember being offered any therapy. I suppose I was,” Kirk tried to remember. “There was a lot to do in the aftermath. Some bodies had to be sent to their homeworlds for burial because of religious beliefs. Some had family on Earth who wanted the bodies returned. Others, like Captain Garrovick were ‘buried’ in space in torpedo tubes with as much pomp and glory as our f/o and the starbase commander could muster.” Jim remembered standing at attention as all of the flag-draped torpedo tubes glided slowly by, each one in turn being shot into the vastness of space, until none remained.

In a moment of bitterness, Kirk said, “It seems all of Starfleet’s best captains die young, and the
idiots who play it safe or just get lucky rise to the admiralty.” He was thinking in part about his next captain, a born paper pusher, who had no business on the bridge of a starship but needed six months of deep space duty in order to advance. Oh, how he had missed Captain Garrovick during those six months. The crew of the Farragut were grieving and their new, enthusiastic young crew mates were not meshing well with the somber mood of the remaining original crew. It had been an unhappy time for Jim, lying on his bunk every night wishing he’d been fast enough to kill that cloud creature. Just a second faster… one second.

Lwaxara was looking at him with her kind, compassionate eyes. She knew he was no longer tortured by these thoughts, but it still made her tender heart break to think of him, barely older than she was now, suffering so. Oh, these humans… and Vulcans. They keep so much bottled up inside. She had such a desire to help them.

She wondered if the Enterprise would ever visit BetaZed. Their cultures had much to offer each other. That first envoy, comprised only of Vulcans, had put a sour taste about the Federation in her parents’ mouths. Hers too. But her mother and the leaders of the other Houses would embrace the officers of the Enterprise. She was sure of that. It is a shame they weren’t official diplomats. They could accomplish a lot more than the trained ones.

Captain Kirk’s mind held several memories of successful negotiations with new species. He was great at it, great at thinking on his feet and bending in areas that his moral compass allowed. He was all about the win-win. Spock had diplomatic talents as well. They would make a good team to negotiate BetaZed’s admission to the Federation, if only the powers-that-be in the Federation had the good sense to utilize them. Her mind wandered for a bit as she pictured her family hosting them. It should be for a month or two. Not eight days… although they’d definitely had enough of the Vulcans by Day Five. She smiled.

“What?” asked Jim, when he saw her expression change.

“Oh, nothing. Just the beginnings of an idea. Something I probably won’t be powerful or clever enough to pull off, but it’s fun thinking maybe I could if I try,” she said.

“Lwaxara, I doubt there is much of anything you couldn’t accomplish,” Jim said.

_The great Captain Kirk just told me that! Wow!_ she said to herself with pride. _He means it, too._

“You command people my age, don’t you?” she asked him.
“How old are you?” He asked, realizing he didn’t know.

“22,” she said.

“Well, I don’t have any 22-year-olds anymore, but I did when our five year mission began. Chekov was about 22, if I remember right, gung ho and ready for adventure,” Jim smiled at the memory. “He wasn’t navigator yet then. He has matured a lot.”

“You have all had so many interesting experiences,” she said. “I would like a journey like that. A ship with 430 people aboard traveling from new adventure to new adventure.” She gave a wistful sigh.

“I was serious when I agreed with McCoy that there should be a Betazoid on every starship,” Jim said. “What an asset you would be. Perhaps if the Federation and BetaZed are able to reach an agreement someday….” Jim paused because Lwaxara had jumped up from the guest chair she had been lounging in.

“I just remembered I need to finish a letter to my mother,” she said as she dashed to the door. “Forgive me, Captain. I will see you later!”

He waved as she disappeared, “Uh, okay, bye.”

He smiled to himself at the exuberance of youth and swung his screen in front of him. He wanted to finish The Chronicles of Saret and Luken. Although he had burned some midnight oil reading it last night, he hadn’t been able to finish. It was a great story. He could see why Spock had liked it as a boy; it had all of the elements that appealed to him, too, when he was young… still appealed to him. It had exotic settings, fierce battles, courageous heroes, vicious enemies, glorious victories, crushing defeats, sacrifice, and redemption.

Saret and Luken’s friendship was at the heart of it all. Saret had the more powerful telepathic mind. Luken was a talented strategist. They were both fine warriors. When they bonded, they became unbeatable. Jim wanted to find out what happened next.

McCoy had encouraged him to catch a nap, and he knew he should in order to be well rested for the mind meld with Spock at 20:30. He would just read for a little while until he got sleepy.
Oh, no! It can’t end like THIS! Spock, why did you have me read it, if it was just going to end like THIS?! Ugh. God, my heart! Maybe there’s an epilogue or a sequel… nope. Well, that’s just great. Vulcans. They write an epic story, then end it like this!

Jim clearly wasn’t going to be able to nap now. He flipped on his screen. *I need some Gardencam ASAP*, he thought. As the soothing sight of people strolling through the gardens hit his retinas, Jim tried to shake off the tragic end of Saret and Luken. He should have seen it coming. These kind of epic tales never end happily ever after even on Earth, but Saret and Luken seemed virtually indestructible. Jim had been holding his breath, pulling for them until the last paragraph, hoping their combined cleverness would save them yet again, but alas, they were mortal and could not escape death at the hands of their enemies.

Saret died several hours before Luken. He was drowned in a small tank of water as an ironic punishment by their enemies for trying to take control of their water source. When Saret realized his body was dying and there was no way to save it, his katra fled across the t’hy’la bond to Luken’s mind, where it was safe for a short period.

Luken pledged to Saret that he would take his katra to the temple at Mt. Seleya, but Luken was captured and burned alive. Their katras clung together, retreating to the innermost depths of Luken’s mind to escape the pain. Their words of farewell were beautiful and profound. When Luken’s body died, their katras dissolved into smoke and disappeared.

Jim had never seen the gardens lit for day before and they were gorgeous. He concentrated on watching the people on his screen enjoying the flora, but he had trouble pulling his mind away from what he had just read. Imagine dying that way with your best friend.

Jim had always thought he would die alone. *I guess if you’re bonded, you never die alone.* He wasn’t sure if he liked the idea or not. What if he died as an old man? Would his katra reside in Spock for the 80 or so remaining years of Spock’s long life? Did he even have a katra? What if Spock died first?

Kirk had so many questions. Is a t’hy’la bond for life? Both Luken and Saret had intentions to take wives in the story. How would that have worked? Do t’hy’la bonds have to be undone if one or both parties want to marry? How could you be intimate with your wife, if your t’hy’la were in your head all day… and all night?
That got Jim thinking about all of the women he had slept with. There were more than a dozen; probably closer to two dozen. Spock would see everything he had done with them and everything he had thought and felt as he was doing it. This made Kirk’s eyes go wide and his stomach a little uneasy. What if he met another girl he was attracted to and they wanted to…? Would his t’hy’la experience everything with him? That was sure to make Spock uncomfortable. Would Jim have to abstain from his natural inclinations toward women because of this t’hy’la bond? That should really go to #1 on his list of things to ask Spock.

It didn’t occur to Spock to have sex outside of marriage, but it occurred to Kirk… a lot. Did Spock intend to marry? It hadn’t worked out with T’Pring and Spock had survived his first pon farr, but in another four years, his biology would reassert itself. Was Spock planning to choose another Vulcan wife? How would she react to her husband having a human t’hy’la?

On impulse, Jim opened his drawer and grabbed his communicator. Flipping it open, he said, “Kirk to Spock. Come in, Spock.”

“Spock here, Captain,” came the swift reply.

The sound of Spock’s voice was so reassuring. How did he do that with just three words?

“Are you aboard the Enterprise?” Jim asked, automatically turning his head to the left to look at his ship.

“Yes, Captain, I am coordinating our supply needs with the quartermaster at the moment,” Spock said.

“Spock, could you have dinner with me at 19:30, if it’s convenient? I have some… matters I’d like to go over with you,” Kirk said. He couldn’t wait that extra hour to see Spock, and it might be good for them to just talk for awhile before the meld, he was thinking.

“Certainly, Captain. I will see you then.”

“Shall I order you the same dish from the other night?” Kirk asked.
“That will be fine. Thank you, Captain,” Spock replied.

“Very well, Kirk out.”

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When Spock arrived at exactly 19:30, their meals were laid out already. Spock had slipped past Lwaxara’s room and sensed nothing. Perhaps she wasn’t there. He was glad. He was not happy with her for upsetting Kirk yesterday with his private plans to go to Gol. Although it had turned out well… surprisingly well… Lwaxara had overstepped and Spock would have to tell her so the next time they spoke privately. He was glad that it apparently would not be tonight.

“Hi, Spock,” Jim greeted his friend warmly. “Please, have a seat. The food was just delivered.”

Spock nodded and proceeded to his chair. “How are you feeling tonight, Jim?” he asked in his soothing baritone.

“Doing good. How are things with the ship? Quartermaster get everything he wanted?”

“Yes. Starbase 4 is very well provisioned and they are coordinating efficiently with us to see that we get everything on our request roster.”

“Very good,” Jim said, “Any problems with anything?”

“No, Sir,” Spock reported. “It was an uneventful day.”

“No word from Starfleet Command yet regarding the wrecked Andorian ship?” Jim thought to ask.

“Not yet, Captain,” Spock answered.

“I wouldn’t worry. They’re probably just working up a decent apology,” Kirk smiled. “I wish I’d gotten to meet the Andorian captain properly. Did he seem the type to correct something like this?”
“He did. He was very emotional about the loss of his engineer at first, but after he calmed, he expressed gratitude to you and the crew,” Spock recounted.

“How is your food?” Jim asked after Spock had tried his first bite.

“The same,” Spock said.

“Good same, or bad same?” Kirk asked when Spock’s facial expression and tone offered no clues.

“Good same,” Spock clarified in Jim’s parlance.

Jim chuckled. “Mine’s good, too. I decided to try Lwaxara’s favorite: Chicken Piccata. Lemon-y. I don’t know about the capers, though. What are capers? They’re these little things, I guess. I don’t even know what they are, really,” Jim babbled, holding one up on the tip of his fork for Spock to see.

Spock shrugged. *Jim is nervous*, he noted.

“I finished Saret and Luken a few hours ago,” Kirk ventured. “God, Spock! Why didn’t you tell me how it ended?!”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “It is my understanding that knowing how a story ends ruins the reader’s enjoyment.”

“Well, sometimes a warning is good,” Kirk said. “I just launched in without reading the summary.”

“See? You did not want to know,” Spock pointed out annoyingly.

“I got so invested in those characters,” Jim shook his head. “I can’t believe your parents let you read that story when you were little. The heroes being drowned and burned alive?!”
“Vulcan has a violent past. All school children learn about it,” Spock explained.

“So, are Saret and Luken history or mythology? Bones told me he had a Vulcan Lit professor who presented the story as legend,” Jim said.

If Spock was displeased that Jim had discussed the topic with McCoy, he didn’t show it. “Their existence cannot be confirmed,” Spock stated.

“You think they existed, though?” Jim asked.

“I think warriors like them existed. Much has been written on the topic. The Chronicles of Saret and Luken is the first historical mention of a t’hy’la bond. There are many more references to it in other ancient manuscripts,” Spock explained. “Perhaps one of those would have been more to your liking.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it! I did. Too much. I just didn’t want them to die like that,” Jim sighed. “Everything they were, everything they could do… but it wasn’t enough. Even their katras didn’t get to be together in the afterlife. Is that what the temple at Mt. Seleya is? A place where katras live on after death?”

“Yes,” Spock confirmed.

“Is that real? Are katras real?” Jim wanted to know.

“Yes,” Spock said. “My father has held two.”

“Held them?” Jim asked.

“When a Vulcan is near the end of life, a priest is called to mind meld with him or her at the time of death or shortly before. The katra is transferred to the mind of the priest, who holds it safe and carries it to the temple at Mt. Seleya where it is stored in the Hall of Ancient Thought.

“If a Vulcan dies unexpectedly without a trained priest on hand, a family member or friend will meld with the dying person and collect his katra. My father has done this twice… for his
grandmother and for a colleague who died while they were offworld.”

“And Sarek carried them to the temple?” Jim asked, fascinated.

“In his grandmother’s case, yes. His colleague’s katra was transferred to the mind of a priest to make the journey.”

“Extraordinary,” Jim said. “Are a katra and a soul the same thing?”

“Vulcans believe a katra is a byproduct of a telepathic mind, a tangible remnant of the sum of a person’s thoughts over his lifetime. A human soul is intangible. It is not something that can be contained, measured, or transferred. Therefore, its existence must be in doubt. I hope you don’t find that insulting.”

“Not at all,” said Kirk, pursing his lips in mock offense.

“What happens to katras that aren’t collected and deposited? Oblivion?” Jim asked, curious to see what Spock thought.

“The universe may have its own collection systems that we have not yet discovered. Perhaps nothing is ever truly lost,” Spock said.

Jim smiled warmly at his friend. Sometimes Spock was a poet and philosopher as well as a scientist. There was so much more to Spock than met the eye. It was such an honor to be trusted with it.

Kirk glanced wistfully to his ship. “I hope they went somewhere, all the crew we’ve lost in the past 4 ½ years… somewhere beautiful. They deserve it.”

“Indeed they do,” Spock said softly, his eyes following Jim’s through the window.

They were both silent for a few moments, then Jim turned back to his chicken and asked, “Did you enjoy the hologram deck this morning, Spock? Is it everything it’s hyped up to be?”
“It is a fascinating technology that I admit I do not completely understand,” Spock said.

“Was it enjoyable?”

“It was a very immersive experience, involving three of the senses.”

“Did you see Vulcan? Was it realistic?” Jim asked.

“It approximated my home planet in many intriguing ways.” Spock began. “The plants, rocks, walls of buildings that I touched felt solid and appropriately textured under my fingers. Quite remarkable considering it is all accomplished with photonic energy.

“How do they do that? Does Scotty understand it?” Kirk asked.

“He has done more reading on the subject of hologram photonics than I, but he still expressed a degree of… exasperation at his inability to fully comprehend it.”

“Ha!” Kirk laughed. “Poor Scotty. I can picture him amazed and delighted, then angry at not understanding everything about how it all works.”

“Would you like to hear about walking in the sand?” Spock offered, remembering that island beaches appealed to his captain.

“Oh, you did that!? Polynesian beaches? What was it like, Spock?”

“While I refrained from removing my boots, the sound of wet sand creaking beneath my feet as I walked was most realistic.”

“What else?” Jim coaxed.

“The sound of the wind jostling palm branches, the lapping of small waves, the cry of seabirds…”
“all accurately represented,” Spock reported, “along with the lack of echoes that one would
normally expect in an enclosed space. The acoustics mimicked an open, outdoor area.”

“Wow. Did Sulu like it?” Jim asked.

“Very much. Mr. Sulu and Mr. Scott removed their boots, rolled up their uniform pant-legs, and
walked into the ‘ocean’ a bit. They picked up seashells that they planned to bring to you, but of
course they disappeared when the program ended, like the sand and water on their legs.”

“Unbelievable!” Jim exclaimed, wonder on his face. “How long did it last?”

“When there are people waiting to use a hologram chamber, as there were this morning, the limit is
ten minutes,” Spock explained. “Mr. Sulu and Mr. Scott expressed a desire to go back with Uhura
and Chekov at an off-peak time when they could stay longer and perhaps swim.”

“Wow,” Jim sighed. “I’d love to do that. Maybe there will be hologram decks on starships one day,
Spock. What a way to wind down, huh?”

“I do not think the crew would get much work done, were the Enterprise equipped with hologram
decks,” Spock speculated.

“You may have a point,” Kirk laughed. “…and the Grand Canyon? Did you see that?”

“That program, we were told, is one of the selections that runs only in the evenings. A Tellarite
couple in line told us it is impressive. They seemed particularly taken with the mule rides.”

“Mule rides?!” Jim enthused. “My family did that on vacation when I was a kid. Sam nearly got
kicked in the head because he didn’t listen to the man about not getting behind a mule while we
were gearing up. Ha! That brings back memories.” Jim looked purely happy for a few moments.
Then he sighed, no doubt remembering that his older brother was deceased.

Spock wanted to say something, but while he was still deciding what, Jim smiled again and asked,
“All done with dinner, Spock? I’ll have our trays picked up.”
“Yes, I am finished,” Spock said.

Kirk clicked his screen, reclined his bed a bit as Dr. Mullova had told him to do when not eating, then said, “Spock, there’s something I wanted to tell you about. It happened this morning right after you all left for the hologram deck.”

“What is it, Captain?” Spock asked, sensing it was important and standing up to move closer to Jim’s bed.

“In the Mirror Universe, the other Spock… we just found out that he forced a mind meld with McCoy for information. Bones had blocked the memory… or the other Spock had. Lwaxara picked up on it,” Jim said. “I told McCoy you were going to help me recover my memories tonight with a mind meld and he objected. He wanted me to do Dr. Mullova’s level 12 scan instead. He expressed concerns that I wasn’t well enough right now for a mind meld and I should think twice about it. I wasn’t understanding the source of his concern, then Lwaxara came in and picked up on it in 10 seconds. She saw in his mind what she thought was you at first, forcing a painful meld with him. It upset her, until Bones told her it was Mirror Spock, and I explained about our experience in that universe.”

Spock looked disturbed, “McCoy insisted on treating my counterpart for his head injury, you told me, and remained in Sickbay while you, Mr. Scott and Miss Uhura went to the transporter room to wait for him. Is that when it happened?” Spock reasoned.

“Yes,” Jim said, “Bones’ report stated that Mirror Spock awoke and guessed that we four were from a parallel universe and had devised a plan to get back, but that’s not what really happened. Lwaxara made Bones suddenly remember that your counterpart attacked him for that information right after waking. Lwaxara thought the images of how violent it was would disturb you, so I offered to tell you in words instead.”

“Most thoughtful, Captain,” Spock said, and then was silent, thinking.

After a few moments, Kirk offered, “Lwaxara said Bones has had a wariness about your telepathic abilities ever since then, but he didn’t consciously know why. She thinks McCoy repressed the memory because of the trauma of being attacked by someone with his friend’s face.”

“No,” Spock said.
“No, what?” Jim asked.

“His memory was not repressed. It was suppressed by my counterpart, I suspect,” Spock explained. “Ancient Vulcan warriors with powerful telepathic abilities could ‘steal’ strategic information from an enemy’s mind and then make them forget that they had taken it, so no one would be alerted. I have never had the occasion… or desire… to do this, but it is likely that my counterpart had honed this skill.

“Hm,” Jim nodded. “That sounds more likely than Bones being traumatized to the point of forgetting, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Spock said. “The doctor is a brave man. I doubt a telepathic attack, even a particularly painful one, would cause his mind to react that way. My counterpart surely is responsible for blocking the memory.”

“Bones said he wanted to apologize to you for his negative attitude about your telepathic abilities the past couple of years,” Jim said.

“His attitude seemed no more negative the 3rd and 4th years of our mission than it did during our 1st and 2nd,” Spock noted blandly.

“Ha!” Jim laughed at Spock’s unintended joke, “Maybe just say, ‘Don’t worry about it, Bones,’ if he apologizes to you, Spock,” Jim advised, still chuckling.

“I will take that under advisement, Captain,” Spock said.

Kirk was still smiling when the lady came to take their food trays.

“Did you enjoy your dinners, gentlemen?” the slim blonde asked as she gathered the trays.

“The food here is marvelous, and so is the service,” Jim winked.

“I’m so glad you liked it, Captain,” she beamed. “Can I bring you anything else?” the girl asked hopefully.
Jim shook his head. “We’re good here, I think, thank you.”

“Well, you have a good night. Get well soon, if I don’t see you again,” she said sweetly.

“Thank you. That’s very nice,” he replied.

She basked in his warm smile until there was no longer a reason to linger; then she backed slowly toward the door to watch him as long as she could, before slipping out with the trays.

When the door closed, Spock gave Jim an eyebrow and a small quirk of his lips.

“Nice girl,” Jim said innocently. “Have you noticed we never see the same server twice, Spock? Three guesses why that is.”

Before Spock could speak, Jim answered, “Lwaxara said it’s because they’re taking turns in the kitchen so everyone will get a chance to meet me. Isn’t that a kick?”

“You like having fans,” Spock said. It wasn’t a question.


“It is gratifying to have the people Starfleet serves pleased with our performance,” Spock stated.

“Indeed it is,” Kirk said, satisfied with that response.

“It’s getting late, Spock. Shall we meld? I’ve been procrastinating a bit, I think. I was feeling kind of nervous about it earlier, but not anymore.”

“What was the source of your concern, Jim?” Spock asked gently.
“Uh, I guess if I were to put it in a category, it would be… privacy,” Jim said, looking down. He didn’t like admitting that there were parts of his lifestyle he didn’t want to share with Spock, but there were. Better to tell him now. “Um, women…,” he began, hoping Spock would catch on.

Spock opened his mouth to speak, thinking he knew where Jim was headed with this, but then closed it again, deciding that listening a bit longer might be wise.

Jim realized he was going to have to spell it out. He wet his lips and took a moment to organize his thoughts. “Spock, women expect a certain… discretion… from their lovers. If you and I were bonded, you would be privy to things that….”

Spock started nodding like he understood, but remained silent, allowing Jim to finish his thoughts.

“I mean, I don’t think we’re going to advertise our bond, are we?” Jim asked, “And if a woman thinks it’s just me in her bed, but it’s sort of both of us, because you’re there in my mind, that could be a little…. Do you see what I mean, Spock?”

“You do not want me privy to your sexual activity,” Spock summarized.

“Not firsthand, no,” Jim said, grateful that Spock had caught on.

“You are still interested in bonding, but you wish to keep your mating behavior private?”

“Yes,” Jim replied.

“Past romantic liaisons or future ones?” Spock asked.

“Well, both, I guess,” Jim said, uncomfortable as hell.

“I admit I had not thought of this,” Spock said.

“Hadn’t thought that I sleep with women, or that I would want to keep it private?” Jim asked.
“Neither,” Spock said.

“I hope it’s not… insulting… that I want to shut you out of that aspect of my life; I don’t mean it to be, Spock,” Jim said, suddenly worried that this might be a deal-breaker for the bond.

“I know, Jim,” Spock said. “We will work something out that is agreeable to both of us.”

“Oh, good,” Jim breathed out in relief.

“Please be open about any concerns you have, Captain. You do not need to be delicate,” Spock urged.

“Was that delicate? It felt kind of awkward,” Jim said.

“Words make it so,” Spock said, “Do you still want to meld tonight? I will avoid any areas of your mind involving young ladies.”

Jim blushed.

“I’m being a midshipman about this, Spock,” Jim chuckled, shaking his head. “Forgive me.”

“There is no need,” Spock said, taking the hand Jim was offering. “Your concerns show the seriousness with which you are considering the bond. I am flattered.”

Spock was comfort personified. *Why am I worried about this?* Jim wondered. He squeezed Spock’s hand and with the other hand dimmed the lights. They had been bright for dinner, but now seemed harsh.

“Lock the door so we’re not interrupted,” Jim suggested. Spock complied.

The tiny light flickering at the heart of the glass globe was perceptible now, twinkling like a firefly
in the dim room, casting its soothing magenta light over their faces.

Spock returned to Kirk’s bedside. “Jim,” he said softly, “shall we begin?”

“Yes,” Jim said, unsure what to expect. He’d had Spock in his mind before, but this was going to be different.

There were things Spock wanted to tell Jim, go over with him before the meld, but they had talked so long this evening already and he was eager to slip into Jim’s mind. He decided he would tell him from there.

Spock laid his fingertips lightly on Jim’s face. When they were positioned perfectly, he pressed inward gently. Jim’s eyes looked up into his for a moment, then closed.

“My mind to your mind,” Spock said in his velvet baritone, “my thoughts to your thoughts…”
Chapter 13

11 Days Down - Chapter 13

With a sharp intake of breath, Kirk accepted Spock into his mind. Everything Spock was, everything he thought and felt, was suddenly right there with Jim. It would have been overwhelming, except that it… wasn’t. It felt comfortable, familiar.

Spock had not done an unshielded meld with anyone since childhood, when he was just beginning to learn telepathic techniques. The sensation was new to him, but liberating. He enjoyed the feeling of Jim’s mind joined with his, all of his mind. He was committed to showing his whole self to Jim “warts and all,” as humans say. At the moment, though, he didn’t feel like he had any warts. He felt perfect, strong. All of the dark corners of his mind were filled with Jim’s light.

Jim was exploring already, getting his bearings, intuitively searching the terrain. He found Spock’s recent hologram experience on the beach. It was just like Spock had described with words, but 1,000 times richer and more vivid to actually be inside the memory. It felt to Jim like it was his own memory… the wind was on his face, the gleaming turquoise water was dazzling his eyes, the wet sand crunching beneath his feet. Spock felt a tinge of regret that he hadn’t removed his boots so Jim could feel the sand between his toes. He would have liked that. Jim smiled. He could hear Spock’s thoughts. He was Spock.

Spock sensed that Jim was in no hurry to see his memories of the cave-in. Pleasant experiences were a better place to start, anyway. Show me your mule ride, Spock asked. Jim thought of it and suddenly the landscape changed to the Grand Canyon. Jim was eleven. Spock could feel the motion of the mule, bearing its child-sized weight along the steep, narrow trail. He could feel Jim’s excitement and his trust in the sure-footedness of the animal. The guide had said, “A mule never falls, so hang on tight and you’ll be fine, pardner.” Jim had believed it and wasn’t afraid. He loved the name of the dusty trail they were following from the South Rim to the canyon’s floor: Bright Angel. Before the trip, Jim had read a lot about the Grand Canyon and the Wild West. His young mind was full of exciting stories as his family made their slow, scenic descent. The guide was in the lead, then Jim, followed by Sam and their parents. A big-horned sheep jumped up onto the path in front of them. He stood and studied them for a few seconds before continuing his acrobatic climb up the cliff wall. “Did you see that, Sam?!” Jim called, turning to see his brother’s reaction. Sam’s eyes were wide with wonder. On the way down, they also saw jackrabbits, roadrunners, and red-tailed hawks soaring on the updrafts. When they reached the base camp at the bottom of the canyon, the guides set up tents and made a campfire dinner for them as the pink sunset faded. They sang Wild West songs and ate hot dogs and baked beans under the stars. Spock loved every second of being there with Jim. Sam was telling jokes now….

Suddenly, they were on Deneva. Sam was dead. No. No! Jim thought. Perhaps Spock should have let the memory play out, but his impulse was to rescue Jim, so that’s what he did. His captain
didn’t know yet how to direct his thoughts, navigate away from unpleasant surprises. He would learn, but not the hard way, not like Spock had learned. Spock chose a memory from his own childhood that he always found soothing; Jim would feel what he felt and be soothed.

They were in Spock’s childhood bedroom. A 7-year-old Spock lay at the foot of his bed with a beautifully illustrated picture book that he was reading to his pet sehlot. He was reading in Vulcan, but Jim understood every word. He also knew that the book was The Chronicles of Saret and Luken, the sehlot’s name was I-Chaya, and Spock’s parents were about to come into the room.

“Spock, your mother and I were pleased with the way you conducted yourself in front of our dinner guests this evening. You made us proud,” Sarek said from the doorway. “Rest well, my son.”

“Thank you, Father,” Spock replied.

Sarek left, but Amanda came further into the room and stayed for a bit. “How is it working out reading aloud to I-Chaya, Spock? Is it helping your diction?”

“I believe so, Mother, and I-Chaya likes it,” Spock said.

“Is that so, I-Chaya?” Amanda asked, scratching the sehlot’s ear. “Shall I extend Spock’s bedtime by 15 minutes tonight, so you can hear a little more of the story?” she asked the drowsy sehlot.

“Oh, thank you, Mother!” Spock said.

“Well, if it’s helping your studies…,” Amanda winked. “Sleep tight, Spock,” she said as she closed his door behind her.

Spock laid his head down on the side of I-Chaya’s chest, enjoying the feeling of soft fur against his face. Jim could feel it. The sehlot was warm and making a contented noise that was between a purr and a rumble. Then, Spock rose up, grabbed the book again and continued reading aloud.

*Your voice, Spock. God, it’s adorable,* Jim thought. *And your parents are so young. McCoy joked that you were never a child. He should see this.*
Spock thought of something he wanted Jim to know about. His childhood bedroom faded away and they were in Jim’s quarters on the Enterprise. Jim wasn’t there, though. He was lost in Tholian space. Spock had declared him dead and McCoy demanded they go to Kirk’s quarters and view his final orders.

*You two DID listen to my final orders. I knew it!* Jim said.

His two friends were standing soberly, listening to a tape of him lecturing them on how to get along, how to support each other without him there to guide them.

“I’m sorry, Spock,” McCoy said when the tape ended and the screen went dark. “It does hurt, doesn’t it?”

“What would you have me say, Doctor?” Spock said placidly, but in obvious pain.

*McCoy HAD been giving you a hard time. My last orders helped then?* Jim asked.

Yes, Spock answered.

*I’m sorry I gave you a scare, Spock. I give you too many of those, don’t I?* Jim asked, knowing it was true. *Was Pike like that?*

*Somewhat, yes,* Spock confirmed.

The venue they were in changed subtly. It was still the Captain’s quarters, but his orange bedspread was beige and someone else’s books were stacked on his shelf. Captain Pike sat on his bed in his gold velour tunic, looking up at his science officer and his first officer who both stood at relaxed attention by his desk. His chief medical officer, Phil Boyce, lounged in his desk chair.

“Well, Number One,” Pike said, “you got it: commander of ops, Starbase 13! You’ll be on deck for base commander in two years when Hillsdale retires.” He handed her a record tape of her new orders.

“Lucky #13,” Doctor Boyce teased. “Shore leave every day on that base, my dear! I hear they’re
really equipped. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Doctor… Captain,” she said.

Jim knew from Spock’s mind that Number One was not given to emotionalism, but she looked pleased with her assignment.

“As for you, Spock, you’re going to be babysitting another young captain of the Enterprise: James T. Kirk. Thirty-two years old and apparently quite a dynamo. You’re being promoted to lieutenant commander. You’ll be first officer AND will continue your duties as science officer as well… So that’s what you get for showing how capable you are,” Pike winked as he handed the orders tape to Spock. “Congratulations, Spock. I know you’ll serve Kirk as well as you have served me. Help him; he’s going to need it.”

“Yes, Sir,” Spock replied. “Then, you are being promoted to fleet captain?”

“Yes,” Pike said. He sounded a bit reluctant.

His officers offered the obligatory congratulations, but Pike knew they thought he was making a mistake leaving the Enterprise.

“It’s where Starfleet wants me,” Pike said simply.

“Yeah, well enjoy doing cadet inspections and hobnobbing with admirals, Chris,” Dr. Boyce said with a frown, “I’ll be fishing.”

“I wish I were old enough to retire, Phil,” Chris sighed. “I certainly feel it.”

“Oh, you’re a very young man still, Sir,” Number One attempted to reassure. “These last few years have aged us all. I for one could use a little administrative monotony.”

As the memory played out, Jim could feel through the meld that Spock hadn’t wanted to lose Pike. They were friends. He was apprehensive about having a new captain after many difficult years of trying to understand this one. He knew Pike was tired, but that wouldn’t last. Two weeks of rest
and Chris’ explorer heart would be wanting new adventures.

_You didn’t want him to go. Didn’t think it was the right move for him_, Jim said through the meld.

_No. They caught him when he was tired and uncharacteristically passive. Chris called it duty, going where they wanted to put him, but he just was not up for a fight right then_, Spock explained. _He had recently healed from a serious injury to his shoulder. It was still bothering him and he was not in his usual robust frame of mind._

_You heard from him before his accident with the delta radiation_, Jim read in Spock’s thoughts. _He was sorry. He regretted giving up the Enterprise._

_Yes_, Spock confirmed. _He was pleased that I liked you, though, and found you to be a competent commanding officer._

_Competent? That’s the high praise you gave me?_ Jim teased.

_Chris knew I meant it as high praise._

_Pike knew you well_, Jim observed in Spock’s mind.

_Not as well as YOU do. And no, I never bonded with him. You were wondering._

_Yes_, Jim admitted.

_Did you ever want to?_ Jim felt bold enough to ask. He wasn’t sure what exactly he was sensing through the meld. Spock had feelings for Pike. That was clear… loyalty, friendship, respect. He had melded with Chris a handful of times over their eleven years together, but only out of necessity, in emergency situations. Spock found Pike’s mind interesting, but Jim was sensing nothing beyond that.

_I wanted a t’hy’la in childhood_, Spock explained. _The desire for one never resurfaced until you. It did not occur to me with Captain Pike._
Jim wasn’t sure why that relieved him as much as it did.

Would it have mattered? Spock wondered through the link.

It shouldn’t, Kirk said, irritated at himself for letting Spock see that it DID matter to him. Lwaxara said I’m jealous of Pike. I denied it, but I suppose she’s right. Everything you did to save him from that horrible fate: kidnap him from Starbase 11, get him to Talos IV… the planning was so intricate…

…and I left you out of it, Spock interrupted.

You should have trusted me, Jim said.

I wanted to protect you from the death penalty. Had you known any part of the plan, it could have applied to you.

I know Spock, I know, Jim said. They had hashed this out four years ago. Why were they talking about it now, here?

Because it still bothers you that I did not confide in you, that I deceived you, Spock said. It was mutiny, treachery. It SHOULD bother you.

You had only known me for six months then, Jim softened.

Four months, 29 days, Spock corrected out of habit.

Jim wanted to stop thinking about this now. It was water under the bridge, but his mind kept the train of thought going. The way Pike kept saying “No, no,” with that light on his wheelchair…. He didn’t want you to sacrifice your career and your life for him. He would have chosen to sit in that chair, his mind trapped in his paralyzed body for fifty plus years, rather than have you risk so much. He was… is… an exceptional man. I ask myself sometimes if I would have had the fortitude to turn away your help under those circumstances. I don’t know.
Let us hope you are never IN those circumstances, Jim... though I would certainly do the same for you if you were.

Maybe that is what Jim needed to hear. He was ready to move on now with their just-remembered agenda.

Can you find my memories from the day of the cave-in, Spock? Jim asked.

I HAVE been looking. I do not believe they were stored, at least not completely. The trauma to your body must have prevented it, Spock reasoned.

Then show me YOUR memories of the day, Spock, Jim asked. I want to see.

Spock was committed to doing this, but he wanted Kirk aware of the risks first.

Captain, there is a 78% chance that you will become emotional, but I must try not to. If I succumb to the emotions I was feeling that day, there is a risk the meld could end abruptly and painfully. You will experience my memories through my eyes, as though you are me. That is how I must do it to maintain the link. Perhaps afterward, once we are out of the meld, we could talk about it, if you like.

Okay, Spock, Kirk agreed.

Jim’s vision blurred. He was in a torch-lit cave. There was screaming. The Andorian woman was hanging upside down in front of him, but he couldn’t focus on her. He was dazed, damaged. His ribs hurt. Huge ape-like hands were holding him by the shoulders as he tried to stand up. The knife he had grabbed from his captors was back in their hands again. One of the creatures stepped near the girl. Her blood began to flow. Jim struggled and blinked his eyes hard repeatedly, trying to clear his blurry vision. He couldn’t move and he couldn’t see… and there was so much screaming. Jim felt Spock’s impotence, frustration. The engineer was dying a few feet away and he could do nothing to save her.

He was being pulled forcefully now, by the arm, out of that chamber, down a sloping hallway. The creature was moving fast and Spock struggled to keep his feet under him so he wouldn’t be dragged. The creature didn’t seem to care either way.
They stopped. Spock heard the clink of metal chains, then he was pushed into a large cell. The creature re-fastened the chains on the door and abruptly left. Jim, living Spock’s memory, began investigating his surroundings. He checked the chains and bars first… secure. He touched the ground beneath him… slightly damp, cold. He could smell animal droppings. As his vision began to clear and his eyes adjusted to the low light, he studied the petroglyphs on the rock walls. The native creatures had drawn crude depictions of the sacrifice of animals and each other to their deities. Jim could feel how Spock’s mind was trying to make sense of the images, find clues about the way the creatures’ minds worked. How many beings would they sacrifice in one day? Would ONE satisfy them for now, or was a mass slaughter going on up in that chamber? Why was I moved here, separated from the Andorians? Did Scott, Uhura, and Chekov make it back to the ship or are they being held somewhere here, too?

Jim watched from behind Spock’s eyes as he looked again for weakness in the bars and chains and ran his fingers along the walls hoping for a fissure in the rock where he could pry a shard away to use as a weapon if the creatures returned. He watched as Spock removed his phaser and communicator, confirming that neither worked and buried them both in the soft dirt toward the back of his cell, so they wouldn’t fall into the hands of the natives. They weren’t functioning underground, but if the creatures took them up to the surface….

Spock had secured the Andorian ship when the landing party decided to leave it and investigate the underground passages. The creatures could no longer go aboard, but Spock wondered what Federation technology they may have already taken. It would prove difficult to search for, with their sensors unable to penetrate the rock on this moon.

Now, it was several hours later and Jim felt Spock’s breath catch as he heard two or more of the large natives approaching. They undid the chains on his cell, but instead of pulling him out as he’d expected, they shoved him further in and came in themselves, closing the door behind them. One had a bucket of green liquid. The other grabbed at Spock’s uniform shirt with both hands and ripped it off his body, causing a friction burn at the side of his neck. Jim felt Spock’s fear. What are they going to do?

Neither of them had a knife. The one who had ripped his shirt off, threw it to the ground and circled behind him. He pushed Spock to his knees and held his hands behind his back. The creature in front of him also knelt, dipping two of his large fingers into the bucket. Spock shuddered at the first touch of the fingers to his bare chest. Revulsion ran through him. Jim felt Spock trying to control his emotions, trying to force himself to take telepathic advantage of the skin-to-skin contact. He couldn’t sense their thoughts exactly, but they were in an agitated emotional state. The crash landing of the Andorians was something they were attributing to their deities. Trying to understand its meaning and what their gods wanted them to do next was obsessing their primitive minds.

The creature painting symbols on Spock’s chest appeared deep in concentration. Spock tried placing the suggestion in his mind that he should open the gate and let him go. For a moment the hairy native looked confused, but then he returned to his work. Being touched by the creatures’
huge hands was causing Spock more distress than he was showing outwardly; his mind was awash in his captors’ primal fears and anxieties. So much unbearable contact. The creature behind him had his hands and arms in a vice-grip, but the most painful part was the mental contact. Spock tried to exploit it, but failed with the second creature as well. They seemed not to be susceptible to his telepathic suggestions.

Spock remembered seeing green painted symbols on the Andorian engineer’s naked chest. That, and his own intuition, told him the painting was something that immediately preceded exsanguination. Unbidden images came to his mind of himself on that scaffold he had seen in the chamber. He wondered what it would be like to hang upside down and have his blood forcefully pumped out by his hammering heart until there was not enough pressure in his opened circulatory system for his heart to beat anymore. His last thought would be of Jim, he knew that.

Jim, help me! Where are you? Spock’s mind cried out from his cell, when he had exhausted all other options. He knew Jim wouldn’t hear him. They weren’t bonded and Jim didn’t know where he was or what was about to happen to him.

Oh, Spock! I’m sorry, Jim sobbed, feeling his friend’s distress. Jim thought about what he might have been doing at this moment. Conferring with Scotty on the Enterprise possibly, planning a rescue of stealth, since force wasn’t possible. Perhaps they were already on the way. Jim hoped they were, so Spock wouldn’t have to endure this much longer. Intellectually, he knew all of this had transpired days ago and Spock was fine now, but here in the moment, his friend’s anguish felt so real and immediate. Sharing in it was wrenching.

The creature’s palm was flat on Spock’s chest now, moving in slow circles, smearing the symbols he had painted. What did that mean? The symbols on the Andorian woman had not been smeared.

Then, he heard distant shrieking. The Andorians. Jim recognized that as the rescue in progress! He and Scotty had broken the chains on the Andorians’ cell with the crowbar Chekov had fetched and were leading the captives along the walls of the passageways, behind Scotty’s portable duckblind fields. The Andorians had seen the natives and started screaming, Scotty had told him.

Although Jim didn’t remember these events personally, Scotty’s account had been very thorough, and he felt like he did. All of the terrified “beasties” would soon run away toward the lower levels because it seemed to them that the shrieks were coming from nowhere. The rest of the rescue would be smooth sailing. Jim would hand things over to Scotty and go back in search of Spock.

Spock didn’t know what the shrieks meant. He thought maybe the natives were sacrificing another captive or the Andorians had attempted an ill-fated escape.
Startled by the distant screams, both creatures in Spock’s cell immediately left to investigate. They locked the chains in such a hurry Spock thought maybe they hadn’t secured them well, but one test told him they had. At least they were gone. Spock admonished himself for becoming emotional during his ordeal. With his mind returning to normal, he continued to search for a means of escape.

Spock’s cell was cold and the wet paint was making him shiver. He hadn’t noticed how low his body temperature had dropped. He picked up his ruined uniform shirt and used it as a rag to wipe at the paint. Some came off, but most wouldn’t.

He became aware of someone moving nearby and was instantly on alert. It didn’t sound like the way the creatures moved. On impulse, he called out, “Captain?”

“Spock!” Jim rushed up to him smiling, then horror overtook his features when he saw what he thought was blood on his friend’s chest.

“It is paint, Jim. It is just paint. I am uninjured,” Spock told him quickly.

“You’re okay?” Jim asked anyway, reaching through the bars to squeeze Spock’s shoulder.

His touch was so warm, so full of comfort and friendship. In his mind, Jim could feel Spock’s relief at seeing his captain coming to his rescue. Spock relaxed even more as he realized Jim’s other hand held a very sturdy-looking crowbar.

“Everyone is safe. We’re the only ones still down here,” Jim said as he twisted the crowbar in the chains. After two attempts failed to pop the links, he asked Spock sheepishly, “Do you mind?”

“My pleasure, Captain,” he said. Taking the crowbar, Spock easily broke the chain.

“Come on,” Jim urged. “Those things ran off, but no telling when they’ll be back. Scotty’s waiting in the transporter room to beam us up as soon as we’re out in the open.”

Thinking Spock was following him, Kirk took off at a run, “The entrance is a good 500 feet from here and we…” his voice trailed off in the distance. Spock had turned to retrieve his buried equipment. Quickly clipping his phaser and communicator to his belt, Spock set out after his captain who was about 50 feet ahead.
Viewing the scene through Spock’s eyes, Jim felt his friend’s horror as the ceiling began to collapse above the captain. Kirk stopped running and turned. Their eyes met for a shocked second, as Spock ran toward him. Then the captain was gone. Spock was choking on the dust, but he wasn’t hurt. Climbing over the fallen rocks, he made his way to where Kirk was standing a moment ago… or close to it. Thick dust made everything in his field of vision a monotone gray. The great gust of wind created by the ceiling’s collapse had blown out all but one of the torches lighting the pathway.

“Jim. Jim!” Spock called.

No answer.

As the dust settled a bit, he saw it. Jim’s left hand was sticking up through the rocks about three feet from him. It wasn’t moving. Spock began lifting rocks off the area where his captain’s head and chest would be and throwing them aside. When he could finally see his face, he brushed the dust away from his nose and mouth and gave him two quick rescue breaths before even checking for a pulse. He did have a pulse, but Spock had to press deeply into his neck to find it.

“Jim, hold on,” Spock whispered. He threw the remaining rocks off of him until he came to one too large to move. It was trapping the left side of Jim’s lower body. Spock thought of the crowbar. He had left it by his cell door. It would take him 38 seconds roundtrip, he calculated, to go retrieve it, but he could see no alternative. When he returned, he gave Jim two more rescue breaths, watching his chest rise and fall. Then he positioned the lever and slowly coaxed the massive boulder to roll a quarter turn away from the captain. His mind automatically calculated its weight and the survivability statistics of such an accident.

Experiencing this through Spock’s eyes, Jim felt his panic rise as he tried once again to get a pulse. There was nothing this time. No. No! Spock’s mind was shouting. Without delay, he scooped Jim into his arms, wincing at how broken his body felt. There was no other choice but to move him. No help was coming. He had to get Jim above ground so Scotty could beam them up.

“Surak, give me strength and speed. Keep me calm so I can save my captain,” Spock whispered. It was like a prayer. Surak, the father of modern Vulcan philosophy, was the closest thing the secular Vulcans had to a god, Jim supposed. It touched him that Spock would pray for him.

Spock’s emotions swirled around him. Jim saw how deeply devoted to him Spock was, how desperately he wanted him to live, how certain he was that he was going to die.
Jim was crying inside Spock’s mind. He loved his friend. How many times had Spock saved his life? Too many to count. Jim needed him, needed him like air. He wouldn’t give it all up like Pike had. He would fight to keep Spock, fight to keep the Enterprise.

“Jim, hold on. Please, Jim. Please!” Spock was whispering to the body in his arms as he ran. He could see the light of the cave entrance ahead. If Scotty was doing his job, they’d be on the Enterprise in 25 seconds. He went over the commands he would give to minimize the time it would take to get the captain into surgery. He was starting to tire, but he kept his pace until the moment he cleared the cave entrance. Seconds later the transporter beam grabbed them.

Scotty’s eyes were huge as he beheld the sight before him on the transporter platform.

“Call McCoy to surgery, now!” Spock ordered, snapping Mr. Scott to action.

“Yes, Sir,” Scotty said, already flipping the switch, “Doctor McCoy to surgery. Doctor McCoy to surg…."

Spock was already out of earshot. There were always emergency gurneys in the transporter room, but Spock had carried him this far and every second counted. He would take him directly to McCoy.

Bones was there when Spock rushed in with Kirk. “Lay him here,” McCoy directed. Scotty must have told the doctor it was Jim who was hurt… and badly… because he didn’t look surprised.

“No pulse,” Spock said, “Cave-in. Multiple fractures, crushed left hip, internal bleeding…” Spock gave in to a fit of coughing. “…dust inhalation.”

McCoy had already started perfusing oxygen.

“Nurse! Clean him up. Prep him for surgery.”

“What kind?” she asked.

“EVERY kind!” McCoy shouted, “and give me a heart stimulator.”
The biobed’s readings and the portable scanner he was running over Kirk confirmed everything Spock had said, and then some. As the nurse began quickly cutting off his shirt, Bones punched the comm, “Nurse Rogier and Nurse Allard, report to surgery, stat.” He looked at the nurse prepping Kirk. “We’re gonna need help,” he told her.

She nodded in agreement. Both she and McCoy looked worried. “Here’s the heart stimulator, Doctor,” she said, handing it to him. “It’s on the setting for a blocked circulatory system.”

“Thank you, Nurse,” McCoy said as he took it and began stimulating Jim’s heart.

The two nurses McCoy had called away from their lab assignments rushed in. One gasped, “Captain!” when she saw who their patient was. The room became crowded with activity.


Spock backed out of Sickbay into the corridor until the door whooshed shut. A few crewmen who had seen Spock carry the captain in were still gathered by the door.

“Will he be all right, Mr. Spock?” One of them asked earnestly.

“Unknown,” Spock replied.

“Are you all right, Sir?” a second crewman asked.

Becoming aware of his appearance, he nodded and silently headed for his cabin without further comment. Crewmen were everywhere, staring at their shirtless, dust-covered commander as he passed. Many offered their help, but he waved them off and kept walking at a steady pace until he reached his cabin.

In the privacy of his quarters, he removed his dusty boots and uniform pants and turned on a water shower. In the mirror, his face and green torso, caked with dust, shocked him. The crewmen must have thought what Jim first thought, that the green was his blood.
Jim. Would Jim live? The biobed was displaying life signs when he left. McCoy had not given his usual assurances, however. Spock knew assurances were unwarranted; the captain’s condition was critical.

In the shower, the paint proved hard to remove. Spock wished he had something more abrasive to scrub with. He washed the grime out of his hair and ears and nose, soaped up his whole body until he was as clean as he could get. He was in command now and must get to the bridge as soon as possible, but he gave himself just a moment to stand under the water and breathe the steamy air that soothed his dusty lungs. As he breathed slowly in and out and tried to calm his mind, a sob caught him, then another and another, until he was wracked with them.

Jim, my t'hy'la, don't die. I love you. Please don’t die.

Jim, still experiencing Spock’s memories as though he were him, was overcome by his friend’s emotions.

Spock! This is enough. End the meld. I’m sorry I made you re-live this. End it, please!

***

Spock’s fingers were wet. He slowly removed them from Jim’s face as he withdrew gently from his friend’s mind. He had stayed in control, but it had been an effort.

Jim was still shuddering with emotion. Tears were dripping off his jaw onto his hospital gown. Kirk looked around his room. The glass globe twinkled on his desk and his ship sat serenely outside the window. He felt Spock put his arm around his shoulders.

Jim looked up into his friend’s eyes. “I love you, too, Spock,” he said before he lost his nerve. “I love you, too.”

Spock laid his head on Jim’s and continued to hold him close. It was difficult coming out of a lengthy meld sometimes. There was an emptiness, a separateness that stole over you. Spock didn’t want Jim to feel it, especially since he was upset already.

The chronometer in the corner of Jim’s dark screen read 23:17. “That was the longest mind meld I have ever sustained,” Spock said, “and the first unshielded one I have done as an adult.”
“Are you tired? I’m exhausted,” Jim said, wiping his face and eyes.

“Parts of it were taxing,” Spock admitted.

“I shouldn’t have asked you to do it. I didn’t realize,” Jim whispered.

“It is all right, Jim,” Spock breathed softly into his hair.

Jim reached up and touched his friend’s encircling arm. The soft velour at Spock’s wrist felt so reassuring. Spock was not naked and cold, covered in dust and paint, fearing for his captain’s life. He was safe and sound. They both were. Jim breathed out and the last of the tension left him.

“That was incredible. You are a wonder, Spock,” Jim said with awe in his voice. “I was right there with you. I was you.”

Spock lifted his head and stood completely erect for the first time since beginning the meld nearly three hours ago. A human could not have held that crouched position for so long, but Spock’s muscles barely registered the strain. He took a small sidestep toward the foot of Jim’s bed, so he could look his captain in the face.

“I believe our minds are compatible for a t’hy’la bond, if you are still interested in that,” Spock said.

“Interested? I’d say do it right now!” Jim responded.

“A few more melds first would give us a greater chance of achieving the bond,” Spock said.

“Chance?” Kirk asked. “Then you’re not 100% sure you can do it?”

“No,” Spock admitted.
“Because I’m human?” Jim asked.

“I know of no record of a Vulcan-to-human t’hy’la bond, and I have no way of inquiring about it without revealing our plans. As far as I know, it has never been done.”

“We’ve done a lot of things that had never been done before,” Jim reminded him with a twinkle in his eye and his most charming, confident smile. “We’ll just have to make another ‘first.”’

The captain’s confidence was contagious and it bolstered Spock’s own.

“Indeed,” Spock said.

They smiled at each other, then Jim picked up his glass globe and said, “You know, I really like this. You picked out a good one. You shouldn’t worry that you didn’t know my favorite color. Lwaxara says I don’t have one.”

“Hmm,” Spock said, “Interesting.”

“What is your favorite color, Spock?” Jim asked.

“The transition from blue to indigo,” Spock stated.

“So… purply-blue?”

“Or bluish-purple, yes,” Spock said.

Jim grinned. After such an emotional experience, talking about favorite colors was a relaxing wind-down.

“How are you feeling now, Jim?” Spock asked. “Shall I go back to the Enterprise and let you get some sleep?”
“I am tired,” Jim acknowledged. “Thanks for staying a little while, though. When the meld first ended, I felt…”

“…empty and separate?” Spock supplied.

“Yes!” Jim said.

“It is an after-effect of a long meld. One becomes accustomed to the mental intimacy of companionship and mourns the loss of connection for a few moments when it ends,” Spock explained.

“Oh,” Jim said, “That makes sense. Your emotions in the shower overwhelmed me. After everything I… you… had been through, it was just too much. I wanted out, but once you left my mind, I felt almost more anguish for a short time.”

“I thought you might,” Spock said.

“Did you feel it, too?” Jim asked.

“Yes,” Spock said.

They were quiet for a few moments, then Jim said, “I don’t want you to ever be that sad, like you were in the shower, and be alone. We need each other, Spock.”

“I concur,” Spock whispered. He took Jim’s left hand and pulled it up to his lips. He looked ready to cry, as he held it there, breathing warm breath over Jim’s fingers.

“What are you thinking about?” Jim asked gently, since he no longer had access to Spock’s thoughts.

“How slim the odds were that you would be here right now, that we would be having this conversation.”
“You did everything perfectly, Spock. You gave me... us... this chance,” Jim said gratefully, “and as soon as I can walk, I’m going to give you a great big bear hug... if you’ll let me,” Jim grinned his beautiful grin.

“I shall look forward to it,” Spock said.

“It doesn’t sound too undignified?” Kirk checked.

“Compared to you seeing me naked in the shower and washing my... everything... a fully-clothed ‘bear hug’ sounds... mild,” Spock joked. His eyebrow went up and Jim burst out laughing.

Spock decided this was probably a good time to take his leave. Jim seemed to be feeling good now.

“Get some sleep, Jim. I will see you tomorrow,” Spock said as he let go of Kirk’s hand and moved to leave.

“Okay, Spock,” Jim agreed. “I have a treatment tomorrow at 14:30. Any other time is good.”

“Very well. Goodnight, Captain.”

“Goodnight, Spock. You get some rest, too,” Jim called.

Spock nodded as he unlocked the door and quietly slipped through.

Kirk reclined his bed all the way. No midnight snack for him tonight; he was exhausted. The neckline of his hospital gown was still damp from his tears, but it wasn’t bothering him. He turned his head to look at his ship, imagining Spock passing through the docking port and walking to his cabin. He wondered if Spock slept better in the quiet of space dock or with the engines humming. That was the last thought he remembered having before the nurse came in at 07:30.
“Good morning, Captain Kirk,” Virginia said, smiling and bright-eyed.

“Good morning,” he replied, stretching and yawning.

“Did you enjoy a good night’s sleep last night?” she asked.

“I did, thank you.”

“Hm,” she said, her brow furrowing, “It doesn’t look like it on here.” She was looking at his bio numbers on her tablet like she did every morning.

“What do you mean?” Jim asked.

Just then McCoy and Dr. Mullova came in. After a round of ‘good mornings,’ Virginia said, “Doctor, look at this.” She meant Dr. Mullova, but McCoy came to look at the tablet, too.

“What could have caused that? Not nightmares or zingers,” Virginia said.

“Captain, what time did you go to sleep last night?” Dr. Mullova wanted to know.

“About 23:30, I think,” Jim said.

“Then this happened before you went to sleep,” she said.

“What did?” Kirk asked.
“For about three hours last night your brainwave patterns went berserk. You can still see your normal patterns here,” she pointed, “but they’re overlaid with something completely different here. It’s almost as if you were a different person for three hours. It must be a malfunction.”

Jim smiled at McCoy. Bones understood.

He rocked up on his toes and then back on his heels, smiling a knowing smile. “Ladies,” he said like a flamboyant detective who had just solved a very puzzling case, “What we see recorded here is a Vulcan mind meld.”

Virginia and Dr. Mullova looked at Kirk for confirmation.

Jim shrugged, “I guess I won’t be needing your level 12 scan.”

“Then, did Spock recover your memories from the day of the accident?” Bones asked.

“Not really, but he showed me his in such vivid detail that I feel like he did.”

“It looks like quite a… tumultuous experience,” Dr. Mullova commented glancing back down at the tablet.

“That’s a good word for it, Doctor,” Jim smiled and crossed his arms, signaling that he was finished talking about it.

“Well,” said Dr. Mullova, “I’ll come to get you at 14:30 for your second nerve re-gen treatment, Captain.”

Jim nodded and the two ladies departed, leaving just McCoy in the room with him.

“Three hours, Jim?!?” Bones asked.

Jim shrugged again. “Spock has stamina.”
Bones blew out a lungful of air and rolled his eyes. Jim was feeling cocky and a bit ornery this morning, apparently.

“You’re not going to tell me any more than you told them, are you?” Bones said, pointing his thumb backward over his shoulder at the door.

“I might,” Jim teased. “What do you want to know?”

“Did Spock think you were going to die?” Bones blurted.

Jim’s playful mood evaporated. “Yes,” he said, looking down.

“Damn,” Bones said, “I should have told him you’d be all right before he left Sickbay.”

“You mean before you ordered him out of Sickbay,” Jim corrected.

“Well he was a dusty mess and it was getting too crowded in…. Wait. You heard that? I thought you were out cold.”

“I saw it in Spock’s mind last night. I saw it as though I were Spock, through his eyes,” Jim explained. “God, Bones, it was incredible. I experienced the whole day in those caverns, as Spock experienced it. I watched the Andorian engineer die. I had my shirt ripped off and my chest painted in a cell. I dug my captain out of a cave-in and carried him to you. I watched as you tried to save him. I left when you told me to and went to my cabin.”

Obviously, he wasn’t going to tell McCoy about the shower.

“No wonder it took three hours,” Bones said, amazed.

“Everything was so vivid. I was Spock, but Spock was also there, I could feel his thoughts….” Jim sighed, “I’m not doing the experience justice with this description. It was really something.”
Jim got a serious, lost-in-thought look. “You know, Bones, I thought that Spock just had a perfect memory or something, but I showed him a memory of *mine* from my childhood, and it was also perfect, in every detail: Sam’s face, his voice, the campfire dinner we were eating…. Spock can retrieve memories from my head better than I can!”

“That’s great, Jim. I’m glad you got to see your brother,” McCoy said.

“Maybe Spock could walk you through some of your old memories if you asked him to,” Jim suggested.

“No. I don’t think…”

“You’re not still afraid of his telepathy because of…”

“No, no,” Bones reassured. “It’s just that… well, you’re special to Spock. He and I don’t have the same kind of relationship. I don’t think he’d be comfortable.”

“He thinks very highly of you, Bones. He just doesn’t say so,” Jim said.

McCoy smiled. That was nice to hear.

“He called you ‘a brave man’ last night,” Jim recalled.

“Oh, did he now?” Bones looked surprised. “In what context did that come up?”

Jim gathered his thoughts, “Before the meld, we were just talking and I told him what happened yesterday with Lwaxara uncovering the memory that Mirror Spock had attacked you. He doesn’t think you repressed the memory yourself, by the way. He said Vulcan warriors from ancient times would attack an enemy’s mind for information, then cover their tracks by making him forget… so no one would be the wiser that security had been breached. Spock said his counterpart likely had this skill. He said you were a brave man and wouldn’t be traumatized by a forced mind meld to the point that you’d repress it on your own.”

“Wow.” McCoy thought about that. “Vulcans could really do a lot of damage without their logic
and their code of ethics, couldn’t they?” he realized. “Maybe Lwaxara and I shouldn’t make fun of their tight emotional control. Maybe we’re all better off for it.”

“You don’t believe that, Bones,” Jim said smiling. “You should see how good Spock is inside. There are no barely-contained violent tendencies, just goodness and humanity… unlike me.”

“What do you mean?” McCoy asked.

“When the transporter split me in two. I came face to face with what’s inside of me… so did my yeoman.”

“Oh, Jim. That’s ancient history. Janice forgave you.”

“She transferred ships, Bones.”

“I think she just had a little crush on you, Jim, and saw that it wouldn’t work out,” McCoy speculated.

“Or she saw what was inside of me and that was the end of her crush,” Jim said, frowning. “I scared her so bad,” Bones, “when I… the evil half of me… attacked her. We called him ‘the imposter,’ but he wasn’t an imposter. He was me. Half of ME.”

Jim was getting himself upset thinking about it. He wanted to be as good as Spock, and the transporter incident was glaring proof that he wasn’t.

“Why are we talking about this right now?” Bones asked.

“You unknowingly held a grudge against Spock for an attack that wasn’t his fault,” Jim explained. “I think Janice did the same thing with me. Her attitude toward me changed. I could feel the difference. ‘The imposter’ ruined things between us.”

“Maybe you were so rattled by what happened that you started holding her at arm’s distance and she got upset by that. I think that’s more likely. Don’t you, Jim?”
“And I handled the whole thing with Charlie Evans badly,” Jim went on. “I should have taken Janice’s concerns more seriously sooner. She saw the writing on the wall and tried to tell me it was more than just a puppy love situation with Charlie, but I just laughed it off. Janice couldn’t have thought very well of me after the Thasians took Charlie back. She had so much compassion and that whole affair was really hard on her. I remember her trying several times to talk it out with me afterward and I was dismissive… pushed her to arm’s length, like you said.”

Bones was looking at Jim with sad eyes, not knowing what to say.

“I guess as the five-year mission is winding down, Bones, I’m just feeling introspective, grading myself, analyzing the areas where I fell short.”

“Imagine if we’d had Lwaxara onboard,” McCoy said. “I’m a surgeon, not a psychiatrist. I can patch people up, and try to see to their psychological health, but there’s not much I can do if they won’t open up to me. Lwaxara cracks them open like an egg, scrambles ‘em up, and serves a beautiful quiche at the end!”

That made a hardy laugh burst out of Jim.

“That kid’s got more intuition about how to help people in her little finger than I have in my whole body, Jim!” Bones exclaimed.

“Oh, now,” Jim said to his friend, “you’ve helped me get my head on straight lots of times, but you’re right, there’s not a lot you can do when I… or Spock… or any member of the crew clams up. I’m sorry for the times I’ve shut you out, Bones. You and Spock, you’ve always been there for me. Sorry for making you guess sometimes what’s going on in my head.”

Bones stepped closer to Jim and laid his hand on his shoulder.

“We all need privacy from time to time. No one faults you for that, Jim.”

“I do,” Jim said. “The crew is so much stronger when we act as a unit. The times I’ve pulled away and tried to go it alone were mostly disastrous… the cloud creature, Kodos the Executioner.”
McCoy looked contemplative for a moment before offering, “Those instances both struck very emotional chords with you, Jim,” Bones said, squeezing his shoulder in understanding, “Captain Garrovick’s death… and your experiences on Tarsus IV when you were so young….”

“You’re saying I shut people out when I get emotional?” Kirk asked.

“I’ve known you to withdraw when something’s really eating you, yeah,” McCoy answered honestly.

“Janice used to try to help, when I got into that sort of mood, but I resented it,” Jim thought out loud.

“I didn’t know you had so much guilt about her, Jim,” Bones said. “I’m sure she’s doing fine. Is she still on the Scrimshire?”

“I don’t even know,” Jim said sadly.

“You never got another captain’s yeoman,” Bones observed.

“I really wasn’t comfortable with someone pouring my coffee, folding my shirts, trying to ‘take care of me,’” Jim laughed softly, “but now, looking back, it was kind of nice. She was very professional and did a great job. Everybody liked her. I didn’t appreciate her like I should have. She was too beautiful; she made me worry I would step over the line… and then the transporter split me in two and….”

“You’re really beating yourself up over this, Jim.”

“Well, wouldn’t you? If you’d attacked a girl like that, someone you were supposed to respect and protect? I never told you or Spock, but when I took ‘the imposter’ back, the memory of the attack came with him. I had to fall asleep every night after that with images of Janice trying to fight me off. Did you ever talk to her, Bones, afterward? Did she get any kind of therapy at all?” Jim was shaking his head at the fact that he hadn’t ever asked before.

“She seemed fine, Jim, honestly,” Bones insisted. “She went back to work and acted like all was forgiven.”
“Well she would, wouldn’t she?” Jim said.

“What’s stirring this up? Did Spock touch on any of these memories last night?” Bones asked.

“No. I’m not sure what made me think of it. Too much lying in bed feeling sorry for myself, probably, analyzing the past 4 ½ years,” Jim sighed, then shook it off and said, “I need breakfast.”

“I’ll eat with you today, if you want,” Bones offered.

“Okay. I’ll try to be better company.”

“You’re always good company, Jim,” Bones said. “You don’t have to fake good spirits on my account, if that’s not how you’re feeling today.”

Jim smiled at his friend. “I’ll be fine. Come look at the menu.”

As McCoy circled around to stand over his shoulder to view the menu, Jim glanced out the window to his ship. An open docking clamp caught his attention.

“Now that’s damn peculiar,” Jim said with concern.

“What?” McCoy said, following his friend’s eyes out the window.

As they watched, the Enterprise lit up like a Christmas tree with all exterior lights coming on. Then, lights winked on and off in clusters as though a pre-flight check were going on.

Bones cocked his head. “Are they doing tests?”

Just then, McCoy’s communicator went off with a loud, long buzz.
Both men’s eyes went wide as they recognized it as a Recall Alert Signal.

McCoy grabbed his communicator off his belt and opened it, triggering the automated message. The robotic voice of the ship’s computer said:

“EMERGENCY RECALL OF ALL USS ENTERPRISE PERSONNEL TO DUTY STATIONS. DEPARTURE IN 7 MINUTES.”

“EMERGENCY RECALL OF ALL USS ENTERPRISE PERSONNEL TO DUTY STATIONS. DEPARTURE IN 7 MINUTES.”

“Go!” Jim said. McCoy was out the door, only sparing a split second for a backward glance.

Jim’s heart was pounding. The desire to run to his ship was so powerful. They were leaving without him. *Spock, what is the emergency? Where are you going?* the captain thought. He checked the outer starbase cams and saw that rescue vessels were also being scrambled. A rescue then, a ship in trouble in this sector.

Switching to live Starbase 4 news, Jim watched intently as the reporter said, “...received an urgent distress call from Federation transport ship the Astral Queen. The USS Enterprise, which has been docked at ‘C’ for the past 4 days, is mustering her crew and will be departing in 5 minutes to intercept. Emergency response ships have already left.”

_The Astral Queen is Jon Daily’s ship_, Jim recalled. He and Jon knew each other from way back and were friends. He hadn’t talked to Jon in three or four years, since the Karidian affair. Anton Karidian and his troupe of actors had booked passage on the Astral Queen to Benecia, but Kirk asked Jon to strand them instead, so he could get them aboard the Enterprise to investigate the true identity of Anton Karidian.

The broadcast continued, “The Astral Queen under the command of Captain Jonathan Daily, has been in service for 37 years and has a passenger capacity of 235 and a cargo maximum of 500,000 tons. Although we don’t know the exact nature of the emergency yet, Captain Daily reportedly said that life support was failing and rescue needed to be immediate.”

Poor Jon. Hurry Spock, Jim thought nervously. A 7-minute muster on a base this size was very optimistic. Spock evidently thought that every crew member could run as fast as he could… or more likely he had calculated that leaving a small percentage of the crew behind to gain a few extra
minutes was a good exchange. It sounded like every second counted.

Jim kept listening to the report, but no new information was coming yet. He watched out his window. In a few minutes, docking clamps began releasing one by one from his ship. The main crew portal would be closing now. The crew who hadn’t made it, hadn’t made it. Nothing they could do now but stand by and watch as the mooring beam pushed the Enterprise to a safe distance and she engaged impulse power. Then, after a few more seconds, she engaged warp drive and was gone in a bright flash.

Godspeed, Jim wished his crew in earnest. It didn’t surprise him that Spock hadn’t called to brief him before leaving. Spock had refused to give his own father the emergency blood transfusion that he needed when it interfered with his duty. He wasn’t going to make a farewell call during a crisis.

I wonder how far away the Astral Queen is. What happened to her? Jim asked himself. It was obvious he would be glued to his screen all day.

Lwaxara rushed in suddenly. “Oh, Captain Kirk! I just heard. The Enterprise is leaving. Can I look out your window?”

“You’re too late. She just went to warp,” Kirk said.

“Are you all right? …oh, you’re not,” Lwaxara realized.

“I’m fine. I want to watch the news,” Kirk said, a little more tersely than he intended.

“Let’s order some breakfast and we’ll watch it together,” she suggested.

“Okay,” he agreed, since there was very little point trying to get her to go if she wanted to stay.

“I’ll order from my room, so you don’t have to leave the news to go to the menu screen. What do you want?”

Before he could open his mouth to reply, Lwaxara said, “Okay, got it. Be right back.”
Jim shook his head. She was amazing. Perhaps she had learned something about the distress call that wasn’t on the news. He’d have to ask her when she came back.

The chyron on his news screen said, “Breaking News,” but the reporter was still repeating what Kirk had already heard. Surely there would be more soon. He considered calling the commander of starbase operations; she would know more. He assumed he would get a courtesy call from her when her duties permitted, though. Perhaps he should wait for that. The Recall Alert Signal McCoy had received hadn’t sounded on Jim’s communicator because he was currently listed as “inactive.” He wasn’t in the chain of command at the moment and would just have to live with that. It was hard, though.

Spock, did you get some sleep last night and have a chance to meditate? Jim wondered. They were up so late. Kirk was emotionally exhausted from the meld and he hadn’t been the one with the strain of maintaining it. Hopefully, Spock had adequate recovery time before this crisis. There was no way to know.

The news was reporting something new: “…and the manifest confirms that the Astral Queen currently has 194 passengers aboard. 194 passengers and a crew of 32. The Priority 1 distress call from the Astral Queen was received by this starbase at 07:40 this morning. At 07:43, Commodore Jensen, the commander of starbase operations, ordered Commander Spock of the USS Enterprise to muster the crew for an immediate departure. Following a 7-minute muster, the Enterprise departed at 07:52. Three standard rescue vessels, which maintain a round-the-clock readiness, were also sent to the Astral Queen’s coordinates to assist, however, it is assumed the Enterprise will arrive first, due to her superior speed….”

Lwaxara returned. “Okay, breakfast is ordered. Did I miss anything?”

“Passenger count is 194 and 32 crew, and they gave a timeline for the morning, after the Priority 1 distress signal came in. It was only 12 minutes from the time the SOS was received by base ops until the time the Enterprise left!”

“That’s fast, right?” Lwaxara said, impressed.

“Yes,” Jim said. “They haven’t reported yet if any crew got left behind, but they must have.”

“I’m sorry you got left behind, Captain. That must feel awful having to watch your ship go off without you,” she said.
“I think you have a fairly good idea of how I’m feeling right now, without me having to talk about it,” Jim said, slightly irritated that she was diverting his attention from the news.

The reporter was saying, “…we’re expecting information about the location of the Astral Queen shortly. As soon as base ops releases the tape of the distress call, we will be playing it for you, right here on your favorite channel, Starbase 4 News. All news, all the time.”

“Have a seat, Lwaxara,” Jim offered. “Do you know anything more about this than the news is reporting?”

“No. I’m sorry.” She was looking at him. As she sat, she said, “You know the captain of the Astral Queen.”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Jon Daily. Great guy.”

“You used to date his younger sister.”

“Uh, yes… Ruth,” Jim said. “Jon was very protective of her, but finally decided that I was A-okay.”

“His family used to have you over for dinner. You liked all of them a lot.”

“I did,” Kirk said, smiling at the memory of the Dailys’ welcoming table and Mr. Daily’s dry wit. “They were kind to me when I was a poor, overworked student at the Academy.”

“Ruth wanted you to join the family,” Lwaxara said.

“I think so, yeah, but I got a taste of space and knew I wasn’t going to be a family man,” Jim said. “Jon understood; he was the same way. He didn’t attend the Academy, but he definitely had the space bug… got his commercial pilot’s license and worked his way up to captain.”

“Oh, my! Ruth has five children now, all girls,” Lwaxara read in his mind.
Jim smiled. “It could be more by now. Ruth always wanted a large family. Jon was crazy about his nieces, bringing them presents from all of his ports of call. They were his favorite conversation topic. I haven’t talked to him in awhile, though. I hope he comes through this all right. I wonder what is happening… if the Enterprise is there yet?”

He turned his attention back to the screen, but no new information was forthcoming.

“Breakfast. May I come in?” the server called from the doorway.

“Yes,” called Lwaxara and the captain in unison.

“I’ll take that. We’re trying to listen to the news,” Lwaxara said, jumping up and grabbing first her tray and then the captain’s from the server, who backed out without another sound.

Lwaxara laid her tray down on the guest table and brought the captain his, laying out his silverware and arranging his glass and plates. She was proud how much her dexterity had improved over the past few months.

“What’s this purple drink?” he asked.

“Grape juice,” she said.

“I haven’t had that since I was a kid.”

“Well, you wanted it,” she explained simply.

“I suppose I did,” he acknowledged, raising his eyebrows.

Lwaxara kept fussing and arranging things.

“Are you going to tuck my napkin in under my chin next?” he joked.
“What? You don’t like it when people take care of you, Captain?”

“Not usually, no.”

She cocked her head and said, “You used to have a yeoman who took good care of you. You were just thinking of her earlier this morning… Janice.”

Jim froze, he really didn’t want Lwaxara to see that he had attacked Janice. It was too late, though. She was getting the same shocked look she had when she thought Spock had attacked Bones.

Jim didn’t defend himself. What defense was there? It was him… at least part of him. He had done it. He was so ashamed imagining what Lwaxara was seeing in his mind right now: his beautiful yeoman fighting back sobs, accusing him of the unthinkable, black tears running down her face.

Jim shut his eyes. He opened them again when he heard Lwaxara resuming her shuffling and arranging on his tray table.

Removing the dome lid on his pancakes, she said, “I ordered you the boysenberry syrup even though you wanted blueberry, because it is sooo much better. Trust me.”

She had already worked through all of his complicated memories of his feelings for Janice and being split in two by the transporter. She’d already moved on and seemed content not to offer any comment.

Naturally, this made Kirk long for a comment!

“Well?” he prompted.

“Well, what?”

“Do you think I’m a terrible person now.”
“No, Captain,” she said.

“But, I… there’s no excuse,” Jim said, his mouth a tight, thin line of anguish.

“Well,” Lwaxara said, “There aren’t many excuses, but if I had to come up with the best possible one, it would be getting split in two by a transporter,” she winked although he wasn’t ready for levity yet.

“Captain, you were forced to see what no one should ever have to see… and by the way, that other ‘half’ of you wasn’t half. He was about 1/100th of you. All of this time you’ve been feeling like 50% of you is bad. That is a terribly misguided way of interpreting what happened.”

“Yeah?” Kirk asked, curious what else she had to say about it.

“My people have a legend. BetaZed was once supposedly visited by a race of very advanced, noncorporeal beings. They were said to be pure light and love, beautiful to all who gazed upon them. Legend has it that they were just like us once, but they invented a way to ‘shed’ their darker tendencies, like a skin of evil that peeled off. They left it behind on their home planet and were free.”

“The point is, we aren’t like that. We have to live with our evil, temper it, integrate it. I think ‘the imposter’ was the perfect name for that sliver of you that the transporter peeled off, because he was trying to be you, wanted to be you, but without your guidance he had no idea how. He wanted to come back under your control in the end. It was very astute of you to realize you needed him, and very compassionate the way you comforted him and took him back.”

Jim started eating his pancakes. It was astonishing how much better she could make him feel.

“To feel even better about the whole thing, you should send a letter to Janice,” Lwaxara recommended.

He liked the idea. “What should I say?”

“Just tell her the truth, that you’ve been thinking about what happened and getting really upset about it lately. Tell her you wanted to apologize again and make sure everything was okay with her… and maybe tell her thanks for all of the kind little things she used to do for you.”
“You think I should?” Jim asked.

“Absolutely. Trust me,” she said.

“Well, you were right about this syrup! It’s fantastic,” Jim said.

She smiled her scar-stretched smile at him. It was as beautiful to him now as any woman’s smile.

The news had been showing a commercial message, but it was now coming back on with a new chyron that read: “The Astral Queen attacked!”

“Oh, no!” Lwaxara said.

“Shh shh,” Jim shushed her.

The reporter said, “We now know that the Astral Queen did NOT suffer an accident. The transport ship with 194 passengers and 32 crew aboard was attacked by two heavily armed space cruisers of unknown origin. Here is an audio excerpt from this morning’s Priority 1 distress call from the Astral Queen’s captain of 6 years, Jonathan Daily:

“This is Captain Daily of the Federation transport vessel Astral Queen. We are under attack. Repeat, we are under attack for reasons unknown by two unidentified space cruisers. Their phaser weapons have breached our hull in cargo sections 10, 12, and 13. We’re venting atmosphere. I have 194 passengers who are being moved to the center sections of the ship. Our shields are at 22%. We won’t last much longer. We need immediate assistance.”

Jon’s voice was as composed as could be expected under the circumstances. Still, it sent shivers down Jim’s spine hearing a ship’s captain… any ship’s captain… in such a predicament. What are the coordinates?! How soon until the Enterprise gets there? Jim wanted to know.

Lwaxara looked at him with wide eyes. This was bad. Captain Daily and his whole crew and passengers could be dead by now. Spock might arrive to conduct a salvage mission instead of a rescue… or perhaps the Enterprise was there already and engaged in battle with the attackers.
Just then his communicator in his table drawer sounded off: “Commodore Jensen to Captain Kirk. Come in Captain Kirk.”

He whipped it out, “Kirk here.”

“You’re following the news, Captain?” the commander of starbase ops asked.

“Yes, Commodore.”

“The Enterprise has arrived on scene. They report there are survivors, who they are rescuing as we speak. We don’t have a count yet,” she said.

“Those two armed cruisers?” he asked.

“Neutralized,” she assured.

Jim relaxed a bit.

“Early theories are that it was an attempted political assassination,” the commodore explained. “Among the passengers is a candidate for Prime Chancellor on Berengaria V. He is a challenger to a leader who has held power for over 30 years. He is expected to win,” she explained.

“Somebody doesn’t want that to happen,” Kirk supplied.

“It’s just a theory so far, until we have more evidence,” Commodore Jensen said.

“Commodore, do you know yet if Captain Daily survived? We are friends,” Jim said.

“No word yet, Captain, but soon,” she promised. “I need to go. Just wanted to let you know what was happening.”
“I appreciate it, Commodore,” Kirk said thankfully.

“Jensen out.”

Jim and Lwaxara looked at each other.

“Neutralized.’ That means those cruisers aren’t shooting at the Enterprise, right?” Lwaxara asked.

“Right,” Jim answered.

“Then, your crew is safe. They’ll just conduct the rescue and be back here soon,” she said.

“Yes, probably,” he said, “If Spock has to send anyone aboard the Astral Queen, there could still be danger. Hopefully, he can retrieve all survivors by transporter.”

“I hope Captain Daily makes it,” she said.

“Me, too,” said Kirk. “He sent his passengers to the innermost compartments, but he would have remained on the bridge, and the bridge is always a target. Those commercial transport vessels are armed; they aren’t just sitting ducks out there by any means, but they don’t have the firepower of a starship.”

“A political assassination! Someone willing to destroy a whole transport ship with all of those people on it to kill one man!” Lwaxara said, astonished.

“I don’t follow Berengarian politics, so I don’t know anything about that,” Jim admitted.

“Isn’t the Berengaria system where the dragons live?” Lwaxara asked, remembering a story she had heard.

“Yes,” Jim said, “Berengaria VII.”
“You’ve seen them?”

“No, but Spock has. The Enterprise was there when Pike was captain. Spock told me about it.” Jim’s mind wandered and he started thinking what an exciting mind meld experience the dragons of Berengaria would be, if Spock would share that memory with him.

“You did a 3-hour mind meld with Spock last night. I meant to ask you about it, but with the news and everything…. How did it go?” Lwaxara asked.

“It was incredible. Spock is incredible,” Jim said. “I tried to describe it to Bones, but couldn’t do it justice. You can understand, though.”

“Yes,” she said knowingly. It’s the way Betazoids communicate with each other all the time.

“It wore me out. How do you feel so much all the time and not burn out?” he asked.

“It energizes us. We thrive on it,” she explained. “It’s our normal.”

“Spock and I want to get closer, but it’s hard for us,” Jim revealed. “We are both very independent personalities.”

“Are you still planning to bond?” She asked.

“If we can. Spock’s not 100% sure it is possible… since I’m human.”

“Even Vulcan-to-Vulcan it might not be possible. T’hy’la bonds could just be a legend, right?” she asked.

“I suppose so, yes,” Jim answered. “I wish we were bonded right now so I could see what is going on out there.” He glanced out the window.
“Spock told you the chance of achieving a bond will be greater after a series of mind melds,” she said.

“Yes,” Jim confirmed.

“I hope he will be back soon. Will the survivors be brought here or to another location?” she wondered.

“That’s a good question. I imagine they will be brought here. I hope there aren’t too many injuries; the doctors will be overwhelmed.”

“Oh! Look!” Lwaxara said suddenly, pointing at the screen.

The chyron had changed to “Astral Queen: All Hands Rescued.” The smiling newscaster was saying, “We are receiving reports that all passengers and crew of the Astral Queen have been rescued and taken aboard the USS Enterprise. No casualties. Repeat, no casualties reported from the Astral Queen.”

“Aaaaah!” Lwaxara screamed excitedly, jumping up and down. “Oh, Captain! No casualties! Spock did it. He got there in time and he rescued them all!”

“Shhh,” Kirk shushed, still trying to listen.

“…and the Enterprise, arriving first, due to her superior warp speed capabilities, conducted the rescue alone. The three rescue vessels dispatched from this base are just now arriving, offering their medical teams to the Enterprise to help with any injuries. Once again, all passengers and crew traveling on the Federation transport ship Astral Queen have been rescued and are now aboard the starship Enterprise. The Enterprise has been docked at Starbase 4 for the past four days as her captain, James Kirk, recovers in our medical clinic from nerve injuries he sustained in the line of duty. His first officer, Spock, is commanding this rescue mission. It is fortuitous for those aboard the Astral Queen that this base had a starship docked here.”

“Indeed it is!” Lwaxara exclaimed. “Most fortuitous. All of those people were saved because you got clobbered by a cave-in,” Lwaxara marveled. “Isn’t life crazy?!”

Jim had to smile. Lwaxara’s youth was showing. He forgot sometimes that she was only 22. Her
exuberance was entertaining.

“Have they said when the Enterprise is coming back?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” Jim said, pulling a mock annoyed face.

“Oops, sorry,” she whispered, looking back to the screen. The report had gone to a commercial again, though.

“Call the Commodore. Ask her when they’re coming back,” Lwaxara suggested.

“I shouldn’t bother her,” Jim said. “Ops have their hands full right now, I’m sure. The news will have the info soon enough.”

“You have so much patience, Captain Kirk,” she remarked.

“Ha. My mom would laugh at that,” Jim chuckled.

“You didn’t have patience when you were younger?” she asked.

“Nope,” Jim said with a smile. “It comes with age, I guess.”

“These injuries of mine force me to learn some patience,” Lwaxara said. “Nerve and tissue re-gen take so much time.”

“Nerves are finicky things,” Jim joked.

She didn’t get the joke at first, then read it in his mind. “Ha,” she laughed. “‘Finicky’ was Dr. McCoy’s word and it struck you funny when Spock said it.”

“Yeah. I think I was pretty drugged when I thought that was funny. It’s not all that funny,” Jim
“Speaking of re-gen, I have to go for a treatment now. You have one later in the day, right?” she asked.

“Yes. 14:30,” Jim said.

“Well, I’ll see you later, Captain. I hope the Enterprise is back at good ol’ Docking Port ‘C’ before too long.”

Jim’s head couldn’t help but turn to look at the absence of his ship out the window. “Thanks. Me too,” he said, “but it may be awhile. If Spock has to tow the Astral Queen back here, he can’t do it at top warp speeds.”

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Have a good treatment,” Jim said, as she stood up to go.

“I don’t even notice them anymore,” she said. “Thanks for letting me eat breakfast with you and watch the news reports.”

“Thank you, for the pleasure of your company,” Jim said.

*Always such a gentleman,* Lwaxara thought as she left.

Jim flipped to the menu and requested tray removal, then quickly back to the news. Deciding this would be a good time for some quick grooming, he opened his table drawer and laid out his “gizmos” as Virginia called them. He cleaned his skin, hair, and teeth, then cut his fingernails. *There, much better,* he thought. He considered calling Virginia to trim his toenails like she said she would, but how much could they have grown in four days? He was enjoying this moment to himself. Toenails could wait.

He reclined his bed a few degrees and kept monitoring the news.
They were doing a bio right now on the VIP passenger, Trevinahr Frin, the Barangarian candidate expected to win the vote and become the new Prime Chancellor. Apparently, he had been stabbed six months ago, suffered a mysterious illness four months ago that was attributed to poisoning, and just got his youngest daughter back from kidnappers three weeks ago. Wow! *Barangarian politics are rough!* Jim thought.

Now, there was a new chyron across the screen that read: “Kamikaze Cruisers.” The reporter was saying that when the phaser banks ran dry on the two attacking cruisers, the ships had nosedived straight into the Astral Queen. They sliced into the passenger compartments, because by then the Astral Queen’s shields were gone, but by that time, all of the passengers had been moved to interior locations.

*Boy! Jon got lucky,* Jim thought. *Sounds like he did everything right.* Jim felt relief that Spock would be coming back victorious, instead of dragging a funeral barge behind the Enterprise. He hoped Jon’s company would put him up in a nice, comfortable suite in the hotel here on Starbase 4 and give him some paid leave to rest and recreate. He certainly deserved it after an ordeal like that.

Jon’s picture was up now, and the reporter was lauding him for moving all passengers deep inside the ship to protect them. He and five officers were apparently the first to be transported to the Enterprise when she arrived, because sensors detected low levels of oxygen on the bridge. They were minutes away from suffocating.

*Oh, wow. Well done, Spock,* Jim thought with pride. He closed his eyes for a second and let himself remember Spock wrapping his arm around him last night, whispering into his hair, “It is all right, Jim.” Just the thought of Spock was comforting. They would be reunited soon. Maybe Spock would show him some of the rescue through his eyes the next time they melded. If they were bonded, Jim would already be seeing it. It was getting harder and harder to be away from Spock now that Jim knew they would be bonded soon. Spock had said he “craved” the bond. Kirk was beginning to crave it, too.
For the third time today, the Starbase 4 News was showing pictures of both Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, explaining again why Spock was commanding the rescue mission instead of Kirk. Jim smiled at the two pictures of them side by side on his screen. They were so different from each other, the two of them, but made such a good team. They completed each other. He wished he were helping Spock right now instead of lying in bed.

Hearing a knock at the door, Jim answered, “Come in,” and in walked a very sheepish Kevin Riley.

“Lieutenant Riley! Didn’t make muster, I see,” Jim said.

“No, Sir,” Riley said apologetically, obviously disappointed in himself. “There are 17 of us who missed the ship and I decided to come ask you what we should do.”

“Call starbase ops and they will see to your quartering,” Kirk offered.

Riley still looked miserable.

“Relax Lieutenant. I didn’t say ‘draw and quartering,’” the captain winked.

That got a small, uncomfortable smile out of Riley. He liked to be good at his job. It embarrassed him to be among the 17 who got left behind by the Enterprise, the only commissioned officer who didn’t make muster.

“I really tried, Captain, but I was clear on the other side of the base when the Recall Alert Signal went off,” Riley felt compelled to explain… but then he overdid it… “I dressed at light speed and tore outta there, but the Enterprise was already gone when I got to ‘C’ dock.”

“So, you were clear on the other side of the base… undressed?” Kirk couldn’t help inquiring. Watching Riley squirm might provide some entertainment, Jim thought wickedly.
“Uh, well, last night I met this girl… um, lieutenant, who works in Starbase 4 Communications. We really hit it off and she….”

“…invited you back to her place,” Kirk said knowingly.

“Yes, Sir, and communications officers are quartered on the opposite side of the base,” Riley reluctantly explained.

“Well, maybe she’ll take you back for tonight and you won’t have to bother ops,” Kirk suggested with an amused smirk.

“I don’t think she’s gonna be too impressed by a guy who couldn’t make muster. I was the only officer who didn’t make it, the other 16 are all enlisted.”

“Last time I checked, officers weren’t issued longer legs than enlisted men, Lieutenant. If you couldn’t make it, you couldn’t make it. Mr. Spock knew with a 7-minute muster, he’d be leaving some people behind, but time was critical. If you’ve been watching the news, you know. Had he left even a few minutes later, it would have cost lives,” Kirk said.

“I am very glad that there were no deaths, Sir,” Riley said. “I just heard that. So, you think Mr. Spock called the 7-minute muster with the expectation that not everyone would make it?”

“Yes, I do,” the captain said, as a manner of forgiveness.

“That makes me feel a little better, Sir.”

“You were on your own time, Riley, on shore leave. If you made an honest effort when the Recall Alert Signal sounded and couldn’t make it, you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Riley said, finally smiling a bit. “I hope Mr. Spock sees it the same way.”

“Hmm, maybe we took drawing and quartering off the table too soon,” Kirk joked.
Riley smiled but still looked a bit uneasy. “When will you be back in command, Sir?” he ventured.

“That’s up to my doctors, but they project at least another week,” Kirk shrugged. “Sorry Lieutenant. You’ll just have to suffer whatever punishment Mr. Spock sees fit to bestow.”

“I just hope he doesn’t ask me the reason I couldn’t make it,” Riley moaned.

Picturing that made Kirk laugh. It was true, Spock would not be as understanding about sexual shenanigans as Kirk was. He didn’t think he would punish Riley for it, but he would definitely give him the face, the disapproving Vulcan face. Poor Riley.

Jim had been so surprised to learn that a fellow survivor of Tarsus IV was stationed on the Enterprise. Kevin Riley was only a 4-year-old child when his parents were murdered by Kodos the Executioner. He barely remembered anything of those events. Kirk envied him for that. He had been 14 and remembered everything. He still occasionally had nightmares about it. Kevin had been raised by a cheerful aunt and uncle in Boston, who did their best to give him a happy home. Lt. Riley seemed very well-adjusted, overall.

The news was going over the assassination attempt theory again, but there had been no mention of a predicted time of return for the Enterprise yet. Jim decided to use the 17 crew members left behind as an excuse to call Commodore Jensen and see if she knew when his ship was expected back.

“Sit down, Lieutenant. I’ll call ops for you,” Kirk said.

“Why, thank you, Sir,” Riley said, taking a seat in one of the captain’s guest chairs.

“Captain Kirk to Commodore Jensen. Come in Commodore Jensen,” Jim spoke into his comm.

“Jensen here. Go ahead Captain,” she said.

“Seventeen of my crew didn’t make muster this morning. Unless the Enterprise is returning tonight, they will need base quartering. Can you take care of that?”
“Yes, Captain. Have them report to Lieutenant Hemsley’s office on corridor 12, deck 16. He will assign them temporary quarters for the next five nights.”

Jim’s heart sank. *Five nights?* “Then the Enterprise isn’t due back for six days?” he asked.

“That’s correct, Captain. The Astral Queen took heavy fire and her hull is like an eggshell. It was decided it couldn’t handle even Warp 1, so Commander Spock is towing her here on impulse power. Did you hear that all hands were rescued?” she asked.

“Yes, I did,” Kirk confirmed. “Such a relief.”

“Since there were no serious injuries and the Enterprise and three rescue ships had space for the passengers and crew, I made the decision for the Enterprise to tow the Astral Queen back here on impulse power. She’s not just a wrecked ship; she’s a crime scene, and Starfleet Investigations wants her treated as such. They are eager to determine if the attacking cruisers were from Barangaria or not. They had concerns that if we left the Astral Queen unattended for a period, the planners of this attack might return to destroy the evidence,” she explained.

“I understand,” Kirk said. “Give Spock my congratulations on a successful rescue next time you talk to him, Commodore.”

“Will do, Captain. Jensen out.”

Kirk closed his communicator and held it in a tight grip for a moment, before returning it to his drawer.

“Oh, great,” Riley whined. “Six days of strangers rifling through my stuff.” He imagined that all empty crew quarters would be utilized.

Kirk gave a little laugh, but it was forced. *Six days. Six days until he would see Spock again... and McCoy.* He sighed. He would be nearly well by then, though. Perhaps he could greet them standing up.

“Well, Riley, here’s hoping Lt. Hemsley doesn’t put four of you to a room, down near the power
plant,” Jim teased.

“Ugh,” Riley groaned, then said, “Thanks for calling ops, Captain. I’d better go get the others and find corridor 12, deck 16.”

“If you get a beautiful penthouse suite, I don’t want to hear about it,” the captain joked.

“I hope you get well soon, Sir. It was good seeing you,” Riley said as he stood to leave.

“You, too, Lieutenant. If the men need anything they’re not getting, call me,” he offered.

“Will do. Thank you, Sir.”

As Riley closed the door behind him, Jim let his face fall. *Six days. Damn.*

***

Dr. Mullov was doing Jim’s nerve re-gen treatment today. He was more introverted than his wife and Jim was thankful for the lack of chit chat. After 35 minutes, though, it was starting to get weird. Kirk was used to the constant banter of McCoy and Dr. Mullova, and the play-by-play narration she gave as she stimulated the various nerve branches. Dr. Mullov evidently had a different style. He had told the captain at the outset that if his leg ever got uncomfortably hot, to speak up. It never had, so he never did.

Now, Dr. Mullov seemed to be satisfied with his work and shut the stimulator off. He said, “Captain, we’ll have 15 minutes of ‘cool down’ now, then I’ll be back for a quick check.”

“Okay, Doc,” Kirk said.

“Would you care for a therapy tribble?”

“A what?!?” Kirk asked, certain he had misheard.
“A therapy tribble,” Dr. Mullov repeated with a completely serious face.

“This base has tribbles?” Jim asked cautiously.

“Yes, Captain. They have a soothing effect on the nervous system. Have you ever held one?”

“A few hundred fell on my head once,” Jim recalled.

It was clear Dr. Mullov didn’t have a response to that. “Would you like to hold one while you lie here and wait, Captain.”

“Sure. Why not?” Jim agreed. The tribble will probably be better company than Dr. Mullov, he thought, then chastised himself. Evgeny might not be the more personable half of Team Mullov, but he was healing his leg and Jim was grateful.

Dr. Mullov left for a minute and returned with a white tribble, which he handed to Kirk. “Her name is Nadia,” he said. The clinic has ten: Nadia, Oksana, Yalena, Tatiana, Tasha, Czarina, Olga, Anastasia, Svetlana, and Elaina… after my wife. Tribbles are always female, Captain. Did you know that?”

“I did actually, yes,” Jim said.

“This clinic was very lucky to get ten. They are highly regulated. They made us take a class on their proper care and feeding.”

“Really?” Kirk said knowingly.

“Yes. They are lovely creatures, but apparently there have been some problems with overbreeding. You see, they are born pregnant and unless you feed them a very low calorie diet, they will start having babies all over the place!”

This was the most Kirk had heard Dr. Mullov say since he met him. The man obviously loved
“I’ve seen these little animals work wonders to comfort patients who had no friends or family to support them. With your brave shipmates away, I thought perhaps Nadia could work her magic for you.”

*Well that was really quite thoughtful, Jim realized.*

“Well that was really quite thoughtful, Jim realized.

“On a mission, we discovered that tribbles hate Klingons. One helped us identify a Klingon agent who was disguised as a human.”

“Well that was really quite thoughtful, Jim realized.

“You don’t say?! I’ve never known a tribble to hate anybody,” Dr. Mullov marveled. “What do they do around Klingons? How did you know they didn’t like them?” he asked.

“They let out a little scream, kind of a chittering squeal,” Kirk said.

“I want to hear! Can you imitate their sound for me?” Dr. Mullov looked so hopeful.

“Well, maybe,” Jim said, not wanting to let this tribble enthusiast down. “It was kind of like, bleetle eetle eetle. No, that sounded nothing like it,” he apologized. “Think of a screech owl; it’s more like that.”

“Guess I’ll never hear it. We don’t get any Klingons around here,” Dr. Mullov said.

“Be glad of that,” Kirk said. “And if you ever DO hear a tribble go berserk, better give that patient a second scan! You might have a spy infiltrating the clinic,” Jim joked.

“It’s working, isn’t it? Nadia is lifting your mood, isn’t she, Captain Kirk?” Mullov asked, giving the white fuzzball on the captain’s chest a little pat.

“I believe she is, yes,” Jim smiled. There had been an uncomfortable tightness in his chest since McCoy’s Recall Alert Signal had gone off this morning. Even news that his shipmates were safe and the rescue was a success hadn’t fully loosened it. Kirk felt like that so often, he hadn’t even noticed he was tense. Tribbles were soothing… when they weren’t multiplying and taking over a
“Spock held a white one like this and quite liked her,” Jim said. “She seemed to like him, too. Our Lieutenant Uhura is also fond of tribbles.”

“I just love the sound they make,” the doctor gushed. “Rather like a cat’s purr and a dove’s coo put together. Very soothing to the nerves.”

“When you say ‘nerves,’ do you mean the actual physical nerves that you regenerate, or are you speaking more figuratively about an emotional state?” Jim asked.

“Both, Captain. The body and mind work together. When one is agitated or injured, it effects the other. You keep Nadia tonight. I bet you’ll sleep peacefully.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Jim said.

“Rest for another eight minutes then I’ll be back for a check,” Dr. Mullov said before slipping out the door.

“Okay,” Kirk said.

Holding Nadia lightly on his chest, he stroked her like a good patient and stared at the ceiling, thinking. He considered that perhaps Dr. Mullova had told her husband about his “tumultuous” mind meld with Spock last night and that was why he suspected his nervous system was in need of soothing. Or perhaps he had just noticed that Jim had been uncharacteristically silent throughout the treatment and felt some tension. Dr. Mullov is really quite a nice man. He just isn’t as easy to get to know as his wife, Kirk decided. Well, now he knew how to start a conversation with him: TRIBBLES!

He thought of Spock. People often found his first officer cold and aloof. It took time to get to know Spock. He was gentle and so kind, but people didn’t see him that way right away. Jim thought about his other friends; they all fit in the category of gregarious, easy-going extroverts. Jim wondered how much effort he would have been willing to put into getting to know Spock had they not worked together. Little to none, most likely. Spock wasn’t an easy person to get to know, to develop a friendship with, but the effort was certainly worth it.
How many humans could say they were best friends with a Vulcan? Not many, Jim wagered. What would it be like to just be friends with Spock, outside the command structure? He had always been Spock’s commanding officer, Spock his subordinate.

A new thought occurred to him: Would Starfleet view a t’hy’la bond as an ethics violation? Could it be seen as an abuse of my authority? He would gain all of Spock’s knowledge and abilities, Spock had said. When I start doing Vulcan neck pinches, mind melds, and probability calculations in my head, people are going to notice something’s up, Jim thought to himself. How will Starfleet view that? He found that if he tried, he could imagine an unscrupulous captain coercing a Vulcan subordinate into an arrangement like that for his own glorification. Would he be suspected of doing that? Spock was pretty good at setting the record straight, but perception is reality to some. Would he be seen as the captain who stole his first officer’s abilities to be stronger and smarter than a human ought to be? And what about Spock? If they were one, why should Spock still have a lesser rank?

“Aaagh!” he groaned out loud. Nadia chirped a tiny chirp. “Sorry, Nadia. Zinger,” Jim explained… to a tribble. He went back to petting her and contemplating his new train of thought. Surely he was overthinking things. Mentioning any part of this t’hy’la business to Starfleet Command certainly wouldn’t be a good idea, would it? But then again marriages are reported. They don’t have to be approved, but they are reported. Was a t’hy’la bond like a marriage in that way? Should it have official recognition? Was it a dereliction of duty not to report it? If it were akin to a marriage, it might prevent them from being separated when the six months were up.

Spock no doubt had already considered all of these things. They would speak in six days and work it all out. He should try to relax until then, concentrate on getting better. That’s what Bones would tell him if he were here. It was hard to relax when there was such a life-changing event on the horizon. In Spock’s presence Jim felt at ease and reassured, but when he wasn’t around, he started having doubts and questions.

Dr. Mullov came in and grabbed his scanner without comment. As he began to scan the nerve growth in Kirk’s hip, he said quite out of the blue, “I had an opportunity to mind meld with a Vulcan in medical school, but I missed it. I regret that.”

“Oh?” said Jim, not sure what to say.

“My class had one Vulcan, Stavek. A nice guy… stoic and serious, like Vulcans are, but always willing to help classmates who were struggling. He wasn’t a competitive sort. He wanted everyone to succeed. I liked him for that. Anyway, one day the class was discussing the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems and Stavek commented that the nervous systems of two separate individuals could be combined temporarily during a Vulcan mind meld. Several of our classmates and the professor were skeptical, so Stavek offered to demonstrate. The teacher agreed and let the Vulcan ask for volunteers. He looked right at me, but I was uncomfortable with the idea and
passed. One of our classmates volunteered, Sergei, and the professor stood by with scanners to prove their nervous systems were merged into one. Sure enough! ...It looked just like your chart from last night, only without the huge spikes. Sergei said it was the most amazing experience he’d ever had.” Dr. Mullov stopped then and looked wistful.

“You regretted not volunteering?” Jim asked.

“Yes. I was wary. It just seemed like it would be too… intimate. Is it?”

Jim nodded. “It’s not for everyone.”

“You and Mr. Spock must be very close,” the doctor ventured cautiously.

“Yes,” Jim said.

The doctor turned off his scanner. “Well, your obturator, sciatic, and femoral nerves are regrowing nicely. The iliohypogastric, piriformis, gemellus, and gluteal nerves are a bit slower but looking good. As usual, the perineal nerves are healing the slowest. They’ll get there, and you should be up and walking right on schedule, but slow-healing in the perineal nerves will effect sexual function for awhile.”

“Oh?” Jim asked. That got his attention.

“Not to worry, Captain. There could be some dysfunction, lack of response to stimulation, for two to three weeks, but after that, you’re golden.” Seeing the relief on Kirk’s face, he added, “Didn’t mean to worry you, Captain, just wanted to let you know what to expect in the short-term.”

Oh, god, he thinks that Spock and I are lovers, Jim suspected.

“Thanks for the heads-up, Doc. Forewarned is forarmed, right?” he joked uncomfortably.

“Indeed,” the doctor said.
“I had a zinger while you were gone,” Kirk mentioned in case it was important.

“Did Nadia squeak? Sometimes zingers make her squeak? It’s so cute.”

“She did, in fact,” Jim confirmed.

“Vulcans aren’t the only ones who can merge with another’s nervous system!” Dr. Mullov said with delight. “Tribbles are a wonder, aren’t they? You keep Nadia tonight and I bet you wake up tomorrow with fewer annoying ‘prickles.’ The prickle sensations usually start the day after the second treatment. You haven’t had any yet, have you?”

“Nope, just zingers,” Jim reported.

“Prickles can make you feel uncomfortable and short tempered,” Dr. Mullov explained. “If it gets too unpleasant, please let me know, but we’ve found that tribbles help a lot at this stage of healing, so hopefully Nadia will make it more tolerable.”

“Okay, thanks,” Jim said.

“We’ll do your third treatment in three days. Until then, drink plenty of fluids, get your sleep, and remember to keep your bed reclined slightly when you’re not eating. Orderlies will come in a moment to take you back to your room.”

Jim nodded as he left. The orderlies swept in a minute later and he was back under his almost-comforter in his room before he knew it. Nadia seemed to be happy cuddling under his chin, so he let her stay there. Tribbles could move, but not very far and not very fast, so they were usually content to stay where they were placed, especially if it was on a person. They seemed to be as soothed by people as people were by them. Jim was glad they’d been approved for therapeutic purposes like this. They were nice little animals, despite his first misadventure with them. He was glad he’d held his tongue and not told about how his bridge crew all had a big laugh over Scotty beaming thousands of tribbles over to the Klingon ship. The Klingons surely just beamed them into space. Dr. Mullov would not have found that funny.
Jim had neglected to eat lunch before his treatment and now it was 15:40. He decided he’d write that message to Janice Rand, then watch the news with an early dinner. He switched on his screen and found his way to the Starfleet personnel duty postings. Janice was still on the Scrimshire. Non-urgent personal mail could only be retrieved at a Federation base or station, and it looked like the Scrimshire had put into Starbase 16 two days ago and wasn’t scheduled to leave for five more days. Perfect.

He typed the message, following Lwaxara’s suggestions, and was pleased with the final draft. He sent it. Hm, what other business did he have? Oh! I know. I told Bones I’d ask Admiral Cresient to send someone to check on Khan. He wrote that message, then opened the menu screen. That potato cheese soup he’d had with Spock the first night he was here would hit the spot. This time he’d have it with a big turkey sandwich. His mouth was watering as he ordered. Nine minutes. Not bad. He reclined his bed for a bit while he waited.

“Captain!” Lwaxara called excitedly as she stepped into his room. “I want to show you something! Can I come in?”

“Sure,” Jim said.

“Oh look! You’ve got Nadia! Hi, Nadia,” she said as she rushed up to his bed and started petting the tribble and talking to her. “She’s my second favorite. There’s one named Svetlana who is cream colored with orange patches. She’s just a tad silkier. All of them are wonderful, though. They helped me a lot.”

“What were you going to show me?” Kirk asked.

“Oh!” she remembered. “Look right here.” She pulled the neckline of her hospital gown down a few inches revealing a small area of her chest that was free of scarring. It was a patch of newly-emerged skin. It looked perfect. “I noticed this today. My new skin!”

“It looks terrific,” Jim said.
“Touch it,” she asked. “I want to see what it feels like when someone else touches it.”

He hesitated for a moment. It seemed kind of personal, but then he did as she asked. “Smooth,” he remarked.

“Imagine when I have skin like this all over my whole body! Sometimes it seems like it will never happen, then I have a day like this when it feels like it will!”

“I don’t even know what you looked like before,” Jim realized.

“Oh, hold on… I have a little album of pictures in my room. I’ll be right back,” she said, running out the door.

When she came back, she laid her album on his wrap-around table and began flipping pages. “This is me when I was 19, a few months before the accident.”

“You look beautiful… but what is on your head?” Jim questioned.

“I know, it’s a silly fashion that someone should really put a stop to,” she said. “Ladies of the 5th House have been wearing our hair like that for formal occasions for generations… well it’s not really our hair, obviously. It’s a giant wig.”

“With a caged creature of some sort in the middle of it?” Jim asked.

“Those are called linsors. They are small rodents like Terran chipmunks. Some ladies prefer songbirds. I know it’s ridiculous and cruel to the animals. When I am ruler of the 5th House, I’m going to put a stop to it,” she pledged.

She flipped the page. “Here are all of the living Daughters of the 5th House: my mother, my great aunt, my aunts, cousins, me, and my younger sister, Ockliana.”

“Very elegant,” Jim commented. They were dressed in complicated dresses of shimmering silks like royalty.
She flipped a few more pages. “Here’s one of us with the boys,” she said. “There’s my father, my two grandfathers, my uncles, cousins, and my older brother, Naerin. He’s marrying a Daughter of the 7th House soon. He won’t be living in our household anymore when I get home. I will miss him. He’s oh so smart and funny!” She looked sad for moment. “I’ll go visit him, though. The 5th and 7th Houses have always been the best of allies. Naerin came to visit me a few months ago and stayed for three weeks. My parents have taken turns coming to stay with me, too, but as I’ve gotten better, I haven’t needed their support as much. I’ll see them all in another few months.”

She closed up the album and asked, “How was your treatment today, Captain?”

“Thanks for showing me your family. The treatment went well. It was Dr. Mullov this time. He isn’t as chatty as his wife, is he?” Jim said.

“He can really get going about tribbles, though, sometimes!” she laughed.

“They do seem to be his passion,” Jim agreed.

“He gave you some bad news,” she said, looking worried.

“No, no, it’s nothing,” Kirk assured her, not really wanting to talk about his slow-growing perineal nerves.

“Oh,” she said. “Dr. Mullov told you it would be a couple more weeks until you could… uh, perform normally again, right?”

“Yes,” Jim said, hoping for a new topic soon.

“Dr. Mullov thinks you and Spock are lovers?!” she asked.

“Um, yeah, I got that feeling,” Jim said sheepishly.

“Why?” she asked.
“He asked me if Vulcan mind melds were ‘intimate.’ I said they were and I told him Spock and I were ‘close.’”

“Dr. Mullov had a crush on a Vulkan classmate in medical school,” she said, “but never acted on it. He still has a lot of thoughts, regrets, feelings about it.”

“Oh?” Jim replied. “He told me today that he regretted not mind melding with him. He said another classmate volunteered to do it in a scientific setting, in class. He only told me that he liked the Vulkan, not that he had romantic feelings for him.”

“Yeah, he hides that a lot. He really didn’t want his wife to know,” she said slyly.

“Lwaxara, you didn’t,” he said, knowing that she did.

“Secrets are bad!” she insisted, falling back on her old defense.

“Not always,” Jim reminded. “Is that why he nearly sent you to another clinic after your first month here?”

“Yeah, kind of,” she admitted. “I probably shouldn’t have told his wife that he thinks of Stavek when they’re having sex.”

“Oh, lord. What?! Lwaxara!” Jim’s mouth was hanging open and his hand was on his forehead.

“I was much less discrete back then,” she defended. “I have learned a lot about non-telepaths and touch-telepaths in eight months. Dr. Mullov forgave me… I hope Spock does. That was unintentional.”

“What was unintentional?” Jim asked.

“Gol. Kolinahr. Telling you his plans.”
“I’m glad you told me,” Jim said.

“Spock isn’t,” she said. “He was still angry with me when the Enterprise left. I hope he can forgive me when he gets back.”

“He will,” Jim said. “I’m sure he already has. Things worked out well. Without you nosing in where you didn’t belong…” Kirk winked, “…Spock may never have asked me to bond with him. He might just have gone off to Gol and I would never have known why.” Jim stopped and dwelt on that scary thought for a moment. He looked suddenly very emotional.

“You love Spock. He loves you. I’m glad you two have said it to each other. Doesn’t it feel better having it out in the open?”

“Well, I wouldn’t really call it ‘out in the open,’” Jim corrected. “Nobody knows about our t’hy’la plans except me and Spock… and you. I can trust you, can’t I?”

“Probably not,” she said truthfully.

“Lwaxara! It’s not okay to take something private from someone’s mind because you can and go blabbing it to other people,” Jim said, losing patience with her attitude. “It just occurred to me today that a mental bond with a subordinate might be against Starfleet regulations. We might have to disclose it to Starfleet Command… but I don’t want them getting wind of it beforehand, if possible.” He was looking at her very sternly.

“Oh, Captain. Surely your Starfleet can’t regulate such things,” she said.

“There are rules to prevent the abuse of power by a superior officer,” Kirk explained.

“How would you be abusing Spock? He is superior to you in the area of telepathy and bonding,” she protested.

“They could think I coerced him.”

She looked at him, no doubt reading his thoughts. Abruptly, she gave up this thread for something
more interesting she found. “It didn’t really bother you that Dr. Mullov thinks you and Spock are lovers. You like the idea.”

Jim was silent.

“It’s okay, Captain. That’s how you’re accustomed to expressing love, with your body. Now that you realize you love Spock, you naturally want to share it with him. You’re a good lover. You want to show him that part of yourself.”

“Spock won’t want that,” Jim said quickly, shaking his head. “I don’t know if I do either. A t’hy’la bond is more of a brothers-in-arms kind of arrangement, if I understand it right. It’s for close friends who often face danger together, not lovers.”

“Maybe it can be for both. I don’t know, but it seems like something as intimate as a mental bond could easily lead to a sexual relationship, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Yes,” he conceded. “I just… I don’t think that’s what Spock has in mind. I pretty much told him that I would still be sleeping with women after the bond and he didn’t seem… hurt by that, or jealous. I think he intends to marry one day. I may want to, as well.”

“Hm, well you’ll have to work that out between the two of you,” she said. “I have never read any sexual thoughts in Mr. Spock, but that’s not to say they aren’t there. Vulcans bury them very deep, as they do with anything they attach shame to. It’s no wonder their poor bodies nearly explode every seven years.” She had glimpsed a bit of information about the Vulcan life cycle from one of the delegates who visited BetaZed, but Kirk assumed she’d taken it from his mind.

“Well, don’t go digging. It’s none of your business,” he told Lwaxara. He was remembering how Spock nearly died of embarrassment when he finally told him about pon farr and how Vulcans choose their mates.

“Oh! Spock almost got married three years ago. Well, that didn’t go so well, did it?” she commented on the memory the captain had just provided her.

“No,” Kirk confirmed, “it didn’t.”

“Wow! That pon farr really does drive them mad, doesn’t it?” She shook her head in sympathy.
“Spock never mated, though? He came out of it just by the shock of thinking he’d killed you?”

“Yes.”

“T’Pring married that Stonn fellow, then?” she asked.

“I assume so,” Kirk said.

“It *would* be hard to be married to someone far away. Spock’s intention was to marry T’Pring, then fly off with you to finish your five-year mission?” Lwaxara asked, rather disapprovingly.

“Yes,” Kirk confirmed.

“You can’t have many children *that* way,” Lwaxara winked, “but I guess married Vulcan women only have babies every seven years, anyway though, huh?”

Jim thought about it. “I don’t really know,” he said.

“Vulcan males can have sex outside of pon farr, surely, can’t they?” she wondered. “I would imagine a marriage bond would be even more intimate than a t’hy’la bond. Surely husbands and wives would want to enjoy each other’s bodies more often than every seven years! I mean, even *Vulcans*….”

Jim shrugged. Add that to the many things he still didn’t know about Vulcan biology.

“If Vulcans don’t have any drive outside of pon farr, perhaps your bond will be platonic, Captain,” she speculated. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry. *Mental* intimacy is more than enough. I shouldn’t be greedy,” Jim joked.

“You’re not greedy, Captain. You’re giving. You want to give Spock everything you have,” she smiled approvingly.
Jim smiled back. Sometimes he wanted to be upset with Lwaxara for being so familiar and invading their privacy, but it was part of her charm, and try as he might, he couldn’t fault her for being true to her nature. She was terribly well-intentioned and had helped him and Spock overcome a barrier they might never have crossed on their own. They owed her.

…and it was good to have someone to talk to. He missed McCoy. He and Spock had been gone less than 12 hours. How was he going to do without them for another five days?

“I ordered an early dinner,” Jim remembered. “It should be here any minute. I could order you something if you’d like to stay and eat with me.”

“Thank you, but I’m eating dinner with room 104 in an hour. She’s a new patient, an elderly lady with a whole lifetime of memories to share,” Lwaxara grinned and rubbed her hands together to pantomime eagerness.

Jim laughed. “Does she know she’ll be sharing?”

Lwaxara laughed. “Goodbye, Captain. I hear your server coming and she’s really hoping to ‘get you alone.’ See you tomorrow.”

She pulled the door open for the server, right on cue, then dashed out with a quick wave.

“Hello, Captain Kirk. Ready for your soup and sandwich?” The stocky, 50-something lady asked.

“Yes, please. Thank you,” Kirk said.

She came over, smiling at him, and noticed Nadia as she began to set up his tray. “Therapy tribbles are the best, aren’t they?” she commented, “This all-white one is Nadia, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That’s right,” Kirk smiled up at her.

She looked mesmerized by his smile.
“We’re not supposed to bother you, Captain, but I don’t want to miss the opportunity to thank you for saving my brother.”

“Who is your brother?” Jim asked.

“Jack Young. You don’t know him. He was just one of the million people on Deneva.”

“Oh.” Jim looked down at the mention of Deneva. It was not a happy memory. His brother and sister-in-law died there in agony, and Spock was temporarily blinded. Jim had to leave his orphaned nephew in the care of people who were strangers to him when he left. It was a bad memory for him, though he was lauded for his ingenuity in freeing the Denevans from the single-cell invaders that had controlled the population for weeks.

Light. Ultraviolet light had been the answer. The creatures shriveled up and died and the population was free from the torment they had endured with those things entwined around their nervous systems.

“My brother Jack said the pain he was in was ‘like the worst pain you’ve ever felt, times 20.’ When it stopped, it was euphoric, he said. The people in the street around him were all sobbing and thanking God… but it was you. You and your officers. I hope you got a medal for that! I know you were too late to save your brother,” she said sadly. “I’m so sorry about that, but I wanted to thank you for saving mine.”

“You’re welcome,” Jim said. “I’m glad we were able to figure it out.”

“Your first officer volunteered to be a test subject and was temporarily blinded, I read.”

“Yes, Dr. McCoy theorized that light would kill the creatures. In the end, we discovered it was only the ultra violet light that was needed, but in the early test, McCoy threw the whole spectrum of bright white light at Spock and it appeared to have blinded him. Mr. Spock was gracious about it, telling the doctor that it was a very equitable exchange… being blind but out of pain.”

“Boy, if a Vulcan would say that, it tells you right there how searing the pain must have been! I’ll tell you my brother will be grateful to you for the rest of his life, Captain. Me too.”
“Well, thank you,” Jim said simply.

“Think how many other people feel this way; you saved a whole planet!” She was obviously nervous and star struck. “I should let you eat your dinner. My name is Kate Brindley. It’s been an honor meeting you.”

Offering his most charming smile, Jim reached out his hand and shook hers, “The pleasure is all mine, Kate Brindley.”

She looked like she might pass out. Reluctantly backing away toward the door, she said, “You’re even more handsome in person, Captain. I hope you get well soon.” Then she dashed out.

Jim chuckled softly to himself. He remembered what Spock had said about feeling gratified that the people Starfleet served were pleased with their performance. It was gratifying. The captain didn’t often think of himself as someone who had saved a million people, but he had. He tried that truth on for a moment and it made his head swim. Best not to think of it or his head might grow as well, he decided.

*Spock, what are you doing right now? You saved all of those people on the Astral Queen. Are you letting them thank you?* Jim decided it was more likely that Spock was hiding from his grateful public. Hopefully, at least he had let Jon Daily thank him properly. Jon was always one to express his gratitude for a favor or a small kindness. Jim could imagine how profuse his thanks would be for saving his life and the lives of his passengers and crew.
Capt. Daily sat in his borrowed cabin on the Enterprise, relieved that this harrowing day was finally ending. He went over everything he had done and the way he had done it and decided to be proud of himself. He thought he might cry when he was finally alone, but now he didn’t feel like it. He would live to see his five nieces again. He would surely get to captain a transport ship again, if not the Astral Queen, then another in his company’s large fleet. No one had lost their lives… except the bad guys, and he couldn’t bring himself to feel too bad about that.

There would be an investigation. He would help, but it felt good knowing that no fault would likely be found with his performance or the performance of any of his crew. He had so much pride in them. The way they moved all of those passengers so quickly to the safety of the inner compartments. They had trained many times for emergencies such as this. No one choked when push came to shove. They’d done their duty. It felt good.

They had maybe four of five minutes of air left on the bridge, when Jon had heard the Enterprise hailing them. *Jim Kirk! Jim is going to save us!* He had thought. Then, after he was beamed aboard and told that Mr. Spock was commanding this mission, he could have kissed that Vulcan’s feet. He was glad his Astral Queen was in tow, even though it meant five days’ travel time to Starbase 4. He was happy to learn that Starfleet Investigations was on the case. Whoever was behind the attack on his ship needed to be caught and punished. Perhaps they were already dead; perhaps there were others who could still be brought to justice.

Capt. Daily had been assigned the rather disorganized quarters of Lt. Kevin Riley, who, he’d been told, missed muster for this emergency mission. Jon had already decided this Riley character was a messy slowpoke. At least Jon had a cabin to himself, though. Most everyone else was having to double up. He had made the bed and picked up clothes from the floor, and was just starting to tidy up the desk area, when his door chimed.

“Come in,” Jon called.

The door opened and Mr. Spock was standing there.

“Captain Daily,” Spock greeted him.
“Our savior, Mr. Spock! Please, come in Commander,” Jon welcomed him.

“I wanted to make sure you are comfortable and all of your needs and your crew’s needs are being met,” Spock said.

“Sit down, Mr. Spock, please,” Jon offered, gesturing to one of Lt. Riley’s office chairs. “I bet you haven’t been off your feet all day. What an amazing job you and your people did! We are eternally grateful.”

For courtesy’s sake, Spock sat. It did feel good. The day had been an unusually difficult one… following an emotionally stressful week. If the captain of the Astral Queen wanted to praise him, Spock would sit with him for a bit and try to enjoy it.

“You certainly have A-#1 timing, Mr. Spock. Five more minutes and my bridge crew would have suffocated. I was clean out of ideas. Even my f/o, who is really the brains of our outfit, couldn’t come up with a way to restore life support to the bridge. We were gonna die there, trapped like rats, with our one comfort being that our passengers had two hours of air left and might be rescued in time.”

He was babbling and he knew it. The tensions of the day were catching up to him.

“I’m seriously fighting the urge to hug you right now,” he told Spock. “I know Vulcans hate that, but I’m just so damn grateful. When I heard it was the Enterprise come to save us, I thought I was gonna have to be grateful to Jim for the rest of my days, but now I guess I’ll just have to do that for his first officer instead,” he said.

“You know Captain Kirk?” Spock asked.

“Yes. Don’t get to see him much anymore, but we’ve been friends a long time. He used to date my sister, Ruth,” Capt. Daily said. “He sat at my parents’ table in San Francisco for many a family dinner. My sister was over the moon for him, but I didn’t like him much at first. Academy brat with a pretty face, all the girls swooning over him….” Jon rolled his eyes and blew out a scoffing breath. “I just wanted him away from my little sis.”

“But your opinion of him changed?” Spock prompted, curious.
“Well, yeah. Turned out he was a helluva guy. He had an Academy friend named Gary who used to call him a ‘stack of books with legs,’ because he was always studying. The kid was serious about his goals and his future. I started seeing how respectful he was to Ruthie, too. Our dad would say, ‘Have her home by 23:00,’ and they’d be back at 21:30, because Jim wanted to go back to his dorm and study. That kid was really squared away. Helped me get my act together, too.”

“In what way?” Spock asked. This was intriguing information that he didn’t know about Jim.

“Well, I’d been kind of floundering, doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and Jim showed me by example that you had to set a goal and just go for it with everything you’ve got, not sit around expecting opportunity to come a’ knocking. I’d done some flight training and had dreams of just suddenly being a transport ship captain one day,” Jon scoffed at his younger self. “Jim showed me that a career was a series of steps, and if I saw myself at step 10, I’d better damn well figure out what step 1 was and take it! He really set me on track, spelled things out for me. I needed that back then.”

“He sounds like a mentor,” Spock commented.

“Yeah. He was two years younger than me then, too… Still is! Ha.”

Spock gave a social smile in acknowledgment of Capt. Daily’s ‘joke.’

“I was hoping he’d be my brother-in-law,” Jon said. “I think I was more upset than Ruth when they called it quits. He let her down real easy. She never told me how he did it, but there were no tears, no sulking. She bounced right back. She’s happily married now with five kids. Does Jim still have skills with the ladies?”

“Yes,” Spock answered.

Jon chuckled, then turned serious and asked, “So, how exactly did Jim get hurt?”

“He was caught in a cave-in beneath the surface of an uncharted moon,” Spock explained. “Numerous injuries, but the crushed hip he sustained is the one that required 11 days in the Starbase 4 medical clinic.”

Jon winced. “He’s going to fully recover, though?” he asked.
“Yes,” Spock affirmed.

“Hoo wee, that lucky son-of-a-gun! That’s good to hear,” Jon said. “So that accident is the reason the Enterprise was at Starbase 4… and the reason we’re all still alive?”

Spock hadn’t thought of the connection until now, but Jon was right. The rescue ships may have arrived in time to save the passengers, but the bridge crew would have died if the Enterprise hadn’t been docked at Starbase 4. The Potemkin was somewhere in this sector, but apparently too distant to have been of any help.

“That is essentially correct,” Spock said. “A significant portion of the Enterprise crew was off-ship when the orders came in, but we were able to recall most of them with an emergency 7-minute muster.”

“Seven minutes?! No wonder that poor Riley fellow whose room I’ve got was left behind. How many others didn’t make it?” Jon asked.

“Sixteen, but I factored the likelihood that a small percentage of the crew would fail to make muster into my assessment of the critical time factor,” Spock explained.

“Boy! I’m glad a Vulcan was calculating things, with such a small margin for error,” Capt. Daily gushed. “This oughta be a real feather in your cap, huh? You should be up for your own ship soon. Isn’t your five-year mission about over?”

“Five months, 24 days remaining,” Spock offered without addressing the other points.

“Boy, I wouldn’t want to lose my f/o,” Jon said, shaking his head. “Stan and I are really tight. You and Jim tight?”

“Yes,” Spock said promptly, without the lengthy introspection and analysis a question like that would have provoked in the past.

“I dug him out, yes,” Spock said. “Doctor McCoy deserves the credit for preserving his life; he performed extensive surgery.”

“Sorry this emergency took you away from him while he’s healing. I’m sure he would rather you be with him in the hospital. Eleven days is a long time when you’re flat on your back. Thank you for protecting what’s left of my ship, though. I’m told if you’d left her there, whoever planned the attack might have tried to blow her up and destroy the evidence.”

“That was the reason given to me by Commodore Jensen when she ordered me to tow the Astral Queen to Starbase 4,” Spock confirmed.

“So I guess the working theory is political assassination then, huh?”

“Apparently,” Spock said, looking for a way to end the conversation. He didn’t want to be rude to Jim’s friend who had just survived a frightening ordeal, but he had many duties to see to this evening.

“Captain Daily, I am gratified to learn that you are comfortable and not wanting for anything. If this changes, please let me know. I must now return to my duties,” Spock said, standing to leave. “There will be a formal briefing tomorrow morning at 07:30, conducted remotely by Commodore Jensen. You and your senior officers are invited to attend. Conference Room 2.”

“We’ll be there! Thank you for everything, Mr. Spock,” Jon said. “Our families are being notified about what happened and that we’re all okay?”

“Yes,” Spock assured. “Rest well, Captain.”

“Thank you, Mr. Spock. I believe I will.”

Spock strode off to the turbo lift. He would check in with the bridge, then with some of the department heads, just to be certain everything was well in hand before retiring to his quarters for the night.

The corridors had never been so busy. An elderly lady dressed in an attractive purple and blue knit
dress stopped him just as he was reaching the turbolift.

“Thank you so much for rescuing us, Mr. Spock. In all my days I’ve never had such an eventful trip! Is this what your life is like all the time?” she asked.

“Rescuing a passenger ship being fired upon by unknown assailants is not a common occurrence for us, no,” Spock responded.

“Who was shooting at us and why?” she asked.

“An early theory is that it may have been an attempted assassination of a Barangarian political candidate traveling on the Astral Queen,” Spock explained.

“Oh, such intrigue,” she commented. “I hope you have the poor man in protective custody, Mr. Spock, in case the assassins have a backup plan.”

“That is a very perspicacious idea, madam,” Spock said, both eyebrows raised in surprise for not thinking of that himself.

“I enjoy reading the occasional spy thriller and the assassins always have a backup plan,” the lady said.

“I am at a loss to explain why I had not thought of that,” Spock admitted.

“Don’t worry about it, young man. You have had a very demanding day! Just squirrel him away somewhere with a couple of competent guards and it should be fine.” She gave him the thumbs up sign and asked him where the mess hall was.

After pointing her in the right direction, Spock thanked her and continued to the bridge. He told Chekov to have security move Trevinahr Frin and his entourage to quarters on Deck Six, apart from the other passengers, and post two armed guards for their protection.

“Yes, Sir,” Chekov said. “Right away, Sir.”
When he had finished, he asked, “Ees eet just a precaution, Mr. Spock, or ees there a reason to suspect someone onboard the Enterprise may have murder on hees mind?”

“Just a precaution, Ensign, suggested to me by an astute passenger,” Spock said.

“Call coming in from Commodore Jensen, Mr. Spock,” Uhura said.

“On speaker,” Spock replied.


“Commander Spock, Starfleet Investigations recommends passenger Trevinahr Frin be under guard for his protection for the duration of the journey.”

“Already done, Commodore,” Spock replied.

“Excellent. I should have known you’d be several steps ahead of them,” she said. “There hasn’t been any sign of trouble, though, has there? Regarding the Barangarian?”

“No, Commodore,” Spock answered.

“I’ve kept Captain Kirk apprised of events and he offers his congratulations on a successful rescue,” she said.

Spock thought of Jim. He wished he could speak to him directly, share everything that had happened today with him. This was his opportunity to send a short message to him. What could he say that was also fit for a commodore’s ears?

“Tell the Captain ‘thank you’ and assure him his friend, Capt. Jon Daily, is well and looking forward to seeing him,” Spock said.
“I will do that, Mr. Spock. Speak with you tomorrow at the 07:30 briefing. Jensen out.”

Spock felt like he had squandered his chance to say something more personal to Jim, but his Vulcan sense of decorum had won the day.

“Capt. Daily is a friend of the Captain’s, Mr. Spock?” Uhura asked after she had closed the channel to Commodore Jensen.

“Yes,” Spock said.

“How do they know each other?” she wanted to know.

“Captain Kirk knew his family in San Francisco while he was at the Academy. He was often at their house for ‘family dinners,’ Captain Daily just told me,” Spock said. Better to keep Jim’s dating history to himself, Spock thought. The Captain would likely not care if his bridge crew knew, but even so….

“An old friend, then,” Uhura said. “I’m glad we got there in time. Those six men on the bridge wouldn’t have lasted another five minutes.”

Sulu swiveled his chair around to comment. “The Enterprise’s speed saved the Captain’s leg last week and his friend’s life this week. Sure is good to have a fast ship!”

“Eet sure ees!” Chekov seconded.

“I’d rather be on the Enterprise than anywhere else in the galaxy!” Sulu exclaimed, swiveling back around to face Chekov.

Uhura noticed Spock was about to get his disapproving face from all the exuberance, so she said, “It’s the way we all feel, Mr. Spock.” Then, in a moment of boldness, she asked him, “Wouldn’t you rather stay on the Enterprise… the Enterprise under Captain Kirk… than be a captain anywhere else?”

Chekov and Sulu froze, sharing a glance of surprise that their friend had been so blunt.
“Yes, I would, Miss Uhura,” Spock answered simply.

The bridge crew expected the “We all have to go where Starfleet needs us” speech to come next, but Spock stood up to leave.

“I will be meeting with the department heads for 30 minutes, then retiring for the night,” Spock said as he headed for the turbolift. Then, turning back to face them, he added, “All of you performed at peak efficiency today. Captain Kirk would be proud.”

The doors whooshed shut to a chorus of “Thank you, Mr. Spock.”

“Well, what do you know about that?” Uhura said when he was gone.

Sulu and Chekov both spun their chairs to face Uhura. “I kint believe you asked heem tat!” Chekov said.

Sulu agreed. “Everybody knows Mr. Spock, of all the first officers in the fleet, deserves his own ship.”

“Deserves, yes. But I wanted to know what he wants,” Uhura explained. “And now we know, don’t we?” she winked.

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Later in his cabin, Spock reviewed the day in his mind. With the exception of not putting the Barangarian under guard sooner, he decided that his performance had been adequate. Now, his mind was free to think of Jim. He had felt it longing to all day, and now in the dark quiet of his private quarters, it could have its way.

Spock wanted to talk to Jim, wanted to touch him, meld with him. He pictured the landscape of Jim’s mind, remembering how at ease his own mind had felt there, accepted, wanted. He longed for that feeling again, that warm, euphoric sensation of oneness with Jim.
He let himself imagine being Jim’s lover. What would that be like? It was a possibility; he had seen it in Jim’s mind. Jim loved him and would show him that love with his body if that’s what Spock wanted. Did he? He imagined Jim lying beside him here on his bed in the dark. How would you touch me Jim, if I let you. How should I touch you?

He thought of Jim’s beautiful smile and his charming ways. The captain was good at touch. He’d had lots of practice with it. Spock would be lost. Jim would show him, the same way Spock was showing him mental touching. Jim wasn’t afraid of telepathy even though it was foreign to him. Why should Spock be afraid of Jim’s physicality, his sexuality? Touching Jim’s body had an appeal that Spock couldn’t deny. His golden skin, his hands. He envisioned holding hands with the imaginary Jim lying next to him, then gently stroking two of his fingers over two of Jim’s, front and back, over and under, caressing every part of Jim’s hand. Oh, it felt so good. Jim.

He considered the possibility that Jim might want to rub other things together. How would Spock feel about doing that? Too much sensation was often like pain for Spock. Would Jim understand that? Of course he would, Spock decided. His t’hy’la would feel everything he felt, know everything he knew. He would sense every thought in his head and every feeling in his body. The idea of so much mental intimacy would have scared Spock once; now, he was even considering sexual intimacy. Oh, Jim, you’ve changed my life, my heart, and all of my goals. I’m going to give up a captaincy for you. I already know that.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter begins with a dream containing sexual violence.

11 Days Down - Chapter 18

Captain Kirk was lying in his bed, trying to get back to sleep. It was 04:42 and the third time his
leg had woken him up tonight. These “prickles” weren’t for sissies. It felt like his leg had been
asleep for a year and the circulation was coming back with a vengeance. Jim knew the circulation
was fine, but that’s what it felt like. Nadia had shimmied down closer to his hip like she sensed that
was the troublesome area. These little creatures really were sensitive. He could still reach her
without sitting up, and gave her a thankful little pat. She cooed. The prickles subsided a little and
Jim fell back to sleep thinking of Spock.

He dreamt of himself and his first officer in perfect sync, gold and blue, thinking as one,
unstopable as Saret and Luken had been. Human and Vulcan, one and the same, the closest of
friends bound together by loyalty and love. Spock had always been at his side, but now he was part
of him. Their minds were entwined. They had become more than the sum of their two parts. It felt
so right. Jim felt stronger and better than he had ever felt. Spock was happy. He was smiling and
joking with the crew more. All was well on the Enterprise.

Now, in Jim’s dream, Spock was on Vulcan, dressed in the style of the ancient warriors, his armor
gleaming in the bright Vulcan sun, cape of rich burgundy fabric blowing in the wind as he
approached his t’hy’la. Spock reached for Jim and they were kissing, gently at first, then more
passionately. Spock had him in a tight embrace. Too tight. He was kissing him so hard he couldn’t
breathe. His encircling arms were crushing him. Spock pulled back and his eyes were wild. Pon
farr!

Shocked, Jim tried to scramble away, but Spock grabbed him and threw him down. Then, they
were in Spock’s quarters on the Enterprise. He had Jim naked and pinned to the bed. His eyes were
filled with wild, sexual fury, and his hands were holding Jim’s arms down with Vulcan strength
that he couldn’t match. He was helpless. Spock could feel through their bond that Jim was afraid,
but he didn’t care. He was out of his mind and Jim’s fear was only feeding into his mad lust to
mate.

“Captain Kirk. Captain Kirk!” Lwaxara shook him from the dream-turned-nightmare.
He woke with a start and Nadia fell to the floor with a soft thump and a little squeak.

Jim looked at Lwaxara and she said cheerfully, “There you are, Captain. You were really dreaming deeply. I could tell it was bad. I hope I did the right thing waking you up.”

Calming his rapid breathing, Jim said, “Yes… yes… thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Are you hungry? I’m free for breakfast and a ‘counseling session’ if you like,” she offered knowingly.

Jim felt unsettled and betrayed by Spock for a few uncomfortable seconds. He looked at his chronometer.

“Oh, it’s morning,” Jim sighed, switching his room lights on, “I didn’t have a very good night. Not just the nightmare, but my leg… those prickles kept waking me up.”

Picking up the tribble, and placing her on Jim’s chest, Lwaxara said, “Nadia, you need to do a better job for our good captain. Prickles and bad dreams? We can’t have that. We’re gonna trade you in for Svetlana, if you don’t shape up.”

That made Jim smile. The nightmare was fading away. His heart rate was normal again and his stomach was growling. He pet the little creature and said, “Breakfast sounds good. What would you like, Lwaxara?”

“Hmm, Eggs Benedict,” I think.

“Oh, I like that, too,” Jim said. “I haven’t had any English muffins since I’ve been here, and I always liked them.”

“English muffins are great with eggs,” she commented.

“Yes, but I like them with butter and jam, sort of like dessert after eggs. I think I’ll get a four-cheese omelet with English muffins and fruit on the side.” He punched it in. “Anything on the side for you?” He asked his guest.
“Fruit sounds good and some hot, Rindirian tea, sweet.”

He placed their order and the screen said 13 minutes.

At 7:30 on the dot, Nurse Virginia strode in. Her hairdo always made Jim think of Janice. He wondered if Janice had read his message yet.

“Good morning, Captain Kirk, Lwaxara,” Virginia said. “Are we having any prickles yet, Captain?”

“They woke me three times last night,” Kirk answered, rubbing his eyes.

“Sure enough,” she said, looking over his numbers. “I suppose it wouldn’t help if I reminded you prickles are a good sign.”

“It might,” Jim shrugged.

“They’re a good sign,” she repeated, straight-faced.

Kirk chuckled. “No wonder patients get cranky at this stage; losing sleep will do that to the best of us.”

“Well, you are definitely the best of us, Captain.” Her small compliment caught him off guard.

“I hear Kate Brindley was your server last night and she thanked you for saving her brother on Deneva,” Virginia said.

“Yes,” Kirk replied.

“Sometimes I forget that my patient has saved a million lives. More probably. It really has been an honor, Captain, to aid in your recovery,” she said sincerely.
“Thank you,” Jim said, “But, you’re not leaving, are you?”

“I have two days off, then I’ll be back for another five,” Virginia explained. “You’ll have a nurse named T’Nar tomorrow and the next day. She’s Vulcan.”

Lwaxara couldn’t help interject, “I’ve been wanting to meet her. She’s new to the Nerve and Tissue Re-gen ward.”

Looking back down at his numbers, Virginia said, “Oh, you had a nightmare this morning, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Jim admitted.

She could tell by the set of his jaw that it had upset him and by the tight line of his mouth that he wasn’t going to tell her what it was about.

“Well, at least you have your therapist here,” she smiled, gesturing at Lwaxara. “Dr. Mullova will be in to check on you mid-morning today. You take care, Captain. I hope those prickles don’t bother you too much while I’m gone. If they get really bad, let T’Nar know.”

“Thank you, Virginia. Enjoy your days off,” Jim said as she departed.

“Okay now,” Lwaxara said, leaning in, “tell your therapist about your dream.”

Jim blew out a breath and groaned, “Can’t you just read my mind? I’ve gotten kind of used to it.”

“Done,” she said smugly.

“You don’t have your usual shocked face,” Jim noted.

“I suppose I’m getting used to your insecurities,” she said. “They’re getting dull.”
Jim scowled.

“Look,” she said, “You’ve never had a lover who was stronger than you before. The difference in physical strength between a Vulcan male and a human one is about the same difference as between human males and females. It’s intimidating, emasculating maybe,” she waved her hand in little circles as though explaining something that should be self-evident. “You know Spock would never hurt you like that.”

“Spoken like someone who’s never had an ahn-woon around her neck,” Jim felt compelled to retort.

*Oh, he wants to talk about Spock’s ill-fated wedding again,* she realized.

“Even deep in the blood fever, the *plak tow,* as T’Pau called it, Spock tried to talk her out of making him fight you. He begged her to forbid it. He didn’t *want* to fight you.”

“He did, though,” Jim pointed out. “Only McCoy’s cleverness, slipping me a neural paralyzer, saved me. He’d have killed me.”

“…and you think the next time he’s in an instinct-driven frenzy he’ll see you not as a challenger, but as a mate?” she asked.

“Possibly,” Kirk said.

“Would he have turned that kind of fury on T’Pring? Surely that’s not the way Vulcans mate, is it? Like Klingons?” she made a repulsed face.

“I don’t know,” Jim admitted.

“There have been three… or four?… occasions where you have had to physically fight Mr. Spock. You have felt firsthand how strong he is. It scares you a little, that’s all,” she said.
“All of those times he was not in his right mind,” Jim noted.

“For someone who prides himself on his mental fortitude, that seems to happen to him a lot,” Lwaxara commented.

“It happens to all of us much more than we’d like. In deep space, you discover that you are just a speck of dust in a vast unknown, susceptible to whatever the universe decides to throw at you,” Kirk explained.

“You and Spock have had a lot thrown at you. You’ve proven your mettle many times over. You are legends and rightfully so,” Lwaxara praised him unexpectedly.

“I thought I was dull,” Jim reminded her with a sideways smile.

“Only your insecurities, Captain,” she winked.

“What do you say we chalk up my nightmare to ‘Sometimes a dream is just a dream,’ and enjoy our breakfast?” Jim suggested.

“Yes, that sounds good. Has it been 13 minutes yet? I’m starved,” she complained.

“Feels like ten,” Jim guessed.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Captain, can I ask you something about Ardana? It has to do with my planet.”


“They are the second most recent world to be granted Federation membership. I’ve been reading about them,” she began, “I’m wondering how they could have gotten into the Federation with their fractured society… the Troglytes doing all of the work in the mines, and the Stratos City dwellers enjoying a contemplative life of leisure and scholarly pursuits. Did they just fool the Federation diplomats? And if so, how? Isn’t there a thorough, lengthy examination of any planet seeking Federation membership?”
“Ha!” Jim said. “You would think so, wouldn’t you? I think the Federation representatives who wrote the report recommending membership must have been blinded by the promise of a zenite source and by the albeit impressive sight of Stratos City floating in the clouds with elegant scholars gliding around enjoying the art and sunlight. It is a truly beautiful city. Spock was very impressed with it at first.”

She smiled at what she saw in his head. “Spock liked the High Advisor’s daughter, Droxine. He flirted with her!”

“A bit, yes,” Jim recalled. “Stratos City dwellers are on the same intellectual plane as Vulcans, at least they fancy themselves so. Spock was intrigued by her mind as well as her… other attributes.”

“My, I’d love to have a dress like hers!” Lwaxara exclaimed, enjoying the beautiful images in his memory. “Vanna’s was gorgeous, too. What a shame you discovered such ugliness underneath that lovely façade.”

“Yes,” Kirk said soberly.

“You think the representatives of the Federation just thought that’s all there was to Ardana… Stratos City… and they never visited the surface to see how the Troglytes lived?” she asked.

“If you’ve read about Ardana’s admittance process, you probably know more about it than I do,” Kirk said. “I just know that the High Advisor wanted me to beam to their cloud city to pick up the zenite consignment we needed. He didn’t want us knowing about their society’s class struggle. We never would have been attacked by the miners or known anything about their oppression if we hadn’t chosen to beam down to the mine entrance instead.”

Lwaxara took the rest from his mind. “That was a very clever trick, Captain, having the High Advisor beamed into the mines so he could experience firsthand the damaging effects of the zenite gas.”

“I have my moments of inspiration,” he said, flashing her his charming smile.

She grinned, enjoying his company.
“Breakfast is here. May I come in?” a server called from the door.

“Come in,” they replied.

“Good morning. Who has the eggs Benedict?” the young man asked.

“That’s mine,” Lwaxara said.

He set it up on the guest table and laid the captain’s breakfast out for him. After asking if there was anything else he could get for them, he left promptly.

“You were worried he was going to try to thank you or praise you,” she giggled. “That really makes you uncomfortable, doesn’t it?”

“A little is fine, but this starbase has a few too many admirers for my taste,” Kirk proclaimed.

“Your fame just may save the day, Captain,” Lwaxara winked slyly.

“Which day is that?” Jim asked casually, taking his first bite of omelet.

“The day you get your orders for your next five-year mission,” she said.

That got his attention. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing, Captain. Just a little project I’m working on,” she smiled devilishly.

“Why does that make me nervous?”

“I can’t imagine,” she said innocently.
They ate in silence for a few minutes, then Jim said, “Back to Ardana, why did you say it involved your planet?”

“After you uncovered the class struggle going on on Ardana, there were a lot of questions about how their society had been so poorly vetted for admittance to the Federation. Future candidate worlds are sure to be put under the microscope now…."

“And you don’t think BetaZed will measure up?” Kirk questioned. “The Federation will snap it up if they know what’s good for them.”

She looked unconvinced. “The Federation values egalitarian societies. They demand racial and gender equality of their member worlds, I’ve read. BetaZed is a historical matriarchy. I’m worried that that could be a deal-killer, especially now, after the hullabaloo over Ardana.”

Kirk thought about that, then said, “Well, unless you have your men chained up in dungeons and only let them out to dig zenite, I think you’ll be okay. A race of empaths has a value too great to overlook. I can see a group of Federation diplomats offering well-intentioned advice and suggestions on how you might reshape your culture to better fit the Federation ideal, but BetaZed will definitely have the upper hand in any negotiations. Despite our lofty ideals, we will be more than willing to overlook gender inequity to gain what BetaZed has to offer.”

“That sounds kind of cynical,” she observed.

“What can I say? The Federation has to look out for itself; we have a lot of enemies. We stand for some really wonderful things: freedom, equality, justice, exploration…. But none of that matters if we can’t sustain ourselves. Our ideals have to be tempered with a healthy dose of realism. I rather imagine BetaZed will be ‘in like Flynn’ if that’s what your leaders decide they want.”

“Really?!” She asked. “Oh, Captain, I am so happy to hear that… but you shouldn’t say anything more to me about it.”

“Why?” Jim asked.

“Because, if I have anything to say about it, it will be YOU leading the negotiations for BetaZed’s admittance!”
“I’ve been telling my mother about you and Spock,” Lwaxara revealed with a huge smile, “and asking her to request another diplomatic envoy be sent to discuss Federation admission. I told her not to agree to anybody but YOU.”

“Lwaxara, I’m not a diplomat,” Jim pointed out.

“Like hell you’re not!” She exclaimed. “I’m looking at about a dozen successful negotiations that you’ve accomplished in your head right now! You and Spock are perfect for the job. My mother will see that not every Vulcan is as stuffy and emotionally-repressed as the ones sent to us last year.”

“But I’m a starship captain,” Kirk protested.

Lwaxara smiled, “And what does BetaZed want most from the Federation? Protection!” She spread her arms out to imply the rest was obvious.

“So you want the Federation not to just send a small delegation, but a whole starship? That’s kind of a tall order, isn’t it?” Kirk asked.

“Hey, if you’re gonna woo us, you’ve gotta go BIG! A week ago, my mother was firmly set against any more negotiations with the Federation. I can sway her a bit, but a big display of what the Federation can do for us would go a long way. Patrolling the parsecs around BetaZed, clearing out the riff raff and making us feel safe with our own personal starship in orbit! My mother would have a much easier time convincing the other Houses of the value of Federation membership if the kidnappings stopped and our shipping lanes were protected.”

Jim was frowning, but it wasn’t from disagreement. He was deep in thought.

“You’re thinking this plan of mine could keep your gang all together on the Enterprise,” she smiled broadly. “I thought that would be your favorite part. But I promise the rest of the mission would be very enjoyable and challenging for you and your crew, too. BetaZed is a beautiful planet. There could be frequent shore leaves for your crew and all 430 of your people could mix with mine in the
largest cultural exchange program ever!”

She was getting so excited revealing her idea to the captain. She wanted him to like it and see the logic in it.

“It ticks all of the boxes, Captain.” She counted off the pros on her fingers: “1) BetaZed is safe, 2) You keep the Enterprise and your crew, 3) Terrans and Betazoids get comfortable with each other, 4) You flex your diplomatic skills and broker a deal that will benefit your Federation for decades… maybe centuries. You’ll be changing the course of millions of lives, Captain! No big deal.” She returned to her breakfast in feigned nonchalance.

Kirk was eating his omelet not tasting anything. His mind was spinning. His processing speed was pretty impressive, though, Lwaxara noted. She could wait for him to catch up. Sipping her Rindirian tea, she watched as his face went from a frown of concentration to a smile of considering new possibilities.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I knew you’d like it,” she beamed. “Maybe you could even negotiate a Betazoid counselor on every starship like you were talking about.”

“You want to boldly go where no Betazoid has gone before, do you?” he joked, modifying a line from the popular Starfleet recruitment slogan.

“I wouldn’t mind it… after I’m well,” she said confidently. “You could negotiate a Betazoid on future diplomatic envoys to prospective member planets, too; I could have seen in two seconds that the Ardanan High Advisor was hiding something,” she bragged truthfully.

“That would have been very helpful, for sure,” Jim acknowledged. “I’m already wondering what the Federation, and Starfleet in particular, might ask me to request from… your mother? Would I be negotiating directly with her? There are eight ruling Houses on BetaZed, aren’t there?” he asked.

“Yes, but by tradition, the 5th House dominates. The other Houses will follow my mother’s lead,
unless they seriously object to her decisions. That rarely happens. My mother has the respect and
trust of the other leaders, for the most part, but I would want them to meet with you, too, just to
strengthen their confidence that the Federation is what my mother is saying it is. There would be a
lot of elegant parties and I know you hate your dress uniform,” she teased. “Maybe my mother’s
valet can design you one with a v-neck. Mr. Aln is very talented.”

“McCoy and Scotty would be all for that. Spock is the only one of us who never complains about
those tight collars,” Jim said.

_Spock, would you like this idea of a mission to BetaZed? Jim wondered. Five more years at the
same rank. Would you do that to stay with me?_

“He would, Captain,” Lwaxara said, reading his mind. “It would be a great relief to him, I imagine,
if Starfleet fails to offer him a captaincy. He won’t have to refuse it.”

“Are you sure about that?” Kirk asked. “I have already recommended him.”

“Well just because he is qualified doesn’t mean he has to take it. Perhaps Starfleet will be so
apologetic, they’ll offer him captain’s pay… and you admiral’s pay… to stay in your current
positions!” Lwaxara suggested fancifully.

“Now _that_ will never happen, but it’s an appealing idea,” Jim laughed.

“There are all kinds of other non-monetary perks to being on BetaZed,” Lwaxara said.

Jim wasn’t sure what she meant, but before he had the chance to ask, Dr. Mullova came in.

“Oh, I’m disturbing your breakfasts, forgive me,” Dr. Mullova said to Lwaxara and Kirk by way of
a greeting.

“We’re just finishing,” Jim said.

“We’ve been doing more chatting than eating,” Lwaxara added.
“I wanted to let you know that Dr. McCoy has requested a consultation with me about your case and suggested we do it from your room so he can ‘see the patient.’” She rolled her eyes and chuckled. “He so obviously just wants to talk to you. Leonard implied Spock would be there, too. They miss you and calling it a ‘consultation’ is a way to use the medical channel, instead of the command channel, I think. Am I right?” she asked.

“Most likely,” Jim said. “I take it you don’t mind?”

“No, not at all. He’s calling at 10:00, so I’ll talk to him for a moment from my office then route the call to your screen so you three can talk privately,” she offered.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Jim said appreciatively.

_A chance to talk to Spock and Bones!_ Was it just 24 hours ago that he had been so worried about them, glued to the news for word of what was happening?

Lwaxara smiled at him. She loved to see him happy.

“Are the prickles bothering you, Captain?” Dr. Mullova asked.

“Not at the moment, no, but they woke me several times last night,” he told her.

“Would you like to keep Nadia again tonight? Tribbles can be very soothing when the prickles start to make patients uncomfortable.”

“Yes, thank you,” Jim said. He had to admit her company in the early morning hours had been nice.

“And don’t hesitate to call your nurse for a sleep aid, if you wake more than twice in one night. You need your sleep,” Mullova instructed.

“Okay, Doc,” he agreed.
“Have your screen turned on at 10:00, Captain,” she reminded him as she left.

“Will do,” Kirk called.

“Well! *That* will be nice, talking to your friends later,” Lwaxara said.

“Yes,” Jim said.

“Are you going to tell them about my plan?” she asked.

“That’s more of a face-to-face discussion, I’m thinking,” Jim said, but what he meant was he wanted Spock to have the benefit of experiencing this morning’s whole conversation in a meld when he returned.

“I can relay the whole conversation and your feelings about it to Spock if I can see him on screen for a minute,” Lwaxara offered.

“You CAN?! But he’s parsecs away,” Jim marveled. “You can do that?”

“I think so, yes,” she said.

“To say your people will be an asset to the Federation is an understatement,” he said with respect and wonder in his voice.

She smiled. It pleased her to be useful. “Talk to them privately for as long as you like, then think of me and I’ll pop in for a moment to transmit the info to Spock before you end the transmission… if he’s willing, of course. The last time I saw him, he was mad at me.”

“He’s in command of the Enterprise at the moment; if he thinks your telepathic contact might jeopardize him in some way, he might refuse, but I will ask him.”
“Okay, good enough. You gonna eat that English muffin?” she asked, gesturing to his plate.

He touched both halves and amazingly they were still rather warm. “Want to share?” he asked.

“Sure. Thanks,” she replied.

“Jam? Or just butter?”

“Jam, please,” she said.

“Here you go,” he said, handing her the muffin. Then he made an unexpected grimace.

“The prickles are getting bad again, Captain?”

He nodded, but then his face changed to a startled look. “Oh! I think I just moved my toes… my left toes!”

Throwing the covers back to have a look, he tried to move them again. Success!

“Oh, look at that!” Lwaxara squealed with glee. “Wow!”

There wasn’t much movement, but the toes were definitely wiggling.

“I guess the prickles are worth it if they lead to more of this,” Jim said.

“Indeed!” she said. “I never had complete paralysis of any body part, but I remember when the pain started to subside and I got enough dexterity back in my hands that I could pick up a fork and feed myself again. Oh, it was bliss.”

Jim reached out and held her hand. He didn’t like thinking of Lwaxara’s joyful spirit marred by pain and disability. No wonder she was so happy now, even with her disfiguring scars. She had
been much worse off eight months ago.

She returned to her chair and happily munched her muffin and finished her tea. “What a lovely morning this has been, Captain. I do hope I have the opportunity to host you on my planet someday. I would love that.”

“Me too,” Jim said. He meant it.

She came and gave Nadia a little pat before making her exit. “Think of me if you want me during the call. It’s fine either way,” she said.

“See you later,” Jim said.

After she left, the captain experimented with trying to move his whole foot, but the toes were the only thing he seemed able to control at the moment. Still, it was satisfying to see motion. He experimented swiveling his screen around to see if it could rotate 180 degrees; he wanted to show Spock and McCoy when they called. He determined that he could. After requesting tray removal, he reclined his bed a bit. He glanced left, out the window to the empty docking port where the Enterprise should be.

He closed his eyes and imagined Spock as he had been after their long mind meld, arms around his shoulders, head resting on his, whispering words of comfort in the dark. Jim wished they could talk intimately like they had that night, but that would have to wait until Spock returned. Sitting next to McCoy for the call, his first officer would doubtless be in full stoic-Vulcan mode. Still, seeing his face and hearing his voice would be so welcome.

Both of his friends, telling him firsthand about the rescue of the Astral Queen and everything they had been through. That was something to look forward to. It occurred to him that he hadn’t watched the news in awhile and may not be up to date on the story. He switched on his screen and selected the news channel. Nadia chirped as the news lady’s voice broke the silence of the room. Yep, the attack of the Astral Queen still seemed to be dominating the Starbase 4 news. Jim lay back to catch up.
On the Enterprise, Bones punched the comm button in his Sickbay office, “McCoy to Spock.”

“Spock here, Doctor,” Mr. Spock responded from the bridge.

“Spock, could you come to my office at 10:00?” Bones asked.

“What is it regarding, Doctor?” Spock asked. He had just seen him at the 07:30 briefing.

“What? Oh. I want to confer with you about a patient,” McCoy said.

“I defer to your judgment in medical matters, Doctor,” Spock stated.

“I appreciate that, Mr. Spock, but I would really like to confer with you on this occasion.”

“Perhaps this afternoon, duties permitting, I could…”

“Spock!” Bones said, raising his voice, “Barring any spatial anomalies or attacking Klingons, could you please come to my office at 10:00!!”

“Very well, Doctor. I will see you in 58 minutes. Spock out.”

That green-blooded hobgoblin. The whole bridge doesn’t need to know I’m asserting my medical channel privileges so we can have a nice little chat with Jim, Bones griped to himself. For a supposed mental giant, Spock could be a little slow on the uptake sometimes. I suppose commanding a starship could be taking a lot of his concentration, Bones allowed begrudgingly. He chuckled to himself imagining how delighted Spock would be to see the captain… and how hard he would try not to show it.
Bones could see how close Spock and Jim were getting. A blind man could see it. They were two sides of the same coin, two halves of a whole. McCoy worried how both of them would fare alone were Starfleet stupid enough to split them up.

Dr. McCoy had released the last of his patients last night. Twelve of the Astral Queen’s 194 passengers had needed medical treatment, bumps and bruises mostly. Two had small lacerations that required mending. Capt. Daily’s bridge crew had each received a hypo of Tri-ox compound to compensate for the oxygen-depleted air they had breathed just prior to their rescue, but luckily that is the only treatment the crew had needed. Sickbay was blissfully quiet at the moment. He was really looking forward to seeing Jim.

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At 10:01 Spock walked through McCoy’s office door. Bones had his back to the door and was already speaking to Dr. Mullova on his screen. Seeing Spock enter behind McCoy, she said, “Hello, Mr. Spock.”

Bones gestured for Spock to sit in the chair he’d set up beside his. Spock sat in one fluid movement and immediately inquired, “Dr. Mullova, is anything wrong with the captain?”

“He’s recovering nicely,” she assured him. “Dr. McCoy just wanted a little face-to-face time with him, I think, so I’m going to route this call to his room in a moment. I told Captain Kirk an hour or so ago that you’d be calling at 10:00, so he’s expecting you.”

“Thank you, Elaina,” McCoy said for both of them. The screen went dark for a moment and then… Jim!

“Hi Bones! Hi Spock!” Jim greeted them. Oh, how good it was to see them, McCoy in his blue short-sleeved surgeon’s uniform and Spock in his blue velour.

“Captain,” Spock said.

“Hi Jim,” Bones said exuberantly, smiling from ear-to-ear. “What is THAT? A tribble?!” He asked, spotting Nadia.

“They have therapy tribbles here!” Jim explained, holding the white, furry creature out toward the
camera so it filled their screen. “Her name is Nadia, and don’t worry, the Mullovs have a license and know how to feed them… or not feed them.”

McCoy laughed. “Well, I’ll be.”

Spock raised an eyebrow.

“Dr. Mullov talks with animated gusto when the subject is tribbles,” Jim revealed. “They’re kind of his passion. He has ten. He says they are so in tune with the nervous systems of his patients that they can really help soothe them. I entered the ‘prickles’ stage yesterday which isn’t that much fun, and Nadia helped. Oh!” he remembered, “Look at THIS!” Jim spun the screen around 180 degrees and angled it down to show his left foot. Slowly, the toes began to move and McCoy gave a whoop.

“That’s great, Jim!” Bones said. “Not that I didn’t expect it to happen, but it still feels like a relief.”

“To me too,” Jim agreed.

“I am glad you are healing well, Captain,” Spock said.

“You may be walking by the time we get back. I’m sorry we’re not there with you, Jim,” Bones said.

Spock said nothing, but nodded solemnly.

“Not to worry… Lwaxara, Nadia, and the Starbase 4 News channel have been keeping me company since you left,” Jim said.

“Have you been getting timely, accurate information, Captain?” Spock asked. “Commodore Jensen assured me you would be kept apprised.”

“Yes. I talked with her twice,” Jim said. “At first the news was reporting that the Astral Queen had had some sort of an accident. When they started saying she was under attack by two cruisers, I was worried as hell, but Commodore Jensen called right after that to say the cruisers had been
neutralized, there were no deaths, and you were effecting a rescue. That was very welcome news.” Jim smiled and Spock could tell from his eyes how worried he’d been. “Did they really ‘kamikaze’ into the Astral Queen?”

“Yes, Captain,” Spock confirmed.

“How did Capt. Daily survive that? They didn’t target the bridge?” Jim asked.

“No,” Spock said. “You are familiar with Starfleet Investigations’ theory that it was an attempted political assassination of one of the passengers?”

“The Barangarian candidate, yes,” Jim said.

“The fact that both cruisers targeted the passenger compartments and not the bridge or engineering decks supports that theory,” Spock explained.

“There was life support damage to the bridge, though?”

“And mechanical failures, yes,” Spock said. “We rescued the bridge crew first.”

Bones jumped in, “Those men were minutes from suffocating when the Enterprise arrived, Jim. If we’d been even five minutes later….”

“That 7-minute muster of yours, Spock, was a good calculation. Well done.” Jim smiled and Spock basked inwardly at the praise.

“I am glad we were able to save your friend and his crew and passengers,” Spock said.

“I was wondering if Jon told you we were friends.”

“Yes, he did. He is looking forward to paying you a visit when we return to the starbase,” Spock said.
“It will be nice to see him. Jon’s a good guy. Terrible what happened to his ship, but at least there were no fatalities. Is he handling everything all right? It had to be traumatic; transport ship captains don’t usually have to deal with this sort of thing,” Jim said.

“Capt. Daily and his crew acted appropriately, moving the passengers to interior compartments and taking defensive action against the attackers. He seemed satisfied with his performance and in a stable state of mind when I spoke to him,” Spock assured.

“I agree, Jim,” Bones chimed in. “I treated the bridge crew with Tri-ox for minor oxygen depletion, and they seemed to be pretty grounded fellows. Lots of esprit de corps among those six. Hopefully their line keeps them together.”

“I was told their ship is a mess,” Jim winced, “Jensen compared her hull to an eggshell.”

Spock nodded, “It was determined that even Warp 1 could further damage it. That is why we are returning on impulse power only. I am sorry for the delay, Captain.”

That was as close to an ‘I miss you’ as Spock was likely to offer with McCoy sitting next to him. Jim saw it for what it was, though, and smiled.

“It can’t be helped. You pulled off an amazing rescue, Spock. It’s all over the news. I’m proud of you,” Jim was looking at him with those warm, kind eyes of his.

“Thank you, Captain,” Spock said. He wished they were already bonded, so Jim could feel the emotion that he wasn’t showing.

“Spock, I don’t know how long you have before you need to get back to the bridge,” Jim said, “but Lwaxara was hoping to transmit some ideas of hers to you telepathically during this call. She says she can do it even with you parsecs away if only she can see you on the screen.”

“Fascinating,” Spock remarked.

“Are you willing to let her try? It’s regarding a conversation she and I had this morning. I’d like you to be privy to it, since it concerns you,” Jim explained. “She can share it better with telepathy
“Very well, Captain,” Spock said. He had forgiven Lwaxara for telling Jim about his Gol plans. He recalled the last time she had shared with him a conversation between her and Jim. It had been remarkable, rich with nuance and detail, all of Jim’s feelings and attitudes transmitted to Spock’s mind at dizzying speed. He had recovered from it very fast, though, and knew it would do nothing to compromise his ability to command.

“Good,” Jim said, “Lwaxara said she would know if I wanted her, so…”

“I’m here, Captain,” she called, slipping through the door and running up to the head of his bed so Spock and Bones could see her. “Hi, gentlemen,” she said to the screen with a smile and a wave. “I’m so glad the mission is a success and you’re all right.”

“Why thank you, young lady,” Bones drawled.

“Hello, Lwaxara,” Spock said.

Just then, Bones got a ‘customer.’ The Sickbay door whooshed open and one of the Astral Queen’s passengers came in doubled over complaining of a stomachache.

“Excuse me for a bit,” he said to the group and got up to treat the sick man. He disappeared from Jim’s screen and Spock scooted over some to take up the whole screen. “I am ready, Lwaxara,” Spock said.

*Can you hear me?* she asked inside Spock’s mind.

*Yes,* Spock answered telepathically with some surprise. Her talents truly were enviable.

Jim saw Spock’s eyebrow go up and knew they were conversing telepathically. Good. It was working.

*Here it comes,* was all the warning she gave him.
Spock gasped as the myriad of images, ideas, thoughts, and feelings hit his mind. His eyes were wide, but they were temporarily blinded to the external world, so complete was his internal focus. The landscape of his mind swirled with new ideas, unimagined possibilities. Jim. A way to remain with Jim. Diplomacy. Service to the Federation. Keeping the Enterprise. Protecting BetaZed. Cultural exchange. Lwaxara’s plan was rapidly coalescing for him. He liked it and he knew that Jim liked it. Somehow he doubted that the Starfleet Admiralty would like it, but if the Federation were keen enough on acquiring BetaZed, they would pressure Starfleet into giving them what they needed to make that happen. Would Starfleet agree to allocate an entire starship and crew to the wooing of this planet of empaths?

After he had enough information, Spock started calculating the odds. The one variable he couldn’t account for was Lwaxara’s mother. It was clear from Lwaxara’s mind that she considered her mother formidable and powerful, but requesting the military instead of professional negotiators for diplomatic talks was very irregular. She would have to be adamant and unwavering in her request.

“Okay, that’s all I’ve got,” Lwaxara said casually. “You can get back to chatting with Captain Kirk now.” She waved at Spock, patted Jim on the arm and scurried out.

McCoy was still with his patient in the other room. Jim leaned forward and whispered, “What do you think, Spock?”

“I think Lwaxara is a very creative young woman,” Spock said.

“If she can make it happen, would you come with me?” Kirk asked boldly.

“Of course, Jim,” Spock answered without hesitation.

The Captain smiled. His leg happened to be quite ‘prickly’ at the moment, but he didn’t care. It was so good to see Spock’s face, hear his voice, be able to share with him the exciting ideas from this morning’s conversation with Lwaxara. He’d half expected Spock to have a dozen reasons why the plan was doomed to failure, but if he had qualms, he seemed to be keeping them to himself. Perhaps he just hadn’t had enough time to analyze everything Lwaxara had thrown at him.

Suddenly, Jim remembered the way he’d woken up this morning, with Lwaxara shaking him out of that nightmare about Spock in pon farr. Had she shown that to Spock? He hoped not.
McCoy returned with a grumpy, “hmph.” Spock moved back over to accommodate him as he sat.

“ Seems Enterprise food doesn’t agree with some people,” McCoy said.

“I thought our food was pretty good until I came here,” Jim commented wryly.

“Well, little colorful nutrient bites don’t cut the mustard for the more discerning palates, I guess,” McCoy grumbled. “What do they think we’re running here? A luxury liner?”

Jim chuckled.

“So, did I miss anything?” Bones asked. “Did Lwaxara deliver her telepathic postcard? Did it work at this distance?”

“Well, little colorful nutrient bites don’t cut the mustard for the more discerning palates, I guess,” McCoy grumbled. “What do they think we’re running here? A luxury liner?”

Jim chuckled.

“So, did I miss anything?” Bones asked. “Did Lwaxara deliver her telepathic postcard? Did it work at this distance?”

“Indeed,” Spock replied. “Most impressive.”

“So, can we get back to teasing Jim now about his therapy tribble?” McCoy joked.

Picking up Nadia, Jim rubbed her lovingly against his cheek. “Jealous, Doctor?” he asked.

Bones laughed. It was good to talk to Jim. He remembered bolting out of Jim’s room when the Recall Alert Signal sounded. Such confusion and worry, then. Now, everything had turned out fine and they were on their way back. Spock had done an exemplary job of handling things without Jim, and McCoy might just tell him that someday… maybe.

“Oh, guess who came to see me,” Jim said to his two friends. “Kevin Riley. He missed muster and needed to be quartered. I joked with him about being drawn and quartered.”

McCoy chuckled.

“Probably not the thing to do, but a captain’s got to have some fun while he’s down,” Kirk justified.
“Your friend, Capt. Daily, was given Lt. Riley’s quarters,” Spock mentioned.

“Ha! Riley complained about strangers touching his stuff,” Jim remembered.

“At least his stuff is being touched by a captain,” Bones laughed.

Uhura’s voice cut in, “Bridge to Mr. Spock. Come in, Mr. Spock.”

“Spock here,” he responded.

“I have Commodore Jensen for you, Sir,” she announced.

“On audio please, Lieutenant,” Spock told her.

“Yes, Sir. Channel is open,” said Uhura.

“Commodore Jensen, Spock here.”

“Mr. Spock, a change in orders: Expect to rendezvous with the USS Potemkin in 6.5 hours on your current course. The Potemkin will take over the duty of towing the Astral Queen, so the Enterprise may proceed at warp to deliver your passengers to Starbase 4. Understood?”

“Yes, Commodore,” Spock replied.

“Jensen out.”

“Well! What do you know?” McCoy said. “Did you hear that, Jim? We’ll be ‘home for supper.’”

“Yes, I heard. That’s great news!” Jim said. “It makes sense. The Enterprise wasn’t designed to
hold 226 passengers; they will be more comfortable on the starbase.”

“Like fish, company starts to stink after three days,” McCoy supplied. “Best they disembark while the ‘rescue euphoria’ is still there. They’d be a crabby bunch in five days with this overcrowding, my guess.”

“It is fortunate the Potemkin was nearby,” Spock said.

“Yes,” Jim agreed. “Capt. Daily may want to transfer over to the Potemkin and travel with his ship. Indulge him, Spock, if it’s okay with the Potemkin’s captain.”

“I shall honor his request, should that be his choice,” Spock assured.

Jim smiled. “Well, it’s 10:28 right now. If you transfer the Astral Queen to the Potemkin around 17:00, you’ll be back here late tonight!”

“Shall I request Docking Port C, Captain?” Spock asked kindly.

“You’d better!” Jim said, smiling. And blink those nomenclature lights at me once you’re moored.”

“Will somebody please tell me what in blue blazes ‘nomenclature lights’ are?!” Bones grumped.

Raising his eyebrow in judgment, Spock said, “Really, Doctor.”

Kirk laughed. He’d be seeing his friends tonight… or perhaps in the morning if disembarkation of passengers took too long. Thank goodness for the Potemkin.

“I should return to the bridge now, Captain. I will see you soon.”

“All right, Spock. Go mind the store,” Jim said.
“I should get back to work, too, Jim, Bones said. “I’ll need to have these medical files closed out for the folks disembarking tonight.

“Okay, Bones.” It was easy to let his friends go knowing he’d see them so soon.

As a last thought, McCoy asked, “You haven’t gotten any orders about where we’re off to next, have you?”

“No, your guess is as good as mine. I’m thinking if the Potemkin can spare the time to tug a wrecked ship, there must not be anything too urgent going on in this sector at the moment, right?”

“I guess not,” McCoy agreed. “Well, we’ll be seeing you soon, Jim. Take care of your little Klingon-detector there.” He gestured at Nadia.

Jim chuckled. “Goodbye Bones, Spock. Thanks for the call.”
Warning: This chapter contains recollections of past incidents of unwanted sexual advances/sexual violence.

11 Days Down - Chapter 21

After his screen went dark, Jim’s mood stayed light. It wasn’t going to be five days until he saw Spock after all! What a welcome surprise. He leaned back, stroked Nadia, and started thinking about what to order for lunch. He wiggled his toes because he could. Life seemed good. Having this two week break in his regular duties was like a little vacation. Today at least, he felt inclined to enjoy it. He glanced out his window and pictured his ship coming in. He’d probably have to check out an exterior starbase cam to see Jon’s wrecked ship in a few days. He wondered where they would moor her.

“Commodore Jensen to Captain Kirk,” broke the silence of his room. Nadia squeaked.

“Kirk here, Commodore,” he responded.

“I wanted to share some good news, Captain,” she began.

“Oh?” Jim said, as though he didn’t already know.

“I have arranged for the USS Potemkin to rendezvous with the Enterprise and take the Astral Queen off her hands. Potemkin will arrive here in five days with the transport ship in tow; the Enterprise will arrive late tonight, so the rescued passengers may disembark and enjoy the comforts of Starbase 4 for a few days before another transport ship arrives to take them to their destinations.”

“Oh, that is good news,” Jim said.

“I wanted to let you know, Captain,” she said. “Your crew who missed the muster are being informed right now that they’ll be sleeping in their own quarters on the Enterprise tonight.”
“Thank you, Commodore. I’m sure they will be glad to hear it,” Kirk said.

“Jensen out.”

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That evening, as Jim was having his dinner and checking his messages, he discovered a reply from Yeoman Rand. He clicked and her message popped up on his screen.

*Captain Kirk,*

How nice to hear from you! I am sorry about your injuries, but glad the prognosis is good. I was hurt during an ion storm on the Scrimshire last year and had to stay in bed for three days. Sometimes the best things come from the worst, though, because I got to know our ship’s junior surgeon, Matthew Powell. We started dating after that and now we’re engaged!

I regretted leaving the Enterprise for a long time after I transferred out. I missed everyone. You’re a very lovely part of my memories. We had some amazing adventures together that I will be telling my grandchildren about someday. For a long time, I thought I’d made a mistake following Dr. M’Benga’s advice to “start anew” on a different ship, but if I’d stayed on the Enterprise, I never would have met Matthew, so….

You are very sweet to apologize again for everything and check to see how I am doing. It is nice to know that my old captain still thinks of me and appreciated all of the fussy little things I used to do for him. I know you weren’t really the type to need a Captain’s Yeoman. Do you have one now? Hopefully she’s not a ‘distracting sexpot’ like Dr. M’Benga told me I was. He’ll be pleased to know I took his advice to ‘tune it down’ on my next ship. Nowadays, I look more like… a doctor’s wife, I suppose.

Your letter was so thoughtful. I always liked and respected you very much, Sir, and I always will. I never blamed you for what ‘the imposter’ did, so please don’t give it another thought. I am fine and happy and wish you the same.

Will you be keeping the Enterprise for another five-year mission? The Scrimshire’s three-year mission is up in six months. Not sure where Matthew and I will be posted next.
Jim spent the next few minutes alternating between warm feelings for Janice and seething anger towards M’Benga. How dare he say those things to her, especially after what she’d just been through?! All this time and Jim had never known M’Benga had counseled Janice to leave, abandon all of her friends to ‘start anew.’ What a crock! Now *this* is why starships need Betazoid counselors! The nerve of M’Benga saying things like that under the guise of a doctor’s wisdom.

Jim had heard M’Benga say borderline impolite, dismissive things to Christine Chapel before, and Bones once told him there was a female crewman onboard who refused to see M’Benga and always asked for McCoy when she needed medical attention. Bones hadn’t acted like there was a problem, but maybe there was… is. He wondered if Bones knew how his medical colleague had ‘counseled’ Yeoman Rand. He didn’t seem to. Did Spock know? Had Janice’s friends known? Why didn’t somebody tell him? All this time she’s thought that she was ‘too distracting’ and needed to ‘tune it down.’ Ugh! He was getting so angry. His beautiful, sweet yeoman. Damn. What the hell was wrong with M’Benga? *Nothing a nice transfer wouldn’t fix.* Kirk thought angrily. Maybe *he* would enjoy ‘starting anew.’

Okay, *don’t get carried away,* Jim, he told himself. His leg was prickling rather badly at the moment, and he considered that it might be exaggerating his anger. He would talk to M’Benga tomorrow and see what he had to say for himself. He wouldn’t respond to Janice’s message tonight; he’d wait until he had more information.

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“Take her in, Mr. Sulu,” Spock said as the Enterprise arrived at Starbase 4. They had come out of warp a few minutes ago and approached the base on impulse power. Now, they were gliding the final kilometers to gently dock. The helmsman felt the mooring beam attach and pull the ship into position. His job was done.

An hour ago, Jim had turned off his room’s lights for the best viewing of his ship’s arrival… then fallen asleep waiting. His leg had finally stopped bothering him and he’d told himself he would just rest his eyes for a moment. Now, at 22:45, he was deeply asleep, as the docking clamps were being secured and the ship’s passengers were preparing to disembark. He didn’t see Chekov flash the nomenclature lights.
As the passengers poured off, they were met by representatives of the hotel, who assigned them rooms and arranged for their personal needs. Enterprise crewmen had also been assigned to help. A few reporters were on hand asking for volunteers to speak about their harrowing experience and rescue. It was live on the news, but Jim was missing it, making up for the troubled sleep he’d had the night before. While he slept, his crew performed diligently with the hotel staff, making sure every passenger had accommodations. When the last passenger had left the docking area, it was 01:40. The 17 Enterprise personnel who had missed muster were allowed back on the ship now to go to their quarters.

Lt. Riley knew he’d be getting teased by his shipmates for weeks for missing muster. They were relentless after Psi 2000, humming “I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen,” in the rec room and when they passed him in the corridors. Everyone was a comedian. Riley could only roll his eyes and take it. Now, he’d given them more material. Ugh. He felt disgusted with himself, but too tired to worry about it now. Thankfully, he didn’t encounter another soul as he slipped quietly to his cabin. He fell into bed, barely registering that his quarters were quite a bit tidier than he’d left them.

Most everyone was in bed by 03:30, including McCoy. He had hoped to go directly to see Jim once they got in, but there turned out to be a lot more to do than he’d anticipated, and by 02:00, he’d decided he wasn’t up for anything besides hitting the rack when he finished.

Spock’s duties concluded even later, but he wasn’t tired. He headed for the medical clinic. At 04:15, he slowly slipped into Jim’s dark room. Pushing the door shut quietly behind him, he stood still for a moment allowing his eyes to adjust. He could see the captain’s form outlined on the bed. He must have fallen asleep accidentally, Spock surmised from the angle of the bed. Kirk’s face was turned away from the door. Spock moved silently across the room, rounding the bed to stand on the opposite side where he could see Jim’s face. In the flickering magenta light of the glass globe, his captain looked so peaceful, beautiful. Maybe he shouldn’t be waking him, but he wanted to so badly.

“Jim,” Spock said softly.

Immediately Jim stirred and opened his eyes.

“Spock,” he whispered as he saw his friend’s face only inches from his. “You’re back.” The smile that spread over Jim’s whole face gave Spock no alternative but to return it.

“Spock,” Jim said again with affection, raising his right hand out for Spock to take. Spock collected it and brought it to his lips. He held it there, lightly brushing the knuckles against his mouth. Jim’s breath caught. After a moment, Spock opened Jim’s hand and pressed the palm to his jaw, closing his eyes.
“I love you,” Spock whispered, eyes still closed.

“I love you, too, Spock,” Jim replied, unable to keep tears from springing to his eyes. His heart clenched at Spock’s tenderness.

At the end of their long mind meld two nights ago, Spock had shown Jim the emotional memory of himself in the shower, sobbing uncontrollably and saying he loved Jim when the captain was in surgery and Spock feared he would die… but this was the first time Spock had told him he loved him. It was different. Spock wasn’t desperate, panicked, or anguished. He was just calmly holding Jim’s hand, telling him he loved him. He had apparently woken him up for no other reason.

Still holding Jim’s palm to his jaw, Spock opened his eyes to find Jim’s shining with unshed tears. Spock knew right away, though, that nothing was wrong. This was sometimes a human reaction to exchanging words of love. Smiling, Jim took Spock’s free hand and placed it palm down on his chest, covering it with his own hand. Jim’s heart was beating fast, and it was definitely not from waking up suddenly. He wanted Spock to feel it. He wanted to feel Spock touching him. His hospital gown was thin and the warmth of Spock’s hand easily penetrated it.

Jim closed his eyes, sending a tear sliding down to disappear in his right sideburn. He ran his thumb over the warm hand that he held trapped against his chest, and let the pads of his fingers caress the backs of Spock’s long, elegant fingers.

“Jim,” Spock whispered, clearly moved by the way they were touching, by the deep feelings that both were stirring in the other.

“Can we meld?” Jim whispered.

Spock’s fingertips were on Jim’s face before the next heartbeat, “My mind to your…” but no more words were necessary. They were melding already. To Spock, it felt like Jim’s mind was reaching up to pull him in. Jim was surrounding him, engulfing him. The feeling was tender and powerful at the same time. Spock lacked the emotional control he preferred to have when melding, but Jim’s invitation had been irresistible. He didn’t want to resist. He wanted Jim. He yearned for Jim in his mind, in his history, his present, and all of his thoughts and desires.

Jim felt Spock join with him. Now his mind felt whole, complete. Spock was integral to his existence. There was no fooling himself about that anymore. He had only been gone a day and Jim had missed him so much it was like pain, far worse than the pain in his hip.
Spock felt the same way. The feelings he had developed for his captain over the past few years were undeniable. The only way Spock had been able to keep them in check was the certainty that Jim wouldn’t want him… but he did. This unlikely turn of events still astonished Spock. Jim reciprocated his feelings and wanted to be his t’hy’la.

Will we be lovers, also, Spock? Jim asked through the meld.

I am open to the possibility, Spock answered. We are different.

We will learn each other, Jim assured.

Spock had promised Jim not to look at his memories of past sexual liaisons, so he wouldn’t… but it was tempting. He wanted to see how Jim made love, what he liked. Spock assumed that all of Jim’s sexual partners had been female, but he realized he didn’t know that for sure. He had only known Jim for 4 ½ years. Spock wondered if they became lovers if Jim would still choose to pursue women.

Of course not, Spock! Jim said through the meld. We were discussing a comrade-in-arms kind of relationship when I said that. If we’re romantically involved… which I feel we already are… of course I won’t go looking for anyone else. …And yes, all of my lovers have been women.

…and now you want a male? Spock asked.

I want YOU, Jim said simply.

Spock understood. Jim loved him. As far-fetched as that idea still seemed to him, Jim loved him.

We may not be compatible as lovers, Spock said honestly.

Why not? Kirk asked.

I am easily overstimulated, Spock began to explain, then he caught a glimpse of something Jim
was trying to hide… a dream he’d had of them together… no, a nightmare!

*Oh, Captain. I would never...!* Spock said, after seeing the whole dream until the point where Lwaxara had woken Kirk up.

Jim could feel Spock’s shame, and he hadn’t even done anything.

*That is what you think it would be like between us?* Spock asked, aghast.

*No. No, of course not. Spock, it was just a dream,* Jim said. *Just a dumb dream. Humans have them.*

*And they often reveal deep-seated, unconscious fears,* Spock pointed out.

*No. Spock, I...*

*You fear since I am stronger than you, I would be an aggressive lover. I assure you that the opposite is true,* Spock said.

*Spock, Jim began, I don’t think that. It was just a dream. Perhaps I was thinking that your next pon farr is four years away and if we’re lovers, there might be some aggression I’d have to deal with THEN. I didn’t think you’d be like that all the time! Of course I didn’t.*

*Jim, you do realize that I will not go into pon farr again if I already have a lover?* Spock said.

*What do you mean?* Jim asked.

*The pon farr is Nature’s way of forcing Vulcan males to mate. If I am already... mating regularly, the biochemical levels would not build up to the point of pon farr,* Spock explained. *So you do not have to worry about me attacking you.*

*Spock. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. It was a dream. Why didn’t you ever tell me that about pon farr?*
I was waiting for it to become relevant, as it just did, Spock said logically. I do realize I have been tight-lipped about the details of Vulcan biology. I assure you this will no longer be the case with you. You may ask me whatever you want to know.

Jim knew how difficult, how counter to Spock’s nature, this openness was, and he appreciated it.

Spock continued, I can easily access any and all information about human sexuality; your species is obsessed with it and has written volumes. I know it is much harder for you to learn about Vulcan biology except through me. I will be more forthcoming in the future.

Okay. Thanks, Jim said. …and I don’t know what you’ve researched about human sexuality, but better run things by me, because we’re all different, we humans.

I will take that under advisement, Captain.

This is more like a regular conversation than a meld, Jim just realized.

That is because of the topic, Spock supplied. We have no images we are willing to show each other. I am trying to stay out of your memories and keep you out of mine.

Jim thought about that. You have… sexual memories?

Propositions only, Spock revealed. Nothing that I responded to… except with defensive force when needed.

Someone attacked you? Jim asked, alarmed.

It was long ago and of little consequence, Spock said dismissively, but Kirk sensed there was something there.

Show me, Jim asked.
Cultures have different norms. It is possible I misunderstood…

Show me, Spock, Jim asked again.

Jim, please, Spock entreated. It will… anger you.

Then I’ll get angry. Let me see, Jim asked.

Spock considered. It was so hard to say no to Jim. He’d kept this memory buried deep. It was shameful to him. He’d never told Pike, never told anyone. The Enterprise had left the next morning, and Spock had tried never to think of it again.

He opened the memory for Jim. He would show him.

It was 13 years ago. Spock was a lieutenant on the Enterprise under Captain Pike. The ship had been in orbit around the fourth planet of the Arcturus system for a week, while the crew enjoyed the hospitality of the Arcturan people.

They were a society of decadent sensualists, interested mostly in feasting and copulating. Spock found them unworthy of such an extended visit and was glad the Enterprise was leaving the next day.

The Arcturans were tall, like Capellans. The men reached nearly 7 feet. They stood too close for Spock’s taste and often spoke in sexually suggestive terms. Some of the crew really liked it, but Spock had stayed aloof. The final night of feasting was winding down and Borgan, one of their hosts invited Spock to his dwelling to give him a farewell gift. Jim could feel Spock’s wariness in the meld. Spock had felt the Arcturan’s eyes on him all evening, looking him up and down in the festive reception hall, but all of the Arcturans behaved this way and Spock didn’t want to give offense, so he went with Borgan.

“Lt. Spock,” Borgan said when he had him alone in his home, “I feel like you haven’t enjoyed your time here as much as your shipmates. You don’t seem pleased by our feasts, our dancing, our storytelling, and you act like you have no appetite for sexual pleasures. It must be an act, isn’t it? Perhaps on this final night, you could… indulge yourself,” Borgan suggested, stepping closer.

“Borgan, I should be getting back to the others,” Spock said, stepping toward the door that Borgan
was blocking. He didn’t move aside.

“They say you have quite a brain between those ears, Vulcan, but what have you got between your legs, I wonder?” Borgan said as he stepped even closer, looming over Spock. Before Spock realized what was happening, Borgan’s hand reached out swiftly and grabbed him between the legs, pressing and holding firmly.

“Haha! Nothing much!” Borgan laughed. “Well, I’ll take care of that,” he said, pushing a stunned Spock back against the wall and aggressively fondling him with his large hand.

“Borgan, I have to leave,” Spock managed to say, trying to step away from the wall.

“I love the way you say my name, Vulcan,” Borgan said. “Do you think I can make you shout it? Let’s find out.” Using Spock’s momentum against him, Borgan pivoted and pushed Spock down onto his bed/couch. The giant Arcturan was immediately on top of him, grinding into his crotch through their clothes. He tried to kiss Spock, but he turned his head.

“Get off of me!” Spock yelled.

“You’re a funny one, Lieutenant,” Borgan teased playfully. “You really resist pleasure, don’t you? I thought you wanted your farewell gift,” he grinned devilishly. “A few more strokes and it will be ready for you.” He kept rubbing and grunting against Spock, pinning him with his whole weight, until finally Spock was able to pull one of his arms out from under Borgan and deliver a neck pinch.

Borgan fell limp across Spock. Relief bloomed in Jim, who had been holding his breath in horror through this whole ordeal. He could feel everything Spock had felt, his disbelief, then his panic and fear. Now the big Arcturan was unconscious and Spock had managed to wriggle out from underneath him. He felt dizzy as he stood. He wanted to run, but he took a few moments to get his breath back and decide what to do.

Had he misinterpreted the word ‘gift.’ Was this his fault? A cultural misunderstanding?

He forced himself to look back at Borgan to make sure he was breathing. Satisfied that he would recover from the neck pinch, Spock headed for the door. He beamed up with another Lieutenant who was calling it a night. He knew he should report what had happened, but the thought of having to describe it in detail…. It would be too humiliating. He would lose the respect of his crew mates,
or worse yet, have their pity. The thought of half the crew avoiding him and the other half trying to comfort him was the deciding factor. He would keep this to himself.

And now 13 years later, here he was upsetting Jim with it.

Jim didn’t have to say anything. Spock could feel his reactions. They sat in the meld equivalent of a hug for a moment. Please don’t worry Jim. It was a long time ago, Spock said finally.

You had no one to confide in, Jim remarked sadly.

That was my own choice, Spock said. Have you had any similarly unsettling experiences? he asked the captain.

Jim thought about it. Near the beginning of our five-year mission, on Exo III, Dr. Korby’s huge android Ruk had me naked and strapped onto that turntable machine to make an android of me. THAT wasn’t too much fun, Jim recalled.

He shared the memory with Spock.

Even in the midst of all that, you thought to send me a cleverly disguised message, Spock commented. You have great clarity of thought under duress.

Thanks, Jim said, but he was already thinking of another memory… something more along the lines of what Spock had asked him for.

Finnegan, Spock said.

Yes, Jim confirmed.

Sean Finnegan was an upperclassman at the Academy when Kirk was a Freshman. A practical joker and a bully, Finnegan had targeted Kirk for his serious, studious demeanor and made himself Kirk’s own personal devil that first year. Spock was already aware of this because he saw the Finnegan replica Kirk’s mind had created on the shore leave planet. He had watched Jim ‘duke it out’ with his old nemesis and enjoy the fist fight immensely. It was one of the times he was least
impressed with his captain, honestly.

*I suppose it was kind of childish,* Jim admitted. *We used to fight a lot. Academy instructors give too much latitude to upperclassmen in their treatment of plebes, in my opinion. Was it like that when you were there, Spock?*

*Yes,* Spock confirmed.

*It must have been hard as a Vulcan plebe, everyone trying to see if they could ruffle your feathers, like tourists giving the King’s guards a hard time at Buckingham Palace,* Jim said.

*That is an apt description,* Spock said, *but I believe we were talking about Finnegan…*

Jim decided he might as well get it over with and show Spock that time when Finnegan took his bullying too far.

They were fighting. Finnegan had come into the freshman dorms and poured soup in Jim’s bed. Kirk took off after him with fury in his eyes. He chased him across the quad and tackled him on its grassy edge. They’d tumbled down the small hill into a collection of fallen leaves at the bottom, near the groundskeeper’s shack.

“Fight! Fight!” the other cadets were calling, drawing quite a crowd. The upperclassmen were cheering on Finnegan and the underclassmen were cheering for Kirk, though they were pretty sure he wouldn’t win. He never won against Sean. Jim was on his back, covered in leaves. Finnegan was on his knees straddling him, landing blow after blow. Jim’s mouth was bloody and he was nearly unconscious. Finnegan, ever the showman, was feeding off the excitement of the crowd.

“Had enough, Jimmy Boy?” he shouted for the crowd’s benefit. “Wanna kiss and make up?” He grabbed the back of Kirk’s neck, leaned down and kissed him hard, pushing his tongue into his mouth. Jim was barely aware of what was happening.

“Get an instructor!” he heard a student shout.

Finnegan raised up, wiped his mouth with a dramatic flourish and pronounced loudly, “He’s a pretty plebe, but he tastes like blood.” That got fewer chuckles than he was hoping for. Starting to realize that things had gone a bit too far, he said, “When ya gonna learn, Jimmy Boy? When ya
gonna learn ya can’t beat ol’ Finnegan?” Then he strode off. Most of the crowd dissipated. Some of the girls came to make sure Jim was all right. He was dazed and couldn’t stand up yet.

The students who had gone to get an instructor were returning with Kirk’s organic chemistry teacher. “Cadet Kirk,” she said. “Where is Cadet Finnegan?”

“Dunno,” Jim said, shaking his head and trying to focus. “I don’t know, ma’am.”

“Cadet Simmons says he kissed you. Is that true?”

“I didn’t kiss Cadet Simmons, no ma’am,” Kirk said, confused.

The kids got a big laugh out of that and Todd Simmons’ pale cheeks turned crimson.

“It’s not funny,” the instructor said. “Help me get him to the nurse.”

Jim stood up slowly and started walking, realizing his mouth tasted like blood… and saliva that was not his own. Then he remembered.

The nurse patched him up and didn’t ask questions. He went back to his dorm with two cotton rolls stuffed in his nose and had to change his soupy bed linens before he could finally lie down. He took out a book and started studying for his physics quiz tomorrow.

Was Finnegan ever punished for that? Spock asked.

Yes. Six weeks on restriction, unable to leave Academy grounds, Jim said. He didn’t get to go home for Christmas.

He should have been expelled, Spock said.

Maybe. He’d already accumulated a lot of demerits. I’d been his punching bag all semester and since I was only 17 and he was 20 and an upperclassman who should know better, he was usually the one punished, not me. That tussle in the leaves is the last time I remember having a fist fight
with Finnegan. He still teased me, but things were better spring semester. Then, he graduated.

Spock, do you... I don’t know... amplify my memories when we’re melded? Jim asked. I don’t see my old memories quite that clearly when I’m alone in my own head.

Almost all of your memories are stored with perfect clarity, Jim. It is the retrieval of memories that humans often have difficulty with. I am assisting with that, yes, Spock confirmed.

Sometimes it might be a mercy not to remember some things too vividly, Jim pondered. He’d been so dazed after that beating that he hadn’t remembered many sensory details about the invasive kiss or Finnegan’s demeaning remarks to the crowd, but now revulsion and humiliation were becoming a bigger part of that memory.

Oh, Jim, I am sorry, Spock said.

Jim felt like changing the subject. Spock, show me something from your mission to save the Astral Queen... show me my friend, Jon.

All right, Captain, Spock said. He showed him the conversation he’d had with Capt. Daily in Lt. Riley’s quarters.

Ah! Same old Jon, Kirk said happily. He looks good after everything he went through. I’m glad about that. Is he here, Spock?

No, he stayed with his ship as you suspected he might, as did his bridge crew, Spock informed Jim.

Well, when the Potemkin docks, I hope he comes to see me, Jim said. I should still have one more day at the clinic, if I’m figuring that right. I want to ask him about Ruth and her kids.

Thinking of Ruth somehow led to thinking about Janice Rand.

Oh, Spock, I want to tell you something concerning Dr. M’Benga. Lwaxara advised me to write to Yeoman Rand so I did and got a lovely message back... except for a few things. Look at this:
Jim showed Spock his memory of reading Janice’s letter, complete with his feelings about it, intentions to talk to Dr. M’Benga, and curiosity about whether Spock or McCoy knew about it.

*I did not know the doctor had ‘counseled’ your yeoman in this fashion,* Spock said immediately. *I agree with you, Jim. It is disgraceful.*

*It makes me sad that she thinks she needs to look ‘like a doctor’s wife’ now instead of the stunning goddess she is,* Jim said, showing his ire. *Who the hell does M’Benga think he is to tell her how to look?! I wonder what he’ll have to say about it when I question him? I mean, after what she’d just gone through with me… part of me… attacking her, then M’Benga treating her like that! It makes me angry.*

*I can tell,* Spock said.

*Does it upset you, when I get riled up during a meld,* Jim asked, suddenly curious.

*No, Jim,* Spock said. *However you happen to feel at the moment, show me. Your emotions are like an ever-changing landscape. They are beautiful and I am honored to see them this way.*

*I love you,* Jim said.

*I love you, too, t’hy’la,* Spock replied tenderly.
11 Days Down - Chapter 22

Spock, you said our minds are compatible. When can you bond us? Jim asked inside the meld.

Soon, I think, Spock answered.

I was kind of going crazy when the news said the Astral Queen was being attacked, Jim admitted. I was afraid you would die and your katra would have nowhere to go.

Spock was touched by this. Jim was thinking of something he thought about often.

After we are bonded, would I be obliged to take your katra to Mt. Seleya if you die, or can I keep it? Jim asked.

Keep it? Spock wondered.

Yeah, in my head. Would I have to give you up? Wouldn’t you rather be with me than with the spirits in the Hall of Thoughts?

I suppose I would, yes, Spock replied, if that is what you wanted. You may decide.

I could go to Vulcan as a very old man, Kirk proposed, and have your katra transferred to the Hall of Thoughts before I die. That way, I wouldn’t have to be without you for all those years… if you were to die young, I mean, which I thoroughly intend to keep you from doing!

Despite Jim’s bravado, Spock could feel his worry. Where there is love, there is always fear of loss, Spock said solemnly. We are taking a big risk. Humans say ‘Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all,’ but there is no proof of that.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, Jim supplied, in a poem about his best friend who died young.
Yes, Spock said.

_I don’t know who said, ‘Between grief and nothing, I’ll take grief,’ but I like that one, too, _Jim said.

_William Faulkner_, Spock supplied.

_Your knowledge of Terran literature and art is beyond impressive, Spock_, Jim said admiringly. _I’ve always thought so. It puts my knowledge of Vulcan lit to shame._

_You’ve read Saret and Luken_, Spock pointed out.

_I want to read more. Make me a list of your favorites, or things you think I would like, _Jim requested.

_All right, Jim_, Spock agreed.

_Until Scotty, I don’t get excited over technical journals and I still have six more days of convalescence_, Jim said. _I’d like to read something we can talk about._

Jim could feel Spock mentally filing through his favorite poetry and literature. There weren’t a lot of Vulcan selections in there.

_You favor Terran art and lit, don’t you? _Jim noted.

_I suppose I do_, Spock mused.

_Flint’s house was a treasure trove for you_, Jim said. _Brahms, deVinci…. _

Spock froze at the mention of Mr. Flint. He was never sure how much the captain remembered about Rayna. Jim had been ashamed of how he’d acted on that mission, remarking that he and Mr. Flint fighting as they had over Rayna was “a pretty poor show.” Jim had called the two of them, “a
very old and lonely man and a young and lonely man.” It was the only time Spock had heard his gregarious captain admit to being lonely.

Spock had reasoned early on that Rayna was likely an android and he wanted to protect Jim’s heart from being broken. He’d offered to investigate what was in Flint’s secret lab himself, to spare the captain from seeing what he suspected was there, but Jim had said, “We’ll all go,” and that was that. Spock saw the shock and pain on Jim’s face when they discovered the many prototypes of Rayna. The brilliant doe-eyed waif he wanted to rescue from her life of solitude with Flint wasn’t human. Jim wanted so much to believe that she could be, though, and ended up destroying her.

Jim could hear all of Spock’s thoughts. I have a foolish heart, Spock, he sighed. A foolish, foolish heart. Are you sure you want it?

Your passions make you who you are, and they often serve you well, except when they overrule your mind. Spock said. I can help with that.

Jim didn’t respond.

You have doubts, Spock said.

I’m reminded of a saying my grandma used to tell me: “The glove gets dirty; the dirt doesn’t get glovey.”

Spock analyzed the unfamiliar adage. You think your passions are more likely to corrupt me than my logic is to elevate you?

Spock put everything so perfectly. Too perfectly. That was Jim’s fear exactly, that Spock would find himself lessened, pulled down from his ivory tower of logic into a quagmire of human emotions he was ill-equipped to handle.

In what context did your grandmother tell you this? Spock wanted to know.

It was a warning against keeping company with people of poor character, Jim said.
Jim, you are far from being a person of poor character. You are a leader of men, the captain of a starship.

Spock, I was romancing a robot while the crew was dying of Rigelian Fever. I was trusting an antagonistic stranger to get us the ryetalyn to stop the plague. I made a series of bad choices. Stop trying to let me off the hook for it. Three crewmen died.

They died before we beamed down, Spock reminded.

Jim gave up. Spock wasn’t going to let any of his self-recriminations go unchallenged.

When we are bonded, will I still make human errors, Jim asked seriously.

Undoubtedly, Spock said, although their frequency and severity may be mitigated by my influence.

Ha! Jim laughed. I’m looking forward to it.

Captain? Spock asked hesitantly. Did you know I tried to help with your grief following Rayna’s demise?

What do you mean? Jim asked.

You were in a bad state, Spock recalled. Not sleeping, not eating. Doctor McCoy was concerned about you. He and I were with you in your quarters when you laid your head down on the desk and fell into an exhausted sleep. As the doctor left, he said that he wished you could forget Rayna, and on impulse I touched your mind and tried to ease some of your suffering, soften the poignancy of your memories of her.

Jim saw all of this in Spock’s mind, felt his good intentions, his affection.

…and Bones had the nerve to say that the word ‘love’ isn’t written in your book, Jim mused.

Jim, how do you think the doctor will feel about us bonding? Spock asked. He approves of very
little about me. Will he disapprove of your decision to… integrate me into yourself?

I don’t know. Maybe. I’m a bit afraid to tell him, Jim realized. I feel like it may hurt his feelings, like I’m choosing you over him. I bruised his feelings the other day by encouraging him to decide things with Natira. I told him he’s almost 50 and she won’t wait forever. Twice he joked that I was trying to get rid of him.

Spock saw their conversation and noticed that Jim knew Leila Kalomi had married. Then, Jim noticed that he’d noticed.

I thought I ruined your chance for true love, Jim said. I don’t want to ruin McCoy’s. As we left Omicron Ceti III, after we’d thrown off the spores’ influence, you said that was the only time in your life you’d been happy. That stayed with me. It wrung my heart.

The spores provided a euphoric… ease with myself… that I had never experienced before, Spock explained. It was a very enjoyable experience, but I like this more. This is real.

Did you mind meld with Leila? Jim asked casually.

No, Spock responded.

Did you and she… um…?

No, Jim. I do believe you are going to be ‘the jealous type,’ Spock mused.

Haha! Damn right,” Jim said good-naturedly.

Spock let Jim explore a bit. He saw Zarabeth in her icy prison. There was a lot of sadness there; Spock hated leaving her to such a cruel fate. He wanted to save her as much as Jim had wanted to save Edith Keeler, but it was impossible. Both women were lost to Time.

She was beautiful, Spock, Jim whispered. I’m so sorry.
So am I, Spock replied reverently. Jim knew he was referring to Edith.

Both men had such deep pools of sadness and regret within them. Bathing in each other’s sorrow was both painful and cathartic. Jim was starting to feel tired.

*Shall we end the meld before you get too tired?* Spock suggested.

*I suppose we should,* Jim said, reluctantly. *Dr. Mullova held her tongue, but I don’t think she was too happy about our long, ‘tumultuous’ meld, nor was Virginia. ...oh, I’m told I have a new nurse for the next two days and she’s a Vulcan, T’Nar.*

Spock was ending the meld. Slowly, gently. The last thing Jim saw in Spock’s receding mind was that T’Nar meant ‘dusk’ in Vulcan. Then he was moving away. Farther, farther…

*Spock.*

Jim was seeing with his eyes again instead of with his mind. He felt separate, alone. Spock was there, right beside him, but nonetheless…

“You are all right, Jim. I am here.” Spock’s arm was already around his shoulders. He pulled Jim closer.

“I feel…”

“I know. It will pass in a moment,” Spock reassured.

Jim reached for Spock’s hand and pulled it up under his chin. He was trembling a bit. Spock leaned over and laid his cheek on the top of Jim’s head.

“I will stay and we can have breakfast together,” Spock suggested.

“B-breakfast?” Jim questioned. “I thought it was the m-middle of the night.”
“I arrived at 04:15 and it is now 06:02,” Spock informed him.

“Oh,” Jim said, noticing that the corridor light seeping under his door had gone to the full bright mode of daytime.

It was frightening how bereft he felt when Spock left his mind. He didn’t like feeling this vulnerable, this dependent.

“Give yourself a moment, Jim. I feel it, too,” Spock whispered into his t’hy’la’s soft hair, as he tightened his grip around Jim’s quivering shoulders. “In a moment we will be all right.”

The ache of separateness reminded them how much their minds wanted the bond. When Spock had first said “I crave it,” Jim hadn’t understood yet, but now he did. Hopefully, it could be accomplished soon.

The captain still had a tight grip on Spock’s hand that he’d tucked under his chin, but slowly, he began to feel better. He was easing his hold and about to let go when light from the hallway streamed across his face and he looked up to see Bones standing in the doorway.
Chapter 23

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Spock raised his head off of Jim’s. Neither of them could see the expression on the doctor’s face, which was probably for the best. Only his familiar outline against the backlighting gave away that it was their friend.

“Do you two… uh… need a moment?” McCoy asked, uncomfortably, from the doorway.

“Come in, Bones,” Jim said, composing himself. He gave Spock’s hand one last squeeze, then let go. Spock’s arm slid free from his shoulders as he stood up from his sheltering crouch.

The captain turned his room lights to 25% and McCoy stepped in a few inches, uncertain of where he fit in this new arrangement. It was new, wasn’t it? He didn’t know. Tempting as it was to crack a joke to ease his tension, the doctor refrained. He didn’t want to embarrass his friends. There were times for good-natured teasing and McCoy was pretty sure this wasn’t one of them.

Jim had his warm, welcoming smile on now. “Come in,” he said again, gesturing.

McCoy glanced at Spock to make sure it was also all right with him. He saw that it was and stepped further into Jim’s room, dropping the door behind him.

“I didn’t mean to intrude…,” McCoy began, feeling like he should apologize. As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t just act like he hadn’t seen anything.

“It’s no intrusion. I’m happy to see you, Bones,” Jim said. “Welcome back.”

“Good morning, Doctor. You appear rested,” Spock said.

_Oh, Lord. They’re not going to pretend I didn’t just see what I saw, are they?_ Bones thought.

“Have you eaten yet?” Jim asked cordially. “Spock and I were about to order breakfast. What can I
They ARE going to act like everything’s normal, dammit! McCoy couldn’t decide whether to be irritated or grateful. Jim just probably doesn’t want to embarrass Spock. I’m sure he’ll talk to me later about it, he told himself.

“Oh, just some black coffee, I guess,” Bones finally answered. He was hungry, but wasn’t sure he wanted to stay if things were going to be awkward. Jim and Spock were obviously having a moment for two, not three. He should skedaddle and let them get back to… whatever that was.


“Your leg, Jim?” Bones asked.

“Yeah,” Jim said, rubbing his left thigh.

“Can you feel that?” the doctor wondered.

“Hey, yeah, I can,” Jim realized, surprised.

Spock raised a supportive eyebrow as Jim glanced up at him.

The captain made the head of his bed a bit higher, so his hand could reach farther down his thigh. “Yeah, I can feel all of this,” he discovered.

“Let’s see how much more. Do you mind, Jim?” McCoy asked as he reached to move the bedcovers off of Kirk’s leg.

“No, go ahead,” Jim consented.

Bones started at the knee and went down toward the foot, trailing his finger lightly over Jim’s skin. Every couple of inches, he asked, “Do you feel this?”
Jim answered, “yes,” all the way to the sole of his foot, which the doctor tickled just for fun… and to test his reflexes. None yet, but Jim could feel it.

“How far up does epidermal sensation go? Can I test the area around your hip, Jim?” McCoy asked.

“Sure.”

Spock glanced away to give the doctor and his patient a bit of privacy. He caught just a glimpse of Jim’s bare hip as it was being exposed. He listened as Jim responded in the affirmative again every time McCoy asked if he could feel it.

“That’s terrific, Jim,” Bones said, pulling the covers back over his hip and thigh, but leaving his lower leg exposed. “Let’s see those toes wiggle again.”

Spock looked back to see that. Jim gave the most vigorous wiggle he could do, but it wasn’t much.

“Try to move your ankle or knee,” McCoy suggested.

Nothing.

“Why are my toes moving before my ankle and knee?” the captain wondered aloud.

“Nerves are finicky things,” Bones offered for Jim’s amusement.

“Ha!” Jim laughed. “I’m starting to suspect that means the same thing as ‘I don’t know.’”

“Guilty,” McCoy admitted with a wry smile. “Ask one of the Mullovs. They’re the experts.”

“Speaking of them, Dr. Mullov named off so many nerves the other day, after my treatment,” Jim remembered. “Seriously, there were almost TEN!”
“Lots more sub-branches, too,” McCoy added. “Did he say all of them were responding well?”

“Um, most of them, yeah,” Jim said.

“Most?” Bones asked.

“He said they repair at different rates and I’d be walking on schedule, probably, but it would be two or three weeks before I could… um… before my perineal nerves would be fully healed.”

“Ah,” McCoy said knowingly and for some reason glanced at Spock, before looking back at Jim. “Well, that won’t be long.”

“No, it won’t be long… not for two or three more weeks,” Jim joked.

McCoy burst out laughing. At least Jim could make jokes about it, Bones thought. Spock apparently had no idea what they were talking about… or was pretending not to… and that made it even funnier.

Jim flipped his screen on and motioned for both Spock and McCoy to come stand over his shoulders and pick out some breakfast from the menu.

Things seemed a lot less awkward now among the three of them, so Bones decided to order a full breakfast and stay awhile. When everyone had made their selections, McCoy and Spock sat down at the guest table.

Looking toward his friends, Jim saw his ship through the window beyond. “I’m so glad the Enterprise is back and things went as well as they did,” Jim said.

“Oh, me too,” McCoy seconded. “Spock, you should have seen how huge Jim’s eyes got when my Recall Alert Signal went off. I was here in the room with him and Captain Eagle Eyes had just noticed that a docking clamp was open….”
“I regret that no advance warning was possible, Captain,” Spock said.

“Oh, no, I understand, Spock. You did an amazing job getting the Enterprise underway so quickly,” Jim praised. “Jon owes you his life.”

“It’s nice to know I can still run that fast,” McCoy declared. “It felt kind of good actually.”

“You can run faster than me,” Jim said with mock self-pity, which Bones ignored.

“Hey, Spock, what are you going to do to Lt. Riley?” McCoy asked, curious. “Is he gonna get reprimanded for not making muster?”

“I had not yet given the matter any thought,” Spock replied.

“He was clear on the other side of the base, Spock, and made an honest effort,” Jim weighed in.

“Go easy on him, Spock,” Bones suggested. “The poor kid is still getting teased for his… musical stylings… over the shipwide comm.”

Jim chuckled and started humming, *I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen.*

“That was 4.3 years ago,” Spock pointed out.

“Oh, there’s no expiration date on material that good,” McCoy explained, joining Jim’s humming.

Spock raised an eyebrow. I was not aware. Perhaps I should do something to stop it.

“Stuff like that can’t be stopped, Spock, or I’d have done it,” Kirk said. “Just let the crew’s inevitable ribbing be enough punishment for missing muster, huh?”

“Very well, Captain,” Spock agreed. “I had calculated that up to .06% of the crew would be left
behind. Lt. Riley’s absence caused no hardship. It is unlikely I would have decided that punishment was warranted.”

Jim smiled. Then, his face suddenly turned stern as he remembered another ‘personnel problem.’

“Bones, I have to ask you something about Dr. M’Benga and Janice Rand,” the captain began.

“Well that’s a strange combo, Jim. What about them?” McCoy wanted to know.

“M’Benga ‘counseled’ Janice to leave the Enterprise and start over on another ship. He told her she should ‘tune down’ her look on her new assignment, because she was a ‘distracting sexpot,’” Jim revealed.

“He did?” McCoy chuckled.

Jim nodded. “Janice just told me in a letter. You didn’t know?”

“No, but that does sound like him. He thinks all beautiful women in the service are here to catch husbands,” McCoy laughed.

“It’s not funny, Bones,” Jim said.

“Janice didn’t have to take the ol’ prig’s advice,” McCoy pointed out.

“Well, the ‘ol’ prig’ is a doctor, an authority figure, and Janice was particularly vulnerable at the time, if you recall....”

“Yes,” McCoy said softly, looking down.

“She left the ship, Bones, left me, left all of her friends, and apparently took his advice to change her look. It makes me angry. She deserved better than sanctimonious advice like that.”
“She wrote to you?” Bones asked.

“I wrote to her,” Jim said, “on Lwaxara’s advice. Remember how I was feeling upset the other day thinking about the incident with ‘the imposter?’”

McCoy nodded, recalling how Jim had been beating himself up analyzing his perceived mistakes over the past 4½ years.

“Lwaxara said it would make me feel better to let Janice know I still thought about her and wanted to see if she was all right. She said to thank her for all of the nice little nurturing things she used to do for me as my yeoman,” Jim explained. “Unlike M’Benga, Lwaxara gives good advice, so I took it. Got a really nice letter back last night, too. She’s happy on the Scrimshire… but the stuff she said about Dr. M’Benga had my blood boiling. He basically made her feel worthless and responsible for what ‘the imposter’ did to her.”

“M’Benga’s a good surgeon, but the guy can be a bit of a jackwagon,” McCoy admitted with a shrug.

“Well, if you know that, do something about it. Are you his boss or not?!” Jim scalded. “I’ve heard him say dismissive put-downs to Christine, too.”

“Well, so do I sometimes!” Bones defended. “Doctors can get cranky….”

“Have you ever told a crew member she was a distracting sexpot who should transfer out?!” Kirk pressed.

“No, of course not. Do you want me to talk to him about it, Jim?”

“Yes. I know it’s been a long time ago now, but I just found out about it….”

“Captain,” Spock interjected, “the Andorian captain complained to me informally about Dr. M’Benga. He said two women on his crew were told to stop ‘behaving like hysterical infants’ by Dr. M’Benga while he was treating them. He reportedly also told them they ‘could use a good slap.’”
Jim’s and McCoy’s eyes both went wide.

“Yeah, definitely talk to him, Bones. You also once told me that there was a female crew member who refused to see M’Benga and would only see you. What was her complaint?”

“She said M’Benga treated her with ‘disdain’… and there have been a couple more women like her since I told you that, Jim,” McCoy admitted hesitantly. “Uh… most of the nurses don’t like working with him either, Christine has told me.”

“Looks like this matter is overdue to be addressed, Chief Medical Officer. I expect you to resolve it soon, in whatever way you see fit,” Kirk ordered.

“Yes, Captain,” McCoy responded, contritely.

“Maybe start listening to crew complaints and the opinion of your nursing staff instead of closing ranks with a colleague who doesn’t deserve your protection,” Jim suggested hotly.

Spock averted his eyes. Seeing Dr. McCoy dressed down by the captain was a rare and uncomfortable sight. He felt responsible, in part, for failing to relay the Andorian captain’s complaints to Dr. McCoy until now, when the captain’s ire was up. At the time, he had been too worried about Jim’s injuries to care much about M’Benga’s unprofessional attitude.

“Perhaps, if you will be gathering statements and complaints in your investigation, Doctor, you could include Lt. Uhura and Yeoman Landon,” Spock suggested. “I recall overhearing in rec room 3 a discussion in which they called Dr. M’Benga a ‘jerk’ and a ‘self-righteous creep.’”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Spock?” Kirk asked.

“It was not intended for me to overhear. My Vulcan hearing is often forgotten by crew members expecting privacy. I grant it to them.”

Jim smiled.

The door cracked open and a server said, “Breakfast. May I come in?”
What a welcome interruption, McCoy thought.

“Come in. I have the pancakes,” Jim said. He was hungry.

The trays were laid out and the server thankfully departed quickly.

“Lwaxara recommended boysenberry syrup over blueberry and boy was she right! I’m hooked now,” Jim said, trying to restore the congenial mood that he had ruined.

Spock and McCoy had both gone for plain eggs and toast. The three men ate in silence for a minute or two, then the captain made a decision.

“Bones,” Jim began with a twinkle in his eye, “Spock and I have something to tell you.”
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Spock froze, not sure what Jim meant by, “Spock and I have something to tell you.”

“Lwaxara, our favorite empath, has a plan….” Jim began.

Spock relaxed.

“A plan?” asked McCoy, responding to Jim’s mischievous grin.

“A plan, a plot, a scheme, an intrigue…,” Jim kept the suspense going. “Spock and I think it might work.”

Jim was smiling and McCoy couldn’t stand it anymore.

“What? Tell me,” Bones asked.

“You know how you said that the Federation better snap up BetaZed pronto if they know what’s good for them?” Jim reminded.

“Yeah,” McCoy recalled.

“Well, they want it. It’s just a question of how badly. They’ve already sent a diplomatic envoy; I told you about that…”

Bones glanced at Spock.

“Yes, it was led by Ambassador Sarek, and was not… entirely successful,” Jim said, careful not to insult Spock’s father.
“I heard it crashed and burned. Those Betazoids tossed ‘em out on their pointed ears,” McCoy said with intentional indelicacy.

Spock kept eating, refusing to be baited.

Kirk continued, “Lwaxara said the all-Vulcan delegation and her mother’s household were like ‘oil and water,’ but she has told her mother about Spock and me and all of the Enterprise officers she has met so far and has her nearly convinced that we should be the next delegation sent to negotiate BetaZed’s admission.”

McCoy’s breath hitched.

“The Betazoids’ main concern is security… of their citizens and their shipping lanes,” Jim explained. “Lwaxara thinks that if her mother requests a starship be present for five years, for protection and a lengthy cultural exchange during the negotiation process, she will get it.”

“A fully-staffed starship for five years, dedicated solely to BetaZed and her trading partners?” McCoy gaped. “How big an area are we talking?”

“As I understand it, BetaZed trades with three non-Federation planets, all warp-capable, who can defend their halves of the trade routes,” Jim said. Our patrols probably wouldn’t extend more than 30 light years from BetaZed. Unless…”

“Unless what?” McCoy was drawn in.

“Well,” Jim said, that mischievous look in his eyes again. “The Betazoids apparently have their eyes on a new potential trading partner that is 74 light years away. They might want our help negotiating a first agreement with them. You may have heard of it. It’s a newly-colonized planet with mostly ocean, one large continent, and a rather beautiful queen.”

“New Fabrine.” McCoy smiled, grasping the possibilities.

“Not to get ahead of ourselves, but I’m thinking of sending out our best trade negotiators under the direction of Ambassador McCoy,” Jim said fancifully, caught up in the moment.
Naturally, Spock was there to bring him back to Earth.

“Captain, we do not yet know if Madame Dirn will choose to make the request, or if the Federation will be willing and able to pressure Starfleet into agreeing,” Spock reminded.

“True,” Jim said, “It is still just a plan, a plot, a scheme, an intrigue….”

“Well, I am definitely intrigued,” McCoy said. “Boy, that girl is really something! So, her mother rules the whole planet? I didn't realize that.”

Jim replied, “Lwaxara explained BetaZed to me as a traditional matriarchy, with eight ruling houses. Her mother rules the 5th House which is the most powerful and commands the respect of the others. Lwaxara says BetaZed could ally with the Federation on her mother’s say-so alone, but she wants buy-in from the other houses. She wants a cultural exchange so her people know what they’re getting into and vice versa. She said there would be a lot of fancy parties but her mother’s valet would design v-neck uniform dress shirts for us… so your neck won’t have to be in a sling,” Jim winked.

“I’m in!” McCoy enthused.

Spock rolled his eyes, but McCoy and Kirk kept smiling.

“It may all fall through. Who knows?” Jim said, “but it feels good to get excited about another five years with us all together doing something that makes a difference, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does!” Bones grinned.

They both turned to Spock.

“Yes,” he said simply.

Everyone was finished with breakfast and had somewhere to be… except Jim. Spock had promised
an interview to a Starbase 4 News reporter last night to get her off his back during the disembarkation of their passengers. He had to be at their studio at 10:00 and needed a briefing from starbase ops beforehand to make sure he had the most updated information. The doc had to get on his M’Benga investigation. So they both bid their farewells and Jim found himself alone with Nadia again. He stroked her as he checked his messages. Nothing.

He should write to Peter. Just thinking of his orphaned nephew made him feel guilty. He should be stepping up to help raise his brother’s son, not be giddy as a schoolgirl about another five-years on a starship.

Peter still lived on Deneva. He was nearly 16 now. Sam’s research partners, Sarah and Tovin Nelson had generously offered to see to his rearing. Their son, Derek, and Peter were best friends and it was clear to Jim that they didn’t want to be separated. When his nephew had woken up in the Enterprise’s Sickbay, free from the horrible pain he’d endured, Peter was relieved and cheerful. For a moment it was a pleasant reunion; then he asked about his parents. He didn’t fall into his Uncle Jim’s arms after he learned the terrible news. He wanted to go planetside and cry with the Nelsons, not Jim.

Peter had been only 12 when he lost his parents. His letters were getting smarter and sounding more grown-up all the time. In his last letter, he had told his uncle that Derek and he liked the same girl… so they might not be friends anymore by now, Jim should ask. It was hard to talk to a 16 year old. What would his father say to him? Would Sam be angry that I’m not raising him? I’m sorry, Sam, I can’t, Jim thought to himself. He cranked out a letter and sent it. At least the kid would know his uncle was thinking about him.

It was 08:45 and Kirk just realized no nurse had come. He’d gotten used to seeing Virginia at 07:30 every morning. Perhaps T’Nar had a different schedule. Surely if he lay his bed back and tried to get a little nap, someone would come in and wake him up. Spock had woken him up at 04:15, which had been wonderful, but now he was feeling tired. He decided to chance it. Lowering the lights in his room, Jim leaned back and closed his eyes.

He thought of Spock. How the heat of his hand had soaked through his hospital gown, through his skin, and into his chest, into his blood. Spock. That name was camaraderie, loyalty, comfort, and now… love. How could he be so lucky to have Spock’s love? Christine wanted it. Leila wanted it. But he’s giving it to me. Me. The thought still choked him up.

Jim wondered if Spock would come back tonight, or earlier maybe. Do you daydream about me, Spock, or is your mind too disciplined for that? Kirk fell asleep wondering.

An hour later, he didn’t notice the footsteps of a woman creeping up on him.
The Starbase 4 News studio was a busy place today. Mary Purdue had spent the morning interviewing survivors of the Astral Queen attack and was about to welcome Commander Spock to her program. During a break for a commercial message, her producer offered her some advice.

“Vulcans tell even the most exciting stories in a hopelessly boring way, Mary,” he said, handing her a question card, “so ask Mr. Spock these questions and if he gets bogged down talking about calculations or regulations or blah, blah, blah, we’ll cut away to the replay of Capt. Daily’s distress call to liven things back up.”

“Okay. I’ll try to get some good stuff out of him, though,” Mary said from the studio couch on the set. “If you have any ideas during the interview just pass me a card, Ray.”

“You got it, Mary,” the producer said. “They’ve got him prepped. Here he comes. You know not to shake a Vulcan’s hand, right?”

She rolled her eyes, “What do you think, I was born yesterday? Now get outta here, Ray. I’ve got it.”

“Okay, Mary. You’re on live in 30… 29… 28…,” he ducked behind the partition just before Spock walked up.

“Hello, Commander Spock,” Mary said, “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Miss Purdue,” Spock greeted.

“Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Please have a seat. I’m going to ask you some questions about the particulars of the rescue. Just answer naturally, either looking at me or at the camera with the red dot.” She gestured to the camera just as the red dot came on, her cue to begin.

“We have with us today, one of the many bona fide heroes of Starfleet, the man of the hour, just
back from his extraordinary rescue of the Astral Queen: Commander Spock of the starship Enterprise!"

Angling her body towards Spock now, Mary said, “Good morning, Mr. Spock and thank you again for being with us today.”

“You are welcome,” Spock said calmly, outwardly unaffected by the over-the-top introduction.

“You commanded a rescue mission that saved 228 people, with no deaths. Can you tell us how that feels?”

“226,” Spock corrected. “It is gratifying that we arrived in time to save all hands.”

“We have learned that Capt. Jon Daily of the Astral Queen is an old friend of Captain Kirk’s.”

“That is correct,” Spock confirmed.

“How do they know each other?”

“They met in San Francisco when Captain Kirk was a cadet at Starfleet Academy,” Spock answered, once again omitting Kirk’s dating history.

“Is it true that the Astral Queen’s bridge crew was losing life support when the Enterprise arrived?”

“Yes.”

“Did anyone from the Enterprise have to beam over to the Astral Queen during the rescue?”

“The rescue itself was accomplished entirely by transporter,” Spock said. “Afterward, Chief Engineer Scott took a team over to the Astral Queen to survey the damage.”
“That is a lot of people to transport?” How long did it take? Were any of the passengers panicking?” Mary asked.

“It took 38.6 minutes. It was explained to the passengers that they had a full two hours of life support left in the inner compartments of the Astral Queen, so no one panicked,” Spock explained. “It was an orderly process.”

“It sounds like it was. When you returned triumphant, did Captain Kirk compliment your success and thank you for saving his friend, Capt. Daily?” Mary asked.

“He did, yes,” Spock said, remembering the Captain’s words but keeping them to himself.

The newsroom was growing increasingly noisy, like a breaking story was happening. Everyone seemed in a dither. Spock was still giving her his full attention, however, so Mary tried to proceed.

“You got to the Astral Queen so quickly because you called a 7-minute crew muster. This is unusual, I hear.”

“For a base this size, yes,” Spock confirmed. “I calculated that .06% of the crew would not be able to make it to the ship before we left. As it turned out, the absentee factor was only .0471% which allowed for….”

Mary was now seriously distracted and Spock being dull wasn’t helping. What’s going on? She mouthed to her producer while the camera was on a closeup of Spock.

Ray scribbled a question on a card and thrust it at her with wide eyes.

Spock was still answering the muster question, as she quickly read the card to herself.

The camera came back to a wide angle and she calmly posed her next question: “Mr. Spock, do you have any comment concerning this morning’s attempt on Captain Kirk’s life by a Romulan agent posing as a Vulcan nurse?”

Betraying his Vulcan training, Spock’s face reflected alarm. “What?” he asked, posture going to
Mary’s producer was furiously handing her more scribblings…

“Oh, you didn’t know,” she said. “We’re just learning that the authorities found the Romulan agent dead in her apartment. She did get into the clinic and onto Captain Kirk’s hallway, but her assassination plans were thwarted somehow and she ended up back in her apartment, where authorities are saying she took her own life.”

The camera panned over from Mary to Spock to get a closeup reaction, but he was gone.

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“Captain,” Dr. Mullova said, shaking her famous patient a bit to wake him from his mid-morning nap.

“Yes. What?” Kirk answered, startled to alertness.

He knew it. You couldn’t sleep in the daytime around here.

“Captain, there’s been an incident. I’m so glad you’re all right,” the doctor said.

“W-Why wouldn’t I be? What happened?” Jim asked, turning on his room lights and raising his bed to sit up.

“Your new nurse, T’Nar…”

“Yeah, she didn’t show up this morning,” Jim said.

“I’m afraid she did, Captain, but thank goodness she didn’t get in here!”
“What do you mean?” Jim asked, puzzled.

“Lwaxara stopped her. She was going to kill you!”

“What? My nurse?!?” This didn’t make any sense.

“She wasn’t a nurse. She wasn’t even Vulcan; she was a Romulan! Lwaxara knew right away.” Dr. Mullova was still rattled.

“Evgeny and I were standing outside in the hallway about ten minutes ago, talking to Lwaxara, when the new nurse T’Nar walked by, heading for your room. None of us had met her yet, so we started to introduce ourselves. She seemed perfectly pleasant, but Lwaxara immediately circled around behind her and did something to the side of her neck. T’Nar crumbled to the ground. We were all shocked. Lwaxara said, ‘That is a Romulan! She wants to kill Captain Kirk. Call Security!’”

So we did, and as they were taking her away, she woke up and started fighting them. She could really fight, too! Lwaxara was right; she’s no nurse. Anyway, she managed to break away from them and run. We don’t know where she is right now, so there are two armed security men outside your door in case she comes back.”

“Where is Spock?” Kirk needed to know. “If she failed with me, she might try for him, or one of my other officers.”

“I don’t know where Spock and McCoy are right now,” Dr. Mullova shrugged helplessly.

Whipping out his communicator, Jim said, “Kirk to Spock. Come in Spock.” After a moment with no answer, he said, “Kirk to McCoy.”

“McCoy here, Jim,” he answered.

“Where are you?”

“In my lab,” Bones replied.
“Where is Spock?” Jim asked.

“Um, he had that live interview at 10:00, didn’t he? Turn on the Starbase 4 News, I’ll bet you’ll see him. I almost forgot to do that,” McCoy said, flipping on the screen in his lab. “Yep, there he is. You got him too, Jim?”

“Yes,” Kirk said, after fumbling with his monitor’s controls. “Kirk out.”

“Get security to that studio on the double,” he told Dr. Mullova. “The whole base knows where Spock is, if that Romulan is targeting him, he’ll be a sitting duck!”

“Yes, Captain.” She ran out to have the security men in the hallway relay the message.

On the screen, Spock was answering a question about the 7-minute muster. *I could watch Spock get killed right here on live TV,* Jim thought to himself. His hands felt numb as he tried his communicator again. Spock obviously had it turned off for the interview.

Now, the camera was on the reporter. “Mr. Spock, do you have any comment concerning this morning’s attempt on Captain Kirk’s life by a Romulan agent posing as a Vulcan nurse?”

“What?” Spock asked, his body going taut.

“Oh, you didn’t know,” she said. “We’re just learning that the authorities found the Romulan agent dead in her apartment. She did get into the clinic and onto Captain Kirk’s hallway, but her assassination plans were thwarted somehow and she ended up back in her apartment, where authorities are saying she took her own life.”

“Oh, she’s dead. Thank god,” Jim whispered to his empty room.

The camera was showing a vacant seat where Spock had been. *Unless she has an accomplice, Spock is safe and he’ll be here in a few minutes,* Jim reasoned. He took some deep breaths.
“McCoy to Captain Kirk.” His communicator called to him.

“Kirk here.”

“God, Jim. A Romulan tried to kill you after we left?!?”

“Apparently so. I napped through the whole thing. Dr. Mullova woke me about ten minutes ago and told me. She said the Romulan had broken away from security and run off. I needed to locate you and Spock, since you could be targets, too. Listen Bones, I want you to stay on the Enterprise until things get sorted out over here. There could be accomplices… you never know.”

“Is Spock with you yet, Jim?” McCoy wanted to know. He had seen the empty seat on TV, too.

“Not yet. We had security sent to the studio. I hope they don’t try to detain him, because that won’t go well. Don’t leave the ship, okay, Bones?”

“I won’t, Jim. Take care.”

“Will do. Kirk out.”

“Oh, Captain!” Lwaxara called as she came running in. “That Romulan’s mind was as black as death and she was so determined to kill you! Thank goodness for Spock.”

“Spock?” Jim questioned.

“I learned the Vulcan neck pinch from his mind. I wasn’t sure if I could do it, but I could! I did! She dropped like a sack of potatoes,” Lwaxara marveled.

As she said that, she dropped like a sack of potatoes into one of his guest chairs. “I have never felt a mind as malevolent as that. I hope that’s not what all Romulans are like…."

Kirk thought of the ones he’d known, so she could see.
“Ah, good. They aren’t all like her,” Lwaxara said. “Formidable enemies, though, treacherous. Thank goodness for the treaty that created the Neutral Zone. I hope this incident doesn’t tear it all apart.”

“Tell me what you saw in T’Nar’s mind,” Jim asked, then realized, “We really shouldn’t call her that now, I guess.”

“Her name was Raketh,” Lwaxara revealed. “She was a member of the Tal Shiar, the Romulan secret police. She has been a successful assassin for two decades and you were going to be her swan song. The plan was to inject you with a slow-acting poison and be back to the Tal Shiar’s secret base on the 3rd moon of Canopus II before Dr. Mullova even realized Starfleet’s shining star had been poisoned. Then she planned to retire to a villa by the sea on Romulus.”

“Wow,” Kirk whispered, shaking his head slowly.

“It was going to have yellow-green tiles on the patio. She was very specific about the color and texture… hideous taste,” Lwaxara rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out.

Jim tried to smile.

“Captain, I need your advice,” Lwaxara said, serious again. “Obviously, I need to tell everything to investigators that I learned from Raketh’s mind. They need to raid that nest of vipers on Canopus’ moon and hold the Romulans responsible for crossing the Neutral Zone and committing atrocities… Admiral Bogari’s heart attack last year? NOT from too many cannolis… I have a whole list now of crimes the Tal Shiar have committed against the Federation and their other enemies over the past 20 years. Of course I have to give it to investigators, but….”

“You don’t want to be exploited, or become the Tal Shiar’s next target,” Kirk supplied.

“Exactly,” she said. “Are you sure you’re not a telepath, Captain Kirk?”

“I guess I will be soon… but not yet,” Jim smiled. “Spock will be here in a minute and we’ll help you decide what to do. You’re right, investigators might be all over you to help them interrogate suspects or vet witnesses for all kinds of crimes, once they understand the scope of your abilities. It’s probably best to keep the extent of them under wraps, for now at least.”
Jim flashed a charming smile at his Betazoid savior. “Thank you, Lwaxara. Have I told you that yet? You saved my life.” He extended both arms to invite a hug. She sprang from her seat and accepted. His beautiful mind was so full of gratitude. Saving him was the best thing she’d ever done and probably ever would do. She couldn’t help but start crying.

“I’m sorry I let her get so close to you, Captain. It scares me. It never occurred to me you could be in danger here on a starbase,” she said.

“Me neither. You were very brave to subdue her like that. I hope the hallway has a surveillance camera. I want to see that!” Jim enthused to get her laughing again. “Spock has never been able to teach me his signature neck pinch.”

“You’ll be a lot more teachable soon, Captain,” she said, winking. “Wait until my mother hears about this! You know, this could help with our plan, if we play it right….?” Lwaxara said, looking thoughtful and wiping her eyes dry.

The captain could see the wheels turning in her clever head. Just then, Spock came through the door.

“Jim,” was all he said.

“I’m all right, Spock.” Jim assured. “She never got in here. Lwaxara was quite a heroine. She saved the day!”

Spock looked at Lwaxara and from his expression, Kirk could tell she was relating the whole shebang to him telepathically, all of this morning’s events and everything she’d seen in Raketh’s mind. It only lasted a few seconds, then Spock did something Jim had never seen him do before. He rushed up and embraced her, holding her tight for a moment and whispering in earnest, “Thank you.”

Spock was in her debt. Jim would not have been able to defend himself, wouldn’t have even known he needed to defend himself. A nurse giving him a hypospray was not something to fear; Jim likely would not have questioned it or mentioned it to Dr. Mullova. Then, he would have gradually declined, getting sicker and sicker with no one understanding why. If Lwaxara hadn’t been in the hallway, hadn’t been who she is… Spock didn’t want to think about it. They needed to discuss what to do next.
“I am apprised of Lwaxara’s concerns,” Spock announced, so Jim would know. “Shall we discuss possible courses of action?”

“Let’s see what is being reported,” Jim suggested, switching on his screen.

Mary Purdue was still reporting. She had a guest, a coworker and neighbor of T’Nar’s, on with her already, a human male.

“Mr. Gordon, you are a nurse in the orthopedics ward at the medical clinic, correct?” she was asking him.

“That’s right,” the man replied.

“You worked and lived with T’Nar?”

“I’ve lived across the hall from her for two years and worked with her for nearly three,” he explained. “I moved into that apartment complex on her recommendation.”

“You were there when security was in her apartment today, and you saw the body?” Mary asked.

“Yes,” he answered, “It wasn’t T’Nar. I told the security men. That woman was dressed in a nurse’s uniform and had her hair up the way T’Nar wears her hair, but her face was different.”

“Are you aware that the dead woman is confirmed to be a Romulan and she had been in the nerve and tissue regeneration ward this morning…”

“Trying to kill Captain Kirk! Yes, the security men told me they had chased her from there,” he said. “T’Nar was supposed to be Captain Kirk’s nurse, starting today. She told me that a couple of days ago.”

“Why did she want to leave orthopedics?” Mary asked.
“She had been there for three years and was interested in something new. I think that’s all it was,” he said. “The transfer was approved weeks ago.”

“Do you have any thoughts on where T’Nar might be right now?” the reporter asked.

“No.” Mr. Gordon said. “I’m sure she didn’t have anything to do with this, though. She would never be involved with our enemy.”

“Thank you for being with us, Mr. Gordon. We’re going to take a short break and be right back after these messages,” Mary concluded the segment.

Kirk turned the sound down.

“T’Nar is dead,” Leaxara told him. “Raketh vaporized her with an elicit weapon she smuggled through security in several small, unrecognizable parts.”

“Oh,” Jim said.

“She went to T’Nar’s apartment last night, saying she was a new member of the Office of Vulcan Affairs and wanted to introduce herself. T’Nar invited her in,” Lwaxara explained. “Raketh conversed with her for a bit, casually extracting information about the clinic and its routines, then shot her when her back was turned, so if the weapon she’d assembled failed to fire, she could conceal it again before T’Nar turned around. She was vaporized instantly, never knew she was dying. Her katra is lost forever,” Lwaxara said sadly, turning toward Spock.

“Spock, you know Sobren at the Starbase 4 Office of Vulcan Affairs?” Lwaxara asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, I met him at a lecture I attended there,” Spock said. Lwaxara and Spock knew all of this verbal communicating was for the captain’s benefit. They didn’t mind.

“Sobren is my ‘caretaker’ while I’m on this base. Your father set things up that way. He stops by to check on me every few weeks,” Lwaxara said. “Since a Vulcan citizen has been murdered, we should call someone at the Office of Vulcan Affairs, and since this involves me, the logical person to call is Sobren.”
“Sound reasoning. I concur,” Spock said, but deferred to Kirk. “Captain?”

“Yes,” Jim said, “and Commodore Jensen. I will call and ask her to come here with the highest ranking member of Starfleet Investigations on the base. Spock, call Sobren and ask him to come to my room for a meeting regarding Lwaxara and what she knows about the fate of T’Nar. We’ll have some chairs brought in and this can be our little base of operations for a few hours. Lwaxara, we will make sure all involved know that the full extent of your abilities and the knowledge you obtained from Raketh’s mind need to remain hush hush for now. We will explain the diplomatic situation and that you, as the future leader of BetaZed, must be protected, from the press as well as the Tal Shiar. We’ll get everything worked out and make sure the right people know what they need to know. Many people will owe you a debt when this is over, but if we do this right, most won’t know there’s a mind-reading Betazoid to thank. Is that all right with you?”

“Perfectly, Captain,” she said enthusiastically. Kirk was so focused. Getting to witness his leadership abilities first hand was a thrill.

He got on the horn to Commodore Jensen who was more than willing to leave her many duties to her subordinates and come right away. Spock had similar success contacting and convincing Sobren to attend the urgent meeting.

“I’ll get some chairs,” Lwaxara offered. “Can the Mullovs come?”

“Yes,” Kirk said as she headed for the door. “Be careful.”

“Don’t worry, Captain. I’ll know if anyone nearby means harm to any of us. I won’t get caught with my britches down again,” she said as she slipped out.

Jim chuckled at the universal translator. It was the best!

“Spock, how come this translator doesn’t make up any colorful metaphors for Vulcans?”

“Perhaps because, like you, I am speaking Earth Standard.” He quirked his eyebrow, because it would be rude to say “obviously” to his captain.
Jim laughed.

“I love you, Spock,” he said, his eyes warm and sincere.

“I love you, too, Jim.”

It was nice to have a moment with just the two of them in the room. It wouldn’t last long. Jim knew McCoy would probably not appreciate being excluded from this meeting, but Jim felt better with him safely on the Enterprise. Commodore Jensen would likely institute a phase one security protocol following their discussion, if she hadn’t already. Civilians and their belongings would be checked and double checked. The base would be on a kind of lockdown, no vessels in or out, until the security check was complete. It could take 24 hours, then Bones could come visit again. Recalling Enterprise personnel to the ship would be a step too far, probably, although he considered it.

“Spock, what was it you told me that elderly passenger said to you? ‘Assassins always have back up plans?’” Jim asked.

“Prophetic?” Spock wondered.

“Let’s hope NOT,” Jim said.
Lwaxara returned to Jim’s room with the Mullovs in tow. She and Elaina each had a chair. Evgeny had four. They began arranging them after greeting Kirk and Spock.

“I’ll just sit here,” Jim joked from his bed.

“Oh, Captain, I’m so sorry for our clinic’s poor security,” Dr. Mullova lamented. “We just never thought anything like this could happen on a starbase!”

“Healing patients is your concern, Doctor. Stopping threats like this is security’s job,” Kirk said. “One got through. It happens.”

“You don’t think she had accomplices, do you, Captain?” Dr. Mullov asked, picking up Nadia off the bed and stroking her. He evidently was in need of some soothing at the moment.

“We don’t know,” Kirk said, “We’ll discuss that at this meeting. We’ve invited Commodore Jensen, Sobren of the Office of Vulcan Affairs, and a ranking member of Starfleet Investigations. Lwaxara means to impart to them the pertinent information she gleaned from her contact with the Romulan’s mind. It involves much more than just this particular crime.”

“I’m afraid Nurse T’Nar is dead,” Lwaxara told the Mullovs. “The Romulan killed her last night to take her place.”

“Oh, no,” Dr. Mullova said, “How horrible.”

Just then, the door opened to reveal an aging Vulcan in dark robes, the ops commander, and an Andorian lieutenant commander.

“Captain Kirk,” Commodore Jensen greeted, “I am so glad to see you unharmed.”
“Thank you, Commodore,” Jim replied. “It is thanks to this young lady right here.” He gestured to Lwaxara who stood to meet the Commodore. “May I present my fellow patient, Lwaxara Dirn of BetaZed.” They had never met before, though Jensen knew of her presence on the base.


“Greetings, Miss Dirn,” Sobren said.

“Base security falls under my purview, so please accept my apologies for this appalling lapse,” Jensen said humbly, “and let me introduce Lt. Commander Sharba of Starfleet Investigations, who arrived yesterday in anticipation of inspecting the Astral Queen when she arrives. I am diverting him, at least for the time being, to this matter.”

“Thank you, Commodore,” Spock said.

“Commander Sharba, this is my first officer, Commander Spock,” Kirk said, “and these are my… and Lwaxara’s… doctors, the Mullovs. Husband and wife,” he added for clarity.

Spock introduced Sobren and explained his connection to Lwaxara.

When the whole group was introduced and seated, Kirk began the meeting. His bed made him higher than everyone else in the small room and his personality naturally drew all eyes to him. As an opening, he began, “Miss Dirn, and apparently all Betazoids, are much more extraordinary than is generally known, and we need to keep it that way….”

The meeting stretched on and on. Lwaxara had so much information to impart and having to do it verbally was time-consuming. It was finally decided that Lwaxara would transmit all of her information about the Tal Shiar and everything else telepathically to Sobren. That way, future questions by investigators could be directed to him in the Office of Vulcan Affairs, so Lwaxara could keep her low-profile. A Vulcan citizen had been murdered, so frequent visits by investigators to Sobren’s office should not raise anyone’s eyebrows.

Lwaxara had never bothered to communicate with Sobren the way she did with Spock because she didn’t particularly like him, so he was visibly shocked by the rapidity and completeness of her transmission. He had not realized her telepathy was vastly superior to his, and looked at her with a new respect.
Before the meeting concluded, Commodore Jensen and Commander Sharba promised a phase one security protocol. “And I’ll keep two security guards on your door, Captain, two on Lwaxara’s and two at the entrance to the clinic. After the security check is complete, in about 24 hours, we’ll either have accomplices in custody or be certain that there are none. Security sweeps will include all docked ships. Please advise your security chief to expect us.”

“Of course, Commander,” Spock said. “I should like to stay with the captain tonight, if another bed can be brought in, doctors,” Spock announced to the Mullovs, “if that is all right with you, Captain.”

“Of course, Mr. Spock,” Dr. Mullova replied.

The captain nodded.

“Most commendable,” Commander Sharba remarked. “Mr. Spock is a devoted first officer.”

“Yes, I’m very lucky,” Kirk said, shooting a smile at Spock.

“I also request that we be issued phasers for a final line of defense and that the captain’s meals be inspected,” Spock added.

“That will be arranged,” Sharba promised.

Kirk inquired, “Will my people be asked to remain on the Enterprise until the phase one security protocol is complete?”

“Yes, Captain. Mr. Spock can do the honors if he doesn’t mind,” Sharba said.

“Certainly,” Spock agreed.

“Well, this has been a most productive and illuminating meeting,” the commodore said, standing up to leave. “Thank you for calling it, Captain, and thank you, Miss Dirn, for sharing your wealth of information.”
“I hope this is the first of many cooperative efforts for the Federation and BetaZed,” Lwaxara said diplomatically.

“If all Betazoids are like you, young lady, I think admission talks should begin immediately,” the commodore said. “We need you on our side!”

Lwaxara shot a sly glance at Captain Kirk, then at Spock. Now a commodore thought that BetaZed should join the Federation. She hoped Jensen would share her enthusiasm with Admiral Upham, commander of this base.

There was much shuffling as the meeting broke up. Kirk invited everyone to take a quick look at his ship out the window and he complimented the Mullovs’ thoughtfulness for giving him this room.

Commander Sharba, lingered a bit after Jensen and Sobren had taken their leave. The Andorian investigator advised Kirk and Spock to close the drapes over the window for the next 24 hours and he asked the Mullovs if Kirk would be needing to leave his room for any treatments or therapies today or tomorrow. They told him no.

“I am told you were injured on a mission to save the crew of an Andorian research vessel, Captain Kirk,” Sharba said.

“Yes,” Kirk responded. “We saved all but one, their engineer. A ship from Andoria met us here to take them home.”

“You will fully recover, Captain?” Sharba asked, concerned.

“That’s what they tell me,” Kirk said good-naturedly, “after another week.”

“Well, that is good news. I’m sorry you had your recovery disturbed by this alarming incident,” the investigator said.

“Thank you,” the captain replied.
Turning to Lwaxara, Sharba asked, “If I turn up anyone questionable, may I bring them to you for a quick vetting?”

Lwaxara hesitated. This was just the kind of thing she didn’t want to get started… but if it were for Captain Kirk’s safety…. “Okay,” she agreed. She would see if Commander Sharba were the kind to abuse the privilege or not.

“I will get to work now,” Sharba said, heading for the door. He had a purposeful bearing about him that inspired confidence.

The Mullovs needed to return to their work, too. Evgeny, still holding Nadia, said she needed food and he would bring her back later. Then, the doctors departed, leaving only Kirk, Spock, and Lwaxara in the room.

Spock set up a Recall Alert Signal to get all hands back on the Enterprise within 30 minutes, with a directive to remain there until the phase one security investigation was over. Then, he called Scotty and put him in temporary command, since he would be staying on the base for 24 hours with the captain.

Jim called Bones, who was uncovering all kinds of unsavory things about M’Benga’s conduct with women. He wanted to tell Kirk all about it, but Jim told him to please save it for tomorrow. He had too many other things on his mind right now. He really was feeling tired, he realized. Jim told McCoy that Spock had just put Scotty in command for the next 24 hours and issued a Recall Alert Signal.

“Good God! Another one?” McCoy complained.

“Everyone’s confined to the ship for 24 hours, while they do an intense security sweep of the base,” Jim explained. “Spock’s staying here to be my own personal security guard… and I have two more right outside my door, so don’t worry.”

“What kind of starbase lets a damned Romulan onboard?!” McCoy groused. “Hope they don’t find any more. I don’t wanna hear another surprise on the Starbase 4 News. Keep in touch, okay Jim?”

“Will do, Bones. Call if you need me. Kirk out.”
Turning his attention back to Lwaxara, Jim said, “Well, did everything go the way you wanted at the meeting?”

“Yes, Captain. Are you and Spock satisfied with things, too?” she asked needlessly. She already knew.

“I thought it went well,” Jim said, and Spock nodded in agreement.

She could feel that they were both glad to have this opportunity to spend the night together, but she could also feel Spock’s deep concern for Jim’s safety. The thought of Kirk lying here helpless as a Romulan assassin got within 30 feet of him this morning was plaguing Spock. She remembered the feel of his mind as he had hugged her earlier. Never in her life had she felt gratitude so profound directed at her. She was proud that she had saved the captain. What a day! If she were a person who meditated, she would definitely need to meditate about this. Instead, she excused herself to go write a letter to her mother.

***

First of all, Mother, let me say that I am just fine and very likely to stay that way, but there was a murder on the starbase last night and almost another one this morning… Captain Kirk!

An assassin from the Romulan secret police sneaked onto the base. She killed a Vulcan nurse in the nurse’s apartment last night and impersonated her this morning to come kill Captain Kirk. (I know you remember from Sarek’s mind that Vulcans and Romulans look very similar.)

She came into the clinic with a hypospray of poison and was headed to the Captain’s room. He was told yesterday by Virginia, the nurse he’s had since he’s been here, that he’d have a new nurse this morning, a Vulcan named T’Nar. So he wouldn’t have even questioned a nurse with pointed ears coming in and giving him a hypospray. She fooled the Mullovs that she was really a nurse. Not me, though, of course! I knew right away, but I didn’t show it.

You’re going to love this part! I casually circled around behind her in the hallway, looking very meek and harmless, while she was talking to the doctors, and then I reached up and gave her a Vulcan neck pinch! She dropped in a heap, 100% unconscious! It was amazing! I learned it in Spock’s mind and was pretty sure it would work, but not totally sure… and my dexterity still isn’t perfect…. Anyway, it did! I saved Captain Kirk! This is by far the best thing I’ve ever done in my whole life!
Captain Kirk was asleep in his room and the assassin was only a few feet from his door. He never knew anything had happened until after, when Dr. Mullova went in and woke him up. He told me ‘thank you’ and he was so sweet. He is always such a gentleman. Spock wasn’t there when it happened. He was in the news studio being interviewed about the Astral Queen rescue, but he came as soon as he heard. Oh, mother, he hugged me so tight. You wouldn’t even believe he’s a Vulcan. He thanked me for saving the captain, and the depth of his gratitude choked me up. He loves Captain Kirk so much.

I was concerned that if everyone knew I’d saved such a famous hero as Captain Kirk, reporters would want to interview me and investigators might try to exploit my telepathic abilities, so the captain called a small meeting with all of the important people and they are going to keep things quiet… and make sure I am safe in case the Romulan secret police want to kill ME now. Don’t worry. I told the investigators where their hidden base is and they’re going to go get them.

The assassin is dead. I forgot to tell you that part. After I neck-pinched her, the Mullovs called security and as they were taking her away, she woke up, had this big fight with them, and dashed off. She ran to the nurse’s apartment and killed herself there. A neighbor confirmed that she wasn’t the Vulcan nurse he knew.

I told the head investigator everything I had seen in her mind. The Romulan secret police… they’re called the Tal Shiar… have been violating the treaty for years, coming across the Neutral Zone and killing important Federation people to make it look like they died of natural causes. The assassin’s name was Raketh. She’d been working for 20 years and had killed all kinds of people. Their base is in the Canopus system, on the Federation side of the Neutral Zone. I told the investigator all about it.

We could help the Federation sooo much, Mother! And they really deserve it. They are so good. Terrans believe in all the same things that we do. It’s not their fault that they’re trapped inside their own minds. Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy say there ought to be a Betazoid on every starship, and their mighty starships would certainly keep BetaZed safe. I hope you’re thinking about what I proposed, Mother. Remember what I said about insisting on Captain Kirk’s crew and the Enterprise.

Captain Kirk could help us set up trade with that newly colonized planet they’re calling New Fabrine. Their Queen is in love with Dr. McCoy, and Captain Kirk’s clever mind is already thinking how he could send Dr. McCoy to help get a good trade agreement for us with the Fabrini.

You said in your last letter that seven more Betazoids have been kidnapped. It’s going to get worse and worse once more races with bad intentions realize our security can be breeched. It makes so much sense to invite the Enterprise there to negotiate and provide protection. You’re not under any
obligation to join the Federation. You could just string talks out for five years if you wanted and have the protection of a starship all the while. They would never know that was what you were doing. That would be guileful but your prerogative if you wanted. I’m pretty sure, though, that you will love the Enterprise officers and want to make a deal.

How is the wedding planning going for Naerin? I am very sorry to be missing it. I have a strong feeling that it is fortuitous for BetaZed that I am here right now, though. I hope that is true.

Oh! Wait until you hear this! A spot of perfect, non-scarred skin appeared on my chest yesterday! It is so smooth and just like my old skin. I’m so excited that in a few more months I may look like I used to. I was thinking that I would like the dashing Captain Kirk to fall for me, but he loves Spock and vice versa. They are just starting to reveal their feelings to each other and I wouldn’t want to get between that. It is perfectly delicious enough to be their friend!

Going to try to send this now. I’m not too sure how a Phase One security protocol works, but communications may be blacked out… or monitored. Hmm. Maybe I’d better ask Captain Kirk before I send this. Be right back…

Yeah, darn. He says send it tomorrow after the Phase One security thing is over, if I want to ensure privacy. Oh, well.

Lwaxara wanted to brag to somebody about what she had done, but who? On BetaZed everyone around her would know instantly and be giving her huge accolades. Here, there was a need for discretion. Hadn’t they just had a meeting about keeping things hush hush? She decided to be content and lay low in her room. Her contribution to this very unusual day was over.

Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, she stopped what she was reading or viewing on her screen periodically and scanned the minds nearby. With the exception of the security men, everyone was familiar. It was hard not to linger on Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock down the hall, but she gave them their privacy.
“Bridge to Captain Kirk,” Scotty’s voice broke into the quiet of the captain’s room.

“All is well there, Sir?” the chief engineer asked.

“Yes, Scotty. Mr. Spock and I are just having dinner,” Kirk said.

“Oh, I won’t be keepin’ ya then, Sir. It’s just that they’ve been sayin’ some worrisome things on the base news channel about that Romulan assassin and how close she came to killin’ ya. Uhura’s been monitorin’ and the bridge crew all wanted me to make sure ya were secure and doin’ all right.”

“Thank you, Scotty. You may tell them I’m just fine. I’ve got guards and Mr. Spock is looking out for me. We’re armed. Is everything good on the ship?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Base security is goin’ through her with a fine tooth comb, though. We’re cooperatin’ but I’ll be glad when it’s over,” Scotty commented.

“Us, too,” Jim said, looking over at Spock, who was sitting up in the bed that had been brought in for him, eating his dinner. Spock’s bed had a wrap-around table and viewscreen, like Jim’s and they had both been watching the news off and on all evening.

“Okay, we were just wantin’ to call before it got too late, Sir, and check on ya,” Scotty said on behalf of the bridge crew.

“Let everybody know I’m fine,” Kirk said. “I’d ask you to blink your lights at me, but security told me to keep my drapes drawn… so I wouldn’t see it.”
“Oh, that’s a shame, Captain,” Scotty commiserated, knowing how much Kirk liked seeing the Enterprise out his window.

“Can’t be helped,” Jim shrugged. “As far as Mr. Spock and I know, things should be back to normal by tomorrow afternoon and the crew will be able to resume their shore leave rotations then. Wait for base security’s ‘all clear.’”

“Will do, Sir. Enjoy your dinner and sleep well.”

“Good night, Scotty. Kirk out.”

Jim popped the last forkful of dinner into his mouth. It had gotten a bit cold, but it was nice to talk to Scotty.

He saw that Spock was done, too, and called for tray pickup. Once the trays were gone, there would be no more disturbances, hopefully. Jim was feeling tired. With his body putting so much energy into healing, he got fatigued easily, even though he was lying in bed all day. He tried not to show it, but Spock could see.

It was starting to wear on him that he couldn’t get out of bed, couldn’t walk. His leg felt like a dead log with ants walking all over it. It was getting hard to remember what it was like to be healthy and whole. What if, heaven forbid, the numbness persisted and he wasn’t good as new in another five days as expected? He tried not to think about it. He reminded himself how productive he had been today, conducting a meeting and accomplishing exactly what needed to be accomplished… more than most men do from their med clinic rooms.

Jim wanted to escape into a mind meld with Spock, escape his body that was such a burden right now, escape into Spock’s love.

He wished he didn’t feel so weary. Jim wasn’t sure what Spock had in mind for the evening. He had cunningly arranged for them to be together all night. Jim was impressed by how Spock had made this spare-bed thing happen under the guise of security. Spock really was brilliant. Jim hoped he intended to push their beds together. Lying next to Spock. What would that be like? *It would certainly be better if I could move my leg... and other parts*, Jim thought. Then he decided it might be for the best. He wanted to go really slowly with the physical stuff with Spock. It was far outside Spock’s comfort zone, that was clear. Spock had said he was ‘easily overstimulated.’ Jim wondered what that meant exactly.
The trays were picked up while Spock was preparing for bed in Jim’s bathroom. *Well, at least one of us can make use of that room,* Jim thought, pulling out his hygiene gizmos. He had to admit the 8-second teeth cleaning was kind of nice. He finished with his skin and hair just as Dr. Mullov knocked.

“Captain Kirk, it’s Dr. Mullov,” he called from beyond the door.”

“Come in,” Kirk said.

“I have another tribble for you for tonight if you’d like,” Dr. Mullov said, approaching Kirk’s bed. “Nadia is busy. This one is Svetlana.” He laid the cream-colored puffball with orange patches on the captain’s chest.

Spock came out of Jim’s bathroom just then… thankfully in a long white, velour robe and not his underwear.

“Look, Spock, a new tribble,” Jim said.

Spock nodded a greeting at Dr. Mullov and came to look. Kirk noticed the doctor’s eyes roaming over Spock while the Vulcans attention was on the tribble.

“Lovely markings,” Spock commented.

“Svetlana is our silkiest one,” Dr. Mullov proclaimed proudly, “and I just gave her a brushing. I hope she soothes you after such a stressful day, Captain.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I’m sure she will,” Jim said.

He and Spock both began stroking her and she trilled pleasantly.

Dr. Mullov smiled. He loved all of his therapy tribbles.

“The bathroom should be fully stocked. Is there anything else we can get for you, Mr. Spock?” Dr.
Mullov asked cordially.

“No, thank you, Doctor,” Spock replied. “I have everything I need.”

Turning back to Kirk, Dr. Mullov asked, “How are you feeling, Captain? Sometimes by this stage, patients complain of stiffness and backaches from being sedentary for so long. Are you feeling that way?”

“Yes,” Jim admitted.

“Often a massage can help. Just lying on your stomach for awhile and letting our massage therapist work out some of the kinks can be a great relief,” Dr. Mullov recommended. “She wasn’t working today, but I can schedule you for tomorrow. Sound good?”

“Sure. That sounds great,” Jim said sincerely. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“Goodnight, Captain… Mr. Spock,” the doctor said as he opened the door to depart. “Rest well.”

“Ugh, I wish I could be on my stomach right now. It would feel so good,” Jim said to Spock when Dr. Mullov was gone.

“I can help you turn over, Jim,” Spock offered promptly.

“Would you? Thanks,” Jim said. “I might actually have a chance to sleep if I’m in a new position.”

“I did not know you were so uncomfortable,” Spock said, moving Svetlana to his bed temporarily.

“I haven’t been, until today,” Jim explained.

Spock locked the door, then came close to the bed to plan the best way to help the captain.
He had the mechanics of it figured out in short order, but touching Jim always made him pause.

Jim lowered his bed flat, and Spock had him scoot over to the right edge, raise his right knee, and twist his upper body to the left. Then, with some well-placed pressure on his right hip and shoulder, Spock gently rolled him over.

“Is that better?” Spock asked.

“Infinitely! Thank you,” Kirk said. What a relief it was. It felt like his whole skeleton was realigning. He hugged the pillow up under his left cheek and relished the feeling of being on his stomach like he’d never relished it before. Then, he felt Spock unlace the back of his hospital gown, push it aside, and lay his warm hands on the bare skin of his back. Jim couldn’t suppress a small moan at the sensory pleasure of it. Was Spock going to rub his back? He hoped so.

Jim hadn’t had a shower in days and was suddenly self-conscious about how oily the skin he couldn’t reach with his sonic device must be. Spock didn’t seem to mind, though. He was utilizing that oil to slide his thumbs along both sides of Jim’s spine, pressing firmly and gliding slowly up and down the length of his torso. The tense muscles of Jim’s lower back fought back at first, then yielded to the warmth and pressure of Spock’s hands. Jim felt his knots release one by one. Oh, how good it felt.

They weren’t in telepathic contact exactly, but Spock was aware of how much Jim was enjoying his ministrations. The captain had been burdened with a lot of stress over the past few days, when all he should have had to think about was his recovery. Spock realized some of it was his fault. Jim was so upset when Lwaxara told him Spock intended to go to Gol and undergo the Kolinahr. Jim had begged him to reveal why, to tell him what he needed. Spock thought perhaps he should have promised not to go to Gol, but kept the desire for the t’hy’la bond to himself until Jim was fully recovered. The mind melds they had done were wonderful, but the deep intimacy and emotions they had stirred created additional strains on Jim that probably weren’t helping his nerves recover. Spock thought of the almost withdrawal-like symptoms Jim suffered following their long melds. Perhaps if they joined minds tonight, it should be a short meld filled with happy, pleasant things that wouldn’t cause emotional strain. Then, Jim could get some much needed sleep. Spock could feel how tired his friend was.

Touching Jim like this was such a pleasure. Easing his t’hy’la’s stress eased Spock’s too. Though no one knew it, the Astral Queen rescue mission had taken a toll on Spock. Leaving his captain behind and rushing off suddenly like that to command a mission with a lot of unknowns, had strained him. He did his duty, performed adequately, and thankfully the law of averages had operated in his favor, culminating in a successful mission with no lives lost. In the parlance of his human colleagues, he had ‘gotten lucky.’ Things easily could have gone a different direction. Spock didn’t like to be in command, didn’t seek it out. He was best suited to being Jim’s second, his advisor and protector.
“I can hear your thoughts, Spock,” Jim realized suddenly. “Is it because you’re touching me?”

“Yes,” Spock said.

“You were thinking about the Astral Queen mission and how you don’t like command,” Jim said.

“I was,” Spock confirmed.

“I didn’t like watching you go off without me, that’s for sure, but there’s no one I’d rather trust my ship to than you, Spock… and it wasn’t luck, the mission’s success. It was you,” Jim said.

Spock kept kneading and working Jim’s muscles and didn’t respond. Jim could hear his doubts.

“Spock, do you remember that paper-pusher captain I told you we had on the Farragut for six months after the death of Captain Garrovick?” Jim asked.

“Yes,” Spock recalled.

“He made a huge fumble once that cost lives. A priority one distress call came in from an Altairian freighter that had hit some space junk. We were at Space Station K-6 and he called a 30-minute muster, even though the farthest crewman was only maybe 6-8 minutes away. Then, once we were all onboard, he did a roll call! That took maybe 10-12 additional minutes. The navigator on bridge duty told me later that the captain had only proceeded at warp 5, for reasons unknown. Anyway, we got there too late. Everyone on the freighter had suffocated. Our CMO said it was recent, possibly 20-30 minutes before we got there,” Jim lamented. “Minutes count, Spock. When they were lauding you on the Starbase 4 News for your speedy muster and quick departure, I was so proud of you. I thought about that Altairian freighter and those 22 men waiting for help that came too late. I’m so glad you’re the kind of officer you are, Spock. You’re a huge asset to me. I’m honored that you prefer to stay with me rather than take a well-earned command of your own.”

Jim’s praise could move Spock like no one else’s. For a moment, his hands stopped their massage and gripped Jim’s shoulders. He bent down and laid his head between Jim’s shoulder blades. Jim could feel the outline of his ear against his spine and Spock’s warm breath on his right scapula. Jim knew Spock could hear his heart, and it sped up at the thought.
I love you, Spock thought, and Jim heard him.

I love you, too, Spock, Jim replied telepathically.

The need for a traditional mind meld is over between us now, I believe, Spock said. Any type of intimate skin-to-skin touching and our minds can connect. I no longer need to use the pressure points on your face.

Is that a good sign that we can bond soon? Jim asked.

I believe so, Spock said.

Spock raised up and resumed the back massage. You are enjoying this. Shall I continue or are you getting tired?

Yes to both, Jim replied contentedly.

Spock smiled as Jim groaned his approval.

Oh, I could fall asleep if it weren’t so bright in here, Jim thought.

Spock switched off the light and Jim sighed. The magenta light from the glass globe pulsed and flickered around the room in the most soothing way. Over on Spock’s bed, Svetlana squeaked at the change in illumination. Jim didn’t even know tribbles had eyes.

They can sense light and dark, Spock said, in answer to his thought.

I don’t even know where they come from, do you? Jim asked.

The innermost moon of Acamar III, Spock answered.
Jim smiled.

*Is there anything you don’t know, Mr. Spock?* he asked.

*Millions and millions of things, Captain,* Spock said almost apologetically, as though it were a personal failing.

Jim chuckled softly. Spock was a wonder, good at everything he tried, yet so humble. Like this massage. *Have you ever given a massage before, Spock? You’re amazing.*

*No,* Spock answered, *but I have studied human anatomy. I am pleased you are enjoying it, Jim. When you have had enough, I thought we might push our beds together and lie beside each other tonight to sleep, if that sounds appealing to you,* Spock proposed.

*Yes, Spock,* Jim said. *It… does.*

After a few more minutes of kneading and probing, Spock could feel no more areas of tense muscle in Jim’s back. The feedback he was receiving through the link told him Jim was languid and relaxed.

*Jim, while I position our beds, let’s do an experiment to see if our minds remain linked when we are not physically touching,* Spock suggested.

*Okay,* Jim agreed.

Spock walked over to his bed and released the wheel locks. He lowered the rails and began pushing it into place.

*Can you hear me, Jim?* Spock asked telepathically.

Kirk just looked at him, questioning. Jim couldn’t hear him. Perhaps Jim was trying to communicate with *him,* too, but the loss of physical contact had broken the link. There was just silence.
“Looks like we need to be in physical contact,” Jim said aloud. “I can’t hear you.”

“I cannot hear you either,” Spock stated, as he worked with the beds’ locking mechanisms, making sure they wouldn’t roll apart in the night.

“Are you going to be warm enough in just that robe, Spock?” Jim knew the fabric of Spock’s uniform had a thermal weave that kept him from feeling chilly on the Enterprise. His quarters were usually several degrees above the temperature of the rest of the ship. Since patients here wore thin hospital gowns mostly, the temperature was kept on the warm side, but Kirk was still concerned that Spock might not be comfortable.

“This robe is quite warm and I found another ‘almost comforter,’ as you call your bed covering, in the closet,” Spock said, producing it and laying it out on his bed. He moved Svetlana back over to Jim’s bed, saying, “Your therapy tribble, Jim.”

Just hearing Spock say ‘therapy tribble’ produced a little chuckle from Jim, who rolled his eyes and said, “She can’t do for me what you can, Spock. I feel so good after that back rub. Thank you.”

Spock smiled. “It was a pleasure for me, as well. Would you like to remain as you are to sleep, or turn back over onto your back?”

“I’m fine like this, I think,” Jim said. “I often fall asleep on my stomach… usually wake up on my back, though.”

“Well, if you wake up uncomfortable in the night, rouse me and I will help you turn over,” Spock offered.

“Thanks.”

“Do you need anything before I lie down,” Spock asked as he pulled the portable sonic shower device from Jim’s table drawer. “A drink of water, perhaps?”

“No, I’m fine,” Jim said, realizing Spock meant to ‘wash’ his back. He must have felt me thinking it was oily and needed a cleaning. Jim smiled.
Spock ran the sonics over Kirk’s back quickly and efficiently, then tied the laces of his gown and pulled the sheet and the almost-comforter from his hips up to his shoulders.

“Good?” Spock asked.

“Yes. Thanks,” Jim said, patting Spock’s side of the bed. He was eager for them to be telepathically linked again.

Spock slid into bed beside Kirk and pulled up his double covers. They were face to face in the dim, flickering light. Jim felt so relaxed and safe. He wondered if Spock did, too, and reached for his hand.

After several seconds, the connection was there. He laced his fingers with Spock’s and they were one. He smiled at the warmth of Spock’s hand and mind, and at the close proximity of his friend’s body. *I wish I were well right now,* Jim thought.

*What would you do if you were well, Jim?* Spock asked.

A fierce blush stole over Jim’s cheeks. Spock could discern it even in the low light. If he couldn’t see it on his face, he could feel it in his mind. Jim was embarrassed, nervous about letting Spock see what he was thinking. He was trying to shield it. It must be sexual, then, Spock deduced.

*What would you do if you were well?* Spock asked again. *Show me.*

Jim shook his head subtly. *I… I can’t right now, Spock.*

*Show me with your mind, Jim.*

*Oh.* Jim really didn’t think it was a good idea, but the images were already flowing. His physical desire for Spock pouring into their link. He untied Spock’s robe and slid it back, exposing his left shoulder and hip. He ran his right hand over Spock’s bare skin, slowly. His skin was warm and dry and he wanted to kiss every inch of it. In his mind, Jim could move. He was well again. He rose up and slid closer to Spock. Lying on his left side, with Spock facing him, just inches apart, Jim wrapped his hand around Spock’s back and gently pressed their chests together. *Oh!* Both groaned
at the sensation. Jim kept Spock clutched tightly to him, as he began kissing his neck, his collarbone, his shoulder. Jim’s hand left Spock’s back to move lower. He explored the sharp angle of Spock’s hip, so different from a woman’s, so exciting. He curved his hand around Spock’s iliac crest and pulled his pelvis toward his. It was like electricity when they touched through their underwear. Jim instantly started pressing in harder, rubbing up against Spock. Ah! Jim moaned, desperate. He and Spock were both hard.

Spock pulled back a bit and Jim pushed his underwear down. His own, too… just far enough that he could gather both of their erections in his right hand. Squeezing them together, Jim held them still, barely able to withstand the pleasure. Spock felt exactly as Jim imagined he would, hot and velvety, throbbing against him until he couldn’t tell his own pulse from Spock’s. Oh, Spock! He cried. Oh, god! Spock! Without Jim even having to pump once, they were both coming, pulsing together, over and over in Jim’s hand. Ah! Ahhh!

Jim’s breathing gradually returned to normal. He became aware that his head was not tucked beneath Spock’s chin like he thought it was. He was, in fact, still lying on his stomach on his own half of the joined bed. He wasn’t sweaty… or sticky. He was still holding hands with Spock.

Thank you for showing me, Spock said through the link.

Something about the way he said it, made it sound like he’d been more of a spectator than a participant, Jim thought.

I am afraid that is correct, Jim. Spock admitted. The sensations became too intense for me, and I had to partially shield and just… watch. I wanted to experience it with you. I tried, but…

You were there, though, Jim said, confused.

I was, yes… but I wasn’t the person you were touching. He was a projection of your own thoughts, Spock tried to explain.

I thought it was both of us, but it was just me? Jim asked, clearly disappointed.

I should have told you, but there was no appropriate moment, and I… wanted to see what your desires are, Spock confessed.
Hmm, Jim said, feeling weird about things. He knew this wasn’t a good idea, and now to learn that they hadn’t experienced all of that together…. Jim felt embarrassed. Spock had basically just watched him having a sexual fantasy.

Jim, I am sorry. Some things I cannot… certain sensations are too… I am not able to…

Spock, how can you be tongue-tied when you’re not even using your tongue? Jim joked with a bit of impatience. Just tell me.

Then, he looked into Spock’s eyes for the first time since…. He saw sadness and uncertainty there. He remembered what Spock had said before, that they may not be compatible as lovers, that they were different, that he was easily overstimulated. They had deferred that discussion until later. Jim supposed this was ‘later.’ He’d intended to take things slow sexually with Spock. He thought he would have to, since his injury made him impotent, but then Spock offered this telepathic opportunity…and like a midshipman, home from his first deep space cruise, Jim had jumped at it. Now, he felt weird. Spock felt weird. Jim wished he had just fallen asleep after that magnificent back rub.

Jim knew Spock could hear all of his thoughts on the matter, so he decided to just be still and wait.

I will disappoint you as a lover, Jim, Spock said. I do not get erections. The phallic stimulation necessary to create one is unpleasant for me… even in a telepathic encounter, apparently. I did not foresee that. I am sorry I could not participate. I wanted to… but too much stimulation in that area is almost like pain for me.

I’m glad we’re talking about this, Jim said. I want to understand.

I thought since your preference was for sex with females, you might not… want to touch me that way, but I see that you do.

Yes, I do, Jim said, but not if it hurts you!

I could feel how much pleasure you derived from orgasming with me, Spock said, the closeness you felt. That is how I feel when you are in my mind.

Jim didn’t know what to say to that.
You are a sexual person, Jim. I am not, Spock said. I am making many exceptions for you and enjoying our physical closeness very much, but some things about my nature, I cannot change. Perhaps in small increments, over time....

You don’t need to change for me, Spock. You are perfect as you are, Jim said. Then, to lighten the mood, he added, Maybe now and then, I can get off with fantasy-Spock and you can watch. How does that sound?

Spock laughed at his t’hy’la’s very human crudeness. That is an inventive solution.

Only problems need solutions. This isn’t a problem, Spock. Jim squeezed his friend’s hand and smiled. You enjoyed watching. Admit it, he joked.

Yes, I did, Spock said earnestly. You are beautiful and seeing you like that, watching your body merge with mine.... It was enthralling. I was transfixed.

Jim’s face softened. He shouldn’t have tried to joke about something like this. He rubbed his thumb gently over the warm hand he held in his.

Is it normal for Vulcans to have hypersensitivity in their...? Jim asked.

Unknown, Spock replied, but I do not think so. I am a hybrid. My reactions to stimuli are often quite different from the Vulcan norms... and the human norms... much to Dr. McCoy’s dismay.

Does McCoy know? Jim wondered.

No, Spock predictably replied.

What were you going to do on your and T’Pring’s wedding night? Jim asked.

‘Power through,’ as Terrans say, Spock confided. I suppose I was expecting the strong drive of pon farr to override any discomfort.
Would it have? Jim wondered.

*Unknown*, Spock said.

*What kind of touching DO you like, Spock? That is what I ought to be asking,* Jim realized.

*I like touching hands, like we are now,* Spock said. *Stroking two fingers over your partner’s hand is an intimate gesture on Vulcan, and apparently on Romulus.*

*Why do you say that?* Jim asked.

Spock’s memory of being with the Romulan commander came into focus for Jim.

*Oh,* Kirk said, with a bit of a jealous smirk.

*That was in the line of duty,* Spock reminded him with a raised eyebrow.

*Of course,* Jim said, but still had the smirk.

*I like YOUR hands better, Jim,* Spock said honestly. *Everything about you I like better than anyone I have ever known.* His left hand was still entwined with Kirk’s, but with his right, he reached out and touched Jim’s hair. He leaned in and softly kissed his lips, before pulling back to look him in the eyes again. *No one has ever moved me like you do.*

Spock’s face, that Jim once found impassive and unreadable, was so familiar to him after 4½ years of friendship. It was rich with nuanced expressions and spoke a language that he now understood fluently. Six inches from his friend’s beloved face, Jim’s eyes were dancing over the angles and planes, his eyes, his lips. He didn’t have to say that he wanted Spock to kiss him again.

A slanted eyebrow climbed subtly toward Spock’s dark hairline and his Vulcan lips turned up at the corners as he pressed them gently against Jim’s again and ran his long fingers through Jim’s soft hair.
Ah, Jim sighed, in the meld and audibly.

You should sleep, Jim, Spock said. You are exhausted.

I know, but I hate to waste this, Jim replied. We’ll have no excuse to do this tomorrow night.

No, Spock said.

Will this just be a special occasion, being able to sleep together like this? How did you picture it working back on the Enterprise? Jim thought he would ask.

Spock looked like he was choosing his words carefully. I think the t’hy’la bond will provide a mental intimacy that will make physical proximity at night unnecessary.

It will feel like THIS? As good as this? Jim asked, a hint of skepticism creeping into his thoughts.

The level of comfort and support we are feeling from each other right now, should be comparable, Spock assured.

Jim thought of all the lonely nights he’d spent in his quarters. This would be a whole new way of life, to be alone, but not alone.

Parted but never parted, Spock said.

Always touching and touched, Jim supplied, recognizing the words.

How close Jim had come to losing Spock to T’Pring. What a debt he owed her. Spock could be married now, bonded to T’Pring, still his loyal first officer at his side, but nothing more… nothing like this.

I crave it, too. The bond, Jim said. How soon?
Not long, Spock said. I want to succeed on our first attempt. A failure could be… painful, perhaps.

Painful how? Jim asked.

The ‘withdrawal’ symptoms we experience after a long meld could be even more pronounced after a failed attempt at bonding, Spock explained. I do not want either of us to experience that.

Oh, Jim said, recalling what it was like to feel so bereft and alone. It was only for a minute or two, but it was very disquieting. He thought with apprehension that tonight would end like that, too.

No, Spock said. I have an idea to avoid that tonight. Let me show you something….

Jim nodded, curious what Spock had in mind. Suddenly, the captain was on Vulcan at a classical music concert. He was seated on a crushed velvet chair in an interesting small venue carved back into a stone cliff face. All of the 75 or so guests were Vulcan… except for one human woman, Amanda, Spock’s mother. Sarek was seated beside her. Kirk realized then that all of the guests were parents, families, here to see their teenaged students perform in a school concert. He was about to see Spock, young Spock, play an instrument. His harp, perhaps. Jim smiled in anticipation.

He looked up at the stage. There were four slender chairs positioned in an arc around a shiny black piano, at least it looked like a Terran piano. Nice of Spock to give him a front row seat. The music instructor, clad in the Vulcan equivalent of formalwear, walked to the front of the stage. He was speaking in Vulcan, of course, but Jim understood every word. He introduced himself and welcomed the families to “An Evening of Terran Classical Music.”

The instructor explained that students had been asked to form quartets or quintets and choose the pieces they wished to present. Spock’s group was first. They were all announced by name, then the instructor left the stage. Spock was the only one of the five not carrying an instrument, so Kirk guessed he would be playing the piano. Jim knew he was 17 and nervous. His young face didn’t show it, though. As the three violinists and one cellist seated themselves, Spock stepped in front of the piano to address the audience. There were no microphones, but none were needed in this venue designed for perfect acoustics. In a smooth, calm voice, he announced that his quintet would be playing Pachelbel’s Canon in D. He gave a short history of composer Johann Pachelbel, then seated himself at the piano and they began.

The audience was respectfully silent as the slow, sweet notes filled the air. Jim glanced at the other musicians, all accomplished, but his focus was on Spock. His long, graceful fingers had such a light touch on the keyboard. He had practiced the piece to perfection. It was beautiful, both rousing and lulling. A sense of peace washed over Jim, the upward arpeggios lifting him up, up, to such heights. Four minutes into it, he was on a cloud of joyous contentment. A warm hush of drowsiness
Sleep, Spock whispered into his mind like a soft breeze on a warm, moon-less Vulcan night. The potent suggestion was compelling, irresistible. Jim obeyed.

Gently, one finger at a time, Spock unlaced their entwined hands. As the last of their physical connection ended, Spock slid gradually, carefully out of Jim’s sleeping mind. “Goodnight, t’hy’la,” the pianist breathed quietly. His plan had worked; Spock was pleased. Jim had liked the music and it had produced the desired effect. Spock looked at Jim’s tranquil, beloved face. He felt the chill of separation, but Jim didn’t. That’s what mattered to Spock. His captain would get the rest he needed tonight.
Chapter 28

Jim woke rested the next morning… on his back. *Hm, how did I manage to flip over?* he wondered. Spock’s bed was several feet away from his and made. His white robe was draped over the raised head of the bed. Jim raised his own bed up, so that he was sitting at a comfortable recline and checked the time: 07:25. *Wow! What a good sleep I had,* he thought. The railings on his bed were back up. Spock must have done that when he moved the beds apart. Light under the door of his bathroom and the sound of running water told him Spock was in there.

Jim turned his room lights to 25%, then to 50% a few moments later. He ran his fingers through his hair and yawned. His body went automatically into a huge luxurious stretch and… wait! He was bending his left leg! He threw the covers off to *see* it, even though he could feel what was happening. He was bending his knee and moving his ankle! No wonder he’d been able to roll over to his back during the night. His leg wasn’t a dead log anymore. He did still have the crawling ants sensation, but his leg was animated again. Watching it move felt great. He heard Spock starting to come out of the bathroom.

“Spock! Look at this!” he called.

When he was near, Jim gave him the best show he could, rotating his ankle, wiggling his toes, and raising his knee up and down.

Spock shared Jim’s smile. “I saw that you had rolled over in the night and surmised that your leg may have developed more mobility than it had yesterday.”

“Well, you were right!” Jim said happily.

Spock was dressed in his uniform, hair smoothed into place, ready for the day. He looked well-rested, too.

“Did you sleep well last night, Spock?” Jim asked.

“I did,” Spock answered truthfully. After the few moments of post-meld dysphoria had left him, Spock had lain gazing at Kirk’s face, matching the rhythm of his t’hy’la’s breathing for a few
peaceful minutes before sliding into the same deep, rejuvenating sleep he’d induced in Jim.

“I’m sorry I fell asleep during your concert, Spock,” Jim said. “I must have been more wiped out than I thought. Your playing was just beautiful… too beautiful. I was so tired it acted like a lullaby, I guess.”

“It is quite all right, Jim. I am glad you slept well and your leg had such a leap in recovery overnight,” Spock said, giving Jim’s shoulder a squeeze.

Jim was smiling up at him, looking for a way to convey how much their night together had meant to him, when Nurse Virginia came through the door.

“Oh, Captain Kirk. I’m so sorry for what happened while I was gone!” she lamented. “I’m never leaving you again and that’s that!”

“I’m okay,” Jim reassured her.

She greeted Spock with a quick nod of acknowledgement which he returned.

“It’s tragic what happened to T’Nar… and almost happened to YOU! The whole clinic is in an uproar about it. I’m glad we have so many Starfleet investigators here right now and more on the way because of the Astral Queen. Commander Sharba, the Andorian, seems very good at his job.”

“He struck me the same way,” Kirk agreed.

“He marched me right to Lwaxara’s room when I showed up for work this morning,” Virginia said, “just to be 100% certain I was okay to come near you.”

Jim smiled, “Well, it’s good to have you back.”

“When I think of what that Romulan tried to do to you, Captain, I get so angry,” Virginia grimaced. “They haven’t found any accomplices yet, at least none that the media has gotten wind of. The hall out there is still full of guards. Have you watched any news yet this morning, Captain?”
“No, I’m just waking up,” he answered, as the nurse began going over his numbers.

“Oh, indeed,” Virginia said, pleased by what she was seeing. “You’re an uncommon man, Captain, to have had such a scare yesterday and still sleep so soundly for 9½ hours! That’s wonderful.” If she saw that they’d mind melded before sleeping, she didn’t mention it.

“I feel great,” Kirk said, fluttering a glance up at Spock, “…and look at this!” He showed Virginia his still-exposed knee and foot flexing and bending.

“Oh, marvelous!” she exclaimed, looking over at Spock spontaneously to share the joy. She was surprised to see the Vulcan smiling. He quickly suppressed it out of habit.

“Well, you are really coming along nicely,” she told the captain. “Don’t be tempted to stand up, though,” she warned. “That leg’s looking great, but it’s not up for weight-bearing yet, understand?”

“Got it,” Kirk said like an obedient patient.

Something about the way he said it, though, made Virginia turn to Spock and reiterate, “He should not be attempting to stand up yet, even with help.”

“Understood,” Spock assured.

“Dr. Mullova will be by to check on you soon,” Virginia told the captain as she moved to go. Then, suddenly, she stopped by the door, spotting Svetlana in the room’s far corner. “We have a runaway,” she announced, smiling.

“Oh! I must have knocked her off the bed last night,” Jim said.

“It happens. They never get hurt,” she informed him, retrieving the tribble and placing her back on Kirk’s bed before leaving.

“Hello, girl,” Jim said cheerfully, petting her, “Sorry about sending you flying last night.”
Jim was in such a good mood this morning after so much solid sleep. Spock was gratified.

“Breakfast, Captain?” he suggested.

“Yes!” Jim said, rubbing his hands together and eagerly switching on his monitor. “What’ll you have, Spock? Are you eating this morning? I’m starving.”

Spock looked over Jim’s shoulder at the menu. “I will have a cup of hot vi’dar tea. No food this morning, thank you.”

Jim made Spock’s selection, then hesitated as he was about to choose cinnamon-apple crepes with cream cheese filling for himself. He was beginning to think his decadent food choices might eventually catch up with his waistline. He had been here for a week now, sitting on his backside and eating like a king.

Spock noticed him hesitate and surmised his captain’s reasoning.

“The energy your body is expending to heal your nerves has increased your appetite, Captain. It is logical to indulge it; the calories are being utilized,” Spock explained.

“Well then, crepes it is!” Jim said, making his selection and placing their order. “Who am I to question Vulcan logic?” He shrugged, shooting a charming smile at his friend.

“You frequently question Vulcan logic, Captain,” Spock reminded him with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, not today,” Jim grinned. He reached out and touched the soft velour of Spock’s shirtsleeve. Spock could tell he was unsure about whether skin-to-skin contact was welcome right now. They were alone, but it was daytime and interruptions were to be expected.

“I have not yet wished you a good morning, Jim,” Spock said, leaning down and surprising him with a light kiss on the lips. He raised back up and observed, “It appears that a brief touch, even an intimate one, will not cause our minds to link, so you do not need to be overly cautious.”
“That was a good experiment,” Jim said tenderly. “Want to do another one… for science?”

Spock took Jim’s hand and graced his mouth with another kiss, slightly longer this time. It felt very bold in the light of day with the door unlocked.

When he released Jim’s hand and stood back up, Spock said, “We have at least 12.5 seconds of skin contact before a link will form. This is very useful information, but I think we should cease the experimenting for now.”

“I agree,” Jim said. “We need to be careful.”

“Quite logical, Captain,” Spock complimented.

“I love you,” Jim said.

“I love you, too,” Spock replied.

“You kiss very well,” Jim added.

“Hm, do I?” Spock considered Jim’s veracity with a quirked eyebrow.

“Yes,” Jim said honestly.

“With you, it seems almost… natural,” Spock remarked, surprised at his own choice of words.

Jim nodded.

Two orderlies were allowed in by security just then to remove the bed that had been brought in for Spock. As one rolled it out the door, the other arranged the guest table and chairs as they had been before.
“There,” the young man said. “All ready for breakfast.”

“Thank you,” Kirk said.

After they left, Jim said to Spock, “I wish that you could stay with me again tonight.”

“I know,” Spock said.

Jim’s leg was starting to get an increase in the prickles. He rubbed it and stretched it.

“Is it hurting, Jim?” Spock asked.

“No. Not pain. Just another platoon joining the army of bugs walking on me,” Jim joked. “It’s not bad. I know it’s a good sign, so….”

Spock nodded.

“Virginia really thought I might try to stand up and test the leg, didn’t she?” Jim said, chuckling.

“It would be consistent with your personality, Captain,” Spock pointed out.

Jim pretended to be affronted for a moment, then countered, “It would be consistent with your personality to help me.” He gave Spock a mischievous look.

“No, Jim,” Spock said, his face like stone.

“C’mon, Spock. You’re so strong. How could I get hurt?”

“I will tell Dr. McCoy,” Spock threatened.
Well *that* wasn’t fair. Jim sighed in defeat. He knew when he was up against an irresistible force… or was it an unmovable object? Jim couldn’t decide. Anyway, Spock looked like he was *both*.

The door opened then and it was Dr. Mullova. “Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock,” she greeted. “Virginia told me you slept well last night and had greater motion in your leg this morning, Captain.”

“Yes,” Kirk confirmed.

She looked over his numbers, with the occasional “hm” and “good.” When she was through with his chart, the doctor said, “Okay, let’s see what you can do.”

Kirk bent his knee and rotated his ankle as he had for Virginia.

“Oh, that is looking very good,” she said happily.

“Now, with your leg straight, try to lift your heel off the bed,” Dr. Mullova instructed.

That proved more difficult. Jim got his heel about an inch off the mattress, but that was only because he flexed his foot.

“Is that bad?” he asked.

“No, everything is proceeding more or less as expected. I’m thinking tomorrow morning we will do your third re-gen treatment, followed by some hydrotherapy… which you should find very pleasant… then the next day, we’ll get you up and walking. How does that sound?” she asked.

“Terrific!” Kirk said enthusiastically.

“You’ve been in bed for a week. Ten days if you count the time in Dr. McCoy’s Sickbay before you arrived. You must be getting eager to stand up and move around,” she said knowingly.

“I really am,” Jim said.
“Fight the urge to get up and test the leg. Trust me, it isn’t quite ready yet and could let you down… hard. We’ve had patients fall and it’s just not worth it,” she spoke from experience. “Patience, Captain. We’re on the home stretch.”

“Okay,” Kirk said.

Jim glanced up at Spock’s face to see the “I told you so” expression he knew would be there. Dr. Mullova didn’t notice.

“I hope things are back to usual around here soon,” she was saying. “I’ll be glad for this news cycle to be over. Have you caught any news yet this morning?”

“No,” Kirk said, “but we have breakfast on the way. We’ll probably watch some while we eat.”

“It’s just a lot of speculation. Nobody knows anything yet. That Mary Purdue journalist is promising either Commodore Jensen or Commander Sharba will appear in-studio at 18:00 tonight to explain the results of the phase one security protocol. I’m sure one or both of them intend to brief you privately before then, Captain.”

“Lwaxara’s name hasn’t been mentioned on the news yet, I hope,” the captain wondered.

“No. There are questions about who foiled the assassin’s plot, but her identity is being protected for now,” Dr. Mullova said.

“Good,” said Jim.

“Ah, here’s your breakfast,” the doctor said, as the door opened for the server. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Captain, if I don’t see you sooner.”

“Okay, thanks,” he said.

She nodded a farewell to Spock and departed.
The server set up their trays and left.

“Ah, this smells good!” Jim exclaimed. “Do you like the smell of cinnamon, Spock?”

“I do,” Spock replied.

“It makes me think of fall in San Francisco,” Jim said. “That little place on the south side of campus that sold Kona coffee and those huge cinnamon rolls slathered in icing. Was that place open yet when you were at the Academy?”

“Yes, but I never tried their cinnamon rolls,” Spock recalled.

“Oh, you missed out. Those were magical on misty mornings with a cup of hot coffee,” Jim said nostalgically. “It was a nice place to hang out, too, warm up and socialize a bit. Everyone there always seemed relaxed and happy.”

He tried to picture Spock at the Academy. He took the image of the 17-year-old pianist he’d seen last night and pictured him walking across the quad. Jim was aware that Vulcans were not considered adults in their culture until they had finished their secondary schooling, usually by age 22, so Spock would have entered the Academy “late” by human standards. He wondered how Spock had handled the city’s damp air and cultural foreignness.

“Were you happy at the Academy, Spock?” Jim asked.

“Not particularly,” Spock said honestly. “It was a means to an end. I am grateful for the education I received there, and the opportunities it afforded me.”

Spock had chosen to leave the safety and familiarity of Vulcan for a career in Starfleet. That was quite a bold move, one that Kirk knew Spock’s father had disapproved of.

“Are you glad you chose Starfleet over the Vulcan Science Academy?” Jim wanted to know.
“Yes,” Spock said.

“If you’d stayed on Vulcan, do you think T’Pring would have wanted to marry you?” Jim wondered aloud.

“Perhaps,” Spock said. “My mixed heritage would have been easier for her to overlook had I remained on Vulcan and acted like a Vulcan.”

“You always act like a Vulcan.”

“Why thank you, Captain,” Spock said.

Jim chuckled.

“So, you suspect that her real reason for choosing the challenge… the kaliffee… is that she didn’t want her children to be ¼ human?”

Spock’s mouth tightened. It was still hard to talk about this, even with Jim. “Unknown. She did not give that as a reason… but yes, I suspect it played a part in her decision,” Spock admitted.

“Do Vulcans just give lip-service to IDIC?” Jim asked. “I smell some hypocrisy there. Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations is such a beautiful philosophy… but there doesn’t seem to be much diversity allowed in Vulcan culture… and I’m not just talking about the haircuts.”

This unexpected joke made a small laugh bubble up out of Spock. Jim could be so funny. They were more relaxed around each other now than they had ever been. It felt good. They’d always both been respectful of each other’s taboo areas, but Spock was glad those areas were shrinking.

“Unfortunately, Vulcans are not above hypocrisy and arrogance,” Spock said. “While the IDIC philosophy is embraced in a galaxy-wide context, the majority of Vulcan society wishes to maintain our traditions and… genetic integrity.”

“Fine for thee, but not for me,” Jim summarized.
“Precisely,” Spock said.

“Your father really broke the rules marrying your mother,” Kirk said with a questioning look on his face. “Forgive me, but he doesn’t strike me as much of a rebel.”

“No,” Spock agreed. “I think he became even more devoted to Vulcan principles and traditions after their marriage, as a way to atone for taking a human wife.”

“Oh,” Jim said. He had never considered this. “You would expect having a human mate to ‘soften’ a Vulcan, make him more emotional, not less. That’s interesting.”

“My mother describes a less-rigid, more genial man when they were first married,” Spock revealed.

“Hm, I would have liked to meet him,” Jim said.

“Me too,” Spock agreed.

Spock had endured a difficult upbringing to emerge the person he was today. Jim smiled at his perfect first officer.

“We should turn on the news,” Kirk realized suddenly, shaking his head. “I seem to be more interested in past events than current ones this morning.”

He switched his screen to the Starbase 4 News channel and angled it so that Spock could see it from the guest table where he was still sipping his tea.

Mary Purdue, the newscaster, was on. She had a pleasant personality that reminded Jim of his legal eagle friend Areele Shaw. She resembled her quite a bit, too.

Mary was presenting a biography of T’Nar, as various pictures of the nurse displayed on the screen. Kirk frowned. T’Nar died because of him, because the Tal Shiar had decided to exploit the
fact of his vulnerability and had sent an assassin to kill him. The Vulcan woman was a victim of circumstance, in the wrong place at the wrong time, like he had been when the ceiling collapsed on him in that tunnel.

“Do you think Sobren will arrange a funeral for her?” Jim asked Spock.

“Perhaps,” Spock answered. “In ordinary circumstances, the body would be returned to Vulcan by the individual carrying the katra, but since there is no katra and no body in this case, Sobren and Commodore Jensen might decide to hold a memorial service in T’Nar’s honor here on the base.”

“She has no family here, apparently,” Jim said, listening to Spock with one ear and the news with the other. “She was only 31. I wonder if she was bonded with someone in childhood and was planning to go home to Vulcan and marry him when his first pon farr was due?”

Before Spock had a chance to answer, Jim noticed something on his screen he’d never seen before, a blinking blue button that said “incoming call.”

“Spock, I’m getting a call,” Jim said. As he pushed the button, the news was muted and the screen went blue with a message that read, “Incoming call from Admiral Cresient, Starfleet Command. Touch to receive.” Jim’s eyes went wide and he motioned for Spock to come stand beside him.

He touched the screen.
Chapter 29

Admiral Cresient’s craggy face filled Jim’s screen.


“Captain Kirk, hello. I trust you are well?” the admiral began.

“Nearly, Sir,” Kirk answered. “Four more days of recovery, my doctors estimate.”

“Good. Good,” the admiral said. “We’ve been informed about the attempt on your life, Captain, and be assured that Starfleet is using the valuable information provided to us by Miss Dirn to clear out the Tal Shiar’s secret base in Federation territory. In fact, a mission is already being planned… delicately, so as not to turn our 100-year cold war with the Romulans into a hot one.”

“Glad to hear it, Sir,” Kirk responded.

“Commander Spock,” Admiral Cresient addressed Spock for the first time, “my congratulations on the successful rescue of the Astral Queen’s crew and passengers. I heard you pulled off a 7-minute muster and that made all the difference in avoiding casualties. Well done.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Spock replied.

“Lots of activity there during what was supposed to be a quiet stay at a med clinic, eh?” the admiral observed. “Are they treating you well otherwise, Captain?”

“Yes, Sir. No complaints,” Jim said with a smile.

“Kirk, there are some goings-on here at Command that I thought you ought to know about,” the admiral began. “I’m not sure how you’ll feel about it, but I thought before your fate for the next five years is decided, I should see where you stand on this?”
“On what, Sir?” Jim asked. He braced himself for whatever might be coming.

“Your new Betazoid friend has apparently convinced her mother, the ruler of BetaZed, that you are hell on wheels and that you and Spock are the only ones in the galaxy who can negotiate BetaZed’s admittance into the Federation,” Admiral Cresient explained. “Lahvis Dirn has made it clear that she will accept you and only you to negotiate admission terms. She’s asking for the Enterprise to defend her planet and their shipping lanes for the next five years. She also wants the crew to attend cultural events and interact as much as possible with her citizens during those years. If you’ve spent much time with Lwaxara Dirn, and I’m thinking you have, then you know why BetaZed will be an enormous asset to the Federation of Planets. Their telepathic capabilities put the Vulcans to shame…. No offense, Mr. Spock.”

“None taken, Admiral,” Spock said. “I concede that the Betazoids’ telepathic skills exceed mine by many degrees.”

“We sent one diplomatic envoy to BetaZed, led by your father, Spock, which failed rather spectacularly. We have been graciously paying for Lahvis Dirn’s daughter to receive cutting edge medical treatment only the Federation can provide, in the hopes that the relationship we want to build with BetaZed can still be salvaged. Until you arrived on Starbase 4, though, Captain, our hopes were not high. Miss Dirn meeting the famous Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock was indeed serendipitous… but it may have locked you into something you didn’t bargain for. The Federation leadership is already pinning its hopes on you and persuasive cases are being made to us here at Starfleet Command to sign over the Enterprise to this important diplomatic venture. I just wanted to let you know what is happening here, Kirk, and get your input. I know in the past, diplomatic missions have not been your favorites, despite your being exceedingly good at them.”

Kirk waited several seconds before he spoke, not wanting to look overly eager. His heart was leaping. This was everything he was hoping for.

“Every mission is a diplomatic mission, I have learned, Admiral,” Kirk began. “Even lying in a med clinic bed, chatting casually with a new neighbor, I was on a diplomatic mission, and didn’t even know it.” He smiled. “It was apparent to me, Spock, and our ship’s surgeon very shortly after we met Lwaxara and experienced her abilities that Betazoids would be an enormous asset to the Federation. I can appreciate the calculation the Federation is making that a large investment now will reap decades of rewards. I believe that reasoning is sound.”

The Admiral blew out a lungful of air and ran his fingers through his silvery hair. “It’s a big ask. A starship… 430 crew. It will be a staffing headache to beat all headaches. Lahvis Dirn wants engineering experts to help improve the efficiency of their ships and planet-based systems, medical teams to train their doctors, computer experts, communications people, lawyers, legislators,
historians, zoologists, dramatists, musicians…. Oh, there’s a whole list!”

“Sounds like they’re serious about getting to know us,” Jim offered optimistically.

“So you’re up for this assignment if it’s offered to you, Kirk?” the admiral asked straight out for clarity.

Jim allowed a pregnant pause, then slowly began nodding his head as though just making up his mind.

“Yes,” he said. “It would likely be the most important and lasting contribution I could ever make to the Federation of Planets. I can keep my officers? The ones who wish to stay?”

“And anyone else you want to personally request. You’d be out there on the frontier for five years, Kirk. Anyone you want to take to make your job easier, we’ll try to make it happen. Lahvis Dirn has requested, however, you bring no professional diplomats. She wants ‘real people.’”

Jim chuckled. Lahvis sounded like her daughter’s mother. “Betazoids can see right through deceit and insincerity. People with an open, friendly, outgoing attitude would fare best on this assignment. Secret-keeping is not only despised, but completely impossible around Betazoids. Overly-private personalities would have a hard time there in the beginning.”

Admiral Cresient did an almost-glance at Spock, but stopped himself. This Vulcan is different, if Lahvis Dirn requested him, he thought.

“Thank you, Captain. I’ll keep that in mind. We’ll be talking again, many times I’m sure. Before the whole thing spins out of control, I just wanted to make sure you’d be amenable to commanding such a mission. I am pleased that you are,” the admiral said. “And what about you, Commander Spock? You and Captain Kirk were expressly requested as the exec team for this mission, but there are many at Starfleet who feel it is unfair to ask you to remain at your current rank for another five years.”

“I am certain there will be *intrinsic* compensations on a mission this interesting and historic,” Spock pointed out. “When and if the offer is made, I will accept.”

“Splendid!” the admiral proclaimed, clasping his hands together and leaning in. “The two of you
make a phenomenal team. The reports I get to read from your missions… ah, they make me long for my adventurous younger days. I’m glad we’ll be keeping the executive team together. Hopefully, your other officers will choose to go as well. No one’s going to be forced into this assignment. There is too much at stake to have any friction or disciplinary problems. It will be all by choice. Feel free to start forming your team, Captain.

“Yes, Sir. Do you have an assignment in mind for the last six months of our current five year mission, Admiral?” Jim asked, curious.

“Undecided,” Admiral Cresient said, “You’ll have to stand by on that, Kirk. Changes to the living spaces on the Enterprise are being discussed, as well as engine upgrades and improvements to the mess, life support, and comm systems. We’re looking at several months on Earth before you can get underway. You may be ordered straight here when you’re released from the med clinic, or we might be able to squeeze in one more mission…. No, strike that. I’m nearly certain that Command won’t want to risk either of you right now. Half of Starfleet Command almost lost their lunch when we learned yesterday that an assassin nearly took you out… right there on a starbase!”

Jim nodded. He was getting everything he could have hoped for. This was really going to happen. He thought of all of his officers, his crew. They’d been through so much together. Some would doubtless be eager for a ground assignment after a five-year tour in deep space, but many would want to stay. All would appreciate that they were headed back to Earth next. Jim was dying to trade glances with Spock, but out of respect for the admiral, he kept his eyes straight ahead.

“Well, Kirk. Contact me when your doctor releases you. I should know more by then,” Cresient concluded. “Take care of yourselves.”

“Yes, Sir,” Kirk and Spock chorused before the screen went blue again and then back to the news.

Jim twisted to the left and grabbed Spock’s arm. He looked up into his friend’s face with the widest smile. Spock returned his smile. He brought his face down close to his captain’s and pressing their foreheads together, he embraced him. For a long moment they just held each other and breathed. Then, Jim said, “Call to Lwaxara. Can you?”

“Only if she’s already listening,” Spock said. He tried it.

About ten seconds later she barged through their door, leaning back against it when it closed, her eyes wide. She knew.
“By the Holy Rings!” she exclaimed, her eyes huge. “An admiral… an admiral said this is happening!!” She looked at them both for a couple of seconds, getting the whole conversation. “I have to sit down,” she said, plopping into a guest chair.

“You did it!” Jim said. “You actually did it, you master schemer!”

She was shaking her head slowly in disbelief. “I guess I won’t have to send that letter to my mother now, prodding her to action. She’s already made the request… and a pretty thorough one at that! She said everything right and now this is actually happening! Oh, Captain, I hope you and your crew enjoy this assignment. I really didn’t think I’d be powerful enough to change the course of so many lives. The futures of the Federation and BetaZed have been altered now, because we both had stupid accidents and chanced to meet. She smiled a stupified smile. Crazy, isn’t it?”

To Lwaxara, Jim and Spock seemed quite composed by now. “Look at you two, taking it in your stride already,” Lwaxara remarked. “Changing the fates of whole planets might be just another day at the office for you guys, but it’s a new experience for me!” She fanned herself with her hand dramatically.

Kirk chuckled. “You are the future ruler of BetaZed. You would have changed the course of your planet’s history anyway,” Jim said. “Remember your plan to liberate the chipmunks?”

She broke into hysterics.

“Chipmunks, Captain?” Spock asked straight-faced.

That just made her laugh harder.

“Linsors,” she corrected when she caught her breath, “and I did have a few bigger plans than that, you know,” she winked.

“Doubtless,” Jim said.

Serious again, she said, “I hope I’ve accurately represented to you what five years protecting my planet and negotiating with my mother will be like, Captain. I hope you don’t feel trapped. It will be a very long time in one place for you.”
“I feel kind of ready for that,” Jim said, looking thoughtful. “How about you, Spock?”

“Indeed,” Spock agreed.

“Not that there won’t be adventure,” she said. “Everyone will want to meet you, show you their region, take you hiking, boating, sightseeing. You’ll be very entertained. I hope you like our music and drama. My mother will want you to stay at our house sometimes, I’m sure. You’ll be given rooms there which I think you’ll find quite comfortable. You’ll meet my dad, Gwenar, and my younger sister, Ockliana… sadly my brother Naerin will be off with his new wife, a daughter of the 7th House. You’ll get to meet him at some point, but he won’t be around all the time. I’m going to miss that. He’s a great brother, a lot of fun and very wise. His wedding is in a month; I’m going to have to miss it.” She looked sad for a moment, then perked up. “There will be other weddings for you to see, although I’m not sure you will want to attend any.”

She had an odd expression that made Jim ask, “Why is that?”

“Now… this is totally normal and traditional for Betazoids, of course, but for humans and Vulcans it will be a new and likely uncomfortable experience… um… Everyone at a Betazoid wedding is naked: the bride, the groom, and all guests.”

Jim and Spock looked at each other.

“It’s a celebration of fertility,” Lwaxara tried to explain.

“Will wedding attendance be required for Enterprise officers?” Spock asked.

“No, of course not,” she assured. “No Betazoid would want to make visitors feel uncomfortable. That’s not our way.” We have many customs and traditions that you will enjoy participating in. Don’t worry. And only women wear those giant wigs at formal parties, not the men. Perhaps Lieutenant Uhura will try one on! Oh, she would look smashing!” Lwaxara smiled at the thought. “She will catch many a young man’s eye. Does she have a boyfriend?”

Spock looked at Jim questioningly.
“Seriously, Spock? You don’t know whether Uhura has a boyfriend?” Jim asked.

“I do not,” Spock said.

Jim smiled at him, then said to Lwaxara, “No, she doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

“What kind of men does she prefer romantically?” she asked.

“Now that I don’t know,” Jim admitted.

Spock raised his eyebrow and Jim gave him a warm smile.

“So you’re going to Earth from here… for as much as six months? That’s about how long I have left in here. Can you swing by on your way to BetaZed and pick me up?” she asked hopefully.

“I think that can be arranged… for a daughter of the 5th House.” Jim smiled, stroking his tribble that he seemed to have just remembered was there.

Oh, how I would love to go home healthy and pretty again, escorted by the great Captain Kirk, she thought dreamily.

Spock wasn’t saying much. Exuberant displays of happiness weren’t in his repertoire, but he was enjoying seeing Jim and Lwaxara so happy, especially Jim. Spock was watching his face. His golden skin was glowing and his cheeks were pushed high by his deep smiles. His eyes were sparkling, and the way he was tossing his head back to laugh made him seem like the most carefree man in the galaxy instead of a starship captain. Spock felt the relief Jim was feeling, the satisfaction of finally knowing… knowing what was coming next. It was liberating.

Spock of Vulcan, Lwaxara said in his mind suddenly, are you happy?”

Yes, he answered, looking at her with warm, grateful eyes. She had saved his t’hy’la’s life yesterday and today her plan had secured their tomorrows, ensured Starfleet would not separate him from Jim for at least five years. Yes, he told her with his mind and with his eyes, I am happy.
Commander Sharba released the starbase and all docked ships from the phase one security protocol at 17:30, announcing that no accomplices were found. Sharba had stopped by half an hour before to deliver the news personally to Jim and Spock.

“McCoy to Captain Kirk,” came over Jim’s communicator at 17:35 and he remembered he’d told Bones he would keep in touch. Whoops.

“Kirk here, Doctor.”

“Jim, can I come over there now? I have a lot to tell you,” McCoy said.

“Likewise,” Jim said. “Yes, come on over right now. We can have dinner together, you and me. Spock just left to relieve Scotty.”

“Scotty’s had a pretty long shift, hasn’t he?” Bones realized.

“Yes, but I sent Spock with a message for him that will make up for 24 hours of bridge duty… and then some.”

“Oh?” McCoy said.

“I’ll tell you all about it when you get here, Bones,” Jim told him.

“Ooo, I’m intrigued,” Bones’ smile was audible.

“Tell me what you want to eat and I’ll order now,” Jim offered.

“Well… you can get me some Salisbury steak with mashed red potatoes and green beans, and a ginger-mint soda,” McCoy requested.
“Got it. See you soon,” Kirk said.

“Thanks, Jim. McCoy out.”
Ten minutes later, Bones came barreling into Kirk’s room, his eyes full of excitement.

“Okay, my news can wait, Jim. Tell me yours first!”

He had a feeling it was about Lwaxara’s plan. When he saw Jim’s face, he had no doubt that it was good news. He noticed his dinner wasn’t on the guest table yet, so he rushed up to the captain’s bed and clapped him on the shoulder in greeting.

Jim pursed his lips together, extending the anticipation for just a moment longer, then began, “I got a call today from Admiral Cresient.”

He definitely had McCoy’s attention now. The doctor was wetting his lips and his eyes were wide and expectant. He was bouncing on his toes. Jim was tempted to tease him, and draw this fun out a bit, but then the words just started spilling out.

“Lwaxara pulled it off! Her mother made the request to the Federation exactly the way Lwaxara advised her to. She asked for the moon, and by god, they’re going to give it to her, Bones! It’s like she’s the new T’Pau of Vulcan to them; they can’t say no to her. Starfleet agrees that acquiring a planet of empaths is in the Federation’s strategic best interests. They’re sending us there for FIVE YEARS to negotiate admittance, protect the region, promote trade, and engage in cultural exchange activities. I can have any crew I want! Cresient said I could start forming a team now. Lahvis Dirn, that’s Lwaxara’s mother, has a lot of requests that will determine some of the specialists we’ll need, but I just sent Spock to tell Scotty that Lt. Mira Romaine can definitely be on that roster, if she wants to come. Hopefully, that will be the incentive he needs to stay with us and decline Admiral Cho’s offer to design new engine systems on Earth. Speaking of Earth, Cresient thinks we’ll be ordered there as soon as we leave here for a six month stay! Starfleet wants to do some refits and mods to the Enterprise before we set off for ‘the frontier,’ as the admiral put it.”

Bones’ jaw had been hanging open through most of this and he slowly closed it now as he took it all in. He thought about everything and what it would mean.

“So we’re diplomats now, are we?” he asked calmly.
“Yep. Are you up for it?” Jim was the picture of confidence. He could tell by Bones’ expression that he had him.

“Yeah,” Bones grinned.

“You’re not gonna give me any of that ‘Damn it Jim, I’m a doctor, not a diplomat,’ stuff?”

“Nah. We’ve always worn a lot of different hats. Guess I’m finally getting better at rolling with it,” the doctor said, smiling.

“Having my cake and eating it, too, huh?” Bones sighed at his dizzying good fortune. “Offers like that don’t come along every day, Jim.”

“Women like Natira don’t come along every day either. Does this sound like a good compromise?” Jim asked.

“Compromise?! This is like a gift from the gods! Are you sure Lwaxara’s mother won’t feel there is a conflict of interest?” McCoy asked.

“I wouldn’t make the offer if it only benefitted you, Bones. You’re in a unique position to negotiate with Natira… and your integrity is above reproach. Lwaxara’s mother will see that the moment she meets you.”

“Well, thanks, Jim,” Bones said, touched.

“You’ll find a trade balance that’s a win-win for both planets,” Jim said with assurance.

Bones blew out a big breath. “Boy, I’m glad I’ll have six months on Earth to learn how to negotiate a fair trade agreement.”
“Ha!” Jim laughed, “I bet you’ll only need *three*, tops!”

Bones chuckled. “This is really happening, huh?” He shook his head in disbelief. “So what is *your* title going to be, Jim?”

“‘Captain Kirk’ has always worked well,” Jim said.

“I suppose the people of BetaZed are looking forward to meeting the great Captain Kirk, not High Emperor of the Federation Frontier Kirk,” Bones joked. “And Spock? He’ll still be our fun-loving first officer and science officer?”

“Yes.” Jim leaned back in his bed and grinned, very self-satisfied.

“You’re damned lucky he loves you,” Bones declared.

Perhaps he was fishing for some info on their evolving relationship, but Kirk didn’t bite.

“I’m lucky *you* do, too,” Jim said sincerely. “You and Spock make me more than I would be alone. I’m a very happy man to have you both for another five years.”

McCoy smiled warmly. “I hope Scotty comes with us, too. You need your miracle worker.”

“It will hinge on Lt. Romaine, I’m sure. She and Scotty want to get married, and if she has a family in mind….,”” Jim said warily.

“She doesn’t want kids, Jim. Scotty told me so. He doesn’t either,” Bones revealed.

Jim’s face lit up. “Could it be that I’m going to get *everything* I want, Bones? I should pinch myself; this has got to be a dream.”

Jim laid his head back on his pillow and closed his eyes for a moment, hoping this bubble of good fortune wouldn’t pop.
“Oh!” he suddenly remembered, “Look what I woke up able to do this morning!” Jim threw the left side of his bedcovers off of his leg and demonstrated how much movement he had now.

“Hey, hey! Now that is progress!” Bones raved, clasping his hands together. “Boy, Jim, I wasn’t even thinking about your leg at all. What kind of a doctor am I?”

“You’ve already moved on mentally to being an ambassador,” Jim joked.

McCoy usually enjoyed some good ribbing, but he looked a bit distressed. “Who’s gonna patch up you and Spock now?” he asked. “Not M’Benga… I just canned him.”

“What?”

“I hope that was okay, Jim. You did tell me to manage my staff how I saw fit, and you wouldn’t believe what I learned about that guy over the past 24 hours. It got me so hot under the collar… and when I called him on his mistreatment of female patients, you should have heard his sanctimonious defense. It made me so angry, I sacked him on the spot. You’ll back me up, won’t you, Jim?”

“Of course. Tell me some of the things you found out,” Kirk said.

Ever since Jim’s old friend, Ben Finney, had accused him of ruining his career by logging the engineering error Finney had made, Kirk had been extra hesitant to put a black mark on anyone’s record, but if Bones felt M’Benga deserved it, that was good enough for him.

McCoy had been telling him some of the M’Benga stories his investigation had uncovered for a couple of minutes when their dinners arrived.

The server was the same young Orion woman from Jim’s first night here.

“Well, hello again,” Kirk said.
“Hello, Captain,” she replied warmly as she set the trays down and set up. “I’m so glad that Romulan assassin is dead and not you!”

“I’m a little glad myself. Thanks.” He gave her a smile.

“I knew T’Nar a little bit. She was a good nurse. Not easy to get to know, being a Vulcan and everything…. She was terribly smart, though. All of the nurses over in Orthopedics respected her. Such a tragedy,” she said.

“Yes,” Kirk agreed soberly.

“Even in such a wonderful, safe place as this, terrible things can still happen,” the girl said sadly, clasping her slender green hands together under her chin, as if to comfort herself.

Curiosity got the better of Jim. “May I ask if you were among the group of Orions granted asylum on Starbase 4 last year after being rescued in the Blentnar Corridor?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Captain McFarland of the Lincoln boarded the cargo freighter that was smuggling us and took the crew into custody. Best thing that ever happened to me! We all thought we were going to be Federation slaves now. We didn’t understand that the Federation doesn’t have slaves.”

“Do you like living here?” Bones asked.

“Oh, yes. We all have jobs and are receiving Federation educations. It’s wonderful. Siltara wants to be a stellar cartographer. Giryn wants to be an agriculturalist. Those are my two best friends.”

“What do you want to be?” Jim asked.

“I’m not sure, honestly. I have a boyfriend, a med tech here in the clinic. He’s a wonderful person, a Terran, and he makes me think maybe I’d like to be a mother and raise lots of children. On Orion, if a slave has a child, it can be sold away and you never see it again. Here in the Federation, where I could raise my children myself and get to be with them until they are grown and independent… well, that sounds pretty appealing to me.”
Jim smiled at her. “I know a terrific woman named Ruth who is raising five children like she always wanted. She’s a great mother and very happy.”

“On Earth?” the Orion asked.

“Yes. San Francisco.”

“Wow, Starfleet headquarters! I’d like to see San Francisco someday,” she said.

“My sister brought up two boys on Earth, in the state of Georgia,” Bones contributed. “Nice place to raise kids.”

“I love learning about Earth… and all of the Federation worlds. When my preliminary education is complete, in another year probably, I can apply for Federation citizenship! I’ll have so many options then, so many things that I could do, lives that I could lead. It’s still a little overwhelming,” she said, putting the finishing touches on their tray set-ups. “For now, I’m just very glad to be free, safe, and employed!”

“Amen to that,” McCoy said.

“You’re doing a great job. What is your name?” Jim asked.

“Vera,” she said, then giggled at their expressions. “Yes, I know it’s also an Earth name. I found that out right away on the Lincoln. Captain McFarland’s yeoman was named Vera Wright. The crew treated us really well. It’s been an honor serving a Starfleet captain this week. Captain McFarland saved my life. If you ever see him, Captain Kirk, tell him Vera is grateful.”

“Will do,” Jim promised. “Good luck to you if I don’t see you again before I leave.”

“Thank you. The same to you, Sirs. I’m so glad the scare with the assassin is over. That Andorian, Commander Sharba, was just on the news saying the base is secure, so that’s a relief. You enjoy your dinners, now. Thanks for the nice chat,” she said and slipped out the door. Kirk noticed his security men were gone.
“That girl makes me proud to be in Starfleet,” McCoy declared.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jim said. “I said a few rather jaded things to Lwaxara about the Federation the other day, but we really are the best game in town.”

“We’re not perfect, but our hearts are in the right place and our goals are noble,” Bones said. “You can’t ask for more than that from an organization as huge and far-flung as the Federation.”

“I suppose not,” Jim agreed.

“Vera, the Orion.” McCoy allowed himself a little chuckle about that.

Jim smiled. “To Vera, the Orion,” he said, raising his glass of soda towards McCoy.

“To Vera,” Bones replied, “May she have a long and happy life.”

“Indeed,” Jim said, taking a drink.

As they ate, Bones continued telling Jim about M’Benga’s misbehaviors. Although McCoy was confident he’d done the right thing, he was concerned that they’d be short one doctor now.

Jim wasn’t. They would get more medical personnel soon enough. That gave him an idea….

“Bones, do you happen to know Dr. Matthew Powell of the Scrimshire?” Jim asked.

“Mm, no, Doesn’t ring a bell,” McCoy said.

“He’s engaged to Janice Rand. It might be poetic justice for him to take over for M’Benga. It’s completely up to you. I don’t even know him, just an idea. We will be taking a larger-than-usual medical staff to BetaZed, because Lahvis Dirn wants some Betazoid doctors to be trained by Federation ones.”

“Sounds dangerous, Jim,” McCoy warned, only half-joking. “As I remember, you used to worry
about Janice being a temptation for you. Not anymore?”

“No,” Jim said lightly without explanation. “I’d like to make it up to her. She really loved the Enterprise and had a lot of friends here. I’d like a happy ending for her, too, and her fiancé. Perhaps they’ll decline, but it would be decent of us to make the offer.”

“You’re a romantic, Captain.”

Jim just laughed. “She was one of us, Bones. It isn’t right what happened. Make it right.”

“Okay, Jim. I’ll look up this Dr. Powell, but if he doesn’t have an impressive record….”

“Fair enough. Thanks, Bones.”

“Hmph. I never knew Yeoman Rand liked medical men. There was a perfectly handsome doctor for her to fall in love with on the Enterprise…,” McCoy grumped in jest.

“Who has a queen in love with him?” Jim pointed out with smiling eyes.

McCoy chuckled. “I keep telling you, that’s not her title.”

“Eat your Salisbury steak,” Jim said. “How is it?”

“I like it. Their food really is first rate here, isn’t it?” McCoy marveled.

“One of the systems they’re wanting to update on the Enterprise is the mess,” Jim announced.

“Well, won’t that be nice?” Bones said optimistically. “I’m looking forward to some of the restaurants I like in San Francisco and Atlanta when we get back to Earth. I can’t wait to see my sister and her family. Her boys are teenagers now. What are you looking forward to, Jim?”
“I want to show Spock the Grand Canyon,” Jim said. “And I thought he’d maybe like a boat tour around San Diego harbor. It will be fall soon in the northern hemisphere… maybe a walk in the White Mountains of New Hampshire to see the colors. I bet he’d like attending a concert at the Salzburg Music Center or Sydney Opera House….”

McCoy was looking at him oddly. All of his plans involved Spock. He hadn’t mentioned seeing family or friends. It didn’t seem to have even occurred to him.

“You gonna show Spock the whole planet? He did live on Earth for four years,” McCoy pointed out.

“He didn’t enjoy himself, though,” Jim said sadly. “You know Spock: all work and no play.”

“And you think you can make him want to… play?” Bones asked carefully.

Jim nodded.

“Wow, you really are the great Captain Kirk,” Bones teased.

Jim just smiled.

McCoy wanted so badly to ask if Jim and Spock were lovers. It seemed like maybe Jim wanted him to ask, but he held his tongue. What would a conversation like that with Jim be like? He decided not to find out. This was such a happy night and he could so easily say something wrong and ruin it.

“Dr. Mullova says I’m having hydrotherapy tomorrow morning, after my third nerve re-gen treatment,” Kirk offered as a change of topic.

“Nice,” McCoy said. “That should feel good.”

“What’s it like?” Jim asked. “She didn’t really describe it.”
“She showed me the therapy rooms,” Bones said. “It’s kind of like a deep, stainless steel bathtub with lots of jets and bubbles.”

“Warm water?” Jim asked.

“Of course,” McCoy said.

“Dr. Mullov said I could have a massage, too,” Jim remembered.

“Did I choose the right clinic for you or what?” McCoy asked.

“I thought Spock chose it,” Jim nit-picked.

“That’s not the way I remember it,” Bones joked.

“Well, coming here has worked out in more ways than one, hasn’t it?” Jim said.

“That’s for damn sure!” Bones agreed whole-heartedly.

They finished up their dinners and called for tray pick-up.

“Where is the lady of the hour, anyway?” McCoy suddenly thought to ask. “This is the longest I’ve ever been in your room without Lwaxara coming in, I think.”

Kirk chuckled. “I don’t know. She was here earlier.”

“I want to thank her for saving your life, and for creating this amazing opportunity for all of us!” Bones said.

“We owe her a lot,” Jim agreed.
“I’m gonna go see if I can find her,” McCoy said. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Okay,” Jim said.

He laid his head back and shut his eyes. ‘Feel free to start forming your team,’ Admiral Cresient had said. Kirk’s mind was churning up possibilities, going over all of the people (friends, acquaintances, crew mates) who had ever impressed him in any way. Beyond having the necessary technical skill sets, this crew needed highly developed social skills. They needed to be slow to anger or take offense, quick with a smile, patient, accepting, open. Hmm. Jim needed to not only choose people he found impressive, but people who Lahvis Dirn would find impressive. Jim needed to learn what traits she found admirable. He decided that would be his next question to Lwaxara when he saw her.

In a few days, he wouldn’t be seeing Lwaxara for six months. He frowned at that. He could really use her input with staffing. Jim supposed he could send her some personnel files for consideration, maybe even ask them to do a subspace video interview with her. He decided that probably wasn’t a workable option. His best bet was just to learn as much about her mother as possible before he left Starbase 4. He’d have to trust himself to take it from there.

Jim had a strange impulse to contact Miranda Jones. She was a telepath, the only human telepath he’d ever met. Jim wondered if she was still on her assignment to the homeworld of Kollos, the Medusan Ambassador. She had a complicated psychology. Her jealousy of Spock had nearly cost his first officer his life. But she had been able to face that ugliness in herself and overcome it. Jim respected that. He admired her. Telepathic and blind from birth, Dr. Jones had been an ideal emissary to work with the Medusans, a noncorporeal race of beings that humans found so ugly the mere sight of one drove them insane. Spock was driven insane by accidentally looking at the Medusan Ambassador. Miranda’s telepathic abilities had saved his mind.

With her sensor web clothing, Dr. Jones claimed she could ‘see’ as well as a sighted person. Jim wondered how she would respond to an offer to visit BetaZed, homeworld of another telepathic species. Would she be interested in more challenges after her assignment with the Medusans? She had studied on Vulcan for four years and followed their mental disciplines; Spock might enjoy her company. Jim decided to mention the idea to him before thinking anymore about extending an invitation.

Let’s see… who else? Jim’s mind was on fire with possibilities. He let it run free as he sat there petting Svetlana and smiling at the ceiling.
Alone in his quarters late that night, Spock thought of Jim. He hadn’t meditated as frequently since he started mind melding with Jim. He found he didn’t need to. There didn’t seem to be as much mental turmoil for him to quell. He felt at peace. He had Jim’s love. Spock could not have foreseen what a powerful balm that would be. The tightness that he’d always had in his chest had dissolved.

Doctor McCoy once accused him of being more afraid of living than of dying: “Each day you stay alive is just one more day you might slip and let your human half peek out.” The doctor had been quite pleased with himself at what he obviously thought was a flash of insight into Spock’s psyche. He wasn’t wrong. Controlling emotions was hard. It was work. When Spock chose the Vulcan way in his youth, he committed to years of training, painful privations, much mental discomfort and strain in order to achieve the ordered, logical mind that every Vulcan sought. Keeping it logical and ordered, free of emotional discord, took effort, maintenance. McCoy rightly sensed Spock’s worry that his façade would crack, because that’s what it was, a façade. Other Vulcans didn’t have to fight every day for their mental serenity, but Spock did. He was never quite there. He always felt like he was pretending, acting like a Vulcan, but not actually achieving what full-Vulcans were able to achieve. The idea to go to Gol was born of this constant struggle. It was wearing him out and he was losing. His feelings for Jim were becoming too strong to control. He’d wanted to tell him, ask his captain for what he needed, but somehow he never could, until Lwaxara’s loose lips had forced the issue.

Lying on his bed, a wave of warmth and relief washed over him now thinking about how close and intimate they had become. He replayed with perfect clarity the memory of Jim making love to him. It hadn’t actually been him, but he was there, watching, feeling. He felt Jim’s emotions, his arousal, his climax. Oh, Jim. I love you. You are so beautiful. I may never be able to join with you physically as you would like, but we can make love in our bonded minds like that over and over and I will never tire of it.

Spock reached out and took Jim’s imaginary hand in his. He recalled each small detail of how Jim’s cool skin and gentle touch felt. It was his great honor now to know every line of Jim’s hand, the contour of each knuckle and fingertip. He felt fiercely protective of Jim. His captain had an inner strength that was a powerful thing to behold, but he was also terrifyingly fragile.

When Spock was a small boy, he used to worry about his mother dying. The older boys had told him humans only live 0.625 as long as Vulcans and when they got sick or hurt, they couldn’t do a healing trance to repair themselves. He had wondered why his father had chosen someone for a mate who would die many decades before him. It didn’t seem… logical. Now Spock found himself in the same situation. He remembered what the long-lived Mr. Flint had said about his repeated losses. He lamented that he had married many times, “caressed a smoothness, inhaled a brief
fragrance, then age, death, the taste of dust.” How bitter he had sounded. Spock thought of Jim’s vibrant mind and body succumbing to decrepitude and death. He would lose him, likely to senility before death, if their recent experience with aging accurately foretold the way they would naturally age.

Young people rarely contemplate old age, Spock had noticed, viewing it as something too distant to be dangerous… but Spock had seen it close up, watched it stalk his captain, stealing his confidence and savior faire. He dreaded seeing that again. He remembered the cold hand of death reaching for his own aching, aging body and how he’d had to turn the environmental controls in his quarters to 125 degrees just to be comfortable. Jim wouldn’t be able to stand that.

When he had left Jim this morning, he was so happy to have five more years together, but what were five years? Nothing. What would come next… and then after that? …and all the while Time would be marching on, shortening their lives, ruining them, eventually extinguishing everything they were… Stop! Spock ordered himself as his thoughts rose almost to a level of panic. Stop!

He leapt out of bed and lit his candle. Kneeling on the floor, he got his breathing under control, and then his racing mind. He focused on the flame and set his mind to purging these pernicious thoughts. How foolish he had been to forgo meditation in lieu of the euphoric comforts of Jim’s mind. I am a Vulcan, he reminded himself forcefully. He could love Jim, but he mustn’t let the deluge of emotions pull him under. He recited a comforting litany of truisms and axioms that Vulcan students are taught to do to turn their minds away from unproductive or negative thought streams. When his mind was sufficiently elevated above those septic thoughts, he acknowledged and examined them logically. I am experiencing a fear of loss, dread over the inevitable.

As McCoy had pointed out, Spock didn’t have much of a fear of dying himself… but the thought of Jim dying, either tragically or fading away from old age, could set his heart pounding with anxiety. Death is the natural end of all living things, Spock told himself. I cannot change that. It is a universal constant which must be accepted. Spock accessed his knowledge of several philosophical systems, both Vulcan and Terran, that dealt with this topic. Then, for some reason his mind was drawn to an old memory from childhood of a cottage on a lake and an elderly Earth woman, Lydia Abbott.

She was his mother’s mentor and favorite teacher before she met and married Sarek. Prof. Abbott had lived in Michigan and taught philosophy and history at a very old private college there. Spock remembered all of the greenery and blossoming trees; he hadn’t seen anything like that before except in pictures. His mother took him for a walk across the handsome campus to meet Prof. Abbott in her office. Then, the three of them headed out to her house on the lake for a long visit. Lydia Abbott was a very cheerful, welcoming person and Spock recalled his mother enjoying the afternoon at her house very much. He’d never seen his mother so at ease with anyone. The house was decorated to match Lydia’s personality: florals, lace curtains, a sunny sitting room with comfortable cushions and an inviting view of the lake through a large picture window. Amanda and Lydia enjoyed tea and conversation while Spock explored the woods and the lakeshore by himself. It was a nice day for both him and his mother. Spock enjoyed revisiting the memory, but
couldn’t identify the reason it had sprung to mind while he was examining philosophical systems for some insight into handling his fear of losing Jim someday.

Then, he remembered the plaque! On the wall in Lydia’s sitting room had hung a decorative plaque that read in swirling cursive: “Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.”

Nothing in Spock’s young life was over yet. There was nothing that he had lost or mourned, so he didn’t understand the plaque’s meaning. Since she was a philosophy professor, he had asked her, “What does that mean? Is it philosophy?”

She had answered, “Indeed it is… my own personal philosophy that I find works better than anything the great philosophers came up with. It’s a positive way to deal with loss, a perspective shift in mindset that helps me remain positive when good things end.”

“Oh,” Spock had said, not understanding.

“You are perhaps too young to understand right now, Spock,” his mother had said, “but file this away in that amazing brain of yours. You may need it someday.”

Spock knew his mother considered Professor Abbott very wise, so he did as he was told… and now here it was, a tiny tidbit of human philosophy saving the day. Spock said it over and over in his mind like it might slip away from him if he didn’t. Everything that was now blooming between himself and Jim would someday be over, and Spock knew he would cry, but he would also smile… because it happened.

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Scotty’d been on cloud 9 all day, since Spock had taken him aside and told him about Admiral Cresient’s call to Captain Kirk. Mr. Scott had worked a 24-hr shift and needed rest, but who could sleep with such exciting news?! Spock told him Mira was IN if she wanted to join the crew on a new five-year mission to some distant planet. Scotty had never heard of it. He’d been given very scant details about it, because Mr. Spock said that’s all he knew so far, but he’d immediately written a letter to Mira anyway presenting the information that he did know. He was fervently hoping that she would want to do it.

Being a chief engineer on a starship was Scotty’s passion. Until he met Mira, he didn’t think there was room in his heart for two passions, but he had fallen hard and so had she. When her temporary
assignment to install new equipment on Memory Alpha was over, she’d gone on to Benecia to do more installations there, then back to Earth. For a year, they had been writing to each other. Not mushy love poetry or anything, just the day to day struggles and satisfying accomplishments in their work. They gave each other suggestions and insights. Talking about work projects was enjoyable to Mira and Scotty, both of whom were very practical, straightforward people. One of Scotty’s favorite things about Mira was that she said what she meant. He never had to decode anything she said. Her mind worked a lot like his. She was an engineering specialist and her father was a retired chief engineer for Starfleet. She understood Scotty’s love of starship engines and space. Mira hadn’t taken to it right away and Scotty was worried that the idea of committing to five years in space might give her pause, especially since there was already a plan in place for them to be together soon on Earth. They had started saying they loved each other in their letters several months ago and had some discussions about how they might arrange to be together after the Enterprise’s five year mission was up. Scotty had told her about Admiral Cho’s offer for him to design engines for the next generation of starships. That job would be in San Francisco where Mira was currently assigned. It was perfect, except…. How would Scotty feel if the Enterprise flew off on her next mission with a different chief engineer, perhaps someone less experienced than he was? Scotty was humble by nature, but he knew that some of the tight scrapes they’d gotten out of were because of him, his experience and innate talent for the job. What if Captain Kirk counted on his new chief engineer in a crisis and he let him down?

Scotty hadn’t told Mira for certain that he would take the ground assignment, but they had been discussing marriage and trips they would take on Earth. He didn’t know if Mira would want to give up their perfectly good plans to hop aboard the BetaZed express. Five years was a long time and he didn’t even have enough information yet about what her work would be like. Would it be planetside? Most likely. What was this planet like that the Federation was so keen on wooing? Was it a paradise, a desert, an ice world? Scotty couldn’t answer many of the questions he knew Mira would have.

What if she didn’t want to go? Would he? Would she wait for him for five years? He couldn’t ask the lass to do that. It would be so unfair. Would communications with Earth even be possible and reliable from BetaZed? No, he would lose her for sure, if he left for five years without her.

He had a feeling that she loved him enough to do what would make him the happiest, keep being chief engineer on a starship; but he decided that if she did decide not to go, he wouldn’t either. Life on Earth, doing important work for Cho and being married to Mira would be a wonderful life, he told himself.

Scotty kept checking his mail again and again. He’d sent his letter to her a good ten hours ago. It was nearly midnight now and he needed sleep badly. He changed into his pajamas and stretched his tired body out on his bed and turned the lights out. He would have to find out in the morning what her reaction was. He started thinking the worst, What if she’s cryin’ now? What if I’ve gone and upset the apple cart and she thinks I don’t want to marry her, that I don’t love her enough to leave the Enterprise? Oh, lass! I do. I do love ya.
He let his mind wander to their last night together on the Enterprise before she had beamed down to Benecia and out of his life. They hadn’t been intimate with each other until that final night. Emotions had run high during the crisis with those disembodied “ghosts” from the dead planet Zetar who tried to take over Mira’s body. She fought them bravely and when she had a vision of Scotty dying, she’d said, “Oh, Scotty! I’d rather die than hurt you. I’d rather die!” But after the aliens had been driven from her body and the crisis was over, she’d had some recovering to do, then some work on Memory Alpha, and being a practical, sensible sort, she just never let her emotions get that hot again.

She still adored Scotty, and wanted his company whenever he offered it, but there wasn’t any kissing or overly romantic words spoken between them. She’d been through a traumatic experience and the last thing Scotty wanted to do was push.

Then, on the last night, they were having dinner together in the crowded mess hall, saying what Scotty thought were their final goodbyes, and Mira leaned in and whispered, “Can I come to your cabin later? I want to say a better goodbye than this.”

Scotty just nodded. He didn’t want to assume anything. They had been enjoying an emotional closeness that made him so happy. Mira would tell him if she wanted something more on her last night aboard. He had a feeling that maybe she did, but he would err on the side of being a gentleman until she made it clear. Scotty hadn’t been with anybody in a long time. He didn’t mind being alone in his quarters every night, but the thought of having some privacy with Mira there tonight really appealed to him. He knew he looked at her like a lovesick puppy, but he couldn’t help it. Mira displayed her feelings honestly, too. He wondered what her romantic history was like. Had she suffered any heartbreaks? Parting was going to be hard on them both. Would it be harder if they parted as lovers or friends? He would follow her lead and see where things went.

When she arrived, she seemed to melt right into his desk chair, like she belonged there. Scotty took a seat on his bed a few feet away.

She let out a breath. “The privacy feels good, Scotty. I’m always so happy in your company,” she smiled at him. “I’m going to miss you so much. Thanks for all you did to help me through my first space assignment.”

“Oh, aye, you’re welcome, lass. T’was a doozie, wasn’t it?”

They laughed.

“That’s not typical, huh?” Mira joked.
“I gave ya some bad advice about keepin’ yer ‘space sickness’ to yerself and not tellin’ the Captain or Dr. McCoy. I’m sorry about that,” Scotty said.

“Forgiven,” she said graciously.

Scotty grinned.

“You’ve been the best thing about this whole assignment, Scotty,” she said sincerely. “You’re such a wonderful man.”

“And you’re the warmest, sweetest, smartest lass to ever grace the Enterprise.” Scotty knew he was doing the puppy eyes, but she was so beautiful.

“Oh, Scotty!” she said, suddenly breathless. “I want to touch you and kiss you and show you how I feel, but I’m not quite ready for… everything. Can we just lie on your bed together and kiss and hold each other? Touch a little through our uniforms?”

There. He knew if he waited she would tell him clearly what she wanted, and she had.

“Oh, aye, lassie. That’d be grand,” Scotty said with a welcoming smile and an outstretched hand.

His eyes were soft and full of love, not lust. Mira knew she could trust this gentle man she had fallen for.

“I love your accent, Scotty. I could listen to that for the rest of my life,” she hinted as she moved over to the bed.

They began touching each other slowly. Hands, faces, a few soft kisses on the lips while they were still sitting up. Her leg was touching his and he lightly laid his hand on it, being careful not to take any more than was offered to him. His hesitancy and respect made her bolder. She kissed his mouth deeply, switched off his light, and laid them down on Scotty’s narrow bed. Face to face, they smiled at each other in the near-dark. Scotty gathered her into his arms and tenderly pulled her to him. The sensation of their bodies pressed together was wonderful. He tucked his face into the crook of her slender neck. He could smell her hair. It was like jasmine or magnolia. He pressed his
lips to her neck, pulling her even tighter to him. “Oh, Mira,” Scotty sighed softly. “I love the sound
of your name. I love whispering it in the dark.”

“You say it beautifully. I love the feel of your breath and how you’re holding me, Scotty. This is
heaven. I knew it would be.”

She reached her hand up his back and ran her fingers through his hair. She held the back of his
head while she kissed him, deep and slow. Then, she pulled back enough that she could run her
fingers over his chest and invite him to reciprocate. Touching her through her velour uniform was
exciting to Scotty. Two engineers exploring each other’s construction. He was gentle touching her
breasts until her hands encouraged his to exert a little more pressure. He kneaded, rubbed,
squeezed. Each breast was a little more than a handful for him, so soft and round. He could touch
them all night. Mira was making soft sounds of contentment. He felt her nipples protruding through
the fabric and ran his knuckles across one of them.

“Ah,” she moaned. “Oh, Scotty. Scotty, it feels so good.”

Their lower bodies were still pressed tightly together and she knew that he was hard. She wanted to
rub him with her hand, but decided it might embarrass him to come in his pants, so she just let him
keep enjoying the feeling of pressing himself against her. His hands were enjoying themselves
quite a bit, too. He was cradling both of her breasts in his hands, now, rubbing his thumbs back and
forth over her nipples.

“Kiss me some more while you do that, Scotty. Oh, I’m going to miss you so much,” she
whispered.

That was almost exactly a year ago. By himself now in the dark, Scotty sighed. He hadn’t touched
a woman in a year. Just the memory of touching Mira on their last night together made him almost
as hard now as he’d been then. He reached down to adjust himself, then pulled up the covers and
was asleep from exhaustion before he knew it.

When he awoke the next morning, his first thought was his mail. He sat down at his desk in his
underwear and turned on his monitor. Four messages. One was from Mira! Scotty’s heart was
racing. The path of his life was about to be decided. Faced with her response seconds away, Scotty
was suddenly hesitant to find out. There was a memo from the captain. He opened that one first. It
was addressed to the entire Enterprise crew and detailed the tentative five-year mission as Admiral
Crescent had outlined it. The captain must have realized word would get out and wanted to get a
jump on the rumors.
Scotty read through it. He wished he’d had these details before writing to Mira about the mission. He’d always had a disdain for ambassadors, envoys, and other diplomatic riff raff. The biggest idiots in the galaxy as far as Mr. Scott was concerned. His captain had more diplomatic savvy in his little finger than all of the Federation’s “best” diplomats in his opinion. This Lahvis Dirn of BetaZed sounded like a very smart lady to have requested “normal people.” Scotty hadn’t had the pleasure yet of meeting her daughter, but from the sound of things, she had been so impressed with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock that she’d put this bug in her mother’s ear. She had saved the Captain from that Romulan assassin, McCoy had told him, so Scotty already liked her. Five years protecting her homeworld, negotiating, and mingling with the natives didn’t sound like a bad gig at all. Scotty scanned the rest of the memo. BetaZed was described as a lush green planet with oceans and lakes comparable to Earth.

Scotty was glad the whole ship knew now. He hoped most everybody would stay. He hoped he would stay. Time to find out. He opened Mira’s letter and started crying. The first sentence was in caps. It’s all he could read before the words became too blurry:

YES YES YES I’LL GO WITH YOU!!!!

Oh, Mira! Scotty had to stand up and pace. His pulse was hammering in his ears worse than it had during battles with the Klingons! Get ahold of yerself, laddie! he told himself. He went to the bathroom and dried his eyes, but staring in the mirror at such a lucky man made him start bawling again. He splashed some water on his face, took some deep breaths, and raced back to read the rest:

...Six months together on Earth, then off on a five year adventure, living together in married quarters on the Enterprise, and my 'miracle worker' husband doing what he loves best! It’s like a dream! Capt. Kirk is going to need you. If he has you and Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy, there’s nothing that man can’t do. I’ll be so honored to be on the crew, doing whatever they need me to do.

Will you be involved in the refit of the Enterprise’s systems, or will it be like a six-month shore leave on Earth for you? Oh, Scotty, I can’t wait until I can hold you in my arms. Let’s get married right away. Do you want to? Would Capt. Kirk marry us on the ship? I would beam up the second the Enterprise hit orbit, if he would.

Send me all the mission details as soon as you can. I am hungry for them!

All my love,

Mira
Scotty kept staring at the screen, reading and re-reading, smiling like a fool. If it were a paper letter, he’d have clutched it to his chest like an ingenue. Eventually, he grabbed a shower, put on a clean uniform, and left his cabin feeling like a million bucks. He wanted to go see the captain.
Today was a shore leave day for Scotty until 14:00. He would stop by the med clinic to thank the captain and ask him to officiate the wedding. Scotty pictured himself looking sharp in his kilt and dress uniform shirt at the alter with Mira in the ship’s chapel, his captain and friend smiling at his happy duty of sealing their union. He was daydreaming and taking such big strides that he almost crashed into Uhura as she rounded a corner. They were both headed toward the main docking port.

“Going ashore, Scotty?” she asked him.

“Aye, to see the captain. He’s lettin’ Mira join the crew and she’s comin’ with us to BetaZed! We’re gettin’ married and I’m going to ask the captain to officiate. That’s what she wants,” Scotty babbled like a brook.

“Scotty! Oh, congratulations!” Uhura said. She wanted to grab his hands or hug him, but he was still walking too fast for both. She ran alongside.

“Thank ya, lassie. Will ya be comin’ on the next mission?” he asked her.

“Yes! It sounds amazing. I’m so glad Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock want to stay on the Enterprise and not move up the ladder,” she remarked.

“Ach, there’s naught up the ladder that’s better than the Enterprise,” Scotty said with conviction.

“You said it, mister!” Uhura agreed. “Do you think there will be promotions, though? Most of us have a little wiggle room in our current positions to increase a grade or two.”

“Maybe. I dinna know. I’m just happy Mira’s on the roster,” Scotty said.

“Oh, to live in married quarters. They’re huge. You’re so lucky Scotty,” Uhura said.
“There are goin’ to be improvements to livin’ quarters, I’m told, over the six month refit. Maybe they’ll git bigger… or at least be feelin’ that way,” Scotty said encouragingly.

“I just need to stop buying things at every port. I’m running out of space,” she complained.

“That reminds me… Where is that blown glass shop you like?” Scotty asked. “I want to get somethin’ bonnie for Mira as a weddin’ present.”

Uhura smiled. “Oh, that is so thoughtful. What is her favorite color?”

Scotty’s eyes went wide and his pace slowed.

Uhura chuckled and rolled her eyes affectionately.

***

When Scotty arrived at the clinic, Kirk was not in his bed. Thinking maybe the captain could walk now, he checked the bathroom. Nope. He left the room and was heading back to the front desk to inquire, when Lwaxara popped out of her room and said, “You are Montgomery Scott, Captain Kirk’s chief engineer. We haven’t met yet. I am Lwaxara Dirn.” She put out her scarred hand and he shook it.

“Ah, a pleasure it is, lassie. Your name is on everyone’s lips,” Scotty said cordially.

He was glad he’d been forewarned about her appearance so he didn’t wince and insult her. It wasn’t so much that she was ugly, as just the thought of a young woman being hurt so badly. It upset Scotty, but he concealed it well… or he thought he did.

“Havin’ you for a neighbor was the captain’s great good fortune it seems. T’was you saved his life from that assassin, Dr. McCoy told me! Thank ya for that, lassie,” he said sincerely. “How did ya do it? The doc was very vague about it.”

“Well… I circled behind that ol’ Romulan and dropped her with a single Vulcan neck pinch!” she said with drama, knowing intuitively that Mr. Scott would take it for a joke.
He did.

Chuckling, Scotty decided she didn’t want to tell him, so he moved on… “And now we’ll all be headin’ off to your mysterious planet of BetaZed for a five year mission. All because of you, or so I’m hearin’. I for one am very happy with the way things are workin’ out.”

She smiled. He was happy, *very* happy.

“Would ya be knowin’ why the captain’s not in his room?” he asked her.

“He just finished a nerve re-gen treatment and is in hydrotherapy,” she told him.

“Oh. Where is that? Can I go see him there?” Scotty asked.

“They just shoo’d me out because he’s naked, but they’d probably let *you* in, since you’re a man.” She rolled her eyes. “Humans have such complicated gender rules. Come on, I’ll take you there,” she offered, heading down the corridor.

“Much appreciated,” he said, falling into step alongside her.

“Ooo somebody’s getting married,” she said.

“Who?” Scotty asked innocently.

“You, silly,” she laughed. It was a lovely sound.

“Oh. Yes, I am,” he said proudly, “but how did you know that?”

“I’m an empath. All of my people are empaths,” Lwaxara said.
“Oh, I did know that, but I thought it just meant that you could tell when people were happy, sad, hiding something… that sort of thing,” Scotty said waving his hand.

“I forget Captain Kirk is trying valiantly to keep the extent of my abilities hush hush… so shhh,” she put her scarred index finger up to her lips and giggled. “The captain will be honored to conduct your wedding, Mr. Scott. I’m certain of it, so don’t worry… and yes, he likes Mira, even though she was somewhat ‘difficult’ at times when she was on the Enterprise. He likes difficult women.”

Scotty looked taken aback.

“You care about Captain Kirk very much,” she smiled warmly at him, “and love being his chief engineer, but you were going to stay on Earth with Mira, if she didn’t want to come to BetaZed.”

Scotty stopped walking, realization dawning on him why the Federation was so keen to woo the Betazoids.

“Ya took all that right outta m’mind just now?” Scotty asked, amazed.

“That… and the incident with the Zetars, your difficulties on Argelius, that time Nomad killed you, and the history of Scotland. Interesting place. Okay, gotta go. Captain Kirk’s right through there,” she said, indicating the door behind him. “Nice meeting you, Mr. Scott!”

Scotty just stood there with his jaw slack as Lwaxara hurried off to wherever it was she had to be. Heavens! he thought to himself, What’ve we gotten ourselves into?

He turned around to find the door behind him was marked HYDRO AND MASSAGE THERAPIES. He opened it and went in. He spotted Kirk right away. Having finished his soak in the hydrotherapy tub, the captain was lying face down on one of the four massage tables, getting a massage from the therapist. No one else was in the room. The captain was decent… a white towel covering his mid-section… so Scotty approached. They both looked up at him.

“Oh, good. It’s not an assassin,” Jim said, smiling. Danielle, this is my chief engineer, Mr. Scott.”

“Hello,” the therapist said, still laughing from the captain’s remark; they must have just been talking about the attempt on his life, Scotty figured. It was so like Jim Kirk to be joking about it already. Scotty decided to go along with it.
“Sharba sent me to check the room for Romulans. Either of ya seen any?”

The therapist shook her curly blond head, amused.

The captain said, “Better check the hydro-tubs. A short one could hide in there.”

The therapist and Scotty laughed. “Everyone’s a comedian,” Scotty said. “I just met the amazin’ Miss Dirn. She wouldna tell me how she saved your life, Sir, just joked that she gave the Romulan a Vulcan neck pinch.”

Jim and the therapist both quirked an eyebrow and from their expressions Scotty could tell that’s exactly what had happened.

“What? No?!?” Scotty gaped, skeptical. “How did she learn that? Mr. Spock hasn’t even been able to teach it to you.”

“If you met her, I think you have a pretty good idea of how she learned it,” Jim said. “Did you come to bring me good news, Scotty? Have you heard from Mira?”

Scotty beamed, “She’s gonna come with us! I just heard and wanted to tell ya personally how grateful I am to ya, Sir! I thought perhaps it was just yer way of ensurin’ that I would be comin’, but Lwaxara just told me that you like Mira and really want to have her back on the ship.”

“Of course I like her. I’m glad she’ll be joining us, Scotty.” Jim was so happy for his friend.

“Miss Dirn also said you’d be willing to marry us on the ship when we get to Earth. That’s what Mira says she wants.”

Jim grinned, “Well, I’ll tell you something about Lwaxara… She’s never wrong. I’d be honored.”

“Oh, thank ya, Sir. I’m so happy I could burst!”
“We’ll make sure Lt. Romaine… I mean Lt. Scott… has some valuable, challenging work to do, so she doesn’t feel like she was invited on this mission just because she’s your wife. I may not be telepathic like Lwaxara, but I have a feeling you were concerned about that.”

“I think ya are indeed telepathic, Sir, or the next best thing to it,” Scott said.

“Captain’s intuition,” Jim said, “and right now, it’s telling me I’d better stick my head back into this hole in the table before my therapist makes you leave.”

Danielle smiled as she resumed the massage.

“Keep talking, Scotty. I can hear you,” Jim said. “Fire off some questions about the mission. I know you must have some.”

Well, first, I’d like to say I think it’s grand that you and Mr. Spock are takin’ on a diplomatic mission. You have a real talent for it, if ya ask me. You’ve always done a better job than the trained diplomats we’ve carried… popinjays and fools most of ‘em! If the Federation wants BetaZed, they’re really sendin’ the right man to get it for them.”

Kirk was touched. “Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, Mr. Scott. We have Lwaxara to thank… or blame, depending on how this thing turns out. She pretty much orchestrated the whole thing. She’ll be ruler of BetaZed one day. I hope she knows what she’s doing.”

“I just met her, but she seems like a very formidable young lass,” Scotty said honestly. “Captain, can I ask about the re-fit of Enterprise...?”

“You want to be as involved as possible… for a newlywed,” Jim supplied.

“Aye, Sir,” Scott said sheepishly. “There goes that telepathy again.”

“I just know you.” Jim said. “You don’t want anyone messing with your ‘bairns’ without you in the room.”

“No, Sir.”
“I honestly don’t know much at this point about the re-fit plans, sorry. Just that Admiral Cresient said there would be some and they would take about six months. He mentioned living quarters, mess, communications, environmental, and engineering. Do you think Mira would like to help, too? I could request that you both be assigned,” Jim offered.

“Oh, would ya, Sir? I’m sure Mira would like that better than a honeymoon.”

“Oh, I’d check with her on that if I were you, Scotty,” Kirk suggested wisely. Scotty couldn’t see his face anymore, but he could hear the wink in his voice.

Scotty saw Jim’s back rippling as he chuckled. What a trooper his captain was. He thought about Kirk’s situation: trying to recover from an almost fatal injury, nearly getting assassinated, worrying about his crew as they flew off without him, organizing this plan with Lwaxara so that they could all stay together another five years…. James T. Kirk was special, no doubt about it. Going down in the history books with him was an honor Scotty was very proud of. The captain would be in his wedding pictures; that thought pleased him. He wondered if Jim would ever get married. Scotty hoped the captain would have a future filled with whatever kind of happiness he desired. He deserved it.

“Has anybody on the ship mentioned to you whether they’re staying or going, Scotty?” Jim asked casually.

“I came straight over here this mornin’ and the only person I talked to was Uhura. She’s staying with us!” Scotty reported happily.

“Ah, great!” Jim said. “She’ll look splendid in a wig.”

“Sir?”

Jim chuckled. “Betazoid ladies wear huge, elaborate wigs to formal parties. Lwaxara showed me a picture. She later wondered aloud how Lt. Uhura would look in one, if she chose to try that fashion.”

“Oh, I bet our brave lass will try it; Uhura is a sport. When in Rome, right?”
“I’ve been in Rome,” Jim reminded. “You saved our necks there, as I remember.”

“Let’s hope Betazoids don’t have slaves and gladiatorial combat,” Scotty said.

“Gee, I plum forgot to ask Lwaxara about that,” Kirk joked.

They laughed.

“I think Lwaxara means to play matchmaker for our Lt. Uhura,” Kirk said.

“She did just tell me she was envious that I’d get married quarters; she said her cabin is getting cramped.”

Jim laughed, “Well, if she didn’t buy so much stuff in every port….”

“She’s gonna take me to that blown glass shop today so I can get a gift for Mira as a wedding present,” Scotty mentioned.

“I really like that lighted globe she and Spock picked out for me,” Jim said. “It’s just right as a nightlight; the glow is very peaceful.”

“Hm. Maybe she’d like one of those,” Scotty said.

“I’m very happy for you and Mira, Scotty. Go get your shopping done, maybe have another visit to the hologram deck, see the gardens. We’ll be leaving in a few days. Thanks for stopping by to tell me the happy news,” Jim said.

“Oh, you’re welcome, Sir.” Scotty realized he was being dismissed. The captain must not be able to walk yet and didn’t want Scotty to see him being moved to the anti-grav gurney when his massage ended. Scotty understood. “I’ll be seein’ ya later, Captain.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Scott,” Jim said, raising up just enough to shoot him a smile. Scotty returned it and departed.
Throughout the long afternoon, Jim was tempted to try getting out of bed and walking. His leg felt great. He felt great. In his mind, he could see Spock’s disapproving face, though, and decided he’d better not be foolish. Dr. Mullova said he could try walking tomorrow, in a therapeutic setting. Jeopardizing his recovery when he was so close to being well would be stupid. He had too many people counting on him. So, he contented himself with work. He looked up the current postings of individuals he was interested in having on the next mission and shot them letters to gauge their interest. He held off sending one to Yeoman Rand until McCoy had satisfied himself with her fiancé’s medical service record. Jim hoped Dr. Powell would meet Bones’ high standards.

He hadn’t seen Bones or Spock all day. He wondered if Spock would want to go to Vulcan during the six months leading up to the mission. He wouldn’t see his parents for five years. Would he want me to come? Would he tell them we are t’hy’la? Jim pictured Sarek’s judgmental glare. He wondered how Spock’s human mother would react. He really didn’t like thinking about parents, his or Spock’s. His personal view on the parent-child relationship was that it should end when there was no longer a child involved. Jim had left home at 17 for Starfleet Academy and never looked back. His parents were Iowa farmers. They’d given him a good, solid upbringing, but both he and Sam had no desire to linger when they came of age. The Kirks didn’t seem to mind when their sons left for the wider world. They looked upon the successful fledging of their children as a job well done. Not to say they had washed their hands of their progeny… the occasional letter was appreciated… but there was no expectation for a continued close parent-child relationship. Jim was grateful for this. He thought it unfortunate that Spock still felt bound by familial ties and expectations. It wasn’t good for him, in Jim’s opinion.

As Jim was working, a letter came in from Sarah and Tovin Nelson. That morning, Jim had written to the Nelsons, his nephew’s guardians on Deneva, to tell them about the five-year mission. He had some guilt about it and was looking for reassurances from them that they were still willing to see Peter through his schooling. Their response couldn’t have been nicer:

Dear Captain Kirk,

Peter told us you’d been injured in a cave-in, but would recover. He was so glad you were going to be all right. Us, too. They mentioned it on the news; anything that happens to the savior of Deneva is news here!

Your next mission sounds very interesting and important. Don’t worry about a thing. Raising Peter is a pleasure. Sam and Aurelen were our dear friends and we are honored to continue looking after their son.
Peter and Derek were at odds over the same girl for a time; did Peter tell you? Turned out she fell for a Tellarite and spurned then both! They’re able to laugh about it now and are better friends than ever. Both are attending to their studies better now. They excel in different subjects and help each other. Their grades are very good.

Peter has mentioned an interest in going to Starfleet Academy. We will help him apply and support him if that’s what he decides to do. He is very personable and inquisitive, a joy to raise. He will do well whatever he chooses for a career.

He is very proud of you and wishes you well on the new mission. We all do. You are probably the most beloved figure on all of Deneva. Our hearts go with you, Captain Kirk.

~ Sarah and Tovin

Jim sat back and smiled. It made him feel good that the Nelsons seemed so happy to continue their hastily-decided roles as guardians. That was one thing off his mind.
Jim was glad to know his nephew was wanted and well cared for by his guardians. He remembered when the Bells had graciously assumed responsibility for him when he was 14 and aching for an offworld adventure.

Maris and Robert Bell were his best friend Mark’s parents. They were neighbors of the Kirks, agriculturalists who had volunteered to help a group of 8,000 colonists get started on Tarsus IV. They were very excited for the 12-month mission, but their only child, Mark, didn’t want to leave his best friend for a year and begged them to let Jim come with them. The Bells liked Jim. Maris had chaperoned the boys’ class field trip to the Martian colonies the year before and considered Jim a “good influence friend” of Mark’s. Her son could be a bit unruly at times with his other friends, impulsive and foolish, but Jim had a good head on his shoulders that tempered Mark’s wild nature.

The Bells arranged things with the Kirks and they were off! Jim was in deep space on one of four massive colony ships. It was so exciting. They didn’t know what awaited them on Tarsus or that the venture would end in tragedy. Mark and Jim were running around the huge ship, exploring, meeting the crew, learning the rhythms of the ship. It was a 36-day voyage to the distant Tarsus system and the 14-year-olds were in high spirits.

“We could do this someday,” Jim said to Mark.

“Be colonists?” Mark asked.

“No, be captains of colony ships… or maybe even starships!” Jim was much more intrigued with that lifestyle than anything that awaited him at their destination.

After the tragic events on Tarsus IV had played out and Kodos the Executioner was believed to be dead, the 4,000 survivors had been divided up among the dozens of rescue vessels for the journey back to Earth. Jim and the Bells had made it through the ordeal not too much the worse for wear. The USS Aberdeen was carrying them home. Jim had lost 12 pounds, but only needed to spend half an hour in the ship’s Sickbay. The doc gave him a hypospray of nutritional supplements and some tablets to take over the next two weeks. The ship’s food wasn’t great, but it was like a Thanksgiving feast to Jim and Mark, who had endured many weeks of food rationing after the colony’s main food supply had been hit by an exotic fungus.
The boys ate their fill in the Aberdeen’s mess hall and went exploring. Being on one of Starfleet’s powerful starships was not an opportunity to be squandered. Mark had the idea to take the turbolift up to the bridge and pretend they were too young and dumb to know where they were going.

“Hey, we’re a couple of skinny kids who almost starved to death,” Mark told Jim. “What are they gonna do to us?”

Jim agreed they had the sympathy factor and the worst that might happen is that they’d be politely shoo’d away by an annoyed bridge crew. It was worth the risk. When the turbolift doors opened to the bridge and the boys stepped out, they were beguiled by what they saw. Their looks of wonder must have softened the heart of the captain because he stopped his first officer from turning them around and said, “Come here boys. Have you ever seen the bridge of a starship before?”

“No,” they chorused.

“I’m Captain Gilbert. This is my first officer, Jim Palmer,” he said.

“My name is Jim, too. Jim Kirk.”

“I’m Mark Bell. We’re from Riverside Iowa,” Mark said.

“And I bet you’ll be happy to get back home, after such an upsetting experience,” Captain Gilbert said sympathetically.

“Yes, Sir,” Mark said.

Jim was just looking around, impressed with everything he saw. With just a small gesture of his head and a smile, Captain Gilbert told his first officer to show the boys around. They got a tour of all the stations and got to meet the science officer, comms officer, helmsman, and navigator.

“Thank you for rescuing us,” Jim remembered to tell the captain before they left the bridge.
As they headed toward the turbolift, the captain said with a smile, “You’re smart, brave boys. You’re going to be all right.”

Jim was. Mark would wrap his motorcycle around a tree a year later.

Jim pinched his eyes closed. Why was he thinking about this right now? He pet Svetlana. *What shall we do now, girl? Do you think Spock will come soon?* He’d been trying to stay busy, but boredom was starting to creep up on him.

His door cracked open then and Lwaxara came in. Jim was glad to see her. He had some questions about her mother.

“How Captain,” she greeted.


“I met your Mr. Scott today. You’ve made him a very happy man!” she said.

“Oh, I think Lt. Romaine did that,” he replied. His mind was filled with images of Scotty mooning over Mira from the time she came aboard until she left… and the hangdog face he wore for weeks after her departure.

“The laddie had it bad, did he?” she commented in Scotty’s accent.

“That he did,” Jim said fondly.

“He’s a very gentle man. I saw the way you believed in his innocence when he was charged with murder on Argelius. You were steadfast. He loves you for that,” she said.

Jim smiled warmly.

“You’re a very good judge of character, Captain,” she said. “Humans have so little to go on when judging a person. I don’t know how you do it,” she remarked.
“I’m glad you came by. I was wanting to ask you what traits your mother finds admirable. I’m putting together a preliminary list of staff I might ask to join the mission. You say your mother will be impressed with me and my officers, but I want *all* of my people to meet with her approval,” Jim said.

“You’re a perfectionist, Captain,” she teased.

“A bit, yes,” he admitted. “Diplomacy’s a delicate thing. I don’t want to unknowingly select someone with an offensive trait. So, can you help me out with some insights about your mother.”

She considered him thoughtfully. “Um, no,” she said.

“What?”

“No,” she repeated. “Having arranged all of this, having given you my wholehearted endorsement as negotiator, my job is done. I’m on Team BetaZed after all, and have done more than enough conspiring with the other side,” she winked to let him know she still adored him, but he could tell she was serious.

“Hmm,” Kirk considered. “I’m the opposition now, am I?”

“Just trying to heed my loyalties. I’m sure you can respect that, Captain. I wouldn’t want to give you an unfair advantage over my own mother in the negotiations.”

“I see your point, however, it’s a bit of a stretch to imagine a non-telepath ever having an advantage over a telepath. I’m just trying to even the playing field.” Kirk pressed.

“I know, Captain,” she said kindly.

“But still no?”

“I’m afraid so,” she said unapologetically.
He sighed. Lwaxara was right, though. She wasn’t on his “side.” It was up to him to forge a path to a future where Betazoids would be on the Federation’s side. But that future wasn’t here yet.

“All right,” Jim agreed reluctantly. “Can you still be my therapist, though?”

She laughed, but seemed a little less high-spirited than usual. “I’m going to miss you, Captain. I wish I could go with you all when you leave. I’d love to see Earth for myself.”

“You need six more months to get well,” Jim pointed out.

“That’s just it; I am well. I feel healthy. It’s just the aesthetics that are lacking. I wish such things didn’t matter so much. I’m perfectly fine, just not pretty. It isn’t fair.”

“No, it isn’t,” he agreed, thinking about how her appearance would be judged on Earth.

“It’s no different on my world. We may see beyond skin-deep characteristics a little better than Terrans can, but outward appearance… beauty… is still important.

“I once called beauty ‘our last prejudice,’” Kirk recalled.

She looked into his mind and saw Dr. Jones, a blind psychologist who didn’t even know what beauty was. She had been irritated by the Enterprise officers’ attitude that such a beautiful woman shouldn’t want to work with beings as ugly as Ambassador Kollos. Miranda Jones didn’t know why people regarded her as beautiful and Kollos as ugly; there was no appreciable difference to her.

“You are thinking of inviting Dr. Jones on the mission,” Lwaxara saw in his mind.

“Yes. I need to ask Spock how he feels about it first,” Jim said.

“She saved him. She’s telepathic… but she’s human,” Lwaxara said, confused.
“She is a very rare Terran who was born telepathic and had to train on Vulcan,” Jim explained.

“This is why you think he might like having her on the mission? She was rude to him, very jealous. She almost let him die. If you hadn’t spoken so sharply to her, made her see her error, she might have. It’s amazing how forgiving you are, Captain,” Lwaxara remarked.

“Her mission had first been offered to Spock, who had turned it down. Dr. Jones was very afraid he would change his mind after joining with Kollos and experiencing the Medusan’s mind. She felt threatened by Spock and lost herself for awhile, that’s all. She has not had an easy time in life…” Jim said.

“…and you thought some Betazoid ‘therapy’ would do her good,” Lwaxara finished for him.

Kirk laughed. “Yes, I guess I did think that. I don’t know what her experiences have been since I last saw her, but she was badly in need of some peace of mind then.”

“Perhaps the Medusans helped her,” Lwaxara suggested.

“I hope so,” Jim replied.

“You’re very accepting of people’s flaws, Captain,” she said.

He remembered that she had been sad about not being able to come with him to Earth.

“How about when I can walk, I give you a tour of the Enterprise before we leave?” he offered.

“Oh, I would love that!” she said, clasping her hands together in delight at the invitation.

“She’s going to be re-fitted and may look a lot different when we come back for you. I don’t know. I’d like you to see her now, just in case they change her significantly,” he said.

“Oh, yes, I’d love to see your beautiful ship inside,” she enthused.
“Beware though, you might get the bug,” Kirk said.

“The bug?”

“The space bug,” Jim said with a grin, offering her the memory of Captain Gilbert’s bridge tour on the Aberdeen.

“Hm, it bites hard, huh?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. Some people. I feel like you might be one of those people,” he told her.

She could see in his mind the whole story of Taurus IV and that he didn’t want to talk about it, so she left it alone.

“I hope my mother lives a long, long time,” she said. “When she dies or is impaired by old age, I will take her place, and I want to have had lots of adventures offworld by then.”

“You could go with Ambassador McCoy to New Fabrine; I’m sure he’d be glad to have you,” he suggested.

“Ooo, that sounds good!” she exclaimed.

“McCoy to Captain Kirk,” Bones’ voice broke over Jim’s communicator.

“Wow, right on cue. How about that?” Jim raised his eyebrows at Lwaxara as he reached for his communicator.

“Kirk here, Bones.”

“Hi Jim. Hey, I wanted to let you know it’s a go with Dr. Powell. Rand really picked a winner; turns out he’s got a helluva resume. We’d be lucky to get him.”
“Oh, that’s good news,” Jim said. “Do you want to be the one to write to him?”

“Sure, I can do that,” McCoy said.

“Great, Bones. Thanks. Feel free to forward him my memo about the mission. I’ll write back to Janice and encourage them to join us.”


“Feels great,” Jim said. “I had hydrotherapy and a massage this morning. Tomorrow, Dr. Mullova’s going to let me try walking! You gonna be there?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. When is it?” McCoy asked.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask the docs,” Kirk said. “Oh, have you talked to Scotty today? He came to see me and said he and Mira are IN! He wants me to marry them in the ship’s chapel.”

“Yeah, he told me. That’s one happy Scotsman, Jim! Uhura’s staying, too, he said… and he mentioned something about her wearing a wig…?”

Kirk chuckled as he made eye contact with Lwaxara who was trying to giggle silently. “Ha! I’ll tell you about that later.”

“Okay, Jim. You have a good night and see you tomorrow for the promenade around the therapy room,” Bones signed off.

“Goodnight, Doc. Kirk out.”

Lwaxara said, “I’m glad Uhura is coming to BetaZed. I didn’t get to talk with her very much here, but I feel like she’s someone I’d like to know better.”
“She’s a terrific officer. Very brave and clever. She has a beautiful singing voice and is one of the only people on the Enterprise besides McCoy who can get away with teasing Spock.” Jim smiled.

“And your former yeoman, Janice. She’ll be coming back if her fiancé signs on to the mission?” Lwaxara asked.

“Yes,” Jim said happily.

“You used to find her tempting sexually. Not anymore?”

“No,” Jim said.

“The change in your relationship with Spock has made such a difference?” Lwaxara asked.

“Oh, yes,” Jim confirmed.

Lwaxara smiled. She could see how Spock filled Jim’s mind and his heart.

“Will you two bond before you leave here?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Spock says the more mind melds we do, the better the odds that a bond will ‘take’ on the first try,” Jim reminded her.

“Are you melding tonight?” she asked.

“Yes. Spock should be here soon,” Jim said. He glanced at his chronometer. It was 19:31.

“Well, I’ll go so you can write that letter to Janice before he gets here. I’ll see you later, Captain.”

“Come watch me try walking tomorrow if you want.”
“Thanks. I’ll be there!” she said as a goodbye.

She slipped out and Jim switched on his screen. He pulled his hygiene tools out of his table drawer and spruced up a bit as he was thinking what to write to Janice.

The drapes on his picture window were open again now and framed his silver ship. Soon, Kirk thought wistfully. Soon I’ll be back aboard, back in command, stronger than ever because of Spock.

He focused on writing the letter. When he was done, he switched to Starbase 4 News to catch up. There was a memorial service planned for T’Nar the day after tomorrow in the gardens, a few hours before the USS Potemkin was scheduled to arrive with the disabled Astral Queen in tow. That would be Day 11 for Jim. He would be able to see Jon before they shipped out. That pleased him. He thought again of Mark Bell, his childhood friend who hadn’t made it past his 16th year. When Jim met Jon Daily, he’d struck him as what Mark might have been like had he lived. At 22, Jon was full of promise but unfocused and undisciplined. Jim decided to be the kind of friend to him that Mrs. Bell had wanted him to be to Mark. Jon Daily’s success was a kind of memorial to Mark. Jon didn’t know that. He would never know that, but Jim did. He smiled thinking about his two old friends. They were forever linked in his mind. As he was thinking about them, there was a soft knock at the door.

Spock. At last.
Jim was hungry for Spock’s touch, his mind. They didn’t need small talk anymore. Jim reached out his hand and Spock rushed to him. Their minds joined a few seconds after their hands. Spock washed over him, around him, through him. It was such a comfort. Jim’s whole body relaxed.

*Hello, Spock.*

*Jim. I have missed you.*

For a few moments they just enjoyed the warmth of the meld, the intimate presence of each other. Then, they started sharing events of the day, thoughts, feelings. Jim was getting better at navigating Spock’s memories. He wanted to know if he’d been lonely in bed last night.

*You are worried that I will grow old before you do, die, and leave you alone.* Jim saw in his mind how much distress these thoughts had caused his friend last night in his cabin.

*I worked through it in meditation,* Spock reassured him, showing him Prof. Lydia Abbott’s charming house by the lake and the plaque on her wall.

*That’s an interesting bit of philosophy, Spock. She was wise.*

*Indeed.*

*If I could live forever just to keep you from crying, Spock, I would.*

*I know.*

Jim smiled at Spock’s memories of exploring Prof. Abbott’s lake, the dense foliage and secret hiding places. Spock had been alone that day, and content to be, but having Jim here with him now in the memory, he could see the possibilities for… play. They were 10-year-old boys, running
through the trees, getting their feet wet and muddy on the lakeshore. Jim could smell the blossoms, see the cottage back through the trees where Spock’s mother and her friend were having tea.

*Look, Jim,* Spock shouted. He had spotted a rickety old dock and run to the end of it. Jim came running after him, stopping to pick up some small rocks on the shore before making his way out to Spock.

*Do you know how to skip stones, Spock?*

*No.*

*I’ll show you.*

Jim selected a rock and put just the right English on it, sending it skipping across the lake’s glassy surface four times. Spock was impressed.

*Four times is good, but six is better,* Jim told him. *Hold the rock like this.* Jim positioned Spock’s boyish fingers. *Now, face away from me and shoot across your body at a low angle.*

Spock smiled when he got two skips out of the rock.

*That’s great for your first time!* Jim said encouragingly. *Here, try another.*

The boys kept throwing stones until there were none left.

*Come back to the shore with me, Spock. I’ll show you how to pick good rocks. They have to be smooth and kinda flat…*

Then suddenly, they were in Iowa on the shore of a similar lake. Jim had been thinking how the lake in Spock’s memory resembled a pond on his friend Mark’s property that adjoined his parents’ fields. There weren’t as many trees, but it was about the same size. Sam had taught Jim and Mark how to skip stones on that pond.
Jim! a pre-teen Mark hollered from about 30 feet away. *Come up to the house. My mom made sandwiches... and there’s grape juice!*

*That’s Mark Bell, Spock. He was my neighbor and best friend growing up. This is his pond. I learned to skip stones here.*

*He was with you on Tarsus IV, Spock observed in his mind.*

*Yes. Jim showed Spock his experiences on Tarsus. He had only shared bits and pieces with him before.*

*Mark died after you returned home, Spock said.*

*Yes. A year later. A stupid motorcycle accident in town.*

The lakeside scene dissolved into Jim’s teenaged bedroom. He and Mark were studying in the late afternoon. Below his upstairs window, sunshine lit up the tassels on the long rows of corn, gold gleaming above the green. In jeans and a red plaid shirt, Jim was seated at his desk, quizzing Mark who was sprawled out on Jim’s bed. The Academy’s entrance exam was in three weeks. The two 16-year-olds had big dreams of getting back to space and being captains on powerful starships, exploring the galaxy, rescuing people in need, and discovering new worlds. But in the past month, Mark had been getting discouraged. His grades weren’t as good as Jim’s and he had a much more difficult time concentrating for the long durations Jim could.

*Hey, let’s get our bikes and go for a ride, Jim. We need a break, Mark suggested.*

*We can take a break when the test is over. We really need to hit the books hard until then, Jim countered.*

Mark sighed, *You sound like my mom. C’mon, it’s a gorgeous day. Let’s go tear up some turf. We can race to town. He sprang up and headed for the door.*

*Mark, get serious, Jim said. Sit down. I know Xenobiology is giving you a bellyache. We’ll work on that for awhile. I’ll help you. We only have three weeks. We can’t waste ANY of it.*
Well, I can’t waste this day! Mark said, heading down the stairs. Four thousand people are dead, Jim, but we’re alive. For some unfathomable reason WE are alive. Let’s go prove it!

Mark was violating their unspoken rule not to talk about Tarsus.

Mark! Jim called down the staircase, At the Academy, there will be four hours of homework a night. How are you going to handle that if you can’t even buckle down enough to pass the entrance exam?!

Mark shot back, Who are we kidding? My grades aren’t good enough for the Academy anyway, Jim, no matter how well I do on the test. YOU ace it and go make Riverside proud, okay? I’ve gotta get out. I can’t concentrate anymore.

Mark walked home to get his motorcycle and Jim went back to his room and kept working deep into the night.

I heard the sirens, Spock. It didn’t occur to me….

Jim’s bedroom faded away and Jim was sitting inside a church. His best friend was lying in a closed casket as his parents sobbed in the first row of pews. Jim was seated between his own parents, who kept patting his leg and putting their arms around his shoulders. Oh, Honey, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry, his mother was saying.

Jim was trying to be stoic and hold himself together until he got home. His grieving mind was in turmoil.

You thought… Spock began carefully. You thought that perhaps Mark had intentionally….

No. No, I didn’t. I don’t. He wouldn’t have…. He was reckless by nature, that’s all, Jim protested.

You never told his parents what his last words to you were.

No. I told them Mark wanted a break and I wanted to keep studying. That’s all, Jim said.
Jon Daily reminded you of Mark Bell, Spock said, guiding them away from this venue.

Yes, Jim said. Jon wanted the stars, too, but didn’t know how to get them.

Capt. Daily told me how much you helped him when he was young and floundering.

Yeah, you showed me the conversation you had with him in Riley’s quarters. I’m so glad you got there in time to save him, Spock. I want to make sure I get to see him before we leave. The news just said his ship will come in midday, day after tomorrow. Oh, and there’s going to be a memorial service early that morning for T’Nar, in the gardens.

I should like to attend, Spock said.

I’ll go with you if I can walk by then, Kirk said.

The doctors are going to let you try putting weight on your leg tomorrow, Spock saw in his mind.

Yes. Finally, Jim sighed.

You have been patient. Tomorrow, you shall be rewarded, Spock predicted.

I hope you’re right, Jim replied. Nothing has atrophied. Perhaps I’m expecting too much, but if the nerves have healed, I should be able to just walk like normal again, without any problems. I want you there. Will you come?

Of course, Jim.

A surge of love rose up in Jim. The joy of being in Spock’s mind was profound, even when they were just chatting.

Show me the dragons, Spock, Jim said suddenly, the dragons of Berengaria, when you were there
This would be good! There were so many tales about the flying reptiles of Berengaria VII, each more far-fetched than the last, but Spock had actually seen them with his own eyes and soon the memory would be part of Jim as well.

_They are very interesting creatures_, Spock said, _but do not expect them to be 500 feet long or breathe fire._

Suddenly there was moist soil under their feet and a green canopy overhead with purple sky peeking through. The 5-person landing party was making its way through the dense foliage to the edge of a deep canyon. Number One was fussing that the captain was getting too near the edge.

_She is right, Captain_, Spock said. _My tricorder indicates an abrupt 428-foot vertical drop-off seven feet ahead._

Very slowly and carefully, the landing party crept as close to the rocky rim of the canyon as they dared. Concealed by leaves as big as their heads, they peered out and down at the vast, windy canyon.

_Do you see any dragons, Captain?_ Number One asked.

_No. Not yet_, Pike said. _Spock, are you reading anything? The ship’s sensors pinpointed this area as highly traveled by the creatures. Good updrafts. I wonder where they are?_

_Three large, cold-blooded lifeforms are approaching airborne from the south, Captain_, Spock informed them.

All heads swiveled to the right. _There they are!_ Captain Pike said, spotting the shapes moving toward them. _Quiet, everyone._

The landing party watched in wonder as the slender reptiles glided by at eye level, their huge wings stretching out like rubber parachutes in the strong wind. They measured around 70 feet long.
Wow! Pike whispered.

_Six more approaching from the south_, Spock advised, checking his tricorder.

Those dragons joined the other three, circling upward, upward, until they were about 50 feet above the landing party. Then, positioning their streamlined bodies like arrows, they swooped down to the floor of the canyon to attack their prey: large, hooved mammals.

The dragons that had failed to make a kill, returned on the updrafts to try again. The iridescent scales on the top of their mostly green bodies gleamed in the pale yellow sun as they reached eye level with the landing party. Their dorsal spines stood up in a straight, impressive ridge along their backs. From underneath, however, the formidable creatures looked almost invisible. Their bellies and the undersides of their wings were the same purple as the sky, making them hard to detect by their prey below.

Once they were all well-fed, the dragons performed some acrobatics, apparently just for the sheer joy of it. It was an impressive display. Their narrow bodies sliced through the air when their wings were folded, and wafted almost like kites when spread to the wind. After a few minutes, the huge reptiles finished their aerial dance and headed back to the south, following the canyon’s rim.

_Well, that was definitely worth a stop at Berengaria VII_, Pike said, as he turned to lead the team back to the beam-down site.

_Indeed_, said Number One. _Did you capture all that on your tricorder, Spock?_

_Affirmative_, Spock said.

_Can you have it edited and viewable for the crew by tomorrow?_ Pike asked him.

_Yes, Sir_, Spock replied.

_Splendid. That will make a nice Christmas surprise for them, seeing the famous dragons of Berengaria_, Pike said.
Spock felt Jim’s delight through the meld. It was such a pleasure sharing this with him.

You saw the dragons on Christmas Eve, Spock? Jim asked.

Yes, Spock confirmed.

…and you worked all through the night making the recording as polished as possible for the Captain’s ‘Christmas gift’ to the crew, Jim saw through the meld.

Yes. Captain Pike regretted that more of the crew could not have the opportunity to beam down to experience the dragons firsthand, Spock explained.

So you made them the next best thing. Everyone was talking about it. Lt. McDonald said you should win Nature Documentarian of the Year, Jim remarked. That was a nice thing you did for your crew, Spock.

It was an order, Spock protested half-heartedly.

Working all night to make it an extra special experience for your shipmates on Christmas wasn’t an order…. That was all YOUR idea, Jim said, from your heart.

Jim remembered gushing to McCoy about how GOOD Spock was inside. He wasn’t wrong.

We’re going to be on Earth during the Christmas season. I want to soak it up with you, Jim said.

Having served 4½ years under Captain Kirk, Spock knew of Jim’s fondness for Christmas. Scotty and McCoy loved it, too. Most of the crew did, for various reasons. It was always an enjoyable time of year on the ship. People were just a little bit kinder to each other, a little slower to get irritated or impatient. Spock endorsed anything that had that effect on human beings.

Spock searched Jim’s thoughts for exactly what he might mean by ‘soak it up.’

Ah, you want to enjoy the seasonal ambiance and the feelings of joy and goodwill with me, Spock
concluded.

Yes, Jim confirmed. *Christmas heightens good feelings, and this year I have the best feelings I’ve ever had.*

*So do I, Jim.* Spock brought Jim’s fingers to his lips, placing soft kisses on each knuckle.

Jim sighed at the contentment that was his to enjoy with Spock now.

*I hope we don’t have too much work to do during those six months,* Jim wished. *I told Scotty he could be involved in the engine modifications. I hope they at least consult me about the other mods, but I doubt they’re going to want either one of us buzzing about trying to micromanage things. Staffing concerns will probably take the lion’s share of my time… and watching tutorials on How To Be a Diplomat in Five Easy Lessons,* Jim joked.

*You, Jim, are ‘a natural.’ Following your instincts will surely lead you down a better path than any formal training in diplomacy,* Spock offered.

*You sound like Lwaxara,* Jim said.

*Why, thank you,* Spock replied.

What a crazy thing it was meeting her, Jim pondered. It changed the course of their lives. He held Spock’s hand a little tighter. Think if he had lost Spock. If he had left for Gol and gone through with the Kolinahr…. It still gave Jim cold shivers to think of it. Spock’s beautiful feelings being burned to ash and Jim light years away, not even understanding why his friend left.

*Jim…* Spock could feel he was getting upset. He could understand. The feelings of panic he’d experienced in his cabin last night at the thought of losing Jim… they’d been so powerful.

*Spock, please don’t ever go to Gol, even if I die. Use whatever philosophy you need to help you live with it, but promise me you will live with it, not try to burn it away and all memories of me with it.*

*I promise,* Spock said. It was an easy vow to make. He had Jim’s love, and the memory of that was
like a diamond. It couldn’t be burned away even if he tried. He would never try. He would cherish it until his last breath. He would smile because it happened.

*I love you, Spock.*

*I love you, too, Jim. I am glad we are going on a mission that is not as dangerous as we are used to. I have never had this much to lose.*

*Neither have I, and I want to hang onto it,* Jim agreed. *I’m happy that something so important to the Federation is also so perfect for us personally.*

*Yes,* Spock agreed.

*Janice Rand may be coming back,* Jim said. *She’s engaged to a Dr. Powell on the Scrimshire, who Bones is inviting to join his staff. Oh, and I was wondering how you’d feel about maybe asking Dr. Miranda Jones on this mission? She’s a telepath and has had a lot of experience with diplomacy on the Medusan homeworld.*

Spock wasn’t opposed to the idea. Dr. Jones had saved his sanity… and his life… after the accident, albeit with a lot of strong encouragement from Jim. They had parted well, though. He had wished her the best and he meant it.

*She is not still on the Medusan homeworld with Ambassador Kollos?* Spock asked.

*I don’t know. She may be,* Jim said. *She may have chosen to live out her life there. What was it like, linking minds with Kollos, Spock?*

Jim remembered Spock on the bridge, after merging with Kollos, reciting poetry to Uhura, smiling at the new sensations, and commenting on the loneliness intrinsic to the design of our separate, compact bodies. He wondered what it felt like. He wondered what Kollos looked like inside his small metal box.

Suddenly, Spock was aware of Jim standing in front of Kollos’ box in his mind, reaching for it to have a peek at a Medusan that could drive a human mad with one look.
“Aaaagh!” Jim screamed in pain as Spock abruptly severed the mind meld. There was a jagged, gaping tear in his mind, searing agony where a moment ago there’d been comfort and safety.

“Jim! Jim, I am sorry.” Spock was saying. He seemed far away. Kirk couldn’t understand him.

Jim was drawing sharp breaths through his teeth, holding his head like it was coming apart.

“I thought you were going to see the Medusan! I wrenched my mind away to prevent it. That caused the pain. Oh, Jim, I am sorry!” Spock said, trying to comfort him.

Spock was experiencing just as much pain, but he could control it better than Jim could. He reached for the button to call the nurse, but before he pushed it Lwaxara ran in.

“What’s wrong?! I felt intense pain from you both,” she said. “Can I help?”

“Please, if you can,” Spock begged, delivering the whole story to her telepathically in three beats of his pounding heart. “Help Jim first,” he choked out, but she was reaching for both of them, creating a circuit through the three of them, changing the flow of mental energy and deadening the pain.

Jim had been near to passing out from the pain and shock, but now he was breathing easier. Lwaxara turned to Spock. He could feel that she was in his mind, searching for the memory of the Medusan.

No! Do not look! Spock shouted, trying to shield the memory of Kollos’ physical form. You could go mad, he warned.

Spock had kept the memory of what Kollos looked like locked away in a deep corner of his mind. He knew to stay away from that corner. Jim had not known. Foolish of me not to have warned him of the danger lurking there. How could I not have thought of that? Spock admonished himself.

I will take care of it, Lwaxara said soothingly. Don’t worry.
Spock could sense her near the memory of seeing Kollos with his naked eyes… then the memory was gone. He couldn’t even recall what the Ambassador’s container looked like. He remembered it was some type of metal box, but the details of it were missing from his mind. The box had opened, he had seen the Medusan and gone mad. He remembered that these events had occurred, but he had no direct recollection of them. They were like a story someone had told him.

"There," Lwaxara said, confidently. "That oughta do it. Do you see what I’ve done, Spock?"

"The memory... the dangerous part... is gone," Spock recognized.

"Is Jim all right?" Spock asked her aloud, as she retreated from his mind. The captain’s face no longer looked like he was in pain, but he seemed groggy and confused.

"He will be," she said. "Go back in and explain to him what happened. Comfort him. You can do that better than I can," she acknowledged. "Your mind is free of Medusans now. I don’t know if Kollos’ appearance would have harmed Captain Kirk or not. It was, after all, just a memory, an image of an image. I was tempted to look at it before I destroyed it, but I decided this was not the time for curiosity," she winked. "You did the right thing with the speedy retreat. Better a torn meld than madness, right?" She was worried that Spock was blaming himself. She was right.

"Jim obviously did not think seeing Kollos in my mind would hurt him. What if there is something else in my memories that could endanger him?" Spock asked, his face a portrait of guilt and worry.

She spent a few seconds searching his mind. "You’re clean," she assured him.

"Thank you for what you did... however you managed to accomplished it," Spock said to Lwaxara. Many of her abilities were still a mystery to him.

"You’re welcome," she said, "...and if you want assistance with the t’hy’la bonding before you leave, I could probably help with that."

"You could?" Spock asked, his eyes wide.

"Perhaps. But if you want to do it alone, I understand. It’s a very personal thing," she conceded.
“I am afraid I will fail, hurt him, like I just did,” Spock admitted. “My pride can be put aside. You are a friend to us both. I accept your offer of help.”

Lwaxara was touched. This Vulcan was so special. There weren’t many Vulcans who would even admit to having pride.

“Jim needs to rest now and just be with you. We can make the attempt tomorrow if you like.”

“Yes,” Spock agreed.

Thank you, he whispered again to her mind, as she left.

If she hadn’t come to help, Spock would have had to call the nurse for Jim’s pain. There would have been questions and judgments.

Jim. He still seemed in a bit of a fog, like someone who’d received a large dose of a sedative. Spock ran his fingers gently over Jim’s face and through his soft hair. He held his hand and kissed his forehead. After a few seconds, Jim’s mind opened to him.

I am here, Jim. You are safe.

Mmmm. Hi, Spock, Jim purred in response. He felt so sleepy, but his mind was clearing. We were talking about dragons and Christmas and staffing the mission... What happened?

You almost saw Ambassador Kollos. I abruptly ended the meld to prevent it, Spock explained.

Lwaxara was here, Jim remembered.

Yes. When I tore my mind away from yours, it caused us both intense pain. She sensed it and came in. She proved most helpful, Spock said.
What did she do? Kirk asked, curious.

Spock quickly related the telepathic conversation he’d had with Lwaxara and everything she had done to help them… and the offer she’d made.

She can help us bond? Jim asked, surprised.

She thinks so, yes, Spock confirmed.

It’s okay with me. I trust her, but it’s up to you, Spock, Jim said.

I have already accepted her offer, Spock told him, revealing his reasons to Jim through the meld. The warmth of Spock’s love and concern for his wellbeing surrounded him.

I am more important to you than your pride, Jim said.

By many degrees, Spock said.

I can handle a little pain and the possibility of a few failures, though, Spock, if you want to do it alone, just me and you, Jim said.

I know, Jim, Spock replied. Lwaxara has proven her trustworthiness, and her abilities exceed mine. To refuse her help would be illogical.

Jim smiled. Okay, so it’s tomorrow, then, he said.

Yes, tomorrow, Spock confirmed.

A thrill of excitement ran through Jim. Spock felt it. He bent down and kissed Jim’s lips.

This has been an amazing week, Spock. If bonding proves impossible, for whatever reason
tomorrow, please don’t be disappointed. What we have right at this moment is so much.

Yes, Spock agreed.

We can just continue like this, if a bond isn’t in the cards for us. It will be enough, Jim said.

You are concerned that even with Lwaxara’s assistance, we may not succeed, Spock said for clarity.

Jim sighed. He didn’t want to let Spock down. My brain isn’t laid out like yours or Lwaxara’s. Telepathy between us relies completely on YOUR abilities. I can’t ‘pull my weight’ or ‘meet you halfway.’ I’m the weak link here, so if it doesn’t work, please blame me, not yourself.

Spock clasped Jim’s left hand in both of his and held it to his chest like he had in Sickbay two weeks ago, when he stood over Jim’s pale form after surgery.

Jim, when I first told you I craved a t’hy’la bond, Spock began, it is this simple feeling that I meant more than anything else: Closeness, trust, intimacy, love. I knew only that I NEEDED… but like so many of us, I did not know WHAT. If a permanent telepathic bond is not possible, then it is not possible. To experience these feelings and have them reciprocated… THAT is what I craved.

Jim’s eyes were glistening as they gazed into Spock’s. He was so moved by Spock’s earnestness and could only nod his head as he swallowed down a welling sob.
“Captain Kirk, you have been my second most interesting patient of all time,” Virginia said the next morning as she checked his numbers.

Kirk smiled a charming smile. “Oh? And who’s the first?”

“Lwaxara, of course,” she said with a wink.

“Well, all right then. I don’t mind losing to her,” Jim said.

“Second place isn’t losing, Captain. I’ve been a nurse for 28 years; I’ve had thousands of patients.”

Jim smiled.

“Today’s the big day. You get to test out that leg,” she said.

“Yeah. I am eager,” he said.

She whipped out a pair of toenail trimmers and uncovered his feet. “Let’s get those toes ready for the big event.”

Kirk grinned. He liked her manner. “Okay. Thanks. Do you know what time it’s going to be? I want my friends there.”

“I would guess late morning, but that’s only a guess. Dr. Mullova will be in soon. You can ask her.”

“Okay,” Jim said.
As she clipped his nails, Virginia said, “Between you and me, you may not be sleeping here tonight. Sobren from the Office of Vulcan Affairs was here last night talking to Dr. Mullov. He wants to offer you and Mr. Spock a hospitality suite in the hotel tonight. It has a 2nd floor balcony overlooking the gardens, so you can attend T’Nar’s memorial service in the morning with a little bit of privacy since you’re still recovering.”

“Oh,” Jim said, not sure how to respond to that.

“If all goes well with the walking attempt today, Dr. Mullov said he will do one last treatment… we call it ‘nerve pruning,’ then he’ll discharge you,” she explained. “He said as long as you have Mr. Spock or Dr. McCoy with you tonight to make sure you’re all right, he has no problem with you staying in the hotel.”

If there was anything Kirk was good at it was adjusting quickly to new information. “Well then, I guess I better pack up my gizmos,” he said, sliding his table drawer open.

“Those are med clinic property, Captain, not your personal toys,” she said with humor.

“Then the robes aren’t complimentary either?” he joked.

Virginia laughed. “I think you will find the hotel suite very well equipped with everything you’ll need.”

“I’ll miss my view,” he sighed, glancing at his ship, “and my nurse.”

She smiled. “I’ll miss you, too, Captain Kirk. We’ll all look forward to seeing you again in six months when you return for Lwaxara.”

“Then you know about our next mission?” Jim asked.

“Yes. Word gets around here,” she said.
“This clinic was a lifesaver… or at least a career-saver… for me. I owe you a lot,” he reflected.

She finished clipping his nails and covered his feet back up, giving them a little pat. “Oh, now. You save that talk for the doctors. I’m just the toenail trimmer,” she joked modestly.

“I never asked where you’re from?” Jim realized.

“I grew up in northern Idaho,” Virginia said.

“My uncle has a ranch in Idaho,” Jim mentioned. “Beautiful there. I was raised in Riverside, Iowa. My folks are farmers,” Jim said.

“The great Captain Kirk, just a corn-fed farm boy from Iowa, huh?”

“That’s right.” He shrugged humbly.

“Well, they grow ‘em right in Iowa,” she said as a compliment.

Jim smiled.

“How long since you’ve been back to Earth?” he asked.

“I go every couple of years. I’ve been on the Astral Queen several times. Terrible what happened to her.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“Her captain is your friend?”

Yes. Jonathan Daily. I should get to see Jon tomorrow,” he said happily.
The door opened and in came Dr. Mullova with Dr. McCoy in tow. They all said their good mornings.

“Captain Kirk,” Dr. Mullova said, “I don’t suppose you could leave Leonard with us when you go. We are going to miss him so much!”

McCoy looked down sheepishly. “Aw, shucks.”

Jim laughed. He knew his friend had enjoyed the company of these exceptional doctors.

As Dr. Mullova looked over his numbers, Jim smiled at McCoy.

Dr. Mullova was shaking her head. “I don’t know why you and Mr. Spock enjoy these mind melds of yours so much, Captain. They look terribly painful.”

“They have their up sides,” Jim said casually, with an arm cross that let them know that topic was off-limits.

“Are you ready to test that leg today, Jim?” McCoy asked. He seemed almost as excited about it as Jim was.

“Ah, to be vertical and mobile again!” Kirk said with gusto. “Yes, I’m ready whenever you doctors give the word.”

“Have a little breakfast, Captain… or a big one if you like,” Dr. Mullova winked. “Leonard can finish his last day of morning rounds with me, then we’ll come get you around 10:30. How does that sound?”

“Terrific!” Jim said.

“Have Spock bring you over a fresh uniform, Jim. You get to be dressed for this,” Bones said.
“No more Seymour Butts gown?” Jim joked.

Virginia laughed… way too loud.

“You’ve never heard that one before?” McCoy asked the tickled nurse.

“Nooo!” she said, holding her sides in hysterics.

“Sorry,” Jim said to Dr. Mullova. “Didn’t mean to break your nurse.”

“You may break us all standing at full height in your uniform,” Dr. Mullova said, flirty but sincere. “The great Captain Kirk in all his glory!”

“I wish people would stop calling me that,” Jim said, looking to Bones for help.

“Well, I think that it’s more than fitting,” Bones said. “I can’t wait to see you back on your feet again, Jim. If everything has healed well, you should do fine.”

“Let’s do a quick check on all the branches, shall we?” Dr. Mullova said. “May I, Captain?” she asked.

“Be my guest,” Jim replied.

She lifted the covers off of his left leg and began running her scanner around his hip. Everyone held their collective breath.

After a couple of minutes, she pronounced, “You’re going to need one last pruning this afternoon. We already knew that. But all the nerves involved in walking are strong and healthy. I predict a smooth transition back to mobility for you, Captain!”

Smiling faces looked around the room at each other.
“We’ll take you to the therapy room and start you off with parallel bars for support,” Dr. Mullova explained. “Then, if that goes well, you can start strolling the halls and getting into trouble like Lwaxara.”

Jim and McCoy chuckled at that.

“Hoo boy!” Virginia said, “I remember when *that* girl went ambulatory. This clinic hasn’t been the same since!”

“That reminds me,” Jim said, “I promised her a tour of the Enterprise before we leave. After a few trips around the ward, do you think I’d be able to walk over there and make good on my promise?”

“Maybe give yourself a day at least to get your stride back before walking that far,” Dr. Mullova said. “You wouldn’t want to stumble and start a rumor that we do poor work here.”

Jim chuckled, “Okay, Doc.”

“See you at 10:30, Captain,” Dr. Mullova said as she turned to leave with McCoy in tow.

“Bye, Jim. Eat a good breakfast, and don’t forget to have Spock bring you some clothes and boots.”

“Okay, Bones. See you later,” Jim called.

His routine was about to change, again. Jim was ready to meet the future with excitement and optimism, but he couldn’t help feeling a little regret over leaving this room, where so many life-changing events had taken place. He knew he’d have nostalgia for it for a long time.

Glancing out at his ship, Jim told Virginia, “Whoever gets my room next, I hope they like stargazing.”

“It IS a waste of a beautiful view when the drapes are shut,” she said wistfully. “Believe it or not, many patients prefer it that way, though. You can tell a lot about a person by whether they like the drapes open or shut. Stargazers heal faster.”
“Is that a medical fact?” Kirk asked good-naturedly with some healthy skepticism.

“Oh, definitely,” she said with a wink. “Get some breakfast, Captain.” She pulled his screen’s arm across his bed, then headed for the door.

“Bye, Virginia from Idaho,” he said.

“Goodbye, farm boy,” she called warmly before slipping out.

***

Spock arrived at 10:15 and Jim got dressed in bed. It felt great having his uniform back on. He was just slipping on the last boot when the orderlies came for him. They took him on an anti-grav bed to a therapy room he hadn’t seen before. Both of the Doctors Mullov were already there, along with Lwaxara and McCoy.

Dr. Mullov greeted them, taking control of this therapy session. “Since Mr. Spock is the strongest here, I’m going to ask him please to help you to the parallel bars, Captain.”

“I didn’t know I was going to have to do gymnastics,” Jim joked, gesturing at the apparatus before him.

The doctors and Lwaxara chuckled.

“Captain,” Spock said, offering his hand.

Jim swung his legs off the edge of the bed effortlessly, and taking Spock’s hand, gently slid off the bed until both feet touched the floor. He stood up completely and found they held his weight.

“Yea!” Lwaxara cheered. “You stuck the landing.”
Spock grabbed his elbow in case his first step proved more difficult than everyone was expecting, but the captain gracefully put one foot in front of the other until he was in reach of the bars. Spock released him once he had a hand on each bar. Jim walked between them slowly, holding the bars like he knew he was supposed to, but he didn’t really need their support.

“Hey, hey!” said McCoy when Jim was at the other end.

“Go back and forth a few more times, Captain,” Dr. Mullov instructed.

The floor between the bars was padded, but just barely, so it would feel like natural walking to the patients. Jim wasn’t having any problem at all.

“Now, swing up into a handstand,” Lwaxara shouted.

“Don’t give him any ideas, young lady,” McCoy said in mock concern.

“Are you feeling any numbness or weakness in your leg, Captain?” Dr. Mullov asked.

“No, it feels strong, stable,” Jim was pleased to report. “You do good work here.” He smiled at his cheering section, then at Spock who had stayed within close reach as he walked. His eyes lingered on Spock’s face. His leg worked! It was such a relief. He wanted to dive into Spock’s arms and give him that bear hug he had promised him, but that would have to wait. Spock was trusting him with his heart. Jim wouldn’t betray that with a public display of affection that would embarrass him… no matter how confident and exuberant he was feeling right now.

McCoy ran up and clapped him on the back. “Well, Jim, it looks like the Enterprise will have her captain back soon, if Spock will give her up that is.”

“Gladly, Doctor,” Spock said.

“Spock has done an exceptional job of minding the store,” Jim complimented him in front of the small gathering. He allowed himself a gentle touch on Spock’s shoulder, but only for a moment. Spock inclined his head to acknowledge the praise.
“Thank you, Captain.”

“I don’t think any change of command is going to take place right this moment, though, just because I’m vertical and have a gold shirt on. I still have one more day of ‘vacation,’” Jim joked.

“That’s right,” McCoy said. “I’ve got to certify you fit for duty with a few medical tests back on the ship…”

“…and Dr. Mullova says I shouldn’t try walking that far until tomorrow,” Jim said, looking at her for confirmation.

She nodded, “That would be best.”

“Oh, Captain,” Dr. Mullov suddenly remembered, “Sobren, with the Office of Vulcan Affairs, was here with an offer I said I would pass along to you. He wishes to give you and Mr. Spock one of their hospitality suites in the hotel tonight, so you can attend the memorial service for T’Nar tomorrow morning in the gardens. The suite’s balcony will provide a semi-private way to attend, since you are still recovering and the venue is likely to be quite crowded.”

Captain Kirk didn’t let on that Nurse Virginia had already told him that news.

“So we’ll be sleeping there tonight?” Jim asked.

“It’s up to you, Captain, but if you’d like to get out of a hospital bed and into some luxury, I’m not going to block it on medical grounds,” Dr. Mullov said, “now that you’ve shown you are sufficiently mobile.”

“Mr. Spock,” Jim turned to him, “how does that sound to you?”

“I was planning to represent us both at the memorial service, but Sobren’s offer would allow us to attend together. That would be preferable,” Spock said.

“Yes, it would,” Jim agreed. “We’ll call him and accept when I get back to my room, get the details.”
“Very well, Captain,” Spock said.

Spock’s face was placid. Jim wondered if he felt as delighted by this plan as he did. He didn’t show it.

“Can I walk around the clinic now for a bit?” Jim asked any doctor who wanted to answer.

“Yes, certainly. I’d keep Mr. Spock next to you for a little while, though. Just in case,” Dr. Mullova said. Your ‘pruning’ treatment will be at 13:00. You can walk to the nerve re-gen room for that appointment. Do you remember the way?”

“Yes,” Jim said.

“After the pruning, I’d like you to rest horizontally for at least an hour. We can discharge you around 16:00.”

“Sounds good,” Jim said, eager to head out into the hallway. “Lwaxara, come show me around.”

She hopped up, excited to be his guide. Sliding past Kirk and Spock into the hall, she began, “Well, right down here we have the nurses’ lounge. That is where all the best gossip happens, but for some reason they don’t like it when I go in there….”

Jim was laughing. Their voices faded off down the corridor. McCoy turned to the doctors Mullov now that they were alone. “A job well done,” he said, clapping a hand on each of their shoulders. “Thank you both from the bottom of this country doctor’s heart.”

***

After half an hour of walking the corridors, Jim felt tired and they headed back to his room.

“Spock, call Sobren and get the details about the hotel,” Jim said.
For some reason Lwaxara started giggling. “He doesn’t know?” she asked Spock.

Spock raised an eyebrow at her then turned to Jim. “I already have the details, Captain.”

“He arranged it!” Lwaxara blabbed.

Jim smiled at his clever first officer. “Is that where we’re going to bond?” Jim guessed.

“No,” Lwaxara said. “We can do it here.”

“When?” Jim asked. He had the pruning at 13:00, then he was being discharged at 16:00.

“He thinks it’s going to take a long time, like one of your marathon mind meld sessions,” she said casually to Spock.

Jim raised his eyebrows, “It’s not?”

“No, it would only be a few seconds, but I have to show Spock what I am doing, so if he ever needs to dissolve the bond sometime in the future, he’ll know how. It’ll take two minutes, tops,” she said.

“Wow,” Jim breathed out.

Even Spock looked surprised.

“Want to do it now?” she asked.

With the moment suddenly upon them, neither wanted the other to see him hesitate, but it just seemed so hurried. Jim had expected it to be… intimate, romantic.

Lwaxara rolled her eyes. “Oh, here,” she said softly, lowering the lights. “Better?”
Jim offered her a little smile. Perhaps this was making her nervous, too, being a third party in an intimate moment for two.

She locked the door. The captain was sitting on his bed. Spock was standing at his side.

“Hold his hand, Spock, let a connection form. I will join in when you have it,” Lwaxara instructed.

Jim nodded his okay and Spock took his hand. Jim gripped it tightly, like they were going to be rafting down the rapids on the Colorado River. He didn’t know what it was going to feel like.

The link took longer than usual to form, but then there it was. Jim felt better now that Spock’s calming influence was in his mind. Lwaxara joined casually like they were all having a nice cup of coffee at a café.

Jim closed his eyes. He could feel Spock and Lwaxara communicating, but he didn’t understand. After a bit, he couldn’t sense her presence anymore, just Spock’s.

“Okay, try letting go of his hand now, Spock,” Lwaxara said aloud.

Jim opened his eyes in time to see Spock release his hand. He looked up into Spock’s eyes. The connection was still there!

“Come over here,” Lwaxara said to Spock, indicating the far corner of Jim’s room.

Spock stepped away from Jim’s bed until they were 8.5 feet apart. To Jim, it still felt like Spock was standing right beside him, touching him. His eyes were telling him Spock was across the room, but that’s not how it felt. A smile of wonder crept across his face. They were bonded. This is what it felt like to be bonded.
Spock returned Jim’s smile of wonder. *It worked. We are t’hy’la.*

“Go down the hall, Spock, for a test,” Lwaxara suggested.

Jim watched Spock leave, but still felt his presence in the room, in his mind.

The way Jim was smiling at her, Lwaxara knew he was still feeling Spock as his physical body moved farther and farther away.

*Jim.*

*Yes, I can hear you. I can see everything you’re seeing. I can hear your thoughts. I’m there with you.*

*And I am with you. I can see what you see.*

*Then you see Lwaxara looking very pleased with herself,* Jim joked.

*She should. This is a remarkable achievement,* Spock marveled. *Jim, what did the ancient Ionians call their planting season?*


*What is the atomic weight of Molybdenum?* Spock asked next.

95.951. Jim gasped at his new knowledge. *Let me try. Hm, what was Mark Bell’s middle name?*
Roland, Spock said. *He hated it.*

Wow, Jim exclaimed.

*What is the Vulcan word for beloved?*

*Ashayam,* Jim answered. *Ashayam.*

Just hearing Jim say that word in his own language moved Spock. Jim was searching unprompted now, devouring Spock’s thoughts, history, and knowledge like the insatiably curious being that he was. It was a very pleasant invasion, but the sensation was new and almost overwhelming. As he walked the empty corridors, Spock turned inwardly toward Jim, the least-familiar half of his new tandem mind. It was like a vast unexplored country that he wanted to probe, chart, understand. Such an exotic landscape, so much emotion to integrate. Spock felt swept away. He stopped walking and leaned against the wall of the empty corridor, covering his mouth and nose with his hands and closing his eyes.

*Come back to the room,* Jim called to him once he realized Spock was feeling unsettled. Then, he remembered he could walk, and dashed out to get him. Spock was two hallways away, but Jim knew instantly where he was. He was still leaning against the wall with his eyes closed. Jim threw his arm around him. *Spock.*

“I know. I know, it’s a lot. Let’s get back to the room,” Jim said aloud out of habit. “Did I take too much at once? I did, didn’t I?”

Spock opened his eyes. “Captain… ashayam.” He pulled Jim into a tight embrace. *I believe you promised me a bear hug.*

Despite the possibility of being seen, Jim squeezed him back, hard. This was the first standing hug Spock had ever initiated with him and he wasn’t going to ruin it for propriety’s sake. *Oh Spock. You were right. This is amazing. YOU are amazing. I am definitely getting the better end of this deal!*

Spock wasn’t loosening his hold on Kirk. Jim realized his friend was struggling to control his breathing. While Jim had tapped into all of Spock’s *knowledge,* Spock had drunk from the deep well of Jim’s *emotions.* Kirk could handle gaining millions of new facts in a few minutes, but
Spock was having trouble incorporating the myriad of turbulent emotions he had just ingested.

“Come with me back to the room, Spock. We need privacy,” Jim implored, but Spock just kept hugging him.

Lwaxara appeared around the corner.

“Help me get him back to the room,” Jim whispered loudly to her. “He’s overwhelmed.”

Her mind reached Spock’s like a poke in the arm and he looked up, slowly releasing the captain.

“Follow me, both of you,” she said.

Spock seemed able now, and with Jim’s help and some good fortune, they made it back to the room without being seen.

When the door closed, Spock fell back into Jim’s arms, holding him tightly.

In answer to Kirk’s unasked question, Lwaxara said, “He will be all right in a few minutes. You’ll both do fine. It’s a big adjustment is all. I’ll give you some privacy… and a little advice before I go: Sip from each other, don’t gulp. You’ve got a lifetime to learn one another. Don’t drown on the first night or burn each other to cinders, okay?”

Jim wasn’t sure if she knew Saret had drowned and Luken had been burned alive, or if his enhanced mind was adding a layer of meaning that wasn’t there, but he nodded to her in thanks as she slipped out.

Oh, Jim, Spock said. I thought I knew you, but there’s so much more… s-so much more.

Jim held him, rubbing his hand soothingly up and down his t’hy’la’s back. The velour of Spock’s blue shirt felt good under his hand, with the heat of Spock’s slender body beneath. How many times he had wanted to hold Spock like this. He had feared that the bond’s mental intimacy might make Spock shun any more physical expressions of love. Apparently, he was wrong, at least for the moment.
Spock tightened his grip like he wanted to melt into Jim. He had seen in Jim’s mind how important physical touch was to him and how he had decided to forgo it after they were bonded if that’s the way Spock wanted it.

*That is NOT the way I want it, Jim. It is not.* Spock seemed near to tears.

*Is this ME, Spock? Is this MY half of our new equation causing you distress? My emotions?* Jim asked.

*It is not distress, Jim,* Spock said, shaking his head, but didn’t explain.

After a moment, Spock let go of Kirk slowly and looked into his face. *It is not distress,* he said again, as a smile began to spread across his angular face.

Jim looked at Spock, felt him. *Oh,* he realized, *it’s… happiness.*

*Yes,* Spock confirmed.

Jim sighed and leaned his forehead against Spock’s. *Me too,* he said. *It’s an adjustment. Lwaxara advised us to go slow… ’sip each other, don’t gulp’ is how she put it.*

Spock laughed, a rich, low rumble of contentment that sent joy all through Jim’s body.

*It’s really something, isn’t it?* Jim said with wonder. *I’m glad we’ll be together tonight to get used to it.*

*We would be together even if I were on the Enterprise and you were on the base,* Spock pointed out. *We will always be together now.*

That seemed like the kind of statement that should end with a kiss, so Jim gave him one. Spock kissed him back, holding Jim’s face in his hands. Their love for each other swirled around them. So many thoughts and feelings, knowledge and memories.
My head feels as big as a Talosian’s with you in there, Spock.

I have a similar sensation, Spock chuckled.

You’re laughing more, Jim noted. Is that because you’re bonded with me?

Vulcans do laugh, Spock defended.

They really don’t, Jim said. I think I’m affecting you.

You ARE affecting me, Jim, Spock said, pulling him back into an embrace.

Spock could feel that Jim liked him like this, but as a good commander was concerned that they wouldn’t be able to keep their secret if Spock acted this emotional on the ship.

Do not worry, Jim. I will show them what they expect to see, Spock assured. This is just for you, just a… celebration of what we have achieved.

Jim held him. He DID feel like celebrating.

You want a cheeseburger and a chocolate malt, Spock observed in his t’hy’la’s mind.

Do I? I thought that was YOU, Jim joked. Do we have time for lunch before my ‘pruning’ at 13:00?

Yes, Spock said.

Jim glanced at his chronometer to find that it was 12:10, exactly what he expected it to be.
Hello, I seem to be graced with your inner ‘Spock clock’ now, Jim smiled. That’ll be handy.

And it seems I have your questionable sense of humor, because I just found ‘Spock clock’ amusing, Spock laughed.

Questionable, huh? Jim chuckled. How about your taste buds? Wanna try a cheeseburger?

Spock hesitated. He didn’t eat meat.

Vegetarian version? Jim suggested.

Yes, I will try it, Spock said, feeling adventuresome.

Jim grinned and reached for his screen to place their order. Malts are dairy-based. That okay? Jim asked, before realizing he already knew it was. He also knew Spock preferred vanilla to chocolate. Jim paused for a moment to discover all of the information he had at his disposal on Spock’s culinary tastes. There really wasn’t much there, actually.

I am not as food-oriented as you are, Jim.

Food as sustenance only, huh? Boring, Jim teased. What do Vulcans eat at celebrations?

Celebrations?

Like, for instance... if you had married T’Pring instead of killing me, what would we all have had to eat afterward? Jim asked, intentionally being irreverent to test Spock’s budding sense of humor.

Fried chicken and potato salad, Spock answered promptly, grabbing what he thought would be a humorous answer from Jim’s memories of ‘picnic food.’

It worked. Jim threw his head back and laughed. Spock loved all of Jim’s different laughs.
Traditionally, we don't serve food at gatherings the way Terrans do. I generally eat only four or five meals per week. Full-Vulcans don’t even eat THAT often.

I don’t see how they can be called ‘full’ Vulcans, then, Jim teased, knowing he was being silly.

Spock laughed like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “I am being uncharacteristically emotional,” he stated aloud, like it was just occurring to him.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Jim said with a sideways smirk.

“I feel almost intoxicated. You are behaving atypically as well, Captain.”

Jim smiled. “I think we’re just happy, Spock. You said once that you hadn’t been happy your whole life. I think your cup is just running over and it’s spilling into me… and probably vice versa in equal degree.”

“You are a poet and do not know it…” Spock said.

“…but my feet show it. They’re Longfellows,” Jim finished.

You have so many delightful, funny things in your mind, Jim, Spock said. I am finding it difficult to ‘sip.’

We can get drunk off each other tonight in the hotel suite, Spock, but we’d better compose ourselves, at least outwardly, before the food gets here.

A very practical suggestion, Captain, Spock agreed.

Jim thought he hadn’t noticed how long lunch delivery was going to take, but ah there it was in his mind, a perfect image of the predicted delivery time. It said 7 minutes, and that was about… oh, exactly... 3.2 minutes ago.

“Okay, let’s do something to get our minds off each other, if that’s even possible now,” Kirk
suggested, “like watch some news.”

“Good idea, Captain,” Spock said.

Jim switched his screen to news and hopped up on his bed. Spock, always content to stand, hovered over his left shoulder.

They learned that T’Nar’s memorial service was at 08:00 tomorrow morning, and the Potemkin was scheduled to dock at Port ‘F’ at 12:45 and depart at 14:00. The Astral Queen would be moored at ‘G’ for the foreseeable future, while investigators did their work.

One thing they learned that they weren’t expecting was that Khan Noonien Singh was DEAD. The news was reporting that the USS Liu Yang had stopped by the Ceti Alpha system to check on the ‘supermen’ from the 1990s that Captain Kirk had showed mercy to after they attempted to kill him and take over his ship. They found that Ceti Alpha VI had exploded, affecting the orbits of all the other planets and laying waste to the colony that Khan’s people had built on Ceti Alpha V.

True to his nature, Khan had tried to take over the Liu Yang and been killed by one of his own lieutenants who wanted to accept the Starfleet Captain’s offer of resettlement. A suitable planet was currently being selected for them.

The news didn’t mention Lt. McGivers and Jim and Spock found themselves wondering about her fate. Kirk had allowed her to go with Khan in lieu of a court martial. Now that Khan was dead, he wondered if she’d choose the court martial. Perhaps the captain of the Liu Yang wouldn’t offer her a choice. Jim didn’t know him.

“Well, that is surprising,” Spock commented.

“Yes, it is,” Jim agreed. “They didn’t mention if there’d been any children born in the colony; that’s the primary reason Bones wanted me to ask Admiral Cresient to have someone check on them.”

“Well, it sounds like the seed you planted got uprooted, but will have another chance to grow on a new world, minus Khan’s deleterious leadership,” Spock observed.

A knock on the door signaled lunch arriving. Their decorum was perfect, so Kirk called, “Come
“It was the same young man who had surprised them a week ago with his detailed knowledge of their missions.

Spock seated himself in a guest chair and received his vegetarian cheeseburger and vanilla malt. If the server considered that a strange thing for a Vulcan to be eating, he didn’t comment.

“We’re celebrating,” Spock said unexpectedly.

“I thought you might be,” the young man said with a smile. He’d noticed the captain was dressed. “It’s good to see you back in uniform, Captain Kirk. I’m told this is your last day here.”

“Yes,” Jim confirmed, “my last day in the med clinic at least. We’re attending T’Nar’s memorial service tomorrow, so we’re staying in the hotel tonight.”

“Oh, you’ll like that. It’s very nice,” he remarked, as he finished setting up Kirk’s tray. “Oh, I forgot you don’t need to eat in bed anymore. I should have asked if you wanted this set up at the table with Mr. Spock.”

“Actually, yeah, sitting in a real chair sounds good….” Jim said.

The server quickly grabbed up the captain’s meal and moved it to the guest table for him.

“Hey, did you hear? Khan is dead,” the young man said.

“Yes,” Jim answered, sliding into the second guest chair. The man was obviously hoping for a lengthier comment, but he didn’t get it. He was just about to wish them both safe travels and then go, when Spock said, “I am glad he is dead.”

Both Jim and the server turned to look at Spock, who had said that with slightly more acrimony than a Vulcan should.

“He put the captain in a pressure chamber, intending to kill him. What a horribly painful death that would have been,” Spock reflected aloud. The look on Spock’s face showed anger.
Hey, it’s all right, Jim said quickly through the bond to snap him out of it. Spock looked at him and slipped his Vulcan mask back into place.

“Well, that creep lived 300 years longer than he should have,” the server said. “I’m glad, too, that he’s dead. Good riddance.”

Jim refrained from commenting and Spock seemed to have said all he had to say, so the server bid them farewell and headed back to the kitchen.

Hey, watch it with the emotion, Spock. You don’t want to give us away, Jim said, taking a big bite of his burger.

You had a dream, Jim… a nightmare… after we left Khan on Ceti Alpha V, that you died in the pressure chamber, that your eyes and lungs were bleeding…. I saw that in your mind when the server mentioned Khan, Spock explained.

Oh, yeah, now that you mention it, I remember, Jim said. He exhaled a long breath after he’d swallowed his bite. He chose to spare Lt. McGivers because she had rescued him from that horrible fate. He wasn’t sorry. He hoped she would be all right now that Khan was dead.

These burgers are much too good to worry about stuff like that right now. Let’s try to focus on our tastebuds, shall we? How’s yours, Spock?

Spock picked up his cheeseburger and took a bite. Jim knew instantly that he liked it, before his facial expression revealed anything.

Good? Jim asked anyway.

Very, Spock replied, raising one eyebrow.

Try the malt, Jim suggested. The malts were served in impressively tall glass goblets with extra-long red and white striped straws.
Spock put his lips around the straw and sucked some vanilla malt into his mouth.

*Taste good together, don’t they?* Jim asked, knowing Spock was enjoying it.

*Indeed,* Spock said. *You want to try my vanilla. Go ahead.*

When Spock’s mouth released the straw, Jim took it between his lips and sampled the vanilla. *Mmm! Do you want to try my chocolate?* He asked his t’hy’la.

Spock nodded and scooted his chair over closer to Jim’s for better access. He was just beginning to sample the chocolate malt when Dr. McCoy came through the door.

“Well, hey, kids! What’s happening down at the malt shop?” he joked.

“Hi Bones,” the captain said cordially.

“We are celebrating,” Spock declared with a stoic expression, which McCoy found even more amusing than Spock drinking through a big striped straw.

Trying hard to control his amused expression, Bones said, “Well, go on with your meal, gentlemen. I’ll be observing your pruning procedure at 13:00, Jim, so I’ll see you then. I just popped in to tell you Khan is dead.”

“We heard it on the news a few minutes ago,” Jim said.

“What a crazy thing, huh?! I could have gotten a whole starship crew killed with my bleeding heart suggestion that Cresient send someone to check on that maniac!” McCoy brooded.

“I’m sure they took what they thought were the proper precautions, Bones. Khan is… was… as slippery as an eel.”

“His ‘superior intellect’ apparently didn’t consider treachery from within his own ranks, though,” McCoy noted. “I’m glad that’s the way he met his Waterloo. I hope that group’s new leader isn’t
even worse, though!"

“That IS a possibility,” Spock chimed in. “Most of them were leaders in their own right, before aligning under Khan.”

“Hm, _that’s_ an unpleasant thought,” Kirk said. “Let’s hope they put some effort into choosing a new colony site for them. Not our business anymore.”

Jim took a big bite of his burger and so did Spock. McCoy smiled fondly at the two of them.

“You can’t believe how excited the clinic staff are that you’re walking and almost ready to go, Jim,” Bones said.

“They’re ready to be rid of me?” Jim joked.

“When are we leaving? Tomorrow, sometime after the Potemkin arrives with the Astral Queen?” Bones asked.

“I don’t actually know. Admiral Cresient told me to call him after I’m released from the clinic. I guess that’ll be 16:00. We’ll get our orders then. Hey, have you heard back from Dr. Powell?” Jim asked.

“Not yet,” Bones said. “Heard from Janice?”

“No, but I haven’t checked. I’ll look after lunch,” Jim said.

“Okay, I’ll get out of your hair. See you at 13:00. Enjoy your celebration… oh, Spock, you’ve got a little whipped cream on the tip of your nose.” There wasn’t any.

Spock fell for it and rubbed his nose.

“Ha!” McCoy laughed as he left.
Jim chuckled affectionately when he and his t’hy’la were alone again. *McCoy is going to like new, fun Spock.*

*I am NOT ‘new, fun Spock,’* the Vulcan stated for the record.

Jim laughed. *We can have some fun, can’t we? On Earth… together?*

Spock saw that Jim had mentioned to McCoy some of the many things he wanted them to do together on Earth. McCoy had found it strange that all of Jim’s plans included Spock.

*The doctor plans to see his sister’s family. He thought it peculiar that all of your plans were with me,* Spock said.

*Mccoy knows that we’re close. What was I supposed to do? Deny it?*

*No, Spock said.*

*You wouldn’t deny it if someone asked if we were close, would you?*

Spock *had* denied it in the past, in fact he had made a concerted effort to keep people from discovering just how warm his feelings were for the captain. He wouldn’t do it anymore. He recalled Capt. Jon Daily’s question and was pleased with how quickly he had answered it.

Jim smiled. *Jon said he and his first officer were ‘tight’ and asked if WE were. You told him we were.*

*Yes, Spock said.*
I don’t think Jon and his first officer are quite THIS tight, do you? Jim asked with good humor.

No, Spock agreed. He closed his eyes, still amazed to be holding Jim inside him, all of his thoughts and dreams, all that he was or ever had been… and so much more begged to be explored.

*Sip, remember?* Jim reminded.

Spock opened his eyes to see his t’hy’la looking at him so lovingly.

*You know what’s good, Spock? Chocolate and vanilla together. Try it.*

Spock sipped a bit of ice cream from each straw in turn. An eyebrow reached for his hairline.

*Good, right?* Jim asked.

*Yes.*

Jim stood up then and paced because he could. It felt great to have control of his body back again. He stretched a languorous stretch and raised up and down on his toes a couple of times, enjoying the feeling of taught muscles bunching up in his calves.

Spock smiled at his young captain, in the prime of his life, healthy and whole again. If he thought about him two weeks ago, his body bleeding and broken, he was at risk of becoming emotional and it was nearly 13:00, so he concentrated his mind on the now: Jim, standing there smiling at him in his gold shirt, looking robust and indestructible.

Jim leaned against his window. He’d never been over this close to his room’s window before. From this vantage, his ship and the velvety blackness of space filled his vision. His ship, his home. The trip back to Earth would be about seven days, but their 5-year mission was essentially over, unless something had changed. He would be speaking to Admiral Cresient in a few hours. They would know for certain then.

*You are thinking that perhaps your career as a military man is over,* Spock said, *that skirmishes with the Klingons and Romulans are a thing of the past for the Enterprise.*
Was I? Kirk asked with a half-smile. *I suppose I was.*

*You will miss it,* Spock said, *miss the adrenaline, the hyper-focus, and having to use every scrap of your intuition and expertise to save the ship.*

*Maybe I will miss it,* Jim admitted. *My name was made that way. Those successes define us both. Kirk and Spock: the great warriors of Starfleet.*

*You’re thinking it’s ironic that we’ve bonded NOW, too late to exploit its tactical advantages,* Spock said.

*Yes,* Jim admitted. *It would have helped so much over the past 4½ years. Now, it will be mainly for our own fulfillment.*

*You think it is self-indulgent?* Spock asked.

*A bit,* Jim said.

*I think it may prove more efficacious than you know during negotiations with the Betazoids,* Spock predicted.

*And then there will be the NEXT five years. Who knows what they will bring?* Jim pointed out.

*Indeed,* Spock said.

*The Betazoids DO have enemies. I shouldn’t be acting like this mission will be a cake walk,* Jim realized.

*You are not acting that way,* Jim. *I am just privy to your thoughts,* Spock pointed out.

*You see things in me that I don’t see,* Spock, Jim said. *I like how you mention them. Keep doing*
that. I’m going to reach levels of self-awareness that most humans never do… I hope I can handle it. He smiled a charming smile at his friend.

Spock’s heart swelled for his handsome t’hy’la. Jim’s emotions coursing through his mind were compromising his control, but his own emotions were roiling, too. They had always caused him trouble. He had resented them since childhood… but now, as they rose up to meet Jim’s, to intertwine with them, he was glad they were there. Jim loved them, loved seeing them, being allowed to touch them. Jim had always been gentle with his feelings, never acted like they weren’t there or were unimportant.

You think your mind is falling into disorder, Jim said. You’re enjoying it for now, but you’re wondering how this bond will settle in, if you’ll have to make too many concessions to accommodate me… You think I want you to act ‘less Vulcan.’

Spock thought about this. I have spent most of my life trying to control and suppress my emotions. A stoic demeanor is my ‘normal.’ I am aware, as you are too now, that it is mostly a façade, but changing it will be difficult for me, even with your help. I may not ‘loosen up’ outwardly overnight, even though my mental landscape is freer now.

Spock, if you’re feeling from me that I want you to be ‘less Vulcan,’ it’s only because I want you to be happy. Stoicism, following the philosophy of Surak, has allowed you to accomplish a lot, but it hasn’t made you happy. Behave outwardly as you always have, if that’s what is comfortable for you. You have my love and you always will.

Spock’s eyes were shining and a tear slid down over his sharp cheekbone. Jim’s eyes teared up at the sight and he embraced Spock. Both knew they were crying from love, not distress.

“We should talk about quantum mechanics right now,” Jim joked aloud just to get out of his head.

Spock chuckled, “Yes, that would be advisable.”

“Wow!” Jim marveled. “I know a lot about quantum mechanics now! Physics was always my toughest subject. I thought it was boring, but I see so many elegant connections now that I never understood.”

Spock wiped his face and smiled. It pleased him that his knowledge was enriching Jim.
Kirk walked over to his screen and requested tray pickup. He started considering something.

“Spock, when McCoy certifies me fit for duty tomorrow, will he see on my brain scan that we are bonded?” Jim asked.

“It is likely that he will see a duality of brain patterns akin to what Dr. Mullova saw in your chart after our mind melds,” Spock replied.

“So, we’re not going to be able to hide this from him,” Jim commented.

“No. Did you want to?” Spock asked.

Jim thought about that. “How do you feel about it?”

“He is our doctor,” Spock said.

“…and only a fool lies to his doctor, hm?” Jim gave Spock a little sideways smile. “I didn’t want to lie to him, exactly, it’s just… he won’t have anything good to say about it.”

“That is a sound prediction, Captain.”

Jim breathed out like he was between a rock and a hard place.

“You want his approval,” Spock said.

“No. I just would rather avoid being called a damn fool and have to listen to him call you every Vulcan slur in the book. Maybe I’ll tell him during my treatment today, in front of the Mullovs where he’ll have to watch his mouth a little,” Jim proposed, then sighed as he realized, No, I’d just have to listen to an earful later. “How do I even describe what this is or how it feels? I don’t know how to begin.”

“You told me Dr. McCoy had a Vulcan Literature teacher who taught that Saret and Luken’s t’hy’la bond was a myth,” Spock reminded him. “You could start by telling him t’hy’la bonds are
“Dr. Mullov would be interested in knowing that, too. Perhaps I will tell Bones during the treatment.”

Spock was about to inquire about why Dr. Mullov would be interested in Vulcan t’hy’la bonds when an orderly popped in to remind Captain Kirk he was expected in the treatment room in two minutes.

“No more rides, Spock. I almost forgot I have to walk down there… or I should say I get to walk down there. You want to go to the ship for a little while, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Spock confirmed.

Jim could see in his mind all of the tasks Spock wanted to complete before leaving the ship in Scotty’s hands for the night and morning.

“Bring our dress uniforms for tomorrow, if you don’t mind,” Kirk told Spock. “Oh, and put this in my cabin; I don’t want it to get left behind,” he said, placing the blown glass globe in Spock’s warm hand.

“Very well, Captain,” Spock said. “Do you want me back by 16:00? Is that when you’ll be calling Admiral Cresient?”

“Yes. Please be here for that,” Jim said as they left and headed down the hallway. “I have to lie down and rest for an hour following the treatment. I plan to check my mail and maybe catch some more news.”

If you tell Dr. McCoy during the treatment, he may choose that hour to ‘give you a piece of his mind’ as you would say, Spock pointed out.

Jim smiled. I guess that’s a chance I’ll have to take, isn’t it? You’ll be able to listen in. Hope it doesn’t distract you from your duties too much. Will you be able to shut it out, if it does? Kirk wondered.
Unknown. Spock said. With time, we will be able to put our concentration where we choose, but for awhile, each other’s presence through the bond may be distracting.

***

As they arrived at the treatment room, Dr. Mullov and Dr. McCoy greeted them.

“Well, this is it Jim! Your final treatment,” Bones said exuberantly. Bet you thought it would never get here.”

“It has been quite a journey,” Jim said.

“I shall see you at 16:00, Captain,” Spock said, adding through the bond, Good luck, Jim.

He nodded at the doctors and departed.

Goodbye, Spock, Jim’s mind whispered to his.

Kirk took off his uniform pants and underwear and hopped up onto the treatment table.

“Lie down, Captain, and we’ll get started,” Dr. Mullov instructed. “Now this final treatment will only take 15-20 minutes, with the usual ten-minute cool down and final check.”

“Okay,” Jim said.

From the clinic’s lobby, Spock could feel Jim thinking, Hm, that’s a pretty short time. Maybe I should tell Bones later, in my room. Guess I’ll see whether the right opening presents itself.

Spock tried to turn his attention away from Jim’s thoughts to see if he could. It proved difficult but doable.
Dr. Mullov was talking to McCoy about how he was going to proceed, “…and we start with the outermost tips of the nerve branches, Leonard, and work inward, removing the extraneous growth.”

“Ah,” Bones said.

“Look at the monitor as I begin on the piriformis nerve branch,” Dr. Mullov directed.

Jim felt the familiar heat as Dr. Mullov began applying pressure with the probe.

“Do you see how this fan has grown beyond what is optimal?” Mullov asked McCoy.

“Not really. How are you determining overgrowth?” Bones asked.

As Dr. Mullov gave a detailed description of what he was doing and why, Jim began to abandon his idea of telling Bones about the bond here. *They're going to be chatting medical through this whole thing*, he decided. He closed his eyes, since no one was addressing him and concentrated on Spock to see if he could see through his eyes. He could! Spock was passing through a section of the base’s promenade right now, with its faux-cobblestone walkways and attractive storefronts. He had decided to meet with Sobren at his office briefly before going to the Enterprise, to see what his expectations were for tomorrow. The elderly Vulcan had been very gracious offering them the hospitality suite after Spock had suggested it as a way for Kirk to attend the memorial service. Spock wanted to make sure their role in the proceedings was simply that of attending dignitaries and no participation was expected. Spock’s thoughts were on the upcoming conversation with Sobren; he seemed unaware of Jim reading his thoughts or looking through his eyes.

“Captain?” Dr. Mullov asked.

“Yes?” Jim said, opening his eyes.

“Ha! He fell asleep,” McCoy said to Dr. Mullov.

“Did you, Captain? I must have a lighter touch than I thought if you could sleep through that,” Dr. Mullov said with good-humor.
“Evgeny was asking you if you’d had any numbness or tingling since yesterday, Jim.” Bones said.

“Oh… no, none,” Kirk responded.

“That’s good. Perfect,” Dr. Mullov said. Then, turning back to McCoy, he said, “In three weeks, you’ll need to examine the perineal nerves, Leonard. They never require pruning, for reasons that I won’t go into, but they are the slowest to heal, often needing two to three additional weeks. See?” He pushed the probe rather deeply into the soft tissue of Jim’s perineum and pointed at the screen for McCoy to see.

“Hmm, yeah, I see,” Bones said.

“The captain shouldn’t have any complaints. I’ve already discussed with him what to expect as far as… diminished function.”

An embarrassed glance from Jim told McCoy he remembered that conversation. McCoy shot him a little grin and patted his shoulder.

“Just do a quick exam with traditional instruments at the three-week mark, Leonard, to check that nerve growth had reached at least THIS point,” Dr. Mullov said, pointing at the screen which Jim couldn’t see. “Then, at his next med-check, it might be wise to look again just to be 100% sure no overgrowth has occurred. He’d be the first case in history, but these techniques are new and it’s good to be careful.”

“Okay, I’ll remember to do that,” McCoy promised.

“Worse case scenario, we could do a quick pruning in six months when you pass back by to pick up Lwaxara,” he said. “Assuming those plans are still on. Are they, Captain?”

“I’ll be speaking with Admiral Cresient this afternoon. He’s my commanding officer. We’ll see what our orders are.”

“I hope we’ll be seeing you again, Captain,” Dr. Mullov said.
“Thank you. So do I. Thanks for all of your good work… and for Nadia and Svetlana,” Kirk winked. He knew how proud Dr. Mullov was of his therapy tribbles.

“Ah! I hope my girls were good medicine for you, Captain!”

“They were very soothing,” Jim praised.

“As soothing as your Vulcan?”

“Uh… in a different way, I suppose,” Jim answered awkwardly.

Dr. Mullov gave him a smile and a wink, then returned to his narration, moving his probe from position to position. Bones tried to share a questioning look with Jim, but Evgeny directed his attention back up to the screen.

Jim’s attention went back to Spock. He had left the Office of Vulcan Affairs and was almost to the Enterprise. Good, Sobren expects no official duties from us. We are just honored attendees, Jim read in his mind. Jim hoped Spock would also check with Commodore Jensen to see what she wanted from them tomorrow for the Potemkin’s arrival. Jim was hoping an impressive reception at the dock was planned for Capt. Daily and his crew. Jon would like that, especially if he and Spock were part of it.

I will speak with the commodore, Jim, Spock said in his mind. Kirk hadn’t been aware Spock was listening to his thoughts. How is your treatment going?

I’m fine, and no, I haven’t told McCoy yet, Jim said. He and Dr. Mullov are fascinated by my body.

So am I, Spock said.

Jim flushed from head to toe at those three words. Was Spock going to talk dirty to him through the bond when he was around other people? That was not going to work out.

I am sorry, Captain. I did not know it would affect you like that, Spock said.
I’m just glad right now that my perineal nerves are slow-growers! Whew, Jim joked.

Spock took his meaning, and now it was his turn to blush.

“Captain?” Dr. Mullov said.

“Yes?” Jim said, startled.

“I know you weren’t asleep this time, unless you sleep with your eyes open,” Dr. Mullov said.

“Where’s your head today, Jim?” McCoy asked, looking concerned.

“Just a little distracted, I guess,” Kirk offered.

“I’m almost finished,” Dr. Mullov said. “I was just telling you that you’ll need to go to your room and rest with your feet up for an hour after we’re done.”

“Yes, yes, okay,” Jim said, more dismissively than he’d intended. He realized he was treating Dr. Mullov like the man had rudely interrupted a private conversation he was having… which of course he HAD… but the doctor had no way of knowing that.

Bones was giving him a scowl.

Maybe this was the opening he’d been hoping for. He would just tell them, his dear friend and the doctor who had saved his leg. He would tell them both, tell them the truth. Do you mind if Dr. Mullov knows, Spock?

Whatever you want to do is fine, Jim, Spock said.

“I’m sorry,” Jim apologized, looking up at Dr. Mullov. Then, he took a deep breath and said, “I was talking to Spock just then.”
Jim waited a moment for them to grasp the implications, but puzzled looks were all he was getting.

“Where is Spock right now?” McCoy finally asked hesitantly.

“On the Enterprise,” Jim said.

“Can you always communicate with each other like that, or did Lwaxara teach you some of her tricks while you were here?” Dr. Mullov asked. He saw that Leonard was surprised and deduced that this was a new skill.

“Spock and I have been mind melding a lot in the hopes that we could form a t’hy’la bond together, and today Lwaxara helped us achieve it.” There, he had told them.

“‘Tie law bond?’” Dr. Mullov asked.

“T’hy’la is an archaic Vulcan word that translates to ‘comrades-in-arms,’” Jim explained. “Vulcan warriors in antiquity used to form those telepathic bonds to have a strategic advantage in war.”

“Sounds like something that would have helped on all of your dangerous missions,” Dr. Mullov commented. “Why are you just now doing it?”

“Spock just told me about it last week,” Jim said. “He didn’t know if it would be possible for us, since I’m not a telepath, so we took Lwaxara up on her offer to help us form the bond before we ship out.”

“What does it feel like?” Dr. Mullov asked, intrigued. The captain hadn’t seemed to want to discuss his relationship with Spock before, but now he appeared open to questions.

“It’s… it’s incredible, but learning to prioritize the people around me is going to take some practice. I’m sorry I was listening to Spock instead of you, Doctor.”

“Quite understandable, if this is your first day with the bond! Am I correct in assuming that you
“Yes,” Jim answered.

“I wonder how far apart you can be without the bond breaking,” Dr. Mullov wondered.

“It won’t break. It is permanent. Spock thinks even over parsecs, we could hear each other’s thoughts,” Jim said.

“Astonishing! Isn’t that amazing, Leonard?” Mullov raved.

Jim noticed all of the questions were coming from Dr. Mullov. Bones was quiet.

“Yes,” McCoy finally said. “You gonna finish up with that?” he asked Evgeny, pointing at the probe that he’d been holding idle in his hand for the duration of the conversation.

“Oh, right!” Dr. Mullov said, getting back to work. “If the captain would stop being so interesting, maybe I could concentrate. Boy, you all live stimulating lives! I admit to being a bit envious.”

Jim glanced at Bones. His was the reaction that mattered to him, but he wasn’t giving him one. That spoke volumes; if Bones was holding in his reaction until they were alone, it wasn’t going to be good. Jim tried to make eye contact with him, but he wasn’t having it.

“Oh, right!” Dr. Mullov said, getting back to work. “If the captain would stop being so interesting, maybe I could concentrate. Boy, you all live stimulating lives! I admit to being a bit envious.”

“Okay, I’ll show you how we prune the iliohypogastric nerve branch next. This one presents challenges in that the location limits the amount of… Leonard? Ha! Now who’s distracted? You don’t have a t’hy’la bond, too, do you, Len?” Dr. Mullov laughed.

“No,” Dr. McCoy said, clearly not amused. He raised his eyes back up to the screen as Dr. Mullov continued.

_Dr. McCoy is upset_, Spock ventured.
I’m afraid so. I’m going to get an earful when this is over, Jim replied.

Do you want me to come back? Spock offered. We could explain it to him together.

I can handle Bones, Jim said. I’ll let him blow off his head of steam, blast me with whatever his objections are, then talk him down. Don’t worry, Spock.

Very well, Jim.

“…gemellus nerve branch will often put up a fight unless you direct the probe toward the dorsal edge of…”

Dr. Mullov was still narrating the tour through his hip nerves, but Jim could see that Bones was no longer interested. He was looking at the screen and nodding occasionally, but the muscles in his jaw were flexing.

Jim wondered in a vacuum what McCoy was most angry about: not being told in private, not being consulted beforehand, or perhaps the fact of the bond itself. Bones always worried about him. Jim expected that this seeming anger was just worry in disguise. He would allay Bones’ fears and everything would be fine.

“…without a lot of time. That’s why this technique works best for the femoral and sciatic, but needs adjustments for the gluteal nerves. Now with the obturator branch, we need to be mindful of…” Dr. Mullov continued the narration.

McCoy was trying to focus on what Evgeny was saying. He wanted to learn these techniques, but the bombshell Jim had just dropped was commanding all of his attention. Now he finally knew what was going on with Jim and Spock… and he didn’t like it one bit! Mind melding to recover memories or even for comfort while Jim was recovering was one thing, but merging permanently into each other?! Why would either of them want that? Even if they were lovers, which McCoy suspected they were, why did they need to surrender their individuality and take this radical step? Why did Lwaxara help them? If they couldn’t bond on their own, she should have left well enough alone.

Was that even Jim lying there on the treatment table or was there some plural mind occupying his body? The individual he called Jim Kirk, his friend, might be gone now. A sudden rage at Spock welled up in McCoy. How dare that Vulcan swallow up Jim like this? Jim wasn’t his for the
Dr. Mullov covered Jim’s lower half with a sheet and left the treatment room, telling his patient he’d be back after the 10-minute cool down. Jim looked up at McCoy, and Bones let him have it.

“Damn it, Jim, what have you two done?!” he began. “Is this even James T. Kirk I’m addressing, or some Spock/Kirk hybrid?”

“It’s me, Bones. Spock is with me, though. He can hear you and see you,” Jim told him, so he’d be aware.

“Oh, that’s just lovely!” McCoy hissed. “That will be fun getting used to, never having a private conversation with my friend ever again.”

“Spock is your friend, too, and now you can save time by talking to us both at the same time,” Jim said with good humor, trying to diffuse Bones’ anger with his most charming smile.

“This isn’t funny, Jim,” McCoy persisted. “Did you only tell me now because I’m supposed to certify you fit for duty tomorrow and you knew my instruments would detect that ghost in your attic?”

*Flattering,* Spock said.

Feeling Spock’s raised eyebrow, Jim smiled and McCoy took that as a yes.

“So I’m on a need-to-know basis in your life now,” McCoy said. “That feels great.”

“I was smiling at Spock’s reaction to your ‘ghost in the attic’ analogy, Bones. We were going to tell you soon anyway. It’s very… personal.”

“So personal that you just told Dr. Mullov,” McCoy scoffed.

“You are the one we wanted to tell. I was just looking for an opening and my inattentiveness to Dr.
Mullov accidentally provided it, so I went for it. I didn’t mean to insult you, Bones. I’m nervous about this. It’s new and…”

“So what am I supposed to write on my report tomorrow? Are you expecting me to keep this… merger… a secret from Command? How will they react to learning their finest starship captain’s brainwaves have been co-opted by his first officer?” Bones ranted. “What if this derails our mission, Jim? Did you even think of that? Starfleet may not want their captains to be dual entities.”

McCoy’s words were dripping with venom. It surprised and unnerved Jim.

“Whose idea was this bond? Spock’s, I bet,” McCoy guessed.

Jim nodded.

“Well, his timing is lousy. You’ve got enough on your mind right now without Spock rattling around in there,” McCoy maintained. “Why does he want a bond with a human ruffling his perfectly ordered thoughts, anyway? He disdains human emotion.”

“I think we both know that Spock doesn’t disdain me,” Jim said simply, surprised to have to be defending Spock’s depth and emotional breadth to Bones after all this time.

“No, you’re special to him, that’s obvious, but how long do you think the novelty… the fascination… will last? I predict Spock will have had enough of this tie-law experiment in a month and then where will you be?” Bones spat the sharp words at Jim. “Either shame or emotion-overload will send him running back to his familiar Vulcan ways. He’ll feel embarrassed over the whole thing and want you the heck outta his well-ordered head. You’re gonna get your heart broken, Jim. Don’t you see that? Whatever you think this is, Spock is a Vulcan and surely doesn’t see it the same way.”

Jim was stunned and hurt. “You don’t know anything about it, Bones,” he said.

“No, I don’t, do I?” He threw his arms up dramatically. “You’ve been as tight-lipped as an Aldebaran shell-mouth, Jim. That is Spock’s influence. You’ve always talked to me, asked my advice. I guess you have Lwaxara for that now. I know one thing: I won’t be getting an invitation to the hotel suite tonight, will I?” Bones countered spitefully. “You and Spock enjoy your honeymoon.”
“Bones…” Jim whispered, bewildered, but McCoy was already turning for the door, which he dramatically slammed in his wake, leaving Jim lying on the table, stunned.
Spock, Jim reached out after Bones’ tirade was over.

*I heard him.*, Spock said gently. He could feel Jim’s sadness and indignation. Dr. McCoy was one of the few people who could hurt Jim deeply and he had just wielded that power ruthlessly. Spock felt a moment of anger at the doctor. They didn’t need his congratulations, but some measure of support and understanding ought to be expected from such a close friend.

*Is he jealous? Upset to be excluded?* Jim asked himself and Spock.

*I do not know,* Spock said. *He is protective of you, but I did not anticipate him viewing me as a threat. He expressed a belief that I will abandon you. I will not.*

*I know,* Spock, Jim said lovingly, reassuring him that he’d not been swayed by the doctor’s arguments. *The intensity of Bones’ reaction caught me off guard. I was expecting some negativity, but what the heck was that? I don’t know what to say about it yet.*

*Hm,* Spock said. *I was hoping YOU would understand the source of his enmity and be able to explain it to me.*

*Sorry to disappoint you,* Jim said. *We’ll just have to wait for him to tell us when he cools down, I guess… or we could ask Lwaxara to talk to him.*

*Yes,* Spock said, *she would gain an immediate and complete understanding of his motivations.*

*She helped the two of us with this; maybe she can help the three of us,* Jim said.

*Jim, what if he refuses to declare you fit for duty?* Spock asked.

*He wouldn’t do that, would he?* Jim wasn’t sure.
He witnessed how distractible our bond makes you, Spock said.

That will change with time. I’ll learn to handle it better. So will you, Jim defended.

Yes, but you hope to be cleared for duty TOMORROW, Spock said.

I see your point.

“Hello again, Captain,” Dr. Mullov said as he reappeared. “Let’s take a look and check my work, then you can start your hour of rest.”

“Okay,” Jim said simply as the doctor removed his sheet and switched the equipment back on.

“I was going to show Leonard the final check, but he seems to have left,” Dr. Mullov said.

“Hm,” Jim said.

In silence, Dr. Mullov finished the check. He helped Jim up off the table. It was only 13:50.

“You can walk back to your room, Captain, but as soon as you get there, put your feet up and rest until…” Dr. Mullov consulted his chronometer… “14:50.”

“Will do. Thank you, Doctor,” Jim said.

He wondered if Bones would be waiting for him in his room, but when he got there it was empty. He sat on the bed and swung his feet up as he’d been told. His plan had been to read his mail and check the news, but Bones’ words were still stinging. He couldn’t concentrate.

Bones said YOU have bad timing, Spock, but his is terrible. I’ve got to talk to Cresient in a couple of hours. Can you help me focus if I’m still upset?
The better course of action would be to resolve the matter with Dr. McCoy prior to the admiral’s call, Spock said.

Jim sighed. He was supposed to stay put for an hour. He could call McCoy on his communicator and order him to report to his room, but that seemed a little heavy-handed. Perhaps Bones just needed some time to stew and realize how biting his words had been.

I bet he’s already sorry, Spock, but is too proud to come in here and tell me.

It is possible he is no longer on the base, but has returned to the Enterprise. He may want to have words with ME, as well.

Just then, Kirk became aware that Spock was being paged to the Sickbay.

…and he apparently wants to have those words with you on HIS turf. I’m sorry, Spock. I never thought he would behave this way.

It is not your fault, Captain. No one can guarantee the behavior of another, Spock said as he entered the turbolift and headed for Sickbay to face the doctor’s ire.

Anger was burning in McCoy’s eyes when Spock entered his Sickbay office. There were no patients and he had sent the duty nurse to lunch. As the door whooshed closed behind Spock, Bones lit into him.

“How did you talk Jim into this, Spock? What did you offer him that the rest of us can’t? The Captain isn’t yours to take; he belongs to all of us. Now we can’t talk privately to him anymore because you’re always going to be there, too?!"

Spock considered. “I thought I would be gone in a month, retreating to my ‘familiar Vulcan ways,’ leaving the captain bereft.”

That took the wind out of Bones’ sails a bit.
“Look, I’m sure the captain’s mind is a fascinating place, Spock, but do you have to live there?” McCoy blurted. “Couldn’t you just be content to… visit? Your constant presence is going to change him. How could it not?”

“This arrangement is by our mutual consent and to our mutual benefit, Doctor. It is fulfilling and advantageous for both of us,” Spock said. “I do not understand your objections.”

“Oh, just a giant win-win for all, huh?” McCoy said snidely, waving his arms. “Jim would never have thought of this, relinquishing his individuality like this. It was your idea, Spock. Why did you want it? Why did you want to bond with Jim?! Are you that lonely? Is Jim?”

“What would you have me say, Doctor?” Spock asked, as stoically as he could manage. Jim was getting increasingly upset and it was threatening his control.

“You know how many times he’s been hurt, Spock, how many scars he’s got on his heart. He’s always had you and me to pull him through… but if you hurt him, there will be only me, and I’m not enough. God help me, I’m not enough.”

Spock reflected on the many times he and Dr. McCoy had worked together to save Jim... from danger, from heartbreak, from bad decisions. It occurred to Spock that they were standing in the place where McCoy had saved Jim’s life, against all odds, two weeks ago. Spock had carried him here, delivered him into Dr. McCoy’s trusted hands, and McCoy had worked for hours to save his life. Jim was precious to the doctor, perhaps as precious as he was to Spock. Telling the doctor to mind his own business about their choice to bond would not be the right path to take. Current behavior notwithstanding, the doctor deserved better. Spock pondered his options.

*I think I know what to say, Jim. Do not worry.*

“Doctor,” Spock began slowly, feeling his way in this emotional minefield, “when I carried Jim to Sickbay two weeks ago, I gave him to you and I trusted that he was in good hands. Trust me with him now. Trust that he is in good hands with me.

McCoy’s body language softened a fraction. Spock standing there asking for his trust moved him. Of course he trusted Spock. Of course he did.

“We were perhaps in error not consulting you about our plans, but please, Doctor, I ask you to accept the bond we have chosen to form. I love Jim, and we both love you.”
McCoy’s eyes went wide and his anger evaporated. A statement like that could not be met with spite or sarcasm. The angry words he’d been preparing to hurl fell to the floor.

McCoy breathed out in a loud, exasperated breath and looked at the floor. “Well, shoot,” he said.

*You got him, Spock. Just stay silent now and let him come around,* Jim advised.

Spock stood in the ‘at ease’ position, hands clasped behind his back until McCoy found the right words.

“God, this is the first day of your bond and you’re both having to deal with *me*,” McCoy said, shaking his head. “I’m sorry. I… I overreacted.”

“I believe Jim would simply say, ‘forget it, Bones.’”

“I remember you said that to me once after another awkward apology,” Bones said, staring at his feet.

 “…and then you collapsed into my arms, as I recall,” Spock said.

“Nah, I was just hugging you,” McCoy joked, “like I always do after I’ve been an ass.”

Spock looked puzzled. “Doctor, I do not recall you ever hugging me.”

“Well, I guess this will be the first time, then,” Bones said. He stepped toward Spock and opened his arms, allowing his Vulcan friend the opportunity to refuse the hug if he wanted to. He didn’t.

Spock stepped forward and embraced him.

“Congratulations, Spock… and Jim, if you’re in there,” McCoy said, aiming his words into Spock’s left ear as he slapped him on the back a couple of times. “Lord, I don’t know what came
over me. It’s like my two best friends got married and I didn’t even say ‘best wishes.’”

“We are not married,” Spock corrected. “A t’hy’la is a comrade-in-arms, not a spouse.”

“Hm, no reason to report it to Command then, I guess?” Bones smiled.

“We would rather… not,” Spock said. It was a plea.

“All right. What the hell. I’ll keep your secret,” Bones relented. “Just don’t crash the ship or start reciting Byron to each other on the bridge.”

Spock looked taken aback.

“You two may not have a marriage license, but your bond goes a little further than just being warrior pals. Am I wrong?” McCoy asked.

“No,” Spock admitted after a quick check with Jim.

*He won’t ask for details,* Jim assured.

*You are certain about that?* Spock questioned.

*Not entirely,* Jim admitted.

Bones let it go, though, and escaped the uncomfortable silence by saying, “I’m going to go find Lwaxara. Somebody needs therapy and I’m pretty sure it’s me. Let me know what Cresient says, if there’s anything new…”

Bones looked like he wanted to say something else, but thought better of it and slipped out of Sickbay with a tentative wave.
He will be all right. You were phenomenal, Spock. Your understanding of human psychology may exceed mine, Jim said fondly. That was just the right thing to say. How did you know?

I put myself in his place and imagined how I would feel if you and he had bonded without telling me. I would want to know that I was still important to you both.

That’s extraordinary, Spock, Jim said.

I am benefitting already from your abilities, Jim.

No, that was all YOU, Spock. I was just watching, Jim said.

I have no doubt it felt that way to you, but I was actively tapping into your reservoir of knowledge and experiences.

Oh?

Yes. You frequently use the method of ‘walking in someone else’s shoes’ to understand their feelings. I employed that strategy.

Oh. Well, glad to know I helped. I felt really useless.

No, Jim, Spock asserted. Everything you are is always there, available to me, whether you are consciously aware of it or not. It is quite… satisfying.

Jim smiled. Well, you plunder very gently, Mr. Spock. I’m not even aware of it. Hm, I don’t think I’m utilizing your talents quite as well.

You will learn, Jim. You have not needed them yet. They will be there for you when you do, Spock assured.

Just being able to speak to you over a distance like this without anyone knowing is great, Jim said. What is the etiquette, though? Do I ignore you in favor of the people around me, or do I focus on
YOU and let the people I’m with think I’ve lost my marbles?

That made Spock smile a bit. He had been mulling that question himself. He’d been on the bridge when Dr. McCoy had been blasting Jim in the clinic’s treatment room. It was quite distracting. It didn’t need to be. Spock could have used his mental disciplines to block it out, but he didn’t want to. He wanted to be with Jim, experiencing what Jim was experiencing. He had already spoken to everyone on the bridge and received their reports. They had fallen into a period of silence by the time McCoy started yelling at Jim, so Spock didn’t have to make the choice of whom to attend to, but it had raised the question in his mind how he should prioritize incoming information from the bond versus his physical surroundings. He had seen how Jim was perceived by Dr. Mullov and Dr. McCoy as “inattentive.” Spock wanted to make sure neither he nor Jim were ever perceived that way while on the bridge or in any official capacity.

_The tendency will be for us to prioritize each other, _Spock began, _but as the Enterprise’s exec officers, we must not allow our attention to duty to lapse, even for a moment._

_Agreed, _Kirk said.

_I think we will eventually get proficient at conversing through the bond while concurrently communicating with those nearby, _but until we reach that level of competence, I suggest we de-prioritize each other and be… understanding when other matters take precedence._

_Very good. There will be plenty of quiet moments when we can talk, _Spock. Don’t worry that you’ll insult me if your attention needs to be elsewhere._

_Thank you, Jim._

Spock headed out of Sickbay, suddenly realizing that he’d been lingering without any reason to still be there, except to have a private place to converse with Jim. He headed for Engineering to talk with Scotty.

Jim enjoyed seeing the ship through Spock’s eyes. He felt three inches taller.

That made Spock almost smile as he strode purposefully to the turbolift. Jim stayed with him until he entered Engineering. Then, he focused his attention on his bed’s viewscreen. He had another 25 minutes to rest with his feet up and needed to check his mail and think up some intelligent questions for Admiral Cresient about the mission. He was also curious what duties he and Spock
would be assigned during their six months on Earth. A flicker of worry ran through him that the admiral would say the whole mission to BetaZed was called off and the Enterprise would be patrolling the Romulan Neutral Zone instead. He pushed that thought away and opened a letter from Janice Rand, soon to be Janice Powell.

*Captain Kirk,* I am so happy to be considering coming back to the Enterprise! Matthew has heard a lot about Dr. McCoy (mostly from me!) and feels it would be an honor to work with him. He wants to have an idea what his duties would be before he says a definite ‘yes,’ and has written to Dr. McCoy to ask.

What an adventure you’re offering us! Thank you so much. I’ve never even heard of BetaZed. Can they really all read minds? Yikes! Is everyone I remember from the Enterprise going? I am so excited at the thought of seeing them all again. We’re shipping out tomorrow and I wish I could give you a solid ‘yes’ right now, but I suppose it will depend on what Matthew wants to do.

I feel like I got Dr. M’Benga fired, but you say Dr. McCoy’s investigation turned up lots of similar behavior with other female crew? Well, I’m sorry to hear other things happened but at least Dr. McCoy handled it.

This is silly, but I think Matthew is worried that you’re asking us aboard because you still have a crush on me. Is there something I can tell him to ease his mind? Do you have a steady girlfriend or something?

Jim chuckled. He wanted to tell her about Spock, but that probably wouldn’t be the thing to do. He understood Dr. Powell’s suspicions; Janice was quite a catch and Jim knew he had a womanizing reputation. Perhaps she herself was concerned that he had ideas. He read the rest of her letter and started a reply.

*Yeoman Rand,*

I am very happy to hear that you like the idea of joining us on this diplomatic mission. Hopefully, Dr. Powell will receive a response from Dr. McCoy soon that will help him decide. If the Scrimshire doesn’t make port for awhile, do not worry that the offer will be rescinded. There will be a place for you if you want it.

No, I don’t have a girlfriend. You have only my word that I want you here as a friend and a valued crewman, and to right a wrong that took place on my watch. Hopefully, that will be enough for your fiancé. Dr. McCoy was quite impressed with his resume, by the way. I’m sure he and the nurses would prefer him to M’Benga.
Yes, most of the crew is signing on for another five years, Mr. Spock tells me. He’s in command until tomorrow. I can walk now and am being released from the clinic in a couple of hours. Tomorrow, I’ll be back in command and we’ll be headed for Earth, barring any change in orders.

Take care,

Capt. Kirk

Jim had seven more responses to get to. When he’d finished reading them, he felt mostly pleased. The people he’d invited expressed an enthusiastic interest in the mission, but few could give an outright ‘yes.’ That was fine. A well-considered decision was a good decision. An inquiry he had made into the whereabouts of Dr. Miranda Jones yielded the information that she was still on the Medusan homeworld and expected to be for the foreseeable future.

Well, that’s that then. Jim sighed. Oh, well. It was a thought. I wish you happiness, Miranda.

***

Suddenly Jim realized it was well past 14:50 and he didn’t need to have his feet up anymore. He sprang out of bed and decided to pace the halls because he could. He walked up and down the corridors at a vigorous pace to make sure everything was working well. He felt strong and fit. He saw Dr. Mullova coming out of a patient’s room and rushed up to her to thank her again for a job well done.

“Captain Kirk!” she exclaimed, looking very pleased. “Look at you dashing around with vigor, the perfect figure of a starship captain.”

“You did a terrific job, Doctor. Thank you for saving my career,” Jim said sincerely.

“Oh, you are more than welcome. It was my pleasure. I’ll be by at 16:00 to sign off on everything and make your discharge official… in fact, wait, let me just do that right now in case I get tied up with something. It’s almost 16:00 now, isn’t it?” She started keying codes into the tablet she was holding. “There, done.”
“Would it be all right if I used my room for another hour or so?” Kirk asked. “My admiral wanted me to call him after I’d been discharged.”

“Certainly, certainly,” she said. “No problem.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“Dr. Mullova,” a nurse beckoned from the doorway of a patient’s room, and the doctor headed down the hall to see what she needed.

“Enjoy the hotel tonight, Captain,” she called over her shoulder to him.

Jim waved a fond farewell and headed back toward his room at a good clip, stretching his legs and enjoying the thought that he’d soon be walking right out of here.

He let his mind wander to his upcoming night with Spock in the hotel suite. Bones was right; he was not getting an invitation! Jim smiled to himself. The bond would give him a perfect understanding of what Spock wanted. What would it be like to have such accurate feedback from a lover? No more guessing, using moans and sighs to guide him. He would know with certainty whether Spock was enjoying what they were doing or not. Even if Spock were of a mind to deceive him about how he was feeling, he could not. How many times had Jim offered a lover a courtesy-moan when he wasn’t actually experiencing that much pleasure? There would be none of that with Spock. Jim tried to picture how it would be, lying beside Spock on a large, luxurious bed knowing exactly what he wanted and didn’t want. He knew Spock wanted intimacy, physical closeness tonight. He had felt that through the bond, but the details were fuzzy… or maybe Spock didn’t know himself yet. They would work it out tonight.
As Jim strode back to his room and rounded the corner onto his own corridor, he saw Lwaxara and McCoy at the end of the hall, standing outside his room.

“There he is, Doctor,” Lwaxara said.

“Oh, Jim,” Bones said, as the captain approached, “I am so sorry for what I said before.”

“Water under the bridge, Bones,” Jim said with a big, forgiving smile.

“I already apologized to Spock… after saying some awful things to him. Did you hear?” McCoy asked.

“Yeah,” Jim said.

“I don’t know what came over me. Spock is right; I do need to learn to govern my passions. Lwaxara’s been helping me get my head on straight,” he said. “I don’t know how we are going to manage without her for six months.”

“Oh, you’ll do fine,” she reassured them.

“I’m so sorry, Jim. The last thing I want to do is be a thorn in your side,” McCoy said guiltily.

“Hey, Spock got a hug. Have you got one for me?” Jim asked, reaching out for McCoy.

Bones enfolded Jim into his arms and squeezed him tight. If he were honest with himself, he still felt jealousy, but if he didn’t control it, it would ruin his relationship with his two best friends. He wouldn’t let that happen. He was lucky they were both as forgiving as they were.
“Keptin! Doctor McCoy!” a voice hailed them from the other end of the hallway.

It was Chekov… or at least it sounded like Chekov, but the hair was all wrong. As he got closer, they inspected his new, short haircut. It was up off his forehead and swept back, like Jim’s. He seemed very proud of it and turned around once so they could see the tapered back, too, as he gave a hello nod to Lwaxara.


“Tank you, Keptin. I asked the starbase barber to make me look older,” he explained proudly, before adding, “It ees good to see you back on your feet, Sir.”

“Thank you, Ensign. It feels good,” Kirk said.

“Well, now, I don’t know why anybody would wanna look older, but it suits you very well, Chekov,” McCoy complimented with a smile.

An Ensign Chekov with a short haircut! Now that would take as much getting used to as his two best friends being bonded.

“You look very handsome, Ensign. I just wish I had hair,” Lwaxara lamented good-naturedly.

“You will soon,” Bones reassured.

“How old are you, Ensign Chekov?” Lwaxara asked.

“Just shy of twenty-six,” the navigator responded, trying to stretch up taller than his 5 feet, 6 inches.

His girlfriend was a year older and an inch taller and this was apparently reason for a crisis of confidence for him on this very important day. Lwaxara knew he had a diamond ring in the shopping bag he was holding. He was going to ask Yeoman Landon to marry him tonight. He had come to show his new haircut to his captain and perhaps pick up some of Kirk’s natural confidence. He wasn’t really sure why he was here. He didn’t intend to tell Captain Kirk his plans
just in case she said no, but he wanted to be around someone he respected. He was having doubts that he was good enough for Martha and being around Captain Kirk always made him feel strong and confident.

Lwaxara wished she had a way to let the captain know that his junior officer needed his praise and approval right now. She could sense that Jim was mentally preparing for the upcoming call from the admiral and might unknowingly be dismissive to his ensign when he shouldn’t be.

*Spock,* she called out to him with her mind, *quickly… deliver this information to Captain Kirk.* Lwaxara knew Spock was just entering the clinic, on his way here. Hopefully, through the bond, Spock could get the message to Kirk.

Suddenly, she noticed that the captain was looking at Chekov with a fonder, gentler gaze. He knew.

“So, are you coming to BetaZed, Ensign Chekov?” Lwaxara asked.

“Oh, yes!” he answered, “eef the keptin vill have me.”

“There’s no one I would rather have at Navigation,” Kirk told Lwaxara. “…or as weapons officer or security officer. Ensign Chekov has worn a lot of hats over the past few years, and his work in every capacity has been exemplary.”

“Why, tank you, Keptin,” Chekov said proudly.

“Mr. Spock has personally overseen much of his training, and it shows in Chekov’s thoroughness and attention to detail.”

Chekov was beaming.

“Is Yeoman Landon signing on for another five years, too, Pavel?” Kirk asked.

“Oh, yes, Keptin! Martha vas wery excited to hear about the new meesion. Vee vant to stay together on the Enterprise.”
“That’s great news. She’s a lovely girl and a good yeoman. You two make a fine pair,” Jim said. “I’m glad you’re coming with me.”

“It’s going to be different on a diplomatic assignment,” Bones said. “Her mother is a heck of a fierce negotiator, I hear,” he said, gesturing to Lwaxara.

“Nothing you and Mr. Spock kint handle, Keptin. I tink the Enterprise crew vill make fine deemplomats. I am looking forward to the cultural exchange aspects… a whole planet of people I kin teach about Russia!”

Spock arrived to find them all laughing convivially. He had been monitoring their conversation through the bond, after relaying Lwaxara’s mental message to Jim. As Spock approached, Jim said to him, “Notice anything different about our ensign, Mr. Spock?”

Taking in Chekov’s new look, Spock said, “He has altered his hairstyle, resulting in a more mature appearance.”

“Do you really tink so, Mr. Spock?” Chekov asked, delighted.

“Indeed.”

“Tank you for scheduling me and Martha together on the shore leave rotation tonight, Mr. Spock. I am taking her out for Russian food.”

“I am sure it will be a memorable evening,” Spock said stoically.

“Her birthday is een two days and mine is een four. Vee vill celebrate dem both tonight. I bought her a leetle lamp from the blown glass shop a veek and a half ago. Uhura’s been hiding it for me in her quarters,” Chekov said conspiratorially.

“Oh, those lamps are exquisite!” Lwaxara said. “She will love it, I’m sure.”
“Hopefully, vee vill not experience any turbulence on the vay home to Earth.”

“Yeah, glass and starships really don’t mix, but I’m hoping my lighted globe survives, too,” Jim said. “Did you put it in my quarters, Spock?”

“Yes, Captain, and I brought you a dress uniform for tomorrow.”

“My dress uniforms just seet in the drawer,” Chekov lamented.

“Well, I’d like mine to stay there!” McCoy exclaimed. “Those things are a menace.”

“Not sure how Starfleet will feel about it, but Lwaxara has volunteered her mother’s valet to design us new, no-pain dress uniforms,” Jim said.

“Now, that’s hospitality!” McCoy enthused.

You look incredible in your dress uniform, Jim, Spock said spontaneously to his t’hy’la’s mind. He was thinking of the captain’s court martial, how Jim had held himself with such dignity in the face of those horrible unfair charges against him. He had looked truly the very model of Starfleet’s finest. 

You saved me, Spock. They wanted to sweep me under the rug ‘for the good of the Service,’ Jim recalled with some leftover resentment.

I am gratified that such a great wrong was averted, Spock said.

Jim and Spock smiled at each other. It appeared to the others that they were just sharing the amusement McCoy’s statement had produced, but Lwaxara heard their internal conversation. She had taken the tale of Ben Finney’s deceit from the captain’s mind several days ago and she knew all about how Spock had discovered that their records officer had faked his own death to destroy Kirk’s career. The captain had been betrayed by friends and lovers too often in the past. She was so happy he had Spock’s undying loyalty and love now.

“Well, I have to go, gentleman,” Lwaxara said to the four men. “Dr. Mullov is giving me my one millionth skin re-gen treatment at 16:00.” She rolled her eyes. “It seems that way, anyway. Good
luck with your call to the admiral, Captain. Fingers crossed everything’s still a go.”

“Thanks,” Kirk said. “Dr. Mullova has already discharged me, and Spock and I are heading to the hotel after the call, so I won’t see you until tomorrow, I guess. I haven’t forgotten your Enterprise tour. We’ll come pick you up at, say, 10:30 tomorrow morning and walk over together. Does that work?”

“Yes indeed, Captain!” she said. “I will see you then.”

“She’s a very nice kid,” Chekov said after she was out of earshot.

The older men exchanged glances over Chekov calling someone else a kid. He’d been the baby onboard and now here he was at the end of their mission about to propose marriage. Jim realized Bones didn’t know yet. He’d tell him as soon as Chekov was on his way.

“Very, I am very glad you are all healed, Keptin. I will see you tomorrow on the ship,” Chekov said.

“Enjoy your birthday dinner. Thanks for stopping by,” Jim said.

“Love the haircut,” McCoy added as Chekov turned to go.

“Tanks,” Chekov waved from a few feet down the hall.

Spock nodded a farewell.

As soon as he was around the corner out of sight, Jim pulled McCoy and Spock into his room and closed the door.

“Bones,” he said with a huge smile, “Chekov is proposing to Martha tonight!”

“What?! How do you know that?” McCoy asked, noticing that Spock didn’t seem surprised. “I thought you two could only read each other’s minds.”
“Lwaxara saw it in Chekov’s mind and told Spock to tell me so I could bolster his confidence a bit,” Jim explained. “She said that Chekov had just bought a diamond ring. It was in his bag.”

“Oh God, I’m glad I didn’t know,” McCoy said. “I probably would have said something stupid like I’ve been doing all day.”

Jim gave him a little smile and squeezed his shoulder.

“You might be marrying more than just Scotty and Mira, Jim,” Bones commented.

Jim hadn’t thought of that.

“Then, after two weddings onboard, everybody’s gonna want to get married and it’ll spread like wildfire,” Bones predicted.

“Hm,” Jim considered. “Let’s hope at least some of them will want to go to Niagara Falls.”

“Russia probably has a waterfall twice that size that Chekov will want to get married by,” McCoy joked.

“Probably,” Jim said with amusement.

McCoy chuckled, “Aw, I’m happy for the kid. He and Martha are a nice couple. Do you think she’ll say yes?” Bones asked. “Imagine having to hear tall tales about glorious Russia for the rest of your life. The poor girl.”

Kirk looked sideways and gave a chuckle, then said, “Oh, Bones, I heard from Janice Rand, and she said her fiancé had asked you some questions about what his duties would be…”

“Yes, I got back to him a couple of hours ago with as many answers as I have,” McCoy said. “If this call with Admiral Cresient yields more info, I’ll write an addendum to him.”
“You’re welcome to stay in the room for the call, by the way, Bones, if you’d like,” Jim offered.

“Okay, if you don’t mind,” Bones accepted. “Thanks.”

He plunked himself down in a guest chair and got comfortable.

The way his screen was configured, Jim really had no choice but to sit on the bed, and Spock stood over his left shoulder as he had done before. Jim placed the call request.

After a bit, a man’s face appeared on the screen. It was an unfamiliar vice admiral.

“Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock,” he greeted, “I am Vice Admiral David Ostermann. Admiral Cresient is in a meeting and asked me to take this call.”

“Sir,” Kirk and Spock chorused.

“Have you been discharged from the clinic as expected, Captain?” Ostermann asked.

“Yes, I have, Sir.”

“And your ship’s surgeon has certified you fit for duty?”

“No, Admiral, not yet. I am to rest tonight at the base hotel, attend an official function tomorrow, then return to the ship to be certified fit by my CMO and assume command tomorrow afternoon, Sir.”

“Very well, Captain. Are the clinic doctors happy with your recovery? Is there any reason to suspect you might not meet the qualifications for fitness tomorrow?” Ostermann asked.

“I expect to meet them, Admiral. The clinic doctors consider my recovery complete. One more night’s rest ought to do it, Sir.”
“Good! Good to hear. Admiral Cresient wanted me to assure you that the information he gave you when you last spoke is unchanged, and I am authorized to give you your orders concerning your departure from Starbase 4 and arrival on Earth. Admiral Cresient will debrief you further when you arrive. You will hear from me or my assistant Yeoman Reynolds en route, regarding such things as crew housing, duty assignments, and scheduled meetings, but I can tell you now that all crew will be housed planetside in the greater San Francisco area during the six months that Enterprise will be undergoing the refit.”

“That will be welcome news to them, I’m sure, Sir,” Kirk said.

“You may leave Starbase 4 at your discretion tomorrow night and arrive at Spacedock 12 no earlier than 09:00 Earth Standard Time on September 30th. You will be directed by Spacedock 12 personnel which bay to enter, but at the moment, they have the Enterprise scheduled for refit in Bay “A.”

“Very well, Admiral,” Jim said.

“Do you have any questions, Captain?” Ostermann asked.

“My chief engineer wishes to be involved in the re-fit of engineering. Will that be possible, Sir?” Kirk asked.

“I’m sure his help will be welcomed. I will make Admiral Cresient aware of your request.”

“Thank you, Sir. My CMO is wondering how large the medical staff is slated to be on the mission to BetaZed, and what specialties will be required for his team.”

“I don’t have any information for you there, Kirk. It is still early days. He will be included, of course, in all upcoming meetings to determine medical staffing needs and proposed improvements to Sickbay,” Ostermann said.

“Very good, Admiral,” Kirk said.

“I will send you the plans for living quarters and mess remodels. I think you’ll like some of the changes our engineers have cooked up for improved crew comfort and efficiency,” Ostermann remarked.
“I’m sure we will, Sir,” Jim replied. “Oh, one more request, if I may.”

“Certainly, Captain,” Ostermann said.

“I have the pleasure of conducting a wedding ceremony for my chief engineer when we get into space dock. The bride is Starfleet Lt. Mira Romaine, currently stationed in San Francisco. Can you have her and any guests of hers beamed aboard as soon as we arrive?”

“I think that can be arranged,” the vice admiral said, smiling. “Congratulations to the happy couple.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Well, like I said, we’ll be in touch en route, so if there’s nothing else, you have your orders.”

“Nothing else, Sir. Nice to meet you.”

“And you, too, Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock. Starfleet Command, and a grateful public, are preparing to welcome you home warmly. Safe travels. Ostermann out.”

The screen went black.

Spock gave Jim a little squeeze on his shoulder. The mission was on!

McCoy slowly rose from his chair. “Oh, boy, they’re not going to do parades, are they? I hate parades,” he groused.

Jim rolled his eyes, amazed that the doctor had found something to complain about.

“Well,” Jim said, relaxing his posture and leaning back in bed, “in a week we’ll be home. I like that they’re keeping everybody together by the Bay. I wonder what duty assignments everyone will
“I was hoping for a couple of weeks at least to see my sister,” Bones said.

“I’m sure there will be lots of time to do that, but there may be some critical meetings in the first couple of weeks you won’t want to miss,” Jim pointed out.

“We shall find out in good time,” Spock said sensibly.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get more information about the mission’s medical staffing parameters for you, Bones,” Jim said. “If it had been Cresient…”

“It’s fine, Jim,” Bones said, disappointed that he hadn’t been able to subdue his natural instinct to complain. “Things will unfold as they unfold. Command has a lot on its plate right now. I’m not gonna sweat it. Thanks for letting me sit in.”

“No problem,” Jim said.

“I’m going to head back to my office,” McCoy said. “The Mullovs want to take me out to dinner tonight, but not until 20:00, and I have some work I want to get to before then. I don’t need to attend the memorial service in the morning, do I?”

“No. Spock and I will represent the ship,” Jim said. “Eat, drink, and be merry tonight, Bones. Celebrate a successful collaboration with the Doctors Mullov and toast to a job well done.”

“Okay, will do,” McCoy said, smiling a broad smile. He remembered what serious shape Jim had been in such a short time ago. It was so good to have his captain back in the pink again. He felt like he should apologize a little more for reacting the way he had to his friends’ new bond, for questioning Spock’s motives and his fidelity, but he didn’t want to bring down the mood again, so he just radiated as much warmth as he could toward them both, then took his leave.

He intentionally didn’t mention the hotel; he knew Jim and Spock would be having a celebration of their own tonight. As he walked back to the ship, he let his mind wander and ended up accidentally picturing some things that he felt very guilty picturing. *I suppose Spock IS exotic, as exotic as any woman Jim has ever romanced,* Bones thought to himself. *What do they DO together? It was impossible not to wonder. They were in love. That was clear. But did they express it in a fully
physical way, or was the bond so gratifying mentally that they didn’t need to, or want to?

What would it be like to be with a Vulcan? he wondered as he walked. Christine had found Spock attractive. Pining for him had made her look foolish, McCoy thought. He’d teased her about it more than once. Probably shouldn’t have. Why am I such a jerk to the people I care about? Jim had made his choice to bond with Spock and offer him his heart. McCoy resolved to trust Spock to protect it and be whatever Jim needed.
Chapter 40

11 Days Down - Chapter 40

The hotel suite was even larger than they had expected. As they entered, Jim was struck by the unexpected feel of carpet beneath their feet. The captain sat down in a comfortable velour chair and took off his boots, so he could feel the luxuriously soft floor better.

“Mmm, how long has it been since we’ve walked on carpet, Spock?”

“302 years, 5 months, 16 days, Captain,” Spock said nonchalantly.


Spock sat on a long velour couch and removed his boots. In black socks, he padded over to where Kirk was now standing by the sliding glass door to their balcony.

“What a view!” Jim exclaimed as he looked out over the gardens. Some of the foliage reached their balcony, but the majority of plants were about 12 feet below them. The largest of the fountains bubbled and sprayed directly in front of their balcony. There were no colored lights, though, because the illumination on the starbase had not yet gone to night mode. The large ceiling panels, 20 stories above the gardens, were still opaqued for day lighting, but an evening hue of pink and orange was being projected on them at this hour instead of pale blue.

“A very pleasing sight,” Spock agreed.

Their suite was silent, but when Jim slid the door to the balcony back a bit, the rush of water and hum of humanoid voices broke the quiet. They were a bit too close to the people below for
anonymity, so neither of them stepped out onto the large balcony. Instead, they slid the door closed again and enjoyed the view together from inside.

“You spied on me,” Spock said suddenly.

“Oh, um, yeah,” Jim admitted, remembering the night he’d followed Spock through the gardens via the Gardencams.

“Why did you do that?” Spock asked.

“I just wanted to watch you,” Jim said honestly.

“Why?”

“You know why,” Jim said with a soft smile.

The corners of Spock’s lips turned up. He did know why. He knew everything Jim knew, every fond thought Kirk had ever had about him, each warm feeling, every daydream and fantasy. Spock could see them all, feel them as Jim felt them. The way Spock was searching for them, reveling in them when he found them, made Kirk blush.

Yes, I’ve loved you for a long time, I suppose, haven’t I? Jim said.

It seems so, Spock acknowledged.

Jim searched Spock’s mind for similar things and found quite a few moments of friendship where Spock had let himself admire his captain and entertain warm feelings for him, but anything akin to a sexual fantasy was so interwoven with guilt that it spoiled any joy Jim might have felt in discovering it. Even in the privacy of his own mind, Spock had censured himself, scolded himself for not being able to stop wanting what he was certain he shouldn’t want. There wasn’t one instance from before a few days ago where Spock had just allowed his mind to roam unbridled to imagine sexual scenarios with Jim, at least none that Jim had access to.

I am not hiding anything, Jim. I cannot. That is all there is. I am able to control my mind and just
never let… trains of thought like that develop, Spock explained.

A few times they almost got away from you, but you squelched them. You felt so guilty about having them, Jim remarked sadly. No wonder he hadn’t picked up any clear images of what Spock wanted tonight. Spock didn’t have any. He’d been trained in his childhood to keep an ordered mind. Any errant thoughts that threatened that order got ‘pruned away’ like Jim’s hip nerves.

That is an apt analogy, Spock said. I was taught to arrest the development of any turbulent thought, cut it off before it could threaten to overtake my mind. That would include anything in the emotional or sexual realm. I have been doing that since childhood. It is automatic.

I know, Jim said.

You think that is tantamount to child abuse, Spock read in his mind.

No.

Yes, you do, Spock pressed.

Intentionally stunting the emotional development of a child is a crime on Earth, Jim said.

You’re wondering why my mother allowed it, Spock said.

Yes.

It did cause her pain, but she believed that eventually I would be beyond the difficulties of my early years and would attain the serenity of perfect logic that every Vulcan seeks. I chose that path because my father encouraged it. She supported me.

You have accomplished so much in your life, Spock. I didn’t mean to imply that your Vulcan training bore no fruit. I mean look at you. You’re magnificent.

But sexually and emotionally stunted, Spock said.
That was a bad choice of words, Jim apologized.

You are right. The price of my accomplishments was high. Controlling my emotions never became effortless, like I am told it does for many Vulcans. I could never attain that level of peace.

That’s why you thought you needed to undergo Kolinahr, Jim said.

Yes. Wanting you was creating a strain I could not resolve. I sought relief from it.

I’m glad you’re getting it THIS way, Jim said, I wish you could feel the happiness without any guilt, though.

My upbringing was such that I may continue to struggle with guilt. If you feel it in our bond, please know that it is not something I want to be there, but I am currently unable to eradicate it. I believe a human would say, ‘It is me, not you.’

That made Jim smile, as Spock intended.

I love you, Spock. You’re coming so far, stretching yourself so much to be with me, Jim acknowledged with gratitude.

It is not a hardship. It is the most satisfying, enriching decision I have ever made. Thank you for helping me summon the courage to do it.

Just then, the base lighting began transitioning to night mode. In the gardens, the pathway lights came on, followed by the fountains’ colorful lights. As the last of the pinks and oranges faded from the ceiling panels, they lost their opacity and suddenly the stars were on full display.

It was a beautiful moment in the gardens and many visitors were looking up. Jim and Spock shrank back a bit from the window lest they be spotted.

You have guilt, too, you know, Spock pointed out gently.
Yes, I know, Jim acknowledged.

_I wonder what it will be like living on BetaZed, Jim said. Judging by Lwaxara, Betazoids don’t seem to carry a lot of guilt._

_Their minds are completely open to each other. Acting in good faith is the norm, because committing crimes or offenses would make you a pariah. Anyone who met you would instantly know what you had done, Spock said._

_Lwaxara sees us. She sees us through and through… and she likes us, Jim said. There must not be anything too dark or terrible in us then, right? She likes you better than your father, better than Sobren, better than any Vulcan she’s ever met. Next time you feel guilt, think of THAT._

Spock smiled and looked thoughtful.

_It was a salient moment for me when I first learned that a telepathically talented race existed whose abilities do not require a strict mental discipline, Spock revealed. I was taught that such skills are only attained at great cost._

_She does easily what you had to work years for. Does that upset you? Jim asked._

_My worldview is what it upsets, Spock sighed. I predict that if we are successful and BetaZed is added to the United Federation of Planets, the importance of Vulcan will wane. Vulcans are known for our intellect, telepathy, and truthfulness. The Betazoids possess all of these traits without the stoicism that humans find difficult to interact with._

_You think we will fall in love with the Betazoids and Vulcans will be yesterday’s news?_ 

_Spock laughed. You sounded like Dr. McCoy just then. But yes, that is essentially what I predict._

_Perhaps it will force a shift in Vulcan culture, a bloodless revolution, Jim suggested. Adapt or die, right?_
Spock raised an eyebrow. *Perhaps you are right.*

Jim went on. *Maybe in a few generations, Vulcans and Betazoids will be inter-breeding and there will be bubbly, pointed-earred counselors on every starship.*

Spock rolled his eyes. Jim’s first prediction was somewhat serious, but this one was clearly a flight of fancy. His captain was feeling playful now. Spock could tell by his expression.

*Jim!*

*What?* Jim asked innocently.

*You just imagined me married to Lwaxara and what our children would be like!*

*Uh, I’m just going to deny that, I think,* Jim said with a charming smirk.

Spock raised an eyebrow and tilted his head incredulously. He knew what he’d seen.

*Okay, Jim laughed. I was about to name them. Want to help me?*

*You are in a strange mood tonight, Jim,* Spock said. *I am old enough to be Lwaxara’s father.*

*You just had your first pon farr three years ago. How do you figure you’re old enough to be her father?*

Spock looked stumped.

*Logic!* Jim proclaimed, tapping his temple.

They were still standing to the side of their glass door, watching the cascading water of the closest fountain. It was changing colors in a very pleasing way. Violet slowly became indigo, which
slowly became blue, which turned to turquoise before becoming green. Different levels of the fountain changed colors at different rates. The effect was entrancing. As the warm colors began their progression to red, Jim remembered watching Spock on the Gardencam, standing ramrod straight staring into the fountain for a long time, unaware that passers-by were noticing him and recognizing him.

*What were you thinking at that moment, Spock? Do you remember?*

Yes, Spock said softly. Their mood had turned quiet and contemplative again.

*I was trying to relax and enjoy myself, because I knew that is what you wanted me to do. The plants were interesting and the fountains were beautiful, but I felt so empty.*

*You were trying to experience the fountain as ME, as though you were me, but you couldn’t, Jim said.*

*And now I CAN, Spock said with wonder. The whole world is like the fountain to me now, glowing with color that I could not properly appreciate before.*

Jim reached for his hand. *Ashayam,* he said lovingly, stretching up to give Spock’s lips a gentle kiss. Spock pulled him into an embrace and held him tight. They rubbed their hands up and down each other’s backs, pressing their chests together, feeling the soft velour of their uniform shirts and the beating of their hearts.

Suddenly Kirk became aware of a physical sensation that wasn’t as pleasant. After 14 days on pause, his GI tract was choosing this moment to come rumbling back to life in a way that couldn’t be ignored.

*It’s a good sign, Jim,* Spock said when he perceived the source of their sudden discomfort.

“Ugh, sorry,” Jim said, letting Spock go. “Excuse me for a bit, okay?”

“Of course,” Spock said.
While he was laid up, a biowaste elimination unit had been doing all of the work for Jim, but now his GI’s vacation was over. Perhaps malts and cheeseburgers hadn’t been the wisest choice for today’s lunch. Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Jim headed for the door he assumed would lead to a bathroom.

“I will unpack… on the other side of the suite,” Spock called after him.

There wasn’t much to unpack, but it took Spock’s attention away from the bond. He was pretty sure Jim didn’t want him in his head right now.

Spock picked up the small bag he had packed for himself and Jim and headed to the opposite side of the suite, searching the two bedrooms there to decide which one was the best. He knew Jim wouldn’t mind letting him choose where they slept. Both bedrooms were similar, large and luxurious, so he chose one and began hanging up their dress uniforms in the walk-in closet. He placed their underwear and socks on one of the closet’s open shelves. He stood back and regarded their uniforms hanging close beside each other in the mostly empty closet. On impulse, he grabbed the sleeve of Jim’s green shirt and slid his fingers down the silky fabric to the gold braid near the cuff. He pictured all of their uniforms hanging together beside their civilian clothes. Spock didn’t know if they would be roommates in San Francisco. Likely not. As ranking officers, a captain and first officer would almost certainly have private apartments. He hoped they would at least be close to one another.

Spock went back out to the living area to collect their boots. On the way back to the closet, he decided Jim’s could use a little dry polishing before tomorrow. He went looking for a cloth in the nearest bathroom and was pleased to find a shoeshine mitt among the complimentary items. Turning the bathroom light to maximum, he began rubbing a brighter shine into Jim’s boots.

The bathroom was huge with pearly iridescent tiles around the sinks and a spacious water shower. Two plush ivory bathrobes were folded neatly in a dark wicker-like basket on the counter, wrapped with a wide ivory ribbon tied in a bow. As Spock shined the boots, he pictured himself and Jim in those robes. This would be a luxurious night of comfort. Rare for them. He hoped Jim felt well enough to enjoy it.

When he was satisfied with the shine he’d obtained from Jim’s boots, he took them to the closet and placed them beside his. He went back to the bathroom to wash his hands and Jim came in.

“Better?” Spock asked him.
“Much,” Jim said with a slightly embarrassed sigh. He glanced around the bathroom. “These showers are huge! I see it’s the same on this side of the suite, too. You could land a shuttlecraft in there!”

“Hyperbole,” Spock said raising an eyebrow.

Jim smiled at him. “I’ve gone two weeks without a shower. I’m going to clean up a bit before bed.”

Spock finished drying his hands and pointed out the robes in the basket. “Something to put on afterward,” he said, untying the ribbon.

“Nice,” Jim said. He noticed there were two robes. “There’s lots of room in there… want to join me?”

“I… I usually shower in the morning,” Spock said hesitantly, caught off guard.

“Okay, Spock,” Jim smiled and didn’t press. “I won’t be long.”

Spock stepped out and shut the door to give Jim privacy. He realized he was still giving him privacy through the bond, too. He opened it up a bit to touch Jim’s mind, feel his thoughts. Spock was sorry that he’d turned down the offer to shower together and Jim felt it.

Come in if you want to, Spock, Jim said.

Spock could feel all of Jim’s warm and welcoming feelings. He wanted to run his hands over Spock’s body, wash him, enjoy the novelty of such a large shower with him. Spock wanted it, too, especially after seeing the way Jim imagined it. He wanted to run his hands over Jim’s body, too. The creamy soap he had just felt on his hands was fragrant and luxurious. Washing each other with it would be a sensory delight. This was to be a night of sensory delights. He would embrace this new experience with his t’hy’la, his ashayam.

Jim smiled at him as the bathroom door opened. He’d already undressed except for his underwear and turned on the shower. The room was beginning to get pleasantly steamy.
**I’ll keep the water warm enough for you,** Jim promised. He pulled off his underwear with Spock watching, then stepped into the shower. The walls of the shower were transparent glass, but they had already fogged up enough to prevent Spock from seeing all but the outline of Jim’s body.

Spock took off his uniform and hung it on the towel bar that Jim had used for his. He let his underwear fall to the floor near where Jim’s lay. Then, he rounded the glass wall of the shower and joined Jim.

**Oh, this feels good, Spock. Come in,** Jim welcomed him with a big smile. He stepped to the side a bit and let Spock stand under the water.

Jim looked magnificent wet, droplets of water beading on his hairless chest. Spock looked more like a wet cat. He had lots of dark hair on his chest and stomach. The black hair on his head, that he wore perfectly groomed into a shiny helmet, had separated into corded strands. Jim thought it was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen. He tried to remember if he’d ever seen Spock soaking wet before. He could only remember the time in Spock’s quarters on the day of the cave-in, where he had seen through the meld his friend showering, scrubbing green paint off his chest and sobbing, thinking his captain would die.

Jim hadn’t meant to think of such a thing at a happy moment like this, but his mind was what it was. Spock understood.

**This is a much better shower, Jim,** he said, smiling. Being reminded of his anguish that day made Spock appreciate all the more that his captain was standing before him healthy, whole… and just so beautiful it took his breath away.

Seeing Spock smile drove the image of him crying from Jim’s mind. He knew that Spock was impressed with his body and wanted to touch him. **I’m hungry for your touch, Spock. Touch me however you want. Wash me.**

Spock filled his right hand with the lotion-like soap from the dispenser and rubbed his hands together. Facing Jim, he put one hand on each of Jim’s shoulders and rubbed towards the center of his chest. He washed his chest with small circles, feeling the musculature under the smooth skin. When Jim’s chest was all lathered, Spock returned his soapy hands to Jim’s shoulders. He slid his right hand down Jim’s left arm until he reached his hand. Intertwining their fingers, he slid his left hand over Jim’s shoulder to his back and pulled their upper bodies into an embrace.
Ahh, Jim sighed when his chest met Spock’s. He naturally wrapped his arms around Spock’s slender body and encouraged the contact.

Spock washed the right side of Jim’s back while holding him close. When he was finished, he slid his left hand down Jim’s arm and laced their fingers. He let go of Jim’s other hand and slid his right hand over his shoulder to wash the other side of his back. Jim saw the methodology and smiled. It had seemed random before.

Jim loved the feeling of Spock’s hands on him and his hairy chest pressed up against his bare one. He bent his knees and straightened them several times in a row to rub their chests together. The soap allowed a slippery sensation, but there was also some pleasant abrasion. Jim had never considered his nipples very sensitive, not like a woman’s, but they were certainly enjoying this sensual scrubbing by Spock’s course chest hair. He knew through the bond that it felt good to Spock, too.

When Spock finished washing both sides of Jim’s back, he pulled him under the water stream for a rinse. Jim’s chest skin looked so pink.

*Is that from my chest hair or is the water too hot?*

*Both, Jim answered, but it’s fine.*

Spock felt through the bond that it was true. The water wasn’t uncomfortably hot for Jim. He liked breathing the steam.

*It feels good to my lungs after the dry, recirculated air we breathe all day,* Jim said.

*Yes, I agree,* Spock said. He thought maybe Jim had turned the water up so hot just for him, but now he knew Jim liked it very hot. He loved learning these things about Jim.

Kirk was thinking he’d like to wash Spock’s hair.

*Go ahead, Jim,* Spock said.
The shower soap had smelled delicious and Jim wondered what the hotel’s shampoo would smell like. He pushed the dispenser and drew a generous amount of pearly, pale turquoise shampoo into his palm. He lathered it up between his hands and dived right into Spock’s hair at the temples. He massaged his scalp with his fingers from nape to crown, ending with the front. He realized he had never seen Spock’s natural hairline before and coaxed his bangs back with the suds. He had a bit of a widow’s peak, a really lovely hairline. Jim smiled at what he had discovered. Spock knew what he was thinking.

*I cannot wear my hair like that, Jim,* Spock said.

*Why not? Scared you’ll steal Chekov’s thunder?* Jim joked.

*As you pointed out before, Vulcans only have one haircut,* Spock said, as though that explained everything.

*Well, it’s a damn shame because this is a beautiful forehead.* Jim ran a lathered finger across the part of Spock’s brow that never got to see the light of day. Jim was happy to have seen it. He pulled Spock gently under the water stream to rinse. He gazed at his Vulcan first officer as he stood, eyes closed, with water spilling over his hair and sharp cheekbones. God, he loved him.

*Wash mine now?* Jim asked as Spock rubbed the water from his eyelids and opened them.

Spock nodded and filled his hand with the greenish shampoo. Jim wasn’t sure if it was supposed to smell like apples or… *oh,* yes he did know. *It smells like kaasa.* From Spock’s memory, Jim learned of the blue-green fruit native to Vulcan and how it smelled. It stood to reason, he decided, that the toiletries would have scents pleasing to Vulcans, since the Office of Vulcan Affairs operated this suite.

*And the body soap smells like…* Jim stretched deep into Spock’s memory of Vulcan scents. *Bar-kas.*

*Very good, Jim. It is our version of a cinnamon-nutmeg blend of baking spices. It is also used in some beverages,* Spock explained as he began washing Jim’s hair. Compared to Spock’s cord-like hair, Jim’s was fine and wispy. Spock was surprised how easy it was to push his long fingers through it to massage Jim’s scalp. It took much less time than it had taken Jim to wash *his* hair. Spock lingered on his nape, kneading the tendons there longer than necessary just because Jim was enjoying it so much.
It seemed like there was no part of Jim’s body that didn’t sing under Spock’s touch. Every square inch of him felt so alive. Jim sighed as he stepped under the water to rinse his hair. When all the suds were washed away, he filled his hand with bar-kas soap and started on Spock’s back. Standing behind him, Jim ran his hands up and down along Spock’s sides from hips to armpits. His hipbones were sharp and fascinating to touch. Jim’s hands lingered there for a moment, gripping them. Then, he slid his soapy hands around to Spock’s front. He felt the muscles of Spock’s stomach tense as his friend braced for the possibility that Jim would touch him… there.

*I won’t, Spock. Don’t worry. I’ll remember,* Jim assured as he scrubbed through Spock’s lower belly hair with his fingertips and nails and then up to his chest.

You want to, though, Spock said.

Yes, Jim said, but I’m perfectly happy with the other 98% of you. Please don’t worry about it. Jim pressed the side of his face against Spock’s upper back and hugged him tenderly from behind.

That estimate is erroneous, Jim. My reproductive organs comprise only .04% of my total body mass, Spock informed his new lover with the seriousness of a legal disclosure.

Ripples of Jim’s joyous laughter danced through the bond. He kissed the back and side of Spock’s neck over and over, then turned him around to face him.

Estimate MY ratio, Jim asked playfully, inviting Spock’s perusal by glancing down and back up at him suggestively through his wet lashes. Kirk stepped back a bit to give Spock a full frontal view, offering himself unselfconsciously for Spock’s analysis.

His captain was a feast for the eyes and Spock was more than happy to look, but judiciously refrained from assigning numbers. Jim chuckled.

You want me to touch you, Spock read in Jim’s mind, even though your still-healing perineal nerves will prevent... a response.

They will only prevent me from getting hard, not from feeling your touch, Spock. Nothing is numb or tingly. I can feel. I’m just… temporarily impotent.

Spock could tell that Jim half-expected him to refuse on medical grounds, but he surprised him by
filling his hand with soap and circling behind Jim. He rubbed his palms together then placed his soapy hands on Jim’s hips, gripping for a moment, then rubbing small circles over his hips and outer thighs to encourage the lather. As Jim had done to him, Spock began sliding his slippery hands forward around Jim’s torso to rub his stomach. Then, since he knew it was welcome, Spock slid his hands lower and went where no man had gone before.

*Oh,* Jim gasped.

With both hands, Spock rubbed slowly up and down and between Jim’s legs. The sensation through the bond was intense. With his long, elegant fingers, Spock took the delicate bit of sensitive tissue he found amid the hair and copious suds and rolled it gently, stroking it lovingly with his thumb, as Jim gasped in pleasure.

*Ahh.* *Oh, Spock!* *Ohh, I would be sooo hard right now,* Jim said, showing him an image of what his touch should be producing.

Spock seized the image and made it come alive in the bond. Jim wanted him to feel him hard and throbbing, so Spock made it so.

*This isn’t real,* Jim gasped in wonder as he felt himself grow and thicken.

*It is real for us,* was all Spock said.

Jim’s thoughts about what he wanted directed Spock’s actions in this mental fantasy. With his thumb and fingers he made a ring and ran it up and down around Jim’s shaft, exactly as Jim was picturing it in his thoughts.

*Oh, god, Spock!*

Jim’s pleasure was evident until a point where it seemed to Spock that his ministrations were almost causing Jim pain, so he stopped abruptly.

*No! Spock, don’t stop. Don’t stop! Hold me and don’t stop,* Jim moaned desperately through the bond.
Sure, Spock did as his captain directed. He continued stroking with his soapy hand and wrapped his other arm around Kirk’s waist, holding him tightly as it seemed that Jim was losing control of his mind and his body. Spock thought they should stop, but everything in Jim was screaming MORE!

Then, as Spock tightened his grip again around Kirk’s waist from behind, he pressed his chest even more firmly against Jim’s back, curving around him, forming his body to Jim’s. It was then that Jim felt Spock’s slight bulge pressing into the cleft of his cheeks and that sent him over the edge. Powerful ribbons of white pulsed out of him beneath Spock’s hand and onto the glass wall of the shower.

“Ahhh! Oh, Spock. Oh, my god, Spock,” Jim panted aloud, spent. As he caught his breath, he realized that Spock was still holding him around the waist very tightly, worrying that he would pass out and fall.

“I’m okay, Spock,” Jim said. “Th-that was amazing. Oh, my god.” He looked around and realized the shower wall had no stripes of white. “It felt so real, Spock. How do you do that?”

Jim stepped under the water stream to wash away the soap and the mess his body still believed was there. Spock let him go, convinced that he was all right.

“Whew,” Jim sighed with contentment. He greedily breathed in huge gulps of the fragrant, steamy air and leaned back against the one wall of the shower that wasn’t glass. Putting his hands on Spock’s shoulders and looking up into his eyes, he said in awe, “You’re something else, Spock.” He embraced his amazing lover, almost forgetting to keep their lower bodies apart a bit.

“I thought at one point that you were in pain. You seemed… overstimulated,” Spock said.

“Well, that’s how it feels, Spock,” Jim explained. “Arousal builds and builds until the tension begs for release, makes you chase that climax until you lose control. You didn’t know that?”

“So, the loss of control is… sought? It is the goal?” Spock asked.

“Yes. Once you come, the uncomfortable tension is gone and a great relief comes over you, a serenity,” Jim explained, running his fingertips gently down Spock’s arms. “Some people fall asleep afterward, if they’re lying down.”
Spock was taking in the information and considering.

You're thinking perhaps your over-sensitivity is just a fear of losing control, Jim said.

Possibly, Spock said.

Jim thought about it and searched Spock’s mind. When you are aroused and you feel it increasing and threatening your control, you shut it off. You make certain you never get to the point where you lose control, Jim said accurately.

That is true, Spock realized.

That kind of control is admirable, Spock. I wish I had it sometimes, but when you’re alone... or with me... it’s okay to lose control. It’s only temporary. See! Jim spun around under the water, smiling and happy. All better. “Wanna try?” Jim said aloud with a hopeful face.

God, Jim was beautiful. Spock wanted to let his ashayam touch him anywhere. He didn’t want any part of his body to be off-limits to his human lover... and he was curious.

All right, he said.

Jim was delighted. For real, right? Not in our minds. Great as that just was, your body probably needs some real release.

Spock agreed. He had tried a few times over the years... alone in his quarters, standing in his shower, lying on his bed. But now, he had a new piece of information: Losing control is the goal. He had never been willing to let that happen before, hadn’t known that he was supposed to. No wonder he could never achieve the release that human males covet.

Now, he had Jim to guide him, help him. He would let Jim try to arouse him to the point where climax was possible. If anyone could do it, his captain could. He was so attracted to Jim in every way. They were t’hy’la. They were best friends.

If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. No big deal, right? Jim said, as casually as he could. Spock
knew he was excited about this experiment.

*Just don’t worry, Spock. That’s the main thing. Worry kills it. Just tell yourself, “I’m going to lose control, and that’s okay.”* …*Oh, but don’t scream too loud. We don’t want security busting in here, Jim warned with a wink.*

Spock looked alarmed at the thought that he might scream.

“I was just joking, Spock,” Jim said. “C’mere.” Jim got a handful of soap and quickly washed their legs. “There, now we’re all clean; we can just rinse off afterward, pull on the robes and go lie down.”

Jim got some more soap in his hand and lathered it up in Spock’s belly hair, then he gently moved lower, washing areas that clearly made Spock uncomfortable. His friend was sucking air through his teeth and not enjoying his ministrations at all. Maybe *hands* weren’t the way to go. Jim had an idea. He rubbed some lather on his left hip and turned perpendicular to Spock. *Here, rub up against me,* he told Spock.

Spock liked the idea and pushed himself against Jim’s slippery hip. They were just the perfect heights for this. Spock rocked his hips back and forth and rubbed up and down and diagonally, bending his knees slightly. Oh, it was good. He wrapped his arms around Jim, clutching at Jim’s right hip to pull the left one closer.

*Oh, Jim.* He was so tight up against Jim’s body now. The slide against his friend’s form was intoxicating. He was rutting against him, rutting like an animal. The thought brought a momentary revulsion until he felt Jim in his mind, saying, *Spock, I love this. I love you.*

The sexual stimulation was building past the point where Spock would normally have shut it down. He felt thick and heavy, engorged. His heart was hammering. He could lose control soon. Apprehension stole in, threatening to distract him. Then, Jim was turning in his arms to face him. His mouth was on his, kissing him deeply, and Jim’s hand was reaching between them, stroking him.

Through the bond, Jim felt Spock getting dizzy, overwhelmed. He was starting to lose control, but his mind was fighting it. *Help me, Captain,* he reached out.

Jim realized then what Spock’s subconscious knew. He didn’t need the gentle hand of a lover in
this frightening moment. He needed the commanding hand of his captain. Jim quickly reminded himself that Spock wasn’t made of glass; he was a Vulcan, twice his strength. He grabbed his length securely in his fist and pumped hard and fast, hoping he was right about what Spock needed.

“Aaagh!” Spock cried, breathing hard and gripping Jim’s shoulders. He was so close.

“Come for me, Spock,” Jim said aloud with authority. He thought of adding, “That’s an order,” but couldn’t quite bring himself to do that in a situation like this. Luckily, his commanding tone was enough and Spock toppled over the edge.

“Aaaaah!” he shouted as his orgasm exploded. Streams of white coursed out in waves. Jim held him tight in case his knees buckled, but they held as Spock convulsed in his arms.

“Ohhh, Captain… Jim,” Spock groaned, riding out the aftershocks.

Jim gently shifted them both back under the shower stream, because his fastidious first officer was not going to appreciate this mess. One of them had to be thinking, and at the moment, it was Jim. The last thing he wanted was for Spock to be embarrassed after such a triumph.

Filling his hand with more soap, he sudsed up both of their bellies and did a another quick wash of their lower halves. Lather swirled around their feet and down the drain. Unobtrusively, Jim rubbed away a couple of sticky spots on the shower wall while Spock still had his eyes shut. As they fluttered open below his wet bangs, Spock saw Jim smiling at him.

“Well, well,” Jim said, by way of a congratulations, “that was a very successful experiment. You okay?”

Spock nodded.

“Let’s get into those soft robes and go lie down, huh?” Jim suggested.

“Yes,” Spock said.

Jim turned off the water and reached for the towels, high on a rack above them. He pulled two
down and handed one to Spock. Jim had had at least one hand on Spock since… the experiment’s
dramatic conclusion. His friend seemed to have regained his senses and balance now, though, so
Jim released him to dry himself off. The towels had suffered a lot of steam saturation and weren’t
terribly absorbent anymore. Jim feared the robes would be in the same shape. Tying a towel around
his waist and opening the bathroom door, Jim said, “Be right back.”

Spock knew through the bond what he was thinking. It was a good idea. Jim returned, holding up
two dry robes from another bathroom.

“These will feel better,” Jim said. He handed one to Spock who was still completely naked. He
managed one more look before Spock covered up.

The robes were as comfortable as they looked. Jim pulled the thick collar up to the nape of his neck
to soak up his still dripping hair. Spock was still trying to towel his hair dry.

“Hold on” Jim said. He went and grabbed two more dry towels from the other bathroom. “For your
hair,” he said, tossing one to Spock.

“Thank you, Jim,” Spock said. His t’hy’la was taking care of him like he’d just suffered an
aneurism instead of an orgasm.

Jim heard that thought and chuckled. Well, it seemed like it was kind of… hard on you.

*It was a unique experience,* Spock replied. *Thank you for resolving it as quickly as possible,*
*Captain.*

Jim smiled. It didn’t sound like Spock would be trying that again anytime soon.

*No,* Spock said, smiling. *Are you disappointed, Jim?*

*No,* Jim said honestly.

*I am gratified that I was able to have the experience with you, Jim, although I do not believe I
experience sexual climax in the same way you do.*
He read through the bond that Spock found the sensation similar to being struck by lightning… and he wasn’t being hyperbolic. He actually knew what it felt like to be struck by lightning.

*That bad, huh?* Jim grimaced. *No, it doesn’t feel like being struck by lightning to me.* Jim laughed.

*I gathered that,* Spock said.

*The French did once call it la petite mort, the little death,* Jim recalled. *Orgasms ARE supposed to shake you up, that’s for sure… but electrocution? No.*

Spock raised both eyebrows.

*It could just be inexperience, trepidation, apprehension…* Jim offered. Not wanting to give up entirely.

*…or my hybrid physiology is just unable to handle that much direct phallic stimulation,* Spock said, since it was the likeliest explanation.

*Yeah, or that,* Jim conceded.

*You ARE disappointed.*

*Only for YOU,* Jim explained. *I thought once you came, it would feel good, like it does for me. I’m sorry it didn’t. How come I wasn’t aware through the bond how uncomfortable it was for you?* Jim asked.

*Rubbing against your hip felt good,* Spock explained. *It was only when the arousal reached a critical level that it became unpleasant,* Spock explained.

*But you were urging me on through the bond. I felt it,* Jim said.
Yes.

Why? When it stopped feeling good, why not just stop? Jim wanted to understand.

*YOUR climax was preceded by intense sensations I mistook for pain. I was curious if it would be the same for me,* Spock said simply.

Ah.

*You understand curiosity. We have that trait in common,* Spock said, smiling.

Yes, we do, Jim said, returning his grin. How many times had they both done dangerous, ill-advised things to learn a new truth, uncover a mystery, see an experiment to its conclusion? They could both be reckless in the name of curiosity.

*I just remembered we’re supposed to be sipping each other, not gulping,* Jim said.

*That was advice, to be taken or not,* Spock said, as he gathered up their worn uniforms that they’d hung over the towel bar before the shower.

*I think smart people take Lwaxara’s advice,* Jim remarked.

*Then we must not be as smart as we think we are,* Spock quipped. He took their clothes to the closet and hung them up, even though they’d just get folded up in the bag tomorrow.

Jim followed him in there. *Oh, thanks for hanging up my dress uniform earlier.* He saw in Spock’s mind that he’d also shined his boots. Jim expressed his gratitude through the bond and took Spock’s hand.

“Let’s lie down and rest for a little while,” Jim suggested.

“All right,” Spock agreed. He wasn’t as tired as he could tell Jim thought he should be, but he liked the idea of lying next to Jim in this private sanctuary of theirs.
Jim drew the bed covers back and turned the lights low. There was a small window in their bedroom. It didn’t reach the floor, but had the same view of the fountain their balcony had. Spock looked out and realized that there were two layers of drapes, one darkening, the other sheer. He opened the darkening ones, allowing the colorful lights from the fountain to bleed through the sheers into the room. Jim took his cue and turned the room lights completely off. Perfect.

*Ooo, I like that,* Jim said. *Good idea.*

They climbed into bed with their robes on, settling in comfortably under the plush covers. Jim’s hair was mostly dry, but Spock’s was pretty damp still. Since there were plenty of pillows available, he didn’t worry about it. The hotel pillows were soft and the pillowcases so smooth. Jim laid on his side and let the right side of his face sink down into the pillow. Spock mirrored him on the other side of the bed.

*This has been the best vacation, Spock,* Jim sighed.

*We have only been here for 2 hours and 17 minutes,* Spock pointed out with humor.

Jim laughed. The sound warmed Spock’s heart. His captain had a talent for enjoying the moment. Some would be complaining that they only had a few waking hours to enjoy such comfortable surroundings, but not Jim. He was always grateful for whatever pleasant things came his way, and likewise, he accepted the bad with fortitude. Spock reached for his hand.

*I love you, Jim.*

*I love you, Spock.*

Jim felt through the bond that Spock wanted to touch his hands, run his fingers over his knuckles and the back of his hand, as Vulcans do to express affection. Jim closed his eyes and enjoyed the luxury of Spock’s touch. As long as Spock was with him, he would always have luxury. Spock’s touch was the very definition of it. So much love flowed through those long, gentle fingers. Jim was so moved by all of the care and tenderness Spock conveyed with his fingertips. He hoped that Spock felt the same devotion in *his* touch.

*I do, Jim,* his t’hy’la whispered softly in his mind.
Their hands were warm and soft from the long shower. Spock had been stroking Jim’s hand under the covers, but now he drew it up to his lips for a kiss. Closing his eyes, Spock slipped Jim’s open hand between his face and the pillow, so that Jim’s right hand was cradling Spock’s jaw. He sighed in contentment and began idly stroking Jim’s right forearm, before reaching for his left hand which was resting on his left hip, the hip that had been shattered in the cave-in two weeks ago. Spock took a moment to cup Jim’s hip beneath his palm, appreciating anew its healthy condition. He would surely be doing that for weeks. Through Jim’s thick robe, Spock squeezed his hip possessively.

Jim reached out his foot to touch Spock’s. He rubbed his toes up and down Spock’s sharp shin, silently thanking Nurse Virginia for doing a very professional job on his toenails.

Spock opened his eyes and smiled at him. Their faces were too far apart; the hand on Jim’s hip coaxed him closer. Jim scooted his pillow up against Spock’s and shifted nearer until most of his head was on Spock’s pillow now. He felt Spock’s right hand leave his hip and emerge from the covers to touch his face.

Spock was looking at him with wonder, touching his cheeks and his jaw. He smoothed down one of Jim’s eyebrows with his thumb, then slid his hand around to the back of his neck to gently pull him in for a kiss. Their lips were shower-soft and slid against each other’s like velvet.

“Oh, Spock,” Jim sighed. The Vulcan’s breath was hot against his face and Spock’s mind was filled with such admiration for him.

You are aroused, Spock perceived.

Mm, yes, Jim said.

I meant only to convey love.

Well, you... did, Jim said softly. His right hand was still beneath Spock’s head and he brought his other hand up to touch Spock’s right cheek. He held Spock’s face in his hands, drinking in the sight.

I think I’m going to be in a near-constant state of arousal for weeks with you in my mind, Spock. When my perineal nerves are healed, I’ll have to start wearing tighter underwear so nobody’s the
wiser, Jim joked tenderly.

You will adjust, Spock said.

To wearing tighter underwear? Jim teased. He knew what Spock meant.

Ripples of their laughter skipped along the bond like stones across a smooth lake.

Jim kissed Spock’s lips and with his thumbs, rubbed gently back and forth across his high cheekbones. He let his fingertips trace Spock’s exotic ear, memorizing its upswept curve and tapered tip. Then, he explored his friend’s hidden hairline again, pushing the dark hair back from his forehead over and over in long strokes, gently scratching his scalp with the backs of his fingernails each time.

“Ohh,” Spock sighed.

That feels good, hm? Jim asked.

Yes, Spock answered. Very relaxing.

Jim kept doing it. The hair bounced back over his forehead each time from many years of training, but having the follicles pushed in the opposite direction felt wonderful to Spock. Every hour seemed to bring new discoveries about his ashayam. My Vulcan, he thought. My beautiful Vulcan. He didn’t mean to think that, but it came through the bond and Spock smiled at him.

My beautiful captain, Spock thought. They had claimed each other. They were t’hy’la, Spock’s fondest wish come true. Part of him still couldn’t believe it.

Tomorrow was Day 11 of Jim’s recovery on Starbase 4. They would put on their dress uniforms and stand at each other’s side, representing Starfleet at the memorial service. Then, Lwaxara would have her tour of the ship, Dr. McCoy would certify Jim fit for duty, they would greet the Potemkin, and Jim would hopefully have some time to catch up with his friend Jon. Then... the Enterprise, their home. Kirk would stride onto the bridge like the larger-than-life hero he was and take command for the trip back to Earth.
There would be weddings and meetings and dozens of decisions to be made. Their six months on Earth would be busy ones with business and pleasure. Then, BetaZed was next for them, a new civilization to discover and hopefully welcome into the Federation. With a quick stop at Starbase 4 to pick up Lwaxara, the unexpected architect of their future, they’d be off on their new mission. What a challenging assignment his captain had accepted. Spock was looking forward to being at his side, where he belonged, helping him succeed. He couldn’t remember ever having such optimism for the future. Jim felt it through the bond.

“I couldn’t do it without you, Spock. All that I have done, all that I will do… I couldn’t do any of it without you.”

Spock knew that the great Captain Kirk probably could, but he took the compliment and simply said, “You will never have to, Jim.”

The End

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Optional Epilogue (Prologue?)

“Greetings Q,” Q said cordially, appearing with a bright flash out of nowhere onto the arid moon.

“Oh, hello Q,” Q replied nonchalantly.

The two sat together atop the wrecked Andorian research vessel, their legs casually dangling over the edge, about 30 feet above the dusty surface of the moon.

“What are you up to, Q?” the new arrival asked suspiciously.

“Nothing much. Nothing sinister, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“You just dropped a mountain on Captain Kirk.”
“Not the whole mountain. Don’t exaggerate, Q. Spock is digging him out right now. He’ll be fine.”

“He’s badly injured,” Q complained, “beyond what his ship’s surgeon can fix.”

“That’s kind of the point,” Q hinted with a mischievous grin.

“You’re playing with timelines again,” Q stated the obvious. Mr. All-Knowing All-Seeing was already aware of every permutation of the cave-in. “Altering Kirk’s history will change the future for your precious Picard, you know. I thought he was your golden boy,” Q teased, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Pfft,” Q scoffed. “Picard is plodding and pedantic. His sermonizing got tedious.” Q waved it off. “Captain Kirk is more my style. He has verve and gusto!”

“He did in his youth,” Q conceded, “until Spock left to go lobotomize himself with the Colon R, or whatever it is Vulcans call it.” He wiggled his fingers in the air dismissively.

“Exactly! When Spock went to Gol, Kirk lost his panache.”

“It broke his legs,” Q agreed. “He was never the same.”

“I wanted to try something different, keep them together in their prime.”

“So, now, Deanna Troi’s great-granny is going to help keep them together and recruit them for diplomatic duty?”

“Yes! What do you think?”

“Hm, that’s inspired, Q.”

“Why, thank you, Q.”
“I see you killed off Khan for them. What are you planning to do about V’ger? Let it destroy Earth?” Q asked casually.

“Oh, Commander Decker can handle things,” Q retorted. “He never appreciated Kirk swooping in and stealing his command, anyway. He and Ilia save the Earth from V’ger, not Kirk.”

“True,” Q conceded, “but doesn’t Spock need to mind meld with V’ger to have his epiphany that logic isn’t the end-all of existence?”

“See for yourself…,” Q said with a suggestive smirk, zapping them unobserved into Kirk and Spock’s hotel bedroom, then back to the moon again after a few seconds.

The other Q raised his eyebrows. “Hm. Who would have thought?”

Q chuckled. “Capt. Kirk is a very… dynamic individual, and Lwaxara has given more than her fair share of epiphanies to unsuspecting people, even Vulcans.”

“Indeed.” Q was well acquainted with Lwaxara Dirn and her favorite granddaughter, Lwaxana. “It is an interesting idea, having Kirk ‘n’ crew negotiate BetaZed’s admission into the Federation. Are you controlling for unexpected surprises from here on in, Q?”

Oh, never!”

“That’s what I thought,” Q chuckled, rolling his eyes.

“Letting things play out unguided is half the fun,” Q smiled wickedly. “I’m just providing the first little nudge.”

From their vantage atop the Andorian ship, both Q watched as Spock emerged from the cave below, cradling a limp, dust-covered Captain Kirk in his arms. Scotty’s transporter beam quickly grabbed them, leaving the Q alone again.
Q remarked, “Seems kind of cruel for a ‘little nudge,’ don’t you think?”

“Cruel to be kind,” Q said with a confident smirk. “Cruel to be kind.”

“Well then, if you’re done here, want to go pester the Calamarain?” Q asked.

Q’s eyes lit up. “I can resist anything but temptation. Lead on…,” said Q, indicating the steep slope of the Andorian vessel’s side.

The Q took their dramatic exit, sliding down the side of the wrecked ship, disappearing in two bright flashes of light just before hitting the ground.

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