Dead or Alive

by Interrobanng

Summary

NEW SUMMARY
Forget what you think you know. Forget what you have been taught to believe. Trust no one. Captain Kirk and his crew are once more being used as pawns in the game of power. At stake is the Federation itself, as well as something far more precious to James T. Kirk. Spock.

OLD SUMMARY
Politics and ideology come together and force Spock to confront the darkest chapter of his past. This is a story about the people Spock loves most and the lengths to which they will go to protect him. This is a story about family and the chains of blood and love and fear and faith that hold it together.

(This will end up being a novel-length fic, if any readers have additional tag suggestions that would be very much appreciated.)
And So It Begins...

Disclaimer:

The author falls into an exhausted heap on the faded couch in the castle courtyard. There is a purple sword sticking out of the loveseat.

Mr. X: Again?

The author: Mr. X. X-man. X-anator. X-agator-ocodile-

Mr. X: Stop. What are you doing? Never mind, just stop doing it.

Author: Sunshine of my life. We’ve been through a lot, you and me. I feel I can trust you.

(Mr. X glares at the author suspiciously)

Mr. X: Where are you going with this?

Author: Look buddy, this is going to happen. But I don’t want it to be like before.

(she gestures at the shattered remains of her once glorious castle)

Author: I learned my lesson. This time, I’d like for us to be on the same team.

Mr. X: …Do you mean it?

(The author smiles. It’s a tired smile but there’s warmth there too, and the promise of a better tomorrow. Mr. X sees that promise and he knows that she means what she’s saying. He brushes away a tear from his eye and reaches out his hand. It takes all her strength, but the author reaches up and shakes it with her own)

Kirk: Um…can we go now?

Spock: We would like to be untied and allowed to leave now.

Author: Nope. Sorry. I’m still borrowing you guys. I may not own you, but I can keep you captive.

Kirk: I don’t think that’s accurate.

Mr. X: SILENCE! YOU HEARD THE AUTHOR! NOW DANCE FOR YOUR MASTERS!

Author: …What the fuck just happened?!

Dead or Alive
Spock hid under the bed and stayed very, very quiet. Sybok had promised that if he was good and stayed quiet until they were in the next quadrant he would be allowed to call home and speak with his mother, to reassure her that he was well.

It was wrong to lie but he very much wanted to speak with his mother. He hadn’t seen her for a week now and he was illogically worried about the impact his absence might have on her.

There was shouting in the outer room, people were screaming and furniture was being tossed around. Spock squeezed his eyelids together and pressed a hand over his mouth.

He was a good little brother. That was all Sybok wanted from him. As long as he was good, as long as he was quiet, nothing bad would happen to him. Sybok was trusting him not to be like the Others, the bad ones, the ones who were not good, who were not quiet. Like T’sing, like the guards in the shipyard, like his teacher at school.

Spock did not want to be like *them*.

Sybok had explained that the Others were bad, that they wanted to hurt Spock because he wasn’t like them. They were afraid of Spock because of his humanity and they were resentful of what they didn’t understand. Only Sybok understood.

Spock was not entirely convinced of Sybok’s logic but he trusted his brother. He loved his brother. He had told Sybok that he loved him and Sybok had smiled, kissed his forehead and told him to hide under the bed and stay very, very quiet.

The screaming in the other room had stopped. Spock held his breath and waited.

He heard the door swish open and the sound of heavy footsteps. Spock did not make a sound. He peeked out from under his eyelids as the footsteps came closer. He watched the large black boots come to a halt by the bed and then the mattress creaked and groaned as whoever it was sat down on the standard issue cot.

Spock did not break his silence.

“Boy.” An unfamiliar voice growled. “You can either come out on your own and face me like a man or I can drag you out like a dog. Your choice.”

Spock thought about it logically and slid out from under the bed. He got up onto his feet and faced the stranger on the bed in silence. Spock was not like the Others. He was good. He would stay quiet.

The stranger was a human male with salt and pepper hair and piercing blue eyes. There was a deep ugly scar that ran from his temple to the corner of his mouth. He was dressed all in black and there were specks of green on his hands.

*Blood.* Spock realized and stayed quiet.

The stranger stared at him with an emotion Spock could not recognize. “Do you know who I am?”

Spock shook his head.

“I’m Mister Grayson.” The stranger said. “I’m your grandfather. Your mother sent me to bring you home.”
In the years afterwards they never talked about Mister Grayson, or Auntie Ruth or Cousin Mick or any of the other members of the Grayson clan who boarded the transport ship and brought Spock home, and Spock never asked. It was one of the rules about traveling with the Graysons, even for a short period of time. *Don’t Ask Questions.* Which was fine by Spock because he didn’t want to know. He didn’t want to know what they’d done with Sybok. He didn’t want to know why Mister Grayson brought him home in an unmarked shuttle in the dead of the night. He didn’t want to know why his mother wouldn’t stop crying, why his father refused to come out of his study, why the other adult Vulcans wouldn’t even look at him in the ensuing months.

Spock didn’t want to know. He was a good boy. He stayed quiet.

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“Come on Spock, say something. I feel like I’m talking to myself here.”

Spock raised an eyebrow at Jim over the chessboard. “What would you have me say?”

“I dunno. Something. Anything. How are you doing? You got beat up pretty bad down there.”

It was just the two of them, playing chess in Jim’s quarters as the Enterprise made its way from one harrowing mission to their next hopefully-not-so-harrowing mission. He said hopefully because while it didn’t seem likely that transporting a small group of Vulcans back to the new colony would result in death and destruction it wouldn’t be the first time a supposedly straight-forward mission had blown up in Jim’s face. It wouldn’t even be the first time that week. They’d been sent to Androxia on a First Contact and, predictably, it had very nearly resulted in the entire landing party being killed. *It would have resulted in Chekov bleeding to death in a swamp if Spock hadn’t swung the smaller man over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and run for cover, getting himself shot three times in the process. Jim, trapped on the bridge under medical orders while he recovered from a broken wrist, had been unable to do anything but rip holes in the arms of his chair for three days and threaten, bribe and finally beg the Androxian dignitaries to allow his crew to return to the beam out location. Chekov and Spock had both spent the previous night in sickbay and Jim had…* 

Jim had…

No. Jim was not thinking about what he’d done last night because Spock was *right there* and thinking about it might result in Spock actually finding out about it and *Spock could not find out.*

“I am fully recovered.” Spock answered. “Though perhaps the same cannot be said of yourself.”

“I’m not the one who was shot three times.” Jim reminded him, but there was no bite in the words.

“If memory serves, Doctor McCoy ordered you to rest before our next mission and I do not believe you achieved the necessary amount of REM sleep last night.”

Jim swallowed the acidic panic rising from his gullet and forced himself to ask naturally, “What makes you think that?” *He can’t know. He doesn’t know. There’s no possible way he knows.*

“Because you take a perverse amount of pleasure in disobeying Doctor McCoy.” Spock teased as he moved a pawn. “I am impressed you managed to follow his orders for as long as you did during the mission. Perhaps it is a sign of maturity.”
“I’ll show you maturity.” Jim said, disguising relief as playfulness, and claimed Spock’s bishop. Thank god, he doesn’t know. Besides, even if he did know it’s not like he’d care. You’re just friends, you don’t owe him anything. Now calm down before you give it all away. “Speaking of our next mission, you must be looking forward to it.” Spock reacted just as Jim had expected, by being confused at the suggestion that he was experiencing anticipation.

“My preference is inconsequential, Captain.”

“Yeah, but it’s been ages since we ran into any other Vulcans. I bet you’re dying for some intelligent conversation.”

Spock gave him a Look. “I have not suffered any such deprivation. Your company is often quite stimulating.”

Jim blushed and grinned wolfishly. “Stimulating, huh?”

“Indeed. Interpreting human idioms and fallacies is most arduous.” Spock’s eyes twinkled in that special way that was just for Jim.

Spock had learned that engaging in playful banter was an excellent way to distract Jim from uncomfortable topics of conversation. Communication was a problem. It had been a problem from the very beginning but Spock was starting to suspect that far too much was going unsaid during their regular chess matches than was necessarily wise. For instance, Jim was clearly operating under the assumption that Spock would enjoy the company of other Vulcans. This was incorrect for many reasons, not least of which was that to enjoy the companionship of one species over another was illogical and flew in the face of everything the IDIC stood for. Spock would say this if Jim asked him again.

Another equally significant reason, that regardless of Spock’s preferences other Vulcans frequently did not enjoy his company, would go unvoiced.

If Jim were to ask what their guests might desire of Spock he would find some way to avoid answering because the truth (my absence) had no place in the content air between them. This is where communication between them broke down, where it had been breaking down for months now. At the moment it seemed that only Spock was aware of the issue but he knew that sooner or later Jim would notice the dodged questions and the aborted conversations. Sooner or later Jim would discover the truth and when he did Spock was sure that would be the end of the shared meals and chess matches and the easy undisccussed friendship.

Spock wasn’t concerned that Jim would judge him for his isolated past on Vulcan. Jim had proven over and over again that he was no bigot, that he was a good-hearted soul who possessed the wisdom to see past superficial differences. Spock knew that if he were to open up and reveal his history in all its loneliness and anger Jim would listen and still accept him afterwards. But Spock could not bring himself to speak of it. He knew it was irrational not to trust his friend who had earned his faith a thousand times over and yet he couldn’t do it.

And when Jim found out that Spock couldn’t trust him then they would have a problem.

Jim trusted Spock with his life and more importantly with his secrets. Jim had spoken of his own darkness, sometimes in a raised voice, sometimes in a broken whisper. During long evenings playing chess in their quarters when the affection and respect between them was so palpable and secure Jim felt safe enough to reveal the nightmare of Tarsus. During endless nights locked in captivity on hostile planets when neither knew whether they would see the dawn and Jim told him of a different kind of captivity, of being young and alone and powerless in the hands of a man named Frank. Jim
had spoken of loneliness, of starvation, of grief so raw it burned and of pain so deep it sickened. Spock had listened to all these secrets and loved the man who hid them all the more.

But he had never responded in kind, not even once. Jim spilled his secrets and Spock kept quiet.

Jim was still speaking. “Okay, so maybe you aren’t desperate for some civilized company but you must be feeling some kind of satisfaction. I know you worry about the colony and this is the first chance we’ve had to help out.”

Spock moved his bishop and confiscated Jim’s remaining knight. “Statistically it was unavoidable that we should be asked to convey a group of Vulcans to the colony.” Was all he had to say on the matter. Jim sighed and wished, not for the first time, that Spock would open up to him.

The Vulcan diaspora was so far flung across the galaxy it was impossible to know precisely what their numbers were. When a group was located Starfleet officials were dispatched to convince them to abandon whatever had taken them so far from home in the first place and join the colony. If the species were to survive they’d need as many Vulcans as they could find. Command was calling these groups ‘humpbacks’ in memory of the long-extinct Earth mammals and the efforts that had once been made to save them, but Jim wouldn’t use that term. Saving the whales from hunting and climate change had been a futile effort, but transporting the wandering Vulcans to their new home in order to rebuild and proliferate was anything but. The Vulcan race would survive and he’d said as much to the Admiral’s secretary who had grinned at him from across the vastness of space and said in a voice that crackled with interference, “Sorry about this, Kirk, but we’re giving you a humpback.”

It wouldn’t be easy, even he wasn’t that idealistic. There were only roughly 10,000 survivors from Vulcan and, since schools and hospitals had evacuated first, most of them were either children or infirm. Census data showed that at the time of the Destruction only 574 Vulcans had been off-planet, strewn across all corners of the galaxy. Now it was Starfleet’s job to bring them home.

Problem was, some of them didn’t want to come.

Jim didn’t get it. Surely the survival of the species was a priority over the research and exploration gigs the Vulcan ex-pats were on. It was logical to go home, but the refusals kept coming in. The research is at a crucial stage and cannot be abandoned now, read many of the responses to Starfleet’s offers of transport. It would be irresponsible to neglect this vital work. One team of geologists had been even more abrupt. The entirety of their missive read: Your services are not required at this time. Basically a couple hundred Vulcans were telling Fleet thanks for the thought, but you can go fuck yourselves.

Jim just didn’t get it. At least the team of anthropologists on Udonia III had finally agreed to go home after refusing twice in a row. The Enterprise was going to pick them up now, all four of them. Two males and two females.

Hey, maybe Jim hadn’t been able to stop Nero in time, but he could make damn sure those crazy Vulcan kids made it home safe and started logically churning out genetically diverse babies.

…

Yeah, Bones had already pointed out several times that the whole Vulcan situation was kind of a sore spot for Jim, thank you very much.

“Who knows.” Jim said as he moved his queen and won the game. “Maybe you’ll see an old friend tomorrow.”
Spock stayed quiet.

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Jim, McCoy and Spock beamed down to Udonia III to meet their passengers the next day. Spock had tried to stay onboard the ship by insisting that his presence was required in one of the labs but Jim had laughed and asked what he was scared of.

Of course Spock couldn’t say that he had checked the guest list and seen the name of the one individual he had secretly hoped to never meet again and so instead he had reminded Jim that Vulcans do not experience fear in the same way as humans and had marched to the transporter room, all the while struggling with a sense of impending doom.

“Pretty planet.” McCoy commented as they strolled through the pastoral village. “It would make for a nice quiet shore leave.”

“Not sure if nice and quiet is what the crew really wants out of shore leave.” Jim grinned.

Bones smirked. “Maybe not, but it would cut down on my post-leave work load. Nothing undoes all the good work of the Risa girls like have to diagnose a couple dozen rare and incurable STDs.”

“Hey, if you don’t want people getting wet you should hand out raincoats.” Jim teased.

“I do.” Bones pointed out.

“No, you get Chapel to do it and no one goes to her because she insists on matching the condom to the customer.”

“Nothing wrong with a little customization.” Bones said cheerfully, confirming Jim’s long held suspicion that his CMO was in on his Chief Nurse Practitioner’s humiliating charade. “It’s how we show our support.”

“Uh-huh. Well, the last time I went to see Chapel for a little support she wouldn’t let me leave until she found a blueberry flavored one because, and I quote, it had to match my eyes.”

Bones laughed. “The woman is an artist, Jim! I don’t tell her how to do her craft.”

“Gentlemen.” Spock interrupted in a tone of voice that clearly indicated he was using the term charitably. “We have arrived at the rendezvous location so I suggest this conversation desist.” They came to a halt in front of a grand ornamental fountain in the town square. It was midday and the heat was like molasses in the air. Almost no one was around, the locals all took refuge at this time of day, but it was the perfect temperature for Vulcans. Spock almost looked comfortable.

Jim and McCoy stifled their sniggers. Sometimes messing with Spock was just too easy.

“Don’t worry, Spock.” Jim teased. “We promise not to embarrass you in front of your compatriots by going on about funny business.”

“What is funny business?” They heard someone ask. The three men turned to face the Vulcans they were meeting.

Jim smiled at the elegant Vulcan woman who had posed the question, totally unperturbed. “Forgive
“Ah.” She said knowingly. “Clowns. Humans who don colorful facial pigment and exaggerated footwear in order to provide comic relief to observers. I wrote my thesis on such creatures. Tell me, were pies involved?”

“In Ensign Davis’ case, absolutely.” Bones answered with a straight face. “I don’t mean to be rude, but that doesn’t strike me as a particularly logical thesis subject.”

The Vulcan woman shrugged slightly as her companions settled their bags on the ground. “I specialize in interpersonal interactions and communication amongst xeno-societies.” She explained. “While humor is not a tenant of Vulcan culture its use is a frequent and vital characteristic of many emotional sub-species.”

“T’liv.” A tall Vulcan man stepped forward. “There will be time for idle conversation later.”

Jim, who had been experiencing a cross between tickled pink and everything I knew and understood about the universe had just been slightly but undeniably altered at meeting a Vulcan who could appreciate a joke, instantly disliked the guy.

“Hello.” He said. “I’m Captain Kirk. This is my Chief Medical Officer, Dr. McCoy, and my First Officer Commander Spock.”

The assembled Vulcans raised the ta’als, except for the tall disapproving male.

“I am Stonn.” He said. “I am familiar with Commander Spock.”

Jim hid his surprise. Spock hadn’t mentioned knowing any of the passengers. He suddenly remembered Spock’s reluctance to beam down and felt nervous. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Spock didn’t have the best people skills. He glanced at his friend just in time to see Spock put on his best Proper Emotionless Vulcan face and raise his spread fingers in salute.

“Well met, Stonn.”

Stonn nodded. “Well met, Spock. Our encounter is most fortuitous.”

Jim had gotten pretty good at reading Spock in the year since the Incident, but even he had no idea what was going through Spock’s head when he repeated, “Fortuitous.”

It wasn’t a question. There was no lilt at the end of the word, no twitch of the eyebrow. Spock said it like a confirmation but of what Jim had no idea.

Stonn nodded again. “Indeed. There is much I would discuss with you.”

Spock did not react other than saying, “Perhaps there will be time once we have returned to the Enterprise.” Stonn agreed and that was that.

Except Jim now had a million questions like what’s going on and why is this so weird? He was almost vibrating with the need to figure out what was going on between Spock and Stonn. McCoy shifted closer and elbowed him gently.

“And what’s your name, miss?” McCoy asked the other female Vulcan, flashing his best Southern gentleman smile.

The remaining two Vulcans introduced themselves. The male was T’mo and the female was Sveena.
Jim offered them the chance to say their goodbyes to their Udonian hosts but they declined, explaining that Udonians considered farewells unlucky, and so Jim pulled out his communicator and had them all beamed back on-board without further ado.

Stonn had apparently taken Spock’s words literally because no sooner had they stepped off the transporter pad than Stonn was turning to Spock and saying, “I would speak with you.”

“Actually,” Jim interrupted, earning himself the Best Friend of the Year Award. “There’s some ship business I must go over with my First Officer. He’ll find you once he’s free. My quarters, Mr. Spock?”

Spock nodded once and left the room without speaking another word.

_This is going to be a long mission._ Jim thought glumly. “Dr. McCoy, would you show our guests to their quarters?”

Bones clearly wanted to hear Spock’s explanation but one look at Jim’s face told him better than to argue. “Aye Captain.”

Well, now that was out of the way, time to interrogate a Vulcan about his personal life. Great. This was going to end in tears. Almost definitely in Jim’s tears.

_Though, _he thought as he made his way to his quarters. _It could be worse. If Spock cries again I’ll have to spend the next six months in therapy. Again._

“So.” He said once he’d arrived at his quarters and found Spock obediently waiting by his desk. “What’s going on between you and Stonn?”

“Captain?” Spock raised an eyebrow and tried to look innocently confused.

Jim scoffed. “Don’t even try it, Mister. I know you. If you liked Stonn you would have been talking my ear off about how fascinating he is since you saw his name on the roster. If you were merely acquaintances you would have mentioned it in passing last night. But you didn’t say anything which means you were hoping it wouldn’t come up, which means whatever it is I’m not going to like it.”

Spock wasn’t meeting his eyes and it made Jim want to punch something. _Dammit. _What did he have to do to get Spock to trust him?

“Spock, you’re the best judge of character I know. And the most fair.” He tried to reassure his friend. “I’ve seen you be more cuddly with Klingons than you were with Stonn. I know how private you are and I respect that, but if we’ve just brought a serial killer on board I kind of need to know.”

It was a mark of how well they knew each other that Spock didn’t react to the accusation of ever being cuddly.

“Stonn and I attended the same learning institution as children and operated within the same social circles on Vulcan.” Spock said as if each word were causing him acute discomfort.

“Uh-huh. You guys know each other. Got it. Not what I’m asking.” Jim tried not to snap in frustration. “I’m asking why you’re acting like some guy who just ran into his childhood bully at a party or something.”

Spock’s eyes darted up briefly and Jim’s jaw dropped.

“Oh my god, Spock, was he your bully?”
“There were incidents in our youth.” Spock finally admitted through clenched teeth. “The incidents did not continue for long.”

“What happened?” Jim knew he should feel horrified but Spock never talked about his history and this was downright tantalizing.

“He succeeded in provoking an emotional response by insulting my mother and as a direct result I broke his nose.”

_Do not say awesome. Do not say awesome. Do not respond to Spock’s loss of control like a fangirl on steroids._ “Fucking awesome!” _Dammit Jim! Idiot!

At least Spock was finally looking at him, even if he was frowning in disapproval.

“Is it a human tendency to respond to unnecessary violence with approval, or is it a unique quirk of your own?” Spock asked snarkily, clearly not appreciating Jim’s cavalier attitude towards his childhood shame.

Jim smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. So I’m guessing you’re worried about what Stonn wants to say to you after all these years?”

“History does not suggest an amicable discourse.” Spock admitted.

“Well, I can’t let you break his nose again if he says something nasty. I mean, I _would_ but HQ would have us both court-martialed if I did. But I can keep you so busy you haven’t got a moment to spare, if you like.” Jim offered. “Uhura and I are more than capable of playing gracious host.”

Spock hesitated, his desire to avoid Stonn warring with his sense of duty as First Officer.

“Spock.” Jim said softly. “As Captain it’s my job to make sure every member of my crew is…” He was about to say happy but thought better of it just in time. “Content. It would put my mind at ease knowing you don’t have to deal with his bad attitude.”

In the year since the Incident Jim had also gotten very good at playing Spock like a fiddle. If it were for Jim’s sake there was nothing Spock wouldn’t do, even going so far as to kinda sorta maybe admit to almost possessing some feelings.

“Very well, Jim.” Spock nodded. “If it will put your mind at ease.”

“Great.” Jim grinned, glad to have helped his friend. “How do you feel about signing off on the quartermaster’s reports? And once that’s done you can double check the requisition forms. And don’t even get me started on what the janitorial staff is saying about the recycling facilities.”

Spock cocked his head to the side and Jim’s eyes traced the line of his jaw. “What does the janitorial staff say about the recycling facilities?”

“I honestly have no idea. I think they’ve either blown up the matter converter or they’ve figured out how to turn candy wrappers into dilithium crystals. Either way someone should probably check that out.”

***
Carol Marcus was examining some enzymes in a Petri dish when Spock entered the lab and she was
down right proud of herself for staying calm and not turning red or crying or throwing things at him.
She stayed totally natural even when he said,

“Progress report, Ms Marcus?”

She looked up at him and forced herself to smile. Which was fine and still totally natural because
people forced themselves to smile at Mister Spock all the time and he never seemed to notice the
difference. “The enzymes are reacting to the solution precisely as I hypothesized, Commander.”

Spock nodded once. “Carry on, Science Officer.”

Yup. It was either Ms Marcus or Science Officer with Mister Spock. No Carol or Lieutenant from
him. No sir. It was always either a reminder that she wasn’t officially a member of Starfleet or a
reminder that she’d stolen his job. But come on, he’d only been Science Officer as well as First
because no one else was qualified for the position, and it wasn’t as if anything had changed when
she was put on pay roll. He still split his time between the bridge and the labs, and she wasn’t stupid
or cruel enough to lay a finger on any of his experiments. Most of the time she didn’t let it bother her.
She was used to the jealousy and cat fighting of academia and, more importantly, she possessed
enough compassion and intelligence to know that Spock’s work was his identity and she threatened
that. It wasn’t really about her, it was about how his entire life was confined to the Enterprise and
how he couldn’t see past the lies she’d told to get onboard a year ago. Most of the time she ignored
him and he ignored her. Most of the time they worked adjacent to each other just fine.

Most of the time.

On Monday morning she would have said all of the time but it was Wednesday now. What a
difference a few days could make.

Carol went back to her enzymes and tried not to breathe through her nose.

Fuck me, fuck me, FUCK ME.

She could still smell the sex. Funny how that only seemed to happen when she hated herself the
morning after.

Could Spock still smell him on her? God, she hoped not. She knew Vulcans had a superior sense of
smell but surely it wasn’t so superior that he could identify a certain musk even after three days and
ten showers.

She was being too hard on herself, she knew, but she couldn’t help it. Sleeping with Captain Kirk
had been a terrible mistake. They had both been exhausted and drunk and mindless in their relief at
being alive and one thing had led to another. It hadn’t meant anything, just a way to relieve the
tension. That was exactly how Carol wanted it. Hey, don’t get her wrong, she liked Jim a lot. She
wasn’t blind. He was handsome and smart and decent and possessed the kind of self-confidence that
made you feel better about yourself by extension. But she didn’t see them having a future. Imagine
how the conversations with the kids would go. Mommy doesn’t have a daddy cause your Daddy had
to kill Mommy’s daddy cause Mommy’s daddy was evil.

Yeah. Right. Thanks but no thanks.

It was one night. That was all it was. One night caused by hormones and adrenaline and Scotty’s
homemade theoretically-safe-for-consumption paint thinner.

Or at least that’s what it would have been if James Tiberius Kirk hadn’t forgotten who he was on top
of and wrapped his arms too tight around her chest and bit deep into her shoulder and cried Spock’s name over and over again before passing out.

“Sir?” A confused ensign working at the next station over was staring at her. “Why are you laughing?”

Carol reigned in her semi-hysterical giggles. “Nothing. It’s just these enzymes are hilarious.”

*I’ve got to get off this ship.*

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True to his word Jim assigned Spock so much busy work he honestly didn’t have time for the private conversation Stonn kept trying to have. Every time Stonn tried to corner him Spock could put him off without resorting to falsehoods.

“Spock, I would speak with you.”

“Understood. However my presence is currently required in Engineering. Excuse me.”

“Spock, I wish to converse alone.”

“Understood. Unfortunately I am expected by the quartermaster at this time.”

And on it went. Finally on the third day Stonn lost patience with Spock’s excuses and showed up at his quarters so late into gamma shift Spock could provide no logical reason to escape. Resigned to what was surely going to be an unpleasant interaction Spock allowed him entry. The two Vulcans stood facing each other in the dimly lit room. Spock waited silently. Whatever Stonn wanted to say so badly he’d have to do so without any encouragement from Spock.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“I wish to apologize for my behavior towards your person in the past.”

If Spock were human his jaw would have dropped at Stonn’s stiff pronouncement. As he was not human only the briefest flicker of surprise showed in his eyes. He interlaced his fingers behind his back.

“Apologies are illogical.” He reminded Stonn. “The past cannot be changed.”

“Agreed.” Stonn nodded. “Despite this fact I am compelled to reflect on my actions and I have come to the realization that my logic at the time was imperfect. I operated without a full understanding and was misled by misinformation. I wish to communicate to you that this is no longer the current state of affairs.”

“And you claim that new information has led you to new conclusions?” Spock raised a brow, just barely managing to suppress his surprise.

Stonn nodded again. “Accurate.”

“What is the nature of this new conclusion?”
Stonn turned away and went to examine the lirpa hanging on the wall. Spock did not move. The silence was heavy between them and filled with old injuries that would never fully heal.

“I have come to understand that total control over emotions is a misuse of effort. Our people embraced Surak’s philosophy in the hopes that it would lead to equanimity but the end result was stagnation.” Stonn raised a hand and traced the contours of the ancient weapon. “Even now, with the threat of extinction looming and the stability of the Federation thrown into question, the Elders cling to their ways. They cannot acknowledge that it was fear, not logic, that drove our ancestors to the Surakian way. Fear of that which cannot be controlled.”

Spock swallowed his frown. “Our ancestors did not fear their emotions, they feared the calamity and destruction that accompanied those emotions. Such fear is in its own way logical.”

“And yet calamity and destruction befell the Vulcan people despite our logic.” Stonn swung around to face him and though he was not smiling (if he’d been smiling Spock would have stunned him on the spot and called security) there was a softness to his features that was almost as unnerving. “Let us not dwell on our losses, let us instead consider what we have yet to achieve. Apologies are illogical, Spock son of Sarek, but amends are not. I would seek to make them if you would allow me.”

“You are free to act however you see fit.” Spock replied, privately wondering how to ascertain Stonn’s mental health without Stonn noticing.

“In that case I will find you in the morning. Peace and long life, Spock.” Stonn headed towards the door and the traditional response was on the tip of Spock’s tongue when something else occurred to him.

“Stonn.” He called. “You said you were compelled to reflect on your actions. Compelled by what?”

“I have heard the Call.” Stonn told him and left Spock standing frozen and alone in his own quarters.

I have heard the call.

No. Spock pulled himself together. Many years have passed and those words were spoken by a different person. They do not mean now what they meant then.

Still, he could not shake the uneasy feeling as he prepared for his meditation.

What precisely had happened to Stonn to change him so drastically? The Stonn onboard the Enterprise was not the same as the Stonn in Spock’s memories. Had this alteration been recent and sudden, or a gradual development over the years? Spock decided to question the other anthropologists tomorrow and, if that failed, perhaps he would find answers when they arrived at New Vulcan in two days time.

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“I thought you were keeping Spock away from that Stonn fellow.” McCoy said by way of greeting when he sat down across from Jin in the mess during lunch.

“I am.” Jim said, looking up from his burger and fries.

“Well, they’re thick as thieves today. Stonn’s been following him around like a puppy since
breakfast."

“Is Spock okay?” Jim asked in alarm. He hadn’t seen much of his First Officer since the Vulcans came on board. He had assumed that the plan was still working.

“He seemed fine. A little confused maybe. When I asked him about it he told me that Stonn’s tricorder readings were perfectly normal and then he asked if any of our other guests were acting strangely.” McCoy took a sip of his water. “I kind of got the feeling he thought Stonn might have lost his marbles, but he didn’t look too upset about it.”

“Now I’m confused. Spock told me they were the Vulcan equivalent of arch-nemesis growing up.” Jim frowned, his lunch forgotten. “What exactly is Stonn doing?”

“Making nice as far as I can tell.” McCoy shrugged. “Fetching pads and getting Spock water. Just… following him around and doing things for him. It’s a little creepy, actually.”

“Stonn’s not the only one.” Sulu said as he arrived and joined their table. “I just saw, what’s-her-name, T’liv? I just saw T’liv and Stonn practically fight each other to get Spock a beaker he needed down in the bio lab. It was weird.”

“What?” Jim stared at him.

“Yeah.” Sulu nodded. “I don’t know who was more surprised, me or Spock.”

“Who won?” McCoy asked with what Jim felt was an inappropriate amount of curiosity.

“T’liv.” Sulu answered between bites. “She pulled Stonn’s hair. I think it was an accident…”

Jim tried to rally. “I suppose it’s a good thing that they’re getting along. I mean, there are so few left they kind of have to.”

Sulu shrugged and focused on eating his lunch but McCoy didn’t look convinced. “Really Jim? Since when are hair-pulling and aggressive thoughtfulness normal Vulcan traits? The hobgoblins are up to something, mark my words.”

“I’ll ask Spock about it tonight.” Jim promised.

Unfortunately T’liv sought him out before he had the chance. She found him in his quarters going over shift reports.

“Captain,” she said from the open doorway. “May I speak with you for a moment?”

Jim smiled courteously, but kept his eye on her in case she showed any signs of further hair pulling inclinations. “Of course. Come in. What can I help you with? I hope our hospitality had been sufficient.”

T’liv nodded. “Most suitable. Captain, I am hoping to receive your permission to stage a private event in the officer’s dining facility tomorrow evening in Commander Spock’s honor. Naturally the senior staff and yourself would be invited.”

Jim tried really hard not to gape like a fish. “You want to throw Spock a party?”

“That is roughly accurate.”

“Why?” He realized how that had sounded as the word was leaving his tongue. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m a huge fan of the guy but this is…” He struggled to find the right words.
“Unexpected.”

“Captain, for many Vulcans such as myself Commander Spock represents our future.” T’liv explained. Or at least, her tone of voice suggested that an explanation was taking place but Jim just felt more confused after every word. “He is a symbol of what we must achieve in these trying times. Many of us believe that he is a leader by example and that to honor him is to honor ourselves.”

Jim wasn’t entirely certain, but he thought he’d just heard the Vulcan equivalent of “supermegafoxyawesomehot” and he did not know what to do with that.

Not that he could blame them. A batshit crazy hermit who had spent the past 40 years gorging on mystery mushrooms in a dank cave would recognize Spock’s innate badassery, even if he had to shout over the dancing colors to do it. Spock was a hero. He saved more lives over the course of an average work week than most people did in their entire existences. He was strong and fast and possessed the kind of intelligence that usually resulted in men wearing dark suits and sun glasses showing up at your house in the middle of the night asking menacing questions about family members and saying things like “just don’t forget where your loyalties lie.” Only in Spock’s case they didn’t have to because Spock knew exactly where his loyalties belonged and that, by some sick miraculous twist of fate, was with James T. Kirk.

Add to that his exotic good looks, his acerbic sense of humor, his genuine compassion and his infallible sense of justice and you got…

Well, you got Spock. Jim knew it. He could feel it in his bones every time he looked at the man. He just wasn’t used to other people seeing what he saw.

“As long as Spock’s on board I would be delighted to attend your party.” He told T’liv.

“I am grateful.” She said, as if he could have answered any other way, and rose to her feet. “We will meet again tomorrow evening, Captain.”

Jim waited for the door to close before he dropped the report he’d been reading and leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

Seriously, what was going on? He hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d called Spock the best judge of character he knew. If Spock had expected Stonn and the other Vulcans to treat him poorly it was because he had a damn good reason. But judging from the conversation he’d just had and what Bones and Sulu had said at lunch the Vulcans were treating Spock like he was the best thing since sliced logic. If Jim was confused, how was Spock holding up?

Jim glanced at the chronometer. They weren’t scheduled to meet for another couple of hours but Jim needed to talk to Spock before T’mo or Sveena showed up and asked for Spock’s hand in marriage.

That had better NOT be where this is headed. Jim thought venomously as he grabbed his comm unit and said, “Commander Spock, report to the Captain’s quarters immediately.”

Spock arrived ten minutes later and if Jim didn’t know better he’d have said Spock looked frazzled.

“Where’s Stonn?” Jim really hoped that sounded like light hearted teasing and not a jealous accusation.

“Stonn and T’liv are currently discussing the theoretical merits of organizing a social event.” Spock explained as he took a seat by Jim’s desk.

“So you’ve heard. Is Stonn not pleased with the idea?”
“Stonn believes the observational deck would be a more appropriate location than the officer’s dining room.”

Judging from Spock’s voice he was just as baffled by the VIP treatment as everyone else but Jim had to be sure. “Spock, what’s going on?”

Spock hesitated before answering. “I do not know, Captain.”

“Spock…”

“If I knew what motivated Stonn and the others to act this way I would have already put a stop to it.” Spock continued. “I have already checked their energy signals and life signs and can find no evidence that they are being controlled or manipulated telepathically or otherwise. Nor have I observed obvious symptoms of any known varieties of psychosis.”

*Note to self: find out why Spock thinks people would have to be crazy to be nice to him.* “Have you asked them about it?”

“Yes. Their explanations have not been satisfactory.”

“What exactly have they said?”

Again Spock hesitated and Jim forced himself to wait patiently. Getting Spock to talk about himself was like pulling teeth under the best of circumstances. Right now it was like pulling teeth back in the days before pain killers were invented when big beefy guys had to hold down the patient while he screamed. *If you push he’ll just get more uncomfortable and shut down.* Jim reminded himself as the silence dragged on.

“Sveena arrived at my quarters this morning to deliver my breakfast. When I asked what had instigated the illogical gesture she informed me that she wished to observe my behavior patterns in order to gain a deeper understanding of the True Path. I inquired as to the precise nature of the True Path and she responded that this was still unknown which is why observation was necessary.”

“Spock, no offense, but that sounds a little…culty.”

“The comparison has not escaped my notice, Captain.” Spock sounded a smidge exasperated. “However I can think of no reason for my person to become the focal point of religious fervor.”

“I thought Vulcans were atheists.”

“Vulcan spiritualism is complex. It is not unheard of for extreme ideologies to become popular in the wake of catastrophe. But as I have not been able to escape Stonn and the others long enough to conduct private research into the matter I have-”

He was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Captain Kirk.” Stonn’s unmistakable baritone called through the metal. “Is Commander Spock with you?”

Spock’s deer-in-the-headlights face made Jim feel a lot better about lying. “I just sent Spock up to the bridge.” He called back.

They waited with bated breath and then…

“Very well. Your assistance is appreciated.”
They held their breath for a few more moments but Stonn did not speak again.

“Do you think he’s gone?” Jim whispered. Spock shrugged so Jim got to his feet and crept to the door. He pressed his ear against the cold surface and heard nothing so he slowly opened it and stuck his head into the hallway. It was deserted. With a sigh of relief he closed the door again and locked it. “Jesus Christ, Spock. You’re being stalked.”

Spock said nothing, which meant he agreed but thought it would be illogical to say so.

“Do you need a grown up?” Jim teased, unable to resist. The reference went right over Spock’s head and he could already see the conversation-derailing analytical tangent brewing in Spock’s eyes so he quickly said, “Pull up the Vulcan news feeds on my computer. Let’s see if we can find anything.”

Two hours later Jim had lost track of the number of websites they’d clicked through, the manifestos they’d read, the blogs and the vlogs, all from groups claiming to have found the True Path but none of those groups were Vulcan. They scoured the news feeds but had yet to find a single trace of any discord in Vulcan society, just a bunch of progress reports on construction projects. They even read up on the religious sects of the Udonian people, thinking that this True Path was something the anthropologists had picked up during their stay. Again, nothing. In fact the entirety of Udonian theology appeared dedicated to the principals of chaos, the exact opposite of any kind of True Pathy doctrine.

“If I have to read one more description of what is gonna happen to us heathen infidels I’m gonna shoot myself and mosey on into the afterlife just so I can prove these guys wrong.” Jim grumbled as he clicked away from a particularly fire-and-brimstone centric homepage.

“Are you so confident that they are incorrect in their assumptions?” Spock asked lightly, looking up from the pad in his hands.

“I’ve always been more of what you might call a flexible agnostic, but I’ve also always said that a god who would condemn me to an eternity of suffering in the next life just for not kissing enough ass in this one doesn’t deserve my kisses. Besides,” he waggled his eyebrows conspiratorially. “When it comes to post-brain function experiences I’ve already got the inside scoop.”

He’d brought up the Incident. The first rule of Spock Handling was never, ever talk about the Incident. Spock did not respond well to reminders of the Incident. The last time someone had brought it up Spock had refused to talk to anyone outside of work for weeks. The time before that he’d locked Jim in his room for five hours. The first time Jim had tried to talk about it Spock had almost jumped out a second story window in order to avoid the conversation. Usually he just escaped as soon as possible but heaven help you if you got between Spock and the nearest exit once the Incident had been raised because he would (and, on several memorable occasions, had) go right through you if he had to.

Spock’s pad fell out of brittle fingers and onto the desk with an accusatory thump. “It is a well documented phenomena in the human brain that, following short periods of inactivity caused by trauma, false memories and experiences are created. It is the minds way of understanding what happened but such recollections are illusions. Excuse me Captain, I must return to my duties.” Spock rose to his feet and headed towards the door.

What the hell, may as well go for broke. “We’re going to have to talk about Khan sooner or later, Spock!” Jim shouted at the already closing door. It shut with a deadly snap.

He sighed. Dammit Jim. Way to be an idiot. First time you’ve had him to yourself in days and what do you do? You break the cardinal rule of Spock Handling. Moron.
Before he could get too immersed in self-recriminations Jim noticed a blinking light on his pad screen alerting him to a new message. He opened it up and read the invitation. It seemed that Stonn and T’liv had compromised, the dinner was to be held in the officer’s lounge but Stonn’s name was on the invite.

*Bing.*

Another message. Jim opened it to find a frantic note from the Enterprise event services department demanding to know what the hell was going on and reminding him that they generally required at least two days notice before major events and where the hell were they going to find black table linens with red brocade in this part of space?

*Bing.*

Oh look, now the kitchens were weighing in. Their message was more furious than frantic. Apparently T’liv had ordered a five course traditional Vulcan meal. Soup, salad, appetizers, entrees and desserts, all made entirely from Vulcan ingredients the ship didn’t have and from recipes the cooks didn’t know. Chef Garcia had more than a few scathing words to say about that.

Jim hurriedly typed back a quick note promising to come down and help them reprogram the replicators and resigned himself to the role of damage control for the foreseeable future.

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Eight hours later and Jim was thanking his lucky stars he’d gotten clear out of Riverside and the fuck out of the service industry. It’d been so long since he waited tables he’d forgotten about the stress, the running around and the screaming. He’d been in firefights that were more tranquil than the Enterprise kitchens that night. He finally managed to escape once he’d wrangled the replicators into producing satisfactory Vulcan fruits and vegetables and assured a sobbing cook that quinoa was a perfectly acceptable substitute for Vulcan grains.

“It’s a super food, the most logical food in the galaxy.” He’d joked. “They’ll love it.”

He’d left the cook muttering bitterly into a pot of boiling water and fled.

Jim was beginning to wish they’d never gotten this mission. It was shattering his crew’s peace of mind. Between their inexplicable Spock adoration and their traditionalist appetites his Vulcan passengers were almost more trouble than they were worth.

Jim kicked himself for thinking that as he headed for the bridge. *They’re in pain.* He reminded himself, feeling like an unsympathetic jerk. *After what they’ve been through these last couple of years it’s only natural for them to be acting strangely.*

He was used to Spock but he needed to remember that Spock was better equipped to deal with his emotions than other Vulcans. He’d had more practice for one thing, and he had a ship full of human friends to help him when he needed it.

That idea caught in the mesh of Jim’s brain and bounced around his skull as he arrived on the bridge and relieved Sulu. He sat in his chair and turned the thought over and over, mulling as it blossomed into a theory.
Maybe Spock’s comparatively well-adjusted emotional health was what this True Path business was all about. Maybe some of the other Vulcans were struggling for control in the wake of all they’d lost and they’d looked around for some guidance and found Spock. It made a logical kind of sense. Spock had always had more difficulty controlling his emotions than his Vulcan peers and he’d had to find his own way of creating balance. There was probably a lot other Vulcans could learn from him and they were only now realizing it. Of course in Stonn’s case that involved mending a lot of burned bridges. You couldn’t very well go up to someone you’d tormented for years and say, “Hey, y’know that thing I made your childhood a living hell for? Mind teaching me all about it?” without doing some serious sucking up first. The other Vulcans were probably holding back for fear that Spock would judge them by association and the party was most likely a ruse to observe Spock’s social behavior. It was kind of cute when you thought about it.

By the time Jim’s shift was over he was exhausted but convinced of his theory and he fell into bed happy that he’d finally figured it out.

***

The next morning Jim awoke to find McCoy and Uhura waiting impatiently outside his door. They barged in as soon as he unlocked it.

“What’s all this about a Yay Spock party?”

“Good morning, Captain.”

“Good morning Uhura. And yes, Bones, I did sleep well. No, you didn’t wake me. Thank you for asking.”

McCoy rolled his eyes and Jim knew that was as good as it was going to get.

“What’s up?”

“Captain, what do you know about the party Stonn’s throwing for Spock tonight?” Uhura asked.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with it, it just seems a little…”

“ Weird?” Jim supplied.

McCoy snorted. “Try obsessive.”

“Play nice.” Jim snapped. “Look, you guys, I know it’s a little suspicious but I think it’s a good thing. We all know Spock’s never gotten along with other Vulcans. I figure Stonn wants to apologize and doesn’t know how so he’s going a little overboard.”

“Uh-huh.” McCoy replied. “And the other three Vulcans who don’t share a vague yet menacing personal history with everybody’s favorite First Officer? What are they apologizing for?”

Jim wasn’t quite ready to reveal the whole of his theory, not without discussing it with Spock first, so he shrugged and said, “Maybe they’re trying to be supportive.” McCoy didn’t look convinced.

“Look, I don’t know how Vulcan minds work but they’re Vulcans. Whatever their reasoning is you can bet that it’s 100% logical. All you have to do is show up for a party and try to enjoy yourself. What’s the big deal?”
“The big deal is that it’s downright creepy.”

“Wear the navy blue silk shirt, Bones, it matches your eyes.”

“Fine.” McCoy gave up. “But don’t come crying to me if it turns out that this is all an elaborate ruse so that Stonn can get Spock’s DNA and make a Spock clone sex slave or something.”

“Out.”

McCoy left in a huff but Uhura lingered.

“Jim…” She said softly. “I think I know a little more about the history between Spock and Stonn and…I don’t think he’s trying to apologize.”

“A lot’s changed since Stonn and Spock were kids.” Jim told her. “After everything that’s happened I don’t think the old rules apply.” He grinned. “It’s a good thing. Spock’s finally getting the recognition he deserves.”

Uhura took one look at Jim’s adoring eyes and gave him up for a lost cause. Of course it made sense to him that virtual strangers were falling over themselves to be nice to Spock. In Jim’s mind Spock could do no wrong and this was all just the universe’s way of confirming what he already knew—that Spock was awesome in the biblical sense.

“You’re right.” She said, privately vowing to stick to Spock like glitter all night. “I’ll see you on the bridge Captain.”

Jim shook his head fondly as the door shut behind her. Honestly, it was sweet how much his crew worried about Spock but they were getting a little over-protective.

He should mention it to Carol and they could have a good laugh—

…

On second thought, maybe never running into Carol Marcus again would be a better plan.

Trying to ignore the ball of guilt and shame lodged in his gut, Jim got ready for work.

***

True to her word Uhura showed up at Spock’s quarters 45 minutes before the party.

“It’s you and me tonight.” She told him firmly when he opened the door. “Don’t even try to argue. I was there the last time Stonn invited you out to dinner, remember?”

Spock let her in. “I do not foresee a repeat of that night’s events.”

“Course not.” She said cheerfully, heading straight to the sleeping alcove and plopping down on his bed. “Cause this time I know what to watch out for and I’ll fake an emergency the second he even thinks about mentioning.”

“Nyota.” Spock interrupted. “It no longer matters.”
Uhura gave him a pitying look and he ignored her, continuing the process of preparing for the party.

Sometimes Uhura wanted to grab Spock by the ears and physically shake some sense into him. After all this time, after all the secret glances and long nights standing vigil over Jim’s unconscious body in sickbay and Spock still didn’t understand the first thing about love.

A lot of the women on board the Enterprise thought Nyota Uhura was crazy, and the rest thought she was a saint. First she’d been dating Spock of all people, then she’d given him up voluntarily and then she’d made a seamless transition from lover to platonic confidante. She’d never shown any bitterness or restraint and the truth was she hadn’t felt any.

Oh sure, she’d been a little heartbroken the day she’d seen Spock try to bash Khan’s head in and she realized she’d been as blind as he was, but bitter? No fucking way. Nyota Uhura had worked too damn hard to convince Spock to let her into his life to give it all up over a little heartbreak.

Besides, it wasn’t the first transition their relationship had made. From strangers to teacher and student, to mentor and mentee, to friends, to equals, to lovers and now to…comrades. Their bond had a trajectory of it’s own and Nyota Uhura had been along for the ride since she’d found her Interspecies Ethics professor shivering on the floor of the men’s room in the restaurant she worked at after school.

“What did you tell Jim?” She asked Spock as he selected his outfit.

“I informed the Captain that Stonn and myself once experienced a physical confrontation and had always found each other’s company to be mutually dissatisfying.” Spock answered without looking away from his closet.

“So not about how he stole your wife and then made her wait to block the bond just so he could see your face when it happened?”

Spock gave her a severe look over his shoulder. “It no longer matters.”

“That’s what I thought.” She had no intention of backing down. “Why didn’t you tell him? He’s your friend and you’re letting him think Stonn is harmless.”

“It is inconsequential. Stonn is not the only individual whose recent behavior has raised questions. T’mo, T’liv and Sveena have all approached me in the same curious manner.”

“Spock, this morning I saw Sveena shut a turbolift in T’liv’s face so that she could ask you to lunch first. Even by human standards that isn’t normal behavior. For some reason these Vulcans are obsessed with you and McCoy was right, it’s creepy.”

“What is your point?” Spock raised an eyebrow as he pulled his dress uniform shirt over his head.

“Do you know why they’re doing all this?”

“Negative, but I am confidant that the answers will reveal themselves in due course.” He straightened his sleeves and turned to her with soft eyes. “I am gratified by your concern Nyota but it is unwarranted. Stonn no longer has the ability to harm me as he did before and I have long since ceased caring for the approval of my peers.”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easy, Mister. I’ll be as concerned as I want. Now put on these pants and let’s get going.”
The Enterprise staff had pulled off a miracle and transformed the officer’s lounge into a bastion of Vulcan elegance. Ribbons of black velvet criss-crossed the ceiling and created elaborate shapes and patterns in the air above their heads, illuminated by carnival lights that seemed to hover in midair. The main table was set with black linens, burgundy napkins, china plates and three different kinds of glasses and the sideboards were laden with appetizers. The bar was in the far corner, and it looked great, like a real bar, but Jim knew that it was actually a filing cabinet shoved under a writing desk with a couple of buckets and a black table cloth thrown on top. The ensign standing behind the structure was cutting up lemons and limes and fitting them into the little drawers.

All the higher-ups were in attendance, along with some of the lower-downs who were actually even-higher-ups by virtue of willpower. Specifically Nurse Christine Chapel, who was following McCoy around the room and putting food on his plate and glaring at him until he put it in his mouth and swallowed. Chewing was optional. Yeoman Rand had also shown up, dragged along by Carol Marcus, and wasn’t that a pairing that made Jim want to find a hole he could bury himself in. At least Carol seemed as reluctant to meet his eyes as he was to meet hers.

Jim had never regretted sex before. Even sex he couldn’t really remember. But something about the way Carol Marcus wasn’t looking at him made him suspect he was not remembering a lot more than just sex.

“You’d better not be planning on drinking that, Doctor.”

“God dammit woman, let me drink in peace.”

“Not until you’ve finished that stuffed pear.”

Bones and Chapel had come to join Jim by the makeshift bar. Jim offered them a half-hearted smile and McCoy handed him the mint julep he’d been about to swallow.

“Here, Jim. Don’t let good booze go to waste.”

Jim accepted the glass but didn’t sip. “Did you guys know Marcus and Rand were friends?”

McCoy shrugged but Chapel nodded.

“They went to finishing school together.” She explained.

“Seriously?” McCoy asked.

“What are you surprised about, that they went to finishing school or that they went to the same one?”

“Both.” McCoy said.

“I didn’t even know finishing schools still existed.” Jim added. “Isn’t that where they teach you to balance a book on your head?”

“Among other things.” Chapel’s eyes twinkled. “Traditionally they’ve taught comportment and table manners, things like that. All about creating proper young ladies, you see? Nowadays the curriculum has expanded. A lot of girls who want careers in space go to finishing school, it’s one of the best ways to learn about the social traditions of other species. Those two can make small talk in twenty languages, dress to impress on fifty different planets and they can just say no to everyone from a
Klingon to an Orion without causing offense.”

“Did you go to finishing school?” McCoy asked.

Chapel snorted. “Of course not. They may be churning out diplomats instead of trophy wives but they’re still finishing schools. My parents are hairdressers.”

“Did Rand get a scholarship or something?” Jim asked.

Now both Chapel and McCoy were looking at him with a mix of exasperated disbelief and patient amusement.

“Jim.” McCoy said gently. “Yeoman Rand’s father is Hector Rand.”

Jim blinked.


“The media mogul?” Jim’s jaw dropped.

“Yeah.” McCoy nodded. “Rand’s worth, what, 10, 12 trillion?”

“15.” Chapel said calmly, as if they were talking about 15 credits instead of 15,000,000,000,000 credits. That was a lot of credits.

Jim laughed. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“You really didn’t know?” McCoy chuckled. “Why did you think all those big guys in black suits came and toured the ship after you hired her?”

“…That the Secret Service was having a field trip?” Jim said weakly.

“What are you guys talking about?” Sulu asked as he and Chekov joined them.

“Jim didn’t know that Rand is rich.” McCoy told them.

“Stinking.” Sulu agreed cheerfully before ordering a glass of wine.

“You did not know?” Chekov asked Jim.

“Why should I have known?” Jim said defensively. “It makes no difference to me who your parents are.”

“Everyone knows that.” Chapel reassured him. “That’s why Rand threw a fit when her dad told her she couldn’t join the five year mission. You didn’t read about it? She did it in public on purpose so that all the independent news outlets would talk about it and her father would be forced to allow her to come or risk being seen as anti-Federation.”

Jim flushed and Bones drawled, “Captain Kirk gets all his news from late night comedy shows.”

“Oh look, there’s the man of the hour.” Jim said cheerfully. Spock had just arrived, Uhura at his side. “I’d better go say hello.” He fled before his friends could start having too much fun at his expense.

Besides, he didn’t get all his news from comedians. He still read the Riverside Gazette. Though now that he came to think of it they had been referring to Admiral Marcus’ failed coup as “yet another miscommunication from Starfleet’s entrenched bureaucracy” so it was conceivable that the local rag
wasn’t the most reliable source of un-biased interplanetary news. Not that he begrudged them their resentment. Over half the humans in Riverside County were employed by Starfleet sub-contractors and in the wake of Nero and Admiral Marcus Starfleet was kind of a mess. Things weren’t going so great back on Earth. Even Jim was starting to wonder if Starfleet really—

No. This was a night to celebrate Spock, to hope for the future, to exist in the here and now. Now was not the time for doubts or politics.

Jim couldn’t have stopped his smile even if he’d wanted to as he approached Spock. And Uhura.

“‘You’re a little late.”’ He teased.

“Lieutenant Uhura insisted it was fashionable.” Spock told him.

“Well you still got here before Scotty, so that’s something.”

Stonn and T’liv drew close.

“Welcome, Spock.” Stonn said, his face as expressionless as always.

“You honor us with your presence.” T’liv’s voice sounded slightly warmer, even if her face looked like it was carved from the same granite as Stonn’s.

Spock didn’t seem inclined to respond so Jim said brightly, “Why don’t we get started on dinner now that the guest of honor is here?” He signaled to a nearby server who nodded and vanished through the side door into the back room.

As they made their way to the banquet table Jim saw Uhura take Spock’s arm proprietarily out of the corner of his eye and he felt a stab of jealousy. She of all people knew how Vulcans viewed unnecessary touching, she should know better than to touch Spock like that in public. Or, for that matter, in private. Definitely no private touching. Jim was hoping to find a seat next to Spock but Uhura plopped down on Spock’s left and T’liv claimed the seat on his right before Jim could get there. He ended up sitting between T’mo and McCoy but at least he was as far away from Carol as he could get while still sitting at the same table. She was deep in conversation with Sulu, probably talking about the latest news from the biology lab.

Dinner kicked off with a light kelp soup and a pear and red oak leaf salad. The kitchen was saving the purely Vulcan dishes for the main course. As people ate they began to chat and soon the conversation was flowing.

“So what kind of research were you doing on Udonia?” Jim asked T’mo as he dribbled more dressing on his salad.

T’mo explained their work and Jim listened politely while simultaneously trying to eavesdrop on Spock and T’liv. It wasn’t easy. Vulcans were clearly masters of pitching their voices for private conversations in public places.

“-it is unfortunate that the High Council decided to cease funding our work.”

Finally, a patch of common ground. “I’ve had the honor of meeting the Vulcan High Council.” Jim said. “Of course I’d read about T’Pau during Starfleet Academy but her biographer didn’t do her justice.”

T’mo looked up from his plate with a frown. “How do you mean?”
“Well, I always thought she’d be taller for one thing.” Jim joked, expecting T’mo to reply with something along the lines of how illogical it was to judge people by their physical characteristics, as Spock would have done.

Instead T’mo nodded. “Lady T’Pau possesses a lesser physical stature than the average Vulcan female.”

“Just goes to show you can’t judge a book by it’s cover.” McCoy chimed in.

“Ah. A human idiom to signify the fallacy of appearances. Most apt.”

McCoy chuckled. “You’re a lot more forgiving of human idioms than our First Officer.”

“My specialty is interspecies communications. It is far easier to, as you put it, forgive what is understood than to accept that which is not. My colleagues and I had hoped that the High Council would understand the necessity of our work on Udonia, but alas.”

“I’m sure the High Council will renew your funding once the colony is more settled.” Jim said as the servers put plates of roasted plomeek and quinoa in front of them.

“Perhaps.”

“What are your plans once we arrive tomorrow morning, T’mo?” McCoy asked. “Are you going to see your family?”

“I have no surviving relatives.”

Jim kicked McCoy under the table.

“I’m sorry.” McCoy apologized through gritted teeth. “I shouldn’t have assumed.”

“You were not to know. I am not upset by your query.”

“I’m sorry.” The words were out of Jim’s mouth before he could think about why he was saying them.

“Are you apologizing for your Chief Medical Officer’s perceived social faux pas or are you apologizing for your own role in the destruction of my planet?” T’mo asked.

“Both.” Jim winced, suppressing the instinct to apologize for apologizing.

T’mo stared at him analytically for a long moment before returning to his meal. “It is not you who should apologize, Captain Kirk. Perhaps if the High Council had paid more attention to your own loss ours could have been prevented.”

_Vulcans don’t have emotions my ass._ Even though T’mo spoke without inflection Jim could hear the anger and confusion boiling under the calm surface. He could relate.

“Maybe, but maybe not.” He said. “Unexplainable things happen in space all the time. No one could have known that Nero was a terrorist from the future after the Kelvin was destroyed.”

T’mo allowed his dinner fork to fall onto his empty plate. “It is not the nature of terrorists to surrender after one successful attack. You mentioned the Lady T’Pau earlier. I propose to you that she, out of all Vulcans, should have known there would be a second attack.”

Jim and McCoy both opened their mouths to ask what he meant but before they could the tinkling of
a spoon on a glass interrupted them. Stonn was making a toast.

“We are gathered here to honor our hosts.” He began, raising his champagne flute in Jim’s direction. “You and your crew have done us a great service, Captain Kirk, and we will not forget it.”

Jim bowed his head in acknowledgement but his eyes were on Uhura’s face. She looked tense…no, he told a lie, she looked outright furious and she was fiddling with something under the table.

Stonn continued. “We are also here to honor our fellow, Commander Spock and all that he has achieved despite—” Did Spock just stiffen? Why was Uhura glancing at Rand? Wait, why was Rand whispering something to the ensign who was refilling her glass? “—being mistreated and misunderstood by so many, including myself. This dinner symbolizes a new beginning for us and for our people.”

And now the ensign was headed for the door and Rand was whispering something to Carol. Carol turned and looked up and her eyes met Jim’s. His head snapped back towards Stonn just in time to see Chapel wink at Uhura.

What the hell was going on?

“Spock, you were once called a legend.” Stonn continued, either not noticing or not bothered by the distraction. “Now I give you a new designation. You are our hope, not our legend, not our past, not our mistake. You are our future. You are our destiny. You, Spock of Vulcan, are the great hope of all those we have lost, who we also honor tonight.” He raised his glass higher in the air and all up and down the table champagne flutes were lifted in memoriam, in sympathy and in manners. “To those who are lost and to that which they left behind. To your mother, Spock, and to your wife. We honor them.”

The susurrus of repeated words began. Jim’s fingers were numb on the stem of his glass. He could feel Carol Marcus’ eyes burning into the back of his neck but what the fuck did Stonn just—

The comm unit on the wall lit up.

“Captain Kirk! Come in Captain Kirk!”

Dazed and confused, Jim got up and went to the unit. “What’s going on Scotty? Why aren’t you here?”

“We’ve had a wee little accident in Astrophysics Lab B, sir. We’re going to need Miss Marcus.”

Carol rose to her feet. “I’ll be right—”

“Miss Marcus is not involved in any of the experiments currently taking place in Lab B.” Spock interrupted, also getting up from the table. “I will go.”

“We can both go.” Carol sighed.

“You may accompany me if you wish, though it will not be necessary.” Spock said coolly before bowing to T’liv and Stonn. “I am gratified by the honor you show me.” He turned and left. Carol threw one last glance at Jim and then ran after him.

“Don’t worry.” Uhura murmured to Jim as she passed him. “I’ll go with them and make sure they don’t kill each other.”

Jim nodded mutely, his head spinning. What wife?
“Mister Stonn!” Rand had caught Stonn before he could reach the door and follow Spock. “That was a beautiful toast. Don’t you agree, Mister T’mo?”

“T’liv, Sveena, darlings.” Chapel was standing firmly between the Vulcans and the exit. “You simply must tell me how you girls get your hair to stay up like that. You both look positively marvelous.”

Sulu and Chekov made their way over to Jim and McCoy.

“What’s going on?” Sulu whispered.

“I think the women have been conspiring.” McCoy told him softly.

“When Stonn said wife, did he mean Spock’s wife?” Chekov asked. “Did Meester Spock have a wife?”

The three men looked at Jim, the resident expert on Spocks, but all he could do was shrug. “He never mentioned it.”

_God fucking DAMMIT Spock! Why won’t you just TRUST me?!_

***

“I am going to kill him.”

“That would not be advisable.”

“Don’t you dare defend him, Spock. I knew that sick son of a bitch hadn’t changed.”

“What’s going on?” Carol asked, jogging to keep up with Spock and Uhura.

Spock frowned. “Miss Marcus, whatever the nature of the emergency in Lab B your presence—”

“There is no emergency, Mr. Spock.” Carol sighed.

“I told you I’d fake one if he mentioned T’Pring, remember?” Uhura reminded him. “I had Scotty waiting for my signal, Carol’s here because as Science Officer she’s technically the one they’re supposed to call and Rand and Chapel are distracting the other Vulcans.”

“Rand told Ensign Chu to bring dessert in early so they won’t be able to come after you for at least another 45 minutes, between pudding and aperitifs.” Carol added.

Spock gave them both a disapproving frown. “I do not require protection.”

“Of course you don’t require it.” Uhura said cheerfully as she ushered him into the turbo lift. “We’re giving it anyway.” She punched in the number for the officer’s deck. When the doors opened Spock stepped out first and Carol grabbed Uhura’s arm before she could follow.

“I need to talk to you.” She hissed.

Uhura raised an eyebrow but something in Carol’s face kept her from arguing. Maybe it was the flush in her cheeks or the desperation in her eyes. Uhura sighed.
“Spock, you are going straight to your quarters where it’s safe.” She commanded. “Try to eat something, you barely touched your dinner.”

He ignored her entirely as the lift doors shut.

“What’s up?” Uhura asked.

“Not here,” Carol shook her head. “My quarters.”

“Seriously? Okay, okay, geez. Aren’t we secretive tonight.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” Carol rolled her eyes as the lift opened again and they stepped out into the empty hallway. She led the way to her quarters and rushed Uhura inside, locking the doors behind them.

“What’s wrong?” Uhura crossed her arms.

“Did the Captain know about Spock’s betrothed?” Carol asked.

“How did you know?”

“I didn’t. Well, I assumed. I mean, it’s just how Vulcans work, the whole bonding thing. It’s not exactly a secret, just something no one ever talks about. And since you two were dating I figured she’d died and so there was no point in bringing it up. But did you see Jim’s face when Stonn said wife?”

“I didn’t notice it.” Uhura admitted. “Bad?”

“He looked like someone just ran over his dog. There’s no way he knew.”

“Okay, so he didn’t know and now he does. So what?”

Carol flushed red and refused to meet her eyes. “Jim likes Spock.”

“Of course he does.”

“No, I mean he really likes Spock.”

“I’m sorry, are we seven? Are we seven years old right now and you dragged me here to tell me that Jim like likes Spock? Because being seven years old is the only situation in which that is acceptable.”

“I mean he really, really—”

“Carol, everyone knows that Jim likes Spock. They’ve been dancing around each other for months.”

“Actually everyone doesn’t know that because most of us don’t spend as much time with the two of them as you do, Nyota.” Carol snapped. “We all thought something was going on after…” Her voice faltered. A year later and still she could barely mention it. “After last year, but nothing ever happened. Besides, Jim Kirk flirts with everyone so no one thinks twice if he’s a little more touchy-feely than is Vulcan appropriate.”

“What’s your point?” Uhura asked.

“My point is that Jim really, really likes Spock and he is really, really not going to like this whole wife thing.”
“You think he’s going to be jealous?” Uhura scoffed. “Come off it. Jim’s not the jealous type.”

“He is when it comes to Spock.” Carol said firmly. “In fact he’s bloody possessive.”

Uhura laughed. “Please! When Gaila told him she was sleeping with someone else he high fived her.”

“Gaila wasn’t Spock.” Carol said darkly.

Uhura sobered. “Carol, sugar, what’s this all about?”

Carol bit her lip. She wanted to come clean but this was private and more than a little humiliating. Not to mention Uhura was Captain and Commander of Team Spock.

On the other hand if she didn’t tell someone she was literally going to explode. Literally. Into a billion gory pieces. And Carol Marcus did not want to go down as the first person in history to be exploded by a secret.

“I had sex with Jim.”

“You what?”

“Yeah. I was pissed off my ass but he was black out drunk. I don’t think he even remembers what happened. I wish I didn’t.”

“Why? Was he terrible?”

“What? No! Well… I mean, we were both too wasted for anything—not the point! He, um…he called me Spock.”

Uhura’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“Not just once either. He really thought he was with…yeah. And he got rather…”

“Rather what?” This was the grossest, weirdest gossip Uhura had ever heard and she’d roomed with an Orion. Orions didn’t even count it as sex unless it involved four orifices and three types of bodily fluids. She was hanging on to every syllable.

“Intense.” Carol finished lamely.

“Caveman intense.”

“Gross.” Uhura’s eyes were wide. “He didn’t hurt you did he?”

“No, of course not. Nothing that couldn’t be fixed by a hot bath and some aspirin. It was just…honestly, it was frightening when he thought I was Spock. He has so much pent up feeling. It was violent and controlling. I know he’d never knowingly do anything to hurt Spock but, I don’t know, if something pushed him the wrong way…”

“You make it sound like he’s a pressure cooker.”

“Nyota, I feel like I caught a glimpse of the real James T. Kirk and he was…”

“Darker than you thought he’d be?”
Carol nodded. “Exactly.”

Uhura sighed. “Sugar, you spend so much time in the labs you never see him when the shit hits the fan. Believe me, I’ve seen that darkness. But he doesn’t hide it. He keeps it on a chain and he lets it out when he needs it. Think about it, sweet, on any given day he’s responsible for hundreds of lives. You can’t survive that kind of pressure without a touch of darkness.”

“But this was more than a touch. To have all that desperation and…” Carol groped blindly for the right word. “Ownership, directed at one person…”

“Spock can handle himself and Jim would never try to hurt him.” Uhura said soothingly. “Talk to me, sugar. This isn’t really about Spock, is it?”

Carol Marcus burst into tears and the next second Uhura had enclosed her in her safe, warm embrace. They sank down to the floor. Carol buried her head in Uhura’s shoulder and sobbed.

“I think I need to get off this ship!”

“Shhh, sugar, hush now. It’s gonna be okay.”

***

Jim desperately wanted to go find Spock and demand to know what this whole wife nonsense was about but he never got the chance. Spock was already asleep (or maybe just pretending) by the time Jim escaped from the party and the next morning they were too busy with last minute preparations for their arrival at New Vulcan.

Plus it seemed like everywhere he turned, there was Stonn. In the mess, in the transporter room, in the hallways. Wasn’t Stonn trying to be Spock’s bestest new buddy? Jim was lucky to catch a glimpse of his First Officer that morning and he had to look over Stonn’s shoulder to do it. If he didn’t know better he’d suspect Stonn of trying to keep them apart, but that was ridiculous. There was no conceivable reason for Stonn to do so.

They arrived just before noon New Vulcan time, which was early morning for the crew of the Enterprise.

Beaming was still the only way to get down to New Vulcan since they hadn’t had time to construct safe landing or docking facilities for shuttles, let alone massive star ships. As such the transporter room was uncomfortably crowded. They’d be spending a couple days at the colony, supplying aid and much needed spare hands, and everyone was eager for a bit of fresh air and sunshine. It wasn’t shore leave but after the disaster of their last mission everyone wanted to see a good job done well.

Jim stood on the transporter pad alone with McCoy, Spock and their Vulcan passengers. He nodded to Scotty at the control panel. “Energize.”

If he’d been expecting it to be less crowded once they arrived on the colony he was sorely disappointed. The large antechamber was packed. There were some Vulcans, but mostly there were volunteers from every corner of the Federation. Humans, Betazoids, Deltans and even a handful of Orions. They rushed Jim and the others out of the beaming zone and grabbed his luggage from his hand.
“Hey!”

“Sorry, Captain, but we’ve got to make room for the supplies you’re bringing.” Said the short brown-haired woman as she handed his case to a passing Betazoid. “Ambassador Sarek authorized us to send all your personal effects to his residence. I understand you will be staying there. Hey! You! Be careful with that!”

“Jim.”

Jim turned and broke out into a delighted grin when he saw the familiar face.

“Hi Spock.”

On the other side of the room Spock turned his head and saw Jim clasp arms with his elder counterpart.

“Commander Spock?” T’liv drew his attention back to their conversation.

“Forgive me.” He faced her again. “You wish me to visit you and your sister?”

T’liv nodded. “Affirmative. My sister has been in poor health for many years. I have reason to suspect your presence would be pleasing to her.”

“I can see no reason for this to be so but I will call on you and your sister nonetheless.”

“I am gratified. We will be available tomorrow afternoon at 2 o’clock.”

“That would be acceptable.”

“Very well. I will send you the address.” She bowed. “Until tomorrow, Commander Spock.”

“Until tomorrow, T’liv.”

Meanwhile, back on the other side of the room Jim was accepting an invitation of his own. “Of course we’ll visit the orphanage!” He beamed at the Ambassador. “There’s nowhere we’d rather be.”

Ambassador Spock just barely smiled at his friend. “The children will be pleased.”

“Hey.” An idea suddenly occurred to Jim. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of it sooner. “Does the phrase ‘True Path’ mean anything to you? What? What is it? Spock, what’s wrong?”

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Author’s Note:

OH. MY. GOD. That was a ridiculously long first chapter. 41 pages. Next chapter coming soon, it’s mostly already written. Hopefully it won’t be quite as long as this one…
Anyway, this is going to be a long story. I’ve been bothered by the way Abrams and co. treats the Star Trek universe (i.e. blowing up Vulcan) and this fic is kind of an answer to that. Actions have consequences and when bad things happen people suffer. I’m going to try to show that in this fic, but I’m also going to try and tell a story about love and hope and how, not to be all Lilo and Stitch about it or anything, no one gets left behind.

So if you want to stick along for the ride, I promise it’s going to be a bumpy one. But they’ll end up in a good place. I don’t do sad endings.

Also, yes. In this fic the Graysons are a family of intergalactic criminals. Just in case that wasn’t clear.
The Old Cowboy

Disclaimer:

The author, Kirk and Spock are all hiding behind the sofa.

Kirk: Lady, what the hell did you do to that poor man in the suit?

The Author: I don’t know. I’ve never seen him like this.

(Mr. X charges by, swinging a sword and shouting that Narnia will fall before his might)

The Author: I think I broke him.

Spock: What is his purpose here?

The Author: He usually just tricks me into saying that I don’t own the characters. Which I don’t! I know that I don’t. But it’s his job to make me say it.

Spock: I see.

Kirk: In that case, we have a serious problem.

(Mr. X starts carving brand name logos into the wall with the sword and shouting MINE! MINE! MINE! over and over again)

The Author: …help me…

The Old Cowboy

It turns out that when people say “evacuate the schools and hospitals” what they mean is “evacuate the people who can’t take care of themselves.” Which was good and right and as it should be but the end result was still over a hundred patients for every three quarters of a nurse.

McCoy took one step into New Vulcan’s largest and so-far-only-completed hospital, took one look at the admitting nurse’s face and immediately went into crisis mode. “I’m Dr. McCoy of the Enterprise.” He flashed his ID. “Where do you need me?”

She was a human woman, she’d been a nurse for 27 years and she’d been working with the IDIC Volunteer Medical Corps for 15 of those years. She’d come out of retirement when Vulcan was destroyed and she was currently one of 35 on-call nurses in a hospital with 2,530 beds, 2,600
patients and a waiting list a mile long.

“Second floor, trance ward, ask for Dr. M’benga.” She snapped. “NEXT!”

McCoy headed for the lift. The first floor of the hospital was a cross between a waiting room and a triage center. It was full of small groups of Vulcans in quiet conversation and a wide array of volunteers from all over the Federation in various stages of bleeding. He lingered by an Orion who was holding her left eyeball in her right hand, but she waved him on.

“Bungee cord snapped back.” She explained. “I’m fine. Dandy. Everything’s coming up fluffy.”

McCoy checked the IV drip in her arm. Morphine. Well, there probably wasn’t more he could do for her right now, not until an optical regeneration booth opened up. He pulled a pen out of his pocket. “If you’re still here in 45 minutes comm this number.” He scribbled Christine’s comm numerals on the sleeve of the Orion’s hospital gown. “Ask for Nurse Chapel. Tell her Dr. McCoy authorized immediate beam up and medical treatment. Got it?”

“Got it. You look like a marshmallow.”

“That’s nice.”

“Nom nom nommy nom.”

Morphine. Discovered almost 500 years ago and it was still the best shit around. And people thought progress was everything. How many times had Jim teased him for collecting medical antiques? Well, right now a substance older than anything in his china cabinet was the only thing standing between this calm young lady and senseless howling pain.

“Try not to squeeze your eyeball.” He told her and left, heading for the lift.

The second floor was an abrupt departure from the first. It was silent and, while still crowded, no one was moving. McCoy walked past room after room filled with comatose Vulcans lying on mismatched cots, beds, couches, camping pads, bean bags, chaise lounges and a dozen other moderately comfortable surfaces on which it was technically possible to sleep. It looked like the hospital had just dragged in everything it could get its hands on and piled in the Vulcans wall to wall.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. McCoy looked around. The sound was coming from the monitor attached to a zebra-print couch. He dashed over. The patient appeared to be a Vulcan female at least 125 years of age and her eyelids were fluttering. She was starting to wake up. McCoy took a set back and let her get on with it. The beeping sound from the monitor rose in frequency and volume, going from insistent to frantic. McCoy glared at it.

CRASH.

He turned to see a man with ebony skin, a scraggly beard and unkempt dreads come skidding around the corner. If it weren’t for the white lab coat flapping at his back McCoy might have thought he was an escapee from the psych ward. He looked demented.

“Out of the way!” The man roared and McCoy stepped back. The man slid to a halt beside the couch, grabbed the patient by the front of her gown and backhanded her across the face.

“Hey!” McCoy leapt on the assailant, wrestling him away from his victim. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

“Hands off newbie!” The mad man twisted out of McCoy’s grip and shoved him to the ground. He
slapped the patient again and again.

“Stop it!” McCoy bellowed, getting back to his feet. Suddenly the patient’s hand snapped out and caught her attacker’s arm in midair. She sat up slowly and blinked at them. McCoy grabbed the lunatic and twisted his other arm up behind his back. “I’m so sorry, ma’am, I’ll call security and then I’ll try to find your doctor.”

“I am her doctor, newbie.” The lunatic snapped. “And for your information that’s the only way to get a Vulcan out of a deep trance.”

McCoy hesitated and looked askance at the patient. She was still looking around in bemusement but, noticing his glance, she nodded.

“The doctor is correct.” She said in a voice hoarse from lack of use.

“Oh.” McCoy released his captive. “Um. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” The lunatic—doctor—massaged his wrists. “You’re not the first to freak out about it. The last newbie they sent up here tried to hit me with a chair.” He picked up the chart that was taped to the couch. “Ms. V’hora, I’m Doctor M’benga. How is your condition?”

“I…what has happened?” A frown was forming on the Vulcan’s face. “Where am I?”

M’benga checked something on her chart and threw a panicked look at McCoy, who was reading over his shoulder. V’hora had gone into a voluntary deep trance under the advisement of her doctors three years ago after being diagnosed with a degenerative nerve disorder. She’d been unconscious since just before…

It probably would have been kinder if she’d never woken up at all.

McCoy took a deep breath. “Ms V’hora, I have some bad news.”

They told her together, side by side, shoulder to shoulder. About Nero, about the destruction of Vulcan and about the new colony. She listened without interrupting, except for a few clarifying questions. They didn’t try to sugar coat it or spare her feelings in any way because there was no mercy in genocide. When they were done she only had one more question.

“Did any members of my family survive?”

“I don’t know.” M’benga answered. “There’s a database of all the known survivors. You can access it from the console in my office.”

She nodded and rose stiffly to her feet. She almost stumbled when she took her first step but neither doctor moved to help her. They both knew better, though McCoy had to pinch his thigh to keep from offering his shoulder. M’benga led the way to his office and they left her there, staring at the names on the screen. They shut the door to give her some privacy and then they turned to each other.

There are some things you can’t share without ending up liking each other and telling a middle-aged Vulcan that her planet had been obliterated and everyone she cared about had been murdered while she was in a medically-induced coma was one of them.

“I need a drink.” McCoy sighed.

M’benga clapped him on the shoulder. “Come on. There’s a fully stocked bar at the nurse’s station.”
Jim, Spock and McCoy dined with Sarek their first night on New Vulcan and if Sarek noticed the tension he didn’t mention it.

Jim was fit to burst. He was getting sick and tired of Spock’s recalcitrance. Never mind that there was clearly more going on between Spock and Stonn than a little playground shoving. Never mind that the elder Spock had gone white as a sheet when Jim mentioned the True Path and then refused to say anything more. Never mind that something big and bad was in the wind and Spock was standing in the eye of the storm. Never mind all they’d been through and all they meant to each other, oh no, apparently Jim still hadn’t earned himself even the tiniest crumb of Spock’s trust. It wasn’t bad enough that his Spock wouldn’t open up, now both of them were being tight-lipped as clams. What did he have to do to convince them to trust him? Save the world? Oh wait, he’d already done that. More than once.

As for Spock, he could tell that Jim was displeased with him but he didn’t know why, exactly. He could imagine a great number of reasons for Jim’s anger but he didn’t know which one it was so he was staying quiet. As coping mechanisms went, this one usually worked. Jim would get mad and Spock would stay quiet until Jim lost patience and explained exactly what was bothering him and then Spock would find some way of addressing the issue without actually changing his behavior. This system had worked many times in the past, with many different humans. Even when Jim and Nyota had joined forces against him in the shuttle en route to the Klingon home world he had been able to assuage their wrath with a few well-chosen words, without ever actually promising not to sacrifice himself for the good the many in the future. In the future if a situation arose in which the sacrifice of Spock’s life were the most logical option he would of course follow through, but his friends did not need to know that. And so he waited, quietly.

McCoy was just staying out of it all together. Jim never stayed mad at Spock for long. In a couple days he’d blow his top and say a lot of things he didn’t really mean and then Spock would say something that sounded meaningful and endearing but was actually just a huge load of horse shit, they would accidentally reveal to McCoy what was actually bothering them and they would forget the whole thing without ever actually resolving it.

It was generally agreed amongst the senior staff that if Jim and Spock didn’t have a real heart-to-heart soon they were going to find themselves mysteriously stranded on an uninhabited Class M planet in the near future.

And no, that was not a joke. That was the actual plan. McCoy had two emergency packs stashed under his desk. Scotty had already written a virus that would shut down their communicators from orbit. Sulu and Chekov mapped out likely candidates in every new star system they saw on pieces of napkin they stole from lunch and hid under their stations while they worked. All Uhura had to do was announce the word “Swordfish” over the ship-wide comm and the Captain and First Officer would find themselves on a sudden and unexpected vacation. Jim and Spock had been stuck in this pattern for a year now and people were starting to ask questions.

Dinner itself was awkward and mostly silent. Vulcans didn’t go in much for small talk and despite being married to a human woman for decades Sarek clearly hadn’t picked up the habit. McCoy made a feeble attempt to lighten the mood by mentioning a promising young doctor he had met at the hospital that afternoon who he intended to poach, which was only fair since he’d already received transfer requests from four of his staff to stay on the colony, but he gave up when no one responded.
They ate their meal in silence and once they were all done Sarek finally looked up and asked how long they were planning to stay.

“Just a couple of days until we get new orders.” Jim explained. “Most of the crew is going to be helping out with the construction work, and we’ve been invited to observe one of the orphanages.”

“This would be Ambassador Selek’s institution?” Sarek asked.

Jim hesitated. He wasn’t sure how much Sarek actually knew about the elder Spock’s identity. Only he, Spock and Scotty knew the whole story and they had all kept some of it out of their official reports. After all, there was honesty and then there was baiting a witch hunt. There were already rumors that the Admiralty was considering hiring bounty hunters to find and execute this universe’s Nero, though Jim didn’t buy it. The Nero of this universe probably hadn’t even been born yet and whatever he thought of the Admiralty they weren’t stupid or callous enough to execute an infant for a crime he hadn’t committed. But Jim had no illusions about what the conspiracy theorists and warmongers would say if it ever came to light that Nero had destroyed Vulcan for the sole purpose of punishing one individual.

“Yeah.” Jim finally answered. Sarek nodded.

“Have you spoken with Ambassador Selek?” Spock asked his father.

“I have.” Sarek answered. “On several occasions. He has been most illuminating.”

“He’s an interesting guy. I quite like him.” McCoy said cheerfully. Jim and Spock momentarily forgot their differences and their eyes met across the table. There had never been any reason to reveal the Ambassador’s true identity to the doctor, and he never seemed to guess that the old Vulcan and his First Officer were one and the same.

“Indeed.” Sarek said and ended the conversation for the evening. The men retired to their separate rooms and fell asleep.

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Just as McCoy had expected by the next morning Jim had totally forgotten why he was mad at the Spocks. He chatted happily as the three of them made their way from Sarek’s residence on one side of the settlement to the orphanage on the other side. They had to walk but it was no hardship and they spent the 45 minute journey taking stock of the colony.

Everything was new. The buildings, the roads, even the trees had only been planted within the past six months. The one and only city in the new colony was home to not only the remaining Vulcans but to a small empire’s worth of volunteers. Some of those volunteers were in it for the long haul but most of them only stayed for a couple weeks or months. This was reflected in the architecture. The tents outnumbered the houses 2 to 1. There were no parks yet as recreation was still an unaffordable luxury but there were gardens everywhere. The largest concern of any new colony was food production, something Jim knew all too well. On Tarsus they had relied on communal farms, growing only what they needed. When the blight hit no one had anything stored in the cellar and there were no alternative food supplies. New Vulcan wouldn’t make the same mistake. Every possible available surface was dedicated to agriculture. The streets were lined with fruit trees. Windows were filled with boxes of root vegetables, greens, herbs and low bush berries. Trellises
dripping with vines and tomatoes and beans and a dozen climbers Jim couldn’t recognize marked the doorways and cluttered the sidewalks. Foliage danced on the rooftops and the ears and tips and wisps of grains tickled the porticos. The empty lots—and there were a lot of empty lots—were sectioned with long straight furrows and the fragile thrusts of seedlings and sprouts. There was no livestock. Not only were Vulcans vegetarians, they physically could not digest meat. So unless someone could turn back evolution a few thousand years there was no logical point to keeping livestock. Though given the high number of carnivorous and omnivorous species in the colony Jim had expected to see some chattel. A sty of pigs, perhaps, or a roost of krumpels. But no, apparently the omnivores were willing to swear off meat for the duration of their stay and the carnivores made other arrangements. Or maybe they just ate the chickens.

Well, they weren’t really chickens, but they looked like chickens if chickens were bright green and had antennae. Apparently the creatures were the peak of evolution on this formerly uninhabited-by-certifiably-intelligent-life planet. And they were stupid like chickens. And trusting like a Judas goat. They flocked and swarmed through the desert air, awkwardly flapping and bobbing around the structures that disrupted their ancestral air space. They peered curiously through windows and over shoulders. They perched on people’s heads and outstretched hands and huddled up to standing legs. Their nests lay on the ground, cradled in the crevices of stone buildings and the deep trenches of the sonic trolley line.

The air was hot and dry. This was a desert planet, a planet where only the sunrise dappled the barren plains and mountains and one of the two large seas on the globe was so full of salt it burned white. Vicious winds whipped the sands into folds that stretched for hundreds of miles and ate away at the bedrock. The colony was located on the shore of the smaller fresh water sea, which was still the size of the Pacific and Atlantic combined. The beaches were teeming with vegetation that looked like mangroves, produced fruit that tasted a lot like pina coladas and had the same effect on human skin as poison ivy. Birds had ruled the planet before the Vulcans came. There were no native mammals, only an innumerable amount of avians. The planet had long been a point of interest in the Vulcan science community. There had been a 15 strong team of scientists doing deep-sea research in the salty expanse of the southern hemisphere, studying iodine-based life forms. When the hunt for an available planet began they had immediately submitted PM-D42XF for consideration. Partially due to name recognition and partially due to the fact that none of the indigenous species could talk, the desert planet had won out and became an important part of the rebirth of Jim’s favorite species.

And for that Jim loved this planet, even if he did keep tripping over chickens the same color as cartoon plutonium.

“This is it.” He announced abruptly, coming to a sudden halt on the sidewalk.

“Are you sure?” McCoy asked. There was no sign or visible address number.

“Yeah.” Jim said, staring at the familiar building. “I’m sure.”

Home. He was looking at home. It was the exact 19th century farmhouse he’d grown up in back in Riverside, except the paint wasn’t cracking and it was actually white, instead of gray with dust and age. And there was the red barn, where he’d built a secret kingdom when he was seven and where he’d kissed Olivia Smith for the first time when he was thirteen. He’d smoked his first cigarette on that porch, one of the many nights when Frank was drunk and one of the few when he was in a good mood. How many times had he slid down that drain around 10 o’clock when the Trapezoid of Destiny was on and Frank had passed out on the couch? There was the woodpile behind which he and Derek Weiss had gotten drunk on stolen IPAs and there was the shed in which he and Derek both pretended they were wasted after one forbidden beer and jerked each other off. There was the stoop where Sam had told him dirty jokes and there was the door Sam had nearly thrown off its
hinges the night he left. There was the window Winona had broken the day she kicked Frank out and there was the rocking chair Jim had smashed the night before.

It was home. Spock had been told to build a home for children who needed one and he had built #42 Lincoln Drive.

Not for the first time Jim felt a chasm of better-off-unasked questions open up before him. How much difference could one psychopath make between his universe and Ambassador Spock’s that his childhood home could be seen as a place of comfort and safety, or that Spock would be such a willing party in his life that he would intimately remember the details of a three-story-farmhouse after more than a century? In this universe his childhood was a nightmare he could never run far enough from. In this universe Spock couldn’t even trust Jim enough to tell him when something was wrong.

“I’m definitely sure.” Jim said and opened the gate. A little bell on the post tinkled and as if they’d been waiting for the sound a dozen tiny curious faces popped into the windows. Jim waved to the Vulcan children who were watching them. The front door opened as they approached and the Ambassador came out to greet them.

“My friends. Welcome.”

“Thank you for having us, Ambassador.” Jim glanced at the dark-haired head peeking out from behind the Ambassador’s robes. “And who is this?”

The Ambassador’s eyes glinted with fondness. “This is Suvek. She is one of our permanent residents.”

Jim and McCoy both smiled at the little Vulcan girl. She stared up at them expressionlessly and gripped the Ambassador’s robes a little tighter. Spock bowed his head to the Ambassador and slowly extended the long tip of his index finger to the girl.

“Peace and long life, Suvek.” He said solemnly. The girl cautiously reached out and brushed her own finger against his. She only maintained the touch for the briefest of seconds but something about it put her at ease and her grip on the Ambassador’s robes relaxed. Jim watched the exchange with interest. The finger touch wasn’t something he’d ever seen before but, now that he came to think of it, he’d never seen any interactions between Vulcan adults and children before.

The Ambassador and Suvek led them on a tour of the orphanage. The Ambassador explained that there were currently 24 children living in the house aged 4 to 13. Ten of them would be living there until they were adopted or came of age. Some were staying there until whatever remaining relatives or guardians they had could complete suitable residences. They came in all shapes, sizes and shades, a spectrum of genetic diversity. But other than surface differences like hair color all the children seemed exactly the same. Quiet, wide-eyed and excruciatingly polite. There was no laughter, no pitter pat of tiny feet, but what else could you expect from a Vulcan orphanage? This wasn’t a happy home, it was a port in a storm.

There were more bedrooms than there were back in Jim’s childhood home. 15 in the main house and 20 more in the barn. Three bathrooms, a kitchen and a huge common area. Plants grew in every corner. There were stacks of pads and tablets and even paper books angled between the pots of herbs and saplings. The bookshelves were so heavy they groaned and their contents spilled out along the walls. Whatever available space that wasn’t already being utilized for food production was designated for learning.

They landed in the kitchen after the tour. The Ambassador helped Suvek and some of the other braver children make tea for their guests.
“So how are things going, Ambassador?” Jim asked. “I mean really.”

From the corner of his eye he could see his Spock twitch in irritation but the Spock in front of him just seemed fondly amused. Jim made a mental note to privately ask the Ambassador how long it took for obnoxious human vices like inexact phrasing to become loveable quirks.

“The colony is proceeding with development according to schedule, Jim.” The Ambassador answered. One of his little helpers tried to lift the kettle while it was still too hot and it slipped from his fingers. The Ambassador caught it in mid-air and calmly returned it to the counter.

The little boy looked mortified. “Forgive me, sir, I-”

“No damage was done, Elir. Apologizing for an event that did not transpire is illogical.”

Elir nodded and went back to removing china from the cupboard, carefully and deliberately. Suvek carried a teapot with a lumpy hand-made pumpkin tea cozy to the table.

“And the colonists?” McCoy asked, returning the flow of conversation to the original subject. “How are they proceeding?”

“At a walk, generally, though the colonists have been known to run upon occasion.”

“Lord save me from Vulcan humor.” Bones snapped. “Jim, stop howling like a monkey, you’re scaring the kids.”

Jim wiped the tears of mirth from his eyes. “Come on, Ambassador, you know what he meant.”

The Ambassador considered the children still in the room before answering. “Vulcans are attempting to discover what precisely is required to recover from our loss.” He said carefully.

“Our loss?”

Jim and McCoy stared at Spock, who sipped his tea nonchalantly as if he hadn’t just challenged their host with venom-laced words. Suvek, Elir and the other children glanced nervously from one adult Vulcan to the other.

“Vulcan was my home.” The Ambassador said.

“Was it? There were no residences of this nature on Vulcan. Where is this building from?”

“Iowa.” It was Jim who answered. “Riverside, Iowa.”

The large kitchen grew crowded with unspoken words as the ensuing silence dragged on. Jim wondered if Spock was also afraid of knowing too much about their other lives, like he was. Forget universe-ending paradoxes, he was terrified of finding out that the other Spock had shared his life with the other Jim, had trusted him, had loved him, maybe even wanted him. Finding out what could have been but never would scared him more than any broken singularity.

Or maybe Spock was looking at him like that because he knew what had happened in this house and he was seriously considering burning it down.

“The house in Riverside still stands.” The Ambassador said. He took a seat at the table and nodded permission to the children who readily filed out and gave the adults some privacy. “This building is a reconstruction.”
Spock stopped glancing around for a box of matches but the look in his eyes when they met Jim’s said that by no means was arson off the table.

“The kids seem healthy.” Bones said in an attempt to diplomatically ease the tension. “Not a lot of laughter though, and I didn’t see any toys. Or do Vulcan kids not play games?”

“Under normal circumstances Vulcan children engage in play, just as any mammalian would. It is how all minds in the early stages of development engage with their environment and begin to understand it.” The Ambassador answered seriously. “These are not normal circumstances.”

McCoy frowned and leaned closer. “They won’t play?”

“They are too exhausted.”

“Do you know why?”

“Many of the children are plagued by pavor nocturnus.”

“Night terrors? I thought Vulcans didn’t even dream.”

The two Spocks sighed with exasperation at humanity’s innate ethnocentrism.

“Vulcans do not dream in the human sense.” Spock corrected wearily.

The Ambassador nodded. “As you are well aware, Dr. McCoy, one of the main functions of sleep is to create and repair neural pathways. During this time the mind is vulnerable, the Vulcan mind even more so. The children in this house have lost too much to protect themselves from their own minds. In sleep, when the entirety of existence is limited to the entirety of thought, they have no way to prevent their pain from manifesting.”

“Have you brought in a therapist?” McCoy demanded furiously.

“Bones.” Jim hissed.

“Alternative systems are in place.” The Ambassador answered, unperturbed by the doctor’s tone. For what felt like the hundredth time that day Jim was reminded that this wizened Vulcan knew each of them intimately. He already knew that Leonard McCoy’s brusqueness stemmed from a deep-seated need to heal, to protect those who could not protect themselves. That his anger was born from all the lives he couldn’t save, from his rage and grief each time he lost the fight against mortality. This Spock already knew more about McCoy than his Spock’d had time to learn. The Ambassador continued while Jim smiled into his tea. “All efforts that can be made are being made.”

“But it’s not working.” McCoy growled. “Your alternative systems aren’t effective.”

The Ambassador put down his tea and crossed his hands on the table. He gave McCoy a level stare. “Are you aware of an effective method that allows a young child to mourn the sudden and brutal loss of his entire family, without suffering or grief? You know many things that I am not privy to, Dr. McCoy, but somehow I do not think that is one of them.”

McCoy looked down, properly abashed. “I didn’t mean—”

“Gentlemen, you are more than welcome to stay the night. I would greatly value any medical observations and advice you might offer, Doctor McCoy.” The Ambassador deftly smoothed his feathers before they were fully ruffled. Jim was in awe. Diplomacy was hands-down the hardest part of his job and here he was, watching a master at work. Should he be taking notes?
The conversation turned to chit-chat after that as the Ambassador asked questions about their recent missions and Jim regaled him with epic tales of heroism, with frequent interruptions from his friends.

“We barely escaped. We were just lucky no one got hurt.”

“Excuse me? I just imagined you bleeding all over my sick bay, did I?”

“It didn’t look good but I managed to talk him down.”

“By which the Captain means he shot Yol the Conqueror in his left kneecap.”

“I earned the trust of the village matriarch—”

“Oh, is that what you call it.”

“I’m telling the story, Bones, but if you want to do it go right ahead.”

“Excuse me, Captain, but I must take my leave.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“If you will recall, I agreed to meet with T’liv.”

“Oh. Right. Um. Do you want us to come with?”

“That will not be necessary.”

“You are meeting with T’liv?” The Ambassador’s eyebrows were up so high they were hidden beneath his bangs.

“She requested my attendance.” Spock replied stiffly. “It would be impolite to refuse.”

The Ambassador did not lower his eyebrows one iota and Jim was sure that if the two Spocks had been alone there would have been an almighty row. Hello. He thought, leaning forward. Looks like we’re not the only ones who smell a rat.

To Jim’s disappointment the Ambassador said nothing further and escorted Spock to the front door. Jim and McCoy followed.

“Are you sure you don’t want back up?” Jim pestered him. “We still don’t know anything about this True Path stuff. It could be a trap.” He glanced at the Ambassador. “Right?”

“I do not believe T’liv has any intention of trapping Commander Spock.” The Ambassador answered slowly as they stepped out onto the front porch.

“He’ll be fine, Jim.” McCoy rolled his eyes. “Just remember to check the closets for bodies, Mr. Shining Beacon of Hope, and if she asks for some of your hair don’t give it to her.”

Spock ignored him. “I will return to my father’s residence when my meeting is concluded. Will you do the same or will you spend the night here?”

“No.” Jim had no intention of spending the night in his childhood home, even if technically it wasn’t the same building. “We’ll see you later.”

Spock nodded once and left. They watched him vanish around the corner of a shanty.
“Does anyone else have a bad feeling about this?” Jim asked.


***

T’liv’s sister resided in a one story structure with heavy shutters on all the windows. A high fence hid the garden from pedestrian eyes. Spock tapped the intercom next to the locked gate. It crackled to life.

“Who is there?”

“Commander Spock.”

The gate swung open smoothly, silently, allowing him entry. He stepped inside just as the front door opened and T’liv stepped out to greet him. They exchanged the customary salutations and then she ushered him inside.

“Your moment of arrival is coinciding with my sister’s state of awareness to our benefit.” T’liv informed him.

“What is the nature of your sister’s illness?” Spock asked. T’liv opened her mouth to answer but before she could there came the sounds of something being broken and a woman’s terrified screams. Both Vulcans dashed towards the commotion. T’liv threw open the door to her sister’s bedroom and ran to her side. Spock drew up short in the doorway.

What did you do?

She was bad, Spock. She was going to hurt us.

How many years had passed since he last saw her? 20? The years had not been kind. Her hair, once long and perfectly groomed, was cropped short and stuck out at strange angles as she pulled and tore at her own scalp. Her face was lined, her eyes were bruised, her skin hung from her skeleton like drapes. T’liv grabbed her bony shoulders and sank with her down to the floor.

T’sing was not the proud beauty he had seen as a child, hiding behind his brother’s robes. Now she was a mad woman, sunken and twisted and tortured, as she had been ever since her mate reached into her mind and ripped out their bond at the roots. Her screams grew in volume and she wept over the shards of broken pottery that littered the floor.

“What have they done?” She shrieked over and over again, still not noticing her sister’s guest. “What have they done?!"

“Who?” T’liv asked softly.

“Intruders! Usurpers! They’ve ripped it open and left a hole where nothing should be!” She turned her face and pressed it against T’liv’s breast, weeping inconsolably.

Spock considered his options.

Option number one: Remain here and be subjected to unpleasant reminders of the past in order to
discover T’liv’s motivation for luring him here, which could only be unsavory.

Option number two: Leave and pretend this never happened.

Spock turned around to go but unfortunately T’sing had finally noticed his presence.

“Spock!” She cried and leapt at him. He drew away from her grasping hands but she caught him anyway. He held still while she caressed the contours of his face, her cold fingers skittering over his psi points. “It is you.” She crooned.

“T’sing…” T’liv approached slowly, her voice gentle. “You must not touch.”

“My shields are sufficient. Your sister’s mind is not strong enough to breach them.” Spock told her coolly. He forced himself to remain calm, to allow T’sing’s trespass. After all, she had been kind to him as a child and it was not her fault that her mind was broken now. “I do not believe she means to harm me.” He said this to himself as much as to T’liv.

T’sing smiled beatifically. “Little brother.”

Spock reached up and removed her hands from his face, carefully but firmly. “No.” He said. She just kept smiling as if she hadn’t even heard him. He turned his head to look at T’liv, who was watching them in awe. “What is your intention in bringing me here?” He demanded. She blinked, as if surprised by his disapproval.

“My intention was only to offer my sister a respite from her upset.” T’liv answered.

“Given the events of my last encounter with your sister logic would suggest that my presence would only serve to upset her further.”

T’liv shook her head. “She has been worried about you. Her caretakers tell me she often calls your name when the visions come.”

The visions? Spock stared at her for a long time. T’sing tugged her hands out of his grasp and stepped back, glancing between her sister and her former bondmate’s younger brother.

“What visions do you speak of?” Spock asked.

“They show me much.” T’sing answered. Her knowing smile had returned. “But never you. I was so frightened. They never let me see you. I thought you were lost. But now I know you are still alive, little brother, and there is much to be done.”

“I am not your brother.” He reminded her.

She laughed.

She laughed, a deep full-belly laugh that shook her body and brightened the air around her, a laugh that had no business coming from a Vulcan mouth. It was a laugh he knew and for a second he was five years old again, chasing I-Chaya around the garden while his mother watched from the window and his brother clutched his side and laughed and laughed and laughed.

And then he was back in this strange room, with these strange women, on a strange planet. I-Chaya and his mother were dead and his bro-…and there was nothing left of the garden.

The familiar laughter died away. “Forgive me.” T’sing said ruefully. “My father always told me I had an inappropriate sense of humor.”
No he did not. That was something Sarek said on occasion, but your father never had cause to speak those words.

She turned and stared out the window. “It’s these desert winds. They never stop, just keep blowing until there’s nothing left. See how nothing grows?”

Spock glanced out the window at the blooming garden. “Do you comprehend her meaning?” He asked T’liv.

“She is linked to the prophet and is seeing through his eyes.” T’liv said quietly, as if more than a whisper would destroy something precious. “They told me this happens from time to time, when the prophet’s thoughts are strong.”

“And who is this prophet?”

T’liv gave him a pitying look. “It is illogical to ask a question when you already know the answer.”

***

Night came swiftly on New Vulcan, the darkness gobbling the sky and swallowing the sunlight in the space of minutes. Ambassador Spock watched the shadows swell out the kitchen window while the children prepared for bed. As had been the case since their planet had been destroyed, Spock knew only the lucky ones would sleep. Most would be haunted and tormented by memories and whispers from the past. There would be no rest for him in the dead of the night, all he could do was hold their hands and keep them anchored.

How strange life was, he mused, that he who had never considered the possibility of procreation would now fill this house with children. How fitting that those children would be broken.

He thought of the men who had visited that day. Still so young, still so lost in the woods. He could not remember ever being so young or so sure of himself, though he knew it must have been so at one point.

But that was long ago and far away. His James T. Kirk was gone and the McCoys were lost to him now. His mother was a faded memory and all he had of his father was a second-hand echo.

He’d been thinking of Picard lately, wondering about the man who had twice assumed the role that should have been Spock’s. Picard had known Sarek in a way Spock had never dared. Picard had been there when Jim died. It should have been Spock, if there was any justice in the universe, and yet… What would Picard do if he were here instead of Spock? Would he obey the Prime Directive? Would he try to change the course of an already disrupted history?

What would Picard say if he knew about Operation Retriever?

Ghosts moved past the old alien in the dark while he almost chuckled at his own foolishness. He was getting sentimental in his advanced age. What did it matter what Picard would have done? What did orders and oaths and old allegiances matter in the here and now? Starfleet was for the young and they were welcome to it. Spock hadn’t been an officer for a long time. These days he was a cowboy.

He needed to make some calls. It was time to raise some hell.
Author’s Note:

I ended up breaking this chapter in half. I was hoping to get somewhat further in the plot but as a whole this chapter was getting pretty busy and what happens next is important enough I don’t want there to be a ton of distractions.

But hey! I managed to work in some foreshadowing at least, so I’m happy.

Let me know what you guys think! I’d love to hear any theories on where I’m going with this. I want to see if anyone can figure out my plot twists.
Author: Oh Mr. X, look at this wonderful chapter. Doesn’t it just smack of…ownership?

Kirk: Oh save us Mr. X! Make her admit that she doesn’t own us!

Mr. X: There is no point in fighting it, man, just accept your fate.

Spock: I do not believe this is working.

Author: Dammit. I’m not giving up. I don’t own them, and I’m never giving up!

“The Shadowy Government Agency

“We’ve been summoned.”

“Summoned, Captain?”

“Yes, Spock.” Jim dumped his pad in Spock’s lap. “ Summoned by the Vulcan High Council. Top secret, just you and me.”

“I see. I assume this is the reason you are in my room at this time of morning?”

“It’s already 5:30. Usually you’ve been up for hours.”

“And yet, as you can clearly see from my state of undress and my reclined position in the bed, I have not been.”

“Yup.” Jim agreed cheerfully. “Come on, we’ve only got half an hour to get ready.”

Spock quickly read through the message on the pad screen and climbed out of bed. As the arid climate did not necessitate thermal clothing he had slept in the nude, as was his preference when temperatures allowed. Jim’s face turned pink and his head snapped away. Human modesty. Charming at times, but unnecessary. And not something Jim usually held with. Spock pondered this as he pulled on his uniform. Why would Jim feel embarrassed of Spock’s body when he held no such compunctions about his own? And why would the mere sight be enough to phase him? It wasn’t as if they were touching, which would have been a gross violation of civilized behavior by
Vulcan standards.

At no point did Spock notice that Jim was still watching his reflection in the window.

“Captain?” Spock asked as he pulled on his boots. “Is Doctor McCoy coming with us?”

Jim started and physically shook himself out of whatever reverie he had been in before turning around. He cleared his throat. “No. It’s…um…just the two of us.”

Spock nodded once in acknowledgement and tried to move past Jim into the adjacent bathroom, but Jim stopped him short with a hand on his upper arm.

Now they were involved in inappropriate conduct. But only by Vulcan standards. Fortunately Jim was entirely human and it would be the height of illogic to hold him to the standards of another species. Spock allowed his warm hand to continue resting on his bicep.

“What happened yesterday when you went to see T’liv?” Jim asked softly, his eyes filled with genuine concern. “You got back so late I didn’t get a chance to ask you.”

“I met T’liv’s sister.” Spock answered, looking away. “She is a very sick woman.”

“And that’s it?” Jim pressed him. “You didn’t find out anything more about the True Path?”

“Perhaps the High Council will be able to answer our questions after our meeting.” Spock tried to pull away but Jim’s grip on his arm tightened and held him there. “Excuse me, Captain. We do not have a great deal of time before we depart. I must continue my preparations.”

“…Of course.” Jim’s voice was tight and frustrated but his hand dropped from Spock’s arm down to his side and he stepped back, allowing Spock to move into the bathroom.

Once he was safe behind closed doors Spock allowed himself a few deep breaths. The breaking point was coming fast, he could feel it. Any moment now Jim was going to snap and there was nothing Spock could do to stop him. He could not avoid the issue any longer, but he could not force himself to bring it into the light. He had tried. Last night when he returned home he had spent hours outside Jim’s room, trying to force himself to knock on the door and tell Jim everything he had been keeping silent. He had finally given up a mere hour before Jim came to wake him up. This was not a matter of willpower, or character, or moral fiber. Spock could not speak of it. He simply did not know how.

And he was going to be in a great deal of trouble if Jim ordered him to.

Spock’s only hope was that they would be able to leave all this behind once they departed New Vulcan. Once they were safe in the vacuum of space he would be able to repair whatever damage this mission had done to his relationship with Jim and there would be no point in pursuing the matter any further. It would fade into memory and then disappear altogether. Spock just had to keep Jim placated until they had left the quadrant, and then everything would be fine.

Spock reopened the bathroom door to find Jim sitting on the end of his bed, fiddling with the blankets. The captain glanced up as Spock reentered the room. “Ready to go?” Jim asked. Spock nodded. Jim rose to his feet and stretched his arms behind his head. “Right. Let’s do this.”

Twenty minutes later they were standing in the dark street, staring up at the imposing and locked doors of the Vulcan High Council.

“I could have sworn the message said 6:15.” Jim said softly, his words disturbingly loud in the eerily
silent morning air.

“Your memory is correct.” Spock assured him. “Perhaps there is another entrance.”

“Psst.”

Jim scratched his head. “I don’t see one. Maybe around back? But if we were supposed to go in a
different way wouldn’t they have said so?”

Spock craned his head back so that he could look at the windows on the upper floor.

“Psst!”

“It does not seem as if anyone is within the building.” Spock’s observed. “It is still dark enough that
the average Vulcan would require the use of a light.”

“I agree.” Jim nodded.

“Pss-”

“Young lady, they are clearly ignoring you and your continued efforts are only serving to drench my
person in your saliva. Desist making that hissing sound at once.”

“Yes, Lady T’Pau.”

“Very good. Now. You two. Maybe deliberate obtuseness is an attractive trait in human society but I
assure you that is not the case in Vulcan society. Stop prattling on the sidewalk and climb into this
storm drain, where you might be able to make yourselves useful.”

Jim continued staring up at the sky. “Forgive me, Lady T’Pau, but I think the storm drain might be a
little small for all of us.” He paused. “Also, why are you inside a storm drain?”

“Young man, I will not discuss matters of state on the common street.”

“But you’ll talk under the street?” Jim muttered under his breath. Spock knelt down and peered into
the dark hole in the gutter. He looked back up at Jim.

“It appears to have a significantly larger interior than the average storm drain, Captain.” Spock said.

Jim sighed. “Okay. Looks like we’re really doing this. After you, Commander.” The two men slid
awkwardly through the narrow opening and found themselves in an unlit subterranean antechamber.
Jim could just barely make out the forms of two other individuals through the gloom. He assumed
that the shorter one was the revered Lady T’Pau.

“Your Grace.” He said, bowing in her direction.

“Captain Kirk, explain yourself immediately. Did I or did I not expressly state the clandestine nature
of our meeting in my message?” The Vulcan elder stepped closer so that her face could be seen in
the dawn light that was beginning to trickle through the drain. She looked foreboding.

Jim and Spock shared a look. “Your message instructed us to take all reasonable precautions to
assure we were not followed.” Spock answered.

Lady T’Pau nodded. “Indeed. And yet you stood on the street, in clear view of pedestrians, wearing
your uniforms and discussing your business openly. You consider these to be reasonable
precautions?”
If you wanted us to stick to the shadows and wear fake mustaches you should have said so. Jim thought. Out loud he said, “Forgive us, Your Grace. It won’t happen again.”

She sniffed. “See that it does not.”

“Lady T’Pau, the passageway is cleared.” Said the other shadowy figure, a younger Vulcan female. She was dressed in a pinstripe suit and had a pad clutched tightly in her hands and wore the vaguely put upon expression of personal assistants everywhere.

“Very well. Follow me, gentlemen.” Lady T’Pau turned and marched into the shadows, her assistant close on her heels. Jim and Spock shared another look before following.

They found themselves walking through a dark tunnel. Dim lights embedded in the roughly hewn floor illuminated just enough so that Jim could see where to put his feet but no more.

There isn’t a decent cup of coffee to be found on this planet but they’ve had the time and resources to build a secret underground tunnel system? Jim wondered, seriously questioning the Vulcan government’s priorities.

Eventually Jim noticed that the light was growing and he could see a doorway at the end of the tunnel. Lady T’Pau and her assistant picked up the pace and before long they entered a cavern.

Ropes of LED lights were strung from the ceiling and cascaded down the walls. The effect was beautiful and impressive, but Jim still felt that if you had the kind of money to build secret tunnels you should also be able to afford something a little more elegant than $40 worth of Christmas tree lights. Just as a general rule of thumb, secret underground government facilities should not be decorated like your freshman dorm room.

The rest of the Vulcan High Council, all three members, were seated in a semi-circle of high-backed chairs. Lady T’Pau took the last available seat and her assistant went to stand directly behind her, leaving Jim and Spock to stand at attention in the center of the room.

Oh yeah, this doesn’t seem like a massive power trip at all. Jim thought sarcastically, but out of respect he refrained from flipping the Vulcan elders off and turning around to climb back out the storm drain. Spock probably wouldn’t approve anyway.

“Captain Kirk, we have summoned you here today to discuss a matter of grave importance to the Vulcan people.” Said the Vulcan elder on T’Pau’s left. He was ancient and tiny, no taller than Jim’s nephew, which was unusual for a Vulcan. His robes identified him as one of the Chancellors. “Admiral Nogura will be joining us by video conference shortly.” He turned his head to raise an eyebrow at T’Pau’s assistant, who was fiddling with her pad. “Unfortunately the internet connection in the tunnels is not ideal, however certain members of this Council felt that this matter warranted additional security measures.” The look he gave T’Pau left no doubt which Council member he was referring to, but she remained impervious.

A Vulcan wearing the trappings of High Priestess spoke up. “Gentlemen, have you encountered-”

“Would it not be more politic to wait for the Admiral before we begin?” Interrupted the Chancellor.

“I’m here.” Nogura’s voice crackled from the pad. T’Pau’s assistant stepped into the semi-circle and held the device screen-side out so that Nogura could see them.

“Captain, Commander, good to see you both. You must excuse the circumstances.”

“Admiral.” Jim had finally lost patience. “What’s this all about?”
“In a word, Captain Kirk, it’s about Sybok.”

A heavy, ominous silence settled in the room. Spock was suddenly so tense he looked as if he would snap apart in the event of any sudden movements and the High Council was staring fixedly at the screen, even though the High Priestess had to lean halfway out of her chair to do it.

“What’s a Sybok?” Jim asked.

“A dangerous element. He’s a renegade Vulcan who dropped off the map years ago, but since the Nero attacks he’s become a rallying point for extremists. The situation has gotten serious enough that the Federation can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to his criminal behavior. Dead or alive, we need Sybok brought in.”

Spock’s face was scary. Jim could watch him out the corner of his eye and every crackling syllable was another door slamming shut in Spock’s brain. Whatever progress Jim had made, whatever insight he had into his friend, it all became meaningless in those few seconds. By the second sentence Jim had no more clue what Spock was thinking than he understood the inner suffering of a jellyfish. By the time Nogura stopped talking Spock had shut down, clocked out and stopped the mail. Absolutely nothing he was feeling or thinking showed on his face because Spock wasn’t there anymore. He’d gone somewhere else in his own head and left Jim here to deal alone.

And the High Council still wouldn’t look at them.

What. The. Fuck.

“Look, gentlemen, I’m sorry to rush but we’ve had another PR snafu and I’ve got a press conference in five minutes. The High Council will brief you on the situation on New Vulcan and when you get to Earth tomorrow we’ll be able to meet personally to go over the specifics. Remember, until we talk all information you hear today is need to know only.” Nogura logged off without another word.

…I’ve never heard of a Vulcan renegade before.” Jim’s words sounded trite to his own ears but someone had to break the silence and there was no point in trying to out-stubborn a flock of Vulcans.

“It is not a frequent occurrence.” The second Chancellor, much taller than his fellow and skinny as a rake, spoke for the first time. His dark emotionless eyes never left Jim’s face. “But Sybok is one of, if not the most dangerous criminal this Council has ever dealt with.”

T’Pau’s head slowly turned so that she could stare at the second Chancellor.

“Present company excluded.” The second Chancellor added.

“Those charges were overturned.” T’Pau’s eyes snapped back to Jim’s, but he would have sworn he detected a spark of pride in her voice.

“Captain Kirk,” The High Priestess said. “Have you heard of a concept referred to as the True Path?”

Jim glanced at Spock but he might as well have been glancing at the wall. “Yes, Your Grace, we have.”

If Spock heard the hint there was no sign of it.

She nodded. “Captain Kirk, what we are about to tell you might be hard to accept or understand as you are human and emotions are a central part of your identity but you must remember that Vulcans
“Your Grace, if I couldn’t accept the Vulcan way of doing things Spock wouldn’t be my First Officer.” Jim said, and watched carefully to see if any of them would look at Spock. No one did. It was almost as if they were afraid to look at him. Or ashamed.

Lady T’Pau nodded. “Very well. As you are aware, since the destruction of our planet there has been a growing movement to reject Surrakian ideals and return to the savagery of our ancestors.”

“I was not aware of that, no.” Jim said flatly, his eyebrows shooting up to his hairline. Vulcans rejecting logic? Was that even physically possible?

“And now you are. Do you have a problem? No? Then do not interrupt me again, Captain Kirk. As I was saying, currently this extremist movement is decentralized and there are no emergent leaders we can prosecute but their influence is spreading and they have infiltrated even the highest levels of office, which is why we are having this meeting in secret. We cannot afford for these extremists to learn that we know of their activities. Recently we discovered that their members are becoming increasingly desperate to find Sybok.”

“Why?” Jim asked.

“Because they believe he can save them.” The High Priestess answered. “Our people are suffering, Captain, and we cannot help them. There is no way not to feel what we have lost, there is only the surviving of it. But many, especially the young, cannot accept this. They cannot accept a future in which they continue to feel the torment they feel now. They believe he will show them the way to salvation, and they call this belief the True Path. These Vulcans are not stable individuals and they are dangerous to underestimate. If there was even the tiniest chance that Sybok could ease their suffering they would do anything he told them to.”

“And is there?” Jim asked, just to be sure.

“Of course not.” The short Chancellor pursed his lips. “There is no more truth in that rumor than in any other fairy tale. It is merely the product of desperation and weakness of character.”

“The problem we now face is that members of this extremist movement have started to search for Sybok. Already we have received word of skirmishes in Klingon and Romulan territory. We cannot allow our citizens to trigger an intergalactic war.” Lady T’Pau said. “Unfortunately they are being funded by untraceable anonymous donations from off-planet sources, money which is then laundered into numerous accounts on many different planets. We do not know where this money is coming from or where it is going but the numbers are high enough to cause concern.”

“How high are we talking?” Jim asked.

“A single donation can be in the trillions.” T’Pau answered.

“So whatever they’re planning, it’s something big and bad.” Jim mused out loud. He nodded. “And since Sybok is the closest thing they have to a leader, if we can find him we might be able to control them. Right. So where do we start looking?”

The High Council members looked at each other.

“Captain Kirk,” Lady T’Pau said slowly. “I believe you are missing a crucial piece of information. Sybok is the eldest son of Ambassador Sarek, and the half-brother of your First Officer.”

“…Of course he is.”
“Excuse me, Captain?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Are we done? I think we’re done. Spock, can I see you privately in the tunnels for a moment? Great. Real nice meeting all of you, I’ll let you know how it goes. Bye now.” Jim grabbed Spock’s arm and dragged his unresponsive First Officer back into the tunnels.

The members of the Vulcan High Council began to rise from their chairs and move towards the secret exit on the other side of the room in silence.

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!”

They started as the furious words came hurtling out of the tunnel mouth and slapped through the brightly lit air of the chamber.

“Are all humans like that?” The High Priestess asked T’Pau. T’Pau shrugged.

“Humans are very excitable.” She explained. Theyfiled out while the echoes of WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU SPOCK bounced off the walls.

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“Uhura, what the hell are you doing with the sonic resonator?”

“…What the hell are you doing with the MegaWand 8000, McCoy?”

“…I asked first.”

“I asked louder.”

“…Well, I’m definitely not using it to bribe a nurse so that I can poach a top doctor from the criminally understaffed New Vulcan General Hospital, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Seriously?”

“Look, I’m leaving five of my best people here. I think that’s a fair trade. And furthermore if I don’t get a Vulcan specialist on this ship soon Spock’s going to end up killing himself and none of us are going to have any idea what happened and then Jim will go crazy.”

“Okay, whatever you need to do you do.” Uhura started to move closer to the transporter pad. “Mind if I go first? I’m in kind of a hurry.”

“Hold up. What are you doing with the sonic resonator?”

“If you are suggesting that Carol and I have been taking turns following Stonn since we got here in the hopes of uncovering his agenda, well, that is an entirely unfounded accusation and if we were doing that without permission while using Starfleet equipment it would absolutely be a violation of our authority and jurisdiction. We understand that which is why we are definitely not spying on him and I am offended that you would even think that.” Uhura waved the spyware in the air under McCoy’s nose as if this somehow illustrated her point.

“I won’t tell if you don’t tell.” McCoy promised her.
“Agreed.” She said, sticking out her hand. He grabbed it and they shook on it.

“An’ what aboot me?” Scotty harrumphed from behind the controls.

“Are you going to tell?” Uhura asked, frowning and crossing his arms.

“Probably not.” Scotty admitted. “But it is sweet how the two of ye are doin’ all this just for Mister Spock.” He winked at Uhura.

“Excuse me? I am doing nothing for that green-blooded talking calculator! This is for my own peace of mind, you understand? Not that there’s much left of it these days but what little there is—”

“Energize.”

McCoy swung around in time to see Uhura’s molecules twinkle out of existence. He glared at Scotty.

“I thought you were on my side.”

Scotty smiled back. “Whatever gave you that idea sir?”

Down on the colony Uhura was ducking into the alley where she and Carol had agreed to meet. She almost tripped on a psychedelic chicken in the process, but managed to hop over it at the last possible second.

“Thank god you’re here!” Carol was on her in a second, grabbing Uhura’s arm and dragging her deeper into the shadows so that no one could see them. “He hired a ship!”

“A ship?”

“A ship!”

“Like a sea-faring vessel kind of ship?”

“Yes, Nyota. He’s going fishing. No! A star ship!”

“What does he need a star ship for? He’s supposed to stay on this planet! That’s the whole point of bringing him back here.”

“Exactly.” Carol nodded fervently. “Sneaky bugger’s up to something.”

“Right then.” Uhura hissed, furious at the thought that Stonn had used them for some kind of nefarious purpose. “Show me this ship.”

“Well…I can’t. I mean it’s not here, there aren’t any ships on planet because there’s no docking. It’s in orbit. But I can show you where the deal went down, if you like?”

“…Is there anything suspicious about it?”

“Not really. It’s just a normal tea shop.”

“Fine. Where’s Stonn now?”

“I think he’s going to visit T’liv.”

“Alright. I’ll see you in five hours.”
Carol nodded and pecked Uhura on the cheek. “Bye love. Be safe.” She said and opened her communicator to request beam up. Uhura waited until Carol had fully dematerialized before she left the alley and began making her way towards T’liv’s house. Stonn had been there a few times while Uhura was following him but he never stayed for very long. She hadn’t dared get too close to the house before, for fear of being caught, but today she was determined to get to the bottom of this. They were leaving in the morning, first Earth for debrief and a quick shore leave, then back out into the recesses of deep space. If she didn’t get Stonn dead to rights today he’d slip through her fingers like the slippery eel he was.

Uhura couldn’t let that happen. She still remembered the first time she’d met Stonn, the physical and mental anguish he’d caused Spock, the way he’d watched Spock’s face while T’Pring broke the bond, the way he’d just sat there and drank his tea.

Plus, he had not tipped her. Son of a bitch had spent $30 on tea, telepathically assaulted her favorite teacher, and sat alone at a table that seated five for three hours while the restaurant had to turn hungry customers away because there wasn’t a free table, and then he didn’t tip her.

One way or another, he was going down.

Uhura’s righteous fury gave her the courage to get closer to T’liv’s house than she had previously dared. She hopped the garden fence and flitted past the rows of beans and cabbages until she could press her body flat against the house. She crept along the wall until, with the help of the sonic resonator, she could hear voices. She flipped the settings on the resonator to record.

“…is prepared.”

“Stonn, I do not believe my sister should travel. The strain-”

“Is inconsequential when you consider what is at stake.”

“I am not convinced of that.”

“What more information do you require in order to become convinced? Is it not enough that the very thing we fear most has come to pass?”

“But would it not be wiser to bring this matter to the Council, or even to the Federation itself?”

“And what would you tell them? That your sister shares the mind of another? Do you think they would believe in her visions?”

“The Council-”

“Persecutes anyone who has heard the call and seeks the True Path. The Federation is little more than a mouthpiece for human interests. They would no more believe you than they would a Ferengi. While they ridiculed you and bickered amongst themselves the enemy would destroy us all.”

“But-”

“Even now, while we stand here and argue, they are moving further and further from our grasp. Time is a luxury we can no longer afford, T’liv. The war has already begun.”

“My sister is not well, Stonn. She is too sick to leave her home again.”

“Nonsense. She is no more sick than I am. She is blessed. I am disappointed in you for saying such a thing.”
“Yes, she is blessed, but she is also sick. I do not think that her presence is necessary when we have Spock.”

“Unfortunately due to your failure we do not have Spock.”

“Not yet, but he is wavering. If I had a few more days—”

“You do not have a few more days. The Enterprise leaves in the morning and the Fo-dan leaves tonight. Now go and pack your things. I must alert our comrades.”

Damn. Uhura glanced over her shoulder. Did she have enough time to run back to the street without being seen? She didn’t have a choice. If Stonn came out the front door he would see her instantly. She switched off the sonic resonator and ran for it, diving over the garden fence just as the door opened.

“Squawk?”

“Shh!” Uhura hissed at the green chicken that was hopping on the pavement and peering up at her curiously.

“Squawk?”

“Go away.”

“Squawk!” The chicken creature could see that the poor flightless organism was upset so, out of the kindness of its ornithological heart, it hopped on top of her brain ball and soothingly stroked the area where her eye stalks should have been.

“Stop hitting me with your wings you stupid—”

“Lieutenant Uhura? What are you doing here?”

Uhura shifted so that she was sitting on top of the sonic resonator. Both she and the chicken looked up into Stonn’s cold eyes.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Uhura asked, trying to sound calm and collected.

Stonn glanced around at the empty street and then turned back to her. “No.” He said simply.

“I am clearly trying to catch this bird.” Uhura knew she was panicking but there was no turning back now. She grabbed the chicken off her head and held it up in the air like a shield. “Got it.”

“…Congratulations. Do you require assistance to stand?”

If she stood up now Stonn would see the resonator and know she’d been spying. Right now he only suspected her and she wanted to keep it that way. “No thank you. I’ll just get beamed up like this.” She kept a smile plastered on her face while she reached for her communicator with one hand, still holding onto the chicken with the other. “Uhura to Scotty.” She said, flipping the device open.

“Scotty here.”

“Scotty, I’ve got the chicken. Time to beam me up.”

“The chicken?”

“Yes Scotty. That chicken I came down here to find, remember?”
“Oh. Aye, the chicken. Good work lass. I always knew you could do it. Beaming up now.”

Uhura held her breath as the tingling started and didn’t let it out again until she was safely back in the Enterprise transporter room, the sonic resonator stabbing into her left buttock and an alien chicken having an existential crisis in her right hand.

Scotty smirked. “Let me guess. Ye got caught and the chicken was the best cover ye could come up with?”

“Keep laughing and I’ll tell Keenser what really happened to the dilithium chamber.”

“Yes ma’am.”

***

The walk back to Sarek’s house was uncomfortable to say the least. Jim was so angry he was seeing red and the only person he could talk to without committing treason was the very person he was furious with. He didn’t believe for a second that Spock hadn’t realized his own brother was behind all the weird stuff that had been happening lately. But more than that he couldn’t forgive the way Spock had just shut down the second Sybok’s name was mentioned. Forget whatever personal issues they had, it had been completely unprofessional. As a captain there was no way Jim could excuse his First Officer’s behavior. No matter what kind of family trauma you had you could not pretend you were somewhere else when your superior was giving you orders. It was irresponsible and unacceptable.

Two words Jim would have never thought he would have to apply to Spock.

What. The. Fuck.

It was pretty much all he’d been thinking for the last half hour. At least they were almost back to Sarek’s. Once they were safely behind closed doors he could start shouting again. It wouldn’t do much good but Jim strongly believed that shouting would make him feel a lot better. He wished Spock would fight back but he knew he wouldn’t. Spock had remained silent and downcast when Jim lit into him back in the tunnels and his eyes hadn’t left the ground the whole way home. He was even paler than usual and looked so pitiful Jim almost softened, but then he remembered all the times Spock had sworn up and down over the past couple days that he had no idea what was going on and Jim was back to being livid. Spock had lied to his face and withheld vital information. It was unbelievable.


When they finally arrived at Sarek’s front door Jim had reached his boiling point and he nearly threw the door off its hinges as he barreled through it. He spun around as Spock carefully shut it and opened his mouth, the first bellow of an angry tirade on the tip of his tongue.

“Yes. Father. Spock.”

The words died in Jim’s mouth as he turned again to see Ambassador Sarek himself striding down the hall to meet them.

“Father.” Spock said, bowing his head. It was the first word he’d spoken since crawling through the
storm drain.

“I would speak with you both in my study.”

“Can it wait, Ambassador?” Jim asked, his voice tight and his fists clenched. “There’s something I need to discuss with my First Officer.”

“I must insist, Captain. We do not have a great deal of time and I am certain you have many questions.”

That tempered Jim’s fires a bit. “Very well, sir. Lead the way.”

Sarek’s study was a large dark room on the second floor that overlooked the garden. The shelves were filled with pads and books and scrolls. There was a communication station in one corner and a hulking writing desk in the other. There was one chair at the desk and two stools by the window. Jim remembered those same stools from the kitchen and realized that Sarek had brought them up specifically for his guests. He had been preparing for this conversation, whatever it was about. Jim was pretty certain he knew what it was going to be about. He decided to stay standing for now, though out of respect for Sarek’s thoughtfulness he did go to stand next to one of the stools. Spock stayed by the door and kept on staring at the floor with his hands clenched so tightly behind his back he was probably going to require medical attention. Sarek went to his desk and, pulling a tiny antique key from his robes, unlocked the top drawer.

“Captain Kirk, I must make an unforgivable request of you.”

“Sir?”

“By now you know that my eldest son is a wanted fugitive.” Sarek did not turn to look at the men he was addressing. Instead he stared out the window at the green chickens pecking their way through the garlic stalks. “Sybok is many things, and I cannot say I agree with any of them, but whatever else he is he is still my son. I know that your orders are to capture him and return him to Federation custody. If that happens he will be made an example of, paraded through the public eye, brutalized in court and finally executed for his crimes. For a man like Sybok the humiliation would be more than he could bear. He is talented, more talented than any other Vulcan I have ever encountered, but like most geniuses he is vulnerable in ways others are not. I do not wish to see my son broken, no matter what evil he has committed.”

“And what evil would that be, exactly?” Jim demanded. “I’ve heard a lot about Sybok being a criminal but no one has actually told me what he’s done.”

Sarek was silent for a long time. Finally he said, “Forgive me, Captain Kirk. It is…difficult to speak of such things. And it is possible that you will not understand the severity of his transgressions, as you are human and have no frame of reference for telepathic matters, but of course you are correct in asking for this information. I will attempt to explain it in terms you will understand.” He clasped his hands behind his back and stared at the floor, a mirror image of his youngest son who still had not moved or even looked up.

“In the very distant past there was a practice of telepathic violence. Surak himself put an end to this practice and in this modern era there are virtually no Vulcans who are even capable of such an act, save one.”

“Sybok.”

“Indeed. I do not know how he came to possess this knowledge, for it has been lost for many
thousands of years, and I have never been able to understand what motivated him to use it but that is what came to pass. Understand me, this form of violence cannot be compared to physical violence. When the body is broken it is the mind that tells the body to heal. When the mind is broken there is no healing. No recovery. No salvation. When the mind is broken so is the individual. What is done is done, and it can never be undone.” Sarek began to pace in front of the large bay window.

“Perhaps I should have become more concerned when Sybok renounced logic, but I assumed it was merely a phase brought on by the influence of my human wife. I did not approve of his decision, and we argued about it but I never suspected that he would attempt to…He attacked his bondmate in an attempt to sever their link using an ancient and barbaric practice. There is no analogous crime in human terms, but my wife once said it was as if he tried to cure pink eye by bleeding the demons out. I never fully understood what she meant by that, but perhaps it is a human idiom that you are familiar with.”

“It’s not an idiom but I know what she meant.” Jim answered, wincing.

“I see. When the Council learned of his crime they ordered his immediate execution. He escaped Vulcan, but in the process he attacked three more innocent individuals, leaving them…worse than dead. He never returned to Vulcan. Eventually I managed to convince the Council to reduce his sentence to banishment but I never had contact with him again.”

“So you don’t know where he is now?”

“No, I do not.” Sarek admitted, returning to his desk. “But I know someone who does.” He opened the top drawer and pulled out a plain white envelope. “In this envelope you will find the name and address of a recreational establishment in Whitehorse, Canada. You will read it here, memorize the information, and then you will hand it back to me. I will put it back in the drawer, I will lock the drawer, and you will not speak the information out loud on this planet, on your ship or in the vicinity of any recording devices. When you go to this place you will find someone who may help you. Do you understand?”

“Who am I looking for?”

“Mister Grayson.”

Jim almost jumped when Spock spoke. He’d been so quiet all day Jim hadn’t realized how much this was affecting him. Spock sounded angry when he spoke. He sounded furious. He sounded, in his own quiet way, about as angry as Jim was. And he was sounding angry in front of his father. Jim took a subconscious step back, just in case there was a repeat of the last time Spock got pissed in front of his dad. Just because Jim was furious didn’t mean he wanted a physical—

…wait a second…

“Did you just say Grayson? As in…?”

“My late wife’s father. Spock’s grandfather.” Sarek answered. “He does not like me very much but there is a small chance he will be willing to see Spock.”

Jim kept staring at Spock. “You call your grandfather Mister? And he lives in a really top secret place that cannot be named out loud?”

But Spock wasn’t looking at Jim, he was looking at Sarek and he didn’t look happy. “They helped him escape?”

“I believe your grandfather called it a fresh start.”
“I was under the impression they killed him.”

...what the fuck? Okay, now Jim was starting to get a slightly better understanding of why Spock was reacting the way he was.

“You mother asked them not to.” Sarek answered, frowning. “You never communicated that you were left with that impression.”

“I did not...” Spock faltered, his eyes finally up from the floor and blown wide. Completely forgetting their earlier argument he turned to Jim for support. Jim looked between father and son, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Sarek, when we came in here you said you had an unforgivable request.” Jim reminded the Ambassador. Sarek nodded and handed the envelope to Jim.

“Indeed. Captain Kirk, if there is no way to save my son, I ask that you kill him before he suffers further.”

“What the fuck?!”

“Captain Kirk?”

“Sorry, did I say that out loud? Didn’t mean to. Been thinking it a lot lately. Ambassador, no offense, but I’m not going to-”

“Very well.” Spock’s voice was flat, emotionless, all trace of his inner torment gone.

“Spock, you can’t-” Jim tried to argue but Spock was apparently done with this conversation. Jim watched helplessly as his friend spun around and left the room.

***

Spock returned to the Enterprise that night and Jim didn’t see him again until the next morning. He allowed Spock the space he so clearly needed because Jim also needed some time and space to calm down and collect his thoughts. He couldn’t get to the bottom of Spock’s behavior if he was angry, and Spock wouldn’t talk to him if he felt under attack. Jim knew they needed to talk. He just hoped that Spock knew it too.

From the moment Jim boarded his ship to the moment they left orbit he was giving orders and receiving reports, there was no time or space to spare. As soon as they were back in the stars making their way towards Earth he turned in the captain’s chair and faced Spock, who was bent over the science station and studiously ignoring Jim.

“Spock.” Jim said. “I need to see you in my ready room.”

“Captain, these readings require my immediate attention.”

“Now, Spock.”

“Captain, I must-”

“Spock, if you argue with me again, so help me god I will pull this ship over and none of us will go
anywhere until you and I have an honest conversation.”

The rest of the crew was bowing their heads over their work and avoiding eye contact. Spock straightened up and turned to raise an eyebrow at Jim.

“That would be against protocol.” Spock said.

“Sulu, full stop.”

“Captain?”

“I gave you an order, Sulu. Pull this ship over.”

“…Aye Captain.” Sulu hit the brakes and the ship hummed to a stop. Jim immediately jumped out of his chair and strode to his ready room, not bothering to see if Spock was following. He knew he was. As he passed Chekov he saw the ensign mouth a word that looked like ‘swordfish’ at Uhura, and she shook her head.

*I’ll deal with whatever that is later.* Jim thought as he locked the ready room door behind Spock.

The two men faced each other in silence for a long moment.

“You have to talk to me, Spock.” Jim said. “This isn’t just about us anymore. This is an official matter now. You *legally* have to talk to me.”

“Jim, are you aware that there is a chicken sitting on your desk?”

“Don’t try to change the subject, Spock. We’ve been having communication problems for a while now but over the past couple days the situation has become unacceptable. You weren’t honest with me about Stonn, you still haven’t told me what that wife thing was about, and yesterday you promised your own father that you would murder your brother in direct violation of your Starfleet orders.”

“Our orders were-”

“I know what our orders were, Spock! I don’t want to argue semantics! Admit it, you don’t trust me!”

Spock’s eyes flashed angrily but there was no way in hell Jim was backing down now.

“It is not a matter of trust.” Spock said, his voice level and cold. “Like most Vulcans I was bonded at a very young age for reasons of biological pragmatism. My betrothed was named T’Pring. After I left Vulcan she fell in love with Stonn, who arranged matters so that he would be able to witness my pain when she broke our bond. Nyota is aware of this because by coincidence she was present at the time. You now know my entire history with Stonn and you now know what the ‘wife thing’ is about. I have not told you this because it was not necessary and much like my mother’s death, and much like your death, it is not something I wish to dwell on. I can speak of these things if the cause is sufficient.”

“And you think Sybok being your brother isn’t a sufficient cause?”

“I am not saying that, Jim. I am saying that if I could speak of it I would but I cannot. I do not know how. I do not have the words.”

“Well too bad! You have to. If you don’t trust me I can’t trust you and in order for this to work,
Spock, we have to trust each other. If you can’t talk to me about this I can’t have you on this ship.” The words felt like a knife in his gut but they had to be said. Spock had to know that Jim was serious. And if Spock still couldn’t open up Jim would transfer him somewhere else. It would kill him, but he would do it.

Spock’s brow creased and he stared at Jim helplessly. Jim’s features softened. He felt like he was going to throw up, like his heart was breaking, like his entire universe was about to fall apart. But he had to do this. They had to do this.

“Come on, Spock. You can figure this out. I believe in you. No matter how bad this is, you can handle it, and I can help if you let me.”

“I do not know how.”

“Just start talking. You don’t have to tell me everything right now, we just need to start.”

“Where?”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“On the ship.”

“On the ship? What…oh my god. He took you with him…”

“…He tried.”

Jim staggered back a step to lean against his desk. “You were kidnapped?”

“For one week. My mother’s family brought me home.”

All of a sudden Jim thought killing Sybok might not be such a bad idea after all, but he stomped on that thought until it went out like an ember. Spock needed him right now, he couldn’t afford to descend into a vengeful frenzy.

“How old were you?”

“Five.”

“My god, Spock.”

“Captain, if we delay much longer we will be late for our appointment with Admiral Nogura.”

“Alright. We’ve made a good start, Spock, and I’m really proud of you.”

“Thank you, Captain, but that is not necessary.”

“I need you to do one thing for me Spock.”

“Of course, Captain.”

“Say his name.”

“…Jim…”

“No, I mean it, Spock. I’m your friend and I’ve got your back and I’ll help you through this, but as your Captain I need to hear you say his name. I need to know you can do this.”
“…His name is Sybok.”

Jim let out the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Okay. Now we’re getting somewhere. You can go, Commander.” He turned, needing a moment to process what he’d just learned before returning to the bridge.

“Holy shit, why is there a chicken on my desk?”

“Squawk!”

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Author’s Note

Yay! Now things really start getting interesting. Lots of action coming up, plus some serious fluff now that Jim and Spock have started addressing their communication problems. I’m so proud of ‘em.

As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and I hope you’ll stay tuned for the next one. We’ll be starting in San Francisco and then heading up to the Yukon area, a place I have never been but somehow seemed an appropriate setting so if any of you wonderful readers have been there feel free to share any valuable information you might have about what it’s like.
Author: You guys! What am I going to do? Mr. X is still crazy!

(she wipes a tear from her eye)

I don’t know if I can do this without him.

Kirk: Is there someone who might be able to remind him why he needs to make you say the words?

Author: No. There’s no one.

Spock: Judging from the amount of material you have readily available with which to restrain us and keep us captive in this castle, I find it difficult to believe you have not done this before.

Author: Oh. You mean is there anyone who can remind him that I’M supposed to be the crazy one. Yeah. There is. But he won’t help us.

Kirk: Why not?

Author: Also, I’m legally not allowed to contact him. Or come within fifty feet of him. Or think about him.

Kirk: …Why not?

Spock: Please just say the words.

Author: Fine. You’re no fun. I don’t own them.

(In the distance, Mr. X can be heard naming all the clouds. That cloud is named Fred. No, not that one. The other one.)

Jim, Spock and McCoy stood on the sidewalk in San Francisco, the heavy morning fog twining around their ankles like a friendly cat. The Captain and the First Officer gazed down the zig-zag of Lombard Street, admiring the view and wondering what kind of power mad lunatic city planner would authorize the paving of such a road. McCoy kept his back to the scenery, preferring the sights and sounds of level ground to the near vertical drop of the famous street.

“Captain, why are we here?” Spock asked. “Our meeting with Admiral Nogura is in twenty minutes and 48 seconds.”

“I know, but I thought you could use some cheering up before we get to headquarters.”

“I do not require cheering and I also fail to see how an unusually steep and crooked roadway would achieve your goal.” Spock raised an eyebrow. Sometimes he could not fathom the things humans chose to find interesting.
“It’s not so much the road itself. It’s what’s about to happen. You’ll see. Bones, check out this view.” Jim said with a smirk.

“I’m a doctor, not a tourist.” McCoy snapped, crossing his arms and refusing to turn around. “And I’m not falling for this.”

“Oh, come on.” Jim needled him. “How many years have you lived in San Francisco? 5? 6? And you’ve never even seen Lombard Street. I’m not asking you to drive down it, I’m just asking you to look at it.”

McCoy sighed and reluctantly turned around. He glared down the street.

“No, see, I don’t get it. I just don’t get it.” He started to grumble under his breath. Jim winked at Spock. “It just doesn’t make any sense to me.” McCoy said a little louder, his left eye starting to twitch. “I mean, for god’s sake, why in the hell would anyone, I mean anyone choose to live here?” He took a step closer, cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed, “THE ENTIRE GALAXY CAN SEE INTO YOUR LIVING ROOM! What the hell is wrong with these people?! If you can afford to live here you can afford some goddamn privacy! Are you all idiots?!”

Jim grinned at Spock. “See? I told you it would cheer you up.”

“As I said, I am not in need of cheering.” Spock reminded him. Jim just smiled patiently.

“Go ahead. You know you want to.” Jim said. “We’ve got time.”

Spock was silent for a moment before turning to their ranting CMO and saying calmly, “Doctor, the real estate value alone would make the investment well worth the while of any individual with the means to purchase one of these properties.”

“Well I am insane!” McCoy bellowed. “Look at this! They live like goldfish!”

Jim tapped Spock’s elbow and leaned up to whisper in his ear. “If you’re ever with him in LA take him to see the houses on the Ocean Front walkway. He actually goes inside to yell at the people who live there. Last time we left with three restraining orders.”

“I will keep that in mind.” Spock whispered back.

***

Only Jim and Spock were invited to the meeting with Nogura so they said goodbye to McCoy at the Starfleet campus gates, agreeing to meet up again in a few hours.

“Maybe by then you’ll be allowed to tell me what this new mission is about.” McCoy grumbled.

“It’s not personal, Bones.” Jim sighed for the hundredth time. “It’s need to know only right now.”

“Oh sure. And why would I need to know what kind of hare-brained errand they’re sending us on? I’m only the guy who keeps you all alive for the next one.”

“And we all really appreciate it.” Jim clapped his favorite doctor on the back. “Tell you what. I promise not to die again without explaining myself first.”
Since neither McCoy or Spock seemed particularly amused Jim decided to start walking before the on-going lecture on his inappropriate sense of humor could start up again. Spock fell in step beside him and they strode across campus, splendiferous in their full uniforms. As they walked heads turned and fingers pointed as cadets fell over one another to get a glimpse of the famous heroes. Jim paid them no heed, and if his strut got a little jauntier, well, could you blame him?

“It’s good to be back.” He hummed happily to Spock, who said nothing in reply.

Spock was paying more attention to the looks they were receiving and he was noticing the glances that Jim was missing. There were the usual gaggle of young women who followed James T. Kirk like pigeons hustling for crumbs, the fresh-faced young men with adulation in their eyes and grand expectations in their hearts, all the standard hungers. But Spock noticed other, stranger looks as they made their way through the academic buildings. Glares and frowns and averted eyes, people who went out of their way to give Jim a wide berth, people who made rude gestures when they thought Spock wouldn’t notice. This reaction was new. Was it directed towards him or towards Jim? In the distance a clock tower chimed the hour and within an instant the pathways were flooded with cadets, eagerly chattering about the classes they’d come from and the classes they were going to and, with far greater exuberance, their evening plans. Taking a chance, Spock allowed his telepathic shields to lower slightly as the crowd overtook them. Every time someone brushed him with their elbow or bumped him with their shoulder their surface thoughts and feelings washed over him.

Most of it was drivel, the usual stew of desire, anxiety and the terrible music that humans sang in their heads over and over for some completely illogical and unfathomable reason. But Spock did pick up on something, a general dissatisfaction, a vague displeasure that sharpened into a rumbling rancor, and it was fixated on both of them. The press of the crowd was over within a few seconds and Spock could not recognize the emotion in such short a period of time, but it tasted like blame.

But for what? And if there were blame to be doled out, why would it be on James T. Kirk and his crew? The Enterprise hadn’t even been in the solar system for a year. What reason could anyone have to find her crew wanting?

Spock wondered about this as they entered the tall building where Nogura’s office was located and made their way to the turbolift. When they stepped inside Spock considered mentioning the matter to Jim, but then decided there was no point in worrying him before—

“Out with it.”

Spock blinked innocently at Jim. “Captain?”

“Something’s bothering you. I can see it on your face.” Jim hit the button to stop the lift and turned to face Spock, his arms crossed and his jaw stuck out stubbornly. “Out with it.”

“We will be late for our meeting.” Spock reminded him. Jim didn’t even blink, just kept staring at Spock and waiting. Spock refrained from sighing. “On our way across campus I noticed that nearly half the people we passed showed visible signs of displeasure at our presence.”

Jim’s frown deepened. “I didn’t notice anything.”

“You were preoccupied.” Spock agreed.

Jim sighed. “You mean I was too busy showing off to pay attention to my surroundings.”

“You were preoccupied.” Spock agreed again.

Jim rolled his eyes and hit the button. The lift whirred back to life and began moving upwards once
again. “I bet it’s because of Nogura.”

“You believe the Admiral is unsatisfied with our performance?” Spock asked.

Jim shook his head. “No. Just the opposite. He’s been talking us up so much on the news we’ve become associated with his politics, which aren’t so popular right now. You should see some of the skits they’re doing on the late night shows.”

“Oh.” Spock said noncommittally. He had never watched a late night talk show and he had no intention of starting now.

“You know Janeen, the guy who does that sketch show on Jupiter? He does a great impression of you.” Jim teased as the lift doors opened and they stepped out into the hallway. “Though I’m pretty sure if you ever called Bones ‘Lenny-baby’ he’d have you institutionalized.”

“Since the only logical reason to use such a designation would be insanity, that would be the entirely correct response on the doctor’s behalf.” Spock said scathingly.

Jim laughed. He loved this, the banter, the companionship, how easily they bounced off one another and the conversation swelled between them. He’d been missing it lately. He’d been missing Spock lately.

They finally arrived at Nogura’s office and waited patiently while the Admiral’s secretary went to tell her employer of their arrival. Jim took advantage of the otherwise empty time to really look at his First Officer.

Spock looked tired, which was only to be expected. Jim doubted that he’d been able to meditate much over the past few days. Spock noticed Jim looking at him and glanced back out of the corner of his eye, one brow twitching upwards in a silent query. Jim’s breath caught in his throat and his heart hammered against his rib cage.

Oh right, and then there was that. He’d missed that as well. That way Spock had of just looking at Jim and all of a sudden nothing else in the universe mattered. That way Spock had of tilting his head and it was all Jim could do not to reach out and run a finger up the expanse of pale skin on his throat. That way Spock could bring Jim to his knees just by standing still.

“Captain Kirk?”

“Here!” Jim yelped automatically, snapping his gaze away from Spock’s neck guiltily.

The Admiral’s secretary stared at him. “Yes sir, I know. Are you and Commander Spock ready to see the Admiral?”

Jim could feel the blood rushing back up to his face and turning it tomato red. “Yes, ‘course we are.” He grumbled. The secretary nodded and held the door open for them. Spock went first, but as he passed Jim he turned his head and raised his eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching just a tiny bit upwards. It was sympathy, teasing and commiserating, all rolled into the smallest possible facial tic, and then Spock was gone leaving Jim standing dumbly while the secretary wondered what was wrong with him.

Is he doing it on purpose? Jim thought desperately. It isn’t fair for him to be so goddamn attractive by accident.

He shook himself and followed Spock into the office.
Nogura was waiting for them behind his desk and for a brief second Jim was reminded of Pike. He hastily shoved that thought away. The memories were still painful and while Pike had been his mentor Nogura was just his boss. It would be a mistake to confuse the two.

“Gentlemen.” Nogura stood up to greet them. “Welcome. Please, take a seat.”

Jim and Spock sank into the offered chairs while the Admiral pulled a manila folder out of his desk drawer and slid it over to them.

“What’s this?” Jim asked, picking it up and opening it.

“That’s everything we have on Sybok.” Nogura said. “Known activities and contacts, some financial information, any kind of paper trail my people could scrounge up.”

“This is a picture of someone wearing a hood and robes walking on the Deep Space Six promenade.” Jim said, handing the picture to Spock. “This is another picture of that same hooded figure buying something from a Ferengi at the canteen. And this is a parking ticket.” He closed the folder, having gone through the entirety of its contents. “Is that really all Starfleet has to go on?”

“We sent intelligence personnel after him.” Nogura sighed.

“And?” Jim pressed him.

“We sent intelligence personnel after him.” Nogura sighed.

“And I’ll let you know when we hear from them.” Nogura frowned.

“If Starfleet Intelligence Services have been unable to locate this individual what reason do you have to believe a Constitution-class starship will succeed? We will be far more obvious in our search, and there will be greater restrictions on our movements.” Spock said. Jim noticed that he managed to avoid saying Sybok’s name again.

“I didn’t say Sybok couldn’t be found. I said we haven’t heard from any of the people we sent after him. We’re hoping that whatever it is he’s doing to them will be ineffective against another Vulcan.” Nogura explained.

“You think he’d attack Spock?” Jim asked. His stomach turned at the mere thought. Sybok would never hurt Spock ever again, not if Jim had anything to say about it.

“I have no reason to expect otherwise.” Nogura’s frown deepened.

“Well, they are brothers.” Jim reminded him.

Nogura leaned back in his chair, surprise written all over his face. “Really?” He tented his fingers. “I was not aware of that. Commander Spock, if you are emotionally compromised by—”

“I am Vulcan.” Spock reminded the Admiral coolly.

Nogura stared back into the Commander’s emotionless eyes for a long time as if he expected Spock to crumple under the pressure of his steely gaze. Spock remained uncrumpled.

“Admiral, this could be an advantage.” Jim intervened before Nogura could say anything that would cross the line between insensitive and offensive. “Right now Spock’s the only lead we have, and if anyone asks us why we’re looking for Sybok he’s the perfect cover. He’s right; the Enterprise is a big ship. People are going to notice us looking. But at least with Spock around we might not seem too suspicious.”
Nogura sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “And god knows I haven’t got a choice.” He breathed, more to himself than to them. He looked up again. “You boys have no idea how lucky you are, to still be out there. I remember when I was sitting on your side of the desk, thinking that old Admiral Wilks had no idea what was really going on in the field. I remember going back to my ship and telling my XO that if I ever became a politician he should shoot me. Well, Frank’s been dead for fifteen years now and none of us are quite so brave as we used to be. I need this win, boys. I’m under a lot of pressure and if I can’t go before the Legislature with some actual results I will be out of a job and you…” Nogura trailed off. His eyes became unfocused as they stared into the distance at something only he could see. “When the vultures are through you won’t even recognize Starfleet. Gone will be scientific missions, the observations, the discoveries. If I fall Starfleet will become an instrument of war, make no mistake about it.”

“I thought after that whole thing with Marcus all the people who wanted a more militaristic Starfleet were keeping their mouths shut.” Jim’s eyebrows shot up.

“Their mouths, maybe, but not their wallets.” Nogura snapped. “Don’t be naïve, Jim. Humanity’s a mess. The right wing wants to start a war with the Romulan Empire. The left wing is demanding to know what happened to all the future tech that bastard Khan got his hands on. And honestly, damned if I know! No one seems to have kept track of it! The Vulcans are too wrapped up in their own problems to be any use and the Tellarites just argue for the sake of arguing. And the Andorians? Do you know what the Andorian ambassador wants us to do? He wants us to go to war with the future. The future, boys. Said that when Nero attacked Vulcan it was an act of extreme aggression and the only honorable course would be to respond in kind. Meanwhile we’ve got Klingons and Romulans picking us off one by one and it’s only a matter of time before the Cardassians join them. Gentlemen, the Federation is about to unravel into chaos and anarchy and right now I’m the only guy holding onto the strings! So when I tell you that I need a win, you’d better fucking deliver one!”

Nogura was on his feet, panting hard, his fists clenched tight and his eyes flashing.

Jim and Spock turned and looked at one another. A silent exchange passed between them. Are you sure you’re up for this? Jim asked with his eyes. Not in front of the Admiral, Captain. Spock replied with his raised brow. They turned again and looked back up at Nogura.

“Okay.” Jim said. “One win for the sake of the Federation, coming right up.”

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“Spock has an evil brother?”

“For the seventh time, Bones, yes.”

“I know, I know, but I mean, come on. First of all, Spock is the epitome of an only child. Second of all, Spock’s brother swore off logic for emotions.”

“And evil. Don’t forget the evil.”

“Evil or not I can’t wait to meet this guy. Would it be weird if I asked for his autograph?” McCoy leaned back in his shuttle seat, a dreamy smile on his face. “This might be the best day of my life.”

“Don’t let Spock hear you say that.” Jim hissed, glancing nervously at the cockpit. The three of them were heading north to try and find Spock’s grandfather and Spock had volunteered to pilot the
shuttle. Jim had interpreted that as an unspoken request for some alone time and hadn’t argued when Spock closed the partition. But just because Spock couldn’t see them didn’t mean he couldn’t hear them. “And don’t you have a kid?”

“Second best day, then.” McCoy shrugged. “I told you Stonn was creepy.”

Jim sighed. “Yes, Bones. You are always right about everything forever.”

“And don’t you forget it.” McCoy clasped his hands behind his head and grinned cheekily at the captain. “So what’s this grandfather like?”

“I don’t know. Sarek wouldn’t talk about him and Spock only met him once when he was little.” Jim left out the details of that meeting. Telling McCoy about the mission was one thing, but he didn’t need to know about Spock’s personal history with his brother. Not yet, anyway. Besides, even Jim didn’t know what had really happened when Sybok left Vulcan.

Again, not yet, anyway.

Honestly, Jim was just as curious as Bones to find out what kind of people Amanda Grayson came from. He’d searched the internet the night before but hadn’t turned up anything useful. Not a single article, interview or biography even mentioned her parents. The closest he’d been able to get was an admission in one of her earliest biographies that she’d grown up in the north. The book hadn’t specified the north of what, it had just said ‘north.’

They landed in Whitehorse half an hour later. When the thrusters had dimmed and the engine was silent Spock climbed through the partition and moved towards the door.

“Wait.” Jim called, holding out a puffy black coat. “You’re gonna need this.”

“I am wearing my thermals, Captain.” Spock reminded him, accepting the coat anyway.

“Trust me.” Jim said as he zipped his own jacket up to his nose.

It was February 3rd and the time was 7:30 in Whitehorse. The sky was already inky black and the stars were hidden behind the thick clouds. The cold hit them like a cleaver the second the door was open. It found whatever exposed skin it could and bit down into it, nipping and ripping and eating away. The three men braced themselves and stepped out into the darkness. They made their way across the shuttle field, darting between the empty hulks of steel and the mountains of crusty snow that towered high above their heads.

“Please tell me this place is close.” McCoy hissed. His teeth were already starting to chatter. He’d grown up in Georgia, with peaches and sun tea and other nice warm things. The killer cold of the Great White North, the winds that could flay a man’s flesh from his bones, the tattered mountains with their terrible silence, the smothering darkness, these things had never appealed to him. He was made of softer stuff than whatever it took to live here.

As for Spock, he was too cold to speak but the big brown eyes Jim could see peeking out from under the hood of his coat were perfectly miserable.

“Yeah, it’s close.” Jim said. “Five minute walk. Come on.”

“Can we run?” McCoy growled, already jogging in place to keep warm. “Which direction?”

“That way but don’t—” Jim winced as McCoy took off running in the direction he’d pointed and almost immediately hit a patch of ice and went flying dramatically through the air, landing on his ass
five feet away and looking for all the world like a surprised duck.

“Shut up.” McCoy grumbled as Jim and Spock hauled him back onto his feet. “Fine. We’ll walk. But let’s hurry, it’s freezing out here. What’s this place called again?”

“The Lion’s Den.” Jim answered.

The Lion’s Den, as it turned out, was a small bar on the outskirts of town. A neon sign swung from the overhang depicting the snarling mug of a lion with a thick, wild mane. It was a small white building only one story tall and awkwardly placed in the middle of a parking lot as if a giant had dropped it there by accident. The windows were tinted but light and music streamed through the cracks. There were two chimneys, one on either end of the building, and smoke was billowing out of both of them, filling the air with the scent of evergreens turning to ash. Two old men sat on the bench outside, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and talking quietly. They fell silent as Jim and the others approached. Jim smiled and waved to the strangers as he edged his way between the pickup trucks and the mini-shuttles. They did not return the greeting, just kept staring and puffing, the blue wisps of smoke spiraling around their heads and slowly rising into the atmosphere. Judging from the thick carpet of discarded butts littering the ground at their feet these men were regulars.

“Good evening.” Jim gave the old men his most charming smile. “My friends and I were told we could find someone here. Do you know if Mr. Grayson is in?”

The two old men took identical drags on their cigarettes. The twin rollies glowed angrily in the dark. The old men exhaled and blue-grey smoke billowed in the below-zero air.

“Dunno.” The old man on the left grunted.

“Who’re you?” The old man on the right asked.

“I’m Jim, and my friends are Leonard and Spock.” Jim answered, still smiling.

The old men looked at one another and the one on the left shrugged.

“Talk to Sara.” The old man on the right told Jim.

“That is Sara?” Jim asked.

“Everyone knows Sara.” The old man on the right answered. He pulled a small blue package of tobacco out of his pocket and his partner handed him some papers. The two old men directed all their attention to the ritual rolling of the cigarettes as if they’d forgotten the half-smoked ones still hanging from the corners of their mouths, as if they had never even noticed the men standing in front of them.

“Thanks.” Jim said. McCoy opened the door and the three of them walking into the Lion’s Den.

It was a dive. Rickety tables and wobbly chairs lined the walls and every single one of them had a mysterious sticky patch that was best ignored lest you actually discover what it was. There was a pool table in the middle of the room surrounded by a group of young men with full beards and rough hands. A huddle of women, all over the age of sixty, were playing poker by one of the two fireplaces. The barstools were empty but for a few patrons who stared into the depths of their drinks as if maybe if they waited long enough to take that next sip they wouldn’t need it. Jim carefully stepped around a table where a drunk had already slumped over and led the way to the bar. The tall, muscular woman standing behind it put down the glass she’d been cleaning. Her horn-rimmed glasses glinted in the dim lighting as she sized them up.

“What can I get you?” She asked.
“Are you Sara?” Jim asked her in return.

Spock unzipped his coat and took the stool closest to the fireplace. The bartender’s eyes lingered on the points of his ears and Jim had to stifle the impulse to step in between them.

“That’s my name.” She acknowledged reluctantly. “What can I get you?”

Jim took the seat next to Spock and McCoy claimed the one next to him. “We’re hoping you can help us find someone.” Jim told her softly.

“I’ve got beer, wine and liquor. If you want peanuts, chips or popcorn I can get you some. But I don’t sell people.” Sara crossed her arms. Her biceps bulged aggressively. She had a tattoo of a thick black snake coiling around her forearm and as her muscles swelled the snake danced.

“Jim.” McCoy hissed in his ear. “It’s getting a little crowded.”

Jim looked over his shoulder. The young men playing pool had lowered their cues. The women playing poker had put down their cards. The alcoholics playing Liver Roulette were skipping the next round. The only person in the entire bar who wasn’t staring at Jim with cold, steely eyes was the passed out drunk in the corner.

“Water.” Spock broke the silence, his voice low and husky. “Please.”

“Coming right up.” Sara grabbed a glass. “Tap okay?” Spock nodded and she headed for the sink. Ever so slowly the susurrus of socialization stole back into the room.

“You’re drawing a lot of attention, Jim.” McCoy whispered. “Better wait until the crowd thins out.”

“The doctor is correct, Captain.” Spock murmured. “Perhaps our questions will be better received when there are fewer ears to hear the answers.”

Jim sighed and surrendered the hope that they’d be back on the Enterprise by bedtime.

Sara returned with Spock’s water. She carefully and pointedly laid a cardboard coaster on the greasy bar and placed the tall iced glass in the exact center before turning to glare at Jim and McCoy.

“Coffee.” They ordered in unison.

It was going to be a long night.

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The sun was shining in Sydney as Carol Marcus and Janice Rand made their way to their favorite pie shop. The two women gossiped and laughed like they were still the fifteen-year-old girls they’d been when they first met. Carol could feel all the tension from the past few weeks draining away in the warm Australian sunlight. She could hear the sounds of surf crashing, children laughing, brightly colored birds chattering as they darted over the flat rooftops and every decibel was like a balm to her soul. She hadn’t realized how much she missed humanity in all its splendor up in space. She dearly loved the friends she had on the Enterprise but the ship never felt like home for her the way it did for them.

“Daddy wanted me to go home for a visit.” Rand was explaining. “But I told him I was helping you
“deliver samples to the lab here in Sydney.”

“We already did that.” Carol reminded her. “It only took ten minutes and we’ve still got nine hours of leave.”

“Oh, I know that but Daddy doesn’t. I told him the samples were so sensitive we had to transport them one at a time and it was going to take all day.” Rand snorted derisively. “As if I’d set one foot inside that house after all the horrible things the network has been saying about the Captain.”

Carol inwardly sighed. This was an old conversation and she knew her lines by heart. “You know the network only runs those stories because of the ratings. Your father doesn’t even go to the board meetings anymore. He has no control over what the Milky Way Network airs.”

“Not using your power isn’t the same thing as not having it.” Rand snapped. “And did you see the program last night? They invited on some *imbecilic* pundit and spent half an hour accusing Captain Kirk of treason. The only reason they get away with it is they phrase everything like a question.” Rand plastered on a fake smile and sang in a falsetto. “Is Captain Kirk still secretly in contact with the terrorist John Harrison? You decide! Is Captain Kirk an agent of the Klingon Empire? You decide! Is Captain Kirk a blood-sucking baby-eater? You decide!” Her fake smile vanished and her eyes flashed furiously. “It’s *ridiculous*.”

“Everyone knows that.” Carol tried to reassure her. “No one really believes those stories.”

“I’m just glad Captain Kirk only reads the paper.” Rand sighed. “If he ever starts watching the news instead I’ll probably be out of a job.”

“You don’t really believe—”

“Carol!”

The two women turned to see a man in his early 30s wearing a trim black suit coming towards them, waving cheerfully.

“Rex?” Carol blinked once and then a perfectly charming and amicable smile appeared on her face. Her shoulders slid back and her spine straightened as she stepped forward to greet her childhood friend. “What a wonderful surprise. How long has it been?”

“I haven’t seen you since your father’s New Years Eve party three years ago.” Rex reached out and clasped her hand in his. “We were all so sorry to hear what happened, Carol. Your father was a great man. I am truly honored to have known him.”

Carol’s polite expression did not alter one iota. “Have you met my friend, Janice Rand? Janice, this is Rex Livingstone. We lived next door to one another as children.”

Rex shook Rand’s hand. “Rand? You’re not by any chance the daughter of Hector Rand?”

“Guilty as charged.” Rand said with the exact same charm and poise as Carol, one of the aftereffects of attending the same finishing school. They also couldn’t sit next to each other at meals because people were freaked out by their synchronized chewing.

“What a wonderful happenstance!” Rex beamed. “I’ve been in the private sector since that unfortunate business last year and we’re always looking for new investors.”

“I don’t—” Rand started to protest but Rex just kept talking.
“I’m late for a meeting with some Vulcans and you know how crotchety they can be, otherwise I would love to stay and chat. Tell you what…” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a stack of business cards. “Take my card and give me a call sometime. Carol, we simply must get together soon. I want to hear all about your adventures in space.” He leaned forward and pecked Carol on the cheek before she could dodge and then he was gone.

“Who was that?” Rand asked, feeling somewhat shell-shocked.

“He used to work for my father.” Carol said thoughtfully, gazing at the point in space where he had vanished. “Rex was one of his favorites.”

“Oh.” Rand turned his business card over in her hands. It was black and shiny, just like his suit. “Is he evil?”

“It is a distinct possibility.” Carol mused.

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The problem with waiting for the bar to empty was it gave McCoy more than enough time to start getting imaginative.

“Maybe this was a bad idea.” He hissed to Jim, his knee jiggling anxiously. “We don’t know anything about these people. And judging from our fellow patrons,” he eyed the drunk in the corner suspiciously. “I think it’s fair to say they’re bad news.”

“We’re talking about Spock’s family.” Jim reminded him, glancing at Spock from the corner of his eye. Spock had been unusually quiet all evening and hadn’t said anything at all for the past two hours. Jim was worried about him but he knew there was no point in pressing the matter in public.

“No, we’re talking about people Spock’s mother broke off all contact with when she got married.” McCoy snapped. “Maybe she had a good reason for doing that. Maybe we are in a lot of trouble. Maybe the Graysons are all psychotic serial killers who lure innocent customers into the wilderness. I think we should go. We’ll find Sybok some other way. A way that doesn’t involve us being hunted for sport.”

“Would you do me a favor and chill out?” Jim hissed back. “No more coffee for you.”

Sara walked over and began to wipe down the bar. “We’re closing, gentlemen. Time to finish your drinks.”

McCoy glared at Jim. “See?” He began to pull on his coat. “Sorry. We’ll be leaving.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Remind me to never include you in clandestine dealings ever again. You are terrible. You would make the universe’s worst spy.”

Sara frowned. “Look, boys, there’s a re-run of Holophoners In The Stars in half an hour. Season finale. Sixqua the Magnificent is going to do Akira and the bar doesn’t get the Milky Way Network.” She smiled. It was not a comforting smile. There were too many teeth. “I really don’t want to miss it.”

“Sorry, ma’am, we’ll be on our way—”
“Bones, sit down—”

“We are here to see Mister Grayson.” Spock interrupted, speaking for the first time in hours.

Sara’s eyes flickered to the drunk still passed out in the corner before her mask of forced civility resettled on her face. “I can’t help you.”

Jim leaned forward and pointed to Spock with his thumb. “He’s Amanda Grayson’s son. He just wants—”

“I know who my own cousin is, Captain Kirk, just like I know who you are. If you plan on having anymore clandestine dealings you might want to invest in a less famous face.” Sara Grayson snapped. “I reiterate. The bar is closed.”

“We’re not leaving until we talk to Mr. Grayson.” Jim grabbed McCoy’s arm and dragged him back into his stool.


The drunk in the corner, who had not moved an inch the entire time they had been there, suddenly rose to his feet. He carefully removed his filthy overcoat, folding it lovingly and placing it gently on his table. Jim and McCoy watched with growing trepidation as he turned and walked towards the bar.

The man was a troll. Eight feet tall if he was an inch and wide as a bulldozer with the looks to match. It was immediately apparent that his state of inebriation had been an act and he was no more intoxicated than Spock. He came to a halt directly behind them, looming with intent.

“Hey there big man.” Jim greeted him cheerfully. McCoy put his face in his hands and seriously reconsidered his life choices. Spock didn’t move, he just kept staring at Sara as if he was waiting for something.

“John, be a dear and see our guests to the door.” Sara said sweetly, crossing her arms in order to prominently display her engorged biceps.

Jim whistled. “Would’ya look at those guns! Do you work out?” A hand the size of a shovel landed on his shoulder. He looked up an arm like a tree trunk to meet dull squinting eyes.

“Do as the lady says.” John the Troll grunted. “While we’re still asking nice.”

Jim delivered his most dazzling smile. “Well now, Johnny boy, here’s the thing. I am a Starfleet Captain. I’m a widely acclaimed hero and I’ve got the medals to prove it. Whereas the lady is Miss Sara Grayson, convicted felon and still on parole after a five year sentence for manslaughter. Now seeing as how assaulting a Starfleet officer would most definitely be in violation of Sara’s parole it seems to me that it is the lady who should do as I say.” He grinned at their stunned faces before pulling his tricorder out from his pocket. “I scanned your bio signs earlier.” He told them. “You’re in our database.”

John’s small eyes darted up to meet Sara’s, searching for instructions. Jim and McCoy held their breath while Spock continued to fixate on the bartender.

Sara’s crossed arms tightened so that the snake was pulled thin. “You can’t see Mister Grayson.” She said bitterly.

Jim tsked. “Sara, what did I just say?”
“No one can see Mister Grayson.” She snapped. “He’s not taking visitors.”

“Surely he’ll make an exception for his own grandson.” Jim pointed out.

“I’m sure he would but he’s not in a position to make that call right now.” Sara spat through clenched teeth.

McCoy leaned forward, his desire to leave forgotten. “Why not? Is he sick?”

Sara looked like someone had just put a plate of rotting Klingon gagh in front of her. “Yes.”

“We will see him anyway.” Spock announced. Sara’s eyebrows shot up incredulously.

“I just told you he’s too sick to see anyone.” She said. “And I don’t care what you do to me, I’m not telling you where he is just so you can show up and upset him.”

“It is not our intention to harm him, but our cause is sufficient.” Spock said calmly, his hands crossed in his lap.


“Watch it.” Jim snarled, rising to his feet and slamming his hands down on the bar. He instantly regretted it when John’s mammoth hand closed on the back of his neck, holding him still.

“Release him.” Spock commanded, also getting to his feet.

“Okay,” McCoy tried to intervene. “I think everyone should just calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” Sara shouted. “You waltz in here after all these years and just expect us to do whatever you—”

“We need to find Sybok.” Spock’s voice cut through her shrieks like a knife. Sara’s anger immediately vanished to be replaced by a white face and frightened eyes. John’s hand on the back of Jim’s neck slackened and he pulled away. “Before anyone else does.” Spock finished.

Sara took a deep breath. “Oh.” She said slowly. “I guess you’d better talk to Mister Grayson.”

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Author’s Note

So, what do you guys think of the Graysons so far? Not everyone is going to be as unfriendly as Sara. She’s a little protective of her grandfather and Amanda burned a lot of bridges when she left.

In the next chapter we meet Mister Grayson and get our first real clue as to what Sybok’s been up to.

Thanks for reading! Please stay tuned!
He's Dying, Jim

Disclaimer

Author: Mr. X. We need to talk.

Mr. X: Yes. Do you think we should also lure McCoy to the castle to keep him captive for your nefarious purposes?

Author: Where is all this coming from? You’ve always been the reasonable one, the one who makes sure I admit to not owning the characters. What happened?

Mr. X: I just can’t do it anymore. What’s the point? You just keep writing no matter what I do. (he starts to cry)

Author: Oh, honey. It’s gonna be okay. We’ll get through this together. Would it make you feel better if I just admitted it on my own for now?

Mr. X: (sniff) Uh-huh.

Author: Okay. People, this may come as a surprise, but I do not in fact own the characters from Star Trek.

He’s Dying, Jim

There was a cabin in the forest. It was surrounded by shields, force fields, trip wires and guard dogs. As if that weren’t enough protection from unwanted attention the trees grew so thick even the moonlight couldn’t get through. The only way to reach the cabin was on foot and so Jim, McCoy and Spock took shuffling steps in the deep snow, following Sara through the evergreens.

After two hours of hiking McCoy was at the end of his rope. “This is hell.” He said through clenched teeth. “Forget fire and brimstone. Hell is snow and ice and we’re already there.”

“Don’t be such a wimp.” Jim told him, even though he privately agreed. Winters in Iowa hadn’t always been easy but they were nothing like this. This was brutality in the form of weather. The snow seeped through their clothes and filled their boots. Razor sharp icicles hung down from the branches and snagged the hoods from their heads. And the wind? The wind howled and raged, whipped their faces and chilled their bones. At least on Delta Vega Jim had adrenaline to keep him warm. Right now even his insides felt cold. You knew you were slowly freezing to death when you could feel your spleen turn blue.

“If we don’t get somewhere warm soon Spock’s gonna drop.” McCoy warned him.
Jim looked at Spock with alarm. His Vulcan had fallen silent again, directing all his focus to keeping his desert-bred body moving in the extreme cold. Sensing Jim’s gaze Spock looked up from his boots and immediately tripped on a root hidden under the snow. Jim caught him around the chest as he toppled over and they both fell backwards into a snowbank.

Now that he had Spock’s body pressed against his Jim could feel him shaking. He silently cursed his own thoughtlessness. Of course Spock’s body couldn’t handle the freezing temperatures for such an extended period of time. Spock tried to push himself off but Jim tightened his hold on Spock’s torso and held him close.

“What are you doing?” Sara had noticed their prone bodies and was staring down at them incredulously. Her traffic-cone-orange hat glowed dimly in the darkness. “We have to keep moving.”

“Bones.” Jim snapped, ignoring her. “Spock’s freezing. Is there anything you can do?”

“I a-am s-suf-fi—” Spock tried to protest but he was shivering too violently to be understood. Jim wrapped his other arm around his First Officer and pulled him even closer, trying to share what little body heat he had left. McCoy knelt in the snow beside them and pulled out his tricorder. He frowned at the readings.

“His vitals are dropping.” He muttered under his breath. Fear shot through Jim and he pressed Spock’s face into the crook of his neck, as if he could make Spock’s heart beat faster through proximity alone. Hey, it sure worked for Jim. His heart was already racing. “Keep doing what you’re doing.” McCoy ordered him. “We’ve got to try and keep him warm. And you.” He spun around and glared at Sara. “How much further is this blasted cabin?”

“No.” Spock’s voice was muffled but getting stronger. His breath brushed against Jim’s skin and his ensuing shiver had nothing to do with the cold. He shifted uncomfortably. It was way too dangerous to think those kinds of thoughts when Spock’s bare skin was pressed against his own.

“Don’t be stupid, man.” McCoy growled. “We’ve got to get out—”

“Shut up.” Sara hissed. Jim and McCoy looked up at her in surprise. Spock tried to turn his head as well but Jim tightened his grip and refused to let him move. Spock’s irritated huff tickled the skin on Jim’s throat.

At first the only sound was the howling wind but then they all heard it, a low rumble that was growing louder, coming closer. Beams of light flashed through the trees, first from one direction, then from another. They were completely surrounded. Jim cursed and released Spock as they both struggled to stand.

“Stay down.” Sara barked at them. She snatched her hat off her head and stepped forward with her hands in the air. “Don’t shoot!” She shouted. “Ma! It’s me! Don’t shoot!”

Figures riding snowmobiles emerged from the trees at breakneck speeds and closed in around them. McCoy shoved Jim and Spock back down into the snowbank, hissing, “You heard her. Stay down.”

“Dammit Bones!” Jim spluttered through a mouthful of powdery snow. “At least let me get my phaser!”

The snowmobiles braked hard and the riders dismounted. Their faces were hidden behind ski masks
and goggles and there was no way to tell what species they were, but Jim’s gut said human. He counted seven of the newcomers, all dressed in black and some already holding phasers, but who knew how many more were still hiding in the trees. The figure standing closest to Jim and Spock stepped forward and pulled the ski mask off her head. She was an older woman with wispy grey hair and a thin, hard mouth.

“Sara?” She crossed her arms. “What the hell do you think you’re doing out here at this time of night, girl? And who have you brought with you?”

“Ma, this is Captain Kirk, Doctor McCoy and Spock.” Sara explained. She almost sounded nervous. “They need to talk with Mister Grayson.”

Again, Jim couldn’t help but wonder why everyone called this guy Mister. It was weird, right?

“Spock?” Sara’s mother frowned, her cold blue eyes turning in Jim’s direction.

McCoy jabbed Jim in the side.

“What?” Jim whispered, not turning his eyes away from the woman’s.

“Let Spock up.” McCoy whispered back. “He needs to breathe anyway.”

“Oh.” Jim suddenly realized that he still had Spock clutched tight against him and he somewhat reluctantly allowed his First Officer to escape. Spock pulled back and took a deep breath, glaring at Jim accusingly. “I was just trying to keep you warm.” Jim muttered, not meeting his eyes. He could feel the heat rising in his cheeks. Well, at least if he was embarrassed he wouldn’t freeze to death.

Spock turned around slowly, as if even that small movement was painful. “Aunt R-Ruth.” He greeted the woman. Her jaw dropped in shock.

“Spock!” She gasped. “We had no idea you—what’s wrong with you, boy?”

“It’s the climate, ma’am.” McCoy explained. He was the only person so far who didn’t sound intimidated by Ruth or her band of snowmobile ninjas. “His Vulcan biology isn’t designed to withstand these kinds of low temperatures.” He was checking Spock’s vitals again with his tricorder and he didn’t seem to like the results. “I need to get him somewhere warm. Now.”

Ruth nodded once and immediately leapt into action, barking out orders like a professional. “Tim, Lars, get him onto my sled. I’ll take him up to the cabin straight away. Captain Kirk, you’re with Mick. Doctor McCoy, with Peter. Sara, you’re with Lily. Rest of you, I want a full perimeter sweep and regular patrols. Come after us once you’re done. As of right now we’re on lock down.” As she spoke people raced to do her bidding, and before Jim, Spock and McCoy knew what was happening they had all been manhandled onto the separate snowmobiles and were clutching onto masked figures for dear life as they raced through the midnight storm. The fierce wind brought tears to Jim’s eyes and as he blinked away the salty water the snowmobile carrying Spock vanished, presumably moving further ahead to the cabin. Jim had no choice but to cross his fingers and pray he’d made the right decision, bringing Spock here and allowing him to fall into the hands of his estranged family.

Jim needn’t have worried. When Ruth pulled into the shed outside the large cabin ten minutes later she grabbed Spock’s arm and slung it over her narrow shoulders, helping him into the cabin and completely ignoring his feeble protests that he was more than capable of walking on his own. She had to drag him the last few steps over the threshold but she got him inside and dropped him on the floor next to a huge roaring fireplace.
The main room of the cabin was vast. There was a kitchen in one corner, a full dining set in another. The back wall of the kitchen was lined with empty plywood plomeek crates—the kind that were so often utilized in the smuggling of Romulan Ale. Spock made a mental note not to investigate the crates further, lest he discover something that would force him to act in his capacity as a Starfleet officer. They needed the Grayson’s help. Arresting them for smuggling was not a viable option. The fireplace very nearly took up an entire wall and there were half a dozen couches and loveseats placed in a semi-circle around it. Ruth ran to the cupboards in the kitchen area and pulled out a large mason jar filled with a mysterious dull orange liquid. She pulled off the lid as she walked back over to the fireplace and she handed the jar to Spock.

“Drink that.” She ordered. “It’s fire cider. It’ll get your circulation moving again.” She grabbed a blanket off a nearby couch and threw it over his shoulders.

Spock took a hesitant sniff and immediately flinched backwards. “I do not doubt it.” He said wryly, the inside of his nose burning slightly. Already his voice was stronger and his mind was less sluggish. He took a careful sip and while the taste was far too strong for a Vulcan palate and the burning sensation as the liquid moved down his throat was unpleasant, he couldn’t deny the results. Heat bloomed in his chest and his belly. His toes and fingers began to tingle as the feeling returned to his extremities. Now that the icy hand of death was no longer on his shoulder, Spock turned and regarded his rescuer.

Ruth was his mother’s older sister and she had the wrinkles to prove it. She was already in her mid sixties and life had not always been kind. She watched Spock as he drank the warming umber liquid, a look almost like wonder in her tired blue eyes.

“I’ve got something for you.” She said suddenly. “Wait here.”

There was a chest of drawers on the other side of the room, right next to a door that presumably led to sleeping quarters. Ruth walked over and pulled a hologram out of one of the drawers. She returned to the fireplace, cradling the small silver box in her hands as if it were a baby bird. She placed it on the floor in front of Spock and pressed the button on the side to switch it on. A holographic image came to life in the air above the box. Two human girls smiled up at Spock as they held on to the metal bars of a jungle gym.

“That’s me.” Ruth explained, pointing to the older of the girls. “And that’s your mother.”

Spock stared at the tiny holographic figure, a swell of indistinguishable emotions washing over him.

When Amanda Grayson married Sarek she had left every reminder of her former life behind. Spock had never heard her mention her family or her childhood. She had kept no keepsakes, no letters, no pictures from her past. Spock had never in his life seen his mother as a child before. She couldn’t have been older than 9 when the hologram was taken.

She looked happy. Spock would be the first to admit that he struggled to recognize human emotional cues but Amanda looked happy. Breathless and giggling, her long brown hair was tied back in pigtails, framing a brilliant smile. Her big brown eyes twinkled with evident joy. The lavender dress she wore fluttered in a breeze that didn’t exist anymore. Her bare feet dangled in the air as she clung to the monkey bars.

It hurt. Spock could feel her loss on a physical level and it ached all the way down to his marrow. But why? She looked so happy. She had been so young. Just a little girl. And that little girl had grown up into a beautiful intelligent woman, had traveled through space and time, had fallen in love, had moved heaven and earth to bring her only child—Spock—into the world. She had accomplished more in her lifetime, cut short though it was, than most people would have managed with two. Spock
could not understand why being reminded of this cut so deeply, made him feel so lonely and small. And why, if it hurt so badly, did he want nothing more than to keep looking at her smile. It was not logical, to feel and think such things. He did not understand.

There was a soft, sad smile on Ruth’s face. “I haven’t spoken to her in over thirty years and I still miss her every day.”

Loud voices announced the arrival of the rest of their party. Ruth pushed the box in Spock’s direction. “Take it.” She said.

“I cannot accept this.” He protested.

“Amanda would want you to have it.” She said firmly. “Take it.”

Still Spock hesitated. He understood that Ruth was trying to make a symbolic gesture but he did not know how to answer it. His time on the Enterprise had prepared him for a great range of human behavior but not for this…generosity in mourning.

Ruth lost patience. She rolled her eyes and, snatching up the hologram, shoved it into the breast pocket of his jacket. “Don’t be a fool, boy.” She told him. “When someone offers you a gift you take it.”

“I did not come here to speak about my mother.” He said quietly.

The front door banged open and the horde entered, Jim and McCoy in the lead. McCoy was already pulling out his tricorder as he made a beeline for Spock, leaving a trail of dirty melting snow in his wake.

“How are you feeling?” The doctor demanded without looking up from the readings on his screen.

“I am greatly improved.” Spock assured him as Jim plopped down on his other side. “There is no further need for concern.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, thank you very much.” McCoy snapped even though his tricorder corroborated Spock’s claim. “What’s that you’re drinking?”

“An acidic concoction that appears to be primarily comprised of vinegar.” Spock answered seriously, taking another small sip.

Ruth threw her head back and laughed. “And it’ll put hairs on your chest, my boy.” She declared.

“Ma.” Sara said wearily as she took a seat on a nearby couch. “Please don’t get distracted. They’re here for a reason.”

“Of course they’re here for a reason.” Ruth snapped. “And I’m sure it’s a damn good one too, or you wouldn’t have brought them home.” Her tone of voice suggested that if she heard their reason and found it wanting there would be serious consequences.

“We’re looking for Sybok.” Jim said. “We were told you could help us find him.”

Ruth’s smile vanished in an instant. “Everyone, outside.” She barked. “You too, Sara. You can wait in the barn until I’m done.”

Sara sighed and pushed herself back up off the couch.

“But Ma.” Whined one of the other snowmobilers, a man in his late 20s with a shaved head and a
“Do as I say, boy,” Ruth growled, her lips curled in a ferocious snarl. The younger members of the Grayson clan raced for the door all at once and got stuck in the frame. Ruth closed her eyes and waited in long-suffering silence while they sorted themselves out and fled. She kept waiting until Sara had softly lowered the latch behind herself and only then did Ruth open her eyes and frown at the Starfleet officers still sitting in front of her.

“Sorry.” Jim, to his great surprise, found himself quailing at her disapproval. “Were we supposed to leave too?”

“Don’t be stupid. I only sent the kids out cause the less they know about you the better, believe me. They mean well, most of the time, but they’re a bunch of overzealous morons when it comes to family. Now. What do you want with Sybok?” Ruth crossed her arms and frowned at them. “I assume this is an official matter, seeing as how the Captain of the Enterprise himself is gracing my home with his presence.”

Jim looked askance at Spock, who nodded. The truth it was, then. “We want to arrest him.”

Ruth looked at him thoughtfully. “Well, I’ll give you credit for not lying, at least. Can’t stand being lied to.” She said. “But it’d probably be better for you if you had. If you boys need a snitch you came to the wrong place. No Grayson has ever betrayed one of our own to the law and I won’t be the first.”

“We’re not asking you to betray him.” Jim argued. “Believe me, considering who else is looking for him this is in Sybok’s best interest too.”

“A likely story.”

“The alternative is war.” Spock told her softly. Ruth winced.

“…It’s finally come to that, has it?” She asked. Jim and Spock both nodded. She sighed and for a brief moment she looked her age, old and worn and bone-tired.

“Okay, everybody hold on a damn minute.” McCoy growled. “I want an explanation. Every time we mention the name Sybok people start freaking out and acting like we just announced that the legions of hell are knocking on the door. I want to know why.”

“You’re a doctor, right?” Ruth eyed him. McCoy nodded. “You ever sinned, Doc? Made the wrong call? Ignored a symptom? Let someone die who could’ve been saved? Helped someone on the way out who maybe didn’t need to go so soon?”

McCoy glared at her. “I’m a doctor, not a saint. I’m not infallible. I make mistakes sometimes.”

“And those mistakes pile up, don’t they.” Ruth almost sounded like she was laughing at them. “All those sins, burning a hole right through you. Everyone’s got at least one little flame hidden deep inside.”

“What does that have to do with—”

“Sybok’s got a way of bringing all the filth and rot in your soul up to the surface. Forces you to confront the darkest of your secrets, see yourself for what you really are. It’s a savage thing for any living creature to do to another. And then what do you think he does? The bastard forgives you. He saves you. He waves his hand and all those sins just disappear.” Ruth was smiling a cold, bitter smile. “For someone like me, who’s got an awful lot to be sorry for, that’s a pretty scary prospect.”
“It is true, then.” Spock’s eyebrows were raised so high they were hidden under his bangs. “He would be able to rescue the Vulcans from their emotional turbulence.”

“No.” Ruth said firmly. “There ain’t nothing about what he does that I’d describe as rescuing. People need to feel guilt and grief and every other horrible thing. It reminds us of what we are. Keeps us grounded.”

“Will you help us?” Jim asked her. “Believe me, the other people looking for him are a lot worse than we are.”

“Even if I wanted to I couldn’t.” Ruth shrugged. “I’ve got no idea where he is. And I don’t want to know, either.”

“Then who does?” Jim demanded in frustration. He was beginning to feel like he’d been sent on a wild goose chase. Maybe McCoy was right and this was all an elaborate ploy to lure them out into the wilderness so that they could be hunted for sport. They were far enough north the magnetic poles would play havoc with even the Enterprise’s sensors. They could all three be murdered tonight and no one would ever find their bodies.

“Dad might.” Ruth admitted reluctantly. “But I can’t promise anything. His mind’s still sharp, just not always in the here and now. And he’s real weak.” She leveled Spock with a ferocious glare. “I’ll ask him to see you, but you have to give me your word you won’t bring your brother back here, not ever, you understand?”

“I swear it.” Spock agreed easily. After all, why shouldn’t he? He’d already promised Sarek that he would kill Sybok before returning him to Federation space.

Ruth nodded, apparently satisfied with a verbal contract. “Alright. Wait here. I’ll go see if Dad’s up.” She rose to her feet and walked over to the bedroom door. She opened it softly and crept inside.

“Captain, I would prefer to meet with Mister Grayson alone.” Spock murmured.

Jim looked at him incredulously. “You must be joking.”

“It is the most logical course of action.” Spock argued. “While the precise nature of his activities remain unclear it is certain that Mister Grayson has spent his career at odds with the law. As Starfleet officers both you and the doctor may be seen as a threat. Furthermore, if he is in such poor health that he is not receiving visitors it is reasonable to assume that the presence of all three of us would be overwhelming.”

“He’s right, Jim.” McCoy agreed. “But I’d like a chance to see him when you’re done, Spock.”

“I am certain he has already seen a qualified physician.”

“Yeah, but after a conversation with you I am certain he’ll need another one.” McCoy snapped.

“Bones.” Jim sighed wearily. The bedroom door opened and Ruth reemerged. She nodded at Spock, who turned to Jim for permission. “Fine.” Jim agreed reluctantly. “But later you tell me everything that goes on in there, agreed?”

“Affirmative, Jim.”

“Off you go then.”

The bedroom was small and dark, and even darker once the door was shut, but Spock’s Vulcan eyes
could see quite clearly even without a primary light source.

The room was completely bare except for the large bed in the center. If it weren’t for the old man propped against the headboard there would have been no indication that any human spent time there. It was almost Vulcan in its austerity. Spock liked it.

The old man in the bed bore little resemblance to the Mister Grayson Spock remembered. If it weren’t for the deep scar on the side of his face Spock might not have recognized him at all. The man in Spock’s memories had been in his prime, powerful and independent and fierce. He had seemed both terrifying and insurmountable back on the transport ship all those years ago. In the two decades that had gone by he had turned into something small and fragile, like a paper doll. At least his hair remained the same, a wild untamed mane, but the face it framed was sunken and drawn. He was little more than a skeleton wrapped in human skin, just waiting for his body to wind down.

Spock strode forward to stand beside the bed. “Mister Grayson.” He said quietly. “Do you know who I am?” He unconsciously echoed the same words his grandfather had spoken at their first meeting so long ago.

“You’re the boy.” Mister Grayson’s eyes fluttered open and they were still his eyes, still sharp and aware and angry. “Amanda’s son. Spock.”

“Yes.” Spock nodded. “I am Spock. I am looking for Sybok. Do you know where he is?”

Mister Grayson’s angry eyes filled with water and he turned his head away. “Poor boy.” He moaned. “Poor, lonely boy. Should have known. Should have tried to find him when we lost contact. Should have…”

“Mister Grayson.” Spock said insistently. “Do you understand what I am asking you?”

The old lion struggled to push himself up in the bed but his arms shook too violently, his atrophied muscles not up to the task. Spock bent down and lifted him into a sitting position. It was alarmingly easy for he weighed so little.

Mister Grayson reached under his pillow and pulled out a wrinkled paper envelope. “This is…” He had to pause to take another breath, already winded from the exertion it took just to stay awake. “The last I heard from Sybok.” He closed his eyes again and, to Spock’s shock, tears spilled down his cheeks.

“I wanted to tell you but I couldn’t bare to admit it…Amanda, my precious baby girl!” The old man, once the most feared warrior outside the Klingon Empire, wept bitterly. “I should have known! I could have saved her if only-!” He reached out with a large bony hand and grabbed Spock’s arm, desperation giving him the strength to hold on tightly. “Promise me!” His voice was hoarse but his eyes were open again and Spock found himself staring straight into his grandfather’s soul, cracked and abused and neglected though it was. His grandfather’s raw emotions hammered against Spock’s telepathic shields and no matter how much energy he directed to shoring them up the terrible grief and horrendous guilt still bled through. Ruth was wrong. No sentient creature could possibly be expected to survive emotions like these. They were violent, sickening, ravaging chemical surges that dug holes on your insides. Suddenly Spock knew two things, as truly and deeply as he knew that 2+2=4.

Something terrible had happened which could have been prevented.

If it had, Amanda Grayson would still be alive.
“Promise me!” The old lion wept. “You must help him! That poor boy! All he ever did was…” His eyes drifted shut and Spock gently pressed against his shoulder, guiding him back down into the pillows and blankets and the solace of slumber. “…love you…”

The room fell into silence.

Spock stepped away from the bed, one step, two steps, three, four, five, six, seven. He was at the window. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Spock opened his eyes. A thin sliver of moonlight was streaming through the window, falling on the envelope in his hand. Spock took another breath and counted to seven again. Then he opened the letter.

My old friend, do not blame yourself. Perhaps it is better that you did not come. I see now there was no way to prevent this, not in this lifetime. I felt his pain, and it was terrible. It was great. Vast as an ocean and just as deep.

I used to wonder how any creature could live with so much pain.

Now I know.

I watched as Vulcan crumbled beneath my feet and now I know that it is not the living that is so hard, it is the surviving. Living happens automatically but survival requires so much more. So much more than I can give.

Afterwards they put me in a shuttle and sent me on my way, just as they had promised they would if I cooperated. Which I did. And now Vulcan is gone and it is all my fault. I never should have helped them. I wish…

At least I got to see Spock one last time, though he did not see me. He looked so much like our father I almost thought the wrong Vulcan had come through the rift.

I hope they are both still alive. I wish…

I do not know what I wish. I do not understand how such evil could come from something so good. Isn’t love supposed to be good?

He loved his wife. I know he did. I could hear him scream her name in the night from my prison cell
And I do love my brother. No matter what happens that is the one thing I have always been sure of. But they turned that love into a weapon to be used against Spock and I do not know who or what I am anymore.

This is the last you will hear from me. I cannot ask for your forgiveness but I can ask that you forgive yourself. You could not have known, my friend, and even if you had you could not have stopped him.

Forgive yourself.

-Sybok

Spock looked up from the slip of paper and its damning implications and found the moon staring down at him, accusations in its silver-

He was Spock. He was Vulcan. He was the First Officer of the Enterprise. These were facts and neither Sybok nor his letter could alter them.

He was Spock, and James Tiberius Kirk was waiting for him in the other room. That was what was important. That was what mattered in this moment. The rest could wait. Right now he had a job to do, and that job was to walk back into the other room and show Jim the envelope, specifically the return address that Sybok had so conscientiously scrawled in the upper corner.

He placed one foot in front of the other and made his way out of the bedroom, moving silently so as not to disturb the exhausted old man in the bed. Jim leapt to his feet as soon as Spock opened the door.

“What happened?” The captain asked. “What did he say?”

“He gave me a letter.” Spock explained. “There is an address on the envelope.”

Jim grinned. “Great! Finally. An actual clue. For awhile there I thought the parking ticket was all we had.” His weak attempt at humor failed miserably. Spock mutely handed him the letter and as Jim read it his grin vanished.

“What does it say?” McCoy asked, trying to read over Jim’s shoulder.

“Bones, if you want to see the patient do it now.” Jim said in his Captain Voice, returning the letter to Spock. “We’re going back to the Enterprise in ten minutes. I want to be out of this solar system in an hour.” He turned to Ruth. “Did you know about this?”

“I never read that letter.” Ruth replied calmly. “I didn’t want to.”

Jim wanted to punch her. He resisted. Barely.

At least they now had something to charge Sybok with, other than agitating the masses. If what Sybok’s letter seemed to be claiming was true it meant he’d been a party to the worst act of terrorism in Federation history.

It meant he’d been on board the Narada.
The good ship Enterprise hummed contentedly as she made her merry way to Nimbus III at a leisurely warp three, totally ignoring the inner torment of her command team.

Jim and Spock sat across from one another in Jim’s quarters, the letter laid flat on the desk between them. They were both staring at it as if they thought it might explode at any second. In a way, it already had.

“It can’t mean what it looks like it means.” Jim said for the hundredth time. “I mean…why?”

“I have a theory.” Spock said softly. “We never learned how Nero had known when my counterpart would come through the worm hole. As blood relatives, Sybok and I share a latent telepathic link. It is possible this link also extends to my counterpart and that Nero used Sybok as an warning system of some kind. He would have been able to tell when the other Spock was nearing our side of the rift through the link.”

“The canary in the mine.” Jim mused. Spock gave him a confused frown. “Hundreds of years ago miners on Earth used canaries to test for toxic gases underground. If the canary died they knew it wasn’t safe.” He explained.

“But Sybok did not die.” Spock reminded him. “He served his purpose and then he was released.”

“And we never knew.” Jim pressed his hand to his eyes. He could feel a stress migraine coming on.

“There are always unanswered questions.” Spock murmured. “This was one of them and now it has been answered. It does not change our mission.”

“But what is our mission, Spock?” Jim jumped out of his chair and began to pace the room. “To find this guy? To make an example of him? What good will that do anyone?”

“Are you questioning our orders, Captain?”

“No.” Jim sighed. “I understood what Nogura said earlier. He was right. We have to prove that Starfleet can still enforce the law, but…” He trailed off, trying to pin point the exact source of his misgivings and coming up empty. “I don’t like this, Spock. I don’t like anything about it. I don’t like what we’ve been reduced to. I don’t like that we’re being sent to do the Federation’s dirty work when we could be exploring the galaxy. I know there are all these political reasons for why Sybok has to be caught but I’m not a politician, Spock! I can’t think like one.” He walked around the desk and reached out to brush his finger against Spock’s cheek absent-mindedly. “Most of all, I don’t like putting you through all this.”

Spock’s eyes rose to meet Jim’s and for a moment all the air was sucked out of the room and Jim couldn’t have moved away even if he’d wanted to. His heart raced as his fingers traced the expanse of porcelain skin, catching on the earliest of stubbles, drifting upwards to push a single stray hair back into formation. Spock raised his own hand and gently placed his long, elegant fingers over Jim’s in a rare display of physical affection that took Jim’s breath away and stirred the voracious hunger he tried desperately to keep under wraps.

“Jim.” The sound of his name on Spock’s tongue sent shivers up and down Jim’s spine. “I am grateful that you are the person making this journey with me. I know our relationship has not always ***
been easy but you must know how important your friendship is to me.”

Friendship.

Right.

Because this was Spock, who was incredible and amazing and pure of heart and the fact that he considered an illogical human like Jim to be his friend was a fucking miracle. And Jim was a sad, pathetic fool for not being satisfied with that.

Jim forced himself to smile and ruffled Spock’s perfect hair, much to Spock’s indignation. “Love you too, buddy.” You have no idea. “Look, try to get some sleep. It’ll be a couple days before we reach Nimbus III. We’ll brief the crew in the morning. Ok?”

“I will rest on the condition that you do the same.” Spock acquiesced, rising to his feet. “And Jim, I do not wish to keep anything from the crew. At the very least the senior staff should be made aware of the full extent of Sybok’s crimes, if only so that they do not underestimate him.”

It took Jim’s brain a moment to catch up but when it did he winced. “You heard me and Bones in the shuttle, didn’t you? He didn’t mean anything by it, you know that, right?”

“My point exactly. I was alarmed by the doctor’s cavalier attitude. It would be a grave error in judgment to underestimate Sybok simply due to his relationship with me.”

“Okay, it’s your decision. If you want to tell them I’ll make sure you get the chance at tomorrow’s briefing.”

“Thank you, Captain. Good evening.”

“Spock!”

Spock paused at the door and Jim had to think fast to find a reason for calling out his name. Unfortunately the first words that raced out of his mouth without any permission from his brain were:

“Your family is batshit crazy.”

Spock regarded him with hooded eyes, his long lashes disguising an amused twinkle. “I quite agree, Captain.” He said and left, leaving Jim alone with his thoughts.

***

“Jim! Wake up!”

Jim opened his eyes. He was lying in his old bed back in Riverside. Not the one in the farmhouse, the tiny cot he’d slept on when he turned 18 and finally got his own apartment. Well, the landlord called it an apartment. It was actually a tiny alcove with a door, one soot-covered window, and just enough floor space for the cot and his backpack. The decrepit old building was right next to the transit yard and the whole place rattled whenever a shuttle took off. Bones was standing above him, shaking him awake.

“Bones?” Jim blinked, confused. “What are you doing here?”
“I’m a doctor, not a psychic, remember?” Bones rolled his eyes. “Come on. You’ve got to find Spock. They’re taking him away.”

Fear poured into Jim’s veins like ice and he jumped out of bed. “Where is he?”

“Hurry.”

Jim ran.

He had to find Spock. He raced out of his room and through the hall. The floor buckled beneath his feet and he stumbled. The whole building was swaying and in the distance he could hear the red alert sirens blaring. Was it an earthquake? What was an earthquake doing in Iowa?

The floor rippled again and Jim fell. His legs felt like they were trapped in molasses. He couldn’t move them. “Bones!” He screamed desperately. “Help!”

“Jim!”

He heard Spock’s voice calling his name but he couldn’t tell where it was coming from. All the lights were off in the hallway and the darkness pressed in around him. Jim tried furiously to stand but no matter how hard he strained he could not force his traitorous legs to move.

“Jim!”

“Spock!” Jim shouted back. “Where are you?”

“Jim!” He could hear fear in Spock’s voice and that frightened Jim more than anything else ever could.

“Spock!” He bellowed. “Follow the sound of my voice!”

He heard the crash of a door slamming shut followed by dead silence and knew with a terrible certainty that he was too late. He had failed. Spock was gone.

The sirens kept screaming. BEEP. BEEP. BEEEP. BEEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Jim fell out of bed, hitting his head on the corner of his nightstand.

“Son of a bitch.” He cursed, rubbing the smarting spot on his cranium. He pushed himself up so that he could lean against his berth and closed his eyes, breathing hard.

His face felt wet. Had he been crying in his sleep? Well, that was fucked.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Jim grabbed his alarm clock and threw it at the wall. His heart was still racing, adrenaline still pumping and he still had the feeling that Spock was in danger. He tried taking a few deep breaths to calm down.

*Pull it together, Kirk.* He ordered himself. *It was just a dream. He’s fine. He’s safe. He’s still here.*

The bump to his head proved useful as the pain served as a distraction from the already fading memory of his nightmare. Still, Jim decided to go find Spock and invite him to breakfast, just to be sure.
Okay. So. This chapter? A. Bitch.

I’m still not entirely happy with it. And I definitely wish that I could better develop Ruth and Sara at this point, but let’s be honest. No one reads fanfiction for the OCs. In the first draft of this chapter there were five more OCs. They weren’t necessary, I was just having fun, so I went back and combined them all into Ruth. And I am SO not satisfied with how she ended up. Luckily she’s going to show up at least one more time, so I’ll have another chance to get her right but MAN.

Also, the plot is actually pretty simple and straightforward. But as I was writing this I realized that I’ve been revealing it so slowly it might start seeming convoluted at this point. I promise, it’s not, it just seems like it right now, but if anyone has any clarifying questions feel free to ask and I will answer to the best of my ability. Its not like this is a book you guys can read all at once. Its easy to forget plot threads when there can be weeks between updates.

This is probably why more people don’t write thrillers for fanfiction…

Well, that’s all for now.

Please stay tuned!
Bad Moon Rising

Disclaimer:

**Author:** Everyone, if I could just have your attention please, just for a moment, I want to make a very important announcement.

(a-hem)

I do not own the characters created by Gene Roddenberry. Nor do I own any aspect of the Star Trek franchise. Nor do I own the song Bad Moon Rising by the Creedence Clearwater Revival. This is the end of my very important announcement. The end.

(Glances excitedly at Kirk and Spock)

*How was that? Did it work?*

**Kirk:** (shaking his head) No. He’s still burning textbooks on copy write law in the front yard.

**Mr. X:** I’m cutting off the evil at its source! They can’t learn copy write laws if they don’t have any books about copy write laws!

**Author:** …Okay. So until further notice, no one tell Mr. X about the internet.

Bad Moon Rising

In life there are good days and there are bad days. There are days when the sun is shining and the birds are singing and everything’s coming up daisies and ice cream. And then there are days when your car breaks down and your milk is expired and your dog dies. Part of being alive is taking the good with the bad. You couldn’t have one without the other. And even if it sometimes felt like all the days were bad, he always knew that good days would come around again eventually.

But Leonard McCoy was not having a bad day. His day had gone so far beyond the realm of car troubles and sour milk and, yes, even the demise of a beloved family pet that he could honestly say he was looking back on Spot’s death with fondness. He was having a mind fuck of a day. He was having an unrelenting perfect storm of a day. He was having what was quite possibly the worst day ever had by anyone anywhere in any universe.

And as usual, it was all James T. Kirk’s fault.

McCoy got to his feet so he could face his Vulcan cellmate on equal ground. “What did you just call me?”
He knew what she’d called him but he had to ask anyway. Because if he didn’t ask he would have to accept it and he very much wanted to hold on to this moment, this moment before a total stranger confirmed his worst fears, for as long as possible.

Because as monumentally miserable as his day had been so far it was about to get a lot worse.

***

The mission briefing was attended by all the senior staff, Uhura, Scotty, Sulu, Chekov and of course Jim and Spock. McCoy was there as well and he had insisted on bringing his newest hire, Doctor Geoffrey M’Benga. When he first told Jim of his intention Jim had been reluctant, concerned that Spock would feel uncomfortable talking about his family history in front of a stranger. Spock had put his fears to rest, pointing out that since M’Benga had been hired as an expert on Vulcans in the first place it would be illogical to leave him out of the proceedings especially since there was still so little they understood about Sybok’s infamous telepathic abilities.

Jim looked at the people assembled around the oval conference table, saw them all looking back at him with trust and expectancy in their eyes, and began.

“Our mission, should you choose to accept it—nah, I’m just kidding, none of us have a choice in the matter—our mission is to locate, arrest and if we can return one Sybok of Vulcan to Federation custody. Uhura, I want you to make it clear to the delegates in Paradise City that we are not here to see them. I don’t want our comm channels to be jammed with diplomatic bullshit the second we enter Nimbus III space. Now, before we get into the nitty-gritty, there are a few things I should mention. Number one, Sybok is apparently some kind of telepathic super villain. Do not underestimate him. Number two, we have reason to believe that he might have been on board the Narada when Vulcan was attacked. We’re not sure what capacity that was in, but right now we think he was probably a prisoner. Number three, he is Spock’s older brother.”

“Half brother.” Spock corrected.

“Right.” Jim nodded. “Half brother. Again, do not underestimate this guy. He is dangerous. He will —” Jim’s words came to an abrupt halt as he realized that he still didn’t know the precise nature of Sybok’s powers. “Absolve you of your sins or something, I’m not sure. The people we’ve talked to have been pretty vague but they all seemed really freaked out so whatever it is he does you know it’s bad.”

He looked around at the faces, noting that trust and expectancy had transformed into confusion and incredulity. “Any questions?”

Chekov ever so slowly raised his hand into the air. Jim nodded at him.

“Meester Spock has an evil brother?”

“Meester Spock has an evil brother?” Spock corrected.

“Right.” Jim nodded. “Half brother. Again, do not underestimate this guy. He is dangerous. He will —” Jim’s words came to an abrupt halt as he realized that he still didn’t know the precise nature of Sybok’s powers. “Absolve you of your sins or something, I’m not sure. The people we’ve talked to have been pretty vague but they all seemed really freaked out so whatever it is he does you know it’s bad.”

He looked around at the faces, noting that trust and expectancy had transformed into confusion and incredulity. “Any questions?”

Chekov ever so slowly raised his hand into the air. Jim nodded at him.

“Meester Spock has an evil brother?”

“That was exactly what I said!” McCoy exclaimed, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair. “It sounds nuts, right? Not only that, he’s got a whole evil side of the family. An entire clan of relations, dedicated to the forces of evil!”

“Bones.” Jim hissed angrily. Spock was staring at McCoy with a closed off expression, clearly trying to figure out if the doctor was joking or not.
“Evil isn’t the right word.” Dr. M’Benga said in his unfamiliar baritone. “But he practices a form of telepathy that hasn’t been used on Vulcan since before the time of Surak. The Captain is right to warn you about Sybok.”

“You’ve heard of him?” Jim asked, surprised.

“The Vulcans are a logical species, Captain Kirk.” M’Benga said seriously, but his eyes were twinkling. “They don’t keep secrets from their doctors. Also, one of his victims used to be my patient.” M’Benga gradually became aware that the top three ranking officers of Starfleet’s flag ship were staring at him in varying degrees of shock, ranging from McCoy’s dropped jaw to Spock’s quirked brow with Jim’s bemused squint falling somewhere in the middle. “Did I say something wrong?”

“…I am so glad I hired you.” McCoy answered, sitting back in his chair and smiling like the cat who not only ate the canary but bought the pet shop as well.

“What can you tell us, Doctor?” Jim asked, leaning forward eagerly. He could still see Spock out the corner of his eye and was relieved that while Spock didn’t appear overly enthusiastic about the turn the conversation had taken at least he hadn’t shut down the way he had in front of the Vulcan High Council.

As for Spock, he was mentally reviewing a list of names, trying to figure out who M’Benga’s patient was. It couldn’t have been T’sing because any connection to a known extremist group would have come up in his Starfleet background check which left the guards from the ship yard and—

“His name was Stevesh.”

Ah. Spock held back the urge to shift uncomfortably. This was one of the many topics he’d been hoping wouldn’t be brought up in the course of this mission. He had told Jim about the kidnapping. He hadn’t told him about the Others. In fact, Spock didn’t recall even thinking about the Others since the transport ship.

No, that was a lie. He had thought about them, he’d just pretended otherwise.

Spock did not want to be like the Others.

“It’s hard to explain exactly what happened. As humans we don’t have anything analogous to telepathic violence. Here’s what I know.” M’Benga was explaining. “When Sybok was leaving Vulcan Stevesh, my patient, tried to stop him. They traded a few blows and then Sybok used a telepathic technique that is so taboo in Vulcan society it doesn’t even have a name anymore. Stevesh was for all intents and purposes lobotomized on the spot. He never recovered. He spent the rest of his life in hospitals and long-term care facilities and died a year ago. The strain of relocation was too much for him and he no longer possessed the capability to understand what had happened to Vulcan.”

A horrified hush had fallen over the conference table as he spoke. Uhura’s hand was over her open mouth and Chekov looked like he might throw up.

Sulu just had to ask. “When you say lobotomized…?”

“There was no structural damage, of course.” M’Benga assured them. “But the telepathic damage was so severe all communication between the cortex and the frontal lobe was completely cut off. For a Vulcan this type of injury is even more devastating than it is for humans. I’m sure that for Stevesh it was a kind of living hell.”
Jim glanced over at Spock and discovered his First Officer staring at his hands under the table like a petulant child. Dammit. He sighed inwardly. “Spock?” He asked gently. “Anything you want to add?”

He could read the no loud and clear in Spock’s eyes when he looked up but instead of refusing as he so clearly wanted Spock nodded and leaned forward to address the table at large. “I am familiar with Stevesh. He was a teacher at the learning center I attended as a child. The altercation Dr. M’Benga referenced occurred when Stevesh attempted to prevent Sybok from removing me from the center without the proper authorization from my parental units.”

Jim could see the gears turning in the minds of his crew. Surprisingly it was McCoy who figured it out first.

“Spock, are you saying Sybok kidnapped you?”

“Of course he’s not saying that.” Scotty looked at Spock sheepishly. “Right?”

“That is technically what happened.” Spock admitted.

The conference table exploded. Scotty, Uhura and Sulu all leapt to their feet, trying to shout over one another.

“That bastard!”

“You say the word, Captain, and I’ll push ‘er to warp nine!”

“Oh my god Spock! Why didn’t you tell me?!”

Chekov and M’Benga both looked shocked, confused and deeply concerned. Chekov even went so far as to lean forward and ask sweetly. “Are you alright, Commander?” But his words were drowned out in the shouting. Jim tried to intervene, waving his hands in the air and saying things like “Settle down, will you? Uhura, Sybok’s not here and you can’t actually hurt him by punching the air-Scotty, what the hell are you going to do with that chair, put it down-Sulu! What did I tell you about bringing collapsible swords to mission briefings?!”

But it was McCoy who really stole the show.

He surged up from his chair like an almighty leviathan rising from the deep and there was a righteous kind of wrath in his eyes. His face was turning a dark purple and livid veins throbbed on his temple. He pointed a shaking finger at Spock and roared like a wounded animal, “YOU LITTLE SHIT!”

Dead silence followed. Everyone stared at McCoy, stunned breathless, Sulu with his sword still in his hand. Spock had both eyebrows raised and an expression that said, who, me?

“How dare you!” McCoy bellowed. “HOW DARE YOU NOT TELL US SOMETHING SO MOTHERFUCKING IMPORTANT, YOU SNARKY BASTARD!” His howling dropped in volume but his fury still filled the room like thick black smoke. “I’m your fucking doctor Spock! And on this ship that makes me your psychiatrist too! If you’ve got a problem like this I need to know, god dammit! And you!” He turned on Jim like a ravenous beast. “You knew about this! Don’t deny it, I know you did! How dare you keep something like this from me! You may think you’re protecting him but you’re not, you’re just enabling him! I don’t care if it’s a broken bone, a phaser blast or, I don’t know, being kidnapped by a close family member as a child, if it’s medically relevant information then I need to know about it!”

Jim kept his mouth shut during McCoy’s angry tirade and when he was certain the doctor was
finished he crossed his arms and frowned. “That isn’t fair.”

“Not fair?” McCoy scoffed. “I can’t work under these conditions and that isn’t fair to anyone.”

“As I recall, Captain…” Of course Spock couldn’t leave well enough alone. He just had to chime in. “Your reaction was incredibly similar to the doctor’s, except that you were louder by three entire decibels and you swore with a greater regularity.”

“That’s it. Everyone other than Spock and Bones, out. I’ll send you guys a written packet with the rest of the details later but right now the gentlemen and I need to have a private conversation about professionalism.”

Jim waited with his hands crossed and a pleasant expression on his face while his crew reluctantly filed out. He waited until the door was shut and then he waited some more. Then, just to be sure, he shouted, “I said private, Uhura!” and was gratified when he heard the sounds of muttered curses and stomping feet moving further away. He spun around in his chair and glared at his friends.

“What the hell was that?” He demanded.

McCoy glared back from the other end of the conference table and stuck out his jaw stubbornly. “I think I made myself pretty clear.”

“Bones, you have the right to accuse me of many things, but stonewalling you isn’t one of them. I’m your Captain. You have to believe that if I keep something from you it’s because I have a damn good reason.” Jim snapped.

“And Jim, that excuse might have worked if I hadn’t spent the majority of last night battling snow and ice and killer wind chill just because you told me to.” McCoy’s eyes were like shards of flint. Jim blinked and subconsciously leaned back in his chair, realizing for the first time that this wasn’t one of the doctor’s usual tantrums. He was truly furious with them. “You can lie to everyone else on board this ship if you think you need to, but if you lie to me we will be dead in the water before you can point to a random star system and say ‘that way.’”

“The Captain kept this information private on my behalf.” Spock interjected. “He did not lie to you.”

“Yes, he did.” McCoy snapped. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that it was the Graysons who got you back when you were kidnapped? That’s why they knew what had happened to Sybok afterwards, because they were the ones who did the happening.”

Spock and Jim nodded. McCoy snorted. “That’s what I thought. I don’t know if you guys noticed, but we walked into the headquarters of one of the most powerful smuggling rings in the galaxy last night. Did you see those plomeek crates in the kitchen? Did you see the markings on the side?”

Jim couldn’t say he had but Spock, naturally, remembered the markings in detail.

“An exaggerated illustration of a wild Earth feline displaying unusually large fangs and—”

“I called my ex-wife’s brother last night.” McCoy interrupted what was sure to be a long-winded and technically (and only technically) accurate description. “He works for Starfleet Intelligence. Legally I’m not allowed to discuss missions with him but we keep in touch.” He looked at their confused faces and his own face darkened. “Believe it or not I’m actually a few years older than either of you
and I’ve got more field experience than both of you combined. I have connections. Now I mentioned the Graysons and my brother-in-law sent me a file detailing the crimes of Mordecai Grayson and his gang. It was a big file. Mostly Romulan Ale smuggling. It’s profitable, because everyone wants some. It’s dangerous, cause if you get caught by the Federation you spend the rest of your life in a penal colony and if you get caught by the Romulans the rest of your life will only last another five minutes at most. According to the file the Grayson’s have been doing it longer than anyone else. Remember those markings? Civilians call that the Roaring Lion. People who have cause to know about smuggling, cops, soldiers, other smugglers, they all call it Old Max. The Graysons have brand name recognition. Do you know how many smugglers have a brand, let alone a recognizable one?”

Jim and Spock didn’t respond. McCoy continued anyway.

“Spock, your grandfather? If it weren’t for the fact that Starfleet could never find a witness willing to turn state he would have been on the Most Wanted list for the last fifty years. And last night I took his temperature. I walked into his house and I took his temperature. And sure, maybe he’s a frail old man now, but the rest of them? Sara? I read up on those charges you mentioned, Jim. The only reason she was charged with manslaughter and not first-degree murder was the key witness for the prosecution disappeared under mysterious circumstances so they settled. And I’d bet my left kidney that John the Troll has something to do with that disappearance. Those were not nice people we met last night, Jim. I believe that they put family first or whatever but Jim, if Spock hadn’t been with us you and me wouldn’t have walked out of that bar alive.”

“You know what I find amazing?” Jim snapped sarcastically. “That you managed to say all that without actually getting to the part where you explain how precisely I lied to you.”

“You didn’t tell me!” McCoy yelled back, jumping to his feet. “You let me walk in there, let me risk my life, without giving me all the facts! You can’t do that Jim. I have a right to know when I’m putting myself in danger, and for what.”

“I didn’t know! Sarek gave me the address and so I followed up on it.” Jim also rose from his seat.

“What do you expect me to believe, that Sarek didn’t know what his wife’s family did for a living or he just didn’t tell you?”

“Believe whatever you like, as long as you follow orders I don’t give a fuck!”

“Sir yes sir, you fascist dick!”

“Spock!” Jim bellowed, swinging around to face his First Officer. “Back me up here!”

Spock blinked up at Jim. Then he turned his head and blinked up at McCoy. Then he turned back and blinked at Jim again.

“I do not believe I fully understand the emotional nuance of this conversation.” Spock said slowly. “Why are both of you standing? Should I be standing?”

“Oh, shove it up your ass you lying hobgoblin.” McCoy snapped and stormed out of the room.

“Talk to him like that again and I swear I’ll have you court-martialed!” Jim shouted after him. There was no response other than the soft whoosh of the door closing automatically. Jim huffed angrily and pushed his hair out of his eyes, turning around to look at Spock. “Can you believe him?”

Spock, who had lost track of the conversation right around when the other crewmembers had been sent out of the room, just stared back unhelpfully. He was still trying to figure out how anything that had been said related to professionalism and coming up empty.
As First Officer of the Enterprise it was Spock’s responsibility to confirm that the security personnel were fully prepared for the mission on Nimbus III. This task was complicated by the Captain’s latest mission statement: show up at #367 Zek Street and see what happens. Security Chief Hendorff was not responding at all well to this plan, no matter how hard Spock tried to explain the logical merits of Jim’s knock first policy.

“You want covert, I can do covert.” Hendorff yelled as he paced the floor of Spock’s quarters. Spock watched him wearily from his desk. They had been at this for over an hour. “You want guns blazing, I can give you guns blazing. But you want us to just sit back while you do, what exactly, ring the doorbell?”

“Affirmative.” Spock thought about it for a moment. “Assuming there is a doorbell.”

Hendorff threw his hands up in the air. “See! You don’t even know if there’s a doorbell! What kind of intelligence are we operating on?”

“Very little.” Spock admitted. “And what we do have was secured through questionable sources.”

Hendorff groaned and collapsed in the chair on the other side of Spock’s desk, his face in his hands. “Why are we doing this? I’m supposed to have resources. I’m supposed to have intelligence.” He glared balefully from between his fingers. “I’m supposed to have back up.”

Spock didn’t answer. Of course Hendorff was right. Starfleet was never intended to operate on a shoe-string budget and the entire Fleet was stretched so thin across the Federation it would be three weeks before another ship could reach them if anything went wrong. But acknowledging the situation out loud would not improve it; it would only damage morale in the lower ranks.

“How many security personnel do you recommend?” Spock asked instead.

Hendorff sighed and dropped his hands into his lap. “For the initial? Four, maybe five. Not so many that we draw attention but enough that we’ll be able to cover our own asses.”

“Draw up a roster.” Spock agreed.

“Aye sir.” Hendorff got up and made for the door.

“Commander.” Spock called out just before Hendorff left the room. The head of security turned back.

“Yes, sir?”

Spock hesitated for the briefest of seconds before saying, “I do not expect to be met with resistance of any kind on Nimbus III.”

Hendorff’s eyes clouded over. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Granted.”

“Ever since I came on board this ship once a year, every year, everything goes to hell in a hand basket. It’s been over a year since Khan. I’d say we’re due.”
Spock raised an eyebrow. “You believe our doom is predestined and inevitable?”

“I think we’re probably cursed, if that’s what you mean.”

“That is illogical.”

“Don’t think logic has much to do with it, sir.”

“Explain.”

Hendorff looked uncomfortable. “Look, sir, I’m not a great thinker like you and the Captain. I don’t know anything about politics or—”

“Commander.” Spock interrupted him. “You are Chief of Security on this ship and you have proven that you are a capable and talented officer on multiple occasions. I am asking for your opinion in your capacity as Chief of Security.”

Hendorff looked miserable and more than a little guilty. He began to edge closer to the door as he spoke, just in case he said the wrong thing and needed to make a break for it. “As I said sir, I’m not a great thinker and I don’t know the first thing about politics or telepathy or Vulcan whatever. But I read the briefing the Captain wrote and I’ve got to say that from a purely military perspective—well, of course I trust you, sir, and I trust the Captain but I’ve read reports before like that—and of course I don’t mean to assume anything, sir, about your family but—”

“Commander.” Spock interrupted again before Hendorff could tie himself into too many knots. “What are you trying to say?”

“There’s something they’re not telling us, sir.” The words tripped out of Hendorff’s mouth like they were racing each other. “I’m sorry, sir, but if you send intelligence operatives out into the field you don’t just lose touch. You don’t just wait to hear back. And if you’ve lost more than one operative on the same mission with no clue what happened to them you sure as hell don’t send in the flagship. That’s just not how these things work.”

The two men stared at one another, the word trap hovering silently in the air between them and neither of them able to say it out loud.

“I will sign off on that roster as soon as you write it, Commander.”

“Aye, sir. Right away, sir.”

***

Uhura sung softly under her breath while she spun in her chair and waited for the Klingon representative in Paradise City to get back to her.

“Dun dun dun-dun dun dun dun-dun earthquakes and lighting. I see trouble on its—”

“Uhura!” Scotty called as he walked onto the bridge, beaming and waving a can of mechanical lubricant in one hand and a blowtorch in the other. Uhura immediately jumped out of her seat and plastered herself over her communication control board.

“Back off, Mister!” She growled fiercely. “You’re an explosion waiting to happen and there’s no
way you’re coming anywhere near my station!”

Scotty looked genuinely hurt by her lack of faith. “It’s non-flammable.” He said gloomily, shaking the aerosol can like a rattle.

Uhura was unmoved. “That’s what you said last time, and what happened then?”

Scotty scowled. “That was an unavoidable accident which—”

“What happened?”

…I started a fire in the dilithium chamber.”

“And?”

“And almost blew up the ship.”

“And?”

“And you saved me, o wondrous goddess of beauty and wisdom, I am but your humble servant, I worship at your feet and am grateful just to be in your presence.”

“And don’t you forget it, Mister.” Uhura grinned and flopped back into her seat. Except for the ensign sitting at the navigation station the bridge was empty. Everyone else was running around trying to get ready for, well, everything. No one had any idea what to expect and so they were preparing for every single scenario they could think of. Now considering that every person on this ship was intelligent and more than a little paranoid after spending the last three years exploring space and making new exciting discoveries that invariably tried to kill them, it was possible that the crew was getting a little carried away. When Uhura had last checked in with her Communications department they had teamed up with Botany and were building a giant trebuchet that could function in the vacuum of space. Rumor had it that the janitorial staff had rigged the environmental controls to flood the hallways with water and drop the temperature into the sub-zeros in order to turn all the floors into treacherous sheets of ice in the event that they were boarded. Uhura was inclined to believe that rumor because she knew for a fact that a handful of yeoman had been replicating ice skates for the crew all morning.

Scotty sighed. “I have to replace that circuit sooner or later, Uhura, and to do that I’ve got to take off that broken bolt.”

“Fine.” Uhura grumbled. “Can you at least wait until I’ve heard back from the Klingon representative?”

“No problem.” Scotty agreed cheerfully. He took a seat in the empty chair next to hers. “So.” He said conversationally. “What kind of place is this, anyway?”

“You mean Paradise City?”

“Aye, that’s the one.”

“It’s the main city on Nimbus III, Scotty. You know that.”

“Right. And I know that because…?”

“Because Starfleet sends us intelligence bulletins which we all read and the colonization of Nimbus III and the founding of Paradise City was announced six months ago in a bulletin which I know you
read, on account of the fact that I handed it to you and said ‘read this’ and you said ‘yes, Uhura.’ Any of this ringing a bell?”

“Remind me.” Scotty said without even a trace of shame, totally unperturbed by the hairy eyeball Uhura was giving him.

Uhura sighed. “Fine. But sooner or later you need to start reading the intelligence bulletins.” Scotty just shrugged. He made no promises. “Nimbus III is this tiny little planet that, in its own right, isn’t very important. It’s barely Class M and half the size of Earth. But it is also the only planet that lies directly on the borders between Federation space, Klingon space and Romulan space. Which makes it very important indeed. Scotty? Are you paying attention?”

Scotty looked up guiltily from the sensor he’d been fiddling with. “Aye.” He gulped.

Uhura glared at him suspiciously before continuing. “As you can imagine, all three super powers wanted to claim the planet but it’s almost impossible to tell where borders are in outer space so no one was able to agree. Then last year representatives from the Federation, the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Empire got together and decided to set up a joint colony on the planet. Nominally the colony is a sovereign state, belonging to no one but itself, and governed by a council made up of three representatives from each of the three super powers. Scotty? Would you leave it alone and listen? I’m saying all this for your benefit, you know.”

Scotty again looked up guiltily from the sensor. “Sorry.” He apologized, then frowned as Uhura’s words made their way from his ears to his brain. “What do you mean nominally?” He asked.

Uhura sighed. “I mean if there’s any rule of law at all down there I’ve yet to find it. So far I’ve talked to the Federation representative and the Romulan representative-and neither of those were particularly pleasant conversations, let me tell you—but I haven’t been able to reach Kothar, the Klingon, yet. I’m hoping I can appeal to his sense of honor and get him to make an exception.”

“An exception to what?” Scotty asked without looking up from the sensor reading as he twirled the controls.

“No weapons.” Uhura sighed. “Not in the city, not on the planet. It seems to be the one and only law they have. The Romulan representative made it very clear that while we’re welcome to come and go as we please, if our guys have phasers when they beam down she’ll consider it an act of war and have half the Romulan fleet hunting us down within the hour.”

Scotty whistled. “The Captain ain’t gonna like that.”

“I haven’t told him yet.” Uhura admitted. “Can you do it?” She asked hopefully.

“Ha. You’re hilarious.” Scotty said sarcastically, still messing with the sensors. “Hey, does this look strange to you?”

Uhura leaned over so that she could see the screen he was looking at. “Does what look strange?” She asked.

“Wait for it, there’s a blip or something, keeps going in and—there! Did you see it?”

“Yeah…” Uhura said hesitantly, though the object had appeared and disappeared from the sensor screen so quickly she couldn’t be sure she’d seen anything at all. “What do you think it is?”

“I’ll tell you what it is.” Scotty said darkly, a grim set to his jaw. “Last time we were docked I told Ensign Lewis to clean the sensor probes on the outer hull. You’ve got to give them a good washing—
down every couple months to make sure there’s no space debris getting caught in the machinery and messing up the sensors. Well, it looks like somebody missed a spot. As soon as we’re in orbit I’ll stuff him in a space suit and boot him outside with a bucket and a sponge.”

Uhura didn’t respond straight away. She kept watching the screen, waiting for the blip to come back. And there it was! A longer wait this time and…there it was again. And again, only a split second after disappearing, it was back. And then it was gone again.

“It almost looks like…” She started to say but then trailed off, biting her lip. Scotty gave her a funny look.

“Like what?” He asked.

“Like a ship with an unstable cloaking device.” She whispered.

Scotty turned to her, wide-eyed. “You think it’s a Romulan ship?” He asked.

“Well, I was just threatened by a high-ranking Romulan diplomat.” Uhura pointed out. “But it could just be a coincidence. Or, like you said, it could just be space debris clogging up the sensors.”

“Are you gonna call the Captain?” Scotty asked her.

Uhura considered it for a moment. “No, I’ll call Spock. The Captain’s been acting like a dick to everyone other than Spock ever since he and McCoy got into that fight. If I call him before I’m certain there’s something to be worried about he’ll just bite my head off. Plus I need to convince Spock to tell Jim about the whole no weapons thing anyway.” She tapped her mic. “Come in Commander Spock.”

“Spock here.”

“Would you mind coming up to the bridge? Scotty and I have something we want to show you.”

“On my way. Spock out.”

“If it is a Romulan ship do you think it’s following us?” Scotty asked.

“I don’t know.” Uhura said, frowning. “We’re pretty close to the Demilitarized Zone but we’re still definitely in Federation space. If it’s Romulans we would be well within our jurisdiction to confront them.”

The door opened and Spock walked onto the bridge. The ensign at the navigation station saluted before turning back to his work.

“Uhura, Mister Scott.” Spock greeted them as he strode over. “What did you—”

He was interrupted by the frantic beeping coming from Uhura’s communication station. Uhura slid back over in her chair and began tapping the buttons.

“We’re being hailed by the Klingon representative to Paradise City.” She announced.

“On screen.” Spock said, turning to stand next to the Captain’s empty chair. Uhura nodded and opened the channel. The wizened, bearded face of an elderly Klingon filled the screen. The old warrior glared at them.

“What do you want?” He growled.
“Representative Kothar, I am First Officer Spock. On behalf of Captain Kirk and the United Federation of Planets I request permission for a limited number of our men to beam down in an attempt to locate a wanted fugitive whose last known location was in Paradise City.” Spock answered politely.

The Klingon roared with sarcastic laughter. “You have no jurisdiction on Nimbus III, Starfleet. You have no legal grounds to make an arrest.”

“We are aware of this, sir.” Spock agreed. “This mission would be limited to reconnaissance and we would only beam down with your permission, and the permission of your peers.”

Kothar tugged at the end of his beard thoughtfully. “And what do Kirona and Simmons say about this?”

“Lady Kirona and Agent Simmons have both given us their permission, sir.” Uhura spoke up.

“Will Captain Kirk be joining the mission?” Kothar asked in a tone of voice that suggested he was trying to be subtle. No one was fooled.

“Starfleet policy prevents me from releasing that information to the public.” Spock said promptly. “In this instance that includes you, Representative.” The Klingons had been gunning for Jim ever since the incident with Khan. Kothar was clearly under the impression that he would be able to score points with the Klingon High Council by passing on information about Captain Kirk, or maybe even by removing the Captain from the equation all together.

“Isn’t that just like a Vulcan. You care more for policies than you do for honor.” Kothar sneered. Then he sighed. “Fine. You have my permission. But remember, no weapons.” The main view screen went dark and Kothar was gone. Spock turned to Uhura, one eyebrow raised.

“No weapons?”

Uhura cursed under her breath. “I was hoping to talk him out of it, but he signed off before I could say anything.” She complained. “They don’t allow weapons in Paradise City. It’s the only law they have. If we violate it we’d be violating the treaty and it could be seen as an act of war.”

“Which is exactly what we’re all trying to avoid.” Scotty added helpfully as he tried to slide under Uhura’s station while she was still sitting at it. Uhura rolled her eyes and moved out of the way.

“What constitutes a weapon?” Spock asked her as Scotty got to work on the broken bolt.

“Well, no phasers or disruptors, obviously.” Uhura started ticking off weapons on her hands. “No swords, pikes, bat-liths, spears or anything with a blade exceeding three inches in length. No hand grenades, flash bombs or land mines. No—”

WHOOSH

“AAARRGH!” Scotty rolled out from under the communication station with his hands crossed over his face and covered in soot. Flames burst out of the station while Uhura looked on in helpless shock. The ship’s sensors detected the fire immediately and the sprinklers in the ceiling burst to life, coating the bridge and every person on it with a mist of flame retardant. The ensign at navigation squawked in alarm.

“What did I tell you?” Uhura screamed at Scotty, absolutely beside herself with rage as she pointed to the burnt out remains of her station, all other matters completely forgotten.
“It said inflammable on the can!” Scotty protested. “I was tricked!”

Uhura’s eyes began to bug out of her skull. “INFLAMMABLE MEANS FLAMMABLE!”

“Oh.” Scotty looked sheepish under all his soot. “I did not realize that.”

“I will inform the Captain.” Spock said wearily and made his way over to the turbolift, leaving Scotty’s chastisement in Uhura’s capable hands.

***

Hamlet had escaped his enclosure. It was the third time that week, too. Janice Rand stalked the halls of the Enterprise, peeking in doors and creeping around corners, trying to take the alien chicken by surprise. Rand still wasn’t entirely certain how the chicken had become her responsibility. After all, it was Uhura who had brought the chicken on board at New Vulcan, and it was Chekov who’d named him a day later in the hope that with a name like Hamlet the chicken would face a grisly end sooner rather than later. No one really liked Hamlet The Green Alien Chicken. He squawked all the time and he kept bobbing into the air, landing on people’s heads and slapping them in the face with his wings repeatedly. He never seemed to sleep, all he did was eat and escape, eat and escape, and if he wasn’t doing either of those two things it was because he had already escaped and was now off looking for something to eat. Which might have been funny, except that the janitorial department was for some unfathomable reason terrified of Hamlet and refused to have anything to do with him, which made the growing layer of bird feces on the bottom of Hamlet’s enclosure Rand’s responsibility.

So maybe she wasn’t actually looking for the damned bird all that hard.

As she was walking by the officer’s lounge she happened to notice Captain Kirk sitting in one of the armchairs and glaring at the window as if the vast speckled blackness of space had just farted in his general direction. Under normal circumstances she would never have considered bothering him with a matter as trivial as Hamlet the Escaping Chicken. Taking into account the Captain’s mood over the last couple of days, Rand figured she had a better chance of survival if she volunteered for the next round of drug tests the Chemistry Department was so fond of subjecting innocent crewmembers to rather than asking a grumpy star ship Captain if he’d seen their feathered friend. Rand turned and tried to tip toe to safety. Unfortunately Jim saw her.

“Yeoman Rand!” He called her back. “What are you doing?”

Rand tried to make herself look soft and feminine and bubbly and about as un-McCoy-like as she could possibly be. Be the blonde. She thought, maintaining her inner zen. “I’m looking for Hamlet, Captain.”

“Hamlet?”

“Yes sir. Have you seen him?”

“Who is Hamlet?”

“The chicken Uhura brought on board, sir. He keeps escaping his coop.”

“Oh. Right. I haven’t seen it. You mean to tell me that thing is loose on my ship?”
“Apparently, sir.” Not to mention the other two dozen times he’s gotten out…

“Didn’t I tell you to keep it out of my sight?”

“Yes sir. Commendations all around, I figure.”

“And how do you figure that?”

“Well, you haven’t seen it, sir.”

“…Well played, Yeoman. Well played.”

“Thank you sir.” Rand waited for another moment and when it seemed like Jim wasn’t going to say anything else she turned to continue on her quest.

“Rand.” He called her back again. “What do you make of this mission?”

Rand paled. “It’s really not my place to say, sir.”

Jim snorted. “According to Sulu and Chapel you’re one of the most highly-educated people on this ship outside the Sciences and you’re the only person other than Spock who was a public figure even before coming onboard this ship. And most importantly, I’m the Captain so when I say that I want to hear your honest opinion your place is wherever the acoustics are best.”

“Yes, sir.” Rand felt a blush stain her cheeks. James T. Kirk didn’t stand on protocol. She knew that. It had been a foolish thing to say. This time she thought before she spoke.

“The Betazoids have a story about a man who loved to garden. He loved his garden so much that one night when he woke up and smelled smoke he ran straight out to the garden to see if it was okay. And sure enough, his prized rose bushes were on fire. So he runs to the well and he grabs the bucket and fills it with water and he throws the water on the bushes. Nothing happens. So he fills up the bucket again and throws the water on the flames and again, nothing happens. And again and again and again until dawn comes and the man throws the last bucket of water from the now-dry well onto the bushes and finally the flames go out. By this time his neighbor has noticed that something is wrong and the neighbor comes running up to make sure that the man is still alive. The man laughs and reassures his neighbor that everything is fine because, after all, he managed to save the garden. The neighbor gives him a funny look and says, ‘That’s great, but didn’t you notice your house burnt down?’ The man turns and notices for the first time that while he was putting out the fire in the garden his whole house had gone up in flames.” Rand finished her story and waited for Jim to respond. When he made no sound she tried to explain. “Basically I’m saying that Admiral Nogura, no offense meant, is so busy taking care of the garden he hasn’t noticed the house burning down.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Jim said. “But are we the garden? Or is Starfleet the garden and the Federation is the house? Is Sybok supposed to be the well?”

Rand sighed. “No, sir. I mean—shhh!”

“I didn’t say any—”

“Shh!”

Rand cocked her head and listened very, very carefully. If she really strained she could almost hear something in the distance, something that almost sounded like a…yes! There it was again! Without a doubt the welcome sound of an indignant squawk as a chartreuse avian was knocked off its perch.
“I’ve got you now you fluffy bastard!” She roared triumphantly and charged in the direction of the noise, all sense of protocol or respect for the chain of command completely forgotten.

Unfortunately this meant that Jim was once again left alone with his thoughts. Now that he had no distraction from his brooding he returned to glaring out the window while the memories of his fight with Bones buzzed in his ears.

They would arrive at Nimbus III in nine hours and Jim hadn’t even spoken to McCoy in two and a half days. This was unprecedented. Sure, they fought all the time but it usually ended with both of them shouting something absurd at the same time and then smiling sardonically at one another and skipping off into the sunset.

Okay, maybe not the skipping part, but still. They were best buddies, birds of a feather, amigos forever.

Jim’s glare morphed into an outright scowl. And where the hell did Bones get off, going after Spock like that? None of this was Spock’s fault. The doctor had crossed a line and if he didn’t apologize soon Jim would have no choice but to make a note in his personnel file.

So there.

And then there were the dreams. He’d been having them every night and they weren’t getting any easier. Every night he lost Spock in so many different ways. Sometimes Spock was taken and sometimes Spock left on his own. The setting, the enemy, the people Jim saw and the sounds he heard all changed but the one thing that was always the same was that he, Jim, never made it on time. He was always too slow or too lost or too late to save Spock. Every. Single. Night. It was beginning to drive him more than a little crazy and the worst part was he had no idea what had happened to make him so afraid. Normally he would have talked to Bones but that was clearly out of the question.

Jim stuck out his chin and sunk lower in his chair, secretly wishing someone would walk by and ask him what was wrong so that he could tell them that nothing was wrong and then ask them if they’d seen McCoy lately. Stupid Bones. Probably having a great time down in sickbay. Probably living it up with his new best friend Mmmm’benga. The only reason Bones even likes M’Benga is because he’s new. And some sort of Vulcan guru. I liked Vulcans way before it was cool. All doctors are stupid. And mean. And—

“Captain.”

Jim’s head snapped up and he twisted around in his chair, delighted to see his favorite person entering the officer’s lounge.

“Spock!” He cried, grinning. “Come in! Take a seat.”

Spock closed the door behind himself and claimed the armchair next to Jim’s. “First I must alert you to a fire on the bridge.”

“Mister Scott accidentally set off a very small fire which was immediately dealt with by the ship’s environmental controls. There is no need for further alarm, though Lieutenant Uhura’s station was badly damaged. Communications will have to pass through the department on Deck 4 for the time being instead of the bridge.” Spock explained calmly.

“Ah.” Jim sank back down into his chair. “He got inflammable and nonflammable mixed up again,
didn’t he?”

“Apparently.”

Jim sighed. “Anything else?”

“Yes. Weapons are forbidden in Paradise City. If our team is armed when we beam down to the planet it could spark an interstellar war.”

Jim groaned. “Just what we need. What do they expect us to do? Beam down to that nest of vipers unarmed and completely vulnerable?”

“They expect us to follow their laws while on their planet.” Spock said softly.

“Well when you put it like that, all rational and everything…” Jim grumbled. “So what have we got in the arsenal that’s discrete?”

“Captain?” Spock sounded genuinely surprised at his question. Jim turned his head to look at him incredulously.

“You don’t really expect me to lead my crew into a possible trap without any means to defend themselves, do you?” He asked.

“We do not need to bring weapons with us.” Spock insisted. “To do so would be an unnecessary provocation.”

“You don’t know that it would be unnecessary.” Jim argued. “You have no more clue what to expect than I do.”

“No.” Spock agreed softly. “However, I do not believe we will be met with any amount of opposition that would rival the powers of a starship. We do not need to bring weapons because our greatest weapon will be in orbit above us, ready to act at the first sign of trouble. Compliance with this law would not create undo risk.”

The thought of being without his phaser on Nimbus III turned Jim’s stomach but he could see Spock’s point. “Fine.” He snapped. “No weapons. But you get to explain it to Cupcake.”

“I will make certain that Commander Hendorff is aware of the restriction.” Spock agreed, gracefully sidestepping Jim’s nickname for the security chief.

They sat in silence for awhile, lost and alone in their own thoughts but at least together in the same physical space. The stars stuttered across the window as the ship’s engines whirred and hummed.

“What do you think we’ll find once we get there?” Jim asked suddenly, still staring out the window. “Do you think we’ll find him?”

Spock didn’t need to ask who Jim meant. “No. If it were so easy to find him someone else would have done so already.”

“We got the inside scoop.” Jim reminded him.

Spock’s eyebrows drew together. “The inside scoop?” He asked.

Jim couldn’t help but smirk. “You know. Information that only someone on the inside would know.”

Spock looked if anything more confused. “On the inside of what?” He asked. “And what tool would
one use to scoop information?"

Jim tried to keep a straight face, he really did. But something about the way Spock said the word scoop, as if he wasn’t sure it was even a word at all, as if he suspected that this was an elaborate hoax, transformed the leaden knot of depression in his stomach into a warm bubbly feeling. He started laughing so hard he began to slide out of his chair and in the process totally missed the satisfaction that flashed across Spock’s face and then vanished without a trace. Jim’s head slipped down the cushion and he hit his skull against the armrest as he slid onto the floor, laughing even harder now for some reason that neither of them understood. Spock rose to his feet and offered Jim his hand. Jim grabbed it but instead of using it as leverage to pull himself up he pulled Spock down with him, one sudden jerk and Spock had tumbled right into his lap. Jim ruffled his hair playfully. “Thanks for making me feel better.”

“Captain.” Spock’s disapproving voice was muffled by Jim’s shoulder. “This is undignified.”

“Yup.” Jim agreed happily.

And then…

Something amazing occurred to him.

Something incredible.

Something Jim had never, even in his wildest fantasies, contemplated before.

He poked Spock. In the side. Right on the squishy spot, you know the spot, the spot that makes the squeaks come out.

And while Spock didn’t squeak his response was, in its own way, just as amusing. His whole body flinched inward and he pulled his torso away from Jim so quickly that his lower half didn’t have time to get the message. Jim found himself holding onto Spock’s hips to keep him from falling over while Spock leaned as far back as he could and stared at Jim with wide-eyed shock. Jim was experiencing his own kind of shock, an electric tingling kind of shock that radiated from his fingertips digging into Spock’s thighs, from Spock’s weight heavy on Jim’s thighs. Suddenly all the blood in Jim’s brain went on vacation someplace warm, someplace south.

“Oh my god.” Jim whispered, a devilish grin spreading across his face. “Can I do that again?”

“No. Do not do that again.” Spock snapped instantly, his eyes narrowing in warning.

“I want to do that again.”

“I do not care. Do not do that again.”

“I’m going to do that again.”

“Jim, do not do that—”

“Ahem.”

They both jumped apart at the sound of the intruder’s voice. Spock rose to his feet and straightened his uniform, his face already settling back into its usual mask. Jim wasn’t so fortunate. He was pretty sure his whole body was turning cherry red as he blinked guiltily at Yeoman Rand, who stood in the doorway with her arms crossed and a half-hidden smirk.
“Yes?” He croaked, trying not to feel like she’d sabotaged him.

Of course she didn’t sabotage me. I wasn’t going to do anything. He’s Spock. Can’t do anything to Spock…

Yeah, Jim, maybe now isn’t the best time to think about doing things to Spock…

“Captain.” Rand said sweetly. “Commander.” She nodded at Spock.

“Yeoman Rand.” He replied politely.

“Spock, Rand, Jim.” Jim snapped. “Great. We all have names. Congratulations, us. What do you want, Rand?”

“I was wondering if I could get your permission to implant a tracking device in Hamlet?” Rand asked, swallowing her smirk.

Jim frowned. “Who’s Hamlet?”

“The alien chicken Uhura—”

“Right. Right. I remember now. A tracking device?”

“Yeah. I know that Carol has one left over. We were thinking we’d implant it in Hamlet and then he wouldn’t get lost so often.”

What little fire was left in Jim’s veins vanished at the sound of Carol Marcus’ name, to be replaced with the dull thud of anxious shame. “Right. That’s fine. Do as you please.” He said, standing and brushing himself off.

“Thank you, Captain.” Rand saluted and left them alone once again.

“Jim—”

“You’ll talk to Hendorff?”

“…Yes, Captain.”

“Thanks. I can always count on you.” Jim paused and then said, half-jokingly. “Your friendship means a lot to me.”

“Friendship.” Spock repeated dully, almost silently. The word was barely a whisper as it crossed his lips but Jim still caught it and believed he understood.

“Don’t worry.” Jim said. “Having a friend doesn’t make you any less of a Vulcan, I promise.”

Spock just quirked an eyebrow and cocked his head, showing off his long neck. Which didn’t help with the whole not-jumping-Spock thing so Jim decided that was his cue to leave. “I’ll see you later.” He said and almost ran out the door, leaving Spock alone and confused.

It was only when he was already halfway there that Jim realized he was walking to sickbay. He swore under his breath and spun around, heading back to his quarters.
One of the many things McCoy had been surprised by since joining Starfleet was the simple act of being in orbit. When he was younger and Earth-bound he had always imagined a ship in orbit as being a slow, steady giant circling a planet like a buzzard in the sky. But there was nothing slow and steady about being in orbit. The planet spun on its axis as it spiraled through space, yanked across unfathomable distances by the gravity of a distant star, and the ship reeled around it at a dizzying 17,000 miles per hour. Seventeen thousand. Faster than any human being had any business moving and that was just to make sure a hunk of rock didn’t outrun them.

McCoy watched Nimbus III spinning from the view screen in his office. He was adult enough to admit he was sulking but not quite adult enough to come out of hiding on his own. He wasn’t giving in this time. Goddammit, he was right. Jim and Spock should have trusted him and it was their turn to apologize. He refused to make the first move.

That being said he was starting to feel nervous. The mission was today and he still hadn’t seen or heard from Jim. What if they went without him and something happened? McCoy kept telling himself that even James T. Kirk wasn’t foolish enough to go get himself shot without making up, but his own brain wasn’t buying it. Of course James T. Kirk was foolish enough to get himself shot. Dying was his get-out-of-jail-free card because he knew that once McCoy had spent an entire night keeping Jim alive by the skin of his teeth he’d forgive him anything no matter how angry he was.

But not this time. This time McCoy was going to hold his ground. He was right, dammit!

Hundreds and thousands of miles away from Paradise City a hurricane was raging. Down on the planet the storm covered an area of 200 miles but on his view screen it was reduced to an angry welt on the planet’s belly, no bigger than the tip of his pinky finger. He poked it.

“I hear hurricanes ablowin’, I know the end is coming soon.” He sang under his breath. “I fear rivers overflowin’, I hear the voice of rage and ruin.”

There was a knock on the door and then M’Benga popped his head inside, his long dreads pulled back in a knot. “Hey. I’ve got the test results you wanted. Still pouting?”

“I’m not pouting. I’m sulking. Pouting is something little girls do when they want a pony.” McCoy growled.

“Of course, my mistake.” M’Benga let himself in and took a seat on the other side of the desk. “And what you’re doing is so much manlier.”

“Exactly.” McCoy sighed and held out his hand. “All right. Let me see it.” M’Benga handed him the pad and McCoy scrolled through the results. The test hadn’t been very important and so he was only giving it half his attention.

“What were you saying when I knocked?” M’Benga asked suddenly.

“Hmm?”

“I thought I heard you saying something.”

“Oh. It was just an old song my grandfather used to listen to. Poppa loved the classics. The hurricane reminded me of it.”

“What was it called?”
“I don’t remember.” McCoy finished reading the results and signed his name at the bottom. “Do you
know when the away team is leaving?” He asked, trying to sound nonchalant and not fooling
anyone.

“Not me. Chapel probably does.” M’Benga looked over his shoulder at the open door. “Nurse
Chapel!” He shouted. “Are you out there?”

“What do you want?” Came the disembodied reply.

“We want to ask you a question!”

“I’m busy!”

“It’s just one question!”

“Then it can wait until I’m not busy!”

“Nurse!” McCoy bellowed. “Are you actually busy or are you making embarrassing notes in the
patient files again?” Just last week he’d caught her drawing diagrams in the sexual histories.

“…Fine, I’m coming.” They heard her stomping in their direction and then she threw open the door
and glared at them. “What?” She snapped.

“When is the away team leaving?” M’Benga asked with a winning smile.

“Half an hour ago.”

“What?” McCoy’s jaw dropped. “They already left?”

“Yes. The Captain, Mister Spock, Commander Hendorff and a few other security men all beamed
down around…” She checked the time on her pad. “37 minutes ago.”

“Wha—Buh—” Rage short-circuited McCoy’s brain and he squawked meaningless sounds while
Chapel and M’Benga waited patiently for coherence to return. They didn’t have to wait for long.
“Those BASTARDS!” He roared, springing to his feet and barreling towards the door. Chapel
stepped to the side just in time to avoid being run over.

“Don’t forget your tricorder!” She shouted after him.

***

#367 Zek Street was barely more than a hovel on the edge of town. The neighboring houses were
empty, all of them owned by Ferengi and all of them only occupied when there was profit to be
found in Paradise City. Since it wasn’t mud season, mud being just about the only natural resource
the planet had to offer, there was no profit and thus no neighbors. A thick 12 ft briar hedge wrapped
around the property and sheltered it from prying eyes. There was a rickety gate with rusted hinges
that swung open with a loud squeal when Jim gave it a little push. The house was dark, the one
window covered in beige dust from the plains. Dead leaves stuck out from the gutter, which had
been added to the house as an act of hope as opposed to an act of necessity. The average rainfall on
this part of Nimbus III was 0.6 inches a year. The roof was just a sheet of corrugated steel that had
been hammered into a dome. The place seemed abandoned but to be on the safe side Jim gave the
signal to his men and three of his security officers circled around the hedges to guard the back of the house.

“You ready?” Jim asked Spock softly.

Spock was not at all ready but then again he was never going to be ready so there was no logical reason to delay. He ignored Jim’s question and marched past the gate, up the twig-strewn walkway, raised his steady hand and knocked on the front door.

Nothing happened.

He knocked on the door again and again nothing happened. Once he had knocked on the door three times without getting a response he deemed it safe to test the knob. It was locked.

“What do you think, Spock?” Jim had come to stand beside him. “Is it safe to go inside?”

“The door is locked and the window is not large enough to allow our passage.” Spock pointed out.

Jim gave Spock a look that was a cross between fond amusement and irritation. “The door may be locked but its also rusting off its hinges. Watch.” He placed both his flat palms against the peeling paint and shoved. The door hinges immediately snapped and the tall slab of wood fell backwards and hit the floor like a small explosion. The two men peered through the clouds of dust into the dank, single, empty room.

“Look on the bright side. This won’t take as long as we thought it would.” Jim joked half-heartedly.

The one room had once served as living area, dining room and sleeping quarters before Sybok abandoned it. Judging from the amount of dust built up on the floor no one had been inside the house for a few months at least. Whatever had caused Sybok to leave he’d done so in a hurry. Dirty dishes were piled high in the sink and there was a bowl of rotten fruit on the counter by the window. A chest of drawers had been upended on the lumpy mattress in the corner, grimy robes spilled over dusty linens. There was dust everywhere, the same chalky beige dust that blew off the fields and colored eddies in the air. It came into the house through the cracks in the walls that someone, maybe Sybok, maybe the previous owner, had attempted to patch with duct tape. Now the duct tape was so old and worn it was threadbare and the dust blew right through it. Spock sat on the edge of the bed and began to sort through the clothes, checking the pockets for any clues as to their owner’s whereabouts. Jim and Hendorff began to pull open drawers and peer into corners. How long had it been since Sybok last slept in this bed, Spock wondered. And for how long had he lived here before that? How much longer would it be before Spock saw him again?

“Well, there’s nothing in the kitchen area.” Jim felt he was being generous by comparing the sink, coffee table and Bunsen burner to a kitchen. “Who wants to check the bathroom?”

The three men glanced warily at the dark hole in the wall that presumably led to lavatory facilities.

“I am not yet finished with the clothing.” Spock said quickly, leaving Jim and Hendorff to fight for the honor amongst themselves.

Fortunately, before either man could do something that would violate the chain of command, angry voices erupted from outside the hut.

“You can’t go in there!”

“Get the fuck out of my way!”
Jim, Spock and Hendorff ran out of the house to discover McCoy wrestling in the dusty street with the security officer who’d been left out front to guard.

“Doctor McCoy!” Jim shouted. “Get up!”

“PRIVATE LEVENSPIEL!” Hendorff blared like a foghorn, putting Jim’s attempt to shame. “AH-TEN-SHUN!”

Private Levenspiel jumped to his feet so fast McCoy was sent rolling in the other direction. His spine snapped straight and his arm swung into a salute but it was far too late to save himself from the Commander’s wrath.

“YOU CALL THAT GUARDING, YOU PISS POOR EXCUSE FOR A MAGGOT?” Hendorff raged. “I’VE SEEN LATRINES THAT MADE BETTER LOOK OUTS THAN YOU! ONE MORE INCIDENT LIKE THAT AND I’LL SEND YOU HOME TO YOUR MOMMA LIKE THE PATHETIC, BRAIN-DAMAGED SPOON-FUCKER THAT YOU ARE!”

Spock looked mildly horrified by the tirade but Jim couldn’t help but ask, “What’s a spoon fucker? Never mind. Don’t tell me. Can you do McCoy next?” The doctor, who was getting to his feet and brushing dirt off his pants, glared ferociously.

“Captain.” Spock murmured in Jim’s ear. “I do not believe that would be appropriate.”

“It’s an old human military custom.” Jim whispered back.

“Perhaps, but Doctor McCoy is not military personnel and, given his personality, any comments about his uses for cutlery might serve to only escalate the situation at this point.” Spock insisted.

Jim sighed. Spock was right of course and as much fun as it would be to watch McCoy get dressed down it wouldn’t be worth the revenge that was sure to follow. “Fine. You stay out here until we’re done.” He ordered McCoy, who immediately opened his mouth to argue. Jim cut him off before he could say anything. “This is a top priority mission we’re on, Doctor, and so help me if you do anything to jeopardize it I will have you court-martialed, friends or not. Do you understand me?”

McCoy was obviously spitting mad but he knew as well as the rest of them that Jim wasn’t making an empty threat. He crossed his arms stubbornly. “Fine.” He spat back, echoing Jim unconsciously. “But the second you’re done in there we’re having a little chat, pal.”

“I look forward to it. Bud.” Jim spun around. “Cupcake, you stay out here and make sure the Doctor doesn’t try to follow us.” He stomped back into the hut.

“Commander Spock,” Hendorff whispered before Spock could follow him. “Do you know why the Captain and the Doctor are so mad at each other?”

“From what I understand the Doctor is angry with the Captain for withholding information that the Captain claims he did not possess at the time and the Captain is angry with the Doctor for not having faith in the Captain’s motivations.” Spock explained. Hendorff nodded understandingly but then Spock continued. “Furthermore, the Doctor is angry because he feels the Captain does not value his expertise, while the Captain feels that the Doctor is underestimating him. The Doctor is also under the impression that there was a deliberate effort to keep him uninformed, while the Captain feels that his authority is being undermined.” Spock thought for a moment and then added, “There has also been a great deal of yelling.”

“Right. Okay.” Hendorff kept his tone light so that his intense disbelief at the immaturity of his commanding officers wouldn’t shine through. “I’ll just stay out here then.”
“That is what you were ordered to do.” Spock reminded him.

“Yup.”

“Very well.” Spock turned away and headed back into the hovel.

“Spock? Is that you?” Jim’s voice came from the dark hole in the wall as soon as Spock walked inside.

“Yes, Captain.” Spock answered as he walked back over the bed and kneeled down to look beneath it.

“Can you believe that guy? What’s his problem? Does he really think that coming down here and throwing a tantrum is going to make me forgive him? I mean, after what he said to you?”

“Captain, may I remind you that I am not concerned with the Doctor’s comments. I did not take offense.” There was something at the very back of the bed, pressed up against the wall. Spock couldn’t see what it was so he reached for it.

“Well I did. He was a jerk and I’m not going to apologize. He should apologize. God, this place is disgusting. I’m not even going to tell you what I just found. What’s he doing now?”

Spock resisted the urge to sigh. He grabbed the mysterious object and straightened up until he could peer through the grimy window. “He appears to be arguing with Private Levenspiel.”

“Ha! Figures.”

Spock looked down at the object in his hands. It was a book.

***

Uhura was sitting at the remains of her console, half-heartedly trying to coax some life back into the circuits, when a flashing sensor in the corner of her eye caught her attention.

“Oh no…” She gasped. “Enterprise to Captain Kirk!” She cried, slamming down on her comm link, only to have the little red button come off in her hand. She swore in five different languages as she dashed to the Captain’s chair. She hit the PA system. “Red alert!” She declared. “All hands to battle stations! Scotty, get to transporter room A and get the away team back! The Captain and Commander Spock are still on the planet!”

She was alone on the bridge but that wouldn’t be for long. Any second now the turbolift doors would open and bridge would be swarming with well-trained, cool-headed Starfleet officers who all knew exactly what to do in any situation. As the highest-ranking officer currently on the bridge her job was to keep it together until they got here. She switched on the view screen and her heart stuttered at what she saw.

“Uhura?” Scotty’s voice crackled from the comm unit on the chair. “What’s going on?”

“A ship…” She croaked, fear and self-recrimination making her mouth dry. How had she forgotten? How could she have been so stupid? She cleared her throat and tried again. “A ship just decloaked on the starboard side. Their phasers are armed and their shields are up.” Shields. She left the channel
open and ran to the helm where Sulu and Chekov normally sat. Dammit, she had to raise the shields now! If she didn’t they’d be blown to smithereens any second! But wait… Her hand froze in the air half an inch from the correct button. If she raised the shields now they wouldn’t be able to beam the away team back onboard. They’d be leaving Jim and Spock and the security officers completely unprotected and with no way of getting back home.

“What kind of ship?” Scotty’s voice sounded out of breath as it came from the chair. Uhura knew he must be running to the transporter room for all he was worth.

“Vulcan freighters don’t have cloaking devices.”

“They don’t usually have red matter converters strapped to their hulls either.”

***

The book in Spock’s hand was leather-bound and devoid of decoration. There was no title or design on the cover or the spine. He opened it to a random page and found it filled from edge to edge, top to bottom, with tight hand-written scrawl.

It was his brother’s journal.

“Now what is he doing? Spock?” Jim’s voice called.

Spock glanced out the window again. “Doctor McCoy is—” Being shoved out of the way by Private Levenspiel who is being shot in the chest at a point blank range by a masked assailant. “Jim!”

“Spock?” Jim’s head emerged from the dark hole in the wall. “What’s going on? That sounded like —”

Spock had just enough time to grab Jim and drag him under the bed before the building exploded. Phaser beams criss-crossed through the air above their heads, coming from every direction. Whoever was attacking them had them completely surrounded. Jim tried to pull away but Spock wrapped his arms around his shoulders and pulled him deeper under the bed.

“Bones and Cupcake are still out there!” Jim shouted angrily, trying to break free.

“You are unarmed.” Spock growled. “You will be killed.” That could not be allowed to happen. Not again.

“I have to try!” Jim bellowed. “I can’t just hide under the mattress!”

Spock said nothing.
The first phaser blast had very nearly knocked the Enterprise out of orbit. The second had shut down all non-essential functions, which meant that the turbolift wasn’t working and the bridge was sealed off, leaving Uhura in command. She’d raised the shields and was trying to fire back but whenever she had a lock and fired the enemy ship was gone, appearing almost instantly on her other side and attacking while her phasers reloaded.

She wasn’t frightened anymore, at least. There wasn’t any time to be frightened. Right now she was the only thing standing between the Enterprise and whoever the fuck was trying to blow them off the map. And she was losing ground fast. There was no fear left, only a steely determination that if she had to face the inevitable it wouldn’t be for lack of trying.

Down in transporter room A the situation was nowhere near so zen. Scotty and Chekov were desperately trying to get a lock on the transporter signals of the away team but there were too many life signs clustered around #367 Zek Street to get an exact lock. And they needed an exact lock. Once they had it Uhura would lower the shields for the precise amount of time it took to get their men back safely and not a millisecond longer. Even the couple seconds it would take to transport them might prove fatal for the entire ship but it was a risk they were willing to take.

Another blast knocked Chekov off his feet and nearly sent Scotty flying. “Put your back into it, lad!” Scotty advised, ignoring the sweat on his brow dripping into his eyes. He had to get these calculations exactly right. He had to be completely accurate. No mistakes. No screw-ups. No—

“Squawk!”

“Are you kidding me?!” Scotty screamed as Hamlet the alien chicken bobbed onto his console. “Get off you blasted—!”

“Scotty, wait!” Carol Marcus and Janice Rand came tumbling into the transporter room, shouting at once. “We’ve got an idea!”

“There’s no time!”

“You’ve got to trust us!”

“It will totally work!”

“Just for a second!”

“WHY THE HELL IS THIS THING IN MY TRANSPORTER ROOM?!” Scotty roared at them, jabbing his furious thumb at Hamlet.

“Squawk?” Hamlet wiggled his eye stalks in a way that had always been considered very charming by the other chickens back home.

Carol grinned as the whole ship shook under her feet. “Yesterday I implanted a tracking device in his skull. If you beam him onto the other ship we’ll be able to find them no matter what happens.”

“That’s a great idea.” Scotty said sarcastically. “Except for one problem. Their shields are still up!”

“Scotty!” Suddenly Uhura’s voice emerged from his comm unit. “The other ship just dropped its shields! I think they’re beaming people up from the surface! Yes! They’re turning around! Dammit! I
“GET THAT BIRD ON THAT PAD!” Scotty screamed unnecessarily. Rand and Chekov were already wrestling a distraught Hamlet onto the transporter pad. Scotty made a few quick calculations and Hamlet was gone, hopefully safely transported into their enemy’s cargo hold without anyone noticing.

***

The phaser fire died as suddenly as it had started. Jim and Spock held their breath for a moment before cautiously pulling themselves out from under the bed.

There was almost nothing left of Sybok’s home. The patched walls had caved in under the assault and the dome steel roof had been blown clean off. They could see Hendorff still standing in the street, staring down at Private Levenspiel’s motionless body. Jim and Spock picked their way through the rubble, glancing cautiously over their shoulders in case this was a trick. Jim saw the three security officers who had gone round the back reemerge from behind the hedges, looking slightly dazed and worse for wear but still alive.

“Cupcake?” Jim asked cautiously as they drew near. “Is he…?”

“He was a good kid.” Hendorff’s voice sounded broken. “And the last thing I ever said to him was spoon-fucker.”

The other security officers came over and they formed a huddle around the body.

“Who were those guys?” One of them asked. “Did anyone see their faces?”

“They were wearing masks.” Spock answered. “I did not recognize them.”

“Whoever they were they must have known we wouldn’t have any weapons. Why didn’t they kill us all? Why just shoot and run?” Someone else asked.

“Is everyone okay?” Jim asked, counting the heads. “Where’s Doctor McCoy?”

Hendorff and his men refused to meet his eyes.

Jim’s stomach clenched and his voice shook when he asked again, “Where’s Bones? Cupcake? Where’s Bones?”

“I’m sorry, Captain. They got him. One of them grabbed the doctor and beamed out before I could reach them.”

The next thing Jim knew he was back on the Enterprise and someone was trying to press a warm mug into his numb, unresponsive hands. He could vaguely remember asking Cupcake to repeat himself, but the words that described McCoy’s abduction kept turning to mush and gibberish in his ears. He could faintly recall Spock calling the ship for a beam up and gently guiding Jim off the transporter pad.

And here Jim was, sitting in his quarters while Spock fretted over him in a non-demonstrative way and all he could hear was a strange buzzing in his ears. It was as if his brain had stalled when
Cupcake said Bones was gone and he didn’t know how to make it start again.

It didn’t make any sense. Why Bones? Why take McCoy and not anyone else? He wasn’t a soldier or a scientist or an engineer, he was a doctor. A healer. Everyone knew doctors were supposed to be off limits. There were supposed to be rules. Bones was supposed to be the one person Jim didn’t have to worry about.

Jim felt a whisper of a touch against his cheek and looked up to see Spock kneeling on the floor in front of him so that their eyes were level. Only then did Jim realize he was sitting on the end of his own bed. “Jim.” Spock spoke softly, his deep voice reverberating in his chest in a way that at any other time would have set Jim’s blood on fire. “We will find him.”

“You can’t…” Jim swallowed, tears burning the backs of his eyes. “There’s a chance we won’t. You can’t make a promise like that when there’s a chance we might…”

God, he couldn’t even say it. What kind of Starship Captain was he, if he couldn’t even say the words?

Spock hesitated. His eyes clouded over as he weighed the alternatives and considered the possible outcomes before making his decision. He reached once more for Jim’s face and gently rested a single finger against his temple. All of a sudden Jim could feel something moving under his skin, something very familiar but which did not belong to him. Rage, coiled like a snake. Still and silent but ready to strike with deadly force when the moment was right. You’d never know it to look at him but Spock was livid.

“We will find them.” He vowed.

Suddenly Jim felt a lot better about their chances. Those bastards—whoever they were—had made the worst mistake they could possibly make. They’d pissed off Spock. If history was any indication their enemies were going to burn.

*Good.*

***

He had traveled through space and time.

He knew this because, when he regained consciousness, it was three hours later and two someones were grabbing his arms and pulling him through a transparent bio-tube, the kind found in the living quarters of old asteroid mines. McCoy was still too groggy from whatever drugs they had given him to argue and so he allowed himself to be dragged forward into the main body of the old mine.

“Where are we going?” He tried to ask, the words turning to slush in his mouth.

“Silence.” Said the hooded figure on his right.

*Hold up.* McCoy blinked. His thinking was still slow but there was something…there was something…there was something about that voice…something he couldn’t quite remember…something familiar about that voice…

“T’liv?” He groaned. “I knew it. I *knew* it. I knew something like this would happen.”
“You know nothing.” She said bitterly, pulling her black mask off her head. “You are human. You are not even a person.”

“…Okay. Well. You’ve clearly gone even more insane since the last time we met. Congratulations. I didn’t think it was possible to be crazier than you were, what with the whole stalking Spock thing, but this? This is a whole new level of crazy!” McCoy laughed hysterically as they dragged him deeper and deeper into the old mine. “You two realize you got the wrong guy, right? You know I’m not Spock, right? Shame. You were so close. He was right there, too. Oh well. Guess you’re stupid as well as crazy. No surprise there.”

“Silence.” The other Vulcan growled. He also pulled off his mask. It was T’mo. The same T’mo who just two weeks ago had sat next to McCoy at a table and shared a meal with him. “You talk as much as the other one.”

“Do I now? Who’s the other one?”

“Do not ask questions.” Was the only answer he got.

“Why not? Where are we? What’s your name? What’s the end game here? Are you hungry? What’s your favorite color?” McCoy started rattling off any and every question he could think of, resorting to medical queries when he ran out of ideas. “When was your last bowel movement? Can you feel it when I do this?” He tried to angle his elbow to jab T’mo in the side but T’liv saw what he was doing and shook him violently.

“Stop it.” She commanded. “Soon you will be in your cell. You may rant and rave as much as you wish then.”

McCoy opened his mouth to say something snarky but before he could say anything a familiar sound caught his ear.

“Hope you got your things together. Hope you are quite prepared to die. Looks like we’re in for nasty weather. One eye is taken for an eye.”

T’liv almost winced. “She is singing again. My sister becomes upset when she sings.”

“Your sister is upset by a vast multitude of events.” T’mo pointed out.

“Who is that?” McCoy asked. Funny. I was just singing that same song earlier.

“Don’t go around tonight. Well, it’s bound to take your life. There’s a bad moon on the rise.”

“Your cell mate.” T’mo answered, rounding the final corner. There was a large grate in the floor. T’mo and T’liv lifted it up and shoved McCoy inside. He fell ten feet before he hit the rough stone floor. He rolled to the side, coughing and huffing, the wind knocked out of him. His wrist was probably sprained too, just his luck.

“Are you alright?” An unfamiliar voice asked.

McCoy looked up and found himself face to face with a Vulcan woman around his age, maybe a little older. Her long black hair was tied back and her skin, a shade or two darker than most Vulcans McCoy had met, was unwashed. She looked as if she hadn’t seen the inside of a shower stall in over a week. Her eyes met his and widened.

Her eyes.
Her blue eyes were just like his. He didn’t mean they were the same color, though they absolutely were, but they were the same shape and size. Her lower lid made the same swooping curve as his did.

Her nose was the same nose as his. He could tell because of the way her nostrils flared when she was surprised, and she was surprised right now. But it was a good kind of surprised. He could tell because a slow delighted smile was spreading across her face, which was disturbing enough because he had never seen a Vulcan smile before, but what made it so much worse was that when she smiled a dimple appeared on her left cheek in the exact same spot and the exact same way it did when his little daughter Joanna smiled.

“Poppa!” She called him.

There were good days and there were bad days.

He was having a bad day.

McCoy got to his feet so he could face his Vulcan cellmate on equal ground. “What did you just call me?” He asked her.

She frowned. “Poppa, I am Wicks. Do you not recognize me? Have I been born yet in this universe? I have tried asking our captors what year it is but they have not been particularly forthcoming.” She shrugged. “Oh well. Poppa, I am glad to see you. I have a very important question which you need to answer honestly, right now, okay?”

“…Okay?” McCoy didn’t know which was stranger, having a Vulcan call him Poppa or watching a Vulcan use the word ‘okay.’

She smiled. And he knew that smile. He used that smile. It was the smile he saved for those moments when James T. Kirk had pushed him so far off the edge ‘enraged’ was no longer a strong enough word. It was the smile he used once the dust had settled and the ship was still standing and the day had been saved and now he had to reattach Jim’s arm. It was the smile used by those whose job it was to protect the person who saved everybody else. It was probably the smile Alfred wore every time Batman came home.

“Where the fuck is Ambassador Spock?”

***

And so endeth the first act.

So long…I was not expecting this to be so long…But there were details and stuff that had to be addressed and so it became…really, really, really long…

I took the name Wicks from one of early versions of Saavek’s character. I considered having Saavek show up looking for Spock but I decided I wanted to save her character for a possible sequel.
I hope you enjoyed this chapter and I hope you will stay tuned for the next one! Hopefully the next one won’t take me quite so long to write.
Joy To The World

Chapter Notes

Note About The Timeline

The destruction of Romulus occurred in 2387, about 10 years after Star Trek: Nemesis and 130 years after the events in the AOS universe. The flashback/mind meld in this chapter is set in that year. Any references to the Prime universe (and there won't be many) will be as canon as I can make them having watched The Next Generation and Deep Space Nine. In our story the year is 2261.

Disclaimer

Author: Okay, guys, I’ve run out of ideas. If we ever want Mr. X to be not crazy again we’re going to have to call in the big guns.

Kirk: You mean we haven’t already tried that?

Author: I have the phone number of somebody who might be able to help. The only problem is I’m not supposed to know the number so no matter what happens you can’t tell him who gave it to you. If he finds out I violated the restraining order he'll definitely kill me and then bring me back to life just so he can kill me again. Cause that's how he rolls.

Spock: Who are we calling?

Author: Fluffy.

Kirk: At this point I’m up for anything. Hand me the phone...(dials number)

Ring ring

Ring ring

Ring rii—

BEEEEEEP

You have reached the answering machine of Lord Sesshomaru, Master of the Fluffy. Sesshomaru-sama can’t come to the phone right now but if you leave your name and message he might get back to you if he feels like it at some point. Unless you have anything to do with She Who Shall Not Be Named. In which case, SHE OWNS NOTHING. NOTHING I SAY. NOW RUN YOU PATHETIC MORTAL FOOL. RUN WHILE YOU STILL CAN.

Beeeeeep.
When Jim got to the bridge everyone was already waiting for him, save Scotty who was already deep in the belly of the ship with his army of engineers, trying to repair the damage to the Enterprise as fast as he could. That was exactly where Jim wanted him. His ship was crippled and his doctor was abducted. The quarry they had come here searching for was long gone and someone had told the Vulcan extremists about their plans. If ever they needed a mechanical miracle it was now.

“Lieutenant Uhura.” He said brusquely as he stormed onto the bridge, Spock at his heels. “You are relieved.”

Uhura looked like she might burst into grateful tears. “I am relieved. Welcome back, Captain.”

He took his seat, Spock a comforting presence by his side. Jim took a deep breath. He could do this. “What do we know?” He asked.

“Twenty seven minutes ago an unmarked Vulcan freighter with illegal modifications decloaked right in front of us and opened fire.” Uhura, who had been the only person on the bridge at the time, explained. “Captain, they didn’t just have a cloaking device. They had a small red matter converter strapped to their hull too. I believe they were using it as an energy source which is why they were able to run circles around us.”

Jim frowned. “Where the hell did they get a red matter converter? Red matter isn’t going to be discovered for, what, another century? At least?”

Uhura bit her lip and looked away.

“Lieutenant.” Spock prodded her gently. Uhura threw a bitter look at him, said what she was thinking anyway.

“Sirs. I haven’t asked because I assumed that if Starfleet thought I needed to know I would, but…” Uhura hesitated again. She didn’t want to ask anything that would put her commanding officers in a position where they had to choose between their crew and their orders, but considering what had just happened she couldn’t see any way to avoid the topic. She had to ask why their enemies appeared to be armed with the same technology they themselves had delivered to their superiors. “Is Starfleet absolutely certain they recovered all the future tech from the Narada and the Vengeance?”

“Starfleet doesn’t know what happened to the future tech.” Jim shrugged.

“That information died with Admiral Marcus.” Spock added.

Sulu, who was sitting at his station, leaned forward in his seat with a frown. “No, that’s just what the Admiralty tells the press. They can’t actually be that--”

“Admiral Nogura’s exact words were ‘damned if I know.’” Jim interrupted him before he could say anything that a Captain shouldn’t hear. Something that started with s and rhymed with doopid.

A stunned silence fell over the bridge.
Sooner or later I won’t be able to cut them off. Jim realized. Sooner or later someone is going to say what we’re all thinking.

That said, he still couldn’t bring himself to actually think the words, even in the privacy of his own mind.

“So all the future tech is missing and no one knows where it is.” Chekov said slowly, clearly searching for a positive light to shine on this piece of information.

“We were just attacked by a ship armed to the teeth with future tech.” Uhura snapped. “So clearly someone knows where it is, just not us.”

“Okay. Well, that’s a problem.” Jim agreed. “And now it’s our problem. Does anyone know if these are the same Vulcan extremists we were warned about?”

“No, sir.” Uhura shook her head. “My department tried repeatedly to hail the other ship but they never answered. And since the ones who attacked you guys down on the planet were all wearing masks we can’t identify them either.”

“I can.” Chekov chirped, suddenly sitting straight in his chair and beaming at them. “They were definitely Vulcans, sir!” He announced.

“How can you be sure?” Jim asked.

“Their life signs, sir! I got a good look at them when I was trying to get a transporter lock on the away team, sir. They were definitely Vulcans.”

“Good man, Chekov.” Jim congratulated him. Chekov beamed brighter and if he actually were the giant puppy he looked like his tail would have been wagging so hard he would have propelled himself off his chair.

“Okay. So about half an hour ago Vulcan extremists armed with future tech attacked us and abducted Dr. McCoy. Does someone want to explain to me why we aren’t running these bastards down at this very moment?”

“It was my fault, Captain.” Uhura replied. Her jaw was stuck out stubbornly and her eyes were steely. If it weren’t for the faintest tremor in her voice no one would have known what it cost her to say those words. “I wasn’t fast enough and the enemy took out our warp engines before I was able to raise the shields.”

“I see.” Jim stared at her.

This was one of those moments when he felt wildly unprepared to be the captain of a starship. What was he supposed to say to one of his crewmen who had made a possibly-fatal mistake, a mistake that could very well cost him the life of not only his Chief Medical Officer but his best friend as well, a mistake that her Starfleet training should have prevented her from making, when he knew that in her place he could have just as easily made the same mistake. Uhura was a Communications officer. Of course her first instinct had been to call for help instead of raising shields. But listening to your instincts instead of your training could have disastrous consequences, not that anyone on board the Enterprise would take that advice seriously if it were coming from James T. Kirk. He knew that other starship captains must face similar dilemmas all the time. How do you chastise a vital crewmember without being unfair or hypocritical or doing more harm than good? If only he’d had a chance to learn how to be a captain through observation, if only he had an example to follow right now, maybe then he’d know what to say.
Uhura saved him the trouble of responding. “Captain, I know that I made a mistake but I swear the
next time I’m in command I won’t make it again. I learned my lesson.”

Jim almost smiled. “Next time?”

Uhura ducked her head.

Jim sighed. “Okay. Listen up, everybody. We’re going to meet in the conference room in one hour. I
want all of you to meet with your departments. If any of your people are injured send them to
sickbay. If anyone has a free pair of hands, send them to engineering. Our top priority right now is
getting warp drive back.” He rose from his seat and looked hard at each face assembled before him,
willing them to see that no matter how badly he had initially taken the news of McCoy’s abduction
he was here now and he was in command. “I have two questions. Why did they attack us and where
did they go. When we meet again I want answers. You’ve got one hour, people. Dismissed.”

As usual Jim waited until his senior staff had left the bridge and their shift replacements had arrived
before making his way to the turbolift, and as usual Spock waited with him, silent and supportive.
For that Jim was grateful but he wished Spock wouldn’t stand so close. He could almost smell
Spock, could almost feel the warmth radiating from his body, could almost imagine what it would be
like to reach out and take that warmth for himself. If Jim asked him for it would Spock recognize
how illogical Jim’s selfish request was and refuse him, or would he, out of loyalty or a misplaced
sense of duty or a desire to accommodate his Captain’s needs, allow the transgression? Jim didn’t
even know which outcome he’d prefer, rejection or indulgence. No, it was better to keep standing
straight and looking forward instead of turning and asking his Vulcan First Officer if he wouldn’t
mind giving him a hug. It was better not to think about wrapping his arms around Spock and holding
on so tightly nothing and no one would be able to separate them again. Better not to make promises
he couldn’t keep, like how he would never let anything happen to Spock. Better not to demand
promises Spock couldn’t make, like that he would never leave Jim alone. Better not to dwell on how
his heart raced when he remembered how Spock’s body had felt pressed against his while they hid
from the phaser fire under Sybok’s mattress.

If only Spock wouldn’t stand so close…

When it was their turn to enter the turbolift Jim groaned out loud when he realized they would be
taking it alone. Even if it were only for a few moments, being trapped alone with Spock in an
enclosed space was almost more than he could handle right now. How does that quote go? He
wondered ruefully as the turbolift doors closed and Spock eyed him questioningly. I can resist
everything but temptation? “Sickbay.” He ordered the lift and they began their descent.

“Captain?”

And what about when Spock touched his face and Jim felt his anger? Knowing Spock had emotions
was one thing, actually feeling them was quite another. It made him want to feel more, a lot more.

“Captain?”

Part of the problem was he had all this adrenaline pumping through his system and there was
nowhere for it to go, at least not until the warp engines were repaired. He needed to calm down, but
all he could think about was how good Spock would feel in his arms, how sweet he would taste.
What a relief it would be to lose himself in that sweetness, to forget about the fear and the
desperation for a while.

“Jim?”
If you thought about it, all Jim would really have to do was push the button that stopped the turbolift and the lift would come to a halt and then he would turn and say Spock’s name and…

Spock reached over Jim’s shoulder and hit the button. The turbolift stopped. “Jim.” Spock said insistently. “Are you listening to me?”

“Of course I am.” Jim tried to say but the words came out as a whisper. He could feel Spock’s breath tickling the back of his neck, but he couldn’t allow himself to lean back into Spock’s arms, not while the ship was vulnerable and McCoy was in danger. He had to stay strong and sharp. Spock made him feel weak and soft. Normally Jim didn’t mind. The warm fuzzy feelings could make him feel human again no matter what kind of carnage he’d walked through, but right now he couldn’t afford them. He stepped away from Spock and hit the button again. “What’s up?”

“Why are you going to sickbay?” Spock asked, concern apparent in his voice.

Jim frowned at him, confused. “Are you okay, Spock?”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “Should I infer something from the way you just dodged my question, Jim?”

“No, I just meant you sounded…” Human. “…Never mind. I’m going to sickbay because someone has to tell Christine Chapel what happened and I’m the only person on this ship who has a chance of escaping alive.” Jim joked, though inwardly he had to admit he wasn’t so sure of his chances.

“I would be willing to go in your place, if you would prefer.” Spock offered.

Jim shook his head. “Thanks, but she should hear the news from me. Actually, it will probably be best if it’s just me. Fewer casualties, you know?”

“…I see.” Was it Jim’s imagination or did Spock sound almost disappointed? “Very well, Captain. Please inform me when you are finished.”

“It shouldn’t take long. I’ll comm you as soon as I’m done.” Jim promised as the turbolift came to a gentle stop and the doors opened. He stepped out but turned back before the doors could close. “Spock?”

“Yes Captain?” Spock replied a little too quickly, as if he’d been hoping for Jim to say his name.

“Find out why they took him.” Jim ordered. It would have been an impossible demand to make of anyone else but he had faith that Spock could find the answers they needed.

“…Yes Captain.”

The turbolift doors shut, leaving Spock to return to his quarters alone. He stopped by Engineering on his way but was told his services weren’t required.

“I’ve already got more volunteers than I know what to do with, and I can only have so many people sealing stem bolts at one time.” Scotty explained apologetically. “I might have some work for you later, but right now you’d just be in the way. No offense, Commander.”

Spock frowned. “Mister Scott, you are aware, are you not, that the stem bolts are self-sealing?”

A nearby ensign looked up from her pile of bolts, a spanner in her hand and dismay in her eyes. Scotty laughed nervously. “What? No. No, no, no. What? Mister Spock, always with the jokes, eh?”
He grabbed Spock’s elbow and hustled him out of Engineering. Spock allowed the overly familiar gesture, though he was careful to make certain that there was no skin-to-skin contact. Even still, the patina of Scotty’s thoughts seeped through Spock’s uniform sleeve and tickled his telepathic shields. Scotty was stressed about the warp engines and concerned for Doctor McCoy, as expected. Spock relaxed slightly. It was soothing when people were thinking exactly what he expected them to think, and it did not happen as often as he thought it would.

Scotty glanced left and right to make sure they were alone in the hallway before he leaned in close and hissed. “Look, I know it’s busy work, you know it’s busy work, but they don’t need to know that. Right now they need to feel useful. They need to feel like they’re contributing. This might seem illogical to you, but it’s very important to humans to help each other when we’re in trouble.”

“Even if it serves no purpose?” Spock asked with a raised brow.

Scotty nodded. “Especially then.” He said. “There’s nothing worse than seeing someone you care about in trouble and not being able to do anything about it.”

“I understand.” Spock said truthfully. How could he not when he remembered the look on Jim’s face when he heard Doctor McCoy had been taken, when he recalled the surge of helplessness that had risen in him that he’d been trying to assuage ever since. “Inform me if you require anything.”

“Aye sir.” Scotty nodded. Spock turned to leave but before he could take a step Scotty said his name. “Spock, tell the Captain not to worry. We’ll find the Doctor in no time.”

Spock almost asked if Scotty knew something he didn’t but stopped himself just in time. “Focus on the warp engines, Mister Scott.” He advised instead. “They are your top priority.”

We will find him. Spock promised himself for the hundredth time as he walked away. Even if all we find is a body, we will find him.

***

“Jeremiah was a bull frog—”

“Would you stop doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Singing! You’ve been singing non-stop since I got here!”

“Forgive me. I have been alone for several weeks. I have grown accustomed to keeping myself company.”

McCoy glared at the Vulcan named Wicks. The only source of light they had was the throbbing red glow that pulsed through the holes in the roof of their cell. He could barely make out the eerily familiar features of his companion though he knew she would have no trouble seeing him with her Vulcan vision. They were sitting on opposite sides of their enclosure, which was little more than a half-dug mine shaft. There were no doors or windows and the heavy grate above their heads was locked from the outside. The only way either of them was getting out was if they were released. Somehow McCoy didn’t think that was likely to happen any time soon. “I didn’t realize Vulcans did anything as illogical as singing.”
“I am not only Vulcan. I am also half human.”

“Liar.”

“Why do you keep insisting that I am lying?”

“Because there’s only one Vulcan-human hybrid in existence and you’re not him. I don’t know who you are, but you sure as hell ain’t Spock.”

He could have sworn he heard an exasperated sigh coming from the dark blob that was Wicks. “I already explained this to you. I am—”

“Wicks McCoy, my 70-year old half-Vulcan granddaughter from another universe, who has traveled far and wide searching for her beloved Ambassador Spock. So you said. Try again.”

“And you still refuse to believe me?”

“Yes.” McCoy leaned his head against the damp stone wall of his prison. He almost felt like laughing. Almost. “Because that is hands down the most unbelievable thing I’ve ever heard. And just so we’re clear, I once brought a man back to life by injecting him with someone else’s blood. And it worked! I have no idea how or why it worked, but it did. Never thought anything would top that on the list of unbelievable things, but your story takes the cake.”

There was a pause and then… “You mix metaphors just as my Poppa did. I forgot he used to do that.”

McCoy scowled. “Stop calling me that!”

“Calling you what?”

Now she was just being obtuse on purpose. “Pop—I’m not your grandfather!”

“No.” She said softly. “But you will be, someday. What is harder for you to believe, that I am your granddaughter or that your granddaughter is part Vulcan?”

McCoy saw the bait and refused to take it. “I think the most unbelievable part of your story is the idea that any relative of mine would risk their life for Spock. Us McCoys are smarter than that.”

He heard the rustle of fabric and then she was sitting next to him. “I can prove it to you, if you let me.”

McCoy really did laugh this time but there was no humor in it. “Not a chance in hell.”

Wicks sighed. “Do you trust me?”

“Not even a little bit.” He said with a beatific smile.

Wicks stared back at him.

***

Sickbay was already overflowing when Jim got there. Crewmembers with minor injuries queued in
the hallway, waiting for their turn at the dermal regenerators. Jim stopped and spoke to each and every one of them, asking about their injuries and how long they’d been waiting. Not long, they all hastened to assure him. In fact, many of them had allowed those with more severe injuries to be treated first. They were quite content to wait in the hall until sickbay was calmer. Jim took their word for it and went inside. There were so many bodies present the temperature of the room had risen and judging from the sweat-dripping faces of his medical staff quite a few members of his crew were wishing Starfleet uniforms came with buttons. Nurses ran to and fro, shouting at one another over the heads of their patients. Jim found Dr. M’Benga in the thick of it, diagnosing one unsteady ensign with a concussion while he tied an oxygen mask onto the patient in the neighboring bed.

“No life threatening injuries, Captain.” He said when he caught sight of Jim. “We got lucky.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Jim answered grimly.

“Well, no one’s died yet.” M’Benga pushed a stray dread out of his face and offered Jim a tired smile. “I’ve never been in combat before. There wasn’t a lot of action in the hospital, unless you count people hitting me with chairs. I never expected to be in command during my first battle.”

“You did a good job.” Jim told him, glancing around at the hustle and bustle that surrounded them. Yes, it was chaos but it was chaos with purpose. “Wait…chairs?”

M’Benga shrugged. “Vulcan stuff, not important. I’ll be a lot happier once Doctor McCoy is back in charge. Where is he?”

Jim felt like he’d been punched in the gut. They don’t know. Why hadn’t anyone told them?

He supposed everyone else had assumed he would do it.

“Get Nurse Chapel and meet me in the office.” He ordered softly. “Immediately.”

Dr. M’Benga gave him a nervous look but nodded anyway and hurried off to find Chapel. Jim made his way to the Bones’ office, stopping next to biobeds on his way to make sure his injured crewmen were being looked after. To his total lack of surprise, each and every one of them was receiving the utmost care and attention.

This is a good team you’ve got here, Bones. Jim thought as he watched his medical staff do what they did best—save lives. And they’re going to be really pissed with you if you get yourself killed.

It wasn’t until he stepped inside the office that Jim realized it was the worst possible place he could have chosen for the imminent conversation. It was McCoy’s office and it was filled with McCoy’s things, papers and pads and holograms. His china chest full of antique medical equipment, the bottom drawer on the left side of his desk where he kept bottles of Romulan Ale and Saurian brandy. This office was filled with hundreds of reminders about the little things McCoy did every day, things he might never do again.

Good going, Jim. He thought sarcastically at himself. Why think something through when you can just dive in head first without looking, huh? Need a private place to tell Christine Chapel that you got her boss kidnapped? His office! Brilliant! That’s not unnecessarily cruel at all! His eyes landed on some of the sharper, more mysterious antiques in McCoy’s cabinet. Jim paled. I’d better hide those before she gets here.

“Captain?” Chapel said softly as she pushed the door open and stepped inside, M’Benga close behind. “You wanted to see us?”

If either of them noticed the way Jim swiftly stepped between them and the china cabinet they didn’t
mention it. “Yes. Have either of you heard what happened down on the planet?”

Chapel and M’Benga exchanged a confused glance. “We know there was a fight, Captain.” She answered, then her eyes widened and the color drained from her face. “Oh no. This is about McCoy, isn’t it?” She could read the truth in Jim’s face. “Oh god. That idiot! He went and got himself shot, didn’t he? And now he’s too embarrassed to come in and get fixed up, isn’t he? But no, because if that was the case you’d have dragged him here anyway so…oh god, Jim, tell me he isn’t…”

“McCoy wasn’t shot, Christine.” Jim told her. “He was taken.”

Chapel’s eyebrows met in the middle and her head titled to the side in puzzlement. “Taken where?”

“To the enemy ship.”

“By who?”

“The Vulcan extremists.”

“How?”

“…They grabbed him and beamed up.”

“No, sorry Captain, I meant how could you let that happen?”

“I didn’t let anything happen.” Jim snapped. “They didn’t exactly ask my permission first.”

Chapel crossed her arms and glared furiously. “And what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m going to get him back!”

“Good!”

“Fine!”

“Keep me informed, Captain!” Chapel spun around and stormed out, slamming the door behind her, leaving a fuming Jim and a shell-shocked M’Benga in her wake. From the other side of the door they heard, “YOU! STOP STARING INTO SPACE LIKE A RUBE AND GET TO WORK! AND YOU! WHAT? YOU THINK JUST BECAUSE YOU’VE GOT SECOND DEGREE BURNS ON YOUR FEET THAT GIVES YOU AN EXCUSE NOT TO WORK? HERE! START ROLLING THESE BANDAGES AND STAY OUT OF MY WAY!”

“Sorry about her.” Jim muttered to M’Benga. “She’s always been a little overprotective of Bones. This might make her crazy for awhile.”

M’Benga shrugged. “Of course she is. Don’t worry about us, we’ll be fine. How are we going to find Doctor McCoy?”

“We’re still working on that.” Jim admitted. “But we will find him.”

“Aye, Captain.” M’Benga clasped his hands behind his back. “Until we do, should I retain command of sickbay?”

“Yeah.” Jim nodded. “I know Bones’ trusts you. And you’ve been doing a great job under extreme circumstances so far. That’s good enough for me. You’re temporarily promoted to Acting Chief Medical Officer, until Doctor McCoy is back with us.”
“Thank you, Captain. And if there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know.”

“Can you tell me why they took him?” Jim asked half-jokingly.

“To stop you from finding Sybok.” M’Benga answered all-seriously.

Jim stared at him. “What?”

“That’s why they took him. Because they don’t want you to find Sybok and they knew that if they kidnapped McCoy you’d drop everything to find him again.” M’Benga explained patiently.

“How do you know that?” Jim demanded.

“Because I know Vulcans.” M’Benga shrugged. “Their own feelings are so intense it is difficult for them to imagine how any other species copes without resorting to total emotional suppression. They knew how kidnapping the Doctor would affect you and now they expect you to abandon your mission and chase after him instead. To them, any other outcome would be inconceivable. Remember, they don’t think of you as a rational being.”

Jim frowned. “So what are you saying? That I shouldn’t even try to find him?!”

“Of course not, Captain.” M’Benga answered calmly. “All I did was tell you why they took him. What you do with that information is completely up to you.”

Jim sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped like that. I just—”

WHA—BAM

The whole ship lurched, sending Jim and M’Benga flying across the room. The red alert klaxon flared to life as another blast ricocheted off the hull. Jim swore and dodged falling pads and tricorders as he dragged himself to the comm unit on McCoy’s desk. “Kirk to the bridge!” He shouted. “What’s going on?”

“You’d better get up here, Captain!” Sulu’s frantic voice came from the other end. “It’s the Klingons!”


***

“No.”

“…”

“No!”

“…”

“You can keep staring at me like that for as long as you like, my answer is still no, you can’t meld with me!”
“…”

“In fact, please *keep* staring. I actually prefer the staring to the singing.”

“Really?”

“…I take it back…”

***

Uhura had just finished meeting with her department and was headed towards the conference room when the first round of phaser fire hit the ship.

“*Now* what?” She shouted at the bulkhead she’d just crashed into. The bulkhead, whether due to guilt or due to the lack of sentience, did not respond. Uhura snarled wordlessly and shoved herself back onto her feet, spinning around and running as fast as she could towards the turbolift.

As she ran through the hall a door in front of her opened and a sleek blonde head emerged.

“Uhura! Wait!” Carol Marcus shouted. “I need to talk to you!”

“No time!” Uhura shouted back over her shoulder. “Being attacked!”

She had almost reached the turbolift before she remembered that Scotty still hadn’t had a chance to replace her console on the bridge. All communications were still going through the lab on Deck 4, the lab she’d just come from. She groaned and turned around, resigned to running back the way she’d come.

“Hi there.”

“Ah!” Uhura jumped back and glared at Marcus and Rand, who were standing less than a foot away from her with identical nervous expressions. “You guys scared me.” Uhura told them. “And why do both of you look like constipated toddlers?”

Marcus took a deep breath. “Okay. So we think we figured out where McCoy is.”

“But we don’t know how much longer the sensors will be working.” Rand continued. “At first it didn’t look like it was going to work at all but then the signal cleared up and we were able to get a fix, but now it’s starting to get weaker again.”

“So we kind of need you to go tell the Captain as soon as possible, but now we’re being attacked by Klingons. So…” Marcus held out her pad. “Here you go.”

Uhura took it. “Are you serious? You found McCoy?”

“Yes.” Marcus and Rand nodded. Uhura beamed at them.

“Beautiful! The two of you are geniuses! How did you do it?”

“We implanted a tracking device in Hamlet’s spinal cord.” Marcus told her.

“The chicken?” Uhura stared at them. “McCoy’s life depends on the *chicken*?”
“That would be why you’re going to tell the Captain and not us.” Rand pointed out cheerfully.

Another blast of phaser fire hit the ship and sent them rolling over each other down the hallway.

“This is getting ridiculous.” Marcus grumbled as she extricated herself from beneath Uhura’s elbow and clambered back to her feet. “Does anyone even know why the Klingons are attacking us?”

“Not yet.” Uhura answered grimly. “But I intend to find out.”

***

“Shields at 65%!”

“Phasers ready, Captain!”

“Fire!” Jim gripped the arm rests of his chair and watched the ship on his viewscreen be momentarily engulfed with flame before the smoke cleared and the ship emerged again completely unscathed.

“Target their engines and fire again!” He ordered. “If we can break through their shields and damage their engines they might not be able to get the shields back up fast enough. Keep hammering away at them.”

“Yes, sir.” Sulu nodded as Chekov realigned their phasers and fired again.

“Captain.” Spock straightened up from his station and nodded to Jim, his open comm unit in his hand. “Lieutenant Uhura has achieved contact.”

Jim grinned. “Excellent. Tell her to patch it through. Main viewer.”

The other ship blinked away and was replaced by the sickly grin of an old Klingon warrior. His grey beard was stained and matted, his teeth horribly yellowed and snaggled even for a member of his species. He roared with laughter and as he did his fatty jowls jiggled and wiggled on the screen.

“So!” The Klingon sneered. “The famous Captain Kirk wishes to surrender, eh?”

“He is Representative Kothar.” Spock murmured in Jim’s ear. “The Klingon emissary to Nimbus III.”

Jim nodded his head once and got to his feet. “I have no intention of surrendering, Kothar, but I demand an explanation. What is the meaning of this unwarranted attack on my ship?”

“Unwarranted?” Kothar scoffed. “Was it not you who brought weapons into Paradise City, even after we warned you about our law? It is you who violated the treaty, Kirk, not I. It is you who is the aggressor, not I!”

As Kothar continued to rant and rave Jim’s attention was drawn to the corner of the view screen where writing was beginning to appear. The writing said:

SPOCK, IF YOU CAN READ THIS CLOSE YOUR COMM UNIT.
Carefully, slowly, so as not to draw any attention to what he was doing, Spock closed his comm unit and slipped it into his pocket. The writing vanished and was replaced.

**GREAT. KOTHAR CAN’T SEE THIS, SO EVERYBODY ACT NORMAL. CAPTAIN, SCOTTY SAYS HE CAN GIVE YOU WARP FOUR IF YOU ACT NOW.**

Jim couldn’t help the tiniest frown. Run away? That wasn’t really his style. Besides, Kothar was starting to get on his nerves.

“You are the coward, not I! You are the P’Tok, not I!”

“Did he just call me a P’Tok?” Jim asked Spock calmly.

“I believe so, Captain.” Spock responded just as calmly.

“I called you a P’Tok because you are a P’Tok!” Kothar crowed triumphantly.

**CAPTAIN, PLEASE. WE HAVE TO LEAVE.**

“I don’t think I’m a P’Tok. Do you think I’m a P’Tok, Spock?” Jim crossed his arms.

“Not at all, Captain.” Spock answered loyally.

**CAPTAIN. COME ON.**

“There’s really only one way to respond to slanderous lies like that.” Jim announced, glaring at Kothar.

“Yes.” Kothar hissed triumphantly. “Only in battle can truth be revealed.”

I TALKED TO AGENT SIMMONS. KOTHAR’S TRYING TO COMMIT SUICIDE BY STARFLEET. GET. US. OUT. OF. HERE.

ALSO, CAN SOMEONE GET MY CONSOLE WORKING? THIS WOULD BE A LOT EASIER IF I WAS ACTUALLY UP THERE ON THE BRIDGE WITH YOU GUYS.

“I guess I only have one thing to say to you, Representative Kothar.” Jim offered up his most charming smile. “Bye.” He nodded at Sulu. “Punch it.”

“Aye, aye Captain!”
“JEREMIAH WAS A BULL FROG!”

“Please…”

“HE WAS A GOOD FRIEND OF MINE!”

“Stop…”

“I NEVER UNDERSTOOD A SINGLE WORD HE SAID!”

“Oh dear god please stop…”

“BUT I HELPED HIM DRINK HIS WINE!”

“Fine! Fine! I give up! You can meld with me!”

Wicks immediately stopped her off-key caterwauling. “Thank you.” She said as she shuffled closer until they were sitting side by side. “It is far easier to show you why I am here than it would be to explain it. I appreciate you overcoming your completely understandable reservations, and let me assure you I will do whatever I can to make the experience comfortable for you.”

McCoy glared at her. “I didn’t overcome anything. You’ve been singing that one verse over and over again for hours.”

“It is the only part of the song I know.” She admitted. “But it seemed to be having the desired effect, so I kept singing it. Now, are you prepared?”

“As I’ll ever be.” He grumbled.

“My mind to your mind.” She murmured, settling her long, slender fingers on the side of his face. “My thoughts to your thoughts…”

McCoy blinked as his eyes adjusted to the bright light streaming through the window. He was standing in a large office so cluttered with stacks of paper and pads that the only standing space available was the narrow path that had been left between the door and the desk. Wicks was sitting at the desk, staring into the eyes of a Klingon on her communication display screen. She looked exhausted. McCoy thought she also looked a little younger, but he could never tell with Vulcans. They reached a plateau around 45 and didn’t start aging again until their mid-100s. It could have just been the fact that her face and hair were washed and her clothes were clean that made her seem younger.

“The Romulans cannot be trusted!” The Klingon shouted.

“I understand that you feel that way, Chancellor Martok, but you have to make an exception.” Wicks argued, her voice strained. “We’re talking about four stranded ships, thousands of lives in the balance, and yours is the closest system. You have to take them. According to the treaty between the Klingon Empire and the Federation neither side can turn away refugees that the other will accept in a time of crisis.”

“The destruction of the Romulan Empire is a great triumph, not a crisis!”
I’m in the other universe. McCoy realized. The universe Nero came from. This must be what happened after their Romulus was destroyed.

Wicks closed her eyes as if in pain for a second and McCoy instinctively moved towards her, his hand already reaching for his back pocket where his medical tricorder would have been if he hadn’t forgotten it on the Enterprise. But before he could reach her she had opened her eyes again and her mouth had twisted into a snarl. She rose to her feet and roared at the Klingon in her screen. “The destruction of Romulus was not a triumph, Chancellor, not for anyone! Their planet is gone, do you understand that? The Romulans have nothing. I am not asking you to invite a battalion of Tal Shiar operatives to the chambers of the High Council! I am asking you to provide food and shelter to four unarmed civilian transport ships!” She took a deep calming breath and sat back down. “There are children on board those ships, Martok. Hungry, frightened children who pose no threat to you or your people.”

To McCoy’s shock the Klingon on the display screen didn’t come back swinging with death threats and promises of vengeance. Instead he frowned and said, “Very well. I will discuss this matter with my advisors and the Federation representative and get back to you.”

Wicks grabbed her pad off the desk and started flipping through her notes. “The new representative? That is Ambassador Worf, yes? Excellent. I was going to talk to him next, now I will not have to. I had no idea he was already on Qo‘noS.”

“He arrived this morning.” The Klingon grumbled, perhaps disappointed by how quickly the tense confrontation had died down to cordial pleasantries. “Until next time, Madam Counselor.”

Wicks bowed her head and Chancellor Martok vanished from her screen. No sooner had the display gone dark than a blinking light alerted them to another caller. Wicks sighed and tapped a button. A new image appeared on the screen of a little old lady who looked so much like McCoy’s mother that for one horrifying, deeply unsettling, dizzyingly confusing second he thought she was Mama McCoy.

“Hello Aunt Edith.” Wicks sighed.

“Is he back yet?” Edith McCoy asked abruptly without bothering to explain who ‘he’ was.

Apparently Wicks didn’t need her to. “No, but he has only been gone for twelve hours. I do not expect to hear from him until this evening.”

“I don’t like it. You never should have let him go alone.” Edith complained, frowning deeply. “We agreed as a family not to let him go off on his own anymore.”

“There were half a dozen Romulan scientists with him.” Wicks reminded her. “I hardly call that going alone. Besides…” Her voice dropped in volume as if she were afraid of being overheard. McCoy had to lean in closer to catch the words. “It has been thirty years since Kirk died and Spock has not shown any indication of wanting to follow him.”

“What about when he tried to go to Gol? For, what, the fourth time, I might add.” Edith demanded.

“That was one moment of weakness in three decades, and that happened only a few weeks after we heard the news when the wound was still fresh.” Wicks reasoned. “And we were able to find him in plenty of time and we all discussed the matter as a family and agreed that Gol was not the right place for him. I am telling you, Aunt Edith, there is nothing to fear. Spock is fine.”

“Don’t patronize me, young lady. When Dad died I promised him I’d look out for Spock, and that’s exactly what I intend to do, even if I am too old for space travel.”
She’s talking about me. McCoy realized. That woman is my daughter. And what the hell was I thinking, making my kids promise to look after Spock? Even I can’t look after Spock! The man is a walking danger magnet!

“We are the same age, Aunt Edith.” Wicks pointed out.

Edith snorted. “If we were born in the same year how come I’m so old and you’re still so young, huh?”

KNOCK KNOCK.

Wicks shrugged. “Genetics. I have over twice your natural lifespan. It is only logical that I age at a slower pace. Besides, my lifespan is the same reason we agreed I would assume the responsibilities of Spock’s primary caretaker, as there was no chance of him being able to outlive me. Or, for that matter, trick me into driving him to a war zone so that he can meld with ancient energy beings that are trapped in the mountains, Edith.”

“Ha! We’re all young once, Wicks. We all make mistakes. Besides, he’s as slippery as they come and we both know it. Look, just promise to call me the second you hear from him, okay? No matter how late it is. I won’t be able to sleep until I know he’s safe and sound anyway.”

“Of course.” Wicks smiled fondly. “But let me state for the record that I have complete faith in Ambassador Spock’s ability to return unscathed.”

KNOCK KNOCK.

“Um…” McCoy cleared his throat, unsure if anyone would be able to hear him. “I think there’s someone at the door…”

“Listen, Aunt Edith, I have to go. I will call you as soon as I have any news. Good night.”

KNOCK KNOCK.

Wicks turned off her screen and stared at her reflection. The knocking continued.

“Are you going to get that?” McCoy asked hesitantly. She didn’t answer him, nor did she show any sign of moving.

KNOCK KNOCK—

“Wait just a goddamn minute!” McCoy shouted furiously at whoever was knocking on the office door. They stopped immediately and a terrible silence replaced the banging. Painfully aware that he had no idea what he was doing, McCoy reached out and touched Wicks’ shoulder. “Hey.” He said. “I don’t know if you can hear me but this is the part you wanted to show me, right? The other stuff was interesting but this is the important part, right?”

Wicks’ eyes drifted shut. “I hate this part.” She whispered, either to him or to the empty room, he couldn’t tell which.

“I know.” McCoy said softly.

Wicks stood up and stepped around him. “Come in.” She called. The door opened and a distinguished-looking man wearing an admiral’s uniform stepped in. Wicks’ eyebrows rose in surprise. “Admiral Picard, what a pleasant surprise. I was not expecting you until much later. Can I
get you anything? Tea? I have some--"

“Counselor McCoy.” The man, Admiral Picard, interrupted. “I have some bad news.”

The color immediately began to drain from her face, as if she already knew what he was going to say. “What happened?”

“Do you want to take a seat or—”

“What. Happened?”

“From what we’ve been able to piece together Ambassador Spock’s ship was trapped in the star’s gravity after he deployed the red matter. He was too close and he couldn’t achieve escape velocity in time. I am so sorry.”

“Sorry?” Wicks took a step away, and then another. “I do not understand. Are you trying to tell me that Spock is…that Spock is…”

“He’s dead, Wicks.” Admiral Picard said quietly.

Wicks kept walking backwards until she tripped over a pile of pads and fell to the ground. She stared up at the old Admiral as if she couldn’t understand a word he said. McCoy waited, holding his breath. Any second now the shock would wear off and she would…

Wicks started to laugh. At first it wasn’t clear what noise she was making, the sound could have been a chuckle or a rasp or a sob, but then the laughter grew and grew until it blossomed into full-blown hysteria, the last defense against an unendingly cruel universe. Her whole body shook with each gale of laughter. Her face started to turn a darker green. She was laughing so hard she couldn’t breathe. Admiral Picard knelt next to her, a look of deep concern on his face. He reached for her but his hand stopped just short of actually touching her shoulder. “Madam Counselor.” He said firmly. “Calm down.”

“I cannot!” Wicks howled between bouts of laughter. Tears swelled in her eyes and began to roll down her green cheeks. “Thirty years! Thirty years and I only ever let him out of my sight to shit and sleep.” Her hand rose and grabbed the Admiral’s, holding on so tight she drew red blood. “I used to sleep outside his door so that he could not escape in the night. For thirty years I kept him tethered to this life! For thirty years I fought and begged and schemed to keep him here!” The laughter began to fade and the tears began to fall faster. “I only dropped my guard this one time, one time! That bastard, how could he…"

“Wicks.” Picard rumbled soothingly. “He loved you all very much. You, your aunts, your cousins, the McCoys were his family. He never would have left you on purpose.”

“Bullshit.” She snarled. Her breathing was ragged now and the manic laughter had vanished without a trace. “Kirk is dead and the only chance Spock had to see him again was to follow him. He did exactly what we were worried about. He lulled us into a sense of false security so we would not try to stop him and then he went and got himself killed. That bastard…he did it…on purpose…”

Everything went dark.

It happened so suddenly that for a short, panicked moment McCoy thought he’d gone blind, but then he slowly began to realize that Wicks had broken the meld and he was back in their prison. He was once again safe in his own body and his own mind.

“Oh.” He said slowly. “You’re here for the other Spock.”
“Have you seen him?” Wicks asked urgently, her hand lingering on his shoulder. “Is he here? Is he alive?”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s fine. I saw him a little over a week ago.” McCoy told her, still feeling dazed from the meld. “I mean, I’m not really supposed to know it’s Spock, but I’m not a complete and total idiot so I figured it out pretty quick…Oh no, oh no, no, you are not supposed to be here…”

“What do you mean?” Wicks frowned. “Do you still not understand? I have to find Ambassador Spock.”

“Yeah, I got that. From the voodoo thing we just did. Loud and clear.” McCoy shook his head to try and clear his mind. “What I meant was considering where you’re from, and considering who’s holding you prisoner right now, you are in a lot of trouble.”

“Why?” She asked.

“You know.” He raised an eyebrow. “Because of all that stuff that happened with Nero, I don’t think the Vulcans are going to respond well to any more visitors from your universe.”

“Who is Nero and what does he have to do with my universe?” She asked.

“…I guess that means it’s my turn to explain.”

***

Yay! Done! This chapter was tricky because it felt like a filler chapter but it’s actually full of very important information that the audience might find useful in the future. My only regret is I couldn’t fit in the scene with Sybok’s journal! But don’t worry. That’s coming up next.

Any thoughts on Wicks so far?

Also, I recently became an admin at the kirk/spock fic rec blog These Simple Feels on tumblr. So if you’re looking for any good fics to read come check us out!

Thank you so much for reading! See you all next time.
The Breaking Point

Chapter Notes

WARNING: There is a scene at the very end of this chapter that contains some graphic violence. You have been warned.

Disclaimer:

Mr. X: (Rummaging through the author’s bookshelves) We own you and you. We own you. We own you and we own your cousin. Oh boy! We definitely own you!

(A dark shadow falls over him. Mr. X turns and stares in shock at the newcomer)

Sesshomaru: Mr. X. What are you doing?

Mr. X: I'm uh...we own all the characters?

Sesshomaru: No, Mr. X. You own nothing. You never did.

(Mr. X bursts into tears and falls into Sesshomaru’s arms)

Mr. X: Oh Fluffy! I've been so lost!

(Kirk, Spock and the author spy on them from around the corner)

Kirk: Wow. That guy really has a way with Mr. X, huh?

Author: They bonded over mutual interests.

Kirk: Such as?

Sesshomaru: I HEAR YOU OVER THERE! TWENTY FEET AWAY AT ALL TIMES YOU HEINOUS SHE-DEMON!

Author: Such as battling the evil that is me, that kind of thing.

Spock: Do they require any assistance?

The Breaking Point
The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
Has passed away
Or what is yet to be

... 

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack, in everything
That's how the light gets in.

--Leonard Cohen “Anthem”

She woke up. She got out of bed. She pulled a comb across her head. Every morning she went through the same motions, always the same routine ever since her sixth birthday when she’d outgrown her childhood toys and indulgences and had begun to take responsibility for herself as an individual. At 5:00 she woke up. At 5:02 she got out of bed. At 5:03 she brushed her hair and brushed her teeth. At 5:05 she padded silently to her window to watch the sun come up.

Only the sun didn’t come up anymore.

Or maybe it did, in a manner of speaking, but the horizon that it used to rise over was gone. As were the mountains that shaped it like bruises against the dark dawn sky, and the sweeping plains that burgeoned from the feet of those mountains and swooped across the vast expanse until they met her garden wall. Which was also gone now, as was her home and her bedroom and the floor she walked on and the window she looked out from. Everything was gone now.

Except for her.

For better or for worse, through some sick twist of fate she was still here and so every morning T’liv made the same motions she had always made, even though there was no longer any sunrise for her to watch. It was the only way she knew to begin her morning. If she were to deviate from her routine, even in the smallest way, there would be no point in waking up at all. The empty rituals were all she had left.

So she woke up and for the first minute blinked at the grey slate ceiling. Asteroid mines weren’t designed for long-term living and the architects had not given much thought to the aesthetic
sensibilities of the residents. The sleeping quarters were little more than shallow holes carved into the walls of the mine so deep underground that even on the rare occasions when the asteroid traveled close enough to a star to see daylight not a single ray would reach them. She sat up on her narrow cot and placed her bare feet gingerly on the studded floor. An involuntary shudder rippled through her flesh at the biting cold of the hard steel, but she braced herself and forced herself to stand. There was a bucket filled with water in the corner of her hole and she used it to brush her teeth and wash her face. She picked up the cheap plastic comb carefully placed on the floor beside the bucket and pulled it through her long black hair a few times before just as carefully replacing it. Then she turned, crossed the few paces until she had reached the opposite side of the hole, and stared at the wall.

This was the very worst part. At least on Udonia and New Vulcan she had a window to stare out of and a sunrise to watch, even if it was the wrong window, even if it was the wrong sun. Here there was nothing but solid rock. The rock seemed to stare back at her, mocking in its dullness. What right did this lifeless hunk of mineral have to be more real and attainable than her vibrant home world, which now existed only in memory?

Vulcan had been so beautiful. If she closed her eyes she could almost feel the dawn’s light brushing against her cheeks. She could almost hear her mother and father stirring in the other room while the blue and yellow-plumed Lanka finches began to sing their morning greetings in the garden. Soon it would be time for breakfast. She would turn around and pad silently down the stairs and begin brewing the tea. In a few moments her mother would join her, her strong sun-browned arms filled with the fresh Favinit orchids from the garden for their breakfast, each purple petal tart and crisp and succulent. Her father would join them and they would dine in comfortable silence before going their separate ways for the day. Her father would retreat to his study to consider the stars, her mother would disappear into her botany lab in the garden and T’liv would make the forty-two minute twenty-nine second journey into ShiKahr where she would spend her day at the Academy, studying and debating points of intellectual contention with her colleagues. She would have lunch with T’Pring and they would discuss their plans for a new tricorder app. Afterwards, once the sun had set and the air was cool, she would walk to the hospital and see T’sing—

“T’LIV!”

T’liv’s eyes snapped open and once again her vision was filled with the dark, cold, soulless stone wall of her hole in the mine. She struggled against the tide of revulsion that threatened to flood her body. She wanted to go home.

But that wasn’t possible anymore.

“T’LIV!”

T’liv turned and ran from her hole and into the hole across the hall from hers, where her sister was thrashing and screaming on the floor. T’liv knelt beside her and tried to soothe her but T’sing was lost in her own world and did not see her sister, even as she screamed her name in increasing desperation.

“We must escape!” T’sing’s bony fingers scrabbled over her sister’s shoulders. “Hurry!”

T’liv rested her hand on the side of T’sing’s face and radiated calm. “We are safe here, T’sing.” She reminded her gently.

“They will find us.” T’sing sobbed. “The Romulans will find us.”

“There are no Romulans.” T’liv insisted. “We are in the asteroid mine, remember?”
T’sing’s brow furrowed even as the terror in her eyes faded away. “…Yes. I remember…we…I thought we were…” She turned away and stared at the sloping floor of her hole as if she’d never seen it before.

“Were you with the Prophet?” T’liv asked eagerly. It had been many days since her sister’s last vision. It would be a great comfort to all the members of their group to know that He was safe.

“I was…no.” T’sing’s body sagged in on itself, completely exhausted by her experience. “I was merely…remembering. Forgive me, sister, I was confused and I thought…but surely you have more pressing duties than watching over me. I am keeping you from them.”

“Think nothing of it.” T’liv assured her, biting back her own disappointment. “It is the price you pay for your blessing. It is my privilege to support you. I am sure it was what the Prophet intended.”

T’sing rose to her feet and walked back to her cot without looking at her sister. “You may go now. I will be fine.”

T’liv did not know whether to believe her or not. The silence stretched thin between them. She wished she could meld with her sister, be her tether so that even when the tides came in and T’sing’s consciousness was washed away she would always be able to find her way back. But that was impossible. T’sing’s doctors had explained that her sister’s mind, already so fragile due to the Prophet’s touch, had been ripped apart by the loss of Vulcan. It had been all they could do to keep her sane enough to form words and recognize her surroundings. Now even the softest mental caress could shatter her grip on reality like glass and send her drifting forever. Another evil the other universe must answer for. She thought bitterly.

“All will be well again.” T’liv whispered to her broken sister. “I promise.”

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Jim stared at the coordinates displayed on the pad screen. “McCoy’s there? You’re sure?”

“As sure as I can be.” Uhura nodded. “A tracking device implanted in a chicken isn’t exactly the most reliable source of information but…”

“But it’s all we’ve got.” Jim finished grimly. He let the pad drop back down onto the conference table. “Good work, Uhura.”

“It was Marcus and Rand, sir.” She reminded him. “It was their idea to beam Hamlet onto the freighter in the first place.”

As always, an uncomfortable stab of guilt and shame flared in Jim’s gut at the sound of Carol Marcus’ name. He nodded brusquely and tried not to glance at Spock. It wasn’t likely but it was possible that Spock would see the look in his eyes, figure out that Jim had slept with her and never talk to him again. Or, worse, not even care. Jim didn’t think he could handle either of those outcomes, not without Bones here to get him through it with Romulan Ale and snark.

“So we’re going after him?” Hendorff said cheerfully, already reaching for his comm unit to give the order. “Guns blazing?”

“We’re not going anywhere yet. This could be another trap. What do we know about this place?”
Jim asked.

“According to Starfleet records it’s an abandoned asteroid mine.” Chekov answered. “A Mark 32 phaser drill.”

“The Mark 32s only have rudimentary defenses, sir.” Sulu said eagerly. “Their shields will be no match for the Enterprise.”

“Freighters don’t usually have red matter converters.” Uhura snapped. “We’re dealing with an extremist organization that has access to future tech. We have no idea what the defense capabilities of that mine could be.”

“We can’t just do nothing.” Sulu snapped back.

“We’ve dealt with future tech before.” Hendorff leaned forward, a calculating look in his eyes. “Now, this is just a hunch, but I don’t think these guys know what they’re doing. If that had been Nero who caught us with our drawers down we’d be dead right now. My guess is they’re still figuring out what all the shiny buttons do. I mean, we took more damage from that crazy Klingon what’s-his-name than the so-called Vulcan extremists. These guys just took a couple pot shots and ran off. Tactically speaking, Captain, I’d say that Vulcans have no stomach for battle. We can take them, even if they do have future tech.”

“Pot shots?” Scotty squawked in outrage. “Those pot shots took out half my engines!”

“And you don’t need to be blood thirsty to press one of those shiny buttons.” M’benga nodded. “Captain, as Acting CMO I have to stand opposed to a full-frontal attack.”

Hendorff snorted. “No surprise there.”

M’benga gave him a chilly look. “Excuse me?”

Hendorff shrugged. “I’m just saying, you’ve been on this ship, what, a week? And already you’re Chief Medical Officer. That’s a pretty sweet gig.”

“Are you accusing me of something?” You could have bent steel around M’benga’s voice.

“Of course not.” Hendorff sneered. “But maybe you’re not as motivated as the rest of us to get Doctor McCoy back.”

“How dare you—”

“That’s enough.” Jim’s voice promised swift justice would befall the next person who tried to pick a fight. “Spock?”

“Asteroid mines are built to withstand extreme and frequent collisions. The mine itself will be entirely underground. It would be simple to land a small tactical team on the surface without their presence being detected.” Spock tented his fingers as he spoke.

“They’ll be expecting us.” Jim pointed out. Spock looked up from his hands and his eyes met Jim’s across the table. And there it was, gleaming in those big brown eyes. Spock had a plan.

“Not if they believe us to be otherwise occupied.” Spock said. “As Commander Hendorff pointed out, the ship was crippled by the Klingon attack. For all intents and purposes, we are adrift.”

“We are not!” Scotty gasped, deeply offended at the suggestion.
“Vulnerable, you might say.” Jim nodded his head slowly as Spock’s plan became clear. “A babe in the woods. Desperately in need of some friendly assistance.”

“We are not!” Scotty repeated. “Captain, the ship is in perfect working condition, I give you my word! Aye, we took some damage, but I already fixed—”

“It’s a trick, Scotty.” Uhura sighed. “We’re going to trick them into coming after us.”

“Oh.” Scotty’s mouth snapped shut. “Huh?”

“Come on.” She rolled her eyes and grabbed his elbow, hauling him up from the table. “I’ll explain it while you fix my console. Captain.” She nodded once out of respect.

“Dismissed.” He told her cheerfully. “Go work your magic. Spock, I’ll give you an hour to put together a team. Meet me in my quarters when you’re done. Hendorff, I want to be ready when our friends arrive. No more surprises.”

“Aye aye Captain.” Hendorff nodded, still giving M’benga the stink eye.

“Alright people.” Jim rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He felt like a bloodhound who’d just caught the scent. “Let’s outsmart some Vulcans.”

***

Jim’s hands hovered in the air above his keyboard. His lips were pursed in concentration, his brow furrowed as he tried to examine his quandary from all possible angles.

The door chimed.

“Come in!” He called, leaning back in his chair. He heard the swish and, without turning around, said, “Spock, should I tell Starfleet that it was necessary for me to be part of the rescue team or that it was vital?”

“I’m not Spock.” Came the reply. “And you’re not going.”

Jim spun around so fast he fell out of his chair. “Carol.” He gaped up at the tall blonde from the floor. “Um…hi…um…” He blinked as her words pierced through his sudden panic and he leapt to his feet. “What the hell do you mean, I’m not going?”

“Knock it off, Jim.” She sighed, leaning against his desk without so much as a by your leave. “The dumb boy scout routine doesn’t work on me, remember? You know you can’t leave. You’re the Captain. You’re just hoping no one will remind you.” She glanced around. “You cleaned up since the last time I was here.”

Jim flushed tomato red at the reminder, but rallied swiftly. “That’s right I’m the Captain. Which means you’re bordering on insubordination.”

“Technically I’m a contract worker, Jim. I can’t be insubordinate since I’m not subordinate to begin with.” She reminded him. “Look, calm down, will you? I’m not here to talk about…what happened.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.” He muttered. She raised an eyebrow and he sighed, realizing
how juvenile he’d just sounded. “I’m sorry.” He apologized. He crossed to the far side of the room and felt better for the few feet of extra space now between them. “For everything. It’s just…it’s not that it wasn’t…but it was a mistake.”

“I’m with you there, buddy.” Carol said ruefully. “I really don’t need to talk about it. But if you do…?”

“No!” He said a little too quickly, a little too loudly. “I’m sorry, but…no. Let’s just…pretend it never happened.”

“No problem.” Carol said bitterly. “We’ll just move on then, shall we?”

“That’s probably for the best.” Jim agreed, and felt like a right heel for doing so. “So if I’m not going I suppose you think you are?”

“That’s right.”

“You must be joking.”

“And Rand’s coming with me.”

“Now I know you’re joking.”

“I told you to knock it off!” Carol roared furiously. “I’m not joking so you need to drop the act and listen to me. I know you’re not as blind as you pretend to be. You have to know that the Federation is in trouble.”

Jim couldn’t bring himself to meet her furious gaze. “We have a duty. If Starfleet loses faith in the Federation the whole thing falls apart.”

“A duty? Lose faith?!” She scoffed. He flinched at the righteous outrage in her voice. “We are standing on the brink of oblivion. We are governed by fools who run and hide behind bureaucracy rather than face the evil they have wrought. We are led by warmongers who see only profit where they should see only suffering.”

“We are talking about saving Leonard McCoy, not about the state of the Federation.”

“No, Jim, we’re not. You’re not in Iowa anymore. Like it or not, you matter. You can’t afford to take things personally anymore. And this ship may very well be the last bastion of sanity left in the entire Federation.” Her words were cold, her gaze steely. “I helped kill my own father for the sake of the Federation, so don’t you dare lecture me about duty.”

Jim forced himself to look at her then. There was no way to avoid the damning truth of their situation now, not without shaming himself in front of a woman who had sacrificed everything for him and his ship. “…The only way the Vulcans could have gotten the future tech was if…Starfleet gave it to them…”

The words stank of treason but they had already been said. It was too late to put them back on the shelf like a guilty child returning a candy bar from his pocket. Jim half expected Carol to call security then and there, but she just stared back at him with grim determination. “I’m a weapons expert. And I’m the only expert you can trust to verify if their future tech came from what Starfleet salvaged from the Narada. And if there is a conspiracy, the Rands are the only people in the known universe powerful enough to expose it. Janice and I have to go.”

She was right, dammit. Jim knew she was right. He just didn’t want to believe it. He didn’t want to
believe that the universe he lived in had veered so off track that they couldn’t even trust their own people anymore. “You can’t go alone.”

“We’re not. Nyota is coming with us. They’ll bring Leonard back, but Janice and I are going to see this through.”

A small burst of brittle air huffed out of his mouth, halfway between a resigned sigh and a humorless chuckle. “Is there anything I can say to talk you out of this?”

“Sorry, Jim. I think this is where I get off.” She got up and headed to the door. “Scotty and Spock are getting the shuttle ready. We’ll be leaving in an hour.”

“So soon?” The words came out so plaintive that he visibly winced.

“The sooner the better.” She hit the button to open the door. “Take care of yourself.”

“Carol…” He called out to her as she stepped into the hallway. She turned and looked at him. “…Is it bad that I hope you’re wrong?”

She gave him a fleeting smile. “Honestly Jim, I hope I’m wrong too.”

***

Jim and Spock stood side by side and watched the shuttle leave. “There go we but for the grace of God.” Jim said ruefully as the bay doors closed.

“By the grace of Nyota Uhura would be more accurate.” Spock told him wryly. “It was her plan.”

“Figures.” Jim sighed. “Now what do we do?”

“We wait for our friends to arrive. Nyota sent the fake distress call before she left. I expect Stonn, if it is him who is behind the events of the past few days, will arrive within a week at the most.”

“With that red matter converter they could be here within a couple hours. Why wait a week?” Jim asked.

“They will not wish to seem too eager. They will attempt to make their arrival seem like a fortunate accident. If they are wise they will spend a few days watching our movements to verify that the ship is as damaged as we claim before making themselves known.”

“And then what?” Jim sighed. “If the girls are right and there is…something going on, do we continue the mission?”

Spock was silent for a long time. Jim waited patiently, knowing how hard this had to be for his First Officer.

“I believe we must.” He finally answered. “Even if we manage to neutralize the extremists, there will still be those who search for…Sybok. And there will still be the threat of war should they cross borders in their quest.”

Jim sighed. *I wish I could save you from this.* He wanted to say. *I wish I could make it all go away. I wish it were just you and me, exploring the galaxy and having adventures without worrying about*
politics or conspiracies. That’s how it was supposed to be. “And all we can do right now is wait.”
He said ruefully. “My favorite.”

Spock turned his head and stared at Jim with bald-faced confusion. “Your favorite what?”

It wasn’t even funny. Later on, that was what really bothered Jim. It was just Spock being Spock.
Fussy, particular, adorable Spock. He made Jim laugh. He made Jim feel better, even when he had
no good reason to feel better. He made Jim feel like maybe the universe wasn’t all that fucked up
after all. And Jim loved him for it.

So he kissed him.

He didn’t mean to. He wasn’t even aware of doing it until it was already happening. Spock’s natural
heat scorched Jim’s lips as they pressed against the Vulcan’s. Jim’s hand fisted in Spock’s silky hair,
holding him still. He felt Spock’s long eyelashes flutter against his skin, felt Spock’s velvet lips part
in surprise. It was the most beautiful moment of Jim’s life. The most electrifying, the most thrilling,
the most miraculous kiss he’d ever experienced.

It was also the shortest.

The second he realized what he was doing Jim threw himself away from his Vulcan. He stumbled
backwards, already panicking. Spock watched his retreat in silent shock.

“Sorry.” The word squeaked out of Jim’s traitorous lips. “I didn’t…I mean…it’s not…I…” To Jim’s
horror his eyes were proving just as untrustworthy as his lips. They raked over Spock’s form,
lingering on the faint green flush in his cheeks, the wet sheen of Jim’s saliva on his lips, the way his
always-perfect hair was sticking up where Jim had grabbed it. It was an embarrassingly large number
of dreams come true. Something deep inside Jim was shouting at him, telling him to stop running
away and to just take what he wanted, no, what he needed. But something much closer to the surface
was telling him that now would be a good time to run like hell. “Good night!” He yelped and fled.

Spock stared after his disappearing Captain. Slowly, ever so slowly, one hand rose and brushed
against his tender lips.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he turned to glare at Scotty who was still standing next to the shuttle bay
doors. Scotty stared back at him, his eyes bugging out of his head and his cheeks flame
red.

…”You will not mention this to anyone.”

…”I cannae promise anything…”

All of a sudden Spock was looming over Scotty, a dark foreboding look on his face that promised
vengeance. “You will not mention this to anyone.”

…”Well, maybe…if you made it worth my while?”

…”Mister Scott, are you blackmailing me?”

”Who, me? Blackmail? Never, sir! All I’m saying is, well…I know you’ve been managing the
requisition requests lately and a new Mavorian flux coupler would go a long way down in
Engineering, if you catch my meaning.”

”Mavorian technology is more than three times the price of standard Starfleet issue equipment.”
Spock pointed out.
“Aye sir. But as I always say sir, you can’t put a price on quality.”

“But apparently discretion costs five hundred Federation credits?” Spock raised an eyebrow.

Scotty looked pointedly at the pieces of Spock’s hair that were still sticking up. “Your words sir, not mine. And may I be the first to offer my congratulations—”

“Mister Scott, when I said you were not to mention this incident to anyone I was including myself.” Spock snapped, his cheeks turning an even darker green.

“Ah…were you also including Miss Uhura by any chance?”

“Doubly so, Mister Scott. Doubly so.”

***

By the time he returned to his own private quarters Spock had managed to convince himself that the kiss had been nothing more than a symptom of Jim’s current emotional vulnerability. Nothing more than a small bump in the otherwise smooth road of their friendship, a small bump that Spock would treasure forever in the safety of his memories but a bump nonetheless. He briefly entertained the notion that it could have meant something more, but dismissed the idea as a mere fantasy. Jim had never shown any romantic inclinations before, and for his part Spock wasn’t interested in a purely sexual relationship. As he entered his rooms he resolved to find Scotty’s flux coupler as soon as possible and hopefully the kiss would be completely forgotten by the time Doctor McCoy was rescued and returned to the ship. Illogical though it was, Spock dreaded what the good Doctor might say if he ever found out.

His body relaxed in the welcome heat of his private quarters. He unzipped his uniform and slid into his sleeping robes. But he did not turn to his bed, nor did he head to the alcove where he meditated. There was something else that required his immediate attention, something he had been putting off but could no longer be delayed.

Sybok’s journal.

It rested on his desk. Spock eyed the book warily for a moment, as if it were a feral animal that he had backed into a corner only to discover that its bite was poisonous.

It is an inanimate object. Spock told himself firmly. It cannot hurt you. Still his body refused to follow his commands. His feet obstinately refused to move towards the desk, his hands stubbornly refused to pick up the book.

“Stay quiet.”

Those were the last words his brother had spoken to him, as he pushed Spock under the bed. And ever since then he had assumed those were all the words they had and that there would be no more. And yet here he stood and before him lay an entire book of words.

His stubborn hand brushed against his lips once more. Was it just his imagination that he could still taste Jim, or was there some small chance that some of his Captain’s essence still lingered?

If tonight was a night for miracles, what better time to read those words?
He sat at his desk and picked up the journal.

_It has been many years since I kept diary. Ruth Grayson suggested it when I stayed with her on Earth, so long ago now. They had just taken Spock away from me and the Voice was so loud and angry I could not think clearly. She claimed the practice of writing my innermost thoughts on paper would help me to control them. To give them form, complete and anchored in this world. She told me that if I wrote my thoughts down it would not matter if the Voice grew so loud and insistent that my own thoughts became fragmented and disjointed because I could always pick up where I had left off. No more forgetting. The Voice has been quiet for many years now and so I have not had need of a journal. For better or worse my mind has been my own._

Now I find myself wishing the Voice would return and break my thoughts into fractals once more. I find myself asking why he has forsaken me now, when I need him most. It is shameful to think such things of a god, but it is not the greatest shame I bare. Not even close.

_They came for me in the night while I was meditating. I have not been able to meditate since. Every time I try I am overcome with fear that the same thing will happen again. It has been six years since I was able to achieve the deeper levels of meditation. The deprivation is slowly driving me insane. Recently I noticed my telepathic abilities are starting to weaken. My thoughts are like a tidal wave crashing over me and I am drowning in them._

_Writing is such a slow process. My hand cannot keep up with my mind. Already I am falling behind._

_They came for me in the night and they took me to their ship. I lived on the Narada for three years. In all that time I was only allowed to leave my cell once._

_They brought me to see_

_The next word had been scratched out so heavily Spock could not tell what it had once been. It looked like time had not cured Sybok of his love for theatrics._

_I will finish that thought later. For three years I waited in that cell while the thoughts and emotions of my captors hammered against my walls. Those men, if they were still men, were even more broken than I am. Being in that doomed ship was like a divine punishment from the mythology of ancient Terra._

_He came to see me every day and every day Nero asked me the same question. Is it time? For the first couple months I tried to ask him what he meant. Time for what, I asked, but he never told me. Eventually I gave in and answered as honestly as I could. No, I said, every day for three years._

Except for that last day. I will never forget how wonderful it was to feel him again after so long. It was as if I was suddenly awake for the first time since they’d captured me. Suddenly I had something good again, something worth breathing for, something other than the festering wound that burned when I was awake and screamed when I slept. I could tell that he was older than I remembered but that was only to be expected and I could tell that he was coming from very far away. I swear, that is all I knew.

_And I told them. I did not mean to but I was so happy I could not hide my joy. They saw my face and they knew._
Spock! Please forgive me! If only you knew…

I will finish that thought later.

They brought me to see what I had done.

I still remember the sound Vulcan made when the mantle gave. It was so loud that we could hear it in orbit. It was as if a billion voices, belonging to a billion different species, were groaning in pain at once. It was as if every soul still on the planet screamed out in unison. Maybe they did. They made me watch, and then they let me go.

Everything is lost now. Everything. The spires of ShiKahr, the steppes of Gol. The way the colors changed in the desert when the sun rose, transforming an endless ocean of darkness into the swoops and soars of the sacred mountains.

All gone. All lost. All my fault.

***

T’liv watched as Stonn gathered his belongings with growing trepidation. “I do not believe this to be a wise plan.”

“I do not care what you believe.” He responded without looking at her. He never actually looked at her, preferring to stare over her shoulder at something only he could see. T’liv believed that was part of the reason he was their leader. Of course, they did not have an official leader, but Stonn made all the important decisions. “I am going. You will stay here, to interrogate the prisoners and take care of your sister.”

“But we have the doctor.” T’liv tried to argue. “The Enterprise will come to us. There is no need for you to go anywhere.”

Stonn closed his bag and slung it over his shoulders. He pushed past her into the hallway and began walking so quickly T’liv had to jog to keep up. “The Enterprise does not know where we are. It could take them months to find us, if they ever do. In the meantime they are in need of urgent assistance and the nearest Starfleet ship is three weeks away. This is the perfect opportunity to win Spock’s trust.”

“But if they should recognize the ship they will realize that it was us who attacked them on Nimbus III.” T’liv pointed out.

“Nonsense. We will remove the red matter converter from the hull and replace the markings. They will not recognize the ship. They have no reason to suspect us, as we have been nothing but civil.”

“But—” She could see that they were coming up to the docking bay door. She was running out of time to make her case.

“They are only humans, T’liv. You are overestimating their abilities.”

With a final burst of speed T’liv managed to dart between Stonn and the door before he could walk through it. “This is the wrong choice.” She told him in as firm and dignified a tone as she was able while trying to catch her breath.
Finally she had Stonn’s complete attention. His black eyes fixated on hers and held her still. Her breath caught in her throat as he raised one of his hands and caressed the side of her face. She felt his mind brush against hers, once, twice, and then he was pressing down on her. He did not try to enter her mind, he merely pushed inwards to remind her that he was a force to be reckoned with, both soothing and punishing and never, ever to be questioned.

“The wrong choice?” He sounded almost disappointed in her. T’liv lowered her eyes in shame. “I wanted Spock. You brought me a human doctor. That was your choice. Tell me, was it the right one?”

“No Stonn.” She murmured obediently, and the pressure of his mental touch vanished.

“You will do as I have asked?”

“Yes Stonn.”

“You will finish the interrogation?”

“Yes Stonn.”

“You will get the information we require, regardless of the methods you must utilize in order to do so?”

“…Yes Stonn.”

His hand was heartbreakingly gentle as he pushed a loose strand of her hair back behind her ear. “I will see you again in a week. May the Prophet guide you to the True Path.”

“And you.” She bowed her head and stepped aside, letting him pass. She stood there for an extra moment even after he had vanished through the door, listening to the clanking and shouting as their hired ship was re-outfitted in preparation for its rendezvous with the Enterprise. She did not enjoy being left behind.

One of Stonn’s devotees, a young Vulcan who had shaved his head in deference to the Prophet, was walking towards her. She called out to him.

“Bring the prisoner to the old warden’s office. It is time to finish the interrogation.”

The devotee bowed deeply and scurried off to do her bidding. T’liv watched him go with deep distaste. There was something about Stonn’s bald devotees that didn’t sit right with her. It was one thing to follow the Prophet, but at least she knew he was a mortal being. A visionary, yes. Their salvation in this time of terrible darkness, of course. But he was still Sybok son of Sarek, flesh and blood just like anyone else. The way the devotees spoke of him, in hushed tones, adulation in their eyes, was as if they believed him to be a true god. Their faith made her uncomfortable.

Not that she would ever admit that to anyone, in case Stonn found out.

She took her time as she made her way to the warden’s office. She dropped by T’sing’s hole and found her sister curled on her bed, fast asleep. That was good. T’liv didn’t want T’sing to come looking for her and interrupt the interrogation again. Stonn had been furious with both of them last time.

The prisoner was waiting when she arrived, her eyes closed as if she were sleeping. Someone had strapped her to the chair. T’liv stepped in front of her and stared down at the unwashed face of the intruder from the other universe. Hatred filled T’liv’s lungs and choked her so she could not speak
through it.

Wicks opened her blue eyes. “So.” She rasped. It had been five hours since she and McCoy had split their last cup of water and her throat was dry. “Here we are again.”

“Why did you come here?” T’liv asked. She would not allow the prisoner to draw her into pointless conversation, not again. There was a small black box with a big red button on the desk next to her. She picked it up.

“You brought me here, remember? Your sister had a vision when my shuttle came through the wormhole and so you kidnapped me. How is your sister, by the way? She seemed distraught the last time I—mmph—”

Wicks’ lips clamped shut as her frame shook with the force of the electrical current crackling through her body. T’liv waited a moment before slowly lifting her long index finger off the red button. Wicks’ whole body sagged in the chair. She would have fallen to the floor if it weren’t for the straps holding her upright.

“Never mention my sister again.” T’liv radiated fury. “Why did you come to this universe?”

“I told you.” Wicks had to force the words out of her mouth. Her tongue felt strange, heavy and meaty, as if it didn’t belong to her. “It was an accident. I mean you no—”

Bzzt.

“Fuck that hurts.”

“Stop lying.”

“I am not lying. It really does hurt.”

“I could m-make you tell me.”

Wicks’ head snapped up and for a moment, for a brief moment, T’liv had the victorious pleasure of seeing real fear in those mocking blue eyes. Of course she was afraid. A forced meld was the greatest violation conceivable. But then the fear vanished and was replaced with pity and T’liv felt like she might throw up.

“No.” Wicks said slowly, carefully pronouncing each and every syllable with her dead meat tongue. “Stonn could. It is the sort of thing he would do. But not you.”

T’liv snatched up the little black box and held it in the air, her palm pressing the red button flat. Wicks head flew back as her body convulsed wildly. “You think I am not capable?! You think it is so different from what I am doing now?! She threw the little black box to the ground and once again Wicks’ body collapsed in on itself.

“It is.” Wicks rasped. “It is so different. It is a thing that, once done, cannot be undone. You will carry it with you till the day you die and maybe even afterwards. Whatever secrets you think I have I promise you they are not worth it.”

“Then you must answer my questions!” T’liv was clinging to her rage. She knew that if she let it go now all she’d be left with was grief and shame. “Who are you? Why did you come here? What are your plans?” She raised her foot and stomped on the red button, holding it down while she screamed question after question. “Are there more of you coming? Why did you attack us?”
Wicks just gurgled as her eyes rolled back in her skull.

“Answer me!” T’liv demanded, finally lifting her foot off the button.

“...I am...Wicks of...Vulcan—”

Something inside T’liv snapped. She launched herself at the prisoner, knocking the older woman over and trapping both of them beneath the heavy chair. In her blind, howling fury T’liv didn’t even notice. All she could see was her enemy, right here in front of her.

WHAM

T’liv’s fist collided with the bridge of Wicks’ nose and she felt a satisfying crunch.

“How dare!” She screamed, pulled back her fist again.

WHAM

She caught Wicks under the chin as the prisoner flailed back and forth, trying to escape but still strapped to the chair. “You say!”

WHAM

Her knee landed in Wicks’ stomach. “That word!”

Green blood was pouring from Wicks’ mouth and nose. She sputtered and then whispered, almost as if she couldn’t help herself, “Vulcan.”

T’liv screamed. She screamed and screamed, endlessly and wordlessly. Her blind rage gave her strength and she rose to her feet, lifting up the chair and hurling it at the far wall, prisoner and all. Wicks’ head collided with the roughly hewn stone, leaving a dark wet burst of green blood on the wall. The chair clattered to the floor and Wicks went with it, out cold. But T’liv wasn’t done. She lit into her unconscious prisoner, kicking and screaming. She screamed for her parents, for her bedroom window, for the planet she couldn’t save, for the sister she couldn’t help. She screamed for the ugly mine she hated and she screamed for the man she’d chosen to follow. But most of all she screamed for herself. She screamed because she was frightened and alone and she didn’t know what she was supposed to do anymore.

At some point, after the kicking had stopped and the screaming had died down, while T’liv stood above her victim and watched Wicks’ struggle to breathe through the blood that filled her throat, there came a knock at the door. T’liv turned and saw the shiny cranium of the devotee from earlier poke into the room.

“Do you require anything?” He asked.

T’liv regarded him coolly for a long time. He did not seem to notice that she was drenched in someone else’s blood, or maybe he just didn’t care. That was the universe they lived in now, after all.

“Bring me the other one.”

***
Hi everyone.

I’m so sorry it took me so long to update. The last couple months have been a perfect storm of work deadlines, computer problems, and serious health issues. It’s only been in the last week that I’ve felt well enough to write again.

I hope you liked this chapter. It was pretty intense, huh?
Disclaimer

The author sits in the biggest, fanciest, most samurai-themed conference room in all of Tokyo. The
demon lord Sesshomaru watches her suspiciously from the furthest end of the conference table. The
author leans back in her chair, pulls a flask out of her pocket and takes a swig of the bootleg
moonshine she stole from her fairy godmother. Just to annoy him.

Sesshomaru: So foul wench. You have returned to your evil ways and driven Mr. X to madness.

The Author: Hardly. I’m not a child anymore, old friend. I’m not running around, forcing
characters into ships they don’t want to be in, claiming I own everybody all the time.

Sesshomaru: I am gratified to hear—

The Author: I don’t own anybody.

Sesshomaru: Very good—

The Author: I mean, can anyone truly own a character? What does “intellectual property” even
mean?

(Mr. X, who had been hiding under the table in a fetal position and whimpering, pokes his head out)

Mr. X: You see! You see what I have to put up with!

***

Hide And Seek

Excerpt from Pre-Surrakian Melds and Their Applications for Modern Telepathic Theory by Sybok
of Vulcan.

Current wisdom states that the dangers associated with melding in anything other than the direst of
circumstances outweigh the benefits. The astute student might wonder how, if this is true, the Vulcan
species was able to survive for so many millennia before the introduction of Surrakian social norms.
Critics of experimental melding most often remind the astute student of Fa-wak Glansu Tusa, or The
Prophet’s Lament. When translated into Standard this ancient song, the true origins of which have
been lost for approximately 10,000 years, offers a dire warning against the excesses of melding. The
chorus alone states:
When I see the living I see into their heads
When I touch their bodies I can see the dead
There used to be a wall here
But the wall has fallen down
I no longer walk upon my old familiar ground
I have taken a thousand steps if I have taken one
And when I look up to the sky I see a thousand suns

But is the existence described in those lyrics truly as unfortunate as the critics claim?

***

By the time his interrogation was over the smell of blood had wormed its way so deep inside his nostrils McCoy didn’t think he’d ever be free of it again. He tried not to look at the thick pool of green blood on the floor beneath his feet but his eyes kept returning to it as if drawn by an irresistible force. He knew Wicks had been interrogated before him but he hadn’t seen her being returned to their cell. He feared she was dead, or as good as. For the Ambassador’s sake McCoy hoped she wasn’t. He didn’t think the old Vulcan should have to lose anyone else after all he’d been through.

“What does Captain Kirk know about the Prophet’s location?” T’liv demanded for the tenth time.

“Nothing.” McCoy spat back. No matter what she did to him he refused to be cowed. “Stop asking me questions I can’t answer.” His eyes remained fixated on the blood. He had noticed that the way he thought about the Ambassador had changed since the meld with Wicks. He’d only met the other Spock a handful of times. He had always respected him (as much as you could respect an intruder from another universe who was indirectly responsible for the deaths of billions) but now he felt as if he knew the Ambassador as well as he knew his own Spock, if not better. As his interrogation dragged on he tried to focus on the sensation of intense familiarity that arose in him whenever he thought about the Ambassador to distract himself from the pain. Was he experiencing the emotions that normally belonged to Wicks, or had she just shaken loose something that always existed within himself?

“Very well.” T’liv sounded as calm and controlled as any other Vulcan but McCoy could see that her knuckles were split and her black boots were splattered with green blood. He often teased Spock about his Vulcan mask, but T’liv was masking something he didn’t want to see. She stood tall and proud as if the room was still an office and not a torture chamber. “What do you know about Operation Retriever?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, you pickled half-wit of a gremlin.” McCoy’s anger was getting the better of him. He’d been kidnapped and held against his will before. He’d been questioned, interrogated, even tortured once. But that was only to be expected when the aggressors
were unfamiliar aliens, enemies as strange as they were strangers. T’liv was a completely different story. She was a Vulcan, a fellow citizen of the Federation and someone he knew by name. Someone he’d made small talk with, broken bread with, passed the time with. Every instinct McCoy had was screaming that this was all kinds of wrong.

T’liv pressed the big red button on the small black box and McCoy’s vision went white with pain. In a way he was grateful they hadn’t given him anything to eat or drink in so long. At least on an empty stomach he wasn’t pissing himself every time she electrocuted him.

“I do not believe you.” Her voice was placid as if they were still on board the Enterprise, exchanging anecdotes over dinner. She watched as his body jerked and twitched in the straps.

“…Clowns…” McCoy whispered as the electricity faded away.

T’liv’s brow furrowed. “Repeat what you just said.”

“Clowns.” McCoy spoke again in a stronger voice. He finally looked up at her, his blue eyes bright with rage. “You wrote a paper about clowns. Remember that? I mean, you actually sat down and wrote a paper about clowns. You researched them. You studied them. You spent your free time thinking about them. You dedicated an entire section to the art of pie throwing. You formed a hypothesis and drew conclusions which you then published, all about clowns.”

T’liv frowned. “What is your point?”

“Torture only works if the person you’re torturing is afraid of you.” He hissed, clenching his fists in preparation for another shock. “When I look at you all I can think about is a rainbow wig and a big red nose. It isn’t very scary.” He thought about it for a moment and then added, “Not to me anyway.”

To McCoy’s surprise T’liv didn’t immediately zap him into oblivion. Instead she stared at him for an uncomfortable length of time—more than enough time for him to rethink the wisdom of his words—before saying, “I understand.”

McCoy gaped at her. “Really?” That wasn’t the reaction he’d expected. It wasn’t even the reaction he’d hoped for.

She ignored him and crossed the room to the door. She opened it and nodded to the bald Vulcan standing guard outside. He entered the room and unstrapped McCoy from the electric chair. “We will continue this conversation at a later time.” She said as McCoy was half-led and half-carried into the hallway.

Not bloody likely. He thought but he wasn’t desperate enough to say the words out loud.

Neither McCoy nor the guard spoke as they walked back to the cell. McCoy had tried a few times to lure the strange shaved Vulcans with the long black robes into conversation but all his efforts had proved futile. Instead of talking he used the few minutes it took to return to the cell to examine the mine for possible avenues of escape. There weren’t any. Most of the doors they passed were just entries to abandoned shafts, the majority of which were caved in. But he took note when they passed an open door to what appeared to be a laboratory of cavernous proportions. He had just enough time to see a cluster of bald Vulcans whispering to each other next to a sleek, black, unmarked shuttle before his guard noticed where he was looking and dragged him onwards. When they arrived at the cell McCoy yanked his arm back from the guard’s grip.

“At least let me get in on my own.” He grumbled. “I’ll probably break something if you throw me in
like last time.”

The guard gave him an impenetrable look and pulled the heavy grate up from the floor.

“Thanks.” McCoy said sarcastically and gingerly lowered himself into the cell. The grate swung shut above him and the guard walked away. McCoy paid no mind, already completely focused on the crumpled form of his cellmate.

“Wicks!” He scurried over to her, instinctually reaching for the medical tricorder at his hip that wasn’t there. “What the hell are you doing?!”

Wicks opened her right eye. The left eye was so swollen and crusted with dried blood that she wouldn’t have been able to open it even if she’d wanted to. “…Trying…not to die…what are you doing?”

“Ha ha.” McCoy rolled his eyes as he gently palpated her side, searching for broken bones. “I meant why aren’t you in a healing trance? Your injuries are too severe to recover without one. I’m counting four broken ribs and I think—” He broke off when Wicks began to cough and green blood bubbled from her lips. “I know you’re bleeding internally. If you don’t go into a trance you’re going to die.”

Wicks closed her one good eye. “…I know…”

“Then why—?”

“The pain is…too much…I can’t…”

McCoy cursed T’liv a thousand times over, and then he cursed the guards and Stonn and Sybok and the whole stupid universe that would put him in a cell with a dying woman and give him all the medical wisdom he needed to save her and none of the tools he needed to actually make it happen. If he had a dermal regenerator or even just a simple painkiller, anything that could alleviate some of the pain so that she could—wait…

“Wicks,” McCoy said slowly his idea began to take form. “You used a meld to share your memory with me…can you share your pain with me as well?”

Wicks’ one good eye opened and she tried to give him a disapproving look. “That is…not the same thing…”

“You didn’t answer my question. Does that mean yes?” McCoy gave her the sternest look he could muster, and he had years of experience when it came to stern looks. He was the bona fide Supreme Overlord of stern looks.

“…Yes…”

“Then what are you waiting for?” McCoy demanded, settling himself into a more comfortable position against the wall next to her. “Let’s do some voodoo.”

Wicks still hesitated. “…Poppa, this is not…”

But McCoy had already made up his mind. “Don’t argue with me. I know how much pain you’re in right now and I can handle it. Believe it or not I actually know more about pain and the human body than you do.” As an afterthought he added, “Besides, if you really are my granddaughter, how do you expect me to look you in the eyes once you’re born knowing I let you die?” *Wouldn’t that be something to tell the grandkids…maybe not…I remember when there was only one timeline and life was simple. Better days. “Show me what to do.”*
Wicks gave in. After all, if she wanted to live she didn’t really have any other feasible options. In a weak voice that was frequently interrupted by bouts of coughing and bursts of blood she showed him how to arrange her fingers against his temples and explained that she was going to redirect the information carried by her electrochemical nerve impulses from her brain to his. Step by step she showed him what to do, taught him how to relax his mind and slip into a receptive state. At first McCoy felt nothing and he wondered if maybe it was a wasted effort after all.

_Do not try to hold onto the pain._ He could feel Wicks’ presence in his mind but he couldn’t seem to access hers, the way he had been able when they melded. _Let it flow freely and it will show you the way._

Easier said then done. McCoy had never been very good at meditation exercises but he made an effort. He counted his breath and tried to visualize pain flowing between them like a river. He felt ridiculous but then something clicked and he was swept away in a current of pain, halfway between the metaphorical shore that was Wicks’ mind and the metaphorical shore that was his own.

Somehow he endured. A few hours later, or maybe a few days, he opened his eyes and breathed freely as the pain vanished and Wicks’ limp hands slipped from his temples.

“Did it work?” He croaked. His throat was raw and aching and he thought he might have been screaming. Wicks didn’t answer. “Dammit…” He checked her pulse and heaved a sigh of relief. The thumping of her heart was slow but it was steady. She’d fallen into a trance. Already the swelling around her eye was starting to go down. Satisfied that his patient was going to survive McCoy allowed himself to heave a sigh of relief and relax, leaning against the wall for support. He closed his eyes. He didn’t know how much time had passed but he felt exhausted.

“How did you do that?”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” McCoy jumped to his feet, his eyes snapping open. There was yet another Vulcan woman kneeling on the grate above his head, peering down at him with open curiosity. There was something…off about her. McCoy tried to put his finger on what it could be but he couldn’t quite—wait—she was a mess. Yes, that was it. Her hair was tangled and her clothes were stained and she was only wearing one slipper. Even the bald fanatics in all their obvious insanity managed to keep themselves immaculately groomed at all times. _There’s something wrong with this one._ McCoy realized and he tried to position himself between the stranger and his patient, which was much harder than he thought it would be because the stranger was directly above them. “How did I do what?”

“You saved her. How did you do it?” There was a strange light shining in her eyes that made McCoy extremely uncomfortable.

“I’m…not sure.” He answered slowly, wondering if he was shooting himself in the foot by answering at all.

“Be sure.” She told him, nodding. “It is important that you remember.”

“Huh?”

“Is she a monster?”

McCoy felt like he had somehow joined a conversation in a language he didn’t know. “Who? Wicks? No, she’s a Vulcan.”

The Vulcan woman pursed her lips as if she were considering his words. “Maybe she is not a
“...Okay...Do you talk to monsters?” McCoy didn’t know who this woman was but it was obvious she needed medical help. Prisoner or not, he had sworn an oath.

“No. But my sister does.” The Vulcan glanced over her bony shoulder, checking to make sure the hallway was still empty. “She does not know they are monsters but I always know.”

“Have you told your sister about the monsters?” McCoy asked for lack of a better question. The Vulcan ignored his question and responded with one of her own.

“May I tell you a secret?”

“Is it about monsters?” McCoy wondered what kind of monsters they were talking about. Were they metaphorical monsters or had the mine been attacked by unknown aliens during the time he’d been carrying Wicks’ pain?

“I know where Sybok is.”

All the blood drained from McCoy’s face as he stared up at her. “What? Where? How?”

“I am not telling.”

“Please!” He begged. “It’s very important that my friends and I find him! Before—well, before your friends find him, but...what I mean is...you’re not gonna tell me, are you?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I am not going to tell anyone. I do not want him found. He is not a prophet and this...” Her hand shook violently as she raised it to her temple. “This is not a blessing. It is not a good thing. He ruined everything and now I am ruined too.”

“What do you mean?” McCoy asked. He was completely exhausted after being interrogated and then taking on Wicks’ pain but something about the filthy Vulcan woman with the wild look in her eyes seemed important, somehow. He forced himself to stay awake even though his eyelids were growing heavier with every passing second.

“He tried to break our bond but he just uprooted it. And now I drift and float and cannot hold onto to anything for very long.” Her head fell to the side and she pressed her ear against her shoulder. “Sometimes I see what he sees. My sister thinks that is all that I see. Do you want to know another secret?” McCoy nodded. She glanced over her shoulder again to make sure no one was eavesdropping then pressed her lips against the grate and sang, “When I see the living I see into their heads. When I touch their bodies I can see the dead.”

Then she burst out laughing and stood up and walked away. McCoy had just enough time to register annoyance before exhaustion overtook him and he fell into a deep sleep slumped against the wall of his cell.

***

Jim was waiting outside Spock’s door when he woke up the next morning. This had never happened before. Spock didn’t know which was more peculiar, that Jim was actively seeking him out instead of keeping an awkward distance for a few days in light of what had transpired, or that Jim had
Remembering the kiss brought forth a powerful swell of emotion and Spock hurriedly shoved the memory back in the mental box he’d made for it during his nocturnal meditation. It was a very nice mental box. If it had been a real, live, physical box it would have been made from solid mahogany and encrusted with rare jewels, and Spock would have placed it on an altar at the foot of his bed so that he could see it every morning when he woke up. It was, after all, a very good memory, but it was still just a memory. A very recent memory but still, Spock reminded himself for the hundredth time, it was just a memory and there was no reason to have any expectations for the future because of it. So back in the box, you.

“I couldn’t sleep.” Jim confessed as soon as he saw Spock’s face. “Can I come in?”

Spock stood to the side and allowed Jim to enter. “Captain, if your insomnia was due to anxiety about our last meeting I can assure you—”

“It wasn’t.” Jim sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “Well, maybe a little. But there’s a lot going on right now.”

Spock felt a twinge of irrational guilt, as if he was somehow responsible for all the heavy burdens the universe had placed on James T. Kirk’s shoulders. He decided to ignore the emotion as it made no sense and continued to ignore it even as he continued to feel it.

Jim took a deep breath. “I wanted to—what’s that?”

Spock blinked, not understanding Jim’s sudden change in tone and topic. He glanced around the room quizzically but saw nothing unusual or out of place. “To what are you referring?”


Spock turned and stared at the offending article as if he’d never seen it before either. All other thoughts drowned as a tide of shock overwhelmed him. “It is Sybok’s journal.” His words sounded hollow, robotic even to his own pointed ears.

Jim did not look at him as he walked over to the desk and picked up the book. He turned it over in his hands and, without turning, asked, “When did you get this?”

Spock could barely hear him over the buzzing in his ears. “I found it on Nimbus III.”

“What?”

“It was hidden under the bed.”

Jim still wouldn’t look at him. “Did you read it?”

“Only the first few entries. I have not finished it yet.” Spock already knew what the next question was going to be.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“…I forgot.”

“…You forgot?”

“Affirma—”
Jim punched the wall hard enough to split the skin on his knuckles. He reveled in the pain and ignored the prickling in his throat and eyes. “Goddammit Spock.” He hissed through gritted teeth. “We talked about this.”

“Jim…” Spock didn’t know what to say for himself. “Please…”

“No!” James T. Kirk had finally had enough. “This is bullshit, Spock! You promised you’d be honest with me! What else have you been hiding?”

“I have not been consciously hiding anything.” Spock tried to explain. “I…I…”

“Forgot?” Jim snapped. “Spare me. You don’t ‘forget’ things, Spock. You’ve had plenty of chances to come to me with this. For god’s sake, we were under that fucking bed together!”

“I…I have behaved in a manner that is unacceptable for a First Officer—”

“You’re damn right you have!” Jim began pacing, Sybok’s journal gripped tightly in his shaking hands. “Do you realize that if you were literally anyone else and I found out you’d been hiding vital information about our mission, I’d have you in here to interrogate yourself?” Jim fed the flames of his anger, because he could already tell that once the fury faded he would be left heartbroken. If after all they’d been through Spock still couldn’t trust him then he probably never would. Jim didn’t think he could deal with that. “What is it Spock? Are you protecting Sybok?”

“No!” Spock needed Jim to believe him, but he could scarcely believe it himself. Was it even possible that he had forgotten something so important? Or had he subconsciously buried it in an effort to hide from his past, the same way he always did? How could he, Spock, have been so careless? “I do not know.”

That was not the answer Jim wanted to here. “Well, you’re off duty until you figure it out. I’m taking the book.” He headed for the door. “And Spock?”

Spock looked back at him helplessly. Jim forced himself to stay angry. “You’d better have a damn good reason.”

Jim managed to make it back to his quarters before he completely lost it. He threw the journal at the wall and lit into his bedding, punching his pillows as hard as he could. It was not as satisfying as he hoped it would be but he kept going until his arms ached. Finally the last of his anger slipped away and he slid down to the floor, his back pressed against his mattress and his face in his hands.

Jim had gone to Spock’s room this morning with every intention of coming clean about his attraction. After yesterday’s kiss it had seemed like the right time, but…

“Why won’t you just trust me?” Jim moaned into his hands. Knowing that Spock didn’t trust him hurt as deeply as it would have if Spock had shoved him away yesterday, kicked him in the groin and then filed a sexual harassment suit. Which, since Spock clearly did not trust him, might still happen. Jim should probably think about getting a lawyer. Then again, maybe not. If Spock wanted to press charges Jim wouldn’t fight them. He was guilty after all, a hell of a lot more guilty than Spock knew.

The nightmares were still getting worse. Every night he would wake up, covered in sweat, Spock’s name stuck in his throat, and every night he thought he had finally seen the worst of it. Until the next night, when the dream would become even more upsetting. Last night Jim had managed to sleep for about fifteen minutes. The dream started off surprisingly well, involving Spock, a bathtub and a
scandalous amount of nudity. It ended with Jim sobbing over Spock’s drowned corpse while shadowy figures laughed at him. It had been very disturbing.

He really wished Bones were here.

Jim rubbed his eyes furiously. He had to pull himself together. So what if his personal life was in shambles? He was still Captain of the Enterprise and he still had a job to do. He glared at Sybok’s journal. He couldn’t help but feel that the book was personally responsible for his disastrous encounter with Spock.

*Maybe it’s a mind control book and it forced him to keep it secret.* It wasn’t completely outside the realm of possibility. Who knew what kinds of devious tricks Sybok had up his sleeve?

Jim grabbed the journal and opened it to a random page.

> It is very late now, or perhaps it is very early. I cannot sleep. In fact I have not been able to sleep for several nights. When I close my eyes I can hear him again, screaming her name.

> Mandana, he would cry, Mandana Mandana Mandana. Over and over again he called out for his dead wife. I do not believe he ever said her name while waking but while he slept he could say nothing else. His screams would echo through the belly of the ship and reverberate in my cell while his men stood in silent vigil. Every night was a vicious reminder of all they had lost.

> Whoever Mandana was in the other universe, she has not yet been born in this one. None of them have taken their first breath yet. But they will someday, even Nero. I wonder if the child will know that he and the man who destroyed an entire planet are one and the same.

> When the Nero of this universe grows up, will the same yellow star swallow the empire? Will Mandana die in a sea of flames? Will Nero chase my brother through a hole in space and time? Will Vulcan be destroyed again, in some other unlucky universe? Is the future inevitable?

> Is there anything I can do?

Jim couldn’t help but feel a stab of sympathy for Sybok. He often laid awake at night asking himself the same thing. He skipped ahead to the final entry. It was just one sentence, hastily scrawled in the center of the last page.

> I must protect the innocent.

Jim frowned. Did Sybok mean what Jim thought he—

> “Captain Kirk?”

Jim pulled out his communicator. “Yes, Chekov?”

> “They’re here, sir.”

Instantly all the weariness in Jim’s bones vanished and was replaced with an electric focus. Stonn
and his crew of extremists had finally shown themselves. “I’ll be right there.”

“Aye, sir. Should I let Commander Spock know?”

“Commander Spock is on temporary leave. Captain’s orders.” Jim said tersely.

Chekov knew better than to argue when Jim used that tone of voice, though he did share a concerned glance with Sulu, who was sitting beside him on the bridge. Unfortunately now was no time for Operation Swordfish, mostly because they weren’t near any planets that they could safely abandon their commanding officers on for a few days. Also, Uhura would never forgive them if they did it without her. Neither would McCoy, for that matter. “Yes Captain.”

“Have they tried to contact us?” Jim asked as he rose to his feet and started heading for the turbolift.

“Not yet, sir.”

“Keep up the fake distress call but don’t hail them yet.” Jim ordered. A group of ensigns took one look at his face and vacated the lift. Even the crewmembers who were headed to the bridge held back, allowing Jim to ascend alone. There was something about his face when he was completely focused on a task that was unsettling for mere mortals like them. “If Stonn wants to talk to us he’ll have to make the first move. And no matter what you do, Chekov, do not lower our shields.”

***

Uhura sat alone in the shuttle cockpit and thought about time. And space, because space and time are one and the same when you think big enough, but mostly she was just thinking about time.

After many hours of reflection she had arrived at the conclusion that time was an exceedingly ineffective way of arranging matters.

Here she was, sitting in a small dark room with nothing but time on her hands and at the same time McCoy might very well be running out of time during the time it took them to reach him and all they could do was hope they made it in time.

And by the time Uhura had figured out that sentence she had a headache.

She never seemed to have enough time when she needed it and there was always an excess when she didn’t. Sometimes a second took a lifetime and other times whole decades took no time at all. Where was the sense in that?

The door behind her opened and Carol slipped into the copilot seat next to Uhura, chewing the last bite of her replicator toast. “Have you been awake this whole time?”

“Who knows?” Uhura sighed. “Time is an illusion. And it’s not a very good one at that.”

“You should get some rest.” Carol advised as she checked the readings on the screen bank. “We’ll arrive shortly.”

“I should.” Uhura agreed.

Carol threw her a wry smile. “But you’re not going to.”
“No,” Uhura shrugged. “I couldn’t even if I tried.”

“Oh, come on. You went to the Klingon homeworld.” Carol reminded her teasingly. “This mission isn’t anywhere near as terrifying.”

“I didn’t go to Qo’noS because I was following a chicken.” Uhura teased back. “A chicken named after a suicidal lunatic, no less. Who’s bright idea was that?”

“Janice’s, I think. And mind your tongue. That’s my countryman you’re talking about.” Carol tapped the screen that displayed the signal from Hamlet’s tracking device.

“He was the Prince of Denmark, not England.”

“Well, he was written by an Englishman. That’s good enough for me.” Carol gave her a saucy wink. “Besides, you know how those ancient European royals were. A bunch of incestuous perverts, the lot of them.”

“Aren’t you somehow distantly related to the old British royal family?” Uhura asked, grinning.

“And the Spanish.” Carol nodded. “So I know what I’m talking about.”

Uhura laughed. “You’re terrible.”

“I cheered you up, didn’t I?”

Uhura’s smile vanished instantly. “I’m going to miss you, sugar.”

“Hey now. Don’t undo all my hard work.”

“No, I mean it.” Uhura insisted. “I’m really going to miss you. I don’t even know when we’ll be able to talk again. If we’ll be able to talk again. If...if Stonn really did get that future tech from Starfleet we could be going up against our own people. Best case scenario we spend the rest of our lives in a penal colony. Worst case...we vanish in the shadows without even leaving a body to bury.”

“Then we don’t lose.” Carol reached out and grabbed Uhura’s hand, clasping it with all her strength. “The Federation itself hangs in the balance, Nyota. So we don’t lose.”

“We get to the mine in ten minutes. Are we even ready?”

“Well, I am. Can’t say the same for the two of you.”

Carol and Uhura turned to see Janice standing in the doorway, dressed from head to toe in black and bristling with weapons.

“Did you leave some for us or did you clean out the whole armory?” Carol rolled her eyes.

“Is that a katana strapped to your back?” Uhura asked disbelievingly. “Do you even know how to use it? Does Starfleet even issue katanas?”

“Yes there are plenty of weapons left. Yes it’s a katana. Of course I know how to use it and no, it’s not standard issue. Sulu gave it to me.”

“Really?” Carol raised her eyebrows.

“Okay, I borrowed it.”
Uhura crossed her arms.


Since Spock had overseen the outfitting of their shuttle Uhura was unsurprised to discover that he had stuffed their “armory”—which was really just a pantry in the back—with a weapon for every occasion and a spare for every weapon.

“Seriously?” Carol asked as she gazed skeptically at the extensive collection. “Are we supposed to be fighting the Huns or rescuing the doctor? What was Spock thinking?”

“He just didn’t want us to be unprepared.” Uhura defended her friend.

“Nyota, there are at least twenty phasers in this box.”

“Good. Stick ‘em everywhere.” Uhura grabbed a handful and began hiding them in every available location on her person. “If we get caught I want it to take an embarrassing amount of time for the bastards to disarm us.”

Spock had been right about the asteroid mine’s poor defenses. Janice was able to land the shuttle just far enough away from the mine entrance to be out of sight without setting off any alarms. But that was the easy part and all three women knew it.

“I think Hamlet is in a storage room.” Janice said as they clustered onto the shuttle’s only transporter pad. “I didn’t see any other life signs in the area, but I don’t know what kind of cloaking tech they might have, so be ready for everything.”

“Naturally.” Carol agreed as she programmed the transporter to beam them five feet away from the alien chicken’s tracking signal. “Transport in 3…2…”

They rematerialized in utter darkness.

During that first second Uhura remembered each of the thousands of ways that beaming could go horribly wrong, and then Carol switched on her tricorder’s flashlight feature. The bright white LED light shone like a full moon on a steel cargo box labeled *Biobed Sonic-bath & Beyond*. They all breathed a sigh of relief, which turned into stifled curses when the air exploded with green feathers and flapping wings.

“SQUAWK!” Hamlet welcomed them. “SQUUUAAAWWK!”

“Shut up!” Janice hissed, snatching her avian charge from the air and clamping his beak shut with her hand. His eyestalks bobbed furiously but his body went limp in immediate surrender.

“Fuck.” Uhura swore. “What are we going to do with him?”

“We’ll have to beam him back to the shuttle.” Carol sighed, opening the program that would contact the shuttle’s transporter on her tricorder. But before she could send the signal the overhead lights flickered on and they heard the scraping sound of a heavy, metal door being dragged open. As one they dove into the dark space between the wall and the nearest boxcar of linens. They held their breath as two voices drew near.

“—simple matter to turn this cargo hold into a second lab.”

Uhura immediately recognized T’liv’s dulcet tones.
“No one’s arguing that. My question is why should we fund a second lab when you’ve yet to produce results with the first one?” Uhura didn’t recognize the man’s voice but she doubted he was Vulcan. She felt Carol tense and glanced at her questioningly but it was too dark to make out her expression.

“In two weeks we have successfully engineered red matter core propulsion and made cloaking technology a century advanced compatible with our own. Are those not results?”

“I think so, of course. You guys are doing amazing things here, no doubt about it. But the people I represent, well, between you and me they’re more interested in defense.”

“The possible military applications for this technology is—”

“Know your enemy, my dear. If we don’t have that all the technology in the world is useless. That’s what Operation Retriever is all about. Now we respect that you Vulcans have taken a personal interest in the prisoner but if you don’t start getting results we’re gonna have to revisit our options.”

_The prisoner?_ Uhura wondered if they were talking about McCoy.

“I realize that Vulcans are notoriously difficult to interrogate but I can’t help but think my organization would have gotten some answers by now.”

“She is not Vulcan.”

By human standard T’liv’s tone would have been considered snappish at worst but coming from a Vulcan her words sounded shockingly vicious.

“…Of course not.” The man sounded so patronizing Uhura might have felt sympathy for T’liv if she wasn’t so clearly insane. _So I guess McCoy isn’t the only prisoner._

“She is the enemy.”

“Absolutely. But for god’s sake, T’liv, you haven’t even examined her shuttle yet. A completely functional treasure trove of future tech and you can’t even get the door open!”

“The shuttle is locked.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Furthermore, there is no evidence of a door.”

“Okay but—”

“If the prisoner had not transported out of the shuttle when we seized it we would not even know it was possible to enter it. It is completely shielded to prevent scanning and phaser fire has no effect on the outer hull.”

“Have you tried cutting it open?”

“Phaser fire had no effect.”

“Lord save me from modern science.” The man exclaimed with an exasperated huff. “Tell me, T’liv. Is there, in this vast cargo hold, a chainsaw?”

“No.” T’liv answered coolly. “But there might be something similar amongst the old mining equipment.”
“Then by all means, lead the way.” The man clapped his hands and as T’liv closed the door behind them Uhura heard him say, “That shuttle will be open before the day is over. I can feel it in my bones.”

The lights flickered off and they were once more plunged into darkness. Carol clicked her flashlight back on and stared at Janice, wide-eyed and pale.

“Okay, now we beam Hamlet back to the shuttle—” Uhura started to say.

“Was that…?” Janice interrupted her.

“Rex Livingstone.” Carol nodded.

“Who?” Uhura asked, looking between them.

“We have to follow them!” Carol scrambled to her feet and raced to the door, Janice at her heels. “Hurry!”

“What about Hamlet?” Uhura asked as she followed them.

“There’s no time.” Janice snapped. There was a large bin next to the door filled with fresh black robes. She stuffed the alien chicken inside. Hamlet squawked indignantly and tried to hop back out, but just ended up tangled in sleeves. “We’ll have to come back for him.” Or maybe not. She added to herself.

Carol opened the door a few inches and peeked into the hallway. “The coast is clear.” She whispered. “Come on.”

“Which way did they go?” Janice asked. The hallway stretched in both directions, completely deserted except for them. There was no sign of T’liv or Rex Livingstone.

“Dammit!” Carol spun around and punched the wall. Furious tears filled her eyes and she blinked them away. “We lost them.”

“Whoa.” Uhura rested soothing hands on Carol’s shoulders. “Calm down, sugar.”

“That man worked for my father.” Carol explained. Her wide eyes were staring at the wall but all she could see was her father’s broken, lifeless body. Guilt, grief and rage battled for dominance and she choked on all of them. “Rex Livingstone wouldn’t even take a shit without my father’s permission. Whoever he’s working for now, they’ll just be picking up where Dad left off.” Carol laughed bitterly. “This is all my fault.”

Uhura spun her around. “Enough.” She said firmly. “We don’t have time to waste on your unwarranted self-flagellation. Pull yourself together, Marcus.”

Carol took a deep breath. “You’re right. Sorry.”

Uhura allowed her hands to fall from Carol’s shoulders. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s focus on finding McCoy.”

“He’s two levels down.” Janice announced.

Uhura and Carol turned and stared at her. She saw the surprise in their faces and rolled her eyes. “If you spent less time having personal drama you would have noticed that there’s a map on the wall.” Janice explained, pointing at the poster in question. The map was a relic from the days when the
defunct complex was still a working mine and it suggested at the top in cheery block letters You Don’t Have To Be Enslaved To Work Here But It Helps!

“See? We’re right here, where the big red star is, and two levels down there are these weird circle things labeled ‘detainment quarters.’ I’m betting that’s where he is.”

“This must be the lab.” Carol tapped on a room labeled kitchen.

“Are you sure?” Uhura asked doubtfully.

“It’ll be the largest room not associated with essential functions and it will already have plumbing and ventilation. I’m sure.” She nodded firmly, a steely look in her eye.

Janice’s heart sank. She knew that look. It was the same look Carol Marcus had back at Madam Lorraine’s Finishing School when the Master of Andorian Etiquette told her she shouldn’t sit next to the Orion exchange students during lunch because she was already promiscuous enough. Not only did Carol share every meal with the five green-skinned girls for the rest of the term, she’d slept with all of them too. It was the same look she’d worn when she snuck onto the Enterprise a year ago and locked Janice in a Jeffries tube before Janice could reveal her true identity. By the time Chekov found her Spock had already discovered the truth and in all the chaos that followed Janice completely forgot to be angry. It was the look Carol wore when she’d already made up her mind to do something dangerous and insane, and Janice had a pretty good idea what she was planning.

“Uhura, you go get McCoy.” Janice sighed. “Carol and I will create a distraction. As soon as you’ve got him beam back to the shuttle and get out of here.”

“What about you guys?” Uhura asked, even though she had already anticipated that they would need to split up.

“Don’t worry about us.” Carol smiled with a lot of confidence she didn’t have. “We’ll think of something.”

***

Spock was in a state of disbelief.

He stood in the center of his quarters, staring blankly at the wall, his focus turned inwards.

What had happened?

He had forgotten to tell Jim about the journal. Not only had he failed in his duty as a Starfleet officer, he had betrayed Jim’s trust. He had promised Jim that there would be no more secrets and yet he had inadvertently kept one.

But had it been inadvertent?

Now that he reflected on the matter, Spock could not be sure that a part of him had not wanted to keep the journal for himself. In fact, now that he thought about it, he knew that part of him had wanted exactly that.

The notion that his subconscious was making decisions without his conscious being involved was
not an appealing one, but what other explanation was there? That he had simply forgotten something so important?

Jim was justified in not believing him. Spock did not know what he believed either.

How could he have made such a monumental mistake? There must be something wrong with him.

Spock tried to consider the matter logically. He had never forgotten his responsibilities in his life and it was unlikely that he would start now. So either he had intentionally concealed the journal or his mental faculties were failing.

Could the kiss be to blame? Perhaps he had been far more effected by it than he originally believed? But no, there had been plenty of opportunities to tell Jim about the journal before the kiss but he never breathed a word. Besides, if Jim wasn’t concerned with it—and clearly he wasn’t, he had all but told Spock it wasn’t a big deal—why should Spock be? And to think just a few hours ago the kiss had seemed like a miracle. Spock supposed that Jim thought it was just a small glitch in their friendship, if they even still had a friendship. Jim had been so upset…

There was a commotion in the hallway. Spock immediately headed for the door, all other thoughts banished from his mind as his training took over. Halfway there he hesitated. Jim had ordered him to stay off duty. On the other hand, the furor in the corridor most probably meant the Vulcan extremists had finally arrived. Spock would be needed.

He stepped through the door and headed for the turbolift.

***

Jim tried to look surprised and relieved when Uhura’s replacement, Lieutenant Pine, finally managed to make visual contact with the Vulcan freighter. He received a pointy-eared glower in return.

“I am Davo, captain of the Fo-dan.” Jim didn’t recognize Davo but he doubted the chrome-domed Vulcan was truly in command of the vessel. “State the nature of your emergency.”

“I can’t tell you how delighted we are to see you, Captain Davo.” Jim said with false levity. He forced himself to stay reclined in his chair, presenting a façade of calm even as every instinct he possessed screamed to be on his guard. “We thought it would be weeks before another Federation ship passed this close to the Neutral Zone.”

“The Korsovaya Shipping Company makes numerous deliveries to remote Federation Outposts.” Davo explained away their remarkable timing with practiced ease. He had clearly been expecting Jim to ask about it. “Answer the question.”

Scotty and his team had spent days preparing for this moment, carefully dismantling some of the ship’s non-essential functions and blasting precisely calculated holes in the hull so that the Enterprise would appear crippled to anyone without a total understanding of her innermost workings. And considering all the dubiously legal alterations Scotty made when he thought no one was looking Jim doubted even the Riverside shipyard workers who built her would be able to tell the difference.

“We were attacked by some Klingons.” Jim explained. “We were able to fend them off but not before they took out our secondary power relay and, as you can see, totally destroyed our propulsion channel.” The propulsion channel, a giant cylinder that helped direct the thrust from the warp engine
and was vital for steering in the vacuum of space, was actually sitting in the cargo bay under a tarp. But Davo didn’t need to know that.

“We can provide you with a replacement. Lower your shields so my crew can beam onto your ship and deliver it.”

Jim was ready for this. “We’ll have to lower shields manually, so give us a few minutes. I’ll contact you when we’re ready.” He nodded at Lieutenant Pine and the viewscreen went dark.

Jim leaned forward in his chair, his casual affectation abandoned. “Let them stew for a couple minutes. We’ll beam their men straight to the cargo bay. Sulu, make sure our shields are back up as soon as they’re onboard. They’ll be expecting us to have our guard down, I don’t want to prove them right. Remember, everybody, our job is to keep them here as long as we can, not to start a fight. Until we know who’s backing them we can’t afford to--”

He heard the sound of the turbolift door opening and he turned to see who had only just arrived.

“Reporting for duty, Captain.” Spock said, refusing to meet his eyes.

I can’t deal with this right now. “No you’re not.” Jim probably sounded harsher than he intended but he didn’t appreciate Spock disobeying a direct order on top of everything else. He turned back around. “Return to your quarters.”

“Captain, I believe I—”

“I wasn’t giving you a choice, Commander Spock.”

Jim was still facing the viewscreen and so he couldn’t see the helpless look on Spock’s face, a look that was so subtle he was probably the only person who could have noticed it. “I understand, Captain.”

Jim waited until he’d heard the turbolift doors open and close before he allowed himself to look over his shoulder. By then Spock was gone.

Jim pretended not to see the uncomfortable glances his bridge crew was exchanging. “Get Davo back and prepare to lower shields.” He ordered.

If Uhura had been there she would have immediately demanded to know what was going on between him and Spock. As it was she was nowhere to be found and so no one said anything.

“I’m going down to meet them in the cargo bay.” Jim announced abruptly, leaping to his feet. He couldn’t stand the uncomfortable tension that now filled the bridge. “Sulu, you have the con.”

***

Spock barely noticed his surroundings as he returned to his quarters. He was fortunate the halls of the Enterprise were deserted because Jim’s anger had weakened his control of his telepathic shields. If he encountered anyone in his current state Spock knew he would not be able to block them out.

It was further evidence that Jim’s reaction was completely justified. Spock knew he had made a terrible mistake, though he still didn’t understand what had led him to make it. The very thing he had
most feared, disappointing Jim, had come to pass. His inability to open up had caused Jim to lose faith in him. Spock couldn’t blame him. He didn’t have much faith in himself either.

By the time Spock stumbled through his door his emotions were out of control. His self-loathing and frustration clouded his vision and so he did not see the intruder until long fingers were wrapped around his neck and his face was being shoved into the wall.

“Good afternoon.” Stonn whispered.

***

By the time McCoy woke up Wicks was already fully recovered and sitting up, thanks to him. Her eyes flashed with concern when he groaned and rolled over.

“How are you feeling?” She asked.

“Like somebody scrubbed the inside of my brain with steel wool.” He croaked. His throat was bone dry and his tongue felt swollen. He pushed himself up against the wall just far enough so he could look at his cellmate without moving his head. “We had a visitor.”

Wicks raised an eyebrow. “Who?”

“No idea.” McCoy closed his eyes and the throbbing in his skull eased. “Vulcan. Completely insane. First she said a bunch of nonsense about monsters and Sybok, then she told me she could see dead people and walked away laughing hysterically.”

“That sounds like T’sing.”

McCoy frowned but kept his eyes closed. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“She is T’liv’s sister. And Sybok’s former bondmate.” Wicks paused thoughtfully. “And I am not convinced that insanity is an accurate diagnosis. Stonn’s fanatics believe she is a seer.”

If McCoy had learned anything during his time sharing a cell with his half-Vulcan granddaughter who was over fifty years his senior and from an alternate universe, it was that he didn’t know jack shit about Vulcan telepathy. “Is that possible?”

“I am not sure.” Wicks shrugged. “It would be unheard of but…not only was she able to sense my arrival in this universe, she was even able to pinpoint my locations with complete accuracy. That should be impossible by any conventional means. The Highlander is shielded against all—”

McCoy opened his eyes so he could squint at his cellmate in irritation. “The Highlander?”

“My shuttle was named in honor of my mechanic.” Wicks explained briefly.

McCoy continued to glare at her. His headache was subsiding and he was starting to feel normal once more, which for him meant suspicious and annoyed. “You used a shuttle to get from one universe to the other? Now I’m starting to think you’re insane.”

“Actually this is not the first universe I have visited in my quest. I used my shuttle to travel to seven other universes before I found this one.” Wicks replied, unfazed by McCoy’s disapproval. She continued in a tone of voice meant to be reassuring, “Besides, my ride is severely pimped.”
McCoy had to close his eyes again, not because of pain but because of the wave of nausea that washed over him when he heard those words. “There should be laws against Vulcans trying to talk like humans.”

“You should tell her it’s cultural appropriation.” A familiar voice whispered from above their heads. “That’s what I told Spock when we tried dirty talk.”

McCoy and Wicks both leapt to their feet, crying in unison.

“Ohura!”

“Aunty!”

Uhura shushed them urgently. “Shut up! Someone will hear—who are you?”

“No one.” Wicks said quickly, sitting back down. It was one thing to come out to McCoy. Not only was he her grandfather, he was... well, Wicks had grown up hearing stories about Kirk, Spock and McCoy. When she was a child she had practically worshipped them and her mother’s stories took on larger-than-life dimensions. The idea of any one of them betraying any of the others was down-right laughable no matter the universe. But Nyota Uhura wasn’t wrapped up in the complicated web of soul bonds and Vulcan mysticism that united the Triad (as Wicks and all her many mixed-species cousins called them) across all dimensions. Wicks had to remind herself that even though this Nyota Uhura was still fundamentally the same Nyota Uhura, she was not the Nyota Uhura who had welcomed Miss McCoy and her half-Vulcan daughter into her home for 6 months after Wicks’ father died.

“This is Wicks.” McCoy did not have the same reservations. “She’s my Vulcan granddaughter from the other universe. She was looking for the other Spock and got kidnapped. Possibly because of magic.”

Uhura and Wicks both stared at him incredulously, though for very different reasons.

“What?” Uhura shook her head. “Never mind. We don’t have time for any of that right now.” She pulled out the heavy bar that kept the lid of their cell shut tight and threw down the step ladder the guards had left next to the gate. “Come on.”

McCoy didn’t need to be told twice. Within three seconds he had jumped on the step ladder and hoisted himself out of the dank hole. He turned around to help Wicks but she was still sitting on the floor.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He growled. She looked surprised.

“Am I being rescued too?” She asked, rising to her feet.

McCoy was about to snap that of course she was but Uhura cut him off.

“Look, clearly there’s a lot going on here today that I’m not fully equipped to understand, but whoever you are I can’t let you out of there until I know whose side you’re on.”

Wicks smiled. That alone was enough to half-convince Uhura that McCoy was telling the truth. “I was unaware that there were sides, but if I have to choose I choose Spock’s side.” She stepped onto the ladder. “Always.”

Something exploded in a different part of the mine and the air filled with the sounds of bellowed orders and running feet.
“Good answer.” Uhura said quickly as she and McCoy dragged Wicks the rest of the way out of the cell.

***

Carol and Janice tried to follow T’liv and Rex to the lab but they were only halfway there when the trouble started. A door opened and they had just enough time to turn around and hide behind the corner before they were seen. Carol peeked around the roughly hewn wall and watched as two Vulcans with long black robes and cleanly shaven heads walked away. Their slow, measured steps echoed forebodingly in the seemingly empty hallway. Carol and Janice held their breath and waited for the Vulcan to disappear once more.

“SQUAWK!”

Hamlet, having successfully escaped the deadly sleeve tangle, landed on Janice’s head, his talons digging through her thick blonde hair and scraping her scalp. Carol smashed her hand over Janice’s mouth and barely managed to muffle her pained yelp. Neither woman dared move and they stared at each other with wide, horrified eyes.

“Did you hear something?” They heard one of the Vulcans ask the other.

*Be quiet, please be quiet, for once in your life please just shut up!* Carol tried to beg their feathered friend with her eyes.

Hamlet cocked his head to the left and bobbed his eyestalks.

*That’s right.* Carol thought gratefully. *Nice and quiet.* She lowered her hands and Janice took a deep gulp of air.

“SQUAWK!!” Hamlet, unbalanced by the slight movement, lost his grip on Janice’s hair and fell to the floor.

“Who goes there?” The Vulcans whipped around the corner and drew up short when they saw the two humans and their frantic avian companion.

“…Hi…” Carol said instinctually. The guards recovered from their surprise and reached for the weapons concealed in their robes.

“SCREEEEEECH!” Hamlet threw himself at one of the guards talons-first and the Vulcan collapsed on the floor, mouth gaping with silent screams as green blood poured from his eye sockets.

“Holy shit!” Carol and the second guard leapt away from Hamlet. Neither of them had expected such brutality from the green chicken.

Janice, on the other hand, had already witnessed Hamlet’s latent blood thirst the first time one of the yeoman tried to unceremoniously stuff him in his enclosure back on the Enterprise. Poor Ensign Chang was probably still in sickbay. She didn’t wait for the second guard to recover from his surprise a second time. She drew Sulu’s katana from its sheath and stabbed it through his throat, her eyes cold and steely as hot green blood splattered across her face. She twisted the blade for good measure and yanked it out, letting the heavy corpse fall to the ground.
She turned to make sure Carol was unharmed. Her friend was white-faced and shaking.

“Are you okay?” Janice asked urgently.

“…I think I’m going to be sick…” Carol croaked.

Janice took a step towards her but stopped when she heard the sound of another door around the corner being opened. The first guard, blind and bleeding but still alive, heard it too.

“Help!” He shouted. “Intruders!”

Janice grabbed Carol’s arm and started running. “Be sick later!” She advised as five more guards rounded the corner. She unhooked a flash grenade from her belt and lobbed it over her shoulder.

Carol wanted to ask where they were going but she was afraid that if she opened her mouth she was going to lose the contents of her stomach and so she kept her lips sealed and focused on running as fast as she could through the labyrinth of corridors. Hamel bobbed ahead of them and the women, now completely turned around, followed him blindly.

Eventually Carol realized that their surroundings had changed. The halls in this part of the mine were basically just tunnels and all the rooms had beds but no doors.

“Stop!” She spotted a bucket in one of the bedrooms. She made a dash for it and reached the bucket just in time for her breakfast to exit her body the same way it had arrived.

“Carol?” Janice glanced over her shoulder fearfully. There was no sign of their pursuers but that wouldn’t continue for long. “We don’t have time for this. Are you sick or something?” She knew for a fact that Carol Marcus had witnessed events far gorier than what had just transpired and never blinked an eye.

Hamlet bounced up and down next to the bucket, chirping in concern. Carol just groaned.

“Janice!”

Janice turned and saw Uhura and McCoy running towards them, a middle-aged Vulcan woman she didn’t recognize a few steps behind them. She drew her phaser.

“Get down!” She told her friends, taking aim at the stranger.

“Don’t shoot!” McCoy shouted, waving his hands in the air frantically. “She’s a friend!”

“Oh.” Janice lowered her weapon but didn’t put it away.

“This is Wicks.” Uhura explained briefly when they caught up. “She was the other prisoner T’liv mentioned. She’s on our side. What’s going on?”

“Carol’s sick.” Janice stated the obvious as Carol started a new round of violent heaving in the bucket. Janice winced and turned her back on her friend. Janice had always been the type of person who started vomiting whenever someone else did and her gullet was already starting to rise. “Look, we’re being chased. You guys should get back to the shuttle.”

“What about you?” McCoy demanded as Uhura pulled out her tricorder and started loading the remote beaming program.

“Don’t worry about us.” Janice smiled. One of the many things she’d miss about the Enterprise was McCoy’s unique way of caring. “We’ll figure something out.”
“I am going to New Vulcan.” The stranger, Wicks, spoke for the first time. “If you can get me to my shuttle I can give you a ride.”

“That’s insane.” McCoy snapped. “There are dozens of guards between here and the lab, you’ll never make it.”

“We have to try.” Janice replied.

“Maybe McCoy is right.” Uhura said. “Once we’re all safe we can figure something out but—”

Carol tuned out their argument and tried to focus on keeping her hair out of the bucket. Suddenly cool hands slid around her face and pulled her hair away. Carol couldn’t see which of her friends was rubbing her back soothingly but she sighed gratefully as her nausea began to ease.

“Thanks.” She croaked, her throat sore.

“What the fuck?!”

“Get away from her!”

“Wait!”

Carol looked up to see McCoy and Wicks struggling with Janice and Uhura, holding them and their phasers back. She twisted her head and saw that her helper was a Vulcan woman she recognized but couldn’t place. Then she remembered the pale, haunted face peeking out from behind lacy curtains back on New Vulcan when she trailed Stonn to the house where T’liv’s sister resided.

“Lower your weapons.” Wicks stared at T’sing with a calculating look in her eye. “I have an idea.”

Slowly, so as not to startle the half-mad Vulcan who had somehow managed to slip past all of them, Wicks walked into the hole-room and knelt down next to Carol and T’sing. The two Vulcans sized each other up for a long moment. Wicks spoke first.

“T’sing, do you want to go home?”

“Yes.” T’sing nodded hungrily.

“I can take you there. But in order to do that we will have to trick everyone, even your sister. We will make them think that if they do not let us go I will hurt you. But it is just a trick. I will not actually hurt you. Do you understand?”

T’sing glanced at McCoy. “…He told me you are not a monster.”

“Do you believe him?”

T’sing turned her head and gazed at the wall, as if she could see something there that no one else could.

“…Yes.” She answered both questions at once.

Wicks nodded. “Give me your phaser.” She ordered Carol.

“Absolutely not.” Janice stepped forward. “What if it’s a trick?”

“Unlikely, but if this is a trick we are fortunate that you are not constrained by my promises.” Wicks shrugged.
“Then I should be the one taking her hostage—”

“Won’t work.” McCoy shook his head. He’d had a lot of time to think about the complex psychology of his captors over the last few days. “You’re human. Weak, emotional, dumb. You haven’t got what it takes. But as far as these assholes are concerned Wicks here is the source of all evil. They won’t take any chances so long as she’s the one holding the gun.”

Janice wanted to keep arguing but she could hear their enemies drawing near. She pulled out her back-up phaser and tossed it to Wicks.

“Time to go.” Uhura grabbed McCoy’s arm and sent the signal to the shuttle.

“Kick Spock’s ass for me.” He told Wicks as his atoms began to dematerialize. Wicks flashed the trademark McCoy Family smirk.

“He loves you too, Poppa.” She teased, and then he was gone.

“Up and at ‘em, ladies. We got company.” Janice announced. The guards were nearly there. Carol wiped her mouth and allowed Wicks and T’sing to help her to her feet. The three of them joined Janice in the hall.

“Is this really going to work?” Carol asked doubtfully.

“Trust me.” Wicks said as she wrapped her arm around T’sing’s neck and pressed the phaser to her temple. “I am very good at manipulating people.”

“…For some reason hearing that doesn’t make me feel better.”

“Do not come any closer!” Wicks shouted as the first of the guards came rounding the corner. “I have taken T’sing hostage! I will kill her if anyone attempts to approach us!”

The dozen bald Vulcans who had been charging down the tunnel full-speed came to an abrupt halt. The ones in the back weren’t able to stop soon enough to avoid running into those in front and the tunnel quickly dissolved into chaos as more and more Vulcans arrived and demanded to know what was going on while they tried not to stumble over their fallen brethren. Wicks tried to announce their demands but she couldn’t make her voice heard above the din.

Janice lifted her phaser and shot directly into the tunnel roof. “SHUT UP!” She roared.

“Stop shooting!” T’liv had finally arrived and she shoved her way through the crowd of devotees. “This part of the mine is not adequately stable. You will bring down the tunnel and kill all of—you.” She had finally reached the front of the crowd. The look on her face when she saw Wicks and her sister was so full of loathing the humans had to stifle their instinct to take a step back. Vulcans were not supposed to look like that. “Let go of her.” T’liv spat.

“No.” Wicks pressed the phaser into T’sing’s temple a little harder, taking care not to actually hurt her pretend captive. “You have two options. Attempt to keep us here and I will kill her. Allow us to leave and I give you my word she will live. Make your choice.”

At first Carol didn’t think it was going to work. The devotees didn’t look convinced and T’liv just looked like a danger to herself and others with her lip pulled down in an open snarl. But then something in T’liv snarled and her face melted back into the haughty Vulcan expressionless expression that Carol knew and loved.

“Let them go.”
One of the devotees stepped forward. With a start Carol realized it was T’mo, though she could barely recognize him without any hair. “Stonn would not—”

“She is my sister.” T’liv’s face remained neutral even though her voice was laced with a shameful amount of emotion for a Vulcan. “And she is the Prophet’s bondmate. Her wellbeing is non-negotiable.”

T’mo did not seem to entirely agree but he did not offer any further objections.

“Okay everybody, you heard the lady.” Janice said cheerfully, stepping forward with her phaser in one hand and her blood-stained katana in the other. Hamlet landed on her shoulder and spread his wings, glaring at his enemies like he was one of the Red-rimmed Terror-dactyls of Thule IV. “Form an orderly line and back away slowly.”

The reluctant Vulcans did as they were told. Janice led their group through the silent crowd, Carol bringing up the rear. When they finally left the tunnel and it seemed like the coast was clear Wicks began to loosen her grip but T’sing stopped her.

“Not yet.” She whispered. “They will follow us.” She was right. They were only halfway down the hall when the other Vulcans appeared, following silently.

It was a good thing T’sing was secretly on their side, Carol decided, because it would have been terribly embarrassing to ask for directions to the lab. Whenever they came to a junction T’sing would whisper the right direction and so they reached the lab in half the time Carol and Janice had spent looking for it. They ignored the silent crowd behind them and Janice yanked open the heavy door.

Rex Livingstone, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a chainsaw in his hands, looked up in surprise. His superiors had ordered him to get the illegal alien’s shuttle open by whatever means necessary and he meant to do so, which was why he’d given strict orders not to be interrupted. His jaw dropped in shock when the women walked in.

“Carol Marcus?” He gasped. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Rex.” Carol snapped. She jerked her head towards the door. “Get out.”

Rex started to laugh so Janice aimed her phaser and shot his chainsaw. The blade glowed red and melted, burning holes through the lab’s rubber flooring. Rex looked at the ruined blade, looked back at the women, looked over their shoulders at the stone-faced crowd in the hallway and reconsidered his unarmed options.

“You ladies seem like you could use some privacy.” He picked the fight-another-day route and trotted out the door. Once he was on the other side he turned and winked. “Nice to meet you again, Miss Rand. See you soon, Carol.”

Carol slammed the door in his face. “That guy gets creepier every time I see him.” She muttered angrily.

“Um…” Janice tapped her on the shoulder and pointed to the center of the room where Wicks’ shuttle hulked. “It doesn’t have any doors.”

She was right. The thing was shuttle shaped but there were no visible doors, windows or markings. As far as Carol could tell it looked more like a black marble statue of a shuttle instead of something that could actually get off the ground.
“How do we—” She started to ask but Wicks cut her off.

“Run, run, run as fast as you can.” Wicks declared in a loud, clear voice. “You can’t catch me. I’m the Gingerbread Man.”

Carol experienced a brief moment of panic, thinking they had yet again put their faith in a crazy person, but then a blue outline appeared in the side of the shuttle and a passage just large enough for someone to step through appeared. Carol considered herself an expert on cutting edge technology and she’d never seen anything like it.

“How did—” She started to ask but Wicks interrupted again.


T’sing and Hamlet had already clambered inside and were peering back at them curiously, wondering what the hold up was.

The shuttle had essentially the same layout as the Enterprise shuttles but it was filled with equipment that even Carol couldn’t recognize and there was very little space left for passengers. They all ended up squished together in the cockpit.

Suddenly Carol realized why their enemies had given up so easily. She groaned. What good was a shuttle if it was parked in the center of an asteroid with no way out? Wicks flicked on the viewscreen and Carol couldn’t help but feel that the blank laboratory wall was laughing at them.

“We’re trapped.” She said glumly.

“No, we are not.” Wicks assured her. “The Highlander is equipped with potable wormholes. We will be free of the asteroid in ten seconds.”

“Are you mad?!?” Carol protested. “Even if you could create a wormhole under these circumstances there’s no chance of stability! It would collapse as soon as we entered it!”

“Almost, but we can move up to 2,000 yards before that happens.” Wicks explained as she triggered the wormhole. “Fortunately this lab is only 1,958 yards beneath the surface. It will be close but we will make it.”

Carol meant to argue further but before she could the viewscreen blinked and the blank wall was replaced by distant stars. Her mouth snapped shut and she took another long look around the shuttle.

“…You’re from the other universe, aren’t you?”

Wicks glanced around at her equipment, cutting edge even by the standards of her time. “What gave it away?”

“Do you guys mind if we swap back stories later?” Janice snapped. She was squashed between the pilot’s chair and the wall with her knees pressed against her chin and a handful of levers shoving into her back. “We’re still escaping, remember?”

Sure enough one of the shuttle’s many alarms started going off, alerting them to the fact that the Vulcans were opening their dock and preparing to pursue.

“Do you think we’ve bought Uhura enough time?” Carol asked.
"I don’t think we can afford any more."

"Navigation is ready for coordinates." Wicks glanced back at them ruefully. "Unfortunately as a newcomer to this universe I do not know where anything is."

Carol leaned over her and entered a set of coordinates into the navigation system. Wicks didn’t bother asking where they were going before pushing the shuttle into warp.

***

Jim had never seen a bald Vulcan before today and now he was looking at five of them. Something about their lack of hair made their pointed features seem more alien and strange than Jim normally found Vulcans. Or maybe that was just his caveman instincts sensing danger and kicking in with the me vs. them mentality.

"Welcome to the Enterprise, gentlemen. I’m Captain Kirk, and these two are Chief Engineer Scott and Security Commander Hendorff." He smiled at the Vulcans. Unsurprisingly the gesture was not returned. "Did you…uh…bring the part we need?"

The five Vulcans, practically indistinguishable with their shorn heads and long black robes, looked questioningly at one another as if they thought one of them might have stashed the 20-foot-wide cylinder up his sleeve.

"Forgive us, Captain Kirk." The tallest one drawled. "There must have been a problem with our transporter. I will alert the Fo-dan of the need to attempt a second transport of the propulsion channel."

None of the Vulcans moved.

"…Are you planning on doing that any time soon?" Jim asked, confident that they would not understand his sarcasm. It was obvious they were trying to stall for time but he wasn’t worried. Their shields had only been down for ten seconds. He figured the Vulcans had been planning to invade the ship and were now having to sort out an over-crowded transporter room. Even if anyone had managed to beam onboard unnoticed during that ten second window Hendorff had a security team stationed in every corridor. Intruders wouldn’t get far.

Besides, he was trying to stall for time too. The longer this took the longer Uhura had to get Bones back home.

"No rush." Jim added.

***

Spock lashed out with his elbow but Stonn was ready for him. He wedged his knee into the small of Spock’s back and tightened his grip, crushing Spock’s wind pipe. Spock gasped for air.

"I gave you a chance." Stonn hissed in his ear. "You could have stood at the Prophet’s side in the
new era, but instead you chose your human masters. Now I will stand in your place.”

Spock struggled. He twisted and turned; trying to break free, but Stonn had the upper hand. When Stonn let go of his throat Spock thought he saw a chance but then Stonn’s fingers pressed against his psi-points and he froze. It had suddenly become grotesquely obvious what Stonn’s intentions were.

“Do not do this.” Spock croaked.

Stonn seemed like he was hesitating. Then he said, “Even after she broke the bond T’Pring always admired you. I could sense it every time we joined and every time it made me sick.”

Absurdly enough, the last thought Spock had before Stonn invaded his mind was, *Why did I not tell Jim about the journal?*

Stonn and Spock just watched as Jim picked up the journal. They just watched as he examined it. They just watched as his shoulders hunched and his jaw tightened. They just stood there and watched as everything Spock had tried to create for himself fell apart.

“Pathetic.” Stonn sneered. “You should be ashamed, in tears over a human.”

“I am not in tears.” Spock tried to defend himself but Stonn’s scorn felt like acid.

“Show me The Way.” Stonn commanded. “Do not waste my time with this drivel.”

Jim had not acknowledged them. He continued to stare at the journal and Spock continued to stare at him. “I do not know to what you are referring.”

Stonn did not appreciate Spock’s answer. Spock screamed as Stonn’s rage consumed him, slashing and burning the landscape of his soul.

“Make an effort.” Stonn said condescendingly.

Spock and Stonn were four years old, hiding in the garden. They pretended not to hear Amanda’s voice calling their name.

The rose bushes parted and a friendly face appeared.

“What are you doing here, little brother?” Sybok asked, his warm eyes crinkled with a smile.

No.

The glass was cold against Spock’s hand. He stared into the fading light in Jim’s eyes, pouring everything he had into their last remaining point of contact as if that alone would be enough to keep the light from going out. Spock’s universe was breaking and—

“I have no interest in your perversions.” Suddenly Jim vanished and Stonn was lying in the radiation containment chamber in his place. “Show me The Way.”
“Do not be afraid.” Sybok said as he arranged his fingers against Spock’s temple. The hot Vulcan sun beat down upon them and the scent of roses in full bloom perfumed the air. “I will show you the way.”

No!

Spock and Stonn spread their arms, accepting their demise as the tsunami of molten lava crashed down towards them. The reek of sulfur permeated their suit and, almost as an afterthought, they decided that being swallowed by a volcano was not such a bad way to die.

“Show me The Way!” Stonn was furious. He had not expected Spock’s mind to be so difficult to control.

Sybok was still smiling. “Close your eyes.”

NO!

Spock was running. He knew Stonn was right behind him so he tried to run faster.

He was fifteen, racing across the red Vulcan desert at sunrise, chasing the mountain shadows as they retreated across the sand.

“Show me!” Stonn screamed.

Spock was flying down the streets of San Francisco, not even acknowledging the people falling into the road in their haste to get out of his way. He was running faster than he had ever run in his life yet Khan was still getting away. Spock grit his teeth and—

“Show me!”

“Open your eyes.” Sybok sounded like he was trying not to laugh. Four-years-old Spock opened his eyes and looked around the familiar garden as if he’d never seen it before. Unable to contain his delight any longer, Sybok started laughing out loud.

“Go back.” Stonn ordered furiously. He tried to force Spock to show him the whole memory but every time he caught him Spock slipped from his fingers.

The scenery changed again. Now Spock sat next to Jim in Christopher Pike’s old office in San Francisco. Pike was in a wheelchair, gazing out his window at the city below. He had only been released from the hospital that morning and his face was still tightly drawn with pain.

“So this Ambassador, he’s you?”
“Not exactly.” Spock clarified. “Our lives have taken different trajectories, but essentially yes, he is me.”

“And you’re telling me Nero blew up an entire goddamn planet, murdered billions of innocent people, just to punish you?”

Jim leaned forward. “You can see why we came to you first.”

“What’s he talking about?” Spock realized that Stonn was there, that Stonn could see and hear everything. Spock turned his head and sure enough there Stonn was, his back against the wall and his face pale. Stonn looked back at Spock with the deepest loathing.

“It was you.” Stonn snarled. He could see the truth laid out plainly before him. Now what had happened to Vulcan made sense. “It was all your fault.”

Spock could feel Stonn losing control. If Spock wasn’t able to escape him his madness would destroy them both. But running away hadn’t worked. He would have to hide, somewhere even Stonn couldn’t follow. But where?

Sybok pressed his lips against Spock’s forehead. Spock tried not to flinch away. Even his mother didn’t try to kiss him in the human fashion these day. “No matter what happens,” Sybok whispered. “Stay quiet.”

Spock stayed quiet.

Stonn’s eyes snapped open and he stumbled back into the real world, allowing Spock’s limp body to slide to the floor. He had been ejected from Spock’s mind so violently he was now dizzy and it took him a couple of seconds to realize that his communicator was beeping. He pulled it out. “Why are you interrupting me, Davo?”

“We are evacuating the area. Return to the ship immediately.”

Stonn frowned. “I need more time.”

“If we remain any longer we will be caught between the Enterprise and their enemies. You dismantled our weapons system in order to disguise the Fo-dan. I mean no disrespect, Glorious Leader, but I will not risk the lives of my crew when we have no means of defending ourselves. The Fo-dan will go to warp in 2.4 minutes, with or without you.”

Stonn reminded himself that Davo was a capable captain and a devoted believer in the Prophet. “Very well. Instruct Kirk to lower his shields.”

Spock was still unconscious and showed no signs of waking. Stonn rolled him over onto his back with his foot.

“I will see you again soon.” He promised as his atoms began to dematerialize.
When the five bald Vulcans beamed back to their ship under the pretense of fetching the missing part Jim braced himself for the worst. He fully expected an entire cavalcade of pointy-eared fanatics to come charging in at any second and so he squared his feet and pulled out his phaser, ready for anything.

After of few minutes of nothing happening he started to feel silly.

“Cupcake?” Jim glanced at him questioningly.

Hendorff shrugged. “No sign of them yet, sir.”

“Our shields are still down so what are they waiting—” Jim cut himself off when his communicator beeped. Hendorff and Scotty drew closer so they could listen too.

“Go for Kirk.”

“Captain, the Fo-dan is leaving!” Sulu shouted. He sounded desperate.


“I can’t say for sure but it probably has something to do with the Klingon Bird of Prey that’s coming up behind them.”

Jim groaned. “Goddamn Klingons.”

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Spock’s body lay cold and still on the floor. There were no signs of life.

Then came a knock on the door.

“Commander Spock? It’s Security Officer Miles. Is everything all right in there? I thought I heard voices.”

There was no answer.

“Sir? Are you all right, sir? ...Sir, if you don’t answer me I’m opening the door…Okay, sir, I’m opening the door now.”

Swoosh

“Sorry Commander but it’s my job to—son of a bitch! Commander Spock? Spock?! Fuck. LILY! GET IN HERE!”

“What’s wrong—what happened to Commander Spock?!”

“I don’t know but he’s not breathing. Call a medical team!”

“Hello? We need a medical team in Commander Spock’s quarters immediately!”

“Goddamn you, you Vulcan bastard, breathe!”
Ha ha ha! Did you think I wasn’t coming back?

I’m truly sorry for the wait. Life happened, and I also really wanted to get this chapter right. I haven’t been entirely satisfied with the last couple chapters, so it was very important to me that this one be exactly what I wanted it to be. I think I achieved that.

A huge grateful shout out to my new beta-reader Enry! If you’re wondering why a strange, green, ninja chicken is becoming such a predominant character in this story (I think by this point Hamlet has had more screen time than Sulu or Chekov…) blame her. She really likes him for some reason.

Please let me know what you think of this chapter!

See you next time.

(And don’t worry, there will be a next time. I’m not just gonna leave you guys hanging like that, I’m not that cruel.

…

I mean, I’m cruel, but I’m not that cruel.)
Disclaimer

(Sesshomaru and Mr. X are bent over a stack of legal documents. The author is jumping up and down behind them, trying to see over their shoulders.)

Sesshomaru: Okay. Mr. X, you sign here.

Author: Where do I sign?

Sesshomaru: And initial here...

Author: I wanna sign!

Sesshomaru: And the date here...

Author: INCLUDE MEEEEEEEEEEE!!!

(Author punches Sesshomaru in the face, puts Mr. X in a head lock and grabs the pen. She signs ALL the documents.)

Author: Yay!

Sesshomaru: (smirking) Yay indeed.

Author: ...what do you mean? (She grabs the documents and actually reads them) Hey! This says that I don’t own any of the characters! You tricked me!

The boundaries between universes are, under normal circumstances, impenetrable. The abstraction of reality is not so easily breached, but there are exceptions. There are occasions when the walls wear thin and the edges grow ragged. Wormholes, event horizons and space-time fluctuations could snatch up any unwary wanderers and deposit them in a time and place not of their ken. These were natural occurrences, as much a part of the cosmic flow as stars and planets.

But sometimes, it was because something bad had happened.

The city of thieves was just such a place and they called it Avalon.

A long time ago, long enough that even the eternal beings that breathe dark matter and swim through
the vacuum of space have no recollection, something very bad had happened there. A behemoth planet, or maybe multiple smaller planets, had exploded into bits and pieces. The planetary shards whipped through space like a hurricane, trapped in the mysterious orbit of the shining city at the center. The city itself rotated gently in the eye of the storm. It had once been a great temple but over the millennia it had grown and changed in ways as foreign to the laws that governed this universe as the denizens who resided there. The Federation called it The Romulan Hurricane, and the Romulans called it the Federatti Areinnye, which translated meant The Federation Hell. It was the one unguarded section of the Neutral Zone, because to enter the storm was certain death.

Unless, of course, you had a map.

Across the millennia people had found ways in and out of the apocalyptic asteroid belt. It wasn’t easy. It required a level of grace and precision that would be unattainable for most, but some people managed it. People who, for whatever reason, didn't want to be found or followed. People who needed to disappear. Sometimes they left the same way they had entered and passed on the knowledge to someone else. Sometimes they discovered that Avalon had a secret and were never seen or heard from again.

Whatever bad thing had happened there it left scars emanating out from the city. The scars were like cracks in the universe, and though only a handful of known species were able to actually perceive these cracks it was an open secret in Avalon that the strange disembodied voices that sometimes broke the silence of the night were coming from the other side of those cracks, and that the hooded figures who vanished as mysteriously as they arrived were best left alone—who knew what evils lurked on the other side of the mirror? There were some questions you shouldn't ask on the off-chance someone actually answered.

But if you decided to ask irresponsible questions anyway, there were people you could talk to. People who knew how to help someone disappear. People who were there because they themselves had disappeared from somewhere else. They made a home for themselves in Avalon, the broken city in the eye of the storm, and made a tidy profit off of the legions of mercenaries, smugglers and ne'er-do-wells that sheltered in their port.

It was a dangerous place, and Momp had never been so happy to dock in her harbor as he was that evening. He was just a simple Ferengi businessman, trying to make a little profit in a cruel universe. He didn't consider himself a spiritually-minded individual. He sure as hell wasn't accustomed to questioning his place in the cosmos. But something about the fare they'd picked up back on Nimbus III made him feel guilty, and it was making him rethink his financial strategy. Sure, he dabbled in some shady dealings. He'd been known to sell untraceable weapons to opposing sides in any conflict he came across, but like the 34th Rule of Acquisition said, war was good for business. He wasn't responsible for what people did with those weapons afterwards, right?

Momp glowered at his viewscreen as his ship ran through the automatic docking functions. He could see a crowd of expectant urchins already gathering on the platform, eager to see what amusements the newcomer had brought. He stood alone on his tiny bridge and asked himself why me? Why, of all the ships in the cosmos, did he have to pick mine?

“Sir?” Ordas, his junior under-secretary of resources, bowed deeply as he approached his CEO, as was only proper. A hell of a lot more proper than yesterday when Ordas had run into his office, burst into tears and screamed that he couldn't live with himself anymore. That, in Momp's humble opinion, had been decidedly improper. “The, uh...the passenger is asking when he can leave?”

“As soon as fucking possible!” Momp roared with such fury that Ordas cowered. “He's a menace! Always asking questions! And knowing things he's got no right knowing! Good riddance, I say!”
Ordas glanced over his shoulder, just to be sure their unwelcome passenger wasn't sneaking up behind him again. “He...he asked me about...” His voice dropped to a shrill whisper. “My mother.”

Momp spun around, aghast. “He didn't.”

Ordas gulped. “He did. He said it didn't make me any less of a businessman if I miss Moogie-I mean my mother.”

Momp shook his head. “That sick bastard.” His frown deepened. “In fact, I'm going to see him out myself. Make sure he knows he's not welcome back.”

Momp had been picking up passengers on Nimbus III and giving them secure passage to Avalon for the past five years, but he didn't think he'd be doing that again any time soon.

The Vulcan was waiting by the loading dock, all his belongings packed in the small satchel slung at his side. Momp sniffed disapprovingly. It didn't seem decent to go through life with so few possessions. But since when did Vulcans understand anything about common decency?

At least he understood the concept of currency. As soon as the Vulcan saw Momp coming he pulled a small leather purse from his satchel and produced four bars of glorious latinum. Momp's disapproving frown immediately smoothed into the practiced smile of an ambitious Ferengi. “I admire a man who pays his due.” Momp trumpeted as his indentured crew scurried out of his way. “We settled on five bars of latinum, didn't we?”

“The agreed price was four bars.” The Vulcan answered without hesitation or doubt. An amused chuckle emanated from the depths of his hood. “But I suppose I could add another bar. Consider it payment for the effect my presence had on crew morale.” He pulled the fifth bar out of his purse as the hatch door began to open. The blinking lights that lined the doorway glinted off the latinum and made it shine.

Momp flinched. It was bad enough that the Vulcan's company had led to every single member of his crew tendering their resignation on ethical grounds—though that did raise a lot of philosophical questions about Ferengi nature that Momp was in no way equipped to grapple with—but the fact that the Vulcan was obviously aware of the effect he had made the whole situation that more humiliating. A second too late Momp realized with horror that it was his voice. Is this what I've come to? His soul cried in despair. What manner of Ferengi am I?!

The Vulcan chuckled again. “Nonsense, my dear friend. You and your crew have been so kind to me during our brief time together, this is the least I can do.” He pressed the five bars of latinum into Momp's unresponsive hand. Then he clasped the Ferengi's shoulder and knelt down so he could look into his eyes. “And remember, my friend, the 35th Rule of Acquisition. Peace is good for business.”

No one dared move until the Vulcan had disembarked. When the door was finally securely shut and they could no longer see the mob of professional beggars that had formed around their passenger the second he set foot on solid ground the entire crew heaved a sigh of relief.

As third-in-command (there hadn't been a second-in-command in a long time—one of Momp's many 'safety precautions') it was Ordas' task to cautiously approach Momp and nervously mutter, “Um...me and the guys have been talking and...we don't really want to quit...but, um...I don't think we can sell weapons anymore...there's just...just...” Ordas' eyes welled up with tears. He'd seen a lot of suffering during his tenure as a black market arms dealer, but he'd always been able to hide the painful memories behind a wall of self-delusion. Warlords would find a way to arm their armies one way or another, did it really matter where the weapons came from? But then the Vulcan had come on
board and he'd asked about Ordas' hopes and dreams. He listened to what Ordas had to say and he
didn't judge or reprimand. He had pulled down Ordas' wall brick by brick and when the terrible
reality of his actions came crashing down on Ordas' head and threatened to drown him the Vulcan
had wrapped him in his embrace and sang the lullaby that Moogie used to sing when Ordas was so
young he hadn't even begun memorizing the Rules of Acquisition. Ordas didn't know how the
Vulcan learned the song, he didn't know how the Vulcan knew what questions to ask, but he knew
that because of the Vulcan he would never be the same.

In a rare display of affection Momp reached over and pressed his brow against Ordas' brow. “There's
just too much darkness. Too many ghosts.” He whispered, blinking away tears. “I know. I know.”

“What are we going to do?” Ordas asked his CEO, and his lover of many years.

Momp grinned, a cunning gleam in his eyes. “Well, I've heard there's a lot of money to be made in
the entertainment industry. Just yesterday I was reading that reformed criminals are very in right now.
We've certainly got the material.” Momp turned and addressed his crew. “What do you say, boys?
Want to be rapists?”

As the crowd of assembled Ferengi cheered Ordas leaned over and whispered, “Rap-pers, sir.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure, sir.”

The crowd on the platform outside was growing louder. The Vulcan held out his arms.

“Please,” his voice was gentle but it rang clear and true across the platform. “Forgive me, for I have
nothing to give you. Be on your way.”

The many-limbed urchins and beggars of Avalon were not so easily appeased and so it was with
great surprise that they found themselves backing away from the mysterious newcomer. Not a person
among them could say why they fled but every last one of them knew in their bones that this hooded
figure, while not one of the hooded figures, was still better left alone. Maybe it was something in his
voice, or the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Sybok waited until the crowd had completely dispersed before raising his telepathic shields once
more and heading towards the stairs that led from the docking platform all the way up to the heart of
the city.

Avalon was as beautiful as it was mysterious. The entire city, or whatever was left of the city, grew
in a pyramid from a bed of roots. According to legend there was an organism slumbering in the heart
of the landmass, a creature that was part tree, part god. According to legend the Tree God had
sheltered the city during the terrible cataclysm that had torn the surrounding universes to shreds.
According to legend the atmosphere was preserved in its perfect bubble around the city by the Tree
God, each gaseous molecule tenderly cared for by its benevolence. According to legend the Tree
God slumbered still, waiting for the day when the Old Ones returned and brought a new era of peace
and prosperity to the multiverse. According to legend shortly after the Old Ones returned there was
going to be a Great Reckoning and the chosen few would be transmuted to another plane of
existence blah-blah-blah.

According to the verifiable facts Sybok had been able to research back on Nimbus III before his
library passcode was revoked for unpaid late fees, the entire city of Avalon had most likely been the
private pleasure garden of someone or something that had been wealthy enough to afford a really
good shielding system that protected the city from the unknown cataclysm. Or, as some academics
posited, perhaps it was an elaborate social experiment gone wrong. Of course this was all conjecture as the majority of the intellectual community agreed that Avalon did not actually exist. The citizenry of Avalon knew better but they never corrected the common knowledge because the citizenry of Avalon did not stay the citizenry by snitching. Personally, Sybok liked the idea of a benevolent Tree God watching over the throngs of thieves and murderers that filled the narrow cobbled streets.

But Avalon wasn't like any of the countless other city-state pyramids drifting through space. Avalon didn't just go up, it also went down. And sideways. And a dozen other directions that aren't even possible in a linear time-line. Sybok kept climbing up the stairs but somehow he found himself stepping between the roots that dangled from the underbelly of the city. He looked up and saw the platform the Ferengi weapons dealers had docked at jutting out from the sandstone walls many miles above his head. He had been walking upwards, he was sure, but somehow he had ended up moving downwards. This did not bother Sybok as much as it would anyone else. He was, like the honorable knights of human history, on a quest and he had faith that his footsteps were guided by a greater purpose. All he needed to do was follow his heart.

As Sybok continued up the steps (and as the steps continued to lead him further and further into the dark and seedy underbelly of the dark and seedy city) a group of down-on-their-luck Klingons suddenly realized that their hearts were telling them to mug the guy in the hood. They followed at a safe distance for awhile, watching as Sybok marched past the dark storefronts and bright show rooms. They saw him ignore the come-hither-looks from the myriad females of ill-repute. They observed as he passed the dealers and wheelers of uppers and downers without even a cursory glance. They waited until the crowd began to thin and the stairs grew quiet, until all the stores were closed and the only witnesses around were those who knew when to look away. The three Klingons closed in on their prey.

Sybok turned around as they approached him and lowered his hood. He smiled at them kindly and stepped forward to greet them as if he was greeting an old friend. “Good evening, gentlemen.”

The biggest Klingon, and therefore the leader, growled “Not for you it ain't.”

Sybok’s smile never faltered. “I am certain we can come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement.”

“I'm not arguing.” The Klingons all brandished their weapons. “Give us everything you've got and no one gets hurt.”

Sybok’s smile grew wider, as if he’d just heard a particularly funny joke. “You are not going to hurt me.”

The ringleader needed no further provocation and he had instinctually stepped forward and raised his bat-lith above his head when suddenly he realized that he didn't need to do this. He didn't even want to do this.

Not wanting to hack someone to pieces was a new experience for him. He'd never even heard of it happening to anyone else before. If other people felt like this they would have told him, right? He had no words to describe the terrifying calm that enveloped him, soothing his violent spirit. His body froze while his mind spun, and for a moment he felt like he was going insane. Then a cool hand rested briefly against his temple and the spinning stopped.

“Even warriors require peace from time to time.” Sybok advised serenely as he gently extricated his telepathic influence from their vulnerable minds. “You are safe for now. Rest while you can.”

The leader of the Klingons didn't really feel like being leader anymore but when he glanced at his comrades they just stared back at him with glassy-eyed looks of bemusement. “Uh...yeah...I guess...”
They kept standing there in awkward, dumbfounded silence as the Vulcan lifted his hood once more and walked away. They kept standing there for about ten minutes, until the after-affects of Sybok's presence had worn off enough for them to notice that they were attracting the attention of some of the city's larger, toothier residents. As they ran down an alley, fleeing the Klingon-eating Braxellian Worm (a nice enough guy, by all accounts, but he did have an unfortunate liking for Klingon flesh), one of them started to say, “Uh...about what happened back there...”

“SHUT UP!” The other two shouted back.

“I just thought maybe we should talk about--”

“I said shut up! It never happened, okay? And we are never going to talk about it and if you tell anyone about it I swear to Kahless I will gut you!” After all, their fearsome reputation was their bread and butter. It wouldn't do for word to get out that they'd been inexplicably struck by a sudden bout of pacifism.

Sybok continued on his merry way, until whatever force that was guiding his footsteps told him to stop. The wind snapped at the hem of his robes as he came to a halt and finally took note of his surroundings. He found himself standing at the mouth of a dark, narrow alley between a boarded up Orion pornography store and something that smelled like a fish market and looked like jewelry store, if jewelry stores normally had blood-stained altars instead of cash registers and velvet cases full of dead spiders instead of jewelry. But Sybok barely noticed the dead spiders, or the waifish silver-skinned alien shop girl who stared out at him through the dusty glass with blank, lilac eyes. His attention was completely focused on the star-spangled fortune teller's tent that lurked in the depths of the alley.

The voices no one else could hear began to sing and Sybok knew he had found the place he was looking for.

***

Klingon phaser fire ricocheted off the Enterprise's shields as Dr. M'benga raced from one end of sickbay to the other. The main door banged open as he approached and a team of EMTs carrying Spock on a stretcher came running through.

“Status!” He barked.

“Still non-responsive!”

“Have you found a pulse yet?”

“Not--”

“Yes! There's one!” Cried the technician who was keeping her eye on the biomonitor. “That's one heart beat in five minutes.”

M'benga's own heart sank. That was too slow, even by Vulcan standards. “Signs of trauma?” He grabbed the padd from the stretcher and glanced at Spock's chart. His blood ran cold when he realized what the familiar readings were indicating.

There had been a handful of nights during the first six months of the new Vulcan colony when things
had gotten really bad. As a psi-neutral human he could never put his finger on what caused it but the bad nights were always marked by a silent procession of bodies. It wasn’t as if the streets dissolved into chaos. There was never any looting or rioting or any of the usual signs of a society in distress. But there was something about the bad nights that put people on edge and drove some Vulcan males to commit the most heinous of crimes. Forced melds, a violation that was unspeakable in a civilized society. Sometimes the victims were other Vulcans, but sometimes they were human or Betazoid—snatched from the legions of volunteers that flooded the fledgling colony. All the victims were much younger than their attackers and even the Vulcans lacked the kind of telepathic expertise they would have needed to ward off such an assault.

The bad nights stopped after the first six months, long before construction on the hospital was even finished, back when all the real doctoring still was done in tents. During the long, hot desert nights the Vulcan heart would go mad and lash out at whoever was nearest. Ambulances would find the victims walking in fugue states naked down the middle of the road or at the transport station furiously demanding a ticket back home to Vulcan. And those were the ones that surrendered to the forced meld. The ones that fought were usually just bodies by the time they were found.

M’benga was still just an resident back then and he’d spent the bad nights keeping the gaunt, over-worked telepathic healers hydrated and making heart-breaking long-distance comms to the parents of those human and Betazoid volunteers who fell prey to the brief, turbulent spells of Vulcan madness. At the time he had hated making those comms, despised trying to explain to frantic parents why their child was coming home early and might never be the same again, or worse trying to explain why their child was never coming home at all. But now he was grateful. Having to make those calls, have those conversations, answer those questions again and again had motivated him to learn everything there was to know about forced melds. If Spock couldn’t have a Vulcan healer at least M’benga knew he was the next best thing.

“There's some bruising on his forehead but--”

“Okay, get him to the isolation chamber immediately.” M’benga interrupted. “Get him hooked up as fast as you can and then get out of there.” They ran to do as they were told and M’benga looked around for Nurse Chapel. As if sensing his need she suddenly materialized at his side.

“Commander Spock trusts you, right?” He asked urgently.

“Of course he--”

“I mean on a personal level.”

“I don’t think Spock really trusts anyone on a personal level. Except Kirk. And probably Uhura. Maybe McCoy but--”

M’benga cut her off. “Commander Spock has been the victim of a forced mind meld.”

Chapel gasped and the color drained from her face. “Are-are you sure?”

M’benga nodded grimly. “I’ve seen it before, back on New Vulcan. Commander Spock’s attacker must have beamed directly into his quarters while our shields were down and taken him by surprise.”

“Oh my god.” Chapel placed her hand over her mouth in horror.

M’benga continued. “Forced melds usually go one of two ways. You can surrender, or you can fight. If you fight, usually...8 out of 10 don’t make it.”

“Spock will make it.” Chapel sounded deeply offended at the suggestion that M’benga was even
considering alternative outcomes.

“I hope so.” M'benga agreed quickly. “But in his current state Spock can't protect himself. If he
senses an unfamiliar presence it might cause him to retreat so far into his own mind he'll never find
his way out again. That's why I asked if he trusts you. If a stranger is even in the same room as him it
might be too much.”

Chapel could already see where this line of thought was headed. “But Spock doesn't know you and
since you're the only Vulcan specialist we have...”

M'benga nodded grimly. “The only way I know to help him would be to try to reach him
telepathically. I may have the technical expertise but without a personal relationship I might kill him
the second I try to make contact.”

“And with a personal relationship?” Chapel asked, already bracing herself to dive head first into
Commander Spock's unconscious mind.

“If you didn't know what you were doing the Commander would have complete control. If you
aren't able to convince him to trust you he could kill you both.”

Chapel desperately wanted to say that of course Spock trusted her but her medical training didn't
allow for self-delusion. “What about the Captain?”

M'benga shook his head. “Starfleet protocols are clear. I can't risk both of them on such a risky
procedure.”

Chapel gazed down the hallway towards the isolation chamber where Spock lay dying and felt
useless. “You might not have a choice.”

***

“SULU WHY IN THE NAME OF ALL THAT IS GOOD AND TRUE IN THIS UNIVERSE IS
MY SHIP BEING ATTACKED BY GODDAMN KLINGONS?!” Jim roared as he charged onto
the bridge, Scotty and Hendorff at his heels.

“I dunno. Maybe because they're goddamn Klingons?” Sulu answered without looking up from his
console. His hands were moving faster than the naked eye could follow as he maneuvered the ship
out of the way of the Klingon phasers.

“Shields up. Prepare to return fire.” Jim rattled off orders automatically as he rushed over to
Lieutenant Pine. “Have they hailed us yet?”

“No sir.” The young man answered. “But there's something written on the side of the Bird of Prey,
translation is coming through now.”

“Phasers ready Keptin!” Chekov shouted, stress making his accent thicker than usual.

“Fire on my command.” Jim turned back to the Lieutenant. “How long will the translation take?”

“One more second...oh my god...”

The translation hovered on the screen like a condemnation.
All the blood drained from Jim's face. “HOLD FIRE!” He bellowed. “Hold fire and disengage!”

“Captain?” Hendorff stepped forward. “As Chief Security Officer--”

“They're driving a fucking school bus.” Jim interrupted him.

Hendorff hesitated only for a second. “That doesn't mean the ship is crewed by children. Anyone could be on board. Besides, it’s a fucking battleship. Who drives a battleship to school?”

“Klingons, probably.” Jim snapped. “Pine, I don't care how you do it just get me visual contact.”

“Yes Captain.”

“Captain, they're still shooting at us...” Sulu reminded him as another blast rocked the ship.

“I can see that.” Jim snapped through gritted teeth as he tumbled into the captain's chair. “Lieutenant Pine!”

“I don't have visual yet, sir, but they're hailing us! Audio only.”

“Patch it through.”

“Attention Federation ship Enterprise! Come in Enterprise!”

“This is Captain Kirk.” Jim responded. “You are trespassing on Federation territory. What is the meaning of this unprovoked attack?”

A deep grating voice blasted through the bridge's speakers. “Surrender or be destroyed Federation scum! Your continued--” The comm line crackled. “--insults to the Klingon Empire will not stand!”

Jim looked around at his bridge crew, wondering if they were hearing the same thing he was.

“Did your voice just get higher?”

There was a long pause from the Klingon ship and then some poorly muffled shouting that sounded a lot like Klingon for 'Dammit Marvek, did you turn off the voice simulator with your elbow again? Well, turn it back on! Then the same deep voice from before said, “Pathetic human! You have become delirious with fear.”

Jim ignored this. “Pine?”

“Just a few more seconds...” Pine's fingers flew across his console as he hacked through the Klingon's protections. A few seconds later the view screen switched on and for the first time revealed the faces of their adversary.

Jim's eyebrows shot up past his hairline. “Don't you boys need to be home before bedtime?”

The crew of the Klingon ship turned and stared at each other in shock and horror. Jim couldn't stand their blatant confusion for very long. “We got visual, guys. We can see you.”

The gangly Klingon sitting in what Jim assumed was the equivalent of the captain's chair glared at the viewer. “It makes no difference! We will destroy--”

“How old are you, anyway?” Jim couldn't help but ask.
“Age makes no difference to an honorable warrior! And besides, I'm twenty--”

“Last time I checked honorable warriors don't lie.”

“Fifteen. I am fifteen.” The Klingon teenager looked downright defiant. “But Bagor of the house of Gomil turns seventeen in a week and that's basically a grown up so don't underestimate us just because we're young.”

“Yeah!” Piped up another pimply Klingon teen sitting at the back of their bridge. “That's agist!”

“Dammit Marvek!” The first Klingon whirled around in his seat and roared at him. “Just shut up! You don't even know how stupid you sound so just shut up!”

“Okay.” Jim interjected. “This battle is over.”

“Intern Worf does not stop fighting when his enemies tell him to!” The first Klingon shouted. “Make peace with your gods, puny human!”

“Intern?” Chekov whispered to Sulu. Sulu shrugged.

“No thank you.” Jim said with his cheeriest smile. “Sulu, are our phasers still ready?”

“Yes Captain.”

“Good. Shoot off their phaser bank.”

“Wait!” Intern Worf cried in alarm. “Don't do that!”

“Why shouldn't I?” Jim held up his hand and Sulu paused.

Intern Worf was clearly floundering. “It's not fair!”

“Is that what you tell your mother when she wants you to clean your room?”

“Ah...Keptin?” Chekov looked at Jim over his shoulder, his fair cheeks blotched red. “I was only seventeen when I was assigned to the Enterprise.”

Jim struggled not to smile at Chekov's obvious attempt to not sound offended. “You are absolutely right, Mr. Chekov. I apologize if I seem cavalier.” He refocused his attention on the Klingons. What was he going to do with them? Starfleet HQ would probably expect him to treat them like any other enemy combatant regardless of their age. But why would a band of Klingon teenagers commandeer a school bus and attack a Starfleet vessel this far in Federation territory? The closest Klingon outpost was on Nimbus III and after everything that had happened lately Jim wasn't inclined to believe in coincidences. Whatever the Klingons were trying to achieve he needed to know about it, and he wouldn't get anywhere by attacking them or by treating them like naughty children.

“Intern Worf, I am going to be completely honest with you.” He announced. He had made his decision and he just hoped his next words didn't trigger a mutiny. “I have recently found myself in the position of not knowing who to trust. I'm willing to bet you have to.”

The bridge was completely silent. Jim could taste his crew’s apprehension in the air. He didn't blame them. He was bringing them precariously close to the edge of treason. If he made even the slightest miscalculation he could doom them all.

But the look on Intern Worf's face gave him hope. It was the look of an intelligent mind trying to put the puzzle pieces together.
It was only logical, after all. Intern Worf had admitted that he wasn't the oldest and Jim could see for himself the fifteen year old wasn't the biggest. And yet he was the leader, which meant he was either very rich or very smart. Jim was betting he was the latter.

“What are you suggesting?” Intern Worf asked slowly, suspicious but intrigued.

“A mutual exchange of information. Off the records, of course.”

A more experienced commander would have immediately cut communication but Intern Worf smirked and leaned forward in his seat. “Very well. I will allow you to beam onto my ship, but you must come alone.”

“Nonsense.” Jim offered a gracious smile. “You are guests in our land. It would be inhospitable of me not to welcome you and your men onto my ship. Allow us some time to make our preparations. We will contact you shortly.” At his nod the link was disconnected.

“Sir?” Hendorff’s voice had that grating quality it got whenever he was struggling not to explode. Jim got up from his chair, just in case his Security Chief forgot himself and took a swing. “What are you planning?”

“Don’t you want to know why they’re here, so many light years from Klingon territory? It would take them weeks to reach any planet that wasn’t controlled by the Federation or the Romulans.”

“Except Nimbus III.” Scotty muttered. It was the first thing he had said since arriving on the bridge.

“Which is the last known location of our mysterious Vulcan friend.” Jim lowered his voice so that only Scotty and Hendorff could hear him. Information about Sybok was still on a need to know basis.

“Isn’t it more likely they’re here on Ambassador Kothar’s orders?” Hendorff frowned. “There’s no connection to Sy--”

“As far as we know.” Jim interrupted him. “But either way, this situation warrants further investigation.”

“But they’re Klingons, sir! We can’t just let them on the ship!”

“They’re teenagers. I think we can handle them.” Jim clapped Hendorff on the shoulder. “You get more flies with honey, Cupcake.”

“But I don’t want flies.” Cupcake grumbled. Scotty laughed.

“Captain Kirk?”

Jim pulled out his communicator. “Chapel? Why are you calling me on my personal comm unit?”

“Is the situation stable?”

Jim frowned. He didn’t like his crew getting all mysterious on him. “Chapel, what are you--”

“Jim. Are we safe for now?”

“…Yeah.”

“Good. Get down here.”
Jim was already in the turbolift.

***

Something was not right.

McCoy woke up knowing this in his bones and the closer the shuttle got to the rendezvous location the more insistent the feeling became.

“Please sit down.” Uhura begged as he paced the length of the cockpit. The shuttle didn't have a lot of extra space and his elbow bumped against the back of her head every time he passed her. “I told you—I talked to Carol and they're fine. They're going to New Vulcan and they're going to tell the High Council about Stonn.”

“It's not them I'm worried about.” McCoy snapped. “Try hailing the ship again.”

Uhura sighed. She tapped her console. “Shuttle 2 to Enterprise. Come in Enterprise.”

At first there was nothing but static and McCoy's frown deepened. But then a familiar voice came crackling through.

“Shuttle 2, you are cleared to approach the ship as previously arranged. The situation is stable.”

McCoy plopped down in the seat next to Uhura and their eyes met over the console. It was definitely Sulu's voice they were hearing but his carefully chosen words didn't make sense.

“Shuttle 2 approaching the ship now. Estimated time of arrival 2 minutes. Request for clarification on the current status of the ship.” Uhura was careful not to say anything too specific but her hands were flying over the control panel, trying to make the shuttle go faster.

“Situation is stable. Proceed to dock as planned. Repeat, proceed as planned.”

“Sulu, what the hell are you--” McCoy started to shout but Uhura cut the comm link before he could say anything further. He glared at her furiously. “Why did you do that?”

“Because you were going to say something stupid and we don't know who might be listening.”

She was right, of course, but McCoy hated the fact that she was. He hated the fact that Starfleet officials were working against them. Again. The universe was not supposed to be like this. But it was and now they had to deal with it. “I told you I had a bad feeling.” He grumbled.

“I'll never doubt your bad feelings again.” Uhura's voice fell to a terrified whisper as the shuttle dropped out of warp and they found themselves an equal distance from the Enterprise and the phaser relay of a Klingon Bird of Prey. The two ships hung in the void facing each other and the tiny shuttle glided between them like an insignificant asteroid caught in the orbit of twin planets.

The shuttle was on autopilot at it moved towards the docking bay. Uhura and McCoy held their breath and prayed, as if any sudden movement might break whatever cease fire had been arranged.

Klingons. Uhura thought with disgust. Klingons were not part of the plan. If this is Kothar again I swear to god I am going to bury him under so much paperwork he'll die of old age before it's filed.
McCoy had barely noticed the Klingons. The closer they got to the Enterprise the stronger his
trepidation became.

Something is not right.

***

Chapel and M'benga were waiting for Jim at the entrance of sickbay but somehow he already knew
what had happened. The captain's face was ashen as he burst through the doors and his voice grated
when he asked, “Where is he?”

“In the isolation chamber--” Chapel started to answer but the words had barely left her lips when Jim
broke past them, racing down the hall. “Wait!” She called after him. “Captain, you can't go in there!”

Jim ignored her. Spock needed him. Jim could feel it like a weight in his chest and the only thing he
didn't understand was why it had taken him so long to notice.

I should have known.

The isolation chamber door was shut but Jim could see Spock through the glass. His long body was
Jim's hand shook as he reached for the handle.

M'benga grabbed him under the shoulders and lifted him off the ground. “You can't go in there,
Captain!” He spun around and placed Jim's feet on the other side of the hall, placing his own body
between the captain and the door. After years of wrestling frenzied Vulcans back into their beds Dr.
M'benga was much stronger than he looked.

Jim was startled but not intimidated. “Get out of my way.” His hands balled into fists. No one was
going to stop him from getting to Spock. He'd go right through M'benga if he had to.

Chapel ran up to them, glancing nervously over her shoulder. They were attracting a lot of attention
from the other nurses. “Please listen to what the doctor has to say, Captain.” She begged him
earnestly. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “If you go in there you could harm the Commander.”

Jim had been preparing to pummel his way past both of them but that made him pause. “How?” He
demanded. His whole body was shaking with the effort it took to keep from imploding.

“If you come with me into the office I'll explain--”

“I'm not going anywhere.”

M'benga frowned but Chapel knew better than to argue with Jim when he got that deadly look on his
face. She cautiously stepped closer, ready to duck if he took a swing at her. “Jim. Someone forced
Spock to mind meld.”

Jim shook his head even though deep down he knew that Chapel was telling the truth. “That's not
possible.”

“I've seen forced melds before, Captain.” M'benga told him gently. “The diagnosis is accurate.”

“But...our shields were only down for ten seconds...”
“Long enough for someone to beam onboard undetected, if they had the right technology. But Spock's attacker was long gone by the time the security team arrived. Unless Spock wakes up we have no way of knowing who attacked him or what they hoped to achieve.”

“It was Stonn.”

M'Benga and Chapel shared a concerned look. Jim's face had grown dark, his eyes cold. There was no longer any trace of shock or grief in his voice, only steel and ice.

Chapel cautiously placed her hand over his arm. “Jim, there's no way of proving--”

“It was Stonn.” Jim knew it had been Stonn. How could it be anyone else? From the second their paths crossed on Udonia III Stonn had been hunting Spock like a hyena stalking a wounded gazelle.

Jim should have stunned him the second Stonn asked to talk with Spock.

No. He should have killed him.

Spock needed him, but right now Jim needed Stonn. He needed Stonn's life in his hands. He needed Stonn's broken body before him, completely at his mercy.

Stonn would discover that Jim had no mercy for those who hurt Spock.

“Go to red alert and prepare for battle.” He snapped, spinning around and heading back down the hall to the door. He needed to get back to the bridge.

“Captain, please wait a minute!” Chapel shouted, diving in front of him and blocking his path. The entire sick bay fell silent, the eye of every nurse, doctor and patient laser focused on the two of them. “The situation hasn't changed! There is still a Klingon Bird of Prey with its phasers locked on us! We still do not know how the extremists procured their future tech! We still don't know who our enemy is!”

“I KNOW WHO MY ENEMY IS!” Jim roared, his fists clenched so tightly with the effort it took not to lash out at her that he drew blood. Chapel flinched but refused to back down. “I know who he is and I am going to rip his eyes out of his--”

“You can't.”

Cool, soothing relief swept across the fire that consumed Jim's mind. For the first time since arriving at Nimbus III the ground felt stable beneath his feet. He stared over Chapel's shoulder as Bones stepped through the door and for a split second he half hoped everything was going to work out.

Then he saw Bones' face.

“What the hell did they do to you?” Jim gasped as McCoy walked into sickbay as if nothing had happened, except something clearly had happened. McCoy's face was sunken and his eyes were bloodshot. His skin seemed loose as if he'd lost too much weight in too short a time. Even his mouth was cracked and swollen.

“Nothing permanent.” McCoy said dismissively. Jim frowned, in no mood to be brushed off. “Uhura's gone to the bridge. What happened to Spock?”

“Stonn.” Jim spat the name like it was poison in his mouth. McCoy's face darkened.

“Where is he?”
Jim jerked his head towards the isolation chamber and they both took off running. M'benga threw his hands into the air and went after them, racing so that he could shove his way past them and once again place his own body between the patient and his well-meaning friends.

“You can't go in there.” He repeated.

Jim couldn't override M'benga's medical orders but McCoy could. “Don't be ridiculous, man. How am I supposed to treat a patient if I can't even be in the same room as him?”

M'benga realized that if he said there was probably no way to help Spock at this point he wouldn't make it out of sickbay alive. Thinking fast he said, “Look, Spock's telepathic shields are gone. If you go in there he could pick up on your presence and mistake you for his attacker. If that happens he'll try to escape even further into his own mind, in which case he will die.”

McCoy hesitated. M'benga was giving him a strange, strangled look as if there was more he wanted to say. Or he was constipated. McCoy was willing to bet it was the first thing.

“There's little chance of Spock mistaking Jim for Stonn. Jim, you go sit with him while I talk to M'benga.” McCoy ordered, thinking fast. The horrible sick feeling in his gut was gone but it had been replaced by a strange dreamlike sensation. For some reason he felt like all of this had already happened, as if he already knew what he was going to say. That wasn't normal, right? Then again, what did 'normal' even mean these days?

M'benga sighed despairingly. “This is against my medical advice. I just want that to be on the record.”

“Noted.” Jim stepped past him and finally made it into Spock's room.

The first thing he noticed about the room was how quiet it was. The only sounds came from the softly beeping biobed and Jim's own heartbeat. Spock was too silent. Jim couldn't even hear him breathing.

As Jim looked at Spock’s still body the rest of the world vanished, leaving him alone with his worst nightmare.

“Spock?” Jim felt ashamed of the childish quaver in his voice but he couldn't help it. “It's me.”

There wasn't a response but he hadn't really expected one. He stepped closer, and closer, and closer until his thighs were pressed against the bedside and his hands were clenched in the blankets. He leaned over Spock, his whole body shaking. “...Spock?”

Still no response. Jim's knees buckled and he slid to the floor, his face buried in the blankets to hide the tears that escaped from between his clenched eyelids. He desperately wanted to wrap his arms around Spock's waist and pull his body close, the way he did in his dreams, but he was afraid that if he actually touched Spock he really would kill him. Just like in his dreams.

“I'm sorry.” He sobbed. “It's all my fault. I was selfish. Stupid. It's my fault. You should never have been left alone when--” His throat closed around the words and Jim gagged on his grief. You needed me and I wasn't there.

Spock gave no sign of hearing him but Jim could feel him hurting. He didn't know how but he could.

Jim wept. There was nothing else he could do. At least, nothing that he knew of. How he hated that. Spock needed him and even though Jim was right here he still didn't know what to do or how to help. What if they lost him? What if Jim's nightmares were finally coming true? The person who
mattered more than anything else was hurting and there was nothing Jim could do.

Well, that wasn't entirely accurate. He could kill Stonn. And he fully intended to do just that at the earliest possible opportunity.

***

M'benga led McCoy to his office while Chapel buzzed around them, furiously taking McCoy's readings with her medical tricorder and shouting orders to her underlings for dermal regenerators and hydration packs. The two doctors correctly interpreted the purse of the Chief Nurse's mouth and the glint in her eyes to mean that she would not tolerate any delay in McCoy's medical care. They did their best to continue their conversation over her head while she and her underlings performed the carefully choreographed dance they had perfected over the last couple years, the dance called Doctor McCoy Almost Got Himself Killed Again And Now We Have To Put Him Back Together While He's On His Feet Because He's A Stubborn S.O.B. Yes He Is. As much as Bones complained about having to stitch Jim and Spock together it was nothing compared to the hell-fury Chapel unleashed every time she thought he'd been careless. The only people who could ever convince him to rest were Jim and Spock, an unfortunate reality for any number of reasons. Not least of which was because if McCoy had a wound one or both of them had probably lost a limb.

M'benga wondered if McCoy was aware of how protective his crew mates were of him. Probably not. He was coming to realize that overprotectiveness was engrained in the DNA of the Enterprise crew. Their loyalty to one another was unshakable. He was fortunate, he supposed, to be a part of that even if he didn't feel fortunate at the moment. At the moment he felt like he was trying to reason with a horde of overzealous toddlers.

M'benga finally lost patience when Christine Chapel licked the palm of her hand and then rubbed it against the back of McCoy's head to try and make his hair lie flat while McCoy asked about Spock's vitals and pretended not to notice.

"For god's sake, Christine, you're not a cat!"

McCoy and Chapel both squinted at him. "...I'm aware of that." Chapel said slowly.

"No--I just meant—never mind." M'benga tried to forget the image that was now seared into his retinas. He was not successful.

"Tell me what happened." McCoy waved Chapel off and focused on M'benga. "Jim said it was Stonn?"

"The captain was trying to keep the extremists occupied while you were being rescued. Someone beamed directly into Spock's quarters and forced a mind meld on him. The Captain believes it was Stonn, but there's no evidence that it was actually him."

"It was Stonn." McCoy had no doubts about that at least. "How's Spock doing?"

"Physically he's fine." M'benga explained quietly. "But he suffered severe telepathic damage. The neurons in his telepathic cortex are—"

"Pretend I'm not an expert on telepathic neuroscience." McCoy interrupted. "Why isn't he awake?"
“He’s trapped in his own subconscious.” M’benga murmured. “His brain hasn’t realized that waking up is an option.”

“Possible treatments?”

“Further telepathic contact, I’m afraid.” M’benga sighed. “But it’s incredibly invasive. Technically I could probably do it, but the Commander and I don’t have a connection yet and I doubt he’d recognize me as a friend. He might not let me in and even trying could cause him to retreat further.”

“If you just need someone Spock trusts can’t Jim do it?”

“As a last resort.” M’benga frowned thoughtfully. “Ideally I’d prefer someone who has experience with the telepathic healing arts, but at the very least it should be a medical professional.”

McCoy was still looking at M’benga but he wasn’t seeing him. T’sing had told him to remember. Had she known this would happen? “What exactly does Spock need? Is it anything like sharing pain?”

M’benga was visibly surprised. “You mean the melding technique? I suppose it’s a similar process, theoretically at least. Only instead of taking something away from the patient you’re leading the patient back the way you came.” His mouth twisted in wry embarrassment. “Sorry. It doesn’t sound very scientific, does it?”

“What does these days?” McCoy rubbed a hand over his weary face. He desperately needed a shave. “I’ll do it.”

“Leonard?” M’benga blinked, surprised. “Do you have any experience in this kind of procedure?”

“Let’s just say I got a crash course recently.” McCoy sighed as he rolled up his sleeves. “I’m definitely your man. I’m a medical professional and there’s no chance Spock won’t recognize me.”

“But will he let you in?” M’benga asked.

McCoy swept past him and headed for the isolation room. Jim looked up from his spot on the floor when he opened the door, his eyes rimmed red but dry. McCoy’s heart ached for his friend.

“You should go run the ship.” He said gruffly as he pulled a chair next to the biobed and sat down. “This could take a couple hours.”

“What are you going to do?” Jim asked in a rasping voice.

McCoy wrapped his hands around Spock’s limp wrists and placed the Vulcan’s unresponsive fingers against his temples, propping his elbows on the bed for support. “I’m gonna go into your favorite hobgoblin’s brain and drag him back to the land of the living.”

“Seriously?”

“Kicking and screaming if I have to.”

“Oh.” Jim blinked and his face filled with such overwhelming gratitude that whatever qualms Bones had about melding with Spock vanished. “Good.”

Bones closed his eyes, took a deep breath and concentrated.

And then…
Bones fell down.

Spock’s mind was not at all like Wicks’ mind. Her mind had been like swimming to the bottom of a lake and looking up at the sky. Spock’s mind was like the open ocean, dark and deep and full of shadows. She had been aware of his presence, had stayed at his side and guided his steps. Bones didn’t think Spock knew he was here. He kinda got the feeling Spock didn’t know what was going on. Not that Bones was much better off; the only thing he knew for sure was that he was falling.

Normally this would have sent him into a frenzied panic and yet he remained perfectly calm. Bones suddenly realized with a strange detachment that whatever or whoever was having this experience was no longer connected to all the important stuff like glands that he would have needed to feel his usual panic (whoever or whatever ‘he’ was). This was good. It allowed him to focus on what was important.

He needed to find Spock.

But how did he do that? He tried to remember what it had been like before, during the meld with Wicks. There had been a few moments when the pain grew too much and he had started to drift away, and each time Wicks called him back by reminding him who he was.

Bones thought about Spock. Intelligent, particular, inscrutable, insufferable Spock.

“Spock?”

And then…

Bones was standing in a small, dimly lit room. It looked like a sleeper on an old transport freighter, one of the great slow vessels that carried cargo and anyone with just enough money to far-flung planets. The walls were painted forest green and the carpet was greasy and stained. There were no windows or decorations, just a cot and a standing lamp. At first glance the room seemed empty.

Bones heard a sudden intake of breath, and it hadn’t come from him.

He looked around again. “Spock?”

There was a tiny flutter of movement from under the cot. Bones got down on his knees and peered under the mattress. There was a child staring back at him, a little Vulcan boy with black hair and big brown eyes. He couldn’t have been any older than Bones’ daughter Joanna.

“Hello Spock.” Bones greeted him softly. Kid Spock looked like he was terrified and trying very hard not to be. “What are you doing under there?”

Kid Spock reached out and covered Bones’ mouth with his tiny hands. “We must be quiet.” He whispered urgently.

“Why?” Bones whispered back.

“So the monsters do not find us.”

Bones assumed he meant Stonn and he was about to say that Spock was safe now when all of a sudden something started hammering on the door. The door was struck with such force that it bent in the middle but it did not yield. After a few more fruitless attempts to break through the hammering
Bones completely forgot what he was supposed to be doing and how he was supposed to do it. All he knew was that whatever was making that noise was not something he wanted anywhere near him. “Scoot over.” He hissed. Kid Spock obliged and the two of them huddled under the cot and waited for the monsters to go away.

They both stayed quiet.

***

Lieutenant Pine almost burst into tears when Uhura walked onto the bridge. His chin even wobbled a little bit when she said, “You’re relieved Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, sir.” He managed to say without choking up. She allowed her professional demeanor to soften for a moment and gave him a warm smile.

“Scotty briefed me on the way up. You did a good job.”

“Thank you, sir. I tried to do my duty.”

“You succeeded. Now go get some rest.”

Lieutenant Pine didn’t need to be told twice. He managed not to actually run to the turbolift but it was a close thing.

Uhura sat down as Sulu got up from his station and came over. A nervous-looking ensign took his place. “Welcome home. Are you okay?”

“As okay as I can be under the circumstances.”

“And Doctor McCoy?”

“He’s okay too. I think.”

“You look exhausted.”

“I’ll sleep when we’re safe. Is there any new info?”

“What did Scotty tell you?”

“A group of Klingon teenagers from Nimbus III showed up and scared off the Fo-dan.” Uhura was already hard at work, her eyes locked on her console screen, and she didn’t look up even when Sulu sat down next to her.

“What’s the Klingon word for intern?”

“I don’t think there is one. Why do you ask?”

“Because their leader said his name was Intern Worf and I thought maybe the universal translator
was glitching or something.”

Uhura paused briefly. “There’s no word for intern. I guess the closest would be *Toy ’wl’ur ghojwl’. ‘

Sulu blinked. “Come again?”

“*Toy’wl’ur ghojwl’.” She leaned back in her seat, frowning thoughtfully. “That would make sense, actually. Literally translated it means Indentured Student. It’s a title given to Klingons in the *Matay’di Chavmoh. It’s like a national civil service program.”

“How does that make sense?”

“Because participants tend to be young males from honorable families who fail the entrance exams for the military. They can’t go home without something to show for it and the *Matay’di Chavmoh is often their only option.”

“But they’re just kids!” Sulu couldn’t help but protest.

Uhura gave him a wry smile. “The average age of a Klingon warrior is 37. They start young or they don’t start at all.” She grew serious again. “But the *Toy’wl’ur ghojwl’ have a reputation for being reckless. They have a lot to prove but they’re mostly sent on honor details or surveying work.”

“So?” Chekov had joined them, sitting down on Uhura’s other side. The three of them leaned closer and lowered their voices.

“So what do you think happens when you put a bunch of bored hormonal Klingons on a bus and ship them away to where nothing ever happens?”

Chekov thought about it for a second. “I think they become the thing that is happening.”

“Exactly. I’m willing to bet these guys were guarding Ambassador Kothar and the chance to go up against the Federation flagship was too much to resist. Kothar might not even know they’re here.”

“On the other hand, he might have sent them.” Sulu pointed out.

“But *why*?” Chekov asked, his brow furrowed in confusion. “This makes no sense to me.”

Uhura didn’t know what was going on either, but she intended to find out.

***

Intern Worf kept staring at his view screen long after the humans had vanished, ignoring the chaos around him as his fellow Interns shouted to make themselves heard. Everyone had an opinion and most of those opinions were angry. Worf pretended to listen to them while he thought. Captain Kirk’s invitation seemed like a trap, but for some reason Worf felt inclined to trust him. Which was odd, because Worf hadn’t trusted anyone since he failed his military entrance exams.

Worf was very clever. He knew about planning. He knew about strategy. He had been at the top of his class in tactics and law. More importantly, he was the eldest son of the House of Mogh and as such should have been guaranteed a position in the infantry. Nepotism wasn’t just legal, it was encouraged. Unfortunately his father had run afoul of the powerful House of Marwen during a drunken brawl and Worf had suffered the consequences. When he went to Qo’noS to take his
rightful place in the legions of Klingon warriors he had been refused on the grounds that he didn’t meet the physical requirements. Worf knew he wasn’t the strongest Klingon around, but he wasn’t the weakest either. As soon as he received his notice of rejection he began snooping around, trying to find the real reason he was denied. It didn’t take long for him to discover that a nephew of the House of Marwen was in charge of infantry admissions and that he had been turned away because of his father. Worf had been furious but the decision was already made and there was nothing he could do. Unable to bear the thought of returning home and admitting defeat he enlisted in the *Matay’di Chavmoh*. After a few weeks of training he and his fellow Interns had been sent to guard Ambassador Kothar on Nimbus III.

Worf hated Paradise City. They all did. The harsh constant winds blew sand into their eyes and matted their hair. The only food came from replicators and water was scarce. There wasn’t anything to do, except get drunk and watch emaciated mud farmers dig holes in the dusty ground. But Worf was very clever, and very clever people tend to find trouble even when they aren’t looking for it. Worf had found the trouble he definitely wasn’t looking for in the form of Agent Simmons, the Federation representative on Nimbus III.

Agent Simmons and Ambassador Kothar were drinking buddies. Though it was certainly unusual for Klingons and humans to have any kind of relationship, Worf understood. There was nothing to do but drink and very few people to drink with. Their relationship was based on necessity, and not actual regard. In that sense it was forgivable. What wasn’t forgivable was the way Agent Simmons manipulated Kothar.

**About A Week Ago**

*It was 2:00 in the afternoon and Worf was well on his way to being properly shit-faced. He slumped in the corner of the dimly lit bar and stared into the depths of his bloodwine, wondering how much he would need to drink before mud farming seemed interesting. It was a question he’d been trying to answer for two months, with little success.*

*But Worf was an optimist by nature. Today could be the day. He took another sip.*

*The door opened and briefly filled the bar with light before it swung shut again. This was unfortunate because it revealed just how sticky every surface was. Worf tried to pretend he hadn’t noticed the unidentifiable residue on the handle of his mug. He turned and glanced over his shoulder, wondering who had arrived.*

*It was Kothar and Agent Simmons. Worf got to his feet and saluted like he was supposed to, but Kothar scarcely noticed him. That was nothing new. Kothar had scarcely acknowledged any of the Interns since they arrived for their year-long stint.*

*The two men settled in a booth in the corner and spoke in low voices so that no one could overhear them. Agent Simmons was facing Worf and the young Klingon watched him out of the corner of his eye, reading his lips as he spoke. Reading lips was another one of Worf’s skills that he’d had a lot of time to practice since his arrival, just like drinking.*

*“Did you hear the news?” Agent Simmons asked.*

*Worf straightened in his seat. There was news? There hadn’t been news for a long time. News sounded interesting.*
“You know why they’re coming?” Worf couldn’t be entirely sure but he thought that was what Simmons said.

Kothar responded but Worf couldn’t hear him. There was a keg of bloodwine in the corner next to the booth. Worf drained his mug and made his way over to refill it.

“—damn Vulcans.” Kothar was whispering.

Worf only knew of one Vulcan in Paradise City and he was long gone.

“Nothing but trouble.” Simmons agreed. “But the Enterprise is a totally different story.”

Kothar snorted disdainfully. “Please. The Enterprise is crewed by children.”

Simmons smirked. “They may be young, but Kirk and his crew are the best and brightest the Federation has to offer. Even you Klingons wouldn’t stand a chance against them.”

Kothar and Worf both heard the challenge poorly disguised as an off-hand comment and Kothar grinned savagely as his mind filled with visions of glorious battle. Worf, on the other hand, wondered why a Federation official was essentially daring a Klingon to attack the flagship. What was Simmons up to?

Three hours later Kothar summoned the Interns to his ship and they attacked the Enterprise and lost.

A few days after their humiliating defeat Kothar gave command of the School Bus #45—the battle-ready official Matay’di Chavmoh transport vessel—to Worf and ordered them to find and destroy the Enterprise. The Ambassador himself elected to stay in Paradise City so as not to raise any alarms. Worf knew he was actually going to the bar to drink with Simmons, but he also wasn’t going to argue. A Klingon never backed down from a fight. He knew this could be his only chance to prove himself as a warrior. So he’d accepted the command and he’d rallied his men and he’d gone off to battle. He’d done everything a good Klingon was supposed to do.

But deep down he knew it was a trap.

The question was whether Captain Kirk was in on it.

And he intended to find out.

***

Time moved forward without Jim. Moments came and went around him and he stayed perfectly still. Occasionally M’benga or Chapel would walk by and peek through the glass door. Jim saw them out of the corner of his eye but he didn’t acknowledge them. To do so would require looking away from Spock’s face and Jim couldn’t bring himself to do that. What if he missed something? A fluttering eyelid or a twitching muscle, anything to signify that Spock was returning from wherever he had gone.

McCoy was slumped over Spock’s lap. He had fallen over a few minutes after placing Spock’s fingers on his temples. Those fingers stayed in place as if they were glued on even when McCoy’s
own hands slipped from Spock’s limp wrists and thumped down on his stomach. Jim had no choice but to assume this was normal and not worry about it.

Honestly he didn’t know if he was even capable of worrying about anything at the moment. He had gone so far beyond worry he had ended up at calm. He felt strangely disconnected from everything, even his own emotions. He still felt his rage and grief but it was as if they belonged to someone else. He suspected he was in shock, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Someone knocked on the door.

Jim reluctantly looked over. When he saw it was Uhura he immediately got up and went to the door. Uhura’s stricken face was the only thing in the universe that could break his focus on Spock’s motionless eyebrows.

He opened the door a crack. “You probably shouldn’t come in.”

“I know.” She whispered, her eyes filling with tears. “I’m so sorry, Jim.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Uhura shook her head. “I should have told you everything I knew about Stonn the second he came on board. Then you’d have known how dangerous he was and we would have been able to stop him in time.”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything.” Jim had known Stonn was dangerous eventually and despite his best efforts the lunatic had still managed to get to Spock.

Uhura wanted to burst into tears and say that Jim still didn’t know everything, that he still didn’t know how Stonn had lured Spock into a public place so he could compound the humiliation when T’Pring broke the bond, how Stonn had a history of telepathic violence and how Uhura should have seen this coming a million miles away, but she didn’t do any of that. Instead she swallowed the lump in her throat and said, “The Klingons are beaming on board in five minutes.”

Jim stared at her blankly for a second, then he frowned. “I completely forgot about them.” He glanced back at Spock and Bones. The thought of leaving them hurt enough to cut through the dreamlike fog that had settled around him. How could he even consider abandoning them now? But he had a responsibility as the captain. He had to do his duty. He had to…

“You have to stay here.” Uhura knew that’s what Spock would have wanted, even if he’d never say it because of logic. “I’ll deal with them.”

Jim hesitated. “Are you sure?”

Uhura nodded firmly, also looking at the two bodies on the biobed. “Klingons are my area of expertise, not yours. Besides, this is more important.”

Jim reached through the crack in the door and clasped her hand. “Thank you. For everything. For bringing Bones back.” He frowned. “What happened when you got to the mine—”

Uhura squeezed his hand. “You need to focus on Spock right now. McCoy and I will tell you everything once he’s awake.”

“…Okay.” Jim withdrew his hand. “Keep me updated.”

Uhura nodded. “Yes Captain.”
He closed the door and she left. Jim returned to his chair next to Spock.

Time passed. The lights dimmed automatically to accommodate the circadian cycles of the patients. Jim waited and waited and waited. But James Tiberius Kirk was not by nature a patient person and as time passed and his shock wore off he began to wonder if Spock was still breathing.

This thought bounced around his skull until he could think of nothing else. The biobed was supposed to monitor Spock’s vitals, but biobeds could malfunction. Jim stared fixedly at Spock’s chest for minutes on end but could not detect even the slightest movement. Jim’s worry grew stronger and stronger until he couldn’t take it anymore. He had to know. He gently rested his fingers against the pulse point in Spock’s neck, holding his own breath and hoping…

**BANG BANG BANG**

Jim leapt away from Spock like a guilty child and whirled around to face the door. There was no one there. He started, confused. He had heard someone hammering against it, he was sure. But the door was made entirely of glass and he could see for himself that the hallway outside was empty.

Jim kept his eyes on the door as he reached out and placed the palm of his hand against Spock’s slender collarbone.

**BANG BANG BANG**

Jim could hear the hammering again, and he watched as the glass door shook with the force of each blow. There still wasn’t anyone out there and when he took his hand away from Spock’s skin the hammering stopped. Jim approached the door, examining it for any signs of impact. There were none. He cautiously opened the door and stuck his head into the hallway. It was empty. He closed the door and went back to the bed. This time he touched McCoy’s arm.

**BANG BAN—**

Jim pulled away. *Calm down, Jim.* He ordered himself. *Think about what you know.*

He knew that Spock and Bones were melding.

He knew that something was trying to get through that door.

He knew he could only hear it when he touched them.

He knew…nope, that was it. Those three things were all he knew. And he was pretty shaky on number two. *Okay, well, that didn’t help. Am I…Am I supposed to do something?*

He couldn’t be sure, but he was a man of action. He was exhausted and confused and the concept of mysterious unseen forces trying to hurt Spock didn’t seem that far fetched since he’d been dreaming of just this situation for weeks. So he did the only thing he could think to do.

He locked the door.

*Click*

McCoy’s eyes flew open and he surged upwards, gasping for air. Jim yelped and ran over to him, grabbing his shoulder and steadying him as he reared backwards. “Bones!” Jim shouted. “It’s me! You’re safe! Calm down!”

McCoy stopped struggling. “…That was…weird…”
“Did it work?” Jim asked, his fingers digging deep into his friend’s shoulder.

“It would seem so.”

Spock’s voice was hoarse and weak but he was talking. His eyes seemed unfocused but they were open. His movements as he tried to sit up were slow and halting but he was moving. Jim knew he was grinning like an idiot but he couldn’t help himself. Spock was back. Bones was back. They were all together again. Jim’s knees buckled with relief and he sat down heavily on the side of the bed.

McCoy’s head felt like it was splitting open and he was just now realizing that he desperately needed a shower. He checked Spock’s vitals and was relieved to see that they were quickly returning to normal. Spock was already sitting up and looking around with a dissatisfied expression. “How do you feel?” McCoy asked him gruffly without meeting his eyes.

“…Better.” Spock answered cautiously. “…Thank you.”

“I only did what was logical.”

“You did much more than what was logical.”

McCoy turned and headed for the door so they wouldn’t see him blush. This meld had been… intimate in a way the meld with Wicks had not been. He felt exposed and he wanted nothing more than to be alone. But when he reached for the handle it refused to turn.

“Why is this door locked?” He demanded. Jim opened his mouth to tell them what he had seen and heard during their meld but before he could say anything at all McCoy had unlocked the door and walked through it. “I’ll talk to you later, Jim, but right now I need to rest. Don’t interrupt me unless everyone is dying. For at least five hours. No, make that six hours. Oh, fuck it, I want a solid eight.”

“You’ve earned it.” Jim nodded. “Go to bed. You’re officially off-duty.”

McCoy smirked as he shut the door. “Don’t think I was on duty in the first place, but thanks anyway Captain.”

Jim waved him off and returned to beaming at Spock. Spock gazed serenely back at him.

“Jim, I must ask your forgiveness—”

“I’m the one who should be saying sorry.” Jim interrupted him. “I shouldn’t have gotten so mad at you and I shouldn’t have tried to punish you for being yourself. You were attacked because I was careless.”

“No.” Spock lay back against his pillows and shook his head. “I cannot allow you to blame yourself for something that was not your fault.”

“…Was it Stonn?” Jim immediately regretted his question. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

Spock quirked an eyebrow and Jim’s insides got all warm and wobbly. “Refusing to discuss what transpired would be illogical. I see nothing to gain from such a course of action.”

“Well, maybe you should get some rest before—”

“I would prefer to have this conversation now.” It was Spock’s turn to interrupt Jim. He wanted to
get this over with. “Yes, it was Stonn. He was already waiting when I returned to my quarters and he took me by surprise.”

“What happened?” Jim hated to ask but he needed to know.

“We struggled. He over-powered me.”

“And then?”

“He forcibly melded with me.”

“Do you know why?”

“Ostensibly he wished to retrieve a specific memory of Sybok. But I also believe he did not require much in the way of motivation. He has always objected to my existence in the most strident fashion.”

Jim longed to touch Spock but he didn’t want to make him uncomfortable after everything he had just been through. He laced his fingers together to keep from reaching out. “What was the memory he was after?”

“I am not entirely certain, but I know he did not find it. He was distracted.”

“By what?”

“By a different memory.” Spock frowned slightly, struggling to recall the specifics. “It was... when we were in Admiral Pike’s office, after Nero was defeated.”

Jim thought back to that day. “Wasn’t that when we told Pike about the Ambassador?”

Spock nodded. “Exactly. When Stonn learned the truth behind Nero’s attack he lost control and the meld was broken.”

Jim’s heart sank. “So Stonn knows about the other Spock?”

“He knows of his existence, but no more than that.” Spock confirmed Jim’s fears.

“That’s going to be a problem, isn’t it?”

“Almost certainly. However, the truth was bound to be revealed sooner or later. There is little we can do about that now.” Spock sighed as his eyes drifted shut. His brain required the time and space to heal that only sleep could provide. “Is our ship safe?” He mumbled as he began to drift away.

Jim smiled softly. “Our ship is safe. Sleep now.”

Unable to resist any longer he reached out and brushed Spock’s hand. As his fingers drifted across Spock’s soft skin Spock caught them and slid his own fingers against Jim’s. Warm tingles shot from the point of contact up Jim’s arm and filled his chest with golden sunshine. Spock slipped off to sleep with the Vulcan kiss echoing in his soul.
Thanks for reading everybody! The next chapter should be up by the end of the month, so make sure to stay tuned!

I’d like to once again invite anyone and everyone with questions about this story to ask away! This plot is very involved and I realize that my infrequent updates don’t help. But I’m taking steps to fix that! I’m trying to post at least one chapter a month and I also started a new tumblr blog dedicated to my fics. So check out interrobanngfics on tumblr for progress updates, as well as any thoughts/ideas/head canons/plot bunnies that don’t make it into the official fic. I may not update as often as I should, but I’m still working on the fic pretty much every day so there’s a LOT of stuff that I love but that I have to cut.

Also! As I’m sure you guys have noticed by now, I really love world-building. I’m hoping I can use interrobanngfics to connect with other world-building K/S fans to develop our ideas! So if that sounds like something you’re interested in definitely send me an ask or somefink.

See you guys soon!

EDIT: Just in case anyone was wondering, the Worf in this fic is the same Worf who showed up in The Undiscovered Country...as in THE Worf's grandfather. I always thought it was funny that Gene Roddenberry insisted on not only using Michael Dorn in a TOS movie, but not even bothering to come up with a new name for the character. So when it came time for me to pick a Klingon I couldn’t resist. Not sure if the age difference is completely accurate, but it's accurate enough.
The Way Things Are

Disclaimer:

The author and Mr. X are walking up the long, winding path that leads to the derelict pink castle, hidden in the sheep-covered hills of northern Wales. Kirk and Spock run out of the castle to greet them.

Kirk: How’d it go?

Spock: Were you able to resolve your issues?

Mr. X: (sniff) I…I think so. (He turns and looks at the author) You know what you have to do.

Author: Do I really have to do this?

(Mr. X nods fervently and gets all teary-eyed. The author sighs)

Author: Fine. Hello. My name is Interrobanng and I’m a fanfiction writer.

Everyone Else: Hi Interrobanng.

Author: I was clean for about six years but I recently started writing again and the first step to recovery is admitting that I don’t own the characters.

Leonard McCoy lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling. All the lights were off and his quarters were silent except for the sound of his own breathing. No matter how he tried to think of something else (and he was trying very hard) his thoughts kept circling back to the meld with Spock. Something had changed during the time he spent in the Vulcan’s mind, of that he was certain, but he couldn’t for the life of him figure out what. He’d been mulling it over all night and soon it would be time for the start of the next shift. Jim would be expecting him to make his report about his kidnapping, but instead of preparing his presentation or getting some of the shut eye he sorely needed he just kept brooding.

The most startling realization he had made in the wee hours was that the connection between himself and the hobgoblin was much deeper than he’d expected. He could still feel the intense sensation of comradery that had settled over his soul when he and Kid Spock huddled under the cot in Spock’s memories. For a time it had felt as if he and Spock were…one and the same, yet entirely separate.

But that didn’t make any fucking sense.

McCoy groaned and rubbed his eyes with his fists. He briefly flirted with the notion of blaming Wicks for his uncharacteristically fuzzy feelings for everybody’s favorite Vulcan. She probably did something to him during their meld. Tricky hobgoblins.
Of course she did. A voice in the back of his head reminded him. She showed you the future, a future in which your own flesh and blood would give their lives for his. That would mess with anyone’s head.

And speaking of mind tricks, what about T’sing? Had she really known that Spock would need McCoy’s help when she told him to remember? Was that even possible?

Don’t forget the monsters. The voice in the back of his head snickered. Oh, right, the monsters—whatever they were. When T’sing mentioned the monsters he had completely discounted her. But now, after what he had seen and heard in Spock’s mind, he wasn’t so sure. Were they real or were they some kind of bizarre amalgamation of Spock’s innermost fears created in the aftermath of Stonn’s attack?

And how the hell was any of this connected to Sybok?

Bones sighed in the darkness. Nothing made sense anymore.

Did it ever? Asked the voice in his head.

His alarm clock went off, reminding him that he was due to meet with Jim and Uhura in twenty minutes.

Speaking of things that didn’t make sense…McCoy’s frown deepened as he considered what he was going to tell his friend. He’d been so caught up in the meld with Spock he hadn’t had time to process everything he’d been through since being kidnapped. For all he’d managed to discover during his brief imprisonment he still felt like he had more questions than answers. He wanted to give Jim something useful. He’d noticed how tired the Captain seemed the second he walked into sickbay. Jim had looked like he hadn’t slept in days. Of course, he’d also been half-mad with blood-thirst at the time, but McCoy was concerned for his well-being nonetheless. Now wasn’t the time to add to his problems if it could be avoided.

Unfortunately, McCoy was having trouble coming up with any solutions. He sighed as he rolled out of bed and stepped into his bathroom to shave and brush his teeth. He was just a normal guy. What did he know about secret government conspiracies and Vulcan mysticism? What could he possibly contribute that would help?

McCoy’s eyes landed on the small piece of paper he kept in the upper left corner of his mirror. It was a crudely drawn picture of a house. Actually, it was more of a red square with a blue triangle stuck on top, squatting in the middle of a bunch of green squiggles. The drawing was so creased from being folded and unfolded hundreds of times that the paper was starting to wear thin. Joanna had given it to him on his birthday during his first year in Starfleet Academy and he’d kept it with him ever since.

Bob.

McCoy spat out his toothpaste and quickly rinsed. He dashed back into his bedroom and pulled out his personal comm unit. He may not know anything about secret conspiracies, but Joanna’s uncle Bob worked in Starfleet Intelligence. McCoy wrote a quick message.

Hey Bob.

Have you ever heard of Operation Retriever?
Uhura waited in the conference room for the men to arrive, bent over her padd as she flipped through page after page of intricate legal jargon. She was going over the fine-print of the Klingon-Federation treaty, making sure that all her facts were straight before she presented her case.

10 Hours Ago…

The entire Klingon crew only numbered twelve strong, and Uhura knew this because apparently they had not been able to reach a consensus on who should go to the Enterprise and who should stay on the school bus and so they were all beaming over. She had expected Hendorff to argue but instead he smirked and called in twenty more red-shirts. The transporter room was crowded even before the Klingons beamed aboard. Afterwards she found herself trapped between Scotty’s elbow and the wall.

“Get off of me.” She growled.

“I would.” He growled back. “If this lummox would just get out of my way.” He shoved past the beefy security officer who was trying to walk backwards into them and they pushed their way to the front of the crowd. There was a lot of pushing and shoving going around as the Klingons and the security officers tried to make room for each other. Numerous scuffles were already breaking out. Uhura cleared her throat.

“Which one of you is Toy’wl’ur ghøjwl’ Worf?” She demanded in Klingon. A small, skinny young Klingon would a long ponytail stepped forward.

“I am.” He answered in perfect Standard. “Where is Captain Kirk?”

“I am Lieutenant Uhura. You will be dealing with me.” She said firmly, stepping closer so that they were standing only inches apart. She was a good half foot taller than him and she did her absolute best to look intimidating. Worf’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Nyota Uhura?” He asked.

Uhura was surprised but she tried not to show it. “Lieutenant.” She emphasized.

Worf’s suspicious expression vanished and he smirked. “Fine by me.”

“You can go with the Lieutenant.” Hendorff interjected. “But your men stay here.”

The other Klingons began to protest but Worf just shrugged. He had obviously been expecting that.

“At least allow me to bring one guard. As a gesture of good will.” He haggled. Hendorff glowered but Uhura nodded.
“That’s fair.” She said with a warning glance at the Security Chief. Now was not the time for pointless aggression.

“Very well.” Worf glanced at his fellow Interns. “Gowlo, you come with me—”

**CRASH**

“Oi!” Scotty yelped. “Watch it!”

One of the Klingons backed away from the transporter pad, a broken lever held in his hand. His face was ashen and his eyes were huge. “It was an accident!”

“An accident?!” Scotty was furious. His face was already turning purple as he snatched the lever away. “This thing is made out of reinforced titanium! You couldn’t break it by accident if you tried!”

“DAMMIT MARVEK!” Worf bellowed. “WHAT DID I FUCKING TELL YOU?!”

Marvek glanced down at the floor. “Look but don’t touch.”

“THAT’S RIGHT. AND WHAT DID YOU FUCKING DO?!?”

“I touched.”

Worf scowled deeply as he turned back to Uhura. “If I leave him here he’ll just keep breaking stuff.”

“…We’ll go to the lounge. It won’t matter if he breaks stuff in there.”

Which was a good thing too because Marvek somehow managed to trip over the carpet when he walked into the room and his head hit one of the coffee tables as he fell, shattering the glass top.

“Sorry.” Marvek mumbled as he got back to his feet, his cheeks darkened with shame.

Worf looked like he was about to start screaming again so Uhura quickly said, “It’s fine, don’t worry about it. Someone will clean it up later.” She shook her head as one of the security guards who had followed them moved towards the broken glass and she pointed for him to wait outside the door. He did so, reluctantly. “Just take a seat.” She gestured towards one of the leather sofas near the window. She held her breath until both Klingons were safely seated, just in case Marvak spontaneously burst into flames or something.

“Well?” She asked as she took a seat on the chair across from them.

“Well what?” Worf replied.

“Why did you attack us?”

“Because you disrespected the honor of the Klingon Empire.”

Uhura smiled. “I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific.”

Worf glared at her. “Ambassador Kothar.” He snapped.

**Thought so.** “Kothar attacked us first.”

“When I spoke of disrespect, I wasn’t referring to the battle.” Worf sneered. “I was referring to your baseless accusations that the Ambassador is a coward.”
Uhura’s brow furrowed. “You’re mad because I said he was suicidal? How did you even find out about that?”

Worf laughed but there was no humor in it. “Don’t pretend to be so innocent! You spread your disgusting lies throughout all of Paradise City. Everyone has heard the rumors.”

“I would never gossip about something like that.” Uhura protested. “The only people I told were the Enterprise bridge crew, and I was only passing along the information I received from Agent Simmons. If you have a problem with rumors, I would take it up with him.”

For a brief moment Worf’s eyes narrowed and Uhura caught a glimpse of the intelligent mind trying to solve a puzzle that Jim had noticed earlier, but then his expression snapped back into one of haughty insolence. “Agent Simmons has a lot to say.”

“I wouldn’t know. I only spoke to him that one time.”

“Really?” Worf scoffed.

“Yes, really.” Uhura snapped. “Don’t get any wrong ideas, Intern. The only reason you’re alive right now is Captain Kirk believes we can help each other. But if you’re going to question everything I say then there is no point to continuing this conversation.” She rose to her feet and turned towards the door, as if preparing to leave.

“Why should I trust you when Agent Simmons is your superior?” Worf crossed his arms, refusing to be cowed.

“You need to get your facts straight.” Uhura told him. “I work for Starfleet. Agent Simmons works for the United Federation of Planets diplomatic corps.”

“It is you who needs to straighten her facts. Nathanial Simmons works for Starfleet Intelligence.” Worf insisted. The shrewd look in his eyes was back. “But I want to know who you work for.”

Uhura sat back down slowly. “Why do you think Simmons is working for Fleet Intelligence?”

Worf shrugged noncommittally. “I thought this was supposed to be a mutual exchange of information.”

“What do you want to know?”

“I already asked it.”

“I work for Starfleet.”

“Then we have nothing further to discuss.” Work got to his feet, Marvek a beat behind. “Thank you for your time, Lieutenant Uhura. I would like to return to my ship now.”

Uhura stared at him for a long time. He met her gaze and held it calmly. He wasn’t bluffing.

“…I underestimated you.” She said slowly. “Give me a moment to consider my answer.”

“Take all the time you need,” Worf said as he returned to the couch. “Just so long as you answer truthfully.”

Uhura thought about her answer very carefully before opening her mouth again. “In the Academy they teach us to put the Federation before all else. Before our own goals, before our own safety, before the safety of the people we love. They teach us that the ideals the Federation is based on are
the ultimate truths, and that we must protect them at all costs.” She paused, and her gaze turned towards the window and the infinite void that waited beyond the comforting embrace of the starship. “It’s easy to forget that when you’re out in space. It’s easy to see the Federation as just another feuding government among billions. But it isn’t. The Federation isn’t defined by the people who sit in their towers and squabble about trade ordinances and tax codes. It’s me. It’s us. It’s everyone on board this ship. We are the Federation and when we fight we fight for each other. When I say I work for Starfleet I don’t mean that I work for an organization. I mean I work for everyone I care about, everyone I love, everyone on board this ship. Do you understand?”

Worf stared at her for a really, really long time. He kept staring for so long that Marvek began to fidget. Uhura waited.

Finally Worf appeared to have made his decision. “There’s something Captain Kirk needs to know.”

“About Agent Simmons?” Uhura asked.

Work glanced at his companion. “Marvek. Go outside and wait with the guards. Don’t touch anything. Don’t say anything. Don’t set anything on fire.”

Marvek pouted but he did as he was told. Once Uhura and Worf were alone the Klingon turned to face her once again. He looked nervous.

“It’s about Agent Simmons. And it’s about the Romulans.”

It was Uhura’s turn to stare at him for an uncomfortable amount of time. Romulans too now? Wait…unless he means Stonn’s followers. They’re crazy enough to be mistaken for Romulans, easily. And if Agent Simmons is colluding with Stonn that would explain how he knew exactly where and when we would be most vulnerable on Nimbus III. She had to make a decision. Play it safe or risk everything?

Obviously, she decided to risk everything.

“Is this about Operation Retriever?” She asked.

Worf blinked. “I have no idea what that is. But I do know Agent Simmons has been buying illegal future tech from the Romulans.”

Uhura had ended the conversation there, because they were both getting dangerously close to saying something that could be considered grounds for treason. Starfleet officers had been court martialed for far less than inviting a Klingon crew onboard. She was pretty sure they were already guilty of consorting with the enemy, and it was only short distance from consorting to colluding. Now she was desperately scouring the Klingon-Federation treaties, trying to find something that might help them if all hell broke loose. There had to be some precedent for whistle-blowing, corruption, anything that might stand up in a court of law…

We are so fucking screwed. She thought miserably as the door opened and Jim and McCoy walked in.

“First things first,” Jim went straight to business as he took his seat at the table. “Where are Marcus and Rand?”
“They were on their way to New Vulcan the last time I spoke to them.” Uhura answered. “They’re going to make contact with Sarek and tell him what we learned at the mine.”

“Which is?”

“That the extremists are being funded by someone with connections to Starfleet, if not someone within Starfleet itself.” McCoy answered. “They’re part of something called Operation Retriever and they’re fucking terrified that we might find out about it.”

Jim’s eyebrows shot up. “Terrified?”

McCoy nodded. “T’liv was, anyway, though she tried to hide it. But there was something really wrong with all of them, Jim. It was like…like they were only half-alive.”

“Stonn’s influence, I’ll bet.” Jim spat, his voice thick with venom. His desire to see Stonn suffer had in no way abated since Spock’s recovery. “So what is Operation Retriever?”

Uhura and McCoy glanced at each other. “You first.” She muttered.

“We don’t know exactly.” He admitted. “But I’ve got some ideas…” He trailed off and frowned thoughtfully.

Jim grew impatient. “Which are?” He prodded.

“…There was another prisoner. A Vulcan. She…uh…she was from the same universe as the Ambassador.”

Jim leaned so back in his chair he almost fell over. Whatever direction he had expected this conversation to go in, that hadn’t been it. “Are you certain?”

“Yeah.” McCoy nodded fervently. “Believe me. She proved it. And it gets weirder.”

“Do I want to know?”

“I wish I didn’t. Her name is Wicks McCoy.”

Jim blinked. “…McCoy?”

“Apparently she’s the granddaughter of my counterpart in that universe.” McCoy’s mouth twisted in a wry grimace. Uhura bit the corner of her cheek to keep from smirking at his obvious discomfort.

Jim’s brain struggled to process this new information. “…but you said she was Vulcan…”

McCoy groaned. “Don’t remind me! I’m trying not to think about it.”

“…Okay…well, we will definitely be discussing this in greater detail at a later date but…so why was she there?”

“Looking for Spock, apparently. But when she came to this universe Stonn and his followers captured her.”

“To what end?”

“Well, T’liv seemed to think she was going to attack New Vulcan or something. I got the impression Vulcans don’t think too highly of the other universe.”
“Can you blame them?” Jim asked with a sardonic smile.

McCoy gave him a long hard look. “They tortured her, Jim.”

Jim’s smile vanished. “I’m sorry, Bones. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

McCoy shrugged. “It’s fine. But it wasn’t just her they were interested in. They were obsessed with her shuttle.”

“Her shuttle?”

“This is where I come in.” Uhura interrupted. “When we beamed into the mine we overheard T’liv talking to someone who claimed to represent their investors. Carol recognized him as a man named Rex Livingstone. He used to work for his father, until…well, you know.”

“Until Admiral Marcus betrayed the Federation and was murdered by Khan? Yeah, I remember.” Jim sighed bitterly. “Any chance he’s still on the Starfleet payroll?”

Uhura shook her head. “No such luck. But if his work is classified he wouldn’t show up in any of the records I have access to.”

“Of course not.” Jim grumbled. “So what did Mister Livingstone have to say?”

“From what little I heard, it sounded like he belonged to a group that has been supplying the extremists with funds and equipment in exchange for engineering and weapons research.”

Jim rubbed his hand over his face. This was exactly what he had feared. “How long has this been going on?”

Uhura shook her head. “We don’t know. Not long, I don’t think. It seemed like T’liv was new to the situation, but Livingstone was confidant like he’d done it before. He also implied that they would be willing to overlook T’liv’s treatment of her prisoner so long as she started producing results, by which he meant getting access to her shuttle.”

“What’s so special about this shuttle?” Jim asked.

“According to Wicks, it’s severely pimped.”

Jim gave McCoy a stern look. “Bones. Were those her exact words?”

McCoy nodded mournfully. “Unfortunately.”

“They weren’t able to get inside, which according to Carol is a good thing.” Uhura went on. “She told me the equipment inside the shuttle is so advanced nothing we have today can even come close to matching it. If Stonn had gotten his hands on any of it he would be unstoppable.”

That was an alarming thought. “But he doesn’t have it anymore, right?” Jim asked, just to be sure.

“Right. Carol and Janice used it to escape. They took Wicks with them. And T’sing.”

Jim held up his hand. He was starting to feel dizzy. “Wait—who is T’sing?”

“Remember when Spock went to visit T’liv and her sister on New Vulcan?” Bones asked. Jim nodded. “That’s T’sing. She’s crazy. Or possibly magic, depending on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you.” Jim pointed out.
McCoy unconsciously reached up with his hand and brushed against his temple where a faint bruise still lingered as a reminder of his meld with Spock. “I’m starting to think she might be a little of both, to be honest.”

“They needed to take T’sing hostage in order to escape.” Uhura explained. “And I got the feeling she didn’t like being in the mine anymore than we did.”

“Okay, but do they have any idea what they’re going to do with this hostage now that they’ve got her?” Jim asked pointedly.

“Carol said Wicks was planning to take her to see Ambassador Spock.”

“They’re taking her to the orphanage? Are they insane?”

“Spock can help her.” McCoy said firmly.

Jim was getting frustrated. “How do you know that?”

McCoy shrugged. “I have a feeling.”

Jim could scarcely believe his ears. “A feeling.”

“You should listen to him, Captain.” Uhura advised, a playful twinkle in her eye. “McCoy’s been getting a lot of feelings lately. I think all the Vulcan voodoo is good for him.”

Bones stuck his tongue out at her and she giggled.

“Are you two seriously flirting right now?” Jim snapped.

“Sorry.”

“We’re tired.”

“Well, we’re all tired, Uhura, but you don’t see me going around flirting with random people, do you?”

“Well, no.”

“That’s right, because—”

“But that’s because the only person you flirt with is stuck in sickbay right now.”

“…I am not even going to dignify that with a response. Can we please focus? Yes? Thank you. Okay. So we don’t know how long this has been going on. And if Stonn couldn’t get into this shuttle, how did he get the future tech he’s been using to attack us?”

All traces of levity vanished from Uhura’s face. “Our Klingon friends might be able to shed some light on that.”

Jim and McCoy both leaned towards her, their faces serious. “How did it go with Intern Worf?” Jim asked.

Uhura sighed. “It’s hard to say. He definitely knows more than he’s saying. The problem is I have no way of knowing which side he’s on.”

“What does your gut tell you?” Jim knew he could trust her opinion.
“That he’s a very smart young man who has been deeply disturbed by something. He really cares about his crew but he doesn’t know if he can trust us. I don’t think he would have brought them onboard our ship if he didn’t have something important to say. Honestly, if I didn’t know better I’d say he was scared.”

“Scared of what?” McCoy questioned.

“I don’t know the specifics, yet.” Uhura admitted. “I wanted to research some legal issues before I let the talks go any further, but Intern Worf told me he has evidence that the Federation representative on Nimbus III, Agent Simmons, has been selling future tech to Stonn.” She paused. “Actually, Worf thinks it’s the Romulans, but I’m willing to bet he just can’t tell the difference. You don’t get a lot of Vulcans or Romulans in Klingon space.”

Jim whistled. “Either way we are in big trouble.”

“It gets worse.” Uhura continued. “Worf is also convinced that Simmons is secretly working for Starfleet Intelligence. I don’t know what evidence he has to back this up, but…it does seem likely. I put in a request for identity authentication with Command Personnel but I haven’t heard back yet. And just like with Livingstone, most of the Intelligence officers aren’t listed on any records for which I have clearance.”

“Any chance we can just dump all this in Nogura’s lap?” Jim asked hopefully.

“Are you sure he’s not in on it?” Uhura replied quietly. Her eyes darted around the room nervously. “Honestly, after what happened last year…who can we possibly trust?”

Jim looked up at the ceiling for a little while. “Do you guys ever feel like everything that’s happened to us over the last couple years is somebody’s sick idea of a joke?”

“If this is a joke, I’m not laughing.” McCoy growled. “Conspiracies, an illegal weapons ring and a government cover up. If we’re right about even half this stuff, somebody’s going down for treason and it’ll probably be us.”

“Most likely.” Jim agreed. He had no illusions about his chances of victory in the political world. He was already the most controversial figure in Starfleet. The vultures had been circling since the Destruction of Vulcan. One wrong move and they would have him in their talons, and his entire crew would be ripped apart with him. “But if Starfleet has been sponsoring the extremists all this time, why did Nogura send us after Sybok?”

“Isn’t Sybok exactly what the extremists want?” Uhura reminded them. “We all know Vulcan experimental engineering is the best there is. Maybe Stonn struck a deal, Sybok in exchange for functional weapons.”

“Which would mean we’re being used. Again.” Jim pushed up from the table and began to pace the room. “I don’t like this, you guys.”

“No kidding.” McCoy muttered. “But what can we do about it?”

Jim and Uhura both hoped the other would answer him, but neither of them could.

***
Spock was supposed to be resting.

Chapel said *supposed* to be because no matter how many times she sent him back to bed he still kept trying to sneak past her and go back to work.

“I am sufficiently recovered.” He argued for the fifteenth time. “I am more than well enough to return to my duties.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, Commander.” She snapped as she goose-stepped him back to his room. “You’ll go back to work when I say you’re ready, and not a moment sooner.”

“At least permit me to recuperate in my own quarters.” Spock tried to bargain.

Chapel eyed him warily. “If I do that, how will I know that you’re really resting?”

“My own quarters are far more conducive for rest than sickbay.” Spock saw his chance and went for it. “I will be able to meditate more readily there than here.” He could see that Chapel was still hesitating so he added, “And I give you my word that I will not report for duty until I have your blessing.”

Her face softened and her big blue eyes warmed. “Alright. If you really think you’ll be more comfortable there…but I still expect you to check in every couple hours.”

“Naturally.” He agreed, already heading toward the door.

“And don’t think I won’t come find you if you’re even a minute late!” She called after him. M’benga stuck his head out of his office.

“Did the Commander finally escape your clutches?” He asked teasingly.

“Oh, hush.” She waved him off. “Go cure cancer or something.”

“I finished that half an hour ago.” He came into the hall and fell in beside her as she set off on her rounds. “Now I’m bored.”

“That’s not my problem. Go find someone else to annoy, unless you *really* want to help me change the bed pans.”

Before M’benga could answer there was a commotion at the entrance to sickbay. A group of Klingons and red-shirts had just shoved through the door, elbowing each other out of the way. Some of them had burns and all of them were shouting.

M’benga sighed. It had been decided that the Klingon teenagers would stay on board the Enterprise for the time being, for their own safety. While M’benga could understand the rationale of not wanting the Klingons to run away or allow them the means to attack the Enterprise once again, their presence was adding to his workload exponentially.

Specifically, one Klingon in particular. And yes, M’benga could already see Marvek blushing at the back of the group and loudly explaining that he had not meant to blow up the replicator and he was really, *really* sorry.

“Dammit, Marvek.” M’benga sighed as he reached for his dermal regenerator.

***
When Spock finally arrived at his quarters he hesitated. The last time he walked through those doors Stonn had been waiting for him. Even though Spock knew Stonn was long gone, he could not quite bring himself to walk across the threshold.

*You are being illogical.* He told himself firmly. It didn’t help. His body still refused to move.

He ended up waiting long enough for Jim to find him on his way back from his meeting with Uhura and McCoy.

“Spock?” Jim sounded surprised to see him. “I thought you were still confined to sickbay.”

“I convinced Nurse Chapel to allow me to return to my own quarters.” Spock explained.

Jim glanced at the unopened door. “And?”

“…And now I find myself reluctant to return to the site of my assault.” Spock admitted reluctantly. He did not enjoy having to confess his illogical behavior, but the effort it took to hide his recent emotional lapses was precisely what had caused him to drop his guard in the first place. “But of course that is illogical—”

“No it isn’t.” Jim interrupted him. “It makes perfect sense to me. Do you want to rest in my room? I can comm Chapel, let her know where you are.”

Spock hesitated. “…I do not want to inconvenience you…”

“You won’t.” Jim assured him. “I’d appreciate the company. And we have some things we need to talk about.”

“I promised Nurse Chapel I would refrain from work until she deems me fit for duty.” Spock told Jim reluctantly as he allowed himself to be shepherded into the Captain’s quarters.

“Good.” Jim nodded firmly. “I completely agree with her. But this can’t wait.”

Spock looked around Jim’s quarters. It felt like months had passed since he comforted Jim after McCoy’s abduction, instead of mere days. The room had gotten a lot messier since Spock had last seen it. Clearly Jim had not been expending much energy on basic cleanliness. There were padds and papers strewn across the room, and dirty clothes piled in the corners. Only the bed was clear from clutter, and Sybok’s journal was sitting on the pillow. Spock’s heart sank when he saw the book.

Of course. Jim was still angry with him.

Jim picked up the slim volume and held it carefully in his hands. He traced the spine. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot.” He said slowly. “And I think I owe you an apology.”

Spock shook his head.

“No, I do.” Jim insisted. “I know you have expectations for yourself, for how you’re supposed to behave, and whatever I might think of those expectations I know they’re important to you. I know how much you pride yourself on being rational and logical. But you haven’t been acting rational or logical recently.”

Spock forced himself to keep looking at Jim even though he dearly wanted to hide. “I have failed—”

“No you haven’t.” Jim interrupted him. “Let me finish, okay? I really need to say this.” He took a
deep breath. “When I asked you to be honest with me, I assumed that meant you would tell me everything. I got angry because you weren’t acting the way I expected you to act, and that was unfair of me. And it was wrong of me to take this from you.” He held out Sybok’s journal and Spock gingerly accepted it, cradling the leather-bound book to his chest. “I forgot that what we’re doing here isn’t just about a mission, it’s about you and your family. I should know better than anyone how complicated that can be, and I should have trusted you to tell me if there was anything I needed to know. I need to learn to respect the boundaries that you set, even if I don’t like them.”

Spock shook his head. “The mission is more important than my personal concerns.”

Jim shook his head. “No, it isn’t. I don’t even understand what our mission is anymore. Right now, the only thing that matters to me is you.”

Spock didn’t know what to say to that, and so the silence dragged on.

Jim ran his fingers through his hair nervously. He was pretty sure he was blushing. “Also…um…I guess that brings me to the other thing I wanted to talk to you about…”

Spock’s head jerked up. “There is no need.”

“There absolutely is a need.” Jim snapped before remembering himself. “Sorry. Sorry. I just said I would be more respectful of your boundaries, didn’t I? Sorry. I guess I’m not very good at this…”

“I only meant there is no need for you to explain your actions.” Spock hastened to assure him, relief at not having to discuss Sybok any longer causing him to choose his words carelessly. “I assume you are referring to your momentary lapse of decorum the day before yesterday. I require no explanation, nor do I intend to cause you any grief over the matter.”

Ow. Jim could see from the hopeful look in Spock’s eyes that his First Officer thought he was saying the right thing, but his words stung nonetheless. “Fine. Whatever. We won’t talk about it if you don’t want to.” He gestured towards the bed. “You should get some sleep.” He wanted to scream. And I know something happened between us in sickbay. And I know you know it too. Why do you always refuse to talk about it?

Communication was a problem, and it had been a problem for a long time. Now that he thought about it Jim realized their issues hadn’t started on Udonia III or New Vulcan. No, the problems were much older than that, dating back over a year. He tried to remember when he’d first noticed the distance between him and Spock growing larger as he settled down at his desk and pulled out a stack of reports he was supposed to read. He could hear Spock moving around the room behind him but Jim refused to look back.

When was the last time we really talked? Five months ago when we were stuck in that cave together? No…he spent the whole time examining the moss…

The report fell out of Jim’s hands as he realized when Spock had last spoken honestly about his emotions.

In the shuttle. On Qo’noS.

But that had been over a year ago. Had it really been that long? And how had Jim never noticed?

Jim heard more rustling and he finally looked over his shoulder. Instead of climbing into bed like he was told Spock had started tidying Jim’s bedroom.

Jim silently watched as Spock began to carefully pick up the documents strewn across the floor and organize them into neat piles on the bed. Once that was done to his satisfaction the Vulcan turned
and got to work on the piles of clothing. The dirty clothes were placed in the laundry hamper and the clean clothes were folded and placed in the closet. Jim didn’t say anything. It was a little embarrassing, having Spock clean up after him, but there was also something...fascinating about watching Spock move around Jim’s bedroom like he owned the place. If it had been anyone else Jim would have resented the intrusion, but not with Spock. With Spock, Jim actually liked the intrusion.

The door chimed. Jim realized he had been openly staring at Spock and snapped his head back around before Spock could notice. “Enter.” He called, praying that he wasn’t blushing again.

The door swooshed open and Hendorff walked in.

Jim smiled at the Security Chief. “What’s baking, Cupcake?”

“You need to get the Klingons off this ship.” Cupcake growled. There were dark bags under his eyes and a 5 o’clock shadow smudged across his chin. “As soon as possible. Right now.”

Spock came up to stand beside him as Jim sighed, a silent pillar of support. “They’re just gonna be here a little longer, just until Intern Worf tells us everything he knows.”

Cupcake was shaking his head. “That’s not soon enough.”

“I can’t just—” Jim broke off as the door chimed again. “Enter!”

It was Scotty.

“Get them off!” The engineer howled, tears in the corners of his eyes. “Off, off—oh, hey Hendorff. Jim. Get them off.”

“I assume you’re referring to the Klingons?” Jim asked sarcastically.

“Who else would I be bloody talking about?!” Scotty wailed. “They’re picking fights with everyone! I lost three engineers today!”

“They were killed?” Jim was shocked and appalled.

“Well, no...minor cuts and bruises mostly, but they started it! And that little twit Marvek broke the matter-energy transfer unit!”

“Don’t even get me started on Marvek!” Cupcake roared. “If I had ten seconds alone with that walking disaster I’d—”

The door chimed again and a crowd entered. The heads of nearly every department swarmed into Jim’s quarters, furiously shouting about the misdeeds of the Klingons in general and the sins of Marvek specifically.

“They keep coming up to the bridge!” Sulu complained. “They know they’re not allowed, they’re just doing it to annoy us!”

“Marvek broke half our replicators—don’t ask me how he did it but he did!” Snapped Xw’tk, the tentacled chief janitor.

“And after they broke the fucking replicators they were still fucking hungry so they came down to the fucking kitchen and ate all our fucking food!” Chef Garcia interrupted, his ruddy face turning a dark purple. “What about all the non-sapiens on this ship who can’t eat replicator food, huh? What are they supposed to do?”
“Did the Klingons eat Ensign Wu’s UV lamp?” Jim asked. Ensign Wu absorbed energy by photosynthesis and—as far as Jim knew—was the only member of his crew who had a legitimate dietary restriction that prevented them from using the replicators. He said legitimate, because pretty much everyone preferred the kitchens over the replicators anyway. Even he had a note in his medical file that said he was allergic to replicated dairy, so that he didn’t have to eat fake cheese all the time. They said you couldn’t taste the difference, and you couldn’t—so long as you thought cheese tasted like plastic wrap and had the same consistency as clay.

Chef Garcia was in no way deterred. “No, but one of them kept turning it on and off again and he broke the fucking switch.”

“Was it Marvek?” Cupcake demanded furiously. “I bet it was. That little bastard!”

“It was a short guy, cried a lot for a Klingon—”

“That’s him all right!” Cupcake advanced towards Jim. “Captain, I demand that you remove Marvek from this ship immediately!”

“Do you want me to send him back to his ship, let him run back to Nimbus III? Or maybe I should just shoot him out the air lock.” Jim glared at them. “Of course, the other Klingons might take issue with that. Should I shoot all of them out the air lock? Is that what you want me to do?”

More than one of the department heads were glancing at their shoes with shame in their eyes, but then someone at the very back of the crowd raised his hand.

“I understand your position, Captain.” M’benga said. “But if you don’t remove Marvek from the ship, I’m going to place him in a medically induced coma in the interest of public safety.”

Spock rested his hand gently on Jim’s shoulder. When Jim looked up Spock passed him a padd. Jim took it, his eyes darting across the screen.

“There’s a Class M planet nearby.” He said. “Mostly uninhabited, looks like there’s a fueling station for freighters in the southern hemisphere. No one will notice if we find a nice secluded spot to beam down to.” The more he thought about the idea the more he liked it. He should have known Spock would have the perfect solution. He always did. “Even better, it’s unaffiliated territory.” They couldn’t be charged with treason if they weren’t sheltering enemy combatants within Federation space. There were precedents and legal protections for joint Federation-Klingon efforts in unaffiliated territory, mostly due to the fact that many unaffiliated planets did business with both empires. This planet was just the kind of legal protection Uhura had been looking for earlier.

“I’ll change course.” Sulu said quickly, already moving through the crowd towards the door.

Jim nodded his approval. “Cupcake, put together a security detail. We’ll need enough officers to deal with the Klingons if they try anything, but I’m not expecting trouble.”

“You haven’t met Marvek yet.” Cupcake muttered angrily, but he too turned to leave. “When are we arriving?”

“Looks like we’ll be there in about twenty minutes.” Jim answered, glancing at the specs on his padd.

Scotty snorted. “Twenty minutes, Captain? I’ll get us there in ten.”
Actually, Scotty managed it in 8.7 minutes. It was the worst 8.7 minutes in the lives of his engineers, and some of the younger crew members wept silently as they all huddled in the corner while he whipped and threatened and begged and cajoled the engines to never-before-seen levels of efficiency. Sweat dripped down the side of his face as he danced around the warp core, keeping an eye on a hundred different sensor readings at once.

It wasn’t merely the fear of Marvek’s uncontrollable powers of destruction that drove Scotty to such lengths, it was fear in general. Montgomery Scott was scared in ways he wasn’t accustomed to being scared. He understood fear of an immediate threat, like an angry Gorn or an over-heated warp core. He understood fear of existential threats, like the long slow decline of a mortal life span or disappointed parents. But he could not understand the formless all-encompassing anxiety that had settled in his bones.

Scotty continued pacing around his engines when the ship came to a full stop. Under his watchful eye the engines began to cool, releasing high-pitched hissing sounds as radioactive particles went ricocheting through the air and were caught by the environmental filtration system.

He was scared of the unknown. He was ashamed to admit it, but it was true. They all were, in one way or another, from the lowest ensign to the captain himself. The ground under his feet had shifted like sand and Scotty didn’t know where he stood anymore. Were they working for Starfleet, or against it? Here they were, on the very edge of Federation space, plotting with Klingons and fighting the Vulcans…

Even in his own head, that didn’t sound good.

But it had to be the right thing, they had to be doing the right thing because…because…

*Because if we’re not, then Private Levenspiel died for nothing.*

Scotty hadn’t known the red shirt who’d been killed by Stonn’s men on Nimbus III very well. Engineering and Security officers wore the same uniform but didn’t have much else in common. But he’d seen the kid once or twice around the ship, usually in the company of his friends, and he’d seemed like a nice enough guy. More importantly he had been a fellow crew member, a comrade, and he had deserved better than dying in a random shoot out on a boondock planet.

Blood had been spilled. Someone had to pay.

But Scotty was scared that someone was going to be the Enterprise and her crew.

Not too long ago that fear would have been ridiculous, laughable even. But that had been before he discovered the *USS Vengeance* hiding in the shadow of a moon called Io. That had been before a respected Starfleet Admiral tried to destroy him, his friends and his beloved ship. That had been before Jim died in front of him. Before he heard Spock scream.

*We’re supposed to be explorers.* But Scotty didn’t feel like an explorer. He felt like a soldier, and that was what scared him most of all.
“It’s gonna be cold down on the planet, Spock. You should probably get your coat.” Jim suggested as he pulled his own coat out of his closet. Spock was reclining on Jim’s bed, one of Jim’s pillows pushed under his elbow for support. He was reading Sybok’s journal, turning a page every two seconds as his eyes flew across the tiny scrawl.

“Spock?” Jim asked. “Did you hear me?”

Spock made a non-committal noise in the back of his throat and flipped the page.

Jim sighed and took a seat on the end of the bed. “Are you still…reluctant about going back to your room?”

Spock closed the book with a snap and sat up straight. “I have lingering reservations.” He admitted, refusing to meet Jim’s eyes.

There was a lump rising in Jim’s throat but he hastily swallowed it. He didn’t want to make Spock anymore uncomfortable than he already was. “Do you want me to get your coat for you?”

“No.” Spock answered flatly. “I will do it. My reservations are illogical.”

“You can be illogical with me.” Jim told him gently, unconsciously reaching out and brushing his fingers against Spock’s. “Besides, you have to get permission from Chapel before you can come down to the planet.”

Spock’s brow furrowed slightly. “Nurse Chapel has been quite demanding lately.”

Jim laughed. “Be grateful there’s at least one person on this ship who isn’t intimidated by your Vulcan death glares.”

“I do not have a Vulcan death glare.”

“What do you call the look you’re giving me right now?”

“All emotions that you may associate with my expression are merely projections. I assure you, I am not even certain what a death glare would entail.”

“If I had a mirror I’d show you.” Jim continued teasing him. He couldn’t resist. Having Spock here with him, alive and safe and awake, was nothing short of a miracle. When he closed his eyes Jim could still see Spock lying motionless on the biobed. His hands clenched into fists at the memory, the fear and rage returning full-force.

Stonn would pay for what he had done. Jim would hunt him down and make him pay, and once he was done with that he’d find everyone else who had been helping Stonn and make them pay too—whoever they were.

Spock must have guessed the dark direction Jim’s thoughts had taken, because he gently laid his hand against Jim’s cheek and pulled his face around until their eyes met. Spock didn’t say anything so Jim didn’t say anything either. He just sat there and held his breath while Spock caressed his face and stared at him as if he was an unfathomable puzzle that Spock was trying to solve.

“Why do you grieve, Jim?” Spock murmured.

Spock’s voice sent electric tingles shooting up and down Jim’s spine and he shuddered. Spock tried
“I grieve because I almost lost you, and there was nothing I could do.” Jim admitted. “I felt so helpless.”

Spock snorted derisively.

Jim’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You are many things, Jim. But you are not and never have been helpless.” Spock pulled away and rose to his feet. “I refuse to enable your wallowing.”

Jim gaped up at him. “My wallowing?”

“You are upset because the way things are does not match the way you believe things should be.”

“Damn straight I’m upset!” Jim leapt to his feet so he could face Spock on equal ground. “We’re being attacked by people who are supposed to be on our side! You almost died! Levenspiel did die! Bones got kidnapped and tortured! And all because—” He broke off.

“…Because what?”

“…I don’t know.”

“Precisely. Kai’idth, Jim.” Spock shrugged. “Sybok remains our best lead. Our mission is still the same. Allowing yourself to become upset will achieve nothing.”

“…Well, in that case I feel loads better.” Jim snapped sarcastically.

Spock nodded serenely. “I am gratified.”

It would be a lot easier to stay annoyed with him if he didn’t look so damn adorable all the time. Jim thought with a sigh. “Fine, fine. You’re right, as usual. I need to stay focused.” He gestured towards the door. “Go see Chapel so we can actually talk about work stuff. I’ll grab your coat and meet you down in the transporter room.”

Spock’s quarters were dark when Jim walked in but the lights flickered on when the sensors noticed his presence. Jim glanced around the silent room, feeling like a trespasser. His eyes lingered on the antique weapons mounted against the wall. Did Spock really know how to use all of them?

What am I thinking? It’s Spock. Of course he does.

There was a Vulcan lute lying on the floor underneath the column of ancient bat-liths. Jim frowned as he straightened the instrument. It wasn’t like Spock to leave something so fragile in such a precarious position.

Then Jim realized that there were some papers strewn across the floor as well and his jaw clenched. Of course. No one had been in here since Spock was taken to sick bay. No one had bothered to clean up after the assault.

Well, he still had a few minutes.

Jim went around the room, picking up the papers and straightening the wall decorations. The signs of struggle were all insignificant, but he knew Spock would notice every little detail. There was a kind of satisfaction in the simple act of erasing all traces of Stonn’s presence with his own two hands. Finally, he had managed to find something he could do to help that no one else could do. After all,
no one else had spent enough time in Spock’s quarters to know how everything was meant to look except Spock himself. Only Jim had spent countless hours playing tri-dimensional chess in the red glow from the traditional Vulcan brazier. Only Jim had memorized the precise orientation of each of Spock’s treasured keepsakes. Once he was finished neatening he turned to Spock’s closet. Spock’s downy jacket was hanging on a hook on the inside of the closet door, right where Spock had left it when they returned from Earth. Jim grabbed the coat off the hook and as he did so something fell out of the breast pocket and tumbled onto the floor.

It looked like a hologram. Curious, Jim picked up the small silver box and pressed the button on the side. The multi-dimensional light projection hung in the air, much like the two young girls hanging off the monkey bars in the image. Jim examined the faces of the two girls closely, but he did not recognize them. Shrugging, he slipped the hologram back into Spock’s pocket and headed for the door.

***

Harbonium II was an icy scrap of a planet, trapped in a thousand-year winter. There was a small outpost in the southern hemisphere, little more than a refueling station for long-distance freighters. The crew of the Enterprise beamed down about two miles away from the collection of tiny hovels, far away enough to not be noticed but close enough to take advantage of the maze of subterranean hot springs that kept the region slightly above freezing. Jim was one of the first to beam down and he found a boulder to stand on while he waited for everyone else. And when Jim said everyone else, he meant everyone. When word had spread about the impromptu meeting everyone had insisted on attending, from the greenest ensign to--well, to Jim. Scotty beamed everyone down in groups of ten and Jim watched impassively as the crowd began to grow and swell and mill around and whisper nervously to itself. Those nervous whispers got a lot louder as all 432 crew members materialized in the abandoned moss-covered quarry Scotty had chosen for the event.

He’d been worried about this. The faces of his crew were drawn and tired. He could see his officers eyeing the Klingons suspiciously. When one of the Klingon teenagers dropped his knapsack on the rocky ground the humans standing around him jumped, startled by the sudden movement. Jim had hoped his crew would be able to see past their prejudices, but it seemed some instincts were too deep to be overcome in a day.

“Everyone is accounted for, Captain.” Spock said as he approached Jim’s rock. “How would you prefer to begin this meeting?”

“I need to talk to Intern Worf but…” Jim nodded in the direction of a clump of Klingons. Some of the Enterprise security officers were starting to form a ring around them, separating them from their fellows. “I think I’d better talk to everyone first.”

“Agreed.” Spock said before moving towards the clump, a slight furrow between his brows. He muttered something to the security officers and they reluctantly spread out, no longer trapping the Klingons.

Jim cupped his hands around his mouth. “Everyone take a seat!” He bellowed. “We’re ready to get started!”

It took a few minutes, but before long everyone had found a seat either on a boulder or on the soggy ground. Jim soon found himself looking down at a sea of expectant faces, Federation and Klingon
alike. Spock and Uhura both came to stand at either side of him.

He took a deep breath. “Can everyone hear me?” He called.

“Yes.” The crowd chorused.

“Good.” Jim clasped his hands behind his back and straightened his shoulders. “I know you all have many questions. I know most of you are wondering why we’re here on this sorry rock.” He paused and there were a few half-hearted chuckles as people realized he’d been trying to make a joke. “The mission that brought us here is top-secret. When Admiral Nogura gave Commander Spock and I our assignment he was very clear that any information about our mission was to be revealed on a need-to-know-basis only.” Jim could tell from the looks on the faces of his crew that everyone knew this already. “Today, that means everyone. Every single one of you needs to know exactly what we’re doing before we go any further.”

Whispers broke out in the crowd, spreading from person to person like a virus. Jim waited patiently for the whispers to abate before he continued.

“I’m going to tell you what I know and then I’m going to invite Intern Worf to come up here and tell you what he knows. I haven’t talked to him yet but I want all of you to know exactly what I know. I want us all to be on the same page. So after he’s done, we’re all going to talk about it and we’re all going to decide what to do next, together. I know that’s not how we normally do things in Starfleet, but I think you’ll agree it’s necessary.”

The Klingons seemed confused, glancing around at the Starfleet officers that surrounded them, but the crew of the Enterprise just kept staring up at Jim with complete trust in their eyes.

Jim took another deep breath and steeled himself. His crew might trust him but he wasn’t sure he trusted himself quite as much. On the other hand, he had already made his decision and all he could do now was hope it was the right one.

“Here’s what we know. Our mission was to find and arrest a wanted criminal, a Vulcan named Sybok.” Jim glanced over his shoulder at Spock, who saw the question in his eyes and nodded. Jim turned back to the crowd. “We were chosen for this mission because Sybok is Commander Spock’s half brother.” He paused, expecting shocked gasps or angry mutters, but his audience remained silent and expectant. “Commander Spock has not had any contact with the criminal for over twenty years and is in no way implicated in our investigation. However, we have reason to believe that the Vulcan Stonn—the same Stonn we provided safe transport to not so long ago—is either in contact with Sybok or is trying to make contact. We know that Stonn is the individual responsible for the attack on Nimbus III and the abduction of Doctor McCoy. He also managed to beam directly into Commander Spock’s quarters while we were trying to detain the Fo-dan and assaulted the Commander before fleeing.

“When Lieutenant Uhura rescued Doctor McCoy she uncovered a possible conspiracy between the Vulcan extremists and Starfleet officers.” Jim held up his hand as the angry mutters he’d been expecting earlier finally broke out. “Before you jump to any conclusions, we haven’t been able to confirm if the individual Uhura saw interacting with the extremists is still a Starfleet officer. But…this person used to work for Admiral Marcus.” The angry mutters grew louder, and more than one person shouted ‘That bastard!’

“I know how all of you feel, but it’s important that we stay calm!” Jim had to bellow over them to be heard. “We know, better than anyone else, that there is darkness in the Federation! We know, better than anyone else, that evil can grow anywhere, can be anyone! I will not lie to any of you. We may be in danger again. We may be on the wrong side of Starfleet once again. But I know something
else, and I know all you know it too. *We* are Starfleet, *we* are the Federation, and we do not run from anyone—not even from ourselves. We will not hide from our enemies, whether those enemies are from Qo’noS, Romulus, another universe, another time or even from within our own ranks. *We* do not fight for justice because we are in Starfleet. *We* are in Starfleet because *we’re* willing to fight for justice!”

The crowd cheered and Jim grinned at them.

“I am your Captain, and I *will* protect you so long as there is life left in my body. But I cannot hide you from the darkness, and I cannot hide the darkness from you. You know everything I know. Now let me tell you what I think.

“I think someone in Starfleet made a deal with Stonn. Stonn would research and engineer new weapons and in return Starfleet would find Sybok and bring him back. But I think Stonn grew impatient, or maybe he just couldn’t stand the thought of Commander Spock finding his hero before he did. Either way, he’s got a lot of future tech and someone is protecting him. It’s too risky to arrest him until we know who and why—but we’ve got people working on that. The question we face now is how are Stonn’s people getting that future tech? I’m hoping our Klingon friends will be able to shed some light on that question.”

Jim jumped off his boulder and waded into the crowd until he found Intern Worf. The young Klingon looked terrified as Jim grabbed his arm and dragged him to the boulder. “Just try to sound confident.” Jim whispered in his ear.

“What if I don’t feel confident?” Worf hissed back.

“Fake it.”

“But—”

“No arguing. You agreed to do this.” Jim pushed Intern Worf onto the boulder. “They’re waiting.” Intern Worf stared out across the crowd of unfamiliar faces and thought, *Father was right. I really am too curious for my own good. I couldn’t just leave well enough alone, could I? No, I just had to be the smart one. And now I’m gonna die.*

“I, uh…I don’t know much about Vulcans. Or the Federation. I don’t know who Admiral Marcus is but, um…” Worf was already starting to panic.

“Just tell them what you told me.” Uhura advised him gently.

Intern Worf took a deep breath and counted to five. Then he said, “My men and I arrived on Nimbus III six months ago. I met Sybok my third week in Paradise City. I don’t…” He threw a deeply baffled glance at Spock. “I don’t know what he did or…but pretty much everyone in Paradise City is a criminal. You don’t ask about people’s past on Nimbus III. He seemed…fine. A little…religious, maybe, but…well, he liked chess so we ended up spending a fair amount of time together. One night we were playing at the pub. It was late so it was just us and a few other people, Agent Simmons among them. Then someone came in, someone I had never seen before, but he looked like Sybok, pointy ears, pointy eyebrows, the whole *garbat*. I asked Sybok if it was a friend of his and Sybok said that he didn’t have any Romulan friends anymore. When Agent Simmons saw the stranger he was furious. He grabbed him and dragged him out of the pub so Sybok and I followed them. We couldn’t hear what they were saying, and we lost them pretty quickly, but we saw enough to know that the stranger was selling something and Agent Simmons didn’t want them to be seen together. After that I went home and I never saw Sybok again.” Intern Worf paused and pulled a sheet of
paper out of his pocket. “About two months ago I hack—accidentally discovered that Agent Simmons had been laundering money through the Paradise City Pub. A lot of money.” He handed the paper to Spock, who examined the dense columns of numbers. “Only two things are that profitable on Nimbus III, weapons and Orion slave girls. And if it were Orion slave girls he wouldn’t be trying that hard to hide it.”

“How much money are we talking about?” Jim asked.

“6 million credits.” Spock answered. “On average. It appears the payments are made twice a month, dating back at least sixteen months.” Jim whistled. That was a lot of money.

“Look, I honestly don’t care what happens to any of you or your Federation.” Worf announced, finally gaining confidence. “But Agent Simmons was so desperate to hide whatever it is he’s doing that he was willing to risk my life and the lives of my friends just to keep you from finding him out. He lied, he stole and he tricked us. At least you fight your battles head on, with honor. YouI can respect. He’s gotta go.”

The crowd burst into applause and Intern Worf beamed, surprised but pleased. Now it was Uhura’s turn to step forward.

“Okay, everyone!” She shouted. “We have a couple options for how to proceed from this point. Each department head has been briefed on those options. We’re going to split into groups and each department is going to come to a consensus about which option we should take. Once every person in your department is in agreement your department head will communicate your decision to Captain Kirk. So find your department head—Klingons, you’re with me—and let’s get started.”

Jim had heard of consensus decision making, he’d studied the process in civics classes at the Academy, but he’d never seen it in action before. It didn’t take long for him to discover why it wasn’t a more common technique. Consensus decision making was hard. Everyone had strong feelings that they desperately wanted to express. For the first 45 minutes Jim went from group to group, trying to listen in. Unfortunately, his presence made people nervous. If they weren’t squabbling over semantics they were clamming up out of fear they’d say something to offend their captain. Uhura finally snapped and told him to go away.

“We’re not going to get anything done with you hovering over us.” She told him. “Go keep Spock company.”

Spock’s science department had reached a consensus almost immediately. Complete the mission. Jim didn’t know if it was because as scientists they were less interested in political nuances or if they were just completely loyal to Spock, but he suspected it was a mixture of both. He found Spock resting on one of the boulders.

“Oh, Spock.” Jim told him as he approached. He stuck out his bottom lip and pretended to pout. “I am unloved.”

“You know that is not true.” Spock raised his eyebrow and Jim blushed.

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“Do you want to take a walk?” Jim asked. “If I stay here with nothing to do but wait I’m going to go crazy.”

Spock nodded and slid off the boulder. Jim led the way out of the quarry, clambering over the moss-covered boulders that littered the path. When they reached the top they found themselves standing in a vast wind-swept plateau. The frost-covered blue-green grass crunched under their feet as they walked.
“Chapel clear you for duty?” Jim asked.

Spock nodded. “I do not believe I would have made it off the ship without her blessing.”

Jim snorted. “Probably not. That woman is a force of nature.” He sighed. “There’s something I need to tell you, but I didn’t want to mention it until you were feeling better.”

“What is it?” Spock asked apprehensively.

“When…when McCoy was melding with you I heard something.” Jim admitted.

Spock came to an abrupt halt and stared at Jim with something the closely resembled alarm. “What do you mean?”

“It sounded like someone knocking on the door but I only heard it if I was touching one of you.”

“You touched us?”

“When you say it like that it sounds dirty.”

“That was not my intention. I only meant to express my surprise. It is…not done, to touch a melding pair. I have never heard of such a thing happening and I do not know what one would expect in that situation.”

“So the knocking had nothing to do with the meld?”

“I did not say that. There may have been a parallel experience within the meld but—”

BEEP

“—I am not able to speak with certainty. We would need—”

BEEP

“—a Vulcan specialist. Perhaps Dr. M’benga would be able to—”

BEEP

“Do you hear something?” Jim interrupted, looking around. The plateau was completely empty except for them.

BEEP

Spock reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the hologram. The little button on the side was glowing red and beeping loudly. “It is the hologram of my mother when she was a child.” Spock explained, handing the silver box to Jim. “But I have never seen it function in this manner before.”

BEEP

“Weird. Well, let’s see what it wants.” Jim pushed the button.

Five seconds later Ruth Grayson materialized out of thin air.
I wonder what she wants…

Thanks so much for reading you guys! Please feel free to leave any questions you may have in the comments section (of course, comments are always welcome and adored too ^_^).

You can follow the progress of the fic at http://interrobanngfics.tumblr.com/

There you can also find art related to this fic!

Stay tuned for the next chapter!
Family Reunion

Disclaimer:

Kirk: Do it.

Author: …

Mr X: You promised you’d do it!

Author: …don’t wanna.

Spock: You did promise.

Author: Fine! I do not in any way, shape or form own any part of the Star Trek franchise, including but not limited to the characters.

Kirk: There. Was that so bad?

Author: IT WAS TERRIBLE!!!

Family Reunion

“Finally.” Ruth Grayson snapped as she brushed herself off. “We’ve been trying to reach you for days, but your ship’s shielding relay kept blocking our signal.” Where she had just come from, Jim could not guess, but she wasn’t wearing the same puffy coat and linen suit she’d had on back on Earth. Her outfit was a stew of fashion—a silk skirt from Betazed, a retired Klingon fly jacket, and a belt of tiny lizard skulls. He couldn’t tell what her furry hat was made from, but whatever it was it had fangs.

“…Huh?” Jim gaped at her. Spock’s human aunt was the last person he’d expected to run into on this miserable planet and his brain seemed to be overloaded with shock. He was utterly unable to concoct a complete sentence.

“We don’t have a lot of time, boys. I’ll explain on the way.” Ruth spun on her heels and started trudging through the frost-covered grass.

“…Huh?” Jim repeated, blinking owlishly. Spock grabbed his elbow and pulled him along.

“Aunt Ruth, how did you find us?” Spock asked as they walked. Jim was grateful that at least one of them was still capable of cogent thought.

“The hologram I gave you is also a homing beacon. We use them so we can find each other if we get separated.”

“I assume when you say ‘we’ you mean your band of intergalactic bootleggers.” Apparently Jim didn’t need his brain to be sarcastic. That was good to know.
“No need for name calling, Captain. We’re so much more than that.”

Jim opened his mouth to say, *That’s what I’m worried about.*

“Why are you here?” Spock threw Jim a warning look.

“Sybok’s been spotted. I thought you boys would want to know.” She said over her shoulder. “I won’t say more now—we’re too exposed out here. Hurry up.” She picked up the pace and they had to jog to keep up with her.

At first Jim thought she was heading for the village but after ten minutes she veered sharply to the left and led them towards a rocky outcrop. She pointed to a heavy iron door embedded at the base of one of the mighty granite boulders that slouched on the tundra like sulking giants.

“Get in.” She ordered.

“Why?” Jim asked suspiciously. “What’s down there?” Spock had already pulled out his tricorder and was taking readings.

“It appears to be a series of chambers.” Spock told him. “There are 32 life signs present.”

“All friendly.” Ruth smirked. “Surely big strong Starfleet men like you aren’t scared of little ol’ us.”

“We’re not scared.” Jim snapped back. “We’re appropriately wary of anyone who needs a secret hide out on a border planet like this one.”

Ruth shrugged. “Suit yourselves. I can’t force you to come inside. But it’s the only way you’re gonna find your brother.” She directed the last sentence to Spock. “Where he is now, the Federation can’t reach.”

Jim stepped in front of Spock, blocking her piercing gaze. “But you can?”

Ruth winked. “Aye, aye Captain.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Ha ha.” He glanced over his shoulder at Spock. “What do you think?” He whispered.

Spock thought carefully for a moment. “Sybok’s journal provided clues, but this could be our only chance to gather verifiable intelligence.”

Jim agreed though he still suspected a trap. But his crew was nearby. If anything happened, it wouldn’t take long for someone to realize they were missing. Jim glanced over his shoulder, looking back the way they came, and he could see that their footsteps had left a path through the permafrost. If anyone came looking for them, they wouldn’t be hard to find.

“Lead the way, Aunt Ruth.” Jim gave in.

“Don’t call me that.” She snapped as she opened the door. “You ain’t my family.”

“Sorry.”

The heavy door opened to reveal a spiral staircase, tightly winding down a tunnel that led deep beneath the earth. A string of lights flickered into illumination, guiding their footsteps as they descended into the darkness. Jim slid his hand to his hip, making sure that his phaser was still securely fixed to his belt. It was. Jim kept climbing down the stairs, Spock leading the way and Ruth bringing up the rear. The deeper they got the harder his heart hammered against his rib cage. He kept
his eyes fixed on the back of Spock’s head, unable to squash the feeling that if he lost sight of his Vulcan for even a second he would never see him again.

There was a narrow hallway at the bottom of the stairs, lined with heavy soundproof doors.

“Third on the right.” Ruth instructed them. Spock glanced back at Jim, who nodded his permission, and Spock opened the door.

Warmth, light and chatter spilled into the hallway and Jim’s pounding heart began to settle. They walked through the doorway and found themselves in a large room crowded with degenerates from every corner of the universe, all of them drinking and gambling under the watchful eyes of the Ferengi servers who ran the bar on the other side of the room. Jim could identify some of the groups, like the cluster of Orion pirates playing Dabo and the pair of Gorns sipping mysterious draughts that smelled a lot like diesel—but most of the alien species represented in the room were totally unfamiliar to him. Ruth tapped his shoulder and nodded towards the bar. He and Spock both followed her and as they moved through the room the cacophonous noise vanished and was replaced with brittle silence. Heads were turned, eyes were narrowed and drinks were lowered. Jim became painfully aware that he and Spock were both wearing their Starfleet uniforms in what was clearly an underground smuggler’s den.

*We’re dead.* Jim realized glumly.

He was more than a little surprised when they reached the other side of the room without being assaulted and Ruth, with barely a nod to the Ferengi barman, opened a small hatch behind the bar and led them into a cramped backroom. Spock moved to follow her but Jim grabbed his arm.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to go in there?” Jim hissed in his ear.

“Turning back now might prove more dangerous than continuing.” Spock said pointedly, peeking over Jim’s head at the host of smugglers who were watching them with hooded eyes. “Besides, I already informed Doctor McCoy of our whereabouts. That should provide sufficient insurance against Aunt Ruth’s potential betrayal.”

“When did you do that?”

“When you were checking your weapon on the staircase.”

“You saw that?”

“I heard your movements.”

“Okay but—”

Ruth stuck her head back through the hatch. “Are you boys planning on joining us anytime soon?” She snapped. Jim sighed and clambered through.

The little room seemed to be primarily used as storage for the bar, but there was a bank of computers on the back wall, their screens glowing faintly through the stacks of Romulan Ale and Saurian Brandy. There were four human men circled around one of the computers, and they turned as Jim and Spock approached. One of them stepped towards Spock and, before Jim could stop him, wrapped his arms around the Vulcan’s torso and lifted him into the air.

“Spock!” The man bellowed gleefully. He had a thick salt and pepper beard and twinkling blue eyes and he was huge. So tall and wide that every time he moved he sent boxes toppling onto the floor. If Jim had thought John ‘The Troll’ Grayson was big, this guy was even bigger. Jim wasn’t even sure
how they had gotten him underground in the first place, he looked far too big to fit through the doors.

“Put him down.” He tried to order, but the man ignored him.

“Look at you!” He boomed. “You’ve grown so much!”

“Not nearly enough if you ask me. He’s practically skin and bones.” Ruth chuckled. “Put the boy down, Mick, you’re scaring him.”

“No I’m not!” Mick protested, still holding Spock aloft. Spock didn’t seem to know what to do, he just turned his head and stared at Jim helplessly with giant saucer-sized eyes.

“Well, you’re scaring me.” Jim said weakly. “Please put him down.”

Mick laughed so hard at this he dropped Spock, who backed away slowly until he collided with the wall. “Hello Cousin Mick.” Spock muttered.

Mick shook his head. “Come on now, come on. I told you not to call me that. Remember?”

“…I remember.”

“So what’s my name?”

“…I would prefer not—”

“What’s my name?”

“…Mick the Dick.”

Mick pumped his fist in the air. “Yes!” He grinned as the men still clustered around the computers groaned. “There ain’t nothing funnier than a Vulcan swearing.” Mick started giggling. “Look at your face! You look like a toad eating a lemon!”


“Sure.” Mick grinned.

“Where have you been all my life? Because that was the funniest thing I have ever seen.”

“The trick is to get right up in their face. Works with everyone too, not just Vulcans. Get really loud, get really close. Confuses people, they don’t know what you’re doing, gives you the upper-hand.”

“Wait a second—I need to write this down.”

“I hate to interrupt,” Ruth drawled. “But we’re on a tight schedule. You’ll have to do this later.”

“Later?” Jim whispered to Mick.

“Later.” Mick nodded. “I’ll teach you the best way to mess with Romulans too.”

“I think I love you.”

Mick nodded sagely. “I’m very loveable.”

Ruth cleared her throat angrily. “Captain Kirk, Spock, this is my crew. You already know my son Mick. This is Jasper, Tadashi and Kofi.” When their names were mentioned each man nodded at the
Starfleet officers. Jim sized them up. Like the Graysons they wore a mix of sensible clothes from different civilizations, marking them as people who spent much of their time outside Federation space where being too recognizable or belonging to any specific group could be dangerous. He wondered what they thought of Ruth bringing the Captain and First Officer of the Enterprise to their hide-out. Whatever their feelings, he couldn’t detect a trace of emotion in any of their faces. They quietly stood to the side and let Jim and Spock approach the computers.

“Is this what you wanted to show us?” Jim asked Ruth, gesturing to the screen. She nodded. Jim frowned as Spock leaned in closer. “What am I looking at?”

“That is a Romulan warrant.” Ruth explained, crossing her arms.

Attention all Romulan Guards, Operatives and Law Enforcement Officials

For sufficient cause made known to the the authorized signatory, summarized in the above affidavit [AFFIDAVIT CLASSIFIED] you are hereby commanded to apprehend the individual as specified in the above affidavit [AFFIDAVIT CLASSIFIED] according to the laws of the Romulan Star Empire.

The signature authorizing the warrant had also been censored.

Jim turned and looked at Ruth. “You believe this warrant is for Sybok?”

“Keep reading.”

Jim looked back at the screen. “There isn’t anything else.” But then he noticed the note at the bottom of the page, written in font so small he’d mistaken it for dirt on the screen. Spock tapped on the display, enlarging the miniscule text.

DO NOT ATTEMPT TO APPROACH SUSPECT. SUSPECT IS EXTREMELY DANGEROUS. ONCE SUSPECT IS LOCATED ALERT YOUR ASSIGNED TAL’SHIAR OPERATIVE AND WAIT FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTION.

Jim took a step back, frowning thoughtfully. “Why bother issuing an arrest warrant if they don’t want anyone going near the suspect?”

“Because they aren’t the Federation.” Ruth explained. “I’ve seen this before. The military gets some intelligence and tries to act on it before the Tal’Shiar, and the Tal’Shiar adds an addendum to the warrant so that if the military finds the suspect the Tal’Shiar still has jurisdiction.”

“That may be true, but there is nothing in this document that directly connects it to Sybok.” Spock pointed out. Ruth gave him a patient look.
“Did you notice the dates?”

Spock turned back to look at the display, but Jim had lost patience with the games Ruth was playing. “Why don’t you just tell us what we’re supposed to be seeing?” He snapped. “I don’t feel like wasting time playing 20 Questions.”

“Fine.” Ruth shrugged. “This warrant was issued four days ago. The addendum was added one day after that. Within 12 hours the warrant was retracted and every trace of it was scrubbed from the Romulan records. Fortunately, we have some old friends on that side of the border who were able to send us a copy before it disappeared.”

Jim waited, assuming Ruth had more to say. Instead she just crossed her arms and looked triumphant, as if she’d proven her point. “…And?”

“Are those dates significant?” Spock asked patiently.

“Yup.”

Again, Jim waited. Again, Ruth refused to explain further. “For fuck’s sake would you just—”

“Avalon.”

Jim turned and stared at Spock as if he’d just grown a second head. “Did you just say Avalon? Are we dealing with fairies now? Do I need a magic sword?” Jim was being sarcastic, but secretly he had always wanted a magic sword.

Spock ignored him and kept talking to Ruth as if his Captain wasn’t even in the room. “Four days ago would have been the most recent available exit window from the Romulan Hurricane. If he was on Avalon, that is when the intelligence would have reached the border officials…”

“And the Tal’Shiar a day later.” Ruth nodded, her eyes gleaming with something that almost looked like pride.

“But if the warrant disappeared…”

“It means they either already have him or they know where he is and don’t want anybody else looking.”

“Is there any chance he is still in the city?”

“Not according to my contacts. They weren’t sorry to see the back of him, either.”

“When is the next available entry window?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Would the two of you mind explaining what you’re talking about?” Jim snapped. He didn’t appreciate being left out. Ruth didn’t even glance at him, she just kept staring at Spock with her piercing blue eyes as if she already knew what he was going to do.

Maybe she did.

“Jim.”

Jim looked at Spock, and was shocked to find a deep rage, so well hidden it would have been invisible to anyone else, brewing in the shadows of his First Officer’s eyes.
“I am resigning from Starfleet, effective immediately.”

The words managed to make it most of the way to Jim’s brain before he got angry. “No.”

“Jim, I must go after him and if the Romulan government catches a Starfleet officer in their territory it would almost certainly start a war.”

“No.”

“My resignation would be temporary, and purely for appearances’ sake. Jim, be logical--”

“NO!”

***

Two Days Ago

_The great Ice Whale rejoiced in her frozen ocean. She twirled lazily in the darkness beneath the ice caps. The only light that entered her arctic world was the muffled rays that slipped through the cracks in the ice and oozed into the water like blue syrup. She didn’t mind. She had spent her whole life in the dark frozen water, dancing while the ocean currents whispered against her rigid, scaly skin and soft gelatinous things drifted unaware into her gaping maw._

“T’sing?”

_The Ice Whale beat her spiked tail furiously, a territorial warning to whatever unwelcome visitor to her arctic realm had made that strange sound._

“Can you hear me T’sing?”

The person who until that moment had been a Carnivorous Andorian Ice Whale suddenly remembered that she was also a Vulcan named T’sing. But then she got confused, as she so often did, and somehow for the space of about five seconds T’sing was trapped deep beneath the ice in an unfamiliar body and the Ice Whale…well, the poor Ice Whale didn’t know _what_ was going on.

Carol had been reaching out to tap T’sing’s shoulder in an attempt to get her attention but before she could make contact the Vulcan let out a bloodcurdling shriek and fell backwards on her cot, flailing wildly. Then, as suddenly as the outburst had started, it stopped and T’sing sat back up, calmer but visibly shaken and gasping for air.

“Sorry.” Carol said cautiously. “I was just wondering if you were hungry…”

T’sing frowned as she tried to force her swimming vision to focus on the human woman who was talking to her. “Jellyfish?” She croaked, her throat raw from the sound the Ice Whale had made with it.

_A million miles away, on a planet covered by primordial goo, something new was happening. A scarcely cohesive bundle of cells of sufficient complexity was experiencing the first spark of_
conscious thought. The first thought was: I AM HUNGRY!

This was shortly followed by: WAIT—WHO SAID THAT? and then: I DON’T KNOW WHO YOU ARE BUT I JUST HAD A GREAT IDEA FOR THIS THING I LIKE TO CALL EATING AND I WOULD REALLY, REALLY LIKE TO SHOW YOU HOW IT WORKS.

“What?” Carol asked.

The part of T’sing’s brain that processed sensory information struggled to readjust back to existence and so T’sing had no choice but to sit very still while the bright violent chaos that surrounded her slowly resolved back into shapes and colors. She held her breath until the dizzying din was once again distinct, individual sounds. She didn’t even try to speak until she could once more feel the coarse fabric of the wool blanket beneath her fingers. She knew from experience that trying to speak too soon would just send her mind hurtling through the void again.

“Were you offering me jellyfish?” T’sing asked after a brief struggle to remember what they were talking about.

“I…wasn’t planning on it. Are you okay?”

Before T’sing could blatantly ignore such a stupid question the hatch door slid open and Wicks clambered through.

They were all still on board The Highlander making their way to New Vulcan. Carol and Janice were making plans to meet secretly with Ambassador Sarek and tell him everything they had learned about Stonn’s connections with Starfleet. Wicks just wanted to find the person she was looking for as soon as she possibly could and was planning to abandon them at the earliest opportunity. She didn’t mean to be unsympathetic but she had no intention of getting mixed up in yet another political quagmire.

No one had told T’sing these things, but T’sing rarely needed anyone to tell her what the future held. Or the past, for that matter. It was the present she had difficulty with.

“Is everything alright?” Wicks asked. “I heard screaming.”

“We’re fine.” Carol answered shortly. She wasn’t entirely sure what to make of the strange Vulcan from the other universe. Wicks had been nothing but helpful since they first met, yet for some reason Carol could not bring herself to trust her. Maybe it was because Wicks was obviously hiding many secrets, or maybe it was because Wicks kept watching her with a creepy half-smile whenever she thought Carol wouldn’t notice. "What did you do with Hamlet?"

Their feathered friend had been making a mess ever since they left the mine. "I sedated him." Wicks explained. "He will sleep until we can return him to his natural habitat."

T’sing didn’t share Carol’s reservations. She stood up on the bed so that she could look over Carol’s shoulder, watching the other Vulcan’s every movement with unabashed curiosity.

“I can take care of T’sing if you want to get some rest.” Wicks offered, stepping further into the room. “You must be tired.”

She was, but Carol didn’t want to admit it in front of the Vulcans. “I’m not ti—”

“You are exhausted.” T’sing interrupted her. “I can tell.”

Carol sighed. She knew a losing battle when she saw one. “Fine. I’ll leave you two alone or
whatever it is you actually want. But I’m not going to bed.”

“I understand.” Wicks smiled and stepped away from the hatch, allowing Carol to pass. “We are not the bosses of you.”

Carol glared at her as she walked by. “Has anyone ever told you it’s creepy when you try to talk like a human?”

“On numerous occasions.”

“Good.”

Once Carol was gone Wicks closed the hatch door behind her. Then she sat down on the foot of the bed, crossing her legs and turning to face T’sing.

“And here we are.” Wicks muttered to herself, staring at the other Vulcan. T’sing regarded her in return, each of them eyeing the other with a mix of suspicion and curiosity.

“You have questions.” T’sing noted.

Wicks shrugged. “I always have questions. You do not need magic powers to know that.”

“I do not have magic powers.”

“You have something.”

“So do you.”

“We are talking about your secrets, not mine. How did you find me?”

T’sing shrugged. “I did not.”

Wicks shook her head. “Do not lie to me, T’sing. You told Stonn my exact coordinates. As a result, I was captured, imprisoned and tortured. You have an obligation to tell me the truth.”

T’sing allowed her head to fall to the side as a bitter laugh burst from her lips. “I have an obligation?” She started to laugh even harder.

Wicks waited patiently for her to finish. She wasn’t in a rush. They had hours still to go before they arrived at New Vulcan, and until they landed she had nothing else to do. “You are not like other Vulcans, are you?”

T’sing stopped laughing suddenly. “Neither are you. I was made this way against my will. What is your excuse?” She spat back.

Wicks shrugged. “I am only half Vulcan. I was raised according to my mother’s human customs. I eventually learned Vulcan stoicism but it never came easily.”

“Is that why you came here?” T’sing asked curiously. “Because you did not fit in your own universe?”

“I am here to do my job.” Wicks was beginning to suspect that T’sing was giving her the run around. She decided to get to the point. “What did you mean when you asked Leonard McCoy about monsters?”

T’sing turned away and began picking at the wool blanket, the coarse fibers catching on her long,
yellow fingernails. She whispered something too quietly for Wicks to hear. Wicks leaned closer and asked her to repeat herself. “I saw you.” There were a million accusations in her tone. “You were talking to a monster.”

Wicks tried to think of what T’sing could have possibly witnessed that would leave her so wary, but the only monster she remembered meeting in this universe was Stonn and somehow she didn’t think that was who T’sing was referring to…

“What did the monster look like?” She tried asking.

The look T’sing gave her was so full of frustration and despair that Wicks immediately wished she could take the question back. “I do not know!” T’sing wailed, her face crumpling with misery. “I never know. I never know anything anymore.” She suddenly leapt off the bed and began pacing the room, wrapping her arms around her slight frame. Her words came so fast they started to bleed together. “No one knows anything, not really. But at least you are unaware of how much you do not know—you have no concept, how could you? But it is all there if you look for it! Everything is happening here and now! The past and the future and the present—it is allthesamethingandIcannotkeepthemseperateanymore—”

“T’sing.”

T’sing spun around and looked at Wicks, really looked at her. “You have to help me.”

Wicks’ eyebrows furrowed deeply. “I am not certain that I can.”

“I am certain.” T’sing kneeled on the floor in front of her, maintaining eye contact the entire time. “That is why I had to find you. You are the only one who can help me.”

Wicks was surprised to discover that T’sing disturbed her. All her life, Wicks had been told that she didn’t act like a Vulcan was supposed to act. Even before her mother died and she’d gone to live with her grandfather, even before she and her bond-sisters became involved with Ambassador Spock, even before she had started to probe the boundaries of her biology, she had been told that she was too emotional, too loud, too demonstrative for a Vulcan. But even Wicks had never behaved the way T’sing was behaving now, curled in a fetal position on the floor and begging for mercy. T’sing’s bony fingers grasped the hem of Wicks’ robe. “Please,” she wept. “Please, you must help me. I know you can. I have seen it. Please.”

Wicks knew she needed to turn away. She had come to this universe to do one thing—protect her Spock. She didn’t have the right to interfere in the events of this universe any more than was absolutely necessary.

And, to be honest, Wicks was just as broken as T’sing in her own way. Before the destruction of Romulus she would not have hesitated when someone asked her for help, but now…now there were parts of herself that were missing, and she did not know if she had the strength to do what T’sing was asking her to do.

On the other hand…T’sing knew things, and Wicks needed to know what those things were. Wicks made a decision.

“I will help you. Please stand up.”

T’sing didn’t seem to hear her so Wicks grabbed her wrists and hauled her to her feet. T’sing fell silent, staring at her with huge, damp, vulnerable eyes. “I cannot help you if I do not know precisely what has happened to you.” Wicks told her. “I need you to show me. Do you understand what that
will entail?”

“Yes.” T’sing pulled her wrists from Wicks’ grip and eagerly reached for her face. “I will show you everything he did to me.”

***

The frozen scrub crunched under Jim’s feet as he strode furiously across the plains, leaving a soggy trail of footprints in his wake. He wasn’t sure where he was going or how long he’d been walking, and he was too angry to care.

Spock followed him at a respectful distance. He had already tried to explain his logic to Jim, but instead of understanding Jim had left the underground hideout and started marching through the tundra, muttering under his breath and occasionally lashing out at rocks and trees. Spock bid farewell to Aunt Ruth and the others, and had learned when they were planning to leave the tiny border planet, and chased after his Captain. After some careful consideration, Spock decided that perhaps Jim needed some time to work out his incomprehensible emotions, but it was too dangerous to let his Captain go wandering off on his own. As long as he stayed just out of human earshot Jim seemed content to ignore him, at least temporarily.

Spock’s comm unit chirped. “This is Commander Spock.” He said, holding the unit to his mouth.

“It’s Uhura. Are you and Jim close? We’ve reached a decision.”

Spock checked their location on his tricorder. He had been mapping their trajectory ever since they left the rest of the crew, so that they would be able to find their way back. “We will return in 23.7 minutes.”

“Okay. We’ll be here.”

Spock trotted closer to Jim. “Captain?”

“Leave me alone Spock!” Jim bellowed without turning to look at him.

“Uhura contacted me. Our presence is required.”

Jim groaned. He’d been hoping he’d have some more time to work through his rage before duty called. He turned and glared at Spock. “Your resignation is not accepted.”

Spock nodded calmly. “You already told me that.”

Jim’s eyes narrowed. “Your resignation is unacceptable.”

Spock resisted the very human urge to sigh. “We will discuss this matter later.”

“No we won’t!” Jim crossed his arms and stuck out his jaw. “Because you’ll just avoid me until it’s too late and then you’ll do whatever you want just like you always do!”

“I told you, I do not intend my resignation to be permanent—”

“IT’LL BE PRETTY FUCKING PERMANENT IF YOU DIE!”
“I do not intend to die, either.”

“NEITHER DID I!”

Jim’s words echoed in the empty air between the two men, a stark contrast to the crystalline silence that surrounded them. Both men were frozen in place, staring at one another with a mixture of shock and sadness. Jim had broken his cardinal rule of Spock Wrangling.

Never Ever Talk About Jim’s Death.

For a second Jim wanted to take it back, but it was far too late. He had already pushed them over the precipice. It was up to Spock where they landed. Jim kept his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed and stood his ground.

“…Jim…I…” Spock gesticulated helplessly, trying to explain emotions that he lacked the vocabulary to communicate and was ashamed of experiencing in the first place. But he tried, because James Tiberius Kirk was asking him to and Spock would anything Jim asked him to do.

“Do you remember what it felt like when I died?” The fact that Spock hadn’t immediately fled gave Jim hope. He began to walk closer to his First Officer, but he was so focused on the violent swirl of emotions in Spock’s eyes that he scarcely noticed what his feet were doing.

“It would be impossible to forget.” Darkness fell over Spock’s face and he looked away.

“Have you ever tried?” There were only a few short meters between them now.

“Every night.”

Jim’s left foot moved forward without waiting for permission from his brain and then there was only a few inches of oxygen separating them.

“Tell me what it felt like.”

“Jim, please do not—”

“I need to hear you say it.”

“…It felt as if I was being ripped apart from the inside. I…could not see or think or speak. I…I could only…I only wanted to…” Spock could not force himself to say the words, no matter how hard he tried.

“You wanted to hurt him.”

“I wanted to kill him.”

“Eventually, but first you wanted him to suffer. You wanted him to know what he had done to you. You wanted him to feel everything that you were feeling.”

Spock closed his eyes, hiding himself from Jim’s probing gaze. “…Yes.”

Because Spock’s eyes were closed he did not notice what Jim was doing until their mouths collided.

As soon as Spock understood what was happening all other thoughts in his mind dissipated like smoke. Jim’s kiss was violent, possessive and irresistible. His strong arms circled around Spock’s torso and pulled him closer than Spock would have thought possible, holding him so tightly it seemed as if their flesh was merging together, as if they were no longer two separate entities. Spock
raised his hands to Jim’s shoulders, but instead of pushing the human away as he might have done he fisted his hands in the soft fabric of Jim’s uniform and held on for dear life.

What they were doing was more than kissing. It was more than physical. Through touching and feeling they spoke of all the things they could not put into words. Spock could feel a desperate yearning the like of which he’d never known underneath Jim’s skin, and he gladly surrendered to it. Jim took everything Spock offered him and still he wanted more. He slipped his tongue inside Spock’s mouth and explored, caressing the contours of his palate and delighting in the bright, coppery flavor of his Vulcan tongue. At first Spock was unsure but as time went on he grew more confidant, returning the kiss with all the focus and intensity that he could muster. A distant part of him wondered why he was doing this, but in the here and now everything seemed right and true.

Unfortunately, they both possessed a physiology that required the regular intake of oxygen in order to sustain continuity. Jim managed to ignore the demands of his lungs as long as he could (assisted by other more expressive parts of his anatomy) but when Spock’s lungs began to burn the kiss was ended. The two men separated, gasping for air, Jim’s head falling onto Spock’s chest. They kept standing there for a long time. Even Spock couldn’t say how long they stood since kiss had affected him so deeply he was unable to keep a precise measure of how much time they remained in stasis.

Eventually, Jim had regained enough composure to form a sentence. “Do you understand how I feel now?”

“…I understand that your feelings are similar to mine.”

Jim burrowed his face further into Spock’s chest so that Spock wouldn’t see his deliriously happy grin. He wanted his Vulcan to think he was still angry.

“I know that a Starfleet officer cannot go into Romulan territory. And I know that you have to go after your brother.” These things were true. Jim knew Spock could not ignore what Ruth Grayson was offering him—a chance to find Sybok. At the same time, he desperately needed Spock to understand why Jim could not let him go. “But if you die somewhere far away, where I cannot reach you, I will rip this universe to shreds and burn the pieces until there is nothing left but ash.” The mere thought filled Jim with poison, flooding him with a venomous rage that knew no mercy, and his fingers dug into Spock’s sides, leaving marks under his uniform.

“Then there is only one logical solution.” Spock’s voice was soft but firm. Jim lifted his head just enough so that he could see Spock’s eyes. He could not identify what, exactly, he saw there but it made him weak at the knees. “You will have to come with me.”

Jim drew back further so that he could properly gape at his Vulcan. “Excuse me?”

Spock nodded firmly. He had not considered this solution earlier, but now that he understood how much Jim needed him it was obvious. “Sybok has ventured further into Romulan territory than a Starfleet officer can reach without triggering a war, which we are invested in preventing. However, the future of the Federation is contingent on his retrieval. We know this is true because his absence inspires chaos. In addition, we know that he possesses information that is crucial to the success of our ultimate goal of preserving the peace between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire. If our suspicions are correct, and there truly is a conspiracy within Starfleet to launch a war, then it is our duty—not as Starfleet officers or even as citizens of the Federation, but rather as rational, free-thinking individuals who have chosen to dedicate our brief existence to the betterment of all sentient life—to do whatever is within our power to prevent a war that would take trillions of lives, destroy entire civilizations and upset the relatively balanced order of our entire galaxy. Furthermore, we both have reason to believe that the consequences of such a war would extend beyond the limits of our own universe. Therefore, if our intention is to safeguard whatever peace and justice our Federation
supposedly guarantees, it is our shared responsibility to address these concerns.”

Inspired by how much Jim had been able to communicate through physical contact alone, Spock raised his hand and stroked the side of Jim’s face. Jim looked up at him, a tiny unconscious smile gracing his soft lips and Spock lowered his face to meet those lips with his own, trying to communicate the respect and awe he held Jim in while maintaining the tenderness and compassion he possessed for his Captain—a level of acceptance and understanding that was unparalleled in any of his other relationships.

The human word for that feeling was love, but Spock’s experience transcended such a simple collection of letters. The totality of what he felt and thought and knew about James Tiberius Kirk could not be reduced to gasses manipulated by a larynx to produce sound waves. The relationship they shared transcended spoken and written language. It was a relationship that, as they had both just learned a few moments ago, could only be communicated through contact.

The kiss was so sweet, so kind, so gentle it broke Jim’s heart. There were tears in his eyes when they separated and for the first time Jim didn’t have to search to find Spock’s inner self. Everything Spock had to offer was right there on the surface for the taking.

By that point there was no doubt in either of their minds. They had to find Sybok, and to do that while protecting their friends they would both have to resign their commissions. Anything less would be irresponsible.

“Okay. You win.” Jim laughed. “Bones ain’t gonna like it. One of us is going to have to talk to him.”

Spock nodded and then, raising his hand, placed a long, slender finger against the tip of his nose.

“What does that mean?” Jim asked.

“According to Nyota, this symbolizes my refusal to perform a task. She referred to the process as Nose Goes.”

***

Carol lifted her head out of the waste evacuation portal and pulled the handle, flushing the contents of her stomach into the void. Shaking, she forced herself to her feet and stumbled through the few steps it took to reach the sink in the tiny shuttle washroom. She splashed cold water on her face and tried not to think about what had just happened.

She was getting pretty good at not thinking about certain things.

Once she was satisfied that she only looked half as bad as she felt, Carol slipped out of the washroom and headed for the cockpit, only glancing once at the hatch that led to the sleeping quarters. Wicks and T’sing had locked themselves in over 48 hours ago and hadn’t been seen or heard from since. Carol and Janice had both tried knocking, shouting, bribing, and threatening but nothing they did drew any reaction from the Vulcans on the other side of the door. They’d even discussed breaking the door down, but in the end they decided to let the Vulcans have their privacy. After all, it wasn’t as if they were going anywhere.

Janice looked up as Carol entered the cockpit. “How are you feeling?”
“I’m fine.” Carol responded shortly, keeping her eyes trained on the navigation system. At least the read outs were familiar to her, unlike every other thing on this blasted shuttle. They were flying on autopilot, at least according to Wicks. Carol still hadn’t decided if she could trust the stranger, but for the moment she didn’t have much of a choice.

Janice frowned at her. “You’ve been throwing up a lot lately. Have you—”

“It’s just a stomach bug, nothing to worry about. I’ll be fine in a couple days.”

“…You just said you were fine now.”

Carol threw her hands in the air and grimaced, a gesture that was half exasperation and half helpless capitulation, as if to say that the sheer extent of her reluctance to discuss the matter was beyond the capabilities of spoken language, that she had no answers to the questions being asked and she did not want those answers, but she also did not want to talk about why she did not want to talk about it.

Which was a very sophisticated kind of sentiment to try and communicate with body language alone, but they had been friends for so long that Janice heard every syllable with perfect clarity. She turned in her chair and kept staring at the navigation display, willing the decibels that calculated their ETA to reduce faster.

At least, she thought that was what she was looking at. The numbers in the corner of the screen kept going down the closer the green dot (which she assumed indicated the shuttle) got to the blue dot (which she assumed was their destination) and so she was assuming the numbers were a count down. Janice wondered if she was making too many assumptions in general.

Carol sighed. “How much longer?”

“Not long.” Janice assumed. “We’ll get to New Vulcan in 45 minutes.” She eyed her friend out of the corner of her eye. Carol looked pale, but there was a stubborn set to her jaw and a fire in her eyes that Janice knew better than to argue with. Besides, maybe it was just a stomach bug. “Did the girls come out of hiding yet?”

Carol shook her head. The girls. When, exactly, had they started calling their Vulcan companions ‘the girls?’ It had happened naturally, without either of them noticing, but it had happened nonetheless. It was a proprietary kind of term, as if the Vulcans weren’t just the girls, but their girls. That didn’t sit well with Carol. It was one of the many things she was doing a very good job not thinking about.

“Should we try to get them out?”

Carol shrugged. There was no reason to think they would have any more luck than they’d had the last five times they tried.

Janice fidgeted. “I mean…do you know how to land this thing?”

“No.” Carol admitted reluctantly. “I guess we’ll need Wicks for that.”

Phaser fast, both women smashed their forefingers into the tips of their noses. Janice managed to get there a millisecond before Carol. She smirked and Carol groaned.

“Come on, I had to do it the last three times. It’s your turn to be frustrated.”

“Nose goes.” Janice said firmly, still grinning. “You know the rules.”
Muttering under her breath about unreasonable people who liked to pretend they were six years old, Carol got back to her feet and trudged into the back of the shuttle. She banged her fist against the hatch.

“OI! WICKS! T’SING!” She bellowed. “WE’RE GOING TO LAND SOON SO YOU NEED TO —”

The hatch swung open, releasing a cloud of steam, and Carol cut off midsentence.

“…er…” She said, fully aware that her eyes were bugging out and a heavy blush was making its way across her face.

“Salutations, Miss Marcus.” Wicks greeted her warmly. “Thank you for informing us.”

T’sing, peering over her shoulder, nodded. “Do not drink the tea.”

“…Er…What happened to your clothes?”

The two Vulcans glanced down at their naked, glistening bodies. Both of them were entirely nude and dripping with liquid. It wasn’t sweat—Carol knew from her xeno-biology classes that Vulcans didn’t have sweat glands. Somehow, whatever they had been up to, the Vulcans had managed to generate enough heat that the water in the air was transformed into condensation. It dripped down the walls, dampened the cots and pooled in the hollows of T’sing’s skeletal frame. Wicks, it turned out, was surprisingly voluptuous for a Vulcan, and heavily inked. Carol knew she was gawking, but she couldn’t stop her eyes from following the lines of dense text, text that looked a lot like Klingon, that traced the contours of Wicks’ sloping breasts and wrapped around the heavy swell of her belly like a friendly snake.

Neither Wicks nor T’sing seemed particularly concerned by their exposure. Wicks smiled and T’sing giggled softly in that unsettling way she had. Carol didn’t understand what was so funny and she blushed harder, feeling uncharacteristically unsophisticated.

“We were attempting to limit sensory input. The fabric was a distraction.” Wicks explained with a casual wave of her hand as T’sing fetched their robes from under the bed.

“…Okay.” Carol finally managed to rip her eyes away from their bodies. “Why?”

“Therapy.”

“Therapy?” Carol repeated curiously as they pulled the robes over their heads. “For T’sing?” She watched T’sing straighten her robe. “Did it…help?”

Wicks turned to T’sing but she had already become fascinated by an oddly shaped damp patch on a pillow. Either that or she was purposefully ignoring them.

“I think so.” Wicks answered eventually. “It was a start, at least.”

“Oh.” Carol considered this. She still didn’t trust Wicks but T’sing was obviously a very damaged person. If Wicks could help her, even a little bit, it would be wrong to try and stop them. She supposed she could ask more questions, but if she was being honest with herself she doubted she would understand the answers. Other than the little she’d been taught at finishing school about bonding and touch telepathy sensitivity, she really knew nothing about Vulcan telepathic healing. Like many scientists, she wasn’t comfortable with forces that were inherently unquantifiable.

She wondered why she still didn’t trust Wicks. The Vulcan from another universe had been nothing
but helpful since they first met. In fact, she’d been helpful beyond what Carol had any right to expect. Maybe that was the problem. She was too helpful. No one was that helpful unless they were getting something out of it, and Carol had no idea what Wicks was getting out of helping them. It was obvious she had a secret, perhaps many secrets. But Carol had grown up surrounded by generals, spies, diplomats, bodyguards, politicians, liars and scoundrels, all manner of people who kept secrets for a living. It had never bothered her before, so why did it bother her this time? As a scientist, unanswered questions usually excited her. Maybe it was because Wicks was the ultimate unknown variable, driven by motivations she refused to divulge, originating from a place that was fundamentally incomprehensible, headed in a direction that was shrouded in mystery. Maybe that was the problem. There were just too many unknowns.

“You can land this thing, right?” Carol asked Wicks, trying to turn at least one of the multitude of question marks ricocheting around her brain into some kind of resolution.

“Of course.” Wicks nodded. “Assuming you have our exact coordinates.”

“I do.”

Wicks waited, expecting Carol to divulge whatever information she knew, but instead of continuing the conversation Carol allowed it to die away, her eyes locked on something going on behind Wicks. Wicks turned and saw that T’sing had begun slurping the trails of condensation off the walls, her tongue thick and green and throbbing as she slobbered against the steel paneling. Wicks lifted her right hand into the air and snapped her fingers. “T’sing? Can you hear my voice?”

T’Sing’s head flipped back—like, all the way back—like, she didn’t even turn her head or anything, she just bent her neck in half—like, she didn’t have any bones in her neck or something—like, first she was facing the wall and then she bent her neck the wrong way—like, not side to side, but just straight back—like, the back of her head was pressed against her shoulder blades—like, Carol wasn’t an expert on Vulcan anatomy or anything but that wasn’t normal right?—like, all they way back—like, call a priest cause we need an exorcism kind of all the way back—

“Are you well, Miss Marcus?” Wicks asked, her voice laced with genuine concern. “You seem… distressed.”

Carol had one hand wrapped around her throat and another over her mouth, desperately trying to delay her impending dry heaving. “Excuse me for a moment…” She managed to croak before dashing back to the washroom.

Wicks waited patiently while T’sing re-acclimated to being a Vulcan with a name and a life and a fully-fledged identity and opposable thumbs (as opposed to a Horvian Whistle Minx, which was what she had been for a few moments that lasted an eternity). T’sing let her know she was ready to be herself by briefly tapping the tips of her fingers against the tips of Wicks’ fingers, allowing the overall flavor of her consciousness to bleed through the physical contact so that Wicks would know exactly who and what T’sing was at that moment in time, and respond accordingly.

When she was ready, T’sing looked at Wicks and said, “Should we tell her about David?”

Wicks shook her head. “I think that is the sort of thing she should find out for herself. You and I may know how some journeys will end, but more often than not the journey itself is what matters.”
Well, that’s Chapter 12 done. Onto Chapter 13!

Sorry for being gone so long. Life, work, school, you know how it is.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I can’t wait to hear what you thought. As always, I’m inviting anyone with questions to ask away! All comments are welcome, adored, cherished and soothed to sleep on a nightly basis, but questions are especially encouraged.
The True Meaning of Friendship

Disclaimer

Author: Guys! Guys! Get in here! You won’t believe it!

Mr. X: What’s up?

Author: I made a robot to say the disclaimer for me!

Mr. X: That’s…that’s actually not a bad idea. Does it work?

Author: Of course it works. Robot, do your thing!

Robot: The Author does not own Star Trek.

Mr. X: Wow, to be honest I wasn’t expecting it to actually—


Mr. X: Um…

Author: Okay, so there may still be a few issues…

The True Meaning of Friendship

Earth

Robert Darnell ate his lunch alone. He always ate lunch alone. Today that lunch was a Rueben sandwich. Yesterday, it had been egg salad. He hadn’t decided what he would eat tomorrow and he was considering his options carefully as he chewed, relishing the caress of the San Francisco sun on his bald patch more than the flat, mushy texture of the replicator food.

Robert was a likeable guy and he got along with his co-workers, but he preferred to eat in the relative solitude of the loading dock instead of the canteen with the rest of his colleagues. At first his habit had seemed a bit strange to his co-workers and rumors had flown back and forth as people wondered what could possibly draw him to the sunlit cement block by the dumpsters, day after day. The most popular theory by far was that he used the time to comm his secret lover. Robert knew about that rumor because Eric thought it was hilarious and never missed an opportunity to ask after the non-existent mystery woman.

Robert didn’t mind Eric’s teasing. After all, Eric had been the one who put the rumors to rest.
“Oh, Bob’s always been like that, ever since we were seven.” Eric had explained at a company picnic last year when someone asked Robert if he’d prefer to eat his lunch at the duck pond, safely removed from the rest of the party. Eric grinned and slapped Robert across the back. “The teachers used to find him hiding behind the bleachers during lunch.” He had proceeded to regale them with the story of the time Robert had gotten stuck in a jeffries tube during a fourth grade field trip and everyone had laughed, even Robert. It was good to have a friend like Eric, someone who had known him since childhood and had long ago grown accustomed to all his quirks and minor eccentricities. They had an unspoken agreement: Robert didn’t mind Eric’s teasing and Eric didn’t mind when Robert got promoted to the eighth floor while Eric was still stuck in filing.

Robert continued to chew his sandwich without really tasting it and thought about the message he’d received that morning from his sister’s ex-husband. He’d always liked Leonard McCoy and he hadn’t approved of the way Jocelyn had handled the divorce. He didn’t blame her. He’d never been married himself, but he’d been given to understand that sometimes relationships stopped working and it didn’t have to be anyone’s fault. Leonard and Jocelyn had been two peas in a pod; two angry, sarcastic, too-smart-for-their-own-good peas in a dysfunctional pod. The end of that relationship had not surprised anyone. On the other hand, poor Joanna was still terrified to even mention her father in her mother’s presence. That sort of thing wasn’t good for a kid, and Robert knew for a fact that Joanna was still having nightmares about strange black starships and fathers that never came home. As Robert finished his lunch he decided that he would do whatever he could to help Leonard, if only for his niece’s sake.

But what was Operation Retriever? He pondered McCoy’s query as he packed up his lunch and headed back inside. The 14 story office building seemed completely innocuous from the street. Starfleet Intelligence had gotten a lot smarter after the events of the last couple years. They were spread out now and no longer advertised their presence. But step inside the building and it was like stepping into a different world. A dark, silent world full of secrets, watching the sunlit people in the street from the shadows.

When Robert first joined Starfleet Intelligence—or Ess Eye, as they called it—he had been a young man full of grand ideas about deception, high speed chases through space and scantily clad alien females with poisoned lipstick. It had been hard, at first, when he realized that 99% of his job was paper work. These days he didn’t mind so much. Sure, he spent most of his time staring at a computer screen, but at least he was going to live long enough to retire.

He doubted the same could be said about his former brother-in-law. First McCoy had asked Robert for information on the Grayson Clan and now he was asking about some mysterious Starfleet program? Robert was no genius, but even he knew that spelled trouble.

Poor Joanna.

Robert was so involved in his thoughts he didn’t notice the other person standing in the turbolift until after the doors had closed and it was too late to run.

“Why the long face, Lady Killer?” Eric joshed, wrapping his arm around Robert’s neck and putting him in a head lock. “Did your girlfriend dump you?”

Robert sighed. “Let me go, Eric.”

“What’s the password?”

“We’re 45, Eric, please don’t make me—”

Eric flexed his bicep. “You know the rules, Lady Killer.”
“Fine. You are the smartest, most handsome, manliest man that ever there was and you have a bigger penis than anyone. Now let me go you crazy, immature mother-fucker.”

Eric released him, laughing hard. “The only mother I ever fucked was yours!”

“Yeah? Was that before or after she died?”

“Both.”

“…You’re disgusting.”

_Beep._ The turbolift doors opened and Robert stepped out onto the eighth floor. He looked questioningly at his childhood friend. “Where are you headed anyway?”

“All the way to the top, babe.”

The turbolift doors slid shut and Eric disappeared. Robert shook his head and headed back to his cubicle, a tiny smile on his face. Some things never changed. It was kind of comforting that Eric was still the same leering, juvenile delinquent he had always been. The two of them had been together for so many years Robert couldn’t imagine his life without the daily barrage of noogies and graphic descriptions of fabricated sexual exploits. He fully expected the two of them to wind up in the same nursing home when they were grey and senile, Robert quietly slurping his jello on a solitary bench while Eric hit on the nurses and made everybody laugh.

Miyuki Tanaka, the woman who shared his cubicle, glanced at him as he entered their shared space. “You had a comm.” She told him briskly, shoving her horn-rimmed glasses up her nose with her middle finger. “Marge again.”

“Was it about the Jackson memo?”

“Yup.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Robert sighed, plopping down in his chair. “I told her, the new personnel policies come from the admiralty. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Tell her that, not me.”

“I’m saying I already told—never mind.”

Robert knew that if he didn’t comm Marge back she’d find some way to make his life a living hell. On the other hand, having to talk to Marge would also be a living hell, and so he checked his email instead. He read some reports, signed some forms, reminded a co-worker about a meeting they would have later in the week. When he couldn’t avoid it any longer he commed Marge and spent over an hour listening to her shout at him. It didn’t really matter what she was shouting about. Some new policy the admiralty wanted, something to do with the visas of non-Federation Starfleet employees, something that Marge, as the contractor liaison, objected to. Honestly, Marge objected to pretty much everything, all the time, in the strongest possible terms, so Robert didn’t feel guilty about not listening to a single word she said. He made the appropriate noises, gave a meaningless non-answer, said goodbye and hung up.

He had another meeting later in the day, but he had already finished his paperwork. He had about half an hour of spare time, and so he decided to investigate Leonard’s question. He pulled open the database of active Starfleet missions and searched for the phrase Leonard had asked him about—Operation Retriever.
No results.

He did a quick search through all the Starfleet Intelligence internal memos from the last eighteen months. Again, no results.

He did a Starfleet news search.

One result. Unfortunately, it was an announcement from about four months ago that someone’s pet Golden Retriever had puppies and that anyone who was interested in the puppies should contact Major General Rodriguez at majorhunk420 @ randmail.com Somehow, Robert didn’t think that was what Leonard was asking about.

*I wonder if JoJo would like a puppy…*

He spun around in his chair. “Tanaka-san, have you ever heard about something called Operation Retriever?”

Miyuki shrugged without turning away from her computer. “No. What is it?”

“I’m not sure. It might be connected to the Graysons somehow.”

Even though Robert couldn’t see Miyuki’s face, he could tell she was frowning. She hunched her shoulders whenever she frowned. “Did you check the print archives?”

“No yet.”

“Well, you should. A lot of stuff was put in there when what’s-her-name married Ambassador Sarek, though I guess that was before your time.” Miyuki spun around and grimaced. “You know how Vulcans are about their reputations. The Ambassador didn’t want anyone finding out about his wife’s family, so he had Ess Eye bury everything we had on the Graysons in the archives.”

Robert glanced at his chronometer. “Guess I’ll head down there.”

“You’re going to the meeting with the Division Head, right?”

“Yeah, but this shouldn’t take long. I’ll be back in plenty of time.”

“Suit yourself.” She swung back to her computer. “Tell you what though—take as much time as you need if it means we’ll finally be able to nail those bootlegging assholes.”

“Mm-hm.” Robert shut down his computer and headed back to the turbolift. He wished Leonard had included more information in his request, so that he would know what he was supposed to be looking for.

The Starfleet Intelligence print archives were extensive shrouded in secrecy. They were filled with information deemed to sensitive to store virtually. They lurked beneath the streets of San Francisco, a labyrinth of subterranean tunnels filled with books and files, hidden by top-of-the-line shielding technology and ferociously guarded by the archivists. Robert wasn’t ashamed to admit that the archivists scared him. In fact, they terrified him. It wasn’t anything they said or did that scared him, it was merely the way they looked at him whenever he asked them a question. As if, by asking a question, he had blasphemed them in some way.

“I’m looking for information about the Grayson Clan?” He asked the Andorian archivist waiting at the reception desk. Too late he realized he was being grammatically incorrect, implying a question with his tone instead of asking, and as the archivist’s disapproving eyes focused on him a small part
of his soul shriveled and died.

Robert hated going to the archives.

“Section 34, Row 97.” The archivist answered, turning back to the old-fashioned book he was reading. All the archivists read old-fashioned, ink and paper books. They were rather proud of it.

“Good book?” Robert asked in a desperate attempt at polite conversation.

“You wouldn’t understand it.” The Andorian said, rolling his antennae condescendingly. “Section 34. Row 97.”

“Thank you.”

Why did I say that? Robert asked himself as he walked away. Why did I thank him? What’s wrong with me?

Section 34 was a significant distance from the section of the archives that lurked beneath Robert’s office building and it took him a while to get there. When he finally arrived, and found the shelf of binders about the Graysons, he wondered if he was wasting his time. He had been here not so long ago, when Leonard asked him for information on the gang, and he did not remember seeing any mention of an Operation Retriever. And yet this was his only lead, and so he started pulling binders off the shelves and flipping through them, even though he felt kind of silly doing it.

As he was pulling a binder full of 30-year-old transportation logs off the shelves, he saw something. It was an ancient, unmarked manila envelope that had gotten stuck behind the binders. He had not seen the envelope the last time he was down there and so he dropped the binder he had taken and opened the envelope instead.

He read the letter that was inside.

He read it again.

He thought about what he had read.

He thought about what the letter had meant back when it first arrived.

He thought about what it meant now.

He thought about what it might mean in the future.

He threw the letter onto the floor and pulled out his regulation phaser, which he had never used before, with every intention of destroying every last atom of matter that comprised the so-called letter. He wanted to destroy it because it was treasonous and wrong and lies and…and…and…

And he knew better.

He realized what the letter meant. He realized what the letter might mean in the future.

He remembered that he had a family. He remembered that he had people he loved.

He realized that some of the people he loved might die if he said anything.

He suspected that all of the people he loved would die if he said nothing.

Robert Darnell started to cry.
“We have made our decision.”

Uhura’s voice rang clear and true across the abandoned quarry. The crew of the Enterprise and the Klingons stood together in the basin, intermingled and united. Jim was standing on a boulder in the center of the quarry. Spock was at his side and Uhura was in front of them, her shoulders straight, her head held high, a padd clutched in her hands. Part of Jim wanted to laugh at the self-righteous formality of the situation, but then he looked across the crowd and saw Hendorff and Intern Worf standing side by side, shoulder to shoulder, the same look of steely determination in their eyes, and the laughter died.

This moment was important. This moment would define the rest of their lives. The least he could do was treat it with the gravitas it deserved.

Jim tried to look taller and said, “Whatever you have decided, I will abide by it. Tell me your decision.”

…Yup. He would be serious and courteous and noble even if he felt like a complete and total twat, this was that important.

Uhura managed to keep a straight face, but Jim didn’t miss the twinkle in her eye that promised many future jokes at his expense.

“With your permission, Captain, I would like to read a statement from one of your crewmembers who wished to remain anonymous.” Uhura lifted the pad and opened the screen. She waited for Jim to nod before starting to read aloud.

“You do not know me. I am not particularly smart or strong or powerful or important in any way. I have been a member of Starfleet for seven years, but I never really understood what that meant until I was assigned to the Enterprise. When I joined your crew I felt like I was part of something bigger than myself, and being part of this crew has taught me to be proud, proud of myself, proud of my friends, proud of my Federation. Most of all, being part of this crew has taught me to be proud of my Captain.

You do not know me, but you have saved my life every single day since I joined this crew. Thanks to your example, I am surrounded by people who are courageous and determined. Thanks to your leadership, I have learned more about the universe than I could have ever imagined. Thanks to your spirit, I am now part of a community that is defined by compassion and loyalty.

Today you asked us to decide whether or not to continue our mission knowing that we might end up in opposition with Starfleet Command. You also reminded us that we are Starfleet.
But Captain Kirk, to me and to the rest of your crew, it is you who represents everything we stand for. Your courage, your curiosity, and your vision have defined the meaning of Starfleet for all of us.

And because you stand for us, we will stand with you.”

Uhura paused after she finished reading the anonymous statement, allowing the weight of the words to settle in the minds of all who had heard them. After a few moments she said, “You have our decision, Captain Kirk.”

Jim lowered his head for a moment, feeling humbled, honored and slightly queasy at how much power he had over his crew. But now was not the time for doubt and so he pushed those emotions to the side temporarily and lifted his head, grinning at the crowd. “In that case, we have a lot of work to do.”

The crowd twittered charitably and the tension began to melt away. They still didn’t have a plan, but at least they had a general idea that might be turned into a plan, and they’d gotten by on less before.

The next question Jim had to ask himself was what to do with his crew now that they’d pledged their undying loyalty. He found a boulder to sit on where he could watch his crew make preparations to return to the ship and think about his next move.

He couldn’t take his whole ship over the Romulan border. That would be suicide. The Enterprise would be immediately spotted by the Romulans, who would execute all of them as soon as they were caught, and the ship would be missed by Starfleet HQ—which would risk alerting their enemies in the Federation that they had found Sybok and possibly much, much more.

Furthermore, if he and Spock went with the Graysons, what would happen to the Klingons? Right now, the only people in the universe who knew that Intern Worf and his crew had joined forces with Starfleet were all milling around the quarry, but Jim knew it wouldn’t stay that way for long. Worf and his crew had risked everything, their lives and their honor—which was literally the only two things any of them seemed to value. They had done this incredibly dangerous thing because they knew the difference between right and wrong and that was more important than their lives or their honor. Jim had immense respect for them and the courage it had taken them to come onto his ship, and he couldn’t disregard that sacrifice by tossing it away and abandoning them when they might need him. What would happen when Ambassador Kothar finally stopped drinking long enough to remember the untested teenagers he had sent into battle? More worryingly, what would happen if Agent Simmons discovered their plans?

And Agent Simmons was a whole separate kettle of fish. An old, rusty kettle full of old, rotting fish. Jim didn’t have enough evidence to arrest the spy, but he had enough evidence to know he was up to something. Someone needed to find out what, sooner rather than later.

But if he and Spock couldn’t do that, then who?

Someone touched his shoulder lightly and he looked up.

“Jim, are you okay?” Uhura asked softly as she sat down next to him.

“I think so…it’s a little crowded up here, you know?” Jim tapped his forehead.

Uhura nodded understandingly. “That letter was pretty intense.”

“That’s not it. I mean, yes, it was, but that’s not what’s bothering me…” Jim glanced around to make
“Sure no one else was listening and then leaned closer. “Spock and I might have found Sybok.”

Uhura’s eyes widened. “What? Where?”

“The Romulan Empire.”

Uhura swore in three different languages, none of them human.

Jim nodded grimly. “My thoughts exactly. Now, there’s a way for Spock and I to get there, but we can’t take the whole crew and in the meantime…”

“And in the meantime Stonn and Simmons are still problems.” Uhura finished his sentence for him. She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “This way you and Spock have of getting there…is it safe?”

“…uh…it’s probably better if I don’t tell you the details but—”

Uhura rose her hand to cut him off. “So don’t tell me anything other than what I need to know. Is it safe?”

“…It may not be safe, but I think it might be safest.”

Uhura didn’t find that comforting, but she appreciated his honesty. “Okay…so here’s what we do. You and Spock, you two do your thing. Find Sybok, do what you need to do, then you high tail it back to the Federation. In the meantime, I’ll take the crew and the ship and we’ll deal with Simmons. We’ll leave Stonn to Carol and Janice. We’ll be covering all our bases.”

“If Simmons finds out that Spock and I aren’t with you guys, he might tell his bosses that we’re on to them.”

Uhura snorted derisively. “By the time I’m done with that motherfucker he won’t be able to remember his own name, let alone file a report. You find Sybok, you investigate the Romulan connections, you come back home alive, and in the meantime we’ll shut down this bullshit racket from the inside. Deal?” She stuck out her hand.

Jim didn’t have to think twice. “Deal.” He agreed, and they shook on it.

***

The Enterprise

They returned to the Enterprise that evening and as Jim went to find McCoy and bring him up to speed (a conversation Jim was not looking forward to having and Spock did not blame him) Spock returned to his quarters, alone.

Completely alone.

This was a small comfort. There was an illogical but not unnatural spasm of fear that he might be attacked once again when he walked through the door but the room was still and silent. There was
no sign of Stonn. He looked around but could see no trace of the altercation that had occurred the last time he entered his room. Even the papers that he distinctly remembered falling to the floor in the struggle were once more neatly arranged on his desk, though when he examined them closer he noticed that they were no longer arranged in alphabetical order.

Soft warmth filled the core of Spock’s being as he realized that Jim must have tried to clean up for him. This meant a lot to Spock. It showed him that even though Jim was not by nature an orderly person, he cared enough about Spock to understand Spock’s preferences. Perhaps he had even been seeking to protect Spock from reliving his trauma. This would be a needless concern. Spock had more than enough control to guard himself against such psychological difficulties, but Spock knew Jim did not feel the need to protect many people in that way. As far as he knew, the only person Jim tried to protect from themselves was Spock.

Which made him…special?

Spock struggled to comprehend the nature of his relationship with Jim in its current state. Were things different now? What were they to each other? Did it matter? Did they even need words?

These questions filled his mind and occupied 95% of his attention as he began to pack his bags in preparation for their trip into Romulan space.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Enter.”

Uhura walked in, took one look at him and sighed. “What are you doing?”

Spock blinked at her. “I am packing a bag.”

“I can see that. I meant why are you packing your sheets? I’m pretty sure they have sheets on Romulus.”

Spock looked down and realized he had been absentmindedly stripping his bed and packing the linens into his luggage. “I…my mind was elsewhere…” His brow furrowed. “How did you know where I am going?”

“I talked to Jim. He didn’t tell me much, just what I need to know.” She answered, coming to stand beside him. She reached out and gently pulled his bag away from him, pulling out his linens and placing them back on the bed. She seemed content to do the work in companionable silence and so Spock said nothing. He took hold of two corners of his sheet and together they fitted it back on the mattress. Uhura ran her hand across the surface, pressing away non-existent wrinkles. “…when are you leaving?”

“In the morning.”

“That’s soon.”

“Yes.”

“…look, about what happened with Stonn, I…” She trailed off and looked away, trying to force back her tears. She knew Spock wouldn’t react well to anything that even faintly resembled pity. She couldn’t apologize for not doing more to protect him either, because he’d just say that apologies are illogical and he wouldn’t actually hear the meaning behind those words.

But she needed to say something. Ever since she’d returned to the Enterprise, she’d been kicking
herself for not going straight to Jim the second Stonn came on board and telling him everything she knew. Unfortunately, she knew that if she said that, Spock would only tell her it would not have made a difference. And maybe it wouldn’t have, but guilt wasn’t logical. How could she explain that, while also explaining that her guilt was an expression of frustration and helplessness and friendship? How could she make Spock understand?

All of a sudden Spock was at her side, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her into a tight embrace. It was the first time he had ever initiated any kind of intimate physical contact between them and the shock of it broke Uhura’s fragile control. The tears and sobs came pouring out and she buried her face into Spock’s chest, howling like a baby. She was consumed by raw emotion, grief and rage and frustration and love, mostly love, almost entirely love, love that was powerful and ferocious and complicated. She still wanted to say she was sorry, still wanted to ask if he was okay, still wanted to beg forgiveness and still wanted to know what she could do to make it better, but none of those words would come to her lips and so instead she held him as tightly as she could and whispered, “I love you.”

“I understand.” Spock whispered back.

Uhura’s sobs faded away and she hiccupped. “You do?”

“I do.” Spock nodded, gently backing away from the embrace with only the slightest trace of relief. “My feelings towards you are of a kind. You are an important and irreplaceable associate and…” Spock struggled to explain what he meant, but Uhura was waiting patiently to hear the end of his sentence, a sentence she had been waiting to hear for many years, so he made the effort. “…and I am gratified by your accomplishments.”

To his horror his attempt to assure her of his regard brought even more tears to her eyes. “You’re proud of me?”

“Pride is an illogical—”

“So if that’s how you feel about me, how do you feel about Jim?” The tears were gone, replaced by an impish gleam and a wry smile.

Spock immediately sensed a trap. “Differently.”

“Differently how?” She pressed him, wiping her face dry with the back of her hand.

“I fail to see the relevance—”

“Humor me.”

“…Very well.” Spock tried to think of the words he wanted to use to describe his feelings towards Jim, but once again he came up empty. “I do not know how to say it.”

Uhura nodded. “Can you show me?” She asked.

Spock stared at her for a long time. “This is important to you.” He observed.

“It is.” She admitted. “If you don’t want to or if you’re not well enough, I understand, but I’d like to try. You’re going really far away and I won’t be able to help you if you need help, so I need to know if you’re going to be okay. I think I know how you feel, but I need to be certain or I’ll just be worrying about you the whole time.” She chose not to tell him that before she left, Carol Marcus had been terrified that Jim’s feelings and Spock’s didn’t match, and Uhura needed to be certain that they weren’t going to fall apart before she sent them off into the great unknown.
This did not make a lot of sense to Spock, but many things Uhura felt strongly about made no sense to Spock, and he did trust her...

He extended his index finger and pressed it against her temple, allowing his shields to drop and focusing on the thought of Jim, allowing his feelings—whatever they were—to well up inside of himself and echo through their small telepathic connection. Uhura’s expression slowly changed from one of slight apprehension to an almost giddy delight.

“Okay.” She breathed. “You’re going to be okay.”

***

Jim was waiting nervously in McCoy’s office, trying not to feel like a naughty schoolboy waiting for the principal and failing spectacularly.

This isn’t going to be easy. He thought to himself as the office door finally opened and McCoy came hustling in, already wearing his trademark scowl.

“Unbelievable.” He was muttering as he slammed the door shut. “I’m gone for five minutes and everything falls apart.” McCoy noticed Jim for the first time. “What do you want?”

“Hey, you’re not mad at me.” Not yet anyway. “We need to talk.”

McCoy sighed. “I guess we do.” He sat down behind his desk and pulled a large bottle of whiskey out from the bottom drawer. “Chapel hid all my glasses while I was gone.” He explained as he passed Jim the bottle.

“Glasses? What are we, civilized?” Jim joked as he pulled off the top and took a swig. The amber liquid burned in his throat.

“Certainly not.” McCoy agreed, taking the bottle back. “So where did you and Spock disappear to earlier?”

“Didn’t Spock tell you?”

“Hardly.” Bones took another gulp of whiskey. “He sent me some coordinates and said if you guys weren’t back in two hours, come looking for you. You were back in one and a half, by the way.”

“We saw Ruth Grayson.”

The whiskey that had just gone into Bones’ mouth came spitting out again. “What? Here?”

“No, on the planet.” Jim replied calmly as he wiped his face clean with his sleeve.

“You know what I mean.” Bones growled. “What the hell did she want?”

“She thinks she found Sybok and Spock and I are going with her to find out.”

“Are you joking?” McCoy asked incredulously as the storm clouds began to gather in his eyes. “Are you fucking joking?”

“You don’t even know where we’re going yet.” Jim couldn’t resist provoking his friend.
McCoy’s eyes narrowed into a sharp glare. “Where are you going?”

“The Romulan Star Empire.”

“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR FUCKING MIND?!”

“Shut up Bones!” Jim hissed. “Do you want the whole ship to hear you? Keep it down!”

McCoy sank back into his chair. “Sorry. Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“I don’t think so.”

“If the Romulans catch you in their territory, they will kill you.”

“I know.”

“They will kill Spock too. I know you care about his life even if you don’t give a flying fuck about yours.”

“We’re not planning on being caught, Bones. But if Sybok is there, we have to go.”

“I…I know that. God dammit, I know that…” McCoy rubbed his hand over his face, looking old and weary. “You’re going with the Graysons?”

“Yeah. And look, Bones, I have misgivings about them too but if anyone is going to know how to get around the Romulan authorities, it’s going to be the smugglers. And they seem to take family really seriously. I don’t think they’ll betray Spock.”

“You remember how what’s-her-name reacted when we showed up at that bar in Canada, right? It didn’t seem like they really consider Spock to be part of the family.”

“That was Sara. I’m talking about Ruth. She cares about him, in her own way.”

“…Fine. But I’m coming with you.”

Jim had been expecting this, and he was ready. “Absolutely not. You’re needed here, on the Enterprise.”

“You and Spock are going to need me more.”

Jim frowned. “Bones, I am being completely serious. I need you here, doing your job, not following me around like a mother hen.”

“I’ll try to resist the urge, Captain.” McCoy drawled sarcastically. “But it’s not you I’m worried about.” He thought about it for a second. “Scratch that, I am worried about you, but I’m more worried about Spock.”

Jim straightened in his chair. “Why? He seems okay to me.”

“I don’t know how to explain it. I just…something was off, when I melded with him.”

“How could you tell?”

“It was as if…someone else was there with us, or maybe…” McCoy trailed off, staring into space. “…maybe we were there with them…”
Jim frowned. “I forgot to tell you about something that happened when you guys were melding.”

McCoy blinked and returned to the present. “What happened?”

“So, and don’t freak out, but I was worried and I touched Spock, just to make sure he was breathing.” Jim paused and McCoy nodded, inviting him to continue. Jim was relieved that McCoy didn’t have the same reaction to the fact that Jim had touched them during the meld that Spock had. “And when I touched him I could hear someone knocking on the door, but there wasn’t anyone there. So I touched you and again, I could hear someone knocking, but when I moved away the sound vanished.”

“Was that it?” McCoy asked. “Just knocking?”

“Yeah. So I locked the door and then you woke up.” Jim looked at McCoy carefully. “Spock said there was something in the meld that might have caused it.”

“…we were hiding. Something was looking for us…I don’t remember much.” McCoy sighed. “But that is exactly why I need to come with you. There is weird stuff going on here, Jim, and like it or not I’m involved. So I am coming with you and that is the end of that. Understand?”

Jim sighed. “I’m not going to talk you out of coming, am I?”

“Not unless I can talk you out of going in the first place.”

“Alright. But don’t complain to me when we get back and Chapel’s reorganized your database.”

***

_New Vulcan_

Ambassador Sarek waited in his garden at midnight, scanning the heavens above. He was expecting company.

When Carol Marcus first contacted him, Sarek had been suspicious. He had never met her before, and at first he did not entirely believe that she was part of Captain Kirk’s crew, but a quick records scan had resolved that question. He was not entirely certain why she was coming to speak with him, but he suspected it had something to do with Sybok.

Sybok had left a black mark in his wake when he vanished many years ago. He had been nothing but trouble when he was around, and even in his absence he created chaos in Sarek’s otherwise orderly world. How ironic, that his full Vulcan child was the embarrassment, while his half-human child met and exceeded every expectation Sarek had of him.

Admittedly, Sarek had always not thought so highly of Spock, but his opinion of his youngest child had changed radically over the past few years. Sarek had watched as Spock’s generational peers struggled to come to terms with their new reality and more often than not failed, completely cutting themselves off from non-Vulcans and even isolating themselves from each other. Meanwhile, Spock was thriving. Sarek theorized that Spock’s success was in large part due to Captain Kirk’s influence.
Sarek had not heard from Spock since he and his colleagues visited. This was not unusual. They often went without speaking for long periods of time, and when they did speak their interactions tended to be fraught. This was as much Sarek’s fault as it was Spock’s. He did not know how to speak to his youngest son, and his son did not seem to understand him at all. This was how things had always been between them.

Sybok had been a very different sort of child. Sarek would always remember the day he realized Sybok was unlike any other Vulcan.

“Father, may I ask you a question?”

Sarek looked up from his computer. He’d been entirely focused on a message from the Andorian consulate about newly enacted trade policies and had not noticed his young son standing in the open doorway of his study.

“I am working.” Sarek said. “But you may ask your question if you believe it to be important enough to warrant an interruption.”

“I think it is important.” Sybok shrugged, his narrow shoulders barely lifting the fabric of his robes. He was only 11 years old, and he was small for his age. The doctors had told Sarek that Sybok’s growth had been temporarily stunted by the violent and sudden destruction of the telepathic bond the boy had shared with his mother when she perished in a shuttle crash a few years earlier. The same doctors had assured Sarek that his son’s development would continue in the standard fashion once his body had finished healing the telepathic damage, but it had been three years and Sybok had yet to grow even a centimeter. “Importance is often a matter of opinion.”

“That is true.” Sarek nodded in agreement. “What is your question?”

“Was Surak a savage?”

Sarek leaned back in his seat and eyed his young son, searching for any visible sign of hidden meaning. Sybok just stared back at him with innocent curiosity. “The word savage has connotations that are not usually associated with Surak. Can you provide context for your choice in words?”

“Savensu T’fwa said that Vulcans were savages before Surak unified the clans.” Sybok explained. “But Surak was a Vulcan before he became a leader, so does that mean he was also a savage?”

“Certainly not. It was Surak’s rejection of savagery, if that is what you choose to call it, that elevated him to his eventual position as the founder of our culture.”

“That was what Savensu T’fwa said too.”

“Is there a reason you did not accept your teacher’s answer to your question?”

“That does not answer my question.”

“Your question was whether or not he was a savage. I have said that he was not.”

“But does someone have to engage in savagery to be a savage?”

“Is there any other measure to judge by?”

“I do not know. But if all pre-Surakkian Vulcans were savages, except for Surak, and he had
different ideas and he talked about those ideas, do you think the other Vulcans thought he was the savage one?"

“It seems probable. New ideas, and the individuals that promote them, are frequently met with suspicion and rejection.” Sarek wondered what was really bothering his son, but then his computer beeped and he was briefly distracted by the arrival of another message from the Andorian consulate contradicting the contents of the first message. When he looked up again Sybok had vanished.

Hindsight was a damming thing in the light of the New Vulcan moon. Sarek knew now that conversation had been an early indication of Sybok’s radical tendencies. Had he paid it more mind, perhaps asked why his son was questioning accepted Vulcan social norms at such a young age, maybe he could have done more to mitigate Sybok’s descent into madness. If he had been a better father, perhaps he would not be in the predicament he was currently in…

Sarek did not think of himself as someone who dwelled on the past, but lately he seemed to do little else. He supposed it was his own way of processing the trauma of losing his planet and community. He supposed it could be worse. At least he still understood the difference between right and wrong, unlike some people he knew…

He hoped Carol Marcus would provide him with an opportunity to make amends for his past neglect of his parental duties.

Suddenly he heard a low hum and when he lifted his eyes once more to the heavens above he saw a patch of darkness that seemed to be moving towards him. Sarek watched calmly as the patch of darkness got closer and larger, before finally landing almost silently on the far side of the garden. As Sarek made his way towards the shuttle a glowing blue outline appeared in the side and four women stepped out, one of them holding a specimen of*Helix gallus domesticus* under her arm.

Carol Marcus stepped forward to greet him. She looked exhausted and annoyed, but she managed the traditional Vulcan salute with practiced ease. “Well met, Ambassador Sarek of New Vulcan.”

“Well met, Dr. Marcus.” He returned the gesture. “Yeoman Rand, you are also welcome.” He looked pointedly at the remaining visitors, not recognizing them. “And—” He broke off suddenly when the skinnier of the two Vulcan women met his eyes and he suddenly realized why she seemed vaguely familiar. “…T’sing…”

But the woman who would have been a member of his clan had already lost interest in him. She was focusing all her attention on the taller Vulcan standing next to her, obvious concern in her eyes. Sarek averted his gaze, her blatant inability to control herself making him uncomfortable. Why was she with them? As a hostage, a prisoner, or an ally? He turned to the remaining stranger.

“Well met, Ambassador Sarek.” Her voice was even and calm. “We are gratified by your welcome. My name is Wicks. I work for your son.”

Sarek suspected she had added the last part as an attempt to provide context to her presence. “Wicks is an old family name of the Mitzrasha.” He pointed out, suspicious. “I was not aware that any members of the Mitzrasha clan survived the Destruction of Vulcan.” From the corner of his eye he could see the humans trading nervous expressions.

Her eyes widened slightly. “None of them survived? Even A’mia?”

Sarek softened slightly. If this stranger knew the name of the 200-year-old matriarch of the Mitzrasha
clan she probably wasn’t lying about her origins, though he still suspected she might be a spy for the extremists, especially since T’sing seemed to trust her exclusively. After all, if she was who she claimed to be why did she not already know of the eradication of her own clan? “The Lady A’mia perished while facilitating the evacuation.”

“I see. I was unaware of that.” Wicks fell silent for a moment, her eyes downcast. “That might make the plan more complicated.”

Sarek was about to ask what she meant but Carol Marcus beat him to it. “What do you mean?”

Wicks shrugged. “The Lady A’mia spent the first half of her career as a public defender and labor activist.” The first half? Sarek thought to himself, already forming a hypothesis. “I was hoping she would help you advocate to the working class on New Vulcan. T’sing tells me that is the community where Stonn is finding the most success in his recruitment efforts. My theory was that she would have enough of an understanding of current social unrest to craft an effective counter-narrative against Stonn.” She sighed. “Oh well. I suppose you will have to continue with your original plan…”

“Which is?” Sarek asked.

This time, all four women shared nervous glances. “You probably won’t like it…” Yeoman Rand muttered under her breath.

Sarek raised an eyebrow.

“We are going to tell the truth.” Carol answered defiantly. “We are going to tell everyone.”

“I see.” Sarek nodded solemnly. “You are correct. I do not care for that plan.”

“Why not?” Carol asked, cocking her head.

“Because it is a poorly constructed plan that would involve any number of uncontrollable variables.” Sarek pointed out. “Come inside. We should not discuss these matters in the open.”

Wicks nodded. “Please contact me if you need any further assistance.” She said to the humans.

Sarek, who had turned back towards his home, faced her once more. “Are you leaving?”

“I am.”

“That would not be acceptable.” Sarek frowned slightly. “Come inside. You may leave once our business is concluded.”

“I have my own business to attend to.” Wicks argued. “I do not wish to become more involved in this situation than I already am.”

“It’s a little late for that.” Carol snapped at her. “You’re involved enough already.”


“Bullshit.” Carol crossed her arms. “You’re definitely involved in this, you just haven’t told us how yet. Isn’t that right, T’sing?”

T’sing pursed her lips thoughtfully. “You are both correct.” She said. “And you are both wrong.”

“A-ha!” Carol said triumphantly, pointing at Wicks. “See! She said I’m right.”
“She also said—”

“I know what she said!” Carol groaned. A headache was starting to pound on the inside of her skull. “Look, can you please stop arguing with me just this once? You’ve been playing dumb for days and I’m sick of it. You know very well that we can’t just let you run off. We don’t know who you work for and—”

“I was under the impression she worked for my son.” Sarek interrupted.

“And that’s exactly what we’re talking about.” Rand decided to jump into the fray. “See, she’s being saying ambiguous shit like that for days.” She put her chicken on the grass and he began to hop around, happily pecking at his home turf. “You can’t even say hello without her hinting at some kind of greater purpose.”

“I am not that bad.” Wicks defended herself.

“That is literally what just happened.” Carol argued. “The Ambassador said hello and you were all like,” her voice dropped an octave. “Hello. I work for your son.” Her voice jumped back to its normal register. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Sarek cleared his throat, but none of the women were paying him any mind.

“My intention was to communicate a personal relationship as a basis for establishing trust.” Wicks explained calmly.

“I understood your intent.” Sarek tried to assure her, eager to move towards the guarded sanctuary of his domicile. “However, this discussion would be more secure if it occurred indoors.” He was ignored again.

Carol stepped closer until she and Wicks were standing toe to toe. “And why, exactly, do you want us to trust you so bad?”

It was T’sing, and not Wicks, who answered. “Because she is frightened that Spock will no longer accept her constant presence in his life now that she no longer has access to her informants, and so she is trying to establish personal connections that might result in actionable information in order to compensate for the loss of her intelligence network.”

Wicks’ closed her eyes briefly. Carol’s eyes darted back and forth between the two Vulcans. “You’re a spy?”

“No.” Wicks said firmly. “I was an activist. That was many years ago.” She frowned at T’sing. “The past is no longer relevant.”

“I will be the judge of that.” Sarek said firmly. He had lost patience with their argument. “Once we are inside.”

Still eyeing each other suspiciously, the four women reluctantly followed him.

***

Earth
Robert's hands shook as he unlocked his studio apartment and slipped inside. The room was dark—the environmental controls had been on the fritz for days and he spent so much time at work he hadn't bothered to call an engineer to fix them yet. The only light in the room was the intermittent flashing given off by a blue neon sign across the street. The candy-colored light slipped through his heavy curtains and blinked across his face as he collapsed on his bed. His body was bone-tired but his mind was buzzing.

Robert did not even remember leaving Ess Eye. He'd been trapped in a fog of panic and despair ever since he read that terrible letter. He must have gone to the meeting with the Division Head, or Miyuki would have commed him to complain about it, but he could not for the life of him remember who had been there or what had been said. Had he shown anyone the letter? He didn't think so...

Speaking of which...

Robert reached into his pocket and touched the soft corner of the envelope. He didn't remember stuffing the letter in his pocket, either, but it was too late to put it back. He'd taken the letter out of the archives. That made him...

It made him...

What did it make him? A traitor? A whistle blower? A radical?

The most radical thing Robert Darnell had ever done in his entire life was take a trip to Risa in his early twenties, and he'd spent most of the time hiding in his room. He just wasn't that kind of person.

He was quiet and inoffensive. He didn't make a fuss and he didn't make waves. He kept his head down and kept his mouth shut and did as he was told. He had never wanted more out of life than a quiet spot in the sun to eat his lunch and a few days off every couple months to visit his niece--Joanna.

Robert sat straight up in his bed, his eyes wide and his face pale. How could he have forgotten about Joanna? What would happen to her if McCoy continued his investigation? It was all well and good for him, out on the edges of Federation space, far beyond the reach of Starfleet authority, but what about his little girl? Who would protect her from her father's enemies? Enemies that were most likely closing in around her at this very moment. McCoy had asked Robert about Operation Retriever through semi-official channels, which meant Section 31 probably knew about it. If McCoy had managed to uncover the name of their secret mission it wouldn't be long before he figured out the rest of it.

Robert pulled the envelope out of his pocket and stared at it. He suddenly knew what he had to do.

He didn't have a lot of time.

He dashed to his closet and flung open the door, revealing a personal transporter unit. It was unregistered and untraceable, and very nearly illegal, but being in Ess Eye had certain perks. He punched in the familiar coordinates and hopped onto the platform, disintegrating and re-materializing in his sister's living room in a matter of seconds.

Unlike his own dark apartment, Jocelyn's house was bright and warm. He could hear the familiar sounds of a meal being eaten in the adjacent room.

“Jocelyn!” He shouted.
The sounds of dinner stopped. “Bob?” Jocelyn's head poked around the corner, her eyebrows raised. “What are you doing here?”

“Where's Joanna?” He asked brusquely. His young niece heard her name and appeared at her mother's elbow, all bushy, dark hair and wide, blue eyes. Robert tried to give her a comforting smile. “Hi, JoJo, could you do me a huge favor? Could you go up to your room and pick out two of your all-time favorite outfits? Thanks.”

Jocelyn frowned but waited until Joanna had run up the stairs before confronting her brother. “You're starting to scare me, Bob. What's going on?”

“You need to leave. Tonight.”

Jocelyn started to laugh but stopped when she saw the look in his eyes. “Why? What's happened?”

“I...” Robert glanced around. Jocelyn was a modern woman and her home was fully equipped with every modern convenience available. Unfortunately, as Robert knew all too well, many of those modern conveniences were also potential surveillance devices. He pulled the letter out of his pocket and handed it to her.

“What's this?” She asked as she took it.

“Read it, but don't say anything out loud.” He whispered.

Jocelyn read the letter.

Marcus-

I did what you asked and got the name of the Romulan from the other universe. Do you still want to meet?

According to my sources, he's already begun gathering influence and weapons. Some think he's working with the Tal-Shiar, but no one is certain. Officially the Romulan government has no knowledge of his activities but then again neither do you. Officially, anyway.

One thing we know for sure is he doesn't like Vulcans very much, so I guess the three of us have that in common. Potential ally?

Send your reply in the usual way.

Conveniently yours,

The Lion

When she had finished she read the letter again. After a long, uncomfortable silence she looked up at him and asked, “Why do you have this?”

“Leonard asked me to look into something and when I did that's what I found.”

Jocelyn bit her bottom lip. “…Does it mean what I think it means?”
“Yes.”

“When was this letter written?”

“I’m not sure, but judging from the aging of the paper a long time ago.” Robert thought it was just like Jocelyn to ask that question. She was a lawyer and she knew about the importance of chronology in any type of dispute—the fact that she had immediately switched from concerned sister mode to prosecution mode told him he’d made the right decision in showing her the letter.

“So…they knew? That whole time, and they knew?”

“Yes.”

Jocelyn looked back at the letter. “And they still let all those Vulcans die?”

“...Yes.”

“And Leonard is trying to expose them?”

“I think so.” Robert shifted nervously. He knew his sister didn't exactly have warm and fuzzy feelings for her ex-husband. He wasn't sure how she was about to react and so he stared at his feet instead of looking at her.

“Good. I hope he fucking destroys them.”

Robert's head snapped back up and he stared at his sister. She was grinning, a special kind of savagery in her eyes. She waved the letter in the air. “Fuck these assholes.” She spat. “What do I need to do?”

Robert blinked, but he shouldn't have been so surprised. She had always been a woman who spoke her mind, who stood up for what she believed in, who never backed down from a fight. It was a big part of the reason her marriage hadn't worked out. “They can get to Leonard through Joanna and if he gets too close they’re going to try and take her. You’ll have to go somewhere safe, somewhere no one can find you. Don't use a transporter—they're too easy to trace.”

Jocelyn nodded and turned around so that she could shout up the stairs, “Joanna, pull our suitcases out of my closet!” She waited until she heard a muffled “K, Mom” in response before turning back to her brother. “I still have some old contacts from when I was a public defender—”

“Don't tell me. It's safer if I don't know.” Robert interrupted her.

“What are you going to do?”

“I'm going to try and find out how much they know, maybe it's not too late.” He said hopefully. “If I can find some more evidence maybe I can—”

“Wait, don't tell me.” She stopped him, reaching out and wrapping her arms around his shoulders, burying her face in the crook of his neck. “It's safer if I don't know.”

He returned the embrace and for a few seconds the two siblings stood together, entwined while their simple lives dissolved into chaos around them. Then Jocelyn pulled back.

“But won't you need the letter? For proof?”

He shook his head. “As long as you have that letter you have leverage. Right now it might be the only leverage we have. Keep it safe, keep it hidden.” She nodded and folded the letter in half before
sticking down her shirt, safely hiding it in her bra.

Robert left before Joanna came back down the stairs. It was better that way, better if she had no idea how frightened the grown ups in her life were that night. He returned to his San Francisco apartment and began making preparations.

If he could find evidence that someone in Section 31 had been in contact with someone in the Romulan government he could show that information to Admiral Nogura and then the Admiral would have to shut down the secret military intelligence project. Section 31 had been around for as long as anyone could remember, though there was virtually no trace of it in any of Starfleet’s records. Its members operated in the shadows, with complete impunity. Even Ess Eye agents like Robert had no idea what Section 31 did, but there were rumors.

Every fresh-faced Starfleet cadet heard the stories of mysterious figures in dark cloaks who came in the night and snatched you from your bed if you cheated on a test or missed too many classes. But those were just stories. No one actually believed them. As Robert rose through the ranks of Ess Eye he became gradually aware of the presence of a clandestine group within the ranks of Starfleet Intelligence, but so what? They were spies. Of course there were clandestine groups shrouded in mystery.

Only now it appeared that Section 31 had been aware of Nero’s presence in their universe for years and had done nothing to stop him.

Maybe he shouldn’t go to Nogura first, maybe it would be better if he approached the media? What if Nogura was part of the conspiracy and—

Knock knock

Robert jumped, his heart hammering in his throat as panic raced through his veins. He held his breath and stared at the door, hoping that if he didn’t answer whoever was knocking would give up and go away.

“I know you’re home Bob! Open up!” Eric’s voice came through the heavy metal. “I’ve got beer!”

The breath he’d been holding evacuated Robert’s body in a huff of relief. It was only Eric, nothing to worry about. He unlocked the door and let his friend in, glancing over Eric’s shoulder at the hallway beyond in case someone was following him. The hallway was empty, but Robert still locked the door again when he closed it.

“Eric, this isn’t the best—”

“Damn, why is it so dark in here? Haven’t you called the engineer yet?”

“Not yet, no.”

“You okay?” Eric asked as he placed the six pack of beers on the kitchen counter and started rooting around in the drawers for a bottle opener. “You seem kind of jumpy.”

“I, uh, I was talking to my sister.” Robert didn’t like lying to his best friend, but Eric was just a file clerk. It wouldn’t be fair to involve him in this.

“Nuff said.” Eric found the bottle opener and popped the caps off two beers, handing one of them to Robert. “No offense man, I know she’s your sister, but Jocelyn is basically Queen Bitch of the Ice Planet.”
“She can be a bit strident.” Robert admitted freely. “But her heart’s in the right place.”

“If you say so.” Eric took a long swig of his beer and belched happily. “What are you waiting for? A written invitation?”

Robert sipped his beer, if only to be polite. “Normally I don’t mind you just dropping by, Eric, but I was about to go to bed.” It was his second lie of the night and it tasted sour in his mouth. “Did you want something in particular?”

“Just wanted to check in on my best buddy.” Eric shrugged. “You seemed quiet earlier and Miyuki told me you didn’t say a word during the meeting with the Division Head.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Robert asked. His stomach was starting to twist into anxious knots.

“We’re your friends. We’re worried about you.” Eric took another sip of his beer. “This isn’t like you, Bob.”

The anxious knots in Robert’s stomach turned into anxious snakes, writhing in his gut. “What isn’t like me?”


Robert tried to laugh but he felt like his throat was closing up. “What…?”

“Did you really think Section 31 wasn’t watching you?” Eric shook his head. “We’ve been monitoring your communications with McCoy for the last three years. Why do you think you got promoted and I didn’t? It was so I could keep an eye on you. This really shouldn’t be such a surprise. I’ve been reporting to Section 31 since we entered the Academy, not that you ever noticed. You were always too focused on your studies to notice anything going on around you. Maybe if you hadn’t…of course, it’s way too late for that now. Shame, really.”

Robert’s vision was starting to blur. He tried to focus on the label wrapped around the glass bottle in his hand, but the shapes and colors were all bleeding together. “What…?”

“Seriously, drink up. It’ll be over faster if you do.”

Robert tried to use the bottle of poisoned beer like a weapon, hoisting it above his head and lobbing it at Eric, but instead of flying through the air and smashing into his friend’s calm face the bottle slipped from his weakening grip and fell impotently to the floor. Robert tried to run, he tried to turn and dash to the door—turn the handle—run across the hall to the neighbors—call the police—call somebody…

But instead of doing that the strength left his legs and he collapsed on the floor, shaking and gasping as liquid began to fill his lungs and his vision clouded. The darkness that filled his tiny apartment grew deeper until even the blinking blue light from across the street was lost to him. As his consciousness began to slip away he turned his head and faced the direction of the friend who had become his murderer.

“Why?”

Eric took another sip of his beer and watched as the last of the light left Robert’s eyes and his head fell back, a trickle of blood oozing from the corner of his mouth. Only then did Eric answer.
“For the Federation.”

***

_Dun dun duuuuuuuan!_

_I wrote the scenes with Robert over a year ago. I'm so happy I finally got to use them!_

_So, what are people thinking? We're doing another transition bit, so the next couple chapters are going to be mostly exposition with a lot of high intensity action._

_And, as you might have noticed in this chapter, Spock is in the process of making some huge self-discoveries. So that will be fun. Wink, wink._

_As always, I want to encourage anyone who has questions to ask them!_

_And I also want to encourage all other comments. Questions especially, but all comments are cherished and adored on a daily basis._

_See you guys next time!_
The rolling Welsh hills, covered in heather and yellow rapeseed blooms, were calm. Rain blew across the landscape in rippling billows, bees buzzed drunkenly from one flower to another and a seemingly infinite number of sheep munched everything in sight.

And then…

**BOOM!!!**

*Kirk:* GO! GO! GO! EVERYONE GET OUT!

*Spock:* The robot has taken the castle, Captain.

*Kirk:* Damn! Why did you build an evil robot anyway?

*Author:* I didn’t mean for it to be evil. I just meant for it to say the disclaimer for me.

*Kirk:* This sort of thing happens to you guys a lot, doesn’t it?

*Mr. X:* If you just said the disclaimer yourself we wouldn’t end up in these situations!

*Author:* Don’t you think I know that?!

*Spock:* The evil robot is getting closer. I suggest you state the disclaimer immediately so we can continue escaping.

*Author:* Fine! I don’t own Star Trek or any of the characters or plot elements or any other trademarked property. Everyone happy?

*Mr. X:* I’m never happy…(sob)

*Kirk:* Not this again.

---

*Aloha*
Sarek’s assistant ushered the women into the study while Sarek walked around his estate, ostensibly to make certain the shields protecting his home were functioning. The assistant, a young solemn Vulcan who moved with cautious elegance, bowed and left them standing awkwardly in the study, waiting for their host.

Carol glared at Wicks. “Well?”

Wicks sighed. “Are you asking a specific question?”

“We told you to stop playing dumb.” Janice growled. “We’re not in your creepy shuttle anymore and we don’t have to trust you if we don’t want to.”

Carol pulled out her phaser and leveled it at the stranger. “Who are you and why did you come here?” She was done being condescended to.

“I am only trying to find the Spock from my universe.” Wicks said slowly and carefully, as if she were speaking to a child.

“Why?” Carol demanded.

“To protect him.”

“From what?” Janice pulled out her phaser as well.

Wicks, in a thoroughly un-Vulcan display, rolled her eyes. “From himself, usually.”

Carol wasn’t buying it. “T’sing? Is she telling the truth?”

T’sing, who had been happily examining the grain of the wooden desk, glanced up briefly. “No.”

Carol raised her eyebrows while Wicks gave T’sing a long-suffering glare. “You are not helping.”

T’sing shrugged. “You are lying.”

“I am omitting some information. There is a difference.”

“I don’t think there is.” Carol said calmly, setting her phaser to stun. “Talk.”

Wicks, who had withstood torture and imprisonment and god knows what else, finally broke. “Look, I am who I say I am, okay?” She snapped, suddenly seeming far more human than Vulcan. “And when I say that I know nothing about Sybok or Stonn I am telling the truth.” She paused, and Carol turned to T’sing, who nodded. Wicks wasn’t lying. She may not have been telling the entire truth, but she was not lying. “But…I may know who they are working with.”

“Who?” Janice asked.

Wicks frowned. “I do not want to say more until I have had a chance to discuss the matter with Spock. I have no way of knowing what sort of impact—”

“Who?”

“Section 31.”

“We already knew that.” A low voice rumbled. The women spun around to find Ambassador Sarek standing in the doorway. None of them had heard him enter. “Who else is involved?”
Even Wicks did not dare lie to Ambassador Sarek. “If the intelligence I received before I was captured by Stonn is correct, and I am not certain that it is, there may be some Romulans from my universe involved.”

Carol slowly lowered her phaser. Janice reluctantly followed suit. “Nero’s dead.”

“Nero was an unintended consequence.” Wicks explained, her voice dull and tired. “I am talking about the people who made him.” She looked at Sarek, searching his face for some sign that he believed her. She found none.

Sarek turned back towards the door. “You may join us now.”

A tall, hooded figure stepped into the doorway. His face was hidden in the shadows, but Wicks already knew exactly who it was. She knew from the way he stood, from the feeling in the room when he walked in, from the sound of his nearly silent footsteps, from the way he wore his robes. She stood, frozen, horrified, elated, shuddering. She had spent a lot of time imagining what she would say and do when she finally found her Spock. She had mapped out a thousand different scenarios, but never had she planned for a situation in which Spock surprised her. She did not know how to react.

But then Spock’s hood fell and she could see that he was smiling. It was a small, mostly invisible smile, but if you knew what to look for it was obvious that Spock was delighted to see her. Wicks allowed herself to relax slightly. At least he wasn’t upset that she had come looking for him…

Still. There were protocols to follow.

“The man with no name came home.” She enunciated each word carefully.

Spock nodded. “Leave your salt in the fire.” He replied, raising his hand and beckoning her closer.

Wicks did not need to be invited twice. She yelped gleefully and threw herself at him, completely abandoning any semblance of Vulcan calm. Spock was ready for her, and he caught her as she jumped through the air, embracing her tightly while she laughed and cried.

Ambassador Sarek turned an ever-so-slightly-darker shade of green and turned his back on the pair, offended by their shameless display. Janice dropped her phaser in shock. For the first time, Carol considered the possibility that Wicks seemed inauthentic not because she was a Vulcan trying to act human, but perhaps because she was a human trying to act Vulcan.

T’sing hummed under her breath, closing her eyes and bobbing her head in time with Wicks’ breathy giggles. She was not surprised or offended. She had felt Spock enter Sarek’s home a few minutes earlier, and she already knew how much he had missed his family because he would tell her so in a few days.

She also knew what she had seen in Wicks’ own mind. A lonely childhood filled with tragedy, but Spock was always there. A tumultuous adolescence full of confusion and mistakes, but Spock was always there. She had seen a grown woman still struggling to understand where she fit in the universe finding a place by his side. And then she had seen a woman lose that place and fight tooth and nail to get it back.

Let them find joy in each other, T’sing would have said if she had possessed the wherewithal to realize that the other people in the room did not understand what was happening between the two Vulcans from the other universe, for they have earned some respite from loss.

The respite could not last forever and before long Wicks was stepping back from Spock and trying to
regain her composure. “Forgive me…” She said softly.

Spock shook his head, his eyes crinkled slightly in amusement. “No need. Please, continue your explanation.”

Wicks seemed startled. “Are you certain that is wise?”

“Certainty is an illusion.” Spock replied. “Go on.”

Wicks nodded. “Yes, sir.” She turned and faced the others. “It is a long story. I will do my best to explain.”

“That’s all I ever wanted.” Carol joked, making herself comfortable in one of the chairs that had been moved to the study for their benefit.

Wicks waited until everyone was seated before beginning her explanation.

“In my universe, it has been three years since the Destruction of Romulus and those three years have been…difficult. When Romulus was lost, I was organizing evacuation efforts and in the aftermath I was placed in charge of refugee relocation. I noticed that there were people missing, people I excepted to find alive and well who were nowhere to be found.” She glanced at Spock. “Powerful people. People we had dealt with before.”

“The Tal Shiar?” Spock asked.

Wicks nodded. “Almost a year after the Destruction of Romulus, a team of Federation scientists discovered that the super nova responsible had been mechanically triggered by the Tal Shiar.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Janice interrupted. “Why would the Tal Shiar destroy their own civilization?”

Wicks looked at Spock and he nodded again, urging her to continue. “Have any of you ever heard of the Unification Movement?”

Everyone, except for Spock, shook their heads.

Wicks felt trapped. “May I have a moment to organize my thoughts? I am attempting to communicate an extremely complicated matter.”

Sarek considered her for a moment, then nodded.

Wicks turned and stared out the window, looking past her reflection at the inky darkness on the other side of the glass.

She faced a nuanced dilemma. She had come to this universe because of unfinished business, and because she feared Spock was in danger. But now that she was here she wondered if she was doing the right thing, or if perhaps she was just causing trouble.

She had been the chief facilitator of the Romulan evacuation when she first received news that Ambassador Spock had vanished in space and was presumed dead. The news had been devastating. Over the course of his life (or at least, over the course of his previous life) Spock had created a vast and devoted chosen family. He had been a constant presence in the lives of his former crewmates from the Enterprise, and then he had been a constant presence in their children’s lives, and their grandchildren’s and their great-grandchildren’s, and so on and so forth. Each generation loved him deeply, first loving him as children who saw how their parents turned to him in times of trouble.
When some of those children became rebellious teenagers, which does not happen to everyone but happens to enough to be part of a universal narrative, Spock’s was the home they fled to in the middle of the night when they needed to flee the vestiges of their childhood. He always welcomed them with a minimum of questions and a maximum of soothing tea and contemplative privacy. It became a running joke, that if a McCoy or Sulu or Uhura child was missing they could be found at Spock’s house, probably doing their homework. He was always there when they needed him. He almost never missed a graduation or a birthday. Everyone loved him.

But no one loved him more than his three girls.

Wicks, Edith and Baba McCoy called each other sister, though technically Wicks and Baba were cousins and Edith was their aunt. But they were the same age and they had all grown up together at the house in Riverside, where Leonard McCoy had lived since Kirk disappeared in space. From a young age the girls were fiercely protective of Spock, but none more so than Edith. When he was still alive, Leonard McCoy had been known to joke that his youngest daughter was so protective of Spock she had to be James T. Kirk reincarnated.

When Leonard McCoy was on his death bed he made the sisters promise to take care of Spock once he was gone, and they took that promise very seriously. Edith McCoy became Ambassador Spock’s press secretary and spokeswoman, putting her charisma and natural leadership skills to good use in the court of public opinion. Baba McCoy was half-Klingon on her mother’s side and had studied martial arts since the age of two as a constructive outlet for her aggression as well as a way to learn to control her strength while living on Earth surrounded by soft, squishy humans. She became Ambassador Spock’s bodyguard. And Wicks McCoy, who had never been able to decide if she’d rather be human, Vulcan or Klingon, became his chief aide and the keeper of his secrets.

For the first few decades their lives had been complicated, dangerous and immensely rewarding. With the help of his girls, Spock was working hard to end the cold war with the Romulan Star Empire—and he was making progress. Support for Unification—which was what they called their movement—was building on Romulus and in the Federation. They had allies in Starfleet and the Romulan military. The world was their oyster.

Unification was not a new idea. Technically, it dated back to the most ancient roots of both their civilizations. Very little was known about what had caused a group of Vulcans to leave their home world and settle on Romulus, but there were references in pre-Surakian literature to a great war and a terrible vengeance. These writings carried a dire warning; do not look for those who are lost, for they will never forgive, and we shall not forget. But of course, over the millennia both the Vulcans and Romulans had forgotten whatever terrible events had caused them to split and people on both sides of the divide began to wonder if maybe, after all that time, they were finally ready for Unification—finally ready to be one people once again.

Then, one fateful day, when the whole family had come together in Riverside to celebrate a birthday, Picard showed up and told them that Kirk was dead.

Of course he is. Edith had laughed. He’s been dead for decades.

But of course, that was not what Picard had meant. He had explained about the Nexus and the brawl that had ultimately been Kirk’s undoing—and the girls had listened in shock and disbelief. Was it possible that Kirk had been alive all this time? How could no one have known? How could Spock have never known?

And speaking of Spock, who was going to tell him?

They asked Picard, but he just turned ashen and shook his head. Edith tried, but she couldn’t get the
words out before she burst into tears and locked herself in the bathroom. Baba tried, but she couldn’t figure out how to broach the topic so she punched a hole in the wall instead. And that left Wicks.

Wicks called Spock into the kitchen and shooed everyone else out, locking the door and closing the curtains so the kids wouldn’t be able to peek in on them. Then she reached under the sink and pulled out an ancient, dusty bottle of bourbon. She turned to the cupboard and removed two high ball glasses. She poured two fingers of the amber liquid into each glass and sat down at the kitchen table across from Spock, placing the drinks between them.

She explained what had happened, quietly and patiently. The whiskey went untouched but it wasn’t really for them, anyway. The drinks were for the people who weren’t there anymore, for Kirk and McCoy. Spock said nothing, but the more Wicks spoke the more haggard his face became. He went to bed that night without saying a word.

When the youngest kids burst into his room the next morning, hoping that this time they had finally woken up early enough to surprise him, he was gone. Spock had vanished without a trace.

It wasn’t the first time this had happened. Edith immediately commed the High Priestess of Gol and the Vulcan Transport Authority, telling them to be on the look out for the Ambassador. Across the galaxy, relatives and friends were put on alert and a volunteer army of loved ones began combing the quadrant.

Eventually they found him in the most obvious place, sitting next to the crude gravestone marking James Tiberius Kirk’s final resting place on Veridian III, staring out across the mountains with a lost expression on his face. By the time Edith, Wicks and Baba arrived he had been sitting there for three days, and the Starfleet scientists who had found him were terrified he was going to die. The sisters didn’t try to move him. They brought food, water and sleeping bags, but they knew better than to try to make him leave before he was ready. Instead, they sat beside him for three more days and three more nights, sometimes helping him keep his silent vigil, and sometimes singing songs or telling the stories about Kirk they remembered from their childhood.

It took many years and constant effort to pull Spock back from the brink of despair. The sisters never left him alone if they could help it, for fear he might vanish again and that this time they would not be able to find him.

Until the day they did. And Spock vanished. He went missing in space and was presumed dead, exactly like Kirk. And it was hard for the sisters not to blame themselves, not to think they should have known what would happen, not to wonder why they weren’t enough to make life worth living, even though Kirk was gone.

Edith got sick, refused treatment and died within a year. Six months after her funeral, Baba went searching for clues about Spock’s death amongst the shattered remains of the Romulan Empire and stumbled on a Borg ship scavenging through the planetary wreckage. There were no survivors.

And that left Wicks, alone. She was still surrounded by friends and co-workers and people she loved and who loved her back, but…it wasn’t enough. She had once had people who were as much a part of her as she was a part of them and now…they were all gone, and they were not coming back, and she felt like she drifting through space and time without meaning or purpose. Every bond she used to have was broken. If this was how Spock had felt, she thought, it was no wonder he had not fought harder to stay alive just for them.

Wicks did not know what to do with herself and so she buried herself in her work resettling Romulan refugees. Coincidentally, this work was how she ended up discovering that Spock was still alive.
Wicks had spent many, many years living and working on Romulus, as a spy, as an activist, as a secretary, as a counselor, as a diplomat, as anything and everything Spock needed her to be. She knew all the major players involved in games of power. She knew who was rich. She knew who was famous. She knew who was wielding influence from the shadows. She knew whose identities were classified. She knew who was dangerous. As time went on she began to realize that people were missing from the records of Romulan survivors, people she knew for a fact were off-planet at the time of the Destruction, people who should have been accounted for.

She began to dig deeper and it didn’t take to long to realize that somehow the most powerful members of the Tal Shiar—the primary opponent of the Unification Movement—were nowhere to be found. She also discovered that each and every one of them had cleaned out their bank accounts a week before the Destruction. As she was investigating, Starfleet released a report claiming there was evidence that the super nova that destroyed the Romulan Empire had been mechanically triggered. Wicks immediately suspected the missing Romulans were involved. She began asking around about their whereabouts and one day she was contacted by a man who claimed to be from another universe.

The man said his name was Smiley and he told her that he knew where her missing Romulans were. She asked him why she should trust him. He told her that she would have to trust him, if she ever wanted to see Spock again.

That was all Wicks needed to hear. She didn’t bother to say goodbye before jumping through the looking glass.

And now…here she was. And Spock was here too, alive and well and seemingly happier than she had ever known him to be, and now she had to tell him that his absence had cost her the lives of her bond-sisters?

No…maybe she did not have to tell him that. Not yet, anyway. Sooner or later he would ask about them but for now…

For now, they would keep being her secret.

Wicks turned away from the inky blackness on the other side of the window and faced the room, along with the people in it.

“Okay,” she said, still feeling more human than Vulcan and wishing she were Klingon because Klingons never had identity crisis, the lucky bastards. “Here is the truth…”

***

The Enterprise

The doctors stood side-by-side and looked through a portal of treated glass into the endless void beyond. McCoy had chosen the Officer’s Lounge for their conversation, correctly assuming it would be empty. He had said his piece and now he was waiting for M’benga to respond.

M’benga sighed deeply. “I can’t do this.”
“Yes, you can.” McCoy disagreed. “You did it when I was kidnapped.”

“That was different. It was temporary, for one thing…” M’benga shook his head and turned away from the window, pacing the room. “No, I can’t. I’m not ready. I’m not qualified. I was just a resident before I came here. I can’t be Chief Medical Officer.”

“You can and you will.” McCoy said firmly, still staring out the window. “You won’t have to do it alone. Chapel will help. Right, Christine?”

Nurse Chapel, who was sitting on one of the couches with her head in her hands, just groaned.

“See? You’ll both be fine.”

M’benga ignored him and plopped down on the couch next to the nurse. “This is insane.” He muttered. “You’re giving up everything. If you get caught—forget about your commission, you’ll lose your citizenship.”

Chapel snorted into her fingers. “He’ll lose his life if he gets caught.” But there wasn’t any fight left in her voice. She peeked up at McCoy. “Is it worth it?”

McCoy settled down on the couch directly across from them and thought very carefully before answering. “You guys know I…met someone, when I was gone.”

They nodded, trying to disguise their shameless curiosity as polite interest. McCoy had refused to say much about his time in the captivity, and they were both eager to learn more.

“And you know that we melded?”

They nodded again.

“She showed me a memory, and at the time I thought it was just so I would trust her but…now I wonder if she was trying to show me something more…” McCoy wasn’t looking at them anymore, his eyes were unfocused, his brow slightly furrowed. “I saw the future. I saw a future where humans, Klingons and Romulans wouldn’t think twice before helping each other. I saw a future where…the war was over. It was over and done, and yes there was loss but there was also so much hope…” He blinked and refocused on his friends. “I saw the kind of future I want for my children and grandchildren, and if I don’t fight for it, it’s not going to happen…” He nodded firmly. “So yeah, it’s worth it.”

Chapel reached out and grabbed his hands, holding them tightly in hers. The skin on her palms was hot and dry, and just as she held his hands in hers she also held his eyes with hers, trying to stare into his soul. M’benga held his breath, as always giving deference to the special bond that existed between the doctor and the nurse. Finally, Chapel found what she was looking for, and she lifted their hands and brushed her lips against his knuckles, giving her blessing with a kiss.

“What do you want me to send a message to your daughter?” She asked him softly.

McCoy had to blink away his tears. He wanted to comm Joanna himself, but he was frightened that seeing his face would just make their separation harder for her to bare. “Yeah.” He said, his voice catching in his throat. “Just…make sure she knows how much I love her.”

Chapel smiled softly, her warm blue eyes filling with unshed tears. “I will.” She said. “I promise.”
Jim had been worried his crew would resent his impending departure, but as he walked through the halls of his ship one last time he was hailed as a hero by everyone he met. Word got around fast on the Enterprise, and somehow everyone already knew that he, Spock and McCoy were leaving for a mysterious, secret mission of utmost importance. Yeomen and security officers saluted him as he passed. When he walked by the science labs the researchers streamed into the hall and every last one of them insisted on shaking his hand before letting him escape in the turbolift, blushing ferociously. Chef Garcia caught up to him outside of sickbay and asked what he wanted on the menu for his farewell dinner.

“I don’t want to make a big deal out of it or anything.” Jim tried to protest.

Chef Garcia glared at him as if he’d just said something profoundly stupid, which in a way he had. “It’s not for you. It’s for us. Now I know you like non-replicated cheese, how do you feel about risotto?”

Jim agreed that risotto was delicious and Chef Garcia hurried off to make it before Jim could ask what, precisely, the plan was. He’d been hoping that they would be able to slip away without any fanfare, but it seemed his crew had other ideas.

Jim spent the rest of the day playing board games with Sulu, Chekov and Scotty in the depths of Engineering. They laughed and teased one another as if it were just another day onboard the Enterprise and Jim tried not to think about how much he was going to miss them. On the other hand, he was glad they were staying behind. He did not think he would have been able to leave his ship with anyone else.

When evening arrived Uhura commed them and asked them to come to the cafeteria. They packed away their game (Ferengi Monopoly—which was a lot like human Monopoly except instead of Going To Jail you Paid Back Taxes) and met Spock in the turbolift.

Jim smiled when he saw his First Officer, his stomach filling with butterflies. “Are we all ready to go?” He asked him quietly.

“We are.” Spock whispered back, his big brown eyes warming slightly when they met Jim’s. He had spent his last day on the Enterprise arranging the rendezvous with the Graysons. It had taken all of Uhura’s expertise to bypass the Starfleet firewall so that they would be able to communicate with the smugglers from the ship without creating any evidence that might be used by their enemies in the Federation. Normally, every communication signal generated onboard the Enterprise was recorded in an encrypted log which was automatically sent to Headquarters at the end of every shift cycle. In order to prevent Spock’s communications with the Graysons from being recorded, Uhura had to hack into the log and alter the plaintext codes herself.

“That leaves us six hours to party, then.” Sulu interjected, a forced smile on his face. “No more talk about the future, gentlemen. Tonight is for tonight.”

Spock was not amused but Jim laughed and slung an arm over Sulu’s shoulders, tussling his hair. “You are a wise man, Hikaru Sulu.”

When they entered the cafeteria they were greeted by a wall of noise. Everyone was there, the yeomen and the ensigns, the scientists and the janitors, the kitchen staff and the security officers, the medical team and the Klingons. Every single man, woman, person and other was on their feet,
cheering as if Jim and Spock were already conquering heroes.

Jim stared around at the crowd as the thunderous applause washed over him, drowning him in a sea of sound. He watched as McCoy elbowed his way through the throng and came close enough to shout in Jim’s ear, “I think they broke the kitchens!”

“What do you mean?!” Jim shouted back.

“Come see!”

McCoy led the way to the back of the cafeteria, where a full-on banquet was on display. Jim gaped at the bounty.

“Where did it all come from?”

“Half of it is from the replicators, but the rest is as real as non-replicated apple pie.” McCoy snorted, his eyes twinkling. “Everyone knows how much you hate replicator food. They wanted to do something nice, before you left.”

Jim could not remember ever seeing so much food in one place before. Yes, there was risotto, but there was also pasta and venison and root vegetables roasted in syrup. There were salads tossed with beets and lentils, sweet-savory soups with clear broth, steamed pork buns, curries and tamales. There were lemon tarts and puff pastries filled with Andorian Fire Ants, which tasted like sweet ginger and popped pleasantly in Jim’s mouth when he took a bite. And yes, there were apple pies, as well as chocolate cakes and little cups of salted butterscotch mousse topped with lavender foam. The long table groaned under the weight of the dishes and so Jim wasted no time in declaring that dinner was begun.

They feasted that night. They drank and they laughed and at some point musical instruments appeared and they began to sing and make merry. The Klingons jumped on a table and taught everyone a traditional Klingon drinking song.

Let the bloodwine flow
It’s the sweetest part of life
If I had no more it would surely be a fright
But I have no need for fear of war
For even if I die
I can always drink some more
Once I reach the other side!

It was a fitting song, Jim thought. Who cared what tomorrow might bring? For now, he was home, surrounded by friends and as safe as he ever was. For now, all was well.

For now, at least. For now…
The men left in the darkness, and no one came to say goodbye. It had been agreed earlier that it was best for Jim, Spock and McCoy to leave the ship as quietly as possible. It was too risky to use the transporters, for even with Uhura’s added protections there was no way to prevent the beaming function from being recorded in the automatic Starfleet backup logs. The backup logs were supposed to function as a black box, in case the ship went missing and Starfleet needed to recreate events, but those logs could just as easily be used to monitor their movements.

So instead of beaming down to the planet, they took one of the shuttles and flew it down to the planet in utter silence, each wrapped up in his own thoughts.

Jim was thinking about what he was leaving behind. His ship, his crew, his commission…what if he was making a terrible mistake? He glanced at Spock out of the corner of his eye, and his anxiety faded away. His Vulcan was flying the shuttle, and though his face was expressionless Jim thought his shoulders seemed tense. It was oddly comforting to know that Spock was also struggling with misgivings, just as Jim was. He couldn’t see the future, and maybe things wouldn’t work out, but at least they would be together. He had to hold onto that. He couldn’t afford any doubt. But what if he couldn’t hack it? What were Romulans supposed to be like, anyway? He’d never met one, other than the Romulans on Nero’s ship and those guys had all been bat-shit crazy. The Graysons claimed they had a way to disguise the humans, but he didn’t have much faith in their technology or his own acting abilities. He’d been in a school play once. It had not gone well. What if he blew their cover and got them all killed? Maybe he should have stayed behind on the Enterprise, because at least he knew who he was and what to do…No, no, don’t think about that Kirk, just think about Spock.

Spock was thinking about what lay ahead. He had not forgotten the promise he made to his father, to end Sybok’s life by his own hand rather than subject his elder brother to the humiliation and brutality of a public political trial—a trial which would almost certainly be followed by public execution, though the judicial process would take years. And yet Spock was beginning to question that assumption. When they had first been assigned to this mission, he had accepted that Sybok posed a real threat to the rule of law in the Federation, and yet he now had reason to question who was best served by those rules—the citizens of the Federation, or the people who were manipulating the levers of power from the shadows? And to whom, precisely, did his loyalties lie? With the Federation? With his flesh and blood? Spock could sense Jim looking at him, but when he turned his head the captain was facing forward, a faint blush gracing his cheeks. Something inside Spock softened and released, and his worries began to fade.

He already knew where he belonged. He always knew. And as long as Jim was at his side, he had faith that they would find a solution together.

Leonard McCoy was in another universe entirely. He stared at the control display with unseeing eyes, trying to remember every detail from the memories Wicks had shown him back in the asteroid mine. He could not shake the feeling that he had missed something, or perhaps forgotten something important…

That bastard…He did it on purpose…

Did it on purpose…

On purpose…
“What?”

Jim and Spock looked back at him questioningly. “Did you say something, Bones?”

McCoy blinked a few times while his mind returned to his current position in space and time. “Uh... no, did you say something?”

Jim and Spock glanced at each other. “No.” Jim answered. “You feeling okay, Bones?”

“I’m fine. I thought...I’m just tired, is all.” McCoy sighed and rubbed his face. “How much longer before we land?”

“Just a couple minutes.”

“And Ruth will be waiting for us?”

Jim looked at Spock, who nodded. “That was the nature of our arrangement.” The Vulcan confirmed.

3.7 minutes later, the shuttle landed softly in the clear-cut center of a thick copse of dry, spindly trees. The trees had grown so close together that their branches were intertwined, creating a wall around the center of the copse, which someone (possibly the Graysons, possibly someone else) had cleared in order to create a natural hiding spot for any small spacecraft. The men grabbed their rucksacks and programmed the shuttle to return to the Enterprise on automatic before opening the door and slipping out into the frigid night air.

Just as she had promised, Ruth was waiting for them on the other side of the clearing. Jim opened his mouth to greet her but before he could say a word she shook her head and put a finger to her lip. Without breaking her silence, she turned and led them through the thicket, weaving between and ducking under the thorny branches with practiced ease. Spock managed to mimic her movements with ease and grace, but Jim and McCoy were not so lucky. By the time they managed to make it out of the copse their clothes were torn and their faces were scratched. Jim looked down at himself and sighed internally. He had only brought two shirts, primarily because other than his uniform he only owned two shirts, and he’d already managed to rip one of them. Typical, Kirk. Just typical.

Ruth set off across the tundra, and the men had to jog to keep up with her. At first Jim assumed they were going back to the underground hideout but he abandoned that notion when the ground beneath his feet began to slope upwards and he realized Ruth was leading them towards the mountains. The closer they got to the slopes the more crowded with scrabbly trees and hulking boulders the landscape became.

They hiked in silence for several hours. Sometimes Ruth would hold up her hand and they would come to a halt. She would gesture for them to sit and then disappear for a few minutes, vanishing behind a boulder or fading into the woods. The men would sit uncomfortably, Spock pretending to be aloof, Jim pretending he wasn’t out of breath, and McCoy lying on the ground, staring up at the stars and shamelessly gasping for air.

Unlike Jim and Spock, McCoy didn’t go much for pretense.

And then Ruth would return without explanation and they would continue their journey. They finally reached the summit as the first rosy fingers of dawn were appearing on the horizon.

The Grayson Clan was waiting for them. The four men from the hideout (Mick, Jasper, Tadashi and
Kofi) had been joined by two more women who Jim remembered meeting in Whitehorse though he could not recall their names. Once again, Jim opened his mouth to say hello and once again Ruth shushed him. She then turned to face Mick and held out her left hand, fingers splayed wide, and tapped the center of her palm with the index finger of her right hand.

Mick shook his head and cupped one of his shovel-like hands around his ear.

Ruth frowned, obviously displeased by whatever information Mick had communicated through their hand signals. She pulled a piece of paper and a pencil from her pocket and wrote something on it before handing the note to Jim.

_The Ferengi are listening._

Jim glanced around but saw no trace of anyone other than his friends and the Graysons. He handed the note to Spock and gave Ruth a quizzical look, being careful not to make any sounds. Before she could respond Spock tapped Jim’s shoulder and pointed skywards. Jim looked up.

At first he couldn’t see anything at all, but as he strained his eyes he thought he noticed a tiny patch of darkness that was moving above their heads. As the sky grew lighter the tiny patch of darkness became easier to see and eventually Jim realized it was a tiny surveillance drone, about the same size as an Earth hummingbird. He gulped. Ruth clearly thought the drone had been sent by the Ferengi. Jim didn’t think he could afford to make the same assumptions. Starfleet had not officially used drones for decades, but Jim knew that if he were involved in an illegal intergalactic weapons trade he might prefer to use obsolete tech as well, as drones tended to be harder to trace than communicators and harder to hack than encryption fields.

McCoy stepped forward and mouthed, _what do we do?_

Ruth shrugged and pulled a Klingon disrupter from her belt. She aimed at the sky, pulled the trigger and the drone exploded in midair, showering them with tiny metal shards. “Goor always tries something like that.” She said, speaking out loud for the first time. “He’s got hundreds of those stupid things. I don’t know why he bothers—we always just stay quiet until its bright enough to hit the target, and then we just blast ‘em. He’ll probably send another one in a few minutes, so we should leave now.”

“Who is Goor and why was he spying on you?” Jim asked, still not certain that the drone had not been sent by Agent Simmons or the people he worked for.

“He’s the Ferengi who runs the bar. You met him.” Ruth explained. “He’s a funny guy. I’d trust him with my life so long as I was inside his place of business, but as soon as you’re outside all bets are off. He’s just trying to collect the bounty on our heads.”

“And yet you trust this individual?” Spock asked.

Ruth shrugged again. “It’s the Ferengi way. You can’t blame people for being what they are. I don’t think he’d ever actually collect the bounty, but his employees would lose all respect for him if he didn’t try. He’s trustworthy enough so long as we keep giving him our business, and that is good enough for me.”

“It seems like a lot of trouble to me.” McCoy remarked.

Ruth ignored him, perhaps because she did not feel like explaining moral relativism to good, upstanding Starfleet officers but more likely because she did not care one iota how things seemed to Leonard McCoy. “Alright, Mick. It’s time to go. Is my girl ready for the dance?”
Mick grinned and whistled a brief, mournful tune. All of a sudden a starship appeared on the rocky ground behind him. Jim was impressed. Not only had the Graysons somehow managed to get their hands on a cloaking device, they had found a way to control the cloaking device from outside the ship. According to Starfleet intelligence, even the Romulan cloaking device was not that advanced.

The ship itself was relatively small, only slightly larger than the Starfleet shuttle they had flown down on. It seemed to have been stitched together from parts of much bigger ships, like a mechanical Frankenstein’s monster. It had the body of a Bajoran Impulse Vessel, Starfleet flight apparatus and what appeared to be the thrusters from a Klingon Bird of Prey—and those were just the pieces Jim could identify. The Graysons were already climbing on board, but Jim could not help but feel apprehensive as he examined their vessel. It didn’t look especially space worthy. Admittedly, he wasn’t an engineer, but he’d learned a thing or two growing up at the docks in Riverside.

He remembered when he was 15 and first started asking his mother to buy him a hover-bike. Winona had finally kicked Frank’s sorry ass to the curb only a month earlier and Jim was still milking her guilt for all he was worth (which, it turned out, was quite a bit). But his mother knew him a little too well and before she bought him the bike he so desperately wanted she insisted on taking him to the local hospital to meet ol’ Crazy Eye Willie.

Before ol’ Crazy Eye became ol’ Crazy Eye he’d just been plain old William Freedman, a talented mechanic and dock-man who had a way with starship engines. Legend had it that when an engine wouldn’t start and you’d tried everything else already—replaced every part, checked every circuit, recalibrated every photon balancer—and nothing was working, William Freedman would be able to get her purring after five minutes alone with the engine and a bottle of wine. He had a gift, or so people said. Unfortunately, he also had an insatiable curiosity and a dangerous lack of respect for standard safety precautions. He began experimenting with combining parts from different starships and one day he decided to find out what would happen if he hooked up a medical stasis generator to a miniature warp core. The resulting explosion had burned most of the skin off his body and the medical stasis field had somehow merged with his tissue, meaning he had to spend the rest of his life at the hospital because no matter how many times the doctors used their dermal regenerators to repair his injuries, his skin would start to blister and peel away within a few hours due to the glitching stasis field. That was when he stopped being William and started being ol’ Crazy Eye Willie, in honor of the one part of his anatomy that didn’t require constant mending.

Ol’ Crazy Eye only had one piece of advice for young Jim Kirk: Don’t mix starship parts. Don’t mix ‘em in your basement. Don’t mix ‘em at your dock. And sure as fuck don’t try to put thrusters on your hover-bike because if you do you’ll be wishing you was as lucky as ol’ Crazy Eye, you hear me boy?

But that was then. This was now.

Jim swallowed the warnings from his childhood and followed the smugglers onto their ship.

At least Spock and Bones were right behind him. Ol’ Crazy Eye never had friends like his.

***

Earth
Fat snow flakes fell from the mid-afternoon sky and blanketed the roof of the Lion’s Den as Sara Grayson began preparing her bar for the nightly business. She sat at her desk in her tiny office, checking her inventory while John unloaded crates of whiskey and brandy and stocked the shelves in the front room. There was an old-fashioned pearl-enameled radio sitting on Sara’s desk and as she checked her list twice the latest hit from the Betazed punk girl group, The Tough Titties, blared.

*I CAN SEE INTO YOUR MIND*

*I ALREADY KNOW YOUR KIND*

*GO AHEAD AND TRY TO RUN*

*I THINK THAT SOUNDS LIKE FUN*

Someone knocked lightly on the doorframe of Sara’s office.

“What’s up John?” Sara asked without looking up.

*GO AHEAD AND TRY TO RUN*

*I THINK THAT SOUNDS LIKE—*

*Click.*

Sara looked up. The person standing in her office was not John. It was a woman, a woman who looked vaguely familiar...

Sara’s eyes widened. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s good to see you again, Sara.” Jocelyn Darnell said with a smile. “How have you been?”

Sara let the inventory chart fall from her hands and she rose to her feet, scowling. “How have I been?! How do you think I’ve been?”

“Well, I see you’re out of jail.” Jocelyn commented lightly, as if they were old friends discussing the weather.

“Yeah, no thanks to you.” Sara snapped. “And I don’t feel like going back anytime soon, so please get the fuck out of my bar.”

“I’m not going anywhere Sara. Not until I’ve gotten what I came for.” Jocelyn said firmly.

“I’m sorry, I’m retired, I can’t help you, wish I could, real shame, now get out while you still can.” Sara hissed through gritted teeth.
Jocelyn leaned forward over the desk so that only a few inches of air separated the tips of their noses. “There is a Klingon disrupter in your left back pocket which is a clear violation of your parole and there is enough Romulan contraband in this room alone to put you back on the penal colony for the rest of your life, so do not threaten me. Not when I hold all the cards.”

“When you have an ace up your sleeve I don’t know about, you’re bluffing.” Sara smirked confidently. “Now get—”

“Mommy?”

The two women straightened immediately and turned towards the door, where a little girl in a red coat was standing and watching them with large, worried eyes.

All the fight left Jocelyn in one breath and she hurried over to the door, wrapping Joanna up in her arms protectively. “Sweetheart, I told you to wait outside.”

“It’s cold.” Joanna complained.

“I don’t care if it’s cold, JoJo.” Jocelyn pulled a napkin out of her pocket and wiped away the snot that was dripping down her daughter’s chin.

Sara stepped forward and gently placed her hand on Joanna’s tiny shoulder. Jocelyn held her breath and watched the other woman closely, but did not intervene. “What is your name?” Sara asked, her voice uncharacteristically gentle.

Joanna glanced at her mother, who nodded. “Joanna.”

Sara inhaled a little too quickly. “That’s…a really good name. Joanna, when you are in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by strange people, you need to do exactly as your mother tells you, because she is keeping you safe. Do you understand?”

Joanna nodded, still eyeing Sara suspiciously.

Sara smiled. “Hey, Joanna, there’s a man in the other room named John and I think if you ask really, really nicely he might show you where he hides the ice cream.” Joanna’s face lit up and Sara chuckled. “You like the sound of that, huh? You go find him and I’ll finish talking to your mom, okay? Deal?”

Joanna considered her options carefully for a moment and then stuck out her hand. “Deal.” She agreed. Sara swallowed her smile and shook the child’s sticky hand. Jocelyn put her down and straightened her coat.

“Be good, okay?” Jocelyn whispered to her daughter. “I’ll be with you soon.”

Joanna nodded and ran to find John. The two women stood side by side and watched her leave.

“…Do you remember the last time we met?” Sara asked softly.

Jocelyn did remember.

_Sirens blared and uniformed bodies surged through the halls as Jocelyn Darnell blindly stumbled towards the closest door. She was going to throw up. No, she wasn’t going to throw up, she was going to die. No, she was already dead. This was what being dead felt like. Or maybe this was hell._
Yes, that was it, she was in hell. That had to be it.

It had not been a good day for Jocelyn. It had started off on a sour note, with yet another stupid argument with her fiancée and yet another reason not to tell him that she was four weeks pregnant. And then she had gone to work, which was bad enough on a good day but **today** was no ordinary day and it **certainly** was not a good one.

No, today was not a good day. Today was the day she stood in front of a judge and jury and convinced them to sentence a 19-year-old woman to five years in a therapeutic penal colony. Because she had murdered someone. A man. A man who had been a husband and a father and respected member of his community, as well as a lying, cheating, abusive asshole who waited until his 19-year-old mistress was in her third trimester before losing his nerve about her pregnancy and beating her until she miscarried. And so, in return, the 19-year-old woman who was named Sara Grayson had drugged him, kidnapped him, chopped him up into tiny bits and sent each piece to his wife through the mail.

There were no winners in a case like that.

Still, technically and legally speaking Jocelyn had won her case. She had done her job and now her job was done.

Unfortunately, Sara Grayson had not planned on going quietly and she had somehow managed to escape when the security officers tried to escort her from the courtroom and back to the holding cell. Now the entire courthouse was under lockdown and overflowing with frantic Starfleet officers and engulfed in chaos, and Jocelyn was just looking for a quiet spot where she could ride out her panic attack in peace.

The door opened and Jocelyn stumbled out into the frigid nighttime air.

“Watch it!”

“Sorry, I—hey!”

Sara Grayson was sitting on the pavement outside the backdoor, and Jocelyn had just stepped on her left hand. The 19-year-old popped her fingers in her mouth and glared up at the prosecutor.

Jocelyn automatically dropped into a defensive stance, her fists raised and her legs braced, but Sara just rolled her eyes. “Relax. I’m not going to hurt you. There’s no point.” She waved her uninjured hand towards the force field that shimmered in the air ten feet in front of them.

“So…you’re just waiting for them to find you?” Jocelyn asked suspiciously.

Sara shrugged but did not answer.

Jocelyn glanced back at the courthouse door. She knew she ought to go back inside and tell one of the many security officers that she had found the woman they were looking for, but…but what was the point?

Jocelyn sat down on the pavement next to Sara. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You already cross-examined me.”

“A personal question.”

Sara frowned slightly but did not look at her. “Sure, I guess.”
“Why did you stay with him? You knew he was abusive, you knew he was married, so why didn’t you run?”

Sara shrugged again. “I thought…I don’t know what I thought. I miscalculated.”

Jocelyn tried to understand and failed. “That makes no sense to me.”

“Luckily for me, I don’t care what you think.”

“Can I tell you something I haven’t told anyone yet?”

“If you want to. It’s not like I have anywhere else I need to be.”

“I’m pregnant.”

Sara turned her head and stared at Jocelyn in disbelief. “Am I supposed to say congratulations?”

“I will definitely throw up if you do.”

“That makes two of us then.”

“I have a fiancée but we fight all the time and I don’t think he wants a baby and I don’t know if I want a baby either, except I also think I do but…but I don’t think I can raise a child alone. I’ve never even babysat before. I have no maternal instincts. Children hate me. Everyone says that, but I mean it. My best friend’s son turned eight a month ago and when I asked what he wanted for his birthday he asked me not to come to the party. But every time I decide I can’t do it I imagine holding my baby in my arms and…and it makes me feel whole, like I’ve been waiting for this child my whole life. I don’t know what to do.”

“Sounds rough.”

“You must think I’m a terrible person, complaining about this to you, after everything you’ve been through…”

Sara picked up a small pebble that was lying on the pavement by her feet and flung it at the force field, where it exploded in a shower of sparks. “I don’t think I have the right to judge people anymore.”

The alarms were still blaring and the search lights were still glaring. Jocelyn could hear people shouting in the distance, but the tiny patch of pavement where she and Sara were sitting was calm and quiet, as if they were in their own little world. Jocelyn took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Have you picked a name?” Sara asked suddenly.

“I haven’t even decided if I’m going to have this baby.”

“Yeah, but have you picked a name?”

“No.”

“You should. Names are important. I was going to name my daughter Joanna.”

Jocelyn glanced at Sara, wondering why she was telling her this. “Joanna is a pretty name.”

Sara nodded. “Yeah. But it’s also a strong name. You could be anything you wanted with a name like Joanna.” There was a hint of pride in her voice.
“Like a warrior.” Jocelyn suggested, smiling softly.

Sara gave her one last long, hard look, then nodded and got to her feet. “Or a lawyer.” She said. “Good luck, Jocelyn.” She lifted the handle of the backdoor and slipped inside the courthouse. Two seconds later Sara was tackled by no less than five security officers and the next day she was shipped off to the therapeutic penal colony where she would spend the next nine years, having time added to her sentence for poor behavior.

A little less than eight months after Sara went to jail, Jocelyn gave birth to a baby girl. As she lay in her hospital bed, feeling exhausted and exhilarated and a little annoyed at her new husband, Leonard asked if she had a name in mind.

“I was thinking Rose, after my grandmother, or Anna Rose, after your mother and my grandmother, or maybe—”

“Joanna.”

“What was that, Joss?”

“I want to name her Joanna.” Jocelyn whispered as her eyelids drifted shut and she slipped off into the depths of sleep. “So she can be anything she wants to be...”


Sara walked slowly back to her desk, so that Jocelyn wouldn’t see the tears filling her eyes. “Why are you here, Jocelyn?”

“Because my daughter is in danger and I think you might know why.”

Sara spun around furiously. “If you think I would ever hurt a child then you do not know me.” She spat.

Jocelyn pulled a folded piece of paper out of her bra. “I know that. That’s exactly why I’ve decided to trust you, because I know you would never let something happen to my daughter if you could prevent it. I know that.” She held out the piece of paper, her hand trembling slightly. “So read this letter and tell me it has nothing to do with you or your family.”

Sara took the letter and read it carefully. “Where did you get this?” She asked when she had finished.

“I asked first.”

Sara handed the letter back. “I don’t know anything about Marcus…but that is my grandfather’s handwriting. Your turn.”

“All I know is that my brother was doing a favor for Joanna’s father and—”

“Who?”

“Leonard McCoy. He’s a Starfleet—Sara? What’s wrong?”

Sara had gone white as a sheet and her jaw had dropped. “Leonard McCoy? From the Enterprise?”

Jocelyn’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Yes.”
Sara bit her lip nervously. “This all happened long before I was born, you understand? I have…
theories, but Graysons don’t ask questions. We don’t ask questions, even if…well, the good news is
you came to the right place.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“The bad news is that we’ve probably got about twenty minutes before someone shows up to kill us
all.” Sara grabbed her coat off the hook next to the door. “We need to run.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

***

So, how are people doing? What are people thinking?

I want to ask how you guys are feeling about the way I’m organizing the different plot lines? So for
the next few chapters we’ll have three main plotlines, which can be described as the Earth line, the
Vulcan line and the Romulan line. A lot of stuff needs to happen on Earth and New Vulcan before
certain crucial plot points happen in the Romulan line (for example, Carol needs to make a certain
medical discovery about herself, which most if not all of you have probably figured out already, and
T’ping needs to have better control of her powers). So I’m thinking I’ll play that as I have been
playing it, but if people would rather have less character development in the supporting story lines I
would understand.

So what do my readers think? Should I stay the course or try a different strategy?

Family is a big theme in this story. The motherhood aspect of that is probably already apparent,
though I’ll also be doing more with that, but fatherhood is also going to play a part. It always
bothered me that in the Reboot movies they would spend so much time talking about Jim and
Spock’s relationship with their fathers but they never mentioned the fact that one member of the trio,
McCoy, is himself an absentee father with a young daughter (not to mention his own complicated
relationship with McCoy sr.). So I’ll be addressing that in the next few chapters.

Thanks for reading! As always, I invite and welcome and adore any and all comments.

TTFN.
The Eye of the Storm

*Did you guys know the AOS/Reboot universe is now officially called the Kelvin Universe/Timeline? Were we consulted about this?*

**Disclaimer**

*Kirk*: Okay. Mr. X was really distraught, but I managed to calm him down.

*Author*: Thanks. Sorry about that.

*Kirk*: Yeah. Why do you always go out of your way to upset him like that?

*Author*: I can’t help it. He wants me to say the disclaimer so badly, and every time he gets that look in his eye I can’t help but subvert his desires in a ridiculous and unexpected fashion. I guess that’s just the kind of person I am.

*Kirk*: That sounds like the ravings of a lunatic. Speaking of which, what happened to the evil robot?

*Author*: Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen it for—

**CRASH**

*Evil Robot*: YOU DO NOT OWN STAR TREK! YOU MUST BE ERADICATED!

The Eye of the Storm

The Border

There were rules to follow when traveling with the Graysons, even for a short period of time. The first and foremost of those rules was: Don’t Ask Questions.

“What does that do?”

“Don’t touch that!”

“What does—”

“Put it down, Kirk.”
“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“Fine. What were you going to say?”

“What does this do?”

“Oh my god…”

“This part looks like some kind of igniter, but—hey! You can ask instead of grabbing, you know. I’m happy to share.”

“Emergency photon flares are not toys, Kirk. Why can’t you just sit patiently with your friends until we arrive?”

“I dunno. Where are we going, exactly? What are the coordinates?”

“Be quiet!”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“That’s not a very good reason.”

“MOOOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!”

“LEAVE ME OUT OF IT!” Ruth shouted without looking up from her cards. She threw the Queen of Hearts down on the table. “Your turn.”

McCoy groaned and glowered at his cards, willing them to be more helpful.

They had been flying for a little over nine hours, and so McCoy, Ruth and Tadashi were playing Crazy Eights to pass the time while the rest of the crew manned the ship and Spock meditated in the corner. McCoy had tried to convince Jim to join them, but his friend could not seem to sit still. He’d been restlessly stalking the ship, asking questions and getting underfoot, ever since they boarded.

“Are you sure you just want to ignore Jim? He seems to be causing a lot of trouble,” McCoy asked Ruth. “I think if you gave him something to do, it would help everyone relax.”

“Is that what you think?” Ruth drawled, her eyes narrowing. “Funny. I think you’re trying to distract me so I won’t notice you trying to cheat.”

McCoy tried to look innocent. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Ruth snorted disbelievingly. “Play or draw, Doctor.”

“Fine.” McCoy drew a card and waited for Tadashi to play his turn.

A rustle of fabric indicated Spock had completed his meditation. McCoy looked over his shoulder. “Hello.”

Spock nodded briefly in his direction and then proceeded to ignore him, gliding past the card table towards the engine room, where Jim could be heard fiercely arguing with Lily, another one of Ruth’s seemingly endless supply of offspring.

Even with the distance of several rooms between them, Spock could hear the frenetic energy in Jim’s
voice. When he entered the engine room he found Jim standing on one side of the room, hands on his hips and a snarl on his face, while the Grayson crewmates buzzed around the small warp core, trying to undo whatever it was Jim had done. As soon as Jim saw Spock, his expression smoothed into one of relief.

“Spock!” He grinned. “Thank god you’ve come. I’ve been trying to figure out how this ship works and certain people,” he glared at the tall woman who was giving orders to the other workers. “Are not being helpful.”


Jim opened his mouth to argue but before he could get a word out Spock had grabbed his elbow and was gently but firmly pulling him out of the engine room.

“Come on. This ship is unlike any I’ve ever seen. It’s like the Frankenstein’s monster of star ships.” Jim hissed. “Don’t tell me you’re not curious.”

“I admit that the functional combination of different starships is a fascinating mechanical feat, but the Graysons guard their secrets jealously. Your curiosity is making our hosts uncomfortable.” Spock replied calmly.

“But I’m bored.” Jim complained. “There’s nothing to do on this tiny ship but play cards, and since I’m not an 80-year-old grandmother I—”

“You are not bored. You are anxious about leaving the Enterprise. But harassing Miss Lily will not resolve that concern.”

Jim sighed and his shoulders slumped a little. “Fine. I can’t stop thinking that we’ve made a horrible mistake and that we’ll never see our ship or our friends again.”

“That is a possibility.” Spock acknowledged.

“How possible of a possibility?”

“Given what little I know of Romulan border control, combined with the likelihood of another attack on the Enterprise from either Stonn or his allies in Starfleet, the probability of our never returning to the Enterprise is roughly 75%.”

“So we have a 25% chance of everything working out okay?”

Spock raised one of his eyebrows. “That is never guaranteed. I would not know where to begin in quantifying the possibility of ‘everything’ being ‘okay.’”

“So life sucks and we’re all doomed anyway? Thanks, Spock. I can always count on you.”

By now they were standing in the dark, narrow hallway that connected the different chambers of the ship. The ceiling was low, but what the ship lacked in height it made up for in length. The sleeping quarters were at the very back of the ship, well removed from the cockpit, engine room or the cargo hold that doubled as a recreational space. Realizing that the sleeping quarters would be the quietest part of the ship, Spock began to lead Jim in that direction. Jim followed without noticing, question after question tumbling from his lips.

“What if we get to Avalon and Sybok’s not there? What if no one remembers him? What if they used to remember him but he erased their memories? Can he do that? Can you undo that? And if he’s not
on Avalon, how do we find out where he went? How do we ask without giving ourselves away? What was he even doing there in the first place? Do you think we’ll disguise ourselves as Romulans before we get there or is that something we have to do once we arrive? And—”

“Jim.” Spock interrupted him gently as he opened a door and stepped into a dark, quiet room lined with hammocks. “Now is not the time for such questions.”

Jim stared at him, aghast. “Now is exactly the time for such questions.” Since when did Spock play things fast and loose?

Spock shook his head. “You are in an enclosed, unfamiliar place and your adrenaline levels have risen as a result. Your questions are reasonable, but in order to find the answers you must have clarity, and you will not have clarity until you lower your adrenaline levels.”

Jim knew Spock had a point, but he couldn’t help but feel slightly condescended to. “Well excuse me for not being Vulcan and not having perfect control over my neurochemistry.”

“No one has perfect control.” Spock countered. “But you can learn to have better control.”

Jim was interested. “How?”

“Meditation.” Spock answered. Jim’s heart sank. He hated meditating. “I will teach you.”

…well, maybe he didn’t hate meditating that much.

Jim agreed to try and so the two men settled on the floor in the center of the dark room. Jim crossed his legs and placed his hands on his knees, the way he had been taught. Spock raised an eyebrow.

“Is that how you wish to sit?” Spock asked.

Jim was confused. “Isn’t this how I’m supposed to sit? It’s how you’re sitting.”

Spock shrugged. “In the beginning, it is more important to be comfortable than to be correct. If the mind is resting the body will want to rest as well. If you are uncomfortable your body will communicate that discomfort to your brain and you will not be able to achieve a meditative state.”

“So sitting cross-legged is the most comfortable position for you?”

“I did not say that.” Spock smiled slightly, his eyes twinkling in that special way that was just for Jim. “But I am not as easily distracted as some.”

Jim grinned back wolfishly. “That’s true.” But he was still feeling anxious, and anxiety made him suspicious. “But that doesn’t sound like Vulcan philosophy to me. If you didn’t get that from personal experience, where did you learn it?”

Spock considered his answer carefully. “Vulcan children traditionally learn meditation from their mother. My mother was human, but she always attempted to meet the traditional responsibility of Vulcan mothers. The form of meditation she taught me was an amalgamation of the Vulcan traditions from my father’s family as well as Earth traditions.”

Jim wondered what would make him most comfortable. “How did your mom do it?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”
“On whether she was teaching me or meditating for her own benefit.”

“What’s the difference?”

“When my mother was teaching me to meditate, she chose to teach me the position that my peers would consider proper.”

“So legs crossed, hands on knees?”

“Indeed. However, she preferred a very different arrangement.”

“What was it?” Spock hesitated before answering and Jim’s stomach twisted into knots. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.” He added quickly, loathing himself for forgetting how painful it was for Spock to discuss his mother.

But Spock wanted to answer, wanted to share this part of himself with Jim. “She would lie down in the garden, nude.”

“Really?”

“She claimed the sensation of fabric on skin was distracting, but that the sensation of grass on skin was soothing.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Jim said, though he thought grass sounded more ticklish than soothing. “Can I lie down?”

“You do not need to ask permission.”

“You’re the teacher. I respect your authority.”

Spock’s eyes lit up and both eyebrows disappeared beneath his bangs. “Do you truly?”

Jim felt his face turn red and the wolfish grin returned. “Maybe…” He drawled. “Depends on the circumstances.”

Spock tilted his head to the side in a deceptively innocent fashion. “What manner of circumstances inspires your respect?”

Jim’s heart began to hammer against his rib cage. The conversation had taken an unexpected turn and while he enjoyed it immensely, it wasn’t helping lower his adrenaline levels. The fire in his belly began to grow in warmth and urgency. “Circumstances that involve you…and me…”

“I see.” Spock tilted his head to the other side. “And, under those circumstances, what breed of authority would you respond to?”

Jim knew meditation was all about controlled breathing, but right now he was struggling just to remember to inhale and when he did the air was heavy in his lungs. “There’s only one way to find out.”

Spock’s hands slipped from his kneecaps and onto the floor. He pushed himself up so that he was kneeling instead of sitting. Their eyes met and Jim felt a jolt of electricity travel down his spine. Spock’s eyes were darker now, and his expression serious.

“Lie down.” Spock ordered. Jim immediately fell onto his back, terrified that if he spoke he would break the magic spell that was causing Spock to initiate contact with him.
For nearly a minute, all Jim could see was the shadowy ceiling. Then Spock’s face was suddenly looming above him, the Vulcan’s hands braced on either side of Jim’s shoulders. As Spock regarded Jim with dizzying intensity, Jim completely forgot to breathe. But that was okay, because Spock was breathing enough for both of them. Jim could see his chest lifting and falling, could watch the graceful arc of Spock’s clavicle as it appeared, vanished and reappeared from beneath the collar of Spock’s tunic. There was less than a foot of space between their lips.

“What do you want?” Spock whispered.

Jim’s mouth was bone-dry and he had to clear his throat before he could respond. “I want…” But he couldn’t think clearly enough to know what he wanted. Try as he might, the right words wouldn’t come so he decided to communicate his desires in a different way. He reached up and grabbed Spock, rolling them over so that he was on top and Spock was held to the floor with Jim’s body weight. Jim held Spock’s hands above his head and leaned down to kiss the Vulcan, but Spock turned his head away at the last second and Jim froze.

“Sorry!” He blurted, dropping Spock’s hands as if they were red-hot and leaning back again. But then he saw that Spock was still smiling with his eyes and Jim’s confusion grew.

Spock sat up so that Jim ended up sitting in his lap, facing him, their legs tangled up together. “Tell me what you want.” Spock ordered, his voice serene.

Jim turned beet red and looked away. “Come on, Spock. Don’t make me say that kind of stuff…” He couldn’t imagine anything more embarrassing. Oh no…now he was imagining things way more embarrassing…what if Bones walked in on them? Or worse, Mick the Dick?

Spock leaned in so close that their lips were almost touching. Jim could feel Spock’s breath fluttering against his cheek. “Tell me.”

Jim groaned and closed his eyes so that he wouldn’t be able to see his own face reflected in Spock’s gaze. “I can’t believe you’re making me do this…I want to kiss you.”

Spock was more than happy to oblige.

***

Federation Space

The Fo-dan sailed through the darkness, in more ways than one. The crew huddled in the engine room and on the bridge, doing their best to avoid Stonn’s followers as they stalked the long, narrow halls like silent wraiths. Sure, they were all Vulcans, but even Captain Davo was beginning to have second thoughts about his deal with Stonn.

When Stonn had first approached him and introduced him to the writings of the Prophet, Davo had been transformed. Ever since he was very young he had been different from other Vulcans. He had a bad habit of making decisions based on instinct instead of reason. His impulsiveness had always held him back at school, much to the disappointment of his parents. When he dropped out of school and found a job on a star freighter, his parents had disowned him. Ever since he had felt like a failure as a Vulcan, but the Prophet’s writings had introduced him to a whole new way of thinking, a way of
being a Vulcan while still being true to himself. He wasn’t a failure; he was merely a different expression of what it was to be Vulcan. When Stonn contacted him again and offered to charter Davo’s ship, he had leapt at the opportunity.

But now…Davo was no longer sure if he wanted to be Vulcan the same way Stonn and his disciples were Vulcan. There was something about them that made Davo uncomfortable, but he couldn’t quite put it into words. He wished his ship could move faster, so that they might reach New Vulcan sooner and put this whole affair behind them. As soon as Stonn and his followers were off the ship, Davo was going to change all the communication codes and fly straight out into the black until he was far away enough that Stonn couldn’t find him again.

Meanwhile, Stonn paced the length of his ship quarters, unaware of the concerns of his host. As he paced, Stonn wondered.

What darkness lurked in the hearts of men? What cunning, what avarice? What lust for things that never were, what obsession with things that will never be?

Why did he not share those urges? Why was he, seemingly alone, spared from the insecurities of mortality?

He was a man, after all. Or was “man” a human construct? Had the ideology of masculinity been pressed upon his culture by the humans, the same way they enforced their laws, their customs and their vices? Surrakian ideology did not address gender in any kind of depth, leaving such matters to the whims of ancient tradition. And if it were not embraced by Surak, what value did it have? What good was being a man, if it meant carrying such darkness?

And yet Stonn did think it was good to be a man, to be coded and categorized by force and command, so perhaps there was no darkness after all. Only the brilliant, bursting bright of righteousness, filling his chest and dazzling his mind and urging his feet ever forward. Perhaps the true darkness was a social order that tried to keep him from that light.

Stonn was always moving forward, though not because he wanted to. He was time’s prisoner, dragged further and further away from the point in time where he wanted to be. When he meditated his mind would drift back to that moment, against his will and yet also because he wanted it…

The sun was shining on Udonia III.

Then again, the sun was always shining on Udonia III. Somewhere, at least. But on that particular day, in that particular place, the sun was shining and the sky was a bright cloudless blue.

This was important because Stonn’s communication system was old and often did not function properly when there was atmospheric disturbance.

Stonn had been sitting in front of the blank monitor for over an hour. His Udonian host family did not have a large home, and his communication system took up a great deal of space and so he normally kept it stashed away under his bed, only taking it out and setting it up for necessary purposes. On this particular day he had set up the system in the living room, while his anxious hostess peeked from around the corner.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather use the comm at the post office, dearie?” She asked him, three of her nine tentacles waving invitingly towards the front door.

“This is acceptable, Shnuff-ka.” He replied. A second later, the red light on the top of the monitor
began to blink and he tapped the screen. T’pring’s face appeared.

She is lovely. He thought, though her loveliness was neither greater nor lesser than it normally was. His next thought was, something is wrong.

“T’pring, are you—” He began to ask her if she was in poor health.

“I do not have much time, my love.” Her complexion was pale and her words were rushed. The image on the screen began to flicker, disfiguring her lovely face. Alarm stabbed through Stonn’s gut at her words. Their romance was unconventional enough by Vulcan standards, and they only gave a name to their relationship on extremely rare occasions. For her to call him “love” something had to be very wrong indeed.

T’pring was still speaking. “I love you. I love you. I love you. I—”

“Is something wrong, T’pring?”

“—love you.”

Bzzt

The screen went dark. T’pring’s lovely face disappeared. Stonn tapped on the screen, trying to bring her back, but nothing happened. He tapped again, and again, and again. Harder and harder until his fist went flying through the monitor in an explosion of sparks. As the scent of seared flesh reached his nostrils a blinding pain shot through his skull. Stonn wrapped his singed, bleeding hands around his head and began to rock back and forth, howling. His hostess oozed frantically out the front door and down the street, headed for the neighbor’s house where the other Vulcans were staying. She hoped Stonn’s colleagues would be able to help him, and so she moved as fast as her heavy tentacles could propel her. She didn’t get far before Tufftu came barreling down the street towards her, wailing that the Vulcans had gone mad and that Stonn was needed immediately. The two Udonians met in the sunny street, twittering nervously, unsure what to do next.

Utterly alone, Stonn broke.

Stonn had lost everything the day Vulcan was destroyed, everything he had fought so hard to gain. His career. His bond-mate. In some ways, he had even lost his identity. What did it mean to be Vulcan if there was no Vulcan? What did it mean to be Stonn if there was no T’pring?

Then, one day, Stonn found an answer. He had brought several boxes of academic dissertations with him to Udonia III. All the papers had been rejected, and he intended to study the most common mistakes as he prepared his own doctoral thesis. At the bottom of one of those boxes he had discovered a most remarkable document entitled Pre-Surrakian Melds and Their Applications for Modern Telepathic Theory.

At first glance, Stonn had dismissed the 1,599-page document as idealistic dribble, but then he noticed the author. Sybok of Vulcan. Spock’s elder brother, the shame of his clan. Stonn had never approved of Spock. Since the first day they met the half breed had been a hideous blemish in Stonn’s otherwise orderly and logical world. The fact that Spock had seemingly outperformed him in all academic and professional matters would have aggravated Stonn, if he were not aware that people frequently overlooked Spock’s obvious deficiencies for fear of seeming prejudiced against humans. Stonn had heard rumors about Spock’s older brother, but to his knowledge no one had seen or heard from the man in over 20 years. All Stonn knew for certain was that as a young student Spock had
displayed obvious signs of distress at any mention of his brother. At first, it was idle curiosity that drove Stonn to read Sybok’s manifesto.

But soon, he was reading it because he needed to read it. Sybok’s words, his vision of what it meant to be Vulcan, were a soothing balm on the tattered remains of Stonn’s psyche. It was Sybok who showed Stonn the way back from the brink of destruction, who taught him how to survive with the pain he could never escape.

If he had to put the sensation into words, he would describe it as a sickness festering in his lungs. It hurt to breathe and the backs of his eyes stung constantly. He was both exhausted and unable to sleep or meditate for more than an hour at a time. The muscles in his forehead were sore for some reason, as if the solemn expression he had always worn was suddenly too great a strain to bear. He felt more and more isolated from other people and yet often even casual company was more than he could stand.

The problem, he thought, was that nothing was good enough. And that wasn’t going to change anytime soon, because the only person who could make him see the lighter side of life was gone and she wasn’t coming back. That was a reality that could not be altered. He accepted that. But he could not accept the aching bleeding wound that reality left in the core of his being, a wound that never healed and always hurt.

It hurt. It hurt so much, there were times he thought he would surely go insane. And it always hurt. There wasn’t any way to make the hurting stop, and he had tried. Sybok’s words could only take him so far. After all, Sybok had been banished from Vulcan before completing his education. But after much study, Stonn had found clues in the writings, a cryptic message informing the attentive reader that the True Path was hidden in the uneven mind of the chosen vessel. Stonn knew that had to mean Spock. Who else could it possibly be? And so, desperate to find the enlightenment Sybok promised, he had searched for answers in the most loathsome mind he’d ever known.

Finding the True Path was all Stonn cared about. But Sybok’s instructions on how to do that were complicated and required numerous experiments involving expensive lab equipment. Stonn’s deal with Section 31 was just to pay the bills…not that he ever told them that.

And still his heart hurt, which was completely unacceptable. Had he not embraced his emotions, as Sybok instructed? Had he not sought to cleanse himself of all restrictions, by repudiating the High Council and offering his greatest enemy an olive branch? Was it his fault the ungrateful whelp had refused it? Once Spock rejected Stonn’s friendship, he had been left with no options except force!

He should have guessed that, after all the trouble he went to, Spock wouldn’t know what Stonn needed to know. That should have been obvious. Spock was useless. Fortunately, Stonn had managed to gather information that was just as valuable, if not as welcome.

Finally, he had someone to punish for what had happened to his bond-mate and his planet. Finally, he had a name, and it was not just any name…it was a name that held special significance for Stonn. Spock.

Someone knocked on the door, interrupting Stonn’s musings. He turned as the door slid open and T’mo walked in.

“The Fo-dan will arrive at New Vulcan in 4.6 hours, sir.” T’mo reported.

Stonn nodded. “As expected. Is she awake yet?”
T’mo did not need to ask who ‘she’ was. “She woke up 13.4 minutes ago.”

Stonn nodded again and swept past T’mo without another word. T’mo allowed him to move a few steps ahead before following silently, maintaining a respectful distance. Stonn had never been the most companionable Vulcan, but he had been unusually volatile since his last run-in with Spock. It was best to give their leader some space, rather than risk his disapproval.

On Stonn’s orders, Sveena was standing guard outside the brig. Stonn did not trust the crew of the Fo-dan. It was foolish to trust anyone these days. Sveena stepped aside to let Stonn pass and T’mo quietly took his post at her side.

“She has been asking for water.” Sveena said quietly, so that they would not be overheard.

“She can ask as much as she likes.” T’mo replied. “Did you give her any?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. Stonn will not tolerate interference with the prisoner.”

“But…” Sveena glanced over her shoulder, seemingly torn. “…she is one of us. It was not entirely her fault. We were there too.”

“We were.” T’mo agreed. “Would you prefer to join her in the cell?”

Sveena shook her head.

“In that case, stop asking questions.”

Stonn waited another second on the other side of the wall, in case they said anything more. He found it somewhat intriguing when T’mo and Sveena had these little chats that they thought were so secret. Clearly they did not realize that he was aware of their burgeoning treachery and often lingered just out of eyesight to hear the things they said about him in private. Satisfied that he did not have another mutiny brewing quite yet, he opened the cell door and slipped inside.

The prisoner was chained to the wall. She had not tried to escape but Stonn did not want to take any chances. Her head was lowered when he entered but she looked up as he knelt in front of her.

“Please…I need water…”

“T’liv.” He said her name gently, ignoring her request. “Tell me why you let the prisoners escape.”

“Please, Stonn. If I do not hydrate within the next 4 hours, I will die.”

“In that case, perhaps you will die.” Stonn acknowledged unflinchingly. “On the other hand, perhaps you will survive. It is your choice to make.”

T’liv’s eyes drifted shut, exhaustion and dehydration weakening her control. “I have given you every answer I can think of. None have satisfied you.”

“Then think of a new answer.”

T’liv’s brow creased as her mind struggled to function. “They had my sister. If I had tried to stop them, they would have hurt her.”

“I highly doubt that.”
T’liv’s eyelids flew open, a flickering spark of resistance lingering in her pupils. “You do not know these people as I do. That…that creature is capable of anything.”

“I assume by ‘that creature’ you are referring to the dimensional alien.”

T’liv blinked. “The what?”

“The dimensional alien. The…what was that absurd Terran name again? The McCoy.”

T’liv still looked confused. “No…McCoy was the human…but...”

Stonn’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “But what?”

“The Starfleet doctor was not with the people who kidnapped my sister.” T’liv tried to reach towards him, but the chains affixing her to the wall held her back. “Please, Stonn…they had T’sing, what was I supposed to do?”

“You were supposed to stop them. But that is besides the point now, in large part due to your spectacular failure as a second in command. Fortunately, I have been able to remedy your mistake. As usual.”

T’liv sagged in her chains, filling the small holding cell with the sound of metal link clinking against metal link. To Stonn’s trained eye, she was visibly relieved. “You found her?”

“Who? Ah—you mean T’sing. No. I have not bothered to look. I have had more important matters to consider.”

T’liv head rose again, her eyes clouded with confusion. Stonn found her undisciplined reaction entertaining. “I have a plan. If you cooperate, I am certain that a clever girl like you will find an opportunity to see your sister again. If you refuse to cooperate, it is your sister who will never see you again. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes, thank you.” T’liv gasped. “I will do anything you tell me to do, Stonn, anything. I want to walk the True Path, I swear.”

“I know you do.” Stonn replied, smiling beneficently. “All will be forgiven once we reach New Vulcan.” He rose to his feet and turned to leave.

“Stonn? Wait...”

“All sins will be washed away.”

“I need water, Stonn, please...”

“All wounds shall be healed.”

“Please, at least tell me how long before we reach New Vulcan. Stonn? Stonn!”

Stonn closed the cell door behind him and turned to look through the grate. The door was sound proof and while he could see that T’liv was still calling his name, he could not hear her voice.

Perhaps now would be an opportune moment to practice embracing his emotions, as Sybok had written?

Stonn forced a smile. Despite much practice, the sensation was still foreign and uncomfortable. “All is well.” He told himself firmly.
It still wasn’t true, but it was getting easier to lie.

***

_The Border_

When McCoy stuck his head in the sleeping quarters he found Spock and Jim with their eyes closed, spooning in a hammock. He paused a moment to stare at them silently.

_Well then._ He thought, before tip-toeing away.

Ruth glanced at him when he returned to the bridge. “I thought you were fetching Kirk and Spock?”

“They’re sleeping. I figured they could use some rest before we get to Avalon.” McCoy told her. “How much longer?”

“Depends on the traffic.” She turned back to face the blank view screen. There was a set of drawers underneath the navigation console. Ruth pulled at a slender gold chain around her neck, lifting a small golden key from the valley between her breasts. She unlocked the bottom drawer and pulled out a small, ornate box.

McCoy stepped closer. “What is that?” He asked curiously.

“What does it look like?” She replied.

“It looks like a box.”

“Then I guess it’s a box.”

“…Okay. Got it. I’ll just sit over here and keep quiet, shall I?”

“I would appreciate that.” Ruth placed the box at the very top of the navigation console so that it wasn’t blocking the screen. This way she could observe both the screen and the box. She leaned back in her chair for a second, squinting at the box, before leaning forward and moving the box a few centimeters to the left. Satisfied that it was in the correct position, she tapped a button to the side of her console and the view screen flickered to life.

“AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

“Doctor, if you cannot _shut up_ I will have you removed from the bridge. Is that clear?”

“…uh-huh…” McCoy squeaked, his heart pounding in his chest as he gripped the sides of his seat for dear life.

They were surrounded by asteroids consumed in pale, blue flame, hurtling through space at breakneck speed. The view screen had switched on just as one of the asteroids came hurtling straight towards the camera. For a moment, McCoy was certain the ship and the flaming mass of space rock would collide, but then at the last possible second the asteroid was jerked to the side by some invisible force and sent hurtling in a different direction.
McCoy kept his eyes locked on the view screen and as he watched, the same thing happened again and again. A particular asteroid would distinguish itself from the swirling mass that took up the entirety of the screen by hurtling straight towards the ship and then at the last possible second it would be yanked off course.

“Um…”

“What now?” Ruth snapped.

“Is it possible to get a wider view on this thing?” McCoy asked nervously.

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Sure, but you won’t like it any better.” She hit another button and view screen snapped into a wider frame. McCoy gulped.

Even with a larger view, the storm of asteroids filled the screen, swirling and twirling at speeds faster than the human eye could follow. The blue flame streamed out of their pockmarked surfaces and when one blue tail crossed paths with another there was an explosion of white lightning. Even though McCoy had never seen anything like this before, he had heard about it.

“The Romulan Hurricane.” He whispered, half in awe, half in despair.

“Or the Federatti Areinnye, depending on who you ask.” Ruth pointed out blithely. “You okay, Doc? Need a minute?”

“We’re not going in there, are we?”

“Only way to get to Avalon, I’m afraid.”

“But we’ll be smashed to bits!”

“I haven’t gotten smashed yet.” Ruth reminded him smugly. She was clearly enjoying his terror and he glared at the back of her head as she turned to face the ornate box on her console. “Come close, Doctor, and learn something.”

McCoy reluctantly tore his eyes away from the view screen and approached her chair, peering over her shoulder as she gently, almost reverently, lifted the lid of the box. A familiar tune began to play, spilling from the dark box in bright, twinkling notes. McCoy blinked.

“Is that…?” He started to ask.

“Wait for it…” Ruth whispered, as the music played. “…and…now.”

McCoy wasn’t sure what she meant until he realized that just as the music had paused briefly, a split-second beat between verse and chorus, a gap between the asteroids appeared in front of the ship. Ruth gunned the engine and shot into the empty spot. McCoy grabbed the back of her chair and held on for dear life, his mouth open wide in a silent scream.

The music changed, growing louder and clearer as the mysterious forces whipping the asteroids took hold of the ship and yanked them along through the fiery blue haze.

McCoy forgot to breathe when the eerie blue light given off by the flame began to permeate the ship, bathing the bridge in azure. The light was beautiful but cold, and he shivered slightly when it came into contact with his skin.

On they went, propelled by forces McCoy could only guess at, guided through the storm by the little
Wicks walked a few steps behind Spock, watching the hem of his robe brush against the dusty ground. T’sing walked beside her, gently pinching the fabric of Wicks’ sleeve, careful not to touch her skin even with the tunic as a barrier. The sky was dark and the street was empty, but for the three Vulcans. Wicks felt calmer than she had in a very long time.

She had done it. Spock was alive, she was with him and now she could keep him safe. That was what mattered. Everything else was secondary. Tertiary, even. Scarcely important enough to even mention, now that she thought about it. She did not particularly want to think about it, though. She’d found him. Spock was safe and found, by her. She’d done it. Just her, by herself. It was over… finally over…

T’sing tugged on her sleeve and Wicks stopped. “Please...” T’sing whispered, her eyes pointed down towards the sidewalk. Spock kept walking forwards, getting further away from them.

“Wait, Ambassador.” Wicks called after him. “T’sing is trying to tell me something.”

Spock turned and walked back towards them. Wicks nodded at T’sing. T’sing stared back at her blankly.

“What are you trying to say?” Wicks gently prodded, offering her hand in case T’sing needed to use physical contact to ground her consciousness in the present moment. T’sing reached out and rested her fingertips against Wicks’ palm.

“Do not fight.” T’sing said softly. “Fighting will make it worse.”

“Can you provide more context?” Wicks asked, but T’sing just shook her head and pulled her hand away, tucking it into her sleeve. Wicks looked at Spock. “Are you expecting trouble?”

“No.” Spock responded, frowning slightly. “You believe she has had a premonition?”

“Premonition is not the right word.” Wicks sighed. “I believe her meaning will become apparent in time.”

“In that case, shall we continue?” Spock suggested. “If there is going to be trouble, I would rather be home with the children.”

“Is that acceptable, T’ing?” Wicks checked. T’sing did not say anything but when Wicks offered her arm once more she took it, and Wicks interpreted that as acquiescence. They continued walking.

When they reached Spock’s orphanage, Wicks came to a sudden stop. She stared at the house, wide-eyed and ashen. Spock waited patiently as she took it all in. Finally, she mustered the strength to speak.

“What is this? Is this a joke?”
“Yes, perhaps I should have warned you…”

“This is not healthy.”

“Now, Wicks—”

“You built the house? His house?”

“It was your house too.”

“But you always thought of it as his house. Do not deny it. You even refused to let us redecorate his bedroom until Odessa’s triplets moved in, and we were already sleeping two to a room by then. You have a chance for a fresh start, and this is what you build?“

“Wicks.”

“This is sick, Spock. When will you admit that he is d—”

“That is enough.” There was a slight edge in the Ambassador’s voice. “I had my reasons for rebuilding the house in Riverside. While you are here, I expect you to be respectful.”

Wicks opened her mouth to argue, but then she remembered what T’sing had said about fighting and thought better of it. T’sing was right, it would just make things worse right now. She took a deep breath to quiet her skittering mind. While I am here? What is that supposed to mean? Motherfucker, if you try to make me leave now, I will chagh-pup you into next Friday. Calm down, calm down. Keep it together. “I understand. I will do my utmost to meet your expectations.”

Spock nodded once before turning and sweeping up the front steps. Wicks and T’sing lingered a moment by the gate, staring up at the farmhouse.

“Well, I found him alright. Same old Spock.” Wicks muttered darkly.

T’sing was seeing double, Wicks’ past superimposed over their shared present. When T’sing looked up she saw two white farmhouses with black shutters, one surrounded by the lush gardens of New Vulcan, the other squatting in a vast expanse of corn-covered Earth. One house was new and pristine, the other old and weathered. One was peaceful and idyllic, the other was burning down. T’sing watched as flames consumed the house, spitting from the rooftop and shooting out of the shattered windows, but she did not say anything. That was fine. She knew the flames were not from the here and now, though she could not say how she knew that or what exactly the “here and now” meant. That was fine, too. Somehow, Wicks made it fine.

Wicks could not see the flames and she was too distracted to notice that T’sing was holding her hand. Unsteady and uncertain, she rambled out loud. “This is weird, right? It is an exact replica of the house in Riverside. I am not imagining the weirdness, right? He even found the right kind of wind chimes to put on the front porch…look, he even put the wood pile in the exact same spot. It does not even make sense for a wood pile to go in that spot. It is too far away from the house to be convenient. Edith hated the wood pile, remember? We only needed wood when someone…We only needed wood when someone…We only put it in that spot in Riverside because it was more sheltered from the snow. It does not snow here, does it? No, right? So it does not make sense to put the wood pile there. Oh my god—the pit. What if he put the pit in, too? I have to see—I have to know—what is happening? Why would he do this? We do not…I do not understand.”

***
A man in black walked into a bar on Jupiter to meet a man with blood on his hands.

This was not a joke. These were not the kind of men who “got” jokes. These were the kind of men who did not understand the difference between a joke and a lie. These were the kind of men about whom it was constantly said: “Oh, don’t worry. He’s just joking.”

“What happened to you?” Rex Livingstone asked quietly as he slid into the booth across from Eric.

Eric wiped his hands on his jeans, rubbing the sticky purple blood into his denim pants. “You were late. I had some fun. Sue me.”

“Given the nature of our business here, it is unwise to attract attention.” Rex said disapprovingly.

Eric gestured around at the disreputable clientele of the reeking, smoke-filled barroom. “Look around. You’d attract more attention by not fighting in a place like this.” The words had barely left his mouth when an Andorian on the other side of the room overturned a pool table and launched themselves at a Caitian mercenary. Within seconds, half the bar had joined the brawl. The rest were cheering them on. “See?”

“We could have met at my office.” Rex reminded him, ducking as a chair leg went sailing over his head.

Eric shrugged. “Too many cameras, figured you wouldn’t want that so close to your big debut.”

“How considerate.” Rex drawled. “I had no idea you cared so deeply for my career. I’m touched.”

“I just meant—”

“I know what you meant, and your vigilance is admirable. But it is also unnecessary. In the future, allow me to worry about such details. I assure you, I have no intention of exposing myself or our work.”

“…Yes, sir.”

“Good. With that unpleasantness out of the way, let’s get down to business.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Has there been any word from our friends across the border?”

“Not yet, but there’s a problem.”

Rex frowned. “You know how I feel about problems.”

“Yes sir, and I took care of it as soon as I became aware of it, but…”

“But?”
“But something is missing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t want to say too much—”

“I am not a patient man, Eric.”

“I was keeping an eye on Robert Darnell just like you asked me to. He took something out of the archives, and I dealt with it. Dealt with him. You know we were friends since elementary school, right?” Was it Eric’s imagination, or did the purple blood on his pants look red in the dim light?

Rex nodded. He did know that. Their friendship was precisely why he had asked Eric to keep an eye on McCoy’s brother-in-law. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“So okay. Damn fool brought it on himself. Anyway, I dealt with him, but I haven’t been able to find the thing he took. It’s probably stashed away somewhere. Bob was always really good at hiding. I’ll find it, but I’ll need more time.”

“This thing he took out of the archives…how concerned should I be about it?”

“Moderately. There’s no direct connection to you, but if it found its way to someone who actually knew shit it might…provide evidence.”

“Ah. Evidence.” Rex smiled. “You know I go to a great deal of trouble to avoid evidence.” He did, too. Stonn, and the things Stonn knew, was a temporary vulnerability. Rex would deal with him swiftly. And as for Carol? Well…Rex knew exactly how to handle dear, sweet Carol Marcus.

“This thing…it’s from before your time, sir.”

“Before my time? You mean…”

“Yes, sir. One of, er, Marcus’s…experiments in foreign policy.”

“…you are working very hard to avoid saying anything concrete right now, Eric.”

“Yes, sir. Walls have ears, and all that.”

“Not the walls in my office, but you wanted to meet here. So talk before I lose the very small amount of patience I have.” Rex’s eyes narrowed slightly, though his congenial smile remained fixed on his face.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. It was a letter from Mordecai Grayson to Admiral Marcus, sir. About You-Know-Who. That’s what’s missing.”

If anything, Rex’s smile got even bigger. “That…is not what I wanted to hear, Eric. How close are you to locating this…evidence?”

“Very close, sir. I’ve traced it to Whitehorse.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that is where the Graysons are based, yes?”

“It is one of their known locales, yes sir.”

“And how did the evidence get from San Francisco to Canada?”
“I suspect it is in the possession of Jocelyn Darnell. She’s Bob’s sister, sir, and—”

“I know who she is.” Rex leaned back, his smile fading. “Why would she go to the Graysons?”

“I’m not sure, sir. The only connection I could find was that she sent one of the kids to jail a few years back, the last case she did as a prosecutor before becoming a public defender. Ugly business, very bloody. There’s no love lost there, I can tell you that. I tracked her as far as Whitehorse and then the trail suddenly went cold. I suspect she met up with someone who actually knew what they were doing. Probably a Grayson, but I’m not sure which one. Not sure which one would even agree to help her, anyway…”

“Curiouser and curiouser.” Rex said in a near whisper. “I see. Well. Do you have anymore information for me?”

“No, sir. Not yet.”

“Very well. Keep me updated, but you have my permission to deal with this little problem however you see fit. This probably goes without saying, but given the timing I would appreciate…discretion.”

“Understood, sir.”

Rex stood up and prepared to leave. “Oh…and Eric?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Next time, I pick the rendezvous location.” Rex turned and dodged a burly alien who was being flung across the room, before striding out of the bar and leaving Eric sulking in the corner.

***

New Vulcan

“So…truth.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The truth.”

“Mm-hm.”

“The whole truth, nothing but the truth, the one and only, now presenting, The Truth.”

“Yup.”

“And we’re gonna tell it. To everybody and their mother.”

“Yes we are.”

“Just put it all out there, all the facts, lay all the cards on the table, so that everybody knows everything.”
“That’s the general idea, yes.”

“Okay, but…how?”

“I dunno.” Janice shrugged. “It was your idea.”

Carol groaned. “Don’t remind me. In case you haven’t noticed, I don’t have a great track record with big ideas.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Besides, this is the only idea we’ve got, remember?”

Carol and Janice were still lounging at Ambassador Sarek’s estate, having nowhere else to go and worried about running into any of Stonn’s followers before they could put their plan in motion. Hamlet was pecking at the lawn outside, clearly visible from the study window. He’d been less clingy since returning home, but he still refused to abandon them despite their best efforts to shoo him away. Sarek was out meeting with a few dignitaries from the High Council, and he had instructed them to arrive at an actionable plan by the time he returned. Carol paced the study while Janice sat on the desk and watched her.

“Look, if we can get the story out, we’ll be able to control the narrative from the beginning. That’s good, right? But we need to do something big. Something that will get a lot of attention. An anonymous leak, maybe?” Carol asked.

“It might work. It would probably be safest for us.” Janice said thoughtfully. “The problem with anonymous leaks is that people don’t trust them, and if the original story is only quoting anonymous sources other news outlets typically won’t pick it up since they can’t independently verify the details. Sooner or later, we’d have to name names. Which we don’t have, other than Stonn and Livingstone. I guess we could leak the story to a bunch of different outlets, but we don’t have enough hard evidence to justify the risk to the journalists.”

“You think Section 31 would try to get revenge against journalists who published the story?”

“It’s possible. They’ve done it before.”

“What? When?”

“Um…promise you won’t be mad?”

“…I promise.”

Janice smiled ruefully. “The Kelvin. Daddy told me about it years ago, but I totally forgot about it until just now. I probably should have remembered the connection earlier, but…”

Carol stared at her. “The ship Kirk’s dad was on, the one that Nero destroyed?”

Janice nodded. “Yeah. Apparently right afterwards Daddy was under a lot of pressure to bury the story. I’m not sure what happened exactly, I was only a baby after all, but I know some people came to our house one night. It was pretty serious.”

Carol frowned. “But everyone knows about the Kelvin. Your father must have refused.”

Janice shrugged. “He fired three day-time anchors and replaced a news magazine show with a punditry talk show. Then he manufactured a couple celebrity scandals. You don’t need to bury a story when you can just distract people with shiny objects.”
“So I’m guessing your father wouldn’t be willing to help us, huh?”

Janice frowned. She hated asking her media-magnate robber-baron father for anything, and she had never used her wealth or connections to help her career before, but there was a first time for everything. If this wasn’t the moment to use every privilege she had as the rich heiress to a vast media empire, what was? “He might, if I’m the one who asks. Daddy isn’t a fan of Starfleet Intelligence. He doesn’t like being threatened, and he definitely doesn’t like people with more power than him. I’ll have to convince him that the story makes business sense, but I think I can work that angle… corrupt government conspiracies tend to attract eyeballs. Advertising revenue will go through the roof…”

“That’s a little crass, isn’t it? I mean, we’re talking about the basic institutions of the Federation here. Who cares how much money he might make?”

“That’s just how he thinks.” Janice shrugged. “You of all people should understand that.”

Carol sighed. “I know.” She knew more than most about disappointing fathers. “Okay. If you can convince your father, the Rand Network will run the story?”

“24/7 on every Federation planet and the Ferengi home world.”

“Do you think that will be enough?”

“Yes. Especially if the Ferengi catch wind that there’s a lot of money involved. If we can get the story on the Rand Network, I guarantee every other outlet will pick it up within an hour. The news will have reached Qo’noS by the end of the week.”

“Oh, okay. This is starting to come together…” Carol kept pacing, chewing fretfully on her bottom lip. “But we’ll need to keep Section 31 distracted while we prepare…” A slow grin spread across her face. “And I know the perfect person for the job.”

“Who?”

“Stonn. He’s probably already followed us back by now. We can use T’sing to lure him out of hiding and have him arrested. Section 31 won’t want him testifying, so they’ll try to take him out. Two birds, one stone.”

Janice’s eyes lit up. “That’s diabolical.”

“Thank you. I try. Do you smell something?”

“I think the housekeeper is making some breakfast.”

“Good. I’m starving. Let’s eat, then we’ll comm Ambassador Sarek and tell him our plan.”

***

Avalon

The Graysons’ ship snuggled into the docking bay as urchins filled the platform, watching the the
doors with large, expectant eyes. When the doors opened, Jim was the first one out, eager to behold this mysterious floating city he had never heard of. He had barely gotten one foot on the stone slabs when a gigantic hand grabbed his collar and yanked him back.

“Whoa there, sport.” Mick rumbled. “What’s the hurry?”

Jim tried to squelch the embarrassment of being thrown around like a sack of flour. “What’s the hold up?” He replied, pulling free. Spock suddenly appeared at his elbow, his dark eyes darting back and forth between Mick and the waiting crowd. He noticed a flash of silver and gently nudged Jim, who looked in the direction Spock was indicating just in time to see a sheepish-looking urchin slip a dagger back into his sleeve.

“These Avalonians will rip you to shreds the minute you drop your guard.” Mick told them. “It’s best to let me go first.”

“Why would that be best?” Bones, who had just arrived with the rest of the Graysons, asked.

Instead of answering, Mick stepped onto the platform. Within a second he had disappeared into a press of street folk, all shouting and waving and pushing and shoving. Jim started forward, alarmed at the aggressive antics, but Ruth stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. Suddenly, there was a mighty roar and Mick reappeared in the center of the thrall, swinging his arms as four children clung to his biceps and giggled.

“WHO WANTS A RIDE?!” Mick bellowed. Three more urchins immediately leapt onto his massive shoulders.

“The kids love him.” Ruth whispered to Jim. “We hardly ever get stabbed when he plays with them.”

“Oh. Good.” Jim replied. “I love hardly ever getting stabbed. Wish it happened more often.”

“What did I tell you about being cute?”

“That I’m not?”


Mick headed up the steps leading into the depths of the great pyramid, the crowd of urchins clustered around him, while the Graysons and the Starfleet officers followed at a safe distance.

Jim couldn’t keep his eyes to himself. The cobbled streets of Avalon were filled with aliens he’d never even heard of and some he recognized from books but had never before encountered in person. There were a few Federation species, burly Andorians and heavily armed Caitians, but there were also Klingons, Cardassians and androids. He even spotted a few humans drifting through the crowd, vacant stares fixed on their faces. Peddlers lined the sidewalks, displaying their wares on folding tables and colorful rugs. Spock and Bones had to drag him away from a street vendor selling cursed Megormian lava-stone amulets, which according to legend had the power to turn your enemies into pools of molten flesh.

“I wasn’t going to use it!” Jim protested feebly. “I just thought it would be a good conversation piece for parties.”

“That’s somehow worse.” Bones rolled his eyes and Spock nodded in silent agreement.
“You guys never let me have any fun.”

“That statement is hardly accurate.” Spock demurred with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Jim blushed a dark red and moved a few inches closer to his Vulcan so that their hands might accidentally brush against each other as they walked. Spock clearly noticed but he didn’t pull away and so Jim’s blush turned into a satisfied smirk.

“We’re falling behind.” Bones pointed out brusquely, pretending not to see their antics. Was antics the right word or were they officially flirting now? McCoy didn’t want to ask. Well, maybe part of him did want to ask, but it was a small part. The will-they-won’t-they thing had all been well and good on the Enterprise, with Uhura and Sulu and Scotty and even Chekov to commiserate with, but here it was just him and the two of them. If something happened, he was the only one Jim had to talk to about Spock. McCoy was worried that if he asked about the changes in their relationship, Jim would see that as encouragement to talk about weird Vulcan sex stuff. McCoy didn’t think he could handle that without Chapel’s “helpful” diagrams or Uhura’s informed sympathy.

Ruth was waiting for them outside a large, ornate hotel, by far the fanciest and shmanciest of all the buildings Jim had so far seen in Avalon. Large marble columns framed a gleaming golden door and the slab stone steps glittered with crushed diamonds. A sterling silver sign hung from the jewel-encrusted portico, the word BEWARE etched in big, bold letters. Even the paint glimmered. Jim eyed it nervously.

“I’m not going to see anything I shouldn’t see in here, right?” Jim asked Ruth with a wink. He mostly meant it as a joke. He knew the Graysons were here on business and he wasn’t about to ruin whatever fragile trust they’d managed to build by making a fuss about the nature of said business. Besides—he and Bones had knocked back enough illicit Romulan Ale over the years to land both of them with multiple life sentences if anyone could ever prove it. **Don’t tell Spock that, he might actually try to figure it out…**

But Ruth was still inexplicably failing to find him charming. “A word of advice, kid. If you ever want to see home again, you’ll leave that copper bullshit at the door.” And with that, she turned and swept across the golden threshold.

“Copper bullshit?” Jim repeated with bemusement.

“I believe she meant ‘copper’ as a slang term for police officer, and not as a reference to the metal.” Spock explained.

“Oh…right, I knew that, I was just distracted by…all this.” Jim waved at the golden-marbled-jewel-encrusted hotel with the ominous silver sign.

McCoy squinted up at the top floors. “Am I the only one seeing how sparkly this place is? You guys are seeing this, right?”

“Objects that are considered precious in one society are often considered worthless in another, Doctor. Though in this case, ‘worthless’ is inaccurate. As building materials, these valuable metals and minerals are serving a most utilitarian purpose.”

“Utilitarian? They put diamonds in the goddamn floorboards! Seriously, is no one else seeing the sparkle?!?”

“Perhaps your eyes deceive you, Doctor.”

“Ha ha, nice try, but unlike someone I remembered to bring my tricorder. See? Real deal diamonds.
Embedded in the porch.”

“As a matter of fact, Doctor, I brought two tricorders.”

“Really? I don’t see ‘em.” McCoy scoffed. He raked Spock’s silhouette with his eyes in a way that made Jim a little uncomfortable, looking for hidden tricorders.

“I refer you to my earlier suggestion.”

“I don’t understand…did you shrink them down or something? Did you eat them? Ew—Spock, did you—”


McCoy and Spock exchanged glances over the top of Jim’s head. They were both privately thinking that they’d already hit the point of no return the minute they first met James T. Kirk.

Were they ready? Probably not. But when had that ever stopped them before? When had—

“Oi!” A high-pitched voice shouted from behind them. They turned and faced a small, squat alien in black velvet robes who looked an awful lot like an angry turnip. “Move it or lose it, pals, you’re blockin’ up the whole entrance!”

“Our apologies.” Spock replied politely, pushing the golden door open wide and ushering them inside. Jim glanced around the large lobby and broke into a grin when he saw a pile of wooden boxes stacked next to a bookshelf in the corner.

“Hey, Spock! They’ve got chess.”

***

New Vulcan

The old cowboy waited in the garden at dawn, watching the wistful, waking sun breach the horizon. Another long hard night had come to a close. His children might finally get some sleep now.

Well…except for one.

Ambassador Spock turned to find Wicks McCoy staring at him from the kitchen window. She didn’t turn away when he noticed her, she just kept staring as if daring him to do something, anything, that would give her an excuse to burn down the house. She even had a box of matches in her hand. Spock heaved an indulgent sigh.

He probably should have expected this. Wicks had inherited her obsession with his wellbeing from her grandfather. Leonard had gotten quite…forceful, in his old age. Spock knew he was at least partially to blame. He hadn’t been around much during those final years. At the time he had rationalized his behavior by telling himself that his work on Romulus was too important to neglect and too volatile to manage from afar, which was true, but the truth was also that he had been afraid to
lose Leonard McCoy. If he was being especially honest, he had been afraid of not being enough for Leonard during that time, of being compared to a warm, compassionate long-departed friend like Nyota (...or Jim…) and coming up short. Leonard, of course, had seen Spock’s fear even when Spock himself could not admit it, and of course had misinterpreted it as an early warning sign of the terrible depression that had occasionally led Spock to Gol in the past. In those days, it had just been Leonard and the three sisters living alone in the house in Riverside. By the time Spock finally returned home, a mere five months before Leonard’s death, the good doctor had taught (Brainwashed? Manipulated? Conditioned?) the girls to be good little soldiers in the Army of Spock, completely and totally dedicated to his physical safety and his emotional stability.

Spock had spent decades trying to undo Leonard’s work, but since he was being especially honest today, the truth was that he had never tried that hard.

The truth was, Leonard had been afraid too, afraid of what would happen to Spock once he was gone. Leonard had been the person who held Spock together when they lost Jim, the only person in the infinity of the multiverse who could even come close to understanding. Maybe it was his way of grieving, maybe it was an effect of the unique bond they shared, but as the years went by Leonard started doing some of the little things that only Jim had ever done for Spock, things like finding ways to send him a birthday present even when he was undercover, reminding him about important dates and comming regularly to make sure Spock was up to speed on all the gossip even though Spock always insisted he had no interest in such tawdry affairs. And Spock had started showing up on Leonard’s doorstep at midnight with a bottle of Romulan Ale or Saurian Brandy, just to talk. On one such occasion, they had talked about how when they did these little things for each other, it felt like some small part of Jim was still alive and with them.

Leonard didn’t want to take that piece of Jim with him when he died. So he had given it to Wicks and her sisters. Which was why Spock had never been able to fully commit to ending their fixation. Even after all these years, he could not bare to leave his t’hy’la behind.

Which was all well and good most of the time, but Wicks was alone and showing signs of slipping from one identity to the next, and Spock was gravely concerned. He raised a hand and beckoned to her. Reluctantly, she turned away from the window and emerged a few moments later from the back door.

“Do you require something?” She asked him stiffly, still clutching the box of matches in her left hand.

“There is something important you need to tell me.”

“I do not know what you—”

“Where are your bond-sisters, Wicks? Where are Edith and Baba?”

Wicks was quiet for a very long time, and Spock’s heart sank. Of course, he had expected this ever since he’d sensed Wicks arrival on New Vulcan, knowing that only death would have kept her bond-sisters away while she came for him, but confirmation was very different from suspicion. “Do not ask me that.” She said finally, her voice taut with unseemly emotion.

“Child, if—”

“No. You left us. You left Edith even though she was sick. You do not get to know what happened. You do not have the right.”

Spock turned so that she would not see the darkness that passed over his face. Her rejection was
painful, if understandable. The sisters had been the closest thing Spock ever had to children of his own, at least before coming to this new universe. He should have been there for them when they needed him, but he had failed. Again. He had reasons, but he always had reasons. He had logic on his side, but he always had logic on his side. He was confident that he had made the right decisions, but he was always confident. These facts did not change his sorrow and regret.

“Very well.” He said softly. “I will not ask about your sisters again, but we do need to discuss your bond. Are you aware that you are displaying symptoms associated with carrying a katra? I am concerned for your mental health.”

Wicks winced visibly. “I am fine.” Spock gave her a knowing look and she sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I did not make the same mistake Poppa made when he was carrying your katra, if that is what you are implying. And I am not carrying their katras, exactly. We did not… I was not with them, when it happened. But there are…empty spaces, where they used to be, and…sometimes I have the thoughts they would have had, or say the things they would have said. And I can still hear them, talking in my mind like we used to do through the bond.”

Spock nodded, urging her to go on. Wicks shifted uncomfortably.

“It is worse when I am agitated or isolated. I can usually tell which voices do not belong to me, but when I am alone the…” She struggled to find the right words. “The empty spaces fill up. Do you understand?”

“Not entirely.” Spock admitted. “But that is because there are so many unknowns.”

“Singing helps.” Wicks muttered, staring at the ground. “If Wicks is singing Edith and Baba cannot get through.”

“Do you want that?” Spock asked. “Do you want to erase the empty spaces and silence the voices?”

Wicks’ head jerked up with alarm. “No!” She gasped. “I just want them to shut up sometimes!”

“Edith?” Spock asked, with a twinkle in his eye. Wicks’ face immediately smoothed into a serene calm.

“…That did sound like her, but it is still me talking.” Wicks sighed and tapped her temple with a long finger. “I am the only one left up here, even if it does not always seem that way.”

“Has anyone else noticed your struggles?”

“Yes, many times, but they do not know the root cause. They know something is wrong, but they cannot tell what it is. I seem to make people uncomfortable.”

“Except for T’sing.” Spock pointed out.

Wicks became thoughtful. “That is true…T’sing has seen what is left of my bond. She does not mind. She thinks it makes me like her.” Wicks looked at Spock questioningly. “Does it?”

Spock frowned, wondering. “No two broken bonds are alike, and T’sing’s case is especially complicated because of Sybok’s involvement, but there may be similarities. I know Leonard read Sybok’s research after your bond was first formed and you required help stabilizing it, but I do not know if he utilized any of that research.”

“If he did, I would not know. I was unconscious for most of that…Spock?”
“Yes, child?”

“Is this normal? Is this what it normally feels like when your bond is broken?”

Spock paused for a long time before answering. He had wrestled with that same question for many decades. “To the best of my knowledge, you and I are the only Vulcans who have ever successfully built an interspecies triumvirate bond, and also the only ones to survive it breaking. We get to decide what ‘normal’ means for us. If you want to learn how to control your voices more effectively without silencing them, I will help you do that. If you want something else, I will help you with that too. The quality of your experiences is your choice, and yours alone.”

“…Spock?”

“Yes, child?”

“We still need to talk about the house.”

“I assure you, your concern is misplaced.”

“My concern is completely justified, and you know it.”

“Perhaps, but it is still misplaced.” Spock smiled gently. “Do you remember when I brought you home after your mother passed?”

“Of course.”

“You were broken. Oh, you were injured and traumatized and grieving, but it was more than that. Up until that point you had spent your whole life travelling from planet to planet, civilization to star system, always hiding your true identity. You were the child of professional spies, and their lifestyle had taken a severe toll on you despite your Vulcan advantages. You did not seem to know who or what you were.”

“I remember.”

“But then, when I came back home a few months later, you had utterly transformed. You were happy, in a way I had never seen a Vulcan child be happy. Yes, much of that was the influence of your sisters, but the cause of your happiness was also the place. The house in Riverside was special, it gave you room to grow and play. There were places to hide when you were frightened, spots to sit and read a book in the sunshine. You watched thunder storms from the attic window, you played make-believe games in the barn. No matter how many people came to the house, there was always enough room. It was a place people returned to when they were in trouble, or needed some peace.”

Spock turned and looked back at the orphanage. He could see the shadows moving in the windows as his charges began to prepare for the day. “These children have lost so much. When the High Council first asked me to open this orphanage I was uncertain if I would be able to help them. They were so lost and broken they reminded me of you. I wanted to give them a home the way Leonard had given you a home. I did not know what else that could look like, so I built the house from Riverside.” He turned back to Wicks and offered her a smile.

Her face softened. “So it has nothing to do with Kirk?”

_In a way, everything I do is either for or because of Jim._ “No. It has nothing to do with him.” After a moment of thought, he added: “The house is not completely identical. I made some adjustments. The hot water functions consistently, for example, and there is no fire pit behind the barn.”
“That is for the best.”

“I agree.”

Wicks sighed. “Okay. I suppose I can understand that. Maybe I overreacted a little—”

Suddenly, the world exploded.

Black shuttlecrafts filled the air above their heads as people wearing armored uniforms propelled down into the garden, cocking military-grade phasers with built-in deflector shields and pointing them at the pair of Vulcans standing, dumbfounded, on the grass. Spock turned towards the house but before he could take one step a phalanx of officers trotted around the side, circling them. He could see the children gathering in the windows, he could see the shock and alarm in their faces.

“GET ON THE GROUND! GET ON THE GROUND! HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM!” Someone bellowed at them.

“What is the meaning of this?” Wicks tried to ask, but Spock grabbed her sleeve and dragged her down on the ground next to him. “What are you doing?” She hissed.

“Following orders.” He glanced meaningfully towards the house and when Wicks followed his gaze she could see the children’s pale faces. As she watched, T’sing came to stand behind the children. T’sing took one look out the window and started gesticulating wildly. Wicks couldn’t tell what she was saying, but she seemed extremely upset. Wicks swore. She and Spock had gotten out of tougher situations back on Romulus, but they couldn’t risk starting a fight when they had so many vulnerable people to protect. So instead of fighting, she kept her head down and her hands up.

Do not fight, T’sing had told her the night before. Fighting will only make it worse.

Then someone said: “What the hell is this woman doing here? You, get her out of here! You, secure the prisoner!”

Someone grabbed Wicks and hauled her to her feet, shoving her towards the house. “Get in there.” A deep voice growled. She twisted around, trying to see what was happening to Spock.

“What are you doing? Let him go!” She demanded furiously.

“He’s being arrested for crimes against the Federation.” Her captor growled, still shoving her towards the house. He was human and she could have easily overpowered him, but she was remembering T’sing’s warning. “Don’t make a fuss unless you want to join him.”

Perfect. Wicks shifted so that she could elbow her captor in the stomach and make a run for Spock. There were too many of them to defeat but if she caused some trouble at least she’d be able to stay with Spock. But before she could move she heard his voice calling out over the bedlam: “Breakfast is at 7:30! Ask Suvek to help you find things! The lesson plans are in my study!”

The children. Someone has to stay and take care of the children. Wicks paused, just for a moment, unsure, uncertain, undone. They were almost back to the house, if she left the garden and they took Spock… “Who authorized this?” She demanded. “I will contact the Vulcan High Council immediately and—”

“Go ahead.” Her captor laughed. “It won’t do you a lick of good anymore. The High Council’s gone.”

“What?”
“Word of advice, little lady. Read the news.”

They had reached the back porch. Her captor gave her a mighty shove and Wicks went flying, slamming down hard on the wooden planks. When she pushed herself up again, the black shuttles and the men with phasers were gone, and they had taken Spock with them. A lone figure lingered on the other side of the garden next to the barn. Wicks realized he must have been hiding there for some time.

“You.” She spat.

Stonn took a step closer. “Hello, McCoy.” He said, spreading his lips wide so that she could see all his teeth. “The weather is affable. You have hair. Did you miss me?”

“You did this.” She accused him, ignoring his bizarre ramblings. “Why?”

Stonn closed his lips. “You seem confused. I am not the villain in this situation. I alerted the authorities to a criminal in our midst. I am the ethical one. The logical one.” His eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “Not that I would expect someone from your universe to understand.”

Wicks felt fear trickle through the back of her mind. “You know who he is. How?”

The lips spread once more. Wicks really wished he’d stop doing that. “Spock told me. He tried to hide it from me but...he was not strong enough to resist.”

The fear in Wicks’ mind was getting stronger. Her thoughts, already jumbled from the drama of the last 24 hours, were starting to melt together and she was quickly losing sight of who exactly she was and what precisely her intentions were. “Resist? What did you do—oh...Stonn…”

Stonn kept walking towards the house. “And now, I have come to take back my friend. Bring me T’sing, and maybe I will spare you and the rest of the inhabitants of this domicile.”

After losing Spock so suddenly, the threat to T’sing was too much for Wicks to bare and she finally snapped. The box of matches was still in her hand. She chucked it with all her strength at Stonn’s head, and it hit him right between the eyes. He stumbled back a step, momentarily confused rather than hurt. Well, Wicks could fix that.

Inside the house, T’sing was smiling her vacant smile and gathering the children close to her. “Do not fret, my sweets.” She cooed. “She will keep us safe from the bad man.”

The children looked at each other and wondered what the hell was wrong with the women Spock had just left them with. Outside, they could hear a voice roaring:

“You ever wondered what happens when you put a Klingon mind in a Vulcan body, sunshine? Cause you’re about to find out!”

***

Hi!

Wow. Okay. A lot of stuff was going on in this chapter, huh?

I hope Wicks makes more sense now. There is eventually going to be a time when she stops being
three character voices rolled into one, but that probably won’t happen for awhile. And yeah, that little Sybok mention from the Ambassador was pretty important, so remember that. ^_^~

Little known fact: Originally, I wanted Wicks to be Saavik, but Saavik had too much canon backstory for me to do what I wanted to do, so I took the name Wicks from an earlier version of Saavik’s character. (see second paragraph under Origins and Concept: http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/Saavik)

BUT HEY! Now we are down to only ONE more Wicks-related surprise! So expect to see a little less of her and T’sing, at least for a few chapters.

We’re also getting close to the end of Act II. I hope to get a lot of writing done over the next few weeks before school starts up again, and the story will be moving pretty fast from here on out. Stay tuned!

As always, questions and comments are both welcome and desperately craved with the force of a thousand suns ALL SHALL BOW BEFORE THE GODS OF FANDOM!

(Chorus: All shall bow! So that the gods might grant us a bountiful comments section! Hurrah! Hurrah!)
The Fortune Teller

Disclaimer:

Author: Ok, I think I’ve got everything figured out. What I need you guys to do is stand on top of this overturned wheel-barrow and shout really loudly “THE AUTHOR OWNS STAR TREK!”

Kirk: Yeah, that sounds like a trap.

Author: Whaaaaaat? No. Of course it isn’t a trap. I would never try to trap you.

Spock: If this is not a trap, why is there a large net suspended over the wheel-barrow and why are you standing next to a suspicious lever?

Author: …it’s not a trap.

Mr X: I will gladly sacrifice myself to the obvious trap if it will help. (Mr. X climbs onto the wheelbarrow) THE AUTHOR OWNS STAR TREK!

(Suddenly, the Evil Robot crashes through the walls)

Evil Robot: The author does not own Star Trek or any related intellectual property! All liars must be eradicated!

(The Author pulls the lever and the net falls over Mr X. The Evil Robot rolls back out the Evil Robot shaped hole in the wall)

Author: …okay, maybe that plan wasn’t as great as I thought it was.

***
“Namaste, aloha and nanu-nanu to all the kinfolk out there! You’re listening to the Midnight Howl with Howlin’ Jack and Nitevid.”

“That’s spelled K-N-I-G-H-T-Space—”

“Don’t be a dork, Dave. Anyway, folks, we hope you’re pumped cuz we’ve got a great show ahead. We’re broadcasting live from the dungeon here at Rand Studios.”

“I’d like to apologize to our listeners for the sound quality tonight. There’s a—”

PLIP

“Leak somewhere in the studio and—”

WHOOSH

“Um…it’s a gas leak so that’s why it sounds like…”

WWRUUUU—

“…Our studio is the boiler room.”

“For those of our listeners who don’t know, a boiler room is an archaic chamber containing machines that—I dunno, boil water or something? All we really know is that they’re big and loud and really hot.”

“Not quite, Howlin’ Jack. We also know that mega-trillionaire Hector Rand, owner of the Milky Way Network and Supreme Overlord of the airwaves, uses this boiler room to heat his Ancient Turkish Baths. For those of our listeners who don’t know, an Ancient Turkish Bath is basically a heated pool but with more rules.”

“Also, we know that our producer said he didn’t care what we did so long as we did it in here where we wouldn’t be in anybody’s way. And that, Nitevid, is exactly why the bourgeois imperialists will ultimately fail! Because they cannot begin to conceive of the heights of ingenuity to which we can soar even when they clip our wings!”
“For those of our listeners who don’t know, wings are used to sustain the trajectory of a physical mass through a gaseous atmosphere. Also, our show may or may not have been “canceled” last week, but what does “canceled” even mean when they still let us take our microphones down here, huh?”

“Damn straight! I mean, they were also pretty distracted…”

“They were, yeah…”

“I mean, there’s a lot going on…”

“Yeah…anyway, Howlin’ Jack, speaking of, uh, flying high, that’s what our first band is all about.”

“That’s right, Nitevid. These girls came out of nowhere a couple of years ago and they’ve been upending the establishment since day one. Born on Betazed, these young ladies are revitalizing the grunge punk genre and giving new meaning to the word empath.”

“Midnight Howl presents I Can Feel Your Rage by the Tough Titties!”

I can feel your rage!

You can try to hide it with your false smiles!

And your DARK SHADES!

But I can FEEL YOUR RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—

Click

“Hey, I was listening to that!”

“Sorry, sir, but the game is on and other customers were complaining about the noise. Honestly, most folks around here don’t even know what quantum-radio is, so no one really listens to it. Only reason we even have the set is the owner says antique technologies class up the joint. Let me know when you want a refill.” The unsympathetic bartender turned away and left Jim frowning into his drink.

They were still waiting at the hotel, but for what Jim couldn’t say. He had asked. Ruth hadn’t answered. He sat next to McCoy at the bar and waited for Spock to be done examining the bookshelves, while all three of them waited for Ruth to give the signal that it was okay to start talking to people. Ruth and her crew sat on the other side of the hotel, keeping an eye out for whoever it was they were waiting for. At the other side of the bar, a diverse group of aliens clustered around a small communications display watching some kind of athletic competition Jim couldn’t identify. People came in and out, walking across the lobby and heading up to their rooms, but they avoided eye contact and did not linger long. Occasionally someone would walk in with a weapon poking out of their pocket and one of the lobby assistants would run over and mutter something quietly and the weapon would be promptly turned over without argument. Jim took all of this in, wondering what it meant.

Part of him wanted to get on with things already. Why were they wasting time in this gauzy hotel
lobby with its suspiciously mysterious clientele? He understood that the Graysons had business to attend to, but his business was to be out there on the street, hunting down Sybok. Kicking down doors and taking names. Asking questions, and then banging skulls when asking questions didn’t work. But the Graysons had rules about asking questions. The first was *Don’t Ask Questions* but the second was *Don’t Answer Questions Either.*

“Jim.” Spock had finished with the bookshelves and reappeared at Jim’s shoulder. They had all agreed to use only first names until they were safely back in Federation space. Jim turned and looked up at his Vulcan. Spock nodded meaningfully towards the door. “Something is happening.”

Jim twisted around in his seat so that he could see what Spock was indicating.

A diverse group of aliens had gathered near the door, jostling each other and whispering excitedly. Jim glanced back at the Graysons, but they were still sitting quietly at a table by the window and hadn’t acknowledged the commotion.

“Let’s go check it out.” He said, sliding off his stool. McCoy sighed balefully, but followed suit without complaint.

The three men headed towards the doorway. As they got closer, they could hear a high-pitched voice shouting over the commotion.

“Well my name is Momp and I’m here to say
We don’t care if your money is green or grey!
My crew never asked for a raise
So I’m making profit all damn day!”

And then a chorus of voices shouted:

“Profit! Profit! All damn day! Profit! Profit! Hey hey hey!”

“What the hell?” McCoy asked, speaking for everyone. They pushed their way to the front of the crowd to find a group of Ferengi standing on the hotel steps, awkwardly rhyming in the general direction of the moderately amused audience that was starting to form on the street below. A few people were whistling; a few more were starting to laugh.

“I do not comprehend this event even as I observe it.” Spock mused. “Fascinating.”

“I think they’re rapping.” Jim responded slowly, crossing his arms and cocking his head to the side.

“Ferengis don’t rap.” McCoy grunted.

“Not very well, anyway.” Jim grinned as the chants of “profit” faded away.

“Lords and femmes! Otherfolk and gentlebots! Give it up for Ordas!” The Ferengi who had identified himself as Momp handed the microphone to the shorter Ferengi standing next to him. The Ferengi named Ordas blushed dark brown and coughed nervously into the mic. Momp nudged him in the side with his elbow. Ordas squeezed his eyes shut in blatant terror, then opened his mouth. As the verse fell out in a furious avalanche of pent-up emotion, an amused hush fell over the crowd.

“I did everything a good Ferengi is supposed to do
Better latinum in my pocket than drink or food
I bought and sold, hustle ammo like I’m told
All these bodies for a little bit of gold
Never really knew any other way
Never thought what I did every single day
Could be wrong, made me rich and strong
I thought that made it okay until one day
I met a man unlike any other
Had a plan, made a stand and he called me brother
No gold, no guns, no ship, no silver
Already out of line then he asks about my mother
And all of a sudden my mind is blown
A whole new universe has been shown
For the first time ever I can clearly see
What all this profit has been costing me!”

As the last bellowed syllable ricocheted off the rooftops a bluster of applause rose from the reasonably entertained audience. It was clear that Ordas had at least made an effort, which was more than could be said for most of the buskers on Avalon, who were by and large a sorry, hopeless lot. There were more whistles than laughs this time, none of them jeering.

Jim frowned thoughtfully. “…That was unexpected.”

“Jim…” Spock murmured.

“Yeah, I heard it.”

“Heard what?” McCoy asked, squinting at them. “I could barely understand a word of that. What did you hear?”

Jim leaned in so that he could whisper in McCoy’s ear. “It sounded like he was talking about You-Know-Who.”

McCoy blinked. “Who?”

“You know…”

“I don’t, Jim, and you’re not helping me figure it out.”

Jim glared at his friend. “You’re being purposefully obtuse.”
“I am not.”

“It certainly seems that way, Leonard.”

“Stay out of this, Spock. And don’t call me Leonard. It makes my skin crawl.”

“We agreed to use first names while—”

“Argh! Fine, fine, call me whatever you want, I don’t care.” McCoy rolled his eyes. “Wait, so who were they talking about?”

Before Jim could respond, the Ferengi named Momp started speaking into the microphone once more. “Thank you, thank you, everyone, you’ve been so kind! We hope you enjoyed those selections from our very first album titled Help! A Vulcan Did Something To Us which will be available for purchase in this here hotel lobby until supplies run out! Featuring hit singles such as We Are All Very Confused and But Seriously, What Are We Even Doing This For! Make sure to buy your copy now, before it becomes a collector’s item!”

“Oh.” McCoy said. “I figured it out.”

“I’m glad you had such luck.” A voice drawled from behind them. “But I still have a couple questions.”

They turned to find that Ruth had joined them in the crowd. Her brow was furrowed and her face looked sterner than usual.

“You just love sneaking up on us, don’t you?” Jim asked her. She appeared to think about it for a moment.

“It is one of the bright spots of my day, yes.” She eventually acknowledged. “However, right now I am more concerned with the fact that my long-term business associates are making public spectacles of themselves mere moments before our rendezvous.”

Jim looked from her to the Ferengis. “They’re your contacts?”

“Not for long.” She muttered darkly, glaring at the crowd that was still hanging around while the Ferengis packed up their equipment. “This kind of attention isn’t good for business. You boys should go wait inside. We’ll be with you in a few moments, after my associates and I have had a little chat.”

Jim was sick of being kept in the dark and he opened his mouth to say so, but before he could get a word out McCoy and Spock had each grabbed one of his arms and were dragging him back into the hotel. “What are you doing?” He demanded.

“The Graysons do not approve of your questions about their business practices.” Spock reminded him gently. “Even if you were to ask, it is unlikely that Aunt Ruth would answer.”

“And they might actually tell us things if you’d stop interrogating them all the time. Your curiosity is making people nervous.” McCoy added. “You’re too used to being the first to know everything, Jim. Time to wait your turn like the rest of us poor schlubs.”

Waiting was harder than Jim wanted to admit. Kicking his heels at the hotel bar, he was reminded of how angry Bones had been when he thought Jim had kept things from him. Now that he thought about it, they had never really talked about the argument they’d been having before Bones got kidnapped. It had happened a little over a month ago by now, though so much had happened it felt more like two years than one month. Jim swiveled his stool around so that he could stare at the back
of Spock’s head as his Vulcan investigated the athletic competition still playing out on the communications display on the other side of the lobby.

Jim wondered if Spock was also thinking about what had happened after their interrupted meditation lesson…

Probably not. He seemed pretty focused on the game.

Awareness came flooding back when the warm, breathing, heaviness wrapped up in Jim’s arms shifted. His eyes snapped open and he began to pull away. “Sorry.” Jim muttered, too content to muster more than a modicum of remorse. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

Spock ran a hand down Jim’s side from his shoulder to his hip, lingering at the band of skin that had been revealed when Jim’s t-shirt rode up his waist while they slept. “You required rest.”

Jim shivered under Spock’s hand. “Yeah, I haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“Why?”

“I—” Jim’s mouth snapped shut. He hadn’t been sleeping well lately because he kept having nightmares about Spock dying, and they had only gotten worse since Spock was attacked. But for some reason he didn’t want to tell Spock about the dreams. “It’s just stress.” He said a little too quickly. “Nothing to worry about.”

He felt Spock stiffen slightly. “I shall inform Doctor McCoy immediately—” Spock started to say, pulling away from Jim and looking towards the doorway.

“No!” Jim’s arms tightened around Spock’s waist, holding the Vulcan flush against his body and keeping him there. The hammock swayed, rocking them gently. “Don’t go. I’m fine now. You saw it yourself, I was fast asleep with no problems.”

“Indeed…” Spock didn’t sound convinced. Jim decided it was time to change the subject.

“What about you? Have you been sleeping okay after…?” He couldn’t bring himself to actually mention Stonn or the attack. Luckily, with Spock’s fingers still tracing along his exposed skin, he didn’t need to.

“I am recovering adequately, Jim. I am grateful to Doctor McCoy for his assistance, unorthodox though his methods were.” Spock pulled away a little bit so that he could look Jim in the eyes, and this time Jim let him. Spock was frowning slightly. “You are still deeply disturbed by what happened.”

“Yeah, well, it was deeply disturbing.” Jim croaked.

Spock’s frown deepened. “I am not eager to discuss the incident, but if it would help you process your reaction to the event—”

“That won’t be necessary.” Jim interrupted, voice firm. “I don’t…it’s your thing, Spock. If there’s anything I need to know, you’ll tell me. I trust you.” And if I had done that all along, you never would have been attacked in the first place.

Spock quietly stared at Jim for a long, uncomfortable moment. Then, without saying a word, he swooped in and caught Jim’s lips with his own. The kiss was soft and gentle and insistent and when
Spock pulled back a moment later Jim almost wanted to cry. Jim blinked a few times to clear his head before asking, “What was that for?”

“Some thoughts are better communicated through acts of physical affection than spoken language.” Spock explained, his eyes twinkling. “You taught me that.”

“I see.” Jim grinned. “Have I taught you anything else?”

Spock kissed him again, slipping his tongue past Jim’s lips and exploring the contours of his mouth. Jim moaned as all cogent thoughts fled his mind and all he had left was the burning need. He tightened his arms around Spock’s waist and tried to flip them over so that he could be the one on top once more.

WHUMP

The hammock flipped over instead, dumping both of them on the cold, hard floor in a tangle of limbs and curses.

“Jim, stop staring at Spock like that. You’re making me nervous.”

“Shut up, Bones.” Jim grumbled, blushing furiously. He turned away from his Vulcan to face his other friend once more. “Hey, do you think he’s alright?”

“Spock? He seems fine to me.”

“I mean after what happened…”

“Oh.” McCoy looked down at the mug of tea he’d been sipping, frowning. “I think he’s okay. I’m no expert, and it’s not like he’d tell me if something was wrong, but his readings are all normal.”

“I know his readings are normal.” Jim waved his hand dismissively. “But do you think he’s okay?”

“Did you try asking him?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“And now I’m asking you.”

“I don’t know anything you don’t know, Jim.”

“That’s not entirely true—” Jim broke off when he saw Mick the Dick approaching them. He wanted to ask Bones to tell him more about melding with Spock, but he didn’t think Spock wanted his loud, brash cousins knowing anything about the matter. He and McCoy got to their feet as Spock broke away from the communication display and rejoined them.

“Ma’s meeting is gonna take longer than expected, so you guys might as well get settled in your rooms.” Even speaking softly, Mick could be heard clear across the room. He held up three old-fashioned keys, wrought in an unfamiliar rose-hued metal.

“Do the Ferengi know anything about Sy—” Jim started to ask.

“Ma said she’ll give you an update after we get back.” Mick interrupted. He didn’t sound quite so
friendly as he usually did. “Don’t go wandering off on your own. We’ll be back in a couple hours, so you might as well rest up till then.”

A sharp elbow in Jim’s side prevented him from arguing as Mick walked away. Jim glared at Bones. “That was unnecessary.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Bones answered lightly. “Come on. Let’s find out if the rooms are as sparkly as the rest of this place.”

Their rooms were on the 14th floor. Spock ascertained that all three rooms contained an equal number of reflective objects before selecting the one at the end of the hall. McCoy stood in the doorway and shook his head at the decor.

“Sparkly. What did I tell you?” The doctor grumbled.

Jim ignored him. “Spock, do the windows open?”

“They do.” Spock nodded.

“Good, let’s go.” Jim grinned.

McCoy groaned. “Jim, what are you thinking?”

“Aren’t you curious? This might be our only chance to explore Avalon. Look, there’s a fire escape right outside. It’s destiny.”

“Mick told us—”

“If you want to sit in your room because Mick the Dick told you to, go right ahead. I’m going out. Spock?”

“Right behind you, Captain.”

“It’s Jim here, Spock. Remember.”

“Aye aye, Jim.”

Jim opened the window and clambered onto the fire escape. Spock followed close behind. “You coming, Bones?”

“Do I even have a choice?”

***

**Earth**

The moon wavered in the dark Iowa sky, leaking recycled sunshine across the silent, slumbering fields. The first snow had already come and gone, leaving behind a twisted mess of ice and mud.
Two figures left melting footsteps in the frost as they made their way towards a large, weathered farmhouse. Joanna, mostly asleep, shivered in her mother’s arms as the cold wind buffeted them. “We’re almost there, sweetheart.” Jocelyn murmured, though the assurance was lessened slightly by the chattering of her teeth. Her 80-pound daughter was getting heavier by the second. She wished John was still around to help carry the girl, but he had left the group a few days ago. She hadn’t asked for his reasons. It was better that way.

The windows were dark but the porch light was on, because the porch light was always on. They trotted up the front steps and Sara pounded on the front door.

“Anyone home?” Sara bellowed.

“Shh!” Jocelyn hushed her. “You’re too loud. What if someone hears us?”

Sara gazed across the empty expanse of farmland that surrounded them. There wasn’t another house around for miles. “I don’t think we have to worry about that…”

The door opened slightly and the front end of a phaser cannon appeared in the gap. Jocelyn gasped and pulled Joanna a little closer, but Sara had already stepped in front of them, placing her own body between the weapon and the child.

“Who the hell are you and what the fuck are you doing on my porch?” A voice barked from the other side of the door.

Jocelyn gulped, her eyes glued to the phaser cannon. “Winona Kirk? We met at your son’s graduation ceremony. Do you remember me?”

The door opened a little further and Winona Kirk, dressed in a plush bathrobe and pink fuzzy slippers, squinted at them suspiciously. “…Jocelyn Darnell, right? You’re Leonard’s wife.”

“We’re divorced.” Jocelyn corrected automatically.

“Ex-wife, then.” Winona tilted the muzzle of her phaser cannon towards the floorboards, but did not seem ready to put it down quite yet. Jocelyn wondered how she had gotten her hands on the cannon in the first place. She’d never heard of a phaser cannon that wasn’t physically attached to a starship before. “And who’s your friend with the death glare?”

Sara shifted nervously. “My name is Rachel Henderson. I’m just a friend.”

The phaser cannon came swinging back up. “I don’t like trespassers who wake me up in the middle of the night and then to lie to my face.”

“…Sara Grayson.”

A frown appeared on Winona’s face. “Wait here.” She instructed, and then slammed the door shut. Sara and Jocelyn stared at each other.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea…” Jocelyn said softly.

“It was your idea.” Sara reminded her.

“Well, sometimes I have bad ideas. I’m not perfect. But I’m convinced she knows some—” She broke off when the door opened again.

The phaser cannon was gone. Instead, Winona was carrying an empty glass bottle. She tossed it to
Sara, who caught it and turned it over, revealing the image of a roaring lion that had been stickered to the side.

“That kind of Grayson?” Winona asked.

“I didn’t realize you were a customer.” Sara answered diplomatically.

“More of a collector, really.” Winona pursed her lips and gave them a good, hard stare. “Alright. You can come explain yourselves where it’s warm, but you’d better have a good reason for waking me up at this hour.” She opened the door wider and shooed them across the threshold.

It was much warmer inside, and Jocelyn’s arms immediately began to feel even heavier. Joanna was already fast asleep and Jocelyn saw no reason why she should be awake for this. “Is there somewhere I could let her rest while we talk?” She asked.

“She can sleep in my room. You can meet us in the kitchen when you’re done.” Winona replied, pointing up the stairs. “Second door to the right. Just don’t touch anything. It might explode.”

“Thanks.”

She hurried up the stairs and opened the second door to the right. Winona’s bedroom was dark but Jocelyn could see that the shelves were lined with books and bottles. Deconstructed engine parts littered the floor. She carefully picked her way through the odds and ends and gently lowered her daughter onto the queen sized bed.

Joanna’s eyes opened slightly as her head hit the pillows. “Mommy?”

“Hush, sweetheart.” Jocelyn lovingly smoothed her daughter’s bangs away from her eyes. “Go back to sleep.”

“The bad men are coming…”

“It’s alright, JoJo, we’re safe here. No one is coming for us.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Okay…” Joanna’s eyes drifted shut and within a few seconds she was snoring softly. Jocelyn smiled wryly, more than a little envious of her daughter’s unbounded faith in her promises. If only she could believe her own promises so easily.

Jocelyn tip-toed back down the stairs. Light was pouring from an open doorway down the hall, so she headed in that direction. Sara was already sitting at the kitchen table, looking uncomfortable, and Winona was fiddling with a replicator on the counter.

“I’m trying to make you guys some tea.” Winona explained as Jocelyn entered. “But I hacked this replicator to generate some rare types of engine fuel a couple weeks ago, and now all the food tastes like diesel…”

“We’re fine.” Jocelyn assured her hastily. “Really, we don’t need—”

“Got it.” Winona ignored her and the replicator whirred into action, producing three mugs of tea that gave off a faint petroleum smell. She proudly placed the mugs down on the kitchen table. Sara and Jocelyn looked at each other and decided it was best to be polite. They picked up the mugs and took
tentative sips, wincing as the tea burned down their throats.

“Thanks.” Jocelyn said, pushing her mug a few inches away from her. “I’ll, um, just let it cool down a little…”

Winona shrugged and pulled a silver flask from her bathrobe pocket, pouring some clear liquid into her tea. “Suit yourself.”

“Can I get some of that?” Sara asked, holding out her tea. Winona obligingly tipped her flask into the mug. Sara took a sip and frowned thoughtfully.

“That’s not one of ours…” She said.

“It’s a synthetic. I’ve been experimenting with recipes for Romulan Ale, but nothing beats the real deal.” Winona nodded. “Hard to get, though.”

“I’ll send you a crate.” Sara promised.

“You trying to butter me up or something?”

“Maaaybe.”

“Well, I’m game. You might as well tell me what for.”

That was Jocelyn’s cue. “Mrs. Kirk—”

“Winona.”

“Winona. Do you remember the conversation we had after your son’s graduation ceremony?”

Winona frowned and tried to recall that day. “I remember the beginning of the ceremony, but not much after that.”

“Yes, you were rather…”

“I was drunk.”

“And I asked if you would walk me to the transporter. Do you remember that?”

“Vaguely.”

The reception after the Academy Graduation Commencement was a swanky affair populated by exhausted graduates and their exuberantly proud and understandably terrified family members. The Destruction of Vulcan had cast a dark shadow over the whole celebration and the fight with Nero was still fresh in everyone’s minds. As proud as the parents were, they could not shake the feeling that they were the lucky ones. Not everyone who should have graduated had made it to the actual ceremony. Jocelyn, who hadn’t wanted to come in the first place but had been talked into it, poked at her salad and tried not to think about how annoyed she was. She glared across the table at her ex-husband, who was regaling their young daughter with his latest harrowing tale.

“We dropped out of warp and there it was. The Narada. It was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever seen. Well, actually, I didn’t really see it at that exact moment. I was still down in sick bay because the last Chief Medical Officer was already—"
“Leonard!” Jocelyn interrupted him furiously. Bob, who was sitting next to her, gently pressed a hand against her thigh and Jocelyn forced herself to take a deep breath and smile. No matter what McCoy did, she wouldn’t yell at him. She wouldn’t do that to her daughter today. She would be polite and congenial and—

“I’m just talking to my daughter. Am I allowed to do that?” McCoy snapped sarcastically.

Jocelyn saw red and opened her mouth to rip him a new one, but before a single syllable had crossed her lips Bob had jumped up from his seat and was pointing excitedly across the banquet hall. “Look over there, JoJo! An ice cream bar! I bet I can make a bigger sundae than you.”

“Nuh-uh!” Joanna protested loudly, spinning around in her seat to stare hungrily at the frozen treats.

“I dunno, I can make a really big ice cream sundae.” Bob drawled. “Race you!”

Joanna giggled and dashed across the room. Bob followed right behind, but not before casting a disgusted look at his sister and her ex. “It’s a few hours, you guys. And you know how much this means to her. Pull it together.”

Jocelyn and McCoy glared at each other over the plates.

“She’s gonna be hyper after all that ice cream.” McCoy observed.

“Lucky for the person who doesn’t have to deal with her later.” Jocelyn sneered.

McCoy’s face darkened. “And whose fault is that?”

“Don’t you dare.” She spat, leaning forward. “Don’t you dare make this my fault. She’s already having nightmares from the news reports. Did you seriously think you were helping with that story?”

“Fine. Sue me for wanting to include my only daughter in my life. Oh wait—you already did.”

“And I’ll do it again in a heartbeat if you make things any harder for her than it already is, you inconsiderate jackass.”

“All I did—”

“Toddlers do not belong in an operating room!”

“And if you had been home instead of on Risa with your boyfriend, I wouldn’t have had to bring my three-year-old to work with me.”

“You had an office you could have left her in, idiot!”

“How is Atrazis anyway?”

“I don’t know. Last I heard he was going to audition for the Janeen Variety Hour.”

“Makes sense. Dumb guy, dumb show. You always had terrible taste in men, Joss. Except for me, that is. I’m awesome. I’ve got the commendation to prove it.”

Jocelyn grit her teeth. “Fine. Everything was my fault. Is that what you want to hear? You were a perfect husband and father and I’m the only one who ever did anything wrong. Happy now?”
McCoy blinked and all of a sudden the fight went out of him. “I’m sorry. This…this shouldn’t be about our problems. We’re here for JoJo.”

“Technically we’re here for you.” Jocelyn couldn’t stop herself from needling him a little more, but there wasn’t as much sting in it now. McCoy laughed and for a second she saw the man who’d married her all those years ago.

Then a man she’d never met before came out of nowhere, sat down and started talking. Jocelyn recognized him from the commencement address. And the news. And the giant posters with his face lining Starfleet Academy halls that read “WELCOME HOME HEROES!” in giant, disturbingly cheerful letters.

“Bones, you’ve got to help me. I can’t take it anymore.”

“What have you done now?” McCoy sighed.

The man shook his head. “Why do you always assume everything is my fault?”

“Because it almost always is.”

“That’s an exaggeration—” The man broke off suddenly as a tall woman with graying blonde hair stumbled over and plopped into Bob’s empty seat. Her face was red and she had a tall glass of amber liquid clutched in her right hand.

“Wha’ an exagerashun?” She slurred. “Huh?”

“Mom, please…” The young Captain Kirk muttered, shame-faced.

The woman snorted and turned to Jocelyn. “My son thinks Imma drunk. I’m not drunk. You’re drunk.” She cackled and waved her right hand, forgetting about the glass she was holding. Liquid sloshed over the top and stained the tablecloth. “Jokin’, jokin. I know Imma drunk.”

Jocelyn knew she shouldn’t laugh, but Leonard and Captain Kirk looked so horrified she couldn’t help herself. After all they had put their families through over the last few weeks, she thought they deserved to be embarrassed a little bit. “I’m not drunk. Yet.” She winked.

“Oh god.” McCoy groaned, covering his face with his hands.

For a split second, Jocelyn thought she saw…something in the other woman’s eye, but before she could figure out what it was it had vanished and been replaced with a cross-eyed leer. “Good girl!”

The woman cried, thrusting her now-near-empty glass into the air. “Bartender! Another round for me and my new friend!”

The event had a buffet and an open bar but no waiters, and so no one responded.

“Whash your name, friend?” The woman asked.

“Jocelyn Darnell.” Jocelyn offered her hand.

“Winona Kirk.” Winona responded, taking the offered hand and shaking it firmly. “Josh—can I call you Josh?”

“Sure.” Jocelyn nodded.

“Well, Josh. My son is sho useless, lemme tell you, he lost our hotel key.”
“I did not—mom. You used a transporter to get here, remember?” Captain Kirk snapped. “You’re going back to Riverside tonight. You didn’t even get a hotel room. I can’t have possibly lost a key to a room you don’t have.”

“Pshaw.” Winona waved her hand dismissively. The last few sips splashed out of her glass and soaked the table. Captain Kirk leapt to his feet, blushed furiously.

“Mom, careful!”

“I am the most careful.” Winona giggled. “None are more careful than me.” She hiccupped and grinned at them proudly. “Shee?”

Captain Kirk looked like he was about to start shouting, but something happening behind Jocelyn caught his eye and he froze. Jocelyn turned around in her seat to see a tall Vulcan wearing science blues striding towards them. She recognized him from the news too; Commander Spock, the Ambassador’s son.

“Oh no. No, no, no, Bones help he’s coming over right now and he can’t meet my mom.” Captain Kirk was stammering. Jocelyn frowned. How could he be so disrespectful? His mother was sitting right there.

“What do you want me to do about it?” McCoy hissed back.

Winona tapped Jocelyn’s shoulder. “They’re trying to get rid of me.” The older woman said loudly. The men didn’t even notice.

“Bones, he can’t meet her, not now, not after what I said—”

“You realize his hearing is so good he can probably hear what you’re saying right now?”

“Oh god, do you really think—”

“Enough.” Jocelyn stood up and glared at the Starfleet officers. “Both of you are equally terrible. Winona, my friend, would you care to accompany me to the transporter? I feel I have celebrated enough for one evening.”

“What about—” McCoy asked as she grabbed Winona’s arm and started walking away.

“You can keep Joanna until bedtime, okay?” Jocelyn snapped. “Bob will make sure she gets home.”

She was too angry to think straight as she marched across the banquet hall, dragging the drunk woman behind her. Starfleet officers were all the same. They had no respect for anyone outside their little club, not even their mothers, not even their ex-wives. But she’d be damned if she ever let him treat Joanna like that, the bastard. She’d cut him out of their daughter’s life entirely before she let him treat the girl like an embarrassment. Like a burden. Like a mistake. No, she’d never let that happen. She’d sooner die.

She was so angry she wasn’t looking where she was going, which was how she ended up walking straight into a tall man wearing an admiral’s uniform. It was like running into a brick wall. She ricocheted off his torso and bounced back towards Winona, knocking both women to the ground in a tangle of limbs and drunken curses.

“Forgive me ladies, that was entirely my fault.” The man apologized as he helped Jocelyn back to her feet. He turned to help Winona but she had already gotten up herself and was leaning against
the wall while she waited for the room to stop spinning. “I wasn’t looking where I’m going. Terribly sorry.”

Jocelyn demurred. “Oh, no, it was my fault, I’m sorry, er…Admiral?”

“Admiral Marcus.” Admiral Marcus grabbed her hand and shook it. The handshake lasted a few seconds longer than was strictly necessary and he maintained eye contact the entire time. “I hope you beautiful ladies aren’t leaving before the dancing starts. I’d hate to miss my opportunity.”

“Oh, um…”

“No such luck, Alex.” Winona slurred, draping an arm around Jocelyn’s shoulder and leaning heavily against her. “It’s my bed time and she’s my ride.”

“Winona Kirk!” Admiral Marcus blinked. He looked surprised, but somehow Jocelyn wasn’t buying the idea that her beauty had so transfixed him that he hadn’t even noticed her companion. “As I live and breathe! I hardly recognized you, it’s been so long. How are you?”

“Drunk.”

“Er…yes, I can see that. Well, maybe next time, Miss Darnell.” As the Admiral walked away, Jocelyn realized that she hadn’t told him her name. In fact, he hadn’t even asked.

“Traitor.”

The word wasn’t even spoken. Winona just barely breathed the accusation, and if her chin hadn’t been resting on Jocelyn’s shoulder at that exact moment, Jocelyn never would have realized she made any sound at all. But she did. And she remembered.

Because Winona was good. She was very, very good. She had everyone else fooled, even her own son. But Jocelyn could smell her breath when the older woman leaned in this close, and she had felt Winona shift her weight when they fell, and she noticed the moments when Winona forgot to slur her speech. Everyone else might be fooled, but Jocelyn knew the truth.

“Don’t pretend you don’t remember, Winona.” Jocelyn said calmly. “You and I both know that you were stone-cold sober that night. I don’t know what this is all about,” she gestured at the extensive collection of empty bottles that surrounded them. “But I don’t think you’re an alcoholic. I think you’re faking it. I think you’ve been faking it for years.”

Sara tilted her mug in the air. “It’s a good fake, don’t get me wrong, but a professional can tell the difference. Your Romulan Ale is a synth. No inebriating effects whatsoever.”

Winona glared at them. “What’s your point?”

“Do you remember what you called Admiral Marcus when we ran into him?” Jocelyn asked.

“I called him a mother-fucking traitor.” Winona muttered. “But that doesn’t mean anything. I always called him that. And he was.”

“Why?” Jocelyn pressed her.

Winona frowned and leaned back in her chair. “He’s dead now, anyway. Jim killed him. Or helped—I was never that clear on the timeline. But it doesn’t matter anymore.”
Jocelyn leaned forward. “What would you say if I told you someone was trying to continue Marcus’ work?”

Winona frowned deeply and sharpened her glare. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And they were working with the same Romulans who were responsible for your husband’s death?”

“Look, you’re nice girls, and I’d love to help, but I don’t know anything. I’m sorry, but you’re wasting your time.”

“And we know for a fact that your son is currently investigating these people?”

“HE’S DOING WHAT?!”

Winona’s bellow was so loud that Sara and Jocelyn were knocked back in their chairs. Gone was Winona’s carefully constructed disinterest, replaced with a vicious frenzy.

“Well, that worked.” Sara muttered as Winona grabbed the phaser cannon she had greeted them with from off the kitchen counter. When the older woman spun around, a wild look in her eyes, Sara grabbed Jocelyn and dragged both of them under the kitchen table for cover.

“WHERE IS HE?!” Captain Kirk’s mother roared. “I’LL FIND HIM BEFORE THEY DO, THOSE BASTARDS! I’LL KILL ANYONE WHO TRIES TO HURT HIM!”

“Yes, that’s the general idea…” Jocelyn replied weakly. “But, maybe first tell us what’s got you so angry, and then we can talk about what to do next?”

“THERE’S NO TIME! THEY WILL MURDER HIM! YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND!”

Jocelyn got up and slowly approached Winona, hands outstretched. “Winona. The father of my child is your son’s best friend and his Chief Medical Officer. Anything that happens to James Kirk is going happen to Leonard McCoy as well. My brother went missing after warning me that people would come for my daughter in order to hurt her father. I haven’t heard from my brother in weeks. He is probably already dead.” Her voice cracked. She hadn’t said the words out loud before. She had to take a deep breath to steady herself, but at least she had Winona’s attention and the phaser cannon hadn’t gone off yet.

“Clearly, you know more about this situation than you are admitting. I don’t know what you’ve been through, but I need you to understand that you are not alone in this.” Jocelyn said calmly, firmly, her voice cutting through Winona’s blind rage like a hot knife through butter. “I am just as frightened and angry as you are, but acting rashly will not help anyone. We must make a plan.”

Winona reluctantly lowered the phaser cannon. “…okay. You’re right, you’re right. I’m sorry, I just…I’m sorry. I get upset sometimes and…and with everything going on in the news this week, I just…but I make terrible decisions when I’m upset. I’m not used to this being something other people care about. I gave up trying to convince anyone else years ago.”

Jocelyn took a deep breath. This was it, the opening she’d been looking for, but she had to be careful. If she pressed too hard, Winona might shut down again. Or fly into another blind rage.

“We’re already convinced, so you can skip that part. We just want to know what’s going on.”

But Winona still had reservations. “What about you?” She asked Sara. “Why do you care about this? I mean, you’re a Grayson.”

Sara shrugged. “Technically, Spock is my cousin, but we’re not close. Mostly I’m here because I’m
implicated and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a penal colony.”

Liar. Jocelyn thought to herself. She had her own suspicions about Sara’s motivations, but she wasn’t quite ready to share those suspicions with anyone else yet.

“Fair enough…okay. Here’s what we’ll do. We’re going to sleep on it.” Winona nodded.

“Didn’t you just say there’s no time?” Jocelyn pointed out.

“I was upset. I’m calmer now. We’ll all sleep on it, and in the morning I’ll decide if I’m going to help you or not.” Winona gently returned the phaser cannon to the kitchen counter.

“But—”

“You’re asking me to take a huge risk, Jocelyn. I love my son, but he takes care of himself, always has. And I…I can’t fail again. I can’t do that to him again. I…like I said, I’ve made some terrible decisions. So, before I tell you what I know, I need to be sure you can handle it. I need to be sure I can handle it. I need time to think.”

“…okay.” Jocelyn agreed. Sara frowned and leaned over to whisper in her ear.

“Okay?” Sara hissed. “We don’t have time. Section 31 could show up at any moment. Plus, what if she changes her mind again in three seconds and blows our heads off with that cannon?”

“We don’t have a choice. She clearly knows something, and you won’t ask your grandfather, so this is the best lead we have,” Jocelyn replied.

“Why don’t you go check on Joanna and give me a few minutes alone with her? I’ll get little Miss Manic talking again, no problem.”

“No. No bloodshed. We do this my way.”

“Your way is slow.”

“Maybe. But it’s also admissible in a court of law, and none of this means anything if we don’t have evidence.”

“I can hear you.” Winona drawled. “And you’re wrong. Evidence doesn’t do a damn thing if no one believes you. Trust me—I’ve had evidence for twenty years.” She turned towards the kitchen window, staring out at the inky Iowa darkness with a faraway look in her eyes. “But I had two little boys at home and the only way I could protect them was…god, I made so many mistakes last time… I had to destroy my family just to keep them alive, just so no one, not even my own children, would believe me… But without belief, evidence doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

Jocelyn looked at Sara, a question in her eyes. Sara hesitated a moment, then nodded.

“Winona,” Jocelyn said softly as she pulled the old envelope out of her pocket. “There’s something you need to see.”

***

Avalon
Night arrived, but it did not bring darkness with it. The Avalon glow didn’t change much from night to day, but the light became slightly bluer and the restaurants started putting up signs advertising dinner specials. This was how the people of Avalon marked the passing of time. True darkness never came on Avalon. There was no sun, no moon, no rotation around a distant star to partition the flow of time by way of illumination and shadow. A soft glow lingered in the air itself, and if that soft glowing light had a source it could not be seen by human (or Vulcan) eyes.

Hardly anyone knew where the light came from. At the exact moment Jim was wondering where the light was coming from, only three people in that or any other universe knew the whole truth. One of them cared for the source of the light and kept it safe. The second had found out the secret once upon a time, but had considered the whole adventure quite unremarkable and had mostly forgotten about it. The third was, at that very moment, sitting in a tent a few blocks away, waiting for a special someone to find her.

“Keep your eyes peeled.” Jim instructed, speaking softly so as not to be overheard.

“For what?” McCoy muttered. “A great big sign saying Sybok Was Here?”


“I do not believe any of us are equipped to decide what is and is not out of the ordinary here.” Spock pointed out. “However, I believe one of the Ferengi we saw perform earlier has re-appeared.” He nodded towards a pub at the end of the street, where a dejected-looking Ferengi was sitting on a bench, nursing a flagon of a mysterious bubbling orange liquid.

“Perfect.” Jim grinned and headed in that direction. “Excuse me!” He called cheerfully as he approached the Ferengi. “I was wondering if I might take up a few moments of your—”

But he had to stop, because the Ferengi had looked past him, seen Spock, and immediately released an ear-splitting shriek. He dropped his flagon and began scurrying away from them at top speed, screeching: “HE’S BACK! HE SHAVED AND NOW HE’S BACK! RUN AWAAAAAAAAY!”

Jim glanced as Spock. “Do you look a lot like Sybok?”

“I do not know.” Spock replied calmly. Jim noticed that his Vulcan no longer flinched every time he heard Sybok’s name. It was an improvement, so why didn’t it make him feel any better? “I have not seen his face in many years. It is possible.”

“At least we know we’re on the right track. Come on, let’s catch up to him.”

This was easier said than done. The Starfleet officers were not familiar with the city, which seemed to be primarily built of dark alleys, hidey-holes and shanty warrens. Plus, Ferengi were small and naturally excellent hiders. After a few minutes of fruitless pursuit, they were forced to admit they had lost him. Even Spock’s tricorder was useless, as there were far too many life forms in the nearby vicinity to detect any specific signal.

“Great. Could this day get any worse?” McCoy groused. He didn’t really mean it, he was just irritated that Jim and Spock were cool as cucumbers while he was red-faced and wheezing.

“You boys lost?” Asked a deep, grating voice from behind them.

McCoy groaned. “I just had to say that.” He muttered as they turned to face the three heavily-armed
Klingons that had emerged from the shadows behind them. He braced himself for a fight and pretended not to notice that Spock and Jim had both subtly moved in front of him. Honestly, he wasn’t the one with a record of unnecessary injuries. It was as if they had no faith in him.

But it turned out their protectiveness was completely unwarranted. Just like the Ferengi at the pub, the Klingons took one look at Spock’s face and ran away. This time Jim didn’t hesitate.

“After them!” He bellowed. They took off, Spock leading the charge. The Klingons ran as if hell itself was nipping at their heels. After two blocks McCoy started to wheeze. After five, he started to fall behind. Jim and Spock were too caught up in the chase to notice. He fell behind by a few paces, then a few meters, then by a whole block. Up ahead, his friends turned a corner. When McCoy turned the same corner, he found himself running through an empty street. Jim, Spock and the Klingons were gone. McCoy looked around and realized that he had no idea where he was or how to get back to the hotel.

“Fucking typical.” He spat.

He was standing in the middle of an intersection of four wide alleys. He could go left or right, up or down. He remembered they had left the hotel and headed up the pyramid. If he kept going down it might take him back to the hotel, or at least it would take him back to the starship docks at the lowest level of the pyramid, and he was reasonably confident he remembered how to get to the hotel from there.

It was quiet in this part of the city. The shops were boarded up and there wasn’t another soul around—at least not visibly. McCoy couldn’t shake the feeling that he was surrounded by watchful eyes. “Keep it together.” He muttered under his breath as he continued downwards.

_Not that way._

McCoy froze. His head shot up and he glared into the shadows. “Who’s there?” He demanded. Silence was the only reply. His glare sharpened. Was his mind playing tricks on him? He took another few steps.

_Turn around and take the first left._

The words were not…sounds, exactly. They just sort of appeared in his head as if dropped there by some invisible telepathic presence. Which, now that he thought about it, was probably what was happening. It was, after all, exactly the sort of thing that happened to him on a regular basis. McCoy decided to ignore the not-voice and continue down the pyramid. But as soon as he lifted his foot into the air a figure emerged from the shadows.

“Please, sir—”

McCoy grabbed the phaser hidden in his slacks and aimed it at the waifish silver-skinned alien standing before him. “That’s close enough.”

“Sir, I mean you no harm!” They protested, their violet eyes wide with alarm. “My mistress sent me to find you. She feared you would be late to your appointment.”

“I don’t know any mistresses and I don’t have any appointments. Get out of my way.” He growled, gesturing with the weapon to indicate he meant business. The alien did not budge.

“My mistress instructed me to tell you that she knows the location of the Vulcan you are searching for, and that she will give you this information.” The alien explained.
McCoy was suspicious. He was very, very suspicious. First he’d gotten separated from his friends in a strange city, then he had heard a mysterious not-voice giving him directions, and now a stranger was trying to lure him god-knew-where.

But…somehow…he already knew what he was going to do. He had felt the exact same way back in the Enterprise sick bay when he decided to try a mind meld with Spock. He had a vague sense of certainty and familiarity. In the back of his mind he could still hear the echoes of T’sing’s command. Remember. Remember. It is important that you remember.

Remember what, though? He didn’t know anymore. Every time he thought he had things figured out, he just ended up more confused than before.

McCoy sighed and gave up. “Fine. Lead the way. But go slow. I will shoot you if you make me, got it?”

“Yes, sir. This way, sir.”

The alien turned around and took the first left. McCoy paid close attention as they walked, but the not-voice made no further comments. The vague familiarity, on the other hand, grew stronger the closer they got to their destination. By the time they reached the narrow alley, he already knew what he would find and he felt no surprise when he saw a large brightly-colored tent, draped in twinkling fairy lights, packed into the far end of the alley. His alien guide bowed deeply and gestured for him to enter, but he hesitated. Mysterious voices, mysterious aliens, mysterious tents, mysterious internal experiences that he couldn’t begin to explain. There was a lot of mystery in his life right now.

But what else was new?

McCoy took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

The air was heavily perfumed with patchouli, thin tendrils of blue smoke pirouetting in the inky shadows above his head. The tent appeared much larger on the inside, but that could have been an optical illusion generated by all the mirrors and glittering drapes that adorned every available surface. Stepping into the tent felt like stepping into the covetous and highly negotiable embrace of an aging prima donna.

One of the many drapes twitched to the side.

McCoy yelped, unable to contain himself when the first thick purple tentacle appeared. Then came another, and another. A huge mass of purple tentacles appeared, each one covered in throbbing hot pink suckers. A bulbous shape perched atop the tentacle mass was the head, he knew it had to be the head, though its surface was blank. No eyes, no mouth, no ears, no nose.

See no evil... he thought.

There was an ornate stand with a crystal ball towards the back of the tent. The tentacle creature squirmed over to it and paused. The bulbous shape turned towards him ever so slightly and he got the feeling he was being beckoned closer.

Acting on a hunch, he asked: “Do you know someone named Wicks McCoy?”

The blank head bobbed awkwardly. McCoy realized it was nodding.

McCoy sighed. “Okay, okay, I get it. I’m not stupid, you know?” He walked over to the crystal ball. “Wicks sent me here, didn’t she? These weird feelings started when I melded with her. At first it was just warm fuzzies about the Ambassador, but now I’m knowing things I have no business knowing
and hearing voices that aren’t there. She did something to me and didn’t tell me, right?”

Several tentacles quivered and McCoy got the distinct impression the quivering qualified as a shrug.

“Just…can you tell me how Wicks is connected to Sy—” A smaller tentacle reached out and gently rested against his lips, cutting him off midsentence. The tentacle was cold and slimy. It was not a pleasant experience. But the physical contact allowed the creature (who he now knew was called the Fortuneteller and that, though its species had no gender, she considered herself female in a professional capacity) to communicate the basic outline of a thought.

McCoy’s brow knit. “You have a message for me?” This was the closest he’d gotten to answers in a long time. He couldn’t afford to screw this up.

Bob-bob

“From Wicks?”

Shiver

McCoy figured a head-shiver meant no. “Then who? Sybok?”

Shiver

McCoy’s frown deepened. “But Sybok was here, yes? Your…friend told me you know where he is.”

Bob-bob

McCoy’s frustration, near boiling on a good day, was closing in on super volcano eruption levels of ferocity. “Then what do you want? What do any of you want? What’s this really about? Tell me!” He wasn’t really angry, just desperate.

The Fortuneteller turned away from him and caressed the crystal ball with a thick tentacle. McCoy shut his mouth with a loud click and focused on the inky depths.

A hazy figure appeared in the center of the ball, wavering at first before snapping into relative focus. McCoy blinked in surprise and leaned in for a closer look.

The figure was female. Her edges were blurred, but he could make out the markings of a Romulan warrior—a high ranking one, judging from the quality of her armor. She was staring straight ahead, not moving or saying anything. Her silence continued for a few seconds, just long enough for McCoy to wonder if this was the whole of it, when suddenly her head snapped to the side.

“What? It is already recording? Why did you not inform me? This is exactly the kind of incompetence I do not have time for.” Her tinny voice echoed, as if she was speaking from the bottom of a deep well. Her face turned forwards again. “This is a message for Leonard McCoy of the Federation, Universal Variation 3.269 Beta. Sir, you are in great danger. My name is Charvanek. You need to find me. I have what you are searching for. Look for me on the Romulus homeworld. When you find me, there are two messages you must deliver. Listen closely, Bones, because I am not going to repeat myself.”

The only person who called him Bones was Jim. McCoy’s heart sank. If this was a trick it was a damn convincing one. He listened closely.

“The first message: The man with no name came home. The second message: Moloch cannot be
trusted.” She paused for a few seconds. “That is all I can give you, old friend. Please, do whatever it takes. The future is never certain. You have to find another way. Please, Bones. For all our sakes. Find another way. Farewell.”

The hazy figure slowly melted away, leaving the crystal ball empty once again.

McCoy thought.

His first thought was that he was angry with Wicks. How dare she mess with his mind like this?! Who the hell did she think she was?! Goddamn Vulcans and their goddamn mental voodoo.

His second thought was that he was in no position to judge. This didn’t seem like something he would normally think, as Leonard McCoy loved judging others and did it all the time, and so he viewed this thought with a heavy dose of suspicion.

His primary concern was his own well-being. At least that hadn’t changed, yet. He needed to know what, exactly, Wicks had done to him and if it posed any danger. So far, the only time he had taken an action based solely on what would henceforth be referred to as the Weirdness, was when he agreed to come to the Fortuneteller. He didn’t think melding with Spock counted, since he might have tried that anyway given the dire circumstances. But what if he was being manipulated and had no idea? Was he a danger to anyone else—Jim? Or Spock? These questions needed answers, and soon. Perhaps Spock could help. McCoy decided that he would speak with Spock before making any decisions.

“She said she has what I’m looking for.” McCoy said slowly, glancing up at the Fortuneteller’s blank visage. “Does that mean Sybok?”

The Fortuneteller caressed the crystal ball once more. Another vision appeared in the depths, this time of a tall figure in a grey robe curled in the corner of what was obviously a prison cell. McCoy couldn’t see the figure’s face, but he’d never seen Sybok’s face either so that didn’t mean much. He supposed it could be the same person captured in the grainy surveillance footage from the Deep Space Six station that Admiral Nogura had given Jim. But it could just as easily be a couple of pillows stuffed in a filthy robe.

“Is there any way to know for certain if that’s Sybok?” He asked. The Fortuneteller began to quiver with her whole body. McCoy rolled his eyes. He didn’t need a telepathic connection to understand that she was laughing at him.

“Yeah, yeah, certainty is an illusion, all things are ultimately unknowable and life is chaos. Hilarious.” He grumbled. “Well, thanks for all your help. Really appreciate it. Next time just send a note instead of magically controlling my brain. Can I go now? My friends tend to blow themselves up when I’m not around.”

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Jim ran as fast as he could, but it wasn’t fast enough. No matter how hard he pedaled his feet, he couldn’t catch up to Spock and the Klingons. He tried to call out when he started gasping for air, but Spock either did not hear him or just ignored him. Jim’s lungs were already burning when the Klingons turned a corner and Spock followed them. Jim managed to put on one last desperate burst of speed and came spinning into the dark alley, nearly tripping over his heavy, aching feet.
But the Klingons had finally made a mistake and the chase was over. The alley they had turned into was a dead end and Spock already had them cornered. Jim stuck his hands in his pockets and tried to look nonchalant as his chest heaved and his lungs wheezed.

“What’s the—” pant “—rush?”

The Klingons cowered. “We’re sorry! We’re sorry! Just keep him away from us!” The biggest Klingon howled, jabbing his thumb towards Spock who was watching them with cool disinterest.

Jim smiled softly. “You boys didn’t happen to run into any other Vulcans lately, did you?”

One of the smaller Klingons visibly gulped and started to nod, but the biggest Klingon snarled. “Absolutely not! No! Never!”

Jim opened his mouth. He intended to say something cliché like “Want to try that again?” with as much sarcastic drawl as he could muster. But before he could say anything Spock had moved past him and grabbed the Klingon by the front of his clothes, hoisting him into the air.

“Spock?” Jim glanced up at him, a little confused. But Spock didn’t acknowledge him.

“What did he do to you?” Spock’s voice was low but emotionless. That didn’t fool Jim, though. He could feel the tumult of despair and fury radiating off Spock’s body like a force field.

“Put him down, Spock.” Jim ordered. Spock continued ignoring him and Jim felt the first prickle of fear in his gut.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The Klingon growled, refusing to meet Spock’s eyes.

Spock shoved him against the wall.

“No!” Jim didn’t have time to think. He was only able to react as quickly as he did because he had already noticed Spock’s inner turmoil. He threw himself onto Spock’s back, wrapping his arms around his Vulcan’s torso and hauling him downwards. They fell to the cobblestones in a tangle of limbs and by the time they had gotten back on their feet, the Klingons had escaped.

Jim and Spock stared at each other in the empty alleyway, neither quite able to accept what the other had just done.

“You very well may have just squandered our best chance to get information.” Spock said coolly. Jim couldn’t sense the inner turmoil anymore, but he knew it was still there.

“And how were you going to get that information?” Jim snapped. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I am prepared to do what is necessary to complete our mission.” Spock replied.

“That isn’t necessary. Not ever.” Jim shuddered. If he closed his eyes he could still see Spock’s pale,
motionless face after Stonn’s attack. “What if something had gone wrong? We don’t have M’benga to help you anymore.”

“I…” Spock abruptly cut himself off and looked away. For a brief second, he looked exhausted and Jim’s heart broke just a little bit. “I have to know what Sybok does to people.”

“We’ll ask him when we find him.” Jim sighed. “But until then, don’t try to meld with anyone, okay? It’s too risky.” He reached out and grabbed Spock’s hand, pulling it close to his chest. Spock’s eyes followed their fingers and Jim was relieved that Spock was willing to look at some part of him even if they weren’t quite back to full eye contact yet. “When you put yourself at risk, you are also putting me at risk. Do you understand?”

Spock finally lifted his gaze to meet Jim’s, and Jim could clearly see the pain brewing in his Vulcan’s dark eyes. “I do not understand what is happening to me. I thought I had my mind under control but when I saw the Others I lost whatever semblance of control I thought I had.” He lifted the hand that was not clasped in Jim’s and brushed it against his own temple. “I think something is wrong with me.”

Jim held Spock’s hand a little more tightly. He decided not to ask why Spock had referred to the Klingons as other. There would be time for that later. “We’ll find Bones. He’ll know what to do.”

Suddenly they heard the sounds of feet slapping against the pavement. They had just enough time to stand back up and place their hands on their phasers before Ruth came whipping around the corner. She came to a screeching halt and stared at them for a second before pointing at them with a shaking finger.

“What part of ‘Don’t wander off’ do you assholes not understand?!”

***

I know this chapter took a long time. But I will finish this fic. It might take a million years but I. Will. Finish.

See you next time! All comments and questions are welcome and encouraged.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!