Don't Stop Believing

by kianspo

Summary

The story follows Spock from his own days as a cadet at Starfleet Academy to the ‘present day’ when he’s Kirk’s first officer and the Enterprise is on its five-year mission. Essentially, the story of Spock’s first real love followed by the story of him finding the love of his life. Ad astra per aspera.

Notes

Beta: secret_chord25.

Please visit the master post on LJ for detailed story navigation. Kirk/Spock relationship is central in this work, but it takes a while to get there, so be warned. The story is very long and for various parts various warnings apply, including the somewhat explicit violence, PTSD-related themes, self-harm, explicit sexual scenes, description of non-con (not involving main characters), etc. Please proceed with caution.
Prologue

Spock hasn’t been to this establishment before, but he looks around from his barstool with approval. It’s out of the way enough for him to feel almost comfortable here. Usually people stare at him because of his uniform or his ears or for whatever other reasons. He gave up trying to uncover their motives a long time ago, merely accepting the fact of attracting extra attention. It used to upset his balance slightly, but now, he’s used to it.

Here, he’s left alone, and not in any hostile way. Spock cannot tell how he knows this, but he is certain that he isn’t in error. It is perhaps the calm manner of the bartender and the way he goes about his business, not trying to make conversation with anyone. He is almost Vulcan in his behavior, efficient and unemotional, but not unfriendly. Or maybe the feeling comes from the quiet hum of other patrons and the dignified and quick apology of a man who stumbled next to Spock’s chair as he was passing by.

The place, Spock decides, is agreeable.

He is sitting at the bar, nursing a glass of Altair Water, the most popular non-alcoholic drink in the galaxy. Spock watches the miniscule bubbles spiraling up from the bottom of his glass to the surface. The view is fascinating in its complete predictability, yet remaining an explosive diversity of trajectories. Slowly, Spock takes another sip.

He knows he’s early. It’s a longtime habit. On Vulcan, children wait – waited for adults as a sign of respect. Younger Vulcans waited for elder ones. In Starfleet, junior officers wait for their seniors. The higher the rank, the more respect is due. This meeting is both and neither, and strangely more than that. Spock puts down his glass and runs a finger around the rim pensively.

Six months. It has been six months since they last saw each other. It should be strange for a Vulcan with an internal time sense sharper than a Swiss watch to only become aware of this now. The time elapsed has certainly been eventful for him, and yet how come he hasn’t been keeping count? The captain was irritated when they were turned back to Earth, Spock recalls. It was one of those rare occasions when James Kirk’s inability to govern his emotions didn’t bother Spock at all. It probably should have.

The bartender swoops past him, heading toward a new client and asking silently if Spock would like a fresh drink. Spock is fine. His water tastes a little bitter, but he doesn’t believe another pouring will help that. Sometimes it comes from the wrong spring.

“Hey, stranger.”

It is unusual for him not to register a presence. Perhaps he is tired, though he doesn’t feel like it. Must be a simple lack of concentration. Spock swallows a self-chastise and turns to offer a greeting.

“Admiral.”

Pike grimaces lightly, looking up at Spock from his hover chair. “Please don’t tell me it’s come to that,” he says. He had been smiling, Spock notices. He isn’t anymore. “Let’s get a table.”

Spock picks up his drink and follows the admiral toward a private booth in the corner. Nobody pays them the slightest heed as they pass. Spock waits until the admiral is comfortable and then slides into the seat opposite him. Before either of them can say anything, a waiter stops at their table and places a self-assured tubby glass in front of Pike without being asked. Spock focuses on the dark-amber

Spock lifts his eyes from the table and realizes Pike has been watching him. Something about the long penetrating stare makes Spock uneasy, and he shifts a little in his seat - very un-Vulcan. Pike has always had this inexplicable ability to make him self-conscious. Now, there’s a smile on the older man’s face.

“It’s good to see you, Spock.”

Spock inclines his head respectfully once. “It is agreeable to see you as well, Christopher.” He pauses only slightly before the name.

“Been busy?” Pike asks, still grinning softly.

“Indeed.” Spock tilts his head a little.

“You look good. After so many years, you’d think I would get used to it, but...” Pike shakes his head. “I stayed over there for a while, you know,” he points at the doorway. “Just watching you. I missed you.”

Spock lowers his voice and replies blandly. “I, too, felt your absence. Most disconcerting.”

Pike’s smile dims.

“How is your healing progressing?” Spock asks. He doesn’t like the way Pike cringes at the question.

“I would think the fact that I’m still in this damned chair would be a dead giveaway.” The joke is weighed down by its bitter delivery. “Doctor Sanders says there’s another treatment he wants to try. We’ll probably start in a week or two.”

“You should be patient,” Spock says. “The injuries you suffered were severe. However, Doctor McCoy said there is nothing preventing you from making a full recovery, given due time.”

“Yeah, well. Starfleet Medical seems to agree,” Pike sighs. “I’m just so tired of this, you can’t imagine.”

“I sympathize,” Spock says sincerely. “If there is anything I can—”

“Yes, yes,” Pike interrupts him impatiently. “You’re not a doctor, Spock, which is good, ‘cause I’m tired of the doctor talk. Let’s talk about you. How does serving on the Enterprise agree with you?”

Spock can see Pike’s renewed cheerfulness is artificial, but recognizes the human’s need to change the subject. He takes it in stride seamlessly.

“My service is going well. I am... most curious, however, as to why we have been recalled at this time.”

“Don’t you mean pissed?” Pike chuckles, taking a sip of his drink. “I’d be pretty pissed if I were you.”

“I am a Vulcan,” Spock reminds him. “However, I am fairly certain that Captain Kirk shares your sentiment exactly.”

Pike laughs at this, and Spock relaxes slightly as the familiar sensation of warmth washes over him at the sound.
“I’ll just bet he does,” Pike says, shaking his head. “How’s our little Jimmy, anyway?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow at the form of address. Pike shrugs, grinning.

“He is faring well,” Spock says. “He has adjusted to his new responsibilities most satisfactorily.”

Pike pauses. “That’s a high praise coming from you,” he notes, softer.

Spock frowns, shifting in his seat again. “I am not in the habit of giving praise,” he says sharply. “In the course of the last six months, the Enterprise had been assigned twelve missions of high importance, including first contact in one case. Despite certain difficulties and drawbacks, all of them were concluded at 82.79 to 97.35 percent of efficiency. That is a high rate of success, Admiral. It is logical to postulate that the individual commanding those missions has performed most adequately.”

Pike smiles at him, amused. “I’m sorry, Spock,” he says lightly. “Didn’t mean to get you on the defensive.”

Spock feels blood rushing to his face and spends a moment suppressing a blush – yet another setback of his human heritage. He notices then that he has leaned forward sometime during his speech. He straightens up unhurriedly.

“There is no need to defend something that speaks for itself,” he states.

Pike nods. “My point exactly. Though if you ask me, it sounds like you’re a little taken with him.”

Spock tilts his head curtly in negation. “I have no personal interest in the matter. My reaction was merely an aftermath of my earlier meeting with the admiralty.”

Pike sobered instantly. “I heard they grilled you for about four hours.”

“Five point three hours, to be exact.”

“I take it you didn’t tell them what they wanted to hear.”

Spock purses his lips, staring at the bar unseeingly. “I do not understand the admiralty’s logic,” he admits. “They chose me for this assignment because of my objectivity, yet now they seem to be unwilling to trust my judgment.”

Pike stares at him still. “You can’t possibly be this naïve.”

Spock looks at him, feeling more stubborn than a respectable Vulcan ever should. “Explain.”

“The only reason why you’re on the Enterprise is because they hope you’ll debunk Kirk’s work. They couldn’t deny him the ship after he saved Earth, but there’s no admiral on the board who’s happy with him in command. They want you to expose him as incompetent.” Pike’s eyes narrowed. “They never said that aloud to you, but they know as well as I do that you’re fully capable of reading between the lines.”

“Perhaps,” Spock concedes. “But that does not mean that I must abide by any kind of unspoken orders. Particularly of that nature.”

Now Pike looks genuinely puzzled. “Why did you take this assignment? There’s no way it can turn good for you.”

Spock looks down for a moment. “I had my reasons.”
Pike sighs. Spock looks up. The human takes a long sip of his drink and shakes his head.

“I’ve lost your trust forever, haven’t I?” he asks quietly.

“You have not lost my trust.”

“Then why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“I...” But Spock doesn’t know what to say. He’s been having difficulty formulating an answer to this particular question for a while now.

“This assignment,” Pike leans forward, eyes burning with urgency, “is gruesome and it is beneath you. It’s also what separated us. Just so you know.”

Spock meets his gaze, not quick enough to cover his start.

“Christopher, are you saying...” He made an effort to take his voice under control. “I realize that the distance is creating a certain difficulty, but...”

Pikes lets out a laugh. It sounds hollow.

“Distance is not our problem, Spock. I don’t like it, but I could have accepted it, if it was something beyond your control. If there was some imperative need for you to stay away. But there isn’t. You’re hundreds of light years away from me – because you want to be. What I don’t understand is why. I didn’t understand it six months ago and I still don’t.”

“It is my duty to—”

“To do what? Derail the only captain in Starfleet who’s got the balls?”

“I am serving as first officer and science officer.”

“Oh, please.”

“I assure you, I attend to no other duties.”

“If you really believe that, you’re deluding yourself.”

“I do not believe it to be the case.”

“Then what is the case, Spock?”

They glare at each other across the table, and although Spock is aware that his behavior is unacceptable, he can’t bring himself to lower the intensity of his gaze.

“What’s happening to you?” Pike asks quietly, and Spock nearly winces. “Spock, I can barely recognize you anymore. You sound so distant over the comm, and now that you’re here, it’s like talking to a complete stranger. I miss my Spock, the one who could tell me anything. The one who used to trust me with his heart.”

Spock lowers his eyes. He is not questioning the physical inaccuracy of the statement. He is thinking of the last eight months that had passed since the destruction of Vulcan. He is trying to remember anything about himself during those eight months. He isn’t sure he can. He can give a precise account of every minute, and yet, he cannot see himself. It’s as if he wasn’t there. As if he never was.

Vulcans do not grieve.
“I’m not sure I possess a heart to trust anyone with any longer.”
The first time Spock meets Pike is in the restricted area of the Academy. A group of twenty third-year cadets is attending a special seminar as part of their command training. Spock is the sole second-year among them, though only technically. He doesn’t intend to pursue the command track, but he considers it logical to pick up a second major. After all, he is an accomplished scientist already, and broadening one’s horizons is always a noble challenge.

Spock is standing slightly aside from the others, as is his habit. He prefers his distance and is grateful to the others for respecting his wishes. He’s made no close friends here upon his arrival from Vulcan, but he’s generally well-treated and respected for his skills and expertise. He’s found humans mostly friendly, if somewhat uncivilized, and he can live with that.

They wait until an instructor finally enters the hall. They haven’t seen him before. He’s a middle-aged human male, with sandy-brown hair and numerous laugh lines around his eyes. His expression, however, is severe as he looks over them.

“Good afternoon,” he says, his voice resonating in the large and suspiciously murky classroom hall. “I’m Captain Christopher Pike, and I’m here to get you acquainted with certain ramifications of being taken prisoner.”

The hall goes absolutely still. Nobody likes the sound of that very much.

“As you know,” Pike continues, as if unaware of their reaction, “By choosing a career as a Starfleet officer, you are submitting yourselves to a considerable risk. The Federation is striving for peaceful coexistence with other galactic powers, but good intentions aren’t always enough. There is no standing peace treaty with the Klingon Empire, for example - only a cease-fire. And there are other adversaries. In the last twenty-five years, the Federation had been a party to a major armed conflict seven times. That’s roughly once every three years.”

“Approximately once every 3.5714 years, sir,” Spock says before he can stop himself. This habit of his has earned him a reputation of being a show-off, but he finds the human trait of being sloppy with their figures equally annoying. Still, he wishes he didn’t correct a senior officer without being asked.

Captain Pike, however, doesn’t appear to be displeased. He fixes Spock with a curious gaze and nods.

“Way too often, Cadet, if you ask me.” He stares at Spock a moment longer, then returns his attention to the group at large. “Given that number, every Starfleet officer must be prepared for the possibility that at any point of time he or she may not only be killed, but imprisoned. The further you will rise through the ranks, the more information you’ll have access to. That information has high strategic value and is crucial to the security of the Federation.” Pike looks over twenty young people in front of him, making eye contact pointedly. “Such information should not fall into enemy hands.”

He gives them a moment to absorb this before continuing.

“Not every power is as civil in its treatment of prisoners as the Federation. Your captors will want
information and will subject you to interrogation to get it. Sleep deprivation, starvation, and torture are all time-approved methods. You have been taught various techniques to deal with those that will not save you but can, hopefully, help. I have the dubious honor of introducing you to a warfare tradition that dates back to the beginning of every civilization, ours included. I’m talking about rape.”

The hall that has already been very still is now ringing with charged silence. Pike’s tone is serious, matter-of-fact, and it gets to the group faster and more effectively than if he was shouting.

“Yes,” Pike nods solemnly. “Rape deserves your special attention. Some might argue that there’s nothing particularly terrible in forced sexual intercourse. Certainly, some methods of torture are far more harmful physically. Well, let me tell you this. There is no other method of completely subduing a prisoner’s will, of stripping him or her of every bit of personality and respect for oneself, of breaking a person – no other method that would work better than rape. You can’t imagine how personal this form of assault is and how deeply it affects the victim. You can’t imagine, but you must be prepared. That’s why we’re here.”

Pike’s gaze slides over them again, and he nods with approval at the distressed looks on their faces.

“You need to get a taste of what you might be dealing with. Because if you can’t take it,” his voice turns stern, “we need to know it now. The risks are too great to allow anyone who can’t handle it into the ranks of command officers. What you’re about to see is a recording of a real interrogation made by our enemies. We discovered it in the logs of a captured ship. This is not an installation. These people were Starfleet officers, and it happened for real.”

He steps aside, and they finally gather that the empty space behind him that is a holographic simulator. Pike plays with the control panel a little, and then the show begins.

They are in a Klingon prison. There’s a woman there, a Starfleet lieutenant. Four Klingons are holding her down, while another one rips off her clothes. Gold shirt, Spock notes absently. Probably a pilot or navigator. He knows his thoughts are irrelevant, but his mind is obviously searching for a way to distance itself from what he’s seeing. Spock doesn’t stop it.

The woman is naked in no time and restrained, bound to a crude table. She struggles and swears, but doesn’t scream. The Klingons surround her, watching her with malicious lust, enjoying her helplessness. Their hands are roaming over her exposed body, and she writhes in vain, trying to evade them. It only serves to get more rise out of them, as they laugh and continue their groping.

Suddenly a side door opens and two more guards shove a man in. He’s also a Starfleet officer, and he’s obviously been beaten. His face is covered in ugly bruises and blood, but his eyes look sharp and immediately focus on the woman. He lunges for her and is shoved back by the guards. One of them starts talking to him.

“He’s telling him to start talking,” Pike remarks quietly. “Start talking or watch them rape her.”

The man’s eyes are glued to the restrained woman, but he shakes his head stubbornly.

“He will not talk,” Spock says, unexpectedly to himself. He can feel Pike’s gaze at him at that moment, but can’t look away from the scene in front of them.

“Don’t be so quick in your assessment,” Pike tells him softly. “In many aspects, watching this done to someone else is worse than having it being done to you. Especially when it’s someone you care about.”

In the simulator below, the man is restrained by two guards, while the woman is being raped. The
detail of the recording is astounding. Spock hears gasps and stammered curses from his classmates, as the first Klingon takes the helpless woman. Her face creases in pain, but she doesn’t scream as he ravages her body ruthlessly.

Spock wonders idly if the record has been enhanced, because it seems almost too tangible. Every expression, every groan, every drop of blood is just too much right there. Spock feels his own body shudder at every blow, his muscles clenching with every thrust he witnesses. It’s only then that he realizes his control is drastically compromised. He struggles to reinstate it, as the horrific show goes on.

The routine repeats. The request for information, the stubborn answer, the rape. One guard changes the other. The second captive sags against the wall, his face a terrifying mask of pure agony.

Why doesn’t he simply tell them what they want to know? Spock wonders, dazed. It’s not a conscious thought, but the horror of what he’s witnessing is so overwhelming that he can’t help it. Pike’s words echo in his mind unhelpfully. This isn’t a simulation. This happened to real people. It happened.

The woman is unconscious by the time the fifth guard is finished with her. The man is delirious and unresponsive. Spock shifts uncomfortably, hoping beyond hope that the cruel demonstration will now end. He isn’t sure he can take it any longer.

It doesn’t. The Klingon guard in charge checks on the woman and barks several commands to his men. Then, to the collective horror of the cadets, the guards take her from the table and bind the man to it instead. The woman is not restrained as much, now - she’s supported, unable to stand on her own. She’s brought to her senses by a hypo and opens her eyes to see her colleague taking her place.

“God, no, please,” someone in the group begs. “They didn’t...”

They did. The man is stripped naked, coming around sufficiently to understand what’s about to happen. Spock can see, can feel the utter terror in his eyes, the rigidity of his body. His veins are engorged as he struggles against the restraints helplessly. The Klingon in charge is talking to the woman now, holding her chin up so that she’d watch.

She screams when the first guard enters the man. The cadets shudder, some clinging to each other for support, some stalking away to the back of the room. There’s a whine hovering over them, and no certainty as to who’s making it. Maybe they all are. The woman screams and screams as her former tormentor now rapes her colleague. Her friend?

When the second guard moves to mount the table, she grabs her guard’s arm and starts talking, pleading with him and nodding rapidly. He calls a halt to the ‘interrogation’ and listens as she spills words he’s obviously been waiting to hear.

“I believe you stand corrected, Cadet,” Pike’s voice sounds soft and surprisingly close to Spock’s ear. Only now does Spock realize that there’s a firm hand clasping his elbow tightly. Spock can’t say for how long it has been there. “He may not have talked. But she did.”

“It’s not her fault,” someone protests. “No one can go through that and—”

“I’m not assigning blame,” Pike says firmly. “I’m showing you what you may be up against.”

“Must we watch it?” another voice, a slightly trembling one, asks.

“Yes, you must,” Pike snaps. “Or you may leave and log your resignation.”
There are no protests after that. No one leaves.

The woman continues to talk, now hanging on the Klingon’s arm. As soon as she tells them everything they wanted, they break her neck. Another guard promptly moves to administer the same treatment to the man on the table. The guards leave the room, without disposing of the bodies, and the image freezes with the broken, bloody forms in the middle. Then it fades and the lights turn on.

For a long while, there’s only silence. The cadets are standing motionless, not even blinking, barely breathing. His senses coming back all at once, Spock feels the thick smell of vomit hovering over them. He does remember vaguely hearing someone throw up, more than one person, but at the time, it didn’t register. For the first time, he doesn’t wrong his human colleagues for their inability to control their emotions. He feels sick enough himself.

Pike moves forward again, brushing Spock’s shoulder as he passes him. The captain looks over the group. His face is grim, lips pursed resignedly.

“I’m not sorry for exposing you to this,” he says, and reluctantly, their heads snap up to look at him. “What happened in that cell cost Starfleet three ships and two hundred thirty-six lives. These people weren’t traitors and they weren’t weak. They were experienced officers with distinguished careers.”

“They broke,” a male cadet to Spock’s left says, and everyone turns to look at him. He’s frightened, and therefore angry. “They broke!”

“Yes, they did,” Pike confirms sternly. “And if any person in this room truly believes that he or she would never break under such circumstances, I’ll accept your resignation now.”

Nobody moves. Pike nods.

“You only saw the record and already you’re weak in the knees. You haven’t been through this. But if you choose to be Starfleet officers, you may be. I’m not saying you will break as they did. I’m saying you might. I’m showing you the consequences. You have to make a conscious choice if you are willing to accept this risk.” He pauses, looking over their bleak faces. “Class dismissed.”

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Spock is restless.

It’s been a week since the class with Captain Pike, and he still can’t fully assimilate the experience. His meditation is fruitless. His thoughts are scattered and his concentration is lousy. The only reason he doesn’t fall back in his grades is that unbreakable habit of self-imposed discipline, which has been his constant companion since the age of four. In fact, he’s making progress – refusing to acknowledge his nervous energy, but channeling it into his studies nevertheless. It earns him another commendation for scientific achievements.

He’s still restless. His sleep cycle is disturbed, and he has no appetite. He’s mulling over the events again and again, striving for some clarity. When he does reach it, he immediately goes to Captain Pike’s office.

“Mr. Spock, come on in.” Pike looks up at him from his desk. “I’m glad you showed up.”

“Sir?”

“Have a seat, Cadet.”
“Captain, I have come to make a formal request to be discharged from Starfleet,” Spock says evenly.

“Yes, I know,” Pike nods, his welcoming smile not fading. “Thank God for that. Have a seat.”

Surprised, Spock complies.

“Hang on a second,” Pike tells him, reaching for a form and starting to fill it. It doesn’t take long, and before Spock knows it, he’s looking into Pike’s eyes again. “You request is denied, Cadet.” Pike says almost cheerily. “In fact, I’m pleased to inform you that I’m recommending you for advanced command training.”

“Sir?” Spock stares at him, bewildered. “I do not understand.”

“Of the twenty people who attended my class, only two get the recommendation,” Pike says, as if it explains anything. “You and Cadet Moira Jones.”

“Moira Jones?” There’s a mental image in Spock’s mind of a quiet, shy-looking young woman, who usually sits at the back of his computer science class.

“She was here two days ago,” Pike says. “Making the same request.”

Spock realizes his logic has just hit a brick wall.

“Captain, I apologize, but your reasoning escapes me.”

“Why do you wish to resign?”

Spock hesitates. “I have come to the realization that I am ill-suited for the service.”

“I see.” Pike smiles. “We’ll get to your real reasons in a moment. For now, let me explain my decision. We’ve been monitoring all of you closely during that last week. You and Miss Jones are the only two people who didn’t let their distress interfere with their work. What does that tell us about you?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow.

“Presumably, that we can concentrate on our duties despite emotional distress. May I point out, Captain, that it is a correct but un-telling assumption where I am concerned? As a Vulcan, I have perfect control over my emotions at all times.”

“Vulcans don’t lie, Mr. Spock,” Pike muses quietly, watching him. “At least, that’s how the saying goes. Can you tell me that the experience has not caused any lapses in your emotional control? No sleep trouble? Appetite loss or gain? No problems with concentration?”

Spock looks at him. Pike is right – he can’t lie. But his throat is tight, and he can’t voice his agreement, either. Such lapses are unacceptable for a Vulcan, and while Spock can’t deny having them, he can’t make himself admit them.

“You were affected,” Pike states, and it’s clear that he doesn’t need Spock’s verbal confirmation. Nor does he sound as if he disapproves. “As well you should have been. But you managed to keep it under control and do your job regardless. And as the days went by, you came to realize one other thing. If you were in that room, you could have kept your mouth shut. And if you survived – you could have lived with that. Is that not correct, Mr. Spock?”

Spock stares at him, too shocked to do anything but breathe. Pike’s eyes are locked with his, and
Spock feels himself pierced by that gaze, unable to hide anything.

“That’s why you want to resign,” Pike says. “You think it makes you immoral or evil. It doesn’t. It only confirms you are officer material. That’s why I’m recommending you for advanced training. If your conscience were silent, if it didn’t push you to make this request, I wouldn’t do it. The fact that you are capable of feeling guilt for doing the right thing – and doing it despite personal repercussions – tells me you deserve to wear the uniform. Command without compassion is tyranny. Compassion without will is weakness. You have both, Mr. Spock. Starfleet needs you.”

Spock stares at him in silence, his head buzzing with all the new truths. Pike smiles at him kindly.

“I think you have a lot to chew on, Cadet,” he says gently. “If you need to talk, you know where to find me. Dismissed.”

Cadet Moira Jones becomes Spock’s friend. Well, of a kind. They never took any notice of each other before. Spock preferred his solitude, and Moira was too shy to befriend anyone. They wouldn’t have approached each other now, either, except that they had no choice.

Pike’s recommendation for the two of them to continue with advanced command training while the rest of their training group was dismissed has created a lot of rather unpleasant buzz among their peers. Such distinction is viewed as strange, at best. As a result, whenever the necessity arises to work with a partner in class – and they are sharing quite a few – Spock and Moira have no one to turn to but each other.

It starts as an uneasy partnership of sorts. Moira is intimidated by Spock and isn’t good at hiding it. Soon enough, though, his ever-calm if somewhat detached manner begins to have a soothing effect on her, giving her something reliable to refer to. Spock, for his part, discovers that it is quite agreeable at times to have someone to converse with. It is a pleasant surprise to find out that Moira’s grades are relatively high in all the subjects they share, and that she is as interested in computer science as he is.

They are both scheduled for more special classes with Captain Pike where they join other cadets recommended for advanced command training. Spock and Moira stand out among this group, too, but oddly, it’s not as noticeable or distinct as with the rest of their class. Spock doesn’t spend much thought on this, anyway. Pike’s classes are simply too fascinating to let his attention wander. Mercifully, the cadets are not subjected to any more volatile demonstrations.

Pike concentrates on battle tactics, general strategy, and interpersonal relations aboard a starship. The last part is of particular interest to Spock, who still struggles to understand human behavior. Pike’s lessons on team building and the means to maintain authority without sliding to cruelty or familiarity are intriguing and, to Spock’s surprise, ultimately logical. He discovers he’s looking forward to Pike’s classes even more than to his astrophysics lectures.

It’s probably because of his diligence and punctuality that Spock ends up being the first to enter Pike’s classroom this afternoon. He steps in and immediately hears a muffled curse coming from the captain’s desk. Spock’s eyebrow creeps up, and he’s about to apologize and step out, when Pike lifts his head and notices him.

“Mr. Spock,” the captain smiles at him. “Come on in, don’t mind me. Just a little computer trouble, that’s all.”
Intrigued, Spock comes closer. “If I may ask, sir, what is the nature of your difficulty?”

Pike shrugs, staring back at his screen and frowning. “Some kids have taken it upon themselves to break through my firewall to get the questions for the next test, no doubt. It’s the third time that it’s happened. I change my codes, but it doesn’t seem to have much of an effect.”

“Curious,” Spock says, placing his own PADD to the nearby desk, and drawing closer. “Have you not reported the attempts to the Academy security?”

“I have, but those kids are obviously smarter.” Pike sighs, then smiles tiredly. “It looks like I’m going to have to resign to using quills and parchment.”

“A drastic measure,” Spock remarks, feeling strangely elated when Pike chuckles softly. “If you would permit me to take a look, perhaps I could be of assistance?”

Pike looks up at him, and Spock freezes, held by that suddenly piercing gaze.

“You’re good with computers?”

“I hold an A5 degree in computer science.”

“Impressive,” Pike says with a grin, but he doesn’t sound impressed at all. If Spock is reading his expression correctly, the captain is highly amused for some illogical reason. “How do I know you’re not the one who’s been hacking my computer all along?”

“Sir?” Spock is appalled. “I would never... That would be... Highly illogical, and unethical. Sir.”

“Sorry I asked.” Pike laughs softly, shifting to give Spock some room. “Be my guest, Cadet.”

Spock moves smoothly to look at the screen, feeling a blush creeping up on his cheeks. He suppresses the reaction violently, or at least tries to. He doesn’t know if he’s succeeding, but mercifully, the captain is watching the screen, not Spock’s face.

“Interesting,” Spock says after a minute of checking various systems. “I believe they are using the so-called kamikaze-virus, Captain. It is designed to collect the information, transmit it, and then disintegrate, leaving no traces. Effective, but not entirely reliable, as it is difficult to be precise in finding the required information.”

“Well, that would certainly explain why they didn’t manage to actually steal the questions,” Pike grunts.

“Unfortunately, it also prevents us from tracing them,” Spock says. “However, I am familiar with this form of cyber intrusion. There are means to counteract it.”

“Really?” Pike says. “Well, our security experts told me there was nothing they could do.”

Suddenly unable to look at the captain, Spock says quietly. “I could write an additional subroutine for your defense program, if you wish, sir. I am positive it would be effective in preventing these incidents in the future.”

“You’re telling me you can do something our security experts can’t?” Pike asks and Spock loses his battle with his blush spectacularly. When he finally summons enough courage to look up, Pike is grinning at him. “That’s a rather brave statement from a cadet.”

Spock straightens up, reacting to the challenge in the human’s voice almost against his will.
I ask forgiveness for overstepping my bounds, sir,” he says evenly. “I spoke out of place. Please excuse me.” And with that, he turns to leave, in blatant defiance to protocol.

“Whoa, whoa.” Pike’s voice stops him in his tracks. “I didn’t say no.”

Spock turns back to face him, clasping his hands behind his back tightly. Pike is studying him with an unreadable expression on his face.

“How fast can you do it?”

“It should not take more than two days, sir. I can have it done by Thursday.”

“Aren’t you scheduled for field training tomorrow?”

Spock isn’t exactly sure how Pike knows that, but he doesn’t allow his focus to sway. “Yes, sir. However, I’m positive that I can—”

“Friday is fine, Cadet,” Pike says, and Spock knows instantly that’s the end of the discussion. “You do realize that this work will bring you no bonus points in my class?”

Spock purses his lips. “I am not motivated by personal gain, sir. The problem presents an interesting challenge.”

“No doubt.” Pike smiles, his eyes drifting toward the cadets who are walking into the classroom at that moment. “Friday it is then. And Mr. Spock? I’ll be really interested to know what you’ll come up with.”

Spock concludes his calculations in two days. The work doesn’t take that long, but his studies and duties hardly leave him an hour a day to himself. He works at night. He didn’t lie to Pike – he does enjoy the task immensely. It is not overly complicated, but for some reason Spock feels the need to outdo himself for this one. He checks and rechecks his algorithms in between classes. He smuggles the PADD with him at his field assignment by fooling the detector. He doesn’t get to sleep in two days at all, but the subroutine is finished by Thursday.

He doesn’t deliver it, though. Despite the undeniable eagerness he exhibited while working on it, he is reluctant to let it show. It would be an emotional response. But mostly, he doesn’t want Pike to know how honored Spock feels to have been trusted with the task. Somehow, it seems... inappropriate to show his enthusiasm, even though Spock can’t discern any kind of logic behind the feeling. He spends the next day polishing his flawless design even more, and then Friday comes.

Trouble is, Spock doesn’t have a class with Pike scheduled for Friday, which means he’ll have to just ‘drop by’ the captain’s office. Suddenly, Spock is hesitant, wishing he’d have asked for a precise appointment. Moira rolls her eyes a lot at him during the morning classes, and finally shoves him bodily in the right direction when their lunch break comes.

“Just go already,” she says, her exasperation burning where her fingers grip his arm. “Honestly. You’re obsessed.”

Spock wants to protest against such a forceful treatment and to explain that Vulcans don’t get obsessed, but something in Moira’s eyes advises him otherwise.

Moira is a fascinating human in that way. She’s shy and completely self-conscious on a personal level, never drawing attention to herself. But when there is a situation, she is the first to step forward and take control of it, and nobody really questions why she was recommended for command training anymore. Spock can easily see her fifty years from now as either a renowned Starfleet admiral whom
nobody wishes to cross or the head of a large household where everything works according to her quietly spoken but stringent instructions. Spock, who had grown up under T’Pau’s sharp eye, feels an instinctive surge of obedience.

He walks along the Academy corridors stiffly, mentally rehearsing what he’s going to say. Appearing in front of the Vulcan Science Academy board didn’t feel as intimidating as this seemingly small experience. Spock doesn’t know what to make of his feelings. Moira has called them butterflies, and the analogy, while illogical, does appear to be apt. He resigns to meditate on that later.

The door to Pike’s office is open, but when Spock knocks on it, there’s no answer. He steps in and freezes in the doorway.

Pike is there, and so are Commander Martin, a harsh-looking woman who teaches Federation Law, and Admiral McGregor, the head of Starfleet Science. They are in the middle of a lively conversation and Spock feels suddenly awkward to have interrupted, even though it’s not his fault.

“Mr. Spock.” Pike notices him, still grinning at some joke one of his companions must have just made. “Come on in.”

“I apologize for the intrusion, sir,” Spock mumbles, looking down and berating himself mutely for the most irrational reaction.

“Is it ready?” Pike asks.

“Yes, sir.” Spock lifts up the PADD. “I have it here.”

“Great.” Pike nods. “My terminal’s over there. Would you mind installing it?”

“Of course, sir,” Spock says, feeling his butterflies die.

As he goes up the low podium toward Pike’s desk, the captain returns to his conversation. Spock isn’t sure what he has been expecting, but somehow he can tell it’s not this. Pike’s reaction is perfectly normal and appropriate. Spock realizes he’s making a habit of inexplicable emotional reactions to the most ordinary things. He presses his lips together determinedly and proceeds to install his subroutine.

“...Anyway, the worst reception ever,” Commander Martin is saying.

“Oh, come now, Sally,” Admiral McGregor reproaches gently. He looks incredibly spry for a man of seventy, and judging by the looks he keeps giving the commander, his thoughts are nowhere near retirement. “It wasn’t that bad. I actually enjoyed the evening.”

“Which part?” The commander frowns. “The three-hour-long speech that made no sense whatsoever, or the Regulan ambassador spilling his drink all over me?”

“He spilled his drink over you?” Pike asks with a chuckle. “Surely he didn’t do that on purpose?”

“He most certainly did!” Martin whirls on him. “I saw him coming from across the room, like a goddamn torpedo. I thought he wanted to talk about the treaty; you know, like a normal diplomat? Instead, he came close to me, all smiles and everything, lifted his glass and poured it over my head! I mean seriously, how crazy is that? I looked like a total idiot.”

“Maybe he didn’t like your hairstyle,” McGregor suggests, chuckling.
“I have no idea what he didn’t like, but honestly, since when is that sort of shit someone does at a diplomatic reception?” Martin rages. “I mean, clearly he wanted to insult me – he could’ve damn well just said so!”

Spock, who has been listening while allowing his program to integrate into the firewall on Pike’s computer, raises his head at that, looking at the humans incredulously. He has no intention, of course, on correcting a senior officer, but the gap in her knowledge appalls him. Spock’s eyes meet Pike’s suddenly, and Spock looks away quickly, not wishing to appear as if he’s been eavesdropping.

“Something wrong, Cadet?”

Spock looks up again. Of course, Pike wouldn’t let him off the hook so easily.

“No, sir;” he says. “It’s just that...” Now all three humans are watching him expectantly, and Spock suppresses a sigh. If only he had better control of his outward reactions... He stands up and assumes an at-ease posture. “The commander is incorrect regarding the ambassador’s intentions.”

Now he’s done it. Martin is gaping at him as if he was one of her shoes that had suddenly developed the power of speech and told her that her interpretation of the first amendment was wrong. McGregor raises his bushy eyebrows, regarding Spock curiously. And Pike... Pike’s expression is calm and expectant, but there’s a subtle glint in his eyes, giving away that he’s fighting back a grin.

“Incorrect?” Martin finds her voice at last. “You’re telling me that deliberately spilling a drink at someone isn’t a filthy insult?”

Spock bows his head slightly, indicating that he, at least, doesn’t mean any kind of insult by his defiance.

“Not on Regul V, sir.”

“Pray tell what the hell he did mean by it, then?”

Spock clasps his hands behind his back more firmly. “Regul V is a desert world, sir. Water is a rare and treasured resource. As such, it has a prominent cultural significance and plays a major part in many social rituals” – Spock pauses - “including the mating.”

Martin’s jaw drops like it’s been surgically detached from her face. “What?”

Spock realizes he has to choose his words very carefully if he doesn’t want to end up scrubbing floors for the rest of the week. “The exchange of liquid is considered an equivalent of a... declaration of romantic interest.”

The grin that spills over Admiral McGregor’s face is blinding, while Martin looks stunned and outraged.

“You mean that son of a gun was – I can’t believe this! – he was hitting on me?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow at the colloquialism, but confirms smoothly, “It would appear that way, sir.”

“Way to go, Sally.” McGregor loses it, resolving into laughter that he no longer tries to hold.

Pike is chuckling, highly amused as well, and the look he throws at Spock is so full of mirth and approval that Spock feels suddenly dizzy.

“Well, that’s... that’s just... outrageous!” Martin explodes; her fair coloring does little to prevent her
face from turning completely red. “And how do you know so much about this, Cadet?”

Spock stiffens. “My father serves as a Federation ambassador. I have acquired a thorough diplomatic background over the years.”

She nods, scowling slightly. “Ah. One of those.”

Spock lifts his eyebrow, but doesn’t ask for a clarification. Despite him standing right here, it is clear that the remark isn’t meant for him, and he refuses to explore the implications. Somehow, he knows they are not favorable. He looks at Pike instead, though he doesn’t quite focus on him.

“Captain, I have finished the installation of the subroutine. I am confident it will prevent the breaches from reoccurring. If I may be excused, sir, I must proceed to my next class.”

“Of course, Mr. Spock,” Pike says. Spock knows he’s being studied, but his own gaze is glazed, expression tight. “I appreciate the help.”

“It was my pleasure, sir,” Spock inclines his head, somewhat mechanically.

“Dismissed.”

Spock collects his PADD and leaves, the weight of the silence following his progress pressing heavily on his shoulders.

He isn’t sure what has affected him so and doesn’t want to dip into it just yet, even though he knows, responsible Vulcan that he is, that he will have to address the issue in meditation before long. He is relieved that his visit is over, but he also feels strangely dull, as if all the energy has been sucked out of him. He is unable to feel his usual enthusiasm at the problem his astrophysics professor has presented the class with. He works without a partner again, and he’s actually grateful for it - that is, more than usual.

The surprise comes when he leaves the classroom after the lecture is over. Captain Pike is standing at the opposite wall of the corridor. He acknowledges the cadets’ salutes as they pass him on their way out, but his eyes are fixed on Spock.

“Is there a problem, Captain?” Spock asks when it gets clear that Pike has been waiting for him.

“No, no problem, Mr. Spock. But I was wondering if you have a moment to talk me through the additions you made to my firewall. That is, of course, if I’m not keeping you from anything?”

His smile is soft, but his eyes are serious, and Spock wonders briefly at the disaccord. He also feels a strange tingling at the back of his neck, almost as if someone was blowing cool air down it. It is very doubtful, after all, that the captain requires help with the programming.

“I have no more classes scheduled for today, sir,” Spock says neutrally. “I am at your service.”

Pike’s smile relaxes a bit, and they start together for the other wing of the building. Spock doesn’t expect a conversation to begin, but Pike asks him pleasantly about the class he’s just had. Spock replies, carefully monitoring the length and detail of his response. He’s been told many times that he tends to give more information than is required. He also isn’t very proficient in distinguishing so-called small talk from serious requests for information. This time, though, he seems to have ‘hit the bull’s eye,’ because the dialogue flows easily and Pike doesn’t show any signs of boredom or exasperation as other humans often do when talking to Spock.

They arrive at Pike’s office and Spock takes Pike through the upgrades he’s made. He still has the
feeling that Pike’s request has been merely a subterfuge, because even though the captain asks him several questions, it is clear that he has a good grasp of the program.

“This is excellent work, Mr. Spock,” Pike says when they’re done. “I had the time to examine it on my own, and I’m really impressed. You seem to have excelled where our security couldn’t.”

Spock looks down at his hands. “I- It was not a... hardship. Sir.”

Pike laughs softly. “No one taught you how to accept praise, did they?”

Spock doesn’t have an answer for that. The next moment, he feels a warm hand patting his shoulder lightly and all but bolts at the sudden rush of sensation. He’s not reading Pike, but the overload caused by the very thought of what is happening is shattering. Casual contact is a rare occurrence for Spock, and he knows he’s blushing. Most inappropriate.

“It’s okay,” Pike is saying, and his words come to Spock through a daze. “It’s not like I paid you a compliment, you know. Everything I said was a statement of fact.”

“Yes, sir,” Spock replies quietly, without a clear idea of what he’s agreeing with. He lets out a soft sigh of relief when the contact is broken.

Pike chuckles, and Spock dares to look up, only to meet a kind, luminous gaze. Somehow, it gives him the courage to ask the question that has been bothering him for two hours.

“What did Commander Martin mean when referring to me as ‘one of those,’ sir?”

Pike’s expression dims slightly at his inquiry, but he doesn’t appear to be particularly surprised.

“But the commander doesn’t know you. When she said that, she made an assumption as humans often do. It’s not exactly logical or fair to you, but it’s what we do sometimes.”

“I see,” Spock says, still mildly perplexed. “But my parents aren’t Starfleet officers.”

“Federation officials and diplomats are close enough.” Pike looks at him closely. “Spock, the commander doesn’t know you. When she said that, she made an assumption as humans often do. It’s not exactly logical or fair to you, but it’s what we do sometimes.”

“I do not expect any kind of special treatment.”

“I know you don’t.” Pike smiles at him. “And you’re certainly not getting any, not in my class, Mister. Not that you need it, anyway.”

Spock looks at him and realizes that, while true, the words are meant as a reassurance. Always slightly uncertain where human emotional reactions are concerned, Spock suddenly has no difficulty discerning the humor behind the remark and the respect. He can feel his own lips curve; the corners of his mouth lift up slightly. He could check the reaction, but chooses not to. Pike’s grin widens.

“Well, thanks for your help with this thing,” he says cheerfully, nodding at the computer. “Hopefully
“it’ll stop your colleagues from trying to cheat on my tests.”

“It was my pleasure, Captain.”

Spock bows and leaves. He feels strangely galvanized and as he passes an empty classroom, the temptation is too great to fight. Spock stalks in and stays long after the darkness falls, searching for another proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem. He’s so engrossed in the process he doesn’t hear Moira walk in.

She surveys the even rows of $a^n + b^n = c^n$ and shakes her head.

“The things you do for kicks.”

Spock allows a small smile to himself.

“Indeed.”

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Pike is a challenging teacher. The problems he presents in his class rarely have one solution, and it’s always a bit of a dare to discover what he would have done in every case. The students love every minute of it, excited to be part of this elite group. Everyone knows that one has to be the best of the best to earn a place in Pike’s classroom.

Spock finds this particular class immensely invigorating. Tactics and strategy are very mathematical in nature, and he’s naturally good at both, especially since his emotions don’t get in the way of his decisions. There is, of course, an element of inspiration – a purely illogical, emotional reach for something beyond the boundaries of simple equations – but he’s intrigued to take this aspect into consideration, rather than annoyed.

“Did you know that Napoleon sometimes placed a cat on the chessboard in the middle of a match – to account for the element of unpredictability on a battlefield?” Pike asks the class with a grin.

Spock is hooked.

However, the most fascinating subject for him involves the moral implications of command. He enters several quite heated discussions on the subject with Pike and other students. The human-centrism in Starfleet’s approach to space exploration baffles Spock. He cannot understand why humans consider it appropriate or ‘right’ to judge every civilization they encounter by human standards.

“I am at a loss at how such a shortsighted, self-centered species as humans could have initiated such a diverse alliance as the United Federation of Planets,” Spock says defiantly at the end of one such debate. “Your belief that your species is supreme to everyone else in every way imaginable is as unethical as it is ill-based.”

“You are defending the culture of Belox IV, but they are just barbarians,” one of his classmates lashes out in retort. “Do you know that incest is legal there? Men father children with their own daughters!”

“Which is only logical,” Spock says evenly, “as it is a requirement of Beloxian biology. Their genes have an extremely low range of compatibility. Members of the same clan are 87.6% more likely to produce healthy offspring than cross-clan unions. It’s their natural way of preserving their species.”
“Preserving an abomination, you mean? ‘Cause that’s what it is, an abomination.”

“Because it offends your ethical beliefs? Would you rather they died out in order not to offend your senses?”

“It’s not natural!”

“It’s not natural for you,” Spock points out. “It is, however, perfectly natural for them. And as long as they don’t try to force anyone else to assume their lifestyle – which is also a biological imperative – I fail to see how your emotional reaction bears any relevance in the matter.”

“It bears all the relevance! Captain Brice should never have made first contact with them!”

“He did not appear to have a choice, seeing as his crew was dying and they had a cure.”

“Yeah, and now the Beloxians have warp drive and will spread the seeds of sin throughout the galaxy, when they should have been put into quarantine, until maybe some of our genetic engineers might have helped them to become normal.”

“You are using the same kind of logic as the human who three hundred years ago said: ‘Anyone who sees and paints a sky green and fields blue ought to be sterilized.’”

“Yeah? And who said that?”

Spock merely raises an eyebrow, and his opponent jumps because it’s Pike who answers him.

“Adolf Hitler.”

The classroom is suddenly silent.

“Well, at least humanity is consistent,” Spock says. “I rest my case.”

Pike glances over at him. “Well, Mr. Spock. It looks like we can always count on you to cut us down to size.” He winces. “Though it’s not always necessary to turn the knife in the wound, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Spock’s opponent drawls sulkily. “Save that for the Klingons.”

Spock fights back a sigh. At the end of the class, however, Pike asks him if he would like to defend a thesis on Prime Directive, and Spock is delighted, though he tries not to show it.

“You earned it,” Pike winks.

And it goes like this. Spock stays after classes, often, to continue the discussion they had started because it somehow seems absolutely imperative to present his arguments in full. Sometimes Moira stays, too, but more often than not it’s just him and Pike.

The captain likes to challenge him, but Spock is a fine debater. One isn’t raised by Sarek of Vulcan to be a weak conversationalist. Besides, Spock’s memory is near eidetic, and he is an avid reader. His knowledge is vast on a variety of subjects, and he derives strange but undeniable pleasure from bouncing his thoughts off of Pike. His respect for the captain is boundless and profound, and Spock treasures every minute in his company.

Slowly their conversations drift to more philosophical areas. Spock finds himself voicing questions he never dared to acknowledge before, not even to himself. It’s peculiar how he feels safe enough to raise them with Pike - how this particular human seems to hold the answer to every little thing that
Spock struggles to comprehend humanity, admitting if not accepting that it, too, is part of who he is. Earth isn’t his home, but neither is Vulcan. Spock knows he’s not the only one who searches for his place in this universe, but he also knows that it’s more difficult for some than for others.

His mother loves him, and so her gift to him is acceptance. And while Spock revels in it, he can’t help but think that it’s undeserved. Amanda is his mother; her love for him is a given. He knows she doesn’t understand him, but loves him nevertheless. While this is pleasant, he realizes that her love is blind. It doesn’t tell him he is worthy. He doesn’t have to be anything to warrant her love; he only has to be. But he’s not a child anymore, and he finds that, however sweet and comforting, it’s no longer enough.

His father’s feelings have always been a mystery to Spock. As a true Vulcan, Sarek never shows a glimpse of emotion. His views regarding his son, on the other hand, have always been crystal clear. Sarek did not approve of Spock’s choice of career and told Spock as much. In his opinion, Spock has chosen the path of least resistance, and Spock admits a certain level of truth here. The fact remains that his father has not spoken one word to him since Spock’s decision to reject a position at the VSA.

Pike gives him something he has never experienced before to this extent – understanding. It’s something both very new and extremely compelling to Spock. He finds it difficult to resist the pull and doesn’t, not really. In any case, there is no logical reason for him to.

They don’t only meet indoors, though.

Moira gets Spock into jogging, claiming she wants to improve her stamina. Spock doesn’t see much sense in the activity, but obliges her, and they develop a habit of jogging across the Academy grounds in the early hours of morning. It lasts for two weeks exactly, and then Moira tells him she doesn’t think it’s her thing. To his own surprise, Spock continues without her, finding the rhythmic movement meditative and soothing. It’s also an excellent way to better acclimate himself to lower temperatures.

Spock isn’t the only one who jogs around the campus, but it’s a surprise for him to cross paths with Pike one sunny morning. He stumbles, almost literally, over the captain stretching and catching his breath. Pike grins at him, waving off his apology.

“You’re an early bird, Mr. Spock.”

“Bird, Captain?” Spock lifts an eyebrow.

Pike laughs. “Just an expression,” he says, looking over Spock curiously.

Spock’s a little curious himself, as he had never seen Pike out of uniform and is strangely mesmerized by the view. Pike is wearing dark grey sweatpants and a khaki shirt of the type Spock knows the humans illogically call a wifebeater. There is a band across Pike’s forehead, presumably to prevent his hair from falling into his eyes. It’s probably illogical, but Pike looks more like a soldier now than ever before.

Pike invites Spock to join him for the final leg, and Spock agrees readily. They don’t talk much, but there’s something immensely gratifying in running side by side, listening to each other’s even breathing.

They jog together once or twice a week. It’s never prearrangement, but Spock has memorized Pike’s
schedule by now and he’s almost never wrong in his assumptions on whether the captain will join him on any particular day. He enjoys the morning rallies almost as much as their discussions in class.

And then one day it stops. Pike tells him, in answer to a cautious query, that his increased workload prevents him from maintaining his regime, and Spock nods politely and doesn’t ask further. But in truth, he suspects it’s his fault somehow. The change is very abrupt to be coincidental.

That morning, Spock doesn’t expect Pike to join him. He runs along his usual path, silently returning the salutes other joggers give him. They all know each other on sight now, people who keep the same habit. Spock reflects that it’s a little like a secret society where the members don’t necessarily know each other’s names, but feel the sense of camaraderie that a formal introduction never grants.

Spock has completed his first round and has stopped for stretching. It’s a Vulcan routine, which combines light meditation and physical exercises, a mixture of gymnastics and martial arts. Spock’s in the middle of the Tai’dun sequence when Pike stumbles over him.

“Is this some kind of Vulcan wushu?” he asks, curious, after they exchange greetings.

Spock explains about the exercise and demonstrates some basic steps. Pike listens attentively and watches Spock fixedly, which Spock finds strangely exhilarating and disquieting at the same time. He hasn’t been this self-conscious working out since he was a child and tried the movements for the first time in front of twenty other children. Fortunately, his body is so used to this activity that it can function on autopilot, all seamless motion and fluid grace.

Spock isn’t vain. He knows that he has good plastique and coordination because his instructors back on Vulcan had told him so. They also mentioned Spock’s impeccable sense of rhythm. Spock accepts this for a fact, because his body has always been extremely compliant to his commands. He only wishes his mind came under his control as easily as his body does.

There is a slightly vacant, glassy look on Pike’s face when Spock has finished his demonstration. It only lasts a moment, and Spock dismisses it as an erroneous observation on his part.

“It’s almost like a dance,” Pike says in a strange voice, and Spock gives him a closer look. The captain seems to be somewhat flushed, and his breathing is still uneven, despite the fact that he has been standing motionlessly for a while. Spock frowns, immediately concerned. These are not healthy signs.

“Are you feeling unwell, Captain?” he asks, not bothering to hide his worry. “Would you like to sit down?”

As Pike doesn’t answer at once, Spock moves in. “I shall assist you.” He reaches for Pike’s arm in order to help him down, but the captain nearly springs back, evading the touch.

“No!” Pike snaps, and Spock jerks back, befuddled. Pike notices his reaction and winces. “God, Spock, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean... Thank you, but I’m fine.” He smiles quickly for emphasis. “Really. I was just... I was just thinking. Sorry.” His grin becomes more natural. “I’ll let you finish in peace.”

With that, he turns around on his heel and jogs away, leaving Spock to contemplate in bewildered silence. After that morning, he doesn’t ever see Pike jogging again.

Spock puzzles over this, trying to figure out what cultural taboo he had broken, but the answer wouldn’t come. Pike still acts the same way around him, though, still challenging him to debate various issues and clarifying numerous aspects of humanity that give Spock pause. Spock resigns to thinking that whatever he’d done wrong can’t be more terrible than having bad table manners. The
thought doesn’t please him, but he leaves it at that.

November brings changes into Spock’s schedule. He has more field training now, including a week he spends at Riverside shipyards as part of his practical engineering studies. Moira is there, too, and while they spend most of their time with their noses down some energy coil or power juncture, she does find a way to squeeze some sightseeing in.

Most people wouldn’t find Iowa all that fascinating for tourism, but to Spock any new Earth environment is alien enough, and he doesn’t mind accompanying Moira around. He does change his mind, however, when she persuades him to go to a bar with her on their last night there.

Spock genuinely doesn’t understand this form of recreation and for once has no desire to explore, but eventually yields to Moira’s pleas. He can tell she wants to go but is hesitant to appear alone, and Spock knows that she doesn’t know any other cadets here except for him. He does, though, which for the first time makes him realize that he is not completely antisocial.

The bar Moira takes him to is called the Liftoff. Spock suspects the name has a lot to do with the proximity of the shipyards and the consequent vast amount of Starfleet personnel, mainly cadets. The enlistment office is nearby as well, which explains the prevalence of young people, in and out of uniform, discussing one and the same topic.

After the initial assault of overwhelming odors, the mass of moving bodies, and the loud noises unfathomably called music fades a little, Spock decides he could exist here for a short time. Hopefully, it will be enough to satisfy Moira’s curiosity.

She does look nervous, but happy, he thinks as he watches his companion. Spock doesn’t approve of the ever-present human desire to intoxicate themselves with huge amounts of alcohol, but he understands why Moira would want to walk this path. It’s what everybody around them is doing, and if Spock could understand an emotional craving, it would definitely be the yearning to belong.

They sit at a small table in the corner, consuming drinks and watching people having fun around them. Spock finds it to be a fascinating social study. He doesn’t deviate from his usual habit of drinking Altair Water, but Moira feels much more adventurous and experiments with tequila and something called Moru-Moru. They spend two relatively pleasant hours discussing their surroundings and speculating about their performance evaluations.

Trouble comes when Spock’s least expecting it. Moira takes another trip to the bar to get them new drinks and is going back toward their table when she trips over somebody’s foot and spills the drinks she’s carrying all over him.

Spock has no doubts that were her unintended victim a cadet, the misunderstanding would have been cleared in a minute. Unfortunately, Moira manages to stumble over a young local male who’s come to have a drink with his friends. The three of them are now on their feet facing her, and Spock just knows that it won’t end well. Moira is a well-coordinated human; somehow Spock doesn’t think it was her fault that she tripped.

He’s on his feet before he really knows it, moving in, in one swift motion.

“Is there a problem, gentlemen?”

They turn toward him and look over him appraisingly.
“What’s it to you?”

“Hey, what’s with the pointy ears?”

“Spock,” Moira cautions, “don’t get involved. I’ll handle this.”

“Sure you will, baby,” the man says, and points at his shirt smeared with grenadine. “You can start by cleaning this up. Feel free to be creative.”

“Guys, how about I buy you a round?” Moira says, uncomfortable and nervous.

“I said, clean this up, bitch,” the man demands harshly, and then he makes a fatal mistake.

He grabs her.

Things unfold really quickly from that point. Spock reaches for him, but is stopped by one of the others. Moira’s muffled warning hasn’t faded yet when Spock has the young human cleaning the nearby table face first. For a split second, Spock stares down at him in shock, unable to believe that he has done that, but there’s no time for him to dwell on the matter of his reflexes and the somewhat weird time for them to kick in.

Another human aims a cross in Spock’s belly, but he can’t ever hope to match Spock in either speed or strength, not to mention training. Spock is actually surprised at how much time he has to either avoid a blow or respond with a block or any other move. His sparring partners at the Academy never give him such luxury. The cadets are generally much faster and smarter as fighters, better screened and better trained. Though right now the vast amount of alcohol in their systems probably evens the odds.

Spock concentrates on extricating himself from the fight, trying to cause his assailants little to no damage, but they are continuously pushing him further and further away from his benevolent stance. It becomes rapidly clear that any altercation between the locals and cadets, no matter how small, inevitably turns into a massive ‘us vs. them’ fight, and there is simply no way Spock could get out of it now.

Somewhere in between deflecting blows, Spock thinks briefly that if Moira came here to find a sense of belonging, she has certainly achieved her goal, because by now it appears that half the Academy is defending her honor.

A loud whistle reverberates through the heated room, and the fight suddenly halts, frozen mid-moves. Spock finds himself against the bar, with an unconscious man lying at his feet and another one struggling in his hold. Spock releases him and he stalks away, shooting a nasty glance backward. Spock’s eyes dart across the room swiftly, searching for Moira. He relaxes slightly, realizing she’s standing on her own and doesn’t appear to be injured.

And then Spock tenses all over again, because Pike is standing in the doorway, hands on his hips. He’s looking around, surveying the chaos, and his gaze isn’t promising anything good. Spock swallows as Pike’s eyes meet his and widen slightly. He wishes he could get himself cleaned up or at least smooth his hair back, but like every other cadet present, Spock doesn’t dare to move.

“Who started the fight?” Pike demands quietly, but in the deafening silence he doesn’t really need to raise his voice to be heard.

Nobody moves or says anything. Spock is certain the cadets know full well who started it, but no one volunteers the information. All of a sudden, it’s like a warm wave washes over him. For the first time since he came to Earth, he feels he’s a legitimate part of something. It doesn’t mean that he is
going to start lying though.

He steps forward to say, “I did, sir,” just as Moira does the same, and they glare at each other for a moment.

Pike’s eyes widen once again, and his lips twitch as if he’s fighting back a smirk. But the reaction is fleeting.

“The rest of you outside,” Pike orders briskly. “Not you,” he points at the locals. “You wait right here till the local PD sends someone to collect you.”

“Great,” blurts out the guy who demanded cleaning services from Moira and is now sporting a nice round black eye.

Pike walks over to Spock and Moira as the other cadets file out. They stand in front of him at parade best, as he gives each of them a careful once-over.

“Well,” Pike says. “I must admit I never imagined you two in a situation like this.” He speaks to both of them, but looks mostly at Spock, who feels more uncomfortable by the second. “What in God’s name possessed you, Spock?”

Spock has difficulty meeting his eyes. “I... I regret that I have no explanation to offer.”

There’s a loud snort coming from the group of the local patrons.

“Your Vulcan doesn’t like to share, Captain, sir.” The young man gives Pike a mock salute before switching over to Spock. “Should have watched your girlfriend better now, shouldn’t you?”

Spock stiffens even more, as Pike’s gaze returns to him. The captain appears to be waiting for some kind of reaction, but Spock doesn’t have the first clue of what to say. Pike’s eyes dart uncertainly between Spock and Moira, until finally a resigned expression settles in them. It almost looks like he wanted to ask something but changed his mind.

“It’s all my fault, sir,” Moira says miserably. “Guess I was clumsy or wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“There is an eighty-five point seven percent probability that it was a setup,” Spock informs her coolly. “You are not in the habit of tripping over your own feet.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she insists, shaking her head. “I should have been more careful.” She looks up at Pike almost pleadingly. “Please, sir, Cadet Spock’s only involved in this because of his misguided attempt to protect me.”

Pike looks from one to the other again and sighs softly. He smiles, but once again, the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. Spock feels as if something’s dying inside him.

“You can’t blame him for being a gentleman, Ms. Jones,” Pike tells her, almost kindly, and it sounds like a eulogy.

“No, I guess not,” she sighs too.

“Fine,” Pike says. “The shuttle for the Academy leaves in six hours. Once there, you’re both confined to quarters whenever you’re not in class for a week. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” they say in unison.
“Go get cleaned up. Dismissed.”

Spock holds Pike’s gaze a moment longer. He has no difficulty recognizing the reigning emotion he sees there. Disappointment. The one thing he is most afraid of. The need to right this wrong somehow is overwhelming, and Spock speaks out of turn, words burning on his tongue. He wants to explain that he understands perfectly that he’s made a mistake, that he could have handled the situation better. He wants to tell Pike about the heat of the moment, and how quickly everything happened, and a great number of other things – anything to make this harsh expression soften. But in the end, he can only say one thing.

“Captain, I... I’m sorry.”

The look on Pike’s face becomes even more closed and distant, and he doesn’t answer; just turns on his heel and leaves.

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Spock can appreciate the irony of living among humans. Having initiated an ugly act of a bar fight, he suddenly becomes popular. Not that he has been a pariah before exactly, but he has never received as much attention as he does now. The details of what had happened at the Liftoff are floating from dorm to dorm, gaining more colorful additions on their way. Suddenly, beautiful female cadets are smiling at Spock in the corridors, and there is a lot of clapping on the shoulder from the males.

Spock doesn’t understand their logic at all, but his attempts to gain some clarification only result in the mysterious conclusion, ‘Hey, he’s funny, too!’ Spock decides to let it go, though he’s not entirely comfortable with the situation.

Particularly not with all the impromptu raids on his quarters during the week of his ‘home arrest.’ Spock can’t quite fit it into his mindset that people would come uninvited with a misdirected intention of ‘cheering him up,’ would bring excessive amounts of food and drinks, would turn the music on much louder than he could ever conceive – and would not leave until morning, thus thoroughly disturbing his studies.

Captain Pike doesn’t notice him. He would nod in response to Spock’s greeting, but his eyes wouldn’t change their expression. He would look at Spock in the same way he would at any other cadet, and Spock suddenly realizes that there used to be a distinction, and that it is extremely disquieting not to see it anymore.

In class, though, Pike would still call on him, and it’s reassuring. Spock is still one of Pike’s best students, and their debates are as lively as usual. But there would be no invitation or encouragement to stay after classes to continue the discussion. Spock lingers in the classroom deliberately several times, collecting his things more slowly or under some other pretense, but it’s no use. Pike would leave the room without a second glance.

Moira isn’t there as much as she used to be. They have finally reached the stage when her and Spock’s respective specialties force them to part ways. Moira is primarily an engineer, and Spock a scientist. Pike’s course remains the only class they still share.

“What’s with the silent treatment?” Moira asks quietly at the end of a lecture. Spock gives her a quizzical look, and she sighs. “I can’t believe he’s still mad at you for Iowa; it was ages ago.” She lays her hand on his shoulder and squeezes gently in apology. “And not your fault, anyway.”
Spock glances over to where Pike is answering questions. He laughs amicably at what probably is an amusing comment one of the cadets has made, and Spock feels a sudden pang of pain as if something inside him had gone dead. As if sensing his gaze, Pike looks up at him and for a moment, their eyes meet. Pike’s smile fades as if turned off, and he looks away abruptly.

“You okay?” Moira asks softly. “You look pale.”

“I am functional,” Spock replies, somewhat curtly. “And am late for my next class. Excuse me.”

It goes on in the same manner for weeks, and Spock adjusts. It’s not the first time he has disappointed someone important to him. Apparently, he’s lacking something within, something crucial for forming deep personal bonds. It proves his hypothesis that his mother only loves him because it’s a biological imperative. He is a scientist. He cannot ignore facts.

He’s also practically never alone now. His classmates now consider him ‘cool,’ and it’s always ‘Would you join our team?’ or ‘Really could use your help with temporal mechanics’ and even ‘Hey, there’s a party tonight at Meg’s, you coming?’

Spock participates, because despite his double major, he still has some time to spare. The time he used to spend talking to Pike or reading up for his next meeting with him. Spock finds that whenever his mind is unoccupied lately, it inevitably drifts to the captain, and those thoughts are futile. Spock has always loathed self-pity.

It really catches him by surprise one day when Pike stops him in the corridor and asks to have a word. Spock nods readily and follows the human into an empty classroom. When Pike turns to face him, his face is strict.

“Look, I hate to pry into someone’s personal life,” Pike says without preamble. “But I like to help people whenever I can. I’m sorry for calling you on this, but we talked a lot before, and I consider you somewhat closer to me than an average student, Mr. Spock. I think of you as a friend.”

Spock has to swallow down a lump that has suddenly constricted his throat.

“I am honored, Captain. I consider you a friend as well.”

“Yeah, well, as a friend.” Pike’s eyes bore into him piercingly. “What you’re doing isn’t cool.”

“Sir?”

“Hanging out with these guys?” Pike nods back toward the corridor in reference to the group of cadets Spock has just disengaged himself from. “I know they’re the coolest of them all and that apparently, you’re their new hero. I know you’ve been feeling out of place here and I can sympathize with your wish to belong, but that doesn’t justify turning your back on old friends, Spock. It’s not nice.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Spock frowns helplessly. “I do not understand.”

Pike sighs, his frustration obvious. “I think you’ve been neglecting Cadet Jones for a while now, Spock. What, she was good enough for you to date when no one else was on the horizon, but not anymore? She’s a great person, Spock. Maybe she doesn’t have as much glamour as your new girlfriends do, but she’s more worthy than all of them put together.”

Spock blinks. He can recognize all the words Pike is saying, but together they make no sense to him. He hasn’t seen Moira recently, that is correct. But that is only natural, considering they both have full schedules. Spock is puzzled.
He can feel that Pike is genuinely upset with him, though, as if Spock has slipped from some higher standard. It’s not at all a pleasant sensation.

“You really hurt her, you know,” Pike tells him gravely. “Her grades have been slipping. Her teachers say she can’t concentrate in class, keeps spacing out. Her roommate says she cries often. Spock, I never took you for a cruel person. How could you do this to her?”

Spock stares at him, distressed with the news and struggling to understand his connection to it.

“You believe that Cadet Jones is emotionally distressed and that it is... my fault?” he asks carefully.

Pike’s features soften slightly. “I’m not saying you did that on purpose. But you have to right this wrong, Spock. You have to fix your relationship before we lose her. I know you mean well, and we all get carried away sometimes. But you need to do what men do. Take responsibility.”

Spock nods thoughtfully, still utterly confused and struggling for an epiphany. Which simply wouldn’t come. “I shall endeavor to do so, sir.”

“Great,” Pike grins, and it’s almost like it used to be. “Look, it’s not my place to say, but you two seem to fit well together. I’m sure you can work it out.”

Before a still very bewildered and consequently somewhat slow Spock can ask him what he means, Pike takes his leave.

It takes a while to hunt Moira down. She was absent during Pike’s last lecture, Spock remembers. Actually, she wasn’t at the lecture before last as well. Spock hasn’t seen her in weeks, and being so absorbed with his own dark reflections he didn’t stop to think what it might mean. When Spock finally sees her, he understands the reasons for Pike’s concern immediately.

To borrow a human colloquialism, Moira looks like hell.

She’s sitting in the farthest, murkiest corner of the cantina, with an untouched plate of food in front of her. The moment she spots Spock she drops her head to her arms folded on the table and starts crying.

“There’s this guy,” she manages when Spock slides into a chair next to her. “An upperclassman? We knew each other back home, years ago. And I wasn’t... you know, I wasn’t ever anything to look at, so I didn’t even dream of it or anything. But now we meet here, and I’ve changed, and he’s been all friendly and all, and I thought... I thought maybe it’d work out this time. And he’s been... He’s been...”

“What?”

She lifts her eyes at him, puffy and filled with misery. “He’s been using me to get to my roommate.”

Spock can do little but allow her to bury her face in his shoulder and let the tears fall.

He doesn’t have the first clue of how to offer comfort, and to an emotion-driven being no less. All he has to go by is his recollection of his mother, her soft voice and gentle arms surrounding him when he was very young and came home stiff-lipped and anguished because the other boys tormented him for not being truly Vulcan. Spock remembers her care, her infinite sympathy, which somehow didn’t make him feel weak or small, but gave him the consolation he craved, even without resolving any of his problems.

He pulls the unresisting Moira to her feet then and walks her to his quarters, one arm around her
waist. As there are no other Vulcans currently studying at the Academy, Spock resides alone in respect to his cultural sensitivities. Moira follows him blindly, and he can tell she’s simply too exhausted, physically and emotionally, to care.

Spock doesn’t intend to speak. He could never perceive human psyche enough to offer advice, and he knows that Moira doesn’t need to hear his logical approach to her problem right now. So Spock doesn’t talk. Instead, he makes her drink a cup of Vulcan spice tea, choosing the blend that he knows acts like a potent relaxant on humans.

He then guides her to the bed, for it’s obvious to him that she hasn’t been sleeping and requires rest badly. He sets her comfortably under the blanket, pulling her shoes and jacket off. He turns to go, intending to spend the night reading at his desk, which for him wouldn’t be a big deal. But Moira reaches for him, deliriously, and pulls him back toward her, and she’s making that half-frightened, half-pleading sound that little children make when they are afraid to fall asleep.

Spock gives in. He kicks his own boots off, hangs his jacket neatly next to Moira’s, and yes, he knows it’s called cuddling, and it’s something he has never envisioned himself doing. His mental barriers protest at first against the sensory overload, but Spock adjusts quickly. His human friend has human needs and he is pleased to provide what he can, because he can’t fix her problem for her. If that means some extra meditation time for him, so be it.

It’s an unusual, but strangely stimulating feeling – to be responsible for someone, even in this limited way. It’s as if having someone else turn to him for help makes him stronger, and smarter, and somehow more capable than he is on his own. The emotion is illogical, but overwhelming and highly pleasurable.

“You’re the best friend ever,” Moira tells him in the morning, stepping out of his shower and kissing him on the cheek lightly. “See you around.”

Spock intends to hold her to that.

--

Just like that, Moira’s troubles are lifted. The upperclassman she spoke of is as fond of her as she is of him and her roommate had only tried to play matchmaker, so it was all one big unfortunate misunderstanding. Spock is forcibly reminded of the events of *Much Ado About Nothing*. He thinks ironically that humans haven’t changed since the time of Shakespeare at all.

It’s three days before the Christmas break starts, and Spock’s in Pike’s classroom again, lingering longer than the rest of the group, but this time entirely by accident. Spock is so used by now to Pike ignoring him outside classes that it comes as a surprise to him to catch the captain’s eye. Pike smiles at him as Spock walks down the steps.

“That was an inspired argument, Mr. Spock,” Pike says, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Inspired, sir?” Spock’s eyebrow crawls up. “Merely logical.”

“‘The aesthetic value of cave paintings on Semquat V is no lower than that of the Sistine Chapel; is it only your narrow-minded attitude that prevents you from seeing that?’” Pike quotes Spock’s words from minutes ago. “Sounds like an emotionally-charged argument to me.”

Spock inclines his head softly. “When dealing with emotional beings, such as humans, it is often advisable to use emotion-invoking arguments.”
“So you’ve been humoring us?” Pike grins. “Or playing?”

Spock feels the corners of his own mouth twitch. “Neither, sir. Merely a means to an end.”

Pike chuckles. “Efficient as always. Everything okay with you and Moira?”

Spock blinks. “I am... well, sir. To the best of my knowledge, so is Cadet Jones.”

“Good, good. Sorry for cornering you a while back, but... Anyway. You two have plans for the holidays?”

Spock doesn’t have a family to visit on Earth, and so just like his first Christmas here, he intends to remain at the campus. For him, it’s not unusual. Even when his mother wasn’t accompanying Sarek on one of his diplomatic missions, the strain between Spock and his father would still make any kind of reunion impossible.

“I plan to work on my thesis, sir,” he tells Pike, cataloguing material he is going to need in his head. “As for Cadet Jones, I understand it she plans to spend her vacation in Mexico.”

“By herself?” Pike blinks.

“No, she will be accompanied by the young man who has been courting her.”

This time Pike stares. “She’s got a new boyfriend?” he asks incredulously.

Spock isn’t sure how the word ‘new’ applies. But then, Pike knew Moira was in trouble when Spock didn’t, so maybe he’s better acquainted with her personal life than Spock is. It’s not like he and Moira ever spoke at length about their personal background to each other. Spock opts for a cautious response.

“Yes?”

Pike’s expression changes, and suddenly he’s regarding Spock with endless sympathy.

“Oh, God, Spock, I’m so sorry. She picked one hell of a time to switch gears, huh?”

Spock doesn’t understand, so he doesn’t comment, and the hand on his shoulder feels too good to protest at any rate.

“Tell you what,” Pike starts in a deliberately more cheerful tone. “How would you feel about visiting Switzerland?”

“Sir?”

“I have a cottage there and whenever I’m on Earth on Christmas, my friends and I spend it there. I know it’s probably not your preferred ambient temperature, but the mountains are beautiful, Spock, you’ve gotta see them. I’m going in two days. Would you like to come with me?”

“Captain...” Spock mumbles as his heart begins to race. “I would never wish to intrude—”

“Hey. It’s not an intrusion if you’re invited, right? It’s going to be a house full of people even I barely know by this point. You and I haven’t talked much lately, and I miss it. It’ll be nice to catch up, don’t you think?”

“Yes, sir,” Spock replies automatically. “But it’s not necessary for you to do this. I am—”
“—in need of a break, like everyone else.”

“You do not have to do this.”

“I know, Spock, but I want to.” Pike grins. “So what do you say?”

Spock hesitates another moment, but he knows already he’s fighting a lost battle.

“If you are sure that it won’t be an imposition...” He trails off.

Pike’s grin widens. “Flying pad, the day after tomorrow, nine hundred hours. And Spock? Don’t forget to pack some warm clothes.”

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Clothes turn out to be a problem. Spock’s sparse Vulcan wardrobe obviously is of no help, and he hasn’t been wearing anything other than his uniform for a year and a half now. He needs to do something he has never done in his life: shopping.

“Don’t go to automatic stores,” Moira advises him when he catches her in the midst of her own packing. “I know it might seem easier to you, not interacting with people and everything, but you’ll never get anything that fits right from an auto-vendor.”

Spock tries to tell her that he is less concerned about the appearance and much more about not getting frostbite, but she doesn’t listen. Instead, she pushes a card with the address of the shop she and her boyfriend haunt into his hand and shoves him out of the door.

It’s an old-fashioned store where the clothes actually are hung in the showroom, complete with very much alive human shop assistants. At the time when machines have replaced human labor in so many areas, a shop such as this appears as exotic as the Gutenberg Bible must have seemed to readers used to manuscripts and papyrus.

Spock doesn’t have much time to dwell on it, though. The moment he enters, he’s greeted by a young female wearing the shop’s uniform. As he stammers through his request for winter-proof clothes, they are joined by another female and very soon by a male. Before he has time for so much as a deep breath, Spock is herded into a fitting room. He steps toward the measuring scanner, but the male shop assistant whose nametag reads ‘Daniel’ stops him with an arm across his chest.

“No scanner can compete with my eye for beauty,” Daniel declares with a smirk, glancing Spock over from head to foot. “Damn, this is my lucky day. Girls, I’m thinking Ted Baker, I’m thinking Tommy Hilfiger, and I’d really like to see this guy in Dior, he was born for it. Now get going and make me proud.”

“Wait.” Spock stops them. “You do realize that the clothes should be... practical?”

The girls smile at him in unison while Daniel laughs. “Don’t worry, handsome. It’s all prêt-a-porter.”

Spock doesn’t ask.

Forty minutes later, he feels exhausted the way he’s never felt before. Spock could never imagine that trying on clothes could be so taxing. Everything he tries fits perfectly, but when he leaves the cubicle to demonstrate it to his unexpected assistants, their comments puzzle him over and over again.
“Oh my God. Can I keep him?”

“I think I liked the blue one better.”

“You kidding? Green looks fantastic!”

“Yeah, but blue highlighted his eyes.”

“How about gold?”

“Nah, he’s the classic winter type, can’t you see? Black hair, black eyes, pale skin – he’s made for cold colors.”

“I think he can try chocolate brown.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea. What do we have in chocolate brown?”

“D&G.”

“Transparent shirts? Are you crazy? The guy looks like a blue blood or something, and you want to put him into a stripper’s garb?”

“Well...”

“Forget it; you’re not taking him home. Now, go get me one of those Marc Jacobs shirts. Oh, and grab some jeans while you’re at it, will you? They’re gonna squeeze him just right.”

“I’m on it.”

“Black pants, black shirt? Boring much?”

“Look at him.”

“Could work. Would you please try these for us?”

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Somebody pinch me.”

“What she means is you’re gorgeous.”

“What I mean is he’s smoking hot.”

“He is, isn’t he? Boy, I love my job.”

It goes on for a while. Spock’s patience evaporates remarkably quickly, as the utterly confusing situation continues to escalate. He finally leaves the shop with far more bags than he planned to acquire but far less than they tried to force on him. He considers it a victory. He also discovers Daniel’s card in his pocket later.

--

He joins Pike at the flying pad two days later. They both take a moment to adjust to the sight of each other out of uniform. Pike grins at Spock and claps him on the back.

“There’s one condition on which I’m taking you with me,” he tells Spock, winking at him. “While we’re there, you’re calling me Chris, deal?”
Spock knows the request is logical, but is uncertain he can adapt.

“I shall endeavor to comply... Christopher,” he says at last.

Pike grins. “Good enough. Let’s go.”

Pike pilots the shuttle himself. It’s a small Academy vehicle to which he, as a professor, has full access. The trip takes about two hours. It could have been faster, but Pike takes his time to show Spock the ocean. San Francisco bay is magnificent, no question, but too domesticated. Spock has never seen such a huge, unruly body of water before. He is fascinated.

Pike’s ‘cottage’ turns out to be an old three-floor chalet, more of a size of a small family hotel than a private residence. Spock is enthralled by the original wood panels covering the wall; the sounds the stairs is making; the feel of the house itself that is clearly several centuries old. Pike shows him his bedroom, a nice cozy room on the second floor with its own fireplace.

Pike’s guests arrive soon, and Spock’s worries about being an imposition dissipate almost instantly. The people he meets treat him in the same manner they treat each other – with friendly attention and welcoming warmth. They take note of him being Vulcan, but in the best possible way. Far from teasing him about his ears or his logic, they all try to take care of him, demonstrating good general knowledge of his species.

They pass him vegetarian dishes at the table before he asks for them; he’s offered various spare articles of clothing ‘in case he gets cold’; he’s used as an example of propriety for misbehaving children. All in all, the experience is a bit overwhelming, but highly enjoyable. Spock decides that the old axiom that a man is known by his friends in this particular case works perfectly.

Pike’s cousin Robert and his sixteen-year-old daughter Claire are the only blood relatives of the captain among the guests. The two of them take a walk to the nearby village together with Pike and Spock.

Spock feels as if he is on an entirely different planet. He has never seen so much snow at once, and it fascinates him, as he had never before understood its beauty. The mountains and the frozen lake they pass on their way are magnificent, and Spock’s heightened sense of aesthetics is inundated. His eyes are wide and restless, trying to drink down the breathtaking beauty of this place, and it just doesn’t end.

The village is decorated for the holidays. It’s all bright shimmering lights, the sounds of a dozen different languages, Christmas carols from all over the world, the thick smell of fresh chocolate, carefree laughter, and an intoxicating mood of joy hovering over the rooftops. It’s the most incredible place Spock has ever visited.

Claire grabs Spock’s arm and tugs him into a small shop to buy homemade sparklers. Spock questions the safety factor and the chemical components used to produce the hand-held fireworks. The store’s owner wants them to leave, but when Spock suggests an improvement to his formula, he gives them a box of sparklers for free and a roman candle to boot. Pike only shakes his head as Spock hands him a sparkler while Claire tells the story. Robert laughs.

They drink hot chocolate from chunky ceramic cups with elves and dwarves on them. Spock catches Pike’s speculating gaze and realizes that the captain must also be victim of the misconception that Vulcans get inebriated from chocolate. Spock almost smiles into his cup.

He is slightly drunk, from the abundance of colorful impressions, and from his own incredulity at being here. He notices that Pike keeps close to him on their way back just in case, and he doesn’t...
mind.

They say goodnight in the corridor. When Spock walks into his room, he finds that someone has started the fire, and his toes almost curl up in pleasure. He doesn’t turn the lights on, but undresses in the heated glow of live flame, feeling it stirring the air, washing over his sensitive skin in slow caress. He dives under the blankets thinking that he had never experienced such contentment in his life.

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Pike gives Spock one day to acclimate himself with winter before introducing him to Alpine skiing. Spock has only had a very fleeting knowledge of the sport, but he isn’t about to refuse Pike. Not when the human is looking at him with this insufferable mischievous smirk on his face. A skiing suit wasn’t on Spock’s shopping list, but the problem is solved immediately.

“This color looks good on you,” Pike tells him, when Spock fastens the last of the clasps on his silver-blue suit, fresh from the renting store. “And it’s bright enough for me to see you should you get in trouble.”

Just as last night, they keep company of four. Robert and Claire are experienced skiers, and Pike had been spending every Christmas in this house since he was five years old and until the service took him off-planet. Spock is the only newbie here, but seeing the ease with which his companions slide downhill, he thinks it must not be all that difficult.

He realizes his error when he tries to move for the first time and hits the snow faster than he knows what has happened. Claire giggles as Spock gets up and tries again only to topple over in a moment. By the time he makes the fourth attempt, all three humans are doubled over with laughter. Far from being offended, Spock suddenly realizes how he must look to them rising and falling on the spot, and has to fight back a laugh himself.

Pike slides over to him, offers a hand and lifts him up, steadying Spock. His eyes are alight with mirth and affection, and for a moment, Spock loses his connection with the time-space continuum, lost in that blazing gaze. They stand very close, hips centimeters from grinding into each other. Spock is higher on the slope and keeps sliding down, little by little, not knowing yet how to control his motion.

He distinctly hears Pike’s breath hitch as Spock’s hips press into his, and then Spock is falling backward, having lost his shaky balance, and takes Pike down with him. They land in a mess of limbs and gear. Spock hears several clicks as they roll over the slope, and suddenly his feet are free, the safety clasps on his boots having released the skis at the collision to prevent trauma. Their motion stops with Pike on top of him, laughing uncontrollably again, their faces just inches away. Spock looks up at him, breathless and disoriented, and for a brief moment, he smiles.

“Smooth, Uncle Chris.” Claire’s laughing voice breaks the moment. “He carries on like this, he’ll make a nice snow-Vulcan.”

She and Robert help Pike and Spock up; Pike grins, watching Spock brush the snow out of his hair.

“Nah, he’ll be fine. He’ll give you a run for your money in a couple of days, you’ll see.”

Pike’s prediction proves to be a valid one soon enough. He appears to be just as capable an instructor in Alpine skiing as he is in advanced space battle strategy. After two hours on the bunny slope, Spock’s well-developed sense of balance adjusts to his now slippery footing and he completes his
descent without falling. Pike then shows him the correct technique of descent and is surprised at how quickly Spock grasps the basics.

“Someone’s in great shape,” Pike comments with an approving smile as Spock mirrors his motions sliding down. “I’ll take you up to one of the green trails after lunch. I can’t quite believe it, but I think you’re ready.”

They eat at a charming little café, and Spock practices his French by talking to the waitress. Pike speaks all four local languages fluently, and they run a rather entertaining comparative analysis of European dialects over food.

Spock conquers green trails with an ease that frightens Pike a little. Unlike most newbies, Spock is predictably unaffected by the views of pits and rocks that usually frighten most people. He also likes the speed, and judging by Pike’s expression, he likes it a little too much.

“Hey!” Pike stops next to him, raising a cloud of snow. “I never took you for a hothead. What’s with the racing?”

Spock is unrepentant. “I calculated the acceleration rate and determined that it was safe.”

“Bullshit.” Pike grins. “I bet you just loved the way the wind sang in your ears. Your hair is a mess, by the way.”

“This trail” – Spock glances back - “does not present much of a challenge.”

“Oh really? You’ve been skiing for one day – this should be perfectly challenging for you.”

“That is debatable. However, you must be bored.”

“I’m never bored when I’m with you, Spock,” Pike replies on the spot. Spock looks at him, one eyebrow raised. Pike glances over at the mountaintop. “Tell you what: if you feel up to it tomorrow, we’ll go to a blue trail with Rob and Claire.”

“Can we not try it today?” Spock asks, sounding too hopeful to his own ears.

Pike laughs. “No, I think you’re done for the day. It’s no small feat, Spock, and I don’t want you to overdo it, okay? Besides, tonight’s Christmas Eve. Wouldn’t want you to be too tired for the party.”

The party is a success. The dinner is more festive than the night before. “It helps when your friends cook,” Pike tells Spock with a wink. After the tables are cleared, the party migrates to the huge living room, occupying most of the ground floor. People are chatting, drinking Glüwein, and admiring the impressive Christmas tree.

Something is bothering Spock, however. Unusual as it is for him, he’s experiencing a headache. It starts as a dull pain at the back of his neck, and then spreads up and around, pulsing at his temples unpleasantly. Perhaps Pike was right cautioning Spock about overdoing it, Spock thinks bleakly. He tries to suppress the pain.

“Spock, there’s someone at the door asking for you,” Claire tells him, looking at him curiously. “She’s pretty.”
Spock thanks her, hiding his surprise. He is at a complete loss as to the visitor’s identity. She’s not at the door, though, or at least not at the front door. Spock steps out into the crispy December night and catches a glimpse of a hooded figure hovering at the gate. Briefly, he considers and dismisses the idea of getting a coat. He walks across the yard, and when he’s almost at her level, she throws the hood back gracefully.

Spock is stunned.

“Greetings, Spock.”

And suddenly, his headache is starting to make perfect sense.

“T’Pring.” The name comes out in half a word, half an exhalation. “What are you doing here? How did you find me?”

Her beautiful features remain seemingly immobile, but the impression of a scoff is conveyed perfectly.

“I thought your manners would improve over the years. I see I was mistaken.”

“I ask forgiveness for the breach of protocol; however, my surprise is legitimate. I was not expecting you.”

“Obviously. Now that you have had your emotional outburst, I will state the reason for my being here. Please desist from interrupting me.”

Spock inclines his head softly. “As you wish.”

“You left Vulcan in a rather abrupt manner,” she states coldly. “Instead of accepting a position with the Vulcan Science Academy, thus making yourself as respectable as is only possible for someone of your lineage, you chose to run off to live with humans, playing their childish games. In doing so, you humiliated yourself, your family, and me, Spock. I had my doubts whether you would make a worthy bondmate before. After such a display, I am certain you will not. I wish to dissolve our betrothal.”

Spock suppresses a shiver caused by the frosty air around him. Mostly.

“I understand your logic,” he says quietly. “However, I cannot release you from our engagement until we are officially bonded.”

“That will not happen until your pon farr, which might never come due to your human genes. I refuse to be bound to one such as you any longer.”

Spock closes his eyes briefly. Her attitude isn’t news to him, though she never sounded quite so ardent before.

“I have found a way in which I can divorce you now,” she says. “That is why I came. You will beam back to the ship with me. It is a Vulcan transport equipped with a healer. He will conduct a compatibility test of our DNA.”

“I fail to see what you intend to accomplish with such a procedure. I have been tested before. I am fertile.”

“I am aware. However, your genetic makeup is split. You, at the very least, look like a Vulcan, Spock. Your offspring might not be that fortunate. And I will not become mother to a human child.”
“Our child cannot be human.”

“Not fully, but I am told it is possible for it to attain more human characteristics than Vulcan. Their genes are resilient, like those of any savage species. Why do you think they used genetic engineering to conceive you? Ambassador Sarek would not be humiliated by a human-looking son. Neither will I. That is why we have to take the test. If there is more than a five percent chance that the child will be more human than Vulcan, I can divorce you on the ground of not wishing to contaminate my bloodline.”

Spock looks at her, studying her glittering almond-shaped eyes, framed in long thick lashes; the graceful line of her nose, straight and full of dignity; the elegant sweep of her eyebrows; the seductive, perfectly outlined curve of her lips. She is perfect. Timeless and precious.

“When can we take the test?”

Her eyebrow arches very slightly. “Right now if you are agreeable.”

Spock glances uncertainly back toward the house. The party is in full swing; happy relaxed voices, music, and laughter fill the air, sparkling with joy. Emotions. Freedom. It strikes Spock suddenly that he doesn’t belong there. Nor does he belong with T’Pring and her cool, brilliant world of flawless logic.

The only place for him is right here. At the gate, between two worlds. Out in the cold, out in the dark.

“I am.”

T’Pring relaxes ever so slightly. Spock watches her pull a communicator out of her robes and steps closer to her as she calls her ship. The response is almost immediate.

Only when the heat maintained on all Vulcan ships engulfs him does Spock realize how much time he has spent in the cold. He fights to suppress the shivering. The sudden change in temperature makes him slightly dizzy.

T’Pring guides him along the corridors of the transport, gliding ahead of him like a queen in her domain. Spock trails behind, trying not to pay heed to seemingly impassionate glances he gets from other Vulcans. He’s dressed like a human, and in this Vulcan environment, he feels like one.

The healer is ready for them, evidently forewarned by T’Pring. He collects blood samples from both of them, cleansing his hands twice before turning from Spock to T’Pring. Spock doesn’t show he noticed.

They wait in silence for the computer to complete the analysis. Spock is calm, almost apathetic. He does not require a human intuition to know the outcome of the test. It is pure logic. T’Pring would not have come all the way from Vulcan to find him if she wasn’t sure of the result.

“The probability of your offspring attaining more human features than Vulcan in its physiology is 12.1 percent,” the healer announces finally. He looks at T’Pring. “I am authorized to sever your bond if you wish to do so on this ground.”

“I do,” T’Pring replies immediately. Spock can feel the excitement radiating from her, despite the shielding. She must have desired this for a long time.

The healer looks at him. “Are you consensual to this decision, Spock?”
Spock pauses just for a moment, and T’Pring shoots him an openly anxious glance.

“I am,” he says in a voice he doesn’t recognize.

“Very well,” the healer intones blandly, coming to stand between them. “Clear your minds.”

Spock closes his eyes and forces his mind to still. The effort is enormous, but he succeeds quickly. Vaguely, he feels the healer’s fingers pressing into his meld-points. There’s an emotionless, clinical presence, searching through his mind for the weak but stable link with T’Pring. Spock feels it resonate within him for a brief moment and realizes it’s the last time he’ll ever feel it. Then, the healer withdraws, and T’Pring’s presence is gone with him.

“It is done,” the healer declares, and Spock opens his eyes.

T’Pring bows to the healer elegantly. “I am grateful for your services.” She looks over at Spock.

“And for your cooperation.”

Spock bows to her silently, as an ironic observation enters his mind. She has never been so nice to him before.

“Spock.” The healer addresses him. “Should you so desire, I shall enter your name into the database of unbonded Vulcans. Thus, when your pon farr comes you will be provided with a surrogate to preserve your life.”

Something snaps in Spock at these words and he tilts his head up sharply.

“No.”

“Spock,” T’Pring’s voice is surprisingly soft, almost sympathetic. Now that she is free of him, she can be generous. “It is not logical to endanger yourself needlessly. It is... doubtful that you will be able to find a woman – a partner willing to become your bondmate.”

“I am honored by your concern,” Spock says. “However, it is unnecessary. I shall endeavor to see to my own needs. And should you prove correct” – he pauses and meets her eyes squarely – “I will not beg anyone for my life.”

“The choice, of course, is yours,” the healer says blandly, though it’s clear that he doesn’t approve. T’Pring says nothing.

Spock raises his hand in salute. “Live long and prosper.”

He turns on his heel and leaves, but he’s not quick enough to miss T’Pring sighing.

“Proud. So like a human.”

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Spock wakes up in the darkness, colored by the pulsing amber-red glow. He’s extremely disoriented and dizzy. It takes him a few moments to realize that he’s lying in his bed, in his room upstairs. He doesn’t remember getting here. Nor does he remember stripping to his underwear, which is the only item of clothing he appears to be wearing. There’s a warm weight of at least four thick woolen blankets on top of him, and it doesn’t feel good. He feels overheated and trapped.

Hardly knowing what he is doing, Spock bolts up in bed, jerking the blankets off of him abruptly.
The sharp movement makes his head spin.

“Whoa, easy there,” Pike’s voice cuts through the haze of chaotic sensations. “Are you hot?”

Spock finds the task of focusing on Pike’s face very difficult. “I’m…” He pushes the blankets further away stubbornly. “I don’t…”

“Easy, easy, it’s okay.” Pike sits at the edge of the bed and presses the back of his hand to Spock’s forehead. Spock moans, arching into the touch that feels so deliciously cool. “Damn, you’re burning up,” Pike mutters with concern.

He pushes Spock’s sweat-soaked bangs out of his face gently, and his hand lingers, smoothing Spock’s hair. Spock bites his lip, coherent enough to be ashamed of how good it feels. He must have made some kind of sound, because Pike leans into him, stroking his hair.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Pike whispers, pressing his lips to Spock’s burning forehead. “It’s okay. You’re gonna be just fine. Everything’s gonna be fine. Here—” He pulls back and reaches for something Spock can’t see. “This will make you feel better.”

Spock hears the soft hiss of a hypo and falls asleep on the spot.

When he wakes up again, it’s morning. The sun is filling the small room, and the cheery voices of people having outdoor winter fun seep from the outside, muffled by the distance. Spock examines his surroundings and himself. He’s still somewhat weak, but no longer feverish. He lifts himself up on his elbows to look over the room.

Pike is sitting in the old armchair, which he must have pulled closer to the bed sometime last night. He is sleeping, his head bent at an awkward angle. He’s wearing the same clothes he’s been wearing at the party.

Spock shifts carefully, sitting up in his bed and resting his back against the pillow. He is very quiet, but his movement still wakes Pike, who straightens up with a start, eyes flying to Spock immediately.


“I am functional,” Spock half-replies, half-muses. He tugs the blanket closer around himself. “Perhaps a little tired.”

“Tired,” Pike repeats incredulously. He gets out of the armchair and reaches to feel Spock’s forehead. “Well, your fever’s gone, thank God for that. You gave me one hell of a fright.”

Spock shifts uncomfortably, dropping his eyes. “I regret the inconvenience. What happened?”

Pike resumes his seat and raises his eyebrows. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know. You disappeared from the party last night. I was ready to start a search, but then Claire told me you had a visitor. I didn’t know what to think, so I just waited. You came back at two in the morning, and you were freezing. Apparently, you decided to take a walk without your coat on. Not very logical.”

Indeed, Spock thinks blandly. He remembers now. The Vulcan ship sent him down to T’Pring’s original beam-down point, which was at the village. He must have made the five-kilometer walk from there.

“We tried to warm you up. Brian said you might get feverish later. He left something to take the temperature down. Looks like it worked.”
Brian, a physician from Cardiff. Spock looks at the empty hypospray idly, trying to recall if he’d said more than two words to the man. Pike has obviously spent the night here watching over him. This is unacceptable.

“I ask forgiveness,” Spock mutters, staring at his hands clasped over the blanket. “I did not mean to cause such an immoderate amount of trouble.”

Pike studies him for a moment, then leans forward slightly. “You scared me half to death, Spock,” he says quietly. “But it was no trouble. I’m just glad you’re okay.” He picks a cup from the mantelshelf and hands it to Spock. Their fingers brush. “I’m not sure what your favorite blend is, but I’m afraid the local shops don’t offer much of a choice of Vulcan spice tea.”

“It is ideal,” Spock says, inhaling the sharp aroma. “But you really should not have troubled yourself so, Cap—Christopher. I am undeserving of such an honor.”

“Hey. You’re a guest under my roof, and it’s no trouble and not an honor. And everyone deserves to be taken care of when they need it, Spock. You too.”

“No,” Spock states with conviction, his fingers tightening around the cup. “No. Not me. Do not be deceived, Christopher. I am not who you think I am.”

“Who do you think I think you are?” Pike asks softly.

Spock closes his eyes. “Someone worthy.”

“You’re right.”

“No!” Spock’s eyes snap open and he looks at the human sharply. “I do not know how I do this, but it is obvious that I am deceiving you somehow. I do this unintentionally, but I understand that this is no excuse. All this” - Spock’s gaze surges around the room - “and this” – He lifts his cup for emphasis - “is for someone who doesn’t exist. Someone I can never be. Your regard for me is unwarranted, Christopher. It’s based on a lie.”

Pike contemplates him in silence for a moment. He gets to his feet, unhurriedly but determinedly, takes the cup from Spock’s unresisting fingers and sets it on the nightstand. Then, he sits on the edge of the bed and takes Spock’s hands in his own, eyes never leaving Spock’s face.

“Why don’t you tell me about what happened last night?”

Spock nearly whimpers at the flood of concern seeping through the contact, none of it deserved. He tries to pull his hands free, but Pike doesn’t let him. Spock slams a shield in place and gives in. There’s no point in hiding the truth anyway.

He tells everything. The Vulcan tradition of prearranged marriages. The betrothal ceremony with T’Pring when they were both seven. Her growing resentment toward him. His own inability to adhere to the Vulcan way. The DNA test. The only thing Spock doesn’t speak of is pon farr and the danger he’s now in because he no longer has anyone to turn to.

“Well,” Pike shakes his head. “And here I was, thinking that you were dating Moira.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Cadet Jones? We never shared a romantic relationship.”

“I see. I’m still mad at you, you know? You could have told me last night where you were going. And you could have dressed properly, for God’s sake.”
Spock nods guiltily. Pike’s fingers press under Spock’s chin, urging him to look up.

“Hey. I’m mad because I care. What she did... Spock, I won’t pretend to understand Vulcan customs, so I won’t say anything. Except... if she didn’t want to have your children, it was her loss, not yours.”

Spock shakes his head. “She was within her right. And it was logical.”

“Maybe.” Pike sighs and frowns. “And I can’t tell you how to live your life, Spock, but tell me this. Why did you decide to enlist in Starfleet?”

Spock thinks about it. Having several options was logical, but the truth is, he enlisted because... “I wanted it,” he says. “I share its goals and ideals, and I believe that for a scientist, the service is very rewarding. However, there was another reason. The first Vulcan in Starfleet, Admiral T’Pol, is a close friend of my grandmother, T’Pau. The experiences she spoke of, her years of serving with humans, fascinated me.”

“A little case of hero-worship?” Pike asks with a smile.

Spock shakes his head. “Vulcans do not ‘hero-worship,’ and I seem to be Vulcan enough for that. But T’Pol’s stories inspired me to explore this path. I found that Starfleet is better suited for me, considering my skill set and my… disposition.”

“I see. But when you enlisted, it was in defiance of standing tradition, wasn’t it?”

“Indeed. The ministers at the VSA considered it a childish rebellion. I was convinced, however, that I was doing the right thing. I still am.”

“Well, as ranking Starfleet official in the room, I can say that their loss is our gain,” Pike says, smiling. “But I want you to consider this, Spock. You made a life-defining choice and you stood by it, despite the fact that it had given you a lot of grief, because you believed you were right. You could have taken the easy way. You could have let other people define who you are and shape you into what they wanted you to be. This early in your life you have already come as a person who makes his own choices and accepts the consequences. It requires courage and it requires integrity. You have proved you have both.”

“It still doesn’t make me a proper Vulcan.”

“Maybe not.” Pike smirks. “But if memory serves, T’Pau was considered a terrorist when she was your age. Who knows – a hundred years from now, you might be the most respectable Vulcan alive.”

Spock’s lips twitch in amusement. The reaction is fleeting, but Pike catches it.

“There you go.” He grins. “Now, I want to grab a shower. If you feel up to it, meet me downstairs in ten minutes for’ - he glances at the chronometer - “brunch?”

“I will be there, Christopher. Thank you.”

Pike looks back at him from the doorway. “I’m not saying it’s easy to be you, Spock. But you’re not alone.”

“Indeed,” Spock says quietly, when the door slides shut.
The rest of the holidays pass uneventfully. Thanks to Vulcans’ healing abilities, Spock has recovered remarkably quickly. They go skiing again the next day, and Spock feels completely at ease on blue trails, though Pike wouldn’t let him try the red.

Pike gives him a copy of *Surak’s Teachings* translated into five different Earth languages as a Christmas gift. Spock has a present for Pike, too. It’s *kal-toh*, a table game sometimes called Vulcan chess. It takes years to master, but both Spock and Pike enjoy playing against each other. The week ends far too quickly, and suddenly it’s time to say goodbye to everyone. They are back at the flying lounge of the Academy in no time.

Nothing is the same. Immediately upon arrival, Spock gets sent to a three-week field training course. When he comes back, he finds out that Pike has been reassigned for active duty because of some kind of emergency, and his lectures are to be filled by another professor. Spock doesn’t see Pike for four months.

Due to his scientific gravitas, Spock was admitted to the Academy skipping a year, which makes his next year the final one. Which in turn means he’ll be assigned to one of the starships come May and will serve as an acting ensign for three to four months.

Spock is walking outside Academy grounds, watching the bay. Spring is a lovely time in San Francisco. Spock reflects upon the message he has received this morning from his mother. There wasn’t anything unusual in it, but Spock is sensitive to the tiniest variations of her tone. She is unhappy. Spock doesn’t know why, but she sounds almost lonely. For the first time since he left Vulcan, she asks if he could come home to visit.

Spock tilts his head, watching the seagulls. For a moment, their cries seem almost desperate to him. They sense the storm coming.

Several days later, Spock is standing at attention alongside his classmates at the Academy flying field, ready to hear the name of the ship he’s assigned to. His heart most certainly doesn’t skip a beat when he hears his name followed swiftly by the *Resolution*. It just stops beating and doesn’t start again until Spock’s standing at the hangar deck of the said ship, waiting for the captain to arrive. At least, that’s how it seems.

“Welcome to the *Resolution,*” Pike says with a warm smile, looking over a dozen cadets assigned to his ship. “May your service here make us all proud.”

Spock doesn’t dare to look anywhere but straight ahead, even after the “Dismissed” command has sounded.

The *Resolution* is a relatively small vessel, with a complement of fifty-two. Spock’s duties are to assist the science officer, and he’s never been more motivated to be at his best in his life. He feels Pike’s presence in the room like it’s a physical substance in its own rights. It’s a little distracting, and Spock privately blesses his Vulcan training.

The ship leaves orbit and resumes its normal patrol pattern. The captain finds Spock nearly eight hours later in the science lab. Spock is monitoring an experiment, while another cadet assists the science officer on duty.

“How have you been, Spock?” Pike asks, stopping at Spock’s working station. He’s grinning.

Spock stands up automatically, and Pike waves him back to his seat, chuckling softly.
“We don’t give formal salutes around here,” he says. “But feel free to look me in the eye whenever you feel like it.”

Spock blushes, despite his effort to suppress it, and their eyes finally meet.

“I have been... well, Captain. And you?”

“Peachy,” Pike says. “But I missed my kal-toh partner. What would you say to a game at my quarters tonight? Seems like we have some catching up to do.”

Spock is hesitant. He glances quickly at the other side of the lab, and although he’s fairly certain they haven’t been overheard, he still feels uneasy about the arrangement.

“It’s all right if you don’t want to,” Pike says, still smiling, but it’s somehow not the same. “You don’t have to; it’s not an order or anything.”

“No,” Spock says quickly. “No, Captain. I would enjoy a game of kal-toh very much.”

“Great.” Pike beams at him. “Then meet me there in an hour. I trust you’ll find your way.”

Spock isn’t exactly sure why, but he makes certain no one sees him entering the captain’s quarters. It’s not as if they are doing anything illegal, but Spock still feels it better to be discreet.

“I missed you,” Pike tells him quietly, once they face each other over the kal-toh set. “I’m sorry I had to leave like that, but there was some trouble at the Klingon border, and...”

“You hardly need to explain, Captain.”

Pike looks at him. “Let’s make it Christopher when we’re not on duty and in private, okay?”

Spock nods, feeling a good measure of tension leaving him. “I heard you were in battle,” he says calmly, placing another stick in the midst of the peculiar looking construction. He hasn’t hit a chord and it remains immobile. “The news outlets were... sparse.”

“We’ve been through a couple of fights,” Pike nods, contemplating his move and frowning. “Lost two very fine people there.”

“I heard about your injury,” Spock says, his voice dropping. “But they would give us no details.”

Pike looks up at him sharply. Spock drinks in that gaze, as if it was water and he was dying of thirst. Pike takes a deeper breath.

“I’m okay,” he says gently, reaching out to briefly squeeze Spock’s arm. “I didn’t know you knew about that. It was just a scratch.”

Spock nods as if he believes it. Pike sighs and makes his move. The structure remains immobile for him, too.

“Damn. I practiced, I really did,” he tells Spock earnestly. “I just can’t concentrate tonight for some reason.”

“You are fatigued,” Spock says instantly. “I should not be imposing on your time.”

“No, no, it’s all right,” Pike assures him. “Please don’t go. You won’t be able to meditate until your roommates are asleep anyway. I’m sorry about that, but there was simply no way I could offer you your own quarters without it looking like blatant favoritism.”
Spock has to suppress a smile. “I believe my assignment to your ship has covered that particular ground.”

Pike chuckles. “No, we’re fine. You’re top of your class, Spock. No one familiar with your record will believe you require any favors for a second. And the truth is, if I didn’t ask for you, you’d have been assigned to the *Excalibur*, so I guess I owe you an apology. I know it’s like a dream ship for all of your friends.”

Spock shakes his head, looking at him fixedly. “There is nowhere else I would rather be right now, Christopher. I am honored to serve with you.”

Pike holds his gaze for a moment before looking back at the board.

“It’s your move, Spock.”

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They fall into a familiar pattern, only instead of staying after classes, Spock would come to Pike’s cabin after their shifts. They talk more often than they play kal-toh, but still try to keep it low profile. They don’t need to discuss it; it just seems reasonable to both of them. Days turn into weeks… weeks, into months.

And then it happens. The disaster.

The *Resolution* gets ambushed by three Orion raiders. She puts up a fight, but even after Pike’s tactics genius destroys one of them and cripples another, they’re still badly outgunned. The ship is doomed.

Spock normally has four shifts a week on the bridge, but this isn’t one of them. The order to abandon ship finds him in Engineering, fighting desperately along with other officers to prevent a core breach. He knows he’s fighting the lost battle, but refuses to let it go, until one of the senior officers pulls him away bodily.

The core breach is imminent, and the ship’s systems are collapsing one by one as Spock runs through the rumpled corridors toward the bridge. He knows Pike won’t leave this easily, and Spock isn’t leaving without him.

“Spock! What the hell are you doing here?!” Pike yells, whirling up on him as Spock enters the bridge. “Get to the escape pod! NOW!”

“After you, SIR!” Spock yells back over the chaos of destruction. “We have to go now!”

Just as he suspected, Pike’s alone on the bridge, his first officer killed, the rest of the bridge crew implementing his order. Spock grabs Pike’s arm.

“Let’s go.”

Pike curses and struggles to break free, but Spock’s grip is unyielding. With one last glance at the smashed bridge, Pike follows Spock out. There are only three escape pods left, which means the evacuation is complete. Pike shoves Spock into one of the remaining pods and hits ‘Eject’ before taking another himself.

The *Excalibur* arrives forty minutes later to rescue the crew. That’s when they find out that three of
the cadets are missing. One of the officers confirms he’d seen them getting into escape pods, which could only mean one thing. They have been kidnapped by the Orions.

Some of the rescued Resolution crew are in bad shape and will die if they don’t get to a Starbase soon. The captain of the Excalibur decides to head for the Starbase and drop the wounded before laying pursuit. It isn’t good enough for Pike, though, so he steals a runabout and goes after the pirates alone. No one is happy about it, but the captain of the Excalibur maintains his course and only rushes in pursuit after depositing the wounded.

For Spock, days pass in the torture of the not knowing. He isn’t injured, and he can’t stop berating himself for not anticipating Pike’s decision. Spock is restless, walking the corridors of the Starbase unceasingly, half-delirious from worry. He forbids himself to calculate the odds of a Federation runabout withstanding an attack from an Orion raider. He forbids himself to speculate about the captain’s fate.

He does haunt the base commander’s office at least twice a day in hopes of getting some news. He isn’t the only one. All the orphaned Resolution crewmembers do the same. Spock tries not to talk to them much. He can’t stand the hopelessness of their expressions.

Six days of hell pass before they finally receive the news – six days of not sleeping, not eating, and wearing a hole in the carpet in front of the commander’s office. Spock braces himself as best he can, which by that point is far from Vulcan standards.

The Excalibur found Pike’s runabout after Pike had rescued his missing cadets. They are all on their way to the Starbase now and will be here in a day.

Spock hardly pays any heed to the exuberant claps on the back and hugs from his former crewmates. He, too, is elated, but weak. He needs to see Christopher to really believe he’s safe. He doesn’t get any sleep that night, again.

There’s a huge heroes welcome party at the Starbase the next night. Spock isn’t exactly sure how he’s made it through the day, but he’s there amidst the chattering crowd. The grief at the loss of their ship is dampened by the miracle of the improbable rescue of their crewmates. People are excited and happy, celebrating the return of those they considered dead.

Spock watches Pike enter the room. The captain looks tired, but he’s smiling, and Spock knows. It’s devastating for a captain to lose a ship, but the crew’s lives are so much more important. Spock knows Pike would never have forgiven himself if the cadets died or were sold to slavery on his watch. Spock knows that now, he can leave. He’s seen his captain alive and well; he can sleep now. He doesn’t go.

It’s much later when Pike breaks free from all the people who want to shake his hand and finds Spock in a private booth in the observation lounge. For a moment, they just stare at each other silently. Finally, Spock takes one step forward, and Pike does the same, gripping Spock’s arms.

“You should not have gone without me,” Spock says.

Pike’s hold tightens. “When I was out there,” he says, almost whispering, “When I was looking for them, picturing everything that might have happened to them, all I could think of... All I could think of, Spock, was: thank God it wasn’t you.”

They are at an impasse, staring at each other over the short distance between them. For the first time, Spock realizes what the expression ‘deer in the headlights’ means, and he can’t move, can’t blink,
can’t breathe, it seems. Then suddenly Pike’s arms slide around Spock’s waist and the back of his neck, and they are chest to chest in some indistinct, blurry motion, so close it’s painful.

“You’re safe,” Spock exhales, almost inaudible. “You’re safe.” It’s all he manages to get out before Pike crushes his lips with his own.

Spock has been kissed before, but never with such intent. He yields to his assailant without a fight; he craves the aggression unleashed on him. It only takes one demanding stroke of the rough tongue across his lips, and Spock parts them, opening his mouth to welcome the invader.

Pike kisses him with abandon, and Spock is so overwhelmed that he can do little but take it. His head is spinning wildly, and he clings to Pike desperately, all frantic motions and blind flying and intoxication. He has never been so excited in his life.

Pike tears away from Spock’s lips and moves his mouth along Spock’s jaw line, planting heated but tender kisses on the soft skin. Somehow, it’s drastically not enough, and Spock throws his head back instinctively, exposing his throat. It elicits a guttural groan from Pike.

“I’m going to hell for this,” he rasps against Spock’s skin. “I’m so going to hell...”

The words cut straight through Spock, and he shivers, alarmed by the force of his own passion. But it’s not important, his mind reminds him drunkenly. All that matters now is Christopher, alive, and well, and right here. Spock surrenders his right to think in an instant.

Somewhere along the way to the narrow couch, Pike manages to get them both out of their shirts. Pike’s hands roam over Spock’s body freely, and Spock revels in the touches and breathtaking kisses, of which he seems to be unable to get enough. Pike’s hand slides over Spock’s hip and he presses their groins together sharply, grinding in precise but torturing motions. Spock lets out a soft moan, arching his body into Pike’s like a professional seducer.

Pike growls at that and pushes Spock into the couch, pressing him down and kissing him savagely, ravishing Spock’s mouth like it has committed a gruesome crime and needs to be eradicated. Spock digs his fingers into Pike’s back, scraping down to his waist. He stops for a second and then slides his hand under the fabric of Pike’s pants.

Pike jolts and his teeth sink into Spock’s lower lip, drawing blood. He sucks on it forcefully, making Spock’s thoroughly abused lips swell even further, before wrenching himself away. Spock watches through half-lidded eyes as Pike stands up to quickly take off the rest of his clothes. Spock’s gaze is drawn to Pike’s cock, and he barely notices Pike finishing undressing him, too. Then Pike’s hand closes around Spock’s erection, and Spock thrashes wildly, nearly falling off the couch.

Pike is on him in a moment, steadying Spock with his weight. He kisses down Spock’s throat, sucking on his collarbone, as his hand slides up and down Spock’s cock, pumping gently. Spock’s senses are overloading and he shuts his eyes, desperate to cut off at least one incoming channel.

Pike lets go of him then, covering Spock’s body fully and thrusting against him, pressing them together. Spock’s eyes snap wide open, and he writhes beneath Pike, hands searching for purchase frantically and finally clutching something and pulling desperately until Pike is kissing him again.

Pike’s still controlling every bit of it, and the kiss is slow and soothing now, almost comforting.

“Easy, easy.” Pike’s breath ghosts across Spock’s lips, the motion of his hips slowing. “I’ll take care of you. Relax.”

They breathe into each other, as Pike rocks his hips against Spock almost gently. Spock’s hands lock
on the back of Pike’s neck, restless fingers stroking the short hair.

“Hey. You okay?” Pike asks with a tender smile.

Spock kisses the corner of his mouth in answer, and then he finds his voice.

“Chris.” Pike stills at his broken whisper. Spock’s eyes lock on his. “Take me.”

Pike’s hips buck reflexively at the words, but he pulls away from Spock slightly, his expression startled.

“Spock, no. God...”

“You don’t want me?”

Pike thrusts against him pointedly, and Spock whimpers.

“I want you to the point of going permanently insane.” Pike’s voice is reduced to a gasp. “I want you so much that I don’t care anymore that you’re still my student, and I can be court-martialed for this.” He rocks his hips again and they both moan. “You, with your innocent touch and devilish eyes, and that body... God... That body that will make a saint a sinner... You’re driving me crazy with want, Spock.”

“Then why—?”

“We don’t have anything to help us,” Pike mutters, catching Spock’s earlobe between his teeth and nibbling. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Spock moves his hands to cup Pike’s face and looks deeply into his eyes.

“I want you to,” he says, and feels Pike shiver. “I want to feel you. I want to never be able to forget. I want to be reminded every minute tomorrow of how you felt inside me.”

Pike’s expression changes from worry to uncertainty to resignation – that while he may have evaded this opportunity successfully before, there’s no way he can hold out now. His head drops to Spock’s shoulder.

“Oh God,” he groans. “Oh God, Spock, why do you have to be my undoing?”

He claims Spock’s lips again with desperation, and Spock knows he’s won. He sucks greedily on Pike’s fingers, and spreads his legs wide as they enter him, one by one. Pike is watching his face like a hawk, and although Spock’s far from being able to control his reaction, Pike doesn’t stop, which means they’re fine.

Finally, Pike withdraws his fingers and positions himself at Spock’s entrance. He bends over Spock then and kisses him passionately, pushing into him at the same time, using nothing but his own precome for lubricant. Spock stills at the stinging pain, and Pike deepens the kiss, distracting him from being penetrated and maintaining steady pressure. Spock’s muscles finally relax, just as he starts to return the kiss, and Pike slides all the way inside him in one surprisingly easy motion.

They remain like this for a moment, and Spock can sense the tremendous effort Pike has to make to fight the urge to move. Spock is still hurting, more than he has anticipated, but the pain feels inexplicably good, sobering him and sharpening his perceptions. He notices that his hips are elevated and his legs are hooked around Pike’s waist. His own swollen penis is trapped between their bodies, and the friction created by their stomachs is delicious. And then Spock discovers he has muscles in
the places he’s never given much thought to, and they are as obedient to his command as the rest of his body.

He squeezes all around Pike, and the sound the human makes is indescribable. Just like that, Pike’s resolve is broken. He starts thrusting, slowly at first, making Spock marvel at his control. The pace picks up quickly.

Spock feels torn between pain and pleasure, and he isn’t blocking either. In fact, he feels torn, period, and knows he’s bleeding. For some reason, the thought excites him incredibly, and he starts to lift his hips to meet Pike’s thrusts, joining the building rhythm.

Pike notices and loses what little restraint he had left. His thrusts become more forceful, more aggressive. Spock revels in the sensation of being claimed, being owned so thoroughly. The pain intensifies and he’s craving more, offering himself again and again, helping Pike cut him open, begging to be impaled deeper and deeper.

The rhythm they set is frantic and cruel. Spock’s head is hanging down from the couch, his body shifting a little further with every thrust. His arms finally fall to his sides, powerless. His eyes are shut; his breath is seeping through his parted lips in ragged gasps. His body doesn’t belong to him anymore – it’s being taken. He is being taken. He is being possessed. He is somebody’s now. He’s wanted enough to be claimed.

“Christopher...” Spock whimpers and comes on exquisite pain alone, without being touched.

Pike hisses and loses his rhythm, letting go and shooting his seed into Spock, moaning his name. Just as their climaxes overlap, Spock reaches up and presses his fingers to Pike’s temple, channeling his emotions, for which he doesn’t have names. It creates a tight glowing cocoon of mindless joy around them both, and for an infinite moment, they simply exist within it, outside normal time and space.

Spock comes to his senses to find that Pike has collapsed on top of him in a boneless heap. Spock feels a soft tap of fingers at his side, directly above his heart.

“I love you,” Pike whispers in a voice Spock can barely recognize. “I love you so much.”

Completely incoherent, Spock tugs him closer in response.

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Spock graduates a year later as a full lieutenant and at the top of his class. During this time, he only sees Pike several times. After the obligatory court-martial following the loss of his ship, Pike is offered a choice between taking another command or another tenure at the Academy. He chooses the ship, telling everyone he’s missed the captain’s chair, but Spock knows better.

Pike is very uneasy about their teacher-student situation. They both know that neither of them has been coerced by the other, but they also know how it will look. It might cost them both their careers, and neither is willing to risk ruining the other’s life.

Still, it’s painful to say goodbye, even if it’s just for a while. Spock buries himself in his studies, but he still misses Pike terribly.

Spock is easily the most wanted graduate of the year and as such has a wide choice of postings offered to him. He requests the position of the science officer on the Nelson, and is easily granted his wish, as his predecessor is due for a promotion. Pike welcomes him aboard and invites him for a
game of kal-toh later in his quarters. Spock arrives on time. They don’t play.

Their lovemaking is never again as violent as it has been the first time. Pike has never quite gotten over that first encounter, terrified at himself and the things he did to Spock. No matter how often Spock reminds him that it has been consensual and that he wanted it this way, Pike doesn’t really forgive himself such a total loss of control.

Their connection grows deeper still. Pike is a gentle and considerate lover and Spock readily becomes pliant wax in his arms. Pike likes to take him slowly, tenderly, spending eons in foreplay and preparation. Spock basks in his loving attention, which still comes as a surprise to him.

They are extremely discreet. Very few people are in on their relationship, even though they are breaking no regulations. On board the *Nelson*, only Pike’s first officer Number One and his CMO Philip Boyce know the truth. Pike considers them close friends and trusts them implicitly. They have been serving under him for a long time and they have had the time to get to know Spock and respect him before Pike tells them. Spock is relieved to receive their quiet approval.

A year slips by and then another one. Spock is conducting a lot of research, fascinated by the new discoveries. Pike continues to coach him unobtrusively in command, and they still have their endless debates, which amuse the bridge crew to no end.

Early hours of morning find them in the captain’s cabin. Spock is sprawled face down on the bed, his arms hugging the pillow. Pike is on top of him, fucking him methodically in long, even strokes. He changes his angle, and Spock moans. Pike’s hand on Spock’s cock moves in time with his thrusts, and Spock can feel they are both nearing completion.

Suddenly, Pike stops, buried deep within him, and releases his hold on Spock, allowing him to sink into the mattress. Spock bucks his hips instinctively, seeking friction, but Pike presses him down.

“Shh. Be still.”

Spock freezes. Slowly, Pike lowers himself to cover Spock’s body, spreading his weight on him carefully.

“All right?”

“You are torturing me,” Spock complains, voice muffled by the pillow.

Pike chuckles. “Serves you right for all you do to me.”

Spock can feel Pike’s cock throb within him. It’s a striking contrast with Pike’s otherwise immobile form, and it’s exciting beyond belief. In fact, it’s absolutely maddening.

“I can’t resist you,” Pike whispers, his fingers sifting through Spock’s tousled hair. “You know that? As if it’s not enough that you’re so smart; oh, no. You had to be beautiful, too. You had to be so insufferably attractive so people would lose their heads as well as their hearts.”

“Mutilation is not my preference.”

Pike’s teeth sink into his shoulder in revenge. Spock gasps. “A sense of humor is overkill, don’t you think?”

“I do not believe insulting me is your prerogative as my commanding officer.”

Pike trails kisses and nibbles down Spock’s spine. “You’re perfect. You’d shame Greek gods to
shreds. They’d kill you out of envy with a lightning bolt. Or turn you into a tree.”

“Christopher, you are beginning to sound ridiculous. I am not beautiful.”

“Are too.”

“Your emotions hinder your objectivity.”

“And your damn modesty hinders yours.”

“I am not modest. Merely realistic. Whereas you—”

“I love you. I want you to learn to love yourself, too.”

Spock knows they are at an impasse here and he doesn’t want to upset Pike, but he can’t lie to him, either. He settles for a third option instead and squeezes his ass around Pike without warning.

“You bastard,” Pike growls, jerking up, forced into resuming his thrusts. “That’s cheating, Spock, and you’re so paying for this later.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Later, as they lie side by side, spent and sated, Spock feels a strange disquiet in Pike. Always sensitive to the others’ moods, Spock feels unsurprisingly close to this human. He props himself up on his elbow and runs a finger gently across Pike’s chest. Pike’s wandering gaze settles on Spock and he smiles.

“What is it, Christopher?”

Pike’s smile fades. He catches Spock’s hand and squeezes lightly.

“You’re due for promotion,” he says, watching Spock’s face fixedly.

Spock freezes, startled. “Surely it is too early for that.”

“It’s not. You’re an exceptional officer.”

“Your judgment is impaired.”

“No, it isn’t. I confess I was tempted to hold you back a little to keep you with me, but it wouldn’t be fair to you. Honestly, Spock. When was the last time you looked at your service record? It’s all but exploding with citations for valor – and before you say it, I had nothing to do with that. The Scientific Legion of Honor – and from the VSA no less? Nah, you’re a little overdue if you ask me.”

Spock sits up, looking down at Pike with a frown. “If I am promoted, will I have to leave the ship?”

Pike purses his lips. “You see the problem. With Starfleet’s current policy of spreading the wealth, you won’t be able to serve with me for another rotation or two, that’s for certain.”

“But that can take four to six years, probably more,” Spock says in alarm. “This is unacceptable.”

Pike watches him carefully. “Maybe not.”

Spock stares at him in shock. “Christopher? Are you... tired of me?”

“That’s an incredibly stupid question coming from someone so smart,” Pike snaps. Then, catching a
glimpse of Spock’s face, he sits up and pulls the Vulcan close. “Hey, don’t look at me like that.” He kisses Spock deeply, stealing his breath. “I love you, you know that. But that makes me responsible for you and I have to think about what’s better for you, not only for myself.”

“How is it better for me if I have to be without you?”

Pike smiles and kisses him again, unable to stop himself. “Because your life should be about you, Spock. There’s a whole galaxy lying at your feet, waiting for you to take it. Nothing should hold you back, most certainly not a grumpy old man like me.”

“Christopher,” Spock protests, not bothering to suppress his indignation. “You are neither old nor grumpy, you are—”

“Hush.” Pike presses a finger to Spock’s lips. “Spock, our time together is a gift I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve. But you need to move on. You need to reach out for those new horizons. I know what I’m talking about, because I did when I was like you. I had my chance, a fair chance and I’m happy with my life now. I want you to be happy, too.”

Spock breaks away from Pike’s hold and pulls back a little to look him in the eye properly.

“Christopher... Are you terminating our relationship?”

“What?” Pike flinches. “No, Spock, of course not! How can you think that? I’ll never leave you of my own free will, I promise you that. I’m just saying our relationship shouldn’t get in the way of your life, that’s all.”

Spock doesn’t answer. Pike sighs.

“Just think about what I said. Please. Now, about that payback...”

Spock finds himself pushed back into the pillows. His thoughts begin to leave him as Pike’s fingers prod at Spock’s hole, well-stretched and slick from earlier. By the time four fingers have pushed their way in, Spock isn’t sure he’ll ever be capable of coherent thought again. When Pike’s hand curls into a fist inside him, Spock’s mind goes utterly blank with a snap, and all he sees is stars.

--

“There is a way we can remain together after my promotion,” Spock says.

Pike looks up at him in surprise. They are in the captain’s ready room, and they have never discussed anything personal or showed any open affection outside one of their quarters. Spock is unrepentant. Technically, they are both off duty. Besides, lately Spock feels his time is running short. It’s been over two weeks since he and Pike fell asleep in each other’s arms the last time. Starfleet has been keeping them busy and there is no indication the streak will end any time soon.

“Really?” Pike quirks an eyebrow at him. “What’s that?”

Spock takes a deep breath.

“We can bond.”

Pike stares at him. “Bond? As in marry?”

“Essentially. Starfleet has a policy of not separating married or bonded couples.”
“Spock.” Pike walks around his desk and leans against it, coming face-to-face with his science officer. “I’ve been reading on Vulcan customs. Vulcan bonding is for life. Which means you won’t be able to take another partner while I’m alive.”

“I do not want another partner.”

“You don’t, now. How about in a year? In five years? In ten? Spock, you are very young.”

“I fail to see how my age is relevant since I am past the age of consent.”

“No one should make a life-defining choice in their twenties, Spock.”

“Vulcans make these choices at seven.”

“Really? And how did that work out for you?”

Spock’s eyes widen at the unexpected blow. Pike is studying him calmly.

“There’s something else I read about the bonding,” Pike says quietly. “When one of the spouses dies, their bondmate’s suffering is so terrible that some don’t survive it. Not even full-blooded Vulcans are guaranteed to make it.”

“You are saying that as a half-breed, I don’t stand a chance?”

“No,” Pike’s voice is sharp. “I’m saying that I’m not willing to take that risk. Even if you weren’t Vulcan, I’m much older than you, Spock. I will die much sooner than you. I won’t put you through hell for the sake of my own selfish feelings, no matter how much I want to keep you with me, always. The price is way too high.”

Spock’s protests die on his lips, as Pike levels him with a stern gaze.

“You asked me if we could bond. The answer is no.”

Spock stands there, and his face doesn’t change its expression in the slightest. It’s not as though his whole world has just crumbled to pieces. It’s nothing like that at all.

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It goes steadily downhill from there. Spock does think about Pike’s words, trying to understand his reasoning. Spock sees no logic in Pike’s argument, hard as he tries time and again. It simply makes no sense.

They don’t discuss it anymore, and if Spock notices Pike’s worried glances on him sometimes, he doesn’t show it. He analyses the situation repeatedly, and finally, with painful clarity, he sees the truth.

Pike is not in love with him anymore.

It is the only logical conclusion. It is obvious that Pike still cares about him deeply, but the love is gone. If it weren’t, if he was as deep in it as Spock is, Pike would never have allowed trivial matters to interfere in such a prominent way as to make him reject Spock.

Irony becomes Spock’s shelter. Humans always call Vulcans cold-hearted and emotionless, while their own emotions are so remarkably short-lived. Ironic indeed.
Many years ago, Sarek told him that emotions of the Vulcan race ran deep. His father warned him of the danger of having them out of control. Now, only now, Spock finally understands how right, how infinitely wise his father had been.

Spock resolves to devote himself to logic and nothing else. He accepts the promotion to lieutenant commander, but surprises the admiralty with his request for his next posting. Spock asks to be appointed a professor at the Academy, knowing that it’s not something Pike would want for him. Spock has had enough of other people making decisions for him.

The Academy board is delighted to have him. Admiral Barnett goes ecstatic over subspace; it is actually quite embarrassing. Spock is to report to him the moment his ship returns to Earth orbit.

Pike doesn’t comment on his decision. They stop seeing each other outside duty hours, without discussing it, and really, what is there to discuss? They don’t talk to each other outside duty also, and people notice, of course, but they are a well-trained crew and no one says anything.

Spock’s last two months on board pass invariably in the same way each day. He works a shift on the bridge. He works a shift in the lab. He works out for an hour. Meditates for two hours. Sleeps for five. He doesn’t deviate from this routine once. He finds that this new utterly logical way of life is not perhaps as satisfying emotionally as his previous lifestyle has been, but is much more befitting a Vulcan. He is determined to carry on until it’s no longer an effort.

They enter Earth orbit at oh-nine-hundred ship-time. Spock has his transfer paperwork submitted and approved. His sparse belongings are packed, his room vacated, his replacement briefed. He is ready to leave.

He is already standing on the transporter pad when the doors to the transporter room open and Pike walks in. The transporter operator snaps to attention, and Pike nods at him, offering a professional captain’s smile.

“Could you step outside, Ensign?”

“Of course, sir.”

The young man walks through the doors without batting an eyelash – or looking at either officer. Pike turns toward Spock.

“Is there something you wanted, sir?” Spock asks coolly.

“There is,” Pike nods, seemingly unaffected by his tone. “Step down, please.” Spock quirks an eyebrow. Pike sighs. “Please, Spock. Don’t make me make it an order.”

Spock climbs down from the platform and walks toward Pike. “Sir.”

Pike looks at him. He says nothing, merely stares into Spock’s eyes. In speechless wonder, like it’s the first time. In quiet grief, like it’s the last.

“I wanted to say goodbye,” Pike says, and his voice shakes and crumbles. “And I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

This isn’t fair, Spock thinks. It’s not fair that the control he spent months building is breaking to pieces just like that. It’s not fair that he feels so much when he should be feeling nothing. It’s not fair that it has to end like this. Not fair at all.

He doesn’t know who moves first, and the motion is probably nothing more than a deep breath or the
slightest bow of a head, but the next moment their arms fly around each other and they are pressed together in a desperate, world-shattering kiss.

Spock is smashed into the wall blindly. Pike’s lips are crushing his; Pike’s tongue is plunging into Spock’s mouth, claiming it for the very last time as his own. Spock moans beneath him, hands twisted inelegantly in Pike’s shirt, craving more contact, more touch, more everything. If he could think, he would say something. Ask the right question, find the right thing to say to make Pike change his mind and stay with Spock forever. But his mind is empty and desperate and he can’t think.

They kiss like the universe ends in a moment, and maybe it does. Spock certainly feels it waver and reel as Pike finally tears away. They pant into each other for a small agonizing eternity before pulling apart. It strikes Spock then in full for the very first time.

It’s over.

Pike tugs at his shirt and Spock smooths his hair. Silently, slowly, he walks around Pike and resumes his place on the platform. Pike is already standing at the controls as Spock looks up. The captain finds it in him to smile, and Spock feels a surge of admiration surfacing for a moment through the vastness of grave despair.

“Live long and prosper, Christopher.”

“Good luck, Spock.”

End of Part I
4 years – 8 months ago

When he decided to apply for a position at Starfleet Academy, Spock was aware that the job would present certain challenges for which three years aboard a starship probably hadn’t prepared him. However, seeing unclothed individuals jumping out the second-floor windows at oh-two-hundred hours has decidedly exceeded his expectations.

He’s been working late at the lab, and as he’s leaving the main building, Spock is certain he is the last one, save of course for security. He’s walking along his customary path across campus, heading for the main gates. He rents a small apartment close enough to the Academy, but not quite on its territory. Spock usually walks back home, enjoying the meditative effect of an unhurried stroll.

Tonight, however, it has been interrupted, quite abruptly, by the sight of an unclothed female body moving from a building toward the ground. The speed and trajectory of the movement allow Spock to locate the point where the jump originated with sufficient accuracy. The soft, quiet thud tells him the landing has gone smoothly.

The jumper straightens up, not bothering to cover herself. She turns with an obvious intent to run, and that’s when her eyes catch sight of Spock.

“Shit.”

Spock thinks that a) he was wrong, and she isn’t completely naked if a pair of miniscule panties could be considered an article of clothing in its own rights, and b) he shouldn’t be surprised at all. Not really.

“Cadet Fumbritsskanjngh.”

She grimaces, walking toward him.

“You know, Commander, you’re probably the only person in Starfleet who can pronounce my last name, but would it really kill you to call me Gaila? Just, you know” – she spreads her arms to indicate her state of undress – “in view of this?”

Spock regards her coolly before glancing briefly at the building. “This is a males’ dorm.”

“Yes, sir, Captain Obvious, sir.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Cadet, I really doubt that insulting me will help your situation any.”

“My situation?” She bats her eyelashes at him charmingly.

“Currently, I can report you for being outside your dorm after the curfew without cause, trespassing,
and blatantly violating Starfleet uniform code.”

Gaila giggles. “You know, I’d really love to see their faces when you’ll be, uh, reporting me for that.” She looks up at him, her eyes glinting mysteriously in the sparse light. “You know, it really is kinda cool out here.”

Spock suppresses the urge to close his eyes in exasperation. He unzips his jacket, pulls it off, and hands it to her.

“Thanks.” She smiles sweetly at him and looks appreciatively over his upper body, clad in nothing but a standard issue tank top now. “Wow, would you look at those arms? Nice body, Commander.”

“Thank you,” Spock says dryly. “Give me one good reason for not reporting your activities.”

“Um…” She presses her finger to her lips, a picture of thoughtfulness. “I’m good at math? I speak Vulcan? No, no, wait! Here’s a good one. I know how to break security lockouts in the Academy’s Test Center computer but haven’t done it yet!”

Spock stares at her. “You know – Where did you get this information?”

She shrugs dismissively, smirking. “I was bored during a lecture once and hacked it by accident.”

“You hacked it?”

“Just testing a new algorithm. Why, does my gorgeous body make you think I don’t have the smarts?” She taps her chin mockingly. “Tut, tut, aren’t we being sexist, Commander?”

“No,” Spock says, and it sounds suspiciously like a stifled groan. “I am being constantly amazed at the length certain individuals would go to entertain themselves, however.”


“How long have you been in possession of this information?” Spock asks, steadily ignoring her advances.

“Oh, about four months, maybe five? I really don’t remember.”

“Yet you have not used your knowledge to attain an illegal benefit and improve your scores. Why?”

She scowls indignantly, and it seems remarkably genuine. “I don’t need it! I’ll have you know that I’m a decent student.”

Maybe it’s too easy, but Spock can’t help it. “So forgive me if the word ‘decent’ is not the first to come to my mind when I see you jumping out the males’ dorm window in the middle of the night in a conspicuous lack of attire.”

“Hey! Is it my fault you have a dirty mind?” She tilts her head belligerently. “I was helping – someone with their temporal mechanics homework!”

“At this hour? And your hasty retreat was a result of a temporal paradox?”

“Well, that”— her drawl slips into sulkiness —“and an untimely arrival of a jealous girlfriend. I told her I could help her with her classes, too, but she wasn’t into it.” She makes a face. “Humans.”

Spock looks away for a moment, making another equivalent of a human eye roll. “Do you at least realize that your behavior is unbecoming a Starfleet officer?”
“A human Starfleet officer, maybe.” She lifts her chin up defiantly. “It’s perfectly becoming an Orion. And aren’t you the one who always preaches diversity, Commander?”

Spock closes his eyes briefly, giving up. The girl is way too much for him to handle.

“Go to your dorm, Cadet,” he says. “You can return the jacket to me tomorrow. Preferably in a discreet fashion.”

Gaila’s eyes widen and she’s already shaking her head. “Oh, no. No way; you want to leave me here? Alone? What if I meet anyone?”

“What if you do?”

“They’d want to molest me on the spot!”

“And I am to assume that it would be a disagreeable option for you?”

“Why, you—” She bristles huffily. “You – Sir, you’re not a gentleman!”

“You are wearing my jacket,” Spock points out calmly.

“Well, you’re not a complete asshole,” she admits, “but – hey, do you even realize that if you weren’t Vulcan, we’d be going at it like rabbits by now?”

“Somehow I doubt that would have made me any more of a gentleman.”

“Oh, please, walk me to my dorm, Spock?” she pleads desperately. Catching a glimpse of his eyebrow, she corrects herself quickly. “Commander. It’s so creepy here when it’s dark, all those shadows... Please?”

Suddenly Spock realizes three things at once. One: it’s completely safe for Gaila to walk across the Academy grounds alone. Two: there is no way she could have passed Starfleet psych examination if she was afraid of darkness. And finally, that it would speed up the process approximately five times if he agrees now and they don’t spend another half an hour here arguing before he agrees anyway.

“Very well,” he concedes. “But kindly restrain your impulses.”

“Oh, I’ll be good!” She beams. “But if you change your mind about that other thing... Fine, fine, I get it. Let’s go.”

They walk along the shadowy grounds side by side, but not too close. Good to her promise, Gaila tries to assume as much dignity as she can muster. Her lively nature gets the better of her, though, and her gait still resembles dance steps significantly more than a military march. Spock masks his amusement with his strict professor demeanor as best he can.

The conversation is quiet and surprisingly easy. Despite their banter, Spock knows that Gaila is a very talented computer specialist, and an enthusiast to boot. Spock is one of the few people in Starfleet who not only can pronounce Gaila’s last name, but also are immune to her pheromones. Her constant attempts to flirt with him don’t really mean anything, Spock knows. It’s just the way she is. He is quite certain in her sincerity, though, when she expresses desire for his company. For her, it must be quite refreshing to have her intellect and not her body at the center of attention.

They nearly make it all the way to her dorm, when Gaila suddenly trips over something and grabs at Spock in an attempt to keep her balance. Automatically, he reaches to support her, but just as he gets there, something firm, speedy and very determined crashes into his knees from behind with a low
Spock and Gaila hit the ground in a tangled mess of limbs, accompanied by Gaila’s cursing and an unexpected dog’s barking.

“What in the garpagh was that?” Gaila hisses, bewildered, as she straightens up. “Did you see—?”

Before Spock can formulate a response, a man steps out of the shadows, pulling a very old looking smoking pipe out of his mouth. Gaila gapes for the good thirty seconds before snapping to attention. Spock rises from the ground, tempted to do the same.

“You know what?” Admiral Jonathan Archer says, looking over the pair of them, his gaze lingering on Spock’s hair and Gaila’s knees. “I’m not even going to ask.”

Privately, Spock believes it’s a wise decision.

--

Confusing as his days sometimes are, nights are worse. Maybe that’s why Spock is never in a hurry to get home. He meditates and it calms his senses somewhat, but he still needs to sleep and he can’t. His dreams are disturbed by vivid, heated images – memories and fantasies, all carved into his subconscious. Spock is tired of waking up reaching for a man who is no longer there.

He sleeps less and less.

Agnes is waiting for him on his doorstep when he comes back. He reaches down to pat her fluffy back and she arches into his hand, purring softly in greeting. Spock looks at the cat for a moment, then at his neighbor’s door across the lane. Somehow, he doesn’t think it’s the best time to return the runaway pet.

Agnes mewls and Spock gives in. He sinks to the ground, sitting down on the step and resting his back against the closed door. Agnes jumps into his lap, and Spock strokes her behind the ears. The purring intensifies.

Christopher would like Gaila, Spock reflects. The captain always liked what he described as ‘brains and beauty.’ Spock remembers the night when Christopher told him that. The small, well-hidden beach on Risa and their two days of shore leave in ten months. Spock knows he shouldn’t be torturing himself like this, but he’s tired of fighting.

He closes his eyes.

The stars are glimmering above them and around them, floating on the surface of the ocean. It’s warm enough for Spock and cool enough for Pike to remain on the beach, lying on a huge soft blanket. Spock is on his back, his arms pillowing his head, as he tries to convince Pike that the idea of constellations is illogical. Pike laughs, rolling half on top of Spock and watching his face.

They kiss slowly, languidly, almost lazily. After a day of sailing and three previous rounds of lovemaking, there is no rush and no urgency.

‘I like it when you’re relaxed,’ Pike says, tracing some peculiar pattern on Spock’s chest. ‘I rarely get to see you like this.’

‘You are the only one who has ever seen me like this,’ Spock replies.
Pike leans in and steals a kiss. ‘I hope it stays that way for a long, long time.’

Spock shifts, taking Pike’s face into his hands and kissing him deeply, devotedly. Pike mutters something into his mouth, and Spock doesn’t quite catch it, but he has a viable hypothesis. He can feel Pike’s pulse picking up the pace and his body tensing up, little by little.

‘Hell, Spock—’ Pike rasps, tearing his mouth away for a moment. ‘You just won’t stop until you’ve killed me.’

Spock bites down Pike’s lower lip in response, and while the human moans and shudders Spock flips them over, pinning Pike underneath him. He buries his face in the crook of Pike’s neck, his lips ghosting over the sensitive skin, not quite touching. Voice silky, Spock whispers, ‘Do you wish me to stop?’

‘I’ve created a monster,’ Pike groans breathlessly, tugging Spock closer. ‘Don’t you dare stop.’

Spock hides his smile in the surrounding darkness. He takes his time to worship every square inch of Pike’s skin, feeling Pike growing fully hard under his ministrations. Yet Spock avoids the most responsive area, making Pike curse a lot and call him a tease.

When Spock feels the notes of desperation spiking his lover’s voice heavily, he straightens up on his knees and locks gazes with Pike. Very slowly, very deliberately, Spock begins to open himself with one hand, using the other to hold Pike down.

‘Oh hell, you are a killer,’ Pike lets out, slurring, never knowing what he’s saying. His eyes are alarmingly wide. ‘You have no idea how... how... this is...’

Spock catches him and lowers himself down Pike’s straining length in one slick motion. For the first time ever, Spock hears Pike cry out like this, and it fills him with unprecedented satisfaction and joy. He sets up a rhythm and rides Pike, methodical and smooth, rolling his hips every now and then to hear more of those delicious sounds.

He can feel the moment when Pike snaps as clearly as if it rippled through the air between them. Pike lunges up and grabs him, and in a blurry split second Spock’s flat on his back and taking it, harder than it’s been in a while, apart from that insane first time.

‘You could have just asked,’ Pike murmurs eons later, when they lay next to each other, spent and quiet. Spock is on his stomach and Pike traces the curve of his spine gently.

‘I did,’ Spock responds, turning to look at Pike, a dark silhouette against the starry blackness. ‘I believe you could say that I was ‘asking for it.’’

Pike chuckles. ‘You so were. But you don’t have to go the extra mile to get there. You’re a walking provocation to anyone with eyes just as you are. Add any more and you’ll be fighting people off with a stick.’

Spock lifts himself up on his elbows. ‘You are exaggerating as usual.’

Pike rubs his shoulders in slow circles. ‘I didn’t hurt you, did I?’

‘No, Christopher. You did not hurt me in any way.’

‘Is that exasperation I hear in your voice, Lieutenant? I’m a fragile old man, you know. You should be gentle with me.’
‘You are anything but fragile, Christopher.’

‘We’re all fragile, Spock. The tougher we seem, the harder we shatter.’

Indeed, Spock thinks, opening his eyes. He had never considered himself particularly fragile - until Christopher proved him wrong.

The warm purring form in his lap suddenly tenses, and in a moment, Agnes digs her claws into his skin. She curls her spine in an angle only possible for a really irritated cat, and Spock looks up to determine what has offended her.

There are two men standing at the gate, looking directly at him. Spock rakes his eyes over their uniform and stands up, wondering what San Francisco police department could possibly want from him at this hour. In fact, what could they possibly want from him, period? Spock places Agnes carefully on the steps and walks over toward the police officers.

“Commander Spock, would you come with us, please?” one of them asks, and the tone of his voice brooks no argument.

Hardly intimidated, Spock lifts an eyebrow. “May I ask what for?”

“Captain Ramirez wants to see you.”

Well, that certainly explains some things. Ramirez had never sent police officers for him before, though. The matter must be quite urgent.

“May I take a minute to change?” Spock asks, suddenly having to stifle a shiver.

“You don’t have a minute,” the officer tells him firmly. He grabs Spock’s arm tightly and sticks a transponder to his bare skin. His partner keys a command on his communicator and Spock dematerializes on the spot, Agnes’ mewl following his abrupt departure.

--

The transporter beam releases him in a familiar environment of the Federation Security Headquarters in New York. Spock suppresses his irritation at being manhandled in such a careless fashion and follows the officer on duty into Captain Ramirez’s office. People look determinedly past him as they walk.

It has nothing to do with Spock’s state of dress or the fact that he’s a Vulcan. In this building, on this floor, anyone not in uniform and with an escort is either a criminal or something much more unspeakable.

Spock is so used to it by now that he doesn’t spare it a second thought. Vaguely, he reflects on how accustomed he has become to making this transition from the perfectly legal, logical side of his life to this dark and decidedly slippery terrain on a moment’s notice. He’s only just gotten here, yet already the warm, sunny reality of the Academy is fading, washed out of his perception, replaced by the cruel metallic taste of adrenaline, which he is human enough to enjoy.

He used to require some time to switch from Lieutenant Commander Spock of Starfleet to Operative D-37-V of Federation Security, who didn’t have a name or a rank – only a designation. Spock realizes suddenly that he cannot remember the last time when he had any difficulty shifting from mode to mode. He has become entirely too used to his double life.
Does this make him more despicable than he already is?

Captain Ramirez looks up as Spock walks in. He is a slightly balding human in his late forties, with a constitution of a bulldog and swift, smart eyes, black and unyielding.

“Sit down,” he throws at Spock, the moment the door slides shut behind him.

Spock takes a seat, folding himself carefully into a narrow and deliberately uncomfortable visitor’s chair, and waits. He knows better than to ask questions.

“Shrink was spotted on Ornoria Prime two days ago. According to a tip we’ve got, he intends to stay.”

The information from the data file Spock saw not three months ago springs to his mind immediately.

*Delem Torsa, age 34, Betazoid, male. A sociopath; uses his telepathy to convince people they are guilty of various gruesome crimes and must pay for them by committing suicide. Current body count 28. Federation Security Criminal Base file number 1837. Code name Shrink. Danger index: Black.*

Spock looks up at Ramirez. “I shall require the data on his current whereabouts. I will also need to contact the Academy.”

“It’s already taken care of. You’ve got a two-day leave for research purposes. Your classes are covered.”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “And if the assignment takes longer than two days?”

Ramirez shakes his head. “It’s Shrink we’re talking about here. If you’re after him, in two days you’ll either get him or you’ll be dead.”

“Logical.”

“Your transport has been arranged. Here’s the data you might need.” Ramirez hands him a PADD.

“Look, 37.”

Spock glances up at him, somewhat surprised. The captain doesn’t usually grace him – or any of his colleagues – with any kind of conversation, save for giving the assignment. But now, it appears, Spock has the captain’s full attention.

“I know you haven’t failed an assignment yet,” Ramirez says. “But I don’t want you to get overconfident. I’m sending you because he’s already killed two of my men and I’m not losing any more of my people to that bastard. You’re the closest thing we have to a chance against him.” He sighs. “But telepath or no, you’re not immune. There were three Vulcans among his victims; apparently, he finds tough cases the sweetest. And remember, we don’t give a black rate to just anyone.”

Spock inclines his head slowly. “I understand.”

“One more thing,” Ramirez says. “I know you don’t give a shit about money, but if you bring him to us, it’ll make you a very rich man.”

Spock merely looks at him. Ramirez is correct. Unlike most of Spock’s colleagues, the so-called ‘hired guns’ in the service of FS, Spock isn’t in this for money. The captain is a good judge of character; Spock is surprised he even mentions it at all. Perhaps Ramirez is exercising his ‘guilty conscience.’ Spock finds it highly illogical. Nobody forces him into this job. He’s here by choice.
Ramirez dismisses him with a nod, and Spock hurries off to catch his transport.

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When he is first approached, Spock says yes almost before they finish their proposal. He isn’t interested in money. He isn’t interested to learn the risk factor. He isn’t interested to know that there is a reason why Federation Security prefers not to use its own officers for this. He doesn’t care to find out the rate of survival for contractors.

It makes perfect sense for him to risk his life so that other people, better people, wouldn’t have to.

He is in a precarious position where Starfleet is concerned. If they find out about his ‘part-time job’ there is going to be, in human terms, hell to pay. But somehow the danger of being discovered only adds to the allure of his position, and if the logic behind this reasoning is weak, Spock prefers not to examine it too closely. After all, they haven’t found out yet.

He has been living like this for a year now, sliding along the sharp edge of the blade laid over an abyss, his ‘day’ life and his ‘night’ life never meeting face to face.

Sometimes Spock asks himself if he had lost perspective. It used to make sense. Maybe there’s simply been too much of this lately. He’s good. They keep calling on him again and again. Maybe therein lays the problem.

He dives into this, both seeking a distraction and fighting to give some meaning to his existence. He chases emotional pain with physical pain, and it works for hours, sometimes for days – if he is fortunate, if he is hurt bad enough. Also, there is a certain satisfaction in knowing that while he is here, dealing with the ugliest, most hideous spawn the Federation has ever regurgitated, it means that someone else doesn’t have to.

Someone who deserves better.

It makes sense to Spock, perfect sense in fact. He only wishes he didn’t abuse this medication. What was supposed to turn into an addiction has somehow become routine, and now the shelter he has been using for so long to be able to live with himself is threatening to collapse on his head.

Spock isn’t sure there will be survivors.

--

The first time he gets an assignment he very nearly fails it. The FS is building a case against the dealers offering sexual services of the children they kidnap and factually enslave. There is a whole net of agents spread across the Federation that hasn’t known such an appalling crime for at least a century. Spock’s task is relatively simple. He is to capture a high ranking network operative and bring him in for questioning.

The shock he experiences upon discovering that the operative responsible for a great number of despicable acts is, in fact, an fourteen-year-old girl nearly costs him his life. It’s blatantly clear why the human officers sent to get her had failed their task. Those innocent wide eyes and trembling lips would keep them believing she is a victim, not a villain, long enough for her to fire. Spock is saved in equal parts by the intrusion of his logic and his fast reaction. He hesitates for two days before allowing himself to meditate on the encounter.
He gains the reputation of being emotionless and cold-blooded. Even among his colleagues, he draws the shortest straws due to this.

They send him after a serial killer who picks his victims for their thoughts which he can sense from a distance. Total thought control is taxing for a Vulcan, but impossible for a human. Spock sees the logic of being chosen for this assignment.

His greater physical endurance comes in handy when they are gathering evidence against a necrophile who likes to torture his victims to death before the act. Spock has to play his victim for almost 24 hours before enough evidence is finally gathered.

He gets caught in the crossfire between the drug dealers he lures into the trap and the security squad that arrives ahead of schedule. He isn’t certain from which side the plasma shot that hits him originates.

For twelve months, he watches the underside of the Federation's cozy, utopian façade that most people don’t ever get to see. His projections that dealing with these experiences would become easier with time don’t come remotely close to coming true.

Sometimes, while delivering a lecture in the high, filled with light Academy halls, Spock experiences a sense of strange duality and asks himself which of the two realities unfolding before his eyes is genuine. It seems impossible that the two could coexist occupying the same physical space.

Late in the nights, as his exhaustion wars with his discipline, he allows himself to crave the sunny side and very rarely, to imagine what it would feel like to have earned it.

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In retrospect, Spock thinks the captain’s warning about getting overconfident was only fair.

He opens his eyes in a sterile-looking, well-lit room and regrets it immediately. His eyes burn. His head feels numb, as if it was replaced with a solid rock when he wasn’t looking. There’s a nauseating drumbeat of pain coming from his left side, giving every indication of a stab wound.

Spock concentrates on his body’s reactions, but his pain-control mechanisms appear to not be functioning properly. An attempt to reach within his mind results in near-unconsciousness and an overwhelming surge of pain that makes his eyes water. He resigns to lie still and observe his surroundings.

He knows this room. He has been here numerous times before during the last year. Broken ribs, broken bones, concussions, flesh wounds, disruptor burns – yes, he’s been here often. He’s fairly certain they would have designated a bed for him, were he not supposed to be nameless here. This is an FS infirmary specifically organized to treat the likes of him: nameless doctors treat nameless patients.

Which in turn means that he made it back from his ‘date’ with Shrink. The question remains – was he successful?

Spock knows nobody here will answer his questions, and his own memory appears to be uncharacteristically murky. He remembers cornering the insane Betazoid in a small hotel room on Ornoria Prime. Remembers the crude, blunt attack on his mind that he tried to deflect, and was losing. He distinctly recalls he was yielding to the sheer power of the malicious will ripping his mind to pieces. And then...
His eyes catch sight of a metallic surface, smooth enough to produce a somewhat distorted reflection. A lightning bolt of epiphany surges through his mind.

_A mirror._

His mind was dying and desperately searching for a solution and that’s what it came up with. He created a telepathic mirror, leaving his assailant to fight off his own destructive attack. The solution had saved his life, apparently, but he was too weak for a hand-to-hand struggle that followed. And he is missing something... Something else happened, something he must remember...

“How are you feeling?”

Spock winces, caught off guard. His eyes fly up to meet Captain Ramirez’s cool stare. Spock is astounded. The captain has no reason to be here.

“Yes, I know.” Ramirez speaks quietly above him. “I’m supposed to treat you like shit. Our beloved government and its infinite wisdom. We’re allowed to hire you to do our dirty work, but we’re not allowed to encourage you to continue to do it.”

Spock says nothing. He actually sees the logic of treating mercenaries like the 23rd century variation of the untouchable caste. He is, in any case, used to it.

“I don’t have a problem with the rest of your merry men,” Ramirez says, with a grimace of disdain. “They’re all scum, one way or another. Losers not good enough for proper military training; old schoolyard bullies too stupid to make a career. But you – what are you doing here, Spock of Vulcan?”

Spock knows he must have given out some kind of reaction, because Ramirez nods at him.

“Oh, yes, I’ve been reading up on you. Apparently you’re some kind of Vulcan royalty.” Spock is silent. Ramirez nods again and continues. “You don’t need the money. And as for ambitions, your career in Starfleet – the one we’re not supposed to know about, just as they aren’t supposed to know you’re working for us – is blooming. So what the hell are you doing here, son?”

Spock licks his dry lips, trying to get the words out.

Ramirez shakes his head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.” He bends closer.

Spock clears his throat. “Shrink?” he asks hoarsely. “Did I... Is he...?”

Ramirez purses his lips irritably, straightening up. “Only care about work, do you?” He bristles quietly. “You’ve got Shrink. From what I can tell, he nearly burnt your brains out and when it didn’t work, he attacked you with a knife. Why the hell you didn’t stop him I have no idea, but when you called for a beam up, he was unconscious and you were bleeding to death.”

Spock’s eyes drift momentarily closed in elation. He snaps them open again abruptly, because he suddenly remembers how he got his wound. An unforgivable moment of distraction – all because the Betazoid, uncharacteristically according to his race’s genetic profile, had mercurial grey-green eyes.

The same interchangeable, mesmerizing color as Christopher’s.

“Listen.” Ramirez sighs in exasperation. “You don’t want to talk to me, that’s fine, that’s fair enough. But I’m calling it quits. Thank you for your services, but we won’t be needing them anymore.”

“True, but there’s a reason for that. We shouldn’t have even hired you in the first place. For fuck’s sake, boy, you’re Starfleet. Do you know what they’d do to me if anyone finds out we’re stealing qualified personnel from other agencies?”

“You have not been concerned with that for twelve months, eleven days, and fourteen hours. I did not lie to you when I accepted your proposal.”

“Well, I’m concerned – now. We could afford to keep you while things were quiet, but if you started to make stupid mistakes like that, then something obviously isn’t working with you. I’m not taking chances with you getting yourself killed on one of our missions, leaving us to deal with a shitstorm of paperwork. You’re out. And on a personal note, whatever’s wrong with your life – fix it. Or find someone else to help you self-destruct.”

Spock gives in to the overwhelming impulse to close his eyes and drift into the bliss of sleep, only having one thought following him into it.

And he was doing so well.

--

You’re out.

He signs out of the infirmary at least a day early, ignoring the protests of his nameless doctor. He doesn’t have any real power over Spock and they both know it, so the dispute is doomed to be short-lived.

Spock beams back to San Francisco late in the evening, making his way from the transporter station toward his apartment slowly. He feels mildly light-headed and somewhat less certain of his coordination, which probably means that he had lost more blood than he originally estimated. He doesn’t regret his decision. He knows his recovery will be speedier in the familiar confines of his home. Besides, he has a class to teach in the morning.

You’re out.

Ramirez’s stern voice still rings in Spock’s ears. He really was doing so well. During that last year, ever since he returned to Earth, he has taken self-discipline to inconceivable heights. He volunteers to teach two separate classes – one in xenolinguistics and one in cross-cultural cooperation, and sometimes he hosts special seminars in computer science, too. He picks up three new languages to study. He accepts a position with the FS, and he’s been keeping his end of the bargain diligently. He tries to stay focused at all times, and for the most part, he succeeds.

One mistake.

One moment of weakness when he allowed his thoughts to drift back to Christopher and, tough as he was, he shattered. He thought he was dealing with his emotions, but he wasn’t, not really. He is fortunate that his discovery has not been made at the cost of somebody’s life.

Vulcans do have emotions, and those emotions do, as his father once told him, run deep. Centuries of polishing control over them have accumulated certain basic knowledge that isn’t in dispute, certain baselines that are the same for any Vulcan.
One does not suppress emotions – one is in control of them. The first step in achieving this is to acknowledge the emotion in its existence and accept it for what it is. The second step would be to find a way to channel it into some form of positive energy, and although Spock doesn’t lack the latter, he’s been failing the first step for months now.

He’s been avoiding the truth, hiding from it. Its ugliness scares him, and he keeps looking away instead of facing it. He tries to lose himself in his work, and lectures, and research, and when those don’t work he runs off to hunt down criminals, too dangerous to send regular security officers after them, and there, for a moment, at the peak of pursuit, in the heat of a struggle for survival, he finds his escape from himself – until this one fails, too.

He is Spock, son of Sarek. He is the son of a father who does not wish to call him that anymore – who has the right not to. He is a rejected bondmate, whose noble Vulcan lineage is not enough to compensate for his flaws. Undeserving of a Vulcan wife. A shame to his heritage.

He is Spock, lieutenant commander in Starfleet. A competent officer. An accomplished scientist. Someone good enough to be taken as lover. Not deserving of being considered for more.

Spock knows that were he to yield to his emotionalism, he could blame T’Pring for being prejudiced. But he could never accuse Christopher of this vice.

He is a scientist. He has two sources independently confirming the same fact. It does not get any clearer than that.

It is time he made some responsible decisions. Clearly, his methods of controlling his emotions are lacking, perhaps even inferior. This time, it has only resulted in him endangering himself. What if next time it will be someone else? Some unsuspecting, innocent being who would trust him to protect them? He is a Starfleet officer, and it’s not as if this scenario is completely out the realm of possibility.

He has his truth about himself. If he is incapable of living with it, he must at least spare the people around him suffering from the same affliction.

He must protect people from himself. He must do what he intended to do five years ago – undergo the Kolihnar and purge all emotions. If he is too weak to control them, this is the only way. Logical and ethically sound. He will contact the masters of Gol as soon as possible and make arrangements.

This means he will have to resign from Starfleet, and the thought makes him inexplicably, unaccountably sad. He has met good people here, dedicated and professional. This life is not ideal, but – he liked it. The service had brought him several moments of epiphany, when he felt that yes, he is needed here, he is useful here – he belongs here. Starfleet is the only place that has ever given him a sense of purpose. It will be difficult to give it up.

But it is a responsible and logical thing to do, and therefore it must be done. Incompetent as he is, he is still a Vulcan, and he must do what is right.

*You’re out.*

Indeed, he should be.

--

Spock struggles through his classes the following week, while his body struggles to finish healing,
and if he holds himself a little bit too tightly, his students don’t notice. Having made his decision, he experiences a sense of dull calmness that secludes him into an invisible but strangely comforting bubble. He doesn’t sleep much for Shrink follows him into the world of unconsciousness persistently, but his meditation proves to be restorative, and Spock is grateful for that. He has sent the initial petition to Gol and is now awaiting an answer.

He works in the multiphysics lab through the afternoon, fighting off fatigue. It strikes him suddenly that he is going to miss working on the project that has been his ‘baby,’ as humans would put it, from the original idea to the final stages of execution. He will have to choose someone to replace him here. And he really, really should not be thinking about all the things this person would probably do wrong.

He’s so concentrated on maintaining his focus that he doesn’t notice the sudden silence.

“Spock.”

T’Pol is standing in the doorway, regarding him coolly while the other scientists stare at her in awe. She’s been retired for thirty years, but there’s hardly anyone at all in Starfleet who wouldn’t recognize her on the spot.

Spock straightens. “Admiral.”

She lifts an eyebrow as her eyes scan his appearance. “You have very little time to change,” she notes.

Only then does he notice that she’s wearing what humans would call an evening gown. It is of traditional Vulcan design, though the soft glimmer of the fabric is undoubtedly a bow toward the human sense of fashion and all the years T’Pol has spent on Earth.

“I ask forgiveness, Admiral,” Spock says blandly. “Have I forgotten we had an appointment?” He is certain he hasn’t.

“Poetry reading at the Vulcan Cultural Center,” she replies smoothly. “I wish you to accompany me.”

Spock hesitates. His colleagues give him incredulous looks, and he realizes that in their view, he should obey her without question, even if she invited him for a walk on the Moon without a spacesuit. He knows they are right and follows T’Pol to her extravagant-looking car outside.

T’Pol is eccentric by both Vulcan and human standards. Spock muses on this as they stop by his apartment so he can change. She is much more openly emotional than any Vulcan and completely unfazed by it. She’s also rumored to have a much greater influence on the current Starfleet politics than any retired officer should. It is said that Admiral Archer is the only one who has a fighting chance to see through T’Pol’s schemes – some even say it’s the only reason they still keep him around. It is also known that Archer once said that any captain thinking of picking a Vulcan for their first officer is out of his or her mind.

For many years, T’Pol and T’Pau have shared what humans would call a love-hate relationship. Sarek disapproved of T’Pol, and as a child, Spock only had any contact with her at his grandmother’s house. Ever since then, T’Pol has taken an interest in him; she may see in Spock glimpses of her own daughter, Elizabeth, who was the first human-Vulcan hybrid and who died within months of her birth.

Spock had only seen T’Pol a number of times on Vulcan, but ever since he moved to Earth, they
meet more often. On some level, he is still as fascinated by her as he used to be when he was a boy. Sometimes he wishes illogically that he could have a sister just like her.

T’Pol succinctly criticizes Spock’s apartment and then his attire. Spock offers her tea, but it’s only when she accepts it that he realizes her sudden visit is not a coincidence.

“Rumors reached me that you applied for apprenticeship at Gol,” she says without preamble, looking at him over the rim of her cup which she holds in a traditional two-hand clasp.

“You are well informed,” Spock remarks. His own tea suddenly seems cooler.

“Do you not find your current occupation satisfactory?”

“It is gratifying,” Spock acquiesces. “However, it is my belief that having completed the discipline of Kolihnar, I shall be of more use.”

Her eyebrow arches eloquently, and Spock suppresses the urge to shift in his seat.

“You will fail,” she says simply, taking another sip of her tea.

Spock sets his cup on the table slowly and carefully. “Your certainty is inspiring.”

“Sarcasm, Spock?”

She leans back in her seat; her chestnut hair, tamed with grey, slide silkily down her garment. Spock suddenly catches himself thinking that she looks entirely alien to him, as his brain tries and fails to capture her essence. Her mercurial hazel eyes watch him with ostensible calmness, which doesn’t reveal her thoughts.

Something within his mind shifts, clicks into place and suddenly he knows. She’s a sphinx. The master of riddles. One wrong answer and he’ll be fed to the lions. Quite possibly, literally.

“There is no shame in failing to complete the Kolihnar,” he says softly.

“Indeed there is not. Very few Vulcans manage to complete it. For you, however, the experience would prove excessive. You are well-equipped to deal with your emotions on your own.”

However telling the reaction is, Spock cannot help it. He looks away.

“You are regrettably mistaken.”

“No,” she says. “I am not.”

She sounds so convinced that her opinion is the only one possible that Spock can actually see why T’Pau has come to respect her. T’Pol places her empty cup beside his on the table and rises from the couch, looking down at Spock imperiously.

“Humans have a saying, Spock, involving something called ‘hair of the dog.’ I believe it is time you tried it.”

He looks up at her, eyebrows drawn inward in confusion. “I do not understand,” he admits, but he knows already he will not get an answer.

“Come,” she says, “we are late.”

As they finally leave for the Vulcan Compound, Spock decides to contemplate on that new riddle at
Spock loves poetry, but socializing with other Vulcans is not his idea of a good time. He is no longer fighting to get approval of his own people, but he doesn’t relish the prospect of being subjected to their dispassionate scorn just the same.

However, the initial reception goes well enough. T’Pol dominates any room she walks in, and Spock has yet to see any Vulcan showing the slightest amount of disrespect toward her. The moment they walk into the Vulcan Compound, her expression sets to what Admiral Archer once called ‘T’Pol’s don’t-fuck-with-me face.’ As she has firmly attached Spock to her side, no one bothers him, either.

“Here is the good part,” T’Pol tells him quietly, after the first round of reading is over. “They have invited a human girl to read some pre-Reform poems. I hear she is very talented.”

Spock expresses his surprise at such a high praise by furrowing his eyebrows slightly, but T’Pol merely points him toward the stage.

Even by Vulcan standards, the girl is stunning. She is tall, slender and graceful, and she carries herself with so much dignity, as if competing with the room full of Vulcans. She is wearing a beautiful dark-blue dress, the fabric shimmering and repeating the curves of her body like a second skin. Her long silky hair is organized in a simple, elegant style of which Spock thoroughly approves; it exposes the long, elegant line of her neck and emphasizes her refined angular features. She has deep, almond-shaped eyes that glow with intelligence and brooding passion.

The room becomes very quiet as she begins to read, somehow even quieter than the simple absence of speech. It almost feels like there is no sound of breathing, even. Spock loses himself slightly in her voice, noticing only minutes later that she has almost no accent, even though the poem she reads is written in one of the old, pre-Reform Vulcan dialects. Her inflections are perfect and her memory appears to be impeccable. Spock is enthralled.

After the reading is over, Spock can’t help but notice that most people in the room are following the young female with their eyes. He is stunned when he realizes that she is headed toward him. He glances discreetly to his sides, half-expecting to see someone else there, but he’s standing alone, T’Pol having mysteriously disappeared. Spock suspects a setup, but he doesn’t have the time to dwell on it.

“Commander Spock?”

Spock looks up to meet her eyes, trying to shake off the spell, and bows slightly.

“It appears you have me at a disadvantage.”

She smiles, and he fights to stay unaffected.

“Nyota Uhura.” She raises her hand in the traditional greeting.

Spock returns the salute, noting silently how well their hands would fit together should they ever—

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms. Uhura.”

Her smile becomes even more luminous if that is even possible, and she shakes her head gracefully. “No, no, Commander, the pleasure’s all mine. It’s a great honor for me to be here. I’m just a first-year cadet at the Academy.”

“Indeed?” Spock says. “If I may, what is your specialization?”
She blushes beautifully, though still managing to send him a mischievous grin. “Communications. Couldn’t you tell?”

“Of course,” he inclines his head, finding her teasing strangely pleasant.

“I’ve heard a lot about your classes, sir.”

“Please,” Spock says, unexpectedly even to himself. “This is an informal occasion. I would rather you called me by my name.”

She grins. “Only if you call me Nyota.”

“That means ‘a star,’ does it not? And Uhura, if I am not mistaken, means ‘freedom.’”

She looks at him with admiration and surprise. “You speak Swahili?”

“ Barely,” Spock tells her apologetically. “I have a very superficial knowledge of that tongue.”

“It seems accurate enough,” she says and smiles. “My grandfather named me. He had... somewhat of a romantic streak in him.”

She looks away for a moment and picks at the folds of her dress absently. The gesture seems nervous rather than playful, and Spock searches for a way to put her at ease.

“Your reading,” he says. “It was – flawless.”

This time, her blush is much deeper, and she drops her eyes to the floor. Spock is seized by an irrational urge to lift her chin up with his fingers. He clasps his hands behind his back determinedly.

“Thank you,” Nyota says quietly. “I was not expecting such a high praise from—”

“A Vulcan?”

“From you.” She looks up at him, eyes glinting softly. “You have a reputation for being a demanding teacher.”

Spock finds himself transfixed and completely unable to come up with anything to say.

“I...”

“It’s okay.” She laughs melodically. “I like a challenge.” She speaks the last words in Romulan Common.

“It would seem I will have little to teach you,” Spock replies smoothly in the same language.

“In that case, I hope we could be friends?” Nyota says in Deltan.

Spock lifts an eyebrow at her choice. It is clear that she is trying to impress him, but Deltan has become an unofficial intergalactic language of love and emotion, and all the words carry a specific additional meaning. There is no such word as ‘friend,’ for instance. The one Nyota used means ‘a friend whom I find sexually attractive and would like to engage in sexual relations with.’ Her inflections suggest she knows perfectly well what she’s implying.

Well, Spock thinks. If she thinks to embarrass him, it’s only fair for her to find out that two could play at this game. For the first time since they have started the conversation, he intentionally allows his eyes to divert from her face and travel down her slim form for a moment.
“That would be my preference as well,” he says, meeting her eyes again.

‘Preference’ in Deltan carries additional connotations of ‘desire’ and ‘a thing I intend to obtain.’

Spock watches Nyota’s eyes widen momentarily before she hides them under her magnificent eyelashes. He should definitely make her blush more often.

“Is that a declaration of intentions, Commander?” she asks, in Vulcan this time, still not looking at him.

Spock approves of the language choice. It’s time to be precise.

“Yes.”

Their eyes meet, and Spock isn’t surprised to hear the next words in English.

“Would you like to get out of here?”

He knows a proposition when he hears one, even having them so rarely aimed at himself. She is a cadet, and it would have mattered significantly if Spock was staying, but he’s not, so it doesn’t. He’s not – and therefore he can take her up on her offer without worrying that it would compromise either of them in the future.

He wants to, he really does. Not only is she enticing, but she also seems incredibly honest and sincere about her desire to be with him. He can sense no deceit coming from her, no hidden thoughts. And he is tired of being alone, and maybe – just maybe – he’s earned a going-away present.

He says yes.

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The night is young when they leave the Vulcan Compound. They walk side by side, their hands brushing occasionally. They talk.

It’s quiet, soothing, and amusing to a degree. Spock appreciates Nyota’s intelligence, her tact, and the perfect taste she shows when making her observations on a variety of subjects, starting with famous cultural artifacts and ending with the discussion of the old Vulcan-Andorian border disputes.

Spock revels in the conversation, realizing suddenly he’s been starved ever since – yes, ever since Christopher. Nyota inadvertently manages to break through the layer of ice he’s erected around himself. Maybe it has something to do with the anecdotes based on the deep knowledge of Denobulan mythology, or maybe it’s her compelling smile, or the way she seems to be drawn to him in a way that’s almost tangible.

Somewhere within those intoxicating, exhilarating hours, Spock catches himself thinking that if only he was staying, he would wish for no better friend or companion than Nyota.

“I feel like I’ve known you forever,” she tells him, as they stop in a deserted park lane near the bay. “I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I’m not usually – I mean, this isn’t my usual routine for a first date. I don’t – I’m not that kind—”

Spock interrupts her with a kiss.

He could tell her that this is drastically far from his usual routine, either, but somehow that doesn’t
seem to be a top priority right this moment. Her lips are soft and pliant under his, her waist fits perfectly within the hold of his hands, and when her hands slide up to dive into his hair and her tongue darts forward to meet his, Spock feels the world begin to reel around him.

They are not a block away from his apartment, which he finds fortunate. Spock interlocks their fingers as they walk there, in silence, and he’s not surprised when Nyota responds to the Vulcan kiss as if it’s the most natural thing for her to do.

There is a sense of quiet desperation in the way they undress and caress each other, as if Nyota, too, knows that this will be a one and only occasion. Spock kisses her lips fervently, while his hands roam over her body, showering it in Vulcan kisses, until she can no longer stay on her feet.

He drinks in her moans like nectar as his teeth graze the tender skin of her nipple teasingly, his hand caressing her other breast. His other hand slides down her belly, and she cries out when his fingers press into her gently. Dazed as he is with desire, he listens carefully to what her body is telling him, cataloguing her sweet spots and stimulating them mercilessly, until she’s writhing beneath him, desperate with need.

The sound she makes when he enters her is feral and wild, as is the way she clings to him, wrapping her arms and legs around him as if she’s afraid he’ll disappear the moment she lets go. He wants to be gentle, wary of hurting her, but the sheer urgency that emanates from her dissuades his intentions.

Years he spent making love to Christopher have spoiled him, and his body seems to have signed a secret pact with Nyota’s, aiming to punish him for long months of abstinence. She comes, spasming around him, sobbing unintelligibly, and that’s the only thing it takes for him to loosen his control.

He rises up on his knees, grabbing her hips and elevating them as if they are a detached part of her body. With her legs hooked around his waist, her head and shoulders remain the only part of her still lying on the bed, and she watches, wide-eyed and helpless, as he takes her. Literally, as he’s moving for both of them now, pulling her hips to meet his thrusts steadily.

He revels in the way she yields before him, tender and sweet, and soft, and vibrant. Their eyes are locked over her splayed body and he can see the build up of her orgasm in them before she realizes it’s there. He rocks her through it, watching her eyes slide shut and her teeth sink into her lower lip, as she flutters and ripples in pleasure.

It brings him irrevocably close, and his movements become urgent, almost rough, as he speeds up to his own completion. She screams like she’s dying as his climax pushes her into her third one that night. Spock’s fingers convulsively grip her tighter, probably leaving marks.

Later, he’s lying flat on his back, and she’s kissing him softly, her lips slide almost timidly along his neck, tongue traces the outline of his shoulder. Her fingers are playing with his chest hair, and she’s warm and boneless at his side.

“You were amazing,” she whispers, nibbling at his earlobe.

Spock doesn’t laugh, but he wants to. It is truly amusing how every female since the dawn of days has been telling her bed partner these words, and every male inevitably believed them, were they true or not, because he wanted to. And yet, Nyota manages to sound so genuine and her words so full of unadulterated awe that Spock does, in fact, believe her.

They don’t sleep, making love instead, till the sun is close enough to the horizon to color the waters of the bay in pink and purple. They both get dressed then, after a quick but eventful shower, and Spock escorts Nyota to the Academy grounds.
They walk in silence, not touching, but stealing glances every now and then. The early morning mist smooths the sharpness of their surroundings, and it’s a bit surreal, and thrillingly sad.

Spock’s body is humming inaudibly, filled with emotion he cannot identify. It stirs inexorably every time he catches a glimpse of Nyota’s gait, which isn’t quite as gliding as it has been the night before. He isn’t concerned, though, and maybe it’s because of the way she grimaces and smiles a secret smile every time she stumbles. He wants to pick her up and carry her, never allowing her feet to touch the ground.

“Oh no,” she says suddenly, stopping abruptly and staring straight ahead, a mixture of alarm and disdain on her face. “Doesn’t he ever have enough?”

Spock follows her gaze and freezes.

There are two cadets standing uncertainly at the edge of the sidewalk. They are obviously inebriated, which is not surprising, considering that the establishment behind their backs is a bar, highly popular among the cadets for its proximity to the campus. The taller cadet is dark-haired, well-built, and appears to be older than his companion, whom he’s holding around the waist to prevent from falling. The younger cadet is fair and noticeably slimmer, with bright blue eyes shining excitedly as he gesticulates wildly.

That’s not, however, the reason for Spock’s breath to suddenly catch and for his heart to sink somewhere in the direction of the planet’s core. There’s a senior officer, wearing Academy grey, who is apparently telling the cadets off for some transgression, most likely for being unpresentable. He’s standing with his back to Spock, but there’s no mistaking the firm, tired slope of his shoulders, or that stubbornly straight back.

Nyota is saying something, complaining about the cadets she seems to recognize, but Spock isn’t listening. He is unable, in point of fact, to hear a word she’s saying, because Christopher Pike chooses this very moment to turn slightly to his left and look directly at him.

Spock has the distinct feeling that the earth is parting beneath his feet and wishes, illogically and fervently, for it to swallow him.

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He is staring, transfixed, as Pike dismisses the cadets with a careless wave of his hand. He barely feels Nyota press her fingers to his goodbye. He watches Pike walking over to him, unable to move a muscle or even blink.

“Hello, Spock,” Pike says, stopping in front of him, and smiles.

Spock’s painfully aware of his heart coming back to life with a vengeance, threatening to beat out of his chest.

“Captain,” he says, resenting his breathless tone. “I was not aware you joined the Academy staff.”

Pike nods. “It’s very recent. They lured me in under the pretense of giving me the Enterprise when she’s finished. In the meantime, I’ll be covering recruitment and personnel office.”

“I have heard of the proposal,” Spock says. “I did not know they offered it to you. Congratulations, sir.” He feels strangely relieved and disappointed that Pike’s return has nothing to do with him.
“Thanks.” Pike grins at him. “Actually, I’ve been planning to have a talk with you about that. You have a minute?”

“Certainly.”

They start walking along the bay in a lazy, unhurried pace. Spock tries to keep himself perfectly composed, but it’s difficult. He suddenly becomes acutely aware of how long it has been since he had a full night’s sleep. They walk in silence for a few minutes. Pike looks pensive and calm. Spock tries to follow his lead, but contemplation eludes him for the moment.

Pike stops abruptly, turning to Spock, one hand gripping the railing, and they freeze at point blank range.

“How have you been?” Pike asks quietly, and Spock stills under his gaze, suddenly so very gentle.

“I have been well,” Spock says, taking a step back. “As well as could be expected.”

“I see,” Pike says, and it’s clear he’s noted Spock’s intention to keep his distance. He doesn’t comment on it, though, resuming their walk instead. “The Enterprise,” he says, as if there has been no interruption. “Whenever she’s ready, she’s going to need a first officer.” He gives Spock a sideways glance. “Interested?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow, clasping his hands behind his back more tightly. “What about Number One, sir?”

“She decided to stay on the Nelson,” Pike says. “As captain.”

“I see.”

Pike gives him another sidelong look and sighs. “You heard the rumors.” It’s not a question.

Spock purses his lips, because of course he heard the rumors. “You have not been particularly discreet, sir,” he says dryly.

Pike stops to look at him. “She’s my friend, Spock. And yes, after you left, she’s become more than that. She helped me not to go insane. Just as the young lady I just saw appears to have helped you.”

Spock stares at him blankly. He’s forgotten what real pain could feel like.

“I have only just met her,” he says quietly, knowing that his hurt must be seeping into his voice and being utterly unable to stop it.

“Really?” Pike arches his eyebrows. “I don’t have anything against one-night stands, Spock, but picking a cadet for one was probably a bad idea.”

Spock seethes. “Of all people, I would think you are the last person to lecture me about sexual relations with cadets, Christopher.”

Pike winces as if Spock has slapped him. His gaze becomes dangerously dark. “I didn’t seduce you, Spock. I fell in love with you. Perhaps I shouldn’t have, but it happened. If you expect me to say sorry, then you’re in for a disappointment.”

“No,” Spock says, his anger suddenly dissipating. “No, I do not wish you to apologize. That would take away what little we still share.”

“Spock,” Pike says, very quietly, and this time Spock doesn’t pull away when Pike places a hand on
his arm. “I wasn’t the one who ended our relationship. You were.”

“Chris—”

“You were. You told me it was all or nothing for you, and you couldn’t accept that life doesn’t always work this way. Though I can’t help noticing that you seem to have made that leap now just fine.”

Spock closes his eyes. The reproach is only fair.

“I’m leaving the service,” he says flatly. “You should ask someone else to be your first officer.”

“I want you,” Pike says in a voice that brooks no argument. “The ship’s outfitted for deep space exploration, Spock. You know someone with your background is ideal for this position – and did I mention you’d be Chief Science Officer as well? We don’t have that many people in the fleet with your qualification. What’s more – I trust you. We’ll make a great team.”

“I’m going back to Vulcan to complete the discipline of Kolihnar.”

“Purging your emotions?” Pike asks in alarm. Then suddenly both his hands are gripping Spock’s arms and he presses Spock into the railing determinedly. “You can’t run away from yourself, Spock. I told you once it’s not easy to be you, but you have to be! This is who you are. You can’t deny a part of yourself because you don’t like what this part is doing or where it’s taking you.”

“You do not know,” Spock breathes, desperate to explain and yet feeling utterly unable to. “You cannot understand.”

“Maybe not,” Pike says, pressing closer, his interchangeable eyes turning vast as the morning twilight. “But I do know that you’ll regret this decision. I know you, Spock. Isolation is not for you.”

“It might be the only answer.”

“We all have our demons to fight,” Pike says, tired but determined. “And you’re no different than me, or that girl, or Jim Kirk, for crying out loud.”

“Jim Kirk?” Spock asks, momentarily puzzled.

Pike shakes his head, exhaling loudly. “You don’t want to know,” he groans. “He’s one of our latest acquisitions. A troublemaker.”

Spock looks at Pike curiously. “Any relation to George Kirk of the USS Kelvin?”

“His youngest son.”

“Ah. One of those, then.”

Pike frowns. “We’ll see, of course, but I don’t think so. I knew George, and this kid is ten times smarter than he ever was. Pretty feral, though.”

They both become suddenly aware that they are standing in a near embrace. Pike lets go of Spock reluctantly and steps back, hanging his head.

“I’m never going to be over you, am I?” he mutters, so quietly that Spock has to strain to hear.

“Captain?”
“Never mind.” Pike looks up. “Don’t go to Vulcan, Spock. Your place is in Starfleet, whether you see it now or not. It’s not like you to take the easy path. Besides” – he pauses meaningfully – “we need you.”

“I sincerely doubt that. I’m hardly indispensable.”

“You don’t have to be indispensable, just really, really good – and you are, Spock, I was your instructor and I was your captain. I know what you’re capable of. If you leave, you’ll wound us, and somehow I don’t think it’s part of your Starfleet oath.”

Spock is silent, because Pike is right. The captain watches him fixedly.

“Look,” Pike says. “I know you’re still angry with me, and you have the right to be, I suppose. But I still consider you a friend, Spock. A very dear friend. Before we were anything else, we were friends, remember? I see no reason why we can’t be again. I would like that very much.”

Spock looks away to gaze over the serene waters of the bay basking in the bright morning light. He thinks of Nyota’s gentle, mesmerizing eyes. He feels the body heat of the man he wanted to be his bondmate seeping through the layers of clothing, because they are still standing that close. He thinks of the cold, barren plateaus of Gol. He thinks of his mother.

Things were crystal clear not full twelve hours ago. Right now, he’s no longer certain what the right thing to do is.

He turns to look back at Pike. “I would like that as well, Christopher,” he says firmly, and adds sadly to himself: ‘If you would have me as nothing else, I would still be your friend.’

Pike’s smile is real and bright, and as he clasps Spock’s hand between his own, Spock thinks that whatever may come, he’ll always have this. And according to his mother, beggars can’t be choosers, at any rate.

A year of loneliness and exile has come to an end.

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The first time Nyota enters his class three weeks later, Spock feels incredibly awkward. He knows he has no one to blame but himself, but that doesn’t seem to make his situation the tiniest bit better. She doesn’t look at him as she passes his desk, but she blushes spectacularly, and Spock realizes she’s equally if not more embarrassed.

He is surprised to see her waiting for the rest of her classmates to leave after the lecture, and looks at her warily as she walks toward him. She looks different, wearing standard cadet uniform, but she’s still undeniably attractive.

“Commander, may I have a word?” she asks quietly.

Spock nods, stepping down from the podium to be level with her. “I have been meaning to talk to you as well.”

“And I bet I can guess the subject.” She chuckles awkwardly, though with a fine measure of humor. “Look. What happened, happened. They say you thought you were leaving, and I thought – I wasn’t really thinking.” She pauses. “Okay, so maybe I have just a little bit of a crush on you, and maybe I’ve had it for a while, and the fantastic sex didn’t really help it any, but – it’s not going to be a
problem. What I mean is—” She looks him in the eye squarely “—I’m not going to be a problem. I respect you professionally, and I want to be part of your class. I won’t be expecting special treatment and I know you’re not going to be asking for sexual favors. So – we’re fine, right?”

Spock blinks and has to swallow, processing the information. “Your conclusions appear to be sound,” he says. “I would be pleased to have you as a student.”

She smiles, obvious relief on her face. “Awesome. They say you don’t like to give out As very much.” Her eyes twinkle mischievously. “You better be ready to change your policies, because I fully intend to sweep you off your feet.”

Spock has to fight back a smile. “You already have, Cadet,” he says, and, to his immense satisfaction, she blushes. “I do not believe additional efforts would be necessary.”

“I meant with my knowledge.” She laughs and shakes her head. “You’re an unbearable flirt.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I assure you, you are the only person who upholds that opinion.”

“I sure hope so,” she says enigmatically before winking. “See you next week, Commander.”

Having Nyota in his class is exhilarating. For the first time, Spock begins to appreciate how Pike must have felt having Spock in his. Always scrupulous in preparing his lectures, Spock is now spending extra time searching for additional ways to keep his students’ interests – something he’s never given much thought to before.

Partly, it helps him to redirect his mind from a second job he no longer has. In the first weeks after Ramirez dismissed him, Spock very nearly goes through the withdrawal symptoms. It’s only then that he realizes in full how dependent he became on the regular infusions of raw adrenaline. Mentally-wise, Pike’s return and their newly drawn truce help Spock to center himself again, restoring his balance. He works out for long hours, pushing his body almost into a frenzy to assuage some of its cravings.

It also helps him sleep, at least to an extent. Admitting to nightmares is not very Vulcan.

He doesn’t see Pike very often. The captain’s schedule is so tight that Spock insists on meeting over lunch or dinner to make sure Christopher actually eats something. In six months that have passed since Pike returned to the Academy, his weight loss has been alarming and Spock is worried, monitoring his condition closely. Pike teases him for being a mother hen, but his exhaustion is palpable and Spock ignores his protests, even when Pike pulls rank on him.

When Number One is on Earth, she joins them. It’s a little awkward at first, but they all adjust fairly quickly. Spock has always respected her, and he can’t honestly fault her for being better than him.

“You’ve grown, Spock,” she tells him once, when Pike has been recalled to attend some urgent meeting and they are left alone. “I started to notice it back on the ship, but then it was just a hint of a change. I don’t know what you’ve been doing for a year here, but I bet it wasn’t just teaching.”

Spock leans back in his chair slightly and looks at her calmly. “On what do you base your observation?”

Number One smiles, but it has the mystifying look of a pythoness. “You’ve changed too much. It doesn’t come merely with preparing lectures.”

Spock arches an eyebrow. “In what way?” He’s genuinely curious and slightly alarmed. He never told Christopher – or anyone for that matter – about his self-imposed penance. Somehow, he doubts Pike
would approve.

“You’ve become more assertive with your opinions,” Number One says matter-of-factly. “You always had strong convictions, of course, but you used to yield to Chris out of respect even when you didn’t agree.” She looks up at him, eyes narrowed slightly. “You don’t do that anymore. All I’ve been hearing from him lately is how stubborn you are and that he can’t move you on any subject.”

Spock frowns. “I have not noticed. If I have been disrespectful—”

She chuckles. “You’re never disrespectful. But you’re definitely your own man now. Mind you, I don’t mean to say that you weren’t before. There’s always been that spark of independence in you – something fierce, almost feral. To be honest, it frightened me a little.”

“Frightened you?” To Spock’s eye, she’s always been fearless.

Her expression is mildly clouded as she looks at him. “I wasn’t sure Chris could handle you,” she says bluntly. “Let me tell you something about your beloved mentor, Spock. I’ve known him for fifteen years, and in all this time – in all this time – he’s never lost his head the way he did with you. He’s a loner by character and choice. He’s the most disciplined man I’ve ever met.” She fixes Spock with her eyes and he has to suppress a shiver. “When he met you, he went insane.”

Spock’s mouth goes utterly dry, and he can’t come close to making any kind of response. It seems, though, that Number One isn’t expecting one.

“You were his obsession.” She speaks quietly. “For all I know, you still are. He broke nearly every rule he’s made for himself – and he broke them for you. Do you even understand, Spock? He’d do anything for you. When you left, he was...” She trails off and shakes her head. “I don’t even want to remember.”

Spock suddenly finds it difficult to breathe. Something hot is growing inside his chest, expanding rapidly, something that cannot possibly be contained. Number One’s piercing blue eyes bore into him with strange cruelty that he has never noticed before.

“How it ever occurred to you that you and I are pretty much alike?” she asks in a would-be mild tone. “We’re both rational, both control our emotions, both adhere to logic above all else.” She fishes the cherry out of her drink and examines it captiously. “Both not quite human.”

Spock has to swallow before he can speak. “Do you mean to say that—”

“I don’t mean to say anything,” she snaps. “What I mean is – it’s long past time you stopped acting stupid. Really, Spock. It doesn’t suit you.”

He can only stare at her helplessly. “I did not know,” he manages finally. “I thought... I...”

She peers at him perceptively. “You thought you were merely an infatuation? A way to deal with the midlife crisis? You thought he kept you around for the same reasons other people buy sport cars?”

Spock closes his eyes at his unbelievable ignorance. He hears Number One sigh.

“I always knew he was serious about you,” she says quietly. “But I didn’t know how serious – until he let you go.”

Suddenly, Spock can’t take it anymore. He bolts from the officers’ lounge as if the whole Klingon armada is after him. He’s never been to Pike’s apartment before, but he knows where it is, and his feet carry him there almost of their own volition.
Pike isn’t home yet, and Spock waits. He sits on the bed rigidly, hands clasped firmly in his lap, and listens to Number One’s words over and over again in his head. He almost misses the door when it opens.

“Spock?” Pike sounds surprised. “God, you scared me. What are you doing here?”

Spock stands up, but doesn’t answer, staring at Pike instead. He takes in the dark shadows under his eyes, the way the corners of his mouth turn downward, the way his eyes always seem so sad when there used to be so much life in them...

“Spock, what’s wrong?” Pike asks, and now he’s clearly concerned. “Did something happen? Are you all right?”

That does it.

Spock backs Pike into the wall abruptly, pinning him to it like a moth, and kisses him hard. Pike doesn’t resist, not really, but he isn’t exactly responding, either. First chance he gets, he shoves Spock back slightly and looks into his eyes.

“Spock, what the hell?”

“I’m sorry,” Spock whispers, leaning in, trailing feather-light kisses along Pike’s jaw. “Christopher — Chris, I’m so sorry.”

Pike closes his eyes, going suddenly limp in Spock’s hold.

“Read you the riot act, did she?” he mutters, dropping his head to Spock’s shoulder. “I knew it was a bad idea to leave you two alone.”

“She loves you very much.”

“Yes, she does, and I love her, too, but that doesn’t make it right. She shouldn’t have said anything, not to you—”

“Chris—”

Pike cups Spock’s face with his hands and looks him in the eye with intent. “You have nothing to be sorry for, okay?” he says ardently. “Nothing at all.”

Spock kisses him again, and this time Pike relents, sliding his hands into Spock’s hair, pulling him closer.

“Missed you,” he whispers against Spock’s lips. “Missed you so much.”

They make love slowly, remembering the feel of each other, and it’s bittersweet and emotional, and Spock simply cannot bring himself to care. He’s humbled by the depth of Pike’s feelings. He’s humbled by the endless lengths this man is willing to go for him. Spock’s desperate for a chance to redeem himself, to show his gratitude and his devotion.

“Promise me one thing,” Pike mutters at the murky grey hour, just before dawn, as they lie draped around each other.

“Anything.”

“Don’t feel guilty when you fall in love.”
Spock feels his heart freeze its beating. “Christopher...”

Pike rolls on top of him and looks down at him, intense and very, very serious.

“I’m not an idiot, Spock. You love me. But you’re not in love with me. You’ll fall in love one day. Even Vulcans do that. With that lovely cadet of yours perhaps or maybe with someone else. And when it happens I want you to remember that you’re free. You don’t belong to me and you owe me nothing.”

“Christopher, this is hardly fair—”

“Hush. Promise me, Spock, or I’ll kick you out right this moment and won’t ever let you back.”

Spock stares into his eyes through the darkness, and wishes illogically and desperately for the things to be different. For Pike to be wrong.

“I promise,” he whispers.

Pike smiles at him and plants a soft kiss on his forehead.

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The two years that follow seem to be the most stable period of Spock’s life. He discovers new gratification in academic achievements. Cadets are competing for a place in his classes, despite his reputation of being a harsh taskmaster. Together with his colleagues, Spock wins the Zee Magnee Prize in multiphysics, and even though he doesn’t go to Centauri Prime for the award ceremony, the echo of the festivities leaves him pleasantly satisfied.

He does wake up sometimes in the middle of the night, seemingly without a reason, with his heart beating in his throat and his chest burning. The year he spent hunting down monsters of all shapes and forms keeps reminding Spock of its existence, and while he’s learned to control the flashbacks while awake, his sleep hours become a minefield, and his mornings often find him more exhausted than his evenings.

Slowly, Spock comes to substituting his human sleep with light meditative trance of the Vulcans. It takes some conscious efforts on his part, but he is persistent. He cannot afford to admit to nightmares in front of Christopher.

His relationship with Pike is consistent and steady. Spock knows that Number One is still Pike’s lover as well as his friend, and he finds himself curiously unaffected. He feels grateful to her for being there when he can’t. He decides that he must not be what humans call a jealous type.

It doesn’t really come as a surprise that he and Nyota become close. Spock knew the day they met that she had all the qualities to become a treasured companion, and she seems to find him equally fascinating. Neither of them makes any references ever again to the night they spent together, and if she flirts with him a little every now and then, Spock knows that it’s perfectly innocent.

“What is the purpose of this display?” Spock asks her one evening, as they are walking across the campus.

Nyota follows his gaze to where several male cadets are splashing each other with buckets of water while a small, mostly female audience watches.
“What – this?” Nyota laughs. “I guess there are no wet t-shirt contests on Vulcan, then?”

Spock feels his eyebrow curve. “None that I am aware of,” he says. The very thought that something as precious as water could be treated with such carelessness is akin to sacrilege. Unable to deduce the meaning of the proceedings with so little clues, Spock asks, more articulately, “What are they doing?”

“They are... Well, they’re splashing each other with water, obviously,” she says, giggling.

“For the purpose of—?”

“Defining who looks the most sexually appealing in a wet t-shirt.”

Spock looks at her piercingly. She catches his gaze.

“I’m not pulling your leg, I swear.” She grins. “It’s an old Earth custom. For idiots, obviously, but there you are.”

“I see,” Spock looks back toward the young men who are now all decidedly wet. “And these other cadets are acting as a jury?”

“Yeah,” Uhura nods, glancing at Spock mischievously as the small crowd erupts in catcalls and whistles. “Say, Spock, who would you choose?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, if you were in that crowd, who’d you pick?”

“I find myself ill-equipped to judge in this particular matter.”

“Why?” she asks. “You have eyes, don’t you? And I daresay your sense of aesthetics is rather well-developed.”

Spock peers at her sideways. “You will not let it go, will you?”

She smirks. “No.”

“You do realize this is vastly inappropriate.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

Spock certainly doesn’t roll his eyes in the slightest as he concedes. “Very well,” he allows. “If it pleases you.”

He looks over the line of wet, laughing males appraisingly. Almost immediately, a young man at the end of the line catches his eye. He’s lean and wiry, though not as much as a Vulcan. He’s wearing old, dark pants that hang dangerously low and threaten to fall down completely under too much scrutiny, as well as a white t-shirt that clings to his chest and arms, underlining the obvious but not excessively forceful relief of his muscles. His skin is well-tanned and his hair is bronze-spiked gold.

His hands are on his hips and he’s laughing infectiously, his head thrown back, his whole frame relaxed and oozing raw sexuality. He is simply captivating, stunning in his unabashed lack of self-consciousness. But it’s only when he turns and Spock catches a glimpse of his eyes does he realize that he’s seen the boy before.

“Well?” Nyota prompts him.
“The young man in the white t-shirt, second from the right,” Spock says before he can stop himself. “If there were any kind of prize to be given for something as illogical as mere appearance, I would give it to him.”

There is a pregnant pause, and then Nyota blurts out, “You can’t be serious.”

Spock turns to look at her. “I was given to understand there were no ‘correct’ choices. This is an exercise in subjectivity.”

“Well, yes, obviously,” she says, impatient. “But to choose Kirk, of all people.”

Immediately, Spock glances back toward the cadets, eyes zooming on his ‘winner.’

“This – is James Kirk?”

“You know him?”

“Of him,” Spock says and nudges her gently to resume walking. “His scores are most impressive. He is currently at the top of your class, is he not?”

“Yeah,” she drawls sourly. “It only makes him more unbearable. He takes nothing seriously.”

“And yet his grades would suggest otherwise. Also, I have read his paper on the tactical value of certain space battle maneuvers. It was both logical and intriguing. It has, actually, been taken under advisement by Starfleet Operations.”

“Why are you so interested in him?”

Spock pauses. “I was merely curious. Captain Pike speaks very highly of him.”

“Oh,” Nyota says meaningfully, eyebrows up. “I see.”

“However.” Spock looks back at the laughing crowd for a moment, watching Kirk stripping out of his wet shirt. He finds himself oddly fascinated by Kirk’s body language – vibrant yet impeccably precise, and although the cadet is never completely still, he doesn’t create an impression of excessive motion. “I must confess, I have not expected that he would be so...” Spock hesitates, searching for words.

“Wild?” Nyota suggests. She’s watching Kirk too, a light grimace of distaste on her face.

‘Sensual’ is the word that won’t leave Spock alone, but he settles for, “Overt.”

Nyota snorts. “That’s Kirk, all right. He changed his modesty for a lollipop when he was two. Or maybe for a self-sealing stem bolt.”

Spock frowns slightly, analyzing the uncommon reference. “You are being humorous,” he finally concludes.

“Yes, well.” Nyota looks up at him. “It’s Kirk, you know. I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Spock spares another glance at the live contradiction in question.

“Fascinating.”
“He’s going to be a fine captain one day,” Pike tells Spock a week later as they walk across Academy grounds, leaving for the night. Those slow, soothing walks have become a ritual of sorts, not unlike how their morning jogging used to be. “He shows plenty of promise.”

“I could not pass judgment of my own,” Spock says, “as he is not in any of my classes.”

“Which is probably good,” Pike chuckles. “He’s a tough customer to handle in class.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “You believe I would not be up to the task?”

Pike pats his shoulder amicably. “You’d be ice to his fire, Spock. He’d annoy the hell out of you, and I’m not so sure you’d win. He’s a particularly pig-headed kid.” The captain adds the last sentiment with a fond smile.

Spock peers at him sideways. “You appear to have acquired a new favorite, Captain.”

Pike sends him a bright grin. “Jealous, Spock?”

Before Spock can find an answer to this most undignified, not to mention ridiculous, question, Pike stops and darts a few looks around to make sure they aren’t watched. Satisfied with what he sees, he leans into Spock and whispers, lips brushing the sensitive ear. “I promise not to take him skiing.”

Spock shivers as sharp teeth catch his earlobe gently and swiftly before withdrawing. He reciprocates immediately by gliding two fingertips along Pike’s wrist, accompanying the gesture with the lightest telepathic suggestion. He is immensely pleased to hear the human’s breath hitch.

“I was never concerned, Christopher,” Spock murmurs, watching Pike’s pupils dilate.

The captain pulls away hastily, looking decidedly flushed. “You are evil, you know that?”

Spock gives him an eyebrow. “I learned from the master.”

Pike chuckles and they resume their stroll. The breeze from the bay sweeps past Spock’s cheek, bringing in the odors of seaweed and wet sand and something else, unidentifiable but thick and intoxicating. It’s not only the smell but more the feel of the ocean, its fifth dimension, vast and blurry and alive, that engulfs them meticulously like a caring mother with a blanket. Spock listens to the symphony of sounds and suddenly he doesn’t want to talk.

“He leaps without looking,” Pike says softly, his expression milder, the sharp lines of his face being smoothed by the warm, damp wind. “Starfleet lost that. We’ve become still waters. Jim Kirk is a geyser we need to shake some life back into us.”

Spock’s eyebrow twitches slightly, but he says nothing. The seagulls seem to be flying particularly low tonight. Spock has lived in San Francisco long enough to come in touch with some of the nautical markers. He knows that later in the night, it’s going to rain.

“You don’t agree?” Pike prompts him gently.

Spock tilts his head to his side a little, a gesture he has come to use as a substitute for a human shrug.

“Starfleet is primarily a human organization,” he muses. “As such, you are better equipped to determine its needs. Vulcans tend to identify and exclude any destabilizing elements from their
institutions.”

Spock knows this firsthand. It used to be a deep concern of his father’s that, despite his academic achievements, Spock would never be allowed into the VSA due to his unpredictable and unstable reactions. A concern that proved to be justified when, after years of meticulous training and hard work, Spock rejected their offer.

Spock’s lips curve slightly at the irony of his position. His father’s concerns, however valid, would never be understood by humans, even the shrewdest ones such as Pike. To them, Spock will always come as a model officer, model scientist, obedient and compliant; a devotee adept of discipline and a strict follower of rules.

It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, the realization that if he truly were any of those things, he’d be working diligently for the VSA right now, back on his homeplanet, as an accepted and respected member of the society. The beautiful and brilliant T’Pring would have been his faithful wife, and his father would have been readying him to take up his seat on the Vulcan High Council one day.

It would have been a perfectly logical life.

At this instant, Spock envies James Kirk, a man he’s never met, just a little. He is a rebel in a culture that worships rebels. He doesn’t have to do anything to be accepted, perhaps even admired, but be himself. Spock knows that for him, it’s never going to be that simple.

The worst of it all, however, is that he cannot bring himself to regret it. He yearns to fit in, but not at the cost of denouncing who he is. It is presumptuous of him, he knows, as he’s been told too many times. Presumptuous and arrogant to consider his own unique identity more precious than cultural imperatives of an advanced civilization such as Vulcan. He agrees with this assessment. But he cannot – doesn’t want – to change.

“Spock.”

Pike is standing in front of him, regarding him with a hint of concern. Spock realizes they have come to a point where their paths separate, unless they spend the night together. He also realizes Pike has been talking to him, and he hasn’t been listening.

“Where did you go?” Pike asks him quietly.

“I—” Spock pauses. “My apologies, Christopher. My concentration appears to be... wandering, tonight.”

Pike rubs his arm gently. “Happens to the best of us. Are you all right? You seem a little pale.”

“I am fine,” Spock says, more curtly than he intended. “But I seem to be in need of meditation.”


“Goodnight, Christopher.”

He sits on the cold pebbles, listening to the rhythmic whisper of waves all night. He doesn’t meditate and he doesn’t go home.
They corner him when he’s least expecting it, and of all the inopportune moments, this one is perhaps the worst, given his current frame of mind.

He’s at the gym, working out alone as is his habit. His status of a professor entitles him to some privileges, and being able to book a private booth at the gym is one of those Spock actually invokes.

He isn’t exactly self-conscious, never has been, but he has discovered that practicing in the common area usually leads to a lot of staring and sometimes to impromptu training sessions. Spock doesn’t mind sharing the knowledge, but he is aware that the regular physical training and hand-to-hand combat instructors don’t approve of him giving unscheduled lessons, and even though they lack the authority to stop them, he tries not to annoy his colleagues. He supposes he would be equally dismayed if someone walked in on his regular classes.

He’s working out alone, pushing his body to the limits as usual. With the regime he keeps, it takes a lot to make his muscles burn, but Spock is persistent. Number One, who sparred with him several times – and had him pinned to the mat more times then he would be comfortable to admit, noted that he was coming close to being cruel to his own body. Spock naturally doesn’t agree with this assessment, as for Vulcans, testing the limits of one’s endurance is as much a form of a mental exercise as it is physical, but he can understand where the misconception stems from.

They catch him by surprise, and they are good. He never hears them coming, which considering his Vulcan hearing is telling. They have been able to get through the Academy security net, and that’s telling, too.

He is knocked face down on the mat and held there while someone pulls a thick black bag over his head. He tries to break free, but he is held down by at least two people, and judging by the way his lungs contract under pressure, they are far from lightweights. His arms are being pulled back painfully and held tightly.


The pressure lifts, and in a moment, Spock is free. Immediately, he rolls to his feet and straightens up, tossing away the blindfold in an almost angry motion.

He is surrounded by three men dressed in inconspicuous dirty-grey training suits. Their features are curiously bland as if they all share the same face and it’s so unexpressive that it will likely be lost in seconds in any crowd. They are all watching Spock fixedly, but don’t make any more aggressive moves.

Spock focuses his attention on the fourth man, leaning casually against the wall at the door. He’s dressed like a rich businessman with poor taste. His face is unfamiliar, but something about him is, Spock can sense it.

“Who are you?” he demands. “How did you get in here?”

The man at the wall smiles slightly and shakes his head. “You don’t get to ask me questions, 37. However, I may answer some – if you’re able to walk out of this room.”

Spock processes the information quickly, eyeing his opponents appraisingly at the same time. “And if I’m not?”

The man’s expression becomes smug as he turns to go. “If you’re not, you won’t care.”

The door isn’t quite closed behind him when Spock is attacked.
He didn’t underestimate them, but the thought is a small solace. They are good. Amateurs tend to think that if they gather more people on their side in a hand-to-hand fight, they’ll be undoubtedly victorious. Spock knows this to be very far from the truth. Three is perhaps the greatest number of fighters who can effectively attack one opponent at the same time without hindering each other’s actions. Add one more – and defeating them will be easier. Three more – and they’ll be fighting each other trying to get to him.

At the moment, however, he is nowhere near that fortunate, because there are precisely three of them, and they know exactly what they’re doing. Spock moves as fast as he can, his body warmed up after the workout, the adrenaline spiking his reaction. *Le-matya on the evening hunt.* These three have fought together for a long time, Spock can tell. *The wrath of the Forge – the dancing sand.* He defends himself, and he is successful, but defense isn’t going to gain him his freedom. *Le-matya fighting against hunters. Le-matya fighting for his mate.*

One down, two to go.

His ‘Vulcan wushu’ as Pike had once called it is, in fact, a streak of the ancient martial art, adapted later for recreational purposes. But there would be no weaklings in the House of Surak, whatever their blood composition may be, and Spock had been trained meticulously from an early age, not at all unlike his savage ancestors. It’s not a surprise he has instinctively recalled bone-deep engraved combat combinations, inspired by severe, unforgiving nature of his home planet.

*Wounded sehlat attacks.* A violent, seemingly uncoordinated outbreak of heavy ‘blind’ strikes and hits, neglecting defense. *Sehlat shows his fangs.* Fingers digging into flesh, dislocating joints.

His body moves on autopilot now, as he watches and awaits his opening. Usually when fighting any representative of emotionally driven species, Spock knows that their emotions would start to interfere with their actions, and it will give him an upper hand even if his opponents are stronger than him. But these humans fight with detachment of androids, and their efficiency. They also seem to be much stronger than ordinary human males, and Spock suspects DNA manipulation.

*The sand treacherous.* Quick low dive, sliding under the opponent’s feet. *Sehlat hungry.* A vicious hit in the solar plexus. *Sehlat and le-matya crossing paths.* A combination of hits and blows, breaking the rhythm, a ‘chaotic’ attack. *The tail of a le-matya.* A nerve pinch delivered blindly with his back to his opponent.

Two down, one to go.

There is a certain sense of satisfaction drawn from the sight of his last adversary casting a wary look at his unconscious teammates. Spock doesn’t allow him much time for contemplation.

*Le-matya pouncing its prey. Le-matya prevailing.*

Spock rises up from where he has been straddling the last of his attackers before rendering him unconscious, too, and looks around warily, all senses alert and *en garde.* But there is no movement anywhere, just the sound of uneasy breathing. He wasn’t gentle, but then why should he be? Slowly, he walks toward the exit.

The locker room is empty but for him and the human who ordered the attack. Spock eyes him coolly, not approaching. The man smiles at him again, closing the scanning device that had obviously allowed him to witness the encounter.

“Impressive,” he says, glancing over Spock up and down. “And you’re not even out of breath. Very impressive.”
“Who are you?” Spock repeats his earlier question. He suspects the man has a weapon hidden on him somewhere. It’s the only reason why Spock hasn’t yet attempted to alert security.

“Someone who’s here to offer you a job,” the man says. “For the sake of convenience, you may call me Kosan.”

“You are not from the Federation Security,” Spock states the obvious.

“Hell, no,” Kosan laughs.

“How do you know my former designation?”

“I have my sources. It’s necessary when you’re in this business, 37.”

“And what exactly is your business?”

“A most profitable one. I sell weapons.”

Spock feels his eyebrow arch of its own volition. “You realize that I am obligated to arrest you?”

Kosan laughs again softly and pats his arm. “This transponder works faster than any of your pathetic Starfleet toys. I’ll be out of your reach before you can so much as raise the alarm. And you may report me all you want,” he adds with a pleasant smile, “but bear in mind that there will be no logs to confirm your claim, and this isn’t my real face.”

Spock feels a cold draft sliding down his spine as he regards the man with ostensible calmness.

“What made you think I would be prone to accepting your offer?” he asks, half-stalling, half-curious. “I am a Vulcan. We cherish peace.”

“Yet you are the only Vulcan who’s ever worked as a bounty hunter,” Kosan remarks pointedly. “The FS gave you a glowing note on usefulness and I can see it’s deserved. I can tell you this, 37. Whatever it was that kept you coming back to them – I’ll give you tenfold.”

Spock stares him in the eye squarely.

“No.”

Kosan appears unaffected by his answer. “What you do here is child’s play compared to what we do,” he says. “Think about the possibilities.”

“I said no.” Spock takes a step forward. “I will not say it again. Unless you leave now, you are under arrest—”

Kosan raises his hands, and Spock sees a small white card between his fingers.

“This is in case you change your mind,” Kosan says and throws the card to the floor at Spock’s feet. Then, before Spock can draw another breath, Kosan presses a spot on his forearm and disappears instantly in an unfamiliar looking transporter beam.

Spock dashes back into the training room, but it’s empty. Kosan has obviously taken care of his people. He returns into the locker room and picks up the card from the floor. It has nothing but a comm frequency on it. Spock stares at it thoughtfully, thinking about his options. So far, he can only come up with one.

Later that night, secured within the confines of his apartment, he does something he hasn’t done in
nearly two years. He calls Captain Ramirez.

The captain stares at him blankly and for a moment, Spock thinks he’ll have to introduce himself. Then he remembers about the time difference and calmly waits for the human to become more awake. Ramirez listens to him mostly in silence, frowning and cursing under his breath.

“There’s been a security breach,” the captain tells him wearily, once Spock is finished. “Some of our personnel files have been accessed, and they were mostly looking for people like you – who worked for us and either was discharged or quit. We weren’t able to trace them, and no one bothered to contact us save for you.”

“That is hardly surprising,” Spock comments dryly, remembering the common attitude toward the ‘outsourcers’ inside the FS. “What do you intend to do, Captain?”

Ramirez swears before replying. “We’ll check that comm he gave you, but I’m pretty sure it’s a dead end if anyone but you calls. I don’t suppose you’d want to quit your Starfleet job and come play bait for us in an undercover operation that will likely last a year or so?”

“No,” Spock says firmly. “I do not work for you anymore.”

Ramirez sighs. “Thought not. In that case, we’ll take it from here.”

Perhaps if he appears again——

“He won’t,” Ramirez cuts him off, certain. “We’ve been watching him for a while, but he’s a cautious type. That’s why we can’t build a case against him – he’s too damn careful and too damn smart. He checked your temperature in case you were interested, but he would never try to force your hand. Your position is too visible – there could be too many unpredictable consequences. Nah, you’re a dead end to us in this case now. You’ll never see him again, or I’d put a team to watch your every step.”

Spock purses his lips. “Your logic appears to be sound. I shall contact you if your conclusions prove to be wrong.”

Ramirez gives him a thin smile. “You do that.” He signs off.

Spock stares at the dark monitor for several minutes. He rubs his hands along his arms unconsciously, as if chasing away the cold.

The conversation has eased his mind, but not enough. He yearns to talk to someone, but that would entail telling the whole story and this isn’t something Spock is prepared to do. He can’t tell Pike because that would earn him not only a shouting match, but most likely a full time security detail, and that’s the last thing Spock wants. Not to mention that it would be totally unwarranted, but humans are sometimes so illogical.

That’s not the real reason, however. The real reason is that he isn’t ready to answer the first, most obvious – the why question. He cannot explain something he doesn’t fully understand himself.

He resigns to meditation followed by short hours of fitful sleep. He wakes up long before the alarm to the feeling of something warm pressing him down, and it’s unfamiliar, but somehow lacks a sense of threat. Spock opens his eyes cautiously and discovers a pair of luminescent bright green eyes with vertical pupils staring back at him unblinkingly. Spock closes his eyes again wondering when he had become a legitimate sleeping cushion for his neighbor’s cat.

Agnes is not I-Chaya, but she is a warm, fuzzy, purring weight across his chest, and when Spock
lifts his hand halfheartedly to shoo her away, she regards it with detached curiosity, not budging one limb, and then peers back at him with a pitying expression: Aren’t you stupid?

Spock sighs and drifts back to sleep, privately agreeing with her assessment. She stretches her paws over him possessively and digs her claws into the sheets catching just a bit of his skin so that he wouldn’t get any more stupid ideas like going somewhere or getting himself killed.

Two days later, Spock leaves for a cross-cultural communications conference that Starfleet hosts on Deneb IV, taking along those of his students who major in his subject, including Nyota. They spend a month and a half engrossed in all kinds of fascinating cultural exchanges. It’s like a very long and captivating seminar, complete with maturity tests of ten different species, great quantities of gagh peppered with live-delivered Klingon curses, Denobulan ménage-à-trois/quatre/cinq/.../the-number-of-people-fitting-in-this-tub, Bajoran Festival of Lights where everyone gets high for some reason, and one Betazoid wedding ceremony which, in full accordance with Betazoid tradition, everyone attends naked.

For a while, Spock very nearly forgets English all together, because he’s not using it even when he happens to run across one of his students, which occurs at the most unpredictable moments and places. They all manage to give him status reports on their projects on schedule, though, and he thinks with a certain sense of satisfaction that he has taught them well. Indeed, he is pleased to note that Cadet Rogers gets her Argellian cases and genders right even in the middle of the impromptu belly dance lesson/kalian smoking session, and Cadet Ashanin doesn’t forget the three stages of Kapellan ritual bow when he’s doing it walking amidst very sharp and very real swords.

In fact, barring that one time when Nyota nearly manages to cause an interstellar incident by turning down an invitation to have a drink with a Cardassian gul – and Spock isn’t exactly certain how he ends up having that drink and talking about their races’ mutual preference for warmer environments, the conference proves to be a stimulating and highly pleasurable experience.

When Spock gets back to the Academy, he finds a note from Ramirez on his desk.

*Your friend has taken his business elsewhere. Confirmed. You won’t be seeing him. Confirmed. No need to thank me.*

Spock reads the note several times, letting the words sink in. When it finally happens, he calls Pike’s aide and finds out that the captain is free after 20:00. When Spock asks him to change this status in Pike’s schedule for ‘an outside appointment,’ the young man flashes him a smile so bright it almost hurts.

“Thank God, you’re back, Commander,” he almost sings. “I was starting to plan on feeding him intravenously.”

Spock listens to his complaints regarding Pike’s blatant neglect of his well-being for another five minutes, collecting information, before bidding the aide a polite goodbye. Spock almost catches himself smiling back at him and realizes his elation is contagious.

Christopher asks him later that night why they are dining at the most luxurious restaurant in town, hanging between the sea of lights beneath them and the stars above them, but Spock merely says that he is pleased to be back. Pike talks about the Enterprise, Jim Kirk, major Academy gossip, Number One’s latest *reckless escapade, and honestly, Spock, I taught her better than that,* and Spock listens to him blissfully, feeling almost like he has come home.
The slope of December finds Spock predictably busy. He spends a lot of time preparing the final tests for his students, and even more so covering for his fellow professors. He has noticed that his human colleagues tend to invoke the leave time they have accumulated by the end of the year, leaving the Academy understaffed. Of course, they aren’t allowed to leave unless they find a suitable replacement, and after three years, Spock knows he is going to be approached many times with a similar request starting the end of November.

As a result, this year Spock finds himself teaching twelve different subjects, varying from his own xenolinguistics and CCC to advanced astrophysics and temporal mechanics, and even a course of basic combat training for first year cadets. Scheduling becomes a problem.

The *Enterprise* has entered the final stage of its construction, and Pike spends most of his time at Riverside, overseeing the works. Spock is secretly grateful. Pike has adopted an unfortunate habit of lecturing him on the virtue of the ability to say ‘no’ to requests, and Spock hasn’t quite mastered that one. He doesn’t mind helping out. His colleagues most certainly benefit from spending time with their families during an event of cultural significance, which Spock as a Vulcan does not observe. It’s just that he’s stretched a little thin at the moment, but he can manage. He’s collected a lot of favors he’s never going to recall.

Pike doesn’t approve of Spock’s easy acquiescence. He’s convinced that Spock allows his colleagues to ‘shamelessly use him’ and overworks severely as a result. Spock agrees that filing twenty hours a day is perhaps not ideal, but he can do it – therefore, he must.

This is one of the things about Spock’s Vulcan upbringing that Pike doesn’t understand. On Vulcan, the only legitimate ground to deny assistance is being unable to render it. The matter of personal convenience does not enter into the equation. Nor does any kind of gratification, because it’s not logical. After all, having one’s services called upon is an honor.

There is perhaps but one aspect of this situation that Spock truly dislikes. One of his newly adopted duties is to inform those students who have not shown satisfactory results about their expulsion. Starfleet only accepts the best of the best, and the Academy gives a lot of chances to any cadet to find his or her optimal career path. However, if those chances are wasted and all the correction work fails, expulsion remains the only option. Incompetence is not something easily tolerated in a Starfleet officer.

Logical as the system is, Spock doesn’t enjoy this particular task. It always pains him to see potential wasted, even though he understands that Starfleet’s terms are far less severe than those of any Vulcan institution. If the person in question does not fulfill the standards, there is no other logical alternative. The price of a mistake in space is too high.

As such, he does not relish the prospect of a meeting that is scheduled, due to his overactive timetable, for the morning of December 22. The Academy halls are almost empty by now, and Spock’s steps echo in the deserted corridors as he walks toward his office. Given that he has only left here three-point-two hours ago, Spock muses that perhaps he should not have left at all.

The cadet is already waiting for him at the door, straightening up at Spock’s approach nervously. He’s tall, approximately Spock’s height, but decidedly broader in the shoulders and of a richly muscled constitution. His red uniform all but bursts on him, either too small for his size or deliberately so to make an impression. He’s got blond hair, neatly combed but for a single lock falling across his forehead, and an open, classically proportioned face. His silver-grey eyes look at Spock nervously, and it’s somehow distinctly clear that for this man, it’s an unusual expression.
“Sir. Cadet Gary Mitchell, reporting as ordered.”

Spock inclines his head subtly, reaching to open his door. “Please, come in. Have a seat.”

They settle on the opposite sides of Spock’s desk. The cadet sits primly, hands clasped on the desk, and Spock can’t shake off the impression that the compliant posture is as uncommon for this human as a smile on a Vulcan’s face.

“Cadet Mitchell, it is my unpleasant duty to inform you that the Academy board has decided to dismiss you from the Academy,” Spock says impassively, studying the PADD with Mitchell’s service jacket.

At once, the young man bolts. “You can’t do that!” he exclaims emphatically. “I worked my ass off this semester to catch up!”

Spock levels him with a dispassionate gaze. “I fail to see how this may come as a surprise to you. Your grades have not improved since the last evaluation, remaining well below satisfactory. In fact, they seem to have slipped lower.”

“I concentrated on field training, sir,” Mitchell says hurriedly. “I was told it’s the first area they were gonna look at. I did really well on that one, sir!”

Spock taps the PADD to access the cadet’s field training records. “You did better,” he notes calmly, “but far from acceptable as well.”

“It’s all Lieutenant Gaber, sir,” Mitchell says hotly. “He has it in for me, sir, I swear it.”

Spock can’t help an inquisitive eyebrow. “You believe you have been unfairly judged?”

“Well, sir…” Mitchell looks down at his hands, then back at Spock. “It’s like that, sir. I didn’t want to speak ill of my instructors, sir, but he’s biased against me. He always looks the other way whenever I do something right, but he’s always there when I slip, even a little. He’s always looking over my shoulder, breathing down my neck – I can’t work like that! Imagine going about your business with someone attached to your right arm telling you all the time that you’re gonna fail!”

“I imagine that would be inconvenient,” Spock allows mildly. “Why have you not brought up your difficulty with your curator?”

“Oh, believe me, I tried, sir,” Mitchell says sourly. “But he and Gaber are old pals, so he doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. You know,” he chuckles mirthlessly, “I would totally understand if he treated everyone like that, sir. I’m not the whiny type, I could handle a little stress on my back. But it’s like I’m his punching bag or something. He’s perfectly sweet with everyone else, always asking if they need assistance and everything. But me – no way. It’s like I killed his hamster when he was a boy or something.”

It doesn’t help that Spock isn’t familiar with any of the mentioned officers, but the bitter tone of the cadet seems remarkably sincere. Prejudice is something Spock knows only too well. From his early childhood, he always had to be three times as good as any other Vulcan to eliminate any doubts that he’d earned his place in his class and in his school. If that is indeed the case with Cadet Mitchell, Spock can certainly sympathize.

“Why do you believe Lieutenant Gaber is prejudiced toward you?”

Mitchell sighs. “He served with my father, sir. From what I can tell, they didn’t get along.”
“Did your father speak to you of this?”

Mitchell lets out a harsh snort. “My father dumped my mother when I was three, sir. I haven’t seen
him since.” He shakes his head. “The funny thing is, if I knew him like Lieutenant Gaber did, I’d
probably hate him, too. You’d think we could bond over that, but no – instead, he treats me like I’m
my worthless runaway dad. Guess I can’t say that my dear daddy never did anything for me. At least
he taught me that the world is unfair.”

Spock surveys Mitchell carefully, sensing the long-carried pain beneath the cynicism. He taps the
PADD again. Perhaps the board should not have acted so hastily?

“Mr. Mitchell, there is still the matter of your poor grades,” Spock observes. “You passed the
entrance tests with distinction, then failed seventy-five percent of the examination following your first
year. You improved your performance temporarily to pass the midterms, then failed your second year
finals with a sixty percent decline rate. You have been granted the chance to rectify this and retake all
of the obligatory examination, yet failed those as well by ninety percent. I observe a pattern here, Mr.
Mitchell, and it is not an inspiring one. Are all of your professors prejudiced against you as well?”

“No.” Mitchell shakes his head with a sad, self-accusatory smile. “No, that’s my own fault, sir. I was
so distracted, I guess, with my mother’s health that I didn’t pay due attention to my studies.”

Spock stiffens. “Your mother’s health?”

“Yes, sir.” This time Mitchell’s sigh is profound; his mouth twists into an unhappy bow, eyes losing
their spark. “She suffers from Borellias-Dows syndrome, sir.”

“That is a degenerative condition for humans,” Spock recalls, frowning slightly. “If memory serves,
incurable.”

“Yeah.” Mitchell purses his lips. “There’s no cure. She was in remission when I entered the
Academy, but then it ended, and it all just went to hell. You wouldn’t believe how much it costs to
buy drugs for this thing so that she could feel even a little better.” He parts his hands helplessly. “I
guess somewhere between my three jobs, my studies just slipped.”

Indeed, Spock thinks, studying the desolate cadet in front of him. For a human, it would be
impossible to maintain the level of concentration necessary for the complex education and training
the Academy provides while being occupied at three different working positions. Very few cadets
can manage even one job, and only do so if it’s absolutely crucial for them, with the Academy
allowance covering their immediate expenses. And the emotional stress for someone in Mitchell’s
position must be intolerable.

“Why did you not ask for a sabbatical to care for your mother?” Spock asks, almost gently. It seems
like a reasonable solution, and he knows that the Academy gladly grants those when needed.

Mitchell sighs heavily. “Sir, my mother’s illness is degenerative, but not fatal. It’ll only be getting
worse, and by the time my supposed sabbatical would be over, I’d probably be in my sixties.”
Something must have showed on Spock’s face, because Mitchell nods at him grimly. “I know it
sounds cynical, sir, but it’s the truth. I love my mother, but my staying at her bedside won’t help her.
If I graduate, then as an officer, I’d be able to afford better conditions for her, better care. That’s why
I couldn’t quit, sir. I needed every chance.”

Spock stares at the young man silently, his own problems suddenly seeming so insignificant and
shallow.
“Well,” Mitchell sighs again, “I guess it’s all over now. Thank you for listening, sir. I’m glad it’s you who brought the bad news, not my curator. I’ll be going packing my things, sir, if that’s all?” He half-rises from the chair, looking at Spock questionably.

“Wait.” Spock stops him. “If I convince the board to postpone your expulsion, how will you be able to improve your performance? Obviously, your circumstances will not change.”

“They will, sir,” Mitchell says, sounding carefully hopeful. “I’ve got a promotion and a raise at one of my jobs. I can dump the other two now, and it’ll leave more time for studying. I’m confident I can do it, sir.”

Spock looks him in the eye and finally nods. “Very well, Mr. Mitchell. I shall speak to the board on your behalf. In view of your difficult circumstances, I am positive they would be willing to give you another chance.”

“Thank you, sir!” Mitchell leaps to his feet, reaching for Spock’s hand exuberantly, then stopping just short of touching him. “Sorry, sir. I appreciate what you’re doing for me, sir! You won’t regret it!”

“We shall see,” Spock says, tapping the PADD significantly. “Dismissed, Cadet. And merry Christmas.”

Mitchell sends him a blazing grin and leaves.

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The end of the term doesn’t mean Spock gets to have any time for himself, at least not instantly. A lot of cadets are staying on campus for the holidays, and it’s a long-standing tradition to debauch as many of the nearby drinking establishments as possible on Christmas Eve.

Strangely enough, those parties are usually more loud and wild than New Year ones. It’s almost as if those students who can’t go to visit their families or have no families to visit compensate for it by going as crazy as possible. Knowing this, the Academy board usually leaves someone in charge of the security detail kept around to deal with this kind of disturbances before the police can interfere. Starfleet prefers to take care of its own.

Which is why Spock’s comm frequency has been dutifully transmitted to every bar in the vicinity with the instructions to contact him in case of any disorder. Spock had been in charge of such a duty a year ago, but back then, he had a partner. This year, he knows he’s in for a busy night.

The first call comes at nineteen-hundred, a brawl. Spock sends a pair of the security guards. By oh-one-hundred, Spock has run out of people to send and has long since joined them. After he has restored order in the third bar in a row, he muses with a touch of irritation that the illogical nature of human festivities is not destined to ever be in dispute.

Being subjected to so many volatile emotions is taxing, and as it comes at the end of somewhat eventful several weeks, Spock has no qualms admitting he is tired. He stares at his comm thoughtfully, but it is silent, at least for the moment. This might be partly due to the fact that his shift is already over, and Spock almost wishes that the comm would chirp at him again. He is strangely reluctant to go home.

He looks at the nearby bar. It’s relatively quiet at the moment, but Spock decides to check for himself since he is here anyway. If nothing else, he can get a cup of Vulcan spice tea before he comes off
duty.

He enters, looking around warily, but although the place is filled with cadets, they seem to be behaving themselves. Spock walks toward the bar and catches the bartender’s eye. Spock is surprised when he places a steaming cup in front of him in a moment, without even asking for his order. Spock inhales the scent, but he already knows it’s the right blend, the one best used as a restorative.

“Tough night?” the bartender asks him with a sympathetic wince.

Spock realizes he’s seen the human before, probably a year ago. For a human, the man shows remarkable visual memory.

“Indeed,” Spock agrees. “I am somewhat surprised that no disturbances have been reported here.”

He glances around, spying Gaila amidst one of the groups. His astonishment doubles. He’s used to the unbreakable rule that wherever Gaila goes, trouble follows.

“I know how to do my job, Commander.” The bartender chuckles softly. “You can have your tea in peace here.”

Spock nods gratefully. The bartender still wouldn’t leave, though, watching Spock take a cautious sip. He smiles, catching Spock’s questioning look.

“Any good?”

“It is very pleasant, thank you.” Spock inclines his head and reaches for his credit chip, but the young man stops him with a raised hand.

“It’s on the house.”

“That is an expensive beverage,” Spock tries to protest. He knows import prices on Vulcan tea only too well.

The bartender smiles wider. “I can afford it.” He winks at Spock. “By the way, I’m Will Fisher.”

Spock blinks. “I am—”

“—Spock,” Will finishes for him with a grin. “Yeah, I know. Been seeing you around campus when we did catering and stuff.” Spock finds it strange that he blushes and looks away as he says it. It makes Spock try to recall if there had been any unusual incidents involving catering services on campus lately. Will glances up at him again. “Listen, just so you know. I run a respectable place. I know it’s noisy now, but it’s a party, so... But usually it’s pretty quiet here. I know you’re probably not much of a bar hopper, being Vulcan and all, but should you happen around our neck of the woods on a normal day, I think you’d find it nice in here. Our chef even knows a few Vulcan dishes. He’s pretty decent with them, too, I think.”

Spock blinks again, then eyes his drink warily before looking up at the human again. “Mr. Fisher, I am not a restaurant critic.”

Will lets out a laugh. “No kidding.” He shakes his head, obviously deeply amused. “Enjoy your tea, Commander.”

Spock does just that as he watches Will walk over to another patron. Humans are not getting any less illogical, no matter how long Spock lives among them.
He turns his head to locate Gaila, because there is something distinctly not normal about her and especially people around her behaving themselves under the influence of alcohol. But there she is, in a sky-blue and seemingly fluffy dress and a blue pointed hat with a white pompon. Spock attempts to deduce what kind of Christmas character she tries to impersonate when he notices Nyota to her left. Nyota doesn’t wear a hat, but Spock thinks that that her simple white sweater and jeans suit her incredibly. She has her hair falling freely along her back for once, and she’s smiling and looking so homey that it makes Spock’s heart clench.

He squashes the undue feeling of yearning, which surprises him a little because usually he’s not prone to being homesick. Instead he concentrates on Nyota, remembering that her parents are anthropologists on an in-depth undercover mission, studying a pre-warp civilization on a planet in the Cerulean Cluster. ‘It takes eighteen months of traveling at high warp just to get there, Spock. I’ve been on my own since I was thirteen.’ Because Nyota’s grandmother is a strong-willed, fascinating woman, but she is also one hundred and twenty-eight years old. Nyota visits her whenever the doctors allow, and it’s been years since she last cried because her grandmother doesn’t recognize her anymore.

Spock thinks about it and thinks about Gaila, who is a Starfleet rescue, bought by a starship captain from her master when she was five because there was no other way to free her. She lived in a Starfleet orphanage for the better part of her life because her numerous and speedily changing counselors and advisors considered her a problematic candidate for adoption. Spock thinks that he has never seen anything but a brighter-than-the-sun smile on her face and the not-a-care-in-the-world glint in her eyes, but he has never asked himself what hides beneath this expression. Somehow he is certain that nobody ever has.

Spock cranes his neck a little to be able to see the other side of their group and is surprised to discover James Kirk among others and that tall dark-haired cadet who’s usually seen with him. A medical student, if Spock is not mistaken. Spock’s surprise is valid, because Nyota’s opinion of Kirk rarely lifts above the floor molding level and it is unusual at best to see them socialize together. Spock looks at Kirk’s companion, taking in his grumpy expression, and trying to remember Pike’s words about him. ‘One hell of a CMO one day’ and ‘Scares the shit out of everybody’ seem to be fitting.

Spock isn’t all that familiar with the doctor’s personal circumstances, but Kirk is another matter. Even if his family history wasn’t common knowledge, Christopher seems to be capable of talking of nothing else lately, and Spock has discovered that the best way to deal with it is let him. As a result, he knows for a fact that Kirk’s mother has resigned from Starfleet some time ago and has returned to Iowa. Spock wonders vaguely why Kirk hasn’t gone home for the holidays, but the next moment all thoughts of this nature leave him, because another cadet enters his field of vision.

A bottle of beer in his hand, his laughter sounding almost too loud, Gary Mitchell leans over the back of Gaila’s seat casually to say something to Kirk. To say that Spock is surprised would indeed be an understatement. Spock would expect Mitchell to use the free time to catch up on his studies. However, the cadet seems perfectly at ease and enjoying himself.

“Hello under the table any time, Kirk,” Mitchell is saying, pointing at the battery of empty shot glasses on the table in front of him. “Imma even give you a head start.”

“Hello your dreams, Gary,” Kirk replies with an insolent grin and winks at Nyota, who scowls. “And by the way, aren’t you supposed to be packing?”
Mitchell laughs. “Won’t get rid of me so easily, Jimmy-boy,” he says gleefully.

“You don’t even go to classes,” Nyota tells him, eyeing him strictly. “I thought they didn’t stand for negligence here.”

“Oh, they were gonna throw me out all right,” Mitchell smirks at her. “But can you believe my luck? Of all the professors they could have sent to deal with me, they send an idiot who buys my poor-sick-momma story and gives me a free pass! Told him I’ve got three jobs to pay the bills and he ate it up!”

“Three jobs?” Kirk laughs, staring at him incredulously. “Gary, you haven’t worked a day in your entire life!”

“I know, right?” Mitchell laughs, too. “I mean how thick does someone have to be to believe a cock-and-bull story like that? Jesus. Told him my dad’s left when I was three. Should have told him daddy’s just sent me that beauty hovering at the parking lot, just to see his face!”

“You’re an incredibly lucky devil, Mitchell,” the dark-haired cadet says sourly. “Or the guy you whammed really was an idiot.”

“Yeah, and imagine they say you can’t fool a Vulcan!” Mitchell snorts. “I’m awesome!”

At some point during the conversation, Spock gets up to his feet. His first impulse is to walk over to their table and—

Spock unclenches his fists with an effort. Really, to lose control like that. Most unbecoming. Either he is more tired than he believed or it has been too long since his last full-scale meditation. Probably both.

Forcibly, Spock steels himself and weighs his options. The utter humiliation at the face of his own stupidity washes over him in hot waves, but he is reluctant to make a scene. Not when his control is so precarious. His anger, he knows, is misdirected. Mitchell is right, Spock is an idiot, and the only person he should be angry with is himself.

Not trusting himself to act logically, Spock decides to leave, because it wouldn’t do to cause the cadet physical trauma punishing him for Spock’s own mistake. It doesn’t help to realize that by the end of the holiday break, the whole Academy is going to be laughing at him. He turns to go with an effort, rigid with angry tension, and catches Gaila’s gaze.

She’s staring at him, her incandescent blue eyes wide, and the way her lips, covered with aggressive violet lipstick, form a perfect ‘O’ is almost comical. Spock whirls on his heel and walks out without looking back.

He doesn’t walk too far away, though, when he hears two sets of light footsteps following him. Somehow it’s not a surprise when Gaila and Nyota appear on either side of him, trying to look into his face. He walks on determinedly, ignoring them, when Gaila slides a hand around his arm. A moment later, Nyota does the same on his other side. Forced to acknowledge their presence, Spock stops.

“You know Mitchell’s a jerk, right?” Gaila says, leaning against him and looking him in the eye intently, her hat sliding slightly to one side.

“She’s right,” Nyota nods emphatically. “Even Kirk can’t hang out with him, and that’s saying something.”
“Ny!” Gaila protests indignantly.

“Sorry,” Nyota sends her a sweet smile. “I keep forgetting Gaila’s got a crush on Kirk.”

“Oh, shut up.” Gaila sticks her tongue out at Nyota, who snorts. “Really, Commander, it’s not your fault you wanted to help that piece of shit. He’s taken drama classes; if there’s one thing he can do, it’s act.”

“He really is a sneaky patak.” Nyota adds the Klingon curse pointedly. “And you’ve got a softer heart than you’d care to admit,” she says, smiling at Spock fondly.

Spock lets out a quiet sigh and tilts his head to the left slightly.

“Cadets,” he starts, then remembering it’s holiday time, amends, “Ladies. Is there anything either of you require of me at this time?”

“Weeell,” Gaila intones, exchanging a glance with Nyota. “We were about to retire to our room and have a bottle of Martini to celebrate our survival of another year here.”

“We’d love it if you joined us, Spock,” Nyota says softly.

Spock pauses. “My watch isn’t over yet.”

“I know the regs, Commander; it’s been over at midnight,” Gaila supplies, grinning. “You’re just a workaholic.”

“Who can barely stand on his feet, too.”

“I—” Spock stops. “It is inappropriate.”

“Oh, come on,” Gaila pouts charmingly. “It’s Christmas, Commander.”

“If anyone asks, we’ll say you’re just one of the Santa’s elves who fell out of the sledge,” Nyota suggests, looking at his ears and chuckling.

“You will do no such thing,” Spock tells her strictly, though he already knows he’ll give up. He suddenly has a mental image of an old mangy street cat who expected another beat-up and instead is confronted by two gentle, neatly groomed kittens, who should be terrified of him and somehow totally aren’t. He sighs and retracts his claws hesitantly. “Do not either of you have other plans?”

“Nah.” Gaila shrugs carelessly. “We’re all yours, Commander.”

“Gaila!” Nyota admonishes her.

The Orion girl giggles. “In a completely innocent, totally friendly kind of way!” she declares sweetly. “Come on, you two. I’ll freeze my ass off in this wind.”

“One would assume you would concern yourself with this notion prior to choosing such frivolous attire,” Spock says dryly.

“Awww, Commander, I’m choosing my attire more by the speed factor.”

“Speed factor?”

“Meaning the speed one can take it off with,” Nyota remarks coolly.
Gaila makes a face at her. “You’re such a prude.” She smirks. “Let’s go drink, eat and be merry!”

Spock exchanges a glance with Nyota as they start walking, realizing that his night is going to be more eventful than he thought.

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At some point, three bottles of Martini, two boxes of chocolate, and numerous Cardassian Sunrises later, after they have discussed Surak, Spinoza, Milton, the relation of Orion dancing to Russian ballet – or was it Cirque du Soleil, and for some reason the fate of Admiral Archer’s prize beagle (Gaila postulated its slipping into another dimension) - Spock blinks to find himself sitting on Nyota’s bunk, leaning against the wall. Gaila is nowhere in sight. Spock seems to remember vaguely her declaring her desire to find more ice. His time sense is slightly off, but it seems like a long time ago.

Nyota’s curled up on the bunk beside him, closer to her pillow. She’s lithe and neat like a puma, her long hair covering her shoulders as she stares at the ceiling unseeingly. Without thinking, Spock reaches to run his fingers through the silky strands. He doesn’t know if he expects her to purr or to bite him.

Nyota blinks and looks at him.

“Spock, do you think – after I graduate, do you think we could... I mean—” She makes an uncertain, feeble gesture with her hand. “You and I – do you think—?”

Spock closes his eyes, part exhaustion and part lack of certainty.

“It is unwise,” he says, “to speculate about the future.”

“Very unwise,” she agrees. “But I... would like that. Would you?”

Spock looks at her. She’s asleep before he can find an answer.

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Instead of a simple expulsion, which leaves a possibility of reapplying, Mitchell gets a dishonorable discharge for fraud, which does not – Spock is not that defensive of his pride in this particular case to let the matter drop. However right, that is perhaps not the wisest decision he’s ever made. When Commodore Mitchell, the third in the Starfleet Security’s chain of command, comes down on the Academy board for mistreating his son, Spock becomes the focal point of his wrath.

He is dragged through a number of hearings, designed to demonstrate his incompetence to deal with personnel matters in general and his unfamiliarity with Cadet Mitchell’s case in particular. It’s tedious and time-consuming, and humiliating to a certain degree; Spock is only off the hook when Admiral Barnett steps in and, in his own words, ‘ends the circus.’

Spock’s troubles don’t end there, however. Commodore Mitchell issues orders to search his apartment and his office. The first time it’s masked as a security drill, Spock being a ‘random’ target. The second time it’s ostensibly following a lead in some investigation. The third time the warrant is so unclear that Spock has to run a semantic analysis to make sure that it’s not his imagination and the paper indeed doesn’t make any sense.
Spock is getting extremely frustrated with being woken up in the middle of the night to have a number of nameless and faceless security officers turn his apartment inside out, sometimes deliberately breaking his belongings. He’s also not particularly fond of the rumors that Mitchell is spreading about Spock only getting his rank and position due to his personal relationship with Pike.

Spock is aware that the rumors are not taken seriously by anyone who knows either him or Pike, but he doesn’t enjoy being the number one subject in the Academy grapevine one bit. Pike laughs at him via the comm link, pointing out the utter ridiculousness of the accusations, and reminding Spock that no one in their right mind is going to believe that Spock has won the Zee Magnee Prize by sleeping with the jury. ‘He’s only making an idiot of himself, Spock. I’d let him.’

Strangely enough, Nyota happens to agree with Pike, using almost the same words. ‘Look, I’m a specialist in communications, right?’ she tells him in the library once. ‘That includes public relations. I’m telling you, the more he harasses you, the better you look, taking it all stoically and all. The commodore’s an idiot who doesn’t understand that anyone who’s ever talked to his son for five minutes knows full well he’s a dickhead and was expelled for a reason. He’s digging his own grave, Spock, and the best thing you can do is stand aside and let him.’

It’s not that Spock doesn’t trust them or doesn’t agree, but it’s hard on him. Vulcans are very private by nature, and Spock is perhaps doubly so. It’s the lesson he learned well, back in his childhood when every new discovery about him gave his classmates more ammunition for their constant teasing and tormenting. Somehow, everything about him always turns out to be different from everyone else, and not in any good sense, either.

Though he would never admit it to anyone, it’s a relief to join Pike at Riverside for a weekend. The Enterprise is ready to be hauled into orbit where the matter-antimatter reactor will be installed – the work is too dangerous to be conducted on Earth.

“So.” Pike grins at Spock after they have concluded the tour of the ship. “Like what you see?”

“The ship appears to be built in accordance to engineering specifications,” Spock intones evenly. Then, catching Pike’s eye, he allows, “She’s beautiful, Christopher.”

Pike beams at him. They walk side by side along the shiny, gleaming white corridors toward the airlock that connects the ship with the docks.

“She still needs a first officer,” Pike reminds him. “I wasn’t kidding, Spock. I want you. Incidentally, your name is at the top of the list of candidates the admiralty has sent me. Four years at the Academy is long enough, don’t you think?”

“I agree,” Spock says. “And I would be honored to serve under you as my captain, sir. However—” he stops, in his speech and in his tracks, searching for the right words.

“You’re worried about us?” Pike asks him quietly, even though they are alone in the corridor. “Spock.” He sighs. “I’m not your keeper. I’m asking you to join my crew with no strings attached. You know me. You served under me. You know that I don’t make professional decisions based on my personal feelings. You risked your life under my command, you did so on my orders, and Captain Pike” – Pike smiles a little – “was fine with it. As for Christopher, he was worried sick, but he didn’t get to run that ship and he doesn’t get to run this one.”

Spock pauses, amused despite himself. “Which one of you is asking me to join this crew, then?” he asks.
“Both.” Pike grins. “But you only have to answer to the captain, Commander. By the way,” he smirks mischievously, “congratulations on your promotion.”

Spock blinks. “I beg your pardon?”

“Barnett recommended you for promotion to full commander a month ago. I just happen to know it’s been approved.”

Spock takes a moment to absorb this. “I see,” he says at last. “It seems to be an uncommon time for any promotion to pass, however.”

“True,” Pike says. “It’s usually September or March. Rumor has it that someone in the brass liked the way you handled that Mitchell kid.”

“In other words, I am being promoted for initiating a scandal,” Spock concludes.

Pike rolls his eyes. “You know, it truly amazes me, your lack of self-confidence,” he says waspishly. “Spock, you’re being promoted because you damn well earned it, and if you didn’t change the fleet for the Academy, you’d have been promoted two years ago.”

“Be that as it may, I still—”

“You know,” Pike interrupts him firmly, “if I were any other captain, I’d dismiss you from consideration for my XO right now. No commanding officer can afford to doubt himself so much. But I’ve seen you in command, Spock. I’ve seen you taking control of the situation, with no hesitation and a cool head, making decisions – correct decisions – in the blink of an eye, giving people purpose and direction. You’re good at taking charge and I would trust you with my ship and my crew any time – any time at all, you understand? You’re good at encouraging people, but you need to learn to be fair to yourself. In your case, it means admitting your own virtues and accomplishments.”

Spock is silent. How can he explain this? Pike calls it false modesty, but Spock’s problem goes deeper. It’s not a problem, even, not to him. Merely a part of who he is.

He is five. He hurries home from school, filled with joy and pride. He has just been declared the best in his year in the mastery of Logic. He did not make a single mistake, and found a logical and uniquely correct resolution to all the premises he had been given. His eyes are shiny when he tells his father the news. Sarek looks down at him dispassionately as usual, but somehow Spock knows, he just knows his father disapproves.

‘What is the virtue of mastering the theory of logic if you still let your emotions control you? You have accomplished nothing, yet you are full of pride. Do not shame my name by boasting, at least.’

He is eight. He’s just completed his kahs-wan test, two years earlier than most of his peers. He is not proud of himself, but he is pleased. It was a difficult and dangerous journey, and had he not revealed supreme physical agility as well as clear thinking, he would not have survived. Between a le-matya, a pair of wild selhats, and a sand storm, he could have easily become one of those fatalities that are the inevitable consequence of every kahs-wan. He survived and proved that he is a true son of Vulcan.

‘You are an unruly child who had allowed his emotions to interfere with his logic and took the test before he was ready. Such a display is worth nothing. You will undergo the ordeal in two years again. Then we shall see whether you are worthy.’
He isn’t sure what terrifies him more – the prospect of repeating his fight for survival or the tears standing in his mother’s eyes.

He is eleven. He has long stopped sharing his accomplishments at school with his parents, knowing that Sarek receives a notification with his grades every trimester, and if his father does not wish to discuss it, it means Spock is faring satisfactory. He knows that the praise his teachers give him means nothing to Sarek, even though Spock secretly keeps the rare words of approval close to his heart. Like that one time when his natural sciences teacher told him that he showed ‘inspiration that surpassed logic.’ Spock knows it is illogical to be pleased and encouraged by the words, but he can’t help it; sometimes all he wants is to hear them again, so badly. He knows that every successful project he concludes is going to be examined for flaws by his father prior to him accepting the results. Spock has learned to discover and point out his work’s faults prior to presenting it to Sarek. He knows that if he can’t find any, it only means that he isn’t looking hard enough.

He is fourteen. He has won the Federation chess tournament in his age group. Sarek actually frowns. ‘You have had the benefit of the best teachers on Vulcan, yet your game is still erratic and full of what your mother would call ‘lucky guesses.’ If you cannot master the game properly, I fail to see why you insist on playing it.’

He is seventeen. He has stopped dreaming of ever gaining his father’s approval. It finally settles with him that he is never going to be good enough at anything he does – by default. His father claims to be incapable of experiencing disappointment, but Spock has been trying his patience long enough. He accepts the truth and the logic of the situation. He does what he has been wanting to do since he was ten: he applies for Starfleet.

His father does not approve, but somehow, it fails to have a significant effect on Spock anymore.

Pike sighs, watching him. “You’re never going to open up to me, are you?” he says, softly. “Spock, do you trust me?”

Spock blinks. “Implicitly, sir.”

“Good. Then trust me when I say that your problem is – you’re an overachiever. You’re very generous with accepting that everyone around you is doing their fair share, but your own work is never good enough for you.”

“There is always room for improvement,” Spock pronounces.

“No doubt.” Pike gives him a thin smile. “But when you strive for perfection, remember that even gods make mistakes. And you are a lot of phenomenal things, my stubborn friend” – Pike’s smile warms up tenfold – “but you are still only a mortal.”

Spock feels his own lips curve up slightly. “That is hard to debate.”

“Then don’t.” Pike advises. “There are better ways of spending this lifetime, even if it’s a Vulcan one. Now, will you leave me hanging forever or will you finally say yes to being my first officer so that we could work on that nonexistent ego of yours?”

Spock swallows his doubts with an effort. His whole nature is protesting but he fights it, and it’s a start.

“It will be my honor, Captain.”
“No, no, Commander.” Spock doesn’t object to Pike shaking his hand. The captain’s grin is undeniably insolent. “The honor’s all mine. Now that that’s over with, get to work. We’ve got about five hundred people to employ.”

Spock very narrowly avoids smiling. “Yes, sir.”

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Number One shows up at his office when Spock is least expecting her. Which, come to think of it, could be any given moment, because showing up without a warning isn’t her usual MO.

“That girlfriend of yours,” she says by means of greeting, “Uhura, right? She’s your TA, isn’t she? Can she handle a class?”

Spock sets the PADD he’s been studying aside carefully and looks at Number One, without giving any outward sign of his surprise.

“Cadet Uhura is not my girlfriend,” he says calmly. “She is indeed one of my TAs, however, and I believe she can handle a class.”

He is fairly certain that’s an understatement. Those two times Spock asked Nyota to step in, he got the distinct impression that his students were much more intimidated by her than they had ever been by him.

“Fantastic,” Number One says with her trademark dry sarcasm. “Then get your things, we’re going out.”

“We are?”

“Spock, I really don’t have all day.”

Spock’s instinct of self-preservation tells him that it’s a very bad sign to have her eyes narrow at him like that. He gets up to his feet hastily and goes to find Nyota. She is delighted to help him out, and Spock thinks not for the first time that he is incredibly fortunate to have met her, because she doesn’t ask any questions, just takes the news in stride, even though her eyes dart toward Number One with undisguised curiosity.

Instead of the Academy parking lot, Number One takes him to the main entrance where her hover bike is parked, because clearly she doesn’t believe in ground rules of any kind and Academy Security probably have a good sense of self-preservation, too. Spock has heard about Number One’s preferred means of transport from Pike, but he has never seen the bike before, and uninterested as he generally is in such matters, he pauses because it is a sight to behold. T’Pol, he reflects, would probably be jealous.

Number One mounts the bike gracefully, freezing the technician circling around with a PADD with her icy-blue stare, and looks at Spock across her shoulder.

“Are you waiting for an RSVP or something?”

Spock unfreezes from his staring fit and climbs up behind her, all too aware of the numerous spectators around them. Gingerly, he puts his hands on her waist, and she slams the ignition like it’s going out of style. Spock barely manages to register all the gasps and whistles, before it’s all wind, wind, and even more wind. Number One, he discovers, doesn’t believe in general safeties, either.
Number One’s driving style is probably the main reason for the road police having the worst kind of nightmares ever. Spock tries to calculate the exact number of traffic regulations she is currently breaking, but abandons the endeavor all too soon, because clearly, after one hundred it stops to matter. He thinks that she in any case outranks him, and doesn’t raise any objections. Not that she’d listen to them anyway.

She takes them out of town and abandons the road, flying along the shore line. Spotting a deserted, wild beach, she descends and brings the bike to a complete stop. Figuring they have arrived at their planned destination, Spock slides down.

“Well?” Number One turns to him and miraculously, she smiles. “How was the ride?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Disappointing,” he says. “Given the rate of our acceleration, I was expecting us to go to warp.”

She chuckles and slides off the bike into the grayish sand, too. “Smartass.”

Spock follows her as she walks toward the water edge, wind tugging at her raven black hair. She isn’t all that tall, he realizes suddenly. Her built is slim to the point of fragile, in fact, and Spock wonders why he has never noticed this before. Perhaps the reason hides in the aura of authority and confidence Number One projects. She’s never just an appearance, but always a presence.

“Chris told me you took the job,” she says without preamble.

“Affirmative.”

She pauses, gazing at the ocean, and speaks without turning to look at him.

“I won’t demean you by offering any kind of advice,” she says. “I know I don’t have to teach you how to do your job. And I’m glad it’s you, in fact, because I don’t trust anyone else on that list.”

“I am grateful for your approval.”

She glances at him sideways. “I didn’t haul you all the way here to give you my approval,” she says. “You know, by every rule of engagement that I know, I should hate you. Or at the very least, dislike you.”

Spock clasps his hands behind his back. “You have never been emotional.”

“No.” She purses her lips. “I haven’t. But that’s not the reason.” She frowns lightly, focusing on the blurry line of the horizon. “Chris has always been a dreamer, Spock. But you are probably the only dream he’s ever allowed himself to chase. Chris doesn’t believe in white fences and apple trees.”

As peculiar as the metaphor is to him, Spock doesn’t pretend not to understand the essence of it. He peers at Number One’s chiseled profile, serene and determined. And sad.

“To be honest,” she says, “I don’t believe in white fences and apple trees, either.” She looks at Spock squarely. “But I want to try. And I want to make him try, too. Maybe we won’t have an apple garden. But I think – I want to believe that between the two of us we can at least build a house.”

Spock ponders her words silently for a while. He, too, is watching the ocean.

“I offered him an ‘apple garden’ once.”

Number One smiles, sad and quiet. “I know. But you are not a gardener, Spock.”
“Neither are you,” he remarks calmly. “And for that matter, neither is he.”

She is quiet for a moment. “I’m closer to his age,” she says at last. “We fought the same battles. We both come from the time when the stars were younger. We looked at them through the same eyes.”

Spock doesn’t answer.

“There comes a time,” Number One says, “when every space hound longs for a warm furnace, a gentle hand, and a home cooked meal.”

They both shift at the same time, and their eyes meet.

“Bring him home,” she says. “And if we do build that house, you’ll have a place to return to when your time comes, too.”

Spock doesn’t think there are any words in any language he knows that he could offer in reply, so he simply nods at her once, curt and deliberate. She smiles her fleeting smile again and runs her fingers softly along his cheek.

“It won’t be easy for you,” she tells him in her normal voice, as they walk back toward the bike. “Being the first officer. It’s the shortest straw in the lot and you’ll always be the one who draws it. You’ll walk in shadows. When you do your job well, the crew will get the laurels. When the crew screws up, you’ll be the one to blame. Every unpopular command decision will be your fault, and you’ll have to protect the captain’s image in the eyes of the crew sometimes by blackening your own. The captain’s primary responsibility is to the mission, yours – to the ship and crew. You’ll be working your ass off to see to the crew’s needs, but when they die on a mission, they will die for the captain, not for you. They will want to make him proud, not you. You’ll be a buffer, a vent, and a punching bag more often than not.”


“Oh yes.” Number One nods. “Very much so. But there is a silver lining. Every captain in the fleet was a first officer once. Can’t get to the big chair skipping that one. It teaches appreciation like nothing else does. You two alone will know the full weight that the other’s carrying. And while he’s the one making decisions, you’ll be the one who’ll have to keep him honest and to set him right when he slips. And if that means taking one or a dozen in the face, then that’s what you’ll have to do, too.”

“Have you ever done that?” Spock asks, with resigned curiosity, watching Number One mount her bike. “Taken one in the face?”

She looks at him and suddenly grins like a schoolgirl. “Chris would never hit me,” she admits. “But metaphorically speaking, yes, Spock. Many, many times.”

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It should not have come as a surprise to him or as a disappointment, and yet he’s undeniably experiencing both.

Spock stares at the technical transcript of Cadet Kirk’s third Kobayashi Maru, as if hoping it will reveal something different after two hours of scrupulous examination. But it’s still the same unsatisfying truth.

“He cheated.” Pike sighs. “You almost look crestfallen, Spock. What were you expecting?”

“I do not know,” Spock says.

He doesn’t.

He is appalled with what had happened at first. After realizing that Cadet Kirk had beaten the no-win scenario, a sense of strange, incandescent hope kindles within Spock – a hope that he can neither define nor explain. There is hope that perhaps Kirk’s solution will force the Academy board to finally see the point Spock was making four years ago and has been trying to make ever since. But there is also something else, something less rational, something that he can’t quite grasp, but yearns for desperately.

Before he can even ask himself the proper questions, though, the delicate, fragile feeling dies within him as he realizes that no miracle has happened. There is no wondrous epiphany behind Cadet Kirk’s actions – only the discovery that he considers himself too good to be following the same rules as everyone else. Pretty much, in fact, as Gary Mitchell.

“Well, it’s definitely some out-of-the-box thinking,” Pike says with a sigh.

Spock looks at him. He knows how much Pike has invested in James Kirk, so he can’t really begrudge the captain an attempt to find some kind of silver lining on the gloomy horizon.

“Maybe we deserve this,” Pike muses. “The Academy is supposed to be forging raw talents into steel. We can’t pack our dorms with genius level kids and expect them to restrain their intelligence or ambition just because we’re not fast enough to stay ahead of them.”

“Any talent needs to be disciplined before it can unfold its potential,” Spock remarks calmly.

Pike glances sharply at him. “You know, I think there’s such a thing as too much disciplining,” he says, a strange edge in his voice. “Take you, for instance. You were unhappy with the unfair conditions of the test, too, remember?”

“Unhappy is hardly the correct term—” Spock starts, but Pike isn’t listening.

“What was it you said back then? ‘Ultimately, the lesson we are teaching here is that whether they die stoically, controlling their fear, or panicking, letting their fear control them doesn’t matter, because in either case – they still die.’”

“Correct,” Spock says. “However—”

“But where Kirk protested, even at the risk of being expelled, you held your tongue and obeyed.”

Slowly, Spock straightens up even more in his chair, feeling blood threatening to rush to his cheeks.

“I protested legitimately while the matter was still being discussed,” he says, and it’s an unexpected struggle to keep his voice from shaking. “But after my commanding officer had arrived at a decision, I accepted it, despite my personal misgivings, because this is how the chain of command works. Any other course of action is mutiny or anarchy.”

Pike stares at him in bewilderment. “Spock, I didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers. Perhaps I shouldn’t
have said what I said. You’re a Vulcan – your culture is all about discipline. For you, order must
leave no room for chaos whatsoever. It wasn’t fair to have asked you to understand Kirk’s way of
thinking.”

Spock stands up abruptly, incapable of remaining still, remaining here. He doesn’t look at Pike when
he speaks, his voice tense yet even.

“Perhaps you were so engrossed in understanding his way of thinking, Captain, that you failed to
notice that I am not a typical representative of my culture. I would be grateful if you refrain from
making assumptions about what I can and cannot understand. If you will excuse me.”

Spock turns on his heel, heading for the door to Pike’s office where they have been secluded.

“Spock, wait!” Pike springs to his feet swiftly, moving to intercept. “Please.”

Spock stops, feeling a hand close around his elbow. Reluctantly, he turns to face Pike.

“Spock, I’m sorry,” Pike says quietly, looking Spock squarely in the eye, his whole focus entirely on
the Vulcan the way it hasn’t been in weeks. “I don’t know what I said to offend you, but whatever it
is, forgive me. Please, don’t walk out on me like that. I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“I am neither offended nor hurt, Captain.”

“Liar.” Pike takes Spock’s hand in both of his own and kisses the knuckles gently. “I’m sorry.”

Immediately, Spock feels ashamed of his outburst. “I am the one who should apologize,” he says
softly, leaning in and pressing his forehead against Pike’s. “This whole situation is unsettling. I
reacted... inappropriately.”

Pike takes Spock’s face in his hands; then, pausing briefly as if to ask permission, he kisses him
soundly on the mouth. Spock remains still for a moment, strangely hesitant, then relents, parting his
lips and returning the kiss just as gently.

“It feels wrong to fight with you,” Pike whispers as they separate. “Everything I say to you lately is
wrong.”

“This is hardly the first difference of opinion we have had,” Spock says quietly.

“This is different.” Pike pulls away slightly to look at him. “I feel like I’m losing you. Like there’s a
whole new chapter in your book that I somehow missed. You’re slipping through my fingers like
sand, and all I can do is watch.”

Spock doesn’t have an answer to that, so he simply leans against the wall, extending a silent
invitation. A moment later, Pike sighs and moves closer again, pressing against him. They remain
motionless for a while, holding each other, breathing.

“There’ll be a hearing,” Pike says, even as Spock turns him over and starts massaging his tired
shoulders gently. “And most likely a vote.”

“I am not a member of the Academy board,” Spock reminds him, working on the tense muscles.

“I am,” Pike lets out, moaning softly as Spock locates a particularly tight knot. “I’m going to support
him, should it come to that. I don’t want you to take it personally.”

“Then I will not,” Spock assures him. He feels a tiny stab of betrayal, but doesn’t allow himself to
dwell upon it. After all, it’s hardly logical.

He thinks about the enormous effort he had put into creating the test. It is the most complex program
Spock has written to date. Knowing that some of the most qualified and brilliant Command track
cadets will attack it with all their formidable determination and intellect year after year, Spock had to
think of every tactical scenario, anticipate every move, every combination of maneuvers, every
unexpected order, every unorthodox solution, every flight of inspiration and every whim. Each
possibility created a fork of dozens of other possibilities, intertwining, juxtaposing, clashing. He had
to foresee them all, calculate every eventuality. He had to think of everything, which was impossible,
but which he had done.

He had created a perfect Gordian Knot. And like an insolent and arrogant Alexander, impatient to
conquer the world, James Kirk had sliced it with a sharp blade in one swift motion.

Spock finds it fortunate that he does not believe in the concept of destiny.

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“This session has been called to resolve a troubling matter. James T. Kirk, step forward.”

Spock watches Cadet Kirk walking down the steps briskly, radiating tension. He assumes an at-ease
pose behind a lectern, but he looks as ill at ease, as if the weight of several hundred gazes fixed on
him is exerting real pressure.

Spock frowns slightly. No apples? He expected Kirk to be as flamboyant and rowdy as he had been
at the simulator, telling his crew not to worry about Klingon warbirds. Instead, Kirk’s wearing an air
of a man who has been unfairly judged and knows that nothing he says will change that decision. A
defiant convict.

I never saw a man who looked

With such a wistful eye

Upon that little tent of blue

Which prisoners call the sky... *

“...Is there anything you care to say before we begin, sir?” Admiral Barnett’s voice brings Spock out
of his poetic reverie.

“Yes. I believe I have the right to face my accuser directly.”

It’s not the first time Spock has heard Kirk’s voice, but this time it’s different. Kirk sounds calm, but
it’s graveyard calmness. He is prepared to defend himself but doesn’t believe he can sway the
situation with his argument. Rather, he is merely curious, but even his curiosity bears the sheen of
defeated tiredness.

Spock is struck by the dichotomy revealed by the man he sees. He can’t recognize the self-assured,
devil-may-care rebel from the Kobayashi Maru simulator in this quiet, reserved person who has
woken up this morning already knowing he is going to be beaten today. Spock is at a loss of how to
explain the appalling difference. If not for his familiarity with Cadet Kirk’s appearance, he could
think he was facing two entirely different men.
Spock straightens up automatically and gets to his feet. He ignores Kirk’s gaze as the cadet turns to look at him, but feels it all the same.

“Step forward, please,” Admiral Barnett says. Spock obliges. “This is Commander Spock. He is one of our most distinguished graduates. He’s programmed the Kobayashi Maru exam for the last four years. Commander.”

Being level with Kirk now, Spock can feel the tension as a palpable, tangible substance, spreading its spell over him as well. He compensates by softening his voice, as if talking to a frightened sehlat. He also finds it easier to address the board, for some reason, rather than look at Kirk directly.

“Cadet Kirk, you somehow managed to install and activate a subroutine to the programming code, thereby changing the conditions of the test.”

*He didn’t even hide it,* Spock reflects. *He meant for us to know exactly what he did.*

Kirk looks down for a moment, and utters, with barely a hint of his usual cocky attitude, “Your point being?”

Spock notes the pronounced lack of any official title in Kirk’s response, which clearly is designed to emphasize the cadet’s disrespect toward his accuser. He’s making it personal, and that, Spock knows, is a last resort. This is puzzling to Spock. He feels for a moment as if he had missed the whole event and arrived closer to the end of it. Which, quite clearly, is absurd.

Admiral Barnett must notice Kirk’s lack of respect for protocol as well, because he beats Spock to an answer.

“In academic vernacular, you cheated.”

Kirk stiffens visibly at the harsh response, and the air suddenly fills with dispersed electrical charges.

“Let me ask you something I think we all know the answer to,” he responds, looking down again. “The test itself is a cheat, isn’t it? I mean, you programmed it to be unwinnable.”

“Your argument precludes a possibility of a no-win scenario.”

“I don’t believe in no-win scenarios.”

Spock wants to smack him. Wants to tell him that no one gets to tease death. Not even a human should be this arrogant. He steels himself forcibly.

“Then not only did you violate the rules, you also failed to understand a principle lesson.”

“Please, enlighten me.”

Spock has to struggle to stop himself from reacting to the continuous lack of open respect. It occurs to him that if Pike was in his place, Kirk would never allow himself to behave like this. Spock lets his voice flow downward, relaxing his expression. If Kirk insists on acting like a spoiled child, Spock would oblige him and treat him as such.

“You of all people should know, Cadet Kirk: A captain cannot cheat death.”

Kirk pauses before allowing a verbal reaction, staring down yet again. “I of all people?” he more states than asks, voice quiet, and somehow it’s clear that he already knows where Spock is headed. But Spock is on the roll now.
“Your father, Lieutenant George Kirk, assumed command of his vessel before being killed in action, did he not?”

“I don’t think you liked the fact that I beat your test,” Kirk says, looking up, lashing out with a decidedly personal remark at his opponent.

It’s a sign of weakness, and normally Spock isn’t the one who goes for a literal rather than virtual kill on the gladiators’ arena of verbal sparring. But he can’t stop his blade now, because Kirk’s childish stubbornness rubs him the wrong way, and Kirk. Just. Doesn’t. Understand.

“Furthermore, you have failed to divine the purpose of the test.”

“Enlighten me again.”

“The purpose is to experience fear,” Spock says, and hears his voice ring clearly in the silent hall. “Fear in the face of certain death. To accept that fear and maintain control of oneself and one’s crew.” He softens his speech almost despite himself, seeing the look on Kirk’s face. “This is a quality expected in every Starfleet captain.”

Spock knows he sounds condescending, but he can’t help it. Someone needs to give Kirk a slap on the wrist so that his unfounded optimism and cynicism don’t get him killed on his first deep space mission. Spock’s blood boils with indignation because Kirk scorns death yet he has never faced it. His father’s sacrifice – the only reason for Kirk to be even standing here now – has taught this supercilious young man nothing at all.

You haven’t earned the right to laugh at death, Spock wants to tell him. Who do you think you are to challenge death and be certain you shall prevail whatever the circumstances? Boasting you have no fear? You haven’t earned that right.

But before he can find more appropriate words for it, before Kirk has another chance to prove his case, a messenger approaches Admiral Barnett, and Spock feels instantly that something has gone very, very wrong with all of them.

As soon as the admiral has received the message, he looks up at his audience, eyes wide and mouth set grimly. “We received a distress call from Vulcan.”

Spock’s heart stops, and at this moment, he knows, with a totally unfathomable, almost uncanny certainty, that his life is never going to be the same again.

End of Part II

*From: The Ballad of Reading Gaol by Oscar Wilde*
Part III

8 - 6 months ago

In less than 48 hours, everything about Spock has changed forever. It should not be conceivable, but it’s exactly what has happened. Although as a scientist he cannot deny objective facts, he simply cannot wrap his mind around these.

It starts in a blur as he rushes through the decks of the Enterprise, making sure every station is covered and everything is in working order. He isn’t supposed to do this in such a manner, but then, they are not supposed to be staffed with cadets, even if they are graduates. When Spock finally gets to the bridge, he is only halfway reassured and is asking himself whether it’s time to adopt the illogical human habit of praying.

He doesn’t reveal his doubts.

“Mr. Spock.”

“Captain. Engineering reports ready for the launch.”

Pike knows what their situation is as well as Spock does. He doesn’t need a reminder, and even if he did, Lieutenant Sulu’s ‘parking brake’ has undoubtedly taken care of that.

Spock can’t help but admire Pike – the smooth way he runs the ship, the aura of professional confidence he is spreading over the young people around him who undoubtedly have the proverbial butterflies in their stomachs, because for them it’s their first – their first shift on the bridge, their first starship duty, their first mission. Definitely way too many ‘firsts,’ and the situation doesn’t allow for any of that. Pike presides over this with calmness and efficiency, and the crew adopts his attitude beyond their conscious will.

Then Kirk gets to the bridge, making a rather dramatic entrance, and the predictable, logical order of things has come to an abrupt end.

It’s been less than an hour since their confrontation at the Academy, and now they’re yelling at each other, all pretense of respect taken off the table completely. Or rather, Kirk is yelling, while Spock tells himself that he will not descend to the same level. He attempts to restore order and save his captain the necessity of dealing with the undisciplined youth (Spock certainly doesn’t approve of Kirk’s disregard for Pike’s personal space or his very deliberate change of tone when he addresses Pike) when Kirk suddenly starts making sense.

Pike looks at Spock, and Spock can’t give an immediate answer because he’s overwhelmed by the click-click-click in his mind with which the pieces are shifting into place. Suddenly, it doesn’t matter that Kirk is Kirk – all that matters is that he seems to be right. His personal feelings aside, Spock is never above acknowledging when someone else has a point. Automatically, Kirk’s definitely illegal way of getting onboard falls to the very bottom of Spock’s priorities list.

He throws his support behind Kirk as soon as the cadet gets around his numb tongue and relates the
facts he’s gathered. They both try to stop Pike from going to the *Narada*, and at another time this uncommon solidarity would have bothered Spock, but right now they only have time for the most essential: life and death.

The captain ignores them both, and while Spock is relieved that he seems to have a plan in mind, he’s also extremely concerned about what it might entail.

“Be careful with the ship, Spock. She’s brand new.”

And Spock can only lift an eyebrow and nod. He can’t even say ‘Be careful’ or ‘Please don’t go,’ no matter what his heart is screaming. They don’t even have the luxury of a goodbye. A short, sad glance is all he gets from Christopher before Pike disappears into the turbolift, leaving the ship. Spock refuses to calculate the odds of his return, telling himself that he’s got no time for this.

He doesn’t.

Vulcan. The dry, reddish rock under his feet. He has never felt himself a child of this ancient, severe planet, its flesh and blood, more than he does now, as the barren soil is crumpling, grabbing at his feet, crying out as if alive, calling to him from the depths of its tired heart-core, which still contains too many flames and too much life beneath the harsh surface. Intellectually, Spock understands that these hurried, panicked steps are the last ones he’ll ever take on his *home* planet, but the knowledge crawls cowardly to the back of his mind, leaving it to the burning urgency of the moment.

“Mother, now!”

She spins around to face him at the last instant, her face a frozen mask of fear, and love, and grief, and she doesn’t look at Sarek, not even for a second, but only at him – her child, her son, the one she cradled in her arms, and sang to, and smiled; the one she read *Alice in Wonderland* to, and the one she told that he would always have a proud mother no matter what choices he made.

The one who never told her he loved her. Not once in his entire life, which she had given to him.

And now she’s gone.

His body continues to function but his mind is numb. He stalks into the corridor, and there it reaches him – the shockwaves. The planet beneath them has collapsed and the aether is filled with the death screams of six billion Vulcans.

Spock is doubled over, dropping to his knees, blinded by the sheer agony that courses through him and incapable of blocking it. He barely makes it to a deserted briefing room, because the crew should not see their captain like this, not even an acting captain. His legs give, and he collapses to the deck, writhing in pain and clutching at his temples. He can’t think, and all he sees are endless fields of blazing fire.

He comes around minutes later, alerted back to consciousness by the sound of the intercom. He is needed on the bridge.

He straightens up tentatively; even while his whole body is aching, he can function. It’s weird, because he sees everything around him through a thin grayish veil; it dulls the colors and the sounds, and most blessedly the bleeding wound within his mind. Most bizarrely, he can’t feel his heart, which for a Vulcan is inconceivable, and he can’t tell whether it’s still beating or not. Logic tells him it must be.

He comes back to the bridge to collect status reports. It’s odd, to say the least, to see the captain’s chair empty, and even more odd to sit in it himself. Nyota tells him that after the *Enterprise*
transporters came back online, they targeted the first school they could locate and beamed up as many of its occupants, mostly children, as they could. Spock nods succinctly, but he can’t even thank Nyota for her ingenuity, merely adding another fifty people to his mental list of survivors.

He estimates less than ten thousand, including those who have been off world at the moment. Vulcans are now a dying race.

He can’t allow himself to think about it now. He is in command, approximately five hundred people and the survivors from Vulcan are depending on the next decision he makes, and Nero is still out there, as well as Captain Pike. Spock pulls his duty around himself like a cloak and concentrates – concentrates the way he hasn’t ever done in his life, because the tiniest crack in his armor, the slightest draft beneath the plates, and he is going to lose it.

He eyes Nyota warily as she enters the lift with him. She’s telling him she’s sorry, and he knows – he can see it in her eyes – that she understands how drastically inadequate her words are, but they are all she has to offer. Apart from herself, that is.

_Please, don’t do this,_ Spock pleads with her silently as she kisses him. He is weak, so very weak right now – he cannot tell what it is that still allows him to function – but he knows that if he yields to the temptation and gives in to Nyota’s embrace, he will shatter to a thousand pieces and never be able to get himself together again.

It scares him. He has done without a lot of things in his life, things that most would consider common but that for him have always been a forbidden fruit, and he’s done well without them; not ideal, perhaps, but he has never, never lost the integrity of that tiny, tightly-wound core that is his sense of self. Conflicted – definitely, flawed – most certainly, but whole, imperfect as it is. Whole, and uniquely his, and _home._

It’s under attack now, an attack so massive that he cannot hope to win, and it scares him, scares him like nothing in his life ever has, because he doesn’t know, he doesn’t have the vaguest idea of what will be left after he loses it. The dark hordes of chaos are approaching, and he has nothing to defend himself with, except for his duty and the immediate emergency. They are the only things that hold him on the precipice, and they won’t last long, but he can’t fault himself for wishing to cling to them for as long as he is able.

Once pushed down, there will be no return.

Nyota seems to understand some of this, even though he can’t communicate, because she releases him and doesn’t insist. Spock heads to Engineering, because now that they have lost Olsen, there is no senior officer to control the proceedings in this most important of the ship’s departments. The status of the ship’s systems is not encouraging and the lack of communications leaves Spock little choice in determining their course of actions.

His logic has never been clearer – or so it seems to him – than when he’s reasoning out the effect Nero’s interference has rendered their universe. But the reprieve is fleeting, because James Kirk, whom Spock absolutely refuses to accept as his first officer, doesn’t agree. Spock has already learned that lesson, back on Earth: when James Kirk doesn’t agree with something, he won’t rest until things are done his way, not even if he has to throw a tantrum like a spoiled child.

Spock can’t deal with him right now. Kirk’s frustration and urgency, all aimed at Spock, are threatening his shaky control the way Nyota’s sympathy hasn’t. Kirk is desperate, his emotions raging on the bridge as if Spock needs another bit of pressure, as if what he’s currently under isn’t enough. The man must be a born manipulator, because Kirk uses one thing Spock’s most vulnerable in order to bend him to his will – Captain Pike.
Spock holds his ground. He will do what Christopher ordered him to do, not what he wants to do. Christopher’s order is logical, and correct, and if Spock’s heart is bleeding raw in the cell Spock has locked it up in at the thought of leaving him in Nero’s hands, Kirk has no business whatsoever knowing this.

It’s gratifying to press his fingers to Kirk’s neck – it’s more pleasant than it should be, and Spock barely stops in time from exerting too much pressure. He should have known then, should have got the signal, should have realized that he has long lost the battle he thought he was only closing in on – but he doesn’t. He just doesn’t.

“Get him off this ship.”

He is so proud of himself. He calls McCoy to the bridge and thanks him for his assistance. He converses with his father, calm and dignified, as if he himself experiences no pain. Neither McCoy’s irritation nor Sarek’s quiet grief affects him in the slightest.

It’s only when Kirk is back in some mysterious fashion that Spock gets on the short track to losing it.

He is stunned to see Kirk back onboard, accompanied by some stranger. For the first time in his life, the events happen faster than Spock can cope with them. He’s rudely thrown out of his quiet niche of apathy. He’s on the defensive before he knows it, and he can’t even hope to keep up.

“You’re the genius – you figure it out.”

There’s insolence, challenge, and so much pure loathing emanating from Kirk that it’s all Spock can do to remain still. His own emotions pressing from the inside, Kirk’s unleashed ones calling to them from the outside, and Spock feels trapped in a devastating crossfire, a mere witness to his own instinctive reaction.

It doesn’t matter what Kirk is saying. It doesn’t matter, because Spock finds it harder and harder to concentrate on the words, to connect the sounds with any kind of coherent meaning. His bastions are falling, his walls are cracking, and he almost pleads with Kirk at first – to not do this to him, because it’ll be the same as signing Spock’s death sentence. The person he is now will cease to exist forever, and Spock will have no defense left against the grief and the loss.

But Kirk is standing way too close, moving closer, and there’s no reasoning with him, no convincing, and no begging had Spock even been inclined to beg. Kirk won’t relent, won’t give up, and Spock is angry, because Kirk doesn’t understand what he’s doing, and at the same time he understands it all too well.

“You never loved her!”

Spock is gone.

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Later, he finds himself alone in a deserted transporter room. He isn’t sure how he got here, nor is he sure of how much time has passed. He has relinquished command. He isn’t needed anywhere by anyone anymore. He has nowhere else to be. He has nothing standing in between him and his emotions now. Nothing standing in between him and his loss.

Spock looks around the room. There is a piece of him lying at the transporter pad, a shapeless, bulky something. It’s humming softly, and Spock can’t decide if it’s ugly or not. He spots another piece, a
sitting on top of the step. Another one, darker and sharper, has rolled into the corner. There is a whole heap of pieces lying lifelessly at his feet, and he knows that the corridors must be filled with them also.

It hurts. He doesn’t know how it can hurt so much when there is nothing left of him in him. What is it that is still hurting? What is it that is bleeding so shamelessly, profusely, everywhere around him? Where is this endless ache coming from – when he has lost everything, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, left?

“I married her because I loved her.”

Spock doesn’t need to hear that. He didn’t think it could be any worse, but now that he knows that even his father managed to tell his mother how he felt, Spock is left even more alone than after having lost everything. All his life he had been ashamed of his feelings, unable to fully converse them into logic, and now his father is telling him that it is all right, that Spock shouldn’t even try to, that he is grateful for his son being a child of two worlds – he is telling Spock this now, NOW – when it is already too late, too late for so many things.

He should be consoled by the thought that his parents had at least had this, but instead he feels betrayed and left out, and his guilt is mixing up with anger of the worst kind, and then anger at himself for allowing such thoughts, and he’s drowning in a maelstrom of the darkest emotions that he’s ever experienced to date.

He’s not thinking, but something is, and that something makes him walk over to the transporter control console and reach for the emergency medikit. He snaps it open impatiently, marveling absently at the steadiness in his hands, as he picks up the first sharp object, which happens to be a laser-scalpel, and regards it for a moment with satisfaction. He yanks his blue shirt off then, throwing it away carelessly, raises the scalpel calmly and cuts his left arm from shoulder to wrist in one swift, precise motion.

Vulcan blood, thick and viscous, emerges instantly. It’s hesitant to leave his body, but the cut is bone-deep, and heavy emerald drops start to trickle down to the deck reluctantly, one by one. Spock listens to them falling and imagines they are tears, tears that for some reason his eyes refuse to shed.

There are blood-tears for Amanda, light and transparent; there are some for Christopher, full and swift; there must be three thousand tears for each cadet of the graduating class, three thousand young men and women who will never return to their dorms and classrooms. There must be a sparkly one for Gaila; one for every living Vulcan who has lost their bondmate and for all those who will not survive it; for his father. Spock isn’t sure that there is enough blood in him to cry for all the six billion Vulcans, but he cries for the beautiful city of Shi’Kahr where he grew up, for his favorite meditation spot up on the old watchtower, for the communal fountain on the ancient square, for his mother’s rose garden.

The dark pool at his feet grows, and his head feels suddenly lighter and clearer. Spock nearly sways at the force of his excitement, because he’s living through a moment of perfect clarity, and he knows precisely what he has to do. He closes the cut with a dermal regenerator haphazardly, puts his shirt back on and goes to the bridge.

He ignores the way Kirk is looking at him, ignores the way they are all staring. He doesn’t even wonder what it is they are seeing – he doesn’t care. He says all the right things to convince them, because while Kirk is probably a lousy student, he’s a superb teacher, and Spock uses the newly acquired knowledge to make certain that emotional manipulation works both ways.

It’s a curious sensation to be kissing Nyota freely, in the middle of the room full of people, and not
care— not care the tiniest bit for propriety or consequences or, in point of fact, anything at all, and just do what he wants to do. He kisses her softly, gently, in apology and goodbye, as if she’s an embodiment of every good emotion he’s ever felt, of every moment of bliss and happiness he has been fortunate enough to experience.

He promises her to be back, because that’s what she wants to hear. He knows he won’t be true to his word. Not this time.

He and Kirk fight alongside each other seamlessly as if they have been training in tandem for years. Spock spares a nanosecond to be surprised at that, but he acknowledges on the periphery of his mind that it’s a pleasant feeling. He’s grateful that his last interaction with Kirk will be an agreeable one. Spock regrets for a fleeting moment that he won’t have the chance to study James Kirk more closely. This human has been a catalyst of Spock’s downfall, and yet right now he’s protecting Spock’s back with diligence of a blood brother.

And then the circle is completed, and everything starts making sense.

“It appears you have been keeping important information from me.”

But it doesn’t really matter. So what if this whole catastrophe has started with some other version of himself? It only means that there are a number of realities or universes containing a Spock in them, and in each and every one of them he is as flawed as he is in this one.

“You’ll be able to fly this thing, right?”

“Something tells me I already have.”

Kirk’s eyes are bright and magnetic, and now that there is no cruel intent to hurt in them directed at him, Spock suddenly knows why people are so easily drawn to this human. He wonders for a split second if there is a universe within the conceivable spectrum where he and Kirk have met under some set of circumstances that allowed them to become something meaningful to each other, something other than rivals. Friends?

“Good luck.”

Kirk turns to go and Spock has to stop him, because this is it for him, and he won’t get another chance. Suddenly, oh so suddenly, he wants to live.

“Jim.”

There is impatience in the way Kirk turns around, but Spock needs him to listen.

“The statistical likelihood that our plan will succeed is less than four point three percent.”

“It’ll work.”

You need to listen for once in your life. Please.

“In the event that I do not return, please tell Lieutenant Uhura—”

—that I am sorry I lied to her.

“Spock.” The way Kirk says his name, soft and urgent, stops the words in his throat. “It’ll work.”

Spock knows Kirk’s saying this to both of them, and he knows why. There is too much at stake to entertain the possibility of failure. It is a peculiar quirk in human logic, which, for the moment, Spock
decides to adopt.

He has calculated it all so precisely. Going to warp, taking the *Narada* further from the planet, taking Christopher and Kirk closer to the *Enterprise*. There’s only one thing that goes wrong with his perfect plan.

He hasn’t expected to be saved.

Ever since he realized that the only way to make certain Nero would not be able to evade a ram attack was to stay on board till the end, he has been feeling perfect calmness, almost bliss. In one act, the last act of his life, he aimed to correct at least some of the wrong he had done and avenge what he couldn’t. That was the only thing that allowed him to function through the turmoil he’d been going through. It was a perfect plan, but someone – Nyota, Sulu, Scott, Chekov, or maybe even all of them – was faster than he was. They almost don’t snatch him out in time, but at the end, they manage it.

And now he doesn’t know what to do with the life he hadn’t planned on living.

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There’s an ensign hovering uncertainly at his elbow, and Spock suddenly remembers. Now that the collective breath of relief is taken, it’s time to return back to reality, and in this reality, he is no longer a member of this crew. He had been relieved and has no right to be on the bridge anymore. Spock spares a glance at Kirk, who’s talking to Starfleet Command on a private channel, and at Nyota, who seems to be busy transmitting their logs. With no one looking at him, Spock stands up, nods to the nervous ensign, and leaves the bridge.

Despite the short distance, without a warp core, it will take them approximately two days to reach Earth, provided Starfleet doesn’t send someone to get them. Considering the current disposition of the fleet, it seems unlikely.

Spock heads toward Med Bay almost on autopilot. He feels physically and emotionally enervated, and he strives for a moment of tranquility. He knows he won’t be able to pick up the pieces of his life that had come to an end with the destruction of Vulcan, but he wants to see Christopher.

He finds his way to the captain’s side with surprising ease. Pike’s bed is in a private booth, and Spock slides behind the curtain quietly, either unnoticed or ignored by the medical personnel.

Pike is sleeping. There is a cocoon of medical equipment surrounding him, and Spock stills, struck by the sight. Pike looks small and so very, very fragile. Spock glances up at the monitor, but although he would normally be able to read it, right now he can’t concentrate on the data long enough to interpret it. He steps closer and cautiously reaches for Pike’s hand. It’s surprisingly – frighteningly – light, the skin thin and translucent. Spock holds it carefully, hardly daring a feather-light stroke.

“Sir, may I ask what you’re doing here?”

Spock very nearly winces, checking himself at the last moment. He releases Pike’s hand slowly and turns to look at a young woman, whose ash-blond hair and bright blue eyes together with her white uniform create an impression of walking crispness. Her expression softens, as she catches sight of Spock’s face.

“Captain Pike will be all right, Commander,” she says quietly. “The damage was severe, but not permanent.”
“That is gratifying to hear,” Spock says, his own voice sounding far away and devoid of any inflection. “Nurse –?”

“Christine Chapel,” she finishes and blushes for some reason. “Please, sir. You shouldn’t be here.”

With one last glance at Pike’s peaceful face, Spock follows her out obediently. A thought that’s been lying dormant at the back of his mind suddenly flares to the front of it.

“The Vulcan children,” he says. “Do you know where they are?”

Nurse Chapel’s face falls. She nods at him, looking extremely disconcerted. “Yes, sir. We’ve put them in rec room four for now, but I’m not sure what we can do for them.”

“They are disturbed?” Spock deduces.

The nurse nods miserably. “Very much so, sir. We only have one counselor on board, and so far what she’s been doing isn’t helping.”

“Perhaps the Council members could be of assistance?” Spock asks. He doesn’t believe they would consider the task beneath them under the circumstances.

For some reason, however, his suggestion only makes the nurse look more despondent. “They are... They are not well, Mr. Spock,” she says quietly, as if afraid it would insult him.

“Specify ‘not well.’”

“Well...” She blushes and looks away. “They were in severe pain when... when—”

“When Vulcan was destroyed,” Spock supplies evenly.

“Yes, sir,” she whispers. “We had to sedate them. Your father and T’Mel were the only ones who managed to control it, but T’Mel got... emotional. She was too agitated to meditate or rest, and we had to give her a sedative as well.”

“My father?” Spock asks quietly.

Nurse Chapel chances a glance at him, looking every bit as awkward as in her view he must be feeling.

“He seemed... disturbed, too, but better than T’Mel. He is in your quarters now, resting.”

“I see,” Spock says. “Would you please take me to the children?”

“You think you can help?” Her face brightens up with hope.

“I am uncertain as of yet, Nurse.”

“Oh.” She nods, biting her lip. “Okay.”

He follows her across Med Bay and into the rec room, evidently chosen for its proximity to the medical facilities. Spock enters and freezes in the doorway instantly. He doesn’t know if he has been expecting anything in particular, but in any case, it hasn’t been this.

The children are quiet. There are fifty-two of them, aged from six to fourteen. They are all sitting primly in their chairs, and almost all of them are crying – some quietly, the youngest ones sobbing lightly. Some are holding their heads in their hands and rocking from side to side.
“We’d give them something for the pain,” Nurse Chapel whispers, “but according to our scanners, they shouldn’t be in any.”

Of course, Spock thinks blandly. No tricorder has been invented that would register this pain. A race of telepaths, wiped out of existence. Children who must assimilate the death of their world while struggling with the physical pain of the torn bonds to their parents and betrothed. They are young and therefore resilient. But that doesn’t mean they don’t require help.

As Spock’s eyes sweep over the room, a boy – one of the eldest by the looks of it – rises to his feet and approaches Spock slowly. Silent tears are streaming down his face, but his expression is calm, as if he doesn’t even know he is crying.

“Greetings,” the boy says in a clear, even voice, bowing to Spock slightly. “I am Temak cha-Suban. I am the class leader. I apologize for the display of emotion, but we are” – he pauses, as if reluctant to use the word – “unable to cease it.”

“I am Spock cha-Sarek,” Spock says, with a light bow of his own. “There is no need to apologize, Temak. The cause for the release of emotion is sufficient. I assume you have been informed of what has transpired.”

“We have.” Temak nods, glancing briefly at his classmates. “We have also been informed that our teachers who were transported with us have taken ill. We require direction,” the boy continues levelly, then suddenly winces, pressing his fingers to his forehead. “We are unable to control the pain,” he says, his voice now different – the agonized voice of a small child.

Spock looks at him, thinking of the dull pain at the back of his own head. The same pain that at this very moment is tormenting every single Vulcan alive, leaving adults incapacitated and children suffering. Spock doesn’t know why he isn’t rolling on the deck in agony, but he suspects there may be more to that mystery than his dual heritage. Right now, however, he has to discover at least the partial answer to this question if he is to be of any help to these children.

Suddenly an idea flickers in his mind. “Temak,” Spock asks slowly, “what is the focus of your studies?”

The boy blinks. “Biological research. Genetics.”

“Impressive,” Spock says. He thinks quickly. “If Nurse Chapel” – he nods sideways at the young woman – “and I were to have a child, could you tell me the likelihood of it being male or female and its most probable appearance?”

The boy blinks again while Chapel inhales sharply. Temak looks between the two of them, a slight frown creasing his forehead. “I would require more precise information on your genetic makeup,” he says seriously, sounding somehow calmer.

“I am half-human,” Spock says, and gently points him toward a computer console. “You can use this terminal to access my bio file, as well as Ms. Chapel’s. I would require at least a seventy percent of positive probability on your calculations. How much time do you require?”

Temak looks pensive. “Four hours?”

“You have two,” Spock says.

The boy straightens up so abruptly that he nearly appears to jump. He nods curtly at the grown-ups and hurries over to the computer.
“Mr. Spock, I don’t understand,” Chapel says hesitantly. She looks flushed.

Spock isn’t listening. He observes the look of total concentration on Temak’s face and realizes he’s hit the right chord. Ignoring the bewildered nurse for the moment, Spock reaches for the intercom.

“Spock to Uhura.”

“Uhura here,” she sounds worried. “Spock, is everything all right?”

“No,” Spock says. “I require your assistance.”

“Anything.”

“I need every available science officer not currently engaged in repairs down in recreation room four.” He glances over the room again, realizing there aren’t nearly enough computer terminals. “Tell them to bring PADDs.”

“Uh…” She pauses for a second, clearly put off by the unexpected request, but recovers quickly. “Sure thing, Commander. Will do.”

Spock opens his mouth to correct her, as he is no longer in a position of command here, but thinks better of it. “Thank you. Spock out.”

He turns to find Nurse Chapel covertly scanning Temak. She flashes a smile at Spock.

“His vitals are stabilizing!” she exclaims in excited whisper. “What a brilliant solution, Mr. Spock! All we have to do is to keep them busy, and—”

“Not just busy.” Spock shakes his head minutely. “We need to keep their minds focused at all times, giving them one intellectually stimulating and consuming assignment after another, and monitor them closely. It is a daunting task when applied to Vulcan children, Nurse. Our education system is—was what humans would call ‘severe.’”

Nurse Chapel’s expression sobers. “How long will we have to do this?”

Spock looks over the room full of distressed children.

“Until we find a better solution.”

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Nyota shows up with the science staff, holding a PADD of her own.

“I’m off duty,” she says with a mild shrug. “Communications have been restored and the captain ordered me to rest, so…”

Spock nods at her slightly and proceeds to brief the group of about twenty junior science officers. Each of them will have to take charge of two or three children, Spock muses. He also notes that the people look tired, and frowns slightly. However, the determined air with which they ask questions reassures him in their willingness to be of assistance.

They set to work. Spock is grateful to Nyota for taking it upon herself to remind the officers of the basic cultural specifics of dealing with Vulcans when the need arises. He himself feels it difficult to let his concentration stray too far.
Spock circles the room, monitoring everyone’s progress, helping out whenever necessary. It is very difficult to coax the younger children into focusing on studying at such an inopportune time. Spock speaks to some, gentle but firm, appealing to their logic. He touches them sometimes, lead by an instinct he cannot identify. But be it Vulcan or human or even a universal instinct of being parental, it seems to be working. He knows better than to touch their minds while his own is in total chaos, but he tries to take in as much of their anguish as possible through a simple physical connection, all the while projecting calm and reassurance.

He isn’t certain how much time has elapsed. Once or twice he spots Doctor McCoy hovering around, scanning the children. He even gets a distant impression that the doctor speaks to him, asking him something, but Spock can’t quite make it out for reality or a product of his mind’s projections. The third time McCoy appears, Spock is crouched beside the youngest child of the group, a girl named T’Vin, who looks the most forlorn and scared. Spock is rubbing her back soothingly while exerting gentle but firm insistence that she stays focused on her math.

He lifts his eyes and meets McCoy’s searching gaze aimed at him. Spock raises an eyebrow in silent query, but the doctor merely continues to look at him with a frown. T’Vin asks him something, demanding his attention, and Spock blinks several times, before he can focus on her. Vaguely, he wonders if maybe he should have asked McCoy for a stimulant.

An undetermined amount of time later, Spock straightens up, having just checked Temak’s third assignment. He gives the boy another one, and turns around, meaning to check on T’Vin. His path is suddenly blocked and Spock attempts to walk around the obstacle automatically, without even looking up to determine what it is.

“Whoa,” someone says, and a firm hand clasps Spock’s arm as he stumbles. “Looks like it’s long past time you took a break.”

Spock lifts his eyes finally, locking gazes with Cadet – no, Acting Captain Kirk, who regards him warily.

“Captain,” Spock says flatly, removing his arm from Kirk’s grasp. “Do you require assistance?”

Kirk looks every bit as worn out as everyone else around Spock, but somehow he seems to be handling it better.

“I hate to admit it, because you look about dead on your feet,” Kirk says, “but yeah, I do.”

Spock straightens up, feeling an uncommon ache in his shoulders. “How may I be of service?” Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Nyota watching them and moving closer.

“Starfleet is asking what kind of arrangements they should make to accommodate the…” Kirk glances around the room, fumbling for words. “…survivors.”

Spock frowns. “You will find Ambassador Sarek in my designated quarters,” he says. “As the ranking Vulcan official currently available, he should be able to assist you.”

“That’s just it.” Kirk looks at him, hesitant. “He – your father wouldn’t let us in. He says... He says he won’t let anyone see him while his emotions are in control of him and would like to be left alone with his grief – for our own safety.”

Spock closes his eyes briefly. “I see.”

There is a lull in the conversation, and then Kirk asks, almost pleadingly, “Spock, why don’t you sit down for a moment?”
Spock snaps his eyes open, ignoring Kirk.

“Nyota,” he says quietly, sensing her presence. She steps closer at once. “Contact T’Pol at the Vulcan Embassy and tell her about our... guests.” She nods, sparing a glance at Kirk, while Spock frowns in thought. “There will not be enough Vulcan healers available,” he muses. “And those who have survived might require assistance themselves.”

“What should we do?” Nyota asks gently.

Spock looks at her, fighting to concentrate. Simple thought process should be simpler than this.

“Contact Betazed. We shall require trained psychologists with experience of dealing with severe mental trauma. But—” he stops, a thought suddenly dawning, “—they should not be younger than forty, none of them. It’s very important that they are all forty years old and older.”


Spock looks at him. “Not only. Betazoid telepathy is superior to Vulcan, as it does not require physical contact. However, their natural defense mechanisms are weaker than ours, and Vulcan emotions—” Spock winces at the stab of pain slicing across his forehead. “Vulcan emotions run deeper than those of most humanoid species; they are very strong and overwhelming, for both carriers and recipients. This is why we control them at all times. When unleashed, our emotions are formidable.”

Kirk raises his eyebrows at that but remains silent, for which Spock is grateful. The conversation and the situation are humiliating enough as it is.

“Currently, most of my people are unable to control emotions,” Spock continues, his voice dulled to a monotone. “The telepathic shockwave will not recede for a while. Betazoids have strong empathic abilities. The contact with traumatized Vulcan minds could be highly damaging for young telepaths, whose defenses are still forming.”

Kirk nods at him and turns to Nyota. “Take care of it, please. Make sure they understand the restrictions, but also see that they get that this is an urgent request.”

It takes her a moment to unglue her troubled eyes from Spock and nod at Kirk. “Right away.”

Spock follows her absently with his eyes, his mind curiously void of thought. He realizes belatedly that Kirk is still standing next to him and turns to find the captain watching him.

“Was there anything else, sir?” Spock asks and sees Kirk wince slightly.

“Well, actually...” Kirk pauses, his hand coming up to rub at the back of his neck. “You’ve been on duty for more than forty-eight hours, and I’m guessing awake for much longer.”

Spock awaits the rest of it somewhat numbly. When nothing follows, he frowns impatiently.

“So have you,” he points out.

“Right,” Kirk says, dropping his hands to rest on his hips. He looks up at Spock with a peculiar expression, a mixture of embarrassment and determination. “But I haven’t... I mean it must have been —” he blushes “—it was more difficult for you than it was for me.”

Spock actually sighs, his frustration growing. “Captain. You have already proved me emotionally compromised once recently. Is it really necessary to persist in doing so while I no longer pose a claim
on your authority?”

Kirk’s eyes widen. “Jesus, Spock. I only—”

“If you feel that a further demonstration of my incompetence is in order to facilitate your assumption of your new position, then by all means proceed. I am in no condition to offer you resistance. All I’m asking is – should you feel charitable enough to grant me a small measure of leniency – to expedite your action so that I could return to my own devices.”

He finds Kirk staring at him, wide-eyed, mouth hanging slightly open. Spock waits calmly. It takes a long moment for Kirk to finally move. He runs a hand over his face, his head dipping down slightly.

“Commander, I was about to suggest you stay off your feet for a while,” Kirk says very quietly, his hand still pressed against his eyes. “Just so you don’t collapse, you know?” He looks up at Spock wearily. “But I think the best thing I can do right now is leave you alone.”

Before Spock can reply, Kirk moves away, walking over to Doctor McCoy, who’s busy scanning one of the children.

“Bones, keep an eye on the commander for me, will you?” Spock hears Kirk say.

“Dammit, Jim can’t you see I’m busy?” McCoy snaps, not lifting his eyes off his scanner. “I tried to talk him into a break, but he couldn’t bother to answer. I’ve got a Med Bay full of people in pain, so I really don’t have time for pointy-eared bastards too stubborn to—”

Spock doesn’t hear the end of the phrase for the mad pounding of blood in his ears. He doesn’t know he’s been on the move, either, up until he feels someone’s hands grip his arms tightly and someone’s body is in his way, preventing him from reaching the doctor.

“Spock, no!” Kirk yells in his face, struggling against him in earnest. “He didn’t mean that – I swear, he didn’t mean that!”

Spock pushes forward with blind determination and Kirk’s fingers dig deeper into his flesh, worrying the cut he’d made earlier. Spock stops short, suddenly dizzy and disoriented.

“I really didn’t mean that,” McCoy affirms with wide eyes, his face chalk-white and taut.

Kirk doesn’t remove his hands, and his eyes never leave Spock’s face as he snaps over his shoulder, “Yeah, well, maybe it’s a good idea to hold your tongue for once, Bones.”

“Like you’re the one to talk,” McCoy shoots back.

Spock slumps suddenly, drained and unable to withstand any of it for another moment. But if he is going to collapse, it’s not going to be in front of them. He has provided enough entertainment already.

“Let me go, Captain,” he says quietly. “I will not attack the doctor. I apologize for my – for the... I apologize.”

Kirk’s hands unclench very slowly, sliding down Spock’s arms numbly.

“Spock.” Kirk’s whisper is almost a rasp.

Spock turns abruptly on his heel and stalks out of the room.
The ironic thing is that he doesn’t have a place to go to. His quarters are currently occupied by Sarek. It’s not that there isn’t enough space for both of them, but Spock doubts sincerely that either of them could tolerate the other’s presence at the moment. He is forbidden to sit at Pike’s bedside, the only place that so far has granted him any shred of peace. The ship is a busy hive of activity with all the ongoing repairs, and all Spock wants is to find a dark hole somewhere, crawl up into it, and stop existing.

How Nyota manages to find him amidst his aimless wanderings, Spock will never know. Without saying a word, she takes his hand and tugs him after her. Spock follows her obediently. He’s past the point of thinking.

The lights in her quarters are dimmed when they enter. Nyota quickly keys the environmental controls to a higher temperature, and Spock nearly moans at the sudden rush of heat enveloping him. He hadn’t noticed how cold the rest of the ship has been.

Nyota steers him toward the bed and undresses him quickly and efficiently, her gestures soothing and calm and so very feminine that Spock accepts them without a hint of resistance. He doesn’t question it when she snuggles against him under the sheets, warm and soft like some sweet balm. He closes his eyes the rest of the way and slips into unconsciousness.

He wakes up to the sound of crying. It’s muffled, as if Nyota’s trying to do her absolute best to hide it from him, but her whole body, trapped half-beneath him, is trembling with sobs she unsuccessfully tries to stifle. He shifts a little off of her, and knowing he’s awake crushes the last bits of her resolve. Her tears are soaking the pillow and the sheets, and the whine she makes is that of a mortally wounded she-wolf, not a human.

“Not coming back...” Her voice is unrecognizably broken and thick. “None of them... Simone, Peter, Gaila... Never... How can I? Why me?”

Spock can’t stand it, has to stop it, not knowing why but knowing he must or there will be no coming back for Nyota, either. He kisses her, and she screams and bites him and she means it; the smell of blood makes him a little dizzy, too. He moves to cover her and she digs her nails into the smooth skin of his back, breaking it as her sharp teeth sink into his shoulder. Her scream is muffled by his flesh.

There is a primal, normally dormant part of him that responds to this, and he lets it take the reins for a moment. There is no finesse in the way he flips her over, pressing her face-down into the mattress, subduing her resistance. She tries to break free halfheartedly, crying worse than before as if his actions have ruined the last of her restraint – and maybe they have. She’s puts up little resistance but doesn’t cooperate either, making him work for it, and when he enters her she starts sobbing uncontrollably, a heavy wheeze soaking the sound of her breath.

He doesn’t allow her a moment to recover because neither of them can afford it. He sets a cruel, punishing pace, the only one that can get through to her – the one that his body, too, is demanding. She is rigid and unyielding for a maddening, angry eternity, and then something snaps within her, as if a tightly pulled string is cut loose, and she shakes beneath him and spreads her legs a little wider. He doesn’t slow down, but she turns her head just enough to get the words out.

“Harder.” She doesn’t sound like herself yet, but she sounds alive again, and he obliges through the haze of his exhaustion and elation, even as she goes on demanding, “Harder, Spock. God. Please. Harder. Harder. I know you can.”
It doesn’t take long after that for either of them.

Spock collapses on top of her, and Nyota lets out a small groan at having the wind pushed out of her.

“Forgive me,” Spock breathes, sliding off. There are black dots all over his field of vision, and his chest smarts as if burned.

He doesn’t know what he’s apologizing for – crushing her with his weight when he’s too tired to support himself even while lying down, or for whatever has just happened between them. Maybe it’s for the loss she has suffered, the loss that filled her with survivor’s guilt to an extent that was detrimental. For all the wrongs he couldn’t right.

“No,” Nyota whispers, turning over and shifting closer to him. “No, you’re good.” She presses her lips softly to the bite mark she left earlier. It still stings. She licks it soothingly. “I’m sorry, too. I wish I could...”

But she can’t, and he can’t, either. They are both powerless to help all those who are gone, or even each other. For Nyota, their closeness only serves to pull her back into the world of living – it hurts, and it should. For Spock, it fails to do even that, but it reminds him. There are still people out there, like Nyota, who need him to take care of them, however little he can offer.

Perhaps it is enough.

Three days after the Enterprise returned to Earth, Spock climbs up the tall steps of Starfleet Medical, striding into the wide salad-green halls. The turbolift takes him to the twenty-sixth floor, designated for intensive care. The coloring here is lighter, though still somewhat assaulting to the eye.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asks him politely.

“Yes. I am here to inquire upon the status of Captain Christopher Pike.”

The woman gives him a careful exploratory look, eyes lingering on Spock’s insignia.

“Are you family?” she asks dubiously.

“I—” he begins, then stops. “No. I am a colleague.”

She purses her lips, giving away her answer before she speaks.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we’re not allowed to disclose any information to anyone other than family members or high ranking Starfleet officials.”

“Please,” Spock says, a heightened edge worrying his tone. “I am not seeking into interfering with his treatment. I merely wish to ascertain his status.”

“I’m sorry, sir. You’ll have to direct your inquiry to Starfleet Command.”

Spock grits his teeth. He has spent the last three days talking to various officers at Starfleet Command in the longest debriefing he has survived to date. The exchange of information was very much one-sided.

“Could you at least tell me if he is still in danger?” he asks quietly. “Please.”

She opens her mouth, and Spock can tell it’s to repeat that she’s sorry, but then somebody calls out to him.
"Spock."

Spock turns around to see McCoy standing in the corridor to his left. The doctor’s wearing a medical robe and a rather wary expression.

"Come with me," McCoy says. "I can fill you in."

The receptionist instantly protests. "Doctor! You can’t disclose medical information to unauthorized personnel."

McCoy silences her with a glare. "As one of Captain Pike’s attending physicians, I make the decisions on whom I can disclose this information to, thank you, Nurse." He turns his frown on Spock and repeats, "Come with me."

Spock doesn’t wait for another invitation and follows McCoy, feeling the disapproving stare of the receptionist burning between his shoulder blades. McCoy leads him into his office – shared with other doctors, from the looks of it – and closes the door.

"He’s out of the woods," he says without preamble, watching Spock closely.

Spock folds his arms behind his back, stifling a sigh of relief. "Would you care to be more specific?"

McCoy sighs. "We’ve stopped the spread of the paralysis; his life is no longer in danger. What’s tricky is restoring the damage. The nerve endings can be regrown, but it’ll take a long time – probably eight months to a year. As for his coordination center, we have to put him into a medically induced coma to allow his brain to heal naturally as much as possible before we take over."

"Is it safe?" Spock asks.

"Yes." McCoy nods. "But we’ll have to do this as soon as possible not to lose our window."

"How long is the process going to take?"

The doctor shrugs. "Twelve days at least; maybe more."

"Is he conscious now?"

McCoy looks at him, eyes piercing. "He is."

"Can I—" Spock starts, then cuts himself short. McCoy has done too much for him already. "Thank you, Doctor." He turns to leave.

"Oh, for the love of me," McCoy mutters, grabbing a hold of Spock’s sleeve to stop him. "You wanna see him?"

Spock turns back, but he can do little aside from look into the man’s eyes. He doesn’t know what shows in his own, but McCoy’s expression softens, almost imperceptibly.

"Follow me," he says. "You’ll have about five minutes, and I can’t let you in there alone."

"Thank you, Doctor," Spock repeats, quiet and grateful.

McCoy shows him to the ward, entering behind Spock and proceeding to mark the new readings of the biomonitors on his PADD. Spock’s eyes are glued to the man half-lying on the bed. He feels suddenly light-headed.
“Spock!” Pike’s face splits into a grin. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

He stretches a hand in Spock’s direction, and Spock finds himself walking toward the bed and taking it in both his own before he can even think about it. He spares a glance at McCoy, who’s very carefully not watching them.

“Hey,” Pike says softly. “I’ve been worried about you. How are you doing?”

Spock pauses, slightly drunk on the feel of Christopher – alive, smiling, going to be all right – pulsing between his hands.

“I broke your ship,” Spock says unexpectedly.

Pike chuckles. “So I heard. I also heard you weren’t the one who gave the order.”

“Yes.” Spock looks down for a moment. “Captain Kirk has been... in a haste to get back to Earth.”

Pike grins. “I heard about that, too.”

“I found his actions completely appropriate,” Spock says. “As far as I am aware, so does Starfleet Command. He is to be commended. He is going to—”

“Spock.” Pike interrupts him, his voice still gentle, but firm. “I didn’t ask you about Jim or the ship, I’ve got plenty of people telling me about that. I asked about you. How are you doing?”

Spock allows the mild caress Pike’s fingers tread on the soft underside of his wrist.

“I am... coping. Captain.” He doesn’t know what else to say.

Pike sighs, watching him. When he speaks, his voice is very quiet; Spock has to strain to hear.

“You don’t know what it does to me – knowing that you’re all alone.”

Spock closes his eyes briefly as a wave of overwhelming concern rises from their connected hands and washes over him. At this moment, nothing else exists for him; even McCoy’s presence is tuned out.

“You should not be worrying about me, Christopher,” Spock says softly; he leans in closer to Pike, just a little. “You should focus on getting better.”

“I am getting better, courtesy of the good doctor here and his colleagues,” Pike says, with a slight nod at McCoy. “And I can tell by the way he grunts that he’s impatient to get you out of here so that I could go into some beauty sleep or something.”

Spock looks at McCoy, who looks back at him pointedly.

“Before you go” – Pike draws Spock’s attention back to himself – “let me say this. You’ve got to be very, very careful now, Spock. I talked to a number of people from Starfleet Command in the last two days, and I didn’t like the questions they asked, not one bit.”

“I do not understand.” Spock tilts his head, confused.

“Spock.” Pike’s gaze turns dead serious. “Starfleet has just lost the homeworld of one of the founding members of the Federation. Nero or no Nero, they’ll be looking for someone to blame for this.”
Spock frowns. “That does not seem logical.”

Pike purses his lips. “It never does. Just watch your step, okay? I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Then it is fortunate that I am not prone to human superstition,” Spock says smoothly.

“Gentlemen.” McCoy is no longer pretending to ignore them. “I hate to break this up, but—”

“That’s all right,” Pike says, his eyes never leaving Spock’s face. “I’m happy you dropped by, Spock. You know I—”

“I know,” Spock interrupts quickly. “Get well, Captain.”

He manages to catch a glimpse of Pike’s fond, tired smile before McCoy herds him into the corridor. They remain silent for a moment, until Spock looks up to find himself an object of scrutiny.

“You seem to have a question for me, Doctor.”

McCoy purses his lips, glancing away for a moment. “Yeah, I do, but it’s the kind that’ll likely get me punched in the face, so I’d rather not ask.” He looks at Spock sourly. “I’m not that interested in whether you sleep around as much as Jim does, anyway.”

“That is fortunate,” Spock says, voice rather curt, “as I would not have been inclined to indulge you in this particular line of questioning.”

“I had a feeling. At least you seem to have better luck. And listen.” McCoy lowers his voice. “About what happened on the ship – I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Spock clasps his hands behind his back. “Do not concern yourself, Doctor. I believe it is safe to assume that the whole crew has been under severe stress.”

“Still,” McCoy insists. “I feel like an asshole.”

“That is entirely your choice.”

McCoy grits his teeth. “Dammit. This reminds me why I didn’t like you in the first place.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Doctor, I appreciate what you have just done for me. Even more so since you had to overcome your antipathy toward me to do it.”

“Well, you can’t maroon my best friend on some goddamn ice planet and then expect me to like you,” McCoy grunts. “Though to be honest, Jim can drive just about anybody up the wall, so I can’t really blame you for that one, either.”

Spock regards him with a slightest twitch of curiosity. “That is probably the most peculiar example of human logic that I have heard to date.”

McCoy scowls at him. “Back on the Enterprise, with those children, you showed the most peculiar example of Vulcan compassion,” he retorts. “So I guess we’re even.”

“That was not compassion,” Spock corrects, “merely common necessity. Logic, Doctor.”

“Really?” McCoy folds his arms across his chest, tilting his head slightly in challenge. “And just now, with Captain Pike – was that logic, too?”

Spock looks away and doesn’t answer.

In the pause that follows, a thought suddenly occurs to Spock. “How is Mr. Kirk?”

McCoy blinks and then his eyes narrow. “Not going to be called ‘Mister’ for much longer, if what I hear is true. Why?”

Spock looks at him, mildly perplexed. “I confess I do not know the reason for my query. I was merely... interested to learn how he was faring.”

“Well, we’ve all been pretty much raked over the coals on the debriefing.” McCoy shrugs. “And it hasn’t been easy – returning to the Academy, what with all the empty dorms. Jim had a lot of friends there.”

“And you?”

McCoy’s smile is both ironic and sad. “I’m used to the feeling of losing everything, so I don’t let myself become attached to people.”

“Save for Jim,” Spock notes.

McCoy looks him in the eye, dead on. “Save for Jim. He has a way of getting under your skin when you’re least expecting it.”

“Is that a threat, Doctor?”

McCoy regards him coolly. “A warning.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “What made you feel one is warranted?”

McCoy narrows his eyes and smirks. “Jim’s been asking people about you, too.”

Oh.

It’s a peculiar feeling that Spock suddenly becomes vaguely aware of. Leonard McCoy is a virtual stranger to him – even more so, a stranger who actively dislikes him. And yet there is a sense of strange connection between them, a connection shared with everyone who has been aboard the Enterprise during the crisis. Most of them didn’t know each other before, but Spock feels illogically closer to these people than to some of his lifetime acquaintances. They still don’t know each other, but there is a peculiar sense of camaraderie between them, as if they share some kind of special knowledge that allows them to pick each other in any crowd.

It definitely derives from having been not only through a life-and-death, but also through an end-of-the-world experience. This is probably why McCoy has helped him in the first place. This is probably also why they are having a decidedly personal conversation now, as if the spell of the trust they gained in the face of certain death is still hovering upon them.

“Listen, I should be going,” McCoy says. “I don’t know how long it’ll take them to replace me as one of Pike’s physicians, but as long as I’m in the know, I’ll keep in touch in case of any changes.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Spock says, feeling a most uncharacteristic urge to shake the man’s hand. “Good day.”

McCoy simply nods in acknowledgment.
As Earth is understandably impatient to learn the name of the man who saved the planet, Starfleet’s specially convened board of inquiry announces its decision to promote James Tiberius Kirk to captain with full privileges and responsibilities of this rank within a week. It is also announced that as soon as the repairs on the Enterprise will be completed, Captain Kirk will assume command of the ship, thus solidifying his field promotion.

The announcement of Pike’s promotion to admiral is made during the next news cycle. Curiously, it is released exactly one hour after the former captain of the Enterprise is put into the medically induced coma.

Confirmations follow for the Enterprise crisis bridge crew to retain their positions; all field promotions are confirmed and become permanent. Leonard McCoy is officially appointed Chief Medical Officer, and Montgomery Scott becomes the Chief Engineering Officer, despite Admiral Archer’s pointed abstention during the vote.

Lieutenant Nyota Uhura receives a special commendation from the Vulcan High Council for rescuing fifty-two children and seven professors from a Vulcan school at the planet’s last moments. Along with the rest of the bridge crew, she also receives a commendation from Starfleet Command.

The promotions are already in effect, but the official ceremony is upheld until the Enterprise is fully repaired and ready for its first five-year voyage. After the fanfares have quieted somewhat, the air around Starfleet Headquarters fills with the nervous odor of expectation.

The ongoing inspection of the Enterprise logs, as well as the rescued logs of the other seven ships sent to Vulcan, raises a lot of questions. For instance, how it was possible for such a huge and well-armed vessel to breach into the very heart of the Federation defense perimeter and not be spotted or stopped. How it was possible that so many qualified officers made incorrect decisions that had led to a catastrophe. And finally, who was responsible for Starfleet’s blatant failure to fulfill its first sacred duty: protect the Federation.

“All rise in respect to the board,” Admiral Fitzpatrick intones gravely before glancing to his PADD. “Commander Spock, the charges against you are as follows: That you have willingly and knowingly abandoned your post at a critical moment to run a personal errand; that you have willingly and knowingly committed a breach of security protocol 49-14-09 regarding the treatment of prisoners, thus endangering the life of a Starfleet officer; that you have willingly and knowingly disobeyed a direct order from your commanding officer then-Captain Pike and left him in the hands of a war criminal Nero, thus facilitating him obtaining access to Starfleet defense codes protecting Earth; that you have willingly and knowingly breached Starfleet regulation 619 regarding being in command while emotionally compromised; that you have physically attacked another Starfleet officer, causing him trauma severe enough to qualify as attempted murder.”

Fitzpatrick stops reading from his PADD and looks up to fix Spock with a stern gaze. Spock remains motionless and quiet; the admiral’s words seemingly have no effect on him.

“In view of the serious nature and amount of charges,” the admiral continues smoothly, “there will be no preliminary hearing to resolve this case. Commander Spock, you are hereby taken under arrest. The first round of your court-martial will begin in two days. You are free to seek the assistance of the legal counsel and to be represented by the said counsel during the court-martial.” The admiral
reaches to tap at the naval bell, producing a soft ring. “This session is adjourned.”

Starfleet Headquarters share a lot of facilities with the Academy, and huge hearing halls are some of them. It’s a peculiar experience, Spock thinks, to be escorted under guard along the corridors he used to walk freely as a professor, and before that as a cadet, not so very different from those young men and women who now stare at him as he passes with wide eyes. Some of them were probably part of his classes at one time or the other, Spock thinks, but he’s looking straight ahead, chin tilted up, not making eye contact with anyone. Only when he’s left alone in the holding cell with the shimmering veil of forcefield humming softly behind his back does he allow his body to lose some of the rigidity it has adopted and some color to seep onto his cheeks.

Spock closes his eyes, sitting on the narrow bunk and slumping against the wall. His eyes feel hot and moist but he wills the tears away, detesting his own weakness.

He doesn’t know what he has been expecting. He was blatantly honest during the debriefing, sparing himself nothing, and he should have known better than anyone what the logical outcome of his testimony would be. He should have been prepared for the harshness of the charges. They are, in fact, significantly milder than he deserves.

The lights outside his cell go out, indicating the end of the day. In the dirty grey mix that passes as darkness here, penetrated only by the periodical glimmer running across the forcefield, Spock pulls his feet onto the bunk and hugs his ankles, pressing his forehead to his folded knees.

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Nyota’s face looks drawn and her big, beautiful eyes are red and puffed, as if she’s been crying.

“They told me you waived counsel,” she says by way of greeting.

“Correct.” Spock inclines his head.

“Why?” She exhales loudly. “Spock, this is all so unfair! You have to find someone to help you fight.”

“I do not require assistance,” Spock tells her calmly, “as I do not intend to fight. The charges are just.”

“What?” She stares at him incredulously. “How can you say that? Spock, without you, we never would have found the Red Matter or Captain Pike. None of us, not even Kirk, would have been able to pilot that ship – and then the drill wouldn’t have been destroyed – Earth would have been gone!”

Her voice rises up steadily. “Spock – for God’s sake – it was you who got rid of Nero! What the hell Starfleet Command is thinking I have no idea!”

“You seem to have a perverse perception of the events,” Spock says, frowning. “Had it not been for me, then-Cadet Kirk’s efforts to go after Nero would not have been hindered. The Narada would not have even reached Earth.”

“You don’t know that!” she explodes. “And as far as I remember, Kirk wanted to go after Nero guns blazing – which would only have led to the Narada destroying us on sight – provided we’d even had caught up with them!”

“Nyota.” Spock raises a hand with a light wince. “This discussion is hypothetical, and therefore pointless. What is, is. We cannot change what has already transpired. My actions had nearly caused the death of James Kirk twice. As captain of the Enterprise, I failed to make a correct command
decision. I do not intend to dispute this.”

She closes her eyes and actually groans in exasperation. “Spock, this isn’t fair and you damn well
know it. Why do you insist on taking the blame for something that couldn’t possibly have been your
fault? Nero’s the only guilty party here.”

“That is not entirely true,” Spock says flatly. “Starfleet definitely bears responsibility for allowing
Nero to get this far as to destroy a planet and threaten another one.”

“Sure,” she snaps bitterly. “Starfleet had twenty-five years to hunt Nero down – and suddenly it’s
your fault they haven’t?”

“Your argument is illogical,” Spock says, and catching a glimpse of a security guard, who comes to
collect Nyota, adds, “And I believe the time for your visit is over.”

“Please reconsider taking counsel,” she begs. “It’s your right and it’s only reasonable.”

“Lieutenant,” the guard addresses her firmly.

“I’m coming,” she snaps. “Spock...”

But he shrinks into the shelter of his cell, refusing to give her an answer he knows she doesn’t want
to hear.

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Three rings of the symbolic naval bell sound sweetly in the silence of the hall.

“This court is now in session,” Admiral Fitzpatrick announces evenly. “Commander Spock, as you
have waived the services of counsel, I will address you directly. This board consists of myself as
chairman, Admiral James Komack, and Admiral Harry Morrow. The prosecuting attorney is
Lieutenant Areel Shaw. Commander Spock, if you have reasons to believe that any member of this
board is prone to pass prejudiced judgment against you, you are free to challenge.”

Spock looks over the board. “I have no objections, sir.” Nor do I care.

“I do.”

Spock turns his head, along with everyone else present, toward the speaker, whose appearance in the
sealed hall has come unnoticed.

James Kirk is marching down the aisle confidently in his brand new dress uniform, staring up at the
board in quiet but definite challenge. Spock has a feeling of being wide awake for the first time in
days spent in the haze of grief and apathy. But this isn’t a nice wake-up call, not by far.

“Captain Kirk, this is a closed hearing,” Fitzpatrick tells him, frowning. His disapproval of Kirk’s
promotion is implicit from the slight pause he’s given to his title.

“Not to the members of the board, it isn’t,” Kirk says, undeterred, coming to stand next to Spock, still
making no acknowledgment of his presence. “I am here as Commander Spock’s legal counsel.”

“Commander Spock has waived counsel,” Komack reminds Kirk coldly.

“As his commanding officer, I have the right to represent him, should no other counsel be selected or
appointed. I choose to invoke that right, as defined by Starfleet regulation 244, subsection B, paragraph 13.”

It’s not immediately clear what stuns the board more – Kirk’s brazenness or his unexpected knowledge of regulations – but all three admirals gape at him.

“Captain, what are you doing?” Spock whispers in sudden alarm.

Kirk turns toward him at last and grins crookedly. “Stopping you from committing career suicide.”

“By committing your own?” Spock questions, but the human ignores him.

“Kirk, you were his commanding officer for what – half an hour?” Komack tosses off irritably.

Kirk sends him a sweet smile. “The regulations don’t specify the necessary time limit, Admiral. But if you need to refresh your memory, I’m sure the board will be willing to wait.”

Komack looks strangled. Fitzpatrick turns his stormy eyes on Spock.

“Commander?”

Kirk turns to Spock, too, blocking him from the board. “I know you have no reasons to trust me,” he says, very quietly. “But please?”

Spock meets his eyes. He feels so tired. He hasn’t been sleeping much, and the weight of his loss and guilt barely allow him to stand straight, never mind fight with Kirk.

“I accept Captain Kirk as my counsel,” Spock says, beat and indifferent, and feels a light brush against his fingers resting on the desk.

“Thank you,” Kirk whispers, so softly that only Spock can hear him. The warmth from his words and his touch shoots through Spock, making his skin erupt in goose bumps – like he has been standing out in the cold for hours, and suddenly a door opens, letting out a warm draft.

“Very well, Captain Kirk,” Fitzpatrick allows reluctantly. “You may stay.”

“Thank you,” Kirk says, stepping up front while everyone gets seated.

“Lieutenant Shaw, please proceed with the charges.”

The young woman who is acting as the prosecutor rises gracefully to her feet and walks out front as well. She sends a quick, apologetic glance at Kirk as she goes, and he smiles back at her warmly. Spock catalogues the exchange, Doctor McCoy’s words echoing in his mind, as the charges are being read.

Kirk speaks up the moment Shaw finishes.

“First of all, I would like to remove the charges of assault of a Starfleet officer and improper treatment of a prisoner from the list. As I am the officer who supposedly has been harmed by the commander’s actions, it’s my right to press charges against him” – he looks at Fitzpatrick pointedly – “and I never did that. Nor do I intend to.”

“It’s not as simple as that, Kirk,” Komack breaks in. “The breach of the regulations has been committed, whether you choose to accept it or not.”

Kirk pins him down with a glance. “Any assault of a personal nature is defined as such only by the
declaration of the offended party, as determined by regulation 229 of the Starfleet Code.” He tilts his head defiantly. “Incidentally, Admiral, I do not recall being charged with mutiny or assault of a superior officer which might have resulted in a severe mental trauma, given his then-current state. Are we now using double standards in prosecution?”

“I sustained no damage,” Spock says, speaking out of turn and strangely not caring. “And therefore elected not to press charges. I stated in my report that I find your actions logical and justified.”

Kirk gives him a thin smile. “I never hit a man when he was down before, Mr. Spock,” he says. “It might have been logical. But I didn’t care for the experience.”

Spock simply stares at him. All of a sudden he isn’t sure who this man he is seeing is.

Kirk breaks eye contact, returning his attention to the board. “Furthermore, while on Delta Vega, I chose to disregard the computer’s warning and left the escape pod instead of waiting for someone from the outpost to come get me. I did so in violation of Survival protocol 23-11, with which, if you recall, sirs, I have not been charged. In other words, if any ‘endangering’ of my life had taken place, it was solely of my own doing. Commander Spock cannot be held responsible for my actions.”

“Which doesn’t change the fact that his initial order to send you off the ship could not be justified by any means,” Shaw points out.

“It could,” Kirk argues, “if as acting captain, Commander Spock classified me as a mutineer.”

“Commander Spock.” Shaw whirls on him. “Did you give the order because you believed at the time that Acting First Officer Kirk had been guilty of mutiny?”

Kirk nods at him determinedly and instantly, but he’s not Spock’s commanding officer anymore and Spock doesn’t feel himself compelled to obey. He regards Areel Shaw instead. She’s good, Spock has to acknowledge. She didn’t ask him if he believed Kirk’s actions were mutiny now. She said ‘at the time,’ and these three words have rendered any of his current reasoning impotent.

The truth is, he didn’t classify Kirk either way at the time. At the time, he hadn’t been doing much classifying of any kind. He hadn’t been thinking.

“No,” Spock says.

Kirk seems to have anticipated his answer, because he starts talking almost before the word is out of Spock’s mouth.

“I repeatedly and openly disobeyed my superior officer’s orders, I urged the crew to do the same, and I tried to physically remove him from the bridge – tell me there’s a name for my actions other than mutiny, Lieutenant Shaw.”

“Your actions are not in the focus of the investigation here,” she parries. “Commander Spock’s are.”

“The same actions that made me come in possession of the information that allowed the crew of the Enterprise to defeat Nero and save the Earth?” Kirk demands. “If Acting Captain Spock didn’t send me off the ship, it never would have happened. What does it matter how he had arrived at this decision if it proved to be lifesaving in the long run? Incidentally, intuition is recognized as a command prerogative.”

“A Vulcan acting on intuition?” Komack asks tartly. “Seriously, Kirk?”

“Commander Spock,” Kirk snaps, his eyes fixed on Komack, “can you exclude the factor of
intuition from your motivation completely – as in with 100-percent certainty?”

Spock blinks. Either Kirk is actually that good, too, or someone had been coaching him exactly on how to question a Vulcan.

“No, I cannot.”

“Seriously, Admiral,” Kirk says, still glaring daggers at Komack. “Commander Spock is part Human as well as part Vulcan. He’s not a robot. Your implication that he’s incapable of intuition is bordering racism – which, apart from being ugly, also happens to be in violation of the Federation Charta.”

At this point, Spock becomes utterly fascinated with the expression on Komack’s face. He has never seen any human – anyone – turn that particular shade of scarlet that quickly before.

“Note that those two charges are dropped,” Fitzpatrick finally tells the records officer. “We have more serious matters to resolve. Lieutenant Shaw, please proceed.”

Shaw nods. “The following charge against Commander Spock is leaving his post, willingly and knowingly, at the critical moment, for the purpose of saving his parents. While the board recognizes the emotional strain the situation must have put on the defendant, the board must point out that Starfleet service does not recognize personal privilege, regardless of rank or position. Therefore, Commander Spock’s actions mark him as a deserter. As the transgression is documented and filed within the Enterprise logs, the prosecution demands the full measure of responsibility to be applied in this case.”

“Captain Kirk?”

“See, where you see a deserter, I see a hero,” Kirk says calmly.

His posture is seemingly relaxed, with his hands on his hips and his head tilted back slightly. But Spock can see that the casualness is very masterfully crafted, gesture by gesture, while in fact Kirk’s body is wound up tightly. Spock doesn’t know how he knows this, but the impression is palpable, and he knows he isn’t wrong. Judging by the irritated glares the board members give the captain, though, Spock is the only person in the room who seems able to see through his veneer.

It’s only then that Kirk’s words register, and Spock’s eyes go wide.

What?

“Commander Spock beamed down not to save his parents,” Kirk says, “but the members of the Vulcan High Council. He would have done so even if his father was not a member of the said Council. Starfleet regulation 541, section A: In case of a planet-wide disaster of any nature, it is a duty of crucial importance to evacuate the governing body.”

“It doesn’t state, though,” Shaw cuts in sharply, “that the commanding officer of a ship must do so by leaving his vessel himself while the said vessel is under attack.”

Kirk frowns and shoots back, not missing a beat, “Starfleet regulation 132, section B: The commanding officer of the ship will select the members of an away team according to the corresponding relation between their skill set and the immediate task. I submit to you that as the only Vulcan onboard the Enterprise, Commander Spock was in the unique position to save the Council members – which he had done, taking a tremendous personal risk.”

“He left the bridge to a seventeen-year-old boy—”
“—Who was cleared for bridge duty by the special session of the Academy board, stardate 2125.8, in view of his outstanding performance grades. Incidentally, then-Captain Pike had put Ensign Chekov in command as well, and in both cases the decision was proved to be solid, his charming accent notwithstanding.”

“None of this changes the fact that Commander Spock is a Vulcan, and that, as a Vulcan, he was emotionally motivated to place the safety of his people above that of his crew.”

Kirk actually smiles at this. “You forget,” he says softly, “that members of the Vulcan High Council are not merely fellow Vulcans. They are not even merely the governing body. They are the preservers of centuries of Vulcan tradition. They are also the carriers of katras of the greatest Vulcan minds.”

“Katras?” Morrow asks sourly. “Kirk, we’re not here to discuss Vulcan mysticism.”

“It’s not mysticism,” Kirk says harshly. “It’s a fact. I have a witness who can confirm my claim.”

“Another Vulcan?” Morrow asks skeptically.

Kirk nails him with a searing stare and says evenly, “I call Admiral Jonathan Archer to the stand.”

The hall goes quiet as a very old human stands up. Spock, who hasn’t seen the admiral for quite some time, is astounded anew by the air of dignity and authority this ancient human spreads around himself wherever he goes. The members of the board actually rise as he takes the stand.

“Thank you for joining us, Admiral,” Kirk says, an uncommon note of respect coloring his voice. “We appreciate your cooperation.”

Archer scowls at him. “Well, get on with it, son. I don’t have all day.”

Kirk grins before schooling his features to seriousness again.

“Sir, if you would kindly enlighten us as to the nature of Vulcan katras.”

“Basically, it’s a soul,” Archer says, with a shrug. “Only their souls are as wise-ass as Vulcans are.”

Kirk shoots a glance at Spock at these words, a smirk hiding in the corners of his mouth. Spock lifts an eyebrow and otherwise ignores him.

“It’s the essence of their intellect and experiences,” Archer elaborates.

“Superstition,” Komack blurts out scornfully.

Archer just looks at him, and that’s all it takes for the bulky admiral to shrink into his chair.

“I carried Surak’s katra for days. Ever heard of him?” Archer asks with a nasty smirk. “You tell this guy he’s a superstition when he’s locked inside your head, pestering you with his damn logic like there’s no goddamn tomorrow.”

Komack looks choked on his own breath. “This is fantasy.”

“This is a well-documented fact, Admiral,” Kirk snaps. “Complete with psych evaluations of then-Captain Archer, which found him to be in perfect mental health.”

“Yeah, well, now not so much,” Archer grumbles. “You told me it’s a court-martial, but it looks like a three-ring circus to me.” He appraises the board disapprovingly and clears his throat. “Anyway,
Vulcan katars. When the Council members seclude themselves for their sessions, they are in constant contact with the minds of their greatest predecessors. Vulcans collect their wisdom – they don’t believe in ‘out of sight, out of mind.’”

Kirk nods, fighting back another grin. “Would it be safe to say that Commander Spock had saved more Vulcans than the six members of the High Council who were beamed aboard with him?”

“Well, T’Mel, for one, is a Seleya priestess, and with their training, they can carry up to several dozens of katars.” Archer shrugs. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he saved Surak himself along with her.”

“Does that still sound to you like he beamed down to save his parents and their dinner pals?” Kirk asks the board, not bothering to mask his disdain. “To you, Ms. Shaw? Would you like to cross-examine?”

She looks a little terrified at the prospect. “Prosecution has no questions.”

“You may step down, Admiral,” Fitzpatrick tells Archer.

“Why thank you,” the captain of the first Enterprise mocks. “Couldn’t do without a smoke for much longer anyway.”

“What do you think he smokes?” Morrow asks Komack sotto voce.

“I sure as hell don’t want to find out,” Komack grunts.

“Members of the board” – Kirk rounds on them again – “I submit to you that by beaming down to Vulcan, Commander Spock had saved not merely six individuals but the essence of Vulcan civilization when the civilization itself could not be saved. Last time I looked at the Starfleet Code, that kind of accomplishment spelled ‘commendation,’ not ‘hard labor.’”

Fitzpatrick looks as if he would like nothing better than to send Kirk to hard labor, preferably right this moment. What has clearly been a neatly orchestrated process before Kirk turned up is now cracking along the edges.

“Ms. Shaw, please bring on the next charge,” the chairman says tightly.

“Commander Spock is charged with insubordination and failure to follow his superior officer’s order to extricate him from the Narada.”

Kirk regards her with a lenient smile playing on his lips. “I call Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu to the stand.”

By that point, Spock no longer has any doubts that Kirk has thought of everything. Spock finds himself curiously detached from the proceedings, as if he is a mere spectator on his own trial. He is utterly fascinated by Kirk’s demonstration of his impressive debating skills, but no matter how often Spock reminds himself that Kirk is only doing it to prove some kind of point, he cannot help the sharp, searing something growing within his chest at the thought that Kirk is doing this for him.

No one has ever done anything remotely like this for him.

*It is completely impersonal,* Spock tells himself over and over again. Kirk merely wants the attention. Or fights against something he finds unjust. Or – something. It has nothing to do with Spock himself, nothing at all.

But despite all the logic and reason in the universe, it is impossible for any being with hot blood in their veins not to react to such ardent defense of themselves, whatever reason behind it, and Spock’s
blood is fueled with emotional heat of two strong-willed races. He fights himself, desperately, but he is losing.

He reacts.

“Lieutenant Sulu,” Kirk says pleasantly as a rather anxious-looking helmsman takes the stand. “Please, repeat for the board the orders that then-Captain Pike gave before he left the Enterprise for the Narada.”

“Yes, sir.” Sulu nods nervously. “Captain Pike ordered to restore communications and report the situation to Starfleet Command. He said that if all else failed, the Enterprise was to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet at the Laurentian system. He also said that we’d have to come and get him.”

“In other words, Captain Pike gave two orders?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sulu, you may step down.” Kirk nods at him, to Sulu’s obvious relief. “I call Lieutenant Nyota Uhura to the stand.”

Spock can’t help but start. He didn’t know Nyota was here. She glances at Spock briefly as she takes the stand, and he almost falters at the charge of her gaze.

“Lieutenant, you assumed the position of communications officer during the crisis, is that correct?” Kirk asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“And according to your logs” – he places a PADD in front of her – “the communications were not restored even after the interference from the Narada was no longer present.”

“Yes, sir.” She nods curtly. “The damage we sustained during Nero’s initial attack included our main communications array. It was not functional, even without the interference.”

“What were Acting Captain Spock’s orders in regard to this?”

“He ordered the crew to expedite repairs so that we could contact Starfleet Command and inform them of the situation.”

“‘And if all else fails,’” Kirk quotes, turning to the admirals, “‘fall back to rendezvous with the fleet at the Laurentian system.’ I submit to you that at the moment of making the decision, Captain Pike’s orders were mutually exclusive. It was therefore acting captain’s discretion which of them to follow. Commander Spock is incapable of predicting the future. Therefore, the only blame would have lain with him if he had been unable to make that choice – which is clearly not the case.” He looks around the room in undisguised challenge before settling his gaze on the lieutenant prosecutor. “Your witness, Ms. Shaw.”

“I believe that’s my line, Kirk,” Fitzpatrick says grimly. “Ms. Shaw?”

She looks, if anything, uncomfortable. “Lieutenant Uhura, what is the nature of your relationship with Commander Spock?”

“Objection,” Kirk snaps before Nyota can do more than blush. “Lieutenant Uhura’s testimony is confirmed by the Enterprise logs. Unless the prosecution is prepared to bring forth the charges of forgery against the Lieutenant, the question is irrelevant.”
Fitzpatrick looks as if he is slowly chewing a lemon. “Sustained,” he says reluctantly.

“Prosecution has no further questions for this witness,” Shaw says. She appears mildly flushed herself.

“You may step down, Lieutenant,” Fitzpatrick says through gritted teeth. “Next charge, Ms. Shaw.”

She looks at Spock with a guilty expression before speaking. “Commander Spock is charged with the breach of regulation 619 of the Starfleet Code: being in command while emotionally compromised. The Enterprise logs clearly show that Commander Spock had remained in command for eighteen hours in a compromised state of mind.”

“I assume you have another witness, Captain Kirk?” Morrow asks him pointedly.

“Yes, sir, I do,” Kirk says, seemingly oblivious to his sarcasm. “I call Lieutenant Commander Leonard McCoy to the stand.”

McCoy looks even more grumpy than usual, tugging at the collar of his dress uniform irritably. He scowls at everyone present as if he has been trained to do exactly that.

“Doctor McCoy, you hold a medical degree from the University of Paris, is that correct?” Kirk begins.

“Yes, sir.”

“Is it also correct that you have been retrained as a Starfleet physician, according to all the specifications and requirements of this position?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is it also correct that you hold a degree in space psychology?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, not the whole biography, Jim,” McCoy grits out exasperatedly. “I mean, yes, sir.”

Kirk swallows a smile. “Is it also correct” – McCoy groans – “that while attending Starfleet Academy, you have made your focus the study of alien physiology, particularly Andorian, Tellarite, and Vulcan?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you are the author of the Comparative Study of Vulcan and Rigellian Physiology?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Members of the board, I submit that Doctor McCoy may be considered an expert on Vulcan physiology within the parameters of this court.”

“I have no objections,” Shaw says, almost eagerly.

“Very well,” Fitzpatrick drawls sourly. “So noted.”

“Doctor McCoy, as a physician and psychologist, how would you classify the effect the destruction of one’s homeworld would have on a person?”

“Severe trauma,” McCoy says at once. “In this particular case, a severe telepathic overload would
also be present, given that Vulcans are telepaths.”

“How would the mental processes be affected?”

“The neural pathways would be scrambled and distorted to a various degree – it’s individual dependent,” McCoy says flatly.

“Would you mind using layman’s terms, Doctor?” Morrow asks, pressing his fingers to his temple. “We’re not all experts on Vulcan physiology here.”

“Vulcan minds are highly ordered and structured,” McCoy snaps impatiently. “A disaster such as this would cause physical as well as emotional trauma, resulting in high levels of pain, lapses in reasoning and logical ideation, synaptic failure, loss of emotional control…”

“Would it be possible for the individual suffering from this affliction to self-diagnose himself?” Kirk asks evenly.

“No,” McCoy all but explodes, “haven’t you been listening? Self-objectivity would be the first thing to go out the door.”

“Would you say, then, that Commander Spock could not possibly determine his own state of mind with any degree of accuracy?”

“I would not say that – I am saying that, because that’s exactly what happened,” McCoy states angrily. “I’ve treated other Vulcans directly after the planet was gone, they were all unresponsive and unaware. Frankly, I’m surprised Commander Spock managed to attain enough presence of mind to acknowledge his condition after it was brought to his attention and to take it under control. Any other Vulcan – shit, any other human with a soul – would have been self-destructive and suicidal.”

Spock bows his head at those words, feeling a vast, hot wave rising up his face and to the tips of his ears. He was self-destructive and suicidal. McCoy’s diagnosis is strikingly accurate.

He lifts his head to find Kirk staring straight at him, cyan eyes burning holes in Spock’s head. Spock doesn’t wince, but he does look away.

“In other words,” Kirk says, oddly tense, “not only had Commander Spock been unaware of being emotionally compromised, but there was no way for him to become aware?”

“Not without external assistance.” McCoy nods briskly and shakes his head. “Though you overdid that part, if you ask me.”

“And the moment he became aware,” Kirk goes on, ignoring the jibe, “what did he do?”

“He relinquished command on the grounds of being emotionally compromised,” McCoy says. “Voluntarily.”

“In full accordance with Starfleet regulation 619,” Kirk concludes, and turns to look at Shaw. “So, correct me if I’m wrong, but it seems to me that you’re accusing a wounded man of the fact that he’s experiencing pain.”

There is a long, heavy beat of silence as Kirk stares at the prosecutor without really seeing her; everyone else in the hall stares at Kirk.

“I have no questions for this witness,” Aarell Shaw says quietly.
“Well, I do have a question for this board,” Kirk snaps suddenly, whirling on his heel to face them. “We have just spent an inordinate amount of time to prove that every one of your accusations isn’t worth shit, so my question is: What is the meaning of this charade?”

“Captain Kirk, you would kindly show respect for the board,” Fitzpatrick admonishes him with a frown.

“Sorry, can’t oblige you,” Kirk shoots back, “as I have none to show.”

“Jim,” McCoy warns, half-rising from the stand.

Kirk ignores him as his pacing takes him back to Spock’s side. “What was the reason,” he starts menacingly, “for you dragging this man across the campus in irons? Commander Spock is an exceptional officer who had to overcome a tremendous emotional strain to defeat Nero and save this planet, in case you’ve forgotten. If he’d made some mistakes, then he’d had more reasons to have made them than some of respectable members of this board have to occupy space!”

“Captain,” Spock says quietly, looking up at him in alarm. Kirk is red in the face, indignation cascading out of him.

“The fact that Nero was even able to show up at Vulcan is Starfleet’s responsibility,” Kirk rants, ignoring Spock. “Whose fault was that? You had twenty-five years after the attack on the USS Kelvin to take measures to neutralize him – you didn’t! And how convenient it is that you’ve chosen to prosecute Spock right now – when the media out there is raving for a scapegoat – and he’s in no condition whatsoever to defend himself?”

Fitzpatrick rises to his feet, face blazing crimson and purple. “Captain Kirk, I’m warning you, I’ll hold you in contempt to this court if you persist.”

“This ‘court’ deserves nothing but contempt!” Kirk practically spits.

“Captain,” Spock tries again, getting to his feet, too.

“Whose lousy judgment are you covering?” Kirk shouts. “Whose skins are you trying to save by throwing him to the wolves? Starfleet Intelligence? The CINC? Your own, maybe?”

“Jim!” Spock snaps, grabbing Kirk’s wrist without a conscious thought.

Kirk freezes. He stands there panting, glaring at the members of the board as if willing them to spontaneously combust under his stare. Spock feels his fury like a white-hot wire under his fingers but he doesn’t relinquish his hold, because Kirk looks ready to convert verbal blows into physical. A shiver runs through Kirk’s frame and he relents, marginally.

“You thought that just because Ambassador Sarek has left for New Vulcan and Admiral Pike is in a coma that no one would call you on your bullshit?” he asks, mercifully not yelling this time. “You can hold me in contempt all you want, but I swear to God, if you don’t drop these ridiculous charges, I will make the details of this ‘court’ known to every media outlet from here to the Orion Belt.”

“I do not take well to threats, Kirk,” Fitzpatrick growls.

“And I do not take well to my people being mistreated out of somebody’s convenience,” Kirk snaps, his hand jerking within Spock’s grasp. “In fact, I don’t take well to my people being mistreated, period, and if you have a problem with that, you’d better demote me right back before it takes.”

The silence that follows this statement is so thick and ominous that only a machete would cut it. It’s a
shock to everyone when it’s broken all of a sudden by the sound of crude, throaty laughter.

“That’s what you get for putting teenagers into the captain’s chair,” Admiral Archer says from his seat at the back of the room. No one has noticed that he returned. “They’ll kick your ass for bullshit faster than you can spank them for misbehavior. Drop the charges, Fitzpatrick, it’s the best thing you can do. Kirk’s a funny kid. A loudmouth, too. Reminds me of a chief engineer I once had. He didn’t take it lightly when someone tried to mess with his Vulcan, either.”

Kirk and Spock become aware of their continuous contact simultaneously and all but jump away from each other. Spock stills himself, willing down a blush. Kirk clears his throat, looking down for a moment.

“Prosecution finds no case present against Commander Spock,” Shaw says quietly.

Kirk sends a luminous, grateful smile her way. Spock frowns for some reason, and looks up at Admiral Fitzpatrick. The man’s face is contorted as if he is experiencing physical pain.

“Very well,” he manages through clenched teeth. “In view of the evidence presented... all charges against Commander Spock are dropped.”

Spock’s knees go weak, and it’s all he can do in the general commotion to stay standing.

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Spock isn’t sure how he has ended up at the same bar where he had overheard Cadet Mitchell boasting the previous Christmas. He seems to have a vague recollection of Nyota’s arms around him as she yelled, ‘Never put me through this again!’ in the courtroom while McCoy and Sulu were clapping Kirk’s shoulders with nearly enough force to knock him over. Nobody asked him if he wanted to go or not – that part Spock seems to remember well enough.

Yet here he is, sitting at the table, watching Nyota sway slowly with Sulu on the dance floor. The mourning for the victims of Nero’s massacre is still in effect, but the bartender has found something quiet and sentimental for them to dance to and none of the other patrons seem to mind. McCoy sits at the bar, surveying an even row of shot glasses in front of him with an admirable amount of concentration.

There is, in fact, some kind of alcoholic drink sitting in front of Spock on the table as well. He tried to protest, but McCoy growled at him. Something about Spock being half-human and that it wouldn’t bite. Spock doesn’t mind all that much. He doesn’t enjoy the taste, but at the moment, he doesn’t really care. Besides, McCoy isn’t exactly checking on his progress.

Spock naturally isn’t drunk, but he’s so tired that the effects are almost the same. He winces when Kirk drops to a chair next to him.

“Missed me?” Kirk asks with a pale ghost of his usual smirk.

Spock notes that the captain appears to have lost his dress uniform jacket at some point. His hair is tousled as if he’d been running his hand through it – or someone else had. He appears to be flushed and his eyes are slightly bloodshot. Kirk suddenly snaps his fingers in front of Spock’s face, and Spock jerks back reflexively.

“I really don’t react well to silent treatment,” Kirk says, pouring himself a glass of the dark blue liquid that Spock is drinking. “Are you all right? You haven’t said a word to me after this mess was
over.

“You and Ms. Shaw appeared to be somewhat preoccupied.”

“She’s not a bad person, Spock,” Kirk points out and knocks back a shot. The vile taste of alcohol makes him cringe. “She was just doing her job.”

“I said nothing to dispute this.”

“Well, I’m free now. So?”

Spock glances up at him. “What do you require me to say?”

“I don’t know,” Kirk says in frustration. “Thank you?”

“Thank you.”

“Right,” Kirk grumbles. “And I thought I felt bad before.” He peers over at the bar almost wistfully. “You didn’t make it easy, you know.”

“Why did you do it?” Spock asks, watching him.

Kirk shrugs. “Why wouldn’t I do it?”

“That is not an answer.”

“Maybe I don’t have one.”

Spock stares at him. “By coming to my defense, you have placed your own career at risk. You indicated previously that being captain of the Enterprise is very important to you, yet you challenged the board of three admirals, putting your position in jeopardy.” He pauses. “I find it hard to believe that you had no motive.”

Kirk rubs at his eyes tiredly. “If I told you I really liked you, would you believe me?”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “No.”

Kirk sighs. “Figures. Look.” He glances up at Spock with a frown. “What they were doing to you was wrong, okay? You didn’t deserve any of it and they were trying to use you and it was just – nasty. They give me a fucking medal, which you deserve just as well, but they send you away to a penal colony? And for what, exactly? Having a heart? I couldn’t stand for it.”

“I see,” Spock says. “You were exercising your sense of justice.”

Kirk raises a glass in salute. “What you said.”

Spock watches him down another glass. Out of some strange sense of solidarity, he drinks down his own. When he looks up, he finds Kirk’s eyes on him.

“Listen,” Kirk says, sounding unusually intent, “I need to know something.”

“What would that be?” Spock asks.

“I need to know... I need to know if you hate me. At all.”

Spock feels both his eyebrows disappear into his hairline. “I beg your pardon?”
Kirk sighs again and reaches to refill their glasses. He spills the liquid a little when pouring Spock’s.

“Back on the ship,” he says, voice quiet, “when everything happened, I saw you – I guess you could say I saw you at your worst. You were emotional, and out of control, and doing things you wouldn’t normally do, and just – whatever. And I was mad at you half the time, and the other half just...” He trails off and falls silent for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “And I still think you’re all right, you know?” he mutters, staring at his hands. “If that was your worst, then you’re someone I could – someone I could work with, and... You’re – you’re just – all right. And I guess I wasn’t at my best, either, what with being mean to you and what not. So I really need to know if you hate me for that.”

He pauses, biting his lip. “Or just – hate me.”

Later Spock would wonder how it was even possible to make out anything within this rambling and faltering speech, but that would be later. Right now, he’s painfully aware of the tension with which Kirk awaits his answer. Spock opens his mouth before he is actually ready to speak.

“I do not hate you,” he says.

Kirk looks up at him quickly. “Because Vulcans don’t hate?”

“We do,” Spock says flatly. He’s definitely too tired to be having this conversation. “I do. I hate Nero.” Is he actually drunk? “I feel so much hatred toward him that if he were alive I would have stopped at nothing to cease his existence.”


“I do not hate you,” Spock repeats. “In fact” – he hesitates to conduct a brief introspection – “I do not harbor any negative emotions toward you. I find you undisciplined and impatient. You are capable of brilliance, yet you allow your ambition and ego to define your actions. You are capable of incredible kindness and incredible cruelty, even though I believe you are not cruel by nature. You are strong-willed to the point of stubbornness, but your confidence inspires people to follow you. I am convinced that those qualities will allow you to become an excellent starship captain, if you elect to temper your impulses with reason and logic.”

Kirk blinks, having stared at Spock this whole time and seemingly without breathing.

“Oh – okay,” he says, swallowing again. “Okay. So basically, according to you, I’m a slightly more polished version of Attila.”

“Not exactly,” Spock allows. “Though I confess that I did once compare you to a human who showed explicit lack of respect for cultural artifacts, it was not Attila. However, now that you mention it...”

“How did I become part of this conversation?” Kirk asks the space around him miserably. “Shoot, Mr. Spock, while I can still take it like a man.”


“He, too, was prone to changing the conditions of the problem and was rather straightforward about it.”

“Changing the conditions...” Kirk repeats in confusion, but comprehension dawns momentarily. “The Gordian Knot!” he exclaims excitedly, making heads turn toward them. “You compared your damn test to the Gordian Knot and me to – oh, Spock!” And he suddenly laughs.
“I fail to see the cause of your amusement,” Spock says, making sure to frown. Kirk’s mirth is disturbingly infectious.

“Nothing, really.” Kirk shakes his head, still chuckling, and reaches to pat Spock’s arm. “It’s just that you meant that as an insult, but I feel flattered.”

“Predictably illogical.” Spock nods. “And I did not mean that as an insult.”

“No, I suppose you didn’t,” Kirk says, and gives Spock’s arm a squeeze before releasing. “God, I’m wasted.” He is, Spock can tell. “I should probably go get Bones while he’s still capable of walking, because there’s no way in hell I’m carrying him anywhere.”

Spock watches him get to his feet. It takes two attempts to actually get there.

“You know” – Kirk turns to him suddenly – “as long as we’re exchanging character references here, you remind me of someone, too.”

“Indeed.” He doesn’t have the energy to make it a question.

“Yes.” Kirk nods anyway, dropping his head all the way down before jerking it up abruptly. “Ever heard of King Arthur?”

Spock blinks. “I remind you of King Arthur?”

“Merlin, Spock.” Kirk smiles at him dazedly. “You remind me of Merlin.”

He keeps muttering about wise men and wise asses until McCoy comes stumbling to their table to collect him and bids Spock goodnight.

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The house is old. Its wooden floors squeak as he enters, even though Spock has a very light footstep. His weight is considerable, as Vulcans have higher body mass index, but he has always had a light gait. He can still hear his father’s voice in his head: ‘Sneaking up is undignified, Spock.’ His mother only laughed and made feline-like noises at him.

It was a long time ago.

The floor squeaks. The last time Spock had been here, he was only four years old. He and Amanda had spent three summer months here while Sarek was conducting negotiations with the Cardassians on behalf of the Federation. It was an interesting summer.

Spock looks around, noting how dusty the house is. No one has lived here for a very long time. Amanda’s parents died before Spock was born, and her sister who used to live here has long since moved off the planet. Spock hasn’t seen any of his mother’s relatives for approximately twelve years now, but he isn’t here seeking a family reunion. He just needs some time to be alone, and this house where his mother had grown up seems ideal.

Spock puts his bag on the floor carefully and walks over to the kitchen, searching for the environmental controls. He has already activated the generator in the cellar, so it’s not a surprise when the panel blinks at him. It’s a very old, outdated model, but it’s still in working condition. Spock taps several commands, programming the house systems for automatic cleaning of the rooms. Satisfied with the low hum the equipment makes, he walks out into the garden, allowing the machinery to do its work.
The garden is beautiful but completely wild. If the house were any closer to the neighborhood, it would have stood out like a thorn in the neatly trimmed flesh of meticulously cut lawns and absurdly accurate bushes.

The sharp, fresh odor of honeysuckle drifts in the air, mixing up with the head-spinning smell of jasmine and the delicate scent of wild roses. Their tender, almost unnaturally pink flowers tease unashamedly, peering out of the omnipresent embrace of ivy that covers the fence and most parts of the south wall. The shadow it was never supposed to create had probably killed some light-loving plants, but instead, pansies of every color gleam shyly at each other and butterfly orchids are gathered here and there in small circles, like feudal kingdoms in the barbaric lands. The old chestnut tree is presiding over the savagely blooming wilderness, its white candle-like inflorescences glowing with their own brand of light in the evening air. Spock inhales deeply and closes his eyes.

This has never been a place he thought of as home, and truth be told, neither did Amanda. She had left this house at an early age, impatient to explore the world and then the galaxy. But she had always spoken of this house as a family house, and right now it was the closest place Spock had to a connection with the world that was forever gone.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I just—”

Spock turns around to see a young woman standing at the garden door who’s looking at him in puzzlement and confusion. She has short, strawberry-blond hair and light brown eyes, widened at the moment as she peers at Spock questionably. And it’s a little surprising, given that he hasn’t seen her for a quarter of a century, but he recognizes her at once.

“Lena?”

She smiles uncertainly and takes a couple of steps toward him, eyes roaming over his features as they seek anything familiar.

“Sorry; do I know you?”

Spock realizes suddenly that he has missed two of his regular haircuts, and apparently, combined with his human-style clothing, it’s an effective enough disguise.

“The last time I saw you,” he says very deliberately, “you were wearing a green taffeta dress which you were not supposed to see until your sixth birthday, but found anyway. You insisted on calling a sloppy exhibition of dandelions in your hair a crown.” He pauses. “You were also dripping wet. From falling into the pond, I believe.”

Her eyes widen even more as she looks at him, her smile shifting from uncertain to incredulous, and when Spock tilts his head to the back a little, allowing his hair to slide away, revealing his ears and eyebrows, it becomes radiant with delight.

“Spock?” she breathes out excitedly. “Oh my God, it’s really you!”

And before he can take any further action, she flings her arms around him and all but knocks the wind out of him in a fierce hug.

“Oh my God, oh my God, it’s really you, I can’t believe this!” she exclaims happily. Suddenly, she releases him and all but springs away, looking embarrassed. “Sorry, oh God, I’m so sorry, no touching, I remember, I just – you’re here, and—”

“It is all right,” Spock assures her, relieved that she let go of him but not offended.
“I thought I saw someone pull over this lane,” she says in her rapid manner of speech, which apparently hasn’t changed. “Knew the house was empty, wanted to warn in case someone took the wrong turn or something, but I couldn’t guess it was you, and...” She trails off, and then looks up at him mortified. “God, I’m being tactless, aren’t I? I am so sorry for your loss, Spock.”

“Thank you.” He inclines his head politely. “As for you being tactless, it is gratifying to know that some things do not change with the passage of time.”

She grins and punches his arm. “You’re still insufferable, Sprite.”

Spock very nearly smiles at the resurrection of his childhood nickname. “You know, my mother—” He pauses, expecting a pang of pain. When it never comes, he continues. “She called me that for years afterwards whenever I – misbehaved.”

“Nooo,” Lena drawls in feigned horror, ruined by her grin. “Well, my mom used to call me Toad Queen for years after I took a swim in that pond, so we’re even.”

“Hardly.” Spock lifts an eyebrow. “You fell into the pond through no fault of mine.”

She pouts. “You refused to get me a water lily!”

“The flower would not have survived the transition—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” She sticks her tongue out at him. “You really haven’t changed, Spock. Ever the romantic.”

“How is” – Spock frowns slightly, recalling – “Mr. Tobin?”

Lena chuckles. “I can’t believe you remember Mr. Tobin.” She shakes her head and sighs. “He passed away when I was fifteen. The saddest day of my life right there. He was the sweetest friend I’ve ever had.”

“He was an impressive and well-tempered animal,” Spock agrees, remembering the solid form of the Andorian pony.

“And he was bright blue.”

“Indeed.”

She grins. “You know, I managed to track one of his offspring and bought it for my daughter. She’s completely in love with him.”

Spock’s eyebrows arch. “You have a child?”

Lena’s smile is both shy and fiercely proud. “I have three,” she says. “Two boys and a girl.” She sighs wistfully, but without any real sadness. “I guess I’m boring like this. I married Johnny when I was nineteen, and since then I’ve been a happy wife and a mother, and well, a botanist.” She squints at Spock. “I’ve never even been off planet. God, I must seem so primitive to you.”

“You are not primitive,” Spock says pensively. “You are – I believe there is a human expression – the salt of the earth? It is for people like you that others go into space.”

She is looking at him with an expression he cannot identify. “That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me about my ‘career’ choice,” she tells him. Her face suddenly brightens. “Hey, I’ve seen the holo of you once on the news. Couple of years ago, I think. You won a Nobel Prize or
“A Zee Magnee Prize,” Spock corrects. It suddenly seems to him that the event in question had happened in some other life to someone else.

“Always knew you’d be a know-it-all,” Lena teases, giving him a once-over. “By the way, I don’t recall you wearing jeans in that holo.”

Spock nods, glancing absently at the stone-washed material hugging his hips. He seems to have developed a preference for human clothing during his off duty hours. He’s never before noticed that.

“That would have been inappropriate,” he says. “It was an official occasion.”

“So you, uh – you plan to stay?”

He frowns slightly. “I have been granted an obligatory one-month leave,” he says grimly. “For reasons that elude me. I found myself willing to spend it on Earth before I leave for New Vulcan.”

Her face dims, and she reaches to touch his arm, but stops just short of it. “I’m sorry,” she says quietly. “I can’t imagine what it must be like to have lost... so much.”

Spock doesn’t answer, because what can he say to that? It’s a little surreal, in fact. People expect him to be stricken with grief, yet all he feels is a sense of dull apathy. His emotional control has been in tatters, and yet he doesn’t want to weep, he doesn’t want to tear his hair out, he doesn’t want to end his own existence. In short summary, now that he’s allowed to feel, he seems to have no emotions left.

“Well,” Lena starts awkwardly. “I’d better get going. Lunch for the kids, and well...” She trails off helplessly. “I’ll be seeing you around, I guess?”

“It is possible,” Spock agrees. He doesn’t have any particular plans at the moment. He probably won’t be spending all his time in the house, so Lena’s assumption is logical.

“You know,” she says suddenly, “my husband is an aquabiologist. He’ll be happy to give you a tour of the lake any time you want.”

“I shall bear that in mind,” Spock inclines his head politely. “Thank you.”

She nods, smiles shyly at him again, and leaves.

The month he spends in his mother’s old summer house is very quiet and strangely restless. Spock tries to catch up on his scientific research, but even the most fascinating articles fail to hold his attention for long. He tries to reignite his interest by skimming through various scientific fields at once, but that isn’t really effective, either. His meditation is empty and fruitless, because there are no emotions for him to deal with. He wanders around the house restlessly, picking at things and scrolling through books.

He can’t understand himself and it frustrates him to no end. While still in San Francisco, with the trial’s aftermath and everything, he only wanted for everyone to leave him alone. Now that they had, he wishes they did not give up so easily. He longs for company, but doesn’t answer Nyota’s comm messages which she invariably sends once a day. He enjoys reading them and that one day she doesn’t send one, he’s actually upset, but at the same time, he can’t bring himself to answer.

He wants for people to be around, but when they are around, he wants to be alone, because their sympathy is taxing. Among other things he can’t explain, it makes him feel guilty for not suffering.
They offer him all kinds of comfort as if he is an invalid, but he’s perfectly healthy – too perfectly, in fact. His sleep is undisturbed by nightmares, and his appetite is within its normal parameters. He doesn’t flinch whenever someone reminds him of the fate of his homeplanet, only cringes at the looks of horror and compassion they send his way.

He doesn’t understand his own reactions, and it annoys him. For the first time, it occurs to him that if this were what he would be like if he were fully human, he wouldn’t make a particularly good one.

He ends up spending most of his days in an old hover boat that belongs to Lena’s husband, who is indeed a consummate researcher of the lake fauna. John isn’t a man of many words, and that suits Spock just fine. The two men are most comfortable studying various types of frogs and talking about carps’ spawning habits and pikes’ mating riots. Spock takes up diving under John’s instruction, and together they set up holo cams at the lake’s bottom to study the life of the deep-water creatures.

Spock is steadily ignoring the news broadcasts, totally uninterested in whatever’s happening in the Federation. But by the end of the second week, he receives a message from Doctor McCoy regarding Admiral Pike. It’s sparse and puzzling, but Spock believes he gets the gist of it.

Awake. Released for light duty. Pissed like you wouldn’t believe.

Two weeks later, Spock says goodbye to John and Lena and heads back to San Francisco without a clear idea of what his future will be like or even of what he wants it to be.

--

Gaila is alive.

Spock discovers this as he enters his apartment after four weeks of absence and finds her and Nyota making tea. He lifts an eyebrow to indicate his surprise at having found them there, because he gets back two days earlier than expected and he hasn’t told anyone about that.

“We figured,” Nyota says simply, coming over and kissing him lightly on the lips.

Spock returns the kiss, curt and sweet, but his eyes are on Gaila.

“Lucky save.” She smiles, but he can see the remainder of profound shock storming her once undisturbed blue eyes, as she comes over and hugs him. Far from objecting, his hands lift to wrap around her almost of their own volition. He and Gaila have more in common now than ever before. Neither of them can ever go home again.

She rises on her toes and kisses his cheek. “Marran-do ker’sha d’ha lynn, shaya-ra.”

Her Vulcan pronunciation is impeccable but melodic in ways native Vulcan speakers never really achieve. The words ripple through Spock, touching something inside him he had long considered dead.

You are not alone in your grief, brother.

Spock glides two fingers from her temple to her chin gently. “Nemayo, shaya-re.” Thank you, sister. He pauses briefly and amends, “Shaya-rin.” Little sister.

Gaila smiles at the endearment.
They’ve made his favorite tea – cinnamon and chili powder, they’ve bought new cat biscuits for Agnes, who’s purring contentedly on the windowsill, peering at Spock through one half-opened green eye, and Spock thinks introspectively that it is some kind of universal mistake that he is not in love with either woman.

“You need a haircut,” Nyota says with an amused expression, running her fingers through his hair.

Spock nods, a bit absently. He is somewhat wary because he doesn’t yet know what this is, but he relents, little by little. They don’t ask him how he feels and he doesn’t ask what they’ve been up to. The conversation whirls lamely around the refit of the Enterprise and the fleet finally abandoning the senseless operation in the Laurentian system and about a dozen other pieces of news which fail to excite them, but are there nonetheless.

Spock has never seen Gaila so serious and quiet and he wonders idly if she is ever going to regain her cheerfulness. He believes she will, because if she overcame her childhood experiences of slavery, she will undoubtedly prevail over this disaster as well if given time. But it has marked her, just as it has marked all of them. Even if no one is ever going to see their scars.

Gaila leaves soon for Starfleet Sciences. Spock is distinctly unsurprised to learn that she has been recruited to help reprogram the defense perimeter surrounding key Federation facilities. He would imagine the team working on that problem right now would have to consist of the best of the best, and Gaila has always been gifted in this particular area.

The silence she leaves in her wake is awkward. Spock glances at Nyota who’s standing at the window, leaning against the wall and looking outside pensively, a light frown creasing her forehead.

“Nyota,” Spock starts hesitantly.

She turns to look at him and smiles, shaking her head. “It’s not going to work, is it?”

Spock doesn’t insult her by pretending he doesn’t understand what she means. “I wish—”

“Yes,” she interrupts firmly. “If wishes were horses.”

The silence stretches, as Spock watches her, taking in every detail. Nyota is strikingly intelligent, kind and understanding, reasonable, cool and logical, and she’s probably the most elegant and beautiful female Spock has ever seen, including T’Pring.

“You would make an ideal wife for a Vulcan,” he concludes his analysis aloud.

She looks over at him with a sad smile. “And you would make an ideal ballet dancer. Doesn’t mean it’s going to happen.”

Spock closes his eyes, regret washing over him. If only he had anything – anything at all left to offer her...

“Nyota, I—”

He hears her coming closer. She rests her hands on his shoulders, and he inhales deeply, breathing in her scent that always conjures up a mental image of a frozen jasmine flower in his mind.

“Don’t,” she whispers. “Please. I don’t want to hear ‘It’s not you – it’s me.’ Not from you. We were better than that, Spock. We are better than that.”

He pulls her close without getting up. She permits it, letting him hold her for a while, then pushes
him back slightly, bends over and kisses him. Spock returns the kiss with more feeling than he had experienced in weeks, cradling her face in his hands, wishing desperately to convey everything he wants to tell her and can’t find the words for.

If he were still capable of loving anyone, he would have loved her. Would have. The leitmotif of his life from now on.

“It’s not a goodbye,” Nyota says softly, as they pull apart.

Spock nods determinedly. It’s not.

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Spock goes to see Christopher as soon as he unpacks and returns Agnes to her rightful owner.

“I think you should keep her, Mr. Spock,” Mrs. Lee, his next door neighbor, tells him with a sigh, taking the animal back. “I’m too old to keep tabs on her anyway.”

Agnes is glaring at him from the old woman’s arms, her viciously green gaze calling him a traitor. Spock pets her in apology and leaves.

Pike’s new office is at Starfleet Headquarters, and although Spock is asked for his ID, no one says a word to him about being in civilian clothing. He takes the turbolift to the upper floor because Pike’s office is now a reflection of his new rank. Michael, who served as Pike’s aide ever since Pike was stationed at the Academy, has died on the Farragut, and Spock is looked up and down by an unknown lieutenant who frowns at him with disapproval.

“The admiral’s schedule is full,” he says, adding “Commander” with just enough hint of a doubt. “You should have made an appointment.”

Spock thinks that he probably should have. “Would you please check when the admiral is next available?”

The lieutenant frowns even further, glancing over his screen, but Spock can tell he isn’t really checking.

“The earliest window I can offer you is next week,” the young man says, with clear disdain. “But I’ll have to confirm it first.”

“Lieutenant,” Spock says, telling himself that the man is certainly not trying his patience, “by next week, I plan to be on New Vulcan. Are you quite certain there is no possibility to make an appointment on an earlier date?”

“Listen, sir.” The lieutenant eyes him indignantly. “You may be a Vulcan and a member of an endangered species, and I’m sorry about that, but that doesn’t mean that you can simply barge in on an admiral without an appointment. It’s Starfleet Headquarters, sir. We follow procedure.”

“And hopefully orders,” Admiral Pike says, appearing in the doorway of his office. “Spock, it’s good to see you; come on in. Corley, you learn some manners. You’re talking to a man who saved your planet, for fuck’s sake.”

“Sir, that kind of language——”
“So help me if you say another word to me about that,” Pike hisses. “And next time Commander Spock is here and I don’t know about it within five seconds of his arrival, you’ll find your ass so far down the promotion list you might as well reapply for the Academy, is that clear?”

“Sir. Yes, sir.”

Pike glares at him some more before moving inside, Spock following him stiffly. The moment the door slides shut behind him, Pike rounds on him and grins.

“It is good to see you, Spock. I’m sorry about this little shit.” He gestures irritably at the door.

Spock raises an eyebrow. “It is agreeable to see you, too, Christopher. Though it would appear that your new aide does not approve of me.”

Pike grimaces. “My new aide doesn’t approve of me,” he says tartly. “I haven’t figured out a way to transfer him yet.”

“You seem to be in a bad mood,” Spock notes.

“You think?” Pike sighs and shakes his head, with a grim smile. “Spock, I went to bed as captain and a field officer and woke up as an admiral and a paper pusher. You were gone and nobody knew where, and my ship isn’t my ship anymore. You think I might be a little cranky?”

“I was ordered to take leave,” Spock says, none too happy. “I did not have much choice.” He pauses. “Number One was here.”

“Yes,” Pike agrees with a strange expression. “She was.”

Spock regards him carefully. “You seem displeased.”

Pike bristles. “She relinquished command to her first officer and transferred to Starfleet Command instead. This woman has no sense trading her career like that!”

Spock arches an eyebrow. “Admiral, with all due respect, the Nelson has been assigned to Sector Zero for the last three years. There was hardly any interest for someone with Number One’s talents in the routine patrol of—”

“Fine,” Pike cuts him off impatiently. “But she would have gotten another command.”

“And she still might – as soon as the fleet is rebuilt. I hardly expect there are new command positions available at the moment.”

“Spock.” Pike looks at him squarely. “You know why she did it.”

Spock returns his gaze calmly. “Yes, Christopher. I do.”

Pike looks away first. “Damn.”

There is a long beat of silence while Pike stares unseeingly at his desk, and Spock, who has been standing at a large ceiling-to-floor window, gazes at the spectacular vista of the San-Francisco Bay.

“So this is how it ends.” Pike speaks, sounding hollow. “You’re going to New Vulcan to rebuild your race, and I – I’m stuck here for another twelve months at least as Chief of Operations. And then... This is how it ends?”

Spock looks at him and feels something within him stir beneath the dull sense of apathy that seems to
be his constant state of being now. He crosses the room and sinks down on one knee at Pike’s feet. He takes Pike’s hand gently, urging the admiral to look at him.

“It does not have to end, Christopher,” Spock says, very softly. “Our relationship will continue. It shall simply evolve. It is illogical to assume that all things will remain the same indefinitely.”

Pike smiles at him sadly and reaches with his free hand to tuck a strand of Spock’s hair behind his ear.

“You think I can handle it?”

Spock closes his eyes for an instant, shivering at the caress that feels like an echo.

“You are Christopher Pike,” he says simply. “You can handle anything.”

Pike chuckles, despite himself, and gazes over Spock fondly. “I love you,” he says, soft and earnest. “Whatever this evolution of yours might entail, this clearly isn’t part of it. You will always be my inspiration, Spock. My touchstone.”

Spock brings Pike’s hand to his lips and kisses gently, sending as much warmth as he can muster through the contact.

“No more sadness.”

“No,” Pike agrees, and grins to prove it. He clears his throat and looks away, fighting to restore his equilibrium. “What’s with the savage look, anyway? You going native?”

Spock straightens up and moves back toward the window slowly. “I confess I was not concerned with matters of appearance during my leave.” He clasps his hands behind his back. “I wasn’t concerned with anything. I shall take measures to correct this as soon as I am able, in order to stop offending the senses.”

Pike snorts, giving him a frank up and down. “I wouldn’t call it offence, exactly. That jerk Corley out there was probably just jealous.”

“I doubt it,” Spock says. “I seem to be out of favor with Starfleet Command at the moment.”

Pike frowns. “I heard about that. Can’t tell you how mad I was at Fitzpatrick and his little gang. Bastards.”

Spock turns to look at him. “The matter is still puzzling to me,” he confesses. “I must admit that the reasons behind it elude me.”

Pike sighs. “There’s no mystery to this. Someone screwed up.” He rubs his chin pensively. “When the Kelvin was lost, Starfleet ordered an investigation. You read my dissertation, you know this. What you might not know is that after six months of searching, the mission was abandoned.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “But so were many other missions which failed to harvest results. Starfleet’s resources are significant but still finite.”

“Yeah, but none of the other abandoned missions have backfired till now – only this one.” Pike winces. “Spock, you have to understand. I’ll have to be cynical for a moment, so bear with me.

“The loss of Vulcan is a hard blow on the Federation. We all regret the loss of lives, and the cultural significance of your planet was enormous. But there’s a much more pragmatic layer than this. Vulcan
was Federation’s commerce, diplomacy, and science. Your people had been trading with half the
galaxy before humans even made it into space. We lost all of those contracts now, and it’s only a
matter of time before we’ll all feel the shortage of certain resources; our economy is already running
a fever. Our Diplomatic Corps is in a coma, if you please, because we just lost our best negotiators.
And science – do I even have to go there? You know better than I do that more than fifty percent of
technological innovations were coming from the VSA.”

“Approximately sixty-seven percent,” Spock supplies.

“Well, there you go. The Federation is a living organism, and to lose Vulcan doesn’t mean to break a
nail exactly. More like to lose a lung or a kidney.”

“A curious metaphor coming from you.”

“Yeah, well.” Pike snorts grimly. “I’ll be blaming one of my sixteen doctors for that.”

“If I understand your point, Christopher, you suggest that it is the extensity of the damage that
provokes the need to assign blame.”

“More or less.” Pike sighs. “Someone signed that order, Spock, twenty-five years ago. Someone at
Starfleet Command had decided that the attack on the Kelvin wasn’t worth investigating further.
People are angry and they are frightened – because if Vulcan could be destroyed so easily, who’s to
say that the same won’t happen to more distant, less developed worlds? Did you know that already
the Federation had lost three members?”

“No,” Spock says, eyes widening slightly. “Which ones?”

“Garrapack, Leda, and Baranten.” Pike cringes. “Apparently they’ve all decided that we’re too
dangerous to be associated with. And they might not be the last ones.”

“That is indeed disturbing.”

“No kidding. You know how civilians think, that Starfleet failed to protect them. And let’s face it,
Spock – they’re right. But instead of standing united and accepting responsibility, Fitzpatrick wanted
a quick fix. Hang all the blame on one person and Starfleet’s white as snow again. Even more
convenient – hang it onto a Vulcan and make everyone think that Vulcans had brought that onto
themselves.”

Spock frowns. “I am pleased,” he notes grimly, “that I am not currently in uniform.”

Pike looks up at him in sympathy. “Oh, believe me, the thought crossed my mind, too. But Starfleet
has done many good things, Spock. Three bastards aren’t worth smirching us all.”

“Perhaps,” Spock allows.

“Anyway. Nogura’s got much more sense than Fitzpatrick. Thank God they chose him to replace
that son-of-a bitch as Commander Starfleet.”

“Indeed? That is—” Spock doesn’t finish, interrupted by the sounds seeping from outside the room.

Pike rolls his eyes. “I’m going to fucking murder him. What now?”

But before he can investigate the source of the disturbance, the door slides open, and a very ruffled-
looking James Kirk bursts inside.
“I’m sorry, sir, but this is urgent—” he spatters and stops abruptly at the sight of Spock.

“Kirk,” Pike lets out in exasperation, “didn’t anyone teach you to knock?”

“I’m sorry, Admiral, I tried to stop him,” Lieutenant Corley says, hovering in the doorway, “but he wouldn’t—”

“I can see that,” Pike tells him dryly. “Get back to work.”

The door slides shut behind a very irritated Corley.

“Hey, Spock,” Kirk says, much quieter than before.

Spock inclines his head. “Captain.”

“How – uh, how are you doing?”

Spock really can’t help an eyebrow climbing up at that. “How am I doing – what?”

“Spock,” Pike admonishes him, though not unkindly.

“He’s screwing with me, isn’t he?” Kirk asks Pike, keeping his eyes on Spock. “Nice tan, by the way.”

“Kirk, wasn’t there an urgent matter you came to see me about, like, five seconds ago?” Pike asks dryly. “You know, the one that made you trigger my aide’s PMS a whole day early?”

Kirk actually looks at him. “You know, that guy really is such a dick,” he says, walking over to Pike and handing him a PADD. “Why d’you keep him?”

“Comes with the office,” Pike mutters, scanning the PADD.

“He didn’t want to let me in,” Kirk complains. “Said I don’t look at all like my ID.”

“That is hardly surprising,” Spock comments. “Given that on your ID, you most likely do not look like a janitor’s mate.”

Kirk whirls on him. “A janitor’s mate, huh? I’ll have you know that I’ve spent the better part of the morning cleaning up the mess the shipyards’ folks call a ‘refitted’ dilithium chamber.”

“Indeed? And the sanitary facilities at the shipyards were out of order?”

Kirk snorts. “Says the guy who looks like Rudyard Kipling’s wet dream.”

Pike looks up at him with a frown. “Jim, you can’t keep coming to me with this.” He taps at the PADD impatiently. “It’s going to look like blatant favoritism, and you know what? It is.”

“Admiral, I’m sorry, but—”

“Those requisition forms – correct me if I’m wrong, but you don’t have any paperwork to support them?”

“Sir, I don’t have time to file paperwork,” Kirk retorts impatiently. “The shipyards have a queue a mile long and like one hundred something forms to fill to get so much as a permission to sneeze, never mind refined dilithium. By the time they’d ‘get back to us,’ we’d have to start from scratch,
and we don’t have time for this because Nogura wants us space-worthy by the end of the month. Scotty’s got his hands full, and we need to install the new plasma injectors within a day or the flood capacitors would fail – they were designed to hold warp plasma, not thin air.” He turns to look at Spock. “And you should be really impressed that I know how to handle a warp plasma reaction.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “I am impressed that you know who Rudyard Kipling is.”

“Kirk, we’ve been through this,” Pike says exasperatedly, Kirk still glaring at Spock. “You were the one who let your crew take shore leave.”

“I didn’t know the shipyards engineers were a bunch of incompetent idiots then.”

“Jim, if you took the time to file proper requisitions, the shipyard would give you the best they’ve got. You have to show some respect to the way the fleet operates. You might not like it, but this system has operated successfully for decades. What you’re doing is taking that special treatment thing one hell of a lot too far.”

Kirk’s shoulders tighten slightly as he stares squarely at the admiral.

“I only want what’s best for my ship,” he says. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get it.”

“Really?” Pike furrows his eyebrows. “Then pick a first officer, for God’s sake. The personnel office has been smacking me over the head for weeks now – for some unfathomable reason they seem to think I have some kind of influence over you.”

Kirk sighs. “Admiral, couldn’t you just sign this?”

Pike glares at him for a long moment, then scribbles a signature on the PADD abruptly and pushes it back to Kirk.

“That’s the last time I’m doing this, Jim. I mean it.”

“Thank you.” Kirk nods tightly, picking up the PADD.

Pike still holds his gaze. “I know you’re a genius, and the only person apart from this guy” – he nods at Spock – “who managed to have a double major, but not even you can be in two places at once, never mind more. You have a personnel problem the size of the Enterprise. You’ve gotta do something about it, and sooner, not later.”

“I know,” Kirk says. “I appreciate your help, sir.” He rubs at his forehead as if chasing away a headache, then glances up sharply, as if struck with a sudden idea. “Speaking of people being in two places at once,” he intones, almost cheerful, “you need this guy now?”

Pike blinks, looks over at Spock and shakes his head carefully. “I have a meeting in ten minutes.”

“Great,” Kirk beams. “Then, Commander, you’re with me. Let’s see if we can make you look like a janitor’s mate.”

Spock blinks and peers at Pike.

“Well, don’t look at me,” the admiral says, grinning. “You started it.”

Kirk walks over to Spock, who still hasn’t moved. “Is it somehow not clear that I outrank you?”

“I am still on leave,” Spock reminds him pointedly.
“Cool; that means you’re not doing anything,” Kirk says breezily and, grabbing Spock’s arm, pulls him toward the door. “Nice day, sir,” he offers Pike.

“Admiral,” Spock manages to nod at Pike, too, even as he allows himself to be towed outside.

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Once outside, Spock pulls free, but follows Kirk into the transporter room with a sense of strange resignation distinctly reminiscent of exasperated tolerance.

“Where are we going?” he asks as Kirk stops by the control panel to put in a set of coordinates.

“Liverpool.”

“Starfleet Engineering Corps?”

“Whatever else? Let’s go.”

The headquarters of Starfleet Engineering Corps is always a busy place, but there is a certain flair to it that distinguishes it from any other Starfleet facility. Allegedly the place is built and functions according to the same guidelines and laws, but in reality, being inside it feels like stepping inside an anthill, with its thousands of purposeful motions and movements happening so fast that they appear disorienting, almost chaotic.

Kirk, Spock notices, has no trouble whatsoever navigating within this hive, which speaks volumes of the frequency of his visits here. No one stares at them or in fact even gives them a second glance, because unlike Starfleet headquarters, people here don’t have time for idle observations or gossip. There’s too much work to be done.

They take several rides on various turbolifts before finally arriving to the area with which Spock, too, is well familiar, except that he hasn’t been here for quite some time. He has no difficulty recognizing one of the huge assembling hangars where major starship components are put together before being sent to various shipyards, including Riverside and even the brand new Utopia Planitia.

“Here.” Kirk nods at the team of approximately fifty men working on a disassembled engine. “This Babel Tower of doom is our impulse engine. I need someone to supervise them for a day, because I have to get back to Scotty or he’ll have to clone himself.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow as he observes the proceedings. “Surely this is qualified engineering staff,” he says. “You do not trust them?”

“Frankly, no.” Kirk frowns. “I don’t know them. The guys at Riverside screwed up the first time around pretty badly. These people seem to be better, but I don’t want to take that chance.”

“Yet you would trust me?”

Kirk gives him a dry grin. “Unlike these guys, Spock, you have to actually fly these things yourself.”

Spock nods. “Logical.”

“You don’t say.” Kirk shakes his head. “Anyway, I’ll pick you up some time later, okay? You’ll let me know what you think.” He claps Spock on the shoulder – harder than necessary, Spock thinks – and leaves.
‘Some time’ turns to be approximately ten hours, during which Spock discovers that the engineering team is fully capable of handling the delicate work. He is a little surprised, if pleased, at how easily they accept his authority. These people are professionals who talk little and only on relevant topics, and have their priorities right to boot. Spock joins them while working on different stages of engine calibration, and by the end of the first hour, he and the engineers have already achieved the level of professional trust necessary for teamwork. Spock makes a mental note to advise commendations to their commanding officer.

The work allows him to slip from the press of his current, less than optimistic frame of mind. It’s physically demanding, but Spock revels in it, gratified with the visible results he immediately achieves. If it is a form of mental escape, it’s probably the most productive one.

It’s late in the night in Liverpool when Kirk shows up in the doorway and glances at the day’s work with a satisfied whistle. He looks extremely fatigued.

“How’s it going?” he asks Spock in a blunted voice, all but swaying.

Spock hands him a PADD. “Sign these.”

Kirk takes the stylus before he asks. “What are – oh my God.” He looks up at Spock. “When did you –?”

“I took the liberty of checking what other equipment and instrumentation the Enterprise requires and filling the appropriate forms,” Spock tells him mildly. “I would have forwarded them myself, but currently I have no authority to sign the requests and I was not aware if you or Mr. Scott were available.”

“Spock,” Kirk breathes out in awe, scrolling through the documents rapidly and hardly even listening to the Vulcan. “This is a complete document set for everything we need! It must have taken hours – how did you manage – I don’t know how to thank you!” He signs the pages as they come in front of him, eyes gleaming with excitement. “The shipyards are gonna love these!”

“I am pleased to be of service, Captain,” Spock says. “I am also pleased to report that Lieutenant Dawson is a most competent engineering officer. Under his supervision, we have completed the main impulse drive integration. Once the plasma flow stabilizes, the engine can be moved to the orbital shipyards and prepared for installation.”

Kirk looks up at him at last, his eyes shining. “Spock, you’re a lifesaver.”

Spock tilts his head to his side. “My actions hardly warrant that much gratitude, Captain.”

Kirk seems not to be listening to him still. “You know, I’ve been thinking about what Pike said, and I had this crazy idea in my head...”

Spock waits a moment longer, then remarks carefully, “I am not certain that was the effect the admiral was aiming for.”

Kirk chuckles. “Yeah, I’m sure it wasn’t. But listen, do you want to maybe, well...” He pauses, bites his lip, looks up at Spock, averts his eyes, blushes, looks up again, and finally finishes in a clearly different way than he originally intended. “Do you want to go grab some dinner or something? I’m starving.”

Spock considers this for a moment. “I will not be averse to the idea.”

“Great.” Kirk claps him on the shoulder. “I think the cafeteria is still open.” He catches the look on
Spock’s face. “What?”

“You prefer to consume replicated food while planetside? There are plenty of restaurants outside the building that offer better options.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kirk says, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand and looking hesitant. He sighs. “Oh, screw it, let’s go. You know anything good around here?”

“Indeed.” Spock nods. “I was stationed here for three months during my first year as a cadet.”

Kirk glances up at him and grins as they start walking. “Advanced engineering training?”

“Correct.” Spock inclines his head.

“I did mine at Utopia Planitia. Miles of Martian deserts, no air outside the dome, and it was so frickin’ cold I’m not sure penguins would have loved it.”

“The shipyard itself is rumored to be extraordinary.”

“Oh, it was fantastic.” Kirk’s eyes gleam with enthusiasm. “It’s like working in Leonardo’s workshop only it’s some 25th century Leonardo, and you have to scrape your brain for every bit of information ever put into it not to become the stupidest apprentice ever. Too bad it was so brand new; the officers nearly had heart attacks seeing all those moronic cadets touching anything with their clumsy, filthy hands.”

“I am certain they found you to be a particular challenge.”

Kirk smirks. “I’m always a challenge. But they relented somewhat after I rewrote their security code for them.”

Spock gives him a sideways glance. “One can only hope they have changed the passwords since.”

“Aren’t you sweet,” Kirk drawls. He stops suddenly and looks at Spock squarely. “Listen. I’m sorry, but I’m not sorry about screwing your test. But – it wasn’t you I was fighting. It wasn’t you.”

Spock eyes him carefully in the dimmed light of the corridor. “Is this an apology?”


Spock tilts his head to his left slightly, stifling a sigh. “You seem to have a unique approach to everything, Captain.”

“I know,” Kirk says, sighing for him. “I really am something.”

Their route continues with Kirk chattering idly about his time at Utopia Planitia and the work he and Scott managed to complete in the last several hours. Spock is mostly silent, steering them inadvertently outside and in the direction of a quiet little restaurant he knows. Kirk is very tired, and Spock guesses that his seemingly ceaseless, slightly slurring speech is his way of dealing with it. He talks about whatever comes to his mind, spilling it without a pause just to be saying something, as if he suspects that the moment he stops talking he will fall asleep. Spock lets him talk.

The restaurant is in fact a little tavern, one of those that had grown around Starfleet facilities about the same time they’d been built and that had adopted their ‘never-closed/always-working’ attitude. Still, the middle of the night is the middle of the night even here, and although Kirk and Spock are hardly the only patrons, it’s considerably quieter than it would be during daytime.
They choose a table in a murky corner, and Spock reaches for the menu. Kirk, however, leans back in his chair and satisfies himself with watching Spock.

“Captain?” Spock raises an eyebrow. “Are you not hungry?”

“Oh, I am.” Kirk grins. “But you’re the one who’s been here. I’ll leave it in your capable hands.”

Spock blinks. “You want me to order for you?”

Kirk continues to smile pleasantly. “If it’s not too much of a challenge.”

“But I am unaware of your preferences.”

“That’s okay.”

“But—”

“What would it be, gentlemen?” A waiter appears at their table, without Spock noticing.

Still puzzled by Kirk’s request, Spock orders a Greek salad for himself. He looks at the captain again, but Kirk merely nods at him, the same enigmatic smile playing on his lips. Spock frowns slightly. He has the distinct impression he is being tested.

Very well.

“Please bring him grilled fish,” Spock tells the waiter decisively. Kirk’s face dims noticeably, but Spock doesn’t allow this to affect him. “Whatever kind is available. And—”


“Grilled fish,” Spock repeats as if Kirk hadn’t spoken, “a cheese plate, and vegetable tempura.”

“And beer,” Kirk adds with a sigh. “I earned it.”

The waiter looks at Spock, obviously addressing him as the one in charge. Spock nods. The waiter disappears.

Kirk looks around, commenting on the décor without any real fervor. He looks utterly depressed at the prospect of eating now, which – Spock can’t deny – is extremely amusing. He doesn’t let the reaction show, however.

A girl comes by their table bring two glasses of dark beer.

“You drink that?” Kirk looks at Spock in surprise. “I thought Vulcans weren’t affected by alcohol.”

“We are not.” Spock confirms, eyeing the thick, creamy foam whispering something to the walls of his glass. “No alcohol made by humans can affect us. We seldom drink it because it has no nutritional value and—”

“And?” Kirk grins, taking a sip. The foam rests in a wet, uneven line over his upper lip, like a white moustache.

Spock looks at him, then lowers his eyes to his glass. “And we do not generally enjoy the taste.” He can feel Kirk’s grin getting wider.

“Generally? But you make an exception for Guinness?”
Spock looks up at him. “Indeed.”

Kirk laughs quietly. “You’re kind of a food Nazi, you know that? Grilled fish, honestly…”

The waiter reappears before Kirk can start complaining in earnest, setting plates in front of him first. The smell is delicious, and Kirk’s eyes brighten. Spock fights back a surge of amusement as he watches the captain grabbing hold of the silverware with a kind of genuine desperation. He seems to have forgotten his dislike of fish completely. For some reason, the sight is gratifying.


Spock debates the wisdom of it, but in the end speaks up. “If I may be so bold, Captain. There is a second fork to your left that might… facilitate the process.”

Kirk stares at him for a long moment. Spock looks down.

“I apologize, I intended no—”

“You,” Kirk interrupts, “are an unbearable snob, Mr. Spock.”

Spock chances a glance up and notices that Kirk is grinning. The young captain picks up the second fork and carves the fish with refined deftness.

“Happy now?”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. God forbid you’d be seen in the company of someone with poor table manners. Your reputation will surely not withstand the blow.”

Spock really does sigh this time. “I did apologize.”

Kirk waves him off magnanimously. “Forget it. I understand that you are used to a more distinguished society. Believe me, I’m honored to be sitting at the same table.”

Spock puts his own fork down. “Captain.”

Kirk looks up at him with calculated coldness. Suddenly, he laughs.

“Damn, you should see your face.” He shakes his head, still grinning. “Thanks for these, by the way.” He nods at his plate. “I wouldn’t have ordered anything like it, and it’s really great.”

Warily, Spock picks up his fork again, accepting the generously offered truce, even if he isn’t sure if he’s been praised or chastised. For a while, they eat in silence. Spock draws a strange sense of satisfaction at noticing the relish with which Kirk attacks his food. Silently, Spock wonders how long it has been since the captain has last eaten anything, never mind a decent meal. Then it occurs to him that he should have no interest in this whatsoever, and he frowns slightly at himself.

Kirk looks up at him and grins as if he knows exactly what Spock is thinking. Spock looks away.

“You’re not eating those?”

Spock glances at the olives scattered around his plate. “I only eat the green ones,” he says.

“Picky. May I?”
Spock pushes the plate toward him and watches as Kirk picks up a shiny black olive with his fork and inspects it scrupulously before putting it in his mouth.

“So,” Kirk starts, “you’re going to New Vulcan?”

“That is my intention, yes.”

“Do you really want to or are you merely bowing to the sense of duty?”

Spock blinks. None of those aware of his decision have asked him that question. The query in and of itself is cunning. Even more so, considering that Kirk’s extremely relaxed pose and attitude haven’t prepared Spock for it in the slightest. He suppresses another sigh and makes a mental note to stop underestimating this human and his strategic abilities.

“The matter of desire is irrelevant,” he replies ambiguously. “I shall do what I must.”

“Are you—” Kirk pauses. “Are you certain that going to the colony is what you must do? How can you be sure” – he halts again, as if searching for words – “that it’s not someone else’s... opinion that urges you to see it as your duty?”

“I do not require anyone else’s opinion in this particular matter. Logic clearly dictates—”

“And it can’t be wrong?” Kirk interrupts. His eyes are very intent as he looks at Spock as though waiting for him to spill the answers to every question he has ever asked. “Your logic – doesn’t it ever err? I’m not trying to offend you, I just... Don’t you ever feel like everything and everyone have conspired to make you do something, and it seems right from every logical point you can come up with, but you’re still in doubt?”

Spock narrows his eyes slightly as he looks at Kirk.

“Are we talking about me, Captain? Or your own decision to accept the captaincy of the Enterprise while having virtually no experience?”

Kirk visibly starts, then smiles very thinly. “Touché, Mr. Spock.” He picks at a slice of cheese absently. “I have my doubts.”

Spock allows his eyebrow to rise as far as it would go. “You do not make an impression of a man prone to doubting himself, Captain.”

Kirk looks up at him sharply. “That’s what you think of me, isn’t it? That I’m an overconfident, self-assured, power-obsessed bastard who revels in being the one who gives orders?”

Spock returns his gaze evenly. “I have never thought of you as such, Captain.”

Kirk smiles unpleasantly. “Never?”

Spock looks at him for another moment in silence and then drops his eyes.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Kirk looks away, his expression unreadable. “You know what? We should stop trying to deceive each other, since we both seem to be embarrassingly bad at it.”

Spock nods subtly. “Agreed. To return to your question, however. Logic cannot be wrong.” Kirk rolls his eyes. “But Vulcan people have a saying, Captain, rumored to have belonged to Surak himself. One I wish some of us would remember more often.”

“Really?” Kirk looks curious. “And what’s that?”
"Logic is the beginning of wisdom. Not the end of it."

Kirk smiles, this time without traces of sarcasm. "Elegantly put. Do you believe in that?"

Spock considers this. "Even if I did not before, I would be forced to now. I have thought about my actions as acting captain. I might have been compromised, but my decisions were logical – it was logical to rendezvous with the fleet. But had my course prevailed, Earth would have been gone. Just like Vulcan. No," Spock shakes his head very slightly, "my logic did not fail me, Captain. But it was not enough."

He cannot withstand the intensity with which Kirk is staring at him, nor his expression. He looks down at his hands clasped together on the table.

Kirk clears his throat. "I will never understand," he says, very quietly, "how you were able to – to do what you did, after... well. If it were me, I don’t think I could so much as speak in full sentences, never mind..."

Spock closes his eyes. He doesn’t want to think about it. "It is irrelevant," he says firmly. "It was not you."

"But it could be me," Kirk says grimly. "It could be me next time, and I’ll be sitting in the big chair."

Spock looks at him, and his gaze slides under the veneer of casual confidence and assumed arrogance, slices through the layers of stubbornness and fatigue, until he can see the raw, undisguised feeling beneath them.

"You are afraid." Spock speaks quietly, almost in awe.

Kirk glances at him piercingly, his lips thin and pale from the force he’s pressing them together. He seems defiant, but he doesn’t deny it.

"Wouldn’t you be?"

Blood pounds maddeningly loud at Spock’s temples as the sudden surge of vertigo rushes through him. That the proud and arrogant James T. Kirk would admit it is astounding. That he would do so to Spock of all people is unthinkable. And all Spock can think about at that moment is that it takes a very brave man to admit to his fear.

"I would be," he says. Kirk’s sincerity deserves nothing less in return. "The responsibility is enormous."

"Inconceivable," Kirk agrees. "All my life I’ve been running away from responsibility, Spock. Do you believe I can take so much of it now?"

"I have seen you do so," Spock tells him calmly. "But my opinion is of no consequence. Do you believe you can take it?"

Kirk looks at him for a long time without speaking. Then, finally, he nods, curt and devoid of any kind of bravado that always accompanies gambling.

"Yes."

Spock feels his lips twitch slightly and checks the reaction.

"That is all that matters."
They stare at each other until they become aware of it and break eye contact. They finish their drinks in silence and ask for the tab, but the waiter refuses to bring it.

“Just because no one has disturbed you, don’t think we don’t know who you are,” the man tells Kirk. “It is an honor for our establishment to have you as a guest at any time. To charge you with anything after what you have done for Earth would be sacrilege.”

Spock looks at Kirk, who seems strangely unsurprised by this turn of events.

“See, and I was gonna leave you a huge tip,” he tells the waiter. “You’d better allow me to pay.”

“No, sir.” The waiter shakes his head and even takes a step back. “Not a chance.”

“Would it be acceptable if I paid the bill?” Spock asks impassively.

The waiter looks at him. “Only if you wish to offend us, Commander Spock.”

Kirk sighs without much feeling. “Fine, whatever.” He comes to his feet. “Let’s go, Spock. I’ve been there; it’s no use.”

Spock nods to the waiter in silent apology for Kirk’s abrupt departure and follows him out. It’s almost dawn; everything around is colored in various shades of grey and glaucous. The damp, cool air crawls under Spock’s thin clothes, making him shiver.

“I take it that happened to you before?” Spock asks, joining Kirk on the sidewalk. He has to raise his voice slightly to be heard over the distant sounds of metal being slid along metal, sometimes with a bang.

“Yeah.” Kirk kicks a stone from under his feet almost angrily.

“Why are you so upset about it? They only acknowledge your service to them.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kirk says, looking even more grim. “But it’s like I’m fourteen all over again and can’t pay for a bowl of soup and have to wait till someone—” He cuts himself off abruptly.

Spock glances at him curiously. “Captain—”

Kirk looks up at Spock quickly with a smile that is as false as it is tired. “Never mind. Humans are illogical, and all that jazz. Thanks for helping me out today; I know you had better things to do and I appreciate you lending a hand. Good luck on New Vulcan.” Having fired all this as rapidly as if the words burnt his tongue, he turns on his heel and starts walking away as fast as he can without making it a run.

Spock watches him, and for some reason he’s not surprised when Kirk stops, stands still for a moment, then turns around slowly and walks back. He comes to a stop in front of Spock, looking at him almost in accusation.

“What is it about you that I just can’t—” He’s glaring at Spock, as if Spock has tricked him in some fashion. “You made me eat fish, and I enjoyed it,” Kirk mutters, addressing Spock, but clearly talking to himself. “And I would have asked you to – you know what I want to ask you.”

Spock doesn’t, but doesn’t say so. Kirk obviously isn’t done.

“But I can’t,” Kirk concludes, almost desperately. “I can’t because it’s wrong for you and probably beneath you. God knows, it’s beneath the rest of them, and they aren’t even in the same league with
you.” He shakes his head, biting his lip in frustration. “Pike thinks I’m just being stubborn, or infantile – and shouldn’t he of all people know better?”

Spock is silent still, and it’s a little surreal, as if Kirk is talking without even realizing Spock is there.

“But the thing is,” Kirk continues resolutely, looking Spock squarely in the eye. “The thing is, mostly, I’m simply afraid you’ll say ‘no’ – and I’m going to have to live with it.”

Spock becomes vaguely aware that his lungs seem to be starving for oxygen, but he can’t inhale – or look away right this moment to save his life. He doesn’t have to.

Kirk’s lips curve in a self-derogatory and at the same time defensive smile, but it only lasts a moment. A single heartbeat later, he tilts his head up, squares his shoulders and grins brightly in challenge, transforming himself on the spot into a cocky, self-assured human who doesn’t need anyone and finds the whole idea ludicrous.

“Have fun making babies,” Kirk says with a saucy wink, dragging his eyes up and down Spock in a deliberately obscene manner. In Spock’s opinion, it’s only slightly overdone. “I’ll bet you’ll be in demand.”

He slaps Spock’s shoulder with enough force to knock over anyone else, turns on his heel and leaves, whistling a cheery tune as he goes. Spock stands still, looking after him until Kirk’s silhouette blends with the murky fabric of the dozing city seamlessly and his whistling dissolves in the crude sounds of an awakening port.

Somewhere at the distance, the seagulls are crying hoarsely and a vessel announces its leaving the haven with a long low roar of an ancient horn.

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Meeting his other self is a fascinating experience. Spock has been forewarned of course of his counterpart’s existence by his experience on the _Jellyfish_, but that didn’t make the meeting any less intriguing.

The other Spock, known to most as Selek for convenience’s sake rather than for secrecy, comes off as an individual to whom Spock wouldn’t entrust a broken PADD, never mind a starship or anyone’s destiny. And yet, Spock cannot help but wonder at the confidence his counterpart is projecting, at the sense of utter peace with himself emanating from him. He seems to have the answers for every question, and although Spock knows that it’s an illusion, a skilled impression of which his other self seems to be a master, he cannot deny that it is extremely compelling.

Spock wonders if that is what made Kirk so susceptible to the other Vulcan’s arguments. The change of attitude toward Spock that had come over Kirk after his detour to Delta Vega was, barring the bridge incident, astounding. In addition, Kirk was notorious for his rebellious spirit, yet he had accepted guidance and direction from the other universe’s Spock without any resistance. Spock looks at the older Vulcan, trying to discern the reason for this abrupt change of heart.

“Spock – in this case, do yourself a favor. Put aside logic. Do what feels right.”

And that, Spock thinks, is a kind of an answer to his unvoiced question. His counterpart simply seems to have a knack for telling people what they want to hear - him telling Kirk he was meant to be captain of the _Enterprise_ probably sealed the deal. Spock knows that the other Spock must have had his reasons, because he knows himself and he always has reasons for anything.
They are, however, two very different people – that much is obvious. Their genome might coincide to the last miniscule twist of a chromosome, but everything else about them is as different as is only possible for any two persons to achieve. They are, Spock believes, a textbook example of nature versus nurture paradox.

He cannot decide if he is disappointed with the meeting or amused – only that both emotions are currently too far away from his reach. One thing he knows for certain, though.

The meeting, enlightening as it has been, hasn’t changed his mind.

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“Sit down, Commander.” Admiral Nogura gestures Spock toward a chair. His small, gleaming eyes following Spock’s every motion carefully, as if Spock is a time bomb waiting to go off.

To his left, Commodore Stocker is sitting stiffly, eyeing Spock suspiciously. Unlike Nogura, who guards his expression with a truly Vulcan diligence, the commodore’s face is an open book and at the moment, it’s opened on the page of doubt. Spock’s curiosity is piqued, and as he folds himself into a chair, he glances curtly and unobtrusively at the third person facing him and the only woman in the room, Admiral Nechayev. She is staring at him with a would-be pleasant air, but the appearance is carefully orchestrated. Spock knows immediately that she’s the most dangerous opponent in the group.

The silence grows heavy, but the only emotion Spock is experiencing under the scrutiny is mild surprise. Surely they don’t expect him to be intimidated as easily as any human in his place would be? In any case, they must know that he would show nothing.

“Commander Spock.” Admiral Nogura starts, his voice blunt and dry. “You are undoubtedly surprised at being called to this meeting only a day before you leave for the new Vulcan colony.”

As he is expected to reply, Spock lifts an eyebrow, very slightly. “I am not easily surprised, Admiral.”

“Of course.” Nogura nods, having exchanged a glance with Stocker. “But even for you, it must have been unexpected.”

“I have not anticipated it, no.”

There is another exchange of glances between the men while Nechayev continues to watch Spock with an almost girlish curiosity.

“I see here that you have filed a resignation from Starfleet effective tomorrow at oh-nine-hundred,” Nogura says and looks Spock in the eye squarely. “We invited you here to ask you to postpone that decision.”

“I see,” Spock says slowly. “May I ask for what reason?”

“You are a valuable officer,” Nogura tells him plainly. “Given the recent events, we cannot afford to lose you.”

“Indeed?” Spock raises an eyebrow, staring coldly at the admiral. “I believe I will be referring to the more recent events, Admiral, when saying that they have left me with a different impression regarding my supposed value to Starfleet.”

“Your court-martial was a mistake,” Nogura says, giving Spock a thin smile. “Surely, you of all
people should understand, Commander, that in the heat of the moment, mistakes are prone to happen. The loss of Vulcan was a hard blow to us all.”

“Undoubtedly. And every surviving Vulcan in the galaxy knows where his or her duty currently lies.”

“We understand that,” Nogura says quickly. “But have you considered that while Vulcans seclude themselves in the confines of one world, their influence on Federation politics suffers greatly? Your father understands this.”

Spock suppresses the urge to shake his head in bewilderment. The admiral keeps playing all the wrong cards.

“Sir, if I lived my life according to my father’s beliefs, I would not have enlisted in Starfleet in the first place.”

Nechayev gives Nogura a sideways glance - pitying and superior at the same time - before resuming her silent observation of Spock.

“Quite so,” Nogura agrees. “The thing is, we have a job for you, Mr. Spock. A service you alone can render.”

Spock allows his eyebrows to arch slightly. “The position must be unique.”

“It is,” Nogura drawls tartly. “It is, in fact, the position you’re currently resigning from. First officer of the USS Enterprise.”

“I find it difficult to believe that you do not have another candidate for this position.”

“It’s not that simple.” Nogura folds his arms over his chest. “James Kirk is a very talented young man, but highly inexperienced. He has not filed a single hour of starship duty as an officer. Giving him command of a flagship was, in my view, premature at best. But what’s done is done. I cannot cancel this decision without appropriate grounds. As first officer, it will be your duty to monitor the captain’s actions. Given the unusual circumstances, the Enterprise’s XO will submit reports on the captain’s performance. This person should not only watch for any signs of incompetence on Kirk’s part, but relieve him of duty before the disaster could happen. A lot of young men and women had died in the Nero’s attack. We can’t afford to lose more due to Kirk’s shortcomings.”

“We are discussing the same man who saved this planet from sharing the fate of Vulcan?” Spock asks for clarification.

Nogura grits his teeth. “One stroke of inspiration doesn’t make him a good commander. He’s just a boy who, among other things, had mutinied against you.”

“If you believe that I would be tempted by the prospect of revenge—”

“Wouldn’t you rather be in command of the Enterprise?” Stocker asks sharply. “Honestly, I’d rather see a Vulcan at the helm than a hero’s son with half-baked ambitions. Clearly the flair for the dramatics is a Kirk family trait.”

Spock cannot quite explain the flash of cold anger rushing through him at these words, but he very carefully turns his eyes from the commodore back to Nogura.

“I am not the right candidate for the position, Admiral,” Spock says evenly. “Vulcans make poor spies and even poorer conspirators. I regret that I have wasted your time. If that is all?”
The expression on Nogura’s face states clearly that he isn’t used to being defied so openly. He frowns.

“Take some time to think it over, Commander,” he says, shooting a dark glance at Stocker. “I will expect your decision by oh-eight-hundred tomorrow. Dismissed.”

Spock doesn’t waste any time leaving the office. He can’t understand what had him so riled up, but despite his external calm, he all but shakes with icy fury on the inside.

“Commander Spock!”

Spock stops, looking back to see Admiral Nechayev walking quickly to catch up with him.

“A word, if you please,” she orders more than asks. Sliding a hand around his arm, she pulls him aside.

She is a petite, well-proportioned woman, with blond hair framing her face playfully in sharp contrast with the cold expression in her light grey eyes. She is the kind of a person little children and animals distrust on sight despite her ready smile and pockets full of candy. She is rumored to be raising a daughter alone, but Spock has never met anyone who looks less like a mother than Arina Nechayev.

“Take the job,” she tells him the moment they stop in a deserted intersection.

“Admiral, as I have already stated—”

“Yes, I heard you loud and clear, Commander,” she snaps, quietly but impatiently. “Now you listen to me. Nogura wants Kirk out of the captain’s chair the sooner the better.”

Spock purses his lips. “I have been able to gather that much,” he informs her dryly.

“Yes, I heard you loud and clear, Commander,” she snarls, impatiently. “Now you listen to me. Nogura wants Kirk out of the captain’s chair the sooner the better.”

Spock purses his lips. “I have been able to gather that much,” he informs her dryly.

“Really? Then here’s something else for you to gather. He’ll get what he wants.”

“I am by no means interested in assisting him.”

Nechayev ignores him. “Kirk will be out of the job within a month, maybe two, if you don’t take this offer.”

“Why?”

“Because Nogura’s right. Kirk’s an inexperienced kid, and before you throw another he-saved-the-planet tantrum, try to actually think about it. They say the kid’s got a ton of talent and maybe they’re right; we have proof at hand, after all. But that’s not going to matter. There isn’t a single officer in the fleet who’ll accept Kirk’s authority as captain if they’re appointed the XO. Not a single one. You know I’m right, dammit.”

Spock is reluctant to admit it, but he does see her point. He can certainly see how more experienced officers would find the task difficult. *Humans and their ambitions.*

“Kirk may be a tactical genius, but he doesn’t have the first clue about how to run a starship,” Nechayev continues. “Those little things that are picked up by people like you and me as we progress in rank year after year? All Kirk’s got here is theory.”

“He is a fast learner.”

She glares at him. “Whoever’s appointed his XO is not going to wait for him to learn. They aren’t going to help him or support him. Every mistake he makes will be deemed incompetence and
reported immediately to this office.” She nods her head in the direction they have just come from. “And he is going to make mistakes. He’s not a machine, Commander.”

For the first time during the past hour, Spock feels hesitant. “You seem to believe that I can make a difference.”

She studies him for a long moment before speaking. “As someone who’s been there when Kirk took command, you’re less skeptical about him. As a Vulcan, you are objective and truthful to the core. Don’t you see, Mr. Spock? With you in this position, Kirk stands a chance to retain his command – a chance no one else would give him. If he really proves incompetent, you’ll report it, and Nogura’s right, you’ll be able to take over before anything really bad happens. But if he shows that, unlike his daddy, he’s capable of more than one heroic action per lifetime, Starfleet is going to need him right where he is, regardless of Admiral Nogura’s opinion. Starfleet has always been bigger than any one person.” She looks him directly in the eye. “Do you understand me, Commander?”

Spock holds her gaze steadily. “I believe I do.”

“I believe you do, too.” She nods briskly. “We’ll expect your decision by tomorrow morning. Make the right one.” She turns on her heel abruptly and leaves.

Spock watches her go for a long time before resuming his walk out of Starfleet Headquarters.

It’s a bright cloudless day outside, and Spock tilts his face involuntarily toward the sky, reveling in the way the sun and the wind caress his skin. It occurs to him suddenly that this simple pleasure is one that life aboard a starship seldom provides. Spock frowns at the blazing azure dome.

He thinks about James Kirk, whom he hasn’t seen since they parted ways in Liverpool a week ago. Thinks about the enthusiasm and devotion he exhibited while handling the repairs of his ship; about the responsibility Kirk felt he was ready to take.

‘You are afraid.’

‘Wouldn’t you be?’

Suddenly, Spock realizes that his decision has long been made. It’s not about the good of the service, and not even about justice. It’s about the sudden leap of faith in Kirk’s eyes when he looked at Spock. It’s about ‘I’m coming with you’ and ‘I’ve got you.’ It’s about the court-martial and that treacherous, sneaky sense of steel-melting gratitude that Spock doesn’t have to feel, doesn’t want to feel, and yet feels all the same.

He closes his eyes for a moment. He is in deep, deep trouble where James Kirk is concerned. Compromised doesn’t quite begin to cover it. He knows full well that if he has so much as an ounce of self-preservation instinct left, he must turn tail and run for his life. Literally.

‘Spock. It’ll work.’

Spock grits his teeth and stifles a groan. He has never hated James Kirk more than he does at this very moment. The impossible, unfathomable, infuriating human seems to have turned Spock’s destiny into one of ultimate surrender, and it’s not fair. Not fair at all.

Spock sighs and reaches for his communicator to place a call to Admiral Nogura’s office.
End of Part III
Part IV

6 months ago - Present time

‘Enterprise, we need a beam-out yesterday!’

The desperate words echo in Spock’s mind as he grips the sharp edges of the frozen rock, shifting his weight carefully and blinking rapidly in the icy wind. He can certainly sympathize with the sentiment now, as he tears his hands away from the ledge, one finger at a time, and leaves strips of his own skin as payment. The ledge is only one-point-two meters wide, and Spock needs to hold on, fighting with all his might against the cutting wind. Eight-point-three kilometers to the surface is too far to safely fall, should his hands let go.

It should not surprise Spock that the transporter booster’s magnetic seal activated on the very edge of the mountain ridge, just outside his reach. On the other hand, had it fallen down, he wouldn’t have had any hope of transporting either himself or the landing party deep down below him to the safety of the ship.

Slowly, he maneuvers himself closer to the device, which is pulsing with disquieting orange glow as it struggles to find the right frequency. It fails, time after time. Spock suppresses a sigh, gripping the sharp ridge of the rock with his knees, because he needs both of his hands now. Chekov had hoped that the booster would be able to operate independently, despite the crushing interference, but both Spock and Scott were under no delusions.

He is not wearing an EV suit, which would have hindered his motions. Nor does he wear any gloves, because it’s vital that his hands can be as flexible as possible to handle the delicate piece of equipment. There is nothing in his entire world right now other than wind, snow, and cold, and the distant sense of desperation sinking deeper with each labored breath because he might be too late.

Figures appear on the small screen, changing rapidly, and Spock knows that even one distraction will cost him the success of the mission and quite possibly the lives of the landing party. His mind is working feverishly, remembering, calculating, comparing, as he punches the commands in with numb fingers. Wide purple circles splash before his eyes, and he forces himself to concentrate with every ounce of will he has.

The booster blinks one last time, and the light turns green.

Spock would have sighed with relief, but every inhalation is painful, and he tries to take shallower breaths. He spent his youth conquering the Vulcan Forge; the violent nature of mountains should be well familiar. He curls into himself, trying to shield his face, his muscles rigid with cold and tension.

All he can do now is wait; he left Scott strict orders to beam up the landing party first. Indeed, the fact that Doctor McCoy has become the first serious casualty of their four-weeks-old mission is nothing but an example of the universe’s twisted sense of irony.

They started with routine check-ups of mining colonies of Fendara system, which went exceptionally well until the final round. Three miners were reported missing on one of the outer moons, and since beaming directly to the site proved impossible, Captain Kirk opted to send down a shuttle.
The hard stare Kirk had sent Spock’s way made Spock immediately forsake any arguments he might have had against the captain leading the mission. Their interaction remained tense, and Spock chose not to antagonize Kirk further over an unimportant matter.

He has regretted that decision many times since.

From the moment the distress call from the landing party had first reached them, there was nothing but a frenzied brainstorm on the bridge. Vague communications, reports of a crash, and grave injuries sustained by the Chief Medical Officer were all they had received. Spock had called an immediate briefing on the matter, which had produced nothing, save more frustration.

They could not send down another shuttle, and the transporters were useless. That was when Scott had said, ‘Too bad it’s not the sea; we coulda used lifeboat grid search.’ Vaguely familiar with nautical terms, Spock had asked him to clarify, and before Scott’s explanation was through, Spock was issuing orders.

They formed a chain in the end: the Enterprise; the shuttle grazing the atmosphere and maintaining a shaky orbit just outside the danger zone; and the landing party of one, which they calculated they should be able to beam down from the shuttle to the highest available spot in the supposed crash area. They didn’t know if the booster signal would be enough, or if they would be able to beam up anyone, including Spock, but they had to risk it.

Seconds or centuries slip by; Spock doesn’t know. He is still hanging, and while the situation is familiar – he has been in tight spots before – it is also new, because it’s always new; because being at the edge of dying doesn’t get old so quickly, and it will take many more times before it does, assuming he survives this one. Spock is holding on, thinking that his work has been anything but satisfactory during the last four weeks, and that if his plan fails to extract the captain and the landing party, he probably shouldn’t be rescued, either.

He cannot feel his feet, and the sharp pain in his hands has receded to a dumb pulse, faint and at the periphery of his perception. He waits. He does not know how to pray, and reflects on his own lack of faith in anything, unable to decide if it is regrettable or not.

He hasn’t reached a conclusion as the transporter beam finally seizes him.

The transporter room materializes around him slowly, and Spock blinks several times, overwhelmed by the sudden rush of warm air around him and the disappearance of wind. It is nothing short of a relief to draw in a breath that doesn’t threaten to tear his lungs to pieces, and for a few moments, breathing is all he can do. Then the reality storms in, in the form of the transporter technician asking if Spock is all right.

Spock pushes himself up on feet that he can barely feel and nods to the man who is eyeing him warily.

“The landing party?” Spock asks, surprised at how hoarse his voice sounds.

“They’re aboard, sir,” the technician reports with definite relief. “Doctor McCoy is in critical condition. He’s been taken to Med Bay.”

“The miners?”

“They are...” The ensign looks down for a moment. “That is... We retrieved the bodies.”

“I see,” Spock says. He is cradling his hands to his chest without noticing. Catching the technician’s gaze, Spock forces himself to assume a more relaxed pose. “Thank you, Ensign. Your work has
been satisfactory.”

The young man grins brightly, wariness draining out of him, as Spock turns to go. “Thank you, sir!”

Spock walks out without acknowledging the exuberant exclamation, but makes a mental note that, unlike most crewmembers so far, the ensign seems to realize that, considering the source, Spock’s words have indeed been high praise.

Spock heads for Med Bay, knowing that, at the moment, there are no urgent orders to be given that he knows of, and, if there were, the captain would have taken care of them by now. They might have had a difficult four weeks, but Kirk’s personal efficiency had never been in question.

Med Bay is a tornado of activity and Spock freezes momentarily in the doorway, fighting the urge to stay out of the way. He feels like an intruder in this kingdom of sterility and efficiency, with its bluish towers of equipment and crisp white army of nurses.

Despite his wide exposure to the world of human medicine, Spock has never felt particularly at ease in a medical facility. The year he had spent working for Federation Security and ending up in the cold, impersonal efficiency of the hospital that treated nameless patients like him after almost every assignment might have had more of an effect on him than he had originally suspected.

He spots Kirk standing in front of a huge Plexiglas window separating the emergency room from the rest of Med Bay – a transparent barrier between doctors and patients, and sometimes between life and death. Spock walks over, forgetting his own injuries for the moment, eyes glued to the team of surgeons and nurses working frantically on the outstretched figure on the table. For a moment, it seems to Spock that he is seeing a peculiar live painting. There is too much crimson on it for his liking.

“What is the prognosis?” Spock asks quietly, folding his hands behind his back as he comes to a stop beside Kirk.

The captain winces in surprise. He glances at Spock, his lips a desperately thin line of angry white.

“What do you think it is?” Kirk lashes out angrily. “It’ll be a miracle if he makes it.”

It has been a long day coming at the end of a long four weeks, and Kirk’s emotions are a forceful pressure against Spock’s shields. He seeks for a way to weaken it. Perhaps a change of subject?

“As I understand it, there was no malfunction of the shuttle’s systems,” Spock starts carefully, but Kirk snaps, whirling on his heel to face him.

“Yeah, no; I’m not interested in one hundred and one things I’ve done wrong to make this happen. I know you told me that landing would be difficult and I went and did it anyway, and now my best friend is dying, and this is all my fault – I get that, Commander! I hope you’re happy for being smarter than the rest of us; now you can go and gloat somewhere out of my sight!” Kirk’s eyes narrow even further as he hisses, “I’m sure this’ll look pretty in those sweet little reports you’re sending out.”

For a moment, Spock simply stands speechless, staring into the stormy blue eyes that seem to be all the more furious for lacking real firepower to incinerate him on sight. Then Kirk’s expression changes imperceptibly, his lips curving in what is probably disgust, and he turns away, back toward the glass, intent on ignoring Spock’s existence.

Spock finally remembers how to walk and moves away, only now becoming painfully aware of all the eyes following his progress and the hushed whispers trailing after him. His mind is so completely
devoid of thought that it comes as a surprise for him when someone blocks his way. Startled, Spock lifts his eyes to see Nurse Chapel.

“I don’t think so,” she says sternly, eyeing the hands that he is once more cradling to his chest. “Come with me.”

Spock goes without a fight. He is silent throughout the procedure, except when he refuses the anesthetic. His hands hurt, but, strangely, not as much as the level of injuries would suggest. Spock contemplates this dichotomy faintly, feeling oddly numb, as he watches Chapel apply layer upon layer of bandages after the regenerator has done its work. The nurse is being so thorough that when she has finally finished, Spock’s hands resemble the appendages of a stuffed teddy bear someone once left at his office at the Academy.

Spock nods at the woman vaguely and turns to go. Out of the corner of his eye, he thinks he sees Kirk watching him. Spock doesn’t stop to test the hypothesis.

Kirk’s reaction, while emotional and irrational, is not unexpected, Spock muses grimly. Despite the daunting number of conversations and interactions Spock had with the captain in the last four weeks, they are clearly not communicating. Which means – Spock’s mouth tightens painfully at the thought – that Spock is not doing his job.

The discord started almost immediately after they launched from Earth. Spock believed himself to be prepared for the fact that Kirk would obviously have a very different style of command than any other captain Spock knew, but he wasn’t ready for the maelstrom that was unleashed onboard the moment they broke orbit.

Kirk was unpredictable. He would work on the bridge, diligently going through all the strategic updates and intelligence reviews Starfleet sent them, before suddenly bolting to Engineering or Maintenance or Life Science for an unscheduled inspection effectively stalling the normal working process, creating utter confusion for department heads with requests for modifications they had never heard of.

Kirk would then pick up on his abandoned paperwork, only to be found half an hour later in the catwalk of one of the nacelles, checking on their status personally because ‘the hum of the engines seemed wrong.’ Satisfied with the sounds now, he would round up the first three crewmembers he met on his way to the mess and ask them to demonstrate their hand-to-hand combat technique. He would inevitably find it lacking, and order the crewmembers in question to report to the gym immediately for a surprise training session.

Forgetting his meal, he would sneak into the galley, steal whatever piece of fruit he could find, and munch on it as he hovered beside a lab technician who would stutter through an explanation of the last experiment the team was engaged in. The first time Spock spotted the captain in the lab resulted in an entirely too loud a confrontation for Spock’s tastes.

The night shift crew would look pale and wrung out in the morning because the captain would surprise them with a simulated attack of unknown enemy vessels which he would project directly into the viewscreen, isolating the bridge covertly beforehand. As no-win scenarios went, the test was elementary, but the sheer level of relief that emanated from the night shift bridge crew when Spock walked in once, during the simulation was overwhelming and telltale.

In short, Kirk bounced all over the ship like a particularly troubled ping-pong ball, and the general level of chaos he was creating was, in Spock’s opinion, counterproductive to the point of being performance-hindering.
Yet every time Spock tried to voice his objections, he was either ignored or overruled. Kirk’s irritation with his exec was growing exponentially at an alarming rate, and Spock has very nearly lost count of the number of arguments they had.

‘Doesn’t it bother you that you two are the only ones who showed up on time?’ Kirk threw in his face when Spock objected to an ill-designed nighttime drill. Nyota sighed her indignation, but said nothing. Spock, on the other hand, positively longed to remind Kirk that crew evaluations should not happen in front of the same – and very bewildered – crew. But criticizing the captain in front of them was equally unthinkable, and so Spock said nothing on the subject as well.

‘I’m not sure how to take it anymore,’ Nyota complained, retrieving tea for them both after Kirk dismissed them. ‘Did you know he put Communications on the Delta-shift rotation?’

No, Spock did not know, because the last time Kirk had brought the possibility up, Spock believed he was very clear in pointing out how illogical and confusing it would be to have one department change to shifts different from the others. Apparently, his argument only served for the decision to be made without him.

‘Last night, Ensign Davis asked me if she was supposed to remain with the interpreters or go to Engineering for her cross-training. She seemed to have a three hour overlap.’ Nyota frowned into her cup, as if willing the liquid to boil. ‘I didn’t know what to tell her. Didn’t want her to get a reprimand.’

Spock frowned, too, discovering that Kirk had gone over his head with his own cross-training program as well without heeding Spock’s advice. When he glanced up, he found Nyota looking at him determinedly.

‘Talk to him again,’ she said in a tone that had little patience. ‘Because if a mutiny breaks out tomorrow, I’m not sure that I won’t be leading it.’

Spock knew she was right, but he was not optimistic about the outcome of the conversation. So far, he seemed to be unable to find a way to make Kirk listen. Never did Spock find his own communication skills so lacking as at that moment.

The captain scowled at him the moment the door of the ready room closed behind Spock and he announced the agenda for the discussion.

‘Have you seen their efficiency ratings, Spock?’ Kirk didn’t hide his frustration. ‘Honestly, I always knew our training at the Academy was a bit of a joke, but to this extent?’

‘Captain.’ Spock paused, searching for words. ‘You are expecting an unreasonably high level of efficiency over a significantly short period of time. The crew has not been allowed time to integrate with their new environment and settle into a working routine.

Kirk glanced at him in a way that made Spock feel like he had given the captain a huge disappointment.

‘I don’t want them to settle into a routine, Mr. Spock. We don’t have time to wait until everyone’s cozy and comfortable enough to do their jobs. For God’s sake, you read the same intel reports I do.’

Spock raised an eyebrow at the urgency that colored Kirk’s voice. ‘To the best of my knowledge, we are not currently at war, sir.’

‘We weren’t at war when Nero happened, either,’ Kirk snapped. ‘Did you appreciate Starfleet’s response to a sudden threat?’
Spock pursed his lips and said nothing.

‘Yeah.’ Kirk nodded briskly. ‘I didn’t think so. We weren’t ready then, and we aren’t ready now. Jesus; these kids haven’t got a clue.’ He sighed and ran a hand over his face. ‘I don’t have time to mollycoddle them until they get the first idea. We don’t have that kind of luxury.’

‘Captain.’ Spock hesitated, collecting himself. ‘While your goal is commendable, I am forced to point out that the methods by which you are attempting to achieve it are inefficient and inducing an undue level of stress which does not serve to attain a positive result.’

‘Really?’ Kirk tilted his head, a blush beginning to color his cheeks. The thin smile stretching his lips was anything but pleasant. ‘And your methods are better? I’m sorry, it must have slipped my mind, but what exactly have you suggested to get us there?’

Spock folded his hands behind his back, standing a little straighter. He knew his words would not fall into receptive ears, but he believed in what he was saying.

‘I suggest we follow the guidelines used by Starfleet successfully for over fifty years now,’ Spock said, disregarding the eyeroll Kirk sent him. ‘As any military organization in history, Starfleet is a system. It might have its flaws, however—’

‘You think?’ Kirk cut him off sarcastically. ‘You’re right, Mr. Spock, Starfleet is all about regulations, traditions, and history. It is a system. A system that failed to prevent the destruction of one of the founding members of the Federation.’ Kirk’s eyes locked on Spock’s as he said very clearly and pointedly, ‘A system that produces commanding officers, competent to the gills, who fail to make the correct decision when it’s staring them in the face, Commander.’

There was no second way to interpret that, and Spock forced himself to remain still, taking the blow. Kirk stared at him in unmistakable challenge, but it was the one that Spock had already lost some time ago.

‘This system,’ he said quietly, ‘has also produced officers like Admiral Pike, your father, and yourself, Captain.’

Kirk blinked in surprise.

‘It might have its flaws,’ Spock repeated with conviction. ‘And I will be the first among those wishing to correct them. But destroying any semblance of order and throwing us into chaos cannot achieve this. Not everything has to go. Not every rule and regulation is illogical or redundant. You have an abundance of will, Captain, but you must also exercise wisdom and patience.’ Spock took a deep breath. ‘Assuming you are capable of the latter.’

Kirk’s incredulous expression had hardened into stone. ‘Right,’ he grit out. ‘Any other pointers, or are you done lecturing me for the day?’

Spock suppressed a sigh. ‘Captain—’

‘I want your recommendations by oh-eight-hundred tomorrow,’ Kirk interrupted him curtly. ‘I’ll try to refrain from being any more inefficient until then. Dismissed.’

Spock had no choice but to comply.

The conversation had taken place the night before. While Spock had summarized his views on the matter, the normal course of the Alpha shift was interrupted by the planet fall this morning, and Spock hasn’t found out yet if Kirk had read the proposal.
Spock frowns slightly, thinking about it, as he sits in the mostly deserted officers’ mess with a bowl of soup in front of him. Holding a spoon proves to be a challenge, and Spock regrets his inability to foresee this and request the dish in a cup instead.

This is not to say that he is hungry. Kirk was right about one other thing: Spock does have a report to write. And at this point, he has no choice but to admit that he has no idea of how to write it.

He retires to his quarters for meditation, not expecting it to bring him the inspiration he requires, but hoping, vaguely, for some clarity.

That the responsibility for their hectic take off is his and his alone, Spock doesn’t doubt in the slightest. He is the executive officer. By definition, his job is to see to the captain’s orders being followed and the goals the captain sets being achieved. Spock had failed to not only discern the motive behind Kirk’s ostensibly erratic activity, but even the existence of such. And that motive, when presented, was not only clear, but also logical to boot.

The habitual nature of meditation seems to calm him somewhat, but he is apparently too distracted to reach the deeper stages that would reveal the reasons for his actions to himself. Spock misses the moment when he stops trying to concentrate and simply stares out the viewport of his room, sitting on his knees and watching the stars twinkle softly.

When the door to his quarters slides open, Spock doesn’t stand up or even turn around. He is aware of the intruder, but has apparently exhausted his emotional resources for the day to react in any way. He isn’t surprised when Kirk lowers himself to the deck beside Spock – not because he has expected any such thing, but because he’s too tired to be surprised.

The silence stretches.

“When I was in my second year at the Academy,” the captain says quietly, without preamble, “I was sent to a survival training course to Europa. Icy wasteland and volcanoes—” His lips twitch. “What better place to build a training camp.”

Spock doesn’t comment. He knows both the facility and the routine. It is considered one of the most vigorous in Starfleet.

“There was an accident,” Kirk continues in a flat tone. “One of my team was injured. I tried to get him out of there, but I slipped and fell into the river. You know how fast those things get there.” Kirk shakes his head. “It dragged me under the ice for four hundred meters in seconds before I managed to break out. Wasn’t pretty.”

Spock glances at him sideways. “It is a miracle that you survived.”

“Yeah,” Kirk says, his voice even and indifferent. “I almost didn’t. When I got back to the camp, I was hardly breathing. Managed to break my arm in three places and my collarbone, too.”

Spock watches his face, so young and flawless, and he is unable to look away. Kirk turns his head slowly and meets his eyes.

“I was in the infirmary for three weeks; lung regeneration sucks, I gotta tell you, and I was having such wonderful nightmares.” He stops, glancing away for a moment, teeth worrying his lower lip.

“Bones was with me every minute of every day,” Kirk looks up at Spock again. “He skipped all of his classes, even though it meant no sleep for him for half a year to come or so. He bullied the medical staff to see to my every whim.” Kirk smirks unhappily. “I’m allergic to most painkillers. He let me hold his arm through every procedure. I didn’t break it, but he had bruises for weeks
Kirk is sitting on his knees, shoulders slumped and hands folded in his lap carelessly. Spock watches him as he watches the stars slip by.

“Much as your confidence honors me, Captain,” Spock says cautiously at last, “why are you telling me this?”

Kirk glances at him briefly, pursing his lips. “I’m not a big fan of apologies, Mr. Spock. I don’t think you are one, either.”

“And this is—?”


“No.” Spock pauses. “But understandable.”

Kirk snorts quietly, more of a fatigued exhale than an expression of mirth. Then, they are adrift in silence, neither apparently knowing what to say.

“Was the surgery successful?” Spock asks at last.

“Yes.” Kirk nods. “He’s going to make a full recovery.”

They lapse into another silence, and then—

“I thought I lost him today,” Kirk’s voice falls to a whisper. “And I couldn’t... I’ve never faced death before.” His swallow is audible in the stillness. “Not like this.”

Something tightens in Spock’s chest, creeping up on him through the veil of his numbness. He wants to do something, but cannot think of what.

“Scotty told me about your rescue plan,” Kirk says, in a calmer voice. “And I realized that we nearly lost you, too.”

“An acceptable risk.”

Kirk looks at him with an unreadable expression.

“See, this” – the captain makes a vague gesture with his hand – “is not working. And we need to fix it. Ideally, yesterday, but I would take right now, if that’s the best we can do.”

“Forgive me, Captain.” Spock peers down at his hands. “I have not been doing my job.”

“True,” Kirk says, laying a hand on Spock’s shoulder. “But I haven’t been letting you do it.”

Spock lifts his head. “Have you reviewed—”

“Your recommendations? Yes.” Kirk smiles at him, and for the first time since Spock set foot aboard the ship, he sees genuine warmth in Kirk’s eyes, directed at him. “You’re way more pedantic than I gave you credit for, Mr. Spock. But I think I like it.”

Spock waits. Kirk’s smile fades a little, but it’s fatigue, not rejection, and as his hand slides off Spock’s shoulder, it feels almost reassuring.

“Let’s talk about it,” Kirk suggests. “You make a lot of valid points I’m willing to take, and I have to
Spock lifts an eyebrow. “That is because you designed yours having yourself in mind, Captain. You failed to take into account that your reaction time is considerably shorter than that of an average Academy graduate, and your personal ability to attain and retain new information and skills requires far fewer repetitions. It was shortsighted to expect the same of others, without taking into account their personal qualities.”

Kirk glances at him sideways. “I’m not sure, but I think I was actually praised in there somewhere. Hard to tell with all the criticism.”

“If you were looking for a ‘yes-man’ as your first officer, you should not have accepted me.”

Kirk huffs a surprised laugh. “No, Mr. Spock. A yes-man, you certainly aren’t.”

Spock doesn’t comment. Kirk draws in a breath, sobering.

“There’re some things I believe we should do differently, though,” he muses. “ Mostly, the thing is – I don’t think I can be the captain you seem to want me to be. I realize that I probably shouldn’t breathe down people’s necks as much as I seem to be doing, but I can’t stay all distant and aloof, either. I know where you’re coming from,” Kirk says sincerely. “You want me to concentrate on decision-making. It’s logical and reasonable, I agree, but where it might have worked great for Pike – it won’t work for me.”

Spock catches Kirk’s reflection in the dark glass, watching the human struggling for the right words.

“Spock, I was sharing a classroom with these people just yesterday,” Kirk says at last. “I need to prove to them that I can be their leader. Need to prove it to myself, too. I need to live their life; I need to stand side by side with them. Then I’ll have the right – morally, at least – to be giving them orders.”

He looks at Spock determinedly. “I don’t want to be their captain by rank alone.”

Spock reflects on his words for a moment, and it’s suddenly so easy to understand what Kirk is trying to say that Spock is almost at a loss at how it has been possible for him to not see it before. He quirks an eyebrow at Kirk, who is watching him warily.

“Are you familiar with the concept of the Round Table, Captain?” Spock asks, aiming for nonchalance.

Kirk blinks once and then grins, a mixture of disbelief and delight in his gaze.

“Will you help me build one?”

Spock responds in kind. “Will you trust me to help you?” he asks, and, seized by a strange impulse, reaches out toward Kirk with his hand.

Kirk’s eyes widen slightly, and he reaches back slowly, as though moving underwater. But when his fingers close around Spock’s forearm just shy of his bandaged wrist, his hold is strong and certain, and matches Spock’s own.
Humans have a tendency to anthropomorphize inanimate objects, and if the *Enterprise* had truly been alive, the jolt of the unknown energy hitting it would have counted as a knockdown.

Spock picks himself up from the deck, which is still trembling in the aftershocks. He blinks several times, adjusting to the sparse emergency lights, and looks around.

People are groaning all over the bridge, splayed on the deck and their stations. Nyota is the closest one to Spock; he reaches for her.

“’m fine,” she mumbles, uncharacteristically inarticulate, and the grip of her hands on his arms is weak as he hauls her upright and to her chair.

“Can someone get me a damage report?” Kirk asks, coughing. He’s standing next to his chair, leaning on it and checking controls that appear to be dead. Spock backs to his own station, which shows no signs of life whatsoever.

“Helm’s dead,” Spock hears Sulu say in frustration.

“My console is fried,” Chekov complains, sounding almost petulant.

“Spock?” Kirk turns to him, revealing a reddish mark high on his cheek from where his face must have encountered some hard surface. Spock is already moving along the bridge, opening several panels and checking the systems for life signs.

“We appear to be completely devoid of energy, Captain,” Spock says, walking over to Kirk. “The engines must be down.”

“Obviously,” Kirk agrees dryly, tapping his foot in emphasis of the familiar, now-lacking hum the engines are usually making. “Uhura—”

“I can’t reach Engineering, Captain.” She shakes her head angrily, pulling her earpiece out and dumping it on her console almost in disgust. “Or any other department. The intercom’s down.”

“That’s not all.” Sulu is standing next to the turbolift doors, which, despite his proximity, remain shut. “We seem to be locked in.”

“Spock.” Kirk turns to him, hands on his hips with a tight frown creasing his forehead. “Just before we were hit, you said something about an anomalous reading?”

“Correct.” Spock nods. “An unidentified energy field, which our sensors were unable to penetrate.”

“Could it have been a hostile ship?”


“Right.” Kirk purses his lips. “If anyone’s alive in Engineering, they might need help. Get down there; use the Jeffries tubes. See if you can help Scotty bring our systems back online. Mr. Sulu and I will take another route and try to find out what the hell’s going on, and round up some security if we can.”

“Understood.”

“Captain,” Nyota calls, coming closer. “Request permission to join the commander. The communications center is down, but I might be able to set up an emergency generator so that we can at least use our communicators.”
“Good idea.” Kirk nods at her. “You’re with Spock, then.” He looks over the bridge at large. “I want everyone to arm themselves. We don’t know what we’re dealing with, and until we do, this is Condition Black. Is that clear?”

A chorus of “Aye, sir” runs along the bridge while people retrieve hand phasers and communicators.

“Chekov, you have the conn,” Kirk says, clasping his own belt. “Spock, get me an update if you can. If not, it’s SOP.”

“Understood, sir.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

Spock crawls down under the spare science station console at the back of the bridge to remove the hatch covering the Jeffries tube’s entrance. He has ten decks to climb down to reach Engineering; Nyota has six.

But four decks down, they discover they can go no further. The doors of the tube stay completely immune to the mechanical command, Spock’s strength, or magnetic sealers.

“Looks like it’s glued,” Nyota whispers. Spock can feel the heightened level of nervousness emanating from her, but she is keeping it tightly lidded.

“We must exit here,” he tells her lowly, moving into the side tunnel. “There is another entrance at the next intersection of the deck.”

They barely have the time to straighten up in the ominously silent darkness of Deck Four before they are fired upon.

Spock jumps, taking Nyota with him, and they roll across the floor, illuminated by the sizzling white blasts ripping the air. They can’t afford to stop, not even for a moment. Spock’s training and instincts kick in, and, in the midst of his chaotic movement, he realizes that all of the fire is coming from one direction. He pushes Nyota to the opposite side of the corridor, and they both take cover behind the barely concealing ridges of the doorways before returning fire.

“Three shooters,” Spock shouts to Nyota, using an obscure Tellarite dialect in the hopes of confusing their opponents. “Get to Jeffries tube 34 and proceed as planned. I will cover you.”

He can’t spare a moment to look at her in the vastness of the firefight, but he can feel her eyes on him even as her phaser sends out another blast. He knows she’s reluctant to leave him.

“That’s an order, Lieutenant!”

“Yes, sir.” She bristles and fires a rapid sequence into the blackness of the corridor, clearing it up for the few seconds she needs for the jump.

It helps that either she or Spock manage to hit the invisible target just as Nyota dives from her cover. Spock anticipates her move, rolling over and pushing the recovering time of his phaser to the limit and drowning the passageway in fire. Jeffries tube 34 is just around the corner; Spock hears the cover being removed in record time and ducks to the side, assuming Nyota’s previous position and not letting himself be swept over with relief.

Spock concentrates, trying to calculate the pattern in the rapid change of positions and angles the enemy fire is coming from. On his third attempt, he manages to hit a second shooter and, after a few moments, he realizes that the third hostile is retreating, shooting back occasionally to cover his
movements.

Quickly, Spock runs forward, kneeling beside the splayed aliens, trying to see what they look like in the narrow bluish beam of his flashlight.

Humanoid and bipedal, with ebonite-black skin that seems to be naturally wet and resembles tar. The bodies aren’t covered in clothes, but there is a peculiar net of blue and green specks dotting their skin, connected by silvery lines. Spock reasons that they are probably shorter than an average human or Vulcan, but he believes their mass to be exceeding in two, perhaps three times that. These are most certainly representatives of a previously unknown race.

Knowing that any further examination will have to wait until they retake the ship, Spock hurries over to another Jeffries tube, risking a bit of extra distance to get a shortcut to Engineering.

He’s ambushed just as he rounds the corner. There are two of them, and for some reason they don’t fire, tackling Spock to the deck instead. He tries to evade them, but he was right about their mass, and feels his ribs scream as one of the aliens lands on top of him. Spock’s phaser scatters into the darkness and out of reach, his arms moving automatically to defend his head against a series of heavy blows.

Spock knows nothing about his opponents’ anatomy, but several seconds of fierce struggle empower him with the knowledge that he is quicker, but their blows are deadlier. He tries to apply the nerve pinch, which results in a deafening shout of pain and an outburst of berserk fury from his opponent, but not even a hint of nearing unconsciousness.

The alien slams Spock against the door, knocking the wind out of him and illuminating Spock’s vision in a manner that Spock is certain has nothing to do with external lighting. Unexpectedly, the door behind Spock’s back rolls open, much slower than it normally would but too fast still for Spock’s attackers, who aren’t quick enough to prevent him from being pulled inside.

“Commander?” a tiny, surprised voice says, as the door slams shut without obstruction. Spock recognizes the voice of a junior communications officer on Nyota’s team.

“Ensign Sano,” he greets, attempting to catch his breath. His body protests loudly as he sits up, but Spock ignores it.

“What’s going on?” Sano asks, kneeling beside him. “Oh my God, you’re hurt—”

“Irrelevant at the moment.” Spock pulls away from her hands, which have been trying to ascertain his status, clumsy in the semi-darkness. “We have been boarded; that is all I can tell you. I need to get to Engineering.”

There’s a nervous chuckle. “Well, it’s just a wild guess, but I think the big guys from behind the door might have a problem with that.”

Spock winces. “The situation is serious and does not call for inappropriate commentary, Ensign.”

Her face flushes and she backs off. “Sorry, sir.”

Spock gets to his feet, one arm wrapped protectively around his ribcage. The pain is sharp, but steady, and therefore manageable.

“I will have to use the ventilation grid,” Spock says, staring at the ceiling. “Please move your desk here.”
She goes at once to obey, but that doesn’t stop her from objecting. “Sir, those tubes are really narrow. In your condition—”

“Thank you for your concern, Ensign, but we do not have a choice.”

He climbs onto the desk, forcing both of his arms to work, and removes the ventilation hatch. The effort it takes to climb in nearly makes him faint, and he is certain that his teeth are not supposed to make this kind of sound. Once inside, he bends over.

“Ensign, I suggest you do not try to open your door again.”

“Yes, sir.” She nods hurriedly. “Good luck.”

Spock orients himself using the memorized blueprints of the ship more than his flashlight, which could give away his position. He crawls, squeezing himself into the narrow passageways, the sharp edges of the hatches ripping his shirt and scratching his arms. Finally, when he can go no further, he kicks a hatch open and falls down, hoping to at least gain the element of surprise if he’s in the midst of enemies again.

But he is fortunate this time – the rec room he breaks into is empty. Spock collects himself quickly and moves over to the weapons locker, swiftly punching in the code. He grabs a phaser and rushes toward Jeffries tube 25 this time, securing the hatch behind himself before climbing down.

The Engineering deck is under attack, but Spock has no choice. If the aliens take over Engineering, any hope of retaking the ship is doomed. He throws himself out of the tube and toward one of the side entrances, dodging enemy fire but feeling it burning his skin several times – dangerously close, but thankfully not lethal. Spock pushes himself against the doorway and fires back, one hand tapping at the door and hoping beyond hope someone will hear him in the roar of the cannonade.

The door finally opens a crack and almost instantly all the way, but not before a blast grazes Spock’s shoulder, and he sags down involuntarily. He falls through the door, which is instantly slammed shut, and blinks rapidly, listening to seemingly unending stream of expletives. Someone is maneuvering him, tying a piece of cloth over his shoulder and swearing as Spock sits up.

“...using fucking Morse code? Ye bloody lunatic—”

“Mr. Scott” – Spock winces, getting to his feet – “I am certain that this language is inappropriate.”

Scott glares at him. “Tell that to those bloody bastards behind the door. Sir.”

Spock shakes his head, looking over the ruffled engineering team members who are holding positions at all the entrances.

“What is our status?”

“We’re in deep shit is our status,” Scott growls, walking deeper into his kingdom of tubes and conduits as he gestures wildly with his hands. “I don’t have the first idea of how they did it, but the engines are off cold. We managed to prevent the chain reaction in the intermix chamber, but now it’s all frozen dead.”

“We have to restart the engines,” Spock says.

“Aye,” Scott grunts. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

Spock opens his mouth, but suddenly his communicator chirps at his belt, as does Scott’s.
“Well, would ye look at that,” the Engineer mutters, pulling the device out and studying it in awe. “They’re back online.”

Spock makes a mental note to commend Nyota’s efficiency, but there are more pressing matters to take care of.

“Spock to Captain Kirk.”

The firefight suddenly seems to be all over them, and it takes Spock a moment to realize the sounds are seeping from the open channel.

“Kirk here,” comes a slightly breathless reply, muffled with the sound of phaser blasts. “Spock, you in Engineering? What’s going on down there?”

“Captain, the engines are functional, but turned off cold,” Spock reports promptly. “Mr. Scott will require” – he looks at Scott who mouths a figure at him – “fifty minutes to restart them.”

Kirk swears then yelps, and there’s a sound of running footsteps and more shouting.

“Not good enough,” the captain’s voice comes in again. Kirk’s panting. “Listen, those motherfuckers are all over the ship. I’ve organized security teams and we’re implementing grid defense, but we can’t even get a headcount without internal scanners. We’ve had them contained twice, but they’re beaming out and beaming back in, before we can get our hands on them.”

Spock doesn’t have time to be impressed at the moment, but he is, despite himself, because the fact that Kirk managed to set up organized defense with most of the ship’s systems down and without communicators is no small feat by any measure.

“We need our shields up and we need them up now; we can’t wait fifty minutes,” Kirk snaps, and then he must be firing again, because the sound of the blast is almost deafening. “Med Bay’s full – I’ve left Sulu there to guard them, but I don’t know how many we’ve lost, and we can’t keep it up any longer.”

Kirk allows himself a gulp of air before continuing. “Tell Scotty he’s gotta risk a cold start.”

“What?” Scott sputters, blinking in shock.

“Captain, it has never been done,” Spock tells Kirk solemnly over Scott’s indignant, “Captain, it’s plain suicide!”

“It’s a working theory, it’s possible,” Kirk speaks over them. “We can’t afford to lose any more people, Commander. You’re there, you both know the formula, and that’s a fucking order, you two. Call me when you’re ready, and it’d better be soon. Kirk out.”

Spock slams his communicator shut and looks at Scott.

“Aye, I heard him,” the Engineer says, looking shell-shocked. “But Mr. Spock, this is crazy. For a cold start, even in bloody theory, the matter and anti-matter should be measured precisely to the last micron, and in case ye haven’t noticed, nothing bloody works ‘round here! I’ll have to set all the reactors manually, and that’s – that’s – I don’t even—”

“Mr. Scott.” Spock reaches and grips the apoplectic-looking engineer’s arm firmly. “We are pressed for time. It must be done, and there is no one in this room who stands a better chance of succeeding than you do.”
Scott blinks, looking at Spock’s hand on his elbow and then back into Spock’s eyes. He swallows. “Aye. Ye put in the formula. I’ll... I’ll get to it.”

Spock nods and releases him. He walks over to the main reaction control computer, which Scott has managed to get online somehow, and starts inputting the figures. His memory of the article he read on the subject two years ago is perfect, and Spock lets it flow freely through his hands, thinking of the captain as well.

Spock knows Kirk had a double major; in fact, he is probably more familiar with Kirk’s academic records than his own. It’s still impressive and for some reason, mildly exciting, if Spock is being honest with himself, that Kirk could recall his knowledge of a newly defended theory in warp physics in the midst of a crisis while being fired upon. It is, in any case, more pleasant to dwell on this fact than on the chances of the first-ever practical experiment in the field being successful under such circumstances.

“Well, it’s as ready as it can be,” Scott says gloomily, appearing at Spock’s elbow. “Ye done?”

Spock rechecks the equation for the fourth time and nods. “Check for yourself, please, while I inform the captain.”

Kirk answers immediately, panting. “You guys ready? We’ve just retaken the bridge; it’d be nice to keep it that way.”

Spock waits for a nervous nod from Scott and says, “We are ready, Captain.”

“Good.” A pause. “Throw the switch.”

Scott swallows, and pushes down the control. Holding his breath, he turns to stare at the plasma tanks coming to life, one by one, with a sound glowering in the uncommon silence on this usually busy deck. Slowly, each tank shows green, and Scott sways with relief that he has it right. Only then does he notice what Spock is up to.

“Mr. Spock what are ye doing?” Scott shouts in shock. “Ye can’t just—”

Spock isn’t listening, focused intently on his calculations as he experiences an acute case of tunnel vision. He has been staring at the even row of the equations on the screen, watching the indicators passing the point of no return, when, suddenly, he spots what seems to be a flaw in the formula. If Spock were any calmer, any saner, at that moment, he would have realized that the theory has been proved mathematically several times over and the figures are correct, and, in any case, highly unlikely for him to just ‘spot’ a critical error in the blink of an eye, because other people must have asked this question before and it must have been answered satisfactorily, and Spock’s ruining their only chance for survival by intervening...

But he is not sane at that moment. He has somehow slipped into the coldest, smoothest, straightest tunnel his logic has ever created, and if he stops for a moment to check his calculations or to doubt them, he’ll lose the split second that separates them from obliteration – the micro moment of a head start he has over the silent but deadly streams of matter and antimatter rushing toward each other right now. Spock tunes out Scott’s yelling and Keenser’s whining, and concentrates until he forgets to breathe. He inputs the last digit an instant before the intermix chamber is flooded and waits...

A heartbeat. Another one. Another.

And then, the deck trembles beneath their feet, and there’s a series of consequent clangs that indicate the engines coming online.
It’s Spock’s turn to sway, and he grabs the console for support as Scott rushes over to the control panel to raise the ship’s shields.

“Do I want to know what just happened down there?”

Kirk’s voice neatly cuts through the haze clouding Spock’s mind, and Spock picks up the forgotten communicator, blinking.

“No,” he says, looking at Scott who still seems murderous. “You do not.”

“Ri-ight,” Kirk says skeptically. “Scotty, you there?”

“Aye, Captain,” Scott replies, coming closer and shooting nasty looks at Spock.

“Scotty, I’m transferring all command functions to Engineering,” Kirk tells him. “I’m placing you in operational command until this mess is sorted and we’ve contained all intruders. Right now, I’m heading out with the security teams.”

Spock frowns. “Captain, I do not believe—”

“Spock, get up to the bridge,” Kirk interrupts him. “Out chronometers seem to be going crazy; Chekov’s crying over his console.”

There’s an indignant shout in the background, no doubt coming from the ensign. Spock frowns still. “Captain, it is not logical for you to—”

“Spock, you’re the Science Officer, so get up here and help Chekov sort out this mess. I’m of no use on the bridge, and Garrovick needs every man he can get. It’s not over yet.”

“Aye, sir,” Spock yields reluctantly. “I’m on my way.”

“Watch your back,” Kirk advises before signing off.

Getting up to the bridge proves to be easier than Spock anticipates. He runs into an ambush twice more, but each time, a security team covers him, happening all too conveniently on his way to be a coincidence. He strides onto the bridge to be greeted by an irate Chekov and a picture of general devastation. It is painfully clear that the bridge has been a battlefield.

Chekov pulls Spock – thankfully by his healthy arm – toward his console, showing him the analysis he has in progress. They sit side by side, recalculating the probabilities before Spock orders Scott to stop the ship’s forward motion and activate the reverse. Spock then has Chekov change the course and strides to his own station, noting with satisfaction that Scott seems to have gotten most of the ship’s systems online, including the internal scanners. Spock concentrates on restoring life support in the sectors where it has failed.

An hour and forty-two minutes later, the turbolift doors swish open and Kirk walks onto the bridge, accompanied by Nyota and a security team. They all appear scratched, bruised, and beaten, but overall, none the worse for wear. Kirk is grinning broadly.

“It’s over!” he exclaims, whirling his phaser on his finger before bringing it to his lips and blowing off imagined steam. “All the bastards are sitting under guard in cargo bay four. Good work, team!”

He throws an arm around Nyota’s shoulders. She shoves him in the ribs, but grins. “Get over yourself, Kirk.”
Kirk brings two fingers to his mouth and whistles loudly, striding to his chair and gesturing for
Spock and Chekov to come over.

“So, geek people – talk to me. Why does my wrist chrono say I’m living backwards?”

“It shouldn’t anymore, Keptin,” Chekov says hesitantly, glancing at Spock.

Spock folds his arms behind his back, ignoring a shot of pain from his shoulder. “The cold restart
had an unforeseen side effect, sir,” he says. “According to Mr. Chekov’s calculations, which I can
confirm, we have been thrown approximately three hours, twenty-two minutes, and five point four
seconds into the past before Mr. Scott reversed the engines.”

Kirk whistles softly. “We have three hours to relive?”

“Affirmative.” Spock inclines his head. “I have taken the liberty of changing our course in order to
avoid a second... encounter, with our assailants.”

“They call themselves the Bamun,” Nyota says from her station, not looking up from where she’s
typing at a breathtaking speed. “The UT is pretty much worthless, but I’m putting together a team...”
She trails off.

Kirk’s smirk holds more than a touch of bitterness as he shakes his head. “One hell of a first contact
procedure. Just our luck.”

“Indeed,” Spock agrees.

The turbolift doors open again to reveal a haggard-looking Lieutenant Sulu. One of his arms is in a
cast and he spots a newly sealed gash across his cheek as well. Chekov gasps and rushes to his side;
Sulu acknowledges him with a small smile, but his eyes are somber.

“Doctor McCoy sends his regards,” he says, coming over.

“Head count?” Kirk asks quietly.

“We’ve lost eleven people so far,” Sulu tells him grimly, holding his eyes.

Kirk’s shoulders slump noticeably, and Sulu reaches out to pat his back awkwardly. Chekov steps
closer as well. Nyota turns toward them in her seat, looking sorrowful.

Spock feels strangely excluded from this expression of grief and sympathy, as if there is some kind of
invisible vibe uniting his human colleagues in this but carefully avoiding him. He shifts from foot to
foot, feeling like an intruder.

“I will check the status of the available personnel with Doctor McCoy,” he says, his dry tone
sounding harsh and scratchy to his own ears. “And I will organize the replacement crews and repairs
schedule.”

Kirk looks up at him sharply, fixing on Spock’s face as if searching for something. Spock returns his
gaze calmly, unwilling to let any emotion show. If he let his feelings uncoil now, he would not be at
any level of efficiency at any time in the foreseeable future.

Kirk’s face closes and he purses his lips. Whatever he has been looking for in Spock’s expression,
it’s clear he hasn’t found it.

“Yes, Commander, you do that.” Kirk runs his hand across his face tiredly, which the others
apparently take as a signal to return to their duties. Kirk glances at Spock again. “Have that arm treated first.”

Spock frowns. “It is a minor injury. The medical staff is occupied with more serious matters.”

“Can’t argue with you on that one.” Kirk shrugs gloomily. “But it’s their job. Some of us pull the short straw every time.”

Spock purses his lips. “Indeed.”

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When Spock finally does get to Med Bay, he congratulates himself with his timing. McCoy is exhausted after a double shift, still very busy, and simply doesn’t notice Spock slipping in. The Vulcan looks around for a free nurse and breathes a quiet sigh of relief as he catches Chapel’s eye. She has treated him before, and Spock approves of her quiet, down-to-business attitude.

She is not so quiet and polite after she scans him, however. Spock watches in idle fascination as she fusses over him, slams half a dozen hypos into his chest and neck, cuts away the remains of his shirt, and directs his movements, biting her lip in tired frustration. She becomes the first person that day – or has it been two days? – who is not reprimanded by him for inappropriate language, even though every scan of him prompts a new stream of profanities to seep from her lips that would make the proverbial sailor spontaneously combust. Spock is almost lulled by the sound.

“Commander? Commander, are you with me?” She shakes him slightly. “Sir?”

Spock blinks. She has very strong arms. “Yes.”

“Oh.” She exhales in relief, and, to Spock’s surprise, blushes. “You’re – you’re staring.”

“Will you be able to walk to your quarters?” She persists. “Sir?”

“Yes,” Spock says, confident. He moves to get up, but somehow ends up falling asleep instead.

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“Sleeping on the job?”

There’s some fond exasperation in the quiet voice that wakes Spock. He runs a quick diagnostic of his own condition before opening his eyes. He is satisfactorily healed, his time sense informing him that he has been asleep for six hours. Only after that does he identify the voice.

“Captain,” Spock says, opening his eyes to see Kirk leaning against a wall, arms folded as he watches him. Spock props himself up on his elbows tentatively. Reassured by experiencing only some mild discomfort, he sits up. “You are free to reprimand me.”

Kirk snorts and tosses a long-sleeved undershirt into Spock’s face. “I’m willing to overlook it this one time,” he says leisurely, as Spock unfolds the garment. “If you promise not to pull this kind of shit on me ever again.”
Spock lifts an eyebrow, tugging the shirt over his head. “I did not plan on going to sleep in the middle of my duty shift—”

“Spock,” Kirk interrupts firmly, stepping closer and putting one hand on the biobed next to Spock’s hip. His eyes are gravely serious. “Stop it. You know damn well what I’m talking about.”

Spock holds his eyes, but doesn’t answer. He straightens the shirt around his form instead. Kirk huffs an indignant sigh.

“Chapel has done you a tremendous favor. You slept right through Bones throwing a fit over how I nearly worked my XO to death.”

Spock winces. “Clearly an exaggeration.”

He hops down from the bed, placing their eyes on the same level. Kirk doesn’t back down, and Spock doesn’t, either. He doesn’t like feeling crowded, but with Kirk, everything is a battle of wills, and it’s not Spock’s intention to show weakness.

“This time,” Kirk allows, holding Spock’s gaze. “What kind of logic was that? Indulge me; I’m curious. Do you enjoy being in pain or something?”

Spock merely lifts an eyebrow, but the captain is not thrown off the trail.

“Or was it—” Kirk narrows his eyes. “Did you think no one would care?”

And just like that, Spock can’t help it. He drops his gaze.

“Fantastic,” Kirk breathes out, a warm puff of air across the tip of Spock’s ear.

Spock says nothing.

“I don’t have time for this kind of shit right now, and neither do you.” The captain’s tone is stern, but the hand that grips Spock’s shoulder is solid and sure. “You’re an important and valuable part of this team, Commander, and if you ever endanger this part again on purpose or by neglect, there’re gonna be big repercussions, you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t think I heard you.”

Spock lifts his eyes, and knows he’s probably glaring.

“Yes, sir,” he says louder, hearing his voice reverberate between the narrow walls.

Kirk grins in a manner that makes Spock wish to hit him.

“Good,” he says. “Now, let’s talk repairs schedule.”

“I do not believe we will,” Spock says, stepping away from Kirk and eyeing him critically. “When have you last eaten, Captain? Slept?”

“I—” Kirk pauses. His expression goes from that of a self-assured starship captain to one of a pouting child so fast that Spock almost softens. Almost. “Come on, Spock. It’s not about me.”

“How so?” Spock raises an eyebrow. “Are you not the most important and valuable part of this team?”
“Why, you—”

“Shall I invite Doctor McCoy to provide an opinion?”

Kirk blanches. “You wouldn’t dare.”

A lifted eyebrow is the only response he gets. Spock watches with satisfaction as the captain’s shoulders slump in defeat.

“Fine,” Kirk mutters, glaring daggers at his first officer. “I’ll remember you play dirty next time.”

Spock waits till Kirk reaches the doorway before responding tartly, “I should hope so.”

Kirk pauses, shakes his head, and walks out without looking back, but Spock knows, somehow, that the captain is grinning.

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Spock looks up just in time to see Lieutenant Rogers almost walk into a wall, catching herself at the last moment. She laughs at the concerned but teasing question her colleague shoots at her and shakes her head before resuming her station.

Spock takes a moment to observe the room at large. They are in Lab 2, by far the largest on the ship with the most diversified equipment. Most people in his department have been pulling double shifts this week because Starfleet requested an immediate analysis of Barnum technology, specifically of their weapons. The science staff of the Enterprise has been splitting their time between the in-depth study of the available data, postulating theories and experimenting in record time, and taking part in the repairs, which have been a daunting task for the rest of the crew.

Spock appreciates his staff. They are young, imaginative, and quite creative at times. They lack certain disciplines in scientific study, but that’s why he is here to guide them. They have performed admirably while producing results under stress, but Spock can see how taxing the continuous pressure on them is, even without McCoy’s rants. The good doctor has started to call Deck Fourteen, where most of the science labs are, ‘the zombie factory.’

Spock stands up from his terminal, immediately drawing attention to himself.

“This will be all for tonight,” he announces, raising his voice slightly. “All of you may take the rest of the shift off.”

“But, Commander?” Lieutenant Pechalat says, clearly confused. “Aren’t these results due in Starfleet Sciences in six hours?”

They are due in six hours fourteen minutes, which gives Spock an excuse to say, “No, Lieutenant. They are not so urgent.”

His staff stares at him dubiously, so Spock straightens up and frowns ever so slightly, and the subtle change of his expression seems to do wonders in clearing the room in record time. Natalie Pechalat looks back at him from the doorway, however, and Spock finds himself thinking that he hasn’t had to reprimand her for an inappropriate hairstyle for several days now. He looks at the sad ponytail that had replaced her usual wild cascade of blonde hair, and realizes that he is doing a poor job looking after his team.
After everyone has gone, Spock quickly pulls all their data to his terminal and sets to work, changing his priorities from the repairs of the communications array to this. He’s quicker in making extrapolations and correlations, faster and more confident in drawing conclusions and making projections, but it is experience rather than any real superiority, Spock thinks, and perhaps the fact that he has been trained in science since childhood.

Still, with every new report he files, his frustration with Starfleet Sciences escalates. By forcing Spock to complete his subordinates’ projects, they rob these young, talented scientists of a chance to grow, and Spock is annoyed on their behalf. He is analyzing another set of projections while mentally composing a letter to Starfleet Command with a few choice words regarding their methods when a new, urgent message pops up on his screen.

Spock reads the first two lines. He must be more tired than he thought, because he can’t control his frown. Mr. Scott apparently believes this is a good time to install some untested components into the warp drive.

Before Spock can react, however, another message appears attached to Scott’s. The new one is for Spock’s eyes only: a short ‘I got this’ from Kirk. Spock purses his lips and returns to his work.

He finishes before the deadline, but just barely. It makes the perfectionist in him cringe, but Spock shakes off the reaction as illogical. He puts the lab on alert and leaves.

As any starship, the Enterprise never truly sleeps, but this fact is much more prominent now, when the whole crew is laboring on to put them back in shape. But it’s the dead of night, and Spock meets fewer people on his way up. A rather haggard-looking yeoman catches up with him with a stack of PADDs, and Spock signs them as they walk, taking an extra moment to scan the documents in the sparse light.

Spock isn’t sure if it’s instinct, duty, or curiosity that makes him divert to Cargo Bay 4. He walks in to an already familiar picture of the prisoners, slowly moving but mostly staying still behind a forcefield, and Nyota, sitting on the deck in a barricade of PADDs, recorders, and linguistics analyzers. There is also an orphan of an untouched banana muffin, clearly brought here by some of her staff in vague hopes that Nyota would notice.

“Are you now residing here?” Spock asks, approaching her from behind.

She doesn’t so much as look up, intent on writing something down. “Yeah, I’ll be with you in just a moment, Petra—”

“Nyota.” Spock crouches down beside her.

She flinches and finally looks at him. “Oh, it’s you. Sorry, I thought...” She trails off in favor of finishing her line and tapping the PADD off. “What time is it?” She yawns, covering her mouth with one hand.

“03:42.”

Nyota’s eyes widen slightly. “Damn. Again?”

Spock raises an eyebrow. Nyota smiles in tired apology and takes his hand as he helps her up. They put her equipment away under the silent but frosty scrutiny of the Bamun and walk out.

“I’ll have to review this when my brain restarts,” Nyota says as they enter a turbolift. “But I think we finally have enough to try and talk to them.”
“Indeed?” Spock is interested.

“Yeah.” They are alone in the lift; she leans against him shamelessly. Spock’s arms slide around her waist, and she sighs contentedly. “We’ve managed to extrapolate about thirty-five percent of their vocabulary, and I think I finally got a good grasp of their grammar.”

“That is indeed remarkable progress,” Spock notes, steering her out of the lift toward her living quarters. “Have you been able to break the system of their tenses, then?”

“Aha.” She yawns again, wider than before. “Forty-nine, can you believe it? But it’s not so bad; they only differ by a small prefix I told you about yesterday.”

“The one you thought was a pronoun.”

“Yes. But you said you saw a similar construction in Vegan Continental, and then I thought that maybe it was more like...”

She continues to fill him in up until they reach her quarters. Spock opens the door, because Nyota seems too lost in her explanations, and gently pushes her inside. She falls silent and turns to look at him, suddenly lucid.

“Spock.”

“Nyota.”

“You’re not actually my instructor anymore, are you?”

Spock suppresses a smile. “No.”

“And I’m not having my xenolinguistics midterm tomorrow morning?”

“Indeed not. We are, in fact, in deep space.”

She grins. “Knew something was off.”

“I cannot imagine what must have given it away.”

She laughs, tired but sincere, and punches his arm.

“Goodnight, Nyota.”

She quickly lifts herself up on her toes and plants a soft kiss against his lips.

“Goodnight, Spock.”

Spock steps outside, allowing the door to close. Belatedly, he realizes that he is smiling slightly.

“Yeah; I don’t think you’ll be getting any until we sort this mess out.”

Spock schools his features back to neutrality and turns toward the speaker, hands clasped behind his back.

“Good evening, Captain,” he says airily. “How was your day?”

Kirk shrugs, his shoulders tugging at the black undershirt he’s wearing. It’s covered in various kinds of grease, and Spock doesn’t want to speculate about the fate of Kirk’s command shirt.
“Well, I yelled at Scotty, if that’s what you mean,” the captain says, resuming his walk along the corridor. Spock falls into step with him automatically. “I swear I even cited the regs.”

“I regret that I have missed such an uncommon exhibit.”

“I know; sometimes I scare myself. Don’t worry – Scotty was impressed for both of you. I actually think it’s the first time I’ve seen him speechless.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Given the fact that Mr. Scott has banned me from Engineering, I find myself experiencing surprise at having something in common.”

Kirk chuckles, glancing at Spock sideways. “Well, you scared the shit out of him when you decided to recalculate pi or something in the middle of an anti-matter explosion – which, by the way, we’ll be talking about at some point in the future, make no mistake. Give Scotty some breathing room; he’ll bounce back.”

Spock purses his lips. “Indeed.”

“So what’s Uhura saying?” Kirk asks, massaging the back of his neck as he walks. “I missed the section briefing, though Bones says that Communications don’t have all the pretty girls onboard anymore – just all the pretty undead girls. Green skin and everything.”

“Doctor McCoy’s preoccupation with afterlife is beginning to alarm me,” Spock remarks. “One might get the impression he is a closet necrophile.”

Kirk sputters a surprised laugh, stopping short and looking at Spock in disbelief, blue eyes alight with mirth. Spock stops, too, tilting his head inquiringly.

“Captain?”


He disappears through the officers’ mess doors; Spock waits patiently. Kirk steps out a moment later, cradling a steaming cup of coffee in his hands.

“All right, so. Uhura.” He brings the cup up to his face and inhales deeply, but doesn’t sip. “When can we talk to those confetti bastards?”

Spock frowns. “According to the lieutenant, we might have sufficient language capability as early as tomorrow.”

“Great!”

“However—”

Kirk looks at him and stops again, studying Spock with an expression the Vulcan can’t quite place.

“Oh, go ahead,” Kirk prompts. “I know you’re itching to remind me that it’s first contact and that it’s delicate as shit. You know, it would have been more insulting if I didn’t know you’re actually ordered to do it, Commander.” He leans closer to Spock conspiratorially. “It’s just you and me here. We can pretend for a moment that you trust me not to fuck up and everything.”

Spock bites his lip. “Captain—”

“Fine – I’ll do it for you. The most important rule of first contact is ‘4 Screws.’”
Spock blinks. Kirk grins and clarifies. “Don’t screw them, don’t screw with them, don’t screw them over, and don’t let them screw you in any way in return.”

Spock stares. “This must be... the most... liberal interpretation of the Prime Directive I have ever heard.”

Kirk grins and claps Spock’s shoulder in his usual forceful manner. “I know. You wrote a thesis on it, remember? I read it.”

“You did?”

“Don’t let it get to your head – it’s required reading. It’s good stuff, too.” Kirk peers at him thoughtfully. “So, really. You’re a scholar, I’m a madman, and our lovely Communications Officer is a medium. Do you think, between the three of us, we can pull it off?”

Spock feels a pang of annoyance at Kirk’s usual careless bravado, because first contact is no laughing matter by any stretch of thought and should be treated with utmost caution. A sharp response is already forming on the tip of his tongue when Spock catches the elusive expression surfacing in the captain’s eyes.

And it’s not bravado Spock sees there. It’s a need for reassurance. Kirk seems to be trying to gauge – likely subconsciously – if Spock has any confidence in him, because Kirk knows, knows only too well what a horrible disaster can come from a first contact gone wrong.

Spock inclines his head very slowly. “I believe the chances are currently in our favor.”

And there’s a moment, a split second only that’s so easy to miss, when Kirk’s eyes are flooded with relief and hope. Spock waits for it, which is why he catches it at all, in a fleeting moment before Kirk’s cocky, self-assured mask slams back in place.

“Well, then” – Kirk grins – “maybe your girlfriend will be more, uh, receptive tomorrow.”

Spock doesn’t roll his eyes, but the slip is near. “Lieutenant Uhura is not my ‘girlfriend,’ so whether or not she will be ‘more receptive’ does not concern me.”

Kirk blinks, still smiling. “Right.”

“And Captain? The next time you find yourself overwhelmed with curiosity over my personal life, I suggest you pose a direct query.”

Kirk blushes spectacularly, his fair coloring doing little to help him conceal it. His embarrassment is distracting enough for Spock to neatly take the still-full cup from Kirk’s hands.

“Hey!” Kirk protests, reaching vainly to take it back. “That’s my coffee!”

“Indeed, Captain.” Spock takes several steps further along the corridor. “And can you tell me what this is?”

Kirk squints at him. “A door?”

“This is a door to your quarters. Your quarters are a place that contains your bed. I trust I will not have to instruct you how to use it?”

Kirk makes a choked sound, and Spock comes to a conclusion that the flustered look suits the captain enormously.
“That will not be necessary, Mr. Spock,” Kirk mutters, walking past him, avoiding his eyes. “I’ll manage.”

“I am relieved. Goodnight, sir.”

“Night, Commander.”

It’s only when he is in his own quarters that Spock discovers he still has Kirk’s coffee mug in his hand.

--

They wait.

It has been exactly two hours and thirty-seven minutes since Kirk has delivered the standard Starfleet greeting for new races, which includes basic information about the Federation, the principles upon which it functions, and the clarification of Starfleet’s mission in deep space. They have been waiting ever since, in the dark silence of the cargo bay, and are stirred only by the low hustle of the alien speech behind the forcefield.

Nyota is monitoring her analyzer constantly, biting her lip unconsciously. There is no way of knowing if their message has even been understood or if her language matrix has been correct. Spock wants to reassure her, but he doesn’t move from his position where he’s flanking the captain from the other side. Behind him, Doctor McCoy is emitting frequent sounds of impatience, which annoy Spock, but the man isn’t saying anything, so Spock exercises his own patience and doesn’t turn.

Kirk is rigid like a monolith, standing half a step in front of Spock and Uhura with his arms hanging loosely at his sides, palms turned slightly toward the Bamun. His body language is impeccable, but Spock can feel the tension emanating from him like a forceful draw, making Spock plant his own feet harder to the deck. The captain is positively ringing with strain, though he’s maintaining his ‘relaxed’ pose, and Spock starts to experience similar apprehension. If the Bamun take much longer, he fears Kirk might snap.

Spock hasn’t noticed when he shifted closer – his steps certainly weren’t obvious or even conscious. Nevertheless, there must have been some kind of covert forward motion, because there is a moment when he realizes his close proximity within Kirk’s space – so close, in fact, that their shoulders are millimeters from touching.

Kirk doesn’t move, exactly, but Spock can feel the focus of the captain’s attention drift from the Bamun to him. A question forms in the air between them, and Spock answers by not moving away. The question lingers for a little while more, and then Kirk squares his shoulders, and the back of his arm presses into Spock.

It isn’t skin-to-skin contact, but Spock stills himself and does what he can. Kirk is not trained in channeling his emotions and simply broadcasts them in no particular order. Spock lowers his shields and surfs through the feelings passing through him, until he catches sight of the highest and the strongest wave – Kirk’s anxiety – and pulls at it.

Spock stiffens at the onslaught, his own shoulders going rigid as the handclasp he maintains behind his back shifts to painful. He draws more and more of the troubling emotion into himself, creating a conduit to try and alleviate the tremendous built of nervousness the captain is feeling. The intensity of
the emotion is overwhelming, and Spock spares a fraction of his attention to marvel at Kirk’s ability not to let it show. Any telepath would of course pick up on it at once, but, according to McCoy’s scans, the Bamun weren’t telepathic.

The captain finally relaxes – marginally – and Spock feels encouraged by the reaction. Kirk tilts his head from side to side very slightly to ease the tension at the back of his neck, probably enough for his muscles to stop aching.

McCoy huffs again behind Spock, and that’s when the Bamun finally respond. Spock takes a subtle step back instantly, knowing Kirk is going to need his space now.

The alien that approaches them from the other side of the barrier is perhaps the shortest and the bulkiest of the group. Kirk steps forward, and Nyota straightens up with an almost audible sound. McCoy goes absolutely quiet and still, and Spock tries to center himself against the three of them, monitoring the emotional balance.

“I am Ramu-Garan,” the alien says.

His voice is low and muffled, but the words are clear, and out of the corner of his eye, Spock sees Nyota begin to tremble with momentary euphoria.

“I am James Kirk.” The captain’s tone is even as he stares straight into the Bamun’s amber eyes. In some cultures, such a move would be considered an insult, but, as they know nothing of this species at this stage, it can’t be helped. “Why did you attack my vessel?”

The Bamun’s face is completely devoid of any expression, but some kind of ruffle seems to pass through the net of blue and green dots on his body. *Is this the way his race expresses emotions?*

The thought obviously occurs to Spock and Nyota at the same time – they glance at each other sharply. Nyota nods.

“You were in our space.”

Kirk raises his hands, palms open. “We didn’t know it was your space.”

“It has always been ours. Since the time of Haznum.”

Nyota’s fingers skim over the keyboard as she stores and cross-references the previously unknown term.

“We respect your right to defend your territory,” Kirk says calmly. “But it wasn’t necessary to attack us. If you simply talked to us, we would have—”

“We were protecting,” the Bamun says. “Our planet is not strong. We must protect it.”

Spock knows the UT is simplifying language at this point to an extreme; Nyota’s hands are practically flying over the keyboard now. Of the four of them, she is the only one who is listening to the original speech patterns.

“We mean you no harm. We only wish to be good neighbors.” Kirk shows his open hands again.

“We can prove it to you.”

The alien hesitates. “How?”

“Well, you say your planet isn’t strong, right?” Kirk licks his lips. “Maybe we can help you make
your defenses better.”

Spock speculates about whether the ripple of lights that runs over the Bamun’s body signifies doubt.

“After we attacked you?”

“If you say it was self-defense, we believe you.”

“But we do not believe you. Who helps without wanting something in return?”

“But we do want something,” Kirk clarifies. “A chance to study your culture, for one. Our mission is to explore new life and new civilizations. Before you attacked, you scanned us. Our weapons are for defense only. You overpower us easily; it’s pure chance we took over again. With your level of technology, you have nothing to fear from us.”

Another ripple of flashes. Spock is under the impression that, this time, the creature is reflecting sadness.

“We were once like you,” Ramu-Garan says. “Explorers. We were.”

“What happened?”

“Too many enemies. Lost... our sister-planet. Lost. Alone now.”

The lights on his skin seem to fade as he speaks. Kirk steps closer to the invisible barrier.

“Listen – you are our prisoners. There’s nothing left for you to lose. We have your ship and the coordinates of your homeworld, so if I was your enemy, I wouldn’t need to talk to you to get the information, would I? I’d be heading there right now.”

The amber eyes stare at him, unblinking. Spock notices that the other Bamun move closer, watching Kirk as well.

“But I don’t want to do that,” the captain says patiently. “And that’s because I’m telling the truth. We’re not expansionists seeking new conquests. I’m offering you a chance to make peace. Why don’t you – why don’t you tell me about your planet, and then I’ll tell you about mine?”

The flashes of light are getting stronger now, not only from Ramu-Garan, but from all the other aliens. It’s a beautiful symphony of blue and green lights, and even before Nyota turns and smiles at him, Spock knows that this is a good sign.

“Lower the forcefield,” Kirk calls back to security. “Let me pass.”

“Jim, what are you doing?” McCoy hisses. “You’ve no idea what they could—”

Kirk glances back at him. “If I want their trust, Bones, I have to give them mine.” He shifts his gaze to Spock. “Commander.”

He doesn’t say anything else, but Spock nods. Kirk gives him a small smile and signals security. A narrow window opens in the forcefield, sizzling at the edges. Kirk steps through and the barrier resumes its integrity, with the captain firmly encased on the prisoners’ side.

“Well now,” Kirk says. “I’m alone here, so you can try and kill me. Or we can talk. What do you say?”

Ramu-Garan blinks – pauses – and, finally, sits down on the deck. His crewmates follow his
example. Kirk watches them a moment longer, then lowers himself to the deck, too.

“So,” he says cheerfully. “Where should we start?”

--

The general mood on the Enterprise is jubilant by the end of the day.

By the time the negotiations are over, Spock, Nyota, and Doctor McCoy are sitting on the deck, too, all surrounded by a separate group of the Bamun as they exchanging information. Spock wishes desperately for another set of ears – or better, two – because he simply cannot stop monitoring his colleagues, even as his own conversation demands his full attention. Finally, when it’s no longer possible to split his attention, he takes a leap of faith. If Kirk can trust the Bamun not to kill them, perhaps Spock should trust Doctor McCoy not to tell where the strategic operational control for Earth’s defenses is in an anecdote.

They emerge from the cargo bay almost ten hours later, exhausted but pleased. The aliens will remain in their current accommodations, but Ramu-Garan has agreed to be taken to the nearest Starbase and be set up with the diplomatic team. The Enterprise team has now a huge upload of information on the Bamun, which means even more reports, but nobody is complaining.

Indeed, Nyota seems to be humming euphorically, all the traces of fatigue washed out from her face by a happy glow. Kirk drapes his arm around McCoy’s shoulders, and, for once, the doctor smiles back at him, swinging an arm around his waist and congratulating him warmly.

“Dinner’s on me, guys,” Kirk declares happily, relief pouring out of him like warm rain. “Those reviews can wait, Uhura. Have I told you today that I love you? You’re shiny, baby!”

Nyota groans, but it’s halfhearted, and the smile she sends Kirk over her shoulder is blinding as she winks his way.

“Spock, where are you going?” Kirk demands to know, as Spock takes a turn at the intersection.

“We’re having a party dinner; we earned it! Besides, I’m starving.”

“I must decline, Captain. I have other matters to attend to.”

“Hell, we all do, but Spock, listen, it’s our first first contact, and we all but signed a treaty. Don’t you want to—”

“Leave him be, Jim,” McCoy intervenes. “He’s had enough of us – for a week, no less. Spock probably needs to meditate after so much close contact. Ain’t that right, Commander?”

Spock looks at the doctor. McCoy’s gaze is open and with no signs of mockery or resentment, and it doesn’t take more than a few seconds for Spock to decide not to look the gift horse in the mouth too closely.

“Affirmative,” he says. He does need to meditate, even if he isn’t going to.

“Oh.” Kirk’s face falls a little. “Well, uh... sure. See you later, then?”

Spock bows his head. “Undoubtedly.”

Kirk grins at him, and they part ways.
Despite McCoy’s not-so-veiled advice, Spock doesn’t seek solitude straightaway. He walks a short version of his usual rounds, checking their status with Engineering, the bridge, and the labs, before finally retiring to his quarters. He compiles a short update and forwards it to Kirk’s terminal.

Showering seems like a good idea, and Spock allows himself to stand longer than necessary under the steaming torrent of water, letting it work out his tension.

Feeling somewhat refreshed, he sets to work on the preliminary report. Before now, Spock has been a party to a first contact three times, two of which had gone rather badly. He is pleased with their work today, and also, if he is completely honest – he’s proud. He has no reason or right to be proud of anyone, save maybe partly for Nyota, but he remains proud all the same. For a moment, Spock thinks of Admiral Nogura, and has to fight to keep a smug smile off his face.

The report dealt with, Spock discovers he can neither sleep nor meditate. His thoughts are wandering, and the level of concentration he maintained throughout the day has drained him.

Physical exertion seems to be the answer, and Spock leaves his quarters, heading for the gym.

As he passes the officers’ lounge, he hears soft, soothing sounds of a piano. There is one in the room, Spock knows, and not just any piano, but a Steinway – a beautiful instrument that Spock hasn’t heard played yet. Now it seems like someone is putting it to good use, if those lingering, viscous sounds of Gershwin’s *Summertime* are any indication. Intrigued, Spock walks inside.

It’s a surprise – and yet, it isn’t – to discover the identity of the player. Kirk has changed out of his uniform and is wearing a simple blue shirt. He looks almost frighteningly young and, somehow, inexplicably perfect; timeless, like Cellini’s statuettes.

Then, he looks up, and his eyes sizzle, piercingly blue in the dimmed lights, as he smiles mildly. His head falls slightly back, revealing more of the smooth, even glow of his skin, already exposed by a couple of unfastened buttons. He looks innocent and sinful at the same time, and Spock pauses for a moment, just watching him, knowing he should clear his thoughts but unwilling to do so.

Kirk meets Spock’s eyes, and his lips curve slightly more upward, the smile both charged and completely relaxed. His fingers haven’t halted for a moment, moving confidently and fluidly.

There’s not much sense in retreating once he has been caught staring. Spock approaches slowly and ends up leaning slightly against the piano, listening and watching. He suspects it’s inappropriate, but cannot make himself think of a reason why, and just watches as a subtle, delicate blush rises slowly in Kirk’s cheeks, placing him firmly on the wanton side of Greek mythology, next to Dionysus and Aphrodite.

Kirk seems both relaxed and collected, but he doesn’t look at Spock again, pulling the music around himself like some kind of buffer. Spock can tell by Kirk’s style that the captain has never taken systematical lessons. He forgets the notes sometimes, but improvises very smartly and clearly enjoys himself.

“That was... beautifully executed,” Spock says quietly, after Kirk finishes and glances up with a soft, mildly apologetic grin. “I did not know you played.”

Kirk shrugs. “Well... One of those things you pick here and there, I guess. I know everyone thinks I didn’t have a single job before this one, but I’ve really had one too many.”

“One was a pianist?”
Kirk chuckles. “A tapeur. There was a bar where people liked live music, but, since it was in the middle of nowhere, there was no one to play, and I needed the money.”

“You seem very adept in this.”

“Thanks.” Kirk looks at him speculatively. “You play?”

Spock pauses for a moment. Instead of answering, he moves around to join Kirk on the bench in front of the piano. Kirk watches him with reserved anticipation as Spock considers, briefly, which piece to choose. But the tone seems to be set, and he follows it.

Spock doesn’t look at him, but he feels the huge, radiant grin that splits Kirk’s face as the introduction to *Rhapsody in Blue* fills the air. The sounds are lingering, stretching, enveloping the room, and Spock drifts with them, letting his hands do what feels right as his body sways slightly with the music. And then, suddenly but oh-so-smoothly, there are two more hands on the keys, and Spock is shaken awake for what feels like the first time in weeks.

They are both floating with the music, improvising on the spot and challenging each other, and this is probably the most bizarre interpretation of this piece anyone has ever made. Somehow, that doesn’t ruin the harmony, but adds to it – Kirk’s mischief against Spock’s confidence, and the shared joy of the fact that they can’t upstage each other, no matter how smartly Spock acts or how roguishly cunning Kirk’s play is. It’s unexpected and pure delight, and Spock hadn’t experienced anything so genuine and uncomplicated since he was a child. Kirk laughs as Spock tries to ambush him, and the sound is woven into the colorful musical tapestry like it belongs there.

The last note hangs in the air, reluctant to fade. Kirk and Spock don’t look at each other as they sit quietly, just breathing in the music and the moment.

“Thank you,” Kirk says at last, his shoulder a warm pressure against Spock’s. “Not just for...”

Spock nods.

“We should do this again sometime,” Kirk adds, barely covering a yawn. “It was fun.”

Spock glances up and finds Kirk very close, looking at him with a sleepy smile that Spock cannot decipher, but that makes him wish he could keep it among other things he doesn’t want to analyze too scrupulously.

He rises to his feet instead. “You should get some rest, Captain.”

Kirk nods, grinning tiredly. “Soon as I check your updates. Do *you* ever sleep, Spock?”

Spock pauses, his usual response about Vulcans requiring less sleep than humans already whirling on the tip of his tongue. But he is irrevocably distracted by the fact that Kirk’s eyes are impossibly, supernaturally blue, and shimmering in the twilight.

Softly, Spock only says, “Goodnight, Jim.”

He receives another smile worthy of being run from in return.

--

The planet Verada is beautiful.
Spock wouldn’t phrase it in quite those terms, of course, but, surveying the smooth, plump hills covered in silky, light green grass with a veil of wilted flowers, he can’t deny a certain loveliness to the place. Here and there are huge stone monoliths, most of them tall and stretched and painted with a pleasing dark grey color. They oversee the landscape even as their very existence is the cause for an ongoing debate between the Enterprise’s geologists. The sky is a vast, milky shade of pink and lilac; the breeze is soft, and it’s pleasantly warm.

A most lovely planet.

“I wonder why this planet was never colonized,” McCoy muses aloud. “I mean, I know it’s far, but it’s so quiet here.”

Spock glances at him sideways. The doctor is wearing an uncharacteristically soft expression, the hard lines on his forehead temporarily evened out.

“Perhaps it will be, after we conclude its exploration,” Spock says. “It is not Starfleet policy to establish colonies on planets that have only been surveyed by probes. The risk of such a settlement finding a premature end is unreasonably high.”

“Aw, Commander – ever the romantic,” Natalie Pechalat intones teasingly, pouting at him. She’s sitting upper on the hill, blonde hair gleaming freely in the soft light as she takes readings – the only one of Spock’s staff who isn’t wearing a field uniform. Her skirt is shorter than regulation as it is, and her posture leaves even less to the imagination.

Spock glances at McCoy again, realizing that the doctor is paying much more attention to the lieutenant than to his tricorder. Spock suppresses a sigh. He really doesn’t know what to do with her.

“How have you finished collecting your data, Lieutenant?” Spock asks, stepping forward and neatly blocking McCoy’s field of vision.

“Mais oui, mon Commandeur.” She sends him a brilliant grin, though her laughing eyes tell him quite clearly she knows what he just did. “Transmitting, sir.”

“Thank you.” Spock glances at his own screen, noting the usual accuracy and thoroughness of her report. That is what saves her from his displeasure, most of the time. He has to acknowledge, grudgingly, that she is the most promising scientist on his team. “Then perhaps you could assist with the geological survey?”

Despite the mild tone, it is not a request, and they both know it. Pechalat rises to her feet in one exceedingly graceful motion and salutes Spock smartly. “Yes, sir.”

She walks past Spock and winks at McCoy. “Build a house with me in mind, Doctor.”

“Yes, darlin’.” McCoy grins, enjoying the view and not hiding it, his own tricorder forgotten in his hand.

Spock waits until the lieutenant is out of earshot. “I would appreciate it if you stop distracting my staff, Doctor,” he says dryly. “Particularly Ms. Pechalat, who does not need additional encouragement, I assure you.”

McCoy chuckles. “Jealous, Spock?” The doctor looks at him, grinning. “We’re just being friendly; it’s not a crime. And if nobody flirts with you these days, that’s no reason to turn all Scrooge on the rest of us.”

“I do not object to you and Ms. Pechalat flirting, Doctor, illogical as it may be. I object to you doing
“Fine, fine. Ever the ray of sunshine, aren’t you, Spock? You know, all work and no play makes you an extremely dull... Vulcan.”

“Sometimes your obsession with Terran colloquialisms makes me wonder if you are in the right profession, Doctor.”

“Oh really? You want me turn all doctor on you here? Fine. I’ve been meaning to talk to you, and I suppose now is as good a time as any.” McCoy raises his eyebrows, seriousness now lining his features. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

Spock glances around, but they are conveniently alone, albeit in clear view of several other teams. “If you must,” he says finally.

“Are you and Pike bonded?”

Spock has his training to thank for not dropping his tricorder. He glances up at McCoy from his crouching position on the ground and meets a bluntly appraising gaze. Spock bites back the sharp remark that’s on the tip of his tongue and returns to his readings.

“I assume you have a reason other than idle curiosity for prying into my personal affairs?”

“Wow; those workplace ethics pamphlets must have really done a number on you,” McCoy remarks sarcastically, getting down on one knee beside Spock. “I do have a reason to ask, you antisocial hobgoblin. Can’t believe I actually care.”

“Yes,” Spock says dryly. “Your concern for me is shining through your every word.”

“Well, you’re so warm and fuzzy, it’s a miracle people don’t line up to give you a hug,” McCoy grunts. “Just answer the damn question.”

“I am not bonded,” Spock says. “To Admiral Pike or anyone else.”

For the first time in his life, the words don’t sting. They should; they always have before, but now they just – don’t. He isn’t feeling anything at all, in fact, and while this is probably as close as he has ever gotten to the ideal sought by all Vulcans, the thought is strangely disconcerting.

“Really.” McCoy watches him with a frown, looking strangely disappointed. “Well, so much for that version.”

“Version, Doctor?”

“Yeah. I’ve been getting updates from New Vulcan. What with the little guys we took care of after Nero, and the Council members, and well, you, I’m now considered some sort of an expert on the Vulcan PTSD.”

“The future of my race has never seemed so dim.”

McCoy glares. “The thing is, there’ve been multiple reports of progressing distresses and depressions among the adult population. Emotional collapses, lowered ability to cope and all that.”

Spock stiffens with an instinctive surge of defensiveness. “That is to be expected, Doctor. I do not believe you can comprehend what the loss of Vulcan had meant to us. My people are grieving.”

“Yes.” McCoy stares at him piercingly, undeterred and looking strangely as if he has just obtained a
winning hand. “Your people are grieving. Why aren’t you?”

Spock’s eyes snap up of their own volition. “I beg your pardon?”

“You – are not – grieving,” McCoy repeats steadily, allowing the words to sink in. “Grief, Mr. Spock, is manifested physically, as well as emotionally. You show signs of neither. Your people – those on New Vulcan and back on Earth – are having a normal, healthy reaction to a tremendous loss. Well, healthy for Vulcans, anyway.” The doctor eyes him warily. “You, on the other hand, are not distressed at all. You sleep okay, you eat okay, you go about your duties like a perfect little efficiency machine. You obviously have no problem concentrating, or you never would have pulled Jim out of that snakes’ nest in time last week. In other words, you’re perfectly fine.”

“And that is clearly something you wish to remedy.”

“Dammit, Spock – the only Vulcans who show your level of stability now are either kids or are bonded.”

“Perhaps I have a unique coping mechanism.”

“Or perhaps you’re not coping at all!”

Spock straightens up abruptly, making the air whoosh. McCoy follows suit, refusing to be stared down.

“Perhaps I do not have to. As the captain so aptly noted, I cannot feel pain or heartbreak. It follows logically, does it not, that, unfeeling as I am, I will not have to grieve?”

Spock purses his lips in a terse line as he contemplates the reddening human before him. “You are attempting to project human emotions on me. It does not surprise me that you must fail, given that I am not human.”

“Dammit, Spock, don’t put words in my mouth!” McCoy grits out. “That’s not what I meant at all!”

“It is difficult to discern what you mean when your speech is polluted with colorful metaphors that carry no meaning.”

“What? You pointy-eared—”

“Furthermore, you yourself noted that I perform my duties adequately. I therefore fail to see the reason for your concern because, as long as I continue to operate efficiently, everything else is irrelevant.”

McCoy is positively glowering at him now, and, deep down, inside Spock is elated. He has riled up the doctor enough to drop his line of questioning, likely for the foreseeable future.

“You know what? You’re right. I have no idea why I cared in the first place!” McCoy spits. “I wanted to warn you about the dangers of emotional suppression, but I can see I don’t need to bother, ‘cause you’ve got nothing to suppress!”

It stings, and Spock can see no logical reason why. There is something blatantly immoral in McCoy’s premise, and yet Spock has no ammunition to disprove it on the spot. He inhales deeply, opening his mouth to object without the first idea of the nature of his objection, when a new voice cuts in.

“Gentlemen.” Kirk is standing not some ten feet up the hill’s slope, hands on his hips and staring at
them. “What’s going on here?”

Neither Spock nor McCoy answers, gazes stubbornly locked on each other. Kirk walks toward them slowly and studies both their faces intently before shifting slightly toward Spock, flanking him.

“Bones?”

McCoy blinks, looking now at the two of them. “Nothing,” he snaps. “Nothing’s going on that concerns you, Jim.”

“Really,” Kirk says, in the same tone he usually says, ‘Bullshit.’ “Mr. Spock, is there a problem?”

Spock forces himself to look away from McCoy’s glare. “None that I am aware of, Captain.”

Kirk eyes him sternly, opening his mouth to retort, when a shout from afar interrupts him.

“Hey Doctor!” Lieutenant Pechalat is standing next to one of the obelisks. “Would you like a souvenir?”

McCoy just waves at her, still too engrossed in the battle of wills to really understand her meaning, but watches as she unholsters her phaser. Spock’s eyes narrow suddenly, pieces of the puzzle adding up in his head, and he stares under his feet, seeing grass, grass, grass, and not a trace of even the smallest stone.

“Lieutenant, don’t!” he calls out sharply, but it’s too late.

They hear a thin whine of a phaser as Pechalat carves a small piece of the monolith with a narrow beam. For a moment, it seems as if nothing is going to happen. The lieutenant bends over to pick up the piece she has just phasered out.

As though on cue, the ground under their feet promptly starts to tremble.

“What the hell?!” McCoy yells, as a particularly strong jolt sends him rolling across the ground. “An earthquake?”

“That’s no earthquake!” Kirk shouts over the mounting cacophony of sounds around them. “Look!”

All around them, the stone monoliths are splitting open, changing, reshaping themselves into things that have neither form nor name, but nonetheless marked intent. The now-animated masses of rock? – are moving in every direction at an alarming speed, leaving deep gashes in the ground as they pass.

They hear a scream: Lieutenant Pechalat is now surrounded by three fast-moving objects that threaten to crush her.

“Bones, find Lehmann, get the shuttle over here!” Kirk orders before running after Spock, who is already sprinting toward the trapped lieutenant.

Spock doesn’t stop for a moment, jumping over the newly formed trenches and pulling out his communicator as he runs. Kirk’s the captain, but Spock is, nominally, in charge of the landing party. The order is his to give, though neither of them is thinking about it – Spock simply manages to speak first.

“Team leaders, evacuate all personnel immediately! All shuttles must launch in one minute!”

“Spock!” Kirk’s warning comes a bit too late, but the captain manages to catch his elbow and push
him forward just in time to get out of the way of a particularly vicious-looking stone giant.

They both roll on the ground, not having any time for a sudden delay. Spock stumbles to his feet, pulling Kirk with him, and they run again, ducking and jumping, heads spinning to keep track of the chaotic movements.

“Fucking rush-hour,” Kirk pants, as Spock practically throws him over another trench before following after him.

The lieutenant is now not some ten feet away from them, but the three grotesque monoliths have no intention of letting her go. They force her to run in circles between them as she tries to avoid being squashed.

“Shit!” Kirk yells. “Spock, we’re running out of time!”

Spock spares a glance in the captain’s direction and sees four more living rocks moving toward them fast.

“I’ll distract them!” Kirk shouts, and, before Spock can protest, he runs toward the nearest rock and kicks it.

It all but falls on him, moving with incredible speed, and Pechalat screams again – this time, clearly frightened for the captain – but Kirk manages to scoot over at the last second.

Spock can’t afford to watch the horrific play. The captain is risking his life so that Spock could get the unfortunate girl out.

“Lieutenant, follow my lead!” Spock shouts, and she nods shakily, eyes wide.

Spock uses the interval Kirk has created for him and jumps inside the narrowing circle, extending his hand. Pechalat grabs it like it’s a lifeline, and they both jump as a giant mass of rock crushes over them. Somewhere to their left, Kirk is cursing incessantly, and Spock is grateful because, as long as the soundtrack of profanities keeps coming, he knows the captain is alive.

“Over here, Spock, Jim!”

Spock spots the shuttle hovering not thirty feet to his right and makes a beeline for it, tugging the lieutenant after him and jumping over the gashes opening anew beneath their feet.

“Come on, come on, come on!” McCoy’s voice urges desperately.

Spock grits his teeth and takes another dive, Pechalat’s scream the only indicator of how close a call that was. Kirk is there, suddenly, and he has the lieutenant’s other hand as they all but drag her toward the shuttle, followed by the deafening sounds of crushing rocks.

“Give me your hand,” McCoy says, catching Pechalat’s wrist and tugging her into the hovering shuttle.

Kirk follows suit, muttering, “Dragon teeth. Never thought—”

And, mind almost ringing in his ears with its speed, Spock suddenly lets go of the railing at the same instant the final piece of the puzzle locks in, and jumps back to the shuddering ground.

“Spock, what the fuck are you doing??”

“Spock! Dammit, get into the shuttle! Now!”
Spock doesn’t listen, continuing to run away from the shuttle.

“Shit,” he hears Kirk swearing. “Lieutenant, take off without us!”

“Sir?”

“Jim, what d’you think you’re doing?”

“I said, take off NOW! That’s an order!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Jim!”

Spock hears the shuttle accelerating, accompanied by McCoy’s rapidly fading curses.

“Spock, it’s coming straight at you!” Kirk shouts. “Dammit, MOVE!”

Spock does, but, instead of sprinting away, he steps aside at the last possible moment, and presses his open palms flat against the rock. He’s only got a few seconds as the harsh surface all but erases his hands, rushing past him. The pain is burning, but Spock disregards it, closing his eyes and concentrating hard.

And suddenly, he’s floating.

All the sounds of the outside world fade, and he slides into a consciousness so vast and so alien that his mind needs several attempts to even begin to grasp it, but it’s there. It’s there, and it’s roaring with pain, raw and primal, and Spock is losing himself rapidly, sinking into this violent purple whirlpool of agony, feeling his sense of self disintegrate faster than he can recapture it...

“Spock!”

There are hands on his shoulders, gripping him, shaking.

“Goddamn it – Spock! Snap out of it!”

Spock opens his eyes and groans instantly, the soft light suddenly too sharp against his overly-sensitive eyes.

“Shit,” Kirk mutters as Spock sinks to the ground without warning. Kirk’s hands barely manage to slow his fall. “Spock, are you okay?”

“The – ground,” Spock says slowly. “It is not moving.”

“No,” Kirk confirms, and Spock can finally concentrate on his face. The captain is scowling at him. “All the ka-boom stopped when you touched that thing. Spock, did you – was that a mind-meld?”

Spock blinks. “Affirmative. I—”

“With a stone?”

“You said ‘dragon teeth—’”

“That’s an old Earth legend, what are you —” Kirk blinks, then shakes his head in disbelief. “Oh God, rocks coming alive, is that it? You’ve got to be kidding me.”
“—and I thought if a similar case was present here, I could stay and—”

“No way you’re blaming this on me!”

“Associative suggestion—”

“Don’t even go there. You disobeyed a direct order, mister, and scared the shit out of me—”

“Captain, I...” Spoke breathes deeply before continuing. “There is a – a gigantic creature living beneath the surface.”

Kirk blinks. “I thought you guys scanned it?”

“It is existing in close proximity to the planet’s core. While in latent state, it was not detected. These – monoliths” – Spock points feebly at the frozen rocks around them – “are its... lungs, perhaps, or some other extremities. And when Lieutenant Pechalat cut one of them with a phaser—”

“It woke up.” Kirk nods. “No wonder.”

“Correct.” Spock inclines his head. He makes a move to sit up, but his head is still spinning, and he doesn’t think to object when Kirk’s arm wraps around his shoulders, helping him up.

“Is it sentient?” the captain asks, frowning and peering into Spock’s face intently.

“No.” Spock shakes his head. “At the very least, to the point of the very rudimentary intelligence.”

“Like a dog?”

“Slightly less intelligent than an average Earth canine, but essentially—”

Kirk grins at him. “So what’d you do to calm it down? Pet it?”

Spock realizes suddenly that Kirk’s arm is still wrapped around him. He moves away, refusing Kirk’s further help as he gets to his feet.

“Essentially,” Spock repeats with a nod. “I transmitted the feelings of warmth and calmness, and also —” He pauses. “Also, my impressions of the planet’s aesthetical appeal.”

Kirk laughs softly, his shoulders slumping in relief. Spock quirks an eyebrow at him.

“Is there something you find amusing, Captain?”

Kirk shakes his head, grinning. “Just thinking about how you just told a planet that it’s being a good girl. Or a pretty girl.”

He catches sight of Spock’s expression and sighs, rubbing his face. “Oh, never mind. So what do we do now? Call back the science teams?”

“Inadvisable.” Spock looks at the distorted view around them. It’s painful to observe while remembering how smooth and peaceful it was not an hour ago. “We have neither the time nor the resources required for a mission of such magnitude. A Starfleet science vessel would be optimal to study this world.”

“Okay.” Kirk looks at him guardedly. “If that’s your recommendation.”

“It would be Starfleet Command’s as well. This mission will likely take three to five years.”
“Definitely not our call, then.” Kirk nods. “I’m calling Scotty to send someone for us—”

“If I may, Captain,” Spock says suddenly. The feeling of immense discomfort he has been experiencing grows. “I believe we should undo the harm we have caused this creature before we leave.”

Kirk’s eyebrows arch. “Is it possible?”

“I believe so. Our transporters have been obscured by an immensely dense bio-psychic field. It is my understanding that an infusion of positive mental energy would recompense the loss the system has suffered.”

He turns to look at Kirk. “I believe we can heal it.”

Kirk blinks. “We?”

Realizing instantly what he just said, Spock steps back abruptly, dropping his gaze. “I apologize for assuming, Captain. You are not obligated to assist me—”

“Spock—”

“—I would never have presumed in such a manner. It is my responsibility and—”

“Spock—”

“—it is merely that I believed—”

“Spock! Cut it out and tell me what I can do to help, would you? You caught me by surprise, is all. You know I’m not a telepath.”

Spock looks up, surprised. Kirk is staring at him, hands on his hips, feet planted firmly to the ground – the image of determination.

“I would not have asked,” Spock says slowly, “but the consciousness of this being, while unsophisticated, is vast, and I am somewhat low on resources after the first mind-meld.”

“You want to do it again?” Kirk deduces, stepping closer.

“Affirmative. However, this time, I shall not explore, but will channel positive emotions to fill the gap. This is where I require your assistance. My capacity to do that at the moment is somewhat... limited.”

Kirk swallows and glances down briefly. “You’ll meld with me, too?”

“If you will allow it.”

“And how do I – how do I do it, exactly?”

“The simplest way would be for you to concentrate on the episodes of your life when you were feeling happy and contented. If you could make yourself relive those moments, that is all that I would require.”

“Happy moments?” Kirk’s face falls, and he shakes his head. “Wow. I really wish you had someone else here with you.”

Spock frowns. “You are free to decline, Captain. I have no intention of forcing you.”
“That’s not what I—” Kirk starts, scowling, then stops abruptly. “Fuck it. Let’s just do it.”

Spock steps closer and lifts his hand to Kirk’s face. Kirk stares at it, eyes wide.

“God, Spock. Your hands...”

The upper layer of epidermis is missing entirely. Spock regards it numbly before turning to Kirk. While he might understand the instinctive revulsion the sight provokes, they do not have time for this.

“Vulcan blood is not toxic,” Spock tells Kirk calmly. “I assure you, you will encounter no difficulty removing it from your skin.”

Kirk holds his eyes. “You just don’t want to hear me, do you?” he says quietly. “It’s like talking to a wall.”

He grabs Spock’s wrist and presses Spock’s fingers to his face, looking resigned. “Do it.”

Spock decides not to prolong what is already an entirely confusing and frustrating situation. “My mind to your mind,” he whispers.

The meld is shallow, and Spock keeps his barriers tightly up. He reaches with his other hand toward the monolith, and the connection is reestablished instantly. He is surrounded by the creature’s curiosity, mixed with discomfort and apprehension.

He tries to reassure it, concentrating on the hurting spot and trying to create a conduit. The effort is pulling at his reserves, overstrained already. Kirk must be able to sense it, because suddenly Spock feels washed in a vast wave of happiness that is not his own.

He doesn’t intrude into Kirk’s mind, but he does examine the memory Kirk has pulled out as it passes through him.

...Kirk is a small boy, no more than four or five years of age. He’s at the backyard of a farmhouse, sweeping golden and brown leaves with a broom that is far too big for him to be handling it properly. The wind is soft and dry, and he laughs, happy and carefree, as he watches the leaves gather in whirlpools and rise above the ground.

Suddenly, another boy, a slightly older one, appears. Kirk turns to look at him, pointing at the leaves and talking excitedly, when the other boy smirks mischievously and tackles him into a big pile of leaves. They roll together, scattering the just-gathered leaves everywhere, laughing and yelling and tickling each other.

Vaguely, Spock notices a woman standing in the doorway of the house. Her silhouette is blurry, but Spock knows somehow that she’s immensely beautiful and warm and every other perfect thing in the world. She’s holding a coffee mug in her hand and smiling, watching the two boys play...

The memory fades, and Spock feels the creature basking in its glow. His assumption is correct: they are indeed healing it.

Kirk pulls another memory for him to use, and Spock is momentarily baffled, realizing that there’s an almost twenty-year gap between the two.

...Kirk walks into his dorm at the Academy, and sees Doctor McCoy there, wearing his cadet reds and unpacking unhurriedly. Kirk stills for a moment, and then Spock feels the enormous grin that’s almost literally splitting his face. Kirk yells something exuberant and then squeezes McCoy in a
bone-crushing embrace. Spock hears the excited litany of nearly incoherent thoughts: ‘He’s staying – didn’t scare him off – staying with me – no one ever has – Bones! Bones! – with me – I’ve never – not like him – can’t believe –’ McCoy’s grumbling, but Spock can feel his arms wrap around Kirk’s waist firmly as he grunts, ‘Dammit, Jim, I love you, too, but let the fuck go before we both sprain something.’ Spock is overwhelmed by a burning wish that passes through Kirk at that moment to kiss McCoy senseless, to never stop holding on to his friend...

The next memory is the graduating ceremony at the Academy, where Kirk has been officially named captain and receives orders to take command of the Enterprise.

Spock mixes Kirk’s memories with his own, equally few, and finds himself surprised that they have this in common. Spock’s own rare moments of pure bliss seem to be revolving around Christopher, mostly at the early stage of them becoming lovers, when their feelings were raw and new and neither of them had been holding back. Spock shields the memories, milking them for emotions that he can no longer feel but that he could, once, a long time ago. He channels what seems to be every ounce of happiness he and Kirk have between the two of them to the creature, feeling it revitalize on the memories.

“Spock,” Kirk whispers, and Spock opens his eyes, the meld breaking gradually. “Look.”

Everywhere around them, the monoliths are righting themselves, turning once again into perfect geometrical forms. Each one emits a soft, sweet-smelling cloud of pink dust, shimmering in the air, as the wind spreads it around. It falls down, and the ground starts to bloom almost instantly, little pink and lilac flowers covering the entirety of the surface faster than any biological laws should make possible.

“Wow,” Kirk murmurs in awe.

Spock notices, absently, that Kirk is holding his wrist in a tight, likely subconscious grip. Spock doesn’t comment or move away, but instead lifts his eyes to gaze at the miracle happening around them.

It is breathtakingly beautiful.

“Our hostess is generous,” Spock says softly. “This will be... a pleasant recollection to return to.”

Kirk turns to look at him, smiling in pure wonder. “It will be the best.” They stare at each other for a long moment, as the planet continues to glow around them.

“Thank you for letting me share it.” Kirk squeezes Spock’s wrist before letting go.

Spock looks away, feeling strangely uncomfortable. “I believe our business here is concluded, Captain.”

Kirk nods and pulls out his communicator. He pauses though before making the call. “Hey, Spock?” Spock glances at him and sees a small smile. “I’m glad you thought you could ask me for help.”

Spock doesn’t know what to say to this. They have just shared a great intimacy, and yet – Spock cannot read the man standing in front of him, looking at him with an expression Spock cannot unveil. He only knows that Kirk is being sincere, and it is painful to realize, because Kirk has been open where Spock has not. A man of integrity, indeed.

A man of integrity who only has three unconditionally happy memories scattered over the twenty-five years of his life.
Kirk is still looking at Spock as if waiting for something, expecting some kind of reaction to what he has revealed. He is waiting for something Spock cannot grant, and the regret Spock feels is sharp and consuming. He wants to mourn, unexpectedly, for the disappointment he is causing; for having no choice but to push Kirk away; but mostly, for himself, and his inability to be the man he once thought he was.

In the end, Spock nods slightly, for lack of a better response, and looks away, listening to Kirk negotiate their transportation.

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Later, after he and Kirk both are yelled at by an extremely irate Doctor McCoy, and after Spock spends two hours in regen getting his hands treated, he retires to his quarters and attempts to meditate for the first time in nearly three months.

The attempt is as futile as his last one had been. No matter how deeply Spock looks inside himself, he sees nothing but a void of numbing emptiness. Whatever emotions he experiences these days are so bland that he can barely recognize them. Mild amusement, mild irritation, mild apprehension, mild concern – they are all superficial, fleeting, and there is nothing that would feed them from the inside. They are oil to his water – enveloping him from the outside but never sinking in.

McCoy is right, Spock muses. He’s not grieving. The thought is almost amoral, and yet he cannot deny the fact that he is not feeling sadness or remorse or pain. Not for his planet, not for his home town, not even for his mother. He tries to think about them, recapture the emotions he once had for them, but there is nothing left. He feels empty, like an open shell; a hollow carcass too stubborn to be broken.

Spock stares at the flickering flame of the candle. He thinks of Christopher, and there, finally, there is something; some kind of spark on the bleak horizon. But it is so dull, so distant, that after a while, Spock isn’t sure if it has been there at all or if he has simply succumbed to wishful thinking.

He blows out the candle and goes back to work when he can’t bear to dwell on what he has become for a moment longer.

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A collision of two comets isn’t something particularly mysterious from a scientific point of view – merely quite rare. Spock has explained this in detail numerous times, and yet the crew retains an uncomfortable level of excitement about the upcoming event. Nyota goes as far as to organize a kind of a spontaneous reception on the Observation Deck, with light music and soft drinks, so that everyone off-shift can watch the stellar spectacle. Ensign Chekov even takes it upon himself to transmit the image to every working station on the ship so that nobody will be left out.

Spock raises his eyebrows more than usual in the course of the week, but, after several failed attempts to rein in everyone’s exuberance with logic, he decides to stop fighting the windmills and practically moves to his lab.

Spock can’t really explain why his shipmates’ lifted spirits have such a strange effect on him. He has lived among humans and served with them for a very long time to date, and he is well aware that they are sometimes prone to creating a celebration out of nothing, merely to find an outlet for their emotions. He has, in fact, come to see these tendencies as positive events, because it contributes to his colleagues’ collective mental health. Yet now, for some reason, he finds himself inexplicably and improperly annoyed by all the commotion.
He believes his shielding to be adequate, but there is a definite amount of pressure caused by the heightened emotions. A headache is a most uncommon ailment for a Vulcan, but Spock has had two highly unpleasant migraines in the span of three days. It is unnerving and inexplicable.

“You’re coming to the reception tonight, right?” Kirk asks, catching up with him in the corridor as Spock passes the ship’s gym. The captain has obviously only just finished his workout; his face is flushed from the exercise, and he’s still wearing an extremely old pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt that pass for his training clothes. The t-shirt looks like it has been in battle, and not a recent one. If the thinness of the fabric is any indication, Kirk must have inherited it straight from Hannibal when he led his army over the Alps.

“Negative, Captain,” Spock replies, frowning slightly. “I shall be witnessing the event in the science labs and gathering the data.”

“Really,” Kirk says, disappointment clear on his face. “I thought you’d come. I mean, I think it’s a good idea for you to be there.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Well, everyone else will be.” The captain shrugs. “We’ve been pulling off some pretty tough missions lately, and I think it’s a good opportunity for the crew to unwind a little.”

Spock nods. “I concur. However, I am obliged to point out that, as I am not human, I do not require socializing to ‘unwind.’”

“Well – no, I suppose you don’t.” Kirk pauses, looking uncertain. “But I was – kind of looking forward to tonight myself, I guess. I mean, you all work damn hard, and I guess… well, I’d love to have a chance to just talk to – to everyone about, I don’t know – hobbies and books and favorite foods, you know?”

“It sounds reasonable, Captain. I am pleased you will have an opportunity to enjoy yourself.”

“Yes, but I’d like you to be there and enjoy yourself with the rest of us,” Kirk says, sounding almost frustrated. “Really, Spock – I checked your schedule. You haven’t had a day off in months. And don’t tell me you don’t need to relax; I’ve seen you do it.” He grins knowingly. “There’ll be music there tonight; might even be something you like.”

Spock frowns slightly, searching for words. This sensation of mild disquiet that has become a constant background noise lately seems to intensify to the point of distinct uneasiness whenever Spock’s mind isn’t fully occupied with his duties. He has also noticed that the presence of certain individuals tends to affect him more than that of others, and Kirk most remarkably so.

Spock doesn’t know if he should blame the meld, shallow as it was, or something else entirely, but he can’t deny the pattern any longer. And he most certainly doesn’t need a reminder of the way he acted that night two months ago, when he and Kirk had their impromptu musical interlude in the officers’ lounge.

Kirk was someone else then, or maybe Spock was. Looking back at the episode is like snatching a glimpse of someone else’s life rather than his own. The sensation is akin to what humans describe as ‘a dream so real it feels like it happened.’ Spock is unnerved by the impression, but, as time unfolds, more and more of his memories attain this dream-like, surreal quality. He can scarcely believe he is seeing himself.

There are nights when Spock envies his shadow.
“I would caution you against taking my behavior that night as a baseline for your extrapolation of my habits, Captain,” he says, vaguely pleased with how cool his voice sounds. “That was a particularly taxing mission. The level of strain had made me... act in a manner I would not normally employ.”

Kirk’s smile fades. “I see.” He looks down briefly, his voice soft. “I didn’t mean to assume anything, Spock; I just thought you liked playing with me.”

I did, Spock almost says, and wishes desperately they had never started this conversation. Cocky Kirk, he could deal with. Brazen Kirk, he is used to. This Kirk... This Kirk is like an old wound that has ostensibly healed, but is, in truth, forever there, cut in too deep to mend.

“It is not uncommon for humans to project their own emotions on others.”

Kirk looks up at him, startled. For some reason, Spock finds it physically difficult to hold his eyes.

“If you will excuse me, Captain.”

Spock steps around Kirk and marches down the corridor, trying to recall what it feels like to not be defeated. He glances back just as he’s about to turn the corner. Kirk is still standing as Spock has left him, but his shoulders seem to have sunk even lower.

Spock closes his eyes for a moment, and walks on.

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In the end, his own staff shoves him out.

Lieutenant Pechalat insists on taking over his duty shift and, no matter how hard Spock tries to convince her that she need not to punish herself for Verada, she remains deaf to his arguments. When Lieutenant Hendricks joins her, Spock realizes that he has a minor case of mutiny on his hands. He stares at his two junior officers in mild disbelief, because the majority of the ship’s personnel flinch when Spock so much as looks their way, but those two – those two are smiling at him.

“I don’t quite know how to tell you this, sir,” Pechalat says, grinning like she’s invincible, “but... we work here, too, you know.”

She looks over at Hendricks, who nods. “It’s the collective opinion of the Science department that you take an evening off, sir.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow at him, unable to understand why they refuse to be intimidated by him. The rest of the crew seems to have more sense, and when has he lost control over his own staff like this?

“You seem to be operating under the delusion that this is a democracy, Mr. Hendricks.”

“Hmm, well, it’s not,” Pechalat drawls thoughtfully, whirling a lock of hair around her finger. “But in the interests of efficiency, Commander, we believe you should take a break. Unless you don’t consider us qualified enough to monitor the sensors?”

“I consider you illogical,” Spock snaps, but adds reluctantly, “Though qualified enough.”

The way they beam at him is extremely disconcerting. He concedes – out of tiredness or confusion, he doesn’t know.

“You may proceed.”

“Thank you, sir!” They both salute smartly. Spock barely nods in response. Sometimes working with
humans can be quite... frustrating.

He makes his way toward the Observation Deck slowly, as though fighting an irresistible pull. He can’t explain why he feels so uneasy about going. Kirk is his captain, after all, and captains don’t have to make their requests orders to ensure obedience. Spock should not be having a problem with that.

He resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. The headache is becoming worse.

The low sounds of music and chatter are apparent long before he enters the main observation lounge. Spock pauses at the doorway, not wishing to attract anyone’s attention. His eyes sweep over his colleagues – relaxing, talking, enjoying each other’s company – and suddenly Spock feels vaguely nauseous, because he wants to be with them so badly and he can’t, and he doesn’t know why. He just knows that if he does enter – if he joins the conversation – if he allows that tightly wound coil inside of him to unfold – something bad will happen, something more terrible than nearly killing a stubborn human being who ‘rubbed him the wrong way.’

Of course, the moment he thinks of Kirk, his eyes settle on the captain. Kirk is standing across the room from Spock, in front of the viewport; he’s talking to Doctor McCoy, and both men are laughing.

The crew around them suddenly becomes more excited because, outside the ship, two huge blocks of ice are moving rapidly toward each other, illuminated by the nearest star. Everyone’s eyes are glued to the cosmic show, but Spock can’t focus. He remains a frozen figure by the doorway, trying and failing to concentrate as the comets collide and the lounge erupts in cheers and clapping.

Illogical of course, and yet...

Kirk turns back to McCoy, saying something, and then, as if he can feel the eyes upon him, he turns further and locks gazes with Spock.

Spock doesn’t move; doesn’t breathe. He doesn’t know what is happening, but his heart sinks impossibly low when Kirk’s smile softens, blue eyes clouded with an expression Spock can’t identify, then gives McCoy his glass and starts toward Spock, never breaking eye contact. Spock’s mind clears for a split second, with a flash of panic cutting through the haze, and he knows then – he is instantly enlightened.

For whatever reason, unlikely as it is, James Kirk is a siren and Spock is seconds from being shipwrecked – for the second and final time.

By nothing short of a miracle, his survival instincts flare back to life. Kirk’s progress is halted for a moment by a crewmember who asks him a question. Spock slips out the door and doesn’t look back.

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“—and then he says: ‘Independent suffixes in Andorian? Not on your life!’ And I say, fine, don’t trust me, let’s see who’s gonna get punched in the face instead of served a meal. Three guesses who was right in the end? Oh, sorry, of course, Vulcans don’t make guesses. Spock? Are you even listening to me?’

Spock looks up. “Of course, Nyota.”

“Really?” She folds her arms across her chest, eyeing him dubiously. “What was the last thing I said?”
“The last thing you said was: ‘Are you even listening to me?’”

“Cute, Spock. You’re becoming more human by the day.”

“I see no reason for insults.”

He stares back into his PADD, but Nyota apparently isn’t going to let him go so easily.

“You’ve been doing this a lot lately, you know.”

He glances up. “Doing what?”

“Spacing out. It’s like you’re not even in the room. I’m talking to myself most of the time here, and I’m not so far gone that I enjoy it, Spock, let me tell you.”

“I do not know what you would have me say. If my concentration has been inadequate, surely it would have reflected on the quality of my work.”

“Oh, your concentration’s just fine when you’re on duty,” she allows impatiently. “You’re like two hundred percent in there. It’s when you’re off duty that this is happening – only you don’t go off duty so much anymore, do you? This is like the second time in three weeks. Don’t you think it’s a little extreme?”

Spock looks at her. “I do not believe you are correct.”

“Oh, aren’t I? Spock, when was the last time you and I played racquetball?” He frowns and she chuckles humorlessly. “Don’t bother; it’s been too long. Lieutenant Pfeifer tells me the Science department hasn’t held a public debate in two months, and that was your idea – you love debate clubs, but apparently you haven’t been available to moderate a session in forever. You only go to the gym when you’re certain nobody’s there.

“Spock.” She leans over and places a hand on his knee. “I’m the only person you’re still seeing socially, and you hardly even talk to me.”

Spock frowns and moves out of her reach. “I have many duties, Nyota.”

“Sure, and the rest of us are just here for entertainment.”

“I did not say that.”

“But that’s what you implied.” Her eyes soften, and suddenly Spock wants to be anywhere but in this room with her. “Spock, listen. I know that it couldn’t have been easy exactly... After – after Vulcan and…” She trails off, searching for words and failing. “Look, I don’t want to presume that I know what you’re going through, but—”

“I am not ‘going through’ anything,” he says sharply. If only he were...

Nyota blinks. “Fine,” she says carefully, and Spock can’t submerge a pang of resentment toward her for humoring him so obviously. She is treating him as though he is sick. It is... unacceptable. “I’m just saying, a little more interaction could be good for you.”

He all but springs to his feet, shaken by an unexpected surge of previously pent-up anger. “I am not human,” he snaps. “I do not require socializing to perform adequately.”

She watches him, startled by the sudden outburst, quiet but obvious nonetheless. “Spock, I’m only saying that if you’re not comfortable with others, I’m here. If you need to talk—”
He glances at her brusquely. “Is that a euphemism for what you really desire?”

Color rushes to her cheeks, illuminates her face, and anger has never looked so beautiful. Spock can see it coming, but he still does nothing to stop Nyota when she steps toward him and slaps him across the face with all the energy she can muster. His head jerks to the side with the force of her blow.

They stand immobile for a while, breathing.

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly at last.

“Mhm.” She sighs, rubbing her forehead. “Feeling better?”

“Are you?”

Their eyes meet. Nyota smiles, then laughs softly. “Much.”

Spock is almost swayed enough to smile with her. “I am gratified.”

She pulls him closer, and he goes willingly. The kiss is warm, languorous, and just easy. Spock reaches to tuck a stray lock of hair behind Nyota’s ear.

“You should not tempt me,” he murmurs gently.

She shakes her head. “I’d do it in a second if you needed it. You know that, right?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Am I to assume you found the experience sufficiently agreeable?”

She laughs, open and carefree. “And here I was thinking you’re not equipped with a male ego.” She nudges him in the ribs lightly, eyes dancing. “Nah. You’re good, Spock, but that’s not why I’m offering.”

“I know.”

“I’m just worried about you.”

Spock sighs. “Nyota, I wish I knew a way to alleviate your concern. I am” – he pauses – “fine.”

“Fine,” she repeats, incredulous.

“Fine,” he reiterates, and looks away. The variable definitions to the word have their advantages.

“Well,” she intones dubiously. “I’ll leave you be, then. For now.” She squeezes his hand and steps back, about to leave.

“Wait.” Spock picks up a PADD from his desk and hands it to her. “If you would please give this to the captain? These are the crew evaluation reports he asked for.”

She takes the PADD from him, frowning. “Why don’t you give it to him yourself?”

He busies himself with rearranging his data chips. “I am otherwise occupied, and you are headed to the bridge. It is logical—”

“Spock.” She regards him carefully, her eyes quietly assessing. “You’ve been avoiding him.”

“I have not.”
“We’ve all noticed.”

“Whoever you are referring to, you and they are incorrect.”

“Did you two have another fight?”

“Certainly not.” Spock straightens and turns to look at her, extending a hand. “I did not realize it would be so much trouble. I shall hand it to the captain myself.”

She shakes her head. “No, I got this. It’s just that...” She grimaces.

He lifts an eyebrow, and she shrugs. “He really isn’t so bad once you get to know him.”

Spock sees his way out and seizes it. “I will be certain to mention to him you said so. He will undoubtedly be... ecstatic.”

She blushes vividly. “Don’t you dare! You say one word of this to him, and I’ll – I’ll tell him you like him best in a wet t-shirt!” Her eyes gleam with triumph.

Spock folds his arms across his chest, eyeing her calmly. “He is objectively attractive. What reasons would I have to deny this?”

Her eyes narrow. “You’re just playing it cool, aren’t you?”

“You are welcome to find out. Somehow, I doubt an acknowledgement of an objective fact from me would have nearly the same effect on him as your confession.”

She covers her eyes with her hand. “Oh my God, and I call you a friend.”

“For a reason,” Spock says, suppressing a smile. “I wish you a productive shift, Nyota.”

She shoots him a dark look as the door closes behind her. Spock’s mirth fades as quickly as if Nyota has taken it with her, and he frowns, staring into space.

This was a close call. Something tells him that, next time, Nyota won’t be dissuaded so easily.

Part of him wants to be honest with her, wants to explain... But explain what? That he is as heartless as she never believed he could be? That Kirk was right about him all along, and Spock really doesn’t feel anger or heartbreak when his whole world is gone?

She will not believe him. Nyota is too kindhearted to accept this truth about him, and Spock feels like a coward in wishing for her to remain deluded on his account.

Without her, there will be no one left.

He ends up working well into Gamma shift, but this would be the fifth night in a row that he doesn’t get any sleep if he doesn’t stop, so Spock decides to do what is logical and at least attempt it. This time, falling asleep is surprisingly easy, and, thankfully, his mind obviously has other priorities than supplying him with disturbing dreams that he can never remember in the morning.

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Spock jerks upright in his bed without an immediate understanding as to what has woken him. He has barely been asleep for two hours and fifteen minutes—

“Life support has been compromised! Leave the room immediately! Life support has been
The computer alert is loud and scratchy in Spock’s ears, but his mind has already restarted, analyzing possible reasons behind the alarm even as he rolls out of bed and heads out of the room.

The corridor outside is lit only by emergency lights and is filled with bewildered crewmembers, most of them in their sleepwear. Spock is pleased to note that nobody is panicking as he makes his way toward the control panel at the intersection, even as he hears several people call out to him and each other with variations of ‘What’s going on?’

Spock reaches for the panel, meaning to type in his security code, only to have his fingers clash with someone else’s.

He looks up. “Captain.”

Kirk has obviously been just coming off shift or was working late, because he’s still in uniform.

“Sorry,” Kirk mutters. “Didn’t see you there. D’you know what the hell is it now?”

Spock shakes his head, punching in the code and calling up the environmental system display. “It appears there is some kind of pathogen in the ventilation system.”

“How bad?”

Spock glances down the corridor before returning his attention to the display. “According to this, the substance is contained within crew quarters on this deck, port side, sections 10 to 21. It spread quite rapidly before our environmental system could react – which means anyone who has been there has been exposed, myself included.” He pauses. “However, there appear to be no ill effects.”

Kirk frowns. “Well, thank God for small mercies. Can you tell anything about the substance?”

Spock concentrates on the readings displayed, but they are too few for a conclusive answer. “I will have to go to my lab—”

“Scott to Captain Kirk,” a voice from the intercom interrupts suddenly.

Kirk and Spock share a look. The captain raises his eyebrows as if to say, ‘Well, that’s gonna be interesting,’ and reaches to answer.

“Kirk here. Scotty, what the hell’s happening to my ship?”

Scott’s voice, Spock notes as they listen, is decidedly disapproving. “Well, there’s this lad – Ensign Blunders?”

“I’m sorry?” Kirk blinks and stares at the comm unit. “I have an Ensign Blunders on my ship and I don’t know about it?”

Spock actually winces. “I am fairly certain Mr. Scott is referring to Ensign Bludders, Captain. From the Maintenance department.”

“Aye, him,” Scott confirms grudgingly. “Apparently, this Blunders” – he stresses the name vindictively – “has decided to woo some lass by spikin’ the air in her quarters with rose essence or the like—”

There’s a sharp gasp in the gathered crowd, and everyone turns to look at Yeoman Tamura, who has clasped a hand over her mouth and appears to be suffering from extreme embarrassment.
“—only he got the ingredients wrong. It spread right quickly and the computer went berserk and, well, the smell’s foul. There’s no hazard, only the net is sensitive, and it’ll take a while to clean this up, because someone who’s forgotten his bloody brains back on Earth had gone to extra trouble to make it sticky.” Scott snorts derisively. “We put a stop to that, but I’m not recommending goin’ back to those rooms for a coupla hours at least.”

“Scotty.” Kirk rubs his forehead and tries to ignore the crew snickering around him. His own lips are twitching. “I take it this unfortunate gentleman is down there with you?”

“Aye, he is. And he’s gonna stay here and be decontaminating all kinds of fancy things with a manual cleanser for me for the upcoming month,” Scott growls. “If that meets with yer approval, Captain.”

Kirk’s chest is heaving with silent laughter, but he manages to sound strict as he speaks. “Oh, it most certainly does. Tell him he will also be reporting to Doctor McCoy to update his education on biohazards”— he glances at Spock, grinning—“and Commander Spock for an update on starship protocols.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow, but doesn’t comment. Kirk’s grin widens. “Oh, and Scotty? Let me know when it’s safe for the guys to get back to their beds, okay?”

“Sure thing, Captain. Scott out.”

“Bones is gonna eat him alive,” Kirk says, shaking his head and tapping the panel closed.

“You are taking this incident very lightly,” Spock notes, stepping back as well. The deck is uncomfortably cool beneath his bare feet.

“Maybe, but trust me, Spock—being called Ensign Blunders for the next millennia or so will be punishment enough.”

Spock opens his mouth to make a remark on the illogical nature of nicknames when he realizes they are still standing in the middle of a small crew gathering, and, for some reason, everyone seems to be looking at him.

Spock frowns. While he understands that it is perhaps less than usual to observe one’s commanding officer out of uniform, he does not believe that his inconspicuous regulation underwear and t-shirt merit this much scrutiny, subtle commenting, and not so subtle smirking. Certainly there are more fascinating objects for such attention currently available. Ensign Rowlens, for one, is wearing bright pink pajamas with smiling teddy bears on them; and Yeoman Lynn is holding a stuffed animal in her hands which is vaguely reminiscent of a Deltan dragon.

Spock scowls, but it seems to have no effect whatsoever. This is probably understandable, given that no one appears to be looking at his face.

“Oy, listen up,” Kirk says suddenly, stepping in front of Spock and brushing his arm as he does so. “What’s with the staring, people? Don’t you guys have any manners?”

The immediate effect of Kirk’s words produces an even stranger scene—there now seems to be a wave of people averting their eyes and pretending they hadn’t been staring in the first place. Most illogical.

“I heard rec room 2 is available for a pajama party,” Kirk says, hands planted solidly on his hips as he taps his foot on the deck. “Shoo.”
Spock watches thoughtfully as the crewmembers hurry away, and glances at Kirk sideways.

“‘Shoo,’ Captain?”

Kirk grins at him ruefully. “It worked, didn’t it?”

He looks Spock up and down and sighs for some reason. “You better come with me, I guess. My quarters weren’t affected; you can wait there.”

“I can as easily wait here.”

“Well, yeah, I suppose you can – only you’ll freeze, and I think that’s enough wanking material you’ve given them as it is.”

Spock blinks. “‘Wanking material’?”

Kirk looks at him, sighs again, and drags his hand over his face tiredly. “Come with me, Commander,” he says in an exasperated voice. “Consider it an order if you have to.”

The decks on the Enterprise are shaped as half-moons, and senior officers are traditionally assigned quarters as far away from each other as possible to increase the chances of at least one of them surviving in case of a ship-wide disaster. Kirk’s quarters, however, are only twenty-five numbers down from Spock’s, instead of fifty, because Spock has chosen the room assigned to the Science Officer rather than First Officer. Nyota, who, according to regulations, should never live on the same deck and side as the Chief Engineer, currently occupies the XO’s room. Another senior officer sharing the deck with Spock and Kirk is Doctor M’Benga, while McCoy, Scott, and Sulu reside two decks below.

“Make yourself at home.” Kirk gestures with his hand as they enter the dark room. “Computer, lights. Raise temperature ten degrees Celsius.”

“That is unnecessary,” Spock protests, though it is slightly chilly for him on board even when he is fully dressed.

“It’s no big deal.” Kirk shrugs, walking over to the replicator. “Want some tea?”

Spock considers the offer. “Thank you.”

Kirk nods, punching in the order. Spock looks around. Kirk’s desk is swarmed with PADDs, data chips, and various instruments – some of which seem to be of his own invention, as Spock is certain he has never seen the likes before. There is a half-eaten apple sitting by the monitor, and there are at least two mugs with what looks like stale coffee: one just behind the comm unit, another on the visitor’s chair, flanked by a mounting, haphazardly stacked pile of books, and – Spock squints – yes, there is another one, under a PADD at the corner of the desk. Spock doubts very much that Kirk remembers any of them are there.

He looks behind him. The bed isn’t made, even though it doesn’t seem to have been used recently. There is a vial with what looks suspiciously like plasma coolant on the nightstand, beside an open book, a half-assembled 3D chess board, and another apple. Another set of PADDs is scattered all over the bed, together with a discarded t-shirt and a crumpled towel.

“Yeah, it’s kind of a mess in here. Sorry.”

Spock turns to accept a steaming cup Kirk is handing him. “Thank you,” Spock repeats quietly, curling his hands around the warm ceramic.
“Um, just let me...” Kirk trails off, brushing past Spock toward his bed. “Hold on a sec.”

Spock watches in bemusement as Kirk sweeps whatever has been lying on the bed to the floor in a broad motion of his arm, then pulls the cover up abruptly, trying to smooth it with his hand.

“Well,” the captain drawls, rubbing his neck and surveying his handiwork with a sheepish expression. “It’s probably safe to sit here now.”

“Probably,” Spock says, without making it a question or a statement.

He takes a sip of his tea instead, and sits on the edge of the bed gingerly. Kirk looks at him until Spock raises an eyebrow.

“Um, you maybe want to – I mean, despite what it looks like, I do have some clean stuff in here.” Kirk gestures to his wardrobe. “If you wanna borrow something of mine... You know, if you’re cold or something.”

Spock takes another sip of the hot liquid, closing his eyes for a moment in bliss. When he opens them, he finds Kirk still looking at him with a strange expression. Spock remembers, belatedly, that the captain has asked him a question.

“I am appreciative of your hospitality, Captain, but I do not believe that is necessary,” Spock replies mildly.

“Oh.” Kirk blinks. “Right.” He pauses, as if collecting his thoughts.

Spock drinks his tea, feeling oddly uncaring about any of this. He has been trying to avoid Kirk for some time now, and this is part of the reason. Kirk’s presence has a tendency to relax something profound in Spock when he least expects it. Like a fifth column, it sneaks in, waiting quietly for the right moment to start wrecking havoc – which is why Spock usually tenses up more, trying to compensate whenever he has to be in close quarters with Kirk.

But he is probably too tired tonight. He finds himself succumbing to the fatalism of the situation without much fight.

“Well,” Kirk says, dragging Spock out of his philosophical musings. “You’re not sleeping, I’m not sleeping, and we’re both here. Might as well go over those evaluations, I guess?”

Spock considers it, looking up and watching Kirk, who seems strangely nervous. Spock raises an eyebrow at the uncharacteristic behavior; Kirk blushes suddenly and looks away.

Fascinating.

“That is a logical proposal, Captain.” Spock inclines his head politely. “I believe it would indeed be the most efficient way to utilize our time.”

“Great.” Kirk smiles and claps his hands. “Let’s get to it, then.”

They end up both sitting on the floor, passing PADDs back and forth between them as they discuss personnel deployment and the initial successes and failures of various officers. Spock finds himself approving of the quiet, absorbed way Kirk is listening to his opinions, and is also pleasantly surprised by the unexpected insights the captain offers. Spock doesn’t notice that he has been trying to discern exactly how Kirk has come by them, given their astounding accuracy, until Kirk laughs and shakes his head.
“Sometimes it’s just a gut feeling, Spock – what can I tell you?”

Spock tilts his head to one side curiously, sinking back to let his back rest against the bed. “And your ‘gut feeling’ is based on the fact that Lieutenant Monroe does not know who Loki is.”

Kirk grimaces. “She didn’t laugh at the joke, Spock.”

“That is not surprising, considering that one must be familiar with the basics of ancient Norse mythology to understand it.”

“Hey, it’s not like it’s something extraordinary,” Kirk defends. “I mean, you get it, right? You’d laugh if you weren’t Vulcan.”

“I assure you, I would not. As I understand it, the humorous impact of this particular anecdote is dependent largely on the delivery,” Spock looks at Kirk pointedly. “Which, in your case, was severely lacking.”

“Hey!” Kirk shoots up to sit on his knees. “I’m a great joker, I’ll have you know!”

Spock is unable to prevent his lips from twitching and looks down hastily to conceal his amusement.

Kirk groans and presses his hand against his face. “God, I got a Vulcan to make fun of me. This must be a new low.”

The sound of the door chime catches them both by surprise. Spock straightens his back, blinking at the two empty teacups beside him. He vaguely recalls Kirk giving him the second one, now that he thinks about it.

“Come in,” Kirk calls as they both glance at the door.

Doctor McCoy steps in, his mouth half-open in preparation to say something, when he takes in the picture that greets him inside and stops abruptly, staring. After a few more seconds spent gaping, he looks at the captain, whose gold shirt was discarded due to the heat quite a while ago.

“For the love of my sanity, Jim, tell me it’s not what I think.”

Kirk smirks. “I have no idea what you think, Bones. Spock? Do you know what he thinks?”

McCoy groans.

Spock glances from one human to the other. “I was not aware the doctor could think.”

“Oh, aren’t you hilarious?” McCoy drawls irritably, while Kirk snorts a surprised laugh. “The deck’s decontaminated, if that’s of any interest to either of you smartasses.”

“Indeed.” Spock glances over at Kirk, and they both rise to their feet slowly. “If you would not object, Captain, perhaps we could finish the evaluations at another time?”

“Yeah, sure. Get some rest, Spock.” Kirk grins at him.

“Yes, Spock, please do,” McCoy interjects suddenly, eyeing Spock warily. “You look like shit. I’m placing you off duty till fourteen hundred hours.”

“Doctor—”

“Hush up, now. It’s not just you; it’s everyone who got kicked out of bed tonight. We’re not doing
anything that urgent at the moment, so take a morning off.” McCoy obviously catches Spock’s expression, because he scowls at him even more deeply. “Medical orders, Commander, and don’t make me enforce them. That goes for you too, Jim.”

“Aw, Bones, really?”

“Oh my God, what are you both, five?” McCoy groans exasperatedly. “Spock, off you go. And dammit, Jim, you might wanna clean this mess every once in a while. I heard your yeoman is scared to walk in here.”

Recognizing one of the doctor’s standard starting lectures, Spock chooses to make a strategic retreat. He bends down to pick up the empty cups and deposits them to the recycler.

“Captain.” He nods at Kirk and turns to leave.

He is certain he has misinterpreted the expression in Kirk’s eyes as the captain watches him go.

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As usual, Spock walks onto the bridge eight-point-four minutes early for Alpha shift after completing his tour of key departments. He splits his attention between listening to the Gamma shift science officer and studying the new sets of readings on his screen, running a mental list of tasks for the day and assigning priorities.

At some point, however, the absence of a typical jovial voice penetrates his senses, and Spock glances over the bridge at large.

Kirk isn’t there.

It’s almost time for the shift change, and the captain normally arrives several minutes early. He has never been delayed without a forewarning in Spock’s recollection. The rigid posture of Lieutenant DeSalle, who is currently occupying the central seat, suggests that he is aware of the anomaly as well.

Spock decides to give the captain several more minutes in case of some unexpected delay, but five minutes into the official start of Alpha shift, he cannot ignore the situation any longer.

Narrowing his eyes slightly, Spock leans over Nyota’s station.

“Could you page the captain’s quarters for me, Lieutenant?” Spock asks, keeping his voice quiet. There is no need whatsoever to attract the rest of the crew’s attention to the fact that the captain is late.

Nyota darts a quick glance across the bridge before turning toward Spock slightly. “Already did,” she says, also quietly. “Either he’s not there, or he isn’t picking up. I’d call McCoy, only it’s pretty much the same as sounding a warning bell, so—”

“Hold on that,” Spock tells her softly, rising up and striding toward the central seat. “Lieutenant DeSalle, you are relieved,” he says using his normal voice. “You may leave the bridge.”

“Aye, sir.” The man seems relieved indeed as he strides toward the turbolift.

“Log me as the officer of the watch, Yeoman,” Spock orders calmly, settling into the just vacated captain’s chair.
“But sir—” she starts to protest, bewildered.

Spock looks at her.

“Aye, sir,” she blurs hurriedly, making the note on her PADD.

Spock dismisses her with a nod. Calling McCoy is becoming more imminent by the second, but Spock is reluctant to call attention to a problem he doesn’t know the nature of. The muscles in his forehead tensing with a frown he fights to keep at bay, Spock activates the terminal installed on the captain’s chair.

Two minutes later, he is empowered with the knowledge that the number of crewmembers onboard has not been reduced recently and no emergencies have been reported either in Med Bay or any other department. Spock does frown slightly at that, until he notices Ensign Chekov stealing a glance at him. He instantly schools his features back to neutral impassivity, unwilling to clue in the crew on the fact that the captain has apparently gone AWOL.

Chekov covers his move by reaching for the coffee mug sitting on his console, and Spock suddenly stills.

Coffee.

It is unlike Kirk to be derelict in his duties, but it is not unlike him to lose track of time while engrossed in one of his numerous projects. Spock checks his terminal again and slides out of the chair, cautiously optimistic.

He glances at the communications post curtly. “Lieutenant Uhura, please take the conn.”

He will never cease to admire the smooth way she picks up the information given to her – all of it, not just the verbal layer. She inclines her head quickly, but with no outward sign of excitement, transmitting none of her curiosity or concern.

“Aye, sir.”

Spock walks past her with an appreciative nod and receives a fleeting, understanding smile in return.

He knows he has been right in his assumption the moment he enters the ready room. There is a battery of empty coffee mugs on the desk, the bitter aroma lingering in the air, combined with the unmistakable scent of a healthy human male colored with an aura of agitation and impatience – both conditions having been maintained for a long time. Spock tunes out his hunting instincts now that his target is in sight, and instead subjects his captain to a more scientific scrutiny.

Kirk is sprawled in the revolving chair, one leg thrown over the armrest, the other kicking the desk to maintain the chair’s momentum. He’s scowling at the PADD in his lap, running his hand through his hair – from the looks of it, hardly for the first time. He’s wearing all black again, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to his elbows. Spock has noted previously that the captain seems to dislike his golden shirt for some reason, and uses every opportunity to lose it. There are dark circles under Kirk’s dry, reddened eyes, completing every indication of a sleepless night.

“Captain.”

Kirk jumps in his chair, too engrossed in whatever he was reading to have heard Spock enter.

“What time is it?” Kirk’s voice sounds hoarse, and he cringes as if the words leave a bad taste in his mouth. “Shit. Don’t tell me I’m late for Alpha.”
Spock studies him a moment longer, then lowers himself into the opposite chair. “It is no longer of consequence. Lieutenant Uhura currently has the conn.”

“Damn,” Kirk groans, running a hand over his face. “I mean, thanks. You didn’t have to do this.”

“May I ask what has captivated your attention to this extent?”

Kirk sighs, then slides the PADD he has been studying across the desk toward Spock. “This. The damn thing doesn’t make any sense.”

Spock glances at the header and drops his hand instantly. “Captain, I am certain you are not suggesting I read a classified report meant for your eyes only.”

Kirk blinks, then stares at Spock in bewilderment. “Seriously.” He shakes his head. “Spock, you need to loosen up a bit. I don’t know from where you’re getting this idea that I’m a complete imbecile, but I wish you’d call it quits.”

He pushes the PADD toward Spock determinedly. “I’m ordering you to read it. Do I need to cite the regs allowing me to do that, too?”

Spock opens his mouth to explain himself, but then thinks better of the idea. “No, sir,” he says, reaching for the report.

Several minutes pass in silence as Spock tries to figure out what triggered Kirk’s concern. In his complete focus on the data in front of him, he is only peripherally aware of the impatient noises Kirk probably doesn’t know he’s making.

“You do know how to speed-read, right?”

Spock looks up. “I finished reading four-point-eight minutes ago and was merely trying to discern the reason for your interest. Random activity near the Romulan Neutral Zone is hardly unusual.”

“I don’t believe it’s random.”

Spock narrows his eyes and scans the report again. “The three sectors named here are of very low strategic importance.”

“Doesn’t that tell you something?”

There’s an almost maniacal gleam in Kirk’s eye that gives Spock pause. “Captain... when have you last slept?”

“Oh, that’s right, call me crazy now.” Kirk flops his hand against the desk in frustration. “You know, if you’d get off your high horse every once in a while, it wouldn’t actually kill you.” His voice drops as he mutters, “Maybe you’d even see what I see in there.”

Spock tilts his head slightly. “Indeed. For instance, the fact that all three of the aforementioned sectors are at approximately the same distance from the same planet known as Molot III on the border of the Romulan Neutral Zone and unclaimed space?”

Kirk’s eyes widen momentarily. Spock holds his gaze, lifting an eyebrow for good measure. “Varying from 4.2 to 5.1 light years, if I am not mistaken.”

Kirk purses his lips. “You done showing off?”

“I did not wish for you to ‘get the idea’ that I am unintelligent.”
“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Kirk shakes his head, smirking. “You don’t think something’s going on there?”

Spock considers it. “Unlikely. The planet itself remains unclaimed because it does not possess anything of value, either in resources or strategically.”

“Any planet in such close proximity to the Neutral Zone is of strategic value.”

“I would agree, if either the Federation or the Empire had enough resources to maintain a fully operational base on every barren planet near the Zone.” Spock steeples his fingers thoughtfully. “Such is not the case.”

Kirk leans across the desk toward him. “I think Romulans are about to change that. Look at this – look at those ships.”

Spock does. “None are Romulan. Temerians, Vohh’ch, Duna, Karpallans – these are all species indigenous to this region. They have been operating in this space for several centuries.”

“And all of them have been working for the Romulans at one time or another.”

Spock narrows his eyes. “On what do you base this assumption? I am unaware of any such liaisons.”

“Neither was I, but it was bugging me, so I did some digging. Did you know that for the last century, the most common cause of death for male Temerians over forty-five was lung cancer sustained via roth poisoning? A miners’ disease.”

“Temeria does not have any roth deposits.”

“True, but Emeria does – it’s their major export product.”

“And Emeria is a Romulan enclave.” Spock nods, now captivated despite himself. “Economically, at the very least.”

“Exactly.” Kirk leans closer, looming over the PADD, prodding it with a stylus. “Vohh’ch don’t allow any telepaths into their space, yet the cargo ships travelling from Romulus to Garrapur only spend an average of seventy-eight hours en route. If they went around Vohh’ch, it would have taken them at least twice as long. So either Romulans install warp-fifteen engines on their freighters—”

“—or they navigate directly through Vohh’ch space,” Spock finishes. “I am beginning to see your point, Captain.” He frowns. “But Duna? I am aware of the persistent rumors that Romulans use them as couriers—”

“Yeah, that’s all I got on them, too.” Kirk nods. “I’m pretty sure it’s more than rumors, though. That incident in the Denobulan space?”

“Indeed. Karpallans?”

“Got me.” Kirk falls back in his chair, grinning tiredly. “They’re the only weak spot in my conspiracy theory of doom.”

Spock studies him for a moment, without really seeing. “Perhaps not.”

Kirk is instantly alert again. “You know something?”

Spock pauses. “Only that fifteen years ago, the Vulcan High Council has made a decision to sever diplomatic relations with the Karpallans.”
“Really?” Kirk’s eyebrows arch. “Over what?”

Overcoming his reluctance to divulge information he was not supposed to possess in the first place, Spock says, “A Vulcan transport had been fired upon while unintentionally breaching the borders of Karpallan space.”

“Which wouldn’t be unusual – those guys are paranoid.”

Spock looks him in the eye. “The Karpallans did not possess the capability of disabling Vulcan ships at the time. There had been persistent... speculation that the disruptors used against us were Romulan.”

“Us?”

Spock all but sighs at his own slip, but it’s too late to deny anything now. “As I am not entirely unrelated to a member of the Vulcan High Council, I might have been aboard the transport at the time.”

Kirk purses his lips, regarding Spock with something akin to amusement. “Vulcans aren’t usually fond of speculations, Mr. Spock.”

Spock holds his eyes determinedly. “I might have had an *accidental* look at the sensor readings.”

“And *accidentally* taken them down?”

“We had no point of comparison at that juncture,” Spock states firmly. “However, serving under Captain Pike, I was party to several hostile encounters with the Romulan fleet. My comparative analysis of the weaponry was not entirely conclusive.”

“But enough to convince you?”

Spock hesitates, then inclines his head slightly.

“Well, there you go.” Kirk slouches back in his chair, rocking in it. “The question is – what the hell would Romulans want with Molot III? I might have broken my brain thinking about it, and I still can’t see… For all intents and purposes, it does look random, after all.”

Spock contemplates the situation for a while. His glance falls on the report again, eyes narrowing. “Considering the source of information, Captain, I fear that might be the case.”

“Source?” Kirk frowns. “You mean this guy, Captain Morrain? You know him?”

“By reputation. He does not command a great deal of respect among his peers,” Spock says, cringing internally at speaking ill of his superiors. “Admiral Pike often referred to Captain Morrain as ‘the boy who cried ‘Wolf!’’ – I assume you are familiar with the reference.”

Kirk groans. “Yeah. It means I’ve spent the night on a wild goose chase.” He shakes his head and suddenly grins. “Pike really calls him that?”

Spock looks away briefly. “Admiral Pike’s labeling system is somewhat unconventional, but I have found it to be strikingly accurate in retrospect.”

“No doubt.” Kirk is grinning still, making Spock feel distinctly uncomfortable under his gaze. “You know, sometimes I envy you. Serving with him must have really been something.”

Spock thinks of the years he spent on the *Nelson*, feeling an edgy tightness constricting his throat.
“Indeed,” he says quietly, staring at his hands. “If that is all, sir? I am needed on the bridge.”

“Right.” Kirk nods, growing serious. “I’ll take your beta today, then.”

“That will not be necessary, sir. I am fully capable—”

“As am I,” Kirk interrupts him firmly. “Thanks for covering for me this morning, but I’ll take it from here.”

Spock pauses in the doorway, glancing back at Kirk hesitantly. “Captain… you are entitled to certain privileges.”

Kirk holds his gaze steadily, a smile still curving his lips but his eyes attaining the light-consuming quality of steel. “If you’re offering a back rub, I’ll take it. Otherwise, Mr. Spock, thanks, but no, thanks. I’ll see you in seven hours.”

Spock turns on his heel and leaves, feeling strangely pleased with the response.

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Of course, their ‘idle streak,’ as the captain calls it, does not last for a full week.

“Spock, I need that generator down now!” Kirk snaps over yet another deafening blast missing their cover only by meters.

“I estimate another two minutes, forty-six seconds before the primary grid is compromised,” Spock replies calmly, never lifting his eyes off the alien console. He doesn’t so much as wince when he’s showered in pebbles raised by another near-hit.

“Hendorff, Richards, spread out,” Kirk orders behind his back. “The moment Spock gets their shields down, I want you to smash that damned battery to pieces!”

“Aye, sir!”

“Spock—”

“I am almost there, Captain.”

His hands working feverishly as he inputs one code after the other, trying every combination he can think of to stay ahead of the computer, Spock spares a thought at the absurdity of the situation. Their enemies are not living beings. The Enterprise crew is fighting against the automated defense system left on this small planetoid by the Cardassians who, despite having signed the treaty, were all too reluctant to concede this system.

“I am in,” Spock informs the others briskly the moment the screen in front of him flashes in welcoming teal. “Deactivating the shield generator... now.”

“Teams Alpha and Delta, target the battery and fire at will,” Kirk orders, his voice slightly distorted by the headset. “Team Gamma, time to crash their backyard, go! Spock, get inside this thing – see if you can deactivate the system from here.”

“Unlikely,” Spock says, even as he moves to comply.

“Chekov, you’re with him.”
“But, Keptin—”

Spock beats Kirk to a response. “Ensign, I require your assistance.”

Chekov subsides at once, sweeping past Spock inside the installation and looking flustered.

Kirk nods at Spock, a smirk flashing from beneath his helmet. “Good hunting.”

Spock inclines his head once and dives inside.

He has rarely seen a working space less comfortable for a live operator than this one. Cardassian culture is a curious one, where sybarite tendencies of the aristocracy exist side by side with severe regime of the military and total devotion to one’s duty.

Chekov is already studying the monitors, his helmet unfastened and his phaser holstered once again. He glances up at Spock, pointing. “I don’t understand Cardassian,” he admits, “but if there’s any logic to this system, those should be perimeter defense controls.”

Spock peers at the panel. “I concur. It appears, however, that the weapons controls are situated in the main fort. They would have to be taken down manually.”

He changes the frequency. “Captain.”

“Spock, anything urgent in there? Kinda busy right now; we’ve just taken that fucking battery down and I’m about to check it out, so—”

Spock can hear the shots being fired in the background. He opens his mouth to respond when Chekov suddenly points at a lower screen frantically, making a noise Spock has never heard out of a human being before. Spock looks at the screen and freezes.

“Captain, under no circumstances must you leave the perimeter,” Spock says hastily, a sinking feeling in his stomach telling him it might be too late.

“Why?” Kirk asks, and the careful tone of his voice informs Spock that they are in a lot of trouble.

“You have done so already.” He doesn’t make it a question. As strange as it may seem, Kirk’s actions are usually easy to predict – not because they are logical or expected, but because, as unlikely as it might be, they are exactly what Spock would choose to do in his position most of the time.

“Yeah. I’m, uh, just outside the fence. What’s going on, Spock?”

“Captain, do not move,” Spock orders. “It appears that when the battery was deactivated, it simultaneously activated another defense grid. You are standing on a minefield.”

Kirk’s frustrated sigh crackles loudly through the headset. “Great. Um, Spock? I don’t see any mines.”

“You would not see them until you encounter one. They are laid into the fabric of subspace.”

Kirk curses loudly. “Can I get back?”

“I can see him,” Chekov says, pointing at yet another screen.

And indeed, there’s a clear representation of the fifty meters of square ground Kirk has to cross, with a lone, green-pulsing figure standing at the beginning of it.
“No,” Spock tells Kirk. “There are twelve mines floating directly behind you. Hold perfectly still, Captain. Ensign Chekov and I will attempt to create a map for your passage.”

“Fine,” Kirk breathes.

Spock blocks outgoing audio and rounds on Chekov. “Report.”

“I’m not sure if it’s possible to generate a map,” the ensign says, tapping desperately at the console. “Those things don’t just stand still – they drift, Commander, and they’re everywhere. The only reason why the keptin is still alive is that they don’t all come to the surface of normal space at once.”

Spock looks closer. “I believe there is a pattern to their protrusion. Observe here – every ten seconds they rotate and shift forty degrees to the right. And here – every four seconds to those ten every third mine emerges, while every fifth goes deeper.”

“We don’t have time to create the matrix!”

“We will have to do so as he moves.”

Chekov stares at him, eyes wide in horror. “He’ll never make it.”

“We do not have a choice,” Spock says firmly, ignoring the icy drift streaming down his spine. “Use that terminal and start calculations. Transfer them to this console. Concentrate on emerging timing; I shall focus on space shifts.”

Chekov is still staring at him. Spock raises an eyebrow.

“Now, Ensign.”

Chekov swallows. “Aye-aye, sir.”

Spock taps his headset to change the frequency even as he starts working on his own equations. “Lieutenant Uhura, block every incoming transmission to the captain save for my own.”

“Sir? Is the captain—?”

“Inform Lieutenant Hendorff that he is in command of the operation until further notice. Captain Kirk is trapped within a minefield. It is vital, Lieutenant, that he receives no transmissions other than my own.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Transfer the captain’s life signs telemetry to my helmet now.”

“Aye, sir.” Her voice doesn’t falter. “Good luck.”

Spock taps the controls again. “Captain, are you there?”

“Hey Spock, did you cut me off? I’m not good on the whole silent treatment thing.”

“My apologies, sir. I regret to inform you that you will have to cross the field in order to get to safety. I will guide you. You will have to follow my commands precisely and immediately. I reiterate, Captain: precisely and immediately. Your life is depending on it.”

“I got you, Spock. Jump when you say jump.”
“Exactly.” Spock pauses. “Your heart rate is elevated, Captain. Try to take regular breaths.”

Kirk curses under his breath. Ignoring him, Spock concentrates on the screen, his calculations running alongside Chekov’s, as the prone figure at the bottom of the monitor throbs green with regular intervals. The whole setting is reminiscent of childish human video games, of which Spock has never been a fan. This time, however, the stakes are gravely serious.

“Captain. Slowly, take one step to the left.” Spock watches the figure on the screen move to comply with his directions. “Now, two steps forward. One step to the right. Three steps forward. Bend lower.”

“By how much?”

“The mine is approximately one-point-two meters above the ground.”

“Understood.” Pause. “All right, I’m cool.”

“Take three steps forward. One step to the left. One step back, Captain!”

“Fuck. I think I felt something.”

“A mine emerged outside our matrix. My apologies, sir.”

“Hey, it’s not like you created the damn thing.”

“Hold still, Captain; we are recalculating.”

“Okay. Has anyone ever told you – you have a beautiful voice, Spock.”

To Spock’s left, Chekov curses profusely in Russian, correcting an error at the same time Spock does.

“No, Captain. You will be the first.”

“They just won’t compute!” Chekov explodes.

“Use my algorithm, Ensign.”

“Well, you do,” Kirk continues. “You want me to tell you about your voice, Spock?”

Spock spares a split second to look at Kirk’s telemetry, noting an increase in heart rate. “If you wish,” he says, recognizing Kirk’s coping mechanism for what it is.

“It’s deep, and melodic, but not as low as one would expect from a Vulcan, you know what I’m saying?”

“Not really. Take one step back, Captain. Good. Now one, two steps to the left.”

“I bet you sing really well. You ever tried?”

“Run four steps forward – now.” Spock watches the figure on the screen move forward swiftly before responding to the question. “And no; the thought has not occurred to me.”

“Shame,” Kirk breathes. “What now?”

“Lower yourself on your knees.”
“Could you make it sound a little less sexy?”

Spock manages to stop himself from sighing. *Only Kirk would think of sex in the middle of a minefield.* “Try to occupy as little space as possible and move sideways forty-five degrees to North-East. Use your hands, and please exercise expediency.”

“Yeah, Spock, not helping.”

“Make a forward roll. Another one. Get up and take three steps to the right. Captain, hold!”

“Fuck.”

Chekov has long since taken his helmet off; his hair is plastered to his forehead, drenched with sweat. He works his console, and Spock’s screen changes to show him a scheme of what’s directly in front of Kirk now. The ensign seems to be on the verge of a nervous collapse, and Spock can hardly blame him.

“Captain.”

“Oh God, I don’t like it already.”

“You are facing a grid of alarm beams. If you touch even one of those, the whole minefield will be activated.”

“Shit. Anything to make it better.”

“There is a window of approximately forty to fifty centimeters. It is somewhat challenging, but possible to pass. I will guide you. Do not move without command at all.”

“Roger that.” Spock can almost feel Kirk’s strained smirk through his headset. “You just love ordering me around, don’t you?”

“The first line is at the level of your knees thirty centimeters ahead,” Spock informs Kirk. “Step over it. Good. Now bend to the waist. Tug your knees to your chest as you move and step over the beam twenty centimeters to your right, forty-five in height. Do not straighten up. Lie on the ground and crawl forward one meter. Do not so much as raise your head.”

A pause.

“Stand up. Carefully.” He pauses. “Captain…”

“Yeah?”

“Your pulse rate is dangerously high.”

“No shit.”

“Please attempt to take deep breaths. Your position is safe at the moment.”

“Spock, I... Fuck. Spock, I don’t think I can do it.”

“Yes, you can. I reviewed your Academy file, Captain. Your scores in field training set a new record.”

“Still, I just – this is insane, Spock. There’s no way I can—”
“I will guide you. Please attempt to bring your pulse under control. You are safe as long as you follow my instructions.”

A pause.

“Fine.”

Spock watches the telemetry anxiously, knowing that Kirk’s coordination is going to be compromised beyond acceptability if his heart doesn’t stop working itself into overdrive. Spock can see Chekov’s frantic gestures, drawing his attention to the mines moving slowly but inevitably closer to Kirk’s position.

Kirk’s pulse speeds up as if he can feel them.

“Captain,” Spock says, a bead of sweat gathering at his brow. He can’t afford to abandon his calculations, but they are not going to be any good if Kirk fails to calm down.

“Captain – Jim. Do you play chess?”


“I am playing against you, as white. I move my knight to king’s level one. What is your response?”

There’s another pause, and then, “Pawn to king’s level four.”

“Pawn to queen’s level one.”

“Knight to queen’s level three.”

“Bishop to queen’s level three. Check.”

“I’m not that easy. Rook to queen’s level two.”

“Queen to rook’s level seven. Check.”

Chekov is staring at Spock with wide eyes. Spock’s hands continue to work on the console, as Kirk moves out of yet another check and then declares one of his own. Spock responds by taking his virtual bishop, and notes that Kirk’s pulse has finally dropped to safer levels.

“Captain.”

“Yeah.”

“The window is approximately forty centimeters above the ground. You have to bend low and jump forward. You will hit the ground and roll. Your trajectory must be straight. You will have one meter of free space to stop your rotation. Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be. Hey, Spock?”

“Yes?”

“Totally have you checkmated in three moves.”

“We will discuss it after your jump. On three, Captain?”

“Please.”
“One. Two. Three.”

There’s a sound of movement coming down the line, a whoosh, and a rustle. Spock’s eyes are so intent on the screen they hurt, but the explosion he waits for never follows.

“Shit, I can’t fucking believe it!”

Spock exhales in relief. “Welcome back, Captain. Now all you have to do—”

He sees it too late. Probably because their matrix is only half-baked, or maybe the scheme defies any mathematical system at all, despite their efforts to find one—

“Get down, Jim!”

The screen blinks red; there’s a shockingly loud sound of explosion in Spock’s headset, and then—silence. He doesn’t hear anything, but the desperate staccato of his own pulse.

“Captain?” Spock calls, his voice suddenly weak. “Captain. Captain, please respond. Captain!”

There’s a cough, a spluttering sound, and then Kirk’s voice comes, rasp and hoarse. “Stop yelling, Spock, for God’s sake. I’m half-deaf already.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I’m confused, though. It threw me like four meters or something.”

“Affirmative, I see your new position. Captain.” Spock can barely believe it. “If you are able, get to your feet and run. Your path is clear.”

“ Seriously?”

“NOW!”

Spock watches as Kirk springs into motion, not as fast as before, but still ahead of the mines that are popping up from subspace in his wake. He sways to his sides, dangerously, and Spock holds his breath.

“Hey, what did I say about yelling?” Kirk’s pants are scratchy in Spock’s ears. “All right, I’m in.”

“Affirmative. We have lost you on our screen.” Spock sighs in relief, suddenly dizzy.

“Spock, are you all right? I don’t spy on your heart rate, unlike some nosy people, but you sound really off.”

“I am functional.” Spock straightens up, ignoring Chekov, who is staring at him in incredulous amusement. “And I still remember you have a check to deal with, Captain.”

Kirk laughs, harder and longer than Spock’s words justify, but Spock doesn’t blame him. “I’ve got a board in my quarters. Let’s finish with this mess, and then I’ll beat the pants off you?”

“I look forward to defeating your arrogance. Captain.”

Kirk laughs again, and his voice remains unnaturally high as they coordinate their efforts in taking the defense system down. The sound stays with Spock for a long time, utterly unnerving him.

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Spock pauses just before the door, steeling himself. He had never experienced such mood swings; indeed, had never even had any moods to speak of since he was seven. This is completely unacceptable, and yet he can’t help it. He only hopes his irritation will stay at bay.

“Come in.”

Kirk looks up from where he’s sitting at his desk, reading. Compared to the last time Spock has been here, the room looks more in order, save for the barricades of things on Kirk’s desk and his battle gear piled on the deck by the bed.

Kirk seems tired and a little confused. Spock’s gaze gravitates to the broad purple bruise stretching across the captain’s forehead and he frowns, unable to help himself.

“Spock, um, I don’t think now’s the best time,” Kirk says, laying down his PADD and looking around nervously. “I mean, we could still play, but to be honest, I’m tired and—”

“I have not come here to play chess, Captain.”

“Oh.” Kirk blinks and straightens up, his face growing more serious. “Then, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“You have counteracted my order regarding Lieutenant Hendorff.”

Kirk rolls his eyes. “You bet your ass I did.”

“May I know why?”

Kirk gets to his feet abruptly, all but throwing the PADD to the desk. “Because he didn’t deserve a reprimand, and you damn well know it! What the hell did you think you were doing?”

“As chief of security, he is responsible first and foremost for your safety, which was drastically compromised today. Do you need me to refresh your memory, sir?”

“He was following my orders, Spock! If it’s anybody’s fault I had to dance through that minefield, it’s mine! I jumped out there without looking, before we confirmed it was safe, though I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t have had any way of knowing beforehand. You wanna be pissed at someone, I’m your guy. Leave Hendorff alone.”

“Your bad judgment does not excuse his, sir.” Spock clenches his hands behind his back painfully. “And I cannot work effectively as your executive officer if you make it known to the crew that you do not trust mine.”

“What, you think I did it to remind the crew who’s the boss here?”

“It is a viable hypothesis, yes.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard!”

“Captain,” Spock presses. “While we have our share of disagreements, I was under the impression that you understood the importance of resolving them in private. The crew does not benefit from seeing us publicly undermine each other’s positions.”

“Then perhaps you should have thought about it before you started taking out your temper on my officers, Commander. If you have a problem with me, you take it up with me, you understand? Not with Cupcake, not with McCoy, not with my yeoman, Mr. Spock. With me.”
Spock stiffens, his hands at the small of his back clenching tightly. “I do not – ‘have a problem’ with you.”

“I think you do.” Kirk’s eyes narrow. “I think you have a problem with me, and it’s bigger than you even realize.”

“You are in error.”

“Am I?” Kirk tilts his head, regarding him scrupulously. “You never fail to press my nose into the slightest mistake I make. Whenever you’re around me, you act fine one moment, and the next you bolt from me, like I have some kind of an embarrassing disease. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

He takes a step closer to Spock, as if daring him to step back, and Spock has to summon every ounce of will he possesses to hold his ground.

“Could it be—” Kirk starts, voice soft but not kind. “I mean, is it possible that you’re still mad at me for the Narada? For the way I spoke about your mother?”

Spock feels nauseous all of a sudden, as if he’s been punched in the gut. “You are in error,” he repeats quietly, forcing himself to hold Kirk’s gaze. “I harbor no negative feelings for you – for any reason. I have no reasons to.” He is not entirely certain which of them he is trying to convince.

“Spock,” Kirk whispers. “Spock, you’re so mad at me – you’re mad at yourself. At everyone around you.”

“You are wrong.”

Kirk shakes his head as if he couldn’t hear Spock. “And you can’t do anything about it until you stop denying it.”

“There is nothing to deny,” Spock snaps, and he finally does give up and steps backward.

Kirk stares at him fixedly, his expression half-resentful, half-sad. “Really? Then why won’t you have dinner with me and Bones? I’ve invited you a dozen times.”

Spock looks away. “I did not wish to intrude.”

“Bullshit; you wouldn’t be intruding and you know it. Uhura tells me you’re a music fan. She told me you dragged her out to every piano concert you got wind of. But you wouldn’t go anywhere near Officers’ Lounge anymore, and when I asked you, you told me I was projecting.”

Spock is silent.

“Cupcake” – Kirk’s lips twitch – “Lieutenant Hendorff told me you agreed to teach some Vulcan martial arts to our security team. Then someone told you you’d be teaching a class with me, and you immediately became too busy to participate. You don’t want to come near me so badly, you’d rather be sitting in the corridor in your underwear. Am I imagining things, Mr. Spock, or are you avoiding me like the plague?”

Kirk steps closer again, breaking the fragile bubble of Spock’s personal space, and Spock goes even more rigid with tension.

“Spock,” Kirk says quietly, “I get it that I’m nowhere near as refined as the people you’re used to spend your time with. But am I really so bad that you can’t stand to be in the same room with me?”
“That is not—” Spock’s eyes widen. “That is not it at all, Captain. I – you are – you are – that is not the reason—” he all but whimpers helplessly.

How can he explain this? How can he explain that he would like nothing better than to be included; that if anything, he finds Kirk to be out of his league and Spock never wanted charity; that he is fascinated by Kirk but has no right to be, since Kirk nearly died because of Spock twice, and no level of emotional compromise could excuse that; that he is drawn to Kirk, against his will, against his better judgment telling him he doesn’t deserve the privilege; that he only feels alive again whenever the captain is with him, and Spock is——

*_Scared._*

He’s scared for his life, because there’s something dark and ugly churning deep inside him, and Kirk has this power no one else has ever had to pull Spock inside out with a word.

Spock will never forget the shame, the ultimate humiliation of being exposed thus – being stripped from control and logic and left bare for all to see. He will never forget their faces – the shock, disgust, and fear staining every expression when they saw what he’s truly like on the inside. That they have accepted him in their ranks again – that they have agreed to tolerate one like him in their midst – speaks of their kindness, not his virtues.

He wants to laugh at the thought.

He has no virtues. All he has to offer to make it worth for them is his brain, and he dives into work like a man possessed. If he allows himself anything else, what happened on the bridge during the *Narada* crisis will happen again, and while Kirk might be incredibly forgiving, but he is not a saint. He will not tolerate it the second time around. Not when Spock has spent months deceiving him, deceiving everyone, projecting an image of someone cool, collected, and confident. Someone who has nothing to be ashamed of. Someone who is so definitely not *him*.

He’s clinging now to this veneer, clutching it with slippery hands. He doesn’t want to lose it, because he has nowhere else to go. After spending months getting to know these people, feeling his respect and admiration for them grow – to have them look at him again with fear and revulsion would be intolerable.

And Kirk – Kirk can make it happen. Not out of malice, but because this is who he is. Spock doesn’t think he can live through this the second time.

Already Kirk is looking at him now with barely concealed resentment. And Spock has no means – no means at all to explain.

“Then what is?” Kirk asks sharply. “Are you seriously going to feed me the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ line? Even you can’t think I’m that stupid.”

“No,” Spock says feebly, suddenly unable to catch up. “That is not – I do not think—”

Kirk sighs, harsh and bitter. “You know what? I don’t know why I care,” he tells Spock coldly. “I think I’ve humiliated myself enough, and it’s not like I don’t have any friends and have to pine after someone who so obviously doesn’t want me.” His eyes harden to match his tone. “Maybe I was trying to do you a favor and maybe it was stupid of me. My mistake, Mr. Spock. It won’t happen again.”

Spock can only look at him, mouth painfully dry and vision blurry as he tries to hold himself together with something he has no name for.
“If you will excuse me, Captain,” he utters in a tone which strikes him as unrecognizably unnatural, but which probably sounds as even as always to anyone else. “I have duties to attend to.”

Kirk steps aside without a single word.
Spock flees.

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By the time Nyota finds him, he has long since calmed down. It is somewhat disconcerting how quickly his control restores itself when Kirk isn’t around to push him.

“I heard about what happened with Hendorff,” Nyota says cautiously, lowering herself to the deck beside Spock. The Observation Deck is empty but for the two of them, and her words, while spoken in a normal voice, are robbed of volume by the dominating silence. Spock feels her eyes on him, but doesn’t react.

“Did you really have to dress him down like that?” Nyota asks quietly. “The crew kind of hates you right now.”

Spock purses his lips, as if to shrug. “Then it is fortunate that my function here is not to make the crew happy with me.”

“Yeah, well.” She bites her lip, folding her hands in her lap nervously. “Still. It’s pretty bad.”

Spock doesn’t comment. She sighs. “Why did you do it? I mean, you had to know that wasn’t his fault.”

“I did.”

“Then I don’t understand. You were my instructor for three years, Spock. I’ve never known you to be anything but fair.”

He turns to glance at her. “I am not an instructor anymore, Nyota. This is not the Academy. The mistakes are not theoretical, and I do not have the luxury of being fair – only efficient.”

She looks as if he slapped her, and Spock suppresses a sigh. The crew is so professional that sometimes he forgets how young they really are, and that this is their first deep-space assignment. There are things not taught in classrooms – a lot of things.

“I was aware that Lieutenant Hendorff was not responsible for the captain’s decision. I was aware that reprimanding him would make me unpopular.”

“Then why—?”

“Because I do not care for popularity. I must ensure the captain’s safety.” He holds her eyes calmly. “Lieutenant Hendorff might not harbor any positive feelings for me at the moment, but the next time there is an emergency, there will be one more person to stand up to Kirk and prevent him from killing himself.” He turns back toward the viewport. “Knowing our captain as you and I do, you have to realize that there could never be enough people to do that.”

It takes Nyota several moments to digest this. She shifts uncomfortably next to Spock. “I’m pretty sure Kirk just thought you were trying to show everyone you’re more competent than him.”
Spock feels a pang of bitter amusement. “I am intimately familiar with the captain’s thoughts on the matter.”

He must have let something slip, because she frowns at him. “It’s not funny, Spock. Even if I get what you’re doing, it still looks like you’re just trying to piss people off on purpose, and… it’s not pretty out there.” She rubs her forehead tiredly. “You wouldn’t believe the things I have to listen to about you. It’s ugly, Spock.”

He considers her for a moment in silence, then inclines his head slightly. “I must ask your forgiveness, Nyota. I failed to take into account that my actions would affect you.”

She blinks and goes suddenly very still. “What do you mean?”

“I have found... solace in our friendship. Yet, being considered close to me, you are forced to endure the crew’s displeasure with me by association. It was selfish of me to maintain our relationship, knowing you will have to share some of my—”

“Shut up,” she cuts him off, voice ringing with fury. “Do you honestly think that I’m only here because the crew’s been giving me shit because of you? Do you think I’m that shallow – to leave you all alone just because it’s getting tough? Is that what you think of me?”

“Nyota—”

“I don’t give a damn about what they say about me. I was worried about you, Spock.”

“I am aware. It is unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate?” She stares at him. “Spock, I have a feeling you’re trying to tell me something, but I’m just not sure what it is. If it’s a problem that I care for you, then tell me, and I’ll leave you alone. But if you’re trying to push me away for my own sake, forget it. Nobody forces me to stand by you. I make my own choices.”

“That was never in dispute.”

“Then what was?”

He looks at her, searching for elusive words, for any means to explain. “You are not my wife,” he says finally. “Nor a family member. You should not be subject to the same treatment I receive. It would not be fair.”

She blinks. “Spock... what in the hell are you—”

“You have no obligation to me.”

Nyota regards him for a few long moments, before gritting out, “You are not my wife,” he says finally. “Nor a family member. You should not be subject to the same treatment I receive. It would not be fair.”

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She rolls her eyes and shakes her head again, an enigmatic look splayed across her face. “Well, lucky for you, I’m neither sane nor logical. So I’ll be seeing you around, convenient or no.”
He watches her go, and thinks that he will likely never comprehend the complexity of the human mind.

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It doesn’t help that they are ordered to put their current mission on hold and return to Earth three days later. Three days Spock spent telling himself that this impeccable icy correctness and polite, strictly formal conversation serves his purposes perfectly. He didn’t join this crew to make friends, after all – he joined them to give the captain a chance he wouldn’t have gotten otherwise. Being useful to Kirk as an officer should be good enough.

Kirk doesn’t so much as look at Spock when they receive their orders to turn back, but Spock can feel the captain stiffening, the lively expression on his face closing up short. Alpha shift is unusually quiet that day, as if everyone is highly aware of the tension spreading from the central chair. Spock tries to ignore it, but when he finds himself alone with Kirk in the turbolift several hours later, he cannot pretend any longer.

Definitely not when the captain brings the elevator to a halt and looks at Spock with carefully guarded eyes.

“Is this your doing?”

“Captain?”

“Don’t play ignorant,” Kirk says with a grimace. “This – us being ordered back without so much as an excuse. Is this your doing?”

Spock clenches his hands firmer behind his back, trying to appear nonchalant. “I have not been previously aware of our new orders, if that is what you are implying, sir.”

Kirk studies him, head tilted back slightly, eyes narrowing. “That doesn’t exactly answer my question, does it?”

“You are asking if I have orchestrated our return to Earth at this time?” Spock lifts an eyebrow. “You are overestimating the level of my influence on the admiralty.”

A slow, unpleasant smile taunts the corners of Kirk’s lips. “I’ve come to know, Mr. Spock, that there is no such thing as overestimating you.”

Spock tenses, trying not to show it. “Why would I want to turn us around at this time?”

“I don’t know.” Kirk shrugs, his unnerving, menacing smile still there. “Maybe I’ve finally managed to piss you off enough.”

“I am not your keeper, Captain. I am here to provide assistance.”

Kirk laughs, quiet and sharp. Spock is forcibly reminded of the way Kirk laughed in the Gorn’s face a second before receiving a smashing blow in the face from him on that one occasion they were supposed to be on shore leave and ended up in the middle of an armed conflict.

“I will have all departments provide accurate status reports by oh-eight-hundred tomorrow,” Spock says, seeing no logic in continuing the previous direction the conversation has taken.

Kirk sobers abruptly. “Yeah.” He reaches to release the hold on the turbolift. “You do that, but I
want them ready by zero-hundred tonight.”

Spock opens his mouth to argue. The timeframe he suggested is optimal for all departments that would not be forced to abandon all projects in favor of paperwork. But Kirk’s gaze is cool and slicing and expecting Spock to challenge. Spock purses his lips stubbornly.

“As you wish, sir.”

He will have to assist them personally, and he knows that department heads tend to dislike any unnecessary intervention, taking it as a signal of distrust from their superiors. Spock has been a department head long enough to know that, even as a Vulcan, he is not immune to such treatment, which is easily mistaken for disapproval.

But Kirk has given him little choice, and Spock will have to comply. He knows the department heads will blame him for micromanagement and meddling, probably earning him more accusations in ‘Vulcan arrogance’ and ‘superiority’ and ‘mistrust toward incompetent humans.’ At least he could ask Pechalat to take care of Sciences, Spock muses gloomily. But he can already picture Scott’s resentful mien or McCoy’s outrage. Spock thinks of Nyota and almost sighs.

“A problem, Commander?”

Spock looks back at Kirk steadily. “No problem, sir.”

“Good.” Kirk nods briskly, striding past Spock out of the lift. “I will expect an abridged version from you by twenty-three-hundred.”

Spock watches his retreating back, reminding himself that it is Kirk’s job to push his crew. It’s Spock’s job to make sure they can pull through it.

What wouldn’t Spock have given for the situation to be as simple as that right now.

Kirk was aware of Spock’s orders – it was one of the conditions Spock set to Nogura before accepting the position. He never meant to be deceiving anyone. He informed Kirk of the situation hours after he had been appointed Kirk’s XO. He expected Kirk to be angry, but the captain merely smiled carelessly and waved him off.

‘I knew they’d be keeping close tabs on me one way or another,’ he said. ‘I’m just glad it’s you I have to impress and not them. Not that it’s any easier, of course, but I beat your no-win once. I’ll do it the second time if it kills me.’

Spock remembers thinking that the captain has accepted the situation perhaps too easily and it hadn’t rung true. But Kirk seemed so sincere that it never occurred to Spock to doubt him in this particular regard. And Kirk had never previously doubted Spock’s loyalty.

Spock stops in his tracks abruptly.

Is it that Kirk had really never doubted his loyalty before, or is it that he had merely never voiced his doubts?

The thought tickles unpleasantly under his skin, making him feel cold in the climate-controlled environment. Spock isn’t prepared for how much he’s troubled by it, almost chagrined. This professional connection between them, the one they both took painstaking efforts to forge, has been the only thing of which Spock has been confident. To lose it suddenly is extremely disconcerting.

Just as he predicted, the department heads aren’t pleased with his interference at all. But that doesn’t
become a real issue until Kirk calls Spock to his ready room the next morning and informs him he is dissatisfied with the reports.

“I didn’t ask you to edit them, or do you think I can’t recognize your hand?” Kirk asks coldly, sliding the PADD over to Spock across the desk. “Your fingerprints are all over these reports, Mr. Spock. I would like to hear my other officers for once, if you don’t mind – or do I need to ask for your permission to do so?”

Spock swallows, forcing himself to hold Kirk’s eyes. “No, sir, you do not.”

“I thought not. Inform them I will expect their reports in six hours. Dismissed.”

This time, none of the department heads even try to conceal their extreme displeasure.

“I have better things to do than rewrite the same damn paper till it makes your pointy ears roll up and down!” McCoy yells, incensed. “And I don’t care much for your deadlines, either! We’re arriving back to Earth in four days, so what’s with the goddamn urgency? Are you trying to score extra points with Jim or something? Ain’t gonna work at my expense!”

Spock is nowhere close to finding an argument that would convince the doctor, when he feels someone’s presence at his side.

“It’s really important for you, isn’t it?” Chapel asks, peering at his face. “Don’t worry - I’ll let him vent a little before I make him get to it. You’ll have it in time, Commander.”

She smiles and disappears after the fuming CMO faster than Spock can understand what has just happened.

The Engineering deck greets Spock with icy silence, the edginess of the crew’s gazes scathing Spock as he informs Scott. The Chief Engineer glares at him, then turns to his people.

“Oi, lads - ye heard the commander here. Lock yer stations and pull out yer PADDs. We’ll be writing lines today.” He glances at Spock pointedly. “Again.”

“Mr. Scott,” Spock says in a pained voice. “You cannot take the entire shift off duty to prepare a status report.”

“Ye just ordered me to.” Scott tilts his chin up defiantly. “And I’m always compliant to orders, Commander. So either make do with the report ye collected yesterday, or ye can man Engineering yerself, for all I care. Sir.”

Spock knows Scott is right in his indignation, but he cannot explain the reasons behind his demands. And it will make a bad situation worse, but now that he’s faced with this insubordination in disguise, he knows he can’t let it go. Not when the entire deck is watching him for signs of weakness.

Spock crosses over to a comm unit. “Lieutenant Pechalat, please shut down science labs four through thirteen and send the available personnel to the Engineering deck at once.”

She sounds hesitant, but is probably curious more than baffled. “Sir?”

Spock locks gazes with Scott. “Apparently, our colleagues in Engineering find it difficult to produce an accurate status report while being burdened with their regular duties, as the rest of the ship’s personnel.”

Scott bristles, but Pechalat chuckles down the line and calls out to the room at large, “Hey,
girlfriends, what do you say we pack our lipsticks and candy and go help our little darling babies in Engineering?"

An enthusiastic laughter and whistles – mostly from the males – greet her question, streaming freely down the comm line, and Spock is swept with an urge to find his deputy right this moment and kiss her breathless. Having never had this particular impulse before, he finds it mildly disturbing.

He turns to Scott, eyebrow raised.

“Fine; knock it off,” Scott blurs, as red in the face as his staff. “We’ll get ye yer report. No need for assistance.”

“Do you copy that, Lieutenant?” Spock asks into the comm.

“Yes, sir.” Pechalat’s voice is laughing. “Settle down, girls. No party tonight.”

Spock shakes his head vaguely, unable to comprehend why she is addressing the mostly male contingency of the Science section as ‘girls,’ but knowing better than to ask.

He’s treated to more or less the same reaction in every other department, though no one else dares to oppose him openly as Scott. Lieutenant Hendorff of security is the only one who doesn’t offer any kind of comment, save for a brisk acknowledgement of the order. He stares at Spock with cold, unyielding eyes, and Spock feels suddenly grateful that, as they are not about to launch another landing party, he will not have to entrust his life to this man any time soon.

“You owe me one,” Pechalat tells him, as Spock walks into his lab thirty-four minutes later to check on their progress. “Was it bad?”

He glances at her and pauses. She bites her lip, looking up at him kindly. “It’s okay. Forget I asked.”

“No.” Spock shakes his head. “It is merely that... I understand their reaction.”

“No kidding; so do I.” She snorts. “It’s a good thing you trained us to do five things at a time.”

Spock studies her face carefully. “I am …grateful for your support. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“It’s okay,” she says with a mild smile, her tone low and deliberate. “I know you have reasons to do it.”

“Oh?”

Her smile widens imperceptibly. “Commander, if you don’t mind me saying – some of us know you back from the Academy, and here we’ve been working with you closely for six months.” Her eyes sweep over his face before settling back on his. “You might be the greatest nerd I’ve ever met, but I have never known you to be inconsistent or whimsical. We trust you.”

Spock looks over the quiet room, his eyes lingering on each of his team in turn, before returning to the young woman in front of him. Pechalat has bullied her way into being his personal trainee (one of three on the whole ship), and she seems to be one of the few people onboard who takes his remarks for what they are: a means to improve oneself, not idle criticism. She has been spreading this attitude throughout the Science department, and Spock knows that he has evaded much unnecessary friction within his unit because of her.

“Thank you,” he says, and touches her wrist uncertainly for a moment.
She looks at his hand in surprise, then smiles at him and nods before returning to her work.

Spock heads for Communications, but the head of it intercepts him in the corridor. She’s frowning already, and Spock mentally steels himself – not that it has ever helped with Nyota.

She listens to him, frowning and tapping her foot impatiently against the deck. When he’s done, she raises her eyebrows in disbelief.

“Another report? I thought that was a joke, Spock. You know most of us have been up the whole night doing stuff we were supposed to be doing yesterday instead of filing the first report for you!”

“I am aware of this, Lieutenant.”

“And now you’re telling me it’s not good enough?”

“That is not what I said.”

She eyes him piercingly. “That wasn’t your idea, was it?”

Spock stiffens. “It is of no consequence. I am the one giving the order—”

“For which the rest of the ship will hate your guts, myself included. What, are you afraid to stand up for yourself?”

She makes no effort to reign in her voice, and already people around them are pausing to stare. Spock tries to ignore them, concentrating on Nyota’s irritation.

“It is not a question of my ‘standing up,’” he tells her in an undertone. “The command team must present a united front, whatever internal disagreements we might—”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think it’s right,” she cuts him off sharply, paying no heed to his attempt for being inconspicuous. “This is in no way fair to you, and if you think I’m simply going to shut up and take it, like some spineless people, you’re wrong, Spock!”

She moves to walk past him, and something in Spock snaps. Too many people have tried his patience today.

He reaches out instantly and grabs Nyota’s arm, spinning her back toward him none too gently.

“What the hell are you doing?” she hisses, eyes wide in shock as she struggles to free herself from his hold. “Spock, you’re hurting me.”

“You will not discuss your orders with anyone, Lieutenant, is that clear?” He brings her in a little tighter. “Nor will you share your speculations with any member of this crew. That is an order.”

She glares at him, fierce and defiant. “Yes, sir.” Her voice rings throughout the corridor. “Now let go of me before you break my arm.”

Spock suddenly becomes aware of just how many crewmembers have gathered around them. He unclasps his hand, blinking in shock at his own actions. Nyota sends him another glare before spinning on her heel and marching away, face flushed as an imprint of his fingers begins to protrude on the gentle skin of her upper arm.

Spock does not remember ever feeling so disgusted with himself.

He presents the captain with collected reports precisely on time, and Kirk thanks him both politely
and icily, offering no comment.

Later, as Spock goes off shift and goes to his quarters for a quick shower, he discovers Sulu and Chekov waiting for him by either side of his door, wearing equally grave expressions.

“Gentlemen,” Spock greets them calmly, even as he unlocks his door and strides inside. “May I help you?”

They follow him in, looking determined.

“This is strictly off the record, sir,” Sulu informs him grimly.

Spock inclines his head. “Very well.”

“We have come to tell you,” Sulu says, taking a step closer to Spock, “that while we don’t know what it is exactly between you and Uhura—”

“Because it’s none of our business,” Chekov quips in.

“Right. We don’t know and we don’t care, but we won’t let anyone mistreat her, Mr. Spock,” Sulu says pointedly. “Anyone.”

Spock stares at them. For a moment, he has a most bizarre feeling that he has somehow slipped into a dream and everything around him is some twisted variation of reality. And while the look of cold threat might be appropriate on Lieutenant Sulu, Chekov ruins it by default the more he tries. Spock suppresses the stinging urge to shake his head at the utter absurdity of the situation.

He must have been silent too long, because his visitors exchange a nervous glance before Chekov bravely tries to clarify.

“What we mean, Commander, is that if anyone offends the lieutenant, we will have to take measures against them and—”

“Mr. Chekov,” Spock interrupts, because he is Vulcan and has been trained in repressing his reactions, but even he isn’t sure he could keep anything in for much longer if this continues. “Mr. Sulu. I believe you have made your point. If that is all?”

They look at each other again and reply in unison: “Yes, sir.”

“Then I suggest you show yourselves out.”

They do, and Spock doesn’t know if he should laugh or cry. He has never been in a situation that would have called for a fit of hysteria as much as this one does, and he reflects, rather bitterly, that it is unfortunate he has no one to share it with.

The remainder of their journey back to Earth is spent much in the same fashion. Kirk has visibly distanced himself from his XO; Nyota is avoiding Spock; and McCoy glares whenever he spots the Vulcan. Spock notices that people tend to cease talking when he enters the room.

He buries himself in his duties and tries to act as though he doesn’t notice.

Spock finds himself thinking of Christopher more and more as they come closer to Earth. If he were prone to human emotionalism, Spock would say he is being nostalgic. He pulls out the memories of their time together, trying to reconnect with them and wrap them around himself and feel something else, even for a moment – something other than the crushing weight of isolation. He can’t say he
quite succeeds, but at least concentrating on it enables him to pull through the day.

The *Enterprise* assumes orbit around Earth during an early morning in San Francisco. Spock spends the better part of the day arranging the shore leave schedule and deploying the relief crews. His afternoon is stolen by the admiralty, hungry for news despite Spock’s undeniably thorough reports. He and Kirk are debriefed separately, which doesn’t surprise Spock but still makes him cringe internally at the admiralty’s complete lack of tact.

It’s nearly sunset when he finally has a chance to meet Christopher.

Spock doesn’t know what he has been expecting from the meeting, but he knows almost instantly that it isn’t happening. He is pleased to see Christopher; there’s no denying that. But they feel disjointed, somehow. Disconnected.

He has been receiving regular updates from Number One (Pike would never do it) about Pike’s state of health. Before Spock even signed up to join the *Enterprise*, he had shamelessly used his family connections and his father’s name to make certain Pike would be treated by the best physicians in the Federation, regardless of whether or not they served in Starfleet. Pike wasn’t aware of this, but Number One was, as Spock required her help.

It’s painful still to see Pike struggle, even though they both know he will make a full recovery. Pike has never been one for sitting idly, and Spock feels almost guilty for being assigned to a starship of the line, travelling under the stars that have always been Christopher’s true realm, while Christopher himself is literally grounded to Earth. There’s guilt, compassion, sympathy – but it’s not enough. Spock struggles desperately, but it’s as if there’s a layer of Plexiglas between him and Pike. Spock can see him, but he can’t get to him. And everything they say only serves to make the barrier thicker.

They finally leave the bar, and, as Spock has had the time to pick up his former vehicle, he offers Pike a lift. Pike didn’t sell his apartment, but he doesn’t live there anymore – there isn’t enough room for him and Number One. Pike comments on the change as Spock drives, saying that he could never imagine that, in the end, he’d be the one to move in with a lady, not the other way around. The joke falls flat, as Spock has no comment on the matter.

He walks Pike to the door and exchanges a brief greeting with Number One, but declines an invitation to come inside the house. He doesn’t know how long he stands just outside their house, listening to the sounds of San Francisco at night and trying to recapture the elusive feeling they used to bring him. But the associations are bleak and inert, and Spock finally gets back to his car, only to discover that Pike has forgotten his PADD.

Spock picks it up and strides back toward the house. He raises his hand to chime, but the door opens before him without a sound, the lock obviously trained to recognize him. Spock wants to feel touched by such consideration.

He steps in and freezes involuntarily, listening to the slightly muffled voices coming from the bedroom.

“He’s like a complete stranger,” Pike is saying, and his tone is bitter. “And I’m such a bastard, Number One.”

“What?”

“He’s still Spock, right? Underneath all that, he’s still the same person. But I was looking at him tonight, and I couldn’t help thinking that if I only just met him, I – I wouldn’t want to get to know him.”
Spock places the PADD on a shelf carefully, and leaves without making a sound.

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The reason for the *Enterprise* being recalled is disclosed the next morning. Both Spock and Kirk are called to Starfleet Headquarters to receive new orders, and Spock can tell Kirk is annoyed by the summons. Spock wants to remind him that it’s not unusual for a captain and first officer to receive orders together, and so Kirk’s competence is definitely not being questioned. But the captain storms out of Admiral Nogura’s office the moment they are dismissed, and it’s abundantly clear from the angrily tense line of his shoulders that he doesn’t welcome company.

Spock, on the other hand, is detained by Admiral Nechayev, who suggests, with a smile as sweet as it is false, that they take a walk along the bay.

“So, how’s it going?”

Spock barely lifts an eyebrow. “I believe you have my reports, Admiral.”

She nods. “I do, but that’s something you write for the whole board. You have a curious style, Commander – praising him without actually praising him.”

“Giving praise is illogical.”

“Unfounded praise, maybe. As I understand it, this is not that case.”

“The board has asked for my opinion on Captain Kirk’s performance. I believe I have been clear in providing it.”

“Quite. But I still want to clarify a few things. For example” – she stops suddenly and rounds on him – “I want to know why you look like shit.”

Spock is taken aback slightly and tries to conceal it. “I believe the focus here is the captain’s performance, not my appearance.”

“You’re the first officer, Mr. Spock. His performance and your appearance could have a closer relationship with each other than you think.”

“With respect, Admiral, I fail to see how.”

“I accessed your logs. Your workload seems to be twice as high as that of Commander Tegrim. He’s the first officer of the *Endeavor*, your sister ship.”

“I do not believe Commander Tegrim doubles as a Science Officer.”

“No, but Lieutenant Commander Echlar does. She’s serving on the *Pollux*; and they are far from sitting on their butts smoking kalian, I assure you.”

Spock suppresses a sigh. “If you are suggesting that my workload is influenced by Captain Kirk’s incompetence, nothing could be further from the truth, Admiral. It is not often that he files fewer hours than I do. With all due respect, the missions the *Enterprise* has completed are over seventy-six percent of D-type, and, given the sheer number of them, our working schedule should be self-explanatory.”

She studies him for a moment, then smiles.
“Just checking. It wouldn’t do if Kirk happened to be a slave driver.”

“Indeed, he is not,” Spock says dryly. “James Kirk is one of the most industrious individuals I have ever met. His devotion to duty is absolute.”

“Glad to hear it.” Her smile remains. “Kirk’s done well, Commander. I hope he continues that way. If he does, then in another six months, we could probably cut his leash. Don’t expect any milk runs in the near future.”

“What will happen in six months, Admiral?”

“Cutting to the chase, are we?” She eyes him pensively. “Let’s just say Nero’s attack has got a lot of people thinking. Starfleet needs changes, Commander. And Admiral Nogura is not the right man to supervise them. He’s a brilliant tactician, but a poor strategist. There will be some personnel changes.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I know that you agree with me, and because every Vulcan is a politician at heart. But mostly, of course, because I need you.” She smiles. “Well, Kirk more than you, but I only need him if he’s good enough. And you’re the man to tell me if he has it in him.”

Spock blinks. “Why me? Why would you trust my judgment so much?”

“Because Chris Pike chose you to be his first officer. Don’t flinch, Commander; I know all about your little romance. I also know Chris. If he chose you to be his right hand, then he knew that you had it in you. And I happen to trust Chris.”

Spock feels the wave of a bitter laugh struggling to escape his lips. It is ironic that Pike’s assessment of Spock’s professional qualities weighs so much with this cunning woman as to win Spock a measure of her trust – or, at least, interest – while Pike’s views on Spock as a person have taken such a grim turn.

“It’s a fair solution,” Nechayev goes on evenly. “Kirk gets my full support if I get his, and honestly, Commander, he needs this more than I do.”

Spock knows she’s right. “Why are you so persistent in helping him?”

She looks at him. “Let’s just say that Chris Pike isn’t the only one with connections to the Kirk family.”

“You knew George Kirk?”

She sighs, her face closing. “Why does it always have to be about George? Or Jim, for that matter?”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “Admiral?”

She shakes her head. “Never mind; I don’t have to explain myself to you. But look at the Academy.” She points as if the building hasn’t been there all along. “Seems so prim, doesn’t it? Yet it conceals many sins.”

Her communicator chirps, and she straightens up abruptly. “You are dismissed, Commander. And keep your eyes open during this mission with Kovac – it’s not as simple as the ambassador makes it sound.”
“Admiral.” Spock salutes. She barely nods at him, hurrying back toward the headquarters.

She has left him with a mystery, but Spock is almost sure that she’s left enough clues for him to solve it. He is beginning to understand Arina Nechayev a little better, and almost instantly cautions himself from making this kind of assumption.

He goes to a nearby public library and requests a private terminal. He knows Nechayev knows he will be checking this, but he doesn’t know who else might be watching, so Spock hides his tracks.

He accesses the Academy records of the year 2225. He finds Arina Nechayev listed as a first-year cadet on Command track with minors in Diplomacy and Special Operations. She seemed to be a straight-A student, but her record contains no revelations of what she’s been implying.

On a strike of inspiration, Spock checks her lodgings status. She had been assigned a roommate, one who stayed with her for three years straight up until the final year – which is a record in itself, because usually Academy Housing rotates its cadets more frequently. And yet, Arina Nechayev and Winona Limes had been residing together for three years.

Spock pulls the other woman’s file next to Nechayev’s, his gaze lingering for a moment on two blond girls, young and enthusiastic. He concentrates on Limes, and realizes her features are familiar for a reason. He reads on.

Wynona Limes, class of 2229, major in Engineering, minors in Xenolinguistics and Sciences.

2229, lieutenant (j.g.), station: Starbase 14; position: engineer. Note: marital status changed to married. Husband: George Kirk, lieutenant (j.g.), position: assistant Starbase commander.


2233, promoted to full lieutenant; station: USS Kelvin; position: assistant chief engineer.

Spock checks more records and finally has the full picture. Arina Nechayev and Winona Limes remained roommates up until the graduating year. Incidentally, George Kirk had been transferred to Winona’s training division around the same time.

‘It conceals many sins,’ Nechayev had said.

Spock frowns. It didn’t matter, in the long run, if the two girls were close friends or lovers. What did matter was that George Kirk’s appearance had brought their close association to an end. Admiral Nechayev admitted to having personal reasons for taking interest in James Kirk’s career. The question now became: is she seeking to help the child of her once best friend, possibly lover, or is she acting out of revenge?

Spock steeples his fingers in thought. The revenge motive seems unlikely. After all, the admiral all but invited him to examine her ties with the Kirk family. She wouldn’t have done it if she thought it would harm her plans. On the other hand, she might count on Spock thinking exactly that, and thus eliminate any suspicions he might have only to ambush him (and Kirk) later. Unlike most highly intelligent humans Spock knows, Nechayev is fully capable of thinking the entire game ahead, not just several moves.

Spock’s head is buzzing with all the implications and possibilities. He desperately wishes for a guide who could explain the complexities of human emotionalism to him, because they make a dangerous cocktail when mixed with politics. But no matter how much Spock longs for someone’s assistance, it doesn’t seem plausible he’ll get any. He could ask Pike, he supposes, but Pike has never been a
politician. Pike is becoming one now, Spock suspects, but he’s no match for Admiral Nechayev yet.

Spock has never wanted to talk to T’Pol more in his entire life. But T’Pol is on New Vulcan, completely unavailable. And Spock understands enough of Nechayev’s careful hints to know that this is not the kind of conversation he can have over subspace.

For lack of a better idea, he beams back to the ship. He just needs a moment of quiet reflection or maybe even a moment when he wouldn’t have to think of anything at all. Humankind has never seemed more confusing, and it is definitely the first time when so unimaginably much depends on Spock’s ability to comprehend it – or lack thereof.

The Enterprise is almost empty. The crew has been granted a three-day shore leave, and most of them have seized the opportunity to visit their families. The nervous-looking technician who is conducting the transport all but backs away when Spock looks at him. Spock knows that Mr. Scott has been quite formidable in regards to the interim crew, but Spock has no wish to deal with the matter right now.

He walks to his quarters, wishing for a cup of herbal tea and some quiet time, only to remember that they are conserving power while at space dock, and so the replicator in his quarters will undoubtedly be offline. Spock changes his route toward the rec room instead, recalling which one of those would be powered.

It’s empty when he walks inside but for Doctor McCoy and Nyota, who are talking quietly at the same table. They both glance at Spock as he enters, and he nods in their direction as they return to their conversation. Spock retrieves his beverage and turns to look at them warily. They have no reason to be receptive, and he doesn’t know why he even wants them to be, but – suddenly, the prospect of going to his empty quarters seems almost frightening.

“May I join you?”

They look up at him. McCoy is frowning slightly; Nyota’s gaze is searching. Spock does not know what she sees in him, but her eyes soften noticeably, forgiving.

“Please,” she says.

He nods silently, not wishing to intrude on their conversation or be included in it. He has the strangest wish to just sit near, listening to the even sound of their voices without actually hearing their words. Nyota looks at him speculatively for a moment, and Spock is swept with gratitude for how well she still understands him, because she resumes her conversation with McCoy before the doctor has a chance to ask Spock anything.

Spock stares at her for a moment, wishing he could somehow express how deeply he appreciates her, the kindest heart he has ever met. Nyota doesn’t look at him again, but there’s a small, tender smile playing on her lips that has nothing to do with whatever McCoy’s talking about. Spock sips his tea silently, soaking in the warmth his two companions are emitting. He hadn’t realized how starved he has become for being allowed into someone’s non-hostile presence.

Retrospectively, he thinks he should have known that it was too good to last.

When the captain storms into the rec room, Spock doesn’t react at once. Like a street cat that has finally found a warm spot that no one kicks it from, he’s somewhat slow on realizing his circumstances have changed. He looks up only after McCoy and Nyota fall silent abruptly.

Kirk is standing at the opposite side of the table, glaring at Spock.
“Captain?” Spock rises to his feet; the cup slides treacherously from his hand, landing on the table with a loud clang.

“I hope you’ve had your fun,” Kirk spits, eyes locked on Spock’s as he shakes with barely contained anger. “All those months playing the good guy, telling me you’re not here to spy on me, only to be plotting with the admiralty behind my back – tell me, Commander, do you get off on playing me like a fool?”

“Captain, I do not understand—”

“Oh, don’t give me that – I’m not an idiot, Spock, whatever you might think! You told me you weren’t gonna let one word in those reports that would not be truth, the whole truth and all that shit, so explain to me why I’ve just been spanked for six hours straight like a schoolgirl who’s left her panties in the headmaster’s office? I had to defend every mission, every fucking decision I made! And if only you told me you questioned them continuously in your reports, then maybe I wouldn’t have looked like a goddamn idiot saying they were our decisions, only to be confronted with a piece of paper saying I’m an incompetent piece of shit!”

“Captain!” Spock steps back, aghast. “I supported your decisions, barring two incidents with the Arcturian Order and Weitpoint. You are aware of this.”

“Am I?” Kirk tilts his head, snarling. “Do you honestly think I’ll believe you now? You’ve been lying to me since the day you set foot on this ship!”

“Captain, I do not know in which manner they used my reports to confront you, but I assure you, I gave nothing but a full account of the events the way they occurred.”

“Yeah, well, guess what?” Kirk snaps. “I don’t believe you! They didn’t fuck my brains out like this after the Narada, for God’s sake! They have our logs and they have your reports, Commander, so go on – tell me I’m paranoid for thinking you are responsible for us being ordered here with our tail between our legs!”

“You are,” Spock says, cool anger starting to fill his veins.

“Oh, am I? You asked to be my first officer! You insisted on being included into everything, worming your way into my trust – and I don’t trust people easily, Commander – and I was foolish enough to think sharing life and death with someone would be enough! I trusted you! I was idiot enough to come to think of you as my friend! And after all that, you don’t even have the decency to tell me what you think of me to my face! I asked you straight, and you lied to me!”

“Captain. I have never lied to you.”

“Really? Then tell me, Spock, where were you last night?”

“What?”

“After you were done with your official interviews that are accessible to me, you had a secret meeting with none other than our dear Admiral Pike. Oh, you hid your tracks well, but, unfortunately for you, I have many friends in San Francisco. That bar you thought was a secret place? Totally isn’t.”

Spock blinks. Kirk rushes on.

“Had a nice evening gossiping about me, did you? And today he doesn’t say so much as a hello to me, but he’s there with the rest of them, grilling me over every time I took a piss in the last six
months! I gotta admit, I have no idea if it’s worse to take this shit from him or from you!”

Spock takes a deep breath, steeling himself. He can sense his anger getting rapidly close to the breaking point.

“I do not deny having met with Admiral Pike last night,” Spock says, voice controlled so tightly that the words barely come out. “However, contrary to your egocentric views of the universe, we have not discussed you for any considerable length of time, barring the admiral asking after your wellbeing.”

“Really?” Kirk retorts. “Why all the cloak and dagger routine, then?”

“If you are referring to us meeting in a less public setting, then I assure you, Captain, we had reasons other than concealing the fact from you.”

Kirk’s eyes narrow to slits. “And what reasons would those be?”

Spock’s hands clench into fists.

“Jim,” McCoy says cautiously.

“What?” Kirk snaps, turning for a second toward McCoy and Nyota. “Why are you both staring at me like I’m the last one to get the cookie?”

“Look, Jim, it’s not what you think—”

“It is quite all right, Doctor McCoy,” Spock interrupts icily, eyes locked on Kirk. “Obviously, I am not entitled to privacy where Captain Kirk is concerned.” He draws a tight breath.

“If you must know, Captain, Admiral Pike and I used to be involved in a relationship of sexual nature,” he all but spits. “Albeit having terminated that relationship, he remains one of the three individuals I consider to be family members by extension. Our liaison had not been kept secret after I graduated. If you were not focused so exclusively on yourself, this would not have come as news to you.”

Kirk has gone from nearly apoplectic to gaping at him, mouth hanging open and eyes wide with shock. Spock’s words seem to have drained his anger, rendering him speechless. Spock would rather cut his arm off than be exposed like this at any given time, but he feels inexplicably vindicated by the look of pure astonishment and bafflement on Kirk’s face.

“You and Pike hit it off when you were still a cadet?” McCoy squeaks incredulously to Spock’s left.

Spock ignores him.

“You and Pike?” Kirk seems to have found his voice, just barely. “You and Pike? You’re kidding me, right?”

His incredulity is insulting in a way Spock hasn’t thought possible, and Spock seethes. “Just because I do not fit your parameters for physical attractiveness does not mean that everyone else should share your opinion. Captain.”

“Spock, hold it, I didn’t mean—”

“I find myself distinctly uninterested in what it is you meant. You have called me a liar twice already, Captain. I see no reason to remain here and listen to your continuously irrational insults. This might
hurt your fragile human pride, but I assure you that they are not the most inventive ones I have heard aimed at myself.”

He inhales sharply. “I infer that it would be best for me to leave so that you could rediscover your creativity. If you will excuse me.”

He brushes past Kirk and out of the rec room, stunned silence heavy in his wake.

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The power that an old, familiar routine can have on oneself is remarkable. The sound of his steps is light, the pace is even, the wind in his ears is comforting – the overall rhythm of his run is soothing and reassuring, like an old sweater. Spock pushes his bangs back unconsciously as he rounds the corner and starts another lap. The Academy grounds are quiet and dark, and Spock picks up familiar paths without difficulty, remembering his first introduction to jogging and the young, retrospectively naïve cadet he used to be.

The rhythmical movement – running in particular – has always helped him clear his mind almost as well as meditation. The method is human, but then, he is half-human. Spock runs, his footsteps soft and leveled, parting with excessive energy in the way he used to when his world was young.

The boiling anger he felt two hours ago in the rec room has gone, retreating before a lifetime of discipline and leaving Spock confused, vaguely ashamed, and detesting his own behavior – particularly as he comes to the conclusion that Kirk has had every reason to suspect him of foul play.

He stops by a small fountain hidden deep in the park, the sound of water soothing his ignited nerves as he catches his breath. After a while, Spock straightens up, staring at the clear streams falling from a low pedestal and gleaming in the moonlight.

“Want some water?”

Spock turns slowly toward the man sitting on a bench beneath the bushy branches of wild roses. Spock should have noticed him and hasn’t – a true sign of his reactions being on shutdown.

Spock takes the proffered bottle before stepping back and leaning against the low wall of the fountain. “Thank you,” he says, uncapping the bottle. He really hadn’t expected this. “How did you find me?”

McCoy shrugs, stretching his long legs in front of him and looking up at Spock. “I’d love to tell you that it’s due to my incredible powers of deduction, but the trivial truth is that there are people who know your habits.”

Nyota or Pike, Spock guesses. He doesn’t ask.

He takes a swig of water before focusing on the doctor again. McCoy stares back at him, looking utterly relaxed and unperturbed.

“Why are you here?” Spock asks at last.

The doctor shrugs again. “I’ve already had a few choice words with Jim. Thought there was no reason I should spare you the same treatment, given that you both suffer from the same brand of idiocy and stubbornness.”
Spock lifts an eyebrow and takes another sip of water. “Your bedside manner is charming as always, Doctor.”

McCoy studies his nails, which seems all the more illogical in the poor light. “I might have also wanted to check if you’re likely to throttle Jim the next time you see him.”

Spock lets out a breath that constitutes either a tired sigh or an exasperated chuckle – he doesn’t know. “That is… not likely.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” McCoy nods. “Seeing as he wants to do that himself already.”

Spock doesn’t comment.

“And for what it’s worth,” McCoy continues slowly, “I don’t believe you were trying to sabotage Jim’s command.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you trust me?”

McCoy shrugs. “Someone should. Besides, I remember pretty damn well the way you fought off those creatures on Hinq while I was trying to stop Jim bleeding to death. You held them off until the cavalry came; we both would have been dead if you hadn’t been there.”

He purses his lips and shakes his head slightly. “I haven’t forgotten. And Spock?” McCoy looks up at him. “Neither has Jim.”

Spock sighs softly, staring into the murky haze of night around them.

“My life has been saved due to the captain’s actions a number of times as well,” he says flatly. “Due to your actions, also. It is our profession, Doctor; it is what we do. It does not mean – he swallows – ‘whatever you believe it means.’”

“Doesn’t it?” McCoy asks calmly. “True trust is born in the reptilian brain, Spock, before it goes any further. And I don’t have to like you to trust you. It’s an imprinted instinct.”

Spock presses his fingers to his temple for a moment. “Sometimes I do wonder, Doctor, how it was possible for you to obtain a medical degree.”

“Bribed people.” McCoy deadpans. “How about you? Did they give you a degree in second grade smartassery for free or did you have to actually work for it?”

Spock blinks, and McCoy lifts up a hand hastily. “Believe it or not, I didn’t track you down to trade insults, especially since you’re no fun tonight. I came here to talk about Jim.”

Spock folds his arms across his chest, steeling himself. “I am listening.”

McCoy glares at him a moment longer before rubbing his forehead in annoyed exasperation. “So,” he says finally. “That wasn’t Jim’s finest hour. And before you look any more smug, it wasn’t yours, either.”

Spock shakes his head. “My own outburst is inexcusable, whereas his reasoning is sound. I am reporting him to the admiralty. To the best of his knowledge, he has committed no grievous mistakes. It is a valid assumption that if the admiralty is dissatisfied, I am responsible. I myself would be hard-
pressed to draw a different conclusion.”

“You’re saying Jim’s right about you?”

“I am saying that I cannot fault him for his logic, Doctor. In this particular case, it is impeccable.”

“Well,” McCoy drawls. “Not to throw a shadow on his logic” – he makes a face – “but I’m pretty sure his emotions were reining this ball.”

“Perhaps,” Spock agrees dully. “I find human emotionalism hard to navigate most of the time.”

“Don’t we all,” McCoy mutters. “It’s like he said, Spock – he doesn’t trust people easily. I don’t really know what his childhood was like – he’s not keen on talking about it – but I’m guessing it wasn’t a picnic.”

Spock thinks impassively about Kirk’s lack of happy memories. The doctor is obviously correct.

“He doesn’t let anyone get close to him, not without raising a shitstorm – and it’s not like many would stay after that, anyway.” McCoy shakes his head. “I’ve known him for four years; I’m pretty sure I’m the closest person to him in the whole goddamn universe right now – and there are still things he won’t share with me.”

Spock watches McCoy’s face as the doctor struggles with this truth.

“I mean, we all have our secrets, but Jim is just…” The doctor trails off, frowning. “This job is the most important thing to him. Before he joined Starfleet, he was – well, you must have heard the rumors. Repeat offender and all that shit. He was drowning when Pike dragged him out of there. Another year or two, and we would’ve lost him.”

“That is extremely illogical.” Spock frowns. “He is highly intelligent and capable. He could have taken a number of paths and succeed.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” McCoy cuts him off impatiently. “But it doesn’t always work like that, Spock. Not everyone grows up to be his daddy’s favorite boy, okay? Not everyone has the luxury of being raised a pampered little prince of an ambassador’s son who can do no wrong.” His tone turns bitter. “Some of us have a lot of crap to deal with, and God knows, Jim had it way worse than most.”

Spock presses his lips together and says nothing. It’s not as though McCoy is wrong.

“He’s scared to go back to that,” the doctor says gloomily, kicking a stray stone with his foot. “He would never admit it; probably wouldn’t even know it.” He looks up at Spock. “But I never realized how badly it scares him till I saw him pouncing you up there. It’s not just his captaincy he thinks he’s defending. He’s fighting for his life.”

Spock shivers as the wind throws a spray of water from the fountain over his back. McCoy is looking at him with a mixture of suspicion and apprehension, as if he isn’t certain Spock can digest that much analysis of somebody’s emotions, but Spock doesn’t have to. He knows the fear McCoy has been describing only too well. It has been Spock’s constant companion ever since the day he lost himself on the Enterprise’s bridge.

He has no desire to discuss his own precarious state of mind, however, because Doctor McCoy seems to be too perceptive for Spock’s comfort. It will be best to steer the conversation away from those dangerous waters.

“Why are you telling me all this?” Spock asks, aiming for impassive and slightly challenging.
“Should you not hold the captain’s confidence in greater esteem?”

McCoy’s expression closes as he frowns. “Jim’s my best friend, Spock, and you don’t get to teach me how to treat him right. Sometimes it’s what we have to do. You think I’m having fun spilling his secrets to you, of all people?” He sighs. “I’m doing it because he would never speak to you about this, and you need to know.”

“Why?”

McCoy glares at him before gritting out, “Because I’ve seen the two of you together, all right? Because you work so well together it’s freaking people out. And I hate to admit it, but if it wasn’t for this, we’d all be dead right now, a couple of times over. I want you two to keep it – I want him to keep it. He’s at his best when you push him, and that’s a damn sight to see.”

That might be the closest McCoy has ever come to paying Spock a compliment, and Spock wisely chooses not to look the gift horse in the mouth. In addition, the doctor appears to be wrestling with something, clearly not being finished with what he wishes to say.

“He falls in love with people,” McCoy blurts out at last, and it’s not something Spock has expected. He lifts an eyebrow. “Is that unusual?”

McCoy grimaces, fidgeting. “Not like that. I don’t know how to explain… it’s not sexual or romantic. He – he falls in love with people the way you can fall in love with an idea, or a book. Head over heels, but platonically, you know?”

Spock struggles to understand. “He becomes… fascinated with someone without this person becoming his romantic interest?”

“Yeah,” McCoy confirms. “’Infatuated’ is more like it. He’d admire someone, and gush about them, and go out of his way to impress them, but – without wanting to see them naked.”

Spock puzzles over this, but eventually nods. “I believe I understand.”

“Took me a while to figure it out, too.” McCoy nods. “I’m pretty sure his mother was the first one in that line. A classic case of hero-worship, I think.” He smirks.

“Toward his mother?”

McCoy chuckles. “You’ve never met Winona Kirk. Jim’s hardly the only fanboy she tugs in her wake.” He shrugs. “Then there was Pike. It was sort of funny watching Jim getting all worked up for that one. There was Admiral Archer. He held special seminars in advanced tactics, and I don’t think Jim slept at all for two months, trying to outsmart him.” McCoy shakes his head reminiscently. “Then there was—”

“You,” Spock says, certain.

McCoy looks at him quizzically for a moment, then nods. “There was me. Jim couldn’t – dammit, Spock, that kid is just…” He sighs. “He couldn’t wrap his mind around the fact that I cared about him. That anyone would, in that way. He couldn’t believe it, but when he did, it was – he was – well, he’s an affectionate kind of guy, and—”

Spock feels an uncommon surge of amusement. “He expressed it physically.” Even in the sparse light, he can see McCoy blushing.
“It never went anywhere, okay? It would’ve been taking advantage, and besides, he’s like an idiot little brother I never had. I couldn’t—” He cuts himself off and scowls. “Why am I talking about this?”

Spock opens his mouth, but the doctor lifts up a hand. “Don’t even.”

Spock subsides, looking away. It’s illogical and inexplicable, but he feels calmer now than he has in days. It lasts exactly until the moment McCoy speaks again.

“My point is, for the last several months, his target has been you, Mr. Spock.”

Startled, Spock turns to him. “I beg your pardon?”

McCoy smirks. “You heard me right. Jim’s been totally smitten with you, your pointy-eared highness. If you were any less of an iceman, you’d have noticed.”

Spock stares at him. “I assume you do not mean this in the sense of—”

“Not in any interesting way, no, don’t get excited,” McCoy grumbles. “Like I said, he falls in love with people. And when he does, there’s not a person in the entire galaxy who can hurt him more than his current fancy.” He looks at Spock pointedly.

Spock tries to process this as best he can, but something makes his mind stumble every time his train of thought reaches the ‘Jim’s been totally smitten with you’ point. He must be more tired than he thought – there is no other explanation for this sudden mental deficiency.

McCoy is suddenly on his feet and crowding Spock, staring him in the eye in an openly menacing way. “Now, if you ever use any of this to hurt Jim, I will end you.”

The doctor is standing so close that Spock feels his breath ricocheting of his own face. Spock doesn’t move away. “I’ve seen you with Pike, and I’ve seen you with Uhura, and I’ve been watching you for the last six months,” McCoy continues. “I think I can trust you. But if you prove me wrong, Mr. Spock, I guarantee that you’ll live to regret it. Got it?”

Spock purses his lips. “As you would put it, ‘in one,’ Doctor.”

McCoy glares at him for additional one-point-three minutes before finally walking away.

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Spock isn’t late, exactly, but he isn’t early, either, and for him, the two are almost the same thing. He walks into the room where the security briefing is about to be conducted when all three representatives of Starfleet Tactical and Captain Kirk are there already. Kirk’s back is to the door; the others notice Spock’s entrance, but, as Vice Admiral Tokugawa is currently speaking, they don’t interrupt. Spock looks around for Pike, but the admiral has not arrived yet.

“Sorry about the grilling last night,” Tokugawa is saying, watching Kirk with a humorous twinkle in his eye. “It’s not exactly standard procedure.”

“Thought I was being court-martialed, sir,” Kirk jokes, rubbing the back of his neck.

Tokugawa chuckles. “Blame the Torian ambassador. He wanted to make sure we’re offering him the best we’ve got, and Pike thought the best way to convince him was an impromptu panel.”

Kirk pauses, realization dawning. “…Really. That was all for Kovac’s benefit? I thought—”
“We know you’re capable, Captain. Sometimes it just takes some extra show to convince a diplomat.”

Spock is seized by a sudden wish to roll his eyes or to smirk bitterly. Of course – he should have realized this could happen and warned the captain. Kirk has not been screened the same way any other senior officer normally would be before assuming any high-profile position; he had no way of knowing what to expect, and Spock didn’t warn him. The ugly exhibit of the night before never would have happened if Spock had had the presence of mind to remember the admiralty’s classic behavioral quirks.

“And that was Admiral Pike’s idea?” Kirk asks, sounding incredulous and irritated. Remembering himself, he amends quickly, “Sir.”

Tokugawa’s face wrinkles in amusement. “Pike does that to people he likes, you know. Ask Commander Spock there.” Kirk jumps and turns to look at Spock, who very pointedly does not meet the captain’s gaze. “When he was appointed Pike’s Science Officer, a lot of people asked why a recent graduate got to be second officer on a flagship. Pike locked him up with a full Sciences board for – what was it, Commander? Eight hours?”

“Eleven hours and forty-two minutes,” Spock replies, coming closer. “It was a most... tedious experience.”

“But it did shut everyone up,” Commander Tovan says, smiling. She looks at Kirk amicably. “The admiralty wouldn’t have held a competence hearing if they weren’t sure you could pull it off.”

“Well,” Kirk says, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “That’s... that’s a relief.”

Spock can tell Kirk is having a hard time assimilating the revelation and its implications. Spock knows he should be sympathetic, particularly in light of what Doctor McCoy revealed to him last night, but Spock must not be a very nice person after all. He can’t subdue the light jolt of satisfaction now that Kirk is aware that Spock has not betrayed him.

Spock steps closer, holding out a PADD to Admiral Tokugawa. He’s surprised when Kirk grabs it swiftly, like it’s a loaded phaser.

“Let me get that!”

Spock’s eyebrow arches. “Captain?”

Tokugawa is watching the byplay with interest. “Is that my update on the Vulcan-Torian trade agreement?”

“Correct, sir.” Spock nods. “If I may, Captain? The admiral did request the information.”

“Oh.” Kirk blushes and hands Spock the PADD awkwardly. “Sure, I... Sorry. I thought— I’m sorry, Admiral, we aren’t starting yet, right?”

Tokugawa looks at him from the PADD Spock finally managed to present him. “We’re still waiting for Pike and the Torian.”

“If you could please excuse us for just a moment – Mr. Spock, mind if I have a word?”

Spock glances at Tokugawa, who nods, bemused. Kirk sweeps out of the room as if it’s on fire; Spock follows him in a slightly more dignified manner.
“Shit, Spock, don’t scare me like that!” Kirk blurs out, rounding on him. “I thought you were handing in your resignation.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Why would I do that to the head of Starfleet Tactical?”

Kirk stares at him. “You’re not doing it at all, right?” He grabs Spock’s arm without thinking. “Tell me you’re not quitting.”

“Indeed I am not.” He glances down pointedly, and Kirk snatches his hand away as if burned.

“Sorry.” Kirk winces. “Shit, Spock, I’m so sorry. I don’t even know how I can ever apologize to you.”

“Captain—”

“No, let me just – it was – I was way out of line. I’m sorry I yelled at you, and I’m sorry I thought you were—”

“Attempting to set you up?”

“Yeah. I was just – so angry. I know it’s not supposed to happen to someone in my position, but – I’m still Jim Kirk, captain or no.” He smiles a faltering, self-deprecating smile that somehow twists Spock’s insides. “My temper ran away with me. Illogical, I know.”

Spock looks outside a huge window over the glimmering waters of the bay, steeling himself. The intensity of Kirk’s gaze upon him is almost physically painful.

“I would not say that,” Spock counters. “Having analyzed your circumstances, I have come to a conclusion that it was, in fact, only logical for you to suspect me of foul play. I am the only member of the crew who has been known to oppose you.”

“Bullshit, Spock. That’s water long under the bridge.”


“Of course I trust you. Remember that minefield? I trusted you with my life.”

“You did not have a choice,” Spock points out. “It was either trusting me or facing a certain death. That was not your decision, Captain – merely lack of an alternative.”

Kirk grits his teeth. “Dammit, that’s not true—”

“Captain, I am also at fault here – perhaps more so than you. It is my duty to cultivate a relationship based on trust and professionalism between us, and the failure is my responsibility.”

Kirk presses his lips together stubbornly. “It takes two to tango, Spock. You might have been sending mixed signals, but I should never have forgotten the kind of man you are. I know you better. I never should have made it personal.”

Spock glances at him incredulously. “Then you would have been striving for the impossible. It has always been personal between us.”

Kirk blinks and stares at him for a long moment, before his frame relaxes slightly and he lets out a huff of air. “Yeah. I guess it has.” He laughs softly, pressing a hand to his forehead and shaking his head. “Jesus, Spock. I am so not very good at that.”
Spock lets out a small sigh. “That is unfortunate, Captain, for neither am I.”

Kirk chuckles. “Well. At least we have something in common.” He looks up at Spock, mirth fading gradually from his expression. “I really am sorry,” he says quietly.

Spock inclines his head. “I accept your apology, Captain. And I apologize as well.”

Kirk smiles uncertainly. “No harm, no foul?”

Spock looks at him, and Kirk nods with a sigh. No part of that statement is true and they both know it, but it’s something they will have to accept.

“We should return to the briefing room,” Spock says.

“Yeah.” Kirk bites his lip. “One more thing, Spock. What I said about you and Pike – I didn’t mean to imply that there’s anything wrong with you. It’s just that – he’s sort of a – I don’t know, sort of a father figure, to me?” Kirk squirms uncomfortably. “I guess? I mean, what with him dragging me into enlisting and handing me his ship and... It caught me by surprise, that’s all.”

“I understand,” Spock says patiently. “And if that is all, Captain, we should go back inside.”

Kirk eyes him for a moment longer, as though it’s not quite the reply he’s been hoping for. But then the Torian ambassador appears at the end of the corridor, and Kirk sighs.

“Yeah, that’s all. Let’s go.”

Spock pauses by the door to let the captain walk in first.

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Spock watches the Torians and Starfleet officials file out of the room when he hears Pike’s quiet voice.

“Spock, stay a moment. Kirk, you too.”

Kirk, who is almost at the doors, looks back uncertainly, but steps back inside. The room is suddenly very hushed with just the three of them.

Pike looks between them and sighs.

“All right. First off – what’s wrong with you two?”

Kirk blinks, startled. Spock feels mildly uncomfortable himself. “Admiral?”

“Knock it off, Spock.” Pike waves at him impatiently. “Kirk’s been staring at you like he’s eaten your ice cream and is waiting when you’re gonna figure it out. And you look—” He trips over his words before settling for a shake of his head. “Whatever. Just settle this before you ship out.”

Spock exchanges an uneasy glance with Kirk. “There is nothing to settle, sir,” Spock says at the same time Kirk says, “Consider it settled, Admiral.”

Pike looks at them with a pained expression. “Yeah, you might wanna work on that double act,” he says pointedly. “Anyway, I called you back to warn you.” His gaze locks on Spock. “I wasn’t in the know the other night, and even if I was, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you.”

Spock nods. “I understand.”
“Yeah. I can tell you now – this mission isn’t as simple as the Torians make it sound.”

“Due respect, Admiral, it sounds simple enough.” Kirk shrugs. “We get to Arishuh, find his informant, extract him without attracting too much attention, and score a point to get the Torians sign a new trade agreement with the Federation.”

Pike studies him. “And what if I tell you that Ambassador Kovac asked for the Enterprise specifically? And that he asked for it after he found out to what ship the only Vulcan remaining in Starfleet is assigned?”

Spock’s eyes narrow. “He asked for me? Admiral, that does not seem to make sense.”

“And yet he was very thorough in determining your rank and position prior to choosing the ship.”

Spock looks at Kirk. “It appears you were correct, Captain. I am responsible for us being summoned back to Earth, after all.”

“Spock,” Kirk grits out, pressing his fingers to the bridge of his nose, “really, d’you have to twist the knife? I’m sorry, okay?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “That would be the first time in my experience that you regret being proven right.”

Kirk looks at him, blinks, and turns to Pike. “Did he ever let you have the last word?”

Pike smirks, glancing at Spock. “I had my moments.”

Spock lets his gaze drift from one to the other before lifting an eyebrow. “If you gentlemen are done comparing notes, perhaps we could return to the matter at hand?”

“Which is why Kovac would request you specifically for this mission,” Kirk says, instantly serious. “And the Enterprise.”

“Spock, your father had some dealings with the Torians, right?” Pike asks.

Spock nods thoughtfully. “Correct. However, I do not believe them to be of any importance now. My father was an observer during the Vulcan-Torian trade negotiations once, but his role was non-essential.”

“And you personally?”

“I was but a child at the time.”

“Okay, this is just weird,” Kirk blurts. “Everyone knows that Torians are isolationists. They don’t come out of their territory unless they have to. The only Federation species they’ve had contact with until, like, yesterday are the Vulcans, and you guys hate each other because some sixteen centuries ago they helped the Romulans sever ties with your people.”

Spock winces slightly. “Your timeframe is off, and your appraisal is unduly emotional, but, essentially, you are correct.”

“So why would they suddenly think that the presence of a Vulcan, of all people, would be vital for the mission’s success?”

“It would not,” Spock says slowly, and suddenly, it all falls into place. He looks up at Kirk sharply. “But my presence would be important if the mission fails.”
Kirk’s eyes widen slightly. “They’d have an excuse to say that Vulcans have sabotaged the mission —”

“—and if so, the Federation’s show of good will toward them is indeed a ploy, which—”

“—will leave their hands free to sell their dilithium and veralis to whomever they want—”

“—including the Romulans, because since the Federation will appear to have committed the offence, the Torians will be no longer bound by—”

“—the Sirius Convention. Shit, Spock, that last intel report – remember we tried to figure out what the activity along the border was all about?”

“I suspect you are correct. But we still do not have any proof to confront the ambassador directly.”

“So the only thing we can do is take this mission and not let Kovac screw us up if it kills us.”

Spock nods with conviction – it would be indeed the only possible solution, albeit hardly the easy one.

The sudden silence is somehow very loud, stretching unpleasantly, until Pike clears his throat.

“I believe,” he says slowly, “that the admiralty has no idea what a monster they had created when they assigned the two of you to the same ship.” He looks from Spock to Kirk and back. “Don’t screw this up. If the Romulans get their hands on the Torians’ deposits, nothing will stop them from war, and if there’s ever a time when we are less ready for it than now, then I don’t want to see it.”

His eyes turn grave as he nods at them. “Godspeed, gentlemen.”

Spock shares another glance with Kirk before following him out.

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The journey to Arishuh becomes another test for Spock’s patience. Ambassador Kovac practically glues himself to Spock’s side, needling him ceaselessly with all kinds of unpleasant questions that range from general jibes at the Vulcan way of life to Spock’s personal experiences as a half-breed. Spock grits his teeth frequently as he forces himself to remain polite, but he cannot escape the man who has insisted that Spock become his personal guide.

Kirk isn’t faring much better, because the ambassador has brought his sixteen-year-old daughter with him and placed her in Kirk’s personal care. The girl is the very definition of a spoiled child of royal descent – her table manners make Tellarites look sophisticated, and her mood swings are enough to try even a Vulcan’s tolerance. Whenever Spock hasn’t been intent on preventing himself from climbing the walls, he has been feeling sharp pangs of sympathy toward the captain.

On the eve of the planet fall, they meet in the rec room by accident. Spock has come for some tea and sees Kirk staring at the replicator menu in blank stupor. He glances as Spock approaches, giving him a weak smile.

“Evening, Mr. Spock.”

“It is closer to morning, Captain.”

“Really?” Kirk blinks. “Well, that’s good. I’ve been trying to figure out what to drink instead of
“How is Amara?” Spock asks neutrally, working the control panel.

“God, don’t say her name.” Kirk shivers.

Spock lifts an eyebrow, regarding him curiously. “‘Speak of the devil,’ Captain?”

Kirk stares at him, eyes dry and red with fatigue. “You all believe she’s such a sweet little girl, don’t you? For your information” – he jabs a finger at Spock, grazing his chest – “she tried to seduce me four times in five days.”

Spock feels his second eyebrow arch to mirror the first. “I hope you realize how vital it is that you are not discovered in a compromising position with her.”

“No shit.” Kirk blinks at him owlishly. “Contrary to popular belief, Mr. Spock, I’m not that eager to sleep with anything that moves.”

“I assure you, Captain, that much is obvious,” Spock says, then carefully takes Kirk by the wrist and removes Kirk’s hand from himself gently.

Kirk blinks again and looks down. “Sorry. When I’m this tired, it’s worse than when I’m drunk.”

Spock regards him warily. “You are aware that we will make planet fall in five hours forty minutes.”

“Yeah, well.” Kirk rubs his forehead. “You don’t look too peachy yourself.”

Spock retrieves his tea. “Doctor McCoy threatened me with stimulants.”

“We’ll be both taking them before planet fall.” Kirk nods, eyeing the cup Spock is lifting to his lips. “What’s that?”

Spock halts his movement. “An approximation of Andorian Spring tea. It is” — he watches Kirk take the cup from his hands and inhaling sharply before taking a sip – “a traditional morning drink.”

Kirk eyes him above the rim of the mug. “What?”

“I am… trying to decide if you are picking up manners from our young guest, or teaching them to her.” Spock purses his lips. “The similarity is disturbingly striking.”

Kirk wraps his other hand around the mug and grins in a childish display of triumph over a won trophy. “Get yourself another; I’m not giving it back. Bones says he’s got some drugs missing from his medical cabinet, and she’s got that gleam in her eye… There’s no way I’m drinking or eating anything someone hasn’t tried first.”

“Fascinating,” Spock mutters, working the panel again. “And just when I came to believe that humans could not become any more medieval.”

Kirk chuckles before suddenly saying, “Hey.”

A hand on his arm makes Spock look up. Kirk is staring at a chess set someone has forgotten on one of the tables. He glances at Spock uncertainly, his fingers shifting on the mug. “Do you think we could maybe play a while? And, you know… not talk?”

Spock inclines his head. After a week’s worth of constant nagging and intrusive prodding, the suggestion is more alluring than it should reasonably be.
Kirk magnanimously offers him white the first time they play. The game is swift, with both of them making moves seemingly without thinking. It resembles kamikaze chess, with pieces exchanging hands rapidly and in large numbers. True to their agreement, they don’t talk, save for an occasional proclamation of check.

Spock wins the game. Kirk rotates the board with a smirk before resettling it, presenting Spock with the black pieces this time.

The second game lasts noticeably longer. They both seem to spend more time studying each other’s moves and setting elaborate traps. Spock looks up from the board from time to time, watching Kirk consider his options and his hands move the pieces, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Sometimes Spock looks up to find Kirk watching him, and Kirk’s smile becomes a little more prominent; he holds Spock’s eyes almost in challenge. Kirk laughs softly as Spock declares another checkmate, and Spock feels a weird surge of anticipation curl up low in his belly at the undisguised promise.

The third game seems to be a hybrid of the first two: both players hunt down each other’s pieces, but they take their time in the pursuit. Spock sees it coming, but he’s already too late to save the match.

He tips his king over. Kirk grins and slumps further into his chair.

“Has anyone ever told you that you play a very irritating game of chess, Mr. Spock?”

“Irritating?” Spock lifts an eyebrow, playing absentmindedly with a captured knight. The set must be old; the figurine is somewhat chapped around the edges. “Perhaps not in such emotional terms, but the sentiment has been expressed over my manner of playing, yes.”

“You should have seen that one,” Kirk says, nodding to the board.

“Indeed,” Spock agrees, suppressing a sigh. He is tired, but then, so is Kirk, so it’s not an excuse.

“So,” Kirk drawls speculatively, still studying him. “You don’t play like any Vulcan player I know. What’s your FIDE rating? Because I’ve got 2781, and I can’t remember the last time I had to work for it like that.”

Spock sets the knight aside and begins to reassemble the board slowly. “I do not have a rating.” His eyes are fixed on the pieces. “I have not taken part in an official tournament since I was fourteen.”

He pauses, then adds softly, “This is the first time I have played since then.”

Kirk whistles quietly. “Really. But yeah, I think I’d remember you if you’d been on the Academy chess team.”

Spock glances at him curtly, rising from his seat. “Would you like another beverage?”

He can feel Kirk’s gaze at him, but doesn’t turn.

“Please, since you’re up,” the captain says at last. “Double espresso, Sumatra blend, two sugars.”

Spock suppresses the urge to roll his eyes as he walks to the replicator.

“So, what happened when you were fourteen?” Kirk asks the moment Spock places a steaming cup in front of him.

Spock bites the inside of his lip; he should have known. He takes a sip of his tea, warming his hands
around the cup.

“Nothing ‘happened,’” he replies at last. “There was a tournament. I won.” He glances up at Kirk briefly. “However, it was said that my style of play is... inconsistent and illogical. My father said he would rather not have me display in public my lack of dedication to the Vulcan way any more than I already was. Thus, I quit playing.”

He chances a short look in Kirk’s direction. The captain is frowning, the coffee cooling slowly in front of him.

“I said you didn’t play like any Vulcan I know,” Kirk says slowly. “But I wouldn’t call it illogical. You’re much more ordered than me, for one.”

Spock feels some of the tension leave him; he shifts in his chair, sinking into a more comfortable position.

“There are distinct differences,” he explains. “You studied T’Pok’s Defense and Verak’s gambits.”

Kirk nods. “Then you must know that Vulcans see no other purpose to the game than to achieve victory. The more – straightforward and swift way is introduced to achieve it, the better.”

“You don’t play like that,” Kirk notes softly.

“No.” Spock’s eyebrow arch slightly. “I do not.” He hesitates, searching for words. “My mother introduced me to chess, Captain. It was... I was fascinated by the game, but even more so by the chance to see her mind at work. Chess is – it is a very expressive, very informative game. I was often puzzled by the behavior and motivations of others around me, but when I played chess against them, I could see how their minds worked. The way they made their moves, the choices they made, the timing – I am at a loss to put it into words, but it is—”

“Like a mind-meld distilled?” Kirk suggests.

Spock meets his eyes, and nods, almost emphatically. “Yes.”

“Interesting.” Kirk regards him with an intrigued expression. “I’m almost afraid to ask what you thought of my game.”

Spock meets his eyes, and nods, almost emphatically. “Yes.”

“Interesting.” Kirk regards him with an intrigued expression. “I’m almost afraid to ask what you thought of my game.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow, studying him, and speaks after a short deliberation. “You always play to win,” he says, eyes trained on Kirk. “Your ‘illogical improvisations’ are calculated to the last digit before you make a move, but you prefer to pretend they are spontaneous. Your mind works approximately four times faster than you let on. You pursue victory as the only outcome acceptable to you. You are unaccustomed to defeat, but you fear it, perhaps for that exact reason. The longer you remain victorious, the more vulnerable this fear makes you, and, in the end, you do not lose to your opponent, but to yourself.”

The sudden silence is deafening. Kirk stares at him, mouth open slightly and cheeks flushed; his eyes are wide and troubled.

“Forgive me,” Spock says quietly. “I – they are only assumptions, Captain. I did not wish to presume.”

Kirk clears his throat and looks away. “No,” he says. “I asked; it’s all right.” He flashes a smile at Spock that is far too shocked to be natural. “You should do palm-reading next. You’ve really got a knack for it.”

Spock studies him a moment longer and doesn’t reply. They finish their drinks in silence, and then it
is time to prepare to beam down.

Later, Spock will analyze the events and conclude that he should never have been allowed on the planet.

His eyes are painfully dry, his body humming dully with sleep deprivation. His skin is itching from the stimulants that were never meant for someone with his physiology, and he feels how his shields, tattered by weeks of living on edge, are crumbling and getting thinner under the climbing pressure that bombards them, in steady waves, like poisonous radiation.

*Savage world. Barbaric world.*

A small planet lost between Orion and Romulan space, where the indigenous population of Arishuh is being exploited by the descendants of Orions and every other galactic race imaginable. Spock has seen his share of uncivilized, cruel cultures, but he would never stop being affected by the casual brutality of such worlds or their ruthless natures.

The mission is sensitive, and Kirk and Spock beam down alone while Scott attempts to conceal the Enterprise’s presence in the sector. They are wearing inconspicuous civilian clothes in order to blend with the crowd and do not carry phasers or communicators. The miniscule one-man transponders implanted into their forearms are their only connection to the world of reason.

They find the informant’s house easily, and, the moment they walk in, the old Arishuh drops to his knees and starts crying.

“*I didn’t want to tell them!*” he whines, rocking back and forth on the ground. “*I did not! But the Romulans – they threatened! They hurt! I did not want to!*”

Spock shares one glance with the captain, and it’s clear that they both realize that they have been expected, and that there is no time to waste.

Spock guards the door, while Kirk tries to reason with the old man, because there is no way they could walk through the busiest part of the town with him agitated as he is. When the captain manages to calm the Arishuh somewhat, they set off, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible.

Spock is tense. He has never liked crowds, and this one is more violent and volatile than most. Everyone around him is either inflicting pain or enduring it, if not now, then recently; they brush against him, pushing their anger, lust, and greed on him faster than he can deflect them. His teeth are crumbling and still he grits them harder, barely seeing his surroundings as he concentrates on reaching their destination.

“Oh no!” their companion wails suddenly. “*Marissa! My daughter – it’s my daughter there – they found her – you must help my daughter!*”

Kirk swears as they see a squadron of guards leading a crying young woman away. She cannot be older than seventeen. Spock’s blood starts to boil as he spots dark, ugly bruises covering her face and neck, her thin wrists bloodied with crude manacles.

“We’ll have to come back for her,” Kirk mutters.

“No!” the Arishuh cries out, and people start turning their heads toward them. “*They’ll kill her! We have to help her! We must help her now!*”
“Listen, mister, we’ll come back for her, all right?” the captain hisses through gritted teeth, shaking him a little. “I’ve never left anyone behind, and I’m not starting now, but we can’t risk you being caught.”

“Father!” the girl screams as she notices them. “Father, help me! Father, please!”

Her voice pitches higher and higher with every new syllable, her terrified shrieks cutting through Spock painfully. He has to stop his hands from reaching to cover his ears, and the effort is almost too much.

“Help me! Help me, please!”

Kirk swears again and starts tugging the Arishuh by the hand toward the concealed inner yard where they beamed down.

“Spock, don’t just stand there, help me!” the captain barks, struggling with the older man. “Take him to the—”

“Father!”

Like a knife sharpened with guttural fear of pain and death, it slices through Spock, cutting the thin, translucent string of will that was keeping his control in suspension above the abyss.

Blood roars wildly and triumphantly at his temples like a powerful riptide, clawing hungrily at his civilized veneer and tearing it apart until nothing a frenzied savage is left in its place, blind and deaf to all but his fury and the overwhelming urge to cause pain.

Spock launches himself in the opposite direction from the beam down point, fighting his way toward the guards. He doesn’t hear Kirk yelling after him, doesn’t notice people starting to scream around him. All he sees is the girl’s huge, fearful eyes and her hand stretched toward him. The vision is engraved in him, agonizingly familiar; it rips at his very core, sharp, merciless teeth of excruciating torture sinking into his heart and clenching till he opens his mouth and snarls his hatred for the universe itself, the mindless anger of a mortally wounded beast.

They try to stop him, and he fights back. He barely even sees them. He smashes bones and dislocates joints; he walks through the ranks of twenty-seven armed guards as if they were children with swords of straw. Somewhere on the periphery of his mind blooms an overwhelming sensation of utter relief and cruel, selfish pleasure, because he has always – always – been holding back, with anyone and everyone, and it’s a brutal, twisted delight to let himself go.

Somewhere in the middle of his madness, he catches a glimpse of Kirk standing still, staring at him with blue eyes wide and aflame, and there’s shock in them – but also something else, something dangerous and primal, something that Spock’s deeply demented mind identifies as longing, and anger for being bound by duty and sanity, and a promise of revenge for being left behind. A moment falls out of the normal course of space-time, and for a dizzying, intoxicating instant, it’s just the two of them, and the groans of fallen enemies covering the ground between them, and the familiarity of it is galloping and stunning, and Spock almost falters, swept by the sudden, staggering conviction that this has happened before.

The time resumes its course, and Spock spins on his heel to meet a new attacker as another layer of his inner defenses goes down, blown away by the fierce gaze scorching the skin between his shoulder blades long after Spock has moved out of its range.

He reaches the girl, just as her last keeper is about to cut her throat, and Spock doesn’t know – will
never be able to tell – what fate has come to him; he doesn’t listen to the sounds.

He grabs the crying girl, who shrieks and tries to pull away from him, terrified, but she’s so weak that it’s ludicrous. He holds her in place without effort as his fingers tear away his own skin savagely and dig for the miniature device that McCoy has placed there. Spock can feel it buzz and knows that somewhere behind him, somewhere on the other side of the square full of groaning bodies, the other two transponders have been activated. He presses his own to the girl’s hand and pushes her away, just in time for the transporter beam to seize her.

He hears the sound of many footsteps surrounding him, and he throws his head back, and laughs.

It is the last thing he remembers.

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He isn’t the tiniest bit surprised to come around in a prison cell.

His whole body is aching as if he has been literally dragged over the coals. Perhaps he has been; Spock can’t remember all too clearly beyond a haze of shouts, bodies moving with intent to hurt, and throttling, sickening anger boiling the blood in his veins. He looks at his hands – his knuckles are bloodied and beaten raw. Spock hauls himself up to sit, leaning against the wall, and closes his eyes.

He does not know how long he stays like this before he hears a distant scrape of metal upon metal. A door opening somewhere, far away from his cell. They must have been genuinely frightened to keep him in such isolation.

Two sets of footsteps approach, and Spock turns his head toward the door, keeping his eyes carefully lidded. The door is slammed open, and someone is nearly thrown in, managing to catch himself with braced arms before his head would have hit the wall. The door slams shut, and the footsteps retreat.

“Aren’t you gonna say hi?” Kirk asks, coughing and picking himself up from the floor with difficulty.

Spock stares at him, taking in the bruised arms and torn clothes, and the dark churning starts again low in his stomach, black and ugly and at home there, as if it has always been a part of him.

“Why are you here?”

Kirk smirks. “I broke the law; got arrested. Doesn’t take much around here.”

Spock tries to reign in the newly rekindled anger, but Kirk’s brazenness is smashing, and Spock’s control is slipping, the battle rage still filling his veins.

“You had the informant – you were free to leave. Why are you here?” he demands, barely taming his fury.

Kirk looks at him, eyes narrowed and chin going up rebelliously. “So now you care about the mission. I’m touched.” He sets his hands on his hips. “Do you know why you are here?”

Spock blinks, momentarily put off. “No. I am surprised to be alive.”

“Oh, no, no, no, Mr. Spock.” Kirk shakes his head mockingly. “They won’t execute you. You singlehandedly neutralized a squadron of their best guards. You don’t get to be beheaded – you get to become the newest gladiator on their arena on whatever fucked-up circus is being run out there.
You do know what that means, right?"

Spock pulls his knees to his chest, gritting his teeth. Kirk’s tone is taunting him, the words stinging. “I will not fight anyone.”

Kirk stares at him for a long moment in silence, eyes sweeping over Spock intrusively.

“Shame,” he says with infuriating lameness. “You look like you belong there.”

Spock trembles with the effort it takes him to remain still; the urge to lash out is overpowering.

“It was clear where you walked, you know,” Kirk says, very deliberately. “I lost track of you for a moment, but there was – a path. I didn’t need to look to see where you’d – gone through. They were everywhere.”

Spock closes his eyes. “Did I kill?”

Again, Kirk pauses. “I have no idea. You just – passed through.” He sneers. “Like a knife through butter.”

Spock feels his lungs struggling for oxygen. He cannot inhale, exhale enough air.

“Oh no,” Kirk says with sudden vehemence. “You don’t get to curl up in the corner and moan. What the hell was that about, Spock? You wanted to save the girl, I get that. Was that the logical way? What the hell were you thinking?”

Spock whispers, “I was not.”

“That’s it? That’s your best explanation? You weren’t thinking?”

Spock uncoils from his position in a motion so swift he barely sees it himself. “Stop it. Be quiet!”

“Or what?” Kirk steps closer, challenging. “D’you know why I’m here, in your cell, Spock? Because I’m sentenced to death! Because they think you’re gonna rip me in half for your amusement! And they’re right, aren’t they?”

Kirk pushes him, and Spock steps away, seething.

“No.”

“Come on.” Kirk advances on him, sneering. “I know you want to, you liar. You wanted it all along.”

“No!” Spock growls, turning away from him.

“What’s the matter, Spock?” Kirk pushes him again. “Not man enough to admit it?”

“Don’t,” Spock pleads through gritted teeth. “Do not speak.”

“The hell I won’t. I’ve got tons of things to tell you and you have nowhere to run here. That’s what you usually do, isn’t it? Running away, hiding in some hole when it gets too hot for you. That’s why you wanted to leave Starfleet; that’s why you’ll never make captain. It takes guts, and you’re a crappy officer who abandons his job the moment it gets too emotional. Some Vulcan.”

“Stop, Captain—”
“Why should I? Does the truth hurt too much?”

“Do not—”

“Do you think of yourself as some kind of noble warrior, stoically suffering in silence? Oh, if only that were true; it would have made your existence so meaningful, so gracious.” Kirk’s face twists in disgust. “But you don’t suffer, do you? You’re nothing but a cheap pretender – a bad actor who tries so hard to be good he’s forgotten what his real self is like. And maybe that’s for the best, because your real self isn’t worth shit!”

Spock’s fists clench painfully; he is shaking violently, fighting to hold still.

“You don’t feel!” Kirk yells. “Your fellow Vulcans – Vulcans, for crying out loud – they feel! But you’re not a real Vulcan, are you? You’re not real anyone! No wonder they kicked you out.”

He plants his hands on the wall at either side of Spock’s face, his breath ghosting over Spock’s lips, as Kirk whispers intimately, scathingly, “Tell me, did you have to beg Pike to take you, or did he do it out of charity?”

Spock snaps.

He lashes out before he knows it, overwhelmed by one blinding urge: destroy. He tackles Kirk to the hard floor of the cell and they roll, Spock smashing Kirk’s feeble attempts to protect himself, hardly even noticing the resistance. He hits and hits and growls deep in his throat, a low, animalistic sound of pure frenzy.

But he is unforgivably slow, his body beaten raw and screaming at the overexertion, and somewhere, at the back of his mind, something gives, leaking doubt like slow poison.

Kirk manages to throw him off for a second, and, just as Spock pounces at him again, Kirk strikes, precise and deadly like a cobra, and delivers a blow full in Spock’s solar plexus with all the might he possesses.

Spock cries out in sharp pain, falling backward, and he can’t stop, shouting his lungs out, because something breaks within him – something firm and solid and permanent – it breaks, and he’s rolling in pain that supersedes the mere physical by such heights that it’s barely conceivable.

All the pent-up grief, all the pain, the sheer agony of losing everything – all emotions that he had suppressed so violently that he wasn’t even aware he had them anymore, are set free now, rushing over him all at once, making him wish to hurt himself, to die – anything to end this torture.

A warm, heavy body wraps around his, gripping him tightly as he trembles in violent convulsions, keening in a voice he didn’t know he possessed and wishing for eternal oblivion.


It’s a fierce, unending litany pouring into Spock’s ear, making no sense to him, but being there, never ceasing. He tries to crawl away from it, but it doesn’t let him.

“It’s okay. It’s okay; let it go. Let it all go. It’s okay. It’s okay. That’s it, don’t hold back. Don’t – don’t even try, Spock. That’s it. You’ve been carrying it for too long. Let go. Let it go.”

Slowly, dazedly, Spock reorients himself in the world where everything hurts. Breathing, opening his eyes, being. It hurts, and it doesn’t go away. It just keeps hurting and keeps being.
He draws in a tentative breath, and his lungs restart, aching. He shifts awkwardly, and it’s killing him, but his body obeys. Pain has just become his reality, and he must reintegrate himself into it. He doesn’t know how. He stills at last, seeking, in vain, for any measure of relief.

“Spock.”

Hands on his shoulders. Someone is shaking him.

“Spock. Come on, talk to me.”

Spock looks up into a face he vaguely recognizes.

“Spock. Please, say something. You’re scaring me.”

*Kirk*, Spock realizes at last, and with that name, reality slams back, knocking the wind out of him. Spock tries to make himself move or, indeed, say something. He wants to tell Kirk to let go of him, to leave him alone. He opens his mouth, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Hu – hurts,” he hears someone utter instead.

“Oh God,” Kirk breathes, clutching his shoulders. “I know, Spock. *I know*.”

Spock looks at him, pushing away at last, using the wall as leverage to pull himself up to his feet. The room keeps swaying around him.

“Why?” he utters, almost inaudibly. He doesn’t know what he’s asking.

“I’m sorry,” Kirk whispers, coming to his feet as well. “I had to.” He takes a step closer and stops – a broken, abrupt motion, as if he has to fight to restrain himself. “Bones warned me, but I... We were worried about you.”

“Doctor McCoy?” Spock asks, not comprehending in the least.

Kirk nods. “He’s one smart bastard when he wants to be. You wouldn’t listen to him, so he pestered me. He thought maybe I could... help you.”

Spock looks at him, and Kirk covers his face with his hands, letting out a pained chuckle that falls, sharp and bitter, to the cold floor of the cell.

“When you lost it out there today, I thought that was it. But when I got here, you were still controlling it.” Kirk swallows and shakes his head incredulously. “I’m sorry I had to... You’re so stubborn, Spock. You’d nearly kill yourself, but you wouldn’t let go.”

Spock draws in another strained gulp of air. The sudden silence is hurting him just as the angry shouts have.

“I can never go back,” he says slowly, feeling the words for the first time. “I can never go home.”

“Spock...” Kirk breathed out helplessly.

Spock lifts up his head, looking at him without really seeing. He just needs someone’s eyes to anchor him, because—

“I can never buy flowers for my mother.” He pauses. “She liked roses – I used to buy her new breeds for her garden. I could not say it, but she would look at them, and she would smile, and she would *know*.” He swallows, his throat painfully dry. “I can never do that again.”
“Spock,” Kirk chokes. “Please...”

“I could have come for a visit – I could have...” He closes his eyes. “She would never ask, but I could, and I didn’t. I did not. And now I never can.”

“Spock, she knew—”

“Knowing is not enough,” Spock continues, merciless. “I was a poor son to her. In my arrogance, my pride, I punished her for my own failings. She never asked – she never...”

The ambient cold is finally starting to register, crawling under his tattered clothes and settling on his shock-frozen body. He begins to shiver.

“I wanted to buy a painting,” Spock whispers, his voice fading.

Kirk frowns, his expression becoming openly alarmed. “What?”

“A painting,” Spock repeats stubbornly. It’s important, for some reason, to explain this. “Tuvask and Tarina’s. They lived on the corner of Shi’ran and Tesle, near the fountain. They were very poor. They painted on canvas; beautiful, but unpopular. *Unconventional.* His lips twitch. “I thought I would buy a painting from them the next time I – the next time I came home. The next time.”

“It will never happen,” Kirk says softly, and his voice breaks. “I’m sorry, Spock.”

Spock closes his eyes, feeling the floor sway beneath his feet. “How could I not know? How could I not know that I can never come home?”

“I don’t know,” Kirk whispers, shaking his head. “It takes time?” He shrugs helplessly. “I wish I could do something. God, Spock, I wish I could so badly... If I was just a little faster on that drill, maybe...”

Spock looks up at Kirk, seeing him clearly for the first time. Kirk’s face is a mess of bruises; blood trickles from the corner of his mouth, and he’s pressing his arm to his body protectively. But his eyes are clear and dry and trained on Spock, and he doesn’t know he’s begging, and he doesn’t know what for.

“There was nothing you could have done, Jim,” Spock says quietly, and the last string of tension within him gives with a painful echo, dissipating in the murky air around them. “There was nothing you could have done.”

A wave passes through Kirk at the words, and he trembles as he draws in a greedy breath, as though he has been holding it for the last several months. He takes a couple of steps across the cell, visibly fighting to keep himself together.

“Jim?”

Vaguely, Kirk extends a hand in his direction. “Just give me – just give me a moment.”

Spock slumps against the wall, enervated. “I have nothing but moments now. They are all I will ever have.”

Kirk drifts back to him slowly, his haunted eyes attaining some measure of calm as he looks at Spock.

“I know how you feel.”
“How can you know?” Spock whispers. “How can anyone know?”

Kirk steps a little closer. “Because I lived through it, too,” he says quietly. “I didn’t lose a planet, but it was the same for me.”

Spock watches him, confused and startled. “How?”

Kirk closes his eyes briefly, a shadow of gloom settling over his features. “Have you ever heard of ‘the planet of eternal spring’?” He blinks tiredly. “When I was thirteen, I came to live there. It was as lovely as they said.”

His lips curve in a painful grimace. “And then the spring ended. Four thousand people died in one night. Murdered. My friends; my aunt; the girl I had a crush on.” He chokes. “The rest of us were hunted and forced to fight for survival.”

He meets Spock’s eyes. “My whole world was gone in one night, Spock – less than a day. So you see” – he smiles a strained, tighetned smile – “I do, in fact, know exactly how you feel. Well.” He pauses. “Almost exactly.”

Spock stares at him, cold shivers running down his spine, distracting him from his own agony.

“You were on Tarsus,” he whispers, shocked when he thought he had lost his ability to be shocked. “Jim...”

Kirk bites his lip vehemently, shaking his head. “I never told anyone. Pike didn’t know; Starfleet doesn’t know – mom took care of it. Spock.” Kirk looks him in the eye squarely. “Bones doesn’t know.”

Spock wants to reach for him, to comfort him somehow, but he can’t make himself move.

“It took me almost a year to get home,” Kirk says quietly, forcing the words out. “When I did, there were counselors, and shrinks, and therapists of every fucking kind. ‘Did you feel anger, Jimmy?’ ‘Were you hurt, Jimmy?’ ‘Do you want to talk about it, Jimmy?’” His face contorts in disgust. “All I wanted was to be left alone. Most people couldn’t cope with it on their own, but I could. Am I a freak, because I could? Because I didn’t just break down and die? Am I as heartless as they said I was?”

“No.” Spock shakes his head. “No, Jim.”

Kirk looks at him, blinking rapidly. “They made me feel like I was some kind of monster. Maybe I was – I don’t know. I wasn’t supposed to survive – I did. I wasn’t supposed to be able to move on without therapy, and I was. I did!”

“Jim—”

“They said I had no morals. No compassion. Just because I refused to let them see, just because I wanted to do it on my own, I—”

“I know precisely how you felt.”

Kirk stops short, staring at Spock with the strangest expression clouding his features. It made Spock’s breath catch.

“I know,” Kirk exhales. “Somehow, looking at you – I’ve always known.”
Spock looks away finally, when it becomes too much to withstand, but Kirk commands his attention to the point where Spock can’t resist.

“All I wanted,” Kirk says in a voice that sounds smaller somehow, “was privacy, and time, and no fucking talking about it ever. And maybe—” He pauses, taking a deep breath, struggling to hold it. “Maybe I wanted for someone I knew to be there.” His voice falls another notch. “To – to just hold me, and say nothing at all.”

Spock holds his gaze, feeling his own eyes well up with tears. He blinks and fights it, struggles against some strange resistance that is keeping him in place. He wants to move, and – he can’t.

“Then again” – Kirk sniffs and smiles a wry, self-deprecating smile – “I wasn’t Vulcan. So I guess —”

Spock makes some kind of quiet, indescribable noise, and manages to take a small step forward, trembling with effort.

“Oh, fuck it,” Kirk breathes, taking the final step and wrapping his arms around Spock tightly, forgetting his injuries on the spot. Spock stills at the movement.

“Don’t hate me,” Kirk whispers into Spock’s hair, fingers digging into Spock’s back and shoulders. “Please don’t hate me; not you too. I hate me for both of us already, promise. Hate this, hate hurting you. It feels like I’m betraying myself, and I’ve been there – Jesus, Spock, I’ve been there. Why does it always have to be me?”

Spock is shaking now, arms closing uncertainly around Kirk’s waist. “You – seem to be – uniquely qualified.”

Kirk laughs bitterly. “To be the guy who’s always ruining your life? How did I get this lucky?”

“Jim.” Spock pulls away slightly, without letting go. “I never hated you.”

“Oh no?”

“No. But I was – angry. Very angry with you.”

Kirk lets out a soft chuckle. “That’s a word and a half, I think. Hey.” He tips Spock’s chin up, calloused fingers gentle on his skin. “I deserved it. I’d say it was a human thing to feel, but you’d rip my guts out, and besides, I don’t think it’s just human. I think it’s – a living thing to feel.”

He bites his lip, peering at Spock. “I hated you a little myself,” he admits with a grin, fighting to hold on to the lighter tone.

“For the Kobayashi Maru?” Spock tries to step away, but Kirk doesn’t let him.

“I hate losing, Spock – you said so yourself.” Kirk shrugs. “It just – it freaks me out, usually. Badly. So yeah, for the Kobayashi Maru. And also – for being the most arrogant, self-assured, stick-up-your-ass prick I’ve ever met.”

He laughs at Spock’s expression and lets go of him at last, carefully lowering himself to the floor as he favors his ribs and left shoulder. Spock winces.

“I hurt you.”

“Yeah, but it’s no big deal.” Kirk waves him off dismissively. “Those bastards outside probably did
more than you.”

He leans against the wall and looks up at Spock. “Don’t be a stranger; c’mere. We should stay close. If that idiot Arishuh stopped wailing his thanks for his daughter, he’s told Scotty we’re trapped here with one transponder to share by now, and Scotty’s already figuring a way to boost it for two.”

“I see,” Spock says, sitting down awkwardly next to Kirk. The captain immediately shifts closer, snaking an arm around Spock’s waist. “You should have simply explained this. I thought it was uncharacteristic of you to wish to – hold me.”

Kirk smirks. “Why, Spock, you didn’t really think I wanted to give you a hug, did you?” He teases, pulling Spock closer.

“No, of course not.” Spock pauses, and amends, “Perhaps, for a moment.”

He doesn’t pull away when Kirk rests his chin on his shoulder.

“Well, Mr. Spock,” Kirk murmurs low in his ear. “Perhaps, for a moment, you were right.”

Spock sinks back, leaning into the embrace, and closes his eyes.

It hurts to breathe.

“We’ll get through this, Spock,” Kirk promises softly. “I know you don’t believe it’s possible now; I know it hurts like a bitch and doesn’t quit, but I pulled through it. So will you. We’re too alike, you and I. We’re both—”

“Dysfunctional?”

Kirk chuckles, nuzzling his hair. “That works, too, but I was going for stubborn. Too stubborn to let go.”

Spock rests his head against the hard surface of the wall and takes a deeper breath. “What do we do now?”

“We wait,” Kirk says simply.

“And if Mr. Scott does not rescue us?”

“We fight.” Kirk pulls him closer still. “Under normal circumstances, I’d say we don’t stand a chance. But after I saw what you did out there... God, you were a – a force of nature, Spock. I know I shouldn’t be admiring that, but it was incredible. You were incredible. In your darkest hour.” He sighs.

“Fuck, I’m so screwed.”

“Captain?”

Kirk smiles against Spock’s skin. “Never mind. It’s gonna work out, Spock. Trust me, it’s gonna work out.”

Spock reflects on it. “As gloomy as the situation is,” he says slowly, “the deepest pitfall may be, I believe, that I do, in fact, trust you.”

Kirk laughs quietly, and Spock feels him relax. “Then we’re both screwed, Mr. Spock. We’re both screwed.”
In the darkness of the cell, with his lungs still struggling and his heart aching as if it’s ready to burst, Spock smiles.

End of Part IV
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Interlude

Pain wakes up before he does, and Spock stretches on the bed, savoring it for a moment. In the three weeks that have passed since their mission to Arishuh, pain has become his constant companion an incessant presence – like a shadow that follows an inch too close.

Spock welcomes it.

Not that he enjoys the feeling; except, in a way, he does, because it reminds him that he can feel again. As long as he feels this pain, he knows he can feel, and slowly, hesitantly, other emotions start resurfacing through the veil of his grief. It is illogically gratifying. He never thought he would be so unimaginably relieved to have his conflicted, unruly, irrational feelings back.

Ironically enough, Spock’s breakdown on Arishuh serves to strengthen Starfleet’s position. Immensely grateful for his daughter being saved, Kovac’s informant insists on sharing his data not only with the Torian, but with Kirk and Spock as well, much to the ambassador’s displeasure. With the cards laid out on the table like that, Kovac has no other option but to make the best of a bad bargain, and signs a preliminary trade agreement with the Federation to save his face. Captain Kirk does end up in Med Bay with a case of food poisoning that week, but, other than that, the mission is a success no one had been expecting.

Now that the negotiations are over, Spock composes a detailed report of everything that happened on the planet, sparing no details of his abominable behavior. Normally, he would experience shame from recounting such a total lack of control, but the force of his catharsis has been so strong that he’s still somewhat dazed with its echoes. In fact, describing the events is mildly therapeutic in a masochistic kind of way.

Spock does realize, though, that this might well be the last report he ever files as first officer of the Enterprise. Starfleet cannot leave such a drastic breach of protocol and personal code of conduct unaddressed. It is likely they would consider sending him into a rehabilitation center (in which case he would immediately resign) or ground him for an indefinite period of time to a station where he can be closely monitored. There is no question he will be relieved of his current position.

Spock feels uneasy about it. Now that the blinders covering his eyes have been torn away, he is all the more aware of the people around him – their emotions have suddenly become clearer, sliding into focus. And, to borrow a human expression, Spock likes what he sees. He allows himself to regret his imminent leaving.

“Commander, a word,” Kirk says at the end of a staff meeting.

Spock waits patiently as the others file out of the room, trying not to avoid the captain’s eyes. Ever since the mission, it has been difficult for him to interact with Kirk without experiencing an acute case of embarrassment. No matter how necessary, looking at the darkest parts of his soul has been shameful enough. To have shared that knowledge...

“Spock, um...” Kirk starts hesitantly, making Spock actually look at him. The captain seems
uncharacteristically cautious, a most unusual expression on Kirk’s face. “About your report.”

Spock’s heart sinks unpleasantly at the reminder, and he stiffens involuntarily, trying to control himself.

“Yes, sir?”

Kirk grimaces and rubs the back of his neck uncomfortably, not quite meeting Spock’s eyes, either.

“I don’t want to send it.”

Spock stares. “I beg your pardon?”

Kirk sighs and drops to a chair next to Spock, folding his hands on the table and peering at Spock with a strangely intense expression.

“I don’t want to send it,” he repeats, more confidently. “You know Starfleet bureaucracy as well as I do. They won’t ever let us handle this. I mean, I know we can deal with this perfectly on our own, but—”

“Can we?” Spock asks quietly.

Kirk’s expression softens, but his reply carries strong conviction. “Yes, we can.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “And if you are incorrect, and I turn out to present a constant danger to the ship?”

“Spock.” Kirk sighs. “Really. I don’t believe in that, and neither do you. Do you have to be so backward about it?”

Spock says nothing.

“Look. The simple truth is, I need you,” Kirk says earnestly. “And if you think that’s easy for me to say, you’ve drastically misjudged my character;” he adds dryly. “I’ve just watched you play cat and mouse with Kovac for two days and to be honest, the Federation Trade Commission should pay you extra for what you’ve done. If that was you at your worst, I can wait for your best for, like, a good while.”

“You overestimate my—”


Spock looks away first. Kirk appears not to notice.

“Listen,” he says, leaning forward. “If you want to take some personal time – if you want to go to New Vulcan and help your people – if you want to, I don’t know, join some kind of convent to deal with this, that’s fine.” Kirk pauses, allowing the words to sink in. “I’m not going to like it, but I’ll deal. If that’s what you want, I can understand that.”

Spock clears his throat. “Captain…”

“But if you want to leave just so you wouldn’t inconvenience anyone here too much, you can damn well shove it.”

Spock purses his lips, meeting Kirk’s eyes daringly.
“What do you want, Spock?” Kirk asks, his tone oddly tense with an emotion Spock can’t identify. “You’re so used to thinking about everyone else first. For once in your life, forget everyone else. What do you want? I can play it either way; just tell me.” He leans in almost desperately.

“Tell me.”

Spock knows, feels it clawing at his skin, the realization that something crucial is happening now. Once again, he stands before a life-altering choice, and he has yet to make a correct decision. But this time, the mistake – if, indeed, it is a mistake – is easy.

“I wish to stay,” Spock says, surprised by the firmness of his tone.

Kirk doesn’t grin, but his whole frame relaxes as he falls back into his chair. It suddenly feels like the room has attained additional illumination.

“Okay.” The captain nods. “Okay. Then here’s what we’re going to do. I’m not forwarding your report. They’re gonna have to deal with my own for a while. You’re free to read it,” Kirk says hastily, seeing that Spock’s ready to object. “I don’t intend to lie about anything.”

“That is…” Spock pauses. “Satisfactory.”

Kirk gives him a dry grin. “Right then. Here’s the part you’re not going to like. You’re going to have to be talking to Bones a couple of times a week. I know you two aren’t exactly drinking buddies, but he’s certified for just about anything, I trust him, and we’ll need some medical backup in case we ever need to prove you’re not insane.”

Spock presses his lips together tightly. “If that goal is to be achieved by comparison, Doctor McCoy is indeed the most logical candidate.”

Kirk snorts softly, shaking his head. “I swear to God, there’s something between you two that’s just…” He trails off, grinning, even as the humor in his eyes slowly fades. “If you need some time off, or light duty, or – anything – tell me, okay?”

Spock straightens in his seat. “That is very generous, Captain, but it will not be necessary. I have found my work to be... a distraction and solace both.”

Kirk nods. “I would, too, I guess.” He stands up and rests a hand on Spock’s shoulder.

Spock looks up, and it’s an odd angle for him, but he remains seated. There is no threat coming from the man above him, and the gesture is strangely comforting.

“If I ask you, sometimes, how you’re doing,” Kirk says slowly, “you’re not going to bite my head off, are you?”

Spock will never know what possessed him as he tilts his chin up and says, “Vulcans don’t bite, Captain.”

Kirk’s eyes widen in surprise, but he catches himself quickly, smirking. “Is that so?” His fingers tighten slightly before releasing Spock. “I might just want to change that.”

“Inadvisable,” Spock comments, reaching to collect his PADD.

“Spock,” Kirk’s voice comes from the doorway. “I mean it. I’m here if you need me.”

Spock holds his eyes, and finally inclines his head.
They don’t talk about it again.

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In the darkness, Spock lies in his bed, staring at the ceiling. For four nights in a row now, sleep has eluded him, and it is becoming a problem. So far, his meditation cycle has been taking care of his body’s needs, but it is an emergency resort, not meant to be used daily. He needs to sleep.

He can’t.

His mind refuses to let go, remaining in the alert mode, as if he’s constantly expecting an attack. In four days, Spock has tried everything from Vulcan mind control techniques to Starfleet’s recommended routines. He can’t relax. His whole body aches with the effort.

He gets up finally, frustrated and tired, and walks to his desk. He’s looking over every intelligence report, every news broadcast he can reach; listening to every whisper; looking, searching for signs of danger. He flags messages and then dismisses them, asking himself if this is what paranoia feels like.

He is determined not to let another Nero slip under the radar.

He’s dead on his feet, and he doesn’t sleep.

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“Come on in,” McCoy says, Spock entering his office for what will be their fourth meeting. “Sorry, could you hold this for me?”

The doctor promptly shoves a stack of books into Spock’s arms as he tries to maneuver another one on the top shelf.

“May I ask—?” Spock starts uncertainly, eyeing the precarious position McCoy assumes on his desk.

“Jim gave them to me,” comes a muffled reply. “Said my office needed some ‘decorating.’”

“And these are—?”

“Some ancient medical encyclopedia, goddamn it,” McCoy huffs, only just catching himself before he topples over. “God knows where Jim digs up that shit, though I gotta tell you, some of the pictures here look like a ripper’s manual.”

“The captain has chosen his gift well, in that case.”

McCoy turns his head sharply to glare at Spock over his shoulder, and the fragile balance of his position shifts.

“Doctor,” Spock says warningly, but it’s too late.

McCoy’s knee twists from under him, and he disappears behind his desk with a muffled yelp. Spock resists the temptation to roll his eyes as he sets the books carefully on the desk and looks around it.

“Are you all right?”

“Peachy, Spock,” McCoy snaps. “I almost broke my neck, what do you think? Give me a hand, will you, so that we can get this over with. I know how much you’re enjoying our little dates.”

Spock reaches out obediently to help the doctor to his feet, his gaze lingering on a vase with a dozen
bright pink roses.

“While we are on the subject of dates,” Spock intones slowly, eyeing the bouquet with something close to alarm. The endings of the petals are colored with golden powder. “You appear to have an admirer, Doctor.”

McCoy blushes a spectacular hue of red as he pulls away from Spock and straightens his uniform.

“Someone just left them here,” he grumbles, averting his eyes.

“Ah,” Spock says. “They are...”

“Okay, I dare you.” McCoy glares at him.

“...a most peculiar shade of—”

“Pink,” McCoy finishes with a groan. “Someone sent me pink roses. Hey, Spock.” The doctor’s eyes brighten suddenly. “You don’t suppose it could be—”

Spock almost feels bad, but it is clearly a matter of honor. “No one who works for me would have such a poor sense of style, Doctor.”

“If so, they didn’t learn it from you,” McCoy grunts.

Spock can’t help his curiosity. “Why have you kept them?”

“Only a cold-blooded hobgoblin like yourself would ask that.” McCoy sighs. “I didn’t want whoever sent them to see me getting rid of them. They could be... upset.”

Spock arches an eyebrow. “Would they not be more upset assuming their gift was well received and discovering later that that was not the case?”

“Look, what d’you want from me?” McCoy snaps impatiently. “I’m not exactly an expert in all this lovey-dovey stuff.”

Spock eyes him critically. “I find that hard to believe.”

McCoy glances at him, clearly surprised. “Please tell me you’re not hitting on me.”

Spock gives him an eyebrow. “I am not that mentally deranged, Doctor. I was merely implying that since you are known to be prone to experiencing fits of – what is the word? – sentimentality, this ‘stuff,’ as you put it, should be exactly your area of expertise.”

McCoy’s eyes narrow. “Just because I like ‘em blond doesn’t mean I’ll paint my house like a Hello Kitty store.”

Spock stares pointedly at the senses-insulting roses sitting comfortably in the middle of McCoy’s desk, challenging the visitors. “If you say so.”

McCoy throws his hands up and drops into his chair. “Take a seat, and enough talking about the goddamn roses already.”

Spock folds himself into a chair and tries not to appear as if he’s ready to bolt at any moment.

McCoy looks him over and rolls his eyes.

“Honestly, it’s like I’m torturing you here.” He catches the look on Spock’s face and lifts a hand
hastily. “No, for God’s sake, don’t answer that.” He stills, as the lighthearted tone of the conversation dies out. “So tell me, how was your day?”

Spock shifts uncomfortably, before catching himself. “It was adequately productive,” he replies cautiously.

“No unusual incidents?”

Spock examines the phrasing carefully. Finally, sensing a trap but not seeing it, he says as nonchalantly as he can make it, “None that I recall.”

“Hm.” McCoy hums, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “What about Lieutenant Bonelli?”

Spock frowns slightly. “What about her?”

“I heard she was conducting an experiment with high energy plasma.”

“That is correct.”

“How’d it go?”

Spock folds his arms across his chest, leaning back in his chair slightly. “It proceeded satisfactorily. The extrapolated result has been obtained. Lieutenant Bonelli has demonstrated that she is a capable researcher.”

“Yeah, I heard she’s pretty smart.” McCoy nods, gazing at Spock. “And handy with hazardous substances.”

“Indeed,” Spock confirms. “She is most proficient.”

“Really,” McCoy drawls. “So why didn’t you let her run the reaction by herself?”

Spock pauses. “I do not understand.”

“Well, I’m not an expert in plasma physics,” McCoy says conversationally, “but as I understand it, there’s a part of every such experiment when you have to interact with it directly.”

“That is correct.”

“And when Bonelli reached that phase, you stepped in?”

Spock purses his lips. “Correct.”

McCoy raises his eyebrows. “Why?”

“I was there at the moment.”

“Yeah, I would imagine. But why did you step in? Didn’t you just say she was qualified enough to handle it on her own?”

“That was not a matter of the lieutenant’s qualification.”

“What was it about then?”

Spock frowns. “I don’t understand. How is this relevant?”

“It’s relevant because I say so.”
“I’ve noticed that you have a most perverted view of what constitutes logical reasoning, Doctor.”

“Well, with such astounding powers of observation, I’m sure you’ve also noticed that I’ve asked you the same question three times now, and you still haven’t answered.” McCoy makes a pointed pause. “Also, you’ve just used a contraction. Something you only do when time is of an essence, when there’s a danger present and your adrenaline spikes, or — when you’re irritated.”

“I do not become irritated,” Spock snaps.

“And I don’t have pink roses on my desk. Sure.”

Spock closes his eyes for a moment, steeling himself.

“Why did you step in, Spock?” McCoy asks, casual but firm. “Why did you really step in?”

Mentally, Spock retreats; every fiber of him caves from the question, shying away from the persistent attention pouring at him through a giant looking-glass. But McCoy wants to help, Spock keeps reminding himself.

Dutifully, he thinks back toward the episode, replays it in his mind.

He sees Francesca Bonelli — Fran to her friends — a young, lively woman with dark skin and dark eyes and a timid smile that causes her male colleagues to lose their train of thought 29.9 percent of the time. Spock sees her adjusting the plasma unit, measuring matter particles, inputting the equation. She looks back at him once she’s ready, a mixture of doubt, a request for approval, hope, and excitement in her eyes. She bites her lip, visibly reinstating her confidence; she’s eagerness and alarm in equal proportions.

It’s the alarm that seals it. Spock steps in.

“There was a risk,” he admits finally. “Every experiment of this kind involves a risk.”

“And you didn’t trust her to handle it?”

“No,” Spock says, honest, now. “I did trust her. I did not wish for her to take that risk in the first place.”

McCoy nods. “That’s right, you didn’t. And that’s not the first time in the last couple of weeks you’ve done it, either.” He starts curling his fingers. “Chekov’s shuttle test drive; Monroe’s sky dive; Scotty’s antimatter chamber inspection. Oh, and Jim is probably still mad at you for the way you set him up on Xeen.”

“The captain’s safety—”

McCoy raises a hand. “Whatever. Don’t you see a pattern here? You’re trying to step in every time a member of this crew is about to face danger.”

Spock is silent, because, hard as he wishes he had a different explanation, he cannot find one.

“Are you on some kind of quixotic quest?” McCoy asks, sarcasm gradually seeping into his tone.

“I do not believe so.”

“I don’t either. Risk is part of our profession, Spock. Every single member of this crew is a volunteer. We’ve signed up for this. We’re taking those risks of our own free will. We don’t need saving.”
Spock looks up, and McCoy stares him in the eye squarely.

“But it’s not us you’re trying to save, is it?” the doctor asks quietly. “It’s not us. It’s someone you can’t save anymore. Someone you never can.”

Spock doesn’t say anything, feeling numb, and exhausted, and just so very tired of everything he can’t ever change or escape.

McCoy nods briskly. “We’re done for today. See you on Thursday.”

Spock pulls himself to his feet and leaves, his shoulders aching with the effort to remain upright.

--

Spock doesn’t care if it’s a coincidence or a part of some grand master plan that Nyota is waiting for him in his quarters later that night. She pulls him through the doors, and she doesn’t ask questions.

The petty remnants of discipline that have been holding him together give and dissolve like a paper cup forgotten in harsh November rain. Spock reaches for Nyota, and she lets him hold her. She yields under his frantic kisses, all soft and tender, but she has intent, and Spock surrenders, allowing her to guide him.

She undresses him quickly and pushes him into the shower stall, the water being just on the right side of too hot to withstand. Spock slumps down under the spray and Nyota massages his shoulders and neck, her hands strong and confident, fingers smooth with oil as the smell of jasmine fills the moist air.

It’s familiar and forgotten – that feeling that someone is taking care of him in the most basic way. Someone who doesn’t judge; someone who simply accepts; someone for whom he doesn’t have to be a hero.

Spock remains still as Nyota steps out in search for towels. There’s water on his face, and he doesn’t know – doesn’t want to know.

--

He sleeps for full six hours that night without dreaming.

--

“Hey, Spock. Mind if I join you?”

Spock glances up from his PADD to find Kirk standing at his table with a tray of food.

“Good evening, Captain. And no, of course not.”

“Thanks.” Kirk grins.

Spock looks around the nearly deserted officers’ mess, which, at the moment, offers a wide variety of available seats. He decides not to comment.

“What’s so fascinating?” Kirk points at Spock’s PADD with his spoon. “Another status report?”

“As it happens, no.” Spock gives a mild shake of his head. “I am off duty. This is recreational reading.”
Kirk cranes his neck awkwardly then gives up and reads the title upside down. “The Unbearable Lightness of Being?” He squints at Spock. “That’s like, the most depressing book I’ve ever read.”

Surprised, Spock lays the PADD down, concentrating on his companion. “The emotionality of your assessment aside – you are familiar with Milan Kundera?”

Kirk shrugs, digging into his soup. “Not my favorite. If we talk about the mind games stuff, I’d rather give Fowles another go.”

Spock peers at him curiously. “Interesting choice. I am rather fond of Fowles myself.”

“Really?” Kirk grins wickedly. “Let me guess – you’d choose the third ending to The French Lieutenant’s Woman?”

“The most realistic one,” Spock confirms defensively. “You, on the other hand, would undoubtedly choose the second.”

“Aw, I’ve always had a weak spot for ‘la bohème.’” Kirk smirks. “Throw in a happy ending and I’m sold.”

“Predictable,” Spock says, feeling amused just the same. He glances at his PADD. “I do not find Kundera depressing, however. Perhaps a little melancholic.”

“Mhm.” Kirk hums around a spoonful. “If you like that, you should probably try Kafka.”

Spock isn’t fast enough to stifle a wince. “No, thank you.”

Kirk glances up, eyes dancing. “The Trial did it for you?”

“Letters to Felice,” Spock says, with an internal shudder. “I had the misfortune to read it at a young age. It did make me wonder how the human race managed to persist for so long, considering that your mating rituals were such a test of personal endurance.”

Kirk snorts loudly, grabbing a napkin to wipe his mouth. “Jesus,” he chokes through his paroxysm of laughter. “You thought that was the norm?”

Spock feels his cheeks color slightly. “That was a reasonable assumption under the circumstances.” He pauses. “It was also the first book that made me consider abandoning it before I was finished.”

“I can imagine.” Kirk grins. “I didn’t know you had such a taste for Earth literature.”

“While it was still literature, yes, indeed,” Spock says. “I did not know you had a fondness for reading, either.”

Kirk shakes his head, smiling sadly. “I don’t have the time anymore. Everything I read, I read as a kid or a teenager. My grandfather had this huge collection of printed books, and they were all shipped to us after he died. Unsigned boxes – no catalogue, no system. I never knew what would be in the next box I opened. I read everything I found inside.”

Spock is perplexed. “But some of those volumes were doubtless unsuitable for a child. Did no one direct your reading?”

Kirk shrugs a little stiffly and looks away. “There wasn’t anyone to ‘direct.’ Mom was forced to – I mean, she decided to return to Starfleet when I was five. And Uncle Frank wasn’t the easiest person to be around, so I tried to stay out of his way as much as possible – hence the reading.”
“I see,” Spock says, feeling warmer despite himself because Kirk clearly hasn’t been keen on sharing this, and yet he did so anyway.

Spock looks for a way to lighten the mood. “Did you have a favorite book?”

Kirk tilts his chin, grinning. “Yep – The Three Musketeers. I probably read it a hundred times, give or take.”

It makes a frightening amount of sense, Spock muses, that Kirk’s favorite book would be a romanticized novel about faithful friends sharing numerous adventures while fighting for king and country. For someone who had had a lonely childhood, the choice was so obvious and logical that Spock aches a little at the thought.

“I also loved Captain Blood,” Kirk adds cheerily, oblivious to Spock’s reflections.

“Well, now certain things are beginning to make sense,” Natalie Pechalat says with a teasing grin, joining them at the table. “I always thought you were too much of a pirate to be a proper captain.” She smiles sweetly at him. “Sir.”

“You wound me, Lieutenant.” Kirk pouts, watching as Pechalat slides into a chair next to Spock, placing a cup of steaming herbal tea in front of him as she cradles her own coffee mug.

Spock looks at her in surprise. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“You’re welcome, sir.” She grins slyly at him.

Kirk is gazing at them, a petulant expression on his face. “Okay, so how is it that your deputy is so much nicer than mine?” he asks Spock sulkily, the tone belied by his grin. “Sexier, too.”

“Oh, Mr. Spock, I’m sorry,” Pechalat drawls with a wicked smirk. “I’ve only just realized how much smarter my boss is than yours. Cuter, too.”

“Hey!” Kirk protests indignantly, but his eyes are laughing. “What the hell’s wrong with these women?”

“No affliction that I am aware of,” Spock says, smothering a smile. “Except, perhaps, for good taste.”

“Right as always, Commander,” Pechalat agrees, looking past him. “If you gentlemen will excuse me.”

Kirk turns his head to stare as Pechalat makes her way across the room toward the replicators, where Doctor McCoy is standing with a customarily gloomy expression on his face.

Kirk looks back at Spock eyebrows raised. “Really?”

Spock watches for a moment before replying quietly, “It would appear that way.”

“Holy shit.” Kirk whistles softly. “You okay with it?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “There is no regulation against romance, Captain. Besides” – his eyes narrow as he sees McCoy blushing slightly while pulling out a chair for Pechalat – “I do not believe it has progressed too far as of yet.”

Kirk chuckles, shaking his head. “That girl, Spock? Is the kind who gets what she wants.”
“I am aware. However, the good doctor is... somewhat hesitant in his response.”

“That divorce hit him pretty hard.” Kirk sighs. “She’s right up his alley, though. Given time…”

“I have full confidence in Lieutenant Pechalat’s abilities,” Spock remarks casually. “Had Alexandre Dumas, père, met her, she would have made an ideal prototype for Milady.”

“She would at that.” Kirk laughs. “Which makes you Richelieu in this landscape, my friend.”

Spock holds his eyes, the persistent sensation of warmth washing over him. “You flatter me, Captain.”

Kirk scoops up the last of his soup and smirks. “Yeah. I do.”

--

“I heard they reopened the VSA,” McCoy drops casually.

“Indeed,” Spock acknowledges, trying and failing to assume a more comfortable position while in the CMO’s office. “For over a century now, the VSA has been responsible for educating the Federation and moving its science forward. It would be illogical if we suddenly became derelict in our duties.”


Spock stiffens. “That is correct.”

McCoy nods, looking over his PADD. “Astrophysics, multiphysics, xenolinguistics, computer science—”

“Interstellar law, and temporal mechanics.”

“So you could take your pick.”

“Evidently.”

“So?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “‘So’ what, Doctor?”

“Why are you still here?”

“I have no interest in teaching at this time.”

“Why not? I thought you enjoyed being stuck in a room full of people forced to admit that you’re smarter than they are?”

Spock purses his lips. “Were that the case, I would have obtained a medical license and run Med Bay.”

McCoy looks at him skeptically, ignoring the comment. “The VSA was one of the most prestigious places to teach at before Nero. That change much?”
Spock considers this. “No,” he says. “They have recently hired Professor Vun of Andoria, Doctor Lemarn from the Daystrom Institute, and Mina Davish of Ilyria.”

McCoy whistles. “Quite a collection.”

“Indeed. It would be an honor just to be in their presence.”

“But you turned them down. Why?”

Spock frowns. “I already have a position.”

“Yeah, on a ship loaded with guns and torpedoes, galloping across the galaxy looking for trouble. That doesn’t sound very Vulcan to me – I mean, you guys are supposed to be pacifists.”

Spock stiffens even more. “It is logical to defend oneself—”

“What if it’s not just defense?” McCoy cuts him off. “We might not look it, but we are a military vessel. Every scientist on your team, every nurse on mine, every botanist, anthropologist, and engineer here has a second specialization. We all do.” He pinches the bridge of his nose as if the reminder is unpleasant. “Your friend Uhura wouldn’t be where she is just because she speaks forty languages. She’s there because she’s got best scores in encryption and decryption and can recognize a code in the way the stars are blinking.” McCoy presses his lips together firmly. “Sulu’s trained as a tactical officer. Chekov is a weapons specialist, and Jesus wept – if you think a seventeen-year-old in charge of our weapons banks isn’t scary, think again.”

Spock studies him calmly. “What is your second specialization, Doctor?”

McCoy glares at him, his jaw line tightening painfully. “You know damn well what it is,” he grits out.

“Indeed,” Spock says dryly. “I can personally attest that, should the need arise, you would be superb at it.”

McCoy smirks, but there’s no humor in the sharp, aborted quirk of his lips. “Why are you here, Spock?” he asks again, his tone deceptively mild.

Spock straightens up. “When I joined the service, I took on an obligation, Doctor. That obligation does not stop because it is no longer convenient.”

“Bullshit – you can serve your people just fine by joining them. Teaching at the VSA would be much closer to the Vulcan way, and isn’t that what you’ve always—”

“It’s too idle,” Spock snaps, without meaning to. “Too far away from the front line.”

McCoy’s eyebrows fly up as he allows the words to hang in the air for a moment. Spock stubbornly holds his eyes, even as he realizes that he has just lost another round.

“Too far away from the front line,” McCoy repeats slowly, savoring the words. “And you, what – you consider yourself to be that one person who has to stand between your entire species and any evil that might come its way?”

“I…” Spock hesitates, glancing away. “I do not know. I merely…” He meets McCoy’s gaze. “This is what I do. This is what I am.” He pauses, thinking of the man who told him to set aside logic and do what feels right. “One hundred fifty years from now,” Spock says slowly, “this is still what I am.”
And I am still alone, he thinks. Completely and solely on my own.

McCoy stares at him for a long time before rubbing his eyes tiredly. “We’re done for the day,” he says finally. “You can go now.”

Spock looks at him, and, for the briefest of moments, experiences the strongest urge to remain.

--

“Are you seeing someone… socially?”

Nyota, who has been humming softly to herself while tuning the lyre, now lays the instrument aside and looks at Spock with a confused smile.

“You’re asking me if I’m dating anyone?”

“I—” Spock pauses. “Yes.”

“Why?” She leans back on the bed, crossing her legs but leaving one foot dangling.

Spock stares at the sly smile playing on her lips and averts his eyes. “I should not have asked. Forgive me for prying.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” she says cheerily. “Not so fast. Why did you want to know?”

He glances back at her, frowning. “It occurs to me that I have not been… paying attention… lately,” he admits reluctantly.

“Hey.” Nyota slides off the bed, joining Spock on the floor. “I don’t blame you.”

“I am aware,” he says, avoiding her hand. “However, if something significant happened in your life, I would – prefer – to know.”

Her lips twitch. Spock can see her struggle to contain her mirth, but it is not within Nyota to win. She resolves into giggles.

“I’m sorry,” she tries to say through her laughter. “It’s just that – thinking that you would – ask me to paint your nails next—”

Spock makes a move to rise, but Nyota lunges at him – without much finesse, but effectively holding him in place.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats, grinning and nuzzling his neck.

Spock sighs softly. He has always been defenseless before her. “Why are you doing this?”

“You hate being laughed at,” she tells him, as if it’s the most logical explanation in the universe. “I figured someone should.”

“Very mature.”

“Yeah, about as much as you pouting.”
“I am not pouting.”

“Of course you’re not.”

“Nyota...”

Nyota plants a playful kiss on his nose and stands up, a huge smile illuminating her face. She reaches with the obvious intention to ruffle his hair, and Spock ducks, rolling away from her. She chuckles, watching as Spock hauls himself up to his feet a safe distance away.

“I’m not seeing anyone,” Nyota finally replies. “Tried a while ago, but it didn’t work out.” Spock takes an involuntary step forward, and she lifts her hand, stopping him. “You don’t have to smash anyone’s nose, no. I ended it.”

“I had no intention of... Are you all right?”


“Perhaps the latter,” Spock muses. “I have not considered it to be the general rule.”

“Well.” Nyota smirks. “You’re definitely not the only lone gunman here. Does that make you feel better?”

Spock doesn’t answer, just looks at her, and she chuckles. “Welcome to the wonderful, twisted world of humanity.”

Spock’s eyebrow arches of its own will. “Indeed.”

--

“Hey,” Kirk says, lingering in the doorway of Spock’s office on the Science deck. “We’ve got new orders.”

“So I heard,” Spock replies without looking away from the data on his screen.

Kirk steps inside, his hand flying up to the back of his neck in his customary way of exercising nervousness or hesitation. Spock knows instantly that the captain isn’t here in his official capacity.

“I think I’m being punished,” Kirk says.

Spock glances up at him briefly. “I cannot imagine.”

“Yeah? Why else would they be sending us to mission _Boredom_?”

Spock does give Kirk his full attention then. “‘Mission Boredom,’ sir?”

Kirk studies Spock’s face for a moment with a trapped expression. “Shit. It’s like a field day for you science geeks, isn’t it?”

“If you are referring to a most rare opportunity to study a unique geological formation in the entirety of the Alpha quadrant, then yes, it will be, as you say, a ‘field day.’”

“A field day to last a week.” Kirk grimaces. “I don’t know why I’ve never been particularly
interested in sciences.”

“I do not know the reason either, sir, but it is fortunate, since sciences have never had any particular interest in you.”

Kirk blinks, then grins slowly. “You’re pretty mouthy today. You do this to everyone, or am I receiving special treatment?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Which answer would you prefer I give?”

“Spock!” Kirk’s mouth falls open in an almost comical fashion, as he gapes at Spock with wide eyes. “You are – you’ve just – did you really just...”

“Captain?”

“No,” Kirk says decisively. “This can’t be. I’m hallucinating.” He slaps himself in the face. “Wake up, Jim!”

Spock stares at him with interest. “Did that... help?”

Kirk groans. “You’ve got a knack for driving a person crazy, you know that?”

“From what I just observed, you do not require assistance in that particular endeavor.”

“Bastard.” Kirk shakes his head, grinning. “You evil, cheating, son of a—”

“I presume you are talking to yourself again?”

Kirk snorts, leaning against Spock’s desk for support. His eyes are bright with laughter as he gazes down at Spock with a peculiar expression, making Spock want to check if there is something on his face.

“You have no idea what you’re doing, do you?” Kirk asks softly.

Spock blinks. “I cannot answer your question if you insist on being so vague.”

“Okay.” Kirk nods, smiling, and reaches to pat Spock’s shoulder. “It’s okay, Spock; I won’t hold it against you. Let’s just hope I have a higher tolerance than Pike did.”

Spock is genuinely confused now. “Captain, I do not—”

“Never mind.” Kirk shakes his head, sliding off Spock’s desk and heading for the doors. “I’ll see you at the briefing.”

“Captain,” Spock calls after him. “Do you intend to beam down when we reach Ceillam?”

Kirk turns around, looking thoughtful. “I didn’t plan to,” he replies. “There’s not much to see and I didn’t want to be in the way of your team. Plus, Scotty wants to test his new plasma converter, and I don’t think I can let him blow up the ship all by himself.”

“I see,” Spock says, his eyes drifting back to his screen. “I will see you at the briefing, sir.”

Kirk hesitates in the doorway, as if wishing to ask something. Spock looks studiously at his data, and, after a few moments, the captain walks out.

--
Spock knows he has not imagined the smell of alcohol hanging heavily in McCoy’s office when the doctor asks him the leading question of the day.

“How did your mother die?”

Spock closes his eyes and sees her, sees her eyes glued to his, her silhouette painted in the burning air by blindingly white sparks of energy. She reaches out to him, and his whole being leaps, caged within a powerless body trapped by the transporter beam...

“Spock.” McCoy’s voice cracks like a whip. “Stop reliving it. Tell me. With words.”

Spock forces his eyes open, but, for a frightening moment, he still sees nothing but fire.

“She fell.”

Nero’s face, dark and quiet. Nero’s voice, calm and casual.

‘Spock? There’s something I want you to see.’

Spock blinks, clearing his vision. McCoy is still looking at him, his usually sharp brown eyes blurry; intense but unfocused. Spock clears his throat.

“She fell.” He purses his lips; swallows. “And I could not catch her.”

McCoy holds his eyes for a long time, though it’s doubtful that either of them sees much of the other. After a while, McCoy turns his head away and motions Spock out with his hand, without saying a word.

--

He doesn’t trust himself to spar with a human partner that night. Instead, he seals off one of the smaller rooms at the gym and hits the punching bag till it’s ripped out of its holder on the deck. He claws at it and tears it then till it’s nothing more but a pile of polymeric balls and slices of plastileather.

He makes no entry on the maintenance log to explain the damage.

--

“Spock, status report!” Kirk’s voice barks over the comm line.

It’s unbearably hot in the small, cramped engine room of the Ungian cargo ship, and Spock has no time to adjust his body temperature. Lying flat on his back, head half inside the engine, he blinks sweat out of his eyes as his hands move quickly and confidently in the red-hot mess of scrambled wires. Spock’s voice is the only cool thing currently present.

“I estimate I will require another two minutes and thirty-five seconds to complete the repairs.”

“You don’t have two minutes!” Kirk growls. “Get the hell out of there NOW!”

Spock promptly reaches and disconnects his communicator, eyes set firmly on the conduit in front of him.

“Mr. Scott, prepare to engage power,” Spock orders. “Minimal burst.”

A sigh comes from somewhere to his left. “I’ve been ready for millennia, Mr. Spock. The captain is
right; ye’ll never reset the beastie in time—"

“Engage power,” Spock cuts him off. Around him, the engine starts humming ominously. “Return to the Enterprise.”

“What? I’m not leaving ye here.”

“That is an order, Mr. Scott.”

“Aye, and the captain gave ye one, too. Ye have to move away for the transporter to lock onto yer signal.”

“I do not have the time to argue, Mr. Scott. Return to the ship immediately. I will follow you shortly.”

“The hell ye will, the whole bloody thing is gonna blow up in a moment. Ye need to—”

But what he needs, Spock never finds out. He hears the familiar whine of the transporter beam, and nods to himself. Someone on the Enterprise has become impatient and pulled everything out onto which they could lock. Even better, as he very much does not have the time to argue.

His brain has begun the countdown of the remaining time, and Spock forces himself not to increase the speed of his work. If he maintains his current rate of progress, he will finish with two-point-four seconds to spare. If he succumbs to the emotional urge to hurry up, he risks making a mistake that he’ll have absolutely no time to correct.

“Spock!” The room around him explodes with sound.

Spock mentally nods to himself again. He has foreseen Kirk’s order to reestablish communication, but he believed it would take Nyota one minute and six seconds longer to find a way to tap into the Ungian ship’s intercom system. She is, without a doubt, a brilliant communications officer.

“Spock, you stubborn son of a bitch, listen to me,” Kirk’s voice booms around him, reverberating between the narrow walls. “You’re violating a direct order from your commanding officer, and I don’t have the fucking time to remember what specific regulations you’re breaking—”

“Four, fifteen, and General Order Eight,” Spock mutters.

“—but let me tell you that you’re in big trouble, you pointy-eared asshole, you hear me? Get your ass out of that fucking engine now, or I’ll personally bust you back to ensign faster than you can say ‘illogical’!”

The communication is one-way only, but Spock hadn’t planned on responding anyway. There is a frightening moment when he realizes that his concentration on rewiring the broken connections is no longer absolute – that he has ‘blacked out’ for several seconds, allowing his hands to proceed ‘on autopilot.’ He forbids himself to try and remember his actions, for he cannot spare a fraction of a second for any shred of doubt.

The countdown in his mind has reached single digits, and vaguely Spock manages to think that Kirk must have understood how crucial Spock’s concentration is at the moment, too, because the comm line is silent and James T. Kirk has never run out of words in his life.

Four conduits to go. Three conduits.

Nine seconds.
Second to last refuses to remerge. Retry or find a substitute?

Seven seconds.

Duranium has a slower conducting rate, but the platinum one is further away. To go for it or make do?

Six seconds.

The neutrons in the duranium atoms will magnetize point-zero-four-six seconds later than are left. Platinum.

Two seconds.

The last conduit. Connection point-zero-three-seven seconds later than the time left.

Minus two seconds.

Spock opens his eyes, realizing at the same moment that, at some unknown point, he had closed them. The engine around him is still humming, but the vibrations of the deck have ceased. He looks up at his handiwork, examining it with a critical eye for the first time. He finds it satisfactory and, for some indiscernible reason, feels mildly surprised.

Spock pulls himself away from the engine and shuts the hatch. His back responds to the sharp way he hauls himself upright with an abrupt spasm of pain, and Spock frowns. He does not fancy another visit to Med Bay.

“Spock?” The comm line comes to life again with Kirk’s wary question. “You okay?”

Spock glances back at the engine that seems to be operating smoothly once more and walks over to the comm on the wall.

“Captain. The engine appears to have reentered the safe working mode,” Spock reports, realizing abruptly that his throat is painfully dry. “I will check the life support system and then—”

“You – will beam out of there – now.” Kirk’s tone manages to transport the sensation of frozen fury into the Ungian engine room more effectively than if it had suddenly snowed inside. “Clear?”

Spock tries to swallow, but his throat simply hurts in response. “Yes, sir.”

“Energize.”

The last thought Spock manages to have before he starts to dematerialize is that perhaps he should not have been so efficient after all.

--

Spock is a little surprised not to be beamed directly to the brig. He doesn’t have time to dwell on it, though, because Kirk is there, glaring at him from across the crowded transporter room. The captain stands just within the doors, white-knuckled hands folded across his chest as if he’s trying to restrain himself. His eyes are emitting bolts of white-blue electricity, target-locked on Spock with deadly determination and making the whole room sizzle.

Spock is unable to look away, even as the Ungian captain and his two wives surround him, expressing their gratitude, until McCoy shoves past them to scan Spock. The doctor barely manages to give Kirk a tight nod when the captain steps forward.
“Clear the room,” Kirk orders in a surprisingly even tone. “I need to have a word with my first officer in private.”

Spock assumes the at attention pose automatically, watching the Ungians and Enterprise personnel file out of the room hastily. McCoy lingers in the doorway, however, glancing back hesitantly. At the last moment, he steps back inside. Kirk obviously sees him, but ignores him. Spock doesn’t comment, either.

“I would like to hear an explanation,” Kirk says, still in the same frighteningly calm tone. “If it is convenient to you, of course; if it suits your mood today; if the stars are all in their right positions for you to be so kind and answer me. If it doesn’t – I don’t know – make you pull a muscle or something.”

“Captain—”

“Shut up!” Kirk is on him in the blink of an eye, hands on his hips, fingers trembling, as if he’s barely holding back from physically lashing out. “We had all the personnel evacuated; we even pulled out most of their cargo; we were a safe distance away – WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU DOING ON THE SHIP THAT WAS GOING TO BLOW TO HELL?”

With an unexpected uprise of wisdom or self-preservation instinct, Spock remains quiet. The room is ringing with the echo.

Kirk barely pauses to draw in a breath, which seems to go down the wrong way. “What possible logic made you stay there? I mean, it’s clear that you don’t give a shit about my orders – they might be good for everyone else, but not for Spock of Vulcan – oh no, no, no – he’s so much better than thou! Have you thought about me at all? Have you thought about how it’d look that I can’t even keep my first officer in line?”

Kirk turns away brusquely, as if taking in the sight of Spock standing there for another moment is too much, but his gaze snaps back almost instantly.

“You are a selfish, self-righteous bastard, and don’t you dare tell me you care about my captaincy again.”

Spock bites the inner side of his lip drawing blood. He says nothing.


Spock composes himself, pulling every resource he possesses. “The Ungian race does not have a homeworld. They live on their ships. Each ship is a birthplace and home for entire clans.”

“I know all that,” Kirk says impatiently. “That still doesn’t explain—”

“I knew I could conclude the repairs in time.”

“That’s bullshit, you nearly didn’t make it!”

“I could not see someone else’s home blown apart if I could help it.”

They stand motionless, staring at each other. The only sounds in the room are the wildly crackling air and the truth ringing loudly like a torn string.

“I’m sorry, Jim,” Spock says quietly in the end. “I could not do it.”
Kirk remains still for a moment, then steps back, eyes closing as he shakes his head once. Spock watches him, something heavy, sharp, and violent pulling at the inside of his chest, like a hungry sehlat cub.

Kirk straightens up at last, glancing at Spock curtly with an unreadable, closed expression on his face. He walks out then, without looking back once or pausing for a second. The doors slide closed behind him, and Spock suddenly feels ten times worse than he believed possible.

McCoy unglues himself from the bulkhead he’s been leaning on and takes several steps across the room, rolling his shoulders. Spock glances at him sharply, and McCoy arches his eyebrows.

“Well, you sure know how to do things the hard way,” he drawls.

Spock looks away, pursing his lips. “I deserved it.”

McCoy shrugs. “Yeah, but that’s not why he was yelling.”

Spock peers at him questioningly. McCoy sighs, rolling his eyes. “Honestly, for a supposed genius, you’re just way too dumb,” he grumbles. “You scared him.”

Spock narrows his eyes. “I did not believe that was possible for anyone to achieve.”

“Oh yeah?” McCoy smirks humorlessly. “Well, you seem to be developing quite a knack for it.”

Spock hesitates, experiencing something close to toothache for the need to ask, but Kirk’s frozen expression still haunts his vision.

“How would I—” He cuts himself short abruptly.

McCoy stares at him for a moment in disbelief, then snorts. “Seriously, Spock? Asking a divorced guy for marriage counsel? You must be more far gone than I thought.”

Spock gives him a sharp look. “I find your analogy tasteless and inaccurate.”

“You sure about that?” McCoy asks, grinning. “Granted, yours was a shotgun wedding, but as far as this crew is concerned, yeah, you’re married alright.” His smile fades. “Listen. Jim might be my best friend, and you’re my patient and probably not as much of a heartless bastard as I thought you were, but my job here is to keep this crew healthy – mentally as well as physically.”

“What is your point, Doctor?”

McCoy glares at him. “This ain’t my first rodeo with the both of you, okay? This silent treatment thing the pair of you pull out whenever you’re pissed at each other? Drives the crew to distraction.”

Spock frowns. He has been McCoy’s punching bag for approximately two months now, and all of a sudden it feels like too long.

“At the moment, Doctor, I must admit that I am tempted to call the captain a lot of things. However, silent is not one of them.”

McCoy’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Don’t you care about him at all? I mean, aside from him being your project in that stupid-ass war you have going with the admiralty? Does he as a person – as Jim Kirk, God damn it – mean nothing to you at all?”

Spock straightens his tired back forcefully. “It would seem, Doctor, that he means very much indeed to you. I do not know why you find it difficult to express your affection for the people you care about
– you are, after all, human. But as far as the captain is concerned, I suggest you find means of showing him what he means to you other than abusing your access to hyposprays and lecturing me.”

“All done?” McCoy growls.

“For the most part.”

“Will whichever part remains contain the answer to my question?”

Spock opens his mouth and then suddenly stops, his lips quirking. “Fortunately, I am no longer under obligation to assist you in perfecting your interrogation techniques. Good day, Doctor McCoy.”

He brushes past the doctor and is almost at the door when McCoy calls after him.

“Spock.”

Spock turns around, mildly surprised to see McCoy grinning softly, even if the traces of anger haven’t fully left his face. Spock braces himself for another onslaught of sarcasm, but the doctor shakes his head.

“It’s good to have you back.” McCoy cringes incredulously as if he can’t quite believe he’s saying it, and the thought amuses him.

Spock knows immediately that the doctor isn’t talking about the recent mission.

Silently, he nods in response.

--

Kirk and Spock are scheduled to spend the next day’s Alpha shift separately, for which Spock is grateful, but the unknown also unnerves him. The crew tries their best to act as if nothing has happened, but Spock can feel the pressure of their curiosity and anticipation as if it was a physical force.

In the morning, he walks into a turbolift with Nyota. She doesn’t say a word to him, but smacks him on the head just before the doors open to reveal the bridge. Spock knows he hasn’t imagined a smirk quirking her lips as she strolls toward her station.

He resists temptation for the better part of the day, but, as the virtual sun of the ship begins to set, Spock decides that there has been enough procrastination. He tracks Kirk down, discovering that the captain has camped in the officers’ lounge after finishing with his paperwork. Spock straightens his shirt decisively and starts walking.

The captain is sitting alone in the far corner by the viewport, reading a printed book. Spock hesitates in his approach, feeling the sudden need to reevaluate his chances. He has almost convinced himself that trying to talk to Kirk now is a bad idea, when he notices the title on the cover.

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Spock narrows his eyes, momentarily distracted, and steps closer just as Kirk looks up.

“I thought you said this book was—”

“Yeah,” Kirk cuts him off, blushing slightly. “But you were so fascinated that I decided to give it another go.”
“And?”

Kirk drops the book to the low table and pushes it away. “Nah. Still too damn depressing. I think I’ll ask Chekov for reading recommendations next.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “I must confess I find it disturbing that, at his current age, Ensign Chekov’s favorite book is *Crime and Punishment*.”

“Oh yeah?” Kirk smirks. “Well, I don’t. I think I’d find it disturbing, though, if, at his current age – which is twelve, by the way – his favorite book was *Lolita*.”

Spock’s lips twitch. “May I?” he asks, nodding at the empty seat opposite Kirk.

The captain nods. “Please.”

Spock folds himself into the chair and sets down the cups he has been holding, sliding one of them toward Kirk. The captain frowns in momentary confusion, then stares at the dark liquid as the steaming aroma reaches his nostrils. A slow smirk begins to tug at his lips.

He looks up at Spock. “You brought me coffee?”

Spock inclines his head. “Evidently.”

Kirk’s smirk transforms softly into a grin. “Not just any coffee.”

“I have an eidetic memory and you have a routine,” Spock says matter-of-factly. “Sumatra blend, double strong, double sweet – when you wish to shock yourself into wakefulness. Jamaica blend, small single portions, extra strong, extra sweet – you call them ‘shots’ – when you are so exhausted that the first choice has no effect. And finally, Ethiopia organic blend, medium, no sugar, whipped cream – when you wish to relax and enjoy the taste.”

“Very good, Mr. Spock,” Kirk drawls, grinning and pulling the cup toward himself, the whipped cream melting slowly on the surface. “I don’t see any flowers, but have you brought me chocolates, too?”

Spock tilts his head to the side a little. “The replicator does not do that product justice.”

Kirk grins wider. “Nice save.”

Spock watches as Kirk takes a sip of his coffee, closing his eyes in pleasure and inhaling deeply. Quite at random, a thought occurs to Spock that he could look at that particular image for a long time without tiring. He shakes himself mentally, because Kirk’s eyes are sharp and trained on him again.

“I’m still mad at you,” Kirk says, still smiling softly, but his tone is serious. “No.” He shakes his head, seeing that Spock has opened his mouth. “No, I get why you did it. I really do, Spock. But don’t you ever do that again. You understand?”

Spock holds his gaze, a little shaken by its intensity. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Kirk nods abruptly, taking another sip of coffee. “I’d hate it if I had to transfer you.” His lips quirk a little. “My yeoman can’t remember my coffee routine half as well as you do, and not for lack of trying.”

Spock looks down at his hands for a moment, willing but not ready yet to accept the truce offering.

“Captain…” Spock pauses. “I deeply regret that I had to disobey your order. But you must know that
I did not take an unreasonable risk. I calculated the time required for the repairs.” He glances at Kirk warily. “And due respect, sir, the fact that I am sitting here now proves that I was correct.”

“Really?” Kirk frowns. “You finished your repairs with not a fraction of a second to spare. Don’t you think that’s cutting it a bit close?”

“We are always ‘cutting it close’ out here,” Spock says calmly. “You were ‘cutting it close’ when you ordered a restart on Tapica. We were ‘cutting it close’ with the Bamun. You were ‘cutting it’ so close you were almost too late on Bregor.”

“Yes.” Kirk nods impatiently. “But there’s a difference. They were my choices. I made those decisions.”

“And I made this one. And we were both correct.”

Kirk leans back in his chair and rubs his eyes tiredly. “What is it you’re asking of me, Spock? To denounce the chain of command?”

“No. To trust that I do not have a death wish.”

Kirk stares at him. Spock holds his eyes intrepidly.

At long last, the captain nods. “Okay. But that doesn’t change what I told you before,” he adds hastily. “No more stunts like that, got it?”

Spock inclines his head. “Loud and clear.”

Kirk smirks slowly. “Do you play poker, Mr. Spock? Because I have the strongest feeling that I’m being bluffed right now.”

Spock raises an eyebrow in polite confusion. “Poker? Is that not a card game of some sort?”

Kirk snorts. “Yeah, right.” He stands up and motions for Spock to follow. “Come on. Let’s give our little audience something to write home about.”

Spock blinks, glancing around. He has been focused so completely on the captain that he hasn’t noticed that their quiet tête-à-tête has indeed gathered an impressive number of spectators. Wordlessly, Spock straightens up and follows Kirk, who’s sending smiles in every direction, as he walks toward...

The piano.

Spock suppresses a groan, but he does know why Kirk is doing it, and, privately, he approves. He can also sense the crew around them pulling closer, emanating raw curiosity.

Kirk sits down on the bench and slides to the side, leaving room for Spock. The captain grins at him, definite mischief splashing in his eyes.

“What’s it gonna be, pal?” he asks in a heavy accent Spock can’t identify.

Spock considers his choices. Kirk elbows him in the ribs lightly and laughs when Spock gives him an affronted look.

“Well, we don’t have all night,” Kirk explains.

Spock narrows his eyes forebodingly, and drops his hands to the keys without warning. The
energetic beginning to *In the Mood* explodes the room like a burst of light in the darkness. Spock hasn’t even finished the introduction when Kirk’s hands join his on the keys.

They are not ideal, though Kirk catches up on the rhythm with such ease that he seems to be reading Spock’s mind. Every time he’s late or early, Kirk laughs, and Spock feels it harder and harder not to smile in return.

They are watched – incredulously; delightedly; curiously. Spock hears an uprise of whispering, and he can feel their stares on his skin as if they were corporeal. He stiffens somewhat, which lasts exactly till Kirk’s knee nudges his, reminding him to pay attention. The fact that the captain forgets to move away proves to be distracting enough for Spock to forget about being the center of attention and concentrate on the music instead. He has never enjoyed playing so much in his life.

They catch the audience by surprise with false endings, which makes Kirk laugh again, as they play through the applause to the real one. The captain then stands up and bows mockingly toward the spectators, laying his hand between Spock’s shoulder blades and urging him to do the same. Spock looks up and glares, which predictably only serves to make Kirk beam at him.

“Would you not play some more?” somebody shouts.

“Nooo,” Kirk drawls, grinning wickedly. “Talent night, people. You want some music, ask Christine there. I’ve heard her do the meanest things to Brahms late at night.”

Spock glances to where Christine Chapel is standing, a spectacular blush coloring her face. She steps forward uncertainly as people start to urge her to play, and Spock wishes he could give her some tangible encouragement.

Kirk’s hand on his back taps him gently, reminding Spock that they are still in the way, and Spock stands up, moving away from the piano, further into the small crowd.

“Well, my work here is done,” Kirk says quietly to Spock as they listen to the fast gallop of *Hungarian Dance* springing from under Chapel’s fingers.

Spock studies him curiously for a moment. “You seem... contented.”

Kirk grins. “That’s right. They’re my favorite people, Spock, and they’re happy. I mean, I never thought I’d see so many people I really like in the same room.” He rubs the back of his neck and shrugs. “Heck, I never thought I’d *meet* so many people I really like, to tell you the truth.”

“It was a fortunate mistake, then.”

“Yeah.” Kirk meets his eyes, smiling. “Even if some of them act like total idiots sometimes, they’re still my favorite people, you know what I’m saying?”

Spock stares at his feet, fighting a blush. “I am certain the sentiment is mutual,” he replies quietly, after a pause.

Kirk chuckles, shaking his head. “You’re way too much fun to mess with; you know that, right?”

*Praemonitus, praemunitus, Captain.*

Kirk’s eyes narrow at him. “‘Forewarned is forearmed’?” He cocks his head challengingly. “I don’t think it’s going to help you much there, Commander, because you see, it’s *veni, vidi, vici.*”

“I came, I saw, I conquered.” Spock feels his lips twist into a smirk as he looks at Kirk. “As you
humans say, Captain – good luck with that.”

Kirk lets out a surprised laugh that makes several heads turn toward them. He’s still grinning when Spock bids him goodnight.

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When, several hours later, Spock is jerked awake by the panicked whine of Red Alert, his first reaction is relief, and he doesn’t have the time to analyze it. In just a few minutes, the shields will fail, and, before Mr. Scott is able to restore them, the Orions will kidnap a quarter of the crew. There will be an ongoing battle with three Orion destroyers raging outside, and Kirk is needed here, he can’t leave, so Spock goes.

Kirk will grab his shoulder just as Spock starts to run, and they will spend a split second neither of them has to stare at each other, and then Kirk will shout over the deafening disruptor blasts shaking the ship: “Bring them back!” He will want to add something else, but there will be no time, and Spock will simply nod, because he knows, or thinks that he knows, what the second order was meant to be.

Spock will run to the shuttle bay, gathering a security squad on the way, and he will be more determined than he has ever been in his life to keep his promise.

Both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Not promising things soon after such a long time, but occasionally there might be updates on tumblr...
Part V. 5.1

Chapter Summary

Kirk pulls himself to his feet slowly, his face burning. “Are you saying I can’t do anything without cheating?”

“I don’t know,” Spock snaps. “Can you?”

Chapter Notes

I’m not sure anyone who’s been with me at the beginning of this on LJ is still around. I have to be honest, after such a long time had passed, I didn’t think I was going to come back to this. I thought I was done with Jim and Spock for good. But apparently, I was wrong. This is going to be moving at a snail's pace, but it looks like it's going to be moving. Not the entire part at once, but rather by chapters. And there will be shorter updates on Tumblr.

Oh, and I no longer have a beta, so don't be surprised by a weird turn of phrase here and there...

5.1

“**You stole a space station.**”

Spock looks up from the scrambled Orion hieroglyphs on the navigational console he’s trying to repair and blinks as the harsh white light falling from the corridor hits his eyes.

“I can’t believe you.” Kirk is grinning, leaning against the doorway, his shoulder right against the spot where the locking mechanism used to be.

“Captain.” Spock pulls himself up to his feet abruptly, before he can check the impulse. He stops in place, but it takes a surprising amount of effort. The urge to move closer, to touch, to ascertain Kirk’s physical, living presence is almost staggering.

He lifts an eyebrow instead. “I will be forever puzzled why it appears to please you so every time you catch me doing something you deem untoward. A most illogical attitude, Captain.”

Kirk chuckles. “Let’s just say that it gives me emotional security.”

Spock feels warm, glancing away. “I did not steal the station. I merely… relocated it.”

“Without informing the owners.”

“That would have been counterproductive.”
“Yeah, that’s what I thought. It’s *stealing*. Not only that, but you made Chekov help you, and he’s as good as a minor, so that should be punishable by – something. Somewhere anyway.”

Spock knows a rejoinder is expected, but his brain feels sluggish, overwhelmed by fatigue and the sudden, unbidden flow of emotion. It’s been a long 48 hours, filled with frustrating search and lying in wait and more hand-to-hand combat against physically superior opponents than he cared for.

They subdued the Orion guards eventually, surprise working in their favor, and released the prisoners, shaken but unharmed. Spock thinks about Lieutenant Pechalat’s uniform dress, torn in the middle, and although the Orion kidnappers didn’t have the time to do more, Spock feels his hands curling into fists even now. She lifted her chin up stubbornly and took his shirt, stained with blood and grime without a word.

Chekov emerged out of the prisoners vault then, looking like he’d lost a battle with a rainforest, and so openly relieved at seeing Spock it was hard to bear. It was after he said, voice trembling slightly, but determined, *‘There’re too many people, Commander. They won’t fit into a shuttle’*, that Spock realized a quick getaway would be out of the question.

It wasn’t just the Enterprise crew; the station was filled to bursting with prisoners taken from half the sector. It also meant that a heavily armed transport would come to pick them up at any moment. The Enterprise still hopelessly tied up in an uneven battle light years away, and the station relying on the secrecy of its location and having virtually no protective capabilities, the solution needed to come fast.

Chekov went white when Spock mentioned his plan to turn an admittedly primitive station reactor into a warp engine. But there were no other options, so he and Spock went to work, while Pechalat and the security team tended to the prisoners, trying to calm them down and maintain a semblance of order.

*‘We won’t be able to sustain the warp field for longer than ten seconds, sir,’* Chekov concluded at last, eyes wide.

*‘It should suffice,’* Spock told him. *‘If we can sustain warp two for that long, it will push us outside of their sensor range.’*

*‘Yes, but what about the structural integrity? No one has moved space stations at warp speed, Commander.’*

There was that.

*‘It is a workable theory.’*

Chekov’s thoughts on the matter were written clear on his face, and Spock was grateful when the ensign chose not to comment.

They made it by the skin of their teeth, as humans would say, but they made it intact. Then the long, gloomy wait that Spock spent getting life support back to working order and deliberately not calculating the odds of the Enterprise prevailing over three fully armed Orion raiders.

He had barely allowed himself to relax when the Enterprise had finally arrived, battered, but victorious, with its visual communications and transporters damaged in the attack. Spock had stayed aboard, overseeing the transportation of the liberated prisoners on the two remaining shuttlepods and coordinating the newly arriving security teams that searched the station for the remainder of the Orions’ captives – the Enterprise sensors showed there were more, though they were too damaged to
help pinpoint the exact locations.

“Spock?” Kirk calls softly, his smile fading. “You okay?”

Spock tries to make himself nod, tries to reinstate control, but it’s a losing battle. He knows he’s staring and he can’t tear his eyes away.

Kirk’s command gold is missing, the black undershirt torn in places and singed. There’s soot and grime on his face like a bizarre representation of some savage war paint, a bruise blooming over his chin. His eyes are too bright, too clear a shade on that battle-darkened face, filled to the brim with the familiar burning energy, vibrant, alive.

Spock would chastise himself for the persistent slip, but Kirk is staring right back, transfixed, his humor a veneer, no more. His eyes follow the spiral pattern curling around Spock’s torso where an energy whip, Orions’ favorite hand weapon, had burned through the shirt, shocking skin.

Kirk clears his throat at last. “Chekov said there were only minor injuries for all of you, but—”

“They are,” Spock says, forcing himself out of his stupor. “I had Nurse Chapel check me over, she said—”

“Oh, just come here,” Kirk says, but doesn’t wait, contradicting himself, and moves forward. He grips Spock’s arms carefully, but firmly, as though he, too, is trying to make sure Spock really is there by touch.

It takes every ounce of willpower Spock has not to reach back, but he permits the contact, it’s not in him to step back. A small smile curls over Kirk’s lips, a profoundly relieved expression softening his features.

“We got here as fast as we could,” he says, his voice hoarse and low. “You didn’t make it easy. When we didn’t find the station where it should have been, and your shuttle was destroyed by disruptor fire, I thought—”

His grip tightens almost painfully for a moment, and Spock can’t help pressing back just a little.

“The odds of your survival were not favorable when we left,” Spock says, just as quiet. “I am gratified your tactical solution allowed you to prevail.”

Kirk lets out a shaky laugh. He sounds as Spock feels – giddy.

“I missed you there,” Kirk says, locking eyes with him.

“You have done admirably without me.”

Kirk acknowledges the words, but he doesn’t look away. He takes a deeper breath, preparing to speak, but at that moment the sound of a commotion and loud cursing comes streaming from the corridor. Kirk almost looks annoyed for a moment, before he rolls his eyes, grins ruefully at Spock, and turns around to investigate.

They find Crewman Anders sitting on the floor dazedly, his arms moving in chaotic, uncontrolled jerky motions, while Ensign Leguellec is trying to move him further away from a dangerous area, cursing under his breath. He looks up at the sound of steps, and for a moment his face registers open dismay at the sight of the captain.

“What happened?” Kirk asks, going on one knee beside Anders, ducking under a flailing arm.
“A narrow-band neurodisruptor beam, judging by the effects,” Spock says, studying Anders.

“It hit him when we tried to release the lock on that compartment,” Leguellec says accusingly. “The entire thing is booby trapped, sir.”

The entire contingent had been warned prior to boarding the station, and a year ago, Spock would have pointed that out. Now, he busies himself with checking the locking mechanism to make sure the trap is no longer active and keeps his silence. People are tired and on edge, and humans do not accept the on-the-spot analysis in the way it’s intended.

“It’s all right, Crewman,” Kirk says to the disoriented ensign who has trouble concentrating. “You’d better get him back to the ship,” he tells Leguellec. “Before the nerve damage sets.”

Having managed to catch both Anders’ flying arms, Kirk pulls him carefully to his feet. Leguellec rushes to help, frowning as he looks at Kirk.

“Sir, we haven’t finished checking the outer rim section,” he says uncertainly, as Kirk transfers Anders over to him. “Some of the prisoners heard the Orions talk about a Romulan princess being kept here somewhere. Our scanners can’t locate anyone else, but—”

“The commander and I will check it out,” Kirk says without missing a bit. “Return to the ship, Ensign.”

For a moment, Leguellec looks rebellious, glancing from Kirk to Spock and back. The idea of leaving two senior officers without cover in a hostile territory clearly goes against his security training and instincts.

But their resources are stretched thin, and Anders chooses that moment to nearly drop them both back on the floor in his escalating loss of motor function.

“Go,” Kirk says in a tone that brooks no argument, jerking his chin toward the docking ring. “Get someone to pick us up when you’re done.”

“Sir.” Leguellec salutes unhappily, but obediently starts moving, pulling the flailing crewman along with difficulty.

It’s a marker of how tired everyone is that for a few seconds both Spock and the captain stand motionless, simply staring after the limping figures.

“So.” Kirk rubs his hands with excessive enthusiasm to physically snap himself out of his stupor. “It’s been a while since I’ve rescued any princesses. Do you think they still offer half a kingdom and her hand in marriage?”

Spock recalibrates the scanner before falling into step with Kirk as they start toward the last unchecked section of the station.

“I am uncertain such a reward could be considered a proper incentive,” he offers.

Kirk snorts. “Depends on the kingdom. Though I’m not sure I’d like to be shoved headfirst into Romulan politics.”

“A wise consideration. The nature of Romulan aristocracy differs significantly from what Earth used to have. Most of their titles have to be earned, not inherited. Although nepotism is not unheard of.”

Kirk’s shoulder brushes his lightly. “V’Shar?”
Spock winces internally. “In point of fact, most of our information on the Romulan cultural background comes from the diplomatic corps. Vulcan Intelligence used to be more interested in technology and fire power.”

Kirk rubs the back of his neck. “Can’t say I blame them.” He frowns at his own scanner, unhappy with the chaotic readout. “Do you know if they survived?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “V’Shar? I have no doubt of that, however, they have not made their presence known to the governing body on New Vulcan.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“V’Shar operatives are trained to act in secrecy and autonomously.”

“So in about a hundred years from now they might turn up and tell us what they’ve been up to?”

“Quite.”

Kirk laughs, his shoulder knocking into Spock’s deliberately this time.

They walk in silence for a while, checking the abandoned corridors and rooms. The density of alloys the Orions used in construction prevents the tricorders from working with optimal efficiency, so every door has to be opened in order to be absolutely sure that no one is inside.

Kirk comments idly on the internal design, and Spock finds himself slipping into the explanatory mode he usually saves for briefings and Academy auditoriums. He catches himself when he’s way into it, remembering belatedly that most humans find his ‘lecturing tone’ annoying. Spock glances at his companion warily to see if he managed to bore him, but finds, to his surprise, that the captain is watching him with a soft smile playing on his lips.

Spock’s momentary confusion is strong enough to make him voice it. “Sir?”

Kirk dips his head briefly, smiling still, and reaches to rest a hand on Spock’s shoulder, squeezing lightly. “Nothing. I’m just glad you’re alive, Spock.”

Before Spock can process any of it Kirk turns away, resuming their survey.

“What do you think is behind that one?” the captain asks a bit too quickly, as if he’s trying to speak before Spock does. He stands before an inconspicuous grey door, Spock still several steps behind him. “Looks smoother than the others—”

Spock’s eyes widen as Kirk lifts up his hand to touch the lock, and the next thing he knows he’s stretched across the space between them in a desperate, too-slow, too-long jump. He collides hard with Kirk, who barely has the time to start turning, tackling him to the floor and pressing down, just as a burning flash of pain sweeps across Spock’s shoulders.

The smell penetrates his perception first – a sickening, heavy smell of burnt flesh – and then Kirk’s urgent voice makes it through. The captain is staring anxiously up into Spock’s face, his lips moving, a stream of sounds seeping from them, but it’s not until he grips Spock’s upper arms that a new wave of pain manages to throw Spock roughly back inside his body.

“Do not touch me,” he hisses through gritted teeth. “I will try to move now.”

Kirk lets go of him immediately, his expression turning to one of open alarm. Spock ignores him, concentrating on every motion as he braces himself on his arms – the heaviest part by far – and
quickly pulls himself into a sitting position and away from Kirk. The pain is so blindingly sharp that a sound escapes Spock, a short, quickly aborted groan that he’s helpless to suppress.

“Spock, are you all right?” Kirk is on his knees beside Spock, the alarm having gone to full-blown panic. “Shit, I’m sorry, of course you’re not. How bad is it?”


“What the hell happened?” Kirk demands, anger and worry clashing in his voice, making it vibrate.

“Focused – disruptor beam.”

Kirk scowls, throwing a glare at the lock across his shoulder. “But there was nothing on the tricorder, Spock! I checked!”

Spock nods cautiously, carefully regulating his breathing. Finally, he manages to block the distressed signals from the abused nerve endings. “I know,” he says, reassuring. “It is undetectable by our technology.”

“Then how did you know it was there?”

“I have seen it before.”

Kirk gives him a very strange look, but mercifully doesn’t demand an immediate explanation, instead opting to help Spock stand up.

“Let me take a look,” Kirk says, hands consciously light, but supporting on Spock’s elbows. “We need to get you to Med Bay.”

“It can wait,” Spock refutes, pulling away, and straightening up. Kirk narrows his eyes at him suspiciously, and Spock amends, “The initial shock was harder than the injury.”

“I don’t buy it,” Kirk tells him sourly, but mercifully seems unwilling to press the issue. “And, for God’s sake, Spock, next time just yell, so that I don’t have to feel like my mission in life is to get you killed.”

“If you let me out, perhaps I could be of assistance,” a cool female voice comes from behind the door. “I am a trained healer.”

Kirk freezes, and when he looks over it’s no longer a man concerned for his friend, but a captain requesting the expertise of his science officer.

Spock studies his tricorder. “One lifeform,” he says slowly, frowning at the readouts. “This isn’t conclusive, but the biosigns correspond with Romulan by 73.4%.”

Kirk nods, reaching for his phaser, before leaning in to examine the remains of the lock.

“Perhaps we should wait till Mr. Scott can inspect it,” Spock suggests. His own weapon had been lost at some point during the exhausting and action-packed forty-eight hours before, and he feels ridiculously naked.

“Nah, I got this,” Kirk mutters, deft fingers feeling their way between the cleverly placed sensors now that they are visible. “Picking locks used to be something of a hobby of mine.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow, watching Kirk’s actions keenly. “A most peculiar choice. Though not
entirely unexpected."

"You really think highly of me, don’t you?” Kirk bends a little closer to the lock. "Aaaaand got you."

There’s a swift flash and a puff of black smoke that makes Kirk cough a few times, and then the door slides half open. With a glance at Spock, Kirk pushes it the rest of the way and steps back, aiming his weapon at chest level.

“All right, come out slowly,” Kirk orders after a moment’s pause.

There’s a rustle of fabric, and a woman emerges, dressed in one of the most sophisticated garments Spock has ever seen. She dismisses the weapon pointed at her with an unimpressed look and steps forward, looking from Kirk to Spock, her focused gaze the one of a doctor looking to ascertain injuries.

Spock feels blood freeze in his veins.

"T’Pring."

The shock is powerful enough to knock out his concentration, and he doubles over with pain, sliding to the floor with a groan.

Seconds fly by, filled with confusion, as T’Pring kneels at his side, pulling out a medkit, her expensive dress hopelessly wrinkled.

“Lie still,” she orders coolly, running him over with a scanner of her own.

Kirk is loud in the background, yelling into his communicator, “…I don’t want to hear it, Mr Scott, we need a site-to-site transporter online right now. What? No. No, we can’t wait for the damn shuttle!”

“Your captain is very concerned for your wellbeing,” T’Pring remarks, administering an analgesic and ignoring Kirk’s continuing heated argument behind her.

“As an officer, I am not without value,” Spock says, only vaguely aware that his words might be construed as an attempt at humor. He’s not entirely convinced that it isn’t.

T’Pring’s eyebrow curves elegantly, a trace of returned emotion in her eyes. “Be that as it may, I believe his concern is of a more personal nature.”

Spock stares at her, just as the pain medication kicks in. This must be the effect of whatever substance she had used on him. A universe where T’Pring would tease him in good humor is not something he’s prepared to contemplate.

“If I divine your meaning correctly,” he says slowly, feeling his way, “you are mistaken.”

The blinding whirlwind of a transported beam seizes them, obscuring her features, but Spock can not be certain that just for a split second T’Pring didn’t smile.

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McCoy throws an impressive fit even by his own standards.

‘Third degree burns, are you insane? Should have beamed out immediately, you stubborn green-blooded moron! And you!’ He rounds on Kirk. ‘What the hell were you thinking? Damned pair of
Six hours filled with treatment and a light healing trance later, Spock finds himself remarkably clearheaded – if still tired – and mercifully free of pain.

He’s staring at T’Pring through the virtually undetectable glimmer of a forcefield, feeling mildly disquieted. She’s afforded every comfort a private cell in the brig can offer, but the very idea that she has to be confined makes Spock’s skin tangle unpleasantly.

“Is this really necessary?” He knows the logic behind it, but asks anyway.

“I’m sorry,” Kirk sounds apologetic. “But we’re at war with Romulus, and, according to Bones, the Orions had it right – she’s a Romulan.”

“A Romulan-Vulcan hybrid to be precise,” McCoy supplies glancing at his tricorder. “The Romulan genes would be dominant, I’m guessing.”

“That does not necessarily mean that she’s an enemy,” Spock says, and the looks both humans give him signal quite clearly that he sounds unacceptably emotional. He tries to rein it in.

“No, it doesn’t,” Kirk agrees, his voice soft, almost cautious. “But Spock, you have to agree, it looks suspicious. Your ex-fiancée, who you didn’t even know survived, drops on us out of thin air, after a sudden and brutal attack on our ship – in neutral space. It’s a little too coincidental.”

“She was a prisoner, same as others.”

“Perhaps,” Kirk says, exchanging a glance with McCoy. “Spock, listen—”

“She is a Vulcan citizen,” Spock says in a clipped tone. “She has the same rights.”

“And I would be happy to grant them to her when we’re not crawling at impulse to Deep Space Four, at least a week away from any other Starfleet vessel,” Kirk says, clearly on the verge of losing patience. “You saw the damage report. I don’t have to tell you that we have a slim chance of withstanding another attack. If she had agreed to answer our questions, I might have confined her to quarters, but as it is—”

Spock turns toward him. “Allow me to speak to her. I am certain she would not refuse to explain her situation to me.”

“You sound downright impassioned, Spock,” McCoy comments sourly.

Spock looks at him. “Would you not insist on the same if it was your former spouse in there?”

McCoy winces. “Hell, Jocelyn’s a right witch, but I’d have a hard time buying her as a traitor.” He rubs his neck, looking uncomfortable. “I guess you’re right.”

“Thank you.” Spock nods, before turning back to Kirk. “Captain?”

Kirk’s face is a curious mix of frustration, reluctance and sympathy. At any other time, Spock would have been fascinated by the display of contradicting emotions.

“All right,” Kirk says at last. “Do what you can. But I can’t promise I’ll release her.”

“Understood.” Spock takes a step toward the door of the guard room and stops, looking back. “I assume a modicum of privacy is out of the question?”
Kirk looks genuinely apologetic again. “I’m sorry, Spock.”

Spock nods and leaves the room.

Alone in the corridor, he has to take a few steadying breaths before he’s ready. He taps his authorization on the locking panel and steps inside the cell.

T’Pring turns to look at him as he enters. It would not be fair to say that she sits up straighter, because her posture has been perfect the entire time, but something about her creates the same effect.

“Spock.” She bows her head slightly in greeting.

“T’Pring.”

He comes to a stop in front of her bunk, not quite knowing how to proceed. His eyes drift toward the impenetrable wall of the forcefield, opaque from this side, concealing their audience. T’Pring must know they are being observed, but appears unperturbed.

Surprisingly, she speaks first. “Are you well? Your injuries did not appear life-threatening, however, had your physician delayed treatment—”

“I am quite healed,” Spock interrupts, imagining McCoy’s reaction. Eavesdroppers never hear anything good. “I thank you for the services you rendered.”

“No thanks are necessary,” T’Pring replies with cool politeness, and Spock wonders why none of the humans he’d ever met, with possible exceptions of his mother and Nyota, were able to figure out that the line was not a rebuke but the Vulcan equivalent of ‘you’re welcome.’

Tense silence reigns, as Spock observes her, not knowing how to proceed. T’Pring looks as elegant and poised as the last time Spock had seen her. Her appearance somehow does everything to discourage idle inquiries.

“I require an explanation,” Spock says at last.

She inclines her head. “Understandable.”

“You are Romulan?” he asks abruptly. “I must admit that was – surprising – to discover.”

“I am a Vulcan hybrid like you,” T’Pring responds coolly. “I have been less fortunate where the other half of my genetic makeup is concerned.”

“I meant no insult.”

“No. Just as all those children mocking your humanity never meant it.” She purses her lips. “I envied you. They bullied you, but you did not have to hide. They might have despised you for your ‘weakness’ and laughed at you, but if they found out about me – they would have hated me as only Vulcans can hate.”

Spock experiences the strangest sensation that he should be shocked at such a blatant confession of emotion. But on some level, he’s not shocked at all.

“How did it come to be?” he asks quietly.

For a moment, it feels as though T’Pring would not answer, but when she looks at him, he sees determination.
“My mother was a junior scientist on the *Tesra,*” T’Pring says, her voice adopting a quieter cadence. “Are you familiar with it?”

“I believe so.” Spock nods slowly, his stomach clenching. “That ship was destroyed by the Romulans during a survey mission. The surviving crew were taken prisoner.”

“Not the entire crew,” T’Pring corrects him. “Only the women.”

She takes a moment to collect herself; Spock doesn’t blame her.

“They were returned two months later during the next prisoner exchange. The Romulans… are not known for their respectful treatment of prisoners, even non-combatants. Most of the women were pregnant.”

Spock wishes suddenly they could have some water.

“The majority of them chose to terminate pregnancies,” T’Pring continues in the same cool, measured tone. “You should remember how powerful the stigma regarding offspring with offworlders had been at the time. It would have been unthinkable to carry a child acquired in such a way to term.”

“T’Mia was an exception?”

T’Pring nods. “My mother chose to keep me. She knew that making my true parentage public would have been damning to both me and herself. She chose not to tell the truth, even to my father.”

Spock blinks in surprise. “But surely they were bonded. How was it possible to conceal this knowledge within a full marital bond?”

T’Pring’s lips curve almost noticeably as she looks up at him. “You have a somewhat – romantic notion of bonding, Spock. I can understand that, but your parents… not everyone was that fortunate. Your father’s first marriage, for example, was far from that ideal. And you and I were bonded for 11.4 years. In all that time did you have access to my intimate thoughts?”

He frowns. “That is not the same.”

Her impassive dismissal is akin to a shrug. “It is not much different. Our marriages are arranged. In time, you are supposed to grow a deep emotional connection to your bondmate, however, it does not happen always. You and I are a prime example.

“My parents had never been that close. My father was an ambitious man, interested primarily in himself and his own advancement. It was not a hardship for my mother to conceal whatever she wished from him.”

“I – see,” Spock says.

He doesn’t.

“She told him the child was his, conceived before she embarked on her mission. He never questioned it, and raised me as his own daughter. No one had ever needed to know the truth. I myself did not know it. But then your father approached mine, and complications followed.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow, but doesn’t interrupt.

“Had you been fully Vulcan, the problem would never have arisen. Romulans and Vulcans are
essentially the same species. There are differences, but not enough so that we couldn’t have conceived naturally.” She glances away for a moment, her chest rising a little higher for a deeper breath. “But you weren’t fully Vulcan. Your parents had to donate genetic material to be manipulated in vitro to make your conception possible. You and I had not two, but three genomes between us. If we were to have children, they would have been conceived in a lab. And the truth of my mother’s shame would have come out. Hiding it might not have been logical. But it was—”

“—a matter of honor,” Spock finishes softly, still stunned.

T’Pring inclines her head. “Quite.”

“Why did your parents agree to our betrothal then?”

“My mother tried to dissuade my father; she even tried to stall the negotiations for as long as possible, hoping to aggravate Sarek. But my father was adamant. He did not himself belong to any of the Old Houses as my mother did. He had always felt… inferior to her and her social circle. To have his daughter marry into the House of Surak would have quenched his need for social recognition. He was not to be deterred.”

“Ilogical.”

T’Pring draws in a sharp breath. If she were human, she would be bristling.

“One can be a logical man and not be always governed by logic, Spock,” she says with mild reproach. “I am certain you can personally attest to that.”

The corner of Spock’s mouth lifts. However inadvertently, T’Pring has just paid him a compliment.

“We had entered the first stage of bonding as you know,” T’Pring reminds him. “After that, it was a matter of time. When I was fourteen, my mother summoned me and told me the truth.”

“It must not have been… easy for you.”

T’Pring ignores the emotional assessment. “I spent the next four years of my life looking for a solution. There was the obvious one. I could have waited for your pon Farr and declared the kal-if-fe. But I did not wish to subject you to the plak tow.” She lowers her head, looking at her hands. Quieter, she adds, “And I did not wish you to die.”

Spock doesn’t know what to do with that information.

He must have made some kind of sound or produced some non-verbal response, because T’Pring looks up at him sharply, her face unexpectedly expressive.

“You believe I despised you, but you are wrong. I have always admired your tenacity and your intellect and most of all your endurance. You had not cowered before them, nor did you succumb to prejudice. You were more Vulcan than they were – in spirit if not in form.”

Spock is too thoroughly conditioned to let his mouth fall open, but it’s a near slip.

“You honor me,” he says hoarsely.

She studies him for a moment before looking away, her face attaining its customary dispassionate expression.

“Outside a formal challenge, there were not a lot of ways I could have divorced you. A well-
meaning friend of mine, who sought to save me from a ‘humiliating marriage,’ showed me a well-forgotten clause in our marital laws. I saw it as an opportunity to save both your life and my family’s honor.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow, impressed. “It was a risk. At the time, I complied with your request without protest, but I could have challenged you. That clause was unethical on more levels than one. I could have insisted it was stricken from the Bonding Code altogether and would have probably won the case.”

To his surprise, a ghost of a smile plays across her lips. “That is perhaps more true than you realize, but I knew you would not do so. You were my bondmate. I watched you grow. I knew you. You were tremendously accomplished for someone your age, but when it came to personal matters, you lacked confidence in yourself – you always had. I knew it would not be hard to convince you I did not perceive you as worthy.”

Spock feels his cheeks growing hot with color; he tries to suppress the reaction.

T’Pring continues to look amused, but her gaze is sharp, trained on him. “You have always been so oblivious. It was one thing when we were children, but later, the last years before graduation things had changed, and you did not notice. Half the males in our class were trying to emulate you. And as for the females—” This time she does bristle, her nostrils flaring. “Your friend Reya was a perfect marker.”

There is nothing Spock can do to suppress a blush this time. “You knew about – about that?”

T’Pring sits up straighter, as if it’s even possible, her eyes bright. “I would have to have been blind not to know,” she says, tone suddenly sharp. “You have never been as subtle as you believe, Spock, and as for that girl, she was ne’shara.”

Spock winces at the harsh word. ‘Without shame’ indeed, for a culture that had supposedly disposed of emotions.

“You were jealous,” he says, mildly awed.

T’Pring treats him to an icy glare. “Do not flatter yourself.”

“My apologies,” he says, swallowing a smile.

For a fraction of a second, T’Pring’s eyes reflect the universal female outcry of frustration spelled as ‘Men’. She schools her features quickly.

“Like I said, I calculated it would not be difficult to convince you. I observed you for two weeks from afar to corroborate my assumption, and I was satisfied. Not only was my assessment of your character correct, but you had been – to borrow a human phrase – madly in love with your academic advisor at the time. He seemed to have been infatuated with you in equal measure. That alleviated my last concern – that breaking our betrothal would leave you at the mercy of pon farr alone. I did not wish for—”

“For me to die,” Spock finishes for her. “How very thoughtful of you.”

She dismisses his quip with a slight tilt of her chin. “You agreed even easier than I anticipated. My plan had thus been concluded. Both you and I were free to choose our own partners, and my family’s honor remained intact.”

Spock weighs it all carefully before inclining his head in an appreciative bow. “Logical. Flawlessly
logical."

T’Pring stands up gracefully and returns the bow. “I am honored.”

Seized by a sudden impulse, Spock offers her his hand the way he used to when they were children and had to take part in some social function together. He waits patiently for her to accept the offer before guiding her back to her seat. She is thinner than a Vulcan female of her age and constitution should be – a reminder, no doubt, of her captivity.

“How did you come to be on the Orion station?”

“I was aboard a small courier vessel taking me to Vega,” T’Pring explains. “We – New Vulcan – were hoping to convince them to take part in our medical exchange program. The ship was attacked in neutral space, without warning. Everyone else was killed – they only had a crew of three. I was captured. They scanned me upon arrival and, much as your physician did, established that I was a Romulan.” She pauses. “I did not dissuade them. I saw how they treated their Vulcan prisoners, women in particular.” For all her control, she shudders. “While I remained ‘Romulan’ and a wealthy one at that, they could not risk harming me – otherwise, instead of a reward, they would have had their throats slit. I did not disabuse them of the notion.”

“That was wise of you,” Spock says, sliding back to his feet. “I apologize for our security measures. I will see that you are released from here immediately.”

Strictly speaking, it’s not his decision to make, but Spock cannot imagine Kirk refusing him under the circumstances. If he does… No. He wouldn’t.

“Spock.”

He turns around in the doorway and looks at her.

“I am sorry,” T’Pring says slowly, her careful articulation a sure sign of how foreign the word feels on her tongue. “For my deception. I should have trusted you with the truth at the time. I did not know you for the man you are. I ask forgiveness and – I know that regrets are illogical, but I do regret causing you pain. I am – gratified – that there are others in your life who have been more perceptive than I was.”

At a loss for words, Spock bows courteously to her before stepping neatly through the door.

“Dammit, but that’s cold,” McCoy says from where he’s stretched on Kirk’s couch, twirling bourbon in the glass perched precariously on his stomach. “I mean, logical it might be, I grant you, and she’s pretty as a picture, too. Maybe the prettiest lady I’ve ever seen in my life—” He pulls himself suddenly up on his elbow. “Don’t tell Natalie I said that. Or Uhura.” He takes a sip of his drink hastily. “But the woman is cold like a goddamn block of ice. I thought Jocelyn was bad, but dammit, Spock, your ex takes the cake.”

“She is not precisely my ‘ex,’” Spock says tiredly, leaning back subtly in his chair. He has a glass in front of him that doesn’t have nearly as powerful an effect on his metabolism as it does on McCoy’s, but he can still appreciate the taste.

“Still, to have had her in your head somewhere for eleven years? No wonder you’re all screwed up. Did Pike ever know about this?”
“Some,” Spock says grimly and throws a look at Kirk that is far from appreciative. “I imagine he would be aware of the entire affair by now.”

Kirk is sitting on the floor, his back against the couch, looking ready to collapse. He cuddles the bottle closer to his chest and throws Spock a glare that is more tired than heated.

“It’s protocol, Commander.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve chosen a damn good moment to start following those,” McCoy grumbles.

Kirk turns to look at him. “Et tu, Bones? What was I supposed to do? Falsify a log entry? I let her out, didn’t I? I’m still not convinced she’s not a saboteur.”

Spock ignores the illogical accusation. McCoy laughs, murmuring something under his breath Spock chooses to ignore as well.

“What did she mean – you could die?” Kirk asks suddenly.

Spock freezes. Trust Kirk to ambush him like that. “T’Pring was speaking in general terms, I believe,” he says carefully.

“Bullshit.” Kirk sits up straighter. “She kept repeating she didn’t want you to die and it had something to do with your bond being broken. And something about pon farr,” he adds, his Vulcan pronunciation eerily perfect. “That’s the Vulcan mating cycle, isn’t it? What was she talking about, Spock?”

Spock sets his barely touched glass on the desk, his motions going from sluggish and relaxed to military-precise without his conscious intent.

“That is not your concern.”

“The hell it isn’t. You’re my first officer. If your life is in danger, don’t you think I have the right to know?”

“It is not in danger any more than yours is,” Spock replies, his tone clipped. “Serving in Starfleet is an occupation associated with a heightened risk factor—”

“Don’t give me that crap,” Kirk snaps, setting the bottle aside with a clank. “Your ex-girlfriend was pretty damn specific. Is your life in danger because you’re no longer bonded?”

Spock glares at him. “No.”

There’s a short pause in which Kirk is obviously trying to gauge his sincerity. McCoy clears his throat.

Kirk’s head snaps toward him so fast it’s a miracle he doesn’t give himself whiplash. “Bones? You know something?”

Spock mentally groans.

“I know something,” McCoy confirms, his expression smug. “Not all of it, mind you. Vulcans are secretive as fuck, but ever since the first Vulcan served aboard a Starfleet vessel, certain information had been made available to Starfleet Medical. As a CMO of a starship with a Vulcan crewmember aboard, I had to be briefed.”

“They briefed you and not me?” Kirk demands, outraged.
“Do you have a medical degree?” McCoy challenges, unimpressed. “Didn’t think so.”

Spock clenches his jaw. “I remind you, Doctor, that any information you have been made privy to is considered confidential.”

“No shit.” McCoy fixes him with a measured look. “Don’t sweat it, Spock. I’m just trying to tell this one” – he nods at Kirk – “that he doesn’t have to get his panties in a twist over this.”

“Don’t I, now?” Kirk looks anything but convinced. “So you can tell me right now that this pon farr business doesn’t put his life at risk?”

Spock winces at the casual use of the term, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Kirk. McCoy looks uncomfortable, actually straightening up on the couch. He opens his mouth, then closes it, shooting a vaguely guilty look at Spock.

“You can’t.” Kirk crows, darkly triumphant. He all but shoots to his feet, staring Spock down. “I’ll have that answer now, Commander.”

Spock stands up as well, eyes locked on Kirk’s. “No. This is a private matter. Whether the situation arises or not, it does not concern the ship’s operation.”

McCoy makes a vaguely protesting noise. “I can’t tell him, Spock, but I think you should.”

“No,” Spock says flatly. “I can’t help your knowledge, but this does not concern either of you. An unlikely distant emergency that might never come to pass cannot be considered a risk to the ship, sufficient to warrant disclosure. Captain, I ask you to trust my judgment.”

Kirk stares at him a moment longer, then shakes his head. “Sorry, Spock, not good enough. Not when you can die.” He presses his lips together in grim determination. “This might cost me your friendship, but I can’t risk losing you.”

Heart pounding, Spock watches with mild alarm as Kirk marches over to his desk terminal and presses a comm panel. He looks straight at Spock as he says, ignoring the officer’s on duty greeting, “Bridge, give me a comm link to New Vulcan.”

Spock can feel all color drain from his face.

“Captain, we’re still out of range—”

“Then get us in range, best possible speed. Kirk out.” Kirk steeps his fingers gracefully in a fair imitation of Spock’s favorite posture for concentration. “Well, Mr Spock?”

Spock purses his lips. “I urge you not to place that call, Captain. You would be committing a gross violation of my privacy.”

“I’ll just be talking to the other you, what’s the big deal?” Kirk shrugs with artful casualness.

“We are not the same individual,” Spock snaps, losing patience. “That you would run to him every time you wish to obtain some personal information on me is – unacceptable.”

“Whoa, every time? This is the first time—”

“And how would you feel,” Spock cuts him off, barely listening, “if there was another Jim Kirk around? If I could consult him every time you did not wish to share something with me? One who would feel entitled to your privacy, your secrets and divulged them without reservation?”
“He’s got a point, Jim,” McCoy pipes up, but both Kirk and Spock ignore him.

“I get that and I’m sorry,” Kirk says, losing his would-be careless tone. “But you can’t expect me to just accept—”

“You have not changed at all since our first meeting,” Spock says, his tone freezing. “Arrogant then, arrogant now. There were students at the Academy who, after passing some gruesome examination, created sets of notes to be handed over to their comrades in order to help them pass. I believe those were called ‘cheat-sheets.’ I wonder if you are aware that you are using Spock in a similar manner. As a cheat-sheet on me.”

Kirk pulls himself to his feet slowly, his face burning. “Are you saying I can’t do anything without cheating?”

“I don’t know,” Spock snaps. “Can you?”

They glare at each other in silence, barely broken by the sound of breathing.

“Jim,” Spock says suddenly, his tone soft, defeated. “It is deeply personal and very private. Please.”

There’s a moment when Kirk doesn’t react, as though he hadn’t heard. He rubs a hand over his face and walks around his desk, his motions wooden, to stand directly in front of Spock.

“You will inform me,” he says, “if and when this emergency will arise. You will inform me immediately, not when it is too late for me to do something – do you understand?”

Spock can feel his knees go weak with relief. “Yes, Captain.”

“Not good enough.” Kirk shakes his head sternly. “I want your word, Spock. You will come to me the moment you know and you will tell me everything. Your word. Now.”

Spock locks eyes with him, pulse beating madly in his temples. “You have my word, Captain.”

Kirk studies him for a moment before nodding slowly. Without looking he reaches to tap the panel.

“Bridge, belay my last order. Maintain course and speed. Kirk out.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Spock says with undisguised relief.

Kirk shakes his head softly. “You don’t pull your punches when you’re cornered, do you? I suppose it should be reassuring.”

Quite without thinking, Spock reaches to touch the back of his hand against Kirk’s. It’s an overly revealing gesture, one he wouldn’t normally be comfortable with, but, after the emotional rollercoaster of the last few hours, he needs to know, to feel for himself that they are all right.

Kirk stares down at the point of contact blankly, before turning his hand, letting his fingers encircle Spock’s wrist for a few brief moments, squeezing lightly, his answer to the unasked question.

‘We’re fine.’

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” McCoy announces suddenly, nearly making Spock jump.

“Overindulgence will do that to you, Bones,” Kirk says, but he doesn’t look up, choosing instead to pluck the unfinished bottle out of the danger zone of McCoy’s feet.

“Yes, that’s what’ll do it, exactly,” McCoy drawls acidly. “What else could it be.” He pulls himself
up to his feet unsteadily and gives them a mock salute. “I’ll just go sleep this nightmare off, shall I?”

Spock moves to follow. “I, too, must bid you goodnight, Captain. I promised Mr Scott to look at his new repairs schedule.”

Kirk is grinning, though he doesn’t look at Spock as he says, “Sure, Spock. See you in a few hours.”

“Sir.”

The corridor is still echoing with the sound of McCoy’s expressive and generous use of language, when Spock steps out. Somehow it feels a fitting conclusion to the evening.

_TBC..._
Part V. 5.2

Chapter Summary

“Wow. Did you just—” Kirk falls silent, biting his lip and staring. “Spock,” he says slowly after a beat, his tone softening with inquiry. “Are you jealous?”

Spock wonders if he had ever truly believed it wouldn’t come to that.

Chapter Notes

I want to thank you all so much for the wonderful feedback and notes of encouragement. ♥ I, too, am thrilled and amazed to be working on this again.

A quick remark about Hendorff. When I first started writing this, I don't think he's been named, so I called him Garrovick. I'll be going back and cleaning that up at some point to get rid of the discrepancy.

5.2

The intercom chirps to life so suddenly above them that Kirk bangs his head against a conduit casing hard enough to elicit a dull vibration. Spock doesn’t wince, which is fortunate in the tight confines of the Jeffries tube they’re cramped in, but it’s a near miss.

“Guess this means they finally got to fixing communications,” Kirk mutters, probing at his head with his fingers carefully before reaching for the comm panel. “Kirk here.”

“Captain,” Lieutenant Uhura’s voice comes through an uncommon hindrance of static. “We're picking up a distress signal.”

Kirk’s eyes widen slightly as he exchanges a look with Spock.

Normally, he wouldn’t hesitate for so much as a breath, but the Orions had left the Enterprise in suboptimal condition. With all their critical systems injured and the warp engines beyond their ability to repair in open space, maintaining the bare minimum of ship’s functions – ‘keeping her together’ as Mr. Scott had so aptly put it – demands stretching their resources to the limit. Every officer and crewman, barring those still in Sickbay, are engaged in repairs, regardless of normal shift scheduling. So are most of the passengers they had liberated from the Orion transit station.

If Spock were prone to admitting amusement, he’d have to accept that the expression on Doctor McCoy’s face when T’Pring informed him she would be volunteering her services as a healer was endlessly entertaining.

The captain had no such compunctions, laughing out loud as he heard the news. ‘I don’t know if he’s
more terrified of her or attracted to her, but it sure is fun to watch. Don’t let Pechalat near them, though. Not that I don’t appreciate hot and dangerous women in compromising positions – and with Bones as a prize it would be hilarious – but I wouldn’t know who to bet on, and I just can’t deal with it right now.’

Kirk’s questionable ethics had long stopped to make an impression on Spock, but he did try to reinstate some order in the general conundrum and insist that the captain at least stayed on the Bridge.

‘Yeah, no,’ Kirk told him flatly. ‘There’s nothing to do there now but watch the stars crawl by very, very slowly, and I’m a better engineer than you are anyway, so your argument is invalid. If I were you, I’d shut it before I made an executive decision and got you stuck in that chair up there.’

Spock decided it was not the best time to argue, particularly as Kirk was right regarding his qualifications. Spock had seen the impulse engine Kirk had built for the prototype of a racing space cutter. It was – impressive.

‘I was bored.’ Kirk shrugged when Spock had asked him when he could possibly have had the time. ‘It was last year. You were still playing hard to get, and I had to entertain myself somehow. Okay, so maybe I was a bit angry, too, and nothing helps you focus like a charged impulse reactor that you’re trying to hide from a freakishly smart and resourceful crew.’

For some reason, Mr. Scott didn’t share the captain’s confidence. When he saw Spock reporting for duty alongside Kirk, his expression became openly alarmed. He had stuck them with mechanical manual work in the farthest corner of Engineering from anything vital, but neither of them had any objections. They didn’t have enough personnel to do everything, and in the ship’s current condition another set of hands was far more valuable than a genius-level mind capable of brilliant insight.

The distress call presents a problem. While obligated as Starfleet officers – and humane people – to offer assistance to anyone in need, the Enterprise’s ability to provide it could be questionable at best at the moment.

It’s a marker of the gravity of their situation that Kirk swallows the instinctive response and asks instead, “Uhura, what is the nature of their emergency?”

“The communication is rather garbled, sir.” Lieutenant Uhura sounds as though she sees that as a personal failure on her part. “Something about their engines overheating and a medical emergency.”

Judging by the look on Kirk’s face, his thoughts follow the same pattern as Spock’s and dwell on the overcrowded Sickbay. “Any other ships in the vicinity?”

“None that we can detect, Captain. And our sensors are actually functional for a change.”

“Great,” Kirk mutters, glancing at Spock again. Spock’s expression must convey his opinion on the matter, because the captain rubs his forehead tiredly and nods. “Fine. Uhura, get Chekov to plot a course to intercept, then—”

“Course already plotted, Captain,” Chekov’s exuberant voice comes streaming down the line. “Laying it in.”

“I – see.” Kirk smirks, and the look he sends Spock this time is half-amused, half-exasperated. “ETA?”

“At our current speed, which is also our best possible speed, which is also our only available speed —”
“Chekov—”

“Three hours, fifty-two minutes, Captain.”

“Fine, go for it. Uhura, try to get a message across telling them to sit tight and that we’re on our way. If you do manage to get through, get me some details of what’s going on, on that ship.”

“I’ll do my best, Captain. Will you be available for—”

Kirk rolls his eyes. “Yes, I’ll come to the Bridge, Lieutenant, for fuck’s sake. Kirk out.” He punches the intercom almost savagely before glaring at Spock. “Your minions are getting out of control.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “I would be interested to see you call Lieutenant Uhura that to her face.”

Kirk shudders. “I haven’t actually lost the will to live, despite being locked in here with you for half the day. My God, Scotty must really hate me. I should let him win at poker sometime. Hand me the hydrospanner, would you?”

Spock does as requested without looking up from his own work. Their fingers brush as Kirk picks up the tool from him, leaving Spock with the lightest impression of his mood.

Despite his complaints, the captain is far from unhappy about his current circumstances, positively bubbling with enthusiasm, not unlike the coffee he’d consumed some twenty minutes prior. Spock has to fight back a smirk, a part of him can’t help but relish the implication, especially as Kirk is fully aware of what it entails and could have avoided the touch easily.

Which means he wanted Spock to know.

Spock leans in closer to inspect the damaged portion of the inner power grid, feeling a sudden upsurge of gratitude to Mr. Scott for having assigned them the most unimaginative, mentally-underdemanding task on the list.

They separate within the hour – Spock going to collect progress reports and inspect Sickbay, Kirk heading out for another consultation with Mr. Scott. When the captain finally does arrive to the bridge, the distressed ship is coming within visual range.

“Have you managed to get a clear comm link with them, Lieutenant?” Kirk asks, striding past his chair to stand behind Sulu’s station, staring intently on the viewscreen.

“Not as such; they are still transmitting, but their signal is weakening,” Uhura replies, scowling at her board. “I’m only getting a general distress call now.”

“Their structural integrity is failing,” Chekov cuts in, his voice taut with tension. “I think they shut down their reactor before it went supercritical, but it looks like they can barely hold their ship together without it. Life support failing; I read fires onboard, and they’ll be exposed to space radiation any minute now.”

“Dammit, we need to move faster,” Kirk mutters, hand going white on the back of Sulu’s chair.

“We did manage to identify the ship, Captain,” Spock reports, consulting his scanner unnecessarily. The information is etched in his brain. “It’s a Federation-registry transport ship, E-class, the Arianna. We were unable to get an accurate life signs reading; however, at full capacity, a ship like that is designed to carry up to forty passengers.” He pauses. “From what Mr. Sulu has been able to extrapolate of their course, it appears they originate from sector 75-1-79.”
Kirk looks at him sharply. “One of the outposts near the Romulan Neutral Zone?”

“Correct.”

“Spock—” Kirk walks over closer to him slowly, his expression turning grim. “That sector is off-limits for colonization. The only people living there would be Starfleet personnel and—”

“—their families,” Spock finishes quietly. “Correct, sir.”

Their eyes lock and hold.

Kirk whirls around and moves back to his chair, hitting a control on the armrest with vicious energy. “Scotty, I don’t care if you’d have to go out there and push us along, but I need more speed now.”

“Captain, we doing the best we can!” Scott’s voice comes through the intercom, harassed and almost angry. “We’re not exactly at peak performance, if ye haven’t noticed—”

“Those are our people out there, Scotty,” Kirk cuts him off, just as terse, but also – almost pleading. “We can do one hell of a lot better than getting front row seats to their imminent deaths.”

The pause is barely perceptible in the general commotion sounds streaming down the line from Engineering, but it’s there, and Scott’s tone is grave with acknowledgment as he says, “Aye, sir.”

*Our people*, Spock thinks, but he’s not objecting. He’s not a fifth generation or a third generation Starfleet officer. It’s not in his blood, it’s not ingrained in him the same way it is in Kirk or Scott. For them, Starfleet is – family. Flawed, yes, perhaps even corrupt at times, but consisting of people they identify with. Kirk might resent it, try to escape it, joining at twenty-five, rather than seventeen, and he might accuse any number of admirals of any number of sins, but he would never betray Starfleet itself.

But if Kirk is a prodigal son, Spock is a foreign body. The egalitarian nature of Starfleet will continue to remain an illusion for a number of decades yet. It will not change until they grow far beyond the bloodlines of a handful of deep space pioneers. Not for a century still.

And yet Spock feels it, the emotional impact of Kirk’s words, and inside, he finds no protest. For him, Starfleet consists of people, who, regardless of their genetics, have taken the same oath, the same commitment, have done so by choice, willingly sharing the same dedication to duty. Misunderstandings, prejudice, and personal histories aside, he has more in common with these people than he does with his fellow Vulcans.

The revelation shakes him, and he ruthlessly pushes it back for further examination.

“Chekov, how long till we’re in transporter range?” Kirk asks, not lifting his eyes from his own display.

“Fourteen point seven minutes, Captain,” Chekov replies, hands flying over his console. “Correction! Now only—”

The *Enterprise* makes a mighty lurch, so unexpected and powerful in amplitude that the deck jumps beneath their feet, throwing them roughly forward and then to the side. Spock grabs the edge of his console on reflex, hearing a multitude of curses behind his back. The ship steadies somewhat, still pushing forward in an alarming, jerky manner.

“Captain!” Chekov calls excitedly, his cheek reddened from where he’d hit the floor. “Mr. Scott has done it, sir! Transporter lock in two minutes!”
“Provided we’re still in one piece ourselves,” Uhura mutters, adjusting her headset.

“Do we have a headcount?” Kirk asks, gripping the back of his chair for balance.

“No, sir.” Chekov shakes his head. “Life signs readings are erratic. It’s a – a hot mess over there, Captain.”

“I don’t think you’ve mastered that particular expression, Mr. Chekov,” Kirk tells him, not unkindly. “Keep scanning them, and be prepared to beam out anything within the transporter’s reach, hot mess or not, you got it?”

“Aye-aye, sir!”

“Uhura, get the medics to the transporter room on the double,” Kirk orders briskly, moving toward the turbolift. “Spock, with me.”

The turbolift spills them into the busy chaos of the transporter deck. Kirk moves faster somehow than he would if he was running, making people flatten against the walls to make way.

In the doorway, they nearly collide with McCoy and his team, the doctor muttering darkly about ‘taking the derby metaphor too damn far, aren’t we?’

“How are we doing, Mr. Scott?” Kirk asks, ignoring the doctor.

Scott shoots him a dark look. “We’re operating on emergency impulse power, and I don’t know how long it’ll last. See how much help we’re gonna be to anyone then, Captain.”

“Now, now, Mr. Scott.” Kirk shakes his head with a tight smile. “I have complete faith in you.”

Scott mutters something under his breath that both Kirk and Spock choose to ignore, pretending they haven’t heard. Putting the chief engineer in the brig would hardly make their situation any better.

“Do we have transporter lock yet?” Kirk glances over the secondary screen, as the transporter chief nods at him. “That ship can go at any moment. Energize when ready.”

The hum of the transporter has a distinctive urgent whine to it, signaling the system being pushed to its limits. Spock exchanges a glance with Kirk, and then the first transporter hook seems to have found its prize.

Six people materialize on the pad – two men, four women, all in various state of disarray, their clothes torn and singed, faces darkened with soot. The man further to the left holds his hand to a gush across his forehead, blood streaming down his fingers, unnaturally bright under the harsh light. The woman in front is holding a child of about four in her arms.

“Clear the pad,” Kirk orders, motioning for the security team, the medics rushing in before him. “Mr. Scott, prepare for another sweep. Ma’am, could you please step down?”

The woman, a tiny, delicate-looking brunette, clutches the child tighter as her eyes fix on Kirk, assessing. She takes in his uniform, only then releasing a sigh of pure relief.

“Starfleet,” she breathes out, as Kirk helps her down, the girl in her arms turning to stare at him, wide-eyed, chewing on her linen-white braid. “Thank God. We thought you were Romulans.”

“Romulans?” Kirk asks, pulling back slightly to let a nurse scan them. “Were you attacked? We couldn’t get anything from your distress call.”
The woman straightens up, ignoring the nurse altogether, and giving the unmistakable impression of coming to attention, despite her general appearance and the child in her arms. Behind them, another party of evacuees arrives, the first being hustled out under McCoy’s supervision.

“My name is Alice Mallory, Captain. My husband, Lieutenant Commander Mark Mallory, commanded the Merta outpost.”

Kirk stills. “Commanded?”

Alice Mallory nods, reporting in precise, measure tones of someone, who, despite not being enlisted herself, has been bound to Starfleet for such a long time that she might as well have been commissioned.

“The outpost was destroyed fifty-six hours ago now,” she says, her voice clipped, but not failing. “We had no warning. We couldn’t get a signal over to Starfleet Command, our comms were jammed. And even if they weren’t, the nearest starship must have been – yours, probably, and it doesn’t look like you would have been much help.” She glances around at the open panels, revealing fused circuitry, and the general disarray of what is normally a pristine transporter room. “Forgive me, Captain,” Alice says, noticing Kirk’s expression. “But I’ve been around starships my entire life, and you’re in bad shape.”

“So we are,” Kirk admits almost gently. “You say the outpost was destroyed, how did you manage to escape?”

For the first time, her looks becomes helpless, disoriented. “I don’t – I don’t know. Mark was dead, and there wasn’t even… Lieutenant Kalle, he gathered as many of us as he could on the courier ship that arrived the day before.” She bites her lip and clutches the girl to her tightly, making the child squeal. “He found Molly. She was so scared when the attack had started, she ran away, hid, and I – I just panicked… Mark was dead, I couldn’t find Molly, and… Tom found her. Lieutenant Kalle. I wouldn’t have gone without her.”

“Lieutenant Kalle saved my life, sir,” a man cuts in, an engineering tech by his pale red uniform. He’s holding his right arm in a way that leaves no doubts about it being broken. “I got trapped in the lower levels, the blasted shield generator pinned me down. I thought I bought it for sure, until he pulled me from under that damn thing.”

“How did you manage to break orbit?” Spock asks, raising his voice slightly.

The third group of refugees contains a severely burned man screaming in pain, and Doctor McCoy has to shout over him and a dozen other people as he triages the injured.

“I don’t know,” Alice Mallory says uncertainly. Her body begins to shake as the shock finally hits her. “Lieutenant Kalle, he – he’s not actually a pilot.”

“He’s in security,” the man with a broken arm says, swaying in place a little. “We tried to help him, mind, but he was the only real officer left. Me, I’m enlisted, so were a few others, but mostly – civilians. We did what we could. Lieutenant Kalle’s got a real head for tactics, I figure. Got us out.” The man shrugs and immediately cringes. “Not intact,” he breathes through gritted teeth, “but he got us out.”

“Nurse, some help here,” Kirk calls out, just as Chapel reenters the room, eyes seeking out a new charge on instinct. “Damn, I’d like to meet this Lieutenant Kalle,” the captain mutters, watching as the nurse herds the trio away. “He sounds like something else. I wonder if he’s here yet.”
“The lieutenant stayed behind on the Arianna, sir,” a boy of no more than fourteen tells Kirk, having overheard the comment. “He said you probably couldn’t get a proper lock on us with the interference from the engines. We have a lot of casualties, sir. The lieutenant said, the chances were better if we were in our transporter room, so he stayed to help everyone get there.”

The boy is towed away by a nurse, and Kirk turns to look at Spock, eyes bright. “Okay, I really need to meet this guy.”

Spock is rather curious himself, but, before he can respond, the intercom chirps to life on the transporter pad.

“Chekov to Captain Kirk. Captain?”

“Kirk here; go ahead, Ensign.”

“Sir, the ship, the Arianna, it’s falling apart, sir. It’s got seconds left.”

Kirk’s head snaps up. “Scotty!”

“Aye, we’ve grabbed onto something,” the Engineer mutters, not looking up. “Looks like the last party, but – bloody hell.”

The gradually climbing hum of the transporter gets cut abruptly by a screeching whine that makes even Spock jerk his hands up to cover his ears instinctually. He halts the motion, dropping instead to his knees, shouldering his way under the console, just as Scott does, working on the circuits the engineer can’t reach.

They work faster than an untrained eye could follow. The transporter whines in an almost human fashion, then abruptly clicks to a full-power mode again, beginning the rematerialization.

“Captain,” Chekov’s voice comes over the comm. “The Arianna is gone, sir.”

“Let’s hope we got them in time,” Kirk says quietly, watching the spectacular explosion on the monitor, before turning his gaze back to the transporter.

Spock straightens up beside him, watching. The process takes an unusually long time, filled only with the strained hum of the transporter and Doctor McCoy’s cursing.

But at long last, four more figures materialize on the pad. Scott rubs the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve, turning to Kirk, as he says, “Never make me do anything like that again.”

Kirk, however, doesn’t seem to hear. Everyone in the room seems to freeze, and Spock turns toward the pad at last to investigate what has gotten them so transfixed.

The man closest to them steps off the pad easily and looks around the room, identifying the senior officer instantly and coming to a species of attention in front of him.

“Sir. Lieutenant Tom Kalle, chief of security, Merta outpost. To whom do I owe our rescue?”

The lieutenant is – extraordinary, Spock thinks, for lack of a better term. He’s tall, having maybe an inch on Spock. His shoulders are broader, well-muscled, arms stretching the uniform tunic in a manner that is not at all obscene, but very telling. The broad chest is tapered into a narrow waist, the stomach flat, rippled with muscles. His face is clear, open, and handsome in a way that comes dangerously close to something that couldn’t exist in nature – perfection. His hair is dark browned, curling slightly, tousled from the exertion and the exact length demanded by the regulations. His eyes
are a deep, bright blue, a most uncommon dark hue for a human. The strong line of his jaw, the sculpted cut of his cheekbones, the generous, luscious red mouth, laugh lines making him look friendly and approachable – all conspire to create a breathtaking effect.

Spock has heard the term before, but for the first time he comes face to face with someone who is almost quite literally drop-dead gorgeous.

The effect the lieutenant’s appearance has on the others is remarkable. Mr. Scott is staring with his mouth open, so is the transporter tech beside him. Nurse Chapel’s eyes are wider than Spock has ever seen them, her respiration rate increasing exponentially. Even McCoy, who, to the best of Spock’s knowledge, has never shown that kind of interest in males, seems to have gone slack-jawed, the medical tricorder whirling forgotten in his hand.

Kirk… For some reason, Spock doesn’t want to examine Kirk’s expression too closely.

To his credit, though, Kirk comes to his senses first, the delay being within the margin of not drawing too much attention.

“I’m Captain James Kirk, and this is the Enterprise,” he says, stepping forward. “Welcome aboard, Lieutenant.”

“Sir.” Lieutenant Kalle snaps to attention, his expression registering admiration before he pulls it back under the mask of courtesy. “Captain Kirk, it’s a great honor to meet you. If I may, sir. I’m sure you’ve heard it many times before, but thank you for getting rid of Nero.”

Spock notes with satisfaction that the last of the spell seems to lose its hold on Kirk, who appears habitually uncomfortable with the subject.

“In point of fact, I wasn’t the one who got rid of him,” he says, a slight frown wedged between his eyebrows. “In any case, it was a team effort.”

“Of course, sir.” Kalle nods and glances at Spock. “Commander, I am honored to meet you.” He pauses. “And – I grieve with thee.”

Spock stares at him, caught off guard. The lieutenant’s pronunciation is terrible, but the sentiment behind it appears to be genuine. Spock can count the people who had actually offered him any kind of condolences, let alone in traditional Vulcan form, with fingers of one hand, and, with the exception of Admiral Pike, they all serve aboard this vessel.

Not trusting himself to speak, he inclines his head slowly in acknowledgement.

“Lieutenant,” Kirk says, drawing Kalle’s attention back to himself. “After you get checked out in Sickbay, I need your report on the Romulan attack.”

“Of course, Captain.” Kalle replies, his face a study in earnestness. “The attack was unprovoked, we had no warning. They didn’t offer us any options, didn’t even identify themselves. They came to destroy.”

Spock frowns minutely. “In that case, Lieutenant, how can you be sure that they were Romulans? Did they send down ground troops? Or did you recognize their vessels?”

Everyone turns to stare at him.

“Ground troops?” Alice Mallory, who left briefly to take care of her daughter and has now returned, asks incredulously, regarding him with open hostility. “Do you think we’d be standing here talking
to you, if they’d sent down ground troops? Romulans don’t take prisoners, Commander. They shoot to kill and leave nothing but scorched ground after them.” Her gaze slides over his eyebrows and ears. “Sometimes not even that.”

“Another woman whispers urgently, eyes widening in alarm.

Alice only stands up straighter. “No. He thinks we’re lying, Kat. He thinks Tom is lying. And he of all people should know what it’s like to run for your life when the Romulans attack.” She steps forward, shaking her friend’s hand off. “You’re a Vulcan, and you’re alive, so I guess you can run pretty fast, Commander. Tell me, did you have the time to look back and study their ships as you hightailed from Vulcan? Did you take a good look at Nero?”

Spock meets her point-blank. “Yes, I did. A very clear, very long look, Madam.”

Her mouth is already open to deliver the next blow, but something in his eyes makes her pause, confusion registering briefly in her features.

“Spock,” someone calls softly, and it takes a moment for him to recognize McCoy. The doctor appears by his elbow, not touching, but well within his personal space. “For God’s sake, she just lost her husband and survived a vicious attack. She’s in shock. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

Spock draws in a careful breath and belatedly checks his own reaction. “Of course. My apologies.”

“Spock?” Alice repeats, staring at him, eyes wide with horror. “You’re not the one… not the one who… Oh, my God!” She covers her face with her hands, shaking.

“There, I hope you’re happy now,” McCoy grumbles, stepping forward. He takes the unresisting woman by the elbow and steers her gently toward the door. “Come along, my dear. I’ve got a nice sweet hypospray with your name on it.”

She suffers herself to be led, her friend following closely, not daring to look up. Spock experiences an irrational urge to apologize.

“Commander? Sir, to answer your question,” Lieutenant Kalle says in a tone so normal as though the display he’d just witnessed had never happened. Spock nods at him. “I did take a look at their ships, albeit not a good one. They didn’t look like Birds-of-Prey – you know the Romulans are now using Klingon design. I thought they looked like the old Romulan ships. I’m fairly certain, sir.”

“I see,” Spock says.

“I did manage to download the Arianna’s logs, sir,” Kalle adds, handing Spock a data disc. “I’m not sure our sensors were operating at full capacity, but maybe it’ll help.”

“It does help immensely,” Kirk says, before Spock can reply. “Commander, I want a complete analysis.” He frowns as he looks at Spock. “And any further questions can wait until our guests have had their injuries seen to and got some rest, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Spock inclines his head, fingers closing over the data disc.

“Come along, Lieutenant, gentlemen,” Kirk says, smiling at Kalle. “Sickbay’s this way. I’ll give you a tour on our way if you’re feeling up to it.”

Kalle smiles back, his entire stance relaxing. “I would be delighted, Captain.”

“Well, what d’ye make of that?” Scott breaks the ensuing silence suddenly, staring after the departed
party with a slightly discomfited expression. “That lad can put us all out of business single-handedly. Good thing he’s got a crush on the captain, or we’d all be out of our jobs.”

Spock blinks. “A most peculiar analysis, Mr. Scott.”

Scott gives him a narrow-eyed look. “I’m not hearing ye correcting me, laddie.”

Spock looks at him. Scott stands a little straighter at that, but Spock still has to look away first.

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“Now let me get this straight.” Kirk drums his fingers against the conference room table. “Lieutenant Kalle is barely a year out of the Academy; snapped a post at the Romulan Neutral Zone straight away; since then, had earned four commendations for performance above and beyond. On Merta, he was the only officer who didn’t run around like a headless chicken, but had the presence of mind to grab as many people as he could, stuff them into a courier ship, and make a break for it. With no assistance and no engineering background, he then held the ship together until help arrived. Damn. Is there any way we can seduce him into working for us?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “I do not believe such drastic measures are required. If you wish it, an offer could be made—”

“And the personnel office would munch on it for months,” Kirk interrupts him, grimacing. “Damn, but I would love to have my own personal Clark Kent on my staff.”

“Clark Kent?”

Kirk rolls his eyes. “Never mind.”

Spock considers him. Kirk usually enjoys explaining obscure Earth references to him, positively delighting, in fact, every time he discovers something that Spock’s previous associations with humans haven’t covered.

At the moment, though, the captain sounds dismissive – even annoyed with Spock’s lack of knowledge.

“Much as I am impressed with Lieutenant Kalle’s personal accomplishments,” Spock says, trying to recapture the problem at hand. “I am much more concerned with identifying the attackers of the colony.”

Kirk frowns. “You don’t think they were Romulans?”

“Lieutenant Kalle himself had stated that there had been no communication of any kind. The Arianna’s logs cannot corroborate the assumption either way – her scanners had not been fully operational when the lieutenant had launched from Merta.”

“I’d say he had quite a few things on his mind just then to mind the scanners,” Kirk says dryly.

“I do not dispute that, Captain,” Spock says, mystified by Kirk’s defensive response. “I am merely saying that we do not have proof positive of the Romulan involvement.”

“Spock, for God’s sake, he drew you a picture.” Kirk brings the sketch in question to the screen of his PADD and slides it over to Spock. The drawing is crude, but representative enough. “Tell me that doesn’t look an awful lot like older Romulan designs.”
“It is not dissimilar, but not exact.”

Kirk throws his hands in the air. “So he’s not the next Bruegel! It’s not like that’s a prerequisite to join Starfleet.”

“I did not say it was, Captain. I am merely pointing out that the image provided by Lieutenant Kalle is too imprecise to make a positive identification.”

“Spock, you’re overanalyzing it.” Kirk slaps his palm against the table impatiently. “I’m all for being thorough, but sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, you know what I’m saying? It’s a Federation outpost just shy of the Romulan Neutral Zone. Cui prodest. There’s no one who’d want those outposts gone more than the Romulans. It’s logic, Spock.”

Spock allows his lack of conviction to show on his face. “Captain, the Federation and the Romulan Empire had spent almost a year negotiating a ceasefire. Why would the Romulans wish to violate its conditions so soon? They need it as badly as we do.”

“Which is exactly why they made certain we couldn’t make a positive identification. We can’t accuse them of breaking the ceasefire when we have no actual proof it was them.”

There is a beat of silence as Spock considers this.

“Perhaps,” he allows at last. For some reason, it still doesn’t sit well with him.

“Perhaps,” Kirk mimics. “You just can’t admit you were wrong, can you?”

Spock stiffens, sitting, if possible, even straighter in his chair. Kirk’s irritation is strong enough to press against his shields. “Captain, my only objective here is the truth.”

They stare at each other for a long moment, until Kirk relaxes slightly, some of the tension draining out of him.

“Oh course, Mr. Spock. It’s just that these people have been through a lot. I don’t think we should subject them to interrogation, particularly when one isn’t necessary. You read me?”

Spock frowns, but inclines his head. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. I’m glad we understand each other.” Kirk stands up and moves toward the door quickly. “Scotty’s actually letting me work on the warp drive. Page me if you need me.”

He doesn’t slap Spock on the shoulder on his way out, as he’s taken to doing lately, and doesn’t invite him along. It is for the best, perhaps, given Kirk’s current state of mind, but Spock still feels mildly discomfited.

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Assigning blame is illogical, so later Spock will not blame it on so much as explain his lapse by being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of people on the Enterprise. Indeed, with the prisoners they’d liberated from the Orion holding facility and the rescued passengers from the Arianna, the ship feels overcrowded – especially in view of the still ongoing massive repairs.

It had reached the point where those of the crew who didn’t have special cultural – or physiological – requirements were asked to share quarters. Kirk himself surrenders his privacy by making McCoy move into the captain’s cabin. Spock as a Vulcan is naturally left alone.
It is for the best, Spock believes. Surprisingly, there are any number of individuals aboard the Enterprise with whom he could have cohabitated without undue discomfort, but just at the moment he would not prefer to be under close observation by any of them.

Over the course of the next few days, they manage to get as much repair work as possible while out in space. The warp core is still not functional, but there is nothing to be done about that until they arrive to the nearest starbase that happens to be Deep Space Four – approximately a week worth of travel in their current condition.

It’s enough time for Spock to become aware of certain new developments involving the captain that, while not meriting concern, make him feel – uneasy. More so for, while the instigator is present, Spock cannot divine a reason for his own reaction.

Lieutenant Kalle’s charisma continues to have a noticeable effect on the crew, exacerbated by the fact that the lieutenant seems to be always present virtually everywhere. He’s looking after his Arianna rescues, distracting the children – and sometimes the grief-stricken parents – with jokes and games. Despite not being specifically qualified, he volunteers with the repair crews, especially when blunt force is needed rather than expertise. He socializes freely with the Enterprise crew, his humble, matter-of-fact demeanor and astonishing good looks making him an instant favorite, but it’s the story of his heroic actions that captivates them most. This crew appreciates loyalty and courage above all else, Spock reflects. It is no wonder they are so instantly drawn to the man who seems to be the embodiment of that.

For most of these activities, Captain Kirk joins Kalle, his growing interest in the lieutenant all the more evident. They take almost every meal together and seem to be inseparable when Kirk isn’t on the Bridge. They work together, laughing and talking freely, with an easy and instant camaraderie that Spock utterly fails to grasp. It seems just so natural, so easy.

The crew notice as well, and seem to find the entire affair amusing, judging by their hidden grins and long admiring glances they shoot at the pair.

“Imagine the two of them making a recruiting vid,” Spock overhears Yeoman Barrows whisper to her friend from Maintenance. “Starfleet wouldn’t know what to do with all the applications.”

Both women resolve into giggles, but Spock fails to see the joke. He finds the assessment to be quite accurate.

For the longest time, he doesn’t wish to examine his rather confused feelings on the subject, preferring to take on extra shifts rather than schedule in time for meditation. But without recognizing the emotions there could be no control, and Spock does not wish to face the devastating consequences of denial again.

His discomfort, he finds, stems from the fact that for the last several months, ever since their disastrous mission to Arishuh, he had become accustomed to Kirk’s company outside of duty hours as well as within them.

They have been allies for a long time now, reluctant at first, gradually learning to trust each other – after certain events, perhaps, before all others. But since Arishuh they have also been becoming friends in the most conventional meaning of the word. They had occasionally enjoyed each other’s company before. After Arishuh both of them began to show a definite preference for it when faced with multiple choices.

The realization startles Spock. He hadn’t noticed before, but he does now in hindsight. To have Kirk suddenly drop him so completely from his schedule is – unpleasant. Spock dares not give the
emotion another name.

There is, however, another layer to his dissatisfaction – one that he discovers quite by accident with Nyota’s assistance.

“At last, a fine specimen of human male,” she comments wryly, as they have lunch the day after their encounter with the Arianna. “I thought they didn’t make them like that anymore.”

Spock looks up from his food to follow her gaze across the rec room, where Lieutenant Kalle is also having a meal in the company of the captain. Spock frowns slightly at the implication.

Nyota, ever perceptive, aims a mischievous smile at him. “Why the long face, Spock? Jealous? I did say ‘human male,’ didn’t I? Your position in the rating is safe.”

He quirks an eyebrow at her. “There is a rating?”

Her laugh is melodic and pleasing as ever. “Completely unofficial, don’t worry, Commander.”

“I am relieved,” he tells her dryly. “I was not experiencing jealousy, however.”

“Oh no?”

“No. it is merely that I find it illogical that our crew should exhibit signs of such high regard—”

“The word you’re looking for is hero-worship.”

“—for Lieutenant Kalle. I do not deny that his accomplishments are admirable; however, there are several individuals aboard the Enterprise who warrant the same, if not greater, merit. Most notably, the captain.”

“Wait, back up a second.” Nyota puts her spoon down, concentrating fully on him. “Let me get this straight. You’re not jealous of Lieutenant Kalle for yourself, but you are jealous of him for Kirk?”

Spock gives his salad a regretful look and sets the chopsticks down. “As I indicated, the captain is merely the most obvious example. You yourself, for instance, have committed many commendable acts; some of them would make Lieutenant Kalle’s achievements – mundane. And yet, while you definitely command the crew’s respect, they do not behave in such an unreasonable manner toward you.”

Nyota purses her lips. “I’m not sure about that.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “I believe Lieutenant Palmer’s actions are motivated by emotions of a more personal nature.”

She snorts softly, but doesn’t deny it. “Wow,” she says after a beat. “So you’re actually offended on our behalf. I never even thought about it.”

Spock moves his shoulder subtly in his version of a shrug. “I am not offended. I am merely perplexed. This crew consists almost uniformly of highly accomplished individuals. I would have imagined they would be more – restrained in their response.”

Nyota ponders this, picking at her napkin. “Maybe it’s a novelty thing. Or him being drop-dead gorgeous thing. Maybe we just can’t help but appreciate a good thing when we see it.” She grins at him. “So I guess it’s safe to say you won’t be joining his fanclub any time soon?”

Spock levels her with a look. “Unlikely. Besides, I believe the captain alone can embody such an
Nyota laughs. “I don’t know Spock. I think Kirk’s actions might be motivated by emotions of a more personal nature.”

Spock freezes for a moment, glancing involuntarily to where Kirk is talking animatedly, laughing and gesticulating with his expressive hands, his eyes never leaving his lunch companion.

“Perhaps,” he allows, inhaling mid-word so that his voice falters for a moment. He glances down at his food, but it’s pointless. He feels no appetite.

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It’s late into the Gamma shift when Spock makes his way to the ship’s gym. Curiously, the facility had not suffered much damage during the last battles. Doctor McCoy had expressed an opinion that ‘The universe is trying to tell you lot something’. Spock merely attributed the fact to a statistical likelihood of one area of the ship remaining intact in a series of subsequent altercations.

There hasn’t been much time for him to exercise lately, and he can feel his body tightening under the otherwise constant physical stress, becoming dense, heavy. He can perform for an indefinite amount of time in that mode, but he relishes the opportunity to relieve some of that tension.

The gym is nearly empty due to the late hour. A few security officers training nearby nod at Spock as he passes; two of the treadmills are occupied, and Lieutenant Hendorff is lifting weights, which is his favorite type of workout, but other than that, the gym is nearly vacated.

Spock walks over to an unoccupied exercise area and settles himself. The initial stages of Suus Mahna, or the ‘Vulcan wushu’ as Pike had once called it, require engaging in light meditation to center one’s mind, and Spock experiences an irrational flood of joy over the ease with which the old routine comes back to him, obedient and welcoming, like a childhood friend. His thoughts dwell on Vulcan tonight, never far from his mind, but never allowed to the forefront of it.

He picks up memories one by one: their home, carved deep in the rock massive to repel the omnipresent heat; I-Chaya pushing his forehead against Spock’s knees, asking for treats, knocking Spock over in the process; the smell of ginger cookies, his mother’s rare success in the field of cooking, breaking his concentration as he was trying to solve an equation…

Spock allows the memories to float freely, gradually beginning to look for more arousing ones in order to find the correct mental ‘wavelength.’ He thinks of the bullies who’d made his school days a constant trial. To his surprise, the memory of their childish – so childish! so uninventive and transparent – provocations almost makes him wish to smile. They had been innocent, all of them, so incredibly innocent. Not in the sense of being free of corruption or ill intent, but in a larger, more universal meaning. They had been children, locked in their safe, structured little world.

Spock had never thought it possible, but – would he be friends with his erstwhile tormentors now, had they survived the destruction of their homeplanet? The thought does not provoke resistance. Not friends, perhaps, but acquaintances, whose civility toward each other is not necessarily false or surface? Is he idealizing his former offenders?

With a jolt of warmth, Spock realizes that this is what forgiveness feels like.

You would have been so proud of me, Mother.

He moves without opening his eyes, beginning the Tai’dun sequence, his motions balanced, his body obedient, waking to life after weeks of being coiled tight with tension. He falls and rolls, strikes and
ducks, the speed of his motions exponentially increasing to accommodate not one, but two, three, five imaginary opponents. His imaginary opponents have always been so much better at this than his real ones.

He opens his eyes when it’s time, his mind accepting the additional sensory input without a glitch. He keeps moving, keeps fighting, allowing the inherent aggression to flow freely from his limbs, off his skin. *Suus Mahna* is a defensive discipline, but there is no logic in denying its offensive origins or the basic, natural instincts that are always lying dormant within any Vulcan, closer to the surface than the universe at large can imagine.

Spock almost laughs with the joy of it, the freedom, every motion millimeter-precise, every move an indistinguishable cross between instinctive and calculating. He thought he had forgotten this, but he hadn’t. It’s a part of him, part of his training, part of his *home* that will always be with him, that no one can take away.

He doesn’t make a conscious decision to stop, but at some point he finds himself in a low crouch on the floor, his knee bent, his other leg stretched far to the side, hands lying palms-down on the mat, chin grazing his chest. A bow to the master who is no longer there – and yet he is, will always be there somewhere, safe in the memory of a blistering hot Vulcan afternoon and a twelve-year-old Spock completing the entire series for the very first time.

The sound of laughter breaks the spell, and Spock winces, letting go of his meditative state with a pang of regret. He reorients himself in the present and looks up, searching instinctively for the source of laughter.

It is not surprising somehow to discover Kirk in the opposite end of the gym, and it’s even less of a surprise to find him sparring with Tom Kalle. Spock watches for a moment as the captain executes a near-perfect aikido throw and grins triumphantly as Lieutenant Kalle hits the mat. The distraction costs because the lieutenant loses no time performing a reap, and Kirk laughs as he turns his fall into a roll.

There is an illogical urge to rub at his chest that is inexplicably but undeniably connected with the sight. Spock doesn’t do it, of course, but the phantom pain remains.

It is not a sparring session. Kirk is never that careless. He’s a most proficient fighter; he’s been a hand-to-hand assistant instructor at the Academy. He doesn’t gloat unless it serves a purpose, doesn’t lose concentration like that, an amateur mistake. What is happening before Spock’s eyes is not physical training. It’s—

Something blocks his line of vision even as a voice calls out, “Commander?”

Spock slams a shield in place and collects himself quickly, pulling himself abruptly to his full height.

Lieutenant Hendorff is watching him with mild apprehension, chest still glistening with sweat from the weight-lifting.

“Sir, I didn’t mean to disturb you, but it looked like you were finished."

“Indeed.” Spock forces himself to concentrate on him. “How can I help you, Mr. Hendorff?”

“Can you show me that chatlin thing again?”

Hendorff is so wonderfully blunt. It’s a trait Spock has come to appreciate about the Security Chief, a reliable persistence of character.
“Cha’t’leen,” Spock corrects, because it’s not in him not to. “If you wish.”

Hendorff grins, drops his towel and steps onto the mat, regarding Spock with a universal human expression of ‘Bring it on.’

Spock dodges the first lunge easily, conserving energy. The second one makes him fight, however minutely, to keep his balance.

Hendorff’s grin widens. “I’ve been practicing.”

Spock sweeps his feet from under the lieutenant without pausing for breath. “So I see.”

Hendorff swears.

Cha’t’leen is an offshoot of another branch of Vulcan martial arts, one that is basically simplified combat with no mental disciplines involved. Hendorff had first approached Spock about instruction in it shortly after the memorable minefield mission, which made Spock’s opinion of him rise a few notches. It took a dedicated security officer to ask instruction from someone they hated. The approach was almost Vulcan in its logic. Spock respected that.

Slipping into the instructor mode is easy, and Spock finds his concentration drifting. Hendorff is a determined but predictable opponent, and Spock’s eyes stray almost against his will back toward the other end of the gymnasium at every opportunity.

Kirk and Kalle have gathered a small number of spectators now. Spock frowns, unable to understand the appeal. It is clear that the captain and the lieutenant are not practicing so much as – fooling around, to use a human expression. Why that should be something of interest Spock utterly fails to see.

Lieutenant Kalle is strong and fast, Spock notes, but he telegraphs his intentions too easily. There is nothing in his technique that would make him a challenge to Spock, and he nearly scoffs. That he shouldn’t be running such an illogical comparison at all doesn’t occur to him.

Hendorff takes a swing that has nothing to do with technique of any kind. Spock steps aside, allowing the lieutenant’s own inertia to bring him to the mat, before grabbing his arm and pulling it tightly up behind his back, immobilizing him.

He looks up in time to see Kirk falling for what must be the most obvious of feigns, allowing himself to be pinned to the mat by Kalle’s superior mass, stretching his arms for the lieutenant to catch and hold over his head almost invitingly.

“Urgh. Cmmandr!”

Abruptly, Spock becomes aware that Hendorff’s free hand has been pounding the mat for fifteen point eight seconds now and that his grip on the lieutenant is dangerously close to crushing.

Spock rolls off of him hastily, staying on his knees. “My apologies, Mr. Hendorff. Perhaps tonight is not the best time for this exercise. It appears I am – distracted.”

Hendorff grumbles as he sits up, rubbing his abused wrist. When he lifts his head, the look in his eyes is venomous, but, to Spock’s surprise, it’s not directed at him. The lieutenant’s eyes are narrowed in the exact same direction Spock has been – glaring. Oh.

That pronouncement startles Spock. Has he been that obvious? He has hardly been aware of his – rather peculiar – response himself until just now. Could it be that Hendorff – George Cupcake Hendorff – can tell what Spock himself is barely able to comprehend—

“Commander.” Hendorff turns toward him, his entire body tense, eyes deadly serious. “Sir, is Captain Kirk dissatisfied with my performance as chief of security?”

Spock blinks, taken aback. “I beg your pardon?”

“Is he displeased with my performance, sir?” Hendorff repeats, his face darkening even further.

Overcoming his shock, Spock replies, “Not to my knowledge.”

Hendorff swallows. “Then he’s not – looking to replace me? We have a bit of a history, and I thought – maybe he – would like to work with someone else.”

Abruptly Spock remembers Kirk’s dreamy expression when he studied Lieutenant Kalle’s personnel file and asked “Is there any way we can seduce him into working for us?”

Emotions are illogical by definition, but just at the moment, looking into Hendorff’s – scared and not a little bit hurt, as he sees all-too-clearly now – eyes, Spock experiences a completely irrational surge of anger toward the captain.

“Mr. Hendorff, I can discern no logical reason whatsoever to replace a competent and proven security officer,” Spock says in a clipped tone. “Your service aboard this vessel has been exemplary. I do not believe the captain will overlook that fact. However, should that unlikely happenstance come to pass, you can rest assured that I will remind him.”

It’s Hendorff’s turn to sit up straighter and blink. He stares at Spock for a moment, then grins hesitantly.

“Thank you, sir.”

“One does not thank logic,” Spock huffs. It’s the realization of how closely he has come to sounding like his father that finally propels him into motion. “If you will excuse me. I believe I’ve had all the physical exercise I require tonight.”

He walks past the still grinning lieutenant toward the locker rooms, all the while having the distinct impression that Kirk is following his progress. When Spock does surrender to the urge to check, however, the captain is again laughing with Lieutenant Kalle.

Spock leaves.

--

It is not the most convenient time to be having revelations of personal nature, but once the process has begun Spock finds it difficult to stop. He’s never been hesitant about testing the boundaries. It’s what made him apply to and then turn down the Vulcan Science Academy and ultimately join Starfleet. The same trait that has more or less shaped every relationship he had in his life.

He doesn’t understand Kirk’s sudden ‘infatuation’ with Lieutenant Kalle, if indeed it is one, but he wishes to. More than that, he misses Kirk’s company. In itself, it’s logical, given their recent history. That he misses Kirk enough to consciously seek him out is a bit more surprising.

“The Bridge is yours, Commander,” Kirk says, finishing his shift giving-over report. He moves
toward the turbolift, when Spock calls after him.

“Captain?”

“Hm?” Kirk turns back toward him, tilting his head quizzically.

Acutely aware of the crew’s not so subtle attention on them, Spock steps closer unconsciously and fights not to lower his voice as he asks, “If your duties permit, would you be available for a game of chess later today?”

For a moment, Kirk seems startled by the question, then perhaps pleased, but the emotions pass so quickly in his expression that Spock cannot be certain of any of it. Kirk grins at him, but it’s unmistakably apologetic.

“Sorry, Spock, I was planning to catch up on some sleep. Another time, okay? Thanks for asking.”

Spock inclines his head. “Captain.”

Kirk claps him on the shoulder, still grinning, and strolls off the Bridge.

It is not a productive shift; Spock is constantly distracted. It is not exactly that he’s unaccustomed to rejection, and this indeed has been such a small, innocent thing. Spock has no explanation.

The shift is uneventful, and he spends most of it contemplating the image of a ship Lieutenant Kalle had drawn. Spock makes another search in the database, but the result is the same. Of every ship configuration known to the Federation, old Romulan cruisers show the closest compatibility rate with the ship in the picture. 72.5% is far from a hundred, but way ahead of all the other options.

Frustrated with his inability to resolve the issue, Spock decides to consult Lieutenant Kalle again. Human recollection is a capricious thing. Sufficient time has passed since the incident; perhaps additional memories have surfaced.

After completing his shift, Spock checks the computer for Lieutenant Kalle’s location, and takes the turbolift to the recreation deck instead of living quarters.

He enters rec room five, slightly more crowded than usual, since in addition to off-shift crewmembers some of the passengers are here as well. But even in the general commotion of people having meals, chatting, and playing board games, Lieutenant Kalle isn’t hard to locate. He’s sitting at a table further from the door, contemplating a 3-dimensional chessboard set between him and – Kirk.

Spock freezes. Part of him insists on stubborn incomprehension, but the rest of him understands only too well. Chess, he thinks bleakly, watching Kirk obviously explaining the rules to Kalle. Couldn’t they have played cards instead?

Recognizing the thought as mildly hysterical, Spock pushes it back ruthlessly, along with the accompanying emotion. Chess is a game enjoyed by many. It is illogical to feel – betrayed – over this.

He approaches them at a carefully measured pace, nodding somberly to the crewmembers who greet him. Kirk looks up as he comes closer and grins up at him, his cheeks coloring slightly.

“Commander.”

“Captain,” Spock returns, ignoring Lieutenant Kalle’s salute for a moment. There is nothing he can do to stop himself from saying, “I see you have decided in favor of entertainment after all.”
“Yeah.” Kirk shrugs, grinning wider and looking over at Kalle. “Guess I wasn’t as tired as I thought I was.” He winks.

The lieutenant blushes subtly under his gaze and turns to look at Spock in an obvious attempt to hide his reaction. There is something uncannily familiar about that response, but Spock can’t nail it.

“Would you like to join us, Commander?” Lieutenant Kalle asks politely. “I understand you are quite a master of the game.”

“Thank you, no,” Spock replies, moderating his tone carefully. “I would not wish to intrude.” He avoids looking at Kirk entirely. “I do require a moment of your time, though, Lieutenant.”

Kalle sits up straighter, although his posture has already been near-perfect. “Of course, sir.”

Spock pulls up a chair and hands over the PADD with the drawing to Kalle. “I would ask you to study this image again, Lieutenant. Are you certain this is the ship that you saw attack the colony?”

To his right, Kirk groans. “Not this again. Give it a rest, Spock, would you?”

To his credit, Kalle ignores him, looking at the picture obediently. Spock wishes his own reaction has been as serene, but he can feel a muscle in his jaw tightening.

“I’m sorry, Commander.” Kalle shakes his head after a moment. “I’m really bad at drawing, I know, but that’s the best I can remember. It all happened pretty fast.”

Spock leans forward, locking eyes with him. “Think back to that moment, Lieutenant. The colony is under attack. There is heavy fire from orbit. Buildings are exploding. People are running. Screaming. You gather as many as you can and close the airlock. It’s a courier ship, so you have to run through its entire length to reach the cockpit. People ask you something; some are crying; most are sitting quietly, terrified. You run into the cockpit. You are not a pilot, but you have more knowledge than any of them. You graduated from Starfleet Academy. You can pilot a ship. You take off. Someone is telling you they cannot make the shields operational. You calculate a breakoff trajectory that you hope will keep you hidden until you go to warp. It mostly works, but at the last moment, they notice you. They open fire. You have no weapons at your disposal. Shields are not operational. All you can do is execute evasive maneuvers, and you do. The ship is hit multiple times, but you manage to reach the border of the solar system gravity well. At the last moment, just as you go to warp, you look back at the aft viewscreen. You see three ships approaching. What do they look like?”

Kalle has closed his eyes somewhere in the beginning of Spock’s recitation. His breathing is even, synced to Spock’s own. A frown of concentration is wedged between his brows, as he tries, genuinely tries to remember.

He opens his eyes slowly, gradually, blinking several times before focusing on Spock. “How” – he clears his throat – “how did you do it, sir? It was like I was there again.” He looks down at the PADD and sighs in frustration. “It was all as you said, but I only – I only got a glimpse.” He pushes the drawing tiredly back at Spock. “I’m sorry, Commander, this is really the best I can do.”

Spock nods, more to himself than to Kalle, and collects the PADD from the table. “Thank you for trying, Lieutenant.”

He pushes away from the table and stands, just as Kirk interjects, “Not so fast.” He glares at Spock before smiling an apology at Kalle. “Tom, I’ll only be a minute.”

“Of course, Jim.” Kalle nods, still obviously preoccupied.
Spock doesn’t, absolutely does not, experience a momentary shortness of breath at that.

“Commander, a word,” Kirk says in an icy tone, standing up and brushing past Spock to the doorway.

They cross the corridor and walk into a conveniently located conference room. Kirk rounds on him before the doors even close.

“What the hell is wrong with you? We talked about this. I thought we had an understanding that you would not torture these people again.”

“I do not believe my actions constitute torture,” Spock replies, taken aback. “Lieutenant Kalle is a commissioned officer, trained to handle stress.”

“Not when it’s unnecessary,” Kirk snaps impatiently. “Honestly, Spock, this isn’t like you. You’re practically obsessed.”

“Vulcans do not get obsessed.”

“Well then, what is it? You ask him time and time again, you get the same result, and you act like you don’t trust him. Except, you’ve done the background check yourself, so I’d really like to know the reasons for your animosity toward him.”

“There is no animosity,” Spock protests. “And I do trust Lieutenant Kalle’s account. My doubt is not with him.” He pauses, struggling to explain, his eyes drawn to the PADD in his hand. “It is merely that there is something – not right – with this image.”

Kirk blinks. “‘Something not right?’” he repeats incredulously after a beat. “Are you kidding me? Because that’s what one wants to hear from his Vulcan first officer.”

Spock huffs under his breath. “I regret that I cannot be more precise.”

“More precise? Spock, I don’t think you could be less precise if you tried – which you seem to be doing. Let’s cut the bullshit. What’s this really about?”

“Captain, I do not understand. I do not have a hidden agenda.”

Kirk snorts. “No, there’s certainly nothing hidden about it. Why do you dislike Tom so much?”

“I do not dislike Lieutenant Kalle.” Spock narrows his eyes. “You are remarkably protective of him.”

“So what? He’s my friend.”

“You have known him for a grand total of five point two days.”

“Not all relationships take years to form. Sometimes chemistry is all it takes.”

“I believe you are confusing your disciplines. From what I have observed, your interaction with the lieutenant has very little to do with chemistry and everything to do with biology.”

“What exactly are you implying?”

“You are a sufficiently gifted individual to figure that out on your own.”

“Wow. Did you just—” Kirk falls silent, biting his lip and staring. “Spock,” he says slowly after a beat, his tone softening with inquiry. “Are you jealous?”
Spock wonders if he had ever truly believed it wouldn’t come to that.

“Captain, I do have duties to attend to. Unless it is your pleasure for me to remain here and be insulted, may I be excused?”

“No, you may not be excused. Snapping at me is so not an answer, and I’d like to get one. Now.”

Spock turns to look at him. “To what end? You demand honesty of me, and yet you lied to me today.”

“I didn’t lie; I changed my mind, Spock! I’m allowed.”

“Indeed, and I am allowed not to discuss my emotional state unless I choose to. In addition, Captain, I believe you informed Lieutenant Kalle you would only be absent ‘a minute.’ He might become upset if you make him wait.”

There’s a curious expression on Kirk’s face as though he can’t decide whether he wants to glare or grin. In the end, he simply shakes his head, lips curving up softly. “You may go, Commander. Sorry for keeping you.”

Spock salutes and walks out.

--

“Look what the cat dragged in,” is McCoy’s pleasant greeting when Spock enters the CMO’s office. “What can I do for you, Spock? Got another ex-fiancée to saddle me with?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “If T’Pring’s presence is a hindrance, I am certain you need only say so.”

“And sign my own death warrant? No, thank you. Besides, she’s not actually a hindrance. Some of the techniques she showed me are pretty damn useful.”

“Then I fail to ascertain your difficulty.”

McCoy straightens in his chair to glare at him. “She’s an annoying, smug know-it-all Vulcan who’s constantly around – that’s my difficulty!”

“I see.”

“Oh, don’t give me that look. If you didn’t think so, you’d be married to her right now.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that statement. Amazingly, this is not the reason I came to see you.”

“Color me shocked.” McCoy rolls his eyes. “Well, don’t just stand there, take a seat. Drink?”

“No, thank you,” Spock declines, but takes the proffered seat gingerly. “Doctor, I spent a great many years among humans, yet there are certain aspects of human emotionalism that I still do not comprehend.”

“Oh, this ought to be good.” McCoy leans back in his chair, studying him. “For example?”

Spock meets his eyes steadily. “Infatuation.”

“Huh,” McCoy breathes out softly, his eyes suddenly alight. “Let me guess. Jim and Lieutenant Don’t-Bother-I’m-Perfection?”
Spock doesn’t pretend to misunderstand and simply nods.

McCoy actually leans forward, clasping his hands on the desk before him. “I blame you for that, just so you know.”

Spock’s expression conveys his reluctance to be impressed. “Doctor, you tend to blame me for any number of things outside my immediate control, including, as I recall, bad weather. I therefore fail to see the relevance of that statement to our current situation.”

McCoy looks at him sourly. “Oh, it’s relevant this time, Mr. Spock. Though I don’t suppose you’d get it.” He scowls. “Well, I don’t like it. I don’t know what the hell Jim is thinking. We’re two days away from Deep Space Four. Kalle will go on his merry way, and where will Jim be then?”

Spock frowns. “You anticipate the captain experiencing an emotional difficulty.”

McCoy glowers. “Only you would ask such a thing. Have you seen them together, the way Jim looks at him? Of course I anticipate that he’ll sulk. I just hope he won’t end up with a broken heart on top of it.”

Spock looks down, discovering that the grip of his hands where they’re clasped in his lap has gone white-knuckled. With an effort, he forces his fingers to relax.

“You’re awfully quiet,” McCoy observes. “And awfully pale. Spock, you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine,” he replies automatically and watches the doctor’s eyebrows shoot up.

The silence that follows is incredibly loud.

“I see,” McCoy says slowly at long last, eyes trained on Spock, missing nothing. After beat, he says in a quiet tone, “‘Fine’ has variable definitions.”

Spock says nothing.

“Anything else I can help you with, Mr. Spock?”

Spock makes himself look up and shakes his head. “I think not. Thank you for your time, Doctor.”

“Yeah.” McCoy clears his throat awkwardly. “Anytime.”

--

It is perhaps fortunate that he’s accosted by Scott shortly after. The Engineer corners him in a turbolift and says something so unexpected that Spock nearly forgets his personal predicament altogether.

“Mr. Spock, sir, I’d like yer permission to dump that space junk we picked up from the Arianna. Only it’s taking up room, and we have the transporter fully operational now, so we can disperse it in space.”

Spock fixes him with a look. “What ‘space junk,’ Mr. Scott?”

Scott blinks. “The wreckage from the Arianna. Don’t ye remember? We couldn’t get a proper transporter lock, so the captain ordered to beam everything we could lock onto. The transporter was set to store all non-organic matter in cargo bay four, so that’s where it all is now, sir. And it’s literally everything. Bulkheads and hull pieces and the rest of it. It’s all rubbish now anyway, not a bit intact.”
Spock has to suppress a twinge of excitement. “Hull pieces, did you say, Mr. Scott? Did you happen to notice if any of them carry traces of weapons discharges?”

“Aye.” Scott nods. “There’s plenty of that. I reckon the entire thing was burned near to a crisp before the Romulans were done with her.”

“I see.” Spock pauses a moment, calculating the possibilities. “Mr. Scott, you will get rid of that wreckage when and only when I will give you express permission to do so. For the time being, you’ll leave it exactly where it is.”

Responding to his tone, Scott comes to a species of attention. That’s an effect Kirk hasn’t managed to invoke in the man to date, and Spock feels a pang of amusement.

“Aye, sir.”

“You should have brought this to my attention earlier,” Spock says. It’s not a reprimand. He can hardly blame Scott for prioritizing repairs over cargo disposition, but it needs to be said all the same.

“Aye, sir.” Scott sighs. “If ye don’t mind my asking, what’d ye need it for, Commander?”

“I believe it will prove useful in establishing the identity of the attackers of the Merta outpost,” Spock replies, reaching for the comm panel. “Ensign Chekov, Lieutenant Pechalat, please report to cargo bay four.”

He waits for their acknowledgments and leaves a perplexed looking Scott in the turbolift.

Spock stops by the science labs to get the requisite equipment and, by the time he makes it to cargo bay four, both Chekov and Pechalat are already waiting.

“What’s this all about, Commander?” Pechalat asks, as he hands her a tricorder.

“We are to establish whether the damage the *Arianna* sustained is compatible with Romulan weaponry,” Spock explains as they step into the cargo bay. He looks over the heaps of broken metal and plastic, stored without any kind of a logical pattern and rather precariously to boot, and suppresses a sigh. “Collecting preliminary data might take a while.”

Pechalat gives him a look. “You think?”

Chekov is gazing around dubiously. “Some of this stuff is structurally unstable. I do not wish to die young.”

“You should have considered a different career path then, Ensign,” Spock says, ducking behind a particularly large fragment of the ship’s outer hull.

Behind him, he hears Chekov’s confused voice, “Did he just make a joke?”

They separate in order to gather more data and conduct independent study. Despite Spock’s prediction, however, they reunite again only one-point-three hours later.

Spock takes in Pechalat’s wide-eyed expression and the deep frown on Chekov’s face and suppresses a sigh. “Judging by your reaction, I take it, we all got the same readings?”

“But it is not possible,” Chekov mutters. “They’re only preliminary findings, Commander, and I must cross-check them with the database, but, according to this,” – he glances at his tricorder almost nervously – “the Romulans did not fire at the *Arianna*. We did. Well, not the *Enterprise* specifically,
of course. But the damage is consistent with Federation-type phasers.”

Pechalat looks at Spock grimly. “I’ve got the same results, Commander.”

Spock nods slowly. “So did I.”

“You don’t seem surprised,” she says, not quite making it a question. “You knew it wasn’t a Romulan attack?”

Spock shakes his head. “Knew? No. Suspected? Yes. I cannot explain what made me doubt—” He trails off, as a sudden thought hits him square in the chest like a gust of ice-cold wind.

It must have shown on his face, because both Chekov and Pechalat look at him in alarm.

“Commander?”

“Sir?”

“Excuse me,” Spock says slowly, carefully measuring words. “I must go check something. Please complete your analysis and forward me the report as soon as possible. In addition, I am marking this data as classified. Speak of it to no one.”

“Aye, sir,” they chorus, but he’s already on the move.

He rushes to his quarters almost on the run, dropping the tricorder in favor of the PADD he left on his desk. Spock sits down and pulls up the image of the ship Lieutenant Kalle had drawn. He stares at it for a few moments in deep concentration, then picks up a stylus, erases two lines, and adds three, reshaping the ship’s aft section.

It hits him like a physical blow, the familiarity of the image, and he stares at it for the longest moment, asking himself how he could have not recognized it at once. Is this yet another example of how thoroughly he can suppress things he doesn’t wish to remember?

Slowly, as though moving underwater, Spock reaches for the intercom, eyes still glued to the image.

“Spock to Captain Kirk.”

The response is almost instantaneous. “Kirk here.”

“Captain, I need to see you and Lieutenant Kalle at once, sir. Could you come to briefing room two?”

It’s a marker of how well Kirk can read him that, despite the tone of their last conversation, he senses the urgency in Spock’s voice.

“We’ll be there in five.”

“Acknowledged.”

They are already waiting for him when he arrives. Lieutenant Kalle looks much as he always does – calm and attentive. Kirk’s expression is inscrutable.

“Gentlemen, thank you for coming; I am aware that the hour is late,” Spock says, striding toward them along the length of the table. He lays down the PADD in front of Kalle. “Lieutenant, if you would take a look. Is that the ship that attacked the outpost?”
Kalle stares down at the image obediently, but without enthusiasm. Suddenly he freezes, his expression turning to stunned.

“Yes,” he breathes out, looking up at Spock in clear shock. “That’s it exactly! I knew I’d recognize it if I saw it again, I just couldn’t remember – Commander, how did you know? That’s it, that’s the ship!”

“Thank you,” Spock says, aware that Kirk’s eyes are fixed on him with the intensity of a phaser cannon. “Lieutenant, would you excuse us?”

There’s a split second pause as Kalle, still overwhelmed, digests the command, then he nods. “Of course. Captain. Commander.”

Kirk waits until the doors slide shut behind him, before demanding curtly, “All right, explain.”

“Mr. Scott has recently brought to my attention that when we beamed over the passengers from the *Arianna*, we had also transported some of the debris. Ensign Chekov, Lieutenant Pechalat and myself have conducted the analysis of those fragments. They are working on the final report as we speak, but the preliminary analysis shows that the damage the ship sustained is incompatible with Romulan disruptors. It is, however, precisely corresponding to military-grade orbital phasers produced by the Federation.”

Kirk, for all that he likes to play dumb, grasps the implications immediately. “Judging by your expression, Mr. Spock, this isn’t going to end up being a story about space pirates and stolen goods?”

“Possible, but unlikely. I did recognize the ship, Captain; that was why the image bothered me. But I couldn’t remember exactly until our discovery prompted me to make the connection.”

Kirk glances at the PADD. “You mean to tell me this is one of ours? I’ve been a shipyard junkie for half my life, Spock. Pretty sure I’ve studied every blueprint in the database, including the antics.”

Spock nods. “This one has never been in the Starfleet database, Captain. It is the type of ship constructed independently and off-planet for a special division of Federation Security.”

Kirk is suddenly very still, eyes locked with Spock’s. “Which division is that?”

Spock doesn’t look away. “Extraction and Execution.”

“And you know this how?”

Spock takes a deep breath. This could cost him his career.

He doesn’t hesitate.

“I had served in that division for approximately eleven months. Extraction.”

Kirk whistles softly. “I see.”

There is no judgment in his tone, but Spock feels the urge to explain.

“It was a long time ago, Captain, during a period of my life when I had made a lot of – questionable choices. Choices I had later come to regret.”

Kirk shakes his head, resting a hand on Spock’s shoulder. “You don’t owe me an explanation, Spock.” He smiles softly. “I’m the resident champion of questionable choices. You’ll get no
Spock nods, bowing his head slightly, breaking eye contact at long last. He regrets it, oh how he
does. But wishing to change the past will not make it so. And regrets are illogical.

“Obviously, Starfleet doesn’t know,” Kirk says quietly, his fingers rubbing soothing, likely
unconscious circles, caressing the blue of Spock’s tunic.

“No.” Spock shakes his head. “Neither does Admiral Pike.” He looks up. “Jim—”

“Oh, you don’t have to say it, I’m not telling him.” Despite the graveness of the situation, Kirk’s eyes
flood with mirth. “I need you right where you are, here with me on this ship. Not to mention I really
prefer you alive and well.”

Spock feels a pang of amusement. “It is not his wrath that I fear. The timing—” He bites his lip,
glancing away. “He might blame himself.”

“Oh,” Kirk exhales softly. Then the grip of his fingers tightens. “Should he?”

Spock blinks, meeting his eyes again, surprised by the sharp vehemence of the question. “No, Jim.
My errors are my own.”

Kirk’s frame loses some of its tension, lips stretching in a quiet smile. “Is it weird that I find this
reassuring?”

Spock rolls his shoulder in a deliberate shrug. “You would.”

They share a moment of quiet understanding, slightly amused and indulgent, but mostly completely
accepting. It is the most at peace Spock has felt for months. Judging by the almost timid joy in Kirk’s
eyes, he’s not the only one.

But the problem is laid right in front of them, and the moment inevitably breaks. Kirk drops his hand,
though he doesn’t move away, turning instead to study the PADD again.

“So what do you think is going on? And before you say anything, let me just state for the record that
this entire thing is already so far beyond logic, I’ll take any kind of speculation, no matter how wild
or far-fetched.”

Spock nods his understanding. “I see three distinct possibilities. Number one, it is possible that the
ship and the equipment could have been stolen.”

Kirk shakes his head. “That many people can’t keep a secret, and even F-Sec isn’t stupid enough to
lose that much firepower and not inform Starfleet.”

“I concur. Possibility number two. Some party or parties within F-Sec have gone rogue.”

“Could be, but what would they want with a remote outpost stuck between two very dangerous
powers? It’s not like Merta had anything of value. It just doesn’t make sense.”

Spock fixes him with a look. “Which leaves us with possibility number three.”

Kirk looks up. “This has been a sanctioned operation. Someone in F-Sec ordered it.”

They ponder this for a moment in silence.

“Perhaps we are overlooking something,” Spock ventures after a while. “I have difficulty accepting
that the Federation authorities could have ordered the deaths of their own personnel.”

Kirk rubs his forehead tiredly. “Yeah, I’m not thrilled by the prospect, either. One thing’s for certain. Tom and all the people he rescued were never supposed to make it. Whoever’s behind the attack on the outpost has gone to great lengths to avoid exposure. The moment we submit this report” – he raps his knuckles against the PADD – “the lives of the survivors will be in danger.” He glances up at Spock. “As well as yours, mine, and every Enterprise crewmember who’s in the know.”

Spock frowns. “Your logic is sound.”

“But?”

“You are not suggesting we do nothing?”

“No, I’m not. But this is deadly serious, pun intended. I’m saying we probably should avoid the official channels until we know exactly what’s going on.”

Spock studies him. “You have a plan.”

Kirk grins wryly. “I hated that we have to go to Deep Space Four of all places, but I’m starting to think it’s fate. Cheer up” – he claps Spock on the shoulder – “you’re not the only person who has an in with the higher echelons. I’ll arrange a meeting.”

He is obviously reluctant to go into details, and Spock simply nods, accepting it. The revelation that the Federation is potentially responsible for the massacre of its own people has measurably tempered his curiosity.

“You know,” Kirk says slowly, leaning against the table, “when I signed up for this gig, this wasn’t what I thought I’d ever have to deal with.”

“Nor I,” Spock says. “It is difficult to assimilate.”

“More for you than for me, I think.” Kirk tilts his head to look up at him. “I’ve never been that big on authority figures.”

But he sounds bitter, Spock thinks. Bitter, and disappointed, and angry at the bottom of that well. Kirk’s trouble with authorities have always stemmed from the fact that whoever had been in charge of him, had managed to betray him sooner or later. Spock knows exactly how persuasive Pike can be, but even bearing that in mind, joining Starfleet has been a giant leap of faith for Kirk. He needs the Federation to be innocent of any wrongdoing even more than Spock does. If it isn’t, there is a very real possibility Starfleet will have more than one rogue ship on their hands.

“You should get some rest, Captain,” Spock says quietly, in lieu of any other reassurance.

Kirk looks surprised for a moment, then smiles softly. “I will, and so should you. How about I meet you at the lab in four hours? We can go through your findings together?”

Spock inclines his head. “That would be acceptable.”

He picks up the PADD and heads for the door, somehow knowing that Kirk needs time to process their alarming discoveries by himself.

“Spock, hold up a moment.”

Spock pauses, almost at the doorway, and looks back. “Captain?”
Kirk rolls his neck, looking uncomfortable. “Look, about Lieutenant Kalle. I – was out of line the other day. You were in your investigative mode, and I – misinterpreted it. I hope you won’t hold it against me.” He offers a tentative grin. “A bit of human irrationality known as wishful thinking.”

Spock contemplates him. Kirk looks drawn and tired, thin in his black shirt, one side of his face still bearing the signs of recent tissue regeneration. He doesn’t look at all like his normal abundantly enthusiastic, over-confident self. His guard is down, as though he doesn’t feel he has to keep it up in his current surroundings.

“Wishful thinking?” Spock repeats slowly, tasting the words. “Perhaps not entirely.”

It takes a moment; then Kirk straightens abruptly, looking up.

“You want to try that again? I think I’m imagining things.”

“I suggest you consult Doctor McCoy if that is the case, Captain. I will see you in four hours.”

The doors slide shut behind him, cutting off Kirk’s amused “Son of a—”

Spock clutches the PADD tighter in his hand and doesn’t smile.
Part V. 5.3

Chapter Summary

“Was that really your mother?”

Kirk deflates, sagging back into his seat. “Yeah.”

Spock considers it carefully for a long moment.

“I believe,” he concludes in the end, having exhausted all logical alternatives, “that she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you.” Kirk catches his look. “No really, she doesn’t. She’s just – look, she’s my mother, is it any wonder that she’s insane?”

Chapter Notes

Yay, an update! Don’t despair of me, I might yet come through. )

Thank you all for your wonderful, delightful, encouraging feedback. It almost feels like old times, and almost makes me believe this story will be finished. I came very close to losing faith at some point. Thank you all, who kept it for me. ♥

This is unbetaed, alas, as usual lately. Sorry about mistakes.

Enjoy? ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5.3

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Despite the misleading numeral, Deep Space Four is the oldest deep space installation owned by Starfleet. It used to be a layover station for freighters long before the Federation was even formed. After the United Earth star fleet became Starfleet, a power in and of itself, the station was requisitioned and retrofitted, but it had never quite managed to acquire the polished cheerfulness of the newly constructed installations.

A hundred years later, it remains a place of chaotic design, with unsymmetrical levels, connected by labyrinths of narrow dark corridors that follow no logical patterns, and permeated by the omnipresent smell of grease, streaming from the space dock section thanks to the inefficient ventilation system. It is, in Spock’s opinion, a suboptimal facility.

Naturally, Kirk loves it.

“This is awesome,” he proclaims, staring at the brass nameplate of the base’s most popular drinking
establishment. The plate reads ‘The Bar.’

“Rather unimaginative.”

Kirk rolls his eyes. “It’s authentic.” He looks Spock up and down. “Nice job with the civvies, by the way. Uhura help you?”

Controlling a flare of irritation, Spock checks that they aren’t within earshot of anyone before replying. “I am capable of dressing myself without assistance, Captain. Shall we go in or do you have further comments on my wardrobe?”

“Always, Mr Spock.” Kirk chuckles and claps him on the shoulder. “So a Vulcan and a human walk into a bar…”

The inside is crowded, dimly lit, and noisy. It strikes Spock as an odd place for a meeting with a ranking member of Starfleet. But had they opted for a much cleaner – and much more exclusive – officers’ lounge two levels up, there would have been no chance of not being noticed and recognized.

Here, a few glances are aimed their way as they enter – a few more when Kirk gets drinks, but being out of uniform in a place overrun by members of at least fifty different species, they aren’t all that interesting. They pick a table further from the bar, but not so far into the corner as to arouse suspicion, and wait.

Spock splits his attention between observing the bar and watching Kirk, who’s growing tenser with every passing minute. Spock has seen him nervous numerous times, but that nervousness has always been mixed with another, stronger emotion. Excitement – when they were about to engage the enemy, determination, even anger.

This time it’s different. Despite the air of levity Kirk’s trying to project, what Spock is really picking up from him is – dread.

“Captain—”

Jim Kirk wouldn’t be Jim Kirk, though, if he didn’t give the performance his best. He sheds his leather jacket and leans back in his chair, hair artfully tousled, eyes hazy in a way that a shot of scotch can’t quite be responsible for.

“Have I ever told you about that time Bones and I—”

Spock listens without actively listening. Now is not the time to confront Kirk, and he busies himself watching the patrons, especially one rowdy group at the bar. He studies them for a few minutes until his attention shifts to the barmaid.

She’s dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, a slim, boyish figure, blond hair with darker roots gathered in a messy ponytail. Moving with alacrity and laughing often, she appears young – twenty, twenty-five at most. But there is something about the confidence of her motions, something in the manner she carries herself that implies the imprint of years, almost but not quite concealed by the youthful appearance.

She steps from behind the bar at some point, a peculiar-looking construction hugging her narrow hips – a wide span of leather that is reminiscent of an old Earth-style weapons belt, except instead of archaic bullets it’s loaded with shot glasses and two bottles of some clear and undoubtedly strong spirit instead of guns.
“Here comes Tequila Girl!” somebody yells, and everyone cheers.

Kirk groans and drops his forehead onto his hands clasped on the table.

Intrigued, Spock watches.

The woman moves smoothly from table to table, unloading glasses from her arsenal, pouring alcohol in a showy manner, and watching her patrons drink, cringing and swearing. She laughs at their jokes that are anything but decent, gives as good as she gets, breaks a few unsolicited touches with no effort or mercy whatsoever, and generally – rules – Spock thinks is the term.

Most of the customers are drunk and loud by the time she’s made a few rounds about the bar, and looks up straight to Kirk and Spock’s table. A malicious little smile curves the corner of her mouth, and she moves toward them unmistakably, eyes dark with intent.

Spock can’t quite look away. The barmaid’s fascinating in the way of hurricanes, tsunamis, and other natural disasters. A terrifying and riveting presence.

Spock has only ever known one other person who had that effect on him, and he’s currently sharing his table.

Oh.

An icy draft trickles down his spine. He looks at Kirk, then back at the woman, who looks more her age up close, back and forth, until—

“Captain—” he chokes on the rest, and his voice comes out strangled to his own ears.

“I’m sorry,” Kirk groans, looking around as though searching for a place to hide. “I really am, I just couldn’t bring myself to tell you, and I really didn’t want to, but it’s not like we have a choice—”

“Drinks?” the barmaid purrs, beaming down at them viciously.

“Can we skip that part?” Kirk asks in a plaintive tone.

“Nope. My bar, my rules. Drink up, both of you.” She pushes two very full glasses toward them.

“Vulcans do not imbibe alcohol,” Spock tries. The very smell is turning his stomach.

She smiles at him with mock sympathy and reaches to pat his cheek. “Oh, darling, I know. But you have to.”

“You are a horrible person and I absolutely loathe you,” Kirk informs her, before looking at Spock. “I am so sorry.”

“Come off it, Jimmy, he’s not made of glass. If he can’t handle a little Cuervo, he’s got no business being here. Drink up, boys.”

They reach for their glasses, and their eyes lock. Spock feels as though the entire affair has become some sort of ritual, and he can neither stop it, nor look away. Kirk’s eyes are a kaleidoscope of humiliation, sympathy, support, utter horror, and a dozen other emotions. His free hand brushes Spock’s lying on the table, the touch magnetic and simple, a flicker of shared comfort. Spock throws his head back and swallows what feels like liquid fire.

He can’t breathe. His eyes water. He has consumed alcohol before many times, but it had never been like this. The liquid in his glass had nothing to do with the original contents of the bottle, of that he is
certain. He will survive, but he must look—

“Spock! Spock, oh my God, are you okay? You – you’re absolutely evil! Why would you do this—”

She’s laughing. Spock opens his eyes, unaware he’s closed them, blinking and trying to refocus his vision, his cheeks wet with tears.

“Sorry, it was too good an opportunity to pass up,” she says unconvincingly, laughing still. “Get him cleaned up, I’ll come back for you when it quiets down a bit.”

“Spock! Say something. Are you okay?”

Kirk’s hands are clasping his shoulders, and Spock shakes them off unconsciously, watching the retreating back of his tormentor.

“I am fine,” he replies, his voice sounding scratchy and abused. He dries his face quickly and meets Kirk’s anxious eyes, stowing his embarrassment to be dealt with later. “Was that really your mother?”

Kirk deflates, sagging back into his seat. “Yeah.”

Spock considers it carefully for a long moment.

“I believe,” he concludes in the end, having exhausted all logical alternatives, “that she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you.” Kirk catches his look. “No really, she doesn’t. She’s just – look, she’s my mother, is it any wonder that she’s insane?”

It’s not insanity, and they both know it. Winona Kirk has every reason to detest his very existence, especially in continuous close proximity to her son. For some reason, the thought is far more unsettling than it logically should be.

“I was under the impression,” Spock says, changing the subject, “that Commander Kirk was currently a high ranking member of Starfleet Engineering Corps.”

“She is.”

“And tending the bar—”

“Is a hobby of hers she’d picked up when Starfleet mistakenly thought she’d retired and she mistakenly thought they’d thrown her out. The second time.”

“I see.”

Kirk rolls his eyes. “It’s complicated. But my mom has always been the queen of the scuttlebutt. Half of Starfleet owes her a favor – and it’s the right half, mind you. I’d rather go to Pike, too, but since we can’t exactly wait that long, and were headed here of all places anyway—”

“I understand, Captain. It was a logical solution.”

Kirk cringes, but says nothing to that.

Commander Kirk joins them again twenty minutes later, much to Spock’s relief, without her life-threatening ammunition, but with a round of drinks.

“Don’t worry.” She smiles at Spock, sliding a tall glass in front of him. “It’s Altair Water.”
Spock examines the glass carefully, resisting the urge to reach for his tricorder. “Thank you.”

She beams. “We haven’t been properly introduced. Commander Winona Kirk.” She flashes a perfect ta’al.

Spock returns it. “It is an honor to meet you, sir.”

“Don’t.” She waves him off dismissively, pulling up a chair. “We’re the same rank – yes, yes, I know, I have seniority, but I just tried to poison you, so it’s Winona. Sorry about that, by the way,” she adds, almost managing to sound sincere. “You see, Sam, my eldest, ran off with a band and then met that girl somewhere and eloped. And Jimmy never brought home any girlfriends” – she nods at Spock – “or boyfriends, so I never got to torture anyone about their intentions. I feel like I’m owed.”

“And my first officer fits into this charming story – or should I say medical history – how?” Kirk asks, glaring at her.

“Aw, Jimmy, don’t be such a spoilsport. I don’t hear the commander here objecting.”

“That’s because you’ve robbed him of the power of speech with your concoction. What was that, by the way? Warp plasma?”

“Two quarters Denebian firewhiskey distilled, one quarter Absolut Peppar, one quarter moonshine, a sniff of coolant, a touch of Tabasco,” Winona replies readily. “I call it ‘The Rite of Passage.’”

Kirk stares at her. “How are you not in prison?”

“How are you?” she fires back. “Hacked any more officer’s tests lately?”

“Perhaps,” Spock says diplomatically, “I should give you some privacy for your reunion and return later—”

“No!” both Kirks say at the same time, each grabbing him by the wrist. The ferocity of Winona’s smile softens a little as she lets go of him. Kirk’s expression is simply imploring.

“I apologize, Commander. I imagine Vulcans treat their parents with more respect. This must be a shock to you. Then again, you live with Jimmy, so probably not.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake—”

“It is – unusual,” Spock admits, speaking over Kirk. “However, my concern is mostly that I am intruding.”

Winona chuckles, glancing briefly down at the table. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s the case.”

Kirk pulls his hand away with yet another glare, but a moment later his expression sets into one of determination. “Mom, it might come as a shock to you, but I did mean what I said in the message. We need information.”

Winona sighs, straightening up, and in a split-second transformation, she ceases to be a mildly deranged bar lady and becomes competence personified. Spock doesn’t think she’d object to him calling her ‘sir’ now.

“First things first, where is the crew of the Arianna now?”

“We couldn’t keep them onboard,” Kirk says, exchanging a dark look with Spock. “That would have meant bringing them all in on this, and I don’t think it’s a good idea. The less they know, the
safer they’ll be.”

“Which means you’ve transferred them to the starbase accommodations, which means Starfleet knows now that there have been survivors from the Merta massacre,” Winona summarizes before giving Spock an impatient look. “Oh, stop looking so nervous, Commander. Hasn’t this one taught you anything? There’s no safer place to talk than a bar full of drunk and loud people.”

Spock has his reservations about that, but opts for a question in lieu of arguing. “You believe the survivors are in danger even though we have yet to disclose our findings?”

“Yes, your findings. Very curious.” Winona regards him with narrowed eyes. “It’s – extraordinary, – Commander, that you were able to make that determination.”

“It doesn’t matter how we got there,” Kirk says quickly, glancing at Spock. “He’s right, isn’t he? They were our weapons.”

“Unfortunately.” Winona nods grimly. “All right, fine. Arina was right. Nobody wanted to involve you kids in this, but I don’t see that we have a choice.”

“Us kids?” Kirk repeats incredulously. “We saved the damn planet, woman!”

“Quiet, you. There’s been a situation developing on Earth for the last few months concerning the peace talks with the Romulans.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “I was under the impression that the negotiations were going well.”

“A little too well for some people’s liking.” Winona purses her lips. “There was even talk about making the ceasefire permanent instead of renewing it every two years. Not everyone on Earth – not everyone in Starfleet was happy about that.”

“I can’t believe anyone would be rooting for war,” Kirk says.

Winona looks at him thoughtfully. “Jim, it’s a lot easier to cut your losses and move on when you’re galloping across the galaxy on a starship exploring strange new worlds. Being stuck on Earth, having to clean up Nero’s mess, being reminded of everything we lost every day—” She shakes her head. “I imagine only the Vulcans have it rougher, but Vulcans are Vulcans. They don’t know how to not be constructive.”

Spock lowers his eyes. “It is not logical to blame the Romulans for what had happened. Nero was one individual, acting solely in the interests his own selfish pursuit. He was not even of this universe.”

“Commander, you’re not that naïve. Anger has no logic. Pain has no logic. You’ve done away with Nero, congratulations. The rest of us didn’t have the satisfaction of sending him straight back to hell. Some people are looking for someone to take it out on. Romulans seem like the perfect target, all things considered.” She lifts up a hand. “I’m not saying it’s right. I’m saying this has been the mood back home for a while now. And the worst part is, it’s spreading through the higher echelons of Starfleet Command like a disease.”

“You are implying there is a conspiracy within Starfleet to sabotage the peace negotiations,” Spock doesn’t quite make it a question.

Winona frowns at him. “We’re not sure it’s a conspiracy exactly. We only know with certainty that there is at least one high ranking officer directly involved. But it goes so far up the chain of command, we can’t risk making any direct accusations.”
“Who’s ‘we’?” Kirk asks.

“My knitting club, Jim, who do you think?” Winona rolls her eyes. “You don’t have to know their names.”

“Admiral Nechayev,” Spock assumes.

“Ah yes, I forgot.” Winona smiles at him sharply. “You’re buddies with my dear old roommate Arina. She’s very fond of you, by the way. She thinks you’re – what was it? ‘Competent, respectful, and obedient.’ Sounds like a kiss of death to me, but Arina always had a thing for loyal adjutants. She’s keeping a place for you on her staff when you’re done babysitting my son.”

Spock tenses, glancing to his left, but Kirk just laughs.

“Good luck with that.” He looks at Spock, genuine warmth in his eyes. “‘Respectful and obedient?’ Has she met you?” He makes a face at his mother. “In any case, I found him first, and I’m keeping him.”

Winona’s smile turns sugary. “Of course you are. You have a thing, apparently – what do you kids call it these days? A kink? – for being strangled, so naturally why wouldn’t you keep him?”

And that, Spock thinks, is the true heart of Winona’s animosity. He has sensed it since the first moment of their interaction, and he cannot say she’s being unreasonable. He did try to kill her son. Twice. Three times, although no one, with the possible exception of Dr McCoy knows about the one in the cell. No matter the extenuating circumstances, no mother would look kindly on that, nor should she.

“Didn’t we agree not to discuss my kinks when I was fourteen?” Kirk asks with affected boredom. “Also, aren’t you tired of this passive-aggressive shtick? You got a problem with Spock – we get it. We got it the first five times, too. We don’t care.”

“Captain—”

Kirk looks to him sharply. “Fine, I don’t care, and you shouldn’t. It’s none of her business. You don’t work with her, you work with me, and you know very well where I stand, Spock.” He glares at Winona. “I’ve no doubt that you’ve read every report the Enterprise has ever submitted, yes, even the classified ones. There’s no way you don’t know that he had saved my life, the lives of my crew, and my ship a dozen times over, so forgive me if I don’t give a flying fuck about what your problem is.”

Winona contemplates him for a while in silence, then shakes her head. “You have it bad, kiddo.”

For a moment, it looks as though Kirk is going to bolt, leaving angry scorch marks in his wake, but he only takes a deep breath, pressing his fingers to the bridge of his nose. He looks older suddenly, much older than his years.

“Can we get back to how Starfleet is trying to shoot itself in the head and take the Federation down with it? I don’t care who the members of your knitting club are. I want to know what’s going on.”

“All right.” Winona leans forward. “In a nutshell, someone within Starfleet is trying to start a war. Our suspect list mostly consists of admirals, but in truth any officer of command rank could be responsible. The only condition – they have to be high enough in the chain of command or hold very specific positions in order to be able to influence other agencies, especially Federation Security.”

Kirk and Spock exchange an uneasy glance.
“After Nero, there’s been an ongoing battle over who’s ultimately responsible for defending us in the future – Starfleet or F-Sec. Starfleet Command has been trying for years to take over F-Sec, they’ve been pressuring the president pretty hard. Several months ago, F-Sec had some of its rather valuable equipment – misplaced. Normally, no one outside would have gotten the wind of it, but with the level of scrutiny Starfleet’s been exerting lately, they couldn’t hush it up completely.”

“And by valuable equipment you mean—”

“An array of prototype weaponry and a few ships.”

Spock looks his opinion on this which Kirk voices. “How exactly do a few ships get misplaced? They forgot where they parked them or something?”

“Starfleet wondered that, too, especially as F-Sec wasn’t supposed to have any ships except transports in the first place. F-Sec managed to insist on conducting an internal investigation, but that didn’t stop the information from spreading. We still don’t know who’s responsible, but at least now we know what happened to those ships – thanks to you.”

“And you think someone in Starfleet is the culprit,” Kirk muses out loud, “because F-Sec would stand nothing to gain if we go to war.”

Spock nods his agreement. “It doesn’t have the capability or resources to participate in open warfare. Starfleet would overtake the initiative without needing to exert additional effort.” He pauses. “Starfleet is also probably relying on reports of the current instability in the Romulan government.”

“What better moment for a short victorious war?” Kirk says wryly.

“The two of you are disturbing, you know that?” Winona sighs. “It’s not Starfleet, though. We aren’t all warmongering psychopaths. One individual, perhaps a small group. We’ve been trying to investigate without attracting attention. We’ve intercepted a few communications between our secret Napoleon and an arms dealer named Kosan.”

Spock flinches.

“With the information you brought, it’s a fair bet Kosan’s crew was hired to destroy the outpost, pretending to be Romulans. Obviously, they didn’t count on survivors or that there would be any doubt as to who’s responsible.”

Spock looks down at his hands clasped on the table, his knuckles have gone white. He forces himself to relax, pondering the information.

“Well, since we haven’t received a General Order yet, they’ll have to try again,” Kirk says grimly. “Thanks to Lieutenant Kalle, there are survivors from Merta, and their stories will be enough to muddy the waters even if Spock doesn’t share what he found with the class. They’ll have to try again.”

Winona nods. “We’re counting on that. We’ve made it known that all communications of Starfleet and F-Sec personnel are now monitored at all times. We have the means” – she looks down at her nails for a moment – “to ensure it.”

“Never cross an engineer,” Kirk mutters.

“A week from now, the governor of Altair VI is getting inaugurated. There’s going to be a huge gala, as pompous and loud as you can imagine. Starfleet’s trying to make nice after the Karra incident, so we’re pulling out all the stops. All the admiralty will be there, I think they’re even pulling
people out of retirement for that. No less than seven flagships to attend – you’ll be getting that order in a few hours. It’s foreign territory, not covered by our security net, and we have information that Kosan is going to be there. He’s been pretty consistent in avoiding authorities for the last ten years, so there’s no other reason for him to make an appearance now than to make contact.”

“So you’re planning to catch him in the act and make him lead you to whoever hired him?” Kirk asks.

“That’s the general idea.” Winona purses her lips. “Problem is, we have no idea what Kosan looks like.”

Kirk stares at her. “Then how exactly is it supposed to work? Are you hoping he’ll leave you his card upon entering or something?”

“Do you have any suggestions?” Winona asks him acidly. “Everyone’s a critic, Jimmy. We’re working on it. We can’t let another Merta happen now, can we?”

It feels like jumping off a cliff, but Spock doesn’t see an alternative.

“Perhaps, I can be of assistance,” he says, making a point of looking solely at Winona. “I have met Kosan. I did not see his face, but I am certain that I can recognize his voice.”

The silence this announcement produces is absolute. For the first time since the conversation has begun, Spock becomes aware of the room around them.

“Charming,” Winona says at long last. “Really moving up in the world, aren’t you?”

“Mom—”

“Shut it, Jimmy. Friends with arms dealers – this is new and exciting information about your above-and-beyond first officer. I’m savoring. Well, Mr Spock, it would appear that you’re definitely going to the ball. I hope you look good in crystal slippers.”

Spock wisely chooses not to respond.

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The communal hall of the guest quarters of Deep Space Four is equipped with a fountain. Spock stares at the bizarre extravagance for several long moments, trying to find a logical explanation for the blatant waste of resources. It’s not even aesthetically pleasing.

Someone chuckles beside him.

“I know what you mean,” Lieutenant Kalle says as Spock looks up. “Damn wasteful and ugly to boot. Reminds me of home.”

“And where is home, Lieutenant?” Spock asks, curious.

“Athos Colony. My folks still live there, but I haven’t been home since I joined Starfleet.”

Spock nods to himself. Athos. A distant colony, a high-gravity world, which would account for the lieutenant’s impressive physique and his charming lack of sophistication.

“Is there anything I can help you with, Commander?” Kalle asks hesitantly. “Captain Kirk told me to meet him here, but he didn’t say—”
“He will be here momentarily and will fill you in,” Spock says, frowning slightly.

He’s been adamantly opposed to the idea and said so, but Kirk wouldn’t budge. ‘We know what we know thanks to him, Spock. I’m not going to tell him everything, but I can’t leave him in the dark completely. It’s not right.’

“Oh. Then—"

“I am here to see someone else,” Spock explains. “I will not keep you.”

“It’s not a problem, sir,” Lieutenant Kalle says a little too quickly. “I actually wanted to – forgive my presumption, but I couldn’t ask the captain, and, after five days in his company, I feel like I know you.”

Spock’s eyebrows shoot up. “I beg your pardon?”

“He talks about you a great deal,” Kalle says, a small smile playing over his lips. “I only meant to say, sir, if there’s ever an opening on the Enterprise, I would be honored if you considered me.”

Spock blinks, digesting. It appears the captain has been recruiting. Interesting, though perhaps not entirely surprising.

For a moment, he pictures Lieutenant Kalle stationed on the Enterprise permanently. The image prompts him to seriously contemplate saying, ‘I regret, Lieutenant, that I do not believe you would be a good fit for our crew, since I actually need them to perform their duties instead of following you around like a band of sycophants.’ It is surprising how strong the temptation is.

“I will bear that in mind, Lieutenant,” Spock says out loud, unwilling to be more specific.

“Thank you, sir. That’s all I’m asking.” Kalle smiles.

The room behind them has filled with other inhabitants of the complex while they were talking, and Spock blames the elevated level of noise for failing to notice Kirk’s arrival.

“Morning, Tom,” the captain says cheerfully, coming to a stop beside them. He looks winded. “Sorry, the station commander kept me longer than I thought.” He looks over at Spock. “I need you to go talk to him and be Vulcan and intimidating, because he finds our repairs schedule – ‘unrealistic.’”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “And you believe I will succeed where you have failed because—”

“He has an IDIC badge under a black band on his desk.”

Spock can’t quite stifle a wince. “Sometimes, Captain, I truly lament that you seem to completely lack anything remotely resembling morality.”

Kirk grins at him. “I love you, too.” He claps Spock on the shoulder. “Give my best to T’Pring.”

“There is no need,” Spock replies, not a bit vindictively. “As she is here, and you can tell her yourself.”

“Gentlemen,” T’Pring’s melodic voice makes Kirk freeze in place, a guilty expression on his face.

She approaches, carrying a small travel bag, undoubtedly acquired on the station. She looks even more regal and sophisticated in plain clothes than she had in her traditional robes.
“T’Pring.” Spock bows, swallowing his amusement.

She returns the gesture, coming to his side, but her eyes are on Lieutenant Kalle—

—who has been gazing at her, transfixed, the entire time, Spock realizes, feeling mildly stunned. He hasn’t noticed them interacting much on the ship, but then again, he had other things on his mind, and T’Pring is practically smiling at the lieutenant, looking as warm as a Vulcan could possibly appear.

Kirk obviously hasn’t been aware, either, if his astonished expression is any indication. His eyes, as he meets Spock’s though, are in equal measure shocked and amused, so Spock doesn’t believe that Dr. McCoy’s prognosis of a broken heart will come to pass.

Spock clears his throat. “T’Pring. I do not wish to interrupt, but your transport will be departing in fifteen minutes.”

“Of course.” She glances at him briefly, a faint blush coloring her cheeks, before finally turning to Kirk. “Thank you for your hospitality, Captain.”

“No apologies are required,” she replies, her eyes drawn to Kalle again. “Lieutenant—”

The humans don’t hear it, not at first. Spock’s hands fly to his ears, but the kind of sound that can’t be heard can’t be blocked, either. He’s on his knees, mouth falling open in agony, and under his skull – sharp/acid/destruction.

T’Pring falls down beside him, a heavy thud against his thigh, her forehead smashing into the floor, blood streaming from her nose. Kirk’s and Kalle’s alarmed faces swing in and out of focus, but Spock cannot concentrate, interpret – cannot think.

He sees, he doesn’t hear it. A gigantic orange and purple ball of flame unfurls rapidly in the far corner of the hall, like a flower blooming. People scream, they must be. Trying to get out. Running. Fire. Explosion. Fire.

A firm hand clasps his arm and pulls. Spock can’t feel himself moving. He’s not carried, so he must be. The room is swinging around him like a ship in a storm, a disorienting, wild motion. The connecting door to the rest of the station is suddenly before him, and he’s being pushed.

No.

Spock resists. He can’t think, not in words. But he recognizes the hand and the intent. No. He will not go without—

He falls over the threshold just as the heavy door slides shut, cutting him off from the captain.

It’s quiet. And then sounds. Each one like a nail hammered into his ears – sharp, slicing pain. The room stops spinning. He’s lying with his head on T’Pring’s stomach, both of them shapeless heaps of flesh on the floor.

Someone moans. T’Pring? Himself?

Spock pushes up unsteadily, grabbing for the wall. His vision whites out, coalescing back in chaotic swirls of color. His ears and nose are bleeding, but he can hear. And then he finally pushes through his shock and gets to his feet.
The locking mechanism is jammed, and Spock smashes his hand against the panel.

“Computer, open the door.”

“This area is off limits. Fire inside. Emergency protocols are engaged.”

“Override,” Spock demands. “Command authorization—”

“Cannot comply. This area is off limits. Fire inside. Emergency protocols are engaged.”

Growling, Spock rips the panel off, ignoring the shaking of his hands as he tries to override the locking mechanism manually. Deep Space Four is a very old space station, and its emergency protocols are the heritage of the far less humane days. Spock knows what they entail only too well. If the fire suppressing system doesn’t engage, the entire deck will decompress, sucking out oxygen, flame, and – anything alive caught inside.

Vacuum is the most effective fire extinguisher.

“Attention. Decompression in five seconds.”

“No!” Spock struggles with the insides of the lock stubbornly, already knowing that nothing he does will convince the mechanism to open. His mind is racing and he can’t comprehend the possibility. Will Kirk know what is coming? The decompression will be brief, but what are the chances—

He barely registers T’Pring reaching out for the comm to ask for emergency assistance, but she’s too late. Both of them are too late.

“Attention. Decompression in progress.”

Spock shares a desperate look with T’Pring, pulling his hand out of the wiring. Time is slipping by agonizingly slow and yet so dangerously fast.

Two seconds. Five seconds. Eight.

Spock hits the doors with his fist, willing the mechanism to open. Even if the people inside had managed to fasten themselves or hold on to something, they will start losing consciousness momentarily – and then…

How much time does it take to douse the flame? Surely not that long.

Eleven seconds.

“Pressurizing the compartment.”

Spock lets out a loud, shaky breath, pressing his palm against the doorway.


With a loud hiss, the door slides open. Spock all but falls inside.

It’s havoc and yet it’s not at all a mess. Soot on the walls. Doors to the compartments – deformed, twisted, or sucked completely out. The dry fountain, water trying to break through a thin layer of ice on the surface.

People.
Those who managed to get hooked to something, to hold on. Mostly unconscious now. Some moaning.

"Jim!"

Spock rushes to where Jim is lying prone on the floor, his left wrist tied to the railing with his belt, his right hand still clutched around a young woman’s ankle, a dead man’s grip. The woman is conscious, whimpering softly, blood streaks frozen on her cheeks.

But Jim is motionless, silent, and, for a horrifying moment, Spock can’t discern if he’s breathing at all.

He lands hard on his knees, pulling Jim’s wrist free of the improvised restraint, hand swollen and discolored. Bending low, Spock presses his ear to Jim’s chest, fingers flying up to his neck to check for pulse. It’s there, faint, erratic. Jim’s face is a mask of frozen blood, his lips are split. His eyes are closed, but there’s blood on his lashes, blood traces down the side of his neck, trickling from his ears, blood – so much blood.

“His left lung has collapsed,” T’Pring’s voice startles Spock. He hasn’t noticed her coming near or pulling out her scanner. “The right one is about to. I’ve called for assistance, but if he’s not resuscitated within the next thirty seconds, he might not recover.”

Unacceptable.

More people are beginning to stir, but there’s still no sign of the medical team, their response rate unforgivably slow.

Spock leans over, pushing Jim’s hair out of his face, his hands lingering.

“Spock, you are in no condition to,” T’Pring says, before he even knows he’s made a decision. “Spock!” She grabs his wrist. “There is no telling if his brain is damaged beyond repair. Contact with an unstable mind is not safe.”

“I don’t care.” He shakes her off.

“Spock, be reasonable. You will not help him by injuring yourself. If he’s too far gone, you risk permanent damage to your mind. You could go insane!”

He doesn’t listen. Fingers finding Jim’s psi points unerringly, Spock throws himself in, propelling himself into the face of the abyss.

It’s a chaotic, kaleidoscopic freefall, nothing at all like the first time that Spock has touched this mind almost a year ago. What a careful, tightly guarded contact that had been. There is nothing hesitant or delicate about Spock’s touch now. He takes the most direct route he can find toward his goal, not allowing himself to be distracted by bright flashes of sensations all around him.

_Breathe_, he instructs the only functioning lung, willing it to work. The human body, infinitely more fragile than the Vulcan, is still a miracle of self-healing abilities. Most humans don’t know how to use them, and Spock instruct Jim’s mind, careful but persistent, unrelenting in his effort. He syncs their heartbeats and slows his own. He has a narrow window before his own mind starts to suffer, but Jim is more important now, Jim is—

All around him.

The sound of laughter. The sensation of sunlight on his face. One would assume that after everything
Jim has been through, his mind would be a warzone, all sharp edges and distortion. But it’s not like that at all. Not sleeping, not conscious – this is where Jim’s personality resides, and it’s bubbling with warmth and color. Orange, crimson, terracotta, gold, red like the peak of Vulcan summer, sun splashing on the surface of a mountain stream, light falling through a stained-glass window, mesmerizing, enthralling, alive.

Spock knows he’s drowning, knows that he has to go back. It takes all of his willpower to make himself resurface, a painful ascension to the level where he’s still connected, still helping Jim breathe, but at the same time is aware of the world around him.

“Spock! Fucking finally, I was about to slap you.”

McCoy’s voice. McCoy’s hands somewhere on his person, touching him… no, touching Jim.

“I don’t know what you’re doing, but keep doing it until he’s ready for transport. He’s burned, and he’s suffering from severe decompression sickness. God damn it, Jim! I hate when you do that. Spock. Spock! Nod if you understand. Good. Hold on.”

Spock does. There is no force in the universe that could make him let go right now. He is vaguely aware of the medical teams working on others, the plethora of alarmed sounds from the medical equipment, people rushing back and forth, the urgent tones of their voices as they shout commands…

Pulling back felt like severing a limb. Letting Jim go completely is agony and panic, but he does eventually at McCoy’s insistent prodding. He opens his eyes, but his vision is blurry, a blizzard of dark spots. McCoy’s hand gripping his shoulder.

“Enterprise, three to transport directly to Medbay.”

The world dissolves around him.

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McCoy’s office is directly across from the intensive care unit, a fact that Spock can’t help but be aware of. It’s semi-dark in the room, and the bright lights outside are a natural magnet for his eyes. He forces himself not to look.

“Forty-nine casualties altogether, sixteen dead, thirty-three injured,” Winona says grimly as she walks in. “We’re damn lucky it wasn’t the other way around.”

“Merta survivors?”

She hands him a PADD. “See for yourself. It’s no coincidence that you, Jim, and Lieutenant Super Powers were all there when that thing went off. Whoever’s behind this really doesn’t want to take chances.”

Spock scans the list. “Most of these people are going to recover. Including Lieutenant Kalle.”

“Yes, that one’s got more lives than a cat.” Winona’s tone is bitter.

“It is illogical to blame him for surviving.”

Both Spock and Winona turn to look at T’Pring. She’s sitting in a guest chair, furthest from the doorway, back ramrod straight, eyes still disturbingly green. The blood will eventually clear out on its own, Spock knows. He also knows he doesn’t look any better.
“Sorry,” Winona says, not sounding particularly apologetic. “But the whole thing has just become personal for me.”

T’Pring lifts an eyebrow, unimpressed. “Because your son was hurt?” She glances at Spock. “Is that the much lauded human compassion?”

“Listen, you midget—”

“Enough.” Spock grasps Winona firmly by the arm, pulling her back. “Commander Kirk, T’Pring – this is hardly helpful.”

For a moment, they both stare at him rebelliously, but then mercifully desist. Spock breathes out a quiet sigh of relief. He’s not up to breaking up a fight tonight.

“I assume you’ll be heading up the investigation?” Spock asks Winona.

She nods grimly. “Such as it is. Most of the evidence has been blown out into space.”

“Surveillance?”

“Hasn’t really been working anywhere except critical areas for the last decade or so.” Winona scoffs. “That’s DS4 for you. Probably the best place to pull off something like this if you don’t want to be caught.”

“I am confident you will produce the results.”

She looks at him as though he has delivered some grave insult. “Of course I’ll ‘produce the results.’ I’ll nail the bastard, but, unless there’s a note pinned in there somewhere, detailing who’s responsible, it won’t happen before Altair. What’s more, it’ll keep me here throughout. Forgive me, but I’m not so confident that you will produce the results.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Then I shall endeavor to prove you wrong.” He turns toward T’Pring. “The transport that was supposed to take you to the colony is still here. Can you trust its crew?”

T’Pring looks curious. “I have known them for many years. While I was serving on the Vulcan medical ship, most of them were under my command.”

Spock nods. “I know the resources of the colony are limited, but, as far as I am informed, there is no major outbreak of any disease at the moment.” T’Pring inclines her head in confirmation. “Will you consider accepting the victims of this incident under your care and take them to New Vulcan?”

T’Pring’s eyes narrow. “The transport is capable of accommodating thirty-three people.”

“Thirty-two,” Spock corrects. “Captain Kirk will remain here.”

T’Pring lowers her eyes for a moment. “Dr. McCoy informs me that Lieutenant Kalle’s injuries are severe. The hospital on New Vulcan” – her lips quirk in scorn of the colloquial human name –“is equipped with a burn unit as advanced as that at Starfleet Medical, and it is closer. I was hoping to obtain permission from the lieutenant’s family to transfer him there. Taking on the other victims would be logical.” She looks up at Spock. “But I do not have the authority to send them there.”

“I do,” Spock says.

“Don’t you mean I do?” McCoy’s voice comes from behind them. The doctor walks through the door and walks straight to his desk, reaching for a tumbler. He looks ten years older. “It’s liquid
“stimulant,” he says, catching Spock’s look. “I’m tired of hypos. And yes, good thinking. We should send them all to New Vulcan. They are the closest rehabilitation facility. As CMO, I can give that order. Not that it won’t be questioned, but I don’t really care.”

T’Pring stands up. “I will make the necessary preparations. I assume discretion would be preferable?”

“Highly.” Spock nods. And then, because he can no longer wait, “Doctor?”

McCoy looks at him for the longest moment, then glances back at Winona. “He’ll be fine,” he says at long last. “Eventually. He’ll make a full recovery, though not overnight. I saved his hand and reset his shoulder. His burns are treated, and regenerative therapy is nothing he’s not familiar with. But he has a lot of scar tissue in one lung and we’ll have to completely regrow the other, so it’ll be a while before I clear him, and even after that it’ll be weeks of physical therapy. Knowing him, he’ll probably pull something long before then.”

Spock breathes out slowly. “Brain function?”

McCoy holds his eyes. “Normal. One hundred percent capacity. He’s actually awake now, though he doesn’t like it.”

Winona walks over to him and hugs him tightly. “Thank you,” she whispers, “for saving his life.”

McCoy pats her on the back awkwardly, but his eyes are still on Spock. “I didn’t.”

“Can we see him?” Winona asks, not listening.

“Sure, what the hell. Not too long, though, I’m putting him under in a little while. I remember the last time he’s been regrowing lungs on me.” He rubs his arm. “I still have bruises.”

Winona follows him out, T’Pring in tow. Spock lingers, suddenly uncertain.

There’s a cluster of people already in front of Kirk’s room. The bridge crew, naturally, but there’s also Hendorff, and Pechalat, and a few other people Spock has never noticed to be particularly sentimental.

“Oh good God, what are you all doing in my Medbay?” McCoy fires up predictably. “He’s fine, he’ll be fine, and you can visit him – no more than two at a time! – later. Now, unless you have some dire medical emergency, get the hell out.”

“Doctor—” Nyota scowls at him.

“Except Uhura,” McCoy amends quickly. “Because I like her.”

“Because you’re scared of her, you mean,” Sulu mutters not quite under his breath. A few people laugh.

“Is the captain really going to be all right, Dr. McCoy?” Chekov asks with such open concern that even McCoy’s grouchiness has to give.

“He’ll be fine, kid. He just needs his beauty sleep.” He waits until the room clears out and turns to the rest of them. “You have ten minutes,” he says and keys the door open.

Winona dives in, followed closely by Nyota. Spock hesitates.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t overwhelm him,” he says in response to McCoy’s questioning look.
McCoy rolls his eyes, stepping closer to him and grabbing his arm. “He said your name before he regained consciousness, and when he did regain it, you were the first person he asked for. I might not be the king of logical deduction as some other people I could name, but I’m pretty sure that means he wants to see you.”

Which of course means Spock has to go in. He feels sorely unprepared for it.

The room is a bright white bubble. Kirk can’t be immediately seen due to the elevated biobed and tissue regenerator hooked over his chest. Winona is standing to his left, Nyota to his right. McCoy steps closer without hesitation, checking on the readouts and scowling.

“I’m bringing Uhura in on this,” Kirk is telling Winona, voice low and hoarse as if he has a severe cold, but recognizably, unmistakably, his. “The rest of them can claim plausible deniability, but we’ll need her to monitor the subspace frequencies.”

“In on what?” Nyota demands, frowning.

“Don’t make that face, it’ll freeze that way.” Kirk teases. Nyota sticks out her tongue at him. “Spock will explain. Where is Spock?”

“I’m here, Captain,” Spock replies, not really knowing his own voice.

He can feel them all staring at him as he moves forward. Nyota steps slightly aside to give him room, and then—

“Spock.” Kirk is smiling at him, grinning really, like a human child upon having spotted a candy store. It’s pure, unadulterated joy, and Spock wishes he could have had something to hold on to.

“Captain,” he says hoarsely. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, you know. I love growing lung tissue, but Bones said he’d found some really good drugs since the last time, so I might not even break his arm this time around. What about you? You look very… green. Did Bones not check you up or something?”

“Oh course not,” McCoy grumbles. “Because I never gave my medical oath, and I hate the hobgoblin, so I let him wander the corridors bleeding out of his ears, Jim – what do you think?”

Kirk scowls at him. “You’re a horrible person, so how should I know?”

“You’re an ungrateful little shit, Jim, you know that? Er… sorry, ma’am.”

“No, please, I’m glad someone said it who wasn’t me. I swear I raised him better than this. I don’t know where I went wrong.”

“You raised me in a barn! Uhura here thought I was having sex with farm animals – which, we didn’t even have any animals!”

“Oh, my God.” Nyota buries her face in her hands, giggling.

“Just how good are these drugs, Doctor?” Winona asks silkily.

“Very.” McCoy sighs. “Which is why anyone who wants to keep their sanity should go. Now.”

“Get well, Jim,” Nyota says, ruffling his hair.

Winona leans over to kiss his forehead. “Feel better, kiddo. We have a big conversation ahead about
staying inside rooms that are on fire.”

Kirk groans. With one lingering look at Spock, Winona leaves.

“She doesn’t hate you,” Kirk insists, hand nudging at Spock’s side. “She’s just stubborn.”

Spock gives up and stills Kirk’s hand with his own. “It is of no consequence, Captain.”

Kirk looks impossibly sad.

“Jim,” Spock amends.

Kirk beams.

“This is cruel and unusual, and I didn’t sign up for this,” McCoy grumbles, loading the hypo. “Say goodnight, Jim. The hobgoblin will be here in the morning.”

“Night, Spock,” Kirk says blearily. He’s asleep in seconds.

“I’m keeping you overnight,” McCoy informs him, adjusting the configuration of the regenerator.

Spock frowns. “That is hardly necessary. The Vulcan Healing Trance—”

“—will be far more effective when Commander Kirk isn’t lying in ambush in your quarters, because she knows she owes you one and doesn’t like you very much for it.”

Spock ponders this. “Perhaps remaining in Medbay tonight will be a more logical course of action.”

“Glad we agree.”

Spock pauses in the doorway. “Doctor?” McCoy looks up. Spock nods at the bed. “He was not on any mind-altering medication yet, was he?”

“Nope.” McCoy grins. “Funny how you’re the only one who caught on. Don’t tell Winona, she’ll like you even less. Get some rest, Spock.”

Spock glances one last time at the captain’s sleeping form and leaves.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next...

“Tell me something, Spock. Why is your pulse racing?”

See you on tumblr..)
Chapter Summary

The crew of the *Enterprise* goes to a ball. They have a plan. And then they don't.

Chapter Notes

Good God, I've just realized that this story has turned into my personal 5-year mission...
Good thing we're in year 5 then. Anyone still with me? ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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He manages not to run into either Kirk for the next three days – the expedited repairs on the ship keeping him sufficiently busy. The captain was right in his assessment of the station commander’s disposition. The man looks at Spock almost reverently, and Spock is only mildly discomfited at the special treatment the *Enterprise* gets. He doesn’t have the time to feel embarrassed.

“The DS4 repair dock is at your complete disposal, Mr. Scott. I have reviewed the repairs schedule. The *Enterprise* has to be ready in four days.”

“Four days? Mr. Spock, that’s crazy! I have my people working round the clock, as it is, and—”

“Mr. Scott, that was not a request. It will take the *Enterprise* two point one days at high warp to reach Altair VI in time for the festivities. Use the station personnel as you see fit, pull any resources you require, but we are shipping out in four days.”

Scott glowers at him, but nods. “Aye, sir.”

Spock’s next priority is overseeing T’Pring’s quiet departure with all the survivors. He recruits Nyota’s assistance in case of an emergency, but it is depressingly easy to hack into the DS4 main computer and realign the sensor grid so that the transport ship would continue to appear securely docked with the station, when in fact it had left hours ago. They set up the ruse to hold on for the next three days for good measure without running into the slightest difficulty.

Nyota’s mouth is tight and unhappy. “I know that you’re an A7 computer expert, but this is ridiculous,” she says, scowling at the data stream before her.

Spock doesn’t disagree, and makes a mental note to demand an upgrade of Starfleet’s security protocols at the first available opportunity.

McCoy keeps him updated about the captain’s steadily improving condition. Surprisingly, in regards to the investigation, so does Winona, although her findings are a lot further from reassuring.

His biggest pain, though, is assembling a report for Starfleet Command. The sheer number of creative omissions he has to make is staggering. Spock is not certain it will be justifiable in retrospect,
but he doesn’t have a choice. It gets worse when the admirals begin to call him in person.

“Commander, the next time I call the Enterprise and find you there instead of Kirk, he’d better be dying,” Admiral Komack spits the third time around with understandable frustration. “And I don’t want to hear any more excuses from you – you’re horrible at them, it’s embarrassing to listen.”

“Admiral, with all due respect—”

“Oh, shut up, Spock. And get Kirk to answer the phone, or I’ll write up both of you for willful negligence.”

The screen goes abruptly blank.

“I’m sorry, Commander,” Nyota says in a tone so perfectly chagrined, Spock can’t help a pang of envy. “The communications array is down. Mr. Scott had warned me that it could happen. He estimates the repairs will take over forty-eight hours.”

“Lieutenant—” Spock stares at her, a moment away from ordering to reestablish communication, but Komack is right. Spock is an abysmal actor, and perhaps radio silence would be the most logical course of action.

“Sir?” Nyota prompts him, her face a mask of perfect earnestness.

“Tell Mr. Scott to expedite those repairs,” Spock says at last, ignoring her smirk. “And make certain Starfleet Command is aware of our difficulties.”

“With pleasure, Commander.”

Rolling his eyes would be undignified, but it’s a close call. Spock wisely chooses to leave the bridge instead.

It would be incorrect to say that he loses track of time – he is aware of every passing hour. But the daunting mission ahead is so fully occupying his mind that he exists in a species of time warp, his thoughts tied up tightly in the future, even as he goes through his tasks here and now.

The night of the third day finds him on the upper deck, working on the sensor array. He is alone, having sent the two technicians assisting him to get some much needed rest hours ago. He knows he should follow their example soon or risk losing greatly in efficiency, but he wants to finish the job at hand.

Perhaps he’s missed his window already, though, because a voice cutting through the silence suddenly right next to him makes him jump.

“Hey, Spock.”

Spock nearly lets go of the hydrospanner, checking his own reaction before looking up. It’s been a long time since anyone surprised him.

“Captain.”

Kirk smiles at him from the hoverchair he’s sitting in, his light blue pajamas making him look slightly ghostly in the low light.

“I would ask if you should be out of Medbay, but I believe the answer is obvious,” Spock notes, setting his tools down and moving closer.
Kirk’s smile widens. “You know me so well. I had to get out of all that white for a few minutes. Look, I’m being good – I took the chair and everything.”

“Indeed.” Spock lifts an eyebrow, amused despite himself. “How are you feeling?”

Kirk rolls his eyes. “Won’t be climbing up any stairs in the near future, that’s for sure. Other than that, pretty good.”

He’s a little out of breath just speaking, the color bright in his face, but his eyes are clear, intent. Spock has to remind himself to look away.

Seamlessly, they migrate toward the viewport. Compared to a starship, traveling at warp, the station’s rotation is unimaginably slow, making the stars appear to be standing still. Spock feels vaguely disconcerted by the sight.

He starts delivering a progress report, falling back to the familiar almost on reflex. Numbers, scales, priorities, defining patterns in a kaleidoscope, structuring the seemingly chaotic – the easiest thing, something he’s been doing from cradle. Kirk listens without interrupting, a peaceful expression on his face. He waits with effortless patience until Spock exhausts the topic, until there’s nothing left to report concerning ship’s business and lets the silence linger.

“There was something I wanted to ask you,” Kirk speaks softly in the end, his voice woven organically into the dark quietness of space. “About what happened.”

“Yes, Captain?” Spock says at last, when it becomes clear Kirk is waiting for some sort of acknowledgement.

“Bones said – Bones said, you melded with me.” Spock stiffens, and Kirk touches his wrist lightly, an instant reassurance. “I’m not upset, it’s okay.”

“It was necessary to sustain your life,” Spock replies, words tasting like gravel in his mouth. “But the fact remains that I acted without permission—”

“It’s okay,” Kirk repeats. “I’m not mad. I brought it up, because I remembered – I’m not sure. It felt like a dream, but more real. When I was there, when I was losing consciousness, it felt like I was falling – or maybe drowning, I don’t know. Something was pulling me into the fire, and I couldn’t stop it. And then it stopped. I couldn’t really think, but I felt – and I remember feeling! – safe. As if someone caught me just in time, and I felt so relieved, and also——” He glances up at Spock. “You’ll think I’m mad, but I felt – cared for. As though someone cared very, very deeply for me.”

Spock chooses his words very carefully, every ounce of discipline he possesses hard at work to maintain his usual comportment.

“I will not think you are mad. The data on humans subjected to mindmelds is limited for obvious reasons. But it is not unheard of for the experience to stimulate imagination.”

Kirk’s eyebrows fly up. “You think I’m making it up?”

“No at all. Nevertheless, you must consider that a meld is a form of stimulation alien to you. The human brain would respond on instinct by trying to interpret something it has not been designed to analyze. It would draw from the knowledge and experience it does possess; however, the substitutions for missing terms might not be accurate one hundred percent of the time. It is a very complex issue.”

Kirk watches him, amused. “Spock, you could have just said I got lost in translation. Though, really?
“That’s what you’re going with?”

“You asked me for an explanation. I merely provided you with a logical one.”

“And now you’re snippy.”

“Captain—”

“Tell me something, Mr. Spock. Why is your pulse racing?”

Spock freezes, suddenly hyperconscious of his reaction. He glances down to where Kirk’s hand is wrapped around his wrist. When did it happen? When did the gesture, this particular touch, become so comfortably familiar that he failed to notice?

Instinctively, he tries to pull free. Kirk’s grip tightens.

“No, please don’t. I’m sorry.” He sounds it. “It’s too late for that, don’t you think?”

Spock stills, ordering his heart rate to slow down. Then he pulls free.

Kirk sighs and stands up, close, too close. If Spock turned, their shoulders would press together.

“I’m not mad at you,” Kirk repeats with quiet urgency. “I don’t really know what to say, but I’m very, very far from mad. I’m the opposite of mad, Spock. I’m—”

“Perhaps you should sit down,” Spock says, standing perfectly straight, hands clasped behind his back. “You sound breathless.”

Kirk laughs a little. “You have no idea.”

“I could assist you back to Medbay.”

“Spock. Stop it. You’re not that obtuse.”

Spock says nothing.

“There is something I need to know,” Kirk says at long last. The pauses he has to make are distracting. “Do we have a problem? I hate to use the words, trust me, I do, and I would never do this to you, but this mission – this entire covert op – it’s too important. I never thought I’d say this, but it sucks to be the captain right now. We’re on the verge of a war here, and I need to know. I must know. Are you? Emotionally compromised?”

It feels like receiving a blow he never saw coming. Spock is very close to experiencing respiratory difficulty himself.

Kirk moves closer, a living, physical presence not to be ignored.

“Just so we’re clear,” he says quietly, earnest, intense, “it’s not going to change anything about the mission. I literally can’t do this without you. I just need to know.”

It feels unfair, but it isn’t. The cause for doubt is sufficient. If Spock could turn back time and make the decision again, knowing this would be the price, he’d have made the same one.

He locks eyes with Kirk.

“Captain, I had taken the action necessary to save your life.” Very slowly, very articulately, he says,
“I am not. Emotionally compromised. Over you.”

If Spock wasn’t watching him so closely, he’d have missed it – the momentary widening of Kirk’s eyes, his head moving back a fraction – a split second of recoil.

“You’re not lying,” Kirk breathes out.

Spock lifts an eyebrow. He doesn’t say, ‘You can tell, apparently.’ That is hardly surprising at this point. He doesn’t say that Vulcans don’t lie, either.

“Sorry,” Kirk looks down, rubbing the back of his neck. “I didn’t mean that you – I mean I didn’t—”

“It’s all right, Captain,” Spock interrupts him coolly. “I understand. If there is nothing else?”

Kirk looks at him for another endless second, face flushed, eyes searching. Giving up at last, he shakes his head, his entire frame shrinking somehow. “No.”

“In that case, if you will excuse me, sir. I have duties to attend to.”

Wordlessly, Kirk steps aside.

Spock walks out with a feeling of mild satisfaction at having been able to keep his composure. There is not much else to be proud of.

The turbolift taking him down to officers’ quarters is blissfully empty. He runs straight into McCoy as the doors open.

“Spock! By any chance, have you seen—”

“Observation deck.” Spock walks past him.

“Spock, wait up a second. Are you all right? You look like shit.”

There’s genuine concern in McCoy’s voice, but just at the moment Spock doesn’t care.

“I am well, Doctor McCoy. I suggest you see to your patient, before he changes his location again.”

Cursing, McCoy jumps into the turbolift, as Spock knew he would.

He waits patiently for Nyota’s door to slide open. When at last it does, she looks as though she has slept in her uniform and has barely caught two hours at that.

“Spock?” She blinks blearily, before stepping aside to let him in. “Is something—”

“I need you to start a rumor. It has to be implanted within certain circles immediately, but it must appear as though the information has been there for quite a while.”

“Certain circles?”

“Independent traders dealing in weaponry, criminal and semi-criminal agents, and, if possible, Starfleet.”

Nyota looks decidedly more awake. “Assuming what you’re saying is even possible, what are you trying to do?”

He fixes her with a look. “With six hundred people attending the gala, it would be insurmountably
difficult to recognize and locate Kosan. But it would not be difficult at all to recognize and locate me."

He was drawn to this woman for a reason far exceeding her physical attractiveness. Her understanding is as immediate as her disapproval.

“You realize that’s like painting a target on your chest?” Nyota glares at him, not a trace of drowsiness in her eyes. “I really don’t want to do this.”

“That was not a suggestion, Lieutenant.”

She stiffens, chin going upward stubbornly. “Maybe we should ask the captain, then.”

“Captain Kirk is on medical leave, which puts me in command of this vessel,” Spock says, tone clipped. “If we had time to spare, which we do not, I would have gladly allowed you to consult him, pointless as it may have been. There is no doubt in my mind that he would support this course of action.”

Her eyes turn sad for a moment as she reads his face. “Of course he would,” she mutters softly. “How stupid of me to think that – never mind.”

“Lieutenant?”

She straightens up, coming almost to attention. “What rumor would you like me to plant, Commander?”

He studies her for a moment, then nods. “That I wish to avenge my mother’s death.”

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The splendor of the Altair VI governor’s palace is truly spectacular. The dark marble of the colonnade rich on detail and extravagant sculptures, miles and miles of illumination garlands, golden and silver lights bursting from the ceiling, streaming down the walls until they reach the redwood and mother-of-pearl surface of the floors, polished to reflect starlight, the numerous fountains, heard but not seen – all conspire to create an overwhelming impression of magnificence.

Despite the serious nature of his mission, even Spock is taken aback for a moment. He feels as though he’s stepped into a giant replica of an antique music box or perhaps has been swallowed by it.

He glances over hundreds of the assembled guests, Starfleet uniforms and civilian suits intermixed in seemingly even proportions, but it’s a delusion. Starfleet Uniform Code allows female officers to choose between dress uniforms and civilian evening wear for occasions such as this, so the number of Starfleet personnel in the crowd is prevailing.

Security has been tightened, and, if the look the security officer had given him when Spock had beamed down was any indication, Nyota was successful in planting his legend. The reactions of a few acquaintances he’s met at the gala so far confirm his hope. They seemed startled to see him, barely acknowledging him, and making every effort not to talk to him.

Spock experiences no difficulty at all appearing as though he does not wish to be here, although he does wonder privately if he’d be enjoying himself were the circumstances different.
Probably not, all things considered. Too many of the best and brightest in one room at the same time make for too vulnerable a position. Were anything to happen here and now, Starfleet would be left virtually beheaded.

A loud splash of voices makes him look over to the central transporting lounge, reserved for the most honored guests, one that Spock himself didn’t use. There is no surprise at all that the group that has just finished materializing there has instantly attracted delighted attention.

Lieutenant Pechalat looks stunning in her dark blue dress, arm resting comfortably over that of Doctor McCoy, who seems to be bursting with pride. On the other side, Nurse Chapel creates a mesmerizing impression of an angel in shimmery pearly white fabric, smiling at Engineer Scott at her side. Flanked by two couples, the pair in the middle looks like nothing short of royalty.

True to form, Nyota is clad in regal blood-red silk, the dress hugging her body in a way that is fully hypnotizing and enthralling. Her smile is that of a predator ready for a fight, sprinkled with charm and seduction for disguise. She looks like a warrior princess, intending to take no prisoners.

The man next to her looks like he’s ready to handle that and more, and Spock promised himself that he wouldn’t stare, but he’s helpless to prevent it if only for a moment. McCoy and Nyota must have had a hand at it both, because Kirk looks as though he’s been drinking from the fountain of youth, glowing with health and staggering, almost unnatural beauty.

It’s nearly impossible to believe that just this morning Spock had found him on the floor in the Medbay bathroom, overwhelmed by a coughing fit that had made his eyes bleed. His chest still tightens unpleasantly at the memory, but here and now Kirk is radiant, wrapped in domineering confidence, a true winner, with the most beautiful woman in the room on his arm, and an incredible team at his back.

It’s the entrance of a king.

“My God, what a peacock,” says a cool voice with a mocking lilt beside Spock. “Makes you wonder if Starfleet only keeps him around for recruiting vids.”

Spock gives the speaker a cursory look, cataloguing quickly. Human, male, dark-haired, generally good-looking, Starfleet, captain’s tabs, the uniform is ill-fitting as if worn for the first time – recent promotion, yet his age would put him closer to forty than thirty. Speaks with confidence, the sentiment might be based on true jealousy, but that’s not the reason he expressed it out loud, he’s more controlled than that. Potential contact?

It wouldn’t do to jump at the bait, nor to ward him off with an ardent defense. Subterfuge has never truly been Spock’s forte, but he has discovered over the years that, dealing with a neutral statement, most humans will hear what they want to hear and do the interpreting for him.

“A rather fanciful notion,” Spock remarks calmly. “Captain Kirk is in possession of many talents.”

His tone, not his words, does the trick. The man beside him snorts. “I’m sure. Just wondering if any of them have any merit when it comes to actually captaining a starship and not posing for a holo op.”

Spock glances to where the holophotographers are indeed making Kirk and his company pose for pictures.

“Fortunately, no starship is run by one man.”

“True.” The unknown captain leans a little closer to get into Spock’s line of vision. “So why aren’t you there with them, then? Can’t imagine they thought you’d ruin the picture.”
Spock’s eyebrow crawls up all by itself at this direct overture as he turns to face his unexpected companion.


Spock glances down at the proffered hand briefly. Under normal circumstances he’d have avoided the touch. Now, he welcomes it.

“Pleased to meet you, Captain,” he says politely, his own voice sounding a little distant to him as he focuses on his emotional perception.

Captain Anders is eager and nervous for more reasons than one, and his interest is keen indeed but seems purposefully misdirected.

Though perhaps, Spock thinks as Anders’s thumb slides over his wrist, not entirely.

“I confess, I wanted to meet you for some time,” Anders says, letting go at last. “I think – I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but so much of your history is public record that…” He trails off for a moment, his expression solidifying from courteous to firm. “I think what Nogura did to you is an atrocity. Sticking you on the same ship as him.” He nods at Kirk and his group with disdain. “They should have given you the Enterprise. That would have been”—Anders smiles with rehearsed charm—“only logical.”

Flattery. And a rather unsubtle attempt to gauge his loyalty. How many times during his youth had he watched his father play this game of seemingly showing a lot when in fact giving very little? Not that Spock has a future as a diplomat, but surely he can play someone as unsophisticated in his approach as Captain Anders? Time to throw his own hook.

“I never sought command,” Spock replies with honest disinterest. “And after Nero’s attack it did not make much difference which ship to serve on. Starfleet as a whole seems to have lost direction.”

“Can’t say that I don’t see your point. Why didn’t you quit?”

An emotional outburst is due if Spock wants to seal his carefully constructed reputation of being unstable.

He rounds on Anders sharply, stepping closer. “Have you ever tried to find a new purpose in life when your entire species has been wiped out?” he says coldly, voice dropping to an angry whisper.

Anders recoils slightly, but almost instantly his expression melts from surprise into avid hunger. “I’m sorry,” he says, resting a hand on Spock’s shoulder. “If it was me, I would have wanted to find that bastards who did it, every last one of them, and blast them out of the sky.”

Spock holds his eyes with intensity that he now knows might be interpreted as fury by those who don’t know him.

“And that,” he says in an even, measured voice, “is why I remained in Starfleet. I do not believe that the threat has passed.” He pauses. “Or that the guilty have been brought to justice.”

He pulls back slightly, as though satisfied at having made his point. His gaze falls on the magnificent dancefloor and is immediately drawn to the same couple everyone else is watching. Kirk and Nyota are spinning gracefully in an elegant waltz, her dress floating beautifully around her ankles at the motion, their eyes shining as they beam at each other.
Spock winces involuntarily, thinking of the physical strain Kirk is putting himself through and at what cost. For a moment, he forgets all about Anders, who notices, but misinterprets his reaction.

“And Starfleet has become this,” he murmurs, hand lingering on Spock’s shoulder. “But not all of it. You’re right, Commander. The threat hasn’t passed, and a storm is gathering. I don’t think you’d want to be the person stuck in the safety zone when it hits.”

“A storm?” Spock frowns at him, tearing his eyes away from Kirk with an effort.

Anders leans even closer to him, his expression intent. “You’re a smart man, Commander. I know that the Enterprise has been stuck on the outskirts of the quadrant, but you must have heard something. Vulcan is gone, but not forgotten. The Romulans must pay.”

“The Romulans,” Spock repeats quietly, as though tasting the word. “What an intriguing possibility.”

“Join us,” Anders’s plea is impassioned, his eyes bright with the kind of fanatical fire that makes Spock suppress a shudder. “With you as our spearhead, we will become the hand of God.”

Fanatic indeed. How will they ever clean up the ranks when this is over? And who will be serving in the meantime?

Hesitance, a prerequisite for surrender. “Short of deserting my current crew, I see no possibility for joining your ranks,” Spock says slowly, as though considering it.

Anders beams at him. “That’ll be simple enough. Just submit a request for a transfer.”

“Admiral Nogura would never approve—”

“Not to Nogura. Admiral Morrow. He speaks very highly of you. If you submit your request tonight, you’ll get transfer orders by morning, and just in time, too.”

A flash of surprise is real this time.

Morrow.

The last time Spock had seen the admiral was during his very memorable court-martial… which was to be made public knowledge pending the guilty verdict… which never happened. It follows that those not directly involved, like Captain Anders, would not have heard about it and would have no reason to suspect the admiral of being insincere.

As for Morrow himself, he’d lost a son on one of the seven ships manned by cadets that had been so carelessly thrown at Nero. It was part of the reason he’d wanted someone to blame so badly.

Is Morrow the traitor they are looking for? Had his grief driven him mad enough to have given that criminal order to destroy Merta and then shoot down survivors? It certainly follows logically, frighteningly so, why he’d want Spock to join – lead? – an attack against the Romulans. It would give the admiral a perfect way to defend himself, should his war effort fail. And if it succeeded, the chances of Spock dying in battle would be reasonably high. An inspired move indeed to, as humans would put it, cover all exits.

But to have a suspect is not enough, Spock needs proof. Proof and information on what exactly that ‘storm’ entails before they make a move.

“I look forward to working with you, Captain,” Spock says to a visibly relieved and elated Anders, “should the opportunity arise. Please excuse me.”
He makes his way to the nearest comm console, but as soon as he’s out of Anders’s sight, he changes direction abruptly. He can’t be on the lookout for Morrow and Kosan both with any hope of succeeding. He needs Nyota.

Locating her is not hard; getting a moment of her time out of sight is more problematic. Spock finally manages to ambush her on her way from the ladies room.

“Ow, what the—” She instinctively resists when he grabs her arm and pulls her in an alcove behind the colonnade. “Spock?”

In quick, succinct sentences, Spock fills her in on his conversation with Captain Anders. Nyota listens the way she always does – attentively and without interrupting.

“You need us to find Morrow,” she concludes.

Spock nods. “Tell our crew, tell anyone else you can trust, but someone must have eyes on his every move.”

“Will do.” She turns to go, then pauses. “Listen, when you were talking to that Anders fellow…”

“Yes?” Spock prompts, stomping on his impatience.

Nyota meets his eyes, her lips soft suddenly with the hint of a smile. “I know you only did what you had to do to encourage him, but just so you know. When Jim saw the two of you, he clenched my hand so hard, I’ll have bruises. And I don’t bruise easily.”

Spock blinks. “I assume it was not on purpose and he apologized?”

She stares at him for a moment in disbelief. “Yes,” she bites out, her good humor evaporated. “That’s not the point.”

“What is the point?”

Nyota rolls her eyes and steps back into the twinkling lights of the reception hall. “You’re an idiot. How’s that for a point?”

“Not particularly illuminating,” he replies, but she’s already gone in an irritated swirl of skirts.

Spock assures himself that he has absolutely no time to dwell on the bewildering exchange at the moment.

He circulates the halls and corridors, but with nearly nine hundred guests finding someone specific without even knowing what they look like does not seem promising. Admiral Morrow, whom Spock wouldn’t have a problem identifying, doesn’t prove to be an easier target.

His search comes to an abrupt halt when he comes back into the main ballroom. The interruption comes in the form of a person he should have expected but is totally unprepared to see.

“Admiral.”

“Commander.”

Admiral Nechayev, too, has opted for the non-uniform variation of the regulation dress tonight. The gown she wears leaves her shoulders and arms entirely bare and seems to be of no particular color but made of glittering starlight instead. Her hair is pulled up, drawing attention to the elegant line of her neck. The overall impression is quite striking.
For the first time in their acquaintance, Spock realizes that it is not merely her aura of authority that makes her a truly remarkable woman.

Oddly enough, she seems to be accompanied by two men, who, despite being clad impeccably in dress-uniforms, could never hope to hide their identities as security guards on duty.

Spock lifts an eyebrow at her, a silent query about her unusual choice of escort. Or was it a choice? For bodyguards, the two men seem to focus too much on their charge and not at all on any potential threat.

Admiral Nechayev smiles, a rare occurrence in itself, her eyes flickering for a moment to the dimming lights over the dancefloor. Spock hesitates. It is not precisely the kind of exposure he was seeking, but her eyes are pleading with desperate kind of urgency. There is no way he can ignore that.

“Admiral.” Spock bows lightly, offering his hand. “May I have this dance?”

Her hand flies up readily to meet his, a cool touch, emotions firmly in check to prevent any kind of bleed-through. Spock’s respect for her goes up another notch.

“Why, certainly, Commander,” she says before her companions can react. “It would be my pleasure.”

The guards’ expressions are split between dismay and annoyance. Even as he leads her to the dancefloor, Spock can see out of the corner of his eye as one of them moves to follow, but the other stops him, shaking his head. Both of them freeze, watching closely.

“Interesting company you keep tonight,” Spock murmurs, as they turn to face each other in an unoccupied bubble of light.

Her smile is as sharp-edged and precise as her motions. “You don’t know the half of it.”

The overall lighting dims, and the music begins.

The Dance of a Thousand Rivers is a complicated routine in which steps and figures are similar or reminiscent in some ways to old Earth dances like waltz, tango, rumba, foxtrot, and minuet. Each motion must follow the other in strictly precise manner, but the sequence is never known from the start and must be divined instead from the musical improvisation. Each new figure should start not later, but exactly at the same moment as a new musical element is introduced, and the dancers are supposed to deduce what it’s going to be correctly beforehand. Traditionally, every couple dances within their own bubble of light that goes dark the moment they guess wrong or one of the partners makes a mistake.

As the Dance of a Thousand Rivers contains over eight hundred musical themes and the sequence combinations are numerous, and given the required precision of the physical motion, it makes for a great show, but a difficult act to follow. The Altairans, trained in the Dance from birth, usually dominate every competition, but Spock had heard of a few offworlders, mostly humans, who managed to engage both intuition and mathematical genius in order to succeed.

Once started, the Dance cannot be interrupted while there is at least one couple still dancing. As such, all Spock and the admiral will have to do is stay in long enough to have a conversation.

Spock has been fascinated by the Dance since he had first been introduced to it in his youth while working as his father’s assistant. Even for a gifted mathematician with a well-trained body the Dance presented a challenge. When he was young, Spock could never quite resist.
Where Admiral Nechayev had learned, Spock has no idea.

“Admiral Pike has been arrested,” Admiral Nechayev says, coming out of a twirl, her back straight, every step sharply measured.

Spock very nearly stumbles, ending it right there. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well, the official term is detained for questioning, but for all practical purposes, there is no observable difference.”

“Why?” Spock asks, watching her through the frame of their arms.

Nechayev’s usually unexpressive face ripples slightly with a grimace. “Admiral Komack, who has effectively appointed himself head of Starfleet Security, received a tip that Chris was one of the leaders of the war party. Komack, in his infinite wisdom, chose not to wait for any kind of proof to arrive and to not overburden himself with any kind of common sense or logic, as per usual, and arrested him.”

“Komack,” Spock repeats slowly, leading her through a complicated up-tempo sequence. “Not Morrow?”

“No.” Her eyes narrow. “Why?”

Spock catches her up in short, succinct sentences, giving her a compressed overview of his conversation with Captain Anders.

“Wonderful,” Nechayev mutters when he’s done. “I take it you decided to immediately sign up?”

“I did not think there was any time to waste.”

“Quite.” She turns, hand drawing a graceful arc in the air, before meeting his unerringly, without looking. “Have I mentioned, Commander, that lately your plans show an alarming tendency to be idiotic?”

“What would you suggest, sir? I would appreciate input.”

They turn sharply, and he dips her.

Nechayev is smiling when he pulls her back up. “Winona was right. You boys do seem all grown up these days.”

To that, Spock has nothing to say. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices that approximately one third of the light bubbles have already gone dark.

“I’m not supposed to be here tonight,” Nechayev says unexpectedly. “The arrest squad had orders for me, too.” Her lips curve in one of her rare superior smiles. “But it just so happened that the new governor and I have some history. I saved his life during that unfortunate incident at Karra. He insisted that I be here tonight, and Starfleet didn’t want to embarrass itself by airing its dirty laundry in public.”

“Hence your escort.”

“Hence my escort,” she agrees glumly. “They are under orders to drag me out of here in irons if I initiate a communication with anyone.”

It’s a slow, intimate sequence, and they are dancing close, as the melody stretches and stretches. This
close, her eyes reflect something he’d never thought he’d see from her.

Desperation.

She didn’t come here tonight to give him an order or present him with a mission. She has no orders to give. She did not come to warn him. She had no answers, no information. She defied Starfleet and risked everything to find him because he was her very last resort.

“I see,” he says neutrally as the theme finally changes.

Komack or Morrow. Quite a dilemma indeed.

Both men have served in Starfleet for over thirty years. Both had spent their formative years as officers in the midst of the second and third Klingon wars, and the first Romulan war. As a logical consequence, both are firmly convinced that Starfleet is about defense first, exploring second. Both are conservative, military-minded strategists, who respect the letter before the spirit. Both tend to see everything in black and white, despising the shades of grey.

Both had lost a child on Vulcan.

Morrow’s youngest son was part of the unlucky cadet contingent. Komack’s only daughter was captain of the Farragut.

Both of them obvious, likely candidates. Choosing between the two with no room for error, since they’ll only have one chance to get it right, will be a grueling, time-consuming task, and time is a luxury they don’t have…

Spock freezes for a second, his body only following a sharp, tango-like sequence on autopilot. Nechayev tenses in his arms.

“What?” she whispers. “You have that face—”

“Two obvious candidates,” Spock says slowly. “So obvious and fitting and we could go in endless circles trying to calculate which one is a traitor and which one a misguided patriot, losing time, while a third one would keep on steadily working without obstruction until he succeeds in starting a war.”

He picks her up carrying her through a twirl, giving her time to get past her shock, her eyes wide as she stares at him, hands digging into his shoulders.

“A third—” she chokes. “Who?”

“Let us think,” Spock says, almost grateful to the music for picking up the tempo. Theirs is one of the two light bubbles left. “Who belongs to the same generation, yet has not come out of the latest war a decorated veteran? Who has been distinguished for his strategy yet never for his actions? Who has taken the longest time to advance to the rank of admiral? Whose candidacy for Commander Starfleet has been virtually unopposed because no party perceives him as a threat? Who would have stood no chance of being approved for that position in a time of war? Who is cunning enough yet not brave enough to use that moment for his advancement?”

“Nogura,” Nechayev says, stunned, her face for once betraying her emotions without filter. “But how—”

“He is the only logical choice. Even you report to him. Even on—”

“Our efforts to find the traitor,” she finishes grimly, her hand planted against his chest, as she
“Does he know about the Enterprise’s role in tonight’s events?” Spock asks urgently.

Nechayev blinks. “In fact, no. Not starting from your discovery of what really happened on Merta.” A wry smile curves her lips. “I wanted to be more certain in my conclusions before I bring him that report. I wanted to have it solved and tied with a bow, like a good straight-A student.”

Spock offers what little comfort he can. “I, too, have been conditioned not to present a problem without options on solving it.”

“Insufficiently overachievers unite,” Nechayev mutters, biting her lip. “Nogura isn’t here – unexpectedly delayed. One of us has to find him.”

“I have a task here,” Spock says. “I cannot risk abandoning it under the circumstances. We can’t bring forward an accusation like that without proof. It is vital that I locate Kosan.”

He looks over her shoulder into the surrounding darkness. They are the only couple still dancing, and he can sense the focused attention of the entire ballroom, making the air around them vast and tense. He meets Nechayev’s eyes and reads the same realization there.

She swallows then smiles. “Too bad. We’ve almost made it to the end.”

Indeed, Spock thinks with a pang of regret. At this point, the final sequence would have presented no challenge.

“I will look forward to the next opportunity,” he says, feeling her fingers flex on his shoulder.

“Make it look good.”

For the most part, he does. A stumble or a misstep wouldn’t do, not after all this time. But as they come out of a twirl, Spock turns left instead of right, his hand dropping low instead of flying up, and the light goes out above them.

The crowd lets out its collective breath that Spock can almost feel, and the darkness around him is not absolute, but filled with confused glittering motion like an ocean on a moonless night. One second. Two. Eight.

The lights return gradually in a steadily growing wave, until the huge room is lit once more. Some of the spectators have begun clapping only to stop abruptly in confusion at the sight of Spock standing in the middle of the floor alone. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Kirk emerging forward from the crowd, the vivid red of Nyota’s dress drawing attention toward him. Spock doesn’t turn.

The security guards are on him in a moment, followed closely by a glowering Admiral Komack.

“Where is she?” Komack demands.

“I am afraid I do not know, Admiral,” Spock replies calmly. “Is anything the matter?”

“Is anything—” Komack chokes on the rest of the question and gestures at the two would-be bodyguards angrily. “Find her! She couldn’t have gotten far.”

An entire security detail is flanking him at this point, and this time without even a pretense of a disguise. The Altarian dignitaries in the crowd are looking progressively more concerned, and Spock wonders if there’s any hope that Komack would at least try to prevent this from becoming yet
another diplomatic disaster.

“You’re under arrest,” Komack spits out, glaring at Spock and effectively killing any hope for saving Starfleet’s face. “For aiding and abating a known criminal.”

There’s a gasp from the crowd, and Spock almost frowns in irritation. The admiral has never been one for subtlety, true, but even Komack should have known to keep the last notion to himself.

“What do you mean ‘a known criminal?’” the Altarian ambassador asks, stepping forward. “Are you saying Starfleet has knowingly allowed someone with a criminal record in, when the governor himself is in attendance? That does not reflect well on—”

Komack waves him off impatiently, gesturing for the guards to seize Spock, who doesn’t actively resist, but doesn’t move, either.

“Admiral, I must protest—”

“Sir, with all due respect, what is going on?” a new voice cuts in, and that’s Kirk.

Komack rounds on him, getting progressively redder in the face. “Don’t you get mixed up in this, Kirk,” he hisses. “You have a bad habit of butting in when you’re not wanted – well, let me tell you something, not this time.”

Kirk frowns. “If you’re arresting my first officer, I have the right to at least know the charges—”

“Treason,” Komack snaps with a sense of dark satisfaction, not bothering to keep his voice down in his moment of triumph. “And that’s just the beginning, Kirk, I can promise you. All this time he’s been in cahoots with criminals who would have us start a war with the Romulans before we had a chance to rebuild our fleet, setting us up for defeat. He’s been helping them” – an angry gesture at Spock – “which I should have seen sooner, but you – you, Kirk, are bloody incompetent because he’s been doing that right under your nose, and you knew nothing!”

Absently, Spock wonders if anyone else has caught on to the fact that Komack is essentially only objecting to a war the Federation can’t hope to win, rather than the idea itself. He chances a look at Kirk, who stares back at him grimly.

“I assume you have proof,” Kirk says slowly, addressing the admiral, but looking at Spock as though he’s never seen him before.

“Proof.” Komack actually snorts, beginning to enjoy himself. “Do you think we let that traitorous witch in here tonight just to please the governor? We were hoping she’d bring us to her accomplices, and, boy, did she ever. That Vulcan son of a bitch is the only person she talked to all night. That’s all the proof we need.”

The fact that it is logic of sorts doesn’t make it any easier for Spock to keep his expression blank. He very carefully does not look in Kirk’s direction.

“I see,” Kirk says, his voice unnaturally tight. To an outside observer it might appear as though he’s trying to contain anger and humiliation.

“Take him away,” Komack orders the guards, who up until this point have been notably reluctant to touch Spock. Rumors of violent outbreaks on the bridge of a starship would do that, Spock reflects with suppressed amusement that fades fast. There is very little about this situation that calls for humor.
He suffers himself being led through a crowded ballroom that parts before him like the Red Sea. The sensation of dozens of stares directed at him, while unpleasant, is not exactly novel, and Spock puts it out of his mind, concentrating on the task in hand.

They could not have given a brighter advertisement if they paid for it. The only remaining question is – whether they have deduced correctly and Kosan will take the bait.

The short procession stops in the deserted reception area. Spock believes he knows the reason – the security lieutenant in charge of the detail is clearly at a loss as to where to put Spock. The security protocols have every starship in orbit on beam in-and-out lockdown for the duration of the gala, and using the local police facilities would mean surrendering the prisoner to Altair VI jurisdiction.

Spock watches as the lieutenant brings out his communicator, having correctly found a way out of this being his problem when it could be pushed at someone with a higher rank and less leeway in shuffling responsibilities. He glances at Spock uncertainly, almost as though considering asking him for advice, before signaling in.

Spock doesn’t hear the weapon discharge, but he can see its effect. The lieutenant doubles over soundlessly and topples down the stairs, his communicator sinking noiselessly into the plush carpet. The guards at either side of Spock don’t have enough time to react, caught unforgivably off guard, and collapse simultaneously, only one of them reaching for a weapon.

The ensuing silence is deafening, offset by the distant buzz of the crowd in the halls behind them. Spock doesn’t make a move to pick up a phaser, and instead stands absolutely still, waiting.

“Long time no see, 37,” a familiar, only-once-heard voice drawls from behind him. “I see you’ve been busy.”

Spock turns around then, slowly, and taking care to keep his hands visible at all times.

He doesn’t show surprise when he sees a man in a waiter’s uniform standing on the steps above him, still holding a peculiar looking weapon in his hand. He’s of average height, average build, undetermined age, and has a face that is so bland and non-descriptive it would slip out of memory the moment the man himself is gone. It’s a perfect face for someone who doesn’t want to be remembered.

“Kosan,” Spock says calmly, a greeting and confirmation both. “What is it you want?”

The arms dealer and alleged mass-murderer smiles pleasantly. “I’ve been following your career, Commander. Avidly. That Arishuh stunt – very impressive indeed. I’m a fan.”

“I do not have time for autographs.”

“No, indeed you don’t,” Kosan agrees, looking down at the three bodies at Spock’s feet – stunned, Spock thinks with un-Vulcanly ferocious hope, only stunned – with mock-regret. “But it looks like you don’t have a lot of options right now, and I thought perhaps it’s time you’ve reconsidered that job offer I made you. It still stands.”

Spock tilts his head to the side a little, as though contemplating, heart hammering madly in his chest.

“What do you have in mind?” he asks at last.

Kosan smirks. “How does blowing a few dozen Romulan delegates for the peace talks out of the sky sound for starters?”
To the end of his days, Spock would never know how he manages to keep his composure.

“Logical,” he responds, and his voice doesn’t shake.

Kosan lowers his weapon and grins. “In that case, welcome aboard.”

--

That wasn’t the plan.

Spock is acutely aware of that as he walks the corridors of Kosan’s state-of-the-art spaceship. It’s slick and small, compared to the Enterprise, and carrying just as much firepower. Spock shudders at the thought.

The plan was to detain Kosan and get him to submit the name of the traitor in Starfleet who’d hired him, find out the details of the mission to be carried out, and stop the said mission. It wasn’t at all to be beamed aboard his ship with no means of contacting the Enterprise and relaying the information.

So this might not have been the optimal plan, Spock concedes. But they were desperate.

The crew, dressed in utilitarian grey-and-white uniforms, mostly ignores him completely, as he walks beside Kosan. Vaguely, Spock wonders why Kosan feels no need for a bodyguard. He couldn’t possibly be trusting Spock – or anyone for that matter – to that extent.

“Status,” Kosan demands as they enter the bridge.

“The perimeter security stations are tracking us, Leader,” a tall man occupying the helmsman position reports. “They haven’t taken action yet.”

Kosan turns to Spock, smiling pleasantly. It gives his face a slightly macabre look. “Do you know the code to deactivate the perimeter defenses, 37?”

Spock pretends to study the screen to buy some time. This is a test, he knows. One of the many to come, and he cannot, he absolutely cannot fail it, if there’s any hope of succeeding.

The stations would be manned. A very small contingent to monitor the mostly automated systems, but still personnel. People.

The needs of the many.

He holds his emotions firmly in check as he looks at Kosan. “I believe so.”

Kosan’s smile widens. “Then please, 37. Proceed. Elen, let him use your station.”

The man at the tactical console rises at once, with a short, “Yes, Leader.”

Spock catches a glimpse of his eyes as they trade places. A chill runs down his spine. The blind obedience is disturbing, but the absolute conviction in the man’s eyes is something else. Leader, Spock thinks and suppresses another shudder.

This is not about money for them, not for profit. They are fanatics, programmed for almost robotic devotion to Kosan. It is distressing that this could be done to a human being outside of a religious cult – not that that is acceptable there.
Spock sits down at the tactics console and spends 3.5 seconds familiarizing himself with controls. Then he punches in the code without hesitation.

“Is it working?” Kosan prompts, the same unnerving smile on his lips.

“The security stations’ shields have been deactivated, Leader,” helmsman reports dispassionately. “They are defenseless.”

Spock forces himself to breathe normally, waiting for Kosan’s order. There are people on those stations. People.

“Good,” Kosan drawls, amused. “Then it’s time we left this party, gentlemen. Izin, activate the cloak.”

Ah.

The hum of the engine, barely detectible before, suddenly intensifies tenfold, and a wave rolls over the viewscreen, deeming the stars for a moment.

Spock hadn’t considered a cloaking device. True, ships equipped with one leave a heavier energy trail, but one has to know which part of the specter to search in order to detect it, and it was still classified information. By the time Starfleet or Altarian authorities scramble to find someone who could do that, the trail will be long gone.

They hadn’t considered it, because the only known powers to possess the technology are the Klingons and the Romulans, and there was no evidence of Kosan having had dealings with either. But, of course, it is only logical. The most successful arms dealers are those selling weapons to both sides.


Low warp. Spock calculates quickly. The cloaking device must be much more taxing on this ship’s engine than it would be on a Romulan warbird. That means they cannot reach top velocities while staying cloaked.

“So what precisely is the plan?” Spock asks, turning toward Kosan. “There is nothing on Tefelaz but an abandoned Starfleet outpost. I find it to be an unlikely site for peace negotiations.”

Kosan studies him with obvious pleasure, like a collector who has finally been able to lay his hands on a rare prize. Spock forces himself to remain dispassionate, allowing none of his discomfort to show.

“Eager, are we?” Kosan murmurs, almost gently. “You’re right. There’s nothing on Tefelaz except for a big surprise. You see, when it was finally agreed that the peace talks should happen in person, Starfleet had absolutely forbidden any Romulan warships from entering Federation space – only the transports, not equipped with cloaks. The Romulans agreed on condition that the convoy would not encounter a single Starfleet vessel on their way to the site. That’s why it’s happening now, when the majority of Starfleet ships are tied up back at Altair VI.”

“The Romulans picked the date,” Spock says.

“Yes. The fact that this is happening right now is, of course, highly confidential. Even Starfleet’s top echelon doesn’t know. The route has been carefully mapped out, and it just so happens that it will take the convoy through the Tefelaz solar system.”
“That is now deep Federation space,” Spock says, fighting off a shudder. “But even so, this ship destroying the convoy, even if it were to leave witnesses, would still be circumstantial evidence. It would undoubtedly raise the level of tension, but might not be enough to provoke open warfare.”

“Quite, 37.” Kosan nods, his eyes glinting. “What a pleasure it is to meet someone who truly understands that you can’t leave anything to chance.”

He lays an approving hand on Spock’s arm, and it is all Spock can do to stay still. He doesn’t think showing signs of displeasure at the unwanted touch would be out of character, so he stares at the offending appendage, until Kosan chuckles and takes his hand away.

“You’re quite right of course. Which is why this ship is only going to be in the area long enough to drop us off on Tefelaz.”

“You re-armed the base,” Spock deduces. “The missing F-Sec ships and armaments—”

“—had to go somewhere.” Kosan nods. “And it would be extremely hard to deny that Federation weaponry opening fire from a Federation facility is anything else but an act of war.”

“Logical,” Spock says, because it is.

This account pretty much condemns Admiral Nogura, even if Commander Kirk doesn’t unearth any proof of his involvement with the explosion on DS4 or Spock never makes it back. As Commander Starfleet, Nogura would be the only person to know the exact route of the peace convoy weeks ago, the only person being able to suggest a convenient change that would bring the defenseless transports within firing range of the facility controlled by his accomplice. And he was not so accidentally late for the gala – just enough to be able to transfer this information outside Starfleet security net, but not late as to not have an alibi.

A cunning plan indeed.

“I’m glad you approve, 37.” Kosan smiles again. “I like to think myself quite a rational man.”

“Yet, you are extrapolating on your plan when you still cannot be certain of my allegiance,” Spock says, because it needs to be out.

Kosan’s smile turns almost tender. It’s a severely disconcerting expression on his face. “You’ve noticed my crew, I gather? I’m not giving you access to any critical systems until you truly prove yourself, and my crew – my crew, 37, will eat you alive if you try anything I don’t like. Omicron Conditioning.”

Spock glances at the viewscreen to conceal his reaction. He wasn’t wrong then, when the term ‘robotic’ sprang to his mind. Omicron Conditioning is illegal not only in the Federation but throughout most galactic powers, Romulus included. A combination of drugs and mind control rendered the subjects completely devoid of their own free will and personality, leaving them as ‘clean slates’ to be ‘programmed’ by the controller. The procedure completely destroys certain areas of the brain, and there is no coming back, no getting better. Individuals subjected to it would function as mindless automatons for the rest of their natural lives.

“Impressive,” Spock manages, sounding completely horrified to his own ears.

Kosan leans over to him. “I am that and more. You picked the right side, 37.” He chuckles, pulling back. “You can relax now; we have two hours more to travel. Why don’t we go down to the gymnasium so that you could remind me why I went to such lengths to obtain you? I’d say my boys are eager to test their strength against you, but well—” He laughs again. “Let’s just say I’m eager.
Let’s go.”

Spock nods, collecting himself. “I am at your disposal – Leader.”

Chapter End Notes

Coming soon...

“Hell, Uhura managed to do it, didn’t she?” Kirk rolls his head in frustration. “Maybe I should ask her for pointers, since I’m sure as hell not asking Pike, but there’s got to be a way for you to understand—”

“I understand,” Spock says softly, and there’s less disbelief and doubt than he would have expected. Incredibly, improbably, Kirk’s rambling makes an astounding amount of sense, and it’s not a surprise, not really, not when Spock is finally paying attention to the right things.

“You do?”
Part V. 5.5

Chapter Summary

"Hell, you’ve been in my freaking mind! Did you manage to miss the great big neon sign saying ‘STUPID FOR YOU PLEASE NEVER LEAVE’?"

Till the end of the line. And then onward.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your wonderful feedback! I'm sorry I didn't respond, but here's why maybe you'd forgive me. I'm leaving tomorrow for a job in a different country, and I wanted to finish this so badly before I go. If this was pen and paper, the paper would still be literally hot. Any language issues - that's the reason. You have no idea how grateful I am that you are in this with me. Do let me know what you think, and I hope, as always, that you enjoy.
♥ ♥ ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Kosan takes ten men down, armed to the teeth – all except for Spock, whom Kosan is keeping close at all times.

For an L-Class planet, Tefelaz is small, almost completely lifeless, with a thin, barely breathable atmosphere, and a night that lasts for 36 hours. The site of Starfleet’s former outpost and now Kosan’s arms depot is a system of two man-made caves built on top of a larger, unstable natural system, with barely a layer built over the ground level, connected with each other with a long and narrow corridor, stretching underground for a little over a kilometer.

The bigger chamber hosts most of the stolen weaponry, and Spock takes a reluctant moment to appreciate the ingenuity of the engineering solution that had allowed to transport and install massive ship phasers meant for orbital use only. The scientist in him, not to mention the first officer of a ship carrying over five hundred crewmembers, feels mildly horrified.

“This is extremely unsafe,” he can’t help but say, realizing that at least three layers of insulation are missing between personnel and the autonomous particle mixture chamber, feeding the weapons with energy.

Kosan chuckles. “Not according to Starfleet’s overbearing safety specs, no, but we manage. Don’t worry, 37. This is why you and I are going to be far from here when the action starts.”

Spock doesn’t know if Kosan really is overconfident or there are some unknown factors justifying his bravado, but he only takes three men with him as he and Spock march along the connecting corridor to the second chamber. This one is considerably smaller, far better insulated, and is
unquestionably a control center.

“Report,” Kosan says almost leisurely, with hints of almost childlike anticipation. It would make Spock’s skin crawl, were he human.

“The Romulan convoy has just entered the sector, Leader,” Elen reports, settling at the control station. The other two Omicron soldiers stand guard at the doors. “They will be within firing range in six minutes.”

“Good.” Kosan nods. “Lock weapons as soon as they are within range, but don’t fire.” He glances at Spock with a wry quirk of his lips. “I think it would be symbolic if you had that pleasure.”

“As you wish,” Spock replies calmly, even as his mind is racing.

An attempt to gain control would be suicidal and, more importantly, ineffective. There are six of them, all armed. With luck in which he doesn’t believe, he could hope to incapacitate two – with extreme luck, perhaps three – before he is invariably shot, and the convoy’s fate is sealed.

It is also very clear that, once they let him at the controls, he will not have access to anything that could interfere with the execution of the plan. They merely expect him to push the button, and refraining from doing so will be all he’ll be able to do.

It’s a no-win.

His lips twitch at the irony.

“Four minutes,” Elen announces.

Now. Spock must do something now.

“Kosan,” he starts, turning toward him without a clear idea of what he is going to say. “If I—”

“Leader!” Elen interrupts urgently. “We’ve lost the connection to the weapons room.”

“What?” Kosan snaps, leaning over him to look at his terminal. “How’s that possible?”

“I don’t know. We’re not receiving the visual – or audio, and the telemetry has been cut off.”

“Do we still have weapons control?”

“Yes, but—”

The huge viewscreen on the opposite wall suddenly comes to life, revealing through the swirl of static snow a face Spock hasn’t dared to hope to see again.

Kirk’s mouth is bruised and there’s a gash across his forehead that is still bleeding, staining the collar of his black-and-white dress-uniform which he is incredibly still wearing with vivid red. He’s smirking, and what could be seen of the weapons chamber behind him seems to be in foggy disarray.

“What the hell is this?” Kosan swears.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Kirk drawls, casually taking stock of the room. “Sorry to interrupt your scheduled broadcast, but it just didn’t sit well with me.”

“Wesley, Hun, get him the hell out of there,” Kosan snaps at the two men guarding the door, who instantly turn and disappear into the connecting tunnel. He looks up at the screen, pulling on an
unimpressed expression. “Captain Kirk, I presume?”

“At your service.” Kirk sketches a mock-bow. “And your welcoming committee won’t make it here in time, as we both know.” His gaze drifts to Kosan’s right. “How’re you doing there, Spock? Do they really have cookies on the dark side? Because I can’t say much for the scenery.”

“Captain,” Spock says flatly, reading Kirk’s underlying message loud and clear. Stall. “How did you get here?”

“Funny you should ask that, because my invitation must have totally been lost in the mail,” Kirk says, wiping the blood off his cheekbone distractedly. “Tip to the wise: if you’re traveling under a Romulan cloak, don’t forget to check your energy wake for freeloaders. There’s no way I would have made it here in a shuttle if you didn’t give me a lift. A bumpy ride, but hey, at least I’m here.” He winks.

Kosan looks apoplectic with anger.

Spock stares at Kirk for a handful of stolen seconds in helpless admiration. The speed of his reactions, the sharpness of analysis – immediate and one hundred percent accurate, would be impossible for any other individual in the entire quadrant. He must have followed Spock’s security detail, realized what had happened, located and expropriated a shuttle, scanned the area for alien ships and, upon detecting none, stumbled onto an odd reading, one that would have left entire science departments puzzling over for days, realized in a fit of intuitive brilliance exactly what it was, and threw himself into the energy wake blindly, with an equal chance of being absorbed by the ship’s warp field and taken in for the ride or being torn to pieces.

To risk so much without hesitation, knowing so little, yet being right, being here to deliver the only thing he knows how to deliver – a win, even when the chances are on the verge of being non-existent and he might die for it. Most probably will die for it.

Someday if not today, because he doesn’t know how to live otherwise.

Spock suddenly feels as though his skin is too tight, his chest expanding helplessly, desperate to contain the hot, glowing pressure that is making it difficult to breathe, as his heart swells to bursting. He recognizes the overwhelming, crushing emotion instantly, though he didn’t know it like this, never remotely close to this. It runs deeper than skin, deeper than blood, sinking into his very bones, and reaching further still, piercing something he dares not call – a soul.

He’s the lone figure on the beach staring in the face of a tsunami.

“Ingenious,” Kosan’s voice snaps, bringing Spock sharply back to reality. “And all for nothing. Elen, do we have control of the phasers?”

“Yes, Leader.” Elen checks his console. “Looks like he’s tried to meddle with the system, but couldn’t break the code.”

“I still have time,” Kirk taunts. “And even if I can’t do anything from here, the Enterprise is coming, Kosan, or whatever your name actually is. You won’t make it out of here. I’ll order my ship to burn this entire installation to the ground, you read me?”

Spock’s eyes widen slightly, and sure enough, when he looks at the screen, Kirk is glaring right back at him. Spock’s insides turn to ice as he reads the implication.

Kosan laughs. “The Enterprise? Hell, did you step in it, Kirk. If your ship shows up, you’ll just be doing my job for me.” His laughter dies out and he barks, “Time to firing range?”

“Thirty seconds.”

“Then, 37, be my guest,” Kosan says, pulling out a hand disruptor and gesturing with it for Spock to take the chair.

Spock lifts an eyebrow at the weapon, then moves slowly to sit at the tactical console. He can clearly see three Romulan transports entering the designated space on his screen, crawling slowly but surely directly into the target lock.

“37?” Kirk’s voice comes mocking. “What you don’t merit your own name anymore, or what?”

More than anything in his life at that moment he wants to turn, to take what will in all likelihood be the final glimpse he’ll ever have of Kirk, but he can’t. The moment Spock fires those phasers, Kirk will be gone, obliterated. And yet they have to be fired. They must be. They both know that. Just because they couldn’t speak openly doesn’t mean Spock didn’t hear the order.

‘Are you? Emotionally compromised?’

For the first time in his life, he wishes he was.

“Spock! Hey, Spock, listen to me, you son of a bitch! There are people on those transports, do you hear me? Yes, they are Romulans, but they are innocent! You used to care about this sort of thing, remember?”

Spock does turn then, matching Kirk glare for glare. There is a mixture of carefully concealed fear and iron determination in Kirk’s eyes, and this – this is goodbye.

“The Romulans,” Spock says coldly, “are a dirty stain on the tree of Vulcan evolution. They should never have left their caves. They should be eradicated.”

“Well said, 37.” Kosan presses the barrel of his disruptor between Spock’s shoulder blades. “Now fire.”

“Seven seconds to firing range,” Elen says.

The transmission from the weapons chamber abruptly cuts off, and Spock almost howls at the unfairness of a guillotine striking too early.

No. Please no.

“Looks like Wesley and Han finally made it,” Kosan comments with dark satisfaction.

“Firing range, Leader.”

“Now, 37. Fire.”

Spock presses the controls. The phasers fire.

For a split second, there is nothing, and then comes a deafening, booming sound of a massive explosion, and the ground jumps under their feet.

“What the hell—” Kosan stumbles, and even Elen looks up in confusion.
It comes like a 9.9 Richter scale earthquake compressed into thirty seconds. The floor plates crack and split, the walls are shaking, crumbling down here and there, the narrow ceiling windows explode under sudden pressure, showering them in pieces of broken glass, letting the cool, thin atmosphere in.

Spock manages to snatch one last look at the viewscreen, where the Romulan convoy is still making its undisturbed way toward safety, before the entire control panel cracks open and breaks down, sending sparks of electricity everywhere.

There is no safety zone, no cover. Spock rolls toward the far wall and crouches, shielding his head, when a sharp-edged piece of stone slashes him across the face on its way down, bright-hot pain and blood streaming down his neck. He hears cries of pain behind him, and turns just in time to see an entire column come off the wall and fall down, smashing Kosan’s skull.

Spock regards the body dispassionately. His arms fall limply to his sides, no longer protecting him, as he sits motionlessly and stares and waits for it to be over.

Unlike a real earthquake, it ends as abruptly as it has begun, with no forewarning and no gradual lessening of the tremors. One moment it’s happening, and the next the ground is still.

Spock doesn’t know for how long he remains immobile until it penetrates. It really is over.

It’s done.

He pulls himself up to his feet slowly, cataloguing various aches on autopilot and patting off the dust. There is no meaning in the motions. He makes them anyway. He looks around.

Structurally, the room is mostly intact, though everything inside is broken. He will have no means of sending a distress signal and will have to wait until someone arrives to investigate.

Kosan’s body is almost whole, apart from his head, as though preserved for posterity. Spock turns away. He can’t see Elen, but there’s a two-meter-wide gash across the floor – a newly opened mouth of an abyss, so his fate presents no mystery.

Spock moves toward the entrance to the connecting tunnel, almost wishing for it to be blocked. Then he wouldn’t have to go and investigate. He wouldn’t have to go looking for Jim’s body.

Of course, as cosmic irony would have it, the tunnel is obstructed, but serviceable. It merits a nod of respect for unknown Starfleet engineers who knew how to make something so vital seismic-proof.

He makes his way slowly, climbing over the parts that have caved in and jumping over the gashes. In his mind, he is already constructing a report for Starfleet Command. One would be demanded of him, and he has absolutely nothing better to do with his time.

*We communicated in code. The captain let me know that he had managed to reposition the weapons so that the phasers were pointing downward into the ground. He had accomplished this without triggering the alarm in the computer system, because James Kirk broke codes in his spare time. He said he found the process stimulating.*

Bad form. Start over.

He finds Wesley’s body approximately fifty meters from the entrance to the weapons chamber, smashed between two collapsed bulkheads. It was a brutal and violent death, and yet, Spock finds it hard to feel sorry for him. There is no going back from the Omicron Conditioning.
The way the captain had manipulated the weapons had resulted in a feedback loop once they had been fired. Subsequently, both phasers had imploded. The force of the blast was sufficient to cause severe structural damage to the installation that had caused the death of all hostile personnel. I myself have been spared by a statistical unlikelihood. The captain would have called it 'luck of the draw.'

Hun, he discovers, had made it all the way to the entrance only to be obliterated by the blast. Only the location of the body allows Spock to identify him.

The entrance has caved in, and Spock proceeds to meticulously remove boulders, pushing them further along the tunnel to make room for lesser pieces of debris. The rocks are still warm under his hands. He works, unnoticing that he has developed blisters, vaguely cognizant of the fact that his hands are bleeding.

‘Captain. I am not. Emotionally compromised. Over you.’

When he finally steps into the room, he finds it blackened and empty, burned out. All that remains of the two orbital-grade phasers are two pools of metal, still steaming, filling the chamber with acrid smoke. Crude holes where the windows used to be allow for ventilation, but the smell is foul, poisoning.

The room smells like death. Nothing could have survived this.

No one.

Spock stands motionless, uncomprehending, and yet understanding all too well. Perhaps this is what Omicron Conditioning feels like – a complete vacuum of thought, a void.

He had hoped, Spock realizes, and his heart gives a painful jolt. He had hoped. Up until this moment, irrational as it might have been, he had hoped, because Jim Kirk was brilliant at defying impossible odds.

But Spock’s warning, his suggestion for a shelter must have come too late to be heeded. Seven seconds were not enough.

‘We are always cutting it too close.’

Spock sinks down to his knees as though preparing to meditate. The residual heat seeps through the fabric of his battered dress-uniform, smoke beginning to curl around his ankles. He closes his eyes, unsure if he is still inhaling.

“Spock? What are you doing?”

Jim’s voice. Is he hallucinating?

Spock’s eyes snap open and he half-rises, twisting around. There, a few meters left of the tunnel, a tall slice of rock is covering what appears to be – Spock’s breath catches – an entrance to a service tunnel, obscured from view previously by the weapons. It must go deep enough into the body of the mountain, because Jim Kirk is standing in the improvised doorway – battered and bruised, and looking like he has been knocked out for a really long time, but alive – alive.

Spock stares, simply stares for what feels like ages, while his mind refuses to acknowledge ‘Jim’ and ‘alive’ as part of the same sentence.

“Spock?” Kirk says, softer now, worry washing over his face. “Are you okay? Where is Kosan?”
“Dead.” Spock swallows. “Captain—”

“Spock, I—” Kirk is swaying on his feet slightly, and his breathing is labored, but he seems majorly unharmed. A tentative, uncertain smile curls in the corner of his mouth. “Can you—”

Spock moves then, unable to withstand it any longer. He has to know, has to feel for himself.

He walks up close, disregarding any personal space barriers that have never truly existed between them anyway, and pushes. Kirk falls back against the wall, his breath hitching, and he’s watching Spock intently, eyes blown wide, tense and questing. They are covered in blood, both of them, but Spock doesn’t care, doesn’t think he can care about anything anymore, but the man in front of him.

There’s no hesitation, no deliberation, he cups Kirk’s face in his hands and kisses him. It’s harder than it needs to be, tinged with sharp metallic taste, and Kirk makes a startled noise, but Spock can’t stop, sensing Kirk’s mind – *luminescent, vibrant, alive* – beneath his fingertips, drunk on the feeling. He kisses with everything he has, pouring every bit of mind-numbing terror, despair, and passion into it, and it’s heated and heady, and it has to hurt, but it’s healing something within him he had no idea was broken.

He feels Kirk move under him, arms sliding slowly, but deliberately around his waist, the kiss turning gentler, soothing, until it breaks, leaving them standing close, breathing each other in.

“Hey,” Kirk murmurs, his breath coming in short gasps. “You okay?”

Spock freezes. It all comes crushing back to him in a single moment – where they are, what he’s doing. He pulls back sharply, shocked at his own actions. There is no excuse for almost – almost—

“Captain—” His voice comes out hoarse with underlying terror. “Have you – I ask forgiveness—”

Kirk stills, looking up at him, then says, “No.” His hands tighten, holding Spock in place. “No, we’re not doing this. You don’t get to do this.”

“Captain—”

Kirk’s jaw juts forward, his eyes narrow. “Seriously?”

“Jim,” Spock says miserably. “I—”

“You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to pretend this never happened. That it was some situational insanity or some other bullshit like that. You don’t get to deny that for once in your life you’ve acted on some true, real emotion. I did not *imagine* it. I felt it. And I’m not going to let you deny it – again.”

Spock closes his eyes for a moment. “I did not intend to deny anything.”

Kirk’s eyebrows fly up. “No?”

“No, Jim.” Spock looks at him. “But I acted on my desires. Not yours. I forgot myself. It is inexcusable, and I will understand if you – if—”

Kirk is staring at him, as though he’s lost the ability to comprehend Standard. “You think I don’t want this?” he asks at last, disbelief etched into every syllable. “Spock. Where the *hell* have you been for the last two years?”

He pushes off, creating some much-needed distance, looking at Spock with anger-edged incredulity.
“Spock, I’ve been a complete and total idiot for you since day fucking one. How on earth haven’t you noticed? You’re the best damn science officer in the Fleet – yeah, no. You know. I know you know, dammit. So what is it really? Because it can’t be that you have any doubts about—” He trails off, looking at Spock through narrowed eyes. “T’Pring was right, wasn’t she? You really do get selectively oblivious when it comes to you. Jesus, Spock.”

He laughs, a bit hysterically, pacing.

“That would explain so much, but how does that even work? When I flipped my shit over you and Pike – just what did you think it was? Because even I wouldn’t buy my own excuse at the time. Bones sure as hell didn’t.”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “For God’s sake, you were right there when I told my mother – my mother – I’d choose you over her, if she ever pushed me that far. Did you think I was joking?

“Every time I touched you, didn’t you feel… Hell, you’ve been in my freaking mind! Did you manage to miss the great big neon sign saying ‘STUPID FOR YOU PLEASE NEVER LEAVE’? Jesus Christ, Spock – what does it take to get through to you?”

He smashes his fist into the wall, hard enough for emphasis, not enough to cause actual damage but Spock tracks the motion anyway, rattled.

“Hell, Uhura managed to do it, didn’t she?” Kirk rolls his head in frustration. “Maybe I should ask her for pointers, since I’m sure as hell not asking Pike, but there’s got to be a way for you to understand—”

“I understand,” Spock says softly, and there’s less disbelief and doubt than he would have expected.

Incredibly, improbably, Kirk’s rambling makes an astounding amount of sense, and it’s not a surprise, not really, not when Spock is finally paying attention to the right things.

“You do?” Kirk breathes out, staring at him, his anger having evaporated.

“I do.”

Kirk has never been subtle, that much is fair, and Spock has never lacked observational skills or empathy. That wasn’t the problem.

He lacked faith.

Something so core and vital, broken such a long time ago, surviving despite it, taking blow after blow through the turmoil of his relationships, and people, and life, until finally, here they stand.

Kirk can’t do this bit for him. Only Spock can.

“You—” he falters, then rallies valiantly, heart in his throat. “You love me. You are in love with me.”

Kirk’s eyes close in relief for a moment, his body visibly releasing the tension. He laughs softly, shaking his head.

“That – Spock, God, that’s—” He looks up, eyes bright and intent as he steps closer. “That doesn’t really cover the half of it. You get that, right?”

Spock’s heart swells at the implication. “Jim—”
“But it’s a start,” Kirk whispers. “It’s definitely a start. Want to show me the rest?”

Spock does. It’s easy, the press of Jim’s lips against his own already too familiar for something so completely new, like a forgotten life-defining addiction, tasting of adrenaline and heated spice, alien and exotic, and at the same time so achingly his own, as though he’s owned it, been a part of it through his entire life and has merely forgotten.

The resonance between them swells into something taut and heady, Jim’s mind calling to him, an irresistible pull, begging for Spock to drop that one last barrier and link them, the temptation almost too strong to withstand, his head spinning wildly, but he knows, he knows that if he does, he might not be able to ever let go. Already he can scarcely remember what it felt like not to have this, already the very notion seems inconceivable, and they have barely touched for all of that.

Jim is making soft, helpless little noises that Spock couldn’t have imagined in a thousand fantasies if he were the indulging type, and they’re doing his head in. He backs Jim up against the reclining surface of a wall, craving balance. Jim’s head falls back, gasping for air, and Spock presses his lips against the exposed column of his neck, tugging the collar away, tasting sweat and smoke and the maddening drumming of Jim’s pulse. Jim’s hands dive into Spock’s hair, fingers curling and tugging, as he holds him close, restless, straining. Spock’s teeth graze the sensitive skin, and Jim moans, his entire body responding to the touch.

Spock buries his face in Jim’s neck and whispers helplessly, “I thought I lost you. Jim, I thought you died.”

“It’s all right,” Jim murmurs, holding him and rocking him a little. “It’s all right, Spock. I’m here. I’m here. I’m alive.”

This time, Spock thinks, and it’s a gut-wrenching realization, because he might have missed when it has started, but he’s paying attention now, and it’s going to be there for the rest of his life.

“Hey,” Jim soothes. “Don’t go there. I know how that one feels. You’ve put me through it enough times for me to know.”

Spock pulls back slightly to look at him. He doesn’t question the serendipity, is not surprised by it.

Jim traces the outline of Spock’s cheekbone with his fingers gently, his eyes soft and bare, every defense stripped away. “I’m in if you’re in.”

Spock catches his wrist, holds it. “The price we pay?”

Jim smiles, a bitter, broken twist of the lips. “Till the end of the line.” His breath hitches as Spock kisses his palm. “For me, anyway.”

“Jim.” Spock can’t help a gentle reproach. “You should know better than to ask.”

Jim’s smile grows up in wattage. “That’s why I didn’t.”

It’s gentle this time, almost achingly sweet, like they have done it hundreds of times before, like they would definitely do it thousands of times again, over and over, until the time runs out on them the way they both know it must someday.

“I’m in,” Spock whispers in the shaky breaths between. “I’m in.”

Jim smiles and pulls him back down. “Good.”
Kirk’s communicator chirps closer to the planet’s natural dawn, a little over an hour later. Spock admits to a certain feeling of relief. Kirk’s still healing lungs have been subjected to the planet’s not exactly welcoming atmosphere and combustion residence long enough.

They would have preferred to spend the time engaged in a more pleasurable activity, but they couldn’t afford to yet, not with everything that had yet to be done. An unexpected breather, however, has given them the time to debrief each other, weaving the separately collected threads of information into one coherent tableau.

Their hands kept seeking each other out of their own free will at first, but Spock has been reluctant to draw his shields back up, and Kirk didn’t seem to have any shields when it came to Spock, so the contact has been tantalizingly distracting, and they had to stop. Sitting on the soot-covered floor pressed together shoulder to shoulder seemed like the least unbearable compromise.

“Kirk here,” Kirk says, having dug out his communicator out of his pocket and sending Spock an apologetic look.

“Captain!” Nyota’s excited voice cuts through the static. “Are you all right? We found your shuttle adrift on the edge of the system—”

“I’m fine, Uhura.” Kirk laughs a little, a simple, happy sound. His arm presses tighter against Spock’s. “Spock and I are both fine. And I think we’ve stopped a war even.”

“Good for you, Kirk,” a dry voice cuts in. That’s Admiral Nechayev. “Now get your ass over here, because your entire crew has been declared renegades, we’ve got a ship in tow with a bloody cloaking device installed, Nogura has disappeared into thin air, and Komack is out for my blood. And if you think I’m going to clean this mess up alone, you’re sorely mistaken.”

Kirk gives Spock an incredulous look, lips quirking. “Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir. I would never think that, sir.”

“Oh, shut up. Spock, you there?”

Spock leans closer to the communicator. “Admiral?”

“You owe me a dance.”

Spock’s eyes fly up to meet Kirk’s, and he knows he has completely failed to conceal his amusement, because Kirk’s answering grin is radiant.

“I am at your disposal, sir.”

“You’d better believe it. All right, sit tight, we’re beaming you up in about two minutes. Nechayev out.”

Kirk snaps the communicator closed and looks at Spock. “Renegades?”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “It was to be expected.”

“They might not know he’s guilty, or even what’s going on at all, but with Nogura out of the picture, the admiralty must be running around like headless chickens.” Kirk grimaces, watching Spock get to
his feet and stretch. “I don’t get this guy. Why not try to grab for power, since his game was up anyway? What had he got to lose? He should have run back to Earth, tell everyone we were the saboteurs, declare us outlaws, fabricate evidence – whatever. No one back home suspected him; it’s a perfect starting point for a gambit.”

“One must possess certain decisiveness of character for such a gamble,” Spock muses. “Admiral Nogura has never struck me as a man who would place bets on an uncertain outcome at the price of his own career.”

“Politics.” Kirk makes a face. “I don’t know about you, but when I signed up, it was for the brave new worlds and new civilizations. No one told me I’d have to clean up the house.”

Spock considers him. “Are you familiar with a mid-nineteenth century confidence artist Canada Bill Jones, Captain?”

Kirk blinks at him. “No. It kind of freaks me out that you are.”

“Not as such, though, as I understand it, he was quite a proficient – card-sharp. He was known in particular for having allegedly said, ‘I know it’s crooked, but it’s the only game in town.’”


“Admiral Pike had expressed this same sentiment to me once, using his own words, of course. At the time I was particularly – disillusioned with Starfleet. I did not see it back then as my responsibility to change the order of things. Now, however…”

“It’s not scary that we are adults now, it’s scary that we are adults now.” Kirk nods, grinning at him ruefully.

“Well,” Spock says softly. “Perhaps not quite adults where Starfleet is concerned. Responsible adolescents.”

“Anything to save me from paperwork,” Kirk agrees, just as his communicator chirps again. “And that’s our cue. Let’s hop to it before we get grounded for good, Mr. Spock.”

Spock offers him a hand up, lips twitching. “As you wish, Captain.”

Kirk doesn’t let go, and they remain close, looking at each other, until the moment the transporter beam seizes them.

--

The familiar transporter room of the Enterprise is a pleasant sight, even as Spock takes in their welcoming committee that includes Engineer Scott at the controls, an already scowling Doctor McCoy, a beaming Nyota, and Admiral Nechayev, who has obviously managed to snatch a moment and change into non-descript black fatigues with no rank insignia. Somehow that doesn’t make her any less of a presence.

“Well,” Nechayev breaks the silence, her tone dry. “This is a pretty picture. Spock looks like he’s just jumped out of a Bond movie; Kirk looks like death warmed over, but he’s grinning so hard I want to stick a lemon in his mouth just because; and both of them are covered in each other’s blood.” She turns toward Scott. “I can see what you mean, Mr. Scott. This ship is exciting.”
Scott gives her a cautious shrug.

Spock turns toward Kirk and asks softly, “‘Bond movie?’”

Kirk looks him over and snorts. “She might have a point at that. I’ll explain later.” He sways a little and grabs onto Spock’s arm for support. “Sorry, just—”

“Doctor,” Spock says in alarm, steadying him.

“I’m fine, Spock—”

But McCoy is already on them, aiming a scanner at Kirk almost viciously and swearing. “Dammit, Jim, what the hell have you been doing? All that careful work – did you just feel like spending the next millennium in Medbay?”

“You know I never tire of your company, Bones,” Kirk says with a smile that is only a little pained, as McCoy unceremoniously plucks Kirk’s arm from Spock and wraps it around his own shoulders to escort him to Medbay.

“Spock, you too,” McCoy barks over his shoulder. “Damn stupid suicidal plans!”

Spock hesitates, catching Nechayev’s eyes.

“Are you seriously injured, Commander?” she asks, looking him over critically.

“No, those are superficial injuries only.”

“What?” McCoy – and perforce Kirk – whirl back on them. “I’ll be the judge of that, thank you kindly, Madam Admiral!”

Nechayev lifts a placating hand. “I understand your concern, Doctor, but I believe the commander here could be considered a fair judge of his own physical condition—”

“What, this guy?” McCoy interjects with an incredulous and, frankly, insulting laugh. Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Have you met him? He’ll be telling you he’s ‘fully functional’ while being two seconds away from bleeding out. I would know; I’ve seen him do it.”

“Not this time, Bones,” Kirk says, grinning softly, though his eyes lock with Spock’s for a moment just to make sure. Spock gives him a subtle nod. “He’s fine. Nothing a shower and a few minutes with a dermal regenerator won’t cure.”

Considering the source of this unexpected testimony, Spock believes that McCoy’s astonished expression as he stares at Kirk is justified. He’s a little less comfortable seeing the equally shocked expressions on Nyota’s and even Scott’s faces.

“Right,” McCoy drawls, snapping his jaw with an audible sound. “Spock, I’ll expect you within the hour, or so help me, I’ll hunt you down. Better yet, I’ll send Chapel. Don’t make that face, I know she scares you every bit as much as she scares me.”

Spock, who hasn’t been making any kinds of faces, opens his mouth to reply, but Nechayev beats him to it.

“Don’t worry, Doctor,” she says with admirable patience. “I’ll send him back into the realm of your tyrannical yet well-meaning regime soon enough.”

McCoy glares at her before dragging Kirk, who’s shaking with suppressed laughter, out of the room.
“Lieutenant—” Nechayev’s gaze stumbles over Nyota. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“Yes, sir,” she agrees easily, smiles at Spock, relieved and happy, and leaves.

“Commander Scott, if you please.”

Discounting his slightly terrified expression, Scott very prudently stays quiet, as he leads the way out of the transporter room. Nechayev motions for Spock to follow, bringing up the rear.

The corridors of the Enterprise are bursting with activity – orderly, Spock is pleased to note. Upon spotting him, almost every crewmember they meet salutes or offers a greeting, relieved smiles on their faces. He gets a handful of respectful ‘Commander’ and ‘Welcome back, sir’. Spock nods in acknowledgement.

They finally end up in front of the entrance to Cargo Bay 2, two security guards posted at the doors. Spock lifts an eyebrow.

“Aye, that’s never going to not be weird,” Scott mutters, catching his look. “After you.”

The moment Spock steps inside the need for heightened security becomes apparent. Kosan’s ship is parked, for lack of a better term, in the middle of the main storage area, conveniently cleared out during the recent repairs. The doors are open, and Spock can see an assortment of engineering officers and his own science staff milling around.

Natalie Pechalat emerges from the starboard airlock just as they enter and looks up. She, too, is dressed in a neat set of all-purpose black fatigues, but her hair is still styled for a ball. She beams as she spots them and jumps onto the deck, heading straight for them.

For a moment, Spock feels mildly alarmed at the prospect of being hugged, but she stops a respectable foot away and contains herself to tapping his arm lightly.

“It’s good to have you back, Mr. Spock.”

“It is agreeable to be back, Lieutenant,” he replies, glancing over the ship. “Am I correct in assuming you are engaged in removing the cloaking device for the purpose of then installing it on the Enterprise?”

“Well,” she answers, giving Nechayev an odd look, “that’s the question, isn’t it? We are almost ready to remove it, but Mr. Scott and I both wanted you to look at it before we did. You are the only one who saw it activated, after all.”

“Aye.” Scott nods. “And I don’t think these lads believed in manuals.”

“As for installing it,” Pechalat says, frowning, “it sounds like an extremely unsafe idea without excessive testing, for which I’m told we don’t have the time.”

“And yet it must be done,” Nechayev says firmly. “Your staff has been extremely reluctant to proceed without your seal of approval, Commander. It’s almost as if they need handholding.”

Her tone is even, but Spock can feel the lines of tension between the two women, almost audibly humming with accumulated voltage. Scott shifts uncomfortably in the background, but his body is aligned with Pechalat’s, facing a common enemy.

“I am certain Lieutenant Pechalat was merely following the correct protocols where the safety of this ship is concerned, Admiral,” Spock says, suddenly intensely glad he’d managed to return when he
did. “Were I delayed longer, I am confident, they would have given you full cooperation.”

Actually, he’s not confident, not at all, judging by the look on Pechalat’s face. Her smile is… unsettling. “Get back to work, Lieutenant,” he tells her, pulling her attention away from the admiral. “I will be there in a moment to check your progress.”

“Yes, sir.” She draws the line at snapping a salute at him, but the sentiment in unmistakable.

Spock watches her leave, Scott swept in her wake, but not before he sends Spock a very unsubtle look indicating the admiral – ‘deal with her’. That he hasn’t been his usual vocal self tells Spock just as much about the nature of that particular working relationship as a detailed verbal account would have. Perhaps more.

“What happened to the crew?” he asks Nechayev.

She appears unperturbed by the change of subject. “McCoy’s got them sedated in Medbay, preparing for stasis. There isn’t much else we can do for them. Once we’re back on Earth, we can locate their next of kin and inform them. Those not facing criminal charges before their Conditioning will be released into their families’ custody. The rest – I suppose we’ll have to keep the rest.”

Indeed, Spock thinks grimly. Not much else to be done for them.

“Admiral, is it truly imperative that we install the cloaking device on the Enterprise? Lieutenant Pechalat and Mr. Scott are correct – we’d be essentially using technology we know nothing about. Not only would we physically endanger this ship, we would also be in breach of the Sirius Accord between us and the Romulan Empire. If our destination is Earth, would it not be more logical—”

She lifts up a hand. “Believe it or not, I’ve been through this with your lieutenant and chief engineer. I understand the risks, Commander. But Admiral Komack is in full paranoia mode. He has no idea what happened, Starfleet Command has no idea, and we’re not getting anywhere close to sector zero to tell them if Komack’s got anything to say about that. I’ve known this man for twenty years. Trust me when I say that it’s completely not past him to blast us out of the sky and ask questions later. Stealth is our only option. And we must hurry.”

Spock has suspected as much. He also knows why the crew has been less than enthusiastic. It wasn’t that Pechalat and Scott didn’t see the necessity or the urgency. It was more that, the moment the cloak was installed, Nechayev would have, without a doubt, ordered them to set course for Earth, leaving their captain and first officer to fate unknown. So, while never openly defying her, they stalled as much as they could. He wonders if Nechayev knows that.

“The final decision will be the captain’s,” he reminds Nechayev. “You outrank him as far as the mission is concerned, but not when it comes to the ship.”

“Oh, I’m fully aware of that,” she replies, and then suddenly smiles at him. “Why do you think I’m talking to you first? Kirk will be a lot easier to convince if you are onboard.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Admiral, you are severely overestimating my influence—”

“Oh, don’t even, Spock. We both know I’m right.” She looks absently at the people moving in and out of the captured ship. “You know, this crew is the tightest bunch I’ve ever seen in all my years of service. Kirk is obviously doing something right to inspire that kind of loyalty.”

Spock very carefully says nothing.

“Stop gloating, Commander, it’s unbecoming.”
Spock looks as innocent as he knows how.

“You’ve got ‘I told you so’ written all over your face.” Nechayev sighs. “I had to be sure.”

“And now that you are?”

“Take a look around you. This might be the pivotal point for Starfleet as an institution, perhaps even for the Federation. And it’s in Kirk’s hands.”

Spock inclines his head in acknowledgement. Privately, he wonders what grievous offense Lieutenant George Kirk must have committed against Arina Nechayev to make her distrust stretch all the way into the new generation.

“Go look at the cloaking device, Commander,” Nechayev says, her tone all business. “It really can’t wait. And then please be so kind as to go directly to Medbay before your very benevolent and charming Doctor McCoy has an aneurysm. I don’t care much to have my food poisoned.”

“I wish I could tell you that it was not a possibility, but in view of our recent renegade status, I cannot be certain,” Spock says thoughtfully. “If you will excuse me.”

He salutes her and quickens his pace to catch up with his staff.

--

It turns out to be a very good thing they have waited for him.

Lieutenant Pechalat goes white. Scott tugs at his collar as though it has suddenly decided to strangle him.

“This would have decompressed the entire deck,” he says, staring at the relay Spock has uncovered in horrified awe. “Triple, hell, even quadruple redundancies I could understand, but this little bugger is tied independently into the warp core. What the hell were these people thinking?”

“These people – and I believe it is now safe to say this is Romulan manufacture – most likely had objections to their technology being stolen and repurposed the way we are currently attempting to do,” Spock says, carefully disconnecting the couplings.

“Aye. One hell of an anti-hijacking alarm, if ye ask me.”

“Deadly,” Pechalat says, her voice shaken, but her hands steady where she’s assisting Spock. “I know I said it before, sir, but it’s really good to have you back.”

“You would have discovered it if you had more time to analyze it, Lieutenant. I trust you can continue without me?”

“Yes, sir.” She nods determination. “We’ll page you when we’re ready to install it.”

“Acknowledged.”

The hour McCoy had given him has long been up, but the lack of medical personnel haunting him tells Spock clearly the doctor must have more pressing concerns on his mind. Spock goes anyway; the sensation of dried blood in his hair is not one he particularly enjoys, and it’s inadvisable to take a shower until his injuries are treated.
When he gets there, Medbay is covered in hushed twilight. With a start, Spock realizes it must be late into the Gamma shift ship’s time. He tears his gaze away from the biobeds occupied by sedated Omicron soldiers with uncharacteristic difficulty.

Chapel is not the nurse on duty, but she materializes at his elbow almost instantly and leads him to an unoccupied cubicle. She, too, still has her hair in an evening style, and smiles tiredly at him as she goes through the check-up.

“I think that does it,” she tells him some fifteen minutes later, tucking away the dermal regenerator with blind efficiency of long practice. “Your blood pressure is a little low, so I’ve given you a mild stimulant. You should sit for a few minutes until it kicks in.”

“I am not experiencing any dizziness, Nurse.”

“All the same, sir. It’s only a few minutes.”

Her eyes look tired. Spock inclines his head. “Very well.”

She smiles and disappears behind the curtain, leaving him alone.

A gentle touch to his knee brings him out of a reverie he didn’t notice he’s slipped into. He looks up to find Kirk standing next to him, smile tinged with concern.

“Hey,” he breathes out softly. “You okay?”

“Adequate,” Spock says, resisting the urge to take his hand. “How are you feeling?”

Kirk shrugs. “Well, Bones yelled a lot, and I really hate that torture machine of his, but he agreed to release me, so at a guess it’s not that bad.”

“I am pleased.”

They are quiet for a moment. Kirk laughs suddenly.

“Nothing.” He shakes his head at Spock’s questioning gaze. “It’s just, this is going to be really hard for a while. All I want to do right now, really badly, is—”

“Jim.”

“Right. I know.” He straightens up, steps back. “Walk me to my quarters, Commander? We both need a change of clothes, and you can brief me on the way. I heard Scotty and Admiral Nechayev got along like a house on fire – literally, the house being my ship.”

Spock slides off the biobed. “I must confess I have gotten the same impression.”

They talk on the way quietly, shoulders brushing occasionally as they walk.

--

Nechayev calls a briefing two hours later.

Spock has spent most of them in Engineering, assisting Scott with the installation of the cloaking device. While familiar with the chief engineer’s colorful way of expressing himself, Spock has never heard quite so many inventive combinations of expletives from him before.
“Mr. Scott,” Kirk calls on him first. “I understand that we aren’t going anywhere without the cloak being installed, so how’s that going?”

Scott glances at Nechayev, his expression caught comically between severe disapproval and respectful awe. “Well, the beastie’s installed all right, but it’s not any too stable. It doesn’t seem to like our power matrix very much, so we switched to charging it like a battery. Once the ‘charge’ is gone, we need to take it offline and let it cool or risk overloading our own systems.”

“And how long does this charge give us?”

“Twenty minutes,” Scott says glumly. “Twenty-five if ye stretch it.”

Kirk raises his eyebrows. “That’s not really long at all. Mr. Spock?”

“Engineering and Science department are working on the problem, Captain. So far, however, every simulation has proved Mr. Scott’s estimation to be correct. Romulan technology is significantly different from ours. It would take extensive study and testing to integrate it properly – for which we do not have the time.”

“Sir, we might not need the cloak engaged for the entire trip to Earth,” Sulu says. “Knowing the most likely Fleet disposition, I can navigate a course that would keep us out of their sensor range until we reach sector zero. After that we can engage the cloak and slip in.”

“Except we do not know the current Fleet disposition, Lieutenant,” Nechayev says calmly. “Doubtless, Komack would have canceled all emergency deployment plans he knows I’ve been briefed on. The net is spread, but we won’t know where the traps are.”

“Actually, begging your pardon, Admiral, I think we would,” Nyota interrupts as she enters the briefing room in a hurry, her breathing indicating she might have run here. “I’ve just finished decoding that message Commander Kirk sent us an hour ago, and—”

“My mother – Commander Kirk sent us a message?” Kirk straightens up in disbelief. “How did she find us?”

“Your mother is one resourceful lady,” Nyota answers, eyes on her PADD as she streams data to the table pickup, a slight smile on her lips. “Also, I might have slipped her our emergency frequency while we were stuck on DS4.”

“The same emergency frequency Starfleet doesn’t know about? The one I set up specifically for the Enterprise crew only?” Kirk sounds indignant.

“The one I set up, and yes, that one.”

“Remind me why I keep employing you.”

“Because you need a living reminder of why you shouldn’t hit on girls in bars.” She flashes him a grin. It fades after a moment. “You know they have declared her a fugitive.”

“My mother?”

“Yes. Apparently, Komack issued a warrant for her arrest, but when security showed up, she was nowhere to be found. Seven ships undocked at that time form the station, so now they have no idea where she is.”

Kirk rolls his eyes; McCoy grins.

Nechayev asks, her tone one of mild curiosity, “And how did you come by this information, Lieutenant Uhura?”

“Um.” Nyota swallows. “I’ve tapped into the intra-fleet network.”

“The same network Starfleet has had the Enterprise cut off from the moment they have declared you renegades?”

Nyota blushed slightly. “Yes, sir.”

“I see.” Nechayev studies her for a long moment thoughtfully. “Please, continue.”

“The information Commander Kirk sent” – Nyota taps her PADD – “I believe it’s an updated Fleet deployment grid.”

A star chart springs over the briefing table. In the middle, Earth is easily identifiable, and around it Starfleet vessels emerge, stretching throughout the nearby systems in a helpfully highlighted pattern. Each ship is identified by name and class and is moving according to its designated patrol route.

“The time stamp” – Nyota clears her throat – “indicates this is less than four hours old.”

For almost a full minute, the entire senior staff of the Enterprise and Admiral Nechayev stare at the map in various degrees of intensely appreciative shock.

“A fugitive,” Chekov mutters, sounding in equal parts horrified and in love.

Kirk blinks. “Someone be so kind as to remind me to never ever do anything to piss off my mother. Ever.”

Nechayev’s lips quirk in a near-smile.

Kirk looks at his helmsman. “Think you can plot a course around that, Sulu?”

Sulu grins. “It would be a pleasure.”

“And what’s the plan once we get to Starfleet HQ, Admiral? You realize we’ll be arrested on sight the moment we beam down?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nechayev replies with almost Vulcan-like calm. “All we need is a chance to be heard. I believe they will hear us out, reluctantly perhaps, but they will. And if we do get arrested they’ll have to question us, so it will produce the same result, albeit that would undoubtedly take longer.”

“Not to mention would be much less pleasant,” Kirk mutters.

“We do have proof,” Nechayev says. “By this time the sane half of Starfleet Command has to be wondering what happened to Nogura, and the rest is severely confused. In any case, convincing them is not your job, Captain. Your task is to get me there as soon as possible. Leave the rest to me.”

Kirk exchanges a look with Spock, mouth tight with displeasure. Spock moves his head incrementally to the side for a split second. Kirk sighs.

“All right, fine,” he says. “You heard her, people. Get back to your stations. Let’s get this over with.”
They leave with organized expediency, Spock pausing in the doorway to let Nyota and Sulu pass. He looks up in time to see Doctor McCoy turning a thoughtful gaze from Kirk to him, a deep frown creasing his forehead. Kirk appears to be oblivious, deep in conversation with Scott. Spock lifts an eyebrow, holding McCoy’s eyes. McCoy scowls at him, shakes his head and storms out through the other door. Vaguely concerned, Spock goes about his own duties.

The course Lieutenant Sulu plots will take them to sector zero in approximately eighteen hours twenty-four minutes, assuming the cloaking device would function as planned. Speculating is illogical, and yet Spock can’t help but wonder what their chances of success are.

The odds he’s calculating leave little room for inspiration, and he abandons the idea.

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He pauses just before the door to the captain’s quarters, struck by a peculiar bout of irrationality. Could it be possible that he’d imagined the entire exchange planetside? Is he human enough to be subject to wishful thinking under stress? Could it be possible—

He presses the chime, and the door slides open. Spock steps inside.

The room appears to be empty, but then a voice comes from the direction of the sleeping alcove.

“Computer, privacy lock.”

Kirk walks out from around the dresser. He must have just stepped out of the shower – his t-shirt is clinging to his chest, and his feet are bare.

“ Took you long enough,” he says, drawing closer until Spock can feel the energy emanating from his body against his own skin. “I was about to go hunt you down.”

“I was not aware you were expecting me.” Spock can hear his own voice going down an octave. In the low light of the room, he watches Kirk’s pupils dilate.

“Liar,” Kirk breathes out and kisses him.

It’s electric, the first contact of lips, so sharp the air sizzles with ozone, as dangerous and irresistible as quicksand. Spock feels weightless and too heavy at the same time, falling before he can jump, his hands reaching out of their own volition – to hold on.

“Jim,” he murmurs, “I—”

“No,” Kirk says, kissing him again, pushing him with intent. “Don’t tell me it’s not the time.”

Spock’s back is abruptly pressed against the partition, Kirk’s hands sliding under his shirt, the shock of skin on skin contact making Spock’s breath hitch.

“It’s never going to be the right time.” Kirk bites down on the curve of Spock’s neck and shoulder, teeth scraping a fiery line. “Not with our jobs. Not for us.”

“Jim—”

“No.” Kirk presses his entire body against Spock’s, hand diving into his hair, pulling, holding on. “I’m not waiting forever.”
“Jim,” Spock says, pushing him back slightly to look him in the eyes. “Do you hear me objecting?”

Kirk blinks, then stares at him, eyes wonderfully glazed over. Spock feels a jolt of shock that he has put that expression there. He watches as a slow, stunned smile spreads over Kirk’s lips.

“No,” he realizes. “You’re not. And you’re actually here, which means—”

Spock cuts him off with a kiss, too keen for touch to waste more time talking.

Once again, a feeling of overwhelming familiarity overtakes him, something so right, so well-known, so treasured already that it can’t be the first time. And yet it is. The first time they kiss so freely, the first time their hands rip at each other’s clothes impatiently, the first time Jim looks at him, all of him, like a blind man experiencing vision for the very first time and worshiping the first thing he sees, the first time Spock pushes him down on the bed, chasing down the exquisite, gorgeous blush and the trail of freckles with his lips and fingers, kissing everything within reach, feeling, stroking, sensing, pushing, utterly unable to stop.

Jim moans, and Spock drinks it down from his lips, hands pressing too tight, bruises forming under the surface of the lightly tanned skin – bruises that Jim pushes into, chasing after every touch, his own hands restless and hungry, impatient.

Abruptly, Spock finds himself on his back, Jim straddling his hips, the length of his cock sliding with agonizing sweetness against Spock’s, drawing a soft, helpless inhalation from his lips. Jim looks up at him, triumphant, face flushed with desire, eyes brimming with so much emotion Spock feels himself knocked over by it.

Jim takes a hold of his wrists, pushes them back over Spock’s head, pressing with intent. “Keep them there.”

Spock does, watching through heavy-lidded eyes as Jim dives down, lips closing over Spock’s nipple, teeth grazing hard enough for it to hurt and yet feel so amazing. Jim thrusts his hips against his, and the shock of sudden pressure makes Spock’s back arch up, tight like a bow, his hands curling into fists in an effort not to reach out.

“Yes,” Jim whispers. “Want to hear you. Need to hear you. Don’t hold back.”

Spock realizes he’s breathing loudly through his mouth. He tries to bring himself under control, but it’s a losing battle, because Jim slides leisurely down his body and without a hint of a warning takes Spock into his mouth.

Spock’s head falls back helplessly, eyes open wide and seeing nothing but a colorful kaleidoscope, knuckles pressing hard into the headboard.

He knows sex, knows the art and the science, he’s been fortunate enough to have been with partners who cared deeply about him, and yet he has never known anything quite like this. That he could be so close to losing every measure of control from the pure physicality of it, with the simplest touch threatening to undo him, is inconceivable, and yet—

He can feel Jim’s emotions through the skin, through every point of contact. Spock feels his desire, mirror to his own, feels his passion, the raw need that’s making Jim’s hands shake a little and his rhythm stutter, but also – his unaltering devotion burning bright like the sun, the sheer thrill that he finally gets to do this, the all-encompassing, incredulous, overwhelming joy.

Spock doesn’t make a conscious decision, he simply moves, by feel and instinct alone, pushes Jim off, knocks him onto his back, and kisses him, hard and unrestrained, relishing the way Jim moves
against him.

“Spock, can you – oh God – can you – that – please – do it – please – want it – so bad—”

Spock knows, doesn’t need any more clarification, wants it badly enough himself. His fingers skim over Jim’s temples lightly, barely even a caress, and just like that they fall into the meld, not a simple exchange of emotion, but a complete and instantaneous dissolution of every barrier between them, as though they’ve never existed.

“Yes,” Jim hisses, arching up against him, hands grabbing onto Spock’s shoulders, holding on. “Want you to know.”

It’s easy, natural as breathing. There’s no effort required to maintain the contact, the meld swells around them, smothering them with sensations and memories, pulling them in like a whirlpool.

“you needed to feel this – trust me now? – oh my, is that for me? – that’s I can’t even – how could you have kept this hidden from me for so long? – couldn’t you tell? – then again, I was no better – I can’t believe that this is for me all for me – all for you – we’ll need to do this every day for me to believe – as you wish – you’re laughing at me – Spock, no fair – I could say the same to you

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Back in the physical world, Spock pushes Jim’s knees apart, fingers sliding between his thighs, slipping.

“Don’t have to,” Jim murmurs. Took care of it before. You can just—.

Spock does. Jim’s breath catches in his throat and he gasps for air. Spock steadies him, holds him through it, even as he presses in, slow but sure. “How long has it been?”

“I – uh – a while.”

“How long is a while?” Spock asks, thrusting up, making Jim moan helplessly, head falling back on the pillow.

“One year – eleven – months – nine da-ays – and some – odd minutes—”

Spock shuts him up with a kiss, his hips slamming in, less controlled than he’d like to, Jim’s body tight around him, hands savage on Spock’s back, Jim’s mind drifting alongside his, spinning away, clutching at each other, twined together, impossibly close, striving to be even closer.

“you ruined me that day on the bridge – for everyone else – for good – Spock – now you see –

I see – you do as well –

I do

They climb higher and higher as the spiraling intensity urges them on, lashing out with jolts of electrifying energy, turning from overwhelming pleasure to an almost torturous anticipation, leaving them high-strung, burning with it, and Jim laughs – laughs – as they finally, inevitably crest, falling over, like ships blown away from their anchors, wrecked, torn apart, drowning and on fire.

Spock doesn’t know how much time elapses before he feels his body around himself again, strange like a bulky costume, his limbs clumsy and heavy, as though not quite his. He waits for the euphoria to fade, but it lingers, a strange dichotomy of sensation.

“Paradise lost,” Jim echoes his thoughts, and yes, there is Jim, lying beside him, half-draped over
him. “Wonder if that happens every time.”

That is his hand on the curve of Jim’s back. Spock moves it, almost surprised when it obeys, stroking down the sweat-damp skin experimentally.

“I do not know,” he responds quietly. “It has never – been quite like this before.”

Jim stills at this and pushes up on his elbow, studying Spock’s face. “Really?”

“Really,” Spock says. They are no longer in a meld, but his awareness of Jim is heightened, sharp and full, the way a simple skin-to-skin contact does not provide.

Jim smiles at him slowly, and leans down for a kiss, sweet, gentle. “I guess it was pretty special, huh?”

Spock reaches to tug at a strand of Jim’s hair. “You know it was.”

Jim looks at him as though drinking up the sight, then laughs softly. “Dammit. How are we going to have anything done when this is going on?”

Spock smiles. “I am confident we will manage to remain professional.”

Jim freezes staring down at him, and at the same moment Spock feels an intense burst of emotion that is not his own – amazement, wonder, delight, awe.

“You’re—” Jim’s breath catches. “I want a picture of this. I can’t believe you’re actually—”

Spock turns away self-consciously, but Jim catches his chin, pulling him back. “No, don’t. I love it. Please don’t ever hide from me.”

He presses a kiss to the corner of Spock’s mouth, and it spills over, clear and helplessly honest, his utter shock that he is more in love than he thought he was.

Spock holds him close and tries not to think about the moment when he’ll have to put his shields back in place.

“Yeah,” Jim murmurs. “I don’t want to think about that, either. Not yet, okay?”

Spock kisses his forehead. “Not yet.”

--

The transporter room seems overcrowded with most of the senior staff there, along with technicians, and Admiral Nechayev. Engineer Scott is sweating behind the transporter console where additional equipment has been installed to monitor the cloaking device. The unusual heavy hum indicating the device is operating is having an unnerving effect on the crew.

“We will not need weapons,” Nechayev is saying for the third time to an irate looking Lieutenant Hendorff. “We can’t beam down into Starfleet HQ with phasers drawn, Mr. Hendorff. What is wrong with you?”

He scowls. “Your safety and that of my captain—”

Kirk moves closer clapping Hendorff on the shoulder. “I’m touched you care, Lieutenant, but I don’t
“think even Komack is going to shoot us on sight.”

“Sir, that’s—”

“Speaking of, have we figured out the solution to our little problem yet?” Kirk asks, his eyes dancing as he looks at Spock. “I wouldn’t care to have my atoms scattered all over the stratosphere.”

Spock nods. “I have located the satellite that, once taken out, would allow us to circumvent the Earth Orbit-to-Planet Beaming Protocol without authorization. The window it will create will allow us a two-minute window before the network will compensate.” He looks up from his console. “Of course, we will have to decloak in order to fire.”

Kirk nods. “Which would look like a space equivalent of a B&E. We’ll have to move fast. Sulu, you’re reading this?”

“Loud and clear, Captain,” the helmsman’s voice comes streaming through an open comm link. “We’ll be fast.”

“And if they open fire, you’ll execute evasive maneuvers only,” Kirk stresses the last word, exchanging a look with Spock. “Take the Enterprise out of harm’s way, but do not return fire, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Sulu doesn’t sound happy.

“Good. Scotty will have his hands full, so you’ll be in operational command. If they order you to stand down, you stand down, Sulu, is that clear? These people are not our enemy.”

“Aye, Captain. And if they want to board us?”

“Let them board us. Maybe hide the silverware first,” Kirk mutters, rubbing his face. “Stand by.” He turns toward Nechayev. “Admiral, do you have the beam-down coordinates?”

“Yes.” She taps her PADD. “Sending them to Mr. Scott now.”

Kirk glances over her shoulder. “Sir, are you sure? Starfleet Academy?”

“We need at least one member of the admiralty to get us in in front of the board. Barnett didn’t take over the Academy because he’s fond of kids, Captain. He’s smart, he’s reasonable, and he’s very, very careful.” She pauses. “Also, he served as my second officer on the Gandhi for three years. He’ll listen.”

“Well then.” Kirk looks over at Spock. “As long as we can locate him before we get arrested—”

“I think I can help with that,” Nyota says, walking up toward them. She’s studiously not looking at Nechayev. “Remember back at the Academy when Admiral Barnett’s comm would spontaneously activate in the middle of a lecture?”

Kirk grins. “How can I forget? I’ve learned my best Klingon curses from that thing.”

Nyota is looking at him, waiting. Kirk choke. “You!” He points an accusing finger. “You were the one who bugged Barnett’s comm?”

She shrugs, glancing down. “He was being unreasonable about Gaila’s… natural habits.”

“I can’t believe this.” Kirk shakes his head, grinning. “I was nearly expelled for that. You – you of all people—”
“The important point is,” she interrupts him coolly, “I still have his comm frequency isolated. Once we’re down there, I can pinpoint his location in seconds.”

“You’re a dangerous woman to annoy, Uhura,” Kirk says admiringly.

“In fact, your entire senior staff, Captain, consists of individuals I’m having difficulty not arresting on the spot,” Nechayev says dryly. “What’s our ETA, Mr. Scott?”

“Uh.” He swallows nervously, glancing at her. “Two minutes to drop point, sir.”

“In that case, Captain, Mr. Spock, Lieutenant Uhura, take positions, please.”

Spock taps a few last minute commands to Lieutenant Pechalat in Engineering and follows the admiral to the transporter pad.

“I feel naked without my phaser,” Kirk mutters, shoulder brushing against Spock’s.

“So not entirely unarmed then,” Spock replies quietly and enjoys the effect when Kirk stumbles.

Nyota’s lips twitch. Nechayev, who has gone ahead, turns around already on the pad and looks them over in disapproval.

“Are you always this clumsy, Kirk?”

“No,” Kirk says, eyes on Spock, promising retribution. “It’s a recently acquired skill I’m working on.”

“Twenty seconds,” Scott calls over to them.

Kirk turns around on the pad, taking point, and flips open his communicator. “Mr. Chekov, do you have your target?”

“Yes, Captain. I have target lock.”

“Get ready to fire the moment the cloak is down. Lieutenant Pechalat, prepare to drop the cloak—now.”

The oppressing heavy hum quits abruptly.

“Mr. Chekov, fire! Mr. Scott?”

“The satellite is down, Captain – and there’s your window. Energizing in one, two—”

“Sulu, take care of my ship!”

“—three.”

“I sure hope that works,” Nyota mutters as the transporter room dissolves around them.

--

They materialize in the middle of the main lobby, drawing curious stares from cadets milling around. There is no immediate sound of alarm, but Spock’s eyes dart around for security personnel. Beside him, Kirk is doing the same, both of them turning to keep the admiral behind them.
Ignoring them, Nyota works on her PADD, eyes glued to the screen, looking as calm and collected as though she’s back at her station on the *Enterprise*.

“T’m tracking his signal,” she reports quietly, bringing up the building’s schematics. “Twenty-first floor, corner room.” She looks up. “He’s in his office.”

“The shortest way is through that lifttube,” Nechayev says, pointing with a nod of her head. “Let’s go.”

They make it almost all the way before the whispers start. A two-man security patrol actually pauses to let them pass, the senior security officer giving the admiral a habitual salute which she returns calmly. They keep on walking, when the reaction finally follows.

“Hey! Hold it right there!”

“Run,” Nechayev orders briskly, and they sprint for the lifttube.

They pile up inside a lift cabin just as security guards have opened fire. The doors slide closed, blocking the impact.

“Phew,” Kirk breathes out, his chest heaving. “Think that was on stun?”

Nyota rubs her arm where the nimbus of a blast has grazed her. “I’m not so sure.”

“Can they stop the lift before we get there?” Nechayev asks, frowning at the floor display.

Kirk pulls her aside and rips the control panel open, reaching inside the circuitry. “Not – ouch. Not anymore.”

“Your delinquent youth is making exponentially more sense,” Spock comments.

“Oh, please.” Kirk rolls his eyes. “Like you wouldn’t.”

“They will have guards on every floor,” Nechayev says. “We’ll be stunned as soon as the doors open.”

“Not if they don’t know where we’re going,” Nyota says, pushing Kirk away from the panel. “Gaila showed me that trick once.”

“She never showed me,” Kirk complains, watching her fingers avidly. “What are you—”

“Emergency stop beacon?” Spock asks.

“Yeah.”

Kirk whirls on him. “What, she showed you, too?”

“No.”

“Oh, good, I was beginning to feel so left out.”

“How any of you have graduated from this establishment instead of going straight to a maximum security prison is beyond me,” Nechayev says. “Looks like our screening procedures for recruits – as well as our security measures – are in need of a serious overhaul. Is it working, Lieutenant?”

Nyota pulls back, biting her lip. “There’s only one way to find out, but I believe so. They’ll think
we’re stuck on level thirteen, when in fact—"

“—we keep moving.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, we’re nearly there. Get ready.”

They plaster themselves against the walls as the lift doors slide open. Nothing happens. Cautiously, Kirk looks out.

“Clear for now,” he says. “Let’s move.”

They barely take a few steps when an alarm goes off, bathing the corridor in red light and a cacophony of sounds. They don’t need to hear the order to run. Barnett’s office is less than forty meters away – thirty—

A security squad plummets into them from a side corridor. They have clearly not expected to see Nechayev and her group right in front of them, and it’s that confusion that saves them.

Kirk falls down and rolls over, knocking four guards down, while Spock propels Nyota forward with all his strength, as he blocks the passageway with his body. Nyota grabs Nechayev by the wrist and they race forward, while Kirk and Spock make as much of a nuisance of themselves as possible, keeping the entire squad tangled up.

“You’d think they’d figure it out to step aside so they could shoot us,” Kirk pants, ducking under a blow, while simultaneously delivering a crushing kick with his foot. “Starfleet’s brightest.”

Spock delivers a nerve pinch to a guard, and reaches for the next one, when the man unexpectedly pulls out of reach as do the rest of his colleagues.

“Crap,” Kirk mutters.

“Perhaps the next time you will not care to enlighten our opponents on a tactical advantage they have missed.”

“My bad,” Kirk agrees, staring at seven drawn phasers. “Hey guys, how about we talk about this—"

The last thing Spock sees as he falls is the doors to Admiral Barnett’s office closing behind Nyota and the admiral.

--

The detention cell at Starfleet HQ is much different from a ship’s brig, Spock discovers as he opens his eyes. Instead of a sterile duranium paneling, this one is in an actual basement, complete with poor light, brown brick walls, and a certain sense of dampness. The glow of the forcefield, though, is familiar and unoriginal.

“Hey,” Kirk’s voice comes from somewhere to Spock’s left. “You finally back among the living?”

Spock sits up cautiously, limbs rigid and uncooperative with the residual effect of the stun. “How long was I unconscious?”

“A little over two hours.” Kirk shrugs from where he’s sprawled on the opposite bunk, one knee
drawn up in a would-be relaxed position.


His neck is stiff, and he flinches as he leans against the wall.

“Yeah,” Kirk says helpfully. “I think they hit you multiple times. Probably thought you were more of a menace.”

He sounds petulant. Spock studies him. “Are you functional?”

“Yeah.” Kirk’s tone softens. “You?”

“Adequate,” Spock replies, suppressing a wince.

“So this is an interesting development in our glowing careers,” Kirk says conversationally. “What do you think? Lunar mines or that maximum security prison Nechayev was so keen on?”

“I have full confidence in the admiral and Lieutenant Uhura’s ability to explain the situation.”

“Oh, I do, too. Unless they’re in the next cell, of course.”

“You are being needlessly pessimistic.”

“No, I’m just – happy to be back in my domain.” He spreads his arms to indicate the cell.

Spock looks him over carefully, taking in the sardonic twist of his lips, the loose-limb position, the unusual, peculiar expression in his eyes.

Fear.

“Captain,” Spock says, leaning on the word with purpose. “The bridge of a starship is your domain. Anything else is a temporary aberration.”

Kirk peers at him for a long, lingering moment. “You really believe in that, huh,” he says softly.

“I do not have to believe in it. I know it for a fact,” Spock replies. “And I am not often mistaken.”

Kirk lets out an involuntary laugh. “Now that’s an understatement if I ever heard one.” He shakes his head, grinning at Spock. “Thanks.”

Spock inclines his head.

“So,” Kirk says after a while. “What’s your favorite way of busting up a forcefield?”

Spock looks at the thin shimmer of the energy barrier. An older model, fed by a single emitter located, judging by the slight variance of dispersal, at the top right corner just outside the cell. It would be a simple matter of creating an overload by stressing the barrier with sufficient force. The disadvantage of this particular approach would be the noise, however, so perhaps it would be more logical to locate something that would interfere with the emitter’s signal—

Spock turns his head sharply and narrows his eyes at Kirk who has given up on trying to suppress his laughter.

“You were baiting me. That is not very honorable.”
“I’m not a very honorable man, Spock, where have you been?” Kirk throws his hands up, eyes bright with mirth. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to suggest we actually test your theories.”

“I am both grateful and amazed, Captain.”

“Funny. Though I’m willing to bet you didn’t progress to staging an actual diversion. That’s my favorite way – I love interacting with people. For the sake of the argument, do you think—”

Three hours forty-one minute later, when they are inexplicably – but inevitably, Spock has to concede – discussing the tactical weaknesses of the Klingon Chancellor’s private security detail, they are interrupted by approaching footsteps.

Two men come into view – a harassed-looking security lieutenant and another man, one whose slight limp is compensated with a cane in his hand.

“Really?” the man says, turning toward the lieutenant. “You locked those two up in the same cell? Do you even realize how lucky you are that the walls of this place are still standing?”

“Hey now, that’s just absolutely unfounded slander,” Kirk says, springing to his feet, his grin wide. “It’s good to see you, sir. They let you out then?”

“Nothing gets past you, does it, Kirk?” Admiral Pike says dryly, but his lips are twitching. “Come on,” he says, as the security lieutenant keys the forcefield off, “we have work to do.”

Spock follows Kirk out of the cell and into the corridor, both of them walking slowly enough to accommodate Pike’s unhurried walk.

“Oh, and you brought some friends with you, I’m touched,” Kirk says, as they turn the corner and come face to face with a security detail. He spots a familiar face from several hours earlier. Spock has to admit the man’s black eye is spectacular. “Hey there, sugar pie. How’s the eye?”

The man scowls and moves forward on impulse. Spock folds his arms across his chest, looking at him. It should not be quite so gratifying to see him go abruptly pale and step back.

Kirk, still grinning, looks at Spock over his shoulder. “Honestly, sweetheart, I can’t take you anywhere without scaring the locals.”

Spock lifts an unimpressed eyebrow. “If you are quite done, Captain?”

Kirk sighs. “Fine, I know that look. Don’t get your panties in a twist, Commander. I’ll behave.”

“That’d be a first,” Pike mutters. “They’re waiting for us in the admirals’ lounge. Let’s go.”

They move in an awkward procession, with the three officers surrounded with a blatant lack of subtlety by security personnel.

“So I guess this means we’re not off the hook yet?” Kirk mutters.

“Well” – Pike shrugs – “Admiral Nechayev has made a lot of headway while you were cooling your heels in the cell. Then your Lieutenant Uhura has put the fear of God into the admiralty board with her testimony, which led Komack to finally start listening and release me. He’s not too happy about that, but he’s not actually an idiot, despite staggering evidence to the contrary.” He sighs. “Okay, what’s the look for, Spock?”

“I have never known you to criticize your peers to your subordinates.”
Pike actually grins. “Not in front of the children, I get it. But I doubt I’d be ruining any heroes for you two, and that house arrest didn’t put me in a politically correct mood.”

“So it would appear.”

“Really, though,” Kirk says, frowning. “What exactly we’ll be facing in there?”

“Probably the longest and most unpleasant debriefing of our lives,” Pike replies.

“Joy.”

“Cheer up, Kirk.” Pike claps him on the shoulder. “You wanted to sit at the grown-ups’ table. This is it.”

Kirk throws a less than thrilled look at Spock as they go in.

--

Pike turns out to be right on every account. Four hours into the debriefing, they are separated, and it’s another thirteen hours until a more than a ten-minute bathroom break is allowed. Spock walks into his assigned temporary quarters on autopilot, numb from the endless questioning. At least he’s not under guard anymore, so there has been progress.

He doesn’t key the lights on and regrets it as he stumbles over something on the floor. Boots. He blinks, comprehending.

“Hey.”

Kirk steps out from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his hips, skin flushed from the shower.

“Jim.” Spock sighs, more tired than he realized. “This is not wise.”

“Don’t worry,” Kirk says, coming closer, hands sliding around Spock’s waist. “Nobody saw me come in.”

“That may be, however—”

“Shut up.” Kirk places a kiss just under his jaw line, moist lips against soft skin. Spock shudders at the unconscious sensuality of the touch. “This is the only thing that kept me going this entire time.”

His hands slide under Spock’s shirt. “Do you want to kick me out?”

“No,” Spock says, surrendering. Why was he even trying? “I want you to stay.”

“Thank God for that,” Jim whispers and kisses him.

Spock cups his face in his hands, reaching out on instinct, striving for the already familiar flare of Jim’s mind. He stops himself forcibly, stifling a groan, but Jim catches his hand, holds it in place.

“Yes,” he murmurs, “do it. Been waiting for that all day, too. Please.”

There is no resisting that.

They move ungracefully toward the narrow bed, Spock’s clothes littering the way. Jim pushes him down, straddling his hips, rocking against Spock deliciously as they kiss. Both of them are too strung
up to linger in the sweet and viscous, and Jim lifts up, hand plastered against Spock’s chest for balance, as he positions himself and slides down Spock’s length in one relentless motion.

Jim bites his lip around a moan, and Spock feels it in his blood, the sizzling sharp sting of pain and pleasure all wrapped up together – the ferociousness of Jim’s jagged motions, his own hands pressing hard into the day-old bruises on Jim’s hips, the way he can’t help snapping his hips up, driving into that tight, taut body, ringing with tension of desire so overwhelming it feels like an insatiable thirst in every cell. Their minds twined, sensations double, creating a sensory overload he can’t cope with, no longer knowing who’s up or down, no longer caring, just holding on, swept by the unstoppable force.

The orgasm catches them off guard, ricocheting within the feedback loop they have created, amplified with every touch until the pleasure builds up so high they can’t withstand it and then goes higher still, a ruthless, endless wave, strong enough to lift boulders, rolling them, as they struggle for breath, out of their minds.

The meld has dissolved in the wake of the maelstrom, but even so Jim’s emotions – the lazy, quiet happiness, amazement, pride – of course – slide into Spock’s awareness before the sensation of his body, pressed against Spock’s, does. It’s peculiar and far from unpleasant.

With no conscious decision to propel him, Spock pulls Jim close and kisses him, languid, deep, and sweet, and then kisses him more until their lips begin to buzz, and Jim is laughing softly into his mouth, loose-limbed and liquid and there.

“I think I need another shower,” Jim murmurs, an intimate, soft-edged grin on his lips that not a lot of people have seen. “So do you.”

Spock knows he’s right, but he’s loath to move just yet, stealing kisses, fingers sifting through Jim’s hair, unable to stay still.

Why did you choose me, he wonders. Why, of all people, me?

“It wasn’t really some grand decision,” Jim says, rolling out of bed – over Spock’s body – on purpose. “You were there. You were you. It couldn’t have been anyone else.”

He stands up, naked, unself-conscious, and mesmerizing, but it’s only after he disappears into the bathroom that Spock realizes that Jim couldn’t have – shouldn’t have – heard.

Jim’s voice drifts in the small space over the sound of running water. “You coming?”

Spock moves to follow.

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It takes Starfleet Command approximately thirty-eight hours to get in gear, but after that they rally surprisingly quickly. Admiral Nogura is officially charged with treason and every starship captain and Starfleet operative gets an order to apprehend him on sight.

A new Commander Starfleet is appointed by the admiralty and approved by the president with a singular unanimity and swiftness. Admiral Nechayev does not reveal whether she considers a major plot designed to destabilize the Federation as a merely stepping stone in fulfilling her long-term career goals, but certain observers wouldn’t put it past her.
The crew of the Enterprise get reclassified from dangerous criminals to detainees to persons of interest to heroes in a matter of five or six hours, which gives even Spock a mental whiplash. He’s too busy to dwell on it much though.

Between overseeing the repairs of the Enterprise, giving testimony at debriefings that soon evolve into official inquiry, and working with a high-clearance team from Starfleet Sciences to analyze the data from the cloaking device, he averages three of four hours of sleep a night every other night. As they slide into week three, even his Vulcan metabolism is beginning to feel the strain. He finds himself wishing they would ship out sooner, even though he knows there is more to come before they can.

He barely sees Kirk and then only in his official capacity, except for a few times when Spock wakes up from his sketchy rest to find Jim out cold in bed next to him, obviously too tired to even remove his uniform. He looks drawn and thin, and not younger so much as his age which is always eclipsed by the aura of authority he exudes when awake. Spock watches him, memorizing the lines of his face for a few moments he doesn’t really have, then untangles Jim’s hand from his own shirt and gets up.

He is running a simulation on the newly installed targeting array – the fifth one since the early hours of morning, and so far the accuracy proves to be less than adequate, tamping down even Ensign Chekov’s enthusiasm – when the news arrives in the form of an excited Lieutenant Pechalat.

“They got him!” She almost rolls through the doors of the computer lab, a mildly tousled-haired ball of exuberant energy. “They got Nogura! Brought him in two hours ago.”

“Da neuzheli,” Ensign Chekov mutters sourly, the recent equipment failure still clearly on his mind. “Ne proshlo i goda.”

“Come, come, Mr. Chekov,” Spock says, dropping a hand to the back of his seat. “All things considered, I believe, Starfleet Security has moved with remarkable alacrity.”

“Yeah, I don’t think any of us could have slept easily while he was out there somewhere with all that classified information about the Federation’s defenses in his head,” Pechalat says.

“Did they throw him in prison?” Chekov asks with aggressive – almost bloodthirsty – hope.

Pechalat takes in his demeanor and replies carefully, “Not so far. Starfleet Intelligence has taken him in hand first thing. It looks like he’s been secretly negotiating with the Romulan High Command. He’s there now, trying to cut some sort of deal, I think. Exile to some frontier colony instead of a life in prison or a memory wipe.”

Chekov swears elaborately in Russian. He throws a wary glance at Spock, but seems unable to contain himself. “That man has committed high treason! He sold us all out for – for glory or something! He should be executed for this – they should get a firing squad and shoot the bastard!”

Pechalat looks over at Spock, her eyebrows raised.

Spock forces himself to respond. “An exceptionally inhumane suggestion, Ensign, although your sentiment is understandable. Please continue with the simulation. I will return shortly.”

After a short, surprised pause, Chekov says, “Yes, Commander.”

Ignoring Pechalat’s confused and slightly worried look, Spock walks out of the room.

He doesn’t have a coherent intention, let alone a plan, but finds himself walking out of the building into the busy melee of people, mostly officers and cadets, moving with purpose and enthusiasm – just
as advertised in Starfleet recruitment vids – across the HQ and Academy grounds.

The sun is high and aggressive, the polarization of the air at its peak, almost offensively bright in the early afternoon. Curiously, Spock doesn’t feel the heat, though late spring in San Francisco is usually quite pleasant even for him. The air seems harsh and chilly.

His walk takes him to a place that cadets avoid like the plague and most officers try their best to ignore. Quite a few civilians are almost always around though.

It’s a memorial called the Wall of the Fallen Heroes. Structurally simple, albeit dimensionally impressive, it is, in fact, a black stone wall, mostly marble, Spock believes, three meters in height, a hundred and two meters wide. The names of Starfleet officers who had died in the line of duty are carved into the stone in block gold letters – even columns, perfectly symmetrical rows. At the far left the wall is curving slightly as though hugging a shallow bowl in the granite floor where a small but always steady, by definition, eternal flame torch sits. The names are carved in small letters, and yet approximately eighty-two percent of the Wall’s surface is filled already.

Spock walks along it slowly, eyes sliding easily down the golden characters glinting in the sun. He stops by a spot where Gaila’s name still is – a result of the confusion following the massacre at Vulcan. He asked her once why she’d never had it taken down. Gaila had grinned, shrugged, and said that if she was on there once already, there was little to fear going forward – she couldn’t get there twice, after all.

His thoughts drift toward her for a moment. The last Spock heard from her, Gaila was quickly moving through the ranks of Starfleet Intelligence top agents. She’s not on Earth now, that’s all he knows. He hopes she’s happy.

He thinks about the message he received the day before from T’Pring. All Merta survivors under her care have made a complete recovery, and the majority of them have elected to stay at the new Vulcan colony. That number includes one Lieutenant Tom Kalle who is now bonded to T’Pring, of which she had also informed Spock.

Spock’s first reaction upon hearing that piece of news was intense approval. Starfleet needed to establish a more stable presence at the colony, and the Vulcans proved to be extremely particular regarding the personnel they accepted to be stationed on their new world. Lieutenant Kalle was no longer an outsider by Vulcan standards, and Starfleet could trust him implicitly, so this was beneficial to all parties.

Only after that train of thought was concluded, Spock realized that congratulations should have been his first response. He must be spending too much time in Admiral Nechayev’s company.

He hears a peculiar sound of footsteps – the uneven stride offset with a strangely delayed not quite echo – and feels oddly relieved.

“Spock,” Pike says, coming to stand next to him.

“Admiral.” Spock nods.

“You heard about Nogura, I take it?”

“Indeed.” He inhales deeply the salt-saturated air coming from the bay. “Are they going to take his deal?”

Pike shrugs. “Probably. Doesn’t mean we can’t screw him in the process. An administrator at a dilithium-mining facility on Vega V seems like a good choice. There’s literally nothing there but the
mines, you can’t step outside without an EV suit, constant high wind, and the dust so thick there’s
never any sunlight. A visit from a supply ship twice a year and the ever-present demand to make his
quota – it’s hardly better than a prison. He’ll never be able to leave, you know.”

Spock’s jaw tightens. “Mr. Chekov introduced the not quite novel but barbarically enchanting idea of
a firing squad. I confess, I find it strangely compelling, although not practical.”

Pike snorts, glancing at him. “There was a time when you wouldn’t have admitted as much.”

Spock moves his shoulder slightly in an impression of a shrug. “I do not believe there is any point to
pretence with you, Christopher.”

“Ah.” Pike exhales softly. “I was beginning to think you’d forgotten how to do that.”

They stand in silence for a while. A young woman approaches the Wall to their left, flowers on her
dress and a small selection of them in her hands. Forget-me-nots, Spock thinks absently, watching
her lay the bouquet beneath a particular spot on the Wall, an illogical human name. His mother loved
them.

“So,” Pike says, his tone gentle and controlled in a way that makes Spock tense instinctively, “you
and Kirk?”

A flash of heat runs through him, but he controls his reaction. “To what are you referring?”

“Don’t.” Pike shakes his head. “I can read between the lines – even of your reports, yes – and I’ve
been watching you two every time you were in the same room these past few weeks.”

Spock mentally runs back every meeting he’s attended with Kirk since their return to Earth. They
might have sat together for a few interviews, although separately more often than not, but even for
those, he is dead certain that they had not once touched or acted inappropriately in any way.

Pike is watching him with a soft smile and a knowing look. “No, most people wouldn’t have
noticed,” he reassures. “But I have an advantage. I know exactly what you look like when you’re in
love.”

Spock stares forward blankly, determinedly.

“Or at least I thought I did. Until I saw the way you look at him now.”

Spock winces and closes his eyes.

“It’s real now, isn’t it? No, that’s unfair. It was real before, too. But this is – different? This is – it.
He’s it for you, isn’t he?”

Struggling to control his voice, Spock says, “Yes.”

“Does he know?”

Spock looks up, frowning. “I am uncertain. He knows – how I feel,” he admits with difficulty,
pushing through the instinctive reserve with all the effort he can command. Pike deserves that much.
“But I am uncertain if he understands what that entails.”

“And you don’t want to explain it to him,” Pike finishes for him. “Because what happened between
us still smarts, and you don’t want to risk losing him the way you lost me.”

Spock straightens up, contemplating. In the end, he says, “You had once told me that I could not
accept anything except absolutes. It was ‘all or nothing’ for me. I have aspired over the years to – accept – that alternatives could be viable.”

Pike whistles softly. “Wow, it is real.” At Spock’s confused gaze, he sighs. “Spock, compromise is a great thing, and yes, even Vulcans, with their rigid upbringing, understand that – or else we wouldn’t have a diplomatic corps as brilliant as it is. But there are things that aren’t subject to that. Duty, for one. And this, for another.” He turns and lays a hand on Spock’s shoulder. “You are an all-or-nothing man when it comes to this. You haven’t changed. You can’t change, not in this. It’s not good or bad. It’s who you are.”

“A ‘rigid Vulcan’ who cannot grasp the complexities of the human emotional palette—”

“No, Spock. A man who gives all of himself to the person he chooses and deserves just as much in return.”

Spock looks away first, turning his gaze toward the bay. “I cannot ask this of him.”

Pike huffs in wry amusement. “From what I’ve seen, I don’t think you’ll have to.”

Spock shakes his head, struggling to articulate. He’s talking to the only man in the universe with whom he could possibly have such a conversation, and yet it comes no easier for all of that.

“Jim is – sincere,” he says finally. “Of that I have no doubt. But human emotion is – transient.”

“Fickle, you mean. No, it’s not. I still love you, that’s why I’m saying this.” He laughs suddenly. “Even though I can’t believe I’m saying this, because Jim Kirk of all people?” Pike shakes his head in amused disbelief. “Then again, when you really think about it, it couldn’t have been anyone but him. You know? You two together make no sense at all, and at the same time every sense in the world. Just out of curiosity, how did this happen?”

Spock looks at him as they begin to walk away from the somber Wall, Spock keeping his pace even with Pike’s aided stride.

“He cheated on my test,” he says in the most expressionless tone he can muster. “Also, he looks aesthetically compelling in a wet white t-shirt.”

The passing officers give curious looks – some cadets stare openly – to a blank-faced Vulcan commander and an admiral who’s gone red in face with laughter.

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Admiral Nogura’s court-martial is a necessarily public affair. It’s choreographed and orchestrated by Admiral Nechayev and Starfleet’s public relations office, with every testimony arranged in advance and the entire scenario approved by all parties.

As a key witness, Spock has to attend every court day, along with the rest of the Enterprise senior staff. He finds the proceedings tedious and distasteful, even though he understands why it has to happen this way.

Scott, Sulu, and Chekov have obvious difficulties keeping their mouths shut, their indignation palpable across two rows of seats that separate them. McCoy’s face seems to have stuck on a perpetual scowl, but he’s mercifully quiet. Beside him, Pechalat looks mildly disapproving but mostly contemplative, her hand reaching down to squeeze his every once in a while.
On McCoy’s other side, Kirk sits remarkably blank-faced and dispassionate. When called to the stand, he gives his testimony in a flat, expressionless tone that has none of his usual animation and spirit. His eyes are pensive, assessing, his every motion tightly controlled. At the end of each day, he disappears with McCoy to one seedy backstreet bar or another, and he stops showing up at Spock’s quarters at night. His eyes seek Spock out first thing in the morning though before another session begins.

Spock sits beside Nyota, who is the only one of them with a faintly positive outlook on the proceedings. She’s evaluating them from a PR standpoint, picking up the subtle nuances and the not-so-subtle things, commenting analytically and taking mental notes. A communications officer is more than a tech, she reminds Spock, who nods agreement.

Admiral Nogura looks strangely diminished, sitting at his spot with a disinterested air, as though not quite present. He pleads guilty, and doesn’t quite read his confession off a PADD, but it’s a close thing. Had he ever seen this as one of the potential outcomes of his gamble? He certainly doesn’t look surprised or defiant, but he’s had a lifetime of practicing to present the right front.

Motivations of men, Spock decides, will likely always remain a mystery to him.

The verdict, when it finally reached takes none of them by surprise, although it causes quite an uproar in the media. But Admiral Nechayev deftly concentrates all attention on herself, and the Enterprise crew are temporarily dropped from public view.

“She’s saving us for dessert,” Nyota tells Spock. “She’ll give them a few media cycles to trash Starfleet and then will pull us out of a hat to remind the public that there are heroes in this story to go along with villains. By the time she’s done pinning medals to our chests, no one will remember Nogura.”

She appears to be right in that they get an unexpected reprieve.

Kirk unexpectedly cashes in some leave time, packs a small bag, and flies out to Iowa. He doesn’t ask Spock to come with him, and Spock doesn’t ask to join him.

It leaves Spock strangely at loose ends. The repairs on the ship are mostly complete, and Scott certainly doesn’t need him for whatever’s left. The cloaking device team has finally released him. The admirals are busy sorting themselves out, especially with the ongoing absorption of Federation Security into Starfleet Security.

Every member of the Enterprise crew who has no pressing obligations follows the captain’s example, including Nyota, who goes to check on her extended family. McCoy and Pechalat, to nobody’s surprise, go on vacation together, Pechalat visibly nervous at the prospect of meeting McCoy’s daughter.

Spock stays at his temporary quarters downside. He works on his ongoing projects, meditates, and works out. He tries not to think about what any of this means.

Jim needs space, everyone does at times, and yet…

Could Spock have ruined what they had already somehow? Has he smothered Jim in too much of himself? Should he have been more reserved, more Vulcan about it, not to create so much strain? He tried so hard, so carefully, not to exert too much pressure – in fact, not to exert any pressure at all, but they have been melding, and Jim might have seen…

It’s a week. The Enterprise ships out in a week, after the public award ceremony Nyota had
predicted. Spock will know where they stand in a week. He can wait that long.

His father calls him unexpectedly on the third day just as Spock returns from taking his evening meal. He is surprised enough by the call to let it show.

He is even more surprised when Sarek interrupts the usual exchange of trivial information with a suddenly direct question.

“Spock, are you – happy?”

Spock blinks and stares at him through the vidscreen. “I beg your pardon?”

Sarek frowns slightly. “It is a simple question, my son.”

Indeed, Spock thinks. Not one of the fundamental ones, such as ‘What is my purpose in this life?’ or ‘Why am I here?’

“You have never asked me this before,” Spock says, in lieu of an answer.

Sarek tenses visibly. “No. It is logical, however. The ultimate goal of every parent is to see their child achieve harmony in life.”


The question is on the tip of Spock’s tongue, when he inhales abruptly, swallowing it.

Sarek has never asked him this before, not because he didn’t care, but because he didn’t have to. He had Spock’s mother to ask him that – or to simply know without asking. It left Sarek free to only ask after his more tangible achievements – his grades at school, his career advancements – anything quantifiable, easily and unemotionally measurable. He had Amanda supplying him with information he couldn’t read without asking from his half-human son.

And now he doesn’t anymore.

Spock looks at his father with the light of this revelation still coursing through him. He wonders how he’d never seen this before – the concern in the tight press of his lips he’d always read as disapproval, the deep-seated, painful need to know in the odd, sharp glint of the guarded eyes.

He releases his breath slowly, controlling his expression tightly.

“You are correct, of course,” he says. “I am – satisfied with my current circumstances.”

“Satisfied,” Sarek repeats, his relief at getting an answer without more potentially embarrassing explanations short-lived, as he catches the word.

“Satisfied,” Spock repeats firmly. “It is sufficient. For now.”

It’s not. It’s not at all sufficient, but, revelations or no, he’s not about to burden his father with an emotional outburst that will embarrass them both. Sarek has had to deal with enough of those when Spock was a child – and later. The ugly showdown on the bridge of the Enterprise is something he is unlikely to forget.

“I see,” Sarek says at last. “I trust you will notify me if you require any form of assistance.”

From the graveness of his look, Spock suddenly knows what has brought this entire atypical conversation on.
“T’Pring informed me you have attended her bonding ceremony.”

Sarek doesn’t quite react, but the millisecond of surprise is enough. Spock knows he’s not wrong.

“Indeed. It was a very – elegant event.”

“I am pleased,” Spock says. “Given our former association, this must have raised your concern on
the subject of my bonding.”

Sarek doesn’t deny it. “I rarely have any news from you,” he says instead. “I have clearance to
access the Enterprise mission logs, but they do no contain the information pertinent to this matter.”

For a moment, Spock imagines a log that would incorporate a running commentary on the onboard
romantic entanglements and almost chokes.

“I understand your logical concern,” Spock says, pushing the image away with difficulty. “Please
rest assured that I have the situation under control.”

“Do you?” Sarek look at him shrewdly. “T’Pring said that your captain—”

“I would not,” Spock interrupts unapologetically, “blindly put credence into any observations
T’Pring might have made. She was clearly preoccupied with her own matters.”

“She has always paid more attention to you than you realized,” Sarek counters. After watching
Spock’s face for a few seconds, he lifts up a hand. “Very well. I will accept your word over hers.
But Spock – do let me know if you require assistance. I have noticed that you can be – singularly
stubborn in these matters. It is not logical.”

The very idea that his father has paid any attention to Spock’s social life is, illogically enough,
creating odd sensations in his stomach.

“I will inform you in such a case,” Spock forces himself to say. Anything to end this. “Live long and
prosper, Father.”

Sarek simply nods and signs off.

The conversation, needless to say, does not bring any more peace of mind or emotional security
Spock so desperately craves.

Day four goes by unnoticed. Jim doesn’t call. Day five trickles by in much the same fashion. On day
six the crew starts to arrive back from shoreleave, refreshed and excited, and Spock does his level
best to avoid them. If McCoy returned, Spock couldn’t have gotten away with it, but the doctor
mercifully still isn’t there.

Day seven brings a frown to Spock’s face that refuses to go away. The ceremony is to be held at
noon the next day, and Captain Kirk still hasn’t come back. He’s sent messages to the admiral’s aide,
apparently, confirming his timely arrival, so Spock doesn’t comm him. He spends most of the day in
the gym and tries not to think about anything.

—

He’s woken well past midnight by the weight of another body on top of him. He doesn’t need the
light to recognize the touch.
“Jim,” he mutters too strung up and frustrated to be angry. “What are you doing?”

Jim doesn’t answer, just kisses him, hungry – no, starved for touch. It’s clear in the way he presses against Spock, fingers desperate, pushing too hard, skin hot and damp, body restless. He seems to have disposed of his clothes.

Spock wants to push him back, wants to ask questions, but he’s missed this too, desperately, more than he could have thought possible. He’s close to melting into the kiss, slipping into a familiar pattern, reaching for Jim’s mind, and he doesn’t want to give in, doesn’t want to know.

He moves swiftly, his body still keyed up for action. Not gently, he flips Jim onto his stomach, pulls his arm roughly behind his back, and knocks his knees apart.

“Yesss,” Jim hisses, and Spock pulls his arm back sharper, making him gasp for breath.

He pushes in, uncaring of resistance, relentless and determined, and ruthless, he knows, and even without a deeper connection he can feel Jim loving it, as though everything he’s ever wanted in his life has come to this, and his body is screaming, but he wants more, begs for it without making a sound, craves it, lusts for it, wants it more than maybe life itself.


Spock does. All the hurt and anger and fear, every emotion Jim has so carelessly evoked in him propels him forward, his rhythm brutal, unrelenting, pleasure sharp like a blade, cutting not flesh, but deeper, making something else bleed, permanently…

He doesn’t notice when he slows down, releasing his grip on Jim’s arm. Jim whimpers as it rolls to his side, but Spock doesn’t leave him to it. He stretches himself on top of Jim slowly, consciously, moving in him with murderously tender intent, lips finding the curve between neck and shoulder, teeth grazing. Jim has been too close too long, his body beginning to spasm with tension, with that desperate urge to complete. His hand slides downward with obvious intent, but Spock catches it easily, and Jim lets out a low whine, and fights it a little – reflex, not intent.

Spock reaches to take Jim’s earlobe between his teeth so very gently, and that does it. Jim convulses beneath him, tightening almost painfully around Spock, as he rides it out, almost unwillingly, begging incoherently without knowing, as Spock fucks him through it, then pulls out sharply, and comes, painting Jim’s back in the darkness.

He leaves the bed without a word, and he waves the lights to a quarter in the bathroom. He doesn’t want to see himself particularly much just now.

He doesn’t expect Jim to appear in the doorway within a moment, but he does, tear tracks glistening on his cheeks in the semi dark. He looks wrecked.

Spock doesn’t know what to expect, his own head still spinning. He doesn’t anticipate Jim’s move, doesn’t fight it, when Jim pushes him roughly against the wall, grabs his face, and kisses him, rude, and hard, and very pointed, keeping him in place when Spock tries to turn away, kissing him almost aggressively, careless of split lips and bruising.

Spock doesn’t think either of them notices how the kiss becomes something else, nor how it evolves into the two of them standing there, then sitting, slumped, holding each other with hands that would have to be pried off.

“I’m sorry,” Jim whispers. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. Was hard to think with you around just then, but without you—”
Spock doesn’t understand, not yet, but he’s slowly beginning to. It would be so easy to link them and know instantly, to feel what Jim feels, but he knows that they need to be able to talk about it. They have to learn.

“Jim,” he prompts softly. “What happened?”


“Ah.”

Spock did not ask during the court-martial. He should have.

“I liked him.” Jim sighs, relaxing. “He read strategy when I was a cadet. I spent months trying to outsmart him. I thought he was the shit, you know? Smart. Humble. Thinking ten moves ahead. I was a bit of a fanboy.”

Retrospectively, Spock does not find it surprising at all that Jim would be attracted to the quiet intellectual type, rather than action-oriented larger than life figures like, for example, Pike – or Jim himself.

“I was watching him during the court-martial, and the thing that bugged me most was – he’d planned this, too. Not as an optimal outcome, but as one of them. And he’d prepared. And he still won even when he lost.”

“That” – Spock pauses – “is certainly a unique perspective.”

Jim shrugs. “It’s true. The son of a bitch had thought of everything. And the thing is, knowing what he’d almost cost us, I still couldn’t help but admire that.”

“Understandable.”

“Is it? It made me think what was it about me that made me like him in the first place? He was rotten to the core, Spock, and I still couldn’t help but—” He trails off, pulling away slightly. “What if I’m just like him? All this time, I kept thinking – couldn’t stop myself actually – about what he’d almost done, and how I would have done it differently, and how I – would have succeeded. I created half a dozen scenarios in my head where I could almost guarantee I’d win.”

Spock frowns. “Your ability to strategize does not automatically make you corrupt, Jim. That is extremely illogical.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t waste any sleep thinking about how you would have plunged us into war better.”

“No, indeed. I had much more personal reasons to lose sleep over.”

He doesn’t mean for it to come out bitter, but it does.

Jim stiffens next to him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think… It was the contrast. You can be so – untouchable sometimes, Spock. Like you can go through hell, and blood, and shit, and it just – doesn’t stick to you. Like you’re fireproof. Not in the real sense – God, I wish, – but like there’s nothing in the world that could so much as taint you. And I wasn’t feeling particularly clean sitting there, and I had to decide if I could – if I had any right to try and stick to you. And I couldn’t do it with you around, because you absolutely destroy my willpower.”

Spock sits for a few moments numbly. He becomes suddenly and uncomfortably aware of the
amount of dried bodily fluids stuck without any kind of regard to his skin at the moment. For an absurd instant, he wants to laugh.

Instead, he reaches with his fingers and touches Jim’s temple briefly, sharing the thought and making him laugh instead.

“How is it that you possess the sense of humor of a twelve-year-old with all of that, I’ll never know,” Jim says breathlessly when he’s done. “I was serious, though.”

“Jim.” Spock sighs. “You are being absurd. I understand your sentiments in regards to Admiral Nogura, even the extent of your self-doubt. But of all people, I would think, you would be the last one to put me onto any kind of pedestal. Not after what you saw me go through, after everything that I did.”

“You don’t get it.” Jim shakes his head. “It’s especially after I saw you go through all of that. You don’t see yourself clearly, you never have.”

“Well, neither do you, apparently, so allow me to return the favor. You are brilliant, and that you know. Your potential – wherever you choose to apply it – knows no limits. And yet, even when lacking direction and at the lowest point of your life, the worst crimes you have committed were drunk and disorderly behavior and trespassing. I am sorry to thwart your ambition with this doubtless unexpected revelation, but, to use a human idiom, I’m afraid you do not have what it takes to become a criminal mastermind.”

Jim laughs despite himself. “It does sound a bit stupid when you put it like that.”

“There is no other way of putting it,” Spock says, progressively more aware of the corner of the shower stall digging uncomfortably into his back. “We should relocate.” He stands up.

Jim glances up at him from the floor. “Not sure I can stand after the number you did on my ass.”

Spock reaches down and lifts him to his feet without a word, turning to activate the shower.

“Ow,” Jim complains, then grins. “I think.”

He follows Spock into the small cubicle. Soft light and water create a mesmerizing display on his body, and Spock misses twice when reaching for the soap. Jim laughs a little, breath hitching.

“Spock, can I—” his hands slide down the length of Spock’s back, cupping his ass. “I want—”

Spock cuts him off with a kiss, hungry for him again. Indeed he doesn’t believe he could ever have enough. “Anything,” he says, and tries to turn under the spray, but Jim stops him, strangely hesitant.

“Meld us?” he asks quietly, words melting into the sound of water. “Before we do? Please.”

Spock could drown in him and never want for air. He reaches with his lips and his fingers, and they go under.

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He wakes up alone, but that is no surprise. None of Jim’s things are here, and the ceremony requires them all to wear dress-uniforms again. Spock gets up, gets dressed, and goes in search of breakfast.

Most of his crewmembers have returned to the *Enterprise* and will be beaming down for the
ceremony, but Spock still gets accosted by an exuberant team of Sulu and Chekov, who have apparently gone mountain climbing back at Chekov’s home town somewhere near the southern Urals and are dying to share their experience.

“Well, we’ve seen a bear, Commander, a real bear,” Sulu tells him eyes still wide.

“Oh, not that again,” Chekov mutters, working on his scrambled eggs with vigor. “He wasn’t going to eat you, Sulu.”

“Of course not, why would he when he could eat all our food instead?” Sulu replies sarcastically. “Real smart guy for a furball with giant teeth, wasn’t he?”

Chekov rolls his eyes. “There are signs all over the place for the tourists not to feed the bears, but do they listen? No. What did you expect? You didn’t have to stun him in any case.”

“It was a reflex!”

“Why did you even take a phaser with you? My mother doesn’t allow weapons in the house.”

“Your mother runs a distillery, owns an antique shotgun, and swears like no one I’ve ever known, and I know Scotty.”

“Tread carefully, Mr. Sulu,” Spock advises, watching Chekov go steadily redder in the face. “I have to inform you that Ensign Chekov’s aim has remarkably improved lately.”

“Yes, it has,” Chekov agrees, smiling sweetly. “Next time you shoot a poor defenseless bear, Hikaru, I will shoot you. In your sleep. With my mother’s shotgun. Doctor McCoy will be very grouchy.”

Somehow it’s the last threat that makes Sulu pale. “Poor defenseless bear, my ass,” he mutters under his breath.

The ceremony is held in the same Academy’s main assembly hall, and it’s filled to the brim with cadets and officers. The Enterprise’s bridge crew linger in the antechamber, chatting. Spock locks eyes with Kirk across the room and nods. Kirk smiles at him, blushing ever so slightly, and returns to his conversation with McCoy.

They stay there until the protocol officer appears and indicates that they should go in. Spock moves to follow his colleagues, when Kirk stops him with a hand on his arm.

“Spock, a moment.”

Spock turns to face him, a query in his eyes. “Captain?”

The door slides shut, leaving them alone.

Kirk smiles ruefully at him, his expression almost shy. “Spock, do you remember the day we met? Right here in this hall?”


“Yeah.” Kirk grins. “You were very prissy back then.”

Spock gives him a flat look. “I do not condone your actions now, either, even though I understand them better.”

“Didn’t think you did. It’s a shame we never got to the end of it.”
“Yes, how inconsiderate of Nero,” Spock remarks, eyeing him. “To put your curiosity to rest, I believe the board would have ruled in your favor.”

“How do you know?” Kirk asks, momentarily distracted. “I thought Vulcans didn’t guess.”

“It is hardly a guess. Chris – Admiral Pike informed me he intended to support you. His opinion carried a lot of weight. It follows logically that—”

“Pike told you that?” Kirk interrupts.

Spock glances away. “He did not wish for me to take it personally.”

Kirk blinks. “No, why would anyone take something like that personally?”

Spock studies him carefully. “You are being sarcastic.”

“What gave me away?” Kirk rolls his eyes. His expression softens after a moment. “You’re going to defend him with your dying breath, aren’t you?”

Spock suppresses an impatient sigh. “I do not need to defend him, Jim. He knew you. I did not. And as his judgment in regards to you proved to be correct in the long run, I fail to see—”

“Yes, but that was then,” Kirk insists. “This is now. You know me now.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “And I still believe that you failed to divine the principle lesson.”

A small, mischievous grin forms in the corner of Kirk’s mouth. “Enlighten me again.”

“Jim.” Spock lets his exasperation show. The impression is ruined by the inescapable fondness in his tone. “What is it you wish to accomplish?”

Kirk shakes his head. “Just – indulge me, Spock. Please.”

“As you wish. Kobayashi Maru is not a test of knowledge, wit, or the speed of reaction. The categories of passing or failing are non-applicable, because it is not a test of quantity. It is a test of character – quality of character, if you please. Simulated conditions of extreme psychological pressure that make potential candidates for command track reveal not what they know but who they are – the kind of people that they are.”

“And I cheated,” Kirk concludes, still grinning.

Spock’s eyebrow arches in a way to convey ‘You said it, not I.’

“Spock,” Kirk says, quietly ringing with triumph, “did you know what I realized this morning? I realized that I did pass Kobayashi Maru.”

An alarm goes off in Spock’s head as he takes in Kirk’s expression. “I believe it is time we went in —”

“Just a moment. Don’t you want to know how I won?”

“Very well.” Spock gives up. “Why do you believe that you won?”

“You don’t see it?” Kirk steps closer, pushing the boundaries of propriety, although not quite jumping them. Their eyes lock.
“It’s because you’re my real Kobayashi Maru, Spock. Not your stupid test. You. You’re my ultimate test of character. And yes, I cheat, and I fight dirty, and there’s not much honor in any of it, but I must be – I have to be doing something right, because you’re still here. After all this time, after everything – you’re still here. With me. So I figure, my character must be – sort of okay for this whole command thing after all.”

Spock, perhaps for first time in his life, is truly, unequivocally speechless.

Kirk steps a bit closer still and whispers sweetly, “Checkmate.”

Before Spock can respond – although temporarily mute as he is, he doesn’t know what he would have done – kissed him, punched him? – the protocol officer reappears and clears her throat pointedly.

“If you please, gentlemen.”

Kirk flashes her a smile and walks into the hall, leaving Spock nothing but to follow.

Admiral Nechayev takes center stage, addressing the assembly and a few dozen holocams. As Spock looks at Kirk standing next to the admiral, smiling politely as she praises him, Spock is struck with an inevitable realization.

If he really is Kirk’s Kobayashi Maru, then there is certainly no doubt that Kirk is his. He is Spock’s test of character, of his integrity, of his ability to feel and yet remain professional, but to feel all the same. A test of his very sense of self.

It is an unsettling, and yet an exhilarating revelation, because – as Kirk has so helpfully pointed out – he is still there. Both of them are.

Nyota elbows him subtly in the ribs, and Spock realizes he must have been standing there with an alarmingly absent expression. With an effort, he schools his features and focuses on the proceedings.

“You were the wild child of the Academy,” Nechayev is saying, addressing Kirk, “and today, I’m proud to say that you’ve become one of the best captains in the Fleet.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kirk replies. He turns to face the audience. “The truth is, it’s easy to be good when you’re surrounded by the best – and I have the best damn crew any captain can wish for.” He pauses. “God knows why they stick around.”

A tangible sigh of laughter streams down from the rows of seats. Nechayev nods indulgently.

Spock abruptly experiences the phenomenon of premonition, not knowing what shape or form it will take, but knowing for certain a disaster is coming. He braces, anticipating the inevitable train wreck.

“And as for command training,” Kirk continues in a tone that might be mistaken for self-conscious and honest by the naïve and trusting, “the Academy has given me a lot, but I lucked out. You see,” he says, glancing straight at Spock with a smile that is nothing but pure evil, “after graduation I snagged the best private tutor in Starfleet. Maybe the best in the Quadrant.”

There is a moment of appreciative silence, interrupted only by a few distinctly female voices failing to stifle their ‘Awww’s.

Spock thinks that Kirk is very, very dead whenever this spectacle is over. He refuses to be moved.

“You have changed, Kirk,” Admiral Barnett intones mildly, standing to Nechayev’s left. “Back in
the day, you didn’t have a single humble bone in your body. I can definitely feel Commander Spock’s influence.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow, his curse of silence magically broken. “Admiral, if Captain Kirk is under any kind of influence at the moment, it is the drugs still inhabiting his system. He has not fully recovered from his injuries yet.”

Kirk shakes his head, grinning. “Spock, I swear to God, one day I’m going to make you take the credit you’re due, if I have to sit on you until you cry ‘Uncle.’”

Spock regards him coolly, allowing his face to look his opinion on this. Captured by the hovering camera, his expression is magnified on every screen, and the assembly hall is suddenly filled with the sound of people trying to stifle their laughter.

“Better people than you have tried,” Nyota murmurs under her breath.

“Commander.” Nechayev gestures with her hand, the order unmistakable.

Spock steps forward, reluctant, but compliant, coming to a stop just behind Kirk. Kirk watches him, a soft, private smile on his lips, and steps back, bringing them shoulder to shoulder. Spock very determinedly ignores him as best he can and focuses on the admiral, saluting her as she pins a palm crest to his dress-uniform.

He gives up when the admiral is somewhere halfway down the row, and turns his head. Kirk is still watching him as though he doesn’t know how to stop, and Spock becomes dizzy for a moment with fear that everyone is going to be able to read everything on his face – on their faces.

But the attention of the audience and the cameras follow Nechayev as she cites each officer’s accomplishments, and Spock lets out a quiet sigh of relief. He cannot wait for it to be over.

--

They ship out finally closer to midnight. Their first assignment is to mediate a conflict between two neighboring planets and secure a trade agreement. An odd task for a starship, but they have had worse.

Spock is not scheduled for duty until Alpha shift, but he inspects the key departments out of sheer habit. McCoy gives him a rather pointed look when he stops by Medbay, but Spock chooses to ignore it. The conversation is coming, he knows, and it is not one he can avoid, but there is no need to rush it, either.

He takes time to meditate before bed and then lies there in darkness, sleep elusive. He almost gives up when he hears a soft hiss of the door, a murmured command, and a sound of familiar footsteps.

Jim slides into bed next to him, snuggling close, an arm wrapping around Spock’s waist. Spock moves instinctively to accommodate him.

Neither of them is sleeping, but they lie in silence for a while, enjoying the closeness.

“This is going to be really hard to explain in case of Red Alert,” Jim mutters, breath warm over Spock’s collarbone.

“Indeed.”
Jim lifts his head to look at him. “Do you want me to leave?”

Spock pulls him down for a soft kiss. “No.”

Jim settles back. “Oh. Good.”

“The crew will know,” he says after a while when Spock almost begins to drift. “You can’t hide anything for long on a starship.”

“I am aware,” Spock says.

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“There are regulations regarding sexual liaisons within the same chain of command. We might have to address them one day.”

“Hm. I have an idea about that. You might find it radical. I’ll tell you later.”

Strangely enough, Spock doesn’t find this reassuring.

“But other than that, it doesn’t bother you?”

“Why would it bother me, Jim?”

“I don’t know.” Jim sighs. “You’re you. You’re bothered by strange and unexpected things.”

“I am not.”

The silence is prolonged this time, and Spock very nearly does fall asleep, lulled by the drowsy warmth of Jim’s affection.

“Spock?”

“Hm?”

“There’s something I need to tell you. Please don’t take this personally, but I think we beat your test.”

It’s unexpected like a punch from a master tactician, and Spock is caught off guard. He laughs.

“Oh God.” Jim pulls up on his elbows to peer at him through the darkness. “You realize I’m not going to rest until I make you do it again now?”

Spock, knowing full well that his smile is concealed by the absence of light, replies as deadpan as he can, “This will be a long and restless journey for you, Jim, in that case.”

He can hear Jim’s grin even before he feels it pressed against his mouth.

‘Yeah,’ Jim’s voice spills into his mind, undeterred and unaided, ‘I’ll take it.’

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THE END
Can you believe this has begun in 2009? I can't. I can't believe how much time this story has taken, how many times I was so certain I'm not coming back. Yet here we are. There's an epilogue possibly coming, but even so it's done.

IT'S DONE.

I almost can't believe it myself. This story follows the original plan I had for it, back then, but it's also true that my characters have changed with me. I planned for them to change, I did not plan for me, but as it happened, my Spock grew more confident and self-accepting and open parallel to what's been happening to me. I believed in him, but I didn't believe in myself, and here's a surprise for us both. Maybe my fictional Spock believed in me right back, who can tell? ;) I love him more for it, and sometimes it's hard for me to believe how incredible a journey both of us have taken. I'm grateful and awed.

And I love you - all of you who have been here since the beginning, and you who jumped on board along the way. Every single one who let me know how you felt about this thing or that, about the characters, and their journey and everything. It is unbelievable that one can crawl at a snail's pace of almost 7 (!!!) years and still get people willing to support them and urge them on.

I love you and THANK YOU.
♥ ♥ ♥

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