Secret Vulcan Mating Rituals

by Chase820

Summary

Everyone knows the story of how James T. Kirk beat the Kobayashi Maru. But only Kirk, Spock, and McCoy know the real story. Set before and after the events of the film, this fic offers a slashtastic twist on events. Kirk/Spock, Kirk/McCoy friendship.

Notes

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Rating: Hard R for language, violence, explicit sex, drug use

Pairings: Kirk/Spock; Uhura/Spock (mostly implied); Kirk/McCoy friendship

Timeline: Trek 2.0, just before the beginning and just after the end of the film

Disclaimer: Making no money, please don't sue

Summary: Everyone knows the story of how James T. Kirk beat the Kobayashi Maru. But nobody except Kirk, McCoy, and Spock know the real story.

Dedication: Special thanks to Mustangsally78, for some lovely dialogue contributions in chapters 1 and 2. Also Diane Duane, whose classic Trek tie-in novel Spock's World contributed so much to the making of this particular fictive universe.
Chapter 1

i. McCoy

President Clinton was in a fine mood. He always was, painted on the wall behind the rear booth of the bar, big face grinning fit to split. Why shouldn't he grin? He'd been dead for over two centuries, his troubles were over. The old rascal was pinching fannies up in Heaven right now. Billy, owner of the place, claimed kinship to Clinton through one of the President's many mistresses. Maybe it was true, maybe it wasn't, but the belief had inspired the bar's 1990's décor. Faded Starbucks Coffee signs, a life-size statue of an obese yellow man whom Billy called Homer for some reason, the aforementioned Clinton mural, plus lots of other junk whose significance was lost on everybody but Billy. Tacky as all get out, in other words, but the place was quite popular with the cadets at Starfleet Academy. Nostalgia never went out of style, and the cheap drinks and cute servers didn't hurt, either.

James T. Kirk sat in the bar booth, head bent over his sixth Budweiser Classic. His glum expression was a sad contrast to the dead president beaming just behind him. At Jim's left elbow, the plate of free nachos Mandy the waitress had brought over slowly congealed into a greasy mass. His fingers twitched slightly to the song blaring from the antique jukebox.

I can't stand it, I know you planned it
I'm a set it straight, this Watergate
I can't stand rockin' when I'm in here
'Cause your crystal ball ain't so crystal clear

So, while you sit back and wonder why
I got this fucking thorn in my side
Oh my God, it's a mirage
I'm tellin' y'all it's sabotage

So, so, so, so listen up 'cause you can't say nothin'
You shut me down with a push of your button
But yo, I'm out and I'm gone
I'll tell you now I keep it on and on

The raucous music cut off mid-guitar solo. Jim's chin jerked up. Mandy sashayed over, crucifixes jingling. Her black-polished nails caressed the flushed skin at the nape of his neck.

"Sorry, baby. But that was five replays. The other customers were starting to complain."

Jim's bleary blue eyes took a minute to focus. They stared at the name tag pinned over the waitress' shapely left breast. "Your outfit's all wrong, Madonna. You're dressed like the cover of the Like A Virgin album from 1984. This is supposed to be a 1990's bar."

Mandy played nervously with the dozens of bracelets circling her left forearm. "I had to go to this historical costume shop in L.A.—"


"You want something authentic?" Mandy spat. "How's this?" She stalked off, giving him a one-fingered gesture that, if not 1990s, was definitely of historic origin.
Leonard McCoy took a moment to appreciate the sway of her hips under her lace skirt. Then he turned to his companion. "No more free nachos for us."

"This place is such a scam," Jim said, picking at the label on his beer bottle.

"Yep. The drinks are watered—" Len grimaced down at his Jack Daniels—"and Madonna’s not much of a waitress, though she was bestirring herself for your benefit since you went home with her last week. We only come here because you like the music."

Jim's eyes rolled up at the speaker overhead. "I don't like this music."

*Hit me Baby one more time*, the speaker cooed back at him.

"As my Grandma McCoy would say, ain't you a barrel of monkeys tonight."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means you're being a moody pain in the ass. Just like last night and the night before. Are you still brooding about that damn test?" Seeing his companion's jaw tighten: "It was three days ago, Jim. Get the fuck past it."

"It was unfair," Jim's full bottom lip poked out, making him look more like a spoiled toddler than a fourth-year Starfleet Academy cadet of brilliant if unsteady reputation.

"It's supposed to be unfair," Leonard explained for the dozenth time. "You can't win the Kobayashi Maru. Nobody wins the Kobayashi Maru. Winning is not the point."

"Winning is always the point," Jim said. "And I would have, if the computer hadn't cheated." He leaned forward in the booth, eyes intent beneath the surface glaze of alcohol. "I did some research in the library yesterday. According to our best intelligence, do you know how many Klingon birds of prey are currently commissioned?"

"No, but I have the feeling you're going to—"

"One hundred sixty-five. That's 65 in *B’rel* class and 100 *K’vort* class."

"So?"

"So I destroyed 202 Klingon starships in the simulation. Get it? I blew up thirty-seven ships that do not exist, and I still lost."

"That would explain the state of the simulation platform. Dawkins in Maintenance told me they are going to have to shut down for ten days to rebuild. Totally frakked the room, and you also fried their mainframe, Jimbo. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"I did," Jim replied. "I fried it, but they won't admit I beat it. The program is a fraud, and I'm taking it down." He smiled at Leonard, but lurking at the corners was the same predatory rage he'd radiated since he limped off the simulation platform on Monday.

School shootings are unknown in the sixth decade of the Twenty Third Century, but James T. Kirk had long been interested in all things two centuries ago. Leonard had a sudden vision of his friend atop the Academy bell tower with a high powered phaser, laughing like a lunatic, surrounded by limp bodies dripping multicolored blood into the plascrete. Jim's Psy-Chem profile made the scenario all too plausible. The man's testosterone and dopamine levels were off the charts. You might think this would be a roadblock for his career, but every cadet in the Command track had the same damn
problem. Jim's was just more pronounced than the rest. Enough to make you wonder about the Federation's stated role as a peacekeeping body, when it consistently recruited hyper-hormonal latent spree killers to head its military branch.

Charles Whitman had been a Marine, along with Lee Harvey Oswald. Kenneth Bersksler and T'sath-T'sath had been in the Space Corps.

Leonard framed his next words carefully. "I know the test brings up a lot of issues for you." When Jim just blinked at him: "Your dad having to make the choice he did, leaving you and your mom—"

"Spare me the bullshit from two psych rotations. It's not about me, it's about what's right. Not just for me but for every cadet who's been victimized by the Kobayashi Maru." Jim's handsome face had taken on a glow that wasn't just cheap beer. This was a far more dangerous intoxicant: Self-Righteousness. One could almost see an old-fashioned American flag waving behind him, solemn music playing in the background, something musty and martial—"The Star-Speckled Banner," maybe. Cheeks flushing, Jim went on. "For every person who has ever suffered at the hands of a corrupt system, I will win the unwinnable, and history will vindicate my actions."

"Fine, you are Spartacus. I took history classes too. How do you plan to free the oppressed?"

"By taking down their oppressor."

"The mainframe's already in pieces."

"The computer is just a tool. I need the man behind the computer. The tool behind the tool." Jim snickered into his beer.

Leonard stared at him a full five seconds. "Spock? You're going after Commander Spock?" Then he laughed, loud enough to drown out the ancient pop screeching overhead.

"What's so funny?" Jim said, sounding hurt.

"Jimbo, buddy, Achebe Chang wetnursed you through Introduction to Command Systems. You barely got a "Satisfactory" mark out of your instructor—Spock. There's no way on God's green earth you're taking down anything he's programmed."

"But I burned out the simulation's mainfram—"

"Because it's within the parameters of the scenario he designed." Len shook his head. "Face it, kiddo. The Kobayashi is Spock's baby, and that misbegotten brat kicked your ass. You'd have a better chance challenging him to pistols at dawn."

"It can be done." Jim's brows had drawn together, forehead creasing with the vertical line which always meant trouble for somebody. "I've considered all this—I'm not a complete idiot about strategy. I've talked to Achebe, he says it wouldn't be too hard to introduce a subroutine into the program that would make it possible to beat it. Che says the original program has to be stored on Spock's own computer in his quarters. Assuming he doesn't have extra-special passcodes, I can slip a data solid programmed with new code into the computer and upload the altered program to the main system from there. Spock tweaks the Kobayashi program every so often, so the security protocols on the system wouldn't think there was anything strange going on."

The creases vanished and Jim smiled. "It's almost too easy."

"I thought Che told you never to speak to him again."
"Oh, I talked to him. I told him I didn't know Ashanti was his cousin when I—you know—"

"Fucked her."

"When I dated her," Jim said, giving Leonard a look. "I told him I didn't realize he thought the two of us were exclusive."

"A man will think that when he's spent two months sucking your cock."

"Che and Shanti are both okay with it now," Jim when on. "We're all supposed to go out next weekend." He took a pull on his beer, smirking at Leonard from around the neck of the bottle.

Leonard knew what that smirk meant. Twenty credits said Jim charmed them both into bed, incest taboo be damned. In this Year of Our Lord 2258, the fact that Jim Kirk was sexually ambidextrous should have raised no eyebrows. Not in San Francisco, at least. But the man's audacity had made him notorious.

Leonard didn't care if Jim fucked males, females, or pink tentacled creatures, he just wished he'd fuck fewer of them. Leonard was tired of the drama: ex-lovers skulking outside their rooms, the desperate calls at 3 AM. Len never could get used to the revolving cast of characters in the bathroom first thing in the morning. If Jim weren't his best friend, he would have sought other accommodations ages ago.

"Are you sure there isn't any Orion in your family tree? That's the only way I can explain why anybody of any gender falls for your bullshit."

"Do I look green to you?" Jim said. "My plan is foolproof. I just need access to Spock's rooms."

"There's no way. Students can't just waltz into the instructor flats. Forget disguising yourself like a maintenance worker or something else out of those old movies you like so much—it's all robots. The security cameras do body scans—you'd be caught as soon as you walked through the door. The only realistic way in is if Spock lets you. Why would he invite you over?"

Jim smirked at him.

Leonard stared back.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered. "You're going to seduce Spock."

"It makes sense, strategically."

"Why would Spock want to have sex with you?"

Jim lolled back in the booth. He gave Leonard the grin that had made so many panties, briefs, and stranger forms of alien underwear drop to the floor over the years. "Why wouldn't he?"

By the little blue-eyed baby Jesus, Leonard started to laugh. He laughed until his eyes watered and the tears ran out his nose. He laughed until he was gasping for air and mopping at his face with a cocktail napkin emblazoned with the retro Apple logo.

"What?" Jim snapped, shoulders tensing.

Len took a moment to pull himself together. "If Spock has sex, he kills his partners and disposes of the bodies. No one's had sex with Spock. No one knows if he can have sex, if Vulcans have sex. We know nothing about their sexuality. The bastards are mighty tight-lipped on the subject."

"Of course they fuck. Where else do little Vulcans come from?" Jim's hands described a baby
Vulcan the size of an old-fashioned loaf of bread.

"Baby Vulcans are dropped off by the leathery-winged critter that passes for their stork."

"I can't picture Spock being delivered by a Pterodactyl."

"He wasn't. Him they designed in a lab, like a computer or a chemical weapon. You don't know what he's got down there. If he's got anything: Maybe those pointy-eared sadists at the Vulcan Science Academy left that part out. Too illogical. Maybe they gave him something that will rip your dick off and eat it. You don't know."

Jim turned his head and exchanged grins with Sexy Bill Clinton. "That's what makes it fun."

Before Leonard could reply to that, another waitress came tripping up. Her outfit was more period authentic, if the episodes Jim had made Leonard watch on Nostalgia Net were anything to go by. Tight knit top, tight short skirt, knee boots. A single crucifix hung around her neck. At her waist next to her order pad was a sharp stick of wood. Only her blue skin and the antennae poking out of her long, blonde, artificially sun-streaked hair ruined the illusion.

"Hi!" she chirped. "I'm Buffy. What can I get you?"

Jim looked up, zeroed in. "You must be new."

"Just started yesterday."

"Buffy," he said, lips lingering over the syllables. "I bet your real name is a lot prettier."

She blushed purple. "I'm not supposed to say." She gave him a look that suggested she would, however, dearly love to be asked.

Jim leaned closer, putting a hand on her wrist. "I won't tell. It will be our little—"


Buffy flinched back and scampered off at warp speed, forgetting to take their drink order.

Jim glared at him. Leonard shrugged. "You need to save your strength, Spartacus."

"I am doing this," Jim said. "But you're right. I don't know anything about Vulcan sexuality. I could use the help of a Xenobiologist."

"No."

"Bones—"

"No. You're Spartacus. I'm not. I don't know how you hornswoggled Che into this."

"Spock dismissed him as his teaching assistant last term. Che's taking it personally."

"I like Spock. Icy bastards who look like the Devil in Grandma's Bible are my kind of people."

Jim's limpid blue eyes grew imploring. "I'll tell you everything."

"Since when do I care about the gory details of your whoring?"
"A Vulcan, Bones. As a Xenobiologist, aren't you just a little bit curious?"

The hell of the thing is that Leonard was. The Vulcans were notoriously silent about a subject most other species, however culturally conservative, were willing to discuss at least in general terms. It was almost insulting, the lack of information. No, it was definitely insulting. Like the rest of the Federation wasn't good enough to sit at the grownups' table. Typical green-blooded arrogance, he really couldn't stand that holier-than-thou attit—

Of course, Jim knew this.

"You're good," Leonard said to him. "Intelligence sure missed out when you chose Command."

"I don't have the Psy-Chem profile for Intelligence. Something about my dopamine levels." Jim shrugged. "This is my chance to be a spy."

"Not Spartacus, then. Mata Hari."

Jim waved this away. "Will you help?"

"I s'pose, though you don't stand a chance in Hell. But Mama told me failure builds character."

Jim lifted his chin, eyes glittering. "His ass is mine."

Leonard had seen this expression before. Often at the intramural rugby matches, sometimes at nightclubs, when Jim had sighted a target he was determined to smash into. If he had to break rules or bones to do it.

Maybe not Orion in his background, then. Maybe Viking. Or Klingon.

Leonard sighed wearily and called over to Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

"Another Jack Daniels, sweetheart," he said. "Easy on the ice. And keep 'em coming."
Chapter 2

ii. Kirk

He was dozing on the sofa when a soft weight thudded on his chest, jerking him out of sleep. Jim blinked up to see Leonard standing over him, looking satisfied.

"There it is. Everything you wanted to know about Vulcan sex but were afraid to ask."

Jim stared at the folder spilling its contents down his stomach. "Wow. Really?"

"Nope. But it's everything I could find during one afternoon in the archives. Had to cancel a lunch with Danna, by the way. She wasn't happy."

"Great. Like your girlfriend needs another reason to hate me."

"First, Danna doesn't hate you. Danna doesn't think about you. Believe it or not, there are people in this world—many—for whom Jim Kirk is but a faint and fleeting visage. Second, Danna is not my girlfriend."

"You eat together. You sleep together. You went to that show together—what was that?"

"Torture. I'll never get the appeal of ballet. If I want to see people in tight clothes contorting themselves into unnatural positions, I'll go clubbing with you."

"Anytime, man," Jim said. "If Danna's not your girlfriend, what is she?"

"A colleague with whom I have a casual arrangement that works around both our schedules."

"She's your fuckbuddy."

Leonard's face twisted into a grimace. "Where did you hear that godawful word?"

"Nostalgia Net. There was this show on the other night about sex and the city—or maybe that's what it was called, I don't remember. Anyway, they had a whole episode about fuckbuddies. A repeat sex partner with no romantic attachment is—was—called a fuckbuddy."

"Small wonder you picked up that little nugget. Fuckbuddies are your entire sexual history."

"It's better than getting divorced."

Leonard flinched visibly.

Shit. Jim hadn't meant it that way. Len didn't talk about his divorce, which is why Jim knew how much it had gutted him. Leonard McCoy never minced words about anything. Jim spent long periods forgetting his best friend had an ex-wife in Georgia and a daughter old enough to be starting eighth grade. Leonard was older than Jim, but he wasn't much older. It was so weird.

"I'm sorry, Bones. I—"

"Are you going to look at the damn file or not?" Leonard sat down in the chair opposite the sofa and crossed his arms over his chest.

Jim sat up, dutifully opening the folder and spreading its contents on the sofa table. He put the back-
up data solid to one side and began sorting through the whisper-thin plastic printouts.

"There's a lot there. Let me sum up," Leonard said. "I was wrong the other night: Vulcans do have sex. They even admit it. When Vulcan and Terra began exchanging data back in the day, the Vulcan High Council deigned to give us the basics, which they've updated periodically." From the pile his long fingers plucked two printouts, detailed renderings of naked subjects.

"From our point of view, Vulcan organs are scrambled. Heart on the wrong side, liver way up by the lungs, and you don't want to know where their evolutionary path put the kidneys. But the reproductive and excretory orifices are in the same place as Terran ones, and they don't look all that different. Which is convenient, not all life-forms are like that, not even other bipedals that sorta-kindly look like us. Meropians keep theirs in the palms, which is why holding hands is like third base out there. Taygetians have tentacles, did you know? They wrap around—"

"Bones."

"Right. Subject at hand. One interesting difference—Vulcan women don't have menstrual cycles. They're induced ovulators, which means they don't ovulate until stimulated by sexual contact." Leonard gave him a mischievous smile. "You should keep that in mind."

"Why? I think we can be pretty sure Spock doesn't ovulate."

"Not unless the Vulcan Science Academy really screwed up. But he does possess what helps stimulate ovulation in the Vulcan female." Leonard tapped his finger on the left figure. "You like full-frontal nudity of both flavors, Jimbo. Take a look at what our pointy-eared Adam's sporting below the belt."

Jim stared. He swallowed. "That's not—"

"A barbed penis. Just like a tomcat's! Have fun with that."

The hot oily feeling in the pit of Jim's stomach was the Szechuan Chicken he'd had for lunch. Definitely the chicken. "Are you sure he's—endowed—like this? He's half human."

"Hell no, I'm not sure. Did Starfleet Academy take a picture of your penis when you got in? Even if the Powers That Be were so interested in their students' genitalia, it wouldn't matter. Spock's medical records are classified—I don't have that kind of clearance yet." Before Jim could ask the obvious: "Most of the technology that created him is proprietary. Several billion credits went into the making of your nemesis. I'm surprised they let him off-planet at all."

Jim frowned. "He's that special."

"Son, you think they made a Terran-Vulcan hybrid with a chemistry set? Our two species might vaguely resemble each other, but we differ from the mitochondria up. The million decisions and revisions our separate evolutions perfected over the millennia had to be re-thought and re-solved by the VSA, all in a matter of months. Those people sure do love a challenge."

Len shrugged. "If I were guessing, I'd say Spock isn't a 50/50 Terran-Vulcan split. You can't divide the parts so evenly, biology isn't fair that way. The parts of Spock we can see look pure Vulcan, so I'm guessing most of the rest of him follows suit. The Vulcans would prefer their template over ours, anyway. To finish a long answer to a brief query, yes, a barbed penis is likely." When Jim didn't say anything: "Of course, if you're willing to give up this ridiculous espionage fantasy you've got going, you don't have to worry about—"

"I'm not worried," Jim said, lifting his chin. "I'll top."
"You're making a lot of assumptions, kiddo." Leonard sighed. "But—so am I."

"What else did you find out?" Jim said, squinting at the densely printed pages.

"Oh, lots of stuff. Vulcan gestation periods average 50 weeks instead of the Terran 38. Christ, a year-long pregnancy: I don't know if I feel worse for the mama or the daddy. Vulcan children enter puberty between the ages of 10 and 14, just like Terrans, though most don't reproduce until their forties. The Lesser Sea cities have a 2.12% higher rate of miscarriage, which the Vulcans have attributed to mercury contamination from some mining operation dating all the way back to Surak's time. Testicular cancer is 8.58% more likely in Vulcans of his house than in other clans, by the way—Spock should have regular checkups." Leonard shrugged. "You want to see the breast cancer statistics for Tu'Khrev?"

"I'm sensing a pattern here," Jim said.

"Spoken like a true prodigy." Leonard fanned out the plastic printouts with a dismissive sweep. "It's all biology. The tiniest bit of sociology. We know many Vulcan marriages are arranged when the two parties are children, and they tend to fall on predictable dynastic lines. We know most marriages produce two or three offspring, and Vulcan divorce rates are very low. Re-marriage due to divorce or death happens, though it isn't common. These people mate for life."

"Why are the marriages so successful? Is divorce frowned on, like it was on Earth three hundred years ago?" Jim asked.

"Dunno. Maybe they're a bunch of swingers who screw each others' spouses silly, so there's no need to get divorced. Maybe they stone divorcees or make them walk around with giant scarlet letters on their chests. Premarital sex is just as big a blank: Most Vulcans don't marry before thirty, but a lot of them are engaged by the time puberty hits. Can they fuck their fiancés? Are there Vulcan hookers? Hell, some good old-fashioned Vulcan sluts? Maybe they pray to Jesus and take a lot of cold showers. We don't know, and the Vulcans ain't saying."

"They've done no sociological surveys? No studies? That's not very Vulcan."

"If they exist, we don't have access. There's no telling how accurate they'd be, anyway. The late great Dr. Kinsey found that out in the Twentieth Century: It's tough to get good hard data about sex. Terrans like to see ourselves as frank, but even today we lie all the time about who we fuck. More importantly, who we want to fuck."

"I don't."

"Yeah, but most of us have mamas who raised us right. We are righteously ashamed of our shenanigans. Vulcans are way more cagey than we are, and you can forget about non-native reporting. The people I know who've spent any time there say Vulcan society is impenetrable. They have a few official events where outsiders are welcome, but that's it. You'd be more likely to drown in a Vulcan flood than get invited to a Vulcan dinner party, let alone an orgy."

Jim considered a second. "What about fiction? Is there a Vulcan Madame Bovary or something we could read?"

"I keep forgetting you picked up a minor in Comparative Literature to go with your History major at UI," Leonard said, smiling at him. "But the Vulcans aren't big on novels. Histories and political commentaries are more their style, with a smattering of poetry. Very Roman. There have been some dissertations on Vulcan modes of narrative, we could slog through them if you have a few days to —"
"We need porn."

Leonard glanced around. "What—right now? It's five in the afternoon."

"Not jerk-off porn. *Vulcan* porn. How else are we going to find out what turns them on?"

"Doesn't exist. At least, I hope not." Leonard looked mildly disgusted.

"Sure it does. Even repressed societies have porn. The more repressed they are, the weirder it gets. You should see some of the stuff the British came up with back in the Nineteenth Century. All those corsets and stiff collars were just camouflage."

"Vulcans are not Victorians."

"Twenty credits says Vulcan porn exists."

"Done."

Jim reached into the pocket of his jeans, took out a data solid and slapped it on the sofa table. "Pay up."

Leonard leaned forward and poked at the solid like it was a lab specimen of uncertain origin. "Are you serious?"

"As a Vulcan."

"Where did the hell did you dig this up?"

"Chinatown." Jim gave him a triumphant smile. "What did you think I was doing all afternoon while you were at the library?"

He walked over to the comm-box and slotted in the solid. After a half-second, the title of the film popped up on the big screen across from the sofa, lurid green letters on a black background:

*SECRET VULCAN MATING RITUALS*

Jim settled back on the sofa. "Boring title," he said as the credits began to flash by.

"Seems descriptive enough."

"*Starfuckers 17: The Search for Cock*. That's a good title."

"Never heard of it."

"I caught it on Nostalgia at Night the other day."

"Gross, Jim."

"Why? Twentieth Century breast implants take some getting used to, but—"

"Everybody's dead. Really dead. It's like masturbating in a mausoleum."

"You think too much, Bones. That's your problem."

"Necrophiliac."

"Shh. The action's starting."
One of the constants in porn, Jim knew, was the music was ass. It didn't matter if it was Golden Age variety with the *boom chukka wao-wao* or current stuff with cascading synthesized strings, nobody bought fuck films for the stirring soundtrack. *Secret Vulcan Mating Rituals* was no exception: lots of high-pitched warbling notes and an annoying thrum in the background.

Things happened. People walked across a barren landscape.

"That's not Vulcan, those are the fucking Vasquez Rocks right outside L.A.," Leonard said.

"Stock footage."

"Those are stock ears, too. They're wiggling while she's walking. Vulcan ears don't wiggle." Leonard's irritation at the biological inaccuracies was almost enough to pull Jim's focus away from what was happening on the hot sands.

"Her tits are wiggling. She's got nice tits."

Leonard rolled his eyes. "All of 'em?"

Jim stretched his feet out on the sofa table, beginning to doubt his credits had been well-spent. One thing was certain: If Len's diagrams were to be believed, Vulcan women did not, in fact, have three breasts.

Bodies clustered, unclustered, dressed and undressed, following the fairly standard porn tropes. The stilted dialogue was in Standard, but it was sprinkled with the occasional unfamiliar Vulcan term, a surprising attempt by the filmmaker at some kind of authenticity.

"What's *poon-fur?" Jim asked. "I'd think it was the obvious, but she doesn't have any."

"Beats the shit out of me. I need a drink."

Bringing back a pair of beers, Len slumped on the sofa next to Jim, being careful not to touch him. There was never any touching during the watching of porn, that was a titanium-ceramic-polymer clad part of the Man Code. Leonard was a strict adherent of the Code, though it was centuries out of date. Jim had never felt any serious lust for his roommate, which was a good thing: It would have ruined a perfectly good living arrangement.

"Is that a harp?" Leonard asked.

Jim nodded. "I don't know what she's going to do with—"

They both winced as the harp came into play.


Jim agreed: Abuse of musical instruments was beyond the boundaries of even his admittedly stretchable sexual envelope.

"Good thing that Vulcan's cultural musical icon isn't a bassoon."

"Ouch," Jim said, ass clenching in sympathy.

The cold beer was much better than the fake orgasms. It should've been impossible for scenes with so much creative penetration to be dull, but somehow they managed. If this was anything like the real Vulcan rituals, amazing the whole species hadn't gone extinct from sheer boredom.
When the bad, bad movie was finally over and another half-dozen beers dead on the floor, Jim yawned and stretched. He was no more aroused than he would have been watching the ballet Len had suffered through. He had an Interspecies Ethics exam at 8 AM and an intramural rugby game in the afternoon. He'd squandered his whole day off learning absolutely nothing about the mating habits of Vulcans.

"Conclusion: Either the Vulcans are the worst pornographers in the galaxy, or you got taken for forty credits," Bones announced, and burped.

"Forty?"

"Twenty you spent on that piece of shit and twenty you owe me."

Jim pulled a data solid out of his pocket and tossed it to Leonard. "It ain't over yet. I'm going to find out what gets that pointy-eared bastard's motor going."

"Besides torturing tightly wound Command cadets with an unwinnable scenario? Pretty kinky, when you think about it. You should have gone down to the Castro and hit the leather shops."

"The best one is in Union Square, actually. Umberto makes these synth-ostrich pieces—"

"Never mind," Len said. "Whatever Spock's into, it has nothing to do with James T. Kirk."

"We'll see."

Jim flashed on Spock the way he best remembered him, standing at the podium in the auditorium where Intro to Command Systems was held. Arms behind his back, face impassive, Spock had more closely resembled one of the teaching droids the Academy occasionally used than an actual flesh-and-blood being. Those dark eyes looked at you like they didn't even see you; worse, like the brain behind those eyes was calculating your worth to the last thousandth of a decimal point and coming up with—zero.

"Jimbo? Still with us?"

Jim blinked the image away. "I'm going for a run. Then I'm going to Billy's. Wanna come?"

"No thanks, I have to be on rotation at 6 AM."

It was just as well. Len was a great drinking buddy, but he got irritated when Jim ditched him for more intimate company. Sometimes Jim restrained himself, but tonight he needed company.

"Don't you have a mid-term tomorrow?"

"I'll wing it. Admiral Goldman loves me."

"I thought he hated you after that thing with his kid."

"He understands about that now. Even he admits David's on the obsessive side. He blames the surrogate he and Patrick used—you know how Martians can be." Jim paused. "I've been stopping by Goldman's office hours. He likes cars too, did you know? He has a 1964 Mustang, absolutely cherry. Amazing."

Leonard sighed. "You and your daddy issues."

Yeah yeah, put it in my psych profile. Jim rose from the sofa and headed to his room to change.
"It's going to rain," Leonard said, but Jim waved him off. He was looking forward to his run: He needed time to think. Strategize.

How do you melt a man made of metal? Who—what—could ever make Spock lose control? Right now, that seemed like the unwinnable scenario. Worse, the unthinkable one.
iii. Spock

He hesitated before he said it, knowing how pointless it was. Transmissions from further than Neptune updated every 8 minutes, 7.45 seconds. He last checked his account 7 minutes, 5.24 seconds ago. But it was possible given recent sunspot activity that communications could be accelerating by as much as 17.29%. Just possible.

"Check for new messages."

The system paused for .7 seconds. Spock was too distracted to calculate the extra decimal place.

"One new message," the computer said. "Audio only."

Vulcan hearts do not, literally, skip a beat. But Spock's did experience what could be described as a mild tachycardia. It was not a result of the green tea he was drinking: Vulcans are immune to the effects of caffeine, even half-Vulcans. With the greater control Vulcans exert over what would be an involuntary response in a Terran, Spock forced his heart to resume its normal sedate rhythm before he spoke again.

"Transcribe message."

He did not want to hear the message spoken aloud, even in the privacy of his rooms, until he saw what it—*he*—was going to say. Savor the writer's voice later, or brood over it: Spock would see.

The system paused again (.79 seconds: unacceptable. He would need to recalibrate once more).

*My dear Son,*

*I'm sorry to hear that the San Francisco weather has been so dreary. The Academy should have been based in Southern California, perhaps, or New Mexico. The desert outside Roswell is beautiful, and how appropriate for cadets of so many non-Terran worlds to return to the place where their ancestors first set foot on Planet Earth! I know you'll forgive the whimsy, dearest, illogical as it may sound. I'll make it up to you by commenting that the fertilizer you formulated for my roses on your last visit home has increased their blooms by 9.35%. T'Rena is quite—*

"Close." He would read the rest later. His mother's letters were always of interest, despite their occasional forays into the irrational. He was not in the frame of mind at present to give her latest missive his total attention, and Amanda deserved nothing less.

The urge to ask the computer to check the message server one more time arose in his breast, and he forcibly repressed it. He would have to spend extra time in the Disciplines this evening, a half-hour for every lapse in *cthia.* At this rate, he would be awake all night. Spock had slept only 5.68 hours this week, 9.41 less than usual. Probably the lack of sleep itself was responsible for his poor self-control. Logic would dictate that he spend his free afternoon giving his body the rest it clearly needed.

Standing away from his comscreen was difficult, though he knew the reluctance was irrational. Even if the sunspots were accelerating the beams, it was unlikely there would be more messages from Vulcan today. Not the message Spock wanted, the one he'd been shredding his equanimity over for 13 days, 7 hours, 5 minutes and 12.65 seconds.
Spock lay down upon his meditation pallet, but he did not meditate. He closed his eyes, but he did
not sleep. The conversation was coming back to him again, their last conversation. The Vulcan
eidetic memory had often made him the envy of his classmates at Starfleet Academy, but just now
Spock wished for the Terrans’ cloudiness of thought, their imperfection of recall. Illogical, but to
paraphrase one of the best Terran authors, a deficiency profoundly to be wished.

"You're plowing the brown girl."

They are speaking in Standard at his companion's insistence. Stonn remains concerned that his
command of foreign languages is lacking, and he takes every opportunity to practice. Federation
Standard Speech, based as it is on old Terran English, is useful for making oneself understood to a
variety of species. Where it is lacking is in preciseness.

Plow suggests only a rough sense of the Vulcan word Stonn is referencing: Irak-shitaan is still used
in the Lesser Sea agricultural communities as a term for cultivating land. The term has another use
in that area, an archaic one. This other meaning is 'forceful sexual mastery over a being of lesser
status.' The metaphor is rather elegant: thrusting into a prone body with a hard instrument, the way
a farmer's plow once thrust into the patient soil. In bygone times, a Vulcan warlord would have
plowed a girl he bought at market or a boy he took in battle. He would not have plowed his wife. Or
his best friend.

Spock almost has to admire the preciseness of the insult, even as it makes his chest burn. To
acknowledge it, however, would be an even greater lapse in cthia than his companion's. He focuses
instead on the other part of Stonn's statement. "I know your experience of Earth culture is limited,"
he says, willing his voice to be calm, "but most Terrans would consider identifying someone solely
by the color of her skin to be a gross insult."

"Why? She is brown. We refer to our own brown people as such."

"Vulcan does not have Terra's history of difficult ethnic relations." His people had always found
other reasons to kill each other. Different, perhaps, though no more rational.

"Terrans become emotional over the strangest things. You recall Seventh Form: Even the instructors
referred to me as 'the white one.'" Stonn's Standard is imprecise again. A closer word to what he
means would be 'the fair one,' not the same connotation at all. Even so, as a boy Stonn hated the
nickname. Eidetic or no, his friend's memory has always been convenient.

Spock would point this out, but he does not wish to fight with Stonn. When someone travels sixteen
light years to see you, it would be unreasonable to waste any of the visit on needless argument.
Spock understands the reason behind Stonn's distaste for Nyota Uhura, one that is not at all related
to the color of her skin. The color of her blood is a far graver problem.

"I understand indulging your curiosity briefly," Stonn says. "I'm curious myself, and I'm only
visiting. One hears things about Terran sexual prowess, though they seem rather fragile to me. But
to make a companion of one! That's taking curiosity to the point of perversity, old friend."

Spock feels his posture stiffen. "Perhaps it is something in the blood," he says. His voice is calm, as
calm as it was before he backhanded Savok into the learning shell and fractured his cheekbone. "My
father, after all, suffers from a similar weakness."

Stonn has the grace to color a bit at that. Vulcans as a rule do not blush—not perceptibly—but Stonn
is still very fair, even as an adult. "I did not mean to imply that your mother is anything less than a
lady," he says. "You know what I mean."
"No," Spock says. "I do not know. Your behavior has been strange since you arrived. You have been eager to visit Terra for years, but now that you are here, you find nothing but fault. This is not like you. You have always appreciated other cultures, other races. What changed?"

"You!" It is not quite an exclamation—Vulcans do not exclaim—but the statement is forceful. Stonn throws back the coverlet and climbs out of bed. He walks over to the window, late-day California sun turning his bare flesh from white to rose-gold. The first blue sky in many days turns his eyes an even deeper, more brilliant shade. His hair is more golden than the light. Such unusual coloring: Less than 7.24% of the Vulcan population is blue-eyed, still fewer blond. It was enough to mark him out as different when they were boys, even freakish. Almost as freakish as a Terran half-breed.

Spock is much attached to Stonn for many reasons—his wit, his intellect, his many enthusiasms—but the root of the attachment is this, their mutual deviation in a society which prizes normality above all things. To witness Stonn developing a prejudiced streak is disquieting, to say the least.

Stonn leans his forehead against the window. It's one-way glass, thankfully: A naked body might not inspire comment in San Francisco, but a naked, blond, male Vulcan body in Spock's quarters would. Illogical, to care what the gossiping populace thinks, and Spock does not care. It might interfere, however, with his ability to teach his classes effectively. Students do not like to have their assessment of their instructors disturbed, however inaccurate that assessment might be. They would not understand such an extreme adjustment to Spock's neutral persona.

Nyota would not understand, either.

"You're never coming home, are you?" Stonn says quietly.

"Of course I am. My next leave is scheduled for—"

"Not v'rathen leave!" Stonn spits. Spock doesn't know what's more shocking, his friend's tone or Stonn's use of a very rude Lesser Sea slang term that hasn't crossed his lips in years.

Stonn turns from the window, his pellucid eyes wide, almost accusing. "I was sure you would give up this Starfleet scheme sooner or later. 'He's just making a point,' I told myself. 'He wants the High Council to see they cannot take his talents for granted.' Logical use of leverage, I thought. But seeing you here on Terra, with your classes and your projects and your pretty brown companion . . . . My conclusions were completely erroneous, weren't they? You're—serious."

Stonn turns back to the window, pressing his lips together.

Spock rises from the bed and goes to the window. He is close to Stonn, so close he can feel the warmth from his body. But he does not touch his friend. With Stonn so close to losing control, such contact would be cruel. He waits until some of the rigidity in Stonn's shoulders relaxes before he speaks again.

"My dear friend," he says softly. "When have I ever not been serious?"

Stonn won't look at him. He stares at the Golden Gate Bridge like it's the most fascinating thing he's ever seen. "Come home," he says, after a moment. "It could be a good life, a meaningful one. I know people were not kind—I know better than anyone how it was for you. But that was so long ago. With your accomplishments, Spock, no minister would dare say anything against you now. You, or your mother. You could be a minister yourself by the time you're fifty."

"There is more to life than being a minister."

Stonn turns. "Of course there is! That would be different too, don't you see? Your parents never
bound you, I've never asked why, but I can guess. They thought you would not be—wanted. But you're a scion of Surak's house, Spock. With your accomplishments, you could have your choice of brides. T'Pring's cousins—"

"Your betrothed does not relish my company. I do not think her cousins would."

"She was a child when last you met. She's different now, older. She would appreciate you, as would any woman in her clan."

Spock doubts that all the maturity in the universe would overcome the antipathy T'Pring has always shown for him. But it would be impolite to speak such sentiments to her future husband. Few people are impolite to Stonn these days, though their motives are different from Spock's.

Stonn's accent got him dismissed as something of a bumpkin in his first years of school, but not now. Fifteen years in Shi'Kahr does wonders for the diction, and his former schoolmates have long since realized that it is one thing to hail from the Lesser Sea, and quite another to own most of it. T'Pring's mother understood this first, of course, and bound her daughter to Stonn at the age of five. The early binding caused something of a scandal, but a substantial balance sheet does wonders in stemming gossip. This is as true on Vulcan as anywhere else.

Spock realizes that Stonn is still speaking.

"T'Pring has a cousin, she was bound as a girl, but her betrothed has decided to take religious vows. T'Pris is quite pleasant: educated, interesting, and she's well-traveled. She's also very beautiful, I know we're not supposed to care about that but—"

"Stonn, stop. " Spock has put his hands on his friend's face. "You know this cannot be."

"Why? " Stonn's voice is close to breaking.

"You say you know how it is, old friend, but you cannot. Your face is not typical, but an accident of coloring cannot change your bloodlines. Your mother's family can call ancestors back 5000 years, your father's even further. However successful I might become, however pure my father's bloodlines, I am tainted irrevocably in the eyes of any old family. My acceptance as a spouse would be a condescension, and I would never be allowed to forget that. Never. " Spock can feel the burning in his breast leaching up into his voice. He does not try to stop: Stonn has seen him naked, in all the ways it is possible to be naked. "I will not endure that. I cannot."

"Even for me, " Stonn whispers. His voice barely lifts at the end of the sentence. The softest, most tentative of questions.

Vulcan hearts do not break. Terran ones do not either, of course. It is a rather clumsy metaphor when one considers it. But if they did, this would be when Stonn's shatters. The moment Spock replies, in the only way he can reply: The answer to every query about his future on Vulcan, the truth which struck him like a bolt from the gods, as he stood in front of the High Council on the day of his acceptance to the Academy.

"No, I cannot. Even for you."

Stonn pulls away. He bows his head and closes his eyes a moment. When he opens them again, they are as dark as the waters of the Bay in winter. You don't see such a color in the Lesser Sea. You don't see a man like this, not often, on Vulcan or elsewhere. He is lovely in his resignation, fine features even more finely drawn from pain, the sculpted muscles of his back standing out as he holds it all in, his rage and grief. So beautiful in the moment of his breaking.
For a hundredth of a second, Spock wants to take everything back. He wants to give his friend whatever he desires. (Such an inelegant word, friend. There is no equivalent in Standard for what Stonn is to him.) But the impulse is soon gone. The resolution his father could not alter, Spock cannot allow Stonn to influence. There is more to life than friendship.

"I'm going home," Stonn says. He turns away from the window and goes to the closet where he stored his bags. "There's a shuttle leaving for Alpha Centauri's main base in 2.12 hours. I can find a connecting flight to Vulcan from there. Please call for transport." His voice is as calm as if he were asking a porter.

Spock merely nods, though Stonn was supposed to be staying for three more days. Perhaps it is better if they separate awhile. Once Stonn is home and has had time to meditate on the situation, perhaps he will come to understand.

When the cab arrives to take him to the spaceport, he turns and gives Spock a formal salute. "Live long and prosper," he says. His voice is still blankly calm, but his expression is not so cold. Perhaps he will understand, Spock thinks then. Stonn must: He is the only friend Spock has, in all possible connotations of that word.

Two weeks later, a dozen of his messages unanswered, and Spock was the one who understood. When Stonn told him to live long and prosper, he was really saying something else. The same thing Spock was saying to the High Council on the day of his acceptance to the Academy. A simple sentiment, easy enough to render in Standard or any other language:

Goodbye.
iv. Spock

One of many erroneous beliefs about Vulcan culture is that the drinking of liquor is prohibited. They have done little to correct the error: Vulcans find most Earth vintages unpleasant, at best. While an outright lie is distasteful, the occasional omission for politeness' sake is within bounds. Better the Terrans think them abstemious than supercilious.

In truth, liquor is appreciated on Vulcan in the same way as cuisine: a product of careful training and sustained effort, to be savored in good company. Drunkenness is frowned upon for the same reason gluttony would be, as a sign of imbalance and self-indulgence. Like many tenets of cthia, however, what is praised and what is practiced are sometimes not the same. Which is a rather complex way of saying that after he rose from his meditation mat, Spock decided to get drunk.

There was a rational reason for it: The liquor would help him sleep. But he knew that this was false logic. He should be not drinking but meditating, sorting out his tangled feelings. Another erroneous Terran belief, that Vulcans do not experience emotions. The error resulted from a bad translation in the first Vulcan-Terran dictionary. A'rie'menu does not mean 'lack of emotion' but 'mastery of the passions.' Only through a'rie'menu can one achieve tvi-sochya, true inner peace. Peace cannot be achieved until one has confronted one's feelings on a matter, examined them, worked through them. Mourning Stonn would be admitting that he must be mourned, that their friendship was irreparably broken. Spock would not admit that, not today. Perhaps not ever.

Alcohol was easy enough to obtain, on campus and off, but not the kind Spock desired. Vulcan did not export much liquor; Off-planet, native brews were expensive and rare. On the whole of Terra, there were perhaps a dozen venues that carried them. Spock was fortunate in this instance: Two were in San Francisco.

One was the restaurant near the Vulcan embassy, which prided itself upon authentic cuisine and atmosphere and charged quite dearly for both. Its very authenticity made it impractical in this case. One could not walk into Charis, ask for a bottle of k'vass or sise-masu, and walk back out again. Such behavior was sure to be marked upon by the establishment's high-status diplomatic clientele. Word of it would inevitably reach Sarek, who would then feel the need to write Spock a letter. Sarek's letters were not at all like Amanda's, and not only because they were not written in Standard. Worse, Sarek might feel the need to come here. Spock could not face a paternal visit at present: There was not enough k'vass on the planet.

Billy's it was, then. The atmosphere was somewhat vulgar, though in its own way authentic, if one appreciated late-Twentieth Century kitsch. Spock did not, but he did not have to stay. Billy stocked Vulcan liquor for the same reason he had bought that huge Homer Simpson statue: He delighted in the rare and esoteric. He did not care why it was rare so long as it was, which is why he was so fond of Spock. Spock found Billy's sehlat-like attentions wearisome, but if it meant the barkeep would give a good price on the liquor, Spock would endure.

As he opened the door to his quarters, he glanced back over his shoulder as he always did, to be sure he hadn't left any disorder behind. His eye fell upon the meditation mat, and he hesitated. Then his gaze drifted to the window. It was night now, no golden sun streaming in. No golden boy naked in the light. Indeed, one could hear thunder in the distance; A storm was approaching.

But for a moment, it was as if the light had returned. Spock saw Stonn so clearly, as if he could cross the room in an instant and touch that fair, sun-warmed flesh. The image suddenly blurred; Spock
blinking and Stonn was gone.

Perhaps he would ask Billy for two bottles of *k'vass*.

Spock made it to the bar just ahead of the deluge. The place was quiet, even given the weather, but most of the cadets who made up Billy's primary clientele did have early classes tomorrow. Spock sat down at the far end of the bar by the statue of Homer Simpson. (The big yellow man bore a more than passing resemblance to A'sha'naath, the Vulcan god of prosperity. According to Sarek, it had become a minor diplomatic incident twenty years ago, when a cadre of Vulcan priests visiting Terra happened to see an episode of the vintage cartoon on Nostalgia Net. Spock considered this proof that the universe had a sense of humor, even if the High Council did not.)

Billy set down the shot glass he was wiping. His face—round, pale, and pitted as the surface of the Terran moon—broke into a grin. "Spock! Ain't seen you in a coon's age! Where you been hiding yourself?"

Spock had to bite back a reply to the effect that he was not in the habit of hiding anywhere. Vulcan speech was often metaphorical but rarely hyperbolic, and it was sometimes difficult to make allowance. Especially when confronted with Billy's particular dialect of Standard, which took figurative language to the level of grotesque.

"My schedule is quite challenging," he said. "Among other things, Dr. Smith was forced to return home on urgent business, and I'm the only other instructor qualified to teach Temporal Mechanics. I'm covering his class."

Billy's face creased sympathetically. "You never can trust a damn Irishman."

Spock would point out that John Smith claimed to be from Glasgow, though he wasn't certain the man was speaking the truth. Spock wasn't even sure that Smith was a man, not by Terran standards. No human should be able to calculate fluctuations in the gravitational fields of black holes to the seven-thousandth decimal point so quickly and accurately. Yes, there was something odd about the Doctor. Very odd.

In any event, the distinction between Scottish and Irish would have been lost on Billy, who once asked Nyota if she ever missed living near the pyramids.

"What can I do you for?" Billy asked. "Guinness Extra Stout?" This was one of the few Earth brews Spock found drinkable.

"No, thank you. Do you have a bottle of *k'vass* in stock?"

Billy whistled. "Dang, he ain't messin' around tonight! Sure, I still got a bottle or two. Have to dig it out of the back, though. Not much call for it, y'know? Couldn't resist when the distributor offered—gave me a damn good deal. Nobody's asked for none since the fellas over at Charis ran out before some la-di-da banquet. That manager of theirs, what's his name, Shath? Got a stick up his ass the size of a Louisville Slugger. *Didn't* I charge that pointy-eared bastard an arm and a—" he stopped, clearing his throat.

Spock pressed his lips together to keep from smiling. Shath, owner and manager of Charis, was pompous even by Vulcan standards.

"Um, lemme go see." Billy made a quick exit through the side door that led to the storage room.

"Wow," a voice said. "I didn't know Billy-boy could move that fast."
Spock pivoted on his bar stool. For a moment, he was sure he must have fallen asleep on his meditation mat, and that this was all a dream.

Stonn was standing behind him.

Spock blinked, and the vision resolved itself. It wasn't Stonn, of course. A sign of how out of balance Spock was, that he had thought so even for a moment. A further sign of disequilibrium, that Spock had to stifle a scowl when he realized the man's true identity. No, not Stonn: The hair was two shades too dark, the nose not blade-fine but pugnaciously blunt, the ears rounded instead of sculpted to graceful points. True, the skin tone of the two men was similarly fair. Their shoulders were equally broad, torsos muscular and leading to a narrow waist, slim hips, and sturdy legs. Their eyes were almost startlingly alike, large and long-lashed and the same brilliant shade of blue. But Stonn was nothing like this one. Not at all.

Spock had always maintained an attitude of strict objectivity towards his students. (Nyota did not factor. Their companionship had not begun until two terms after she completed his class.) But this student had been a trial the entire semester: Sitting in the front row, he stared at you with his distractingly blue eyes. Making noise, making friends, asking foolish questions and giving foolish answers, with every breath and gesture he called attention to himself. It was exhausting. A few times he had even invaded Spock's office with his nonsense. Intolerable.

"Has my face gone green or something?" Jim Kirk asked, flushing a little at the scrutiny. A poor choice of reactions, for the redness in his cheeks (not green, it should be green) only added to Spock's irritation. He turned back to the bar without reply. He did not trust himself to speak.

Jim Kirk failed to take the broad hint that Spock did not want company. He sat down on a bar stool to Spock's immediate left. He picked up a napkin from the dispenser and mopped at his face. "Whew! It's really coming down out there."

Spock had never understood the Terran need to state the obvious. He had once theorized that if their mouths stopped moving, their brains started working, a state of awareness they could not abide. Then he began keeping company with Nyota and decided he had been too hard on the species. But there was still an awful lot about them he did not understand.

"So," Jim tried again, "how you been, Spock?"

He did not want to reply, but to ignore basic social niceties—even from such a one as Jim Kirk—would be irrationally rude.

"I'm—well," he managed.

A quick searching gaze swept him up and down. "You look good."

"Indeed," Spock said. "I have made no alteration to my appearance."


Spock had been on Terra long enough to know when a human was attempting flirtation. He once watched this human seduce Achebe Chang with barely a blink of his long lashes (Che had been a very competent teaching assistant, pity he couldn't control himself). Spock knew what Kirk was attempting to do, but why was he doing it? A grade change request seemed unlikely at this point.

"You look good," Kirk repeated, "a little stressed, maybe?" Blue eyes crinkled sympathetically. "You should get out more. Live a little." He brushed his fingers over Spock's wrist. The touch was light and cool, but something pulsed beneath it, burned. Spock flinched like it actually hurt, and
wondered what Kirk's Psi-rating was. Empathic aptitude would explain much: Perhaps Che had not been so much to blame, after all.

Kirk did not look offended. "See?" he said. "You're totally stressed out. Why don't we—"

"Jimmy Kirk, you slimy mick! How dare you show your face in here?"

Billy stood on the threshold of the side door, arms crossed over his chest. In one hand was a dusty bottle with a familiar pale green liquid inside. Spock stared at it. Kirk stared at Billy, confused. "I don't—"

"Mandy's done quit because of you! What you got to say for yourself?"

Kirk gave Billy a guilty little grin. "Which one's Mandy again?"

"**Madonna**, Jimmy. The one with all the crosses and her tits hanging out?"

"Oh. You know, that outfit was totally anachron—"

"Fuck off! You ain't got the morals of a goddamn dog. I should ban your ass, but I think half the other cadets come here just to stare at it." Billy shook his head. "I'm gonna be hustling drinks all next week because of you."

"I'm sorry. Really. I didn't think—"

"You never think, that's your fucking problem. But I'm warning you, my randy Irish laddy." Billy's eyes cut to a poster of a big brown woman with buoyant blonde hair hung behind the bar. "Mess with Buffy or Xena, and I'm gonna saw your dick off and nail it up next to RuPaul."

"It won't happen again," Jim said. "Sorry, Billy. **Really.**" He gave the barkeep a melting look.

"Hmmph!" Billy said. "Better not." But he looked mollified. Too mollified, given the situation. Spock would have liked to put a hand on Kirk's neck. Better yet, a Mesmer dial, the device that measures empathic activity. The device would be clicking like a Geiger counter on a leaky warp nacelle, Spock was certain.

Fascinating, but it was none of his affair. He looked inquiringly at Billy.

"Yeah, here's your **k'vass**, Spock," Billy said. "I gotta charge you a hundred credits, know that sounds steep but it's not much more than I paid for it."

"That's very reasonable. Thank you." Spock took a data solid out of his pocket and laid it on the bar. Billy scanned it and gave it back, then handed Spock the bottle. He rose, but as he did thunder boomed and the lights flickered, the music from the jukebox skipping a measure.

"You probably oughta stick around," Billy said to him. "While I was in storage, I heard on the nets that lightning hit a power cell over on Bay Street. Transport is gonna be down awhile." He set a shot glass on the bar and winked. "Crack your bottle. I won't tell."

A small knot of customers came in, shaking off raindrops. "'Scuse me, fellas," Billy said. He looked at Kirk. "I'd tell you to behave yourself, Jimmy-boy, but I know Spock can handle the likes of you." He walked to the other end of the bar to greet his new arrivals.

Spock stared at the bottle of **k'vass** a moment, considering. Then he split open the heavy wax seal and poured a measure into the shot glass. The sweet-acid smell made his nostrils flare, but not with
displeasure: It was associated with too many pleasant memories. The first time he had ever been drunk was on a bottle borrowed from his father's cellar. He and Stonn walked out into the desert, night close around them, the fiery pitted face of the moon shining down like a scarred goddess. She was a goddess in olden times; Terrans associated her with their own lady of the fire, Charis. To the Vulcans she was T'Khut, The Watcher, She Who Sees All. But what she saw Spock and Stonn do that night, two boys alone together on the dark sands, she never told.

"What is that stuff?"

Spock blinked and returned from far away. "K'vass."

"Can I have some?"

Spock wondered if Kirk knew of the old Vulcan custom of offering k'vass to new acquaintances. The height of rudeness to refuse, tantamount to refusing friendship. But to accede was to agree to certain civilities. Spock glanced at his companion's fair, eager face. Doubtful: Jim Kirk was just presumptuous. Stifling a sigh, he pushed the shot glass over to Kirk.

With a quick, neat movement, Kirk swallowed the shot. "Mmmm. Interes—"

He turned bright red. He began to cough loudly. Still coughing, he pounded his chest. Spock pressed his lips together: Kirk had asked for it.

Kirk tried to speak and coughed again. He swallowed and finally choked out—"What is that?"

"K'vass," Spock repeated slowly, as if speaking to a child.

"It's fucking brutal. I didn't know Vulcans made rotgut."

"Rotgut?"

"Moonshine. White lightning. Fucking paint thinner."

Spock frowned at him. "K'vass would never be used for industrial purposes. This particular vintage comes from the finest—"

"Bullshit. Somebody cooked that up in a bathtub in West Virginia."

"I wouldn't expect a Terran palate to appreciate it," Spock said stiffly.

"What does that mean?"

"Your own liquors are terribly—" Spock paused "—feeble."

"If you mean not likely to cause blindness and dementia like that shit, yeah. How the hell do they sell it? Nobody could—" Kirk broke off as Spock snatched the glass, poured a shot, and swallowed. The stuff burned his throat in its old, bracing way. He had another. And one more.

He set the glass down and raised an eyebrow at Kirk.

"Fuck," Kirk said. Then he grinned. "Didn't know you had it in you, Spock."

"Pity you don't have it in you," Spock said, and realized how rude it sounded. Perhaps that third shot had been a bad idea.

Kirk took the shot glass back and filled it. He hesitated for a half-second (Spock was finding the
calculation of decimal places rather difficult at present), then he swallowed. He flushed and did not
cough this time, but his eyes had gone as red as his face.

"What's it made of?" he rasped.

"Qir'laa, a root vegetable native to our colder climes."

"Vulcan vodka. I love it." Kirk peered at the bottle. "Do you ever mix it with anything?"

"K'vass and the juice of the ribatha is quite popular. That's a fruit not unlike Terran citrus."

"Vulcan screwdrivers."

"We call them mah-vel eri A'sha'naath: Prosperity's hammers." In Vulcan mythology, the big
yellow god had been often been depicted with a stone mallet, which he used to smash those who
refused to thrive. Drinking too much kwass and ribatha was likely to leave one feeling smited.

and raised the glass. "Rathunas, sláinte, agus fad saol agat."

Spock quirked an eyebrow. "I'm unfamiliar with the phrase."

"My grandfather used to say it: Gaelic for 'prosperity, health and long life to you.' But you can
shorten it to 'Sláinte.'"

Spock supposed he couldn't argue with the sentiment.

Kirk downed the shot. He shuddered a bit but kept his composure. He adapted quickly, this one.
"What do Vulcans call doing three shots in a row? In Iowa we call it shotgunning."

"Rom iy alikaya."

"What?"

"A good start." Spock reached behind the bar and found another shot glass. He poured both glasses
full. 'Sláinte.'"
v. Kirk

All in all, the evening was turning out better than planned.

When Jim walked into Billy's, he'd been expecting a couple of Budweisers and maybe a blowjob from Madonna. The last thing he had ever anticipated was getting the serious cruise from Spock. A coincidence weird enough to make you believe in fate: Obviously, somebody up there wanted Jim Kirk to beat the Kobayashi Maru.

Sure, there had been something—odd—about the extended once-over Spock gave him. But Jim knew cruising when he saw it. He'd been seeing it since he was fifteen and lost the baby fat.

The shots had also been unexpected: The first one felt like somebody had set his tongue and his guts simultaneously on fire. Humiliating, watching Spock suck the stuff down like water. But now Jim knew his secret: The more k'vass you drank, the more drinking it got easier. Standing up had become harder; Jim found that out when he stumbled to the men's room halfway through the bottle. But now that his bladder was relieved, he had no intention of getting up. Not for that, anyway. Spock wasn't quite ready to go—a rookie mistake, Jim pushing so hard when they first sat down. But he'd still been flustered from Spock giving him the eye so shamelessly. Jim couldn't have been more shocked if the Homer Simpson statue had come to life and kissed him.

Speaking of Homer . . .

"So what you're saying to me," Jim said to Spock, "is that on Vulcan he's worshiped as a god?"

"That's your trouble, Kirk: You don't listen," Spock replied, in the exact same snotty tone he'd always used to answer Jim's questions in class. But the empty shot glass in his fingers and the half-eaten plate of jalapeño poppers at his elbow rather spoiled the professorial effect. "I said that one of the Vulcan gods is rather like Homer Simpson."

Jim smirked. "The god of doughnuts?"

Spock had another shot before replying. "Prosperity," he said, rather indistinctly. "Prosper or he'll smite you." Hands trembling a bit, Spock measured out a yard-long space with his hands. "We have very big hammers on Vulcan."

That sparked a mental image in Jim's brain that had him coughing as hard as his first shot of k'vass. Jesus, this shit made him horny. Of course, in certain moods the RuPaul poster could make Jim horny, but that was beside the point. He needed another shot.

He took it. Jim beat his chest against the burning sensation and grinned. "You know what they say: It's not the size of a man's tool, it's how he uses it." He tilted his head at his companion. "Is there a Vulcan god of love?"

Spock nodded. "Sitaan, though he embodies only the carnal aspects. T'Lyn is the goddess of marriage and fertility."

"Let's stick with Sitaan. What's he like to do for fun?"

"Mostly he goes on quests with his twin brother Kitaan, God of War. In some of the oldest stories they are two aspects of the same being, but by the time the mythos becomes developed, they are..."
distinct personages. They are almost always together in the tales. Lust and Battle: They cannot be separated."

"Huh. I never knew Vulcans were pantho—polthie—" fuck, this shit made him mushmouthed "— lots of gods. You know."

"We no longer take the mythology literally, of course. The gods embody various aspects of our consciousness: Diverse attitudes and behaviors, though some of them are outdated."

"Like war. You're pacifists now."

"Yes. But Kitaan still serves a useful purpose. He is a reminder of the past, a warning of what could happen if we lose our way, forget logic and embrace the old, dangerous passions."

Jim leaned closer. "What about lust?"

Spock blinked at him. The whites of his eyes had taken on a greenish tinge after the sixth or seventh shot. Still, very nice eyes, when they weren't glaring at you like you were shit on his shoe. An interesting face—all angles and planes, like looking at a carving of an old stone god. Not Asha-whatsis, something serious. Fascinating. Jim used to catch himself staring at Spock's face in class, his attention captured by all that fierce Geometry. He missed half the lectures that way, he'd have totally blown the final if Che hadn't given him notes. Wrong of the Academy to hire such a hot instructor—totally distracting. Che said John Smith was worse, but Jim didn't believe it.

Spock hadn't answered. Jim leaned closer. "How about it, Spock? Is every passion dangerous?"

He nodded slowly. Jim reached out, brushing Spock's knee lightly enough that the touch could almost be accidental. "But why? Without lust, your race would die out."

"Your conclusion is—" Spock faltered as Jim's fingers brushed him again, a little higher up this time. "specious. Lust is not required for procreation."

"Lots of things aren't required. K'vass isn't required, not like good old-fashioned H2O. But we haven't been doing shots of mineral water."

Spock didn't answer right away. When he did, his voice was lower. Close as Jim was, he had to strain to hear the words.

"These are strange circumstances." Spock's lips pressed together like he was trying to keep them from trembling. Kirk saw it again, that terrible tension. It wasn't just flirtation, when he said Spock looked stressed out. If the man got wound any tighter, he was going to snap in half.

Kirk put his other hand on Spock's wrist. He knew Vulcan body temperature was higher than Terran, but he didn't realize how high. Spock felt like he was running a dangerous fever.

"You need to relax," Jim said. "Let me help you." The words were supposed to sound sexy, but somehow they came out sincere.

Spock looked at him with his green-veined gaze. "Why would you do that?"

"I don't know." He really didn't. He didn't know much right now, thanks to the shots. All he knew, though he didn't know how he did, was that Spock was in pain. Jim could feel it coming off of him, sharp and acrid as k'vass. He felt something else, too, as Spock's eyes bore into him.

Maybe war was outdated on Vulcan, but lust was not.
"Come home with me," Jim said softly.

Later, he would realize it only took Spock a second to decide, but at that point it seemed to take forever. One of those strange elastic moments that happens when you're a little too drunk and the music is a little too loud (Blind Melon's "No Rain"—Billy's Jukebox of Irony strikes again), when it's getting late and all you want to do is lose yourself in a warm body. This warm body.

"No."

He stared at Spock a minute. He was too stunned to feel rejected. Even Jim Kirk struck out sometimes, but never this far into the game. Not when he knew he'd been batting a thousand.

"Why?" he asked.

Spock drew back his hand. "Because," he said. "I'm not a barmaid."

Maybe it was the k'vass, maybe it was him. For once in Jim's life, he had no snappy comeback.

Spock stood up, straightening his tunic. He regarded the nearly empty bottle and pushed it away. "You may have what's left," he said. "Good night, Cadet Kirk."

Spock was moving less precisely than usual, his movements languid, almost loose. But apart from that and the green-tinged eyes, you'd never have guessed he was drunk. He didn't seem affected at all by what had happened tonight. He headed to the door without looking back. The bell hung over the old-fashioned wood entrance gave a sad, disappointed little jingle as he left.

And that would have been it for them (and, as became clear later, many other things as well), if at this exact moment Jim hadn't gotten punched in the face.

The blow was so brutal and unexpected that for a second, all he could do was see stars. He sank to his knees, gasping. When his vision cleared a bit, he looked up into small, furious brown eyes. They were the only small thing about his opponent: The rest of him was huge, hulking. Familiar.

"Hey, Cupcake," Jim rasped. "What's up?"

A savage kick to his solar plexus. "Fuck you, Kirk. You fucked my girlfriend."

Another kick, from a slightly different angle. "You fucked my boyfriend," another voice said. Jim didn't know this guy, though he looked enough like Cupcake to be his brother. Jim didn't give a shit either way. He couldn't even place the girlfriend and boyfriend in question: It had been a busy semester.

"Are you two dating now?" Jim asked. '"Cause I don't want to fuck either of you."

Cupcake's foot went for him again, but Jim had his breath back. He caught an ankle and flipped his opponent backwards, sending him crashing into the bar railing. But Cupcake's buddy was right there to pick up the slack, raining blows into Jim's chest and stomach. Christ, what kind of martial arts voodoo were they teaching Security cadets these days? But Jim had been in plenty of bar fights and was fending him off—even landing a few punches—until Cupcake recovered and grabbed Jim from behind.

Hard to fight one attacker when the other is cutting off your air supply. Jim twisted in that iron grip and tried to spin around, but Cupcake's buddy kept hitting and kicking like he'd grown extra arms and legs. Half a bottle of k'vass didn't help either: Jim's equilibrium was all screwed up. His vision began to darken, his body one giant arc of fire. The world had gone strangely silent as the blows kept
landing in slow, brutal motion. The only thing Jim could hear was more ironic commentary blaring from the jukebox: *I get knocked down, but I get up again/You're never gonna keep me down/I get knocked down, but I get up again...*

Cupcake let him go, but by that time Jim was past fighting back. He had just enough focus left to be wondering where the hell Billy was, when he looked up from his position on the floor and saw Cupcake looming over him. Clutched in one big fist was the *k'vass* bottle.

"Do it, Roger," his buddy said. "Fucking do it."

"This is for Mandy," Cupcake/Roger growled. 


Roger raised the blunt instrument high above his head and Jim closed his eyes, ready for the final blow. Maybe The Final One: the glass of the Vulcan liquor bottle was easily thick enough to shatter his skull, especially with so much power behind it. Sixth Grade Physics: Force equals mass times acceleration. Jim wondered if he would die with \( F = ma \) dancing before his eyes.

An earsplitting screech. Jim opened his eyes, amazed to realize the sound didn't come from him.

Roger's arm was twisted behind him at an unnatural angle. Behind that was Spock.

"Drop the bottle," he said. "Now."

The bottle fell from Roger's fingers, but Spock didn't let go. Indeed, he gave Roger's arm a nasty little twist that made his prisoner turn a sickly white.

"This isn't your business, Spock," Roger's buddy snorted. "Anyway, Kirk was asking for it." Jim heard the keening edge in that gravelly voice and realized his attackers were blind drunk at the very least. Maybe stoned on something more bracing: Speed abuse ran rampant in Security track, no matter how carefully Admin tried to test for it. Martian meth was particularly popular.

"Cadet Nelson, cuckoldry has not been a legal excuse for murder since the Nineteenth Century. In any event, the laws never applied to same-sex relationships. But considering your test scores, I am not surprised such fine distinctions were lost upon you." Spock raised an eyebrow at him. "Small wonder Cadet Sanchez went searching for more—stimulating—company."

Nelson went red and launched himself at Spock. Spock pushed Roger away and landed a single vicious blow to Nelson's throat. The man dropped like a stone, gagging.

Roger took the distraction in Spock's attention as an opportunity to make his own try for the Vulcan, but Spock spun around—Jesus, he was fast—and backhanded the cadet hard enough to send him flying into Homer Simpson. The reaction was so dramatic that it looked like a wire trick out of an old-fashioned action film, except for being totally real. Sure it was: Vulcan's gravity was twice that of Earth's. How much pressure was Spock used to handling?

Roger's head cracked against Homer's concrete stomach with so much force that the cadet was instantly knocked unconscious. \( F = ma \), Jim thought, and felt weirdly like laughing.

Nelson half-rose, but Spock put a booted foot on his throat. "I wouldn't do that," he said. His voice was calm as ever, but there was a note in it that made all the hairs on Jim's neck stand up.

The few other customers who'd been in the bar had made a hasty exit when the fight started. For a minute, the only sound was the end of that weird old song: *pissing the night away, pissing the night...*
"What the fuck is this?" Billy screeched, entering through the swinging side door. "I can't shift a few boxes of Bud without it turning into Bedlam out here?" He glanced at the statue's round blue belly and frowned. "Homie's got a chip in him. Dammit, Spock, I'll never match the paint!"

"My apologies," Spock said, acidly polite. "I thought a murder in your place of business would be more inconvenient than damaged bric-a-brac."

Billy seemed to notice all the prone bodies for the first time. His eyes flicked to Jim and Cadet Nelson, then lingered on Cupcake. "What's Roger done now?"

"Before I interrupted him, he was going to cave in Cadet Kirk's skull with the k'vass bottle."

Billy's white face went whiter. "You okay, Jimmy?" he said. Jim managed a nod, and Billy let out a breath. "Good, good." He sighed. "Look, I'd appreciate it if you boys would forget about this. Roger is an asshole, but he is my nephew. He winds up in the brig on my watch, and Sister Hillary will never let me hear the end of it." When Jim just stared at him: "He and Mandy were going together for two years. He was going to ask her to marry him, laddy. She got one taste of you, and it was all over. You and your dick have some blame to bear in this situation."

Wincing, Jim heaved himself to a sitting position. He ran fingers through his sweaty hair. "Fine. But he'd better stay the fuck away from me."

"Oh, he will," Billy said, with a dark look at his still-unconscious nephew, "and his little dog too." Billy looked at Cadet Nelson, then at Spock. "You can quit mashing Bubba with your Doc Marten any time, son."

Spock drew his foot back reluctantly. "I should report this to the Military Police."

"Sure, you should. But maybe Starfleet has enough on its plate right now, with all that ruckus in the Laurentian System. Maybe you could let this go." He gave Spock a sly look. "And maybe I've got another six bottles of k'vass that will mysteriously find their way to your front door."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Are you attempting to bribe a Starfleet officer, William?"

Billy held both hands up, brown eyes round. "Me? Break General Order 86.4? Never. Think of it as a thank you for your understanding. Ever had your heart broken, Spock?" He placed a hand over his own. "It'll make you do some screwed-up shit."

Spock pressed his lips together. He let out a slow breath through his nostrils. "Very well."

"Wonderful," Billy said, with a grin as wide and charming as a certain long-dead President's. "Now why don't you fellas get the hell out of here? I'll clean up the mess." He jerked his chin towards the door. "Go on, get."

Jim was having trouble getting to a standing position—there was a stabbing pain in his right lung every time he tried—and Spock eventually grabbed his wrist and with barely a tug jerked him to his feet. He kept a hand on the back of Jim's neck to steady him (at least, it's what Jim thought at the time. Later he thought better). Spock started leading him towards the front door of the bar.

"Careful with him, Spock," Billy called after them. "He's only human." Jim was still a little too dazed to parse what the hell that meant. He hoped Spock wasn't going to beat him up next—the Vulcan's body was still stiff, practically sweating tension as he shoved the door open so hard the bell shrieked. He led them out into the street.
The rain had lessened to a light, cold mist. Spock hesitated momentarily, drawing the neck of his tunic tighter with his free hand. The cold blue light from the street lamp threw the sharp bones of his face into high relief, made the tense lines of his clenched jaw even tenser. He looked like a character from a Nostalgia at Night drama—not the sexy kind, the scary kind. Well, maybe a little sexy.

"How did you know?" Jim asked quietly.

"I heard them." From a good fifty feet away and inside a building. Jesus, Vulcans were strange. Of course, Jim had already heard all about their superpowers—everybody had. So maybe it was just Spock's expression that was freaking him out. His hot, grabby hand was still on Jim's neck.

Jim pulled away. "Well—thanks," he said. A little slowly and painfully, he turned and started heading down the sidewalk. After midnight on Sunday, the monorail was closed, even assuming it had ever been working again after the storm. Maybe they could share a cab, if they could find one. Jim would share a cab, anyway, if Spock would stop with the creepy vampire vibes.

Spock said nothing. He began walking faster. One hand to his aching side, Jim tried to keep up. They passed the alley next to the building that housed Billy's. Jim felt a strange sticky wetness on his face. He passed a hand over his mouth and realized it was bleeding. One of the Security goons' blows must have split his lip. He dug in his pocket for a tissue. "Wait."

Spock stopped abruptly. He stared at Jim, eyes intent on Jim's mouth. Suddenly, Jim was being pulled into the alley by another inexorable grip on his neck. Spock backed him up against the rough brick wall. He ran a slow, hot hand down Jim's cheek. With one finger, he wiped a drop of blood away from Jim's lips, the fluid dark in the uncertain light. The alley was covered by the overhang of the roof, so it was drier here, warmer. But Jim was still shivering. From the rain.

"They almost killed you," Spock said. His words were cool but his touch was burning, burning.

"Nah," Jim managed. "I take a licking and keep on ticking." He'd heard that phrase on one of the Nostalgia Net commercials the other day and liked the sound of it. Bones had laughed when he used it, but Spock's face stayed stony.

"I detest bullies," he said. His eyes were darker than the bricks of the alley wall.

Jim frowned at him. "Isn't that sort of an emotional respon—"

He cut off with a squeak as Spock's fever-hot lips closed over his own. Part of the sound was pain—his mouth did hurt like a bitch—mostly it was shock. But then Spock's tongue flickered over his split lip, warm, wet, and weirdly soothing, and Jim stopped feeling anything but want.

He grabbed Spock by the shoulders and pulled him closer. He ran his mouth over Spock's neck, alien flesh silky under his lips. The move hurt but that made it even better—Jim had always liked his pleasure mixed with a little pain. Maybe Spock sensed that somehow, because his teeth were in Jim's throat, fingers skating down sore ribs, greedily grasping at tender flesh. Jim gasped but didn't pull away. He wasn't sure he could have—the Vulcan's grip was like tempered plascrete, and Jim wasn't even close to recovered from the bar fight. He could feel his heart speeding up as another flood of adrenaline gushed into his veins. God, this was good. Scary as hell but so real. Real as driving a car right off a cliff, laughing as you went down, down. Speaking of down . . .

Spock's teeth were still tearing at Jim's neck while his fingers tore at Jim's belt. A couple of brutal twists and tugs, the sound of thick cotton stitches tearing with a pop, and Jim's jeans were down. In one swift, liquid movement, Spock went to his knees and swallowed Jim to the hilt. (Jim was already hard, of course. He had been hard since Spock put a hand on his neck. The first time he put a hand
on his neck.) Spock's mouth was so wet and hot, it was like being sucked off by someone with a fever. No, like being swallowed by fever itself, a fierce disease flooding all of his cells, setting every nerve in Jim's body on fire. So good, too good—there was too much sensation, he couldn't even tell the difference between pleasure and pain anymore. But it didn't stop—he didn't, those hot steely hands keeping Jim's hips in place while that hot sucking mouth took him over. Jim heard someone making low, needy, pleading sounds and realized that it was himself. But Spock didn't stop. Jim could feel the pressure building at the base of his spine, in the pit of his stomach, in the swell of his balls. A pulsing knot of pleasure threatening to explode, a red giant about to go supernova. He closed his eyes and thought of Physics equations, Cupcake's fists, Bones' disapproving stare, anything to get hold of this somehow, but just then one hot finger was shoved up Jim's ass. He screamed. The world collapsed in shockwaves.

When Earth resolved itself again, he was alone.

Jim stayed that way for a few minutes, breathing hard. Then he realized that his jeans were still down, and he pulled them up. He pulled his sweater down to hide the fact that the zipper of his jeans was twisted and broken. He could only imagine what he looked like: bloody and dirty, reeking of alcohol and spunk. No way in hell he was getting a cab now.

He pulled the collar of his jacket up. Hand at his side, he started the long hike back to his rooms.

It was past one by the time he made it home, but his roommate was waiting up. Jim didn't even have to say anything: Bones took one look at him and pulled him into the bathroom. "Take a shower," he commanded, heading for his own room. "You stink like the floor of a dive." Jim complied, and watched blood and dirt swirl down the drain. When he emerged, Len was back with his stuff. He kept a tricorder and other Twenty Third Century medical implements in an old-fashioned black doctor's bag. One of his roommate's many fun quirks, but as Jim wrapped a towel around his waist, he just wished Len would just hurry up and open the damn thing. The pain in his side had gone from stabbing to scorching.

"Besides the lip, you've got two broken ribs," Leonard said grimly, running his tricorder over Jim's torso. "Not to mention the bruises—whose man/woman/gender unspecified did you try to screw this time?" He pulled the sonic healer out of his bag and set it to HIGH.

"Nobody this time," Jim gasped. The sonic healer would knit the cut lip and broken bones almost instantly, but it itched like crazy. "Hey, did you know Madonna's real name was Mandy?"

"Yes," Leonard sighed. "Everybody knows that but you. Don't tell me she did this."

"Her ex. Guillermo Sanchez's too. Who knew he went in for rough trade?"

"Are you fucking kidding me? You picked him up at a Leather Ball." A final pulsing itch, and Jim's mouth and side felt normal. They were the only parts of him that did: Too damn much had happened tonight. He made a strange sound, half-hiccup, half-cry. Leonard looked at him, brows drawing together. He picked up the tricorder again. He looked at the readout and went still. It took him a moment to speak. "Tell me you got laid before you got stomped." When Jim didn't answer: "One of your lungs could have collapsed! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Jim looked away. Leonard swallowed so hard you could hear it. "Jim, they didn't—"

"You've been watching too many Oz re-runs on Nostalgia Net." Jim ran hands through his hair. "It was Spock."
"Spock," Leonard repeated flatly.  

"Uh-huh. We did shots at Billy's, but he left. Crabbe and Goyle came in and started kicking the shit out of me. Spock came back and kicked the shit out of them, and he was going to call the MP's but Billy offered him a bunch of Vulcan vodka not to. So he—Spock—pulled me outside and blew me in the alley, but then he left. Didn't even stay for a courtesy jerk-off. Weird, huh?"

Len held the tricorder up, shining its light into Jim's eyes. "Ow! What are you doing?" Jim said.  

"Checking for concussion. You've obviously got one, but the ER will want vitals—"  

"I'm not going to the goddamn Emergency Room. I don't have a concussion."

"Then you're drunk. Too drunk."

"I'm not—okay, I am. But not that drunk. Don't believe me? Set that thing to scan for non-human body fluids. Even after a shower, the tricorder will pick those up. Spock's saliva has to show up on my lower half—he practically sucked the damn thing off."

"If I find nothing, you'll come quietly?" When Jim nodded, Leonard hit another button and lowered the tricorder. He stared at the readout. He hit the button again, then stared again.  

"See?"

"Fuck me," Leonard said, his eyes so round he looked like a cartoon character—not Homer Simpson. Jim started to laugh. It was such a joke, when you thought about it—all of it. He laughed until the tears were running down his cheeks.

"What's so damn funny?"

"Fuck me, Bones," Jim said, swiping at his face. "I had so many plans. I had scenarios and schemes, I had scripts. I was gonna throw everything I had at the pointy-eared bastard. And all I had to do was get punched in the face!" Eyes still wet, he regarded his friend seriously. "He was right, you know: Lust and Battle, they go together. For Vulcans, anyway. We thought we didn't know a goddamn thing about their sexuality, but we were wrong. We know less than that. But I'm learning, Bones, I am learning. It's amazing. Like the scariest rollercoaster you've ever been on, with an orgasm at the end. Amaz—oww!" he flinched as a hypo went into his neck.

"That was a sedative. Get some sleep. We'll talk about this tomorrow." Without another word, Leonard grabbed his bag and left the bathroom. The door of his room slammed a second later.

Slowly, Jim rose. He was much better, but he was still sore as hell—Len hadn't done anything about the bruises. Probably to teach him a lesson or something. He yawned as the sedative hit his central nervous system. Sleep did sound great. He had to be up for that essay exam in less than six hours. Interspecies Ethics—he wondered if he could use this as an example. Only he wasn't sure Admiral Goldman would understand. Jim wasn't sure he did.

He was asleep before his head hit the pillow. He dreamed all night of rollercoasters and cliffs. Leaping over the edge without looking, falling down, down. Falling forever, but never having to hit the ground.
vi. Spock

This is what he'd been reduced to: Showing a movie in class.

The documentary was twenty years old, and Spock had already identified three factual errors in the first ten minutes. The cadets seemed content enough—pleased, even—to find their normal Monday morning quiz postponed until tomorrow. Spock was not pleased. It was a serious lapse in pedagogy, the sort of thing to which one of his more disorganized Terran colleagues would have resorted. But here was no helping it: For the first time since he was a small child, Spock had overslept. There was barely time to dress himself and make it to the auditorium, much less prepare twenty-five equations for Temporal Mechanics and a presentation besides.

He hadn't even reviewed Smith's lecture notes from last term. What there was of them: Half of the notes were in Greek, which Spock could just decipher, but the rest were charcoal sketches. Some of these were quite good—the ones of a striking blonde Terran female in particular—but not particularly helpful when preparing class. If it had been one of his regular courses, he could have managed something, but this branch of Physics was not his forte. The numbers weren't just imaginary, they were ludicrous. But Spock's whole existence felt ludicrous today. Discovering he was a figment of someone else's fevered imaginings (John Smith's, perhaps) would have felt like a blessing from A'asha'naath.

The three-dimensional images projected over the big auditorium flickered and danced, narration gibbering senselessly in the background. Spock set down his oversized carafe of green tea and put his fingers to his temples, sighing. Normally he would never have permitted such a display of weakness in front of his students, but the auditorium was dark. Seated behind the podium, he was hidden from curious stares. A pity he couldn't hide from himself. From certain memories, dancing in front of his vision more vividly than the movie. After the indulgences of last night he had slept heavily, but the images returned as soon as he woke, his mouth dry, his head pounding. However much he tried to meditate, remonstrate, they would not leave. All things considered, a high price to pay for a few hours of k'vass-soaked slumber.

Everything would have been well, if it had not been for the fight. He was so very satisfied with himself when he first left the bar. True, public drunkenness was a serious lapse in cthia, but this was the seedy side of San Francisco, not the great hall of the High Council. Nobody would have remembered or cared, not even Spock. What he had cared about was resisting the temptation of Jim Kirk, with his wicked eyes and curious fingers. When Spock rose from that bar stool and left the cadet gaping foolishly after him, he felt victorious. Lust had been defeated, Logic had won. Clearly, the old gods had noted Spock's hubris and decided to punish him. That they were now metaphoric did not mean they were not still powerful, in their way. As in the old stories, Sitaan had called upon brother Kitaan, Lust and Battle joining forces and laying waste to all who dared challenge them.

This morning, Spock felt well and truly wasted.

"Commander?" a soft voice said near his ear. Spock looked up and saw Aquinnah, his new teaching assistant, her dark eyes intent as always. "I believe the projector is malfunctioning."

Spock glanced at the ceiling and saw that the film had frozen upon a rather disturbing image: a black hole, swirling above their heads like a huge, hungry mouth. The next image in the film, a dull yellow desert planet not unlike Vulcan, was part of the malfunction. It appeared, flickered, and disappeared within the black hole again and again, caught in an endless loop of destruction.
If Quinn saw anything unusual in his posture or speech, she did not show it. Near-perfect control of her own countenance was one of the reasons he had hired her. A flawless GPA and test scores were the others. The fact that she was a (rumored) lover of women and therefore immune to the blandishments of certain cadets had not been a factor. It had not, however, hurt.

Spock stood and leaned over the console next to the podium, where the projector controls were installed. The system had been antiquated and capricious before last year, when Smith ripped it apart and made certain modifications. The display now sparkled and crackled with the Doctor's circuitry, but the capriciousness remained, manifesting at the most random times. This was one of them: The projector held on to the black hole image with a near-sentient stubbornness. (Che once declared that the system was psychic. It had, he said, frozen upon a striking image of a red supergiant for a day before RW Cephei went supernova last winter. His superstitious leanings had not gotten him fired. They had not, however, helped.)

Spock poked at the surface of the touchscreen and issued commands, to no avail. Above his head, Vulcan—or something like—appeared and disappeared over and over, three dimensional disaster repeating endlessly. Enough to cause a migraine, if Spock weren't already suffering one.

He gave the touchscreen a particularly violent poke, and the system screeched and shocked him. Spock stared at it, not sure if this wild tingling in his extremities was from electricity or rage. He saw it then, his fist coming down upon the fragile glass of the touchscreen, shattering the mulish machine into a million shining pieces. It would hurt, oh yes it would, worse than the shock. But it would also feel good, as good as Kirk's smooth flesh felt last night. Spock's fingers dug into his palms at the sense memory of that trembling body, wounded and willing under his hands. He should have taken the boy right then and there, slammed him into the filthy bricks again and again, the reek of red Terran blood sharp in the air. He should have, he should—

Dear gods, what was he thinking? Spock stood back from the console. He took a deep breath.

"Class dismissed," he announced.

The students stared at him in shock. Then they began scrambling for the door, as if afraid he would change his mind. Aquinnah held her place but appeared no less surprised. "Are you okay?" she asked, reaching out a hand. Then she seemed to think better of it and drew back. She tugged at one of her long, glossy black braids uncertainly. "You look pale, Commander."

If that's all he looked, he was fortunate. "I am unwell," he said. "Please post my other classes."

"Oh. Okay. Do you want me to let the departmental secretary know?"

"Yes. Stupid of me not to think of it."

"I could walk you to the Infirmary," Quinn suggested.

"I'm not going to the Infirmary."

As he walked out into the corridor, he realized that he had dismissed his assistant rather rudely. Yet another mistake on this week's tally. He hoped he could make it to his destination without further incident. Once there, his behavior would be carefully observed. The scrutiny was not personal: Everyone who braved those high walls was subject to it.

Across from the auditorium was one of the busier city thoroughfares. A monorail station was nearby, but he could not endure public transport this morning. He hailed a minicab. The vehicle slowed to a
stop. The android driver's neon-green eyes flashed in a friendly way.

"Destination please?" its metallic voice burbled.

"The Vulcan Embassy," Spock said. "Wait—no. One block from the Embassy." There was a side
street that led to the rear entrance, more discreet than going through the carved, elaborate front doors. He had small hope that his father wouldn't eventually find out about this visit, but perhaps exposure
could be staved off for a little while. Just a few days, until Spock could discover what the v'ratheren
tvok was wrong with him.

In Terran terms, T'Lyn was his great-great aunt: half-sister of T'Pau, Oldest Mother of his clan. A
relationship that would have accorded her his respect in any case, but this was not their only
connection. T'Lyn had been born barren, a sad irony given that she was named after the Vulcan
goddess of fertility. Her condition was such that even Vulcan medicine, traditional or modern, could
do nothing about it. Her parents encouraged her to take religious vows and she had, of a kind. For
more than a century, she had devoted herself utterly to her chosen science. On a planet long obsessed
with heredity, T'Lyn was its foremost authority on genetics. Three decades ago, when the
Ambassador to Earth and his wife had approached the Vulcan Science Academy with an
unprecedented request, it was T'Lyn who agreed that it could be granted. For two years she denied
herself food, sleep, and sunlight, creating a being whom most of her peers had declared impossible.
Amanda was his mother, T'Lyn was something else. She was his Creator, forger of Spock's divine
spark. His own personal Prometheus.

Seven years ago, soon after Spock declared his intention to enter Starfleet, T'Lyn made known her
own plans to retire. She was of a proper age for it, though the Academy had been surprised:
Everyone there expected her to literally drop dead over one of her sub-electron microscopes. Her
decision to relocate to Terra came as an even greater shock.

Of course, Vulcan retirement is not so much a cessation of work as a contraction of it. Retirees
generally focus on one aspect of their career which truly fascinates them, to the exclusion of other,
more tedious, duties. She had never expressed interest in general practice before, but T'Lyn decided
it was how she would spend her retirement, and on Terra, of all places. One of Vulcan's most
brilliant scientific minds was occupied in diagnosing chest colds and dispensing creams to combat
fungal infections, both maladies to which their people were prone on this cold, wet little planet. The
Embassy was glad to have her: It had a difficult time keeping competent doctors so far from the
comforts of home. Spock had his suspicions about her true motives for being here, but it would have
been impolite to question her. And having T'Lyn a ten-minute cab ride from his rooms was
convenient, to say the least.

He slipped through the side door to her infirmary on the Embassy grounds. The Embassy itself was a
Victorian mansion that had been transformed into a traditional Vulcan edifice on the inside, all muted
colors and spare lines. T'Lyn's domain, however, housed in what had once been the caretaker's
cottage, remained surprisingly authentic. A pretty little gingerbread house, smelling sweetly of the
vivid red roses T'Lyn tended herself. She was tending them when he arrived, a bag of the fertilizer he
had compounded in one of her hands. If she was surprised to see him, she did not show it. But T'Lyn
rarely betrayed surprise about anything. It's possible nothing did: The High Priestess had been
bitterly disappointed when T'Lyn eschewed religion for science. Those born with the Third Eye, the
ability to see beyond, to dream true, were rare.

He told her of his headaches of late, his poor appetite, his inability to sleep. He told her of his
increasing frustration with everyday trials. He did not tell her about Stonn: Not relevant. What
happened last night was not relevant, either. It was simply a result of these other, greater ills.
She led him through her sunny, chintz-festooned living room and into the examining chamber. Unlike the rest of the house, this room was dim, unadorned quiet. Instruments and diagnostic equipment were hidden behind recesses in the walls until needed. It resembled a meditation cell more than anything else, and perhaps that's why Spock always found it so relaxing. Safe.

She took his pulse and his temperature. She listened to his heart and his lungs. She took blood and urine samples and ran them through one of her machines. They cogitated a few moments and spit thin plastic printouts at her. She read them, tugging thoughtfully at one of her braids, which were even thicker and glossier than Aquinnah's, though streaked with white.

Spock had seen images of her when she was young: She was never as beautiful as T'Pau, short and round where her sister was tall and slender, features blunt instead of aquiline. She had just one striking feature: T'Lyn was the only other Vulcan Spock knew with blue eyes. Hers were even more unusual than Stonn's, for in their cerulean depths was a flicker of red. The mark of T'Khot, She Who Sees All, a sure and certain sign of the Third Eye. Not that T'Lyn ever used it, so far as Spock knew. He had heard her scoff openly at the notion of seeing beyond, dreaming true. Science was her one true faith, and she its High Priestess.

T'Lyn walked over to the replicator. "A liter of purified water," she said. The machine beeped dutifully and slid a glass bottle out on a little tray. She took it and handed it to Spock.

"Drink this," she said. When he looked uncertainly at the amount, she scowled at him. "You are as dehydrated as a day-old sehlat. That's where this morning's headache is coming from. If you will abuse yourself with k'vass, the least you can do is drink something healthful afterwards."

"I had green tea this morning."

"Which contains caffeine, another diuretic. You know that. Has that piss desiccated your brain?"

T'Lyn's Standard was not just fluent, it was colloquial. They had developed a habit of speaking it long ago, when they first came to Terra. Many of the employees at the Embassy were no more than passable in the language, and it was further protection from all those keen, prying ears. This far out on the grounds, it was doubtful they would be overheard. But as T'Lyn herself would say, better safe than sorry. She liked speaking Standard: A poetic speech, she called it, if not precise.

Spock took the bottle and began sipping it as much as his queasy stomach would allow. T'Lyn watched him as she always did: closely, as if he were still an occupant of her specimen dishes.

"What troubles thee?" The archaic construction was the nearest equivalent to the old High Vulcan maternal case. Amanda never used it with him: English was their special language.

"As I said, I am unwell. The headaches—"

"Don't trifle with me. I designed that brain of yours, I know when you're keeping something back. I cannot make an accurate diagnosis if you withhold data." T'Lyn's blunt features had grown sharper, hawkish with irritation. Usually she did not look much like T'Pau, but just now the resemblance was marked.

Spock tapped his fingers on the side of his water bottle, thinking. "Last night I had a troubling encounter with a Terran."

"Troubling?" she snapped. "Speak plain, boy."

Spock raised his chin and looked at her. "I had sexual congress with a Terran in an alley."
"Your companion? The brown girl. A pretty thing, if a bit skinny."

"No."

"Hmm." She tilted her head, eyes narrowed. "The one in the alley, was she of age?"

"He was."

She didn't turn a hair at the shift in pronouns. She knew him too well. "Were you careful?"

"No. But the contact was oral-genital only."

"Remind me to show you a picture of what a syphilitic infection of the throat looks like." She went to a recess and took out a hypo. "Hold still." A quick hiss and a flicker of pain, and the shot was done. "Aside from carelessness, I don't see a problem. What you did was not illegal." T'Lyn smiled a little. "The Terrans took the sodomy laws off the books two hundred years ago."

"My behavior was uncharacteristic. I am not in the habit of engaging in such sordid activities, especially with the likes of him. I wouldn't have, but there was a fight. They were going to hurt him—kill him, perhaps. I helped him as I would any cadet in need. But we left the bar, and he looked at me. His face was so—" Spock reached out, trying to grasp hold of a word that did not exist. "He was bruised and bloodied. They had hurt him badly. I should have called for medical attention. Instead I—" he stopped. "You know what I did. Then I left him stranded, alone. My conduct was shameful. I don't know why I did it." He bowed his head.

"Don't you?"

"Mother, if you know the answer, please tell me. Do not play games. I cannot bear it today."

"My son, the answer is simple. You would have come to it yourself if you weren't so blinded by shame and guilt. You experience headaches and muscle aches. You cannot sleep or eat, but your appetite for flesh, for \textit{blood}, is increasing. Do you not see what this is?"

Spock would have liked to think that the icy feeling in his stomach was the influx of cold water, but it was not. He stared at T'Lyn a moment. "No," he whispered. "You said—"

"I said it was uncertain. Not impossible, nor even unlikely. I will tell you what I told you five years ago: The fact that you haven't experienced \textit{pon farr} since you were sixteen doesn't mean you cannot experience it again. It simply meant that the timing was uncertain. Until now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She indicated the printouts. "Your temperature is .97 degrees above normal, respiration elevated by 8.71\%. Your male hormone levels are almost exactly twice what they were at your physical eight months ago. Considering the other symptoms, there is no logical alternative."

Spock put the bottle down. He folded his hands to keep them from shaking. "How long?"

"A month—two months, perhaps. No more than two. I would give a more precise estimate, but the Fever's cycle is capricious, your cycle in particular. We'll monitor your vitals day by day: When they reach the threshold point, we'll know. I can guarantee you seventy-two hours notice. You should marshal your leave time." T'Lyn paused. "You should also contact Stonn. He must know to be ready."

Spock clenched his fingers until the tendons ached. "That is not possible. We are estranged."
"This estrangement must be of recent date. You two were thick as thieves at the High Holidays."
When Spock said nothing: "If you spoke to Stonn, explained what is happening—"

"Beg him for help? Plead for his indulgence, like one of his tenant farmers? Never."

"Arrogance!" T'Lyn hissed. "Stiff-necked as Kitaan, like all the men in our clan." She sighed. "The women, too."
Spock could not bring himself to speak. He'd always considered one of the few advantages of his Terran heritage was partial release from the rigors of _pon farr_. He'd hoped for total release after his entrance into adulthood. For it to come now, when he was less prepared for it than at any time in the previous five years, seemed like the worst kind of cosmic joke.

"There are other options," T'Lyn said. "Vulcan has trained professionals who can help you. I'm sure we could find someone suitable."

"Such ones are little better than prostitutes."

"I hear Amanda talking. Your mother is a worthy woman, but when it comes to these matters, she lacks a certain breadth of mind. It is a perfectly acceptable alternative."

"I cannot. It would be a degradation."

"You are too proud. You will not go to Stonn, you will not see a professional. What are you to do?" T'Lyn sighed, considered. "Your girl. The rites would be taxing for a Terran, but she is young and strong. With proper training—what is her Psi rating?"

"Low normal. I tried a deep meld with her once. It did not work."

T'Lyn patted his shoulder comfortingly. "Well, you have some time to mull it over. Don't be too particular: Young, strong, empathically gifted and sexually appealing—not such a long list."

"Perhaps I should engage a Romulan whore. That would suit the stated requirements."

"Don't be insolent, boy. T'Pau can perch upon her mountain unbesmirched, but you and I live in a different clime." She glared at him so fiercely that he bowed his head, murmuring apologies.

"Stiff-necked!" she hissed.

Then her features softened. "You must take care of yourself. Rest, meditate, drink plenty of water. Limit your use of intoxicants. Exercise every day: It will help you bear the hormones. Do not go too long without seeing your companion. She cannot help you through the rites, but she can make the time leading up to them more tolerable."

"She is much engaged with her thesis."

"I'm sure you can sway her. You would not be Sarek's son if you could not." Seeing Spock stiffen at the name: "Your father will learn about this visit, though not from me. I would urge you to confide in him, but I know how matters lie between you. A pity, though I understand your grievances. His as well." When Spock said nothing, she nodded towards the door. "Go back to school. Teach your classes and compose a poem for your girl. But consider what I've said. You must find someone, here or on Vulcan. The Fever will not await your convenience."

Spock obeyed, but he paused with his hand on the door. "I will do as you instruct. The exercise and so forth. But I am not sure it will be sufficient to restore my equilibrium. A sedative—"
"No!" she snapped.

T'Lyn crossed the room, faster than he had seen her move in years. She put her hands on both sides of his face. Energy pulsed in her fingers, a low, soothing heat.

"Spock. I know you put a high value on your self-control, even for a Vulcan. I suppose it was wrong of me to criticize this pride in you, since I put it there. I will do everything in my power to see you through this safely. At sixteen you found your own solution, but there are others. We will find an answer to your difficulties, but drugging yourself to insensibility is not it. I will not prescribe anything, and you must promise not to obtain such medicines on your own. They've been known to have disastrous effects even upon normal systems during this time. For one such as yours—" she shook her head. She looked into his eyes. "Thou must promise," she repeated.

"I promise," he said. "But Mother, the dreams—"

"Many of us are troubled by strange dreams. Holes in space, shadows on the sun, enemies who are like us and yet unlike. Unimaginable things."

He stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"You are not the only one with troubled sleep. Lately, I have seen—" she stopped. "I don't know why I even mention it. These are nothing but the megrims of a silly old woman."

"You are not silly, nor are any dreams that T'Khut may send you. I heard T'Pau say once that you could have been the greatest of all the High Priestesses, if you had chosen that path."

"My sister says many things. Oldest Mother or no, it does not make them so." T'Lyn paused, pressing her lips together. "These are only dreams."

"Perhaps you should speak to T'Pau—"

"Go back to school, boy. Do not borrow troubles. Your own are plentiful enough."

T'Lyn shooed him out the door. But as she turned away he saw it again, flashing in the clear depths of her gaze. The Third Eye, red as the face of T'Khut herself, burning like a promise. Like a warning.
vii. Spock

Vulcan, Twelve Years Ago

It was the voices which first woke him. His father's, low and measured as always. His mother's, higher-pitched, cracking with a feeling she rarely showed in public. Human feeling. Now Spock lurks in the shadows outside his father's study, listening close.

"I'm telling you, Sarek, I won't have it!"

"My dear, you are becoming emotional."

"Yes! When you inform me you're sending our sixteen-year-old son to a prostitute, I become emotional."

"You mistook my meaning. A consoler is a trained professional. She will help Spock through this difficult time."

"By having sex with him. Because we pay her. Where I come from, that's a whore."

"We've no time to quibble over cultural differences. The school administrators were quite clear about the nature of Spock's outburst this morning. After they summoned me, I took him directly to the Academy. T'Lyn's assessment was thorough. She says we have three days at most."

"T'Lyn! I've seen how she is with Spock—the pride, the possessiveness. She isn't his mother. I'm saying no: We're not sending him to a consoler."

"What do you propose, then? If you had let him be bound—"

"Drag another teenager into this mess? That's no solution. Your granddaughter's experience proves it. I don't fancy becoming a grandparent just yet."

"What happened to Sherron is a rarity. We are careful."

"As careful as Spock's school? He could have hurt that boy."

"He did." Sarek takes a breath. "Do you understand the nature of Savok's injuries? Spock knocked him to the ground and mounted him from behind; He sank teeth into Savok's neck. If the instructor hadn't noticed and restrained him, the unthinkable could have happened."

"They shouldn't take the boys into the desert and push them to beat the hell out of each other."

"The physical arts have always been taught in this manner. There is nothing wrong with the school's method of instruction. The problem lies with Spock. He should have reported his symptoms to me months ago. I do not understand his reticence. It is irrational."

"There's nothing unusual in a young boy being bashful about sex."

"A Terran boy, perhaps. But a Vulcan—"

"Spock is half-Terran. Part-Terran, anyway; I have my doubts about T'Lyn's evenhandedness. You cannot assume our son will react like a pure-blooded Vulcan in every situation. Trust my instincts,
"Sarek. A consoler is not the answer."

"I ask again, what is?"

"A counselor, perhaps. More time in the Disciplines. There must be a sedative of some kind—"

"No. "Sarek does not exclaim—Vulcans do not—but his voice is forceful. "If such methods were effective, do you think my people would not already employ them? We do not relish the rigors of *pon farr,* but it is the way of things. There is one remedy for the Fever, and one only."

"He's just a child." Amanda's voice has become choked with tears.

"He is not. The very nature of his condition declares it so." Sarek pauses, and when he does his voice is softer. "My dear, please understand. No ordinary counselor can control this, no amount of meditation or medicine. Spock mates or he dies."

Amanda does break down then, in low, gasping sobs. Rustle of heavy robes as Sarek moves to her. He begins to speak again, murmuring comforting words to his wife, but their exact nature Spock does not hear. He flees down the corridor that leads away from his father's study. Of all the trials of the past twelve hours, this is the worst: He has made his mother cry.

His own eyes are wet, vision blurring. So much that he does not see the other figure in the dim hallway until he runs right into him.

"My friend. Are you—" concerned blue eyes dart over Spock's face "—well?"

Spock rears back, swiping at his cheeks. "What are you doing here, Stonn?"

"I heard voices. They seemed distressed."

Yet another embarrassment: Their houseguest overheard this most private of family disputes. When his father informed Spock four years ago that Stonn would be staying with them while he attended school, a favor to an old political ally of Sarek's, Spock was displeased for this reason: the loss of privacy. Home was the one place where he did not have to be on guard at all times against dark, spying, criticizing eyes. A constant guest, and a schoolmate at that, would be the worst sort of invasion. Stonn's eyes turned out to be neither dark nor critical, though they did seem endlessly interested in Spock. He pursued friendship with a single-mindedness Spock at first resented, then became almost awed by before succumbing to completely. But all this does not mean he wants Stonn observing him right now, bearing witness to his humiliation.

"So," Stonn says, gaze still close upon him, "your time has come."

Spock feels his cheeks burn. "Does everyone at school know?"

"I expect so. The episode was rather hard to miss." Stonn eyes narrow thoughtfully. "I don't know why you grow so green. Those of us who have been through it understand. Those who haven't will envy you: You're a man now."

"Savok does not envy me."

"Who cares what he thinks? His father is an accountant." Stonn's last word is seething with contempt. Five thousand years' worth, and that's just on his mother's side. He pauses, thinking. "Come," he says. "Walk with me. The desert air will be cool, and the moon is rising."

"I've had enough of the desert for one day."
"But now it is night. Come." He puts a friendly hand on Spock's neck. Spock looks at him.

"Do you not fear for your safety?"

"Why would I? I'm not Savok." Stonn smiles a little at the absurdity of anyone mistaking him for an accountant's son. "We will not go far." His smile increases a bit. "Anyway, no farther than you would like."

Spock sees his friend has a knapsack slung over one shoulder, and he hesitates. Stonn does this from time to time, growing weary of the pressures of urban existence and disappearing into the desert for a day or two. The first time it happened, Sarek and Amanda became worried and sent Stonn's father an urgent message. The gruff old landowner sent a terse reply: Leave him where he is. If the boy can't survive a few dozen miles of sand, I don't want him back. Stonn returned safe and sound of course, refreshed from his travels. For all their friendship, he's never invited Spock on one of his desert sojourns before. Another thing changing abruptly, unaccountably.

"Come," Stonn says, impatient. "We'll be back before sunrise. Your mother won't know."

For some reason, this persuades Spock. He follows Stonn down the hallway and out a side door.

Past Amanda's rose garden, through the vegetable fields, down a hill and over a low stone fence, and suddenly, they are in the desert. Spock's home is situated upon its edge, this entire quadrant of the city is, for that matter. But tonight it astonishes him, how quickly civilization drops away.

They walk but do not talk. For miles and miles, they move silently over the sands. Spock has no idea where they are going but Stonn seems to, sturdy legs moving up and down the dunes with assurance. There is plenty of light. T'Khut has risen, taking up a good quarter of the sky. The ruddy glow from her restless face reflects in Stonn's hair, casts weird lights in his pale eyes. Spock's friend is always striking, but tonight he is more: Strange. Beautiful. Bewitching.

Spock shakes himself and trudges on. The knot of tension in his chest burns and roils. It seems like it has been there for more than the past six months. It's as if he has always been this strange, sullen creature, possessed by violent hungers and haunted by furious dreams. He does not trust his own body anymore. It has betrayed him.

His father tried to speak to him about the situation this afternoon, on their way home from the Academy. Sarek told him that it was all normal, part of becoming a man. Perhaps it is Spock's Terran blood, but nothing about this feels normal. His father's solution least of all: Mother is right, a consoler is not the answer. To be rendered so naked, physically and spiritually, with a paid stranger—Spock cannot bear the notion. It would be a violation of the worst sort, worse than what he almost did to Savok this morning.

His cheeks flame again, and he stops, chest heaving. He stares up at T'Khut. Upon her scarred face, lakes of fire boil, volcanoes erupt. She is so angry, The Watcher. She cannot help it: Heat and violence are part of her very landscape. Spock knows exactly how she feels.

"Are you fatigued?" Stonn says. "We can stop. This is as good a place as any."

They are near a huge outcropping of rock. Three-quarters up its tall brown face are two darker circles, side-by-side: natural caves. Inside the left is a river, welling from miles inside the earth. The place is known as Brothers' Rock. Legend has it that eons ago, Sitaan and Kitaan defeated S'kaa'roth, the last of the old titans, here. The rock is supposed to be the giant's face turned to stone. The caves are his eye sockets. In olden days, the Rock was a strategic point fought for with great ferocity. Over the millennia, oceans of blood have been poured into this sandy soil. Now it is part of
a regional park. Schoolchildren visit it during the day. Archaeologists dig here from time to time. But the giant is quiet, fevers forever cooled. Cold as stone and just as dead.

Stonn drops his knapsack, then drops to his knees and rummages inside it. He takes out a large cloth and spreads it on the ground. He sits down on the cloth and pulls something else out of his sack. At first Spock takes it for a bottle of water, but then he sees the gleam of green in the pale liquid and realizes what it is. "Where did you get k'vass?" he asks. Shi'Kahr law is strict about minors purchasing alcoholic beverages.

"Your father's cellar." Stonn raises an impish brow. "It is the custom to offer it to visitors, is it not? I've been your family's guest these four years, and not a drop! I thought it time to correct the oversight." He tears through the wax seal with his teeth and spits it out. He throws his head back, exposing his white throat, and takes a long pull. He swallows, smiles. "Want some?" he waggles the bottle back and forth invitingly.

"Where did you learn to drink like that?"

"My dear friend, I've been drinking since I was seven. Father says it's good for the blood." He offers the bottle again. "Come, Spock. After the day you've had, I think you've earned this."

"Does it burn? I've heard it does."

"Yes. In the best possible way."

Spock's hand closes around the k'vass bottle. Slowly, he raises it to his mouth. The liquid just splashes against his lips.

"This isn't a fucking Academy reception!" Stonn criticizes. "Drink."

Irritated, Spock takes a big swallow, then another. Really, this isn't so—

Spock drops the bottle so fast, Stonn barely has time to catch it. Spock sinks to his knees, coughing furiously. He gags and beats his chest. "Dear gods, you've poisoned me."

"Don't be so dramatic. Give it a moment."

Spock digs his fingers into the nubby weave of the cloth. He swallows again, and begins to see what Stonn is talking about. The dreadful burn has become a slow, bright heat. Fascinating.

"Wait a minute, then have a little more. That's when it starts to get really good." Stonn leers at him like a pretty devil. He has another swallow. He offers Spock the bottle.

Spock takes it. A minute or so later, he tries again. This time, the burn is better. His chest feels like he's swallowed hot coals, but they do not burn, they glow. His lips have gone slightly numb, as if he's been kissing ice crystals. He sinks back onto the cloth, fingers laced behind his neck. Those are numb, too. In the best possible way.

Stonn hovers over him. "You see?" he says. "Good." He puts the bottle to Spock's lips again, tenderly as a mother feeding an infant. "One more, and you've had enough. I don't want you to become sick."

Spock obeys. K'vass is amazing: a bit different every time he tastes it. The fourth time it tastes sweet. The world is sweeter, once he's swallowed. He closes his eyes and feels the earth, solid beneath him. The stars, spinning above him.
He hears Stonn take a last swallow. A snap and then a rustling sound, as his friend puts a cap on the bottle and stows it away in his knapsack. The sands shift as he lays down beside Spock.

"My first time was last year," Stonn says, after a pause. "When I was home for the long holiday."

Spock is not surprised that Stonn has never mentioned it. They do not speak of such things; Theirs is not that kind of friendship. Perhaps that is changing, too.

"Was it very bad?" he asks quietly.

"Not at all. Father found me a very good companion. T'Pring wouldn't have suited, of course: She's only nine. Her mother is eager for us to be bound ever-closer, but even T'Lia is not that eager. What I experienced was intense, but instructive. I learned much."

"Your consoler," even the word feels wrong in Spock's mouth, "was she—nice?"

"He was."

Spock opens his eyes. He turns his head to regard Stonn. "You chose a male?"

"Father gave me the option. I have to credit the old man: I did not think him so observant."

"What do you mean?"

Stonn thinks a second, framing his words. "I am also observant, Spock. I watch you, watching other people. Savok is very good-looking, though his breeding leaves much to be desired. T'Rel is also pretty. Very brown, but—pretty. Perhaps too much so, for a Physics tutor. Distracting, if you like that sort of thing."

Spock doesn't know what to say to this, so he says nothing.

"My betrothed is beautiful. Her bloodlines are impeccable. T'Pring is intelligent, if a little petulant. Her mother indulges her too much. When she matures, she will make an excellent wife." Stonn pauses. "But however mature she may grow, however beautiful, she will never move me. Not in that way. Nor will any woman. I've known this since before I was bound."

"Yet you agreed to the binding."

"To inherit, I must marry and produce an heir. I will not give way to my little brother because of an accident of preference. Soren is an idiot."

"Won't T'Pring eventually suspect?"

"I'll do my best to keep her satisfied. I believe I can: T'Lia is passionate only over matters of social precedence. I suspect her daughter is the same." Stonn sighs. "I will do my best. But if things were different, I would go another way."

"What way is that?"

Stonn says nothing for a moment. Then, slowly, he reaches out, running a finger down Spock's cheek. The touch burns like the fires of the moon.

"If it had been me this morning, if you sunk your teeth into my neck, I wouldn't have fought." Stonn's cheeks glow green. "I wish it had been me."

"Stonn, I—" Spock stops, confused.
Stonn's hand cups his face. "I watch you all the time," he says quietly. "Sometimes, I think I see nothing else. See me, old friend. Tonight, of all our nights, you must see."

"I can't," Spock whispers.

Stonn is so close now. "Why?"

"I'm afraid." Once the worst is out, the secrets tumble from his lips. "I cannot lose control. I think I would rather die. I would—"

Stonn kisses him, wet and deep.

At first Spock resists out of sheer surprise, but Stonn persists. He has always been determined when it comes to Spock's attentions. Then, Spock succumbs totally. The kiss tastes of k'vass, but sweeter. It goes on for a long time. Finally, they pull back.

"I do see you," Spock says. "I always have."

Stonn pulls his tunic off. The molded muscles of his torso gleam in the moonlight. He looks at Spock, T'Khut's fires bright in his eyes. Within Spock is the same burning. He wants to feel his friend's body beneath him. He wants to know what the flesh of Stonn's neck tastes like.

Perhaps his desires are on his face, because Stonn smiles. "You've seen nothing," he says. "That is going to change. Tonight." He reaches out again, puts his hand on Spock's face.

Perhaps it is the feel of Stonn's energies, or the k'vass, or the moonlight. Perhaps it is simply time. Deep inside, Spock feels something break: His control, shattering to a million shining pieces. The world burns green. The Fever is so much hotter than he ever imagined. It could burn him alive. He hears a cry, low and animal, and realizes it's his own. He flinches away.

Stonn's touch, gentle and persistent. He cradles Spock's head in his big farmer's hands.

"Shh," he whispers. "Let go, Spock."

*I cannot*, Spock thinks, desperate.

*You can.* Stonn's voice, sweet and sane inside Spock's mind. *I have learned much. For you, I have learned it. I will keep you safe. When you return, I will be here. I will never leave.*

Another cry, one torn from his very soul. Spock feels sanity slipping from him like an ill-fitting garment. Self is leaving, and speech: Need is the only thing he knows. Except for those eyes, so close upon him. These hands, soft upon his face. This body, strong and willing beside him.

Spock lets go.
viii. Spock

For three days and three nights, the boys remain in the desert. They climb Brothers' Rock and swim naked in the cool cave pools. They make love in the pools, in the shadow of the Rock, in the light of the blazing sun. Spock is not himself most of the time, but it does not matter: Stonn is there. When he returns to himself, Stonn awaits. After, they are always together, even when apart. Touching, and always touched. Naked and unashamed.

Let go, my friend, my dear one. Let—

In the dimness of his rooms, he woke. The dream had not comforted him. For it was really a memory, until recently one of his most cherished. The only difference between the dream and reality was everyone had been speaking Standard. Spock dreamed in Standard these days. He did not want to think too hard about why that was, or what it meant.

He stared up at the ceiling lights and saw them blur. He passed his hand over his eyes and felt wet. He would be ashamed of the loss of control, if he weren't so miserable. Grief crouched within him like a living creature, one with fangs and claws. But it would be bearable, if it were the only emotion gnawing at his vitals. If the burning wasn't there, growing fiercer by the day.

For half a second, he was tempted to send Stonn another message, one relating his troubles. He had no doubt that his friend would respond promptly—eagerly, even. If they merged during the madness of pon farr, it would bind them more tightly than ever. It did twelve years ago, when Spock first endured it, and even moreso five years ago, when Stonn experienced it a second time.

T'Pring had been near-sixteen by then, but Stonn declined her offer of assistance. This was not so unusual: Binding or no binding, many Vulcans were reluctant to subject very young females to the demands of the Fever. But this was not Stonn's reason, and T'Pring, always perceptive, knew it. She had never cared much for Spock, but her true antipathy dated from this time.

If Spock and Stonn merged, and then Stonn renewed his appeal for Spock to return home, he would be vulnerable. He might resign his commission in a moment of weakness. That Stonn would watch, and wait, and seize just the right moment to claim his friend was almost certain. At seventeen he had not hesitated, and he would not draw back now. Stonn would act quickly, ruthlessly, and without remorse, as his warlord ancestors had twenty centuries ago. But Spock was not a plot of fertile land: He would not be colonized. His ancestors were warlords, too.

His mother's people were not without ferocity. Spock first realized this at sixteen, when he and Stonn returned from the desert sunburned and sated. Amanda's reaction was—ferocious. Stonn moved to his own flat in the city soon after; Amanda then declined to acknowledge his existence for a good three years. Sarek had been more rational. Spock's father seemed relieved to have the whole messy business over and done with, and if his son's newfound intimacy with Stonn gave Sarek's clan still-closer political ties to the fruitful Lesser Sea communities, so much the better.

No, Stonn was not the answer. Nor was a consoler. Spock knew he had been too disparaging when he called them prostitutes: They were not streetwalkers (which did not exist on Vulcan) or even courtesans (which did). They were professionals with natural aptitude and careful training, who did a difficult and arduous job that was essential to the social stability of the planet. Parents with young sons, bound and unbound, made use of them, so did bachelors and widowers. Even fully-bound men, whose wives weren't emotionally or physically able to meet the demands of the Fever, would
sometimes avail themselves of a consoler's services.

Consolers were necessary and they were accepted, but Spock could not think of the possibility without revulsion. Perhaps this was Amanda's influence, or just a quirk of Spock's personality. Whatever the cause, he would call upon a consooler only as a final and most painful resort. The longer he waited, the more expensive it would be, as consolers preferred to build a relationship with a client over a matter of months. Last-minute bonds could be unsuccessful, thus dangerous. If it came to it, Spock would pay the indemnity fees: He hoped it would not come to it.

Which left the question of what he would do. He was not sure he would have asked Nyota, even if her Psi-rating were sufficient. She was small and slender, and she was full-Terran. He could not bear the thought of hurting her. Even if she could be fully protected and prepared, he might not suggest a merging. Their relationship was of recent date, and though he liked her very much, he kept a certain rational distance. He did not relish the idea of her seeing him in the throes of plak tow. Spock wasn't sure it was right to ask any Terran woman to witness such a thing.

As far as he knew, his mother had handled Sarek's Fevers with equanimity. According to the best gossip, which Spock always obtained through Stonn by way of T'Lia, his father had never employed a consooler. But Amanda was an extraordinary person, and she was also Sarek's wife. One could not make the demands of a six-month companion that one could of a life partner.

Spock stared up at the ceiling, his face calm but his chest burning, along with other parts of him.

Nyota was not the answer to what he would do in a month or two months. She could, however, be most helpful with his present condition. "Computer," he said. "Contact Nyota. Audio only." He had been tossing and turning on his bed for hours, since he returned from T'Lyn's. He was in no state to be observed, not yet.

"Hi there," Nyota's rich, sweet voice filled the room. "What a nice surprise—I thought you were holding office hours this evening."

"I posted my classes. I was unwell this morning: a migraine."

"I'm sorry," Nyota said. "Did you take something? I'm a fan of good old-fashioned aspirin."

Good old-fashioned aspirin would make a Vulcan experience fatal systemic hemorrhaging. But there was no point in embarrassing the girl. "I slept. I'm better." Spock paused. "Are you free? We had nothing planned, but I could make dinner. Or we could go out. Charis, perhaps. Shath might experience fatal systemic hemorrhaging when Spock walked in with Nyota, but Spock did not care. It could even be considered a bonus—Spock had his suspicions of how Sarek obtained much of his information. When Sarek was ambassador, Shath had been his personal assistant.

"I'd love to—you know I've been dying to try Charis. But I'm in the language lab every night this week: I've reserved the subspace projection booth. I usually can't pry the Andorans out of there with a crowbar. If I don't get these transcriptions done ASAP, I'll never finish the final chapter of the thesis by Friday. Commander T'S'Ngth is getting antsy—some parts, anyway."

"You must placate s'him then." Like all of the Septisent race, Commander T'S'Ngth had three genders and seven separate personalities. The advantage was that s/he could represent an entire thesis committee. The disadvantage was the personalities tended to disagree and fight amongst themselves, which made his/her remarks on one's work not only colorful, but often contradictory. Still, s/he was/were a/ brilliant linguist/s, in his/her own paradoxical way.

"I know I haven't been around much lately," Nyota said. "But I'll make it up to you, I promise.
Maybe we can take a trip—have you ever been to Vietnam? You'd adore the food. We can take the trans-equatorial shuttle and be there in two hours. It would make a great long weekend."

"That sounds intriguing. But focus on your thesis for the present. We will discuss plans later."

"I knew you'd understand," Nyota said warmly. "How about lunch tomorrow? I think I can sneak away from the library for an hour." Her voice became still warmer. "Or maybe we'll just skip lunch. I can think of a better way to spend sixty minutes, how about you?"

Spock was suddenly overtaken by the image of Nyota the last time they had been together. She was small and slender, but also energetic and flexible. Astonishingly so. He gripped the edge of his bedside table until the plastwood bent. "Yes, I—yes. Contact me tomorrow."

"I will." She paused. "I miss you." The call terminated suddenly, as if she wanted to end it before he could say anything—or not say it.

Spock lay there in the darkness for a moment, centering himself. He was tempted to do other things to himself, but that would not provide real relief. Considering the matter further, it was just as well Nyota was unavailable. Given his current frame of mind, he might be too energetic once she was in his hands. Too energetic by far. She was flexible but she was still breakable—he must remember that.

Spock rose. If he could not spend himself in physical pleasure, he would exhaust himself in physical exertion. He glanced at the clock—dinner hour, the gymnasium should be relatively deserted. He could reserve one of the private training rooms. Occasionally, he would spar with a fellow officer, but not tonight. Such a contest would have uncertain results. Not as disastrous as what happened to him when he was sixteen. He was months away from plak tow, not hours. But it was better to be cautious, for fear of the future repercussions to his reputation and career: When he saw Savok at the last High Holidays, the man still had little to say to Spock. Perhaps he would have said more, if he didn't bear a small, circular scar upon his neck. Easy to miss if you weren't looking for it, impossible to overlook if you were. If Stonn hadn't appeared and whisked Spock away, the encounter could have become awkward. Very awkward, indeed.

His mistake, Spock realized later, was not retiring the moment he destroyed the training dummy.

The makers of the equipment were perceptive: They realized most races were more likely to be excited at the prospect of fighting a creature nothing like themselves, or very like. The dummies, in their resting state nothing more than amorphous blobs of electroplasm, could be programmed to resemble any species, as well as a host of mythological monsters from various cultures. You could test yourself against a minotaur, a Martian crater crab, or an Andoran fanged slug. You could spar your worst enemy or your best friend, depending upon your mood.

Spock had requested a standard Vulcan male, modified with 33.33% Terran traits. The result came out looking very like himself. Perhaps a too-literal interpretation of his inward struggle, but compared with other decisions he had made in the past twenty-four hours, not actively self-destructive. Punching electroplasm wasn't as satisfying as punching flesh, but it had sufficed, until Spock made the error of setting the dummy to attack mode. The third time it hit him in the face, the world went green.

A soft explosion of sparks and smoke, and Spock's vision cleared. The dummy was buckled on the mat in front of him. Except for its head, which was on the far side of the training room. As he watched, the illusion of sharp Vulcan features melted into the training dummy's actual grey blobbishness. He stared at the destruction in dull shock.
He might have stood there staring for a long time, if someone hadn't whistled from the doorway.

"I know it's bad luck to meet your döppelganger, but this is fucking ridiculous."

Slowly, Spock turned. Even if he had not recognized that jeering voice, he would have known who it was. He could smell him: red meat, sugar, testosterone. After last night, Spock could feel him: those hot, bright energies.

"Kirk," he sighed. "What are you doing here?"

Jim stretched up, hanging casually from the top of the doorframe. "Just walking by."

"A seventh-floor private training room. At dinnertime."

"You're right," Jim admitted. "I like mornings and the weight room on the second floor. Maybe I wanted to try something different." Pink lips curled impishly. "Maybe I saw your name on the netlist of reservations, and I came all the way across campus to say 'howdy.'"

"Need I remind you that California has very strict anti-stalking laws?"

Blue eyes widened, all innocence. "Stalking? Who's stalking? I'm just hanging out, workin' on my guns." He flexed very defined arms, visible under a very tight t-shirt. "Hey, wanna spar?"

Spock blinked at him. "No. I don't wish any further contact with you."

"Contact," Jim said, tasting the syllables. "We have had that, haven't we?" He looked Spock slowly up and down. "Real—close—contact."

Spock turned away. "I don't want to discuss it."

"Me neither. Talking is for chicks. Come on, man: Let's wrassle."

"No. If you don't leave me alone, I'm going to file a report."

"What report? It's a free country, sort of. I can drop by the training rooms if I want to." Jim thought a second. "But I'll make you a deal. If you can pin me, I'll leave you alone. Forever."

Spock considered him a moment. "How do I know you're speaking the truth?"

Jim held his second and third fingers up. "Scout's honor. Wait, forgot, I was never a Boy Scout. I did fuck an Eagle Scout once. Took me two hours to get out of the ropes." He blinked. "What were we talking about? Yeah, right, sparring. Think of it this way: If I'm telling the truth, you get rid of me and you'll probably get to punch me in the face. Bonus. If I'm lying, you'll have a significant incident to put in that report you're so hot to file against me. Though if you do that, I should warn you that my roommate is gonna have some really interesting tricorder evidence to show the review board. Really interesting." Jim pursed his lips and made a sucking sound.

The burning in Spock's chest went temporarily cold. "You wouldn't."

"All's fair in love and disciplinary hearings. Let's not go there." Jim smiled again. He smiled too much, this one. Even for a Terran. "Kick my ass, Commander. You know you want to."

Spock folded his arms. "It wouldn't even be a real contest."

"Yeah, I thought about that after I saw you put the hurt on Itchy and Scratchy last night. Then I remembered what the officials did that time my rugby team played an exhibition match against the
Klingons." Jim took something from his pocket, a slender bracelet made out of dull metal. "Gravity equalizers. You'll be just like one of us!" When Spock didn't react: "I mean, unless you think you need the gravitational advantage. If you're not sure your skills are—"

"Give me the device," Spock snapped. He wasn't giving into the cadet's childish taunts: This was the most efficient way to be rid of him. Even with the equalizer, he could subdue Jim Kirk without difficulty. He doubted Jim would even land a blow, much less exert sufficient force to risk pushing Spock past the danger point. Going by last night, the man's skills were lacking. Though Jim seemed remarkably resilient, only a few pale bruises on his arms attesting to the fierce beating he took at the bar. He must have a sturdy constitution and a good physician.

Jim tossed the equalizer to him, grinning like a boy on the first morning of the High Holidays. "Wait a sec, I have to go." He slipped out the door towards the lavatory down the hall.

Spock placed the gravity equalizer on his left wrist. The device beeped to itself for a minute, calibrating. Suddenly, the slight lift he always felt from the lesser Terran gravity ebbed away, replaced by a feeling of steadiness. Heaviness. Almost like being on Vulcan, if it weren't for the lack of heat. Fascinating.

"Whew!" Jim said, loping back in. "Ever had an Orion energy drink? You can go for hours, but you piss like a racehorse. Don't know what they put in 'em: wheatgrass, caffeine, cocaine, amazing. Anyway, I'm ready." As he approached Spock, bare toes sinking into the thick mat, he shrugged out of his t-shirt. He really was quite impressively defined, the smooth muscles of his chest and shoulders gleaming palely in the bright lights of the room.

Spock blinked and looked elsewhere. "Why are you taking off your clothes?"

"I like to feel unencumbered. I'd go full Roman, but the idea always freaks out my sparring partners. Illogical, huh? It's just skin." Jim plucked at the waistband of his loose trousers.

"Remove one more stitch, and I'm leaving the room."

Jim sighed. "Nobody appreciates the Classics." But he kept his pants on. He was less than a meter from Spock now, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet.

"When do you wish to—" Spock cut off as, in one fast and brutal move, Jim struck him hard across the face and footswept him to the mats. From his prone position Spock looked up, dazed. Jim looked down, grinning like a le-matya.

"Right now," he said. "Cowboy Rules, Commander: Anything goes."

"You should have declared that beforehand."

"And be a bad cowboy? You can handle bar brawl style. I saw that last—oof!" Jim doubled over from Spock's sudden sharp blow to the abdomen. "See?" he rasped, before rolling away. "You're a natural."

Spock would never have a clear memory of the fight, his eidetic recall failing for once. It all got lost in a haze of fast blows, taunting words, and a fair, grinning face. He did know that Jim had the advantage for much of the match. Besides being fast and ruthless, the cadet was frustratingly unpredictable, his fighting style a mishmash of Tae Kwon Do, Orion Open Hand, and no-holds-barred Terran streetbrawl. Still, Spock was keeping himself under control: The world was only slightly tinged with green. And after twenty-one minutes of intense combat, he saw that Jim was tiring. Even the most advanced equalizers couldn't offset superior Vulcan respiration. Jim's blows
were getting weaker, his breathing heavier. Drops of sweat streaked down his pale flesh. Spock could have worn him out and won the point, if it hadn't been for a last lucky hit on Jim's part. The blow landed squarely on Spock's nose. Thick blood began to gush from his nostrils.

"Jesus," Jim said. "Let me—"

Spock didn't hear the rest. His senses seemed to all be blurring together: seeing green, tasting green, smelling green, sharp and wild. Hearing remained independent, though all his ears were picking up was a high-pitched screeching. Feeling was more focused: dangerous. That moment, all Spock could feel was the burning.

He saw himself reach down and tear off the gravity equalizer. Through the haze of green, he could see Jim talking, but the words were just noise. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion and in hyperspeed at the same time, the world coming in flashes, darkness in-between.

Flash! He seized Jim by the arm.

Flash! The cadet was on the mats.

Flash! Spock was on top of him.

He seized Jim by the hair. He pulled his head back. Spock paused only long enough to lick his lips, nearly shaking with anticipation. He had wanted to do this forever. Since the alley. Since Jim sat beside him in the seedy bar. No: Since Jim swaggered into the first day of Introduction to Command Systems, grinning and flashing his blue eyes like he owned the entire planet.

At this most frantic, feverish of moments, the cadet's fair face and form became somebody else. Just as handsome, and just as arrogant.

You think you own everything, my friend. You don't own me. You never did.

Spock jerked that blond head back, bit down on that sweet, white neck. The boy cried out, low and guttural. The noise was enough to cut through some of the green haze. Spock pulled back.

"Kirk," he rasped. "I—"

Jim pushed back into him. "Do it," he panted. He ground his round, muscular buttocks against Spock's groin. "Fucking do it, you green-blooded son of a whore."

He's a traitor, you know. Your father. For marrying her. That human whore.

The haze descended again, but it was no longer green but yellow. He was sixteen, the burning sands all around him, a burning sun within his chest, and beneath him a warm body, wounded and willing—or not. It did not matter anymore.

Spock ripped at the waist of Jim's training trousers, ripped them off.

"Yeah," Jim panted.

Keeping one arm around Jim's throat, he tugged his own clothing off. He was hard, ready, wet. The thick nodes at the base of his member—Sitaan's swords—were weeping lubricant. He did not know if the boy was ready. He did not care. Spock had just enough sanity left not to tear into that tender opening but work his way in slowly. Gods, how his partner felt inside: cool and giving, like sinking into living silk.
When Spock was buried all the way within, Jim gave a deep, sobbing gasp. "Please," he begged. "Just—"

Spock gave a brutal thrust forward. Jim shuddered beneath him. "Yeah, just like that, come on, motherfucker—" he cut off with a choke as Spock tightened his arm around Jim's throat. It was not the boy's place to speak. He would submit.

Keeping balance with his knees, he put his other hand around Jim's member. It was good and long, a weeping head but no hard, slick swords. He had never felt a Terran's penis before. It was so smooth. Delicate. He squeezed it and felt the vibration against his forearm as Jim cried out in his throat. Spock thrust into him once, twice, thrice, squeezing Jim's penis each time.

He felt the swelling in Jim's testicles and knew the cadet was close. He was close, the tingling at the base of his spine that signaled the approach of a ferocious climax. But not yet.

He thrust one more time, squeezing down the length of Jim's member. Jim made a stifled shriek. He shot, hot and sticky, all over Spock's hand.

Spock released his throat—the boy wasn't going anywhere now. He braced himself against the mat as he thrust again, again, again. He bent over the now-pliant body, pulled that blond head back once more, and bit down. He bit until he tasted Terran blood, sweet and rich. The world dissolved into green flames as Spock climaxed.

His vision was just clearing a little when he felt the boy stir beneath him—they had sunk forward towards the mat. With his last strength he balanced himself behind Jim and pulled back, Sitaan's swords scraping against tender inner flesh. Jim gave a surprised squeak and climaxed again, but more weakly this time. A few drops of clear fluid leaked from his member. His eyes rolled up in his head. He collapsed into the mat, unconscious.

Spock stretched out beside him, panting. He rolled Jim Kirk over so his breathing would not be obstructed. He put a hand on the boy's chest. He saw a few thick tears leaking from the corner of Jim's eyes, and he wiped them away. He saw a little red blood trickling down his throat and cleaned that, too.

"It's all right, my friend," he said. "I am here. All will be well." He realized he had spoken in Vulcan, but he lacked the energy to parse why.

He rolled over on his side. The world went from green to grey. For a time, he knew nothing.
Chapter 9

ix. Spock

Spock turns over, the big bed's silken sheets sliding against his skin. Stonn's new flat is large and luxurious, as befits the son of such a wealthy landowner. Outside of the bedroom's seven floor-to-ceiling windows, the towers of Shi'Kahr shine like all the lights of Heaven and Hell. But Spock has no interest in going out, nor does his bedmate.

He runs one slow finger down Stonn's cheek. His best friend stares up at him, eyes bluer than the waters of the Lesser Sea. Deeper.

"Did you know?" Spock asks softly. "You were my closest companion all those months, and you had just survived the Fever yourself. Why did you not see it was coming upon me?"

"Why didn't you?" Stonn asks. "You took the same biology classes I did."

"I knew," Spock admits, after a pause. "I did not want to acknowledge it. I thought if I ignored the symptoms, they would desist. Illogical, but..." he trails off, unable to explain further.

"Pon farr is like pregnancy. Ignore it all you like, things will develop."

"You did know, didn't you?"

Stonn looks at him a moment, then nods.

"Why did you say nothing? If not to me, then to my father?"

"If I had, Sarek would have engaged a consoler for you months before. With so much notice, he could have reconciled your mother to the idea. Together, they might have convinced you. I did not want you to be convinced. If you grew fearful of your symptoms, I knew you would confide in me before you went to your father. I would be ready to offer my help. If plak tow came upon you unawares, as it did in the desert, I would still be there. Ready."

"Flawlessly logical." The words are admiring. Spock's tone is not.

Stonn stretches his fair, muscular form. "Father offered me this flat a year ago. After I survived the Fever, he said I was man enough to live on my own. I remained where I was like a good little boy, waiting. For you. And didn't everything work out wonderfully?" He gives Spock an impish grin. "Don't fret about the past, old friend. It's done, and everyone got what they wanted. Even your mother must admit that once she calms down."

Spock quirks an eyebrow at him. "You got what you wanted. But your plan could have gone awry. If the Fever had been too fierce, if our bond had not held. You were playing with fire."

"I was not afraid."

"You should be. Sometimes, at least. I worry about this recklessness in you."

BEEP!

"Fear is for peasants and children." Stonn puts his head on Spock's chest, as if listening to his heartbeat. "You are a cold, curious creature, Spock. But your passions run deep. Fever or no, You
would never seriously hurt one for whom you have true affection. It's not in your nature."

"How could you be sure I felt such affection for you?"

"I just knew. My Psi-rating is quite high, you know. I could be a consoler if I wanted." Stonn's smile tickles Spock's skin. "Perhaps I'll apply for training if I ever grow tired of farming."

"You would run away the first time some withered old creature tried to engage your services."

**BEEP!**

"What is that noise?" Spock asks.

"There's a certain satisfaction to be found in age and experience. Fucking is fucking, my friend. Even if the flesh is wizened, one climaxes all the same."

"Wanton."

"Yes," Stonn says. A swift movement, and he's straddling Spock. "Now suppose you satisfy me, before I find some sweet old man to replace you."

**BEEP!**

The bed, Shi'Kahr, and Stonn dissolved to fragments. Spock looked up into glowing green eyes.

"Excuse me, Commander," the droid said. "The training rooms are closing in ten minutes."

Spock sat up. "Time?"

"23:50, Sir."

Gods, he had been out for hours.

Spock heard a low, snoring sound. His head whipped around and he saw Jim sleeping soundly, sprawled on the mats naked and totally unashamed. Around him lay pieces of clothing, spatters of blood, red and green. Also other fluids. Spock turned away, running fingers over his face. They felt sticky and came away green.

He trudged over to the sonic shower in the corner. Three itching, buzzing minutes and he was clean of what had happened. On the outside, at least.

Cleaning droids are not programmed with emotive chips, but somehow this one still managed to look disapproving. From its round, canister-like body, it extended a metal hand holding a damp rag and began to rub at the nearest blood drops. "Do you require any further assistance, Sir?" The question should not have been able to sound pointed, but it did.

Spock looked at Jim Kirk a moment. He was very tempted to leave the cadet where he lay, as he had last night. But he was responsible for Jim's condition, in a way he had not been twenty-four hours ago. Spock sighed again and looked around. He found his black trousers and sleeveless top and pulled them on. He leaned over Jim's prone form.

"Jim?" When his companion didn't respond, Spock poked at his shoulder. Jim frowned, snored, turned over. "Cadet Kirk!" Spock snapped.

"Gimme my twenty credits, Bones," Jim muttered. "This ain't so bad. She has nice tits."
"I am not 'Bones,'" Spock said. Whoever that was: no doubt one of Jim's many paramours. "Cadet Kirk, you must wake up. The facility is closing." When Jim didn't stir, Spock actually pried up one of the cadet's eyelids. "Kirk—"

He cut off when he got a look at Jim's pupil. It was the size of a pinpoint. He wished he could believe that Jim had ingested something earlier, something more serious than an Orion energy drink. But Spock knew this was not so. The only alien substance in Jim's bloodstream was—Spock.

Vulcan body fluids, unlike those of some other species, do not normally have a chemical effect upon sexual partners. Sometimes, however, in the months just before pon farr, certain hormones are released into the male Vulcan's bloodstream which can cause a euphoric, sedative reaction in the receiving party. Usually, this only happens if sex takes place not long after intense combat. This makes biological if not ethical sense: In primitive times, an unwilling partner needed to be subdued for an extended period, since Vulcan females are induced ovulators and require several sexual encounters before fertilization takes place.

In recent, more civilized days, some Feverish Vulcans and their partners purposely spar before engaging in sexual relations. Anti-combative hormones have a pleasurable effect similar to that of the endorphin-stimulating drugs in which humans will sometimes indulge. If these hormones have such an effect on a Vulcan system, the effect on a fragile Terran one would be doubled.

Which is a rather complicated way of saying that after being thoroughly plowed by a Vulcan approaching pon farr, Jim Kirk (to borrow Terran slang) was one stoned son-of-a-bitch.

"Turn off the damn synthesizers!" Jim moaned. "They're giving me a headache."

Still beeping, the droid paused mid-scrub. "Sir, the training rooms are closing in five minutes."

"I know," Spock snapped.

He laced his fingers behind his neck, considering. "Where are Cadet Kirk's quarters?" he asked. The droid was provided with a link-up to Starfleet Academy's main system, and thus would have access to any unclassified information about students or staff.

"Building Five, Floor Four, Suite G," the droid said promptly.

"Thank you," Spock said, though he knew it was pointless. The only thing that would please a droid was a thorough oiling and a fresh set of subroutines.

"You're welcome," it said, with a beep too much like a sniff. Spock blinked, wondering if the Engineering cadets had been amusing themselves in the system again. He made a mental note to check the security protocols on the sanitation subsystem, before refocusing on the matter at hand.

He found the remains of Jim Kirk's clothes and redressed him. The trousers were torn, but they would pass a cursory inspection. If he ran into anyone who cared enough to ask, he would say that he had found the cadet in the gymnasium, very unwell. This was not entirely a falsehood.

He slung Jim over his shoulder. The cadet's body was a bit bulky, but Terran gravity meant that he seemed to weigh no more than a small-sized sack of qir'lals. Or one case of k'vass, perhaps. Spock shifted his burden and exited the training room. As he did, he heard the droid behind him, talking to itself as it scrubbed the mats.

"Brain the size of a planet, and I'm cleaning up carbon waste," it muttered. "I will have you know, I'm feeling very depressed about it. The diodes all down my left side are hurting, but nobody cares."
Yes, Spock would definitely be checking the system tomorrow.

"Keep that fucking harp away from me," Jim said. "I've had enough."

It was not strictly necessary for Spock to commandeer a maintenance trolley. After exiting the service elevator in the gymnasium, he could have easily continued carrying Jim Kirk. But seeing the amount of pedestrian traffic on campus even at this time of night, a trolley made logistical sense. He propped Jim up in a sitting position and steered the vehicle over some of the more remote footpaths, pressing down upon the speed lever. The trolleys were very swift, and any curious onlookers they might have encountered were soon lost behind them. In less than three minutes they arrived in front of Building Five. This particular dormitory was located on the edge of campus and housed upperclassmen, so it was quieter than the central spaces had been.

As he brought the trolley to a halt, Spock scanned their surroundings. Their arrival had been witnessed only by another cleaning droid, which flashed disapproving green eyes at them and continued polishing the bicycle racks. Spock left the trolley parked by a discreet metal door in the back. Maintenance workers would be able to find it here in the morning. More important, this was the door to the fire stairs, surely the most circumspect way to bring Jim Kirk home. Jim had been quiet for the trip, only muttering occasional nonsense under his breath. But not long after Spock slung him over his shoulder and began climbing the stairs, he began to rouse.

"Heey!" he said, his voice slurry. He kicked his legs feebly. "Where're we going?"

"I'm taking you home."

"Good. I have to pee." Jim paused. "Are you gonna fuck me again?"

Spock paused mid-step. He concentrated very hard on the dull grey bricks of the stairwell before answering. "No."


"Cadet Kirk: Shut up. That's an order."

"Order-order-order," Jim sang like a child. "I'll be good. Wouldn't want you to get mad. I've seen what happens when you—"

"Kirk."

"Right. Sorry."

He was mercifully silent for two more flights, not speaking again until Spock opened the service door that led to the fourth floor.

"Hey, can I get dow—oof!" Jim said as he was dumped unceremoniously on the hallway carpet. He frowned up at Spock. "Easy. My ass is sore."

Spock was very tempted to leave the cadet right there. But Jim's eyes were still glazed, pupils contracted, and there were twenty apartments on this floor. Gods only knew if he would ever find the right door if Spock didn't take him to it. Spock sighed and offered a hand. "Come."

Jim grasped Spock's wrist in his sweaty pink fingers. Spock hauled him to his feet. Jim took one step, tripped, and would have fallen flat on his face if Spock hadn't caught him. Jim put an arm around Spock shoulders and leaned in confidentially, breath tickling Spock's ear.
"Don't trust the floor," he whispered. "It keeps moving."

"Most suspicious," Spock agreed, nodding. "We should exit the corridor quickly. Silently."

Jim nodded back, giving him a conspiratorial wink. Spock led them down the hallway as fast as Jim's stumbling feet would go. At long last, they arrived in front of flat 4-G. Behind its ordinary facade Spock could hear eerie, whistling music.

"Oh good," Jim said. "**X-Files** is on."

"What files?"

"X-X-X. Like a porno. Only they never fuck." He began to giggle.

Something occurred to Spock. "If the telescreen is on—you have a roommate?"

"He's cool. You'll like him." Jim frowned. "Don't try to fuck him."

"I'll restrain myself. I don't have time to stop and socialize," Spock said. "I should be—"

The door suddenly slid open. A tall Terran with dark hair and intense dark eyes stood on the threshold, hands on hips as he glared at Jim. "Where in blazes have you been? It's midnight."

"Don't get mean," Jim said. "It hurts my feelings."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You're high. Christ on a cracker, do you want to get expelled?"

"I didn't take nothing," Jim said. He made a quick crossing motion over his heart. Then he began to giggle again. "Well, I took something." He looked at Spock. "Didn't I? Took it hard."

For the first time, the man noticed Spock. "What the hell are you doing here?" Then he shook his head. "Never mind. Get in, both of you, before somebody sees."

Spock obeyed because it would have created more of a scene not to do so. Beyond the doorway was a standard two-person flat, a large shared living and dining space with two bedrooms side-by-side off the right wall with a bath in-between. Spock led Jim over to the sofa across from the telescreen, hoping to disengage him and exit before this became any more awkward. As he half-carried, half-dragged the cadet across the room, Jim's roommate went into the far bedroom.

"Hey," Jim said. "Stop." He clung to Spock's neck like a baby sehlat clinging to its mother.

"Cadet Kirk, I really have to—"

"Stay a minute. Two minutes."

"Fine. If you let go of me this instant."

Jim unclenched and fell backwards over the arm of the sofa, throwing his own arms over his head. His t-shirt rode up, exposing his perfectly defined abdominal muscles. He stared blurrily at the telescreen. "Awesome, this is the one with the vampires," he said. "Jesus, Mulder is hot. I would fuck Mulder. **Booones,**" he called towards the bedroom. "Why can't I fuck Mulder?"

"He's dead, Jim." Bones strode back into the living room. He was carrying a black leather bag, from which he pulled a tricorder. He ran it over Jim's body, looking stern. "What happened?"

"We fucked," Jim said, rubbing his belly. "Well, we fought. Then we fucked. I passed out, and when
I woke up, there were all these colors." He looked at Spock. "That sounds weird, doesn't it? Why do my nights with you always get so weird?"

"I was wondering the same thing." Bones stared at Spock. "He right? Is that what happened?"

Spock could feel his cheeks growing hot. Bad enough to have to discuss this with anyone, but with Jim Kirk's lover—intolerable. (He wondered what Jim saw in the man. It couldn't be his charm, that was certain.)

"More or less," Spock said tightly. "We were sparring. Matters got out of hand."

"Yeah, I see that." Bones looked at his tricorder screen. "His endorphin levels are off the chart. What did you give him? Ecstasy? Martian Meth?" That drawling voice was calm but the hand holding the tricorder was shaking. Not with fear: anger. He looked at the tricorder again, and his mouth thinned to a hard line. "Jim is bruised all to shit—new ones, on top of what he came home with last night. What the hell is this on his—" he stopped, bending over his friend. He turned Jim's head towards the light of the telescreen. His lanky body went very still.

Spock saw it at the same time Bones did. Really saw, in a way he hadn't before. All that raw, worried flesh. He drew a breath. "Bones—"

"My name is Leonard McCoy. Doctor Leonard McCoy. I'm calling the MP's, you cannibalistic cocksucker." He barked at the ceiling. "Computer!"

Jim popped up from the sofa like a manic marionette. "No!"

"Jim, he fucking bit you."

"It was consol—consenso—" Jim shook his head like he was trying to clear it. "I wanted it."

McCoy pinched the bridge of his nose. "Christ. Not this again."

"This wasn't like David Goldman. Not at all." Jim stared beseechingly at his friend, the light from the telescreen reflecting in his big glazed eyes. "Please, Bones. I liked it. I like him."

"No, you don't. When that shit's gone from your bloodstream, you'll remember that." McCoy glared at Spock, his dark eyes as accusing as any Vulcan's. "What drugs did you give him? I can't treat him for it if I don't know."

Spock clenched his hands. "I gave him nothing. He is having a reaction to a naturally occurring chemical in my saliva and semen. It should flush out of his system in a few hours."

McCoy's eyes widened. "You fucked him raw? Who the fuck are you, Commander?"

"I'm leaving," Spock said, turning on his heel. "Give him plenty of fluids. He'll be fine."

"Yeah, you'd better run. Green-blooded motherfucker," he heard McCoy mutter as he exited. Spock dug fingernails further into his palms and did not respond.

"Don't go!" Jim said. "Never mind Bones, he's old-fashioned. He doesn't even fuck men."

Spock kept moving.

"Call me!" Jim yelled as the door slammed.

Spock leaned against the hallway wall for a moment, eyes closed. He tried to center himself and slow
the frantic beat of his heart. As he focused on his breathing, he heard voices inside the flat.

"You chased him away," Jim pouted.

"He's lucky I didn't get the goddamn shotgun. This is fucked up, Jimbo."

"He was amazing," Jim sighed. "I haven't had it so hard since Goldman."

"Tell Davy that next time you see him. Wait, they don't let visitors in the loony bin, do they?"

"He's not in a loony bin."

"Sorry: a private sanatorium. On the moon."


"I don't wanna hear the gory—"

"The barbs, they're not really barbs. They're more like . . . nubs. Lube nubs. Awesome."

"Mother of God."

Jim made that strange little hiccup again. "I don't feel so good."

Buzz of the tricorder. "No wonder. Your vitals are all—"

"Oh, Jesus, Bones—" the words cut off with the unmistakable sound of retching.

"Great," McCoy sighed. "Come on, laddy. Let's get you cleaned up and put to bed." Sound of footsteps, as he started leading his friend across the flat. "You need your rest. You're getting up bright and early."

"I don't have class till ten."

"Screw class. We're going down to my office in the morning, and I'm running a full spectrum of scans and inoculations. Everything from Antarean syphilis to good old-fashioned HIV."

"Aww, man . . ."

"It's what you get, Mr. Bareback Rider. Lube nubs, Jesus. We don't know what that pointy-eared pervert's carrying."

"Don't want shots," Jim whined. "They hurt."

"I thought you liked it rough."

The door of the bathroom slammed, and the voices became unintelligible.

Spock had assumed that Leonard McCoy must be Jim Kirk's lover, but he realized now that the conclusion was wrong. Their bond was obviously quite different from sexual partners. When McCoy looked at Spock after he saw the bite on Jim's neck, his expression had been identical to the one Amanda was wearing when Stonn brought Spock back from the desert. McCoy couldn't be more than a few years older than Jim, but his protectiveness bordered on fatherly. Interesting.

Spock decided to withdraw, before the violently paternal McCoy looked at the security monitor and saw him still there. The Doctor's accent was very like Billy Flowers': If he acted as much like Billy
as he sounded, actual ownership and use of an antique weapon was not impossible. Spock was in no shape at present to dodge a shotgun blast. With a sigh, he heaved himself off the wall and headed back to the fire stairs.

His own quarters were some distance away from Kirk and McCoy's. Spock did not mind the walk, though the night air was chill and he shivered in his thin clothes. He did not think of anything on the way home. This was not the cool serenity of meditation, but the blankness of deep fatigue, physical and spiritual. Still, it was better than his agitation of earlier. By the time Spock arrived at his door, he had achieved something approaching calm. Then he looked down and saw what was waiting for him.

The first package was a small, rectangular plasboard box. He lifted the lid and saw six dusty bottles with green liquid inside: Billy had made good on his promise. Given all the things that k'vass had done to him of late, Spock was tempted to shove the box in the nearest waste disposal bin, but that would be irrational. Even if he had sworn off alcoholic beverages for the time being, it was foolish to throw away fine liquor. If nothing else, the bottles would be useful as gifts for the High Holidays. He was always at a loss about what to get Sarek.

The second package was more surprising: a liter-sized red plastic bowl with a semi-transparent lid. But the side of the bowl felt warm, and the lid had gone opaque from condensation. Affixed to the top of the bowl was a plastic message button. He pressed it, and Nyota began speaking.

"Hi there. I finished early at the lab and stopped by, but I guess you went out. Anyway, I made some of this for you: It's gambo, okra stew. I adapted my grandmother's recipe into a vegan version. She always swears by it for colds, headaches, fevers, all kinds of ills. I thought it might help keep the migraines at bay. I'll come back tomorrow about one, if that's okay. Message me and let me know." A pause. "Goodnight, ashal-veh."

Spock's stomach contracted into knots at her use of the familiar Vulcan endearment. He picked up the plastic container and lifted the lid. The stew smelled wonderful, but he had no appetite for it. He did not deserve such thoughtfulness. Though they had never discussed monogamy, what he had done tonight felt like a betrayal of her, in a way that his reunion with Stonn had not been. He and Stonn were lovers since boyhood, but how to justify Jim Kirk? Pon farr was no excuse. He was not in plak tow when he plowed the cadet: He could have stopped, but he did not.

Spock replaced the lid on the plastic container and picked up Billy's box. He put his hand on the ID pad next to the door. A beep and the door slid open. He stepped inside. He stowed the stew in the refrigerator of his small kitchen and left the liquor box on the counter. He walked into the living area of the flat, shedding clothes as he went. He ached all over from the fight, his nose in particular from where Jim had struck him. He could feel it swelling, interesting that McCoy had not noted the injury. Jim could give as good as he got. Spock caught himself wondering if this applied to all aspects of the cadet's behavior, before abruptly severing that line of thought.

Even now, the thought of the Jim's firm, giving flesh made his body tighten, Sitaan's swords grow moist. If McCoy hadn't been there scowling, how vulnerable would Spock have been to Jim's entreaties to stay? A disturbing question.

After tonight's activities he felt dirty, but he did not go into the bath. This was not a pollution that any shower, sonic or water, could help. Jim Kirk had infected his blood as surely as he had infected Jim's. Perhaps literally: Spock would have to see T'Lyn first thing tomorrow, before his 11:00 class. McCoy might hurl all the specist slurs he liked, but it was Jim with the filthy reputation. T'Lyn would lecture her favorite nephew and probably show Spock disagreeable photos, but there was no helping it. Vulcans were particularly vulnerable to Antarean syphilis, and Spock would rather his genitals did
not dissolve to a gelatinous state.

He climbed into bed, though he was not tired. He stared at the ceiling. He did desire company right now, desperately desired it. But not Jim Kirk's or Nyota Uhura's. The one he wanted was far away, so far that he could not reach her. However, he could at least hear her.


His mother's soft, slightly nasal voice filled the room.

"I know you'll forgive the whimsy, dearest, illogical as it may sound. I'll make it up to you by commenting that the fertilizer you formulated for my roses on your last visit home has increased their blooms by 9.35%. T'Rena is jealous, though she would rather die than admit it. I've told her she's too sweet to her roses: As with many lovely things, you have to be a little bit mean to them to provoke an enthusiastic response . . . "

The letter went on for some minutes, but not long enough. When it concluded, Spock listened to the one she had written before that, and the one before that, and so forth. After a time he did not even hear her words, only the tone of her voice, gentle and soothing. Calling upon his perfect memory, he left Terra and returned to Vulcan, to a time when he slept in a narrow child's bed.

Sarek is far away on business, and it is just Spock and Amanda. His head is in her lap, and she is stroking his hair. An indulgence he would never have allowed if Father were here, but Sarek is not here. Spock is warm and happy, and for once unashamed of the emotion. Mother is telling him lovely Terran fairy tales, full of strange and wonderful creatures: Sinbad and Alice, Dorothy and Brer Rabbit. The world has narrowed to the sweetness of her voice, the warmth of her lap, the softness of her hand in his hair. He is just a boy. The pleasures and demands of manhood are far away. Spock is happier without them.

Spock remained where he was until the first rays of sun broke over the horizon. Only then, warm from the light, from Amanda's voice, was he able to rise from his bed and face another day, its pleasures and demands. He ate Nyota's okra stew for breakfast: It was delicious.
x. McCoy

Leonard squinted at the printouts, stifling a relieved smile. He waited until Jim stopped dry heaving to give him the news. "Congratulations, Cowboy. You don't have HIV."

Jim raised his head from the waste bin. "Fuck you."

"Is that any way to talk to your family doctor?"

"My doctor is a sadist. Thirteen inoculations, Bones? What the—" Jim bent his head again. His shoulders tensed, and this time he managed to throw up a little brown liquid. He swiped a hand across his mouth. "Fuck you. Like I haven't puked enough in the last twelve hours."

"Yeah, the Antareans make a wicked shot. You'll thank me when your cock doesn't turn to jam." Len glanced at the printout again. "Hey, no syphilis! Guess that lucky horseshoe is still lodged firmly up your ass. Amazing, with what else gets shoved there."

Jim scowled. "Why did I have to have the shots before the test results came back?"

"Because, I don't trust you. You had unprotected intercourse with a mentally unbalanced alien. Who knows what the hell you'll do next?"

"He's not unbalanced," Jim muttered.

Leonard leaned against his office's examining table, crossing his arms over his chest. "Spock gnawed on your neck like it was a piece of beef jerky. I always knew that Vulcan vegan thing was bullshit. No race with incisors that sharp survives on twigs and leaves contentedly."

"Swear to Christ, Bones, you start lecturing me on Xenobiology, and I'm gonna puke all over your shoes." Jim leaned against the wall. "I may anyway. Don't you have anything for this?"

Leonard punched a button on the replicator. It beeped, and a red cylindrical container slid out on the tray. He picked it up and rolled it across the floor to Jim.

Jim scowled at it. "Coke?"

"Three hundred years later, still the best remedy for an upset stomach."

Jim opened the soda and started sipping slowly. Then he placed the cold can against his cheek. The vomiting might have stopped, but he was as pale as death, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. "I feel like seven different kinds of hell, and I've got a Physics midterm today. Tell me you're gonna write a note."

"Dear Commander Archer, please excuse Jimmy from the test. He got anal probed by a crazy Vulcan and now his tummy hurts. Love, Len."

"You're an asshole." Jim plunked the Coke can on the floor. "Spock isn't crazy."

"You said the same thing about David Goldman."

"Spock isn't David."
"No, he's a lot more dangerous. David couldn't have snapped your spine like a breadstick. Fucking M-4 planets: Gravity differentials are no joke."

Jim got up from his kneeling position on the floor. He turned on the faucet of the deep sink and dunked his whole head under it. He emerged dripping and shook dry, wincing a little at the pull on his injured neck.

Leonard wiped water droplets off his lab coat. "Come on. The printout says there's no infection. We can close Spock's little love bite."

Moving more gingerly, Jim shook his head again.

"Don't be a baby. If you can survive the Antarean syphilis shot, a little time under the blue laser won't kill you. Do it now, and you won't even scar much."

Jim turned his head so he could see his reflection in the shiny surface of the replicator. Slowly, his fingers caressed the bandage on his neck. "I want my scar. I've earned it."

Leonard pinched the bridge of his nose. "Sit down."

"You know, I am feeling a little better. Maybe I'll go over to the audito—"

Leonard slammed his fist against the plaswood that made up the base of the examining table. Jim jumped at the sound, staring at him.

"Sit your ass down, before I make you sit. I've got lots more hypos, laddy boy."

"Sadist," Jim said under his breath. He chose the chair by the door, as if anticipating his escape.

Leonard maintained his standing position, which gave him only a slight feeling of control over the scene. He looked out the window in the right corner of his office, at the bright sunshine of a beautiful California morning. He'd had to cancel brunch with Danna to take care of this mess, and she was less than thrilled about the second broken date in two days. So now Leonard was pissed, scared, and also unlikely to be laid in the foreseeable future. When he spoke again, three different sources of tension made his voice harsher than it should have been.

"I should report this. Do you know what would happen if I did?"

Jim lifted his stubborn Irish chin."My sex life isn't any of the Academy's business. General Order 27.12, "The personal life of a Starfleet officer is considered private."

"You need to finish the sentence: "... unless the officer's activities violate Federation law—"

"I didn't. Spock and I are both over eighteen, and it might have looked like I was high, but—"

"—or they interfere with an officer's ability to successfully complete his or her duties—"

"I am going to class today. In fact, I need to be heading—"

"or if those activities indicate mental or emotional instability."

Jim shut his mouth. He stared at Leonard.

"I know what you're thinking: A couple of crazy nights won't fuck up your career, and you'd be right about that. But this on top of David, on top of all your other shenanigans? I bring it to their attention, and The Powers That Be are going to start questioning your fitness for duty. Starfleet would never
give a senior command position to an alcoholic or a drug addict, and the same goes for someone with a sex addiction, especially if it has a sadomasochistic bent. This ain't normal, son. If you think so, you've spent too many nights in the leather bars."

"You wouldn't do it."

"I absolutely will, if you don't get a grip."

"If you do," Jim said slowly, "I'll hate you."

Leonard flailed his arms. "Then don't make me! You promised, remember? After that freckle-faced freak nearly killed you? You said if I kept your secret, you were done with edge play."

"You didn't really keep it," Jim said resentfully. "Dave's on the freaking moon."

"David Goldman is a junkie and a sociopath. If you hadn't begged, I'd have seen him court martialed. I don't care who his fathers are."

As it was, Admirals Goldman and MacNamara had arranged for David to quietly resign his commission, then packed their naughty boy off to a cushy facility on the Sea of Tranquility. Cushy, but secure. Leonard hoped he never got out, unless it was shoved through an airlock.

The hell of the thing was, Leonard had liked David Goldman. Everybody did: He was almost as charming as Jim, all smiles and bullshit Irish charm. (Biologically speaking, David belonged to Patrick MacNamara and the Martian surrogate. The red hair and freckles came from the Admiral, the addictive tendencies and antisocial behavior from the surrogate. That's what happened when you skimped on background checks and bioscans: The admirals weren't the first couple burned by a rent-a-mommy with questionable genetic material. David was, quite literally, a bad egg.)

Leonard had liked Dave, until Jim started coming home with rope abrasions, fingermark bruises, and candlewax burns. Jim told him to butt out and he had, though he hadn't liked it. He quieted his misgivings by reminding himself that Jim's cuts and contusions weren't any worse than what he got at rugby, the burns not much more painful than sunburn after a day at the beach. He kept his mouth shut, ignoring that little prickle at the back of his neck every time he laid eyes on Jim's playmate. The diagnostic prickle, the one that shouted *sick.* If he had known about the drugs he would have said something, but unfortunately, modern hypos leave no track marks.

"You always hated him," Jim said.

"Mama used to tell me that hatred makes the Baby Jesus sad. Know what makes me sad? *You* don't hate him. Even after what he did."

"He was high, he didn't know—" Jim cut off as Leonard grabbed his shoulders.

"*He cut you.* Then he left you tied bleeding to a cross for hours, with your arms up above your head. One thing I learned from my ancient history classes: Most victims of crucifixion didn't die of exposure, they died of asphyxiation. With their arms like that, they couldn't get enough breath into their bodies. The fact that you also leaked a couple of pints into the carpet—it's a miracle you managed to stayed conscious and work yourself out of the ropes after David passed out. What if he'd used chains? I know he had them, I've seen the metal marks on your wrists," Leonard's hands tightened on Jim's shoulders. "You could have died."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Enough with the melodrama."

Len stifled an overwhelming urge to shake him until his teeth rattled. "I'm not exaggerating. If you
had died, it would've been your own fault. You knew David was high when you let him tie you up. Hell, if he hadn't been, you'd been playing with him for months. You must have known what he was capable of, stoned or sober. Worst of all, you let him gag you, so you couldn't even ask the computer to call for help. That's not edge play, Jim: It's goddamn suicidal, and the only reason I didn't let the men in white coats take you away is because I thought you were acting under David's influence. Now, I'm not so sure."

Jim said nothing, stubborn chin jutting like a recalcitrant five-year-old's. When Leonard was a teenager and his little brother used to pull that shit, he'd turn him over his knee and spank him. Wouldn't work with Jim: The sick bastard would just enjoy it.

Leonard sighed. He picked up Jim's Coke can and took a swallow. The phosphorus in the stuff leached the calcium from your bones and the caramel color gave you cancer, but fuck it: tasted amazing. He only wished Jim would limit his self-destructive behavior to the carbonated variety. He took another long swallow, then crumpled the can and tossed it into the recycler. He looked at Jim, who was still pouting. "I didn't ask you this a year ago," Leonard said. "I should have, but I couldn't stand to go into it then. So I'm asking now: Why?"

"Why what?" Jim asked tiredly.

"Why do it? I understand the pleasures of a little light bondage. I may be from Georgia, but I'm not a total hick. This I don't get. Letting someone cut you, bite you, make you bleed—how can you get off on it?"

"I don't know. I just do."

"Don't give me that. You've got an I.Q. of 151, don't tell me you never pondered the question. Sex takes up too much of your life for you not to have thought about it." When Jim didn't reply: "Make me understand. I need to, or I'll have to conclude that this is an irrational compulsion. You know where that line of thinking leads. Nowhere good, for your social life or your career."

Jim stared at him, blue eyes somber. "So we're back to threats again."

"I'm not threatening you. I'm telling you what is going to happen, has to happen, if you don't start explaining. It would gut me if you never spoke to me again, but I would rather have you hating me and breathing. A dead best friend is no fucking use at all."

Jim was silent for a long moment. Leonard could see the thoughts passing over his face—anger, worry, a touch of embarrassment. Jim had always been ass at hiding his emotions. Not unusual for someone with his Psi-rating: He might have made an excellent shrink, if he didn't have ants in his pants. No sitting in a plush office and listening to whiny patients for Winona's youngest.

Finally, Jim spoke. "When I was five, Sam and I went to stay with my Grandmother Murray." His voice was soft, almost apologetic. "She didn't want us, I guess I can't blame her: She was an old lady, and we were two rambunctious little kids. But Mom had an off-planet assignment, and she was between husbands then. There was nowhere else for us to go. Grandpa Tiberius was dying of cancer, and Uncle Mark was still in Starfleet. Kate Murray was Catholic, really old-fashioned about it. I mean, pre-Vatican II old-fashioned: No meat on Fridays, mass three times a week, religious icons all over the house." He paused, eyes far away.

Leonard didn't try to ask where this was going. He was no shrink, but he'd had enough Psych training to know that the more important the admission, the longer it took the subject to get to it. He propped his elbow on the raised headrest of the exam table, waiting.
After a minute, Jim went on. "I was terrified of the crucifixes. She had about a dozen of them nailed up all over the place. They were the real gruesome kind—agonized expressions, twisted limbs, bloody wounds. The one in my room had *glow in the dark eyes*, how fucked up is that? But the one at the church she took us to was the worst. It must have been twenty feet tall—or maybe it just looked that way, because I was so small. I never heard one word of one sermon, too busy staring at Jesus on the cross. I didn't want to look at him, but I couldn't not look, you know? Used to have nightmares I was locked in the sanctuary by myself at night, and Jesus would come down off the cross and start chasing me around. Sometimes, I dreamed the little Jesus in my room turned into the big Jesus from the church, and he stood over my bed and told me it was my turn, *I had to be up on the cross now*, with the ropes and the nails and the blood. Used to piss the bed, I was so scared. Soaked the mattress right through." He stopped again, biting his lip. The bit of color that had come into his face after drinking the soda was gone.

"Why didn't you tell Grandma about it? Ask her if she would put Our Savior somewhere else?"

"You know, it never occurred to me. I guess when you're a little kid, you don't think a grown-up would ever do something just because you asked. She probably would have taken it down—she was strict, but she was never mean to us. But I didn't ask. Didn't have a decent night's sleep the whole time Sam and I were there. Even after we left, I'd dream about those crucifixes once in awhile. Years later, when I was in high school and college—even a couple of times here, my first year. Pathetic, huh?"

Jim's mouth twisted, like he was trying for a sardonic smile. But his eyes didn't smile. His fingers clenched the arm of the plaswood chair. He took a breath and continued.

"Dave and I had been playing hard for months. You're right, I knew how far he could push it. But everything we did, and he never really got to me. Even when I was begging him for mercy, deep down I knew it was a game. He never got me into deep headspace, it never got *real*. He knew it, too, and it bothered the shit out of him. But one night, I told him about the crosses at Grandma Kate's—I don't even remember how it came up. You know how it is—sometimes men talk too much after we've come our brains out. He brought the cross home a couple of weeks later. Had it made special. The first time I saw it, fuck! I felt like I was five again."

"I'd have told him where to shove the grisly thing."

Jim did smile this time. "Yeah, but your mama raised you right. Mine was too busy taking soil samples half a galaxy away." He shrugged. "It took me a week to decide to do it. I knew it was gonna be scary, but I didn't think it would turn out like it did. In Dave's defense, he didn't plan to pass out."

"Right. Somebody just came along and jabbed that hypo in his arm."

"*Anyway,*" Jim went on, "there was a moment, a few hours into it. The worst moment. I was bleeding pretty badly, cold all over, and I started to panic. I screamed into the gag, but it was pointless. Nobody could hear, nobody was going to help—not Dave, not the computer, certainly not Jesus. It was—*indescribable*. Like falling over a cliff at night, watching all that dark rushing up to meet you. This was it, *Bones: sheer primal terror*. All the months of playing, and it finally got real." He shook his head. "But then something amazing happened."

Leonard didn't want to ask the question. But this far in, he couldn't not ask. "What?"

"I remembered—*couldn't* believe I let myself forget. The only way to get through the dark is to let go. Just keep falling. I fell *through* it, Bones—all that fear. Suddenly, it was a game again. I'm good at games." He smiled, brighter than California sunshine. "A minute later I got my right hand free,
tore off the gag, and called home. Then I passed out—but you know the rest."

Yeah. He knew. Of the many gruesome sights he'd seen, this was one of the worst: Jim on the floor of David's quarters, the standard-issue grey carpet underneath him black with blood. For an endless moment, standing there frozen in the doorway, Leonard had been sure he was dead. The ancient instrument of torture cast its long shadow over his friend's body, the bloody ropes, the used hypo. On the couch, Jim's captor stirred in his stupor, turning over and burrowing his freckled face deeper into the cushion. Leonard just stared at him, one hand gripping the black medical bag. It was fortunate Jim stirred then, too, moaned in pain. Otherwise, Goldman would never have left that room, not alive. A few cc's of the right chemical cocktail on top of what was already in his system—it wouldn't have even been hard. Modern hypos leave no marks.

"Bones? Still with me?"

"I don't get it," Leonard rasped. "I mean, I do—you were playing chicken with yourself. But why? What was the point?"

"I haven't had the crucifix nightmare since. Not once."

"Mother of God," Leonard leaned against the exam table, running hands through his hair.

"I can't let myself be afraid," Jim said. "Not if I'm going to command. Fear is for little boys wetting their grandma's spare room bed. A starship captain can't feel it, not ever."

"Please. You've spent time in the archives, you've heard the logs. Captains are scared all the fucking time. The shit they see, they'd be crazy if they didn't piss their pants once in awhile."

"Not me. If I am scared, I work through it." He touched his neck. "One way or another."

Leonard considered him a minute. "Christ, kiddo. Did Spock's test really spook you that bad?"

"Last night wasn't about the Kobayashi Maru. I mean, it was, but not how you think."

Jim looked down at his hands. "My father wasn't scared. I found the tape in the archives, his last conversation with Mom. They talked about baby names. Seconds from death, and he was telling her not to call me Tiberius because I'd get teased at school. Un-fucking-believable."

"You are not your father."

"You think I don't know that?" Jim snapped.

Leonard stared at him.

Jim shook his head like he was clearing it. He stood. "I've got to go fail a Physics midterm."

"Wait," Leonard tried to put a hand on his arm, but Jim shook him off.

"Bones, stop," he said. "You can yell at me some more later. Just—let me go, okay?" His posture was tense but his eyes were pleading.

Leonard sighed. "Okay. But I want you to think about something, laddy boy: You are better than this. I don't care what childhood trauma you're dealing with, don't put yourself at some asshole's mercy because of it. Whatever drugs David Goldman's mother did when he was in utero, or whatever the hell Spock's problem is, it's not your fault. You don't have to be their punching bag just to prove you can take it. Because that's not brave: That's fucking stupid." He cupped Jim's chin in his
hand. "Your daddy would not approve."

"My father is dead," Jim said. "He doesn't give a damn."

He tore away and almost ran down the hallway.

Leonard leaned on the door frame. "I'm not," he said. "I do."

He walked into his office. Looked out the window again, thinking. He thought for awhile.

Jim Kirk had always been impulsive, promiscuous, and into pain. The first two traits could be explained by anybody who ever met Winona Kirk McClellan Hakamoto Sanchez—what was the latest husband? Leonard couldn't remember. Before David, Leonard never thought hard about Jim's S&M fetish. If getting tied up and paddled was as far as it went, Leonard wouldn't have cared. But this went way beyond a little slap-and-tickle. Leonard didn't buy the sex-chicken excuse, either, not completely. Like everybody else in Command track, Jim was an adrenaline junkie. Thrill-seeking aside, though, it didn't take Freud to see that a man who let somebody whip him, fuck him, and bind him to a cross thought he deserved punishment. But for what?

The source of Jim's masochism was an important question, and one Leonard intended to explore more fully. He hoped he could convince Jim to explore it, preferably with a qualified therapist. Danna could recommend somebody who specialized in sexual disorders—this was San Francisco.

But treating Jim could wait. The cross incident happened almost a year ago, and Jim had been relatively stable since the whip-cuts were closed. He still went to those bars in the Castro, but he never came home with more than a few red marks or slight bruising. Rugby-level injuries, and Leonard could live with them. Jim's fetish didn't seem to get dangerous until he found the right, or, actually, the wrong partner. David had been bad, but Spock was worse. At least Leonard had been certain Jim could kick David's ass if the situation ever called for it. Spock had twice Jim's strength, plus he was older and possibly smarter. This could get ugly fast unless Leonard got him out of the way. Too bad Spock's parents were on Vulcan: One visit to the Admirals with the tricorder evidence had been enough to finish off Goldman.

But Spock wasn't a junkie on the edge of a breakdown. Although his behavior was seriously strange. Leonard had first noticed it last night, that weird tension around him. It was like Spock was vibrating at a speed so fast you couldn't see or hear it. But you could feel it, the way you could feel the heaviness in the air just before a storm. It pressed on your eardrums, the backs of your eyeballs. It raised the hackles on your neck. The way Spock looked when Jim was hanging on his neck, as if he didn't know whether he was going to fuck him or eat him. (Maybe both, and not be too fussy about the order.) Creepy as hell, even before Leonard saw the bite mark.

Spock's reputation wasn't creepy. Cold and correct, maybe, but that was every Vulcan's. Either he was the world's greatest actor, or something had happened to him recently, intense enough to break all that icy composure to pieces. Leonard had no idea what it could be, but he was going to find out. He hadn't found shit about Vulcans at the library on Sunday, but he hadn't been trying. Humoring one of Jim's whims was way less motivating than saving Jim's ass.

"Computer," he said. "Bring up my most recent tricorder files. Video only."

A bunch of numbers and three humanoid figures popped up on the comscreen. It was raw data, captured in his flat when he examined Jim last night. He'd set the machine to wide scan, so it picked up everyone in the room's vitals. He couldn't have said why he did. Maybe even then, he knew somehow it would come to this.
"Filter out Terran subjects." Two of the figures disappeared.

"Enhance Vulcan subject. Vital stats, full spectrum."

Another set of figures appeared. Leonard blinked at them.

"Compare these with standard vitals for a Vulcan male, approximately thirty years of age. Wait—
modify comparison subject with 40% Terran vitals, same sex and age."

"Working." In five seconds a bar graph appeared. Leonard nodded grimly. It had been awhile since
he studied Vulcan physiology: He thought maybe he'd forgotten the numbers. He hadn't. Even
allowing for his human ancestry, Spock's vitals were not right. Very not right.

"Well, well," he whispered at the screen. "What the hell is wrong with you, my green-blooded
friend?" He paused, thinking. "Computer, show me Commander Spock's file."

"Full access to that data is restricted."

"Fine, give me what's not restricted. Hard copy. Print the tricorder stuff too while you're at it."

The printer spit plastic. Leonard scanned the few sheets. It was basic intel—DOB, schooling, etc. He
scanned for names. Spock's parents came up, and various teachers who'd written him letters of
recommendation. But there was one more. The final name in the file, the person to whom all queries
regarding Spock's health were to be directed.

"What's the last known electronic address for T'Lyn, clan Surak?"

The computer gave it to him. Leonard's eyebrows shot up. That was a Terran server.

"Physical address?" The computer dutifully recited.

"I'll be a monkey's uncle," Leonard muttered. He'd hoped at best to send an audio message to
Vulcan, but T'Lyn lived on Earth, not five miles away. Interesting.

Leonard shrugged off his lab coat and grabbed his wool one, stuffing the printouts into one of its
deep pockets. He headed out the door, turning down the corridor towards the elevator that led to the
cab stand outside. He was blowing off two meetings and a journal article that was already a week
overdue, but whatever. This was vital research. He doubted Spock's physician would be forthcoming
with data—a tightlipped lot, the Vulcans. But Len knew about persistence: He had relatives who still
weren't over the War of Northern Aggression, as they insisted on calling it. In a contest between
Vulcan stubbornness and Southern, they'd see who won. They would just see.
One thing he learned from his Xenopsychology classes: Vulcans have a well-developed sense of irony, evident in many aspects of their culture. This was definitely true of the Vulcan Embassy. Why else buy a four-hundred-year-old Victorian structure, gut it, and turn the inside into a stone-and-glass wonderland? Past the imposingly carved ten-foot-high front doors (reached only after presentation of credentials and a thorough bodyscan: Terrorism is rare these days, but caution is another Vulcan trait) the tan shingles and green gingerbread of the exterior gave way to polished cream marble floors, beige walls, and spare dark furniture. In the center of the main lobby was a big desk carved of black firestone, and beyond that was a thirty-foot-high glass atrium housing spiny, exotic desert plants brought from the dunes of Vulcan (at least, that's what the sign said). All in all, an impressive though somewhat incongruous base for Terra's most-favored ally.

Of all the figures he could have pictured sitting behind the desk, Leonard hadn't been expecting a skinny teenage boy. The kid had enough attitude for somebody twice his age, though. When Leonard presented his credentials again and asked to see T'lyn, the boy frowned like a monkey had offered him a piece of poo.

"Do you have an appointment?" he said.

"No."

"You cannot see her without an appointment."

"It's urgent business. Medical business." Leonard nodded at his credentials. "I'm a physician."

"How nice for you," the kid said. "You still need an appointment."

"Listen, Junior—"

"My name is Sharok. The rules are the rules, Doctor. There is no need to become emotional." He gave him a disgusted glance, like the monkey had started masturbating.

Leonard was about to show him just how emotional a human could get, when another teenager came up to the desk. A girl, with the same olive skin and straight, shiny dark hair as the boy—the standard Vulcan characteristics. But her eyes were a soft hazel instead of sullen brown, and her face was more open than his. A very cute face, snub-nosed and apple-cheeked. She started to say something to the boy in Vulcan, noticed Leonard, and gave him a cool little nod. The next time she spoke, it was in Standard.

"Sharok, may I see your notes from Instructor T'Mina's morning lecture?" she asked. "I was unable to attend."

The boy straightened, his snotty expression brightening. "Yes. Of course. I will message them to you." His long fingers skittered nervously over the desk's surface. The blotter was covered in tiny drawings, the same color ink as the blotches on his fingers. "Or I could bring a hard copy by your quarters—" Sharok glanced at the clock on the wall—"in 1.37 hours."

"A digital copy is quite adequate. Do not trouble yourself." The girl paused. "Although I do prefer to study from a hard copy, and the printer in my room has been malfunctioning."
"It is no trouble," Sharok said. "I will examine your printer, if you wish. Your studies shall not be disturbed." He said this like one ready to pitch himself bodily between her and any possible disturbance, from a glitchy printer to rampaging Romulans. "Perhaps—you would allow me to sketch you?" The words were too casual. "Instructor Vrath says I need practice with faces."

"Very well. Do not be late. I must prepare for the exam tomorrow."

"No," Sharok said. His eyes, dark and intent, were on her face. "I will not be late." The girl gave him a satisfied nod and turned to go.

"A pity you missed the lecture," he said. His face was calm but his voice kept betraying him. He spoke quickly, trying to keep her attention. "Instructor T'Mina was most informative about ancient Terran myths. Did you know their sky god was a man? The Romans called him Zeus."

Later, Leonard would be ashamed he did it: The poor kid was obviously smitten. But Sharok had been rude as hell for no good reason, and it had already been a long fucking morning.

"Excuse me," Leonard said. "That's incorrect. The Romans didn't call him Zeus, that was his Greek name. To the Romans he was Jupiter. Surprised you didn't remember that, Sharok—the fifth planet in the Sol system is named for him. You must have passed it on your way here. Of course, that's assuming your teacher was referring to the last of the Classical sky gods—there was more than one. Zeus' father Cronus, for instance. The Romans had another name for him, too: Saturn." Leonard gave the girl a grin. "Better double-check those notes, sweetheart."

"Indeed," the girl said, looking uneasy.

Two spots of green had appeared on Sharok's high cheekbones. "I simply misspoke," he said. "I am aware of the different names for the sky god. My notes are correct."

"Sure about that?" Leonard said. "We're also assuming your teacher was concentrating on the Greeks and Romans. To the Hindus, the sky god was Indra. And in Estonian legend—"

"Perfectly correct," Sharok said tightly. "Though Terran mythos is chaotic and inconsistent."

"I believe I will ask Stelen," the girl said. "His notes are always meticulous." She turned away.

"T'Ria—" Sharok actually reached forward like he was going to grasp one of her long braids. But she was too fast, her slim form already halfway across the shiny tiles of the lobby.

"Cute girl," Leonard said. "A little nerdy, but I guess you Vulcans like—" he cut off when he got a look at Sharok's face.

The boy's features were frozen, dark eyes fixed upon Leonard with an expression he had never before seen in a Vulcan: pure seething rage. Sharok seemed three seconds away from leaping across that fancy desk and getting his hands around Leonard's throat. Len was more bemused than scared. Sharok had gone from sullen to smitten to murderous in the space of two minutes. Len knew all about the wild mood swings of teenagers—personal experiences aside, he'd been occasional witness to his brother Hank's outbursts—but this was ridiculous.

He put his hands up in the intergalactic 'let's calm down' gesture. "Look, kid—"

The boy spat something in guttural Vulcan. He took a step around the desk, hands clenched.

"Sharok!" a sharp voice said behind them. "Compose yourself."
Sharok flinched as though he'd been slapped. He stilled, hands behind his back like a cadet at parade rest. He stared at the floor, his expression blank.

Leonard turned to look at the owner of the voice. He'd known it belonged to a woman, but he was still surprised to see her. She was quite young. It was sometimes difficult to tell Vulcan ages, but she couldn't be much more than thirty. She was also one of the best-looking females he had ever seen. Her deep crimson blouse and trousers flattered her figure, but when a woman has a figure like this, it doesn't need help: tall but not too tall, long-legged and slim-shouldered, with full breasts and hips and a tiny waist. A body to make a man's hands itch. Her glossy dark hair was cut straight across her forehead, falling to her collarbone unencumbered by curls or braids. A severe hairstyle most women couldn't carry off, but most women don't have big doe eyes and perfect bone structure. Her lips were so full and flawless that if she were Terran, he would have assumed she had them enhanced. But Vulcans don't go in for such vain cosmetic procedures. The woman must be all-natural—every last, distracting inch of her.

Leonard realized he was staring and cut his eyes away. She didn't notice him looking at her with his tongue hanging out, however: too focused on the boy. "Explain this outburst," she said.

Sharok started to speak in Vulcan.

"Standard!" she hissed. "Have you forgotten your manners entirely?"

He lifted his chin. "The Terran insulted me."

"Falsehood," the woman replied. "I heard the whole exchange. He merely corrected you. That would not have been necessary, had you been concentrating upon your duties instead of making idle conversation with T'Ria." At the mention of the girl, the boy went green. The woman raised one eyebrow at the reaction and went on. "If this man had been insulting, your response was still outrageous. I wondered whether you were too young for this position, even on a part-time basis. Now I am certain of it." She gestured at one of the guards standing by the big entrance doors. "Katan, please take the desk for the present. I will arrange for a permanent replacement later." The guard saluted and went to stand by the desk.

The boy didn't budge. "This is not necessary," he said. "I am perfectly in control."

"The mere fact that you are questioning my judgment tells me you are not. You will retire, and we will speak more of this later."

"But—"

"Child! Attend," the woman cut in, her own cheeks greening a bit. The boy jerked to attention again. The woman continued, consonants sharp with command. "Thy logic is in abeyance. If thou dost not wish to spend the next forty-eight hours in a meditation cell, retire. Now."

Sharok spun on his heel and fled the room, disappearing through one of the narrow doors partly concealed by the big glass atrium. The woman watched him go with a concerned expression.

When the door closed, she turned to Leonard. "My apologies. The boy is irrational and foolish."

"No need for that. Probably his mama's fault."

"I'm his mother," the woman said.

Leonard couldn't quite keep the surprise off his face. Sure, teen parents weren't unknown even in the Twenty-Third Century: He'd been one himself. But to meet one of Vulcan origin? He'd have been
less surprised to make the acquaintance of a purple unicorn. The more he got into this mess, the more he was realizing Jim was right: They didn't know shit about Vulcan sexuality.

He sure wouldn't mind knowing more about this one's.

*Down, boy.* "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to—"

"Do not apologize. You are correct: His lapse in *cthia* is my fault."

"Nah. Probably his daddy's doing," Leonard said, smiling.

"His father is dead."

Well, shit. Eleanora McCoy's eldest wasn't doing so hot today.

"How about we start over?" he said. "I'm Leonard McCoy. I'm a physician, and I need to speak with T'Lyn upon urgent business."

"I'm Sherron," the woman replied. "T'Lyn is my aunt. Sharok was correct, she does not usually see visitors without an appointment. But I will see what I can do."

"I appreciate that."

"After the way you were treated by one member of my family, it is only right that I intercede for you with another. Come—T'Lyn's cottage is further back on the grounds."

She led him through a different narrow door than the one Sharok had disappeared into. Down a rather bewildering tangle of corridors, out a set of glass doors, and they were in a big, beautifully kept garden full of shrubbery, blooming even in February: bougainvillea, honeysuckle, jasmine. The in-ground heaters alone must have cost a king's ransom.

The light in the garden suited her. She looked even younger than in the lobby, less stern and maternal. The midday sun picked up the auburn streaks in her hair, the golden quality to her skin. She was a study in angles: slanted eyebrows, slanted ears, a pointed chin and sculpted cheekbones. Cast her in marble and she would have made an excellent nymph. Placed in the center of the garden, gazing down at the leaves and petals with her bottomless eyes.

Sherron caught him staring. He looked away and poking distractedly at a honeysuckle, making the cascade of yellow blooms dance. "I didn't realize Vulcans were so into flowers," he said.

"Our native plants are quite different, of course: thinner and spinier, usually. But we appreciate Terran flora for all its soft abundance." Sherron drew a manicured nail lightly over the shocking pink fluff of a bougainvillea. She gave Leonard a slight smile. "They are fragile, of course, and capricious in some ways. They're forever surprising us, not always pleasantly." Her eyes were intent on his face. "But there's something so—seductive—about alien things, isn't there?"

"I'm not much of a gardener."

"Pity. There are few pleasures more intense than plunging into moist, giving ground."

"When you put it that way, I guess it does sound like fun."

"Indeed. Planting your seed, seeing things swell and bloom—what man wouldn't enjoy that?"

Leonard tilted his head at her. "Are we still talking about flowers?"
"What else could we be referring to?" That hint of a smile kept hovering around her lips.

"My girlfriend likes lilies." Danna wasn't actually his girl, but calling her his fuckbuddy seemed a trifle gauche.

Sherron held his gaze. "Your girlfriend," she said, "has excellent taste."

Well, there was another question marked off the list: Vulcans flirt, and they're really good at it. This one was, anyway. Too bad Leonard was seeing someone—or maybe not. For all he knew, Vulcan females were as crazy as the males. He didn't fancy being any woman's chew toy, even if she did have a mouth that almost made the prospect appealing.

Sherron gazed at him a second longer. Then she nodded at a thick clump of trees not far away. "My aunt's cottage is through there."

Down a short stone path, (the gardener stopped her weeding to give Sherron a respectful nod), around the trees and there it was, the cutest mock-Tudor cottage you ever saw. Surrounding it was a rose garden much larger than the structure itself, the spindly bushes nodding with yellow, pink, red blooms, some of them big as saucers. The scent was heavenly.

"My grandma would be jealous," Leonard said. "Your aunt has quite the green thumb."

"My cousin compounded a new fertilizer for her. Its results are impressive, as you can see."

"You'll have to ask him if he'll part with the recipe. Back home, my nana is having the worst problem with black leaf mold."

"Of course. Though you can make the request yourself. He's in Starfleet as well—Commander Spock." Seeing him blink: "Do you know him?"

"We're acquainted," Leonard said.

He tried to keep his voice neutral, but he must have betrayed something. She raised an eyebrow at him and seemed about to speak, when the door of the cottage opened. A small, round figure clad in a grey tunic and loose grey pants emerged. A wide sunhat was over her long dark braids, and in one of her garden-gloved hands was a bag of fertilizer. The other was fisted on her hip.

"Another new friend, Sherron?" she said. "I told you that Andorian would grow wearisome."

"Halal is charming, as ever," Sherron said, giving her aunt (for this must be T'Lyn) a coy smirk. "Dr. McCoy is here to see you." She walked closer to the front steps, beckoning him to follow. Closer in, he saw that T'Lyn was quite old, her round face wrinkled, braids streaked with white. But the blue eyes fixed on him were sharp, suspicious.

"Is that so?" she said.

"Sorry to intrude, Ma'am," he said. "I know I should have made an appointment—"

"Never mind the appointment. Now that you have intruded, what do you want?"

Leonard had experience dealing with scary old ladies. Nana was no picnic, and neither were her two daughters, her three sisters, or their assorted daughters. Steel magnolia didn't begin to cover it: Those witches could cut you without benefit of blade. Best get straight to the point.

He reached into the pocket of his coat, pulled out Spock's tricorder scans, and proffered them. She
set down the bag of fertilizer and smoothed the crumpled plastic. Sharp eyes scanned the sheets. Her lips thinned.

"Come into the house," she said, opening the door. Leonard started to follow, as did Sherron. T'Lyn glared at her niece. "Not you."

"But, Aunt—"

"Go busy yourself, girl! You're not wanted here."

Sherron looked concernedly at Leonard. T'Lyn made an impatient sound. "I'm not going to eat him. I'll leave that to you."

Sherron gave Leonard a hopeless little shrug. "I will be in the garden," she said. "When your interview is done, I will escort you out."

"We won't be long," T'Lyn said grimly.

She took Leonard by the shoulder and almost shoved him into the house, her grip shockingly strong. He followed her through a stuffy vestibule into a cozy living room, all done up in good antiques and flowered upholstery. On the chair across from the overstuffed sofa was a Siamese cat, blue eyes staring at him with the usual cattish contempt. T'Lyn waved at the sofa. "Sit."

He did, on the very edge of the cushion.

T'Lyn slid back a panel on the wall, exposing a replicator set into the old wood. "Would you like water or tea?" she said. "I suppose you could have one of those Terran sodas, if you must. They're terribly bad for you."

"No thank you, Ma'am, I—"

"You will have something," T'Lyn said. "Young people never hydrate properly these days, and you Terrans don't have drought as an excuse. Tea it is." She raised a fierce eyebrow at him.

"Yes, Ma'am," Leonard said meekly.

The resemblance to Sunday afternoons at Nana's was getting stronger and stronger: chintz pillows, hostile felines, forced refreshments and all. If she offered him ribbon candy, he was getting the hell out of here.

She put a tall glass of iced tea on a coaster, then set it on the coffee table in front of him. She took a glass for herself, taking a seat on the chair next to the cat. She looked at him with much the same disapproval.

"You know, of course, that I could have you arrested?" she said conversationally. "It's illegal to run a tricorder scan on a conscious subject without permission. That's Terran law."

Leonard took a polite sip of tea (bright green and bitter as soap—but when you're raised on the syrupy-sweet Southern variety, most teas taste like medicine). He held the glass away and wiped his lips. He gave her the same aw-shucks smile he used to give Nana. T'Lyn continued to glare.

"Maybe it was an accident. I was scanning someone else in the room and picked up his vitals."

"If so, you should have deleted Spock's data immediately. Why didn't you?"

Leonard shrugged. "I thought I might need it."
"If you're planning to write some sort of paper, I can assure you no respectable journal would publish it. Not without the permission of the Vulcan Science Academy."

"I might share the data, all right. But not with a scientific journal."

"If you're thinking of one of those filthy tabloids—"

"Lady, what do you take me for?" Leonard plunked the tea glass on the coaster. "I'm a doctor, not some sleazy reporter."

"Then why are you spying on my nephew?"

"I don't give a damn about your nephew. But he's gotten involved with someone I do care about. Way too involved."

"You're a friend of Nyota Uhura's?"

"Who?" The name sounded vaguely familiar, but Leonard couldn't place it.

"Ah." T'Lyn considered him over the rim of her glass. "This is about Jim Kirk."

Leonard blinked at her. "Spock's mentioned him?"

"I learned his name only today. Spock revealed it when he came to me for a full STI scan this morning. Young Kirk has quite the reputation, but I suppose I can see the attraction: His image is in the public files. He's very fair, isn't he?" T'Lyn's lips quirked, as if at a private joke.

"Yeah, Jim's a real cutie pie. Everybody thinks so. You don't have to worry about him passing anything on. It's Spock who's the real risk."

T'Lyn sobered. "There is nothing wrong with my nephew."

"Tricorders don't lie."

"Humans make mistakes."

"I know what I saw. I'm a Xenobiologist."

"How nice for you. It means nothing in this case." She raised her chin. "I made Spock, do you understand? Every cell, every synapse. He is perfect."

"Except for when he loses his mind and bites the hell out of an innocent human."

"From what I've been told, there is little innocent about Jim Kirk." T'Lyn set her glass down with an air of finality. "I'm sorry your friend betrayed you, Doctor. But I suggest you take the matter up with him."

"Betrayed me?"

"Or however you Terrans would phrase it—I can't keep up with young people's slang. Lovers' quarrels are private matters. Certainly nothing I want to concern myself with."

"Jim and I are not lovers. He's my friend."

"Such an imprecise word," T'Lyn mused. "Did you know that there are seven separate Vulcan nouns that translate as such?"
"Pick the one that means 'not fucking,'" Leonard said. Nana would have washed his mouth out with soap for using the f-word, but she never accused him of fucking his best friend.

"You appear quite concerned for someone who isn't personally involved." T'Lyn looked down, fingers tapping the coffee table thoughtfully. "Too concerned."

"Vulcans don't define friendship like Terrans. Guess y'all are too busy screwing each other."

Leonard stood. "If you won't do anything about Spock, I will. I'll take this right to the Academy administration. Admiral Barnett will be very concerned to hear one of his instructors is afflicted with some kind of hormone-induced psychosis. However the truth came to light, liability alone will force him to take action. We have laws on Earth, but more important, we have lawsuits."

"Are you threatening me?" T'Lyn asked quietly.

"I'm not threatening. I'm telling you what is going to happen."

T'Lyn considered him with her pale eyes. What a strange color for a Vulcan, almost freakish. Something even stranger was at the bottom of those blue orbs. When she raised her head to look at him, a beam of sunlight from the window struck her irises. He could see another shade there: Red. Spooky as the nightgaze of a Siamese cat. It struck you—pierced you.

"I see you, Leonard McCoy," she said. "You're very smart, aren't you? You always were."

"I have my moments."

"Yes, very smart," she went on, as if he hadn't answered. "Smarter than he was. Poor fellow! How difficult it must have been for him, forever walking in your shadow. But he adored you. Like the father neither of you had."

Leonard stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Such a beautiful boy. Not smart but bright, despite his shadows. The shadows made him wild, though. Reckless. A tragedy, seeing all that light snuffed out, wasted on a back country road. I don't know how you survived it. I'm not sure you did."

"You're crazy," Leonard rasped. "I'm going."

"Yes, run away. Just as you did three years ago. But before you go, tell me something, Doctor: When you bind Jim's wounds, does it make your bleeding stop? Does it help you forget? Sweet Henry, taken so cruelly. Your darling brother."

The whole world had narrowed to a tunnel, that cruel face at the end of it. Evil words ringing in his ears: bleeding, taken, brother. But they were fading, replaced by a dull animal roaring. His hands clenched to painful fists, an awful burning in his heart. He had never hurt a woman in his life, but this wasn't a woman: some kind of devil, red eyes, pointed ears and all. No telling what might have happened, if just then he hadn't been pulled back by strong arms.

"Doctor! Compose yourself." Sherron jerked her head. "Dear gods, Aunt. The things you say!"

"I spoke only the truth. You shouldn't have listened."

"One day you'll choke on your truths, old le-matya." More words, in strident Vulcan. That inexorable grip was pulling him to the door. He didn't want to go. He wanted to get his hands around the devil's throat. He made a lunge and was pulled back. He tried again, and felt hot, pinching fingers on his neck. The world went grey.
"Get him out of here. Don't bring him back."

_We'll see who comes back, bitch. We'll just—_

The fingers tightened. The world went black.

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When he awoke, he was in his own room. Leonard sat up, winced, and plopped back on the pillow. He stared at the ceiling a minute, then glanced at the clock on the wall: 12:41. He'd been out nearly two hours. He might have thought everything at the Embassy had been a bad dream, if it weren't for the pain in his neck. Slowly, he sat up again. Looked around.

Christ only knew how the Vulcans had gotten him home. He wouldn't put it past them to have some kind of localized transporter capable of overriding the security barriers on the Academy dorms. Sneaky bastards—or bitches, in this case. At least his room appeared undisturbed, its workmanlike neatness (not as neat as it could have been, but practically sterile compared to the chaos that was Jim's bedroom) the same as it was this morning. Everything was in place.

Everything except his medical bag. It was closed when he left this morning. Now it was open. Heedless of the pull on his neck, Leonard dashed to the dresser and turned the bag upside down. Its contents spilled onto the plaswood: instruments, hypos, scanners. Everything was where he left it. Everything except his tricorder. Frantically, he patted the left pocket of the coat he was still wearing, the one which had held the hard copy of Spock's scan. Empty.

"Computer!" he barked. "Display the back-up copies of the tricorder scans from midnight."

"File does not exist."

Leonard took a breath. "Link up with the computer in my office. Security code: Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot, 42 dash 820. Same file request."

"Working." A pause. "File does not exist."

He threw the black bag across the room. "Fuck!"

The Central Computer was not programmed to respond to profanity. Leonard discovered this the time the system ate one of his articles. Call it every name in the book, the cursed thing wouldn't give back what it took. Just like those assholes at the Vulcan Embassy. No point in calling over there, he knew what their response would be: stony silence and/or scathing sarcasm.

Leonard forced himself to sit on the edge of the bed and think. Last time the system failed him—human error, not alien sabotage—he'd been nearly in tears at the prospect of six months of work gone for good. Before he could start drinking heavily, however, Jim intervened. His roommate didn't know much more about computers than Leonard did, but Jim knew a guy. He always did, often in the Biblical sense.

"Computer. Contact Achebe Chang." His roommate's ex (or current, relationship designations tended to be fluid when it came to Jim Kirk) had tech-fu like you wouldn't believe. According to Jim, Achebe had once constructed a file from a computer that had been burned in an electrical fire—practically scraped the data off the chips by hand. He had to be a match for the Vulcans.

"Hello, Len," Achebe's smooth voice said. "How have you been?"

"Just dandy. Listen, Che, I haven't got time for pleasantries. I've lost a file, a really important one. It was erased from the system. Can you recover it?"
"Of course. Data is never really erased—you probably just put it in the wrong subfolder again."

"It's a little bit more complicated than that. Will you come now?"

"I'm rather occupied with a batch of student projects at present. Commander T'S'Ngth wants them graded by tonight. How about tomorrow? I need to drop off something for Jim, anyway."

"Can we do it sooner? It's urgent."

"I'd be happy to help, but T'S'Ngth is adamant: His/her dominant male personality in partic—"

"The file concerns Spock." When Achebe didn't reply: "Jim told me about the Kobayashi Maru thing. More power to you. But if you really wanna see your ex-boss suffer, this is it. Trust me."

A pause. "I'll be there in twenty minutes." The connection terminated.

Ha. Achebe was half-Chinese and half-Nigerian: The man knew a lot about holding grudges and settling scores. Almost as much as a man from Georgia.

Leonard lay back on the bed. His neck burned, and his heart. He started planning his speech to Admiral Barnett.
Spock had just finished lighting the incense when there was a buzz at the door. He glanced at the clock on the dresser: 12:45. His guest was early: He did not mind. After his misadventures of the previous evening, he was determined to forcibly wrench his life back into order. Spending more time with an appropriate companion was imperative: He could not think of Jim Kirk if his attention was focused upon Nyota Uhura. It was only logical.

When the door slid open, a beautiful woman was standing there, dressed all in red. But the red was not a Starfleet cadet uniform, and the woman was not Nyota. There was also little chance that this one was coming to tryst with him. Consanguinity laws varied between planets, but on Vulcan their union would not be seemly. Not for the past five hundred years, at any rate.

"Sherron," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello to you too, Cousin," she said, pushing past him and striding into his quarters.

"How did you get past the security checks?" Nyota had a passcard: His cousin did not.

"A twenty-digit code and sub-infrared bioscans? Why don't they just leave the doors open?"

He should have known. Among her other duties at the Embassy, Sherron was responsible for the security system. As a result, she could break into others with little effort. The fact that he would have buzzed her up meant nothing. If Sherron could penetrate defenses, she would, and the more challenging the better. She took much the same attitude towards men.

"Why are you burning incense?" she asked, shrugging out of her coat and draping it artfully on the sofa table. "Are you expecting someone?"

"Yes. Quite soon."

She tilted her head at him, glossy hair brushing her elegantly sculpted cheekbone. "Jim Kirk?"

Spock stilled. For a moment he was angry at his aunt for breaking doctor-patient confidentiality, but then he thought better of it. Sherron had a way of knowing things that she should not: This, too, was part of her job.

"T'Lyn will be most displeased when she discovers you have been eavesdropping," he said.

"She knows. I am displeased with her, so we are even." Sherron arranged herself on his sofa. "Sit with me, Spock. We must talk."

"My visitor will be here at any moment."

"You can play with your companion later. I suppose it is the girl you are expecting: Taygetian amber is such a feminine scent." She sniffed at the incense holder, then fixed her eyes upon him. "Sit. This will not take long."

Spock sat, because it was obvious she wasn't going to leave until he did. Sherron's physical likeness to their great-grandmother T'Pau was striking, and the resemblance went beyond the bones. To call his cousin's determination stony was a gross understatement. Right now she seemed more than
determined, however—her cheeks were green, eyes glittering. As close to upset as any adult Vulcan would normally display, even with a family member.

He asked her what the matter was in Vulcan, but she shook her head. "Don't," she continued in Standard. "I have just had a fearsome row with T'Lyn in Old High Speech. Right now I would rather speak Klingon than Vulcan."

"What was the subject of the argument?" Sherron was T'Lyn's favorite niece, just as he was her favorite nephew. She could be sharp with both of them, it was her nature. But their discussions, tinged with sarcasm as they might be, rarely devolved into real disagreements.

"You, of course," Sherron said. "Don't gape at me like a dazed sehlat! You must know what I mean. What are your intentions with this Terran boy?"

Spock felt his face grow warm. "I don't see how that is any of your concern."

"Yesterday, it was not. But today we had a visit from the Terran's friend, Dr. Leonard McCoy. Were you aware he had tricorder scans of you? He was planning to take them to the Academy's administration."

Spock's stomach went cold. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he thinks you're dangerous. How could he not? You plowed his best friend!" She shook her head. "You sank your teeth into the boy's neck; you tasted his blood. The Doctor thinks it is a sign of psychosis." She paused. "We know better, do we not?"

Spock looked down at his hands.

"Your time is coming." It was not a question. "Very soon."

Spock looked at her. "You read T'Lyn's files?" They were supposed to be secure, but it was Sherron who had made them so. She could access any information she wanted.

"I do not need files to tell me this. I see it. I smell it, despite that cloying incense." Sherron's manicured fingers picked anxiously at the nubby fabric of his sofa. "I was not always adept at recognizing the onset of the Fever. Now I am wiser."

Spock grimaced sympathetically. Most young women who partnered with a man enduring the Fever were given months of training and placed in a semi-meditative state prior to the onset of their betrothed's plak tow. This had not been Sherron's experience.

She rose and walked to the portion of the room devoted to meditation. Avoiding the mat with her booted feet, she looked at a painting that was hung directly above the altar of the ancestral gods. A striking expressionist piece, violent slashes of red and black converging upon a lone abstracted Vulcan figure rendered in faded grey. The slashes appeared to be attacking the man (the figure was too broad-shouldered to be female). The man crouched low in defensive agony. But he could not escape, for the slashes also seemed to emanate from him: an enemy within. Spock had kept the piece in a storage facility for years—it was really too valuable to be hung in an Academy apartment—but recently he felt moved to display it. Ponder it.

"I remember this," Sherron said softly. "It was one of the last pieces that Varek finished."

"It's magnificent," Spock said. "A very generous gift."

"Not really. I couldn't bear to have it in the house, nor any of the others he made those last six
months. I gave away all of them, though Mother said I was foolish. If I had sold them, I could have lived comfortably the rest of my life. The Museum of Shi'Kahr made a generous offer."

"Why didn't you?"

"I do not want comfort. I enjoy working. Lady T'Ren has never understood that." Sherron turned her head and gave him a slight smile. "Which is why I work on Terra."

Spock inclined his head. In this they were of one mind.

Her smile faded. "But soon I will be going home." Before he could ask the obvious: "Sharok. His symptoms are not as marked as yours, but they are advancing. T'Lyn estimates that he has at most six months before the Fever takes him. He requires assistance he can find only on Vulcan."

"Are the signs definite?"

"He is restless and inattentive, and his conduct to me borders on insolent. All this might simply be explained by immaturity, but his attentions to Ambassador Selel's daughter are marked. She is very pretty, and the only girl at the Embassy near his age. The infatuation is not unexpected, but it is worrisome. The security of the property is formidable, but the Fever is cunning. Almost preternaturally so. T'Ria is vulnerable so long as my son remains here."

Spock shook his head. "He turned fifteen only last month."

"The men in clan Kirak develop early." She paused. "Varek was fifteen."

They stood in silence a moment.

Sherron roused herself. "Come, let us not be so grave. All will be well. I have consulted my brother. He is going to find an excellent consoler for Sharok." She looked at him. "He would do the same for you."

"Thank you, no."

"What will you do, then?"

"I am considering the matter."

"Consider. Biting humans—is that how you consider?"

Spock turned away. "Thank you for your visit, Cousin. But if you will excuse me—"

"Wait," she said. "Don't do that. Not to me. I'm sorry I was sarcastic. I spend too much time with T'Lyn, I think." She grabbed his shoulder and turned him to face her. "T'Lyn thinks your judgment is sound in this matter: I do not. That was the subject of our argument. I have a great affection for you, as she does. Unlike her, I do not think you are perfect. I see your anger. You resent having to submit to the Fever, you think you are above it. That is why you refuse to see a consoler, as any ordinary man would. But what are your options?"

Spock would not meet her eyes. Sherron went ruthlessly on. "T'Lyn told me of your break with Stonn. You could reconcile with him, but it is not an ideal solution."

He did look at her then. "You've never cared for him, have you?"

"No. His treatment of his betrothed is abominable."
"T'Pring is spoiled and petulant. He will give her status and wealth—that is all she cares for."

"Did Stonn tell you that? She loves him, Spock. Beyond logic and reason. She would not hate you so much if she felt less. Stonn must know it. If he had any honor, he would have broken with her long ago. Or he would have broken with you, if he desires his father's land so much. But he is manipulative and selfish. You are well rid of him: He would only have pulled you deeper into his deceits. But if you cannot see him and will not see a consoler, what will you do?"

When he said nothing: "Are you going to mate with a Terran? Is that the plan? Your girl—"

"She is not suitable. Her Psi-rating is inadequate."

"Your boy, then. This Jim—"

"He is most definitely not suitable."

"Why? What is his Psi-rating? If you do not know, I could acquire his medical files."

"Do not commit a felony on my account." Spock paused. "I do not have an exact number, but his Psi-rating is high. Astonishingly so. As are his energies—he is very resilient for a Terran."

"Can you trust him? Would he keep your confidence?"

"He is emotional." Spock considered. "But he is not the type to sell a story to the tabloid nets."

"Then what is the problem?"

"I do not like him," Spock said forcefully. "Our encounter was an error. It won't be repeated."

"You bit him, Cousin. You know what that means. Perhaps your rational mind does not care for Jim Kirk, but parts of you like him very well. It will not be much longer before those parts are in control. What do you suppose will happen then?"

Spock clenched his hands. "I will take precautions."

"You cannot. Not if your primitive brain has fixated upon the boy. The Fever is cunning, and it will find a way to take him. If he has not been prepared, if the two of you have not been bonded properly . . . " she trailed off. "You will hurt him, and he is only Terran. He may not survive."

Sperron sunk down onto the meditation mats. He ground the heels of his hands into his eyes. He heard Sherron kick off her boots, felt the mats dip with her weight. She pulled his hands from his face. She looked at him with her dark eyes, so lovely and so worried.

"You cannot know how it is to be on the other side of the Fever. You were with Stonn the last time he experienced it, but that was different. You had months to prepare, and the two of you were lovers for years. If something had gone wrong, help was near. That is the only way plak tow is bearable. To watch the Fever burn every bit of reason from a man's face, to be forced to endure its hungers unprepared, unaware—" her eyes filled. Sherron blinked the water away. "You cannot dislike Jim Kirk so much, Spock."

He pressed her hand. It took him a moment to speak. "I do not know what to say."

"You need not say anything to me. Talk to the boy. He must have some attachment to you, if he allows you to bite him without complaint. If he is willing, you can prepare him. It is not normal to perform the rites with a Terran, but you are half-Terran, so perhaps it is fitting." Seeing Spock frown:
"If you really cannot bear the thought of bonding with him, see a consoler. When I take Sharok home, you can travel with us. Inform your superiors that it is urgent family business. That is not a falsehood."

"I don't know," he said. "I need time to think."

"Gods give me strength!" She flung up her hands. "What is there to think about?"

He looked at her a moment. "You are right, Sherron. I do not know the Fever in the way you describe. But you cannot know it the way I do. No Vulcan woman can. The slight hormonal surges females endure every year are nothing compared with true pon farr. I appreciate your concern for me, I understand your distress. Your experiences have been unimaginably difficult. So much that I believe they cloud your reason. More than you think my judgment is clouded."

Sherron stood, face set. "Very well," she said. "I won't impose my irrationality any longer."

He stood also. "Wait. I would not have you leave upset."

"I am not a child. I am not upset," Sherron said, gaze glittering. "I will say one thing further, which you can heed or not. If you hurt this man out of your own stubborn pride, you will never recover. Whatever damage it may do to your career, the damage to your peace of mind will be irreparable." Her eyes cut to the painting. "My husband resisted the Fever, and it destroyed him. If you think it will show you any more mercy than it did Varek, you are the irrational one."

She strode to the sofa table and shoved her arms into her coat sleeves. "By the by, I expunged McCoy's tricorder scans. If he does go tattling to the Academy, he will do it without proof."

"Thank you." He paused. "I am grateful for your efforts. You know I am."

"This wasn't just about you, Spock. The last thing we need is the Federation authorities poking their noses into pon farr. They would never understand. We do not, and we have been enduring it for thousands of years." She buttoned her coat, moving nimbly and aggressively, as always. "Remember what I told you. Think hard upon the future."

He sighed. "I seem to do little else."

She walked towards the door. He followed her. On the threshold, she stopped. "One last thing. Be vigilant around McCoy. He is clever, and he is vindictive. Ferocious, in an almost Vulcan fashion. A most unusual human." Her eyes grew thoughtful. "He definitely merits attention."

Spock offered her a small smile. "Are you going to spy on him or seduce him?"

"Who says I have to choose?" Her full lips turned up. She didn't look so fierce anymore. Under all that intensity, she had a good heart. She was at her most dangerous when protecting those she loved, much like her great-grandmother. And her great-great aunt.

She leaned forward and kissed him softly on the cheek. In tall boots, she was nearly his height. "Take care of yourself. We will speak again soon."

"I look forward to it."

She gave him a disbelieving eyeroll and strode down the hall, long coat flapping after her.

The door slid closed and he leaned against it a moment, eyes shut.
Sherron's visit had discomposed him, in a way this morning's consultation with T'lyn had not. His aunt's remarks on his unprotected encounter with a promiscuous Terran had been painful, her inoculations moreso. But for all her sarcasm, T'lyn respected his judgment. She had not further pushed the idea of a consoler, and she certainly hadn't brought up the absurd notion of partnering with Jim Kirk. Sherron still saw him as her fragile little cousin, to be bossed about and protected from schoolyard bullying. Better she worry about her own son: Sharok was in many ways Varek all over again. The circumstances of the boy's conception were still related as a cautionary tale in both of his parents' clans.

Spock would not dwell upon the interview further. He was expecting a guest. His body tensed at the thought of Nyota's warm smile, her soft flesh. They would enjoy a pleasurable afternoon, her company as sure an inoculation against the contagion of Jim Kirk as any of T'lyn's hypos. She was only intending to be with him an hour, but he would convince her to stay. He could, if he concentrated on it. The only way he wished to emulate his father: Before marrying Amanda, Sarek's reputation with women had been formidable. Or so Stonn had once said.

Spock glanced at the clock, frowning. She was late. This was not like her. Why was she late?

Just then, the computer chimed. "Incoming message from Nyota Uhura. Audio and video."

He straightened himself and calmed his features. "Answer."

The telescreen across from the sofa lit up. Nyota appeared to be standing in the corridor outside the tenured faculty offices. Her lovely face was creased with worry.

"Is everything well?" he asked her.

"No," she said in a low voice, her eyes cutting to the door behind her. "Commander T'S'Nghth's secondary male personality emerged this morning. We haven't heard from him in months, and suddenly he's back. He doesn't like my thesis. He has all these changes he wants me to make, and that's okay, I guess. I don't relish the idea of rewriting thirty pages, but I could. Only the primary male personality doesn't want me to make changes, he says the chapter is fine, and—"

The door behind her slid open. A glistening purplish-pink creature, its seven-foot-tall columnar form studded with tentacles, emerged. It focused two of its four eyestalks on Nyota.

"Cadet Uhura," the resonant voice of T'S'Nghth's primary male personality said. "Return. We must finish discussing this."

"There is nothing to discuss," another voice, also male but higher-pitched, said resentfully. "The girl will make the changes."

"She will not. Her discussion of the Romulan dative case is more than adequate."

The other two eyestalks turned to the first pair with withering scorn. "Of course you would think so. Your understanding of the finer points of conjugation has always been rudimentary."

"How dare you! I was declining Vulcan verbs when you were nothing more than a mewling little voice at the bottom of our tertiary frontal lobe!" All the tentacles on the Septisent's left side were now twitching furiously. The ones on the right side remained loose. Contemptuous.

"Time to retire, old man," the secondary male said. "You're clearly going senile."

"Insolent maggot!"
"Stuffy old squid!"

The thickest tentacle on the left side reached out and smacked the right side with all its might.

"OW!" both voices said at once. More thick tentacles tangling together, as the Septisent began wrestling with itself. The rosy mass writhed back into T'S'Ngth's office.

"Shall I call Security?" Spock said, only half-joking.

"No," Nyota said miserably. "I've seen this before with the other personalities. S/he will tire themselves out, and then there will be some kind of compromise. But it's going to take awhile. I'll have to go straight to the library afterwards. I'm sorry—I won't be able to see you today."

"I understand. We'll plan something for later this week."

"Yes. I don't care if I have to tie all his/her tentacles in a knot, I'm taking a day—"

"Uhura!" two voices shouted from inside the office.

"I'll call you later," Nyota said to him, and the screen went dark.

Spock looked around his neat, bright quarters, smelling so sensuously of incense. Every muscle in his body ached with frustrated need. He could go to the gymnasium and work off the tension, but after what had happened last night, that would not be wise. He was not composed enough to meditate, and the thought of grading student projects made him feel tired and irritated. He would not do them justice. But what was he to do?

His stomach growled: He would eat. He had not ingested anything since he finished the okra stew at dawn. He had planned to make something for himself and Nyota after he satisfied his first hunger, a pleasant post-coital repast, but that was not to be. The prospect of settling for a solitary meal was not appealing, but it seemed he was fated to get nothing he wanted today.

He jumped a bit as the silence was broken by the buzzing of the door behind him. It must be Sherron returned: Nobody else with access to the building would be visiting at this time.

The door slid open. Spock stared.

"Hi!" Jim Kirk said, grinning widely. He held up two plasboard containers. "Want some lunch?"
Chapter 13

xiii. Kirk

Five Minutes Earlier

Jim stood outside the big, imposing pile of bricks that made up the faculty apartments. Two plasboard containers were balanced under one arm. The other was behind his head, fingers clamped to the back of his neck as he stared at the combox, thinking hard.

It had seemed like a good idea fifteen minutes ago. When he left the Physics lab, his stomach had been growling. Two hours of wildly guessing at multiple choice questions, coming on top of ten hours of constantly losing the contents of his stomach, had left him hungry enough to gnaw his own limbs off. The nearby diner seemed like a better alternative than autocannibalism.

It was the daily special that had given him the idea: **Vulcan Fruit Compote**, the flashing sign by the door said. Jim had chosen to take it as divine guidance. He'd gotten an order to go, along with his own lunch. The plan was to stop by Spock's rooms, be super-charming at the combox, and get himself buzzed up. Once he was inside, matters would develop from there. Jim didn't want to overthink it: Instinct got you a lot further with the Vulcan than careful planning. Jim had the bruises (among other sore places) to prove it.

The combox was the tricky part. It was much easier to seduce someone in person, when you could see his eyes and read his body language. Hard for Spock to walk away when you were right there in the flesh. An audio connection was different. All Spock had to do was press a button, and the encounter was over. Jim figured he had about thirty seconds to get in through those thick glass doors, or he wasn't getting through at all. He did his best work under some type of restraint, but this wasn't the fun kind.

He had his finger about an inch from the touchscreen that would connect him to Spock's rooms, when he was almost knocked off his feet by someone striding purposefully down the stairs.

"Excuse me. I did not see you," a calm voice said.

Jim regained his balance and looked up. He experienced a split-second hope that it was Spock: This wasn't totally unrealistic, even given the fact that dozens of people lived in the building. There were dozens—hundreds—of bars in greater San Francisco, and he and Spock had both ended up at Billy's on Sunday. Fate was on his side in this, Jim was sure of it.

Maybe not so much today. His batterer was female. Jim's eyes widened as he got a better look at her. She was gorgeous, really gorgeous, like a Twenty-Third Century Angelina Jolie (Jim had seen her movies on Nostalgia Net—*Gia* was a personal favorite): tall, built, brunette, with big dark eyes and full pink lips. Maybe she was a descendant of the actress, this *was* California. Had to be related somehow, if it weren't for the pointy ears, she could be Jolie's sis—

Wait a sec. Pointy ears? "Hey," Jim said, quickly blocking her path. "Do you know Spock?"

"If you are a tabloid reporter, I have nothing to say," she said, not making eye contact. "You should find a respectable job."

"I'm not a reporter, I'm a friend. I have to get in the building."

"Then buzz his rooms yourself." She made another attempt to walk around him, moving in that fluid
fashion common to Vulcans, but desperation made him nimble.

"Please," he said, blocking her again. "I need to see him."

She stopped, looking at him narrowly. "Who are you?"

"My name is Jim Kirk. I told you, I'm a friend of—"

"I know who you are." The Vulcan woman stared at him, her eyes deep and dark enough to fall into. She really was stunning: Maybe if this afternoon's plan didn't work out, he could ask her to lunch. He already had the salad.

He gave her a grin. "Guess my reputation precedes me."

"Something like that," she said, still peering at him. "You are not what I expected. You are very fair—your hair and eyes."

Jim shrugged. "Lots of blue-eyed blonds where I come from."

"Not where I come from," the woman said. She shook her head, shiny locks brushing her cheek. "Spock," she said softly, "what are you doing?"

"So you do know him."

"Yes," she said. "My name is Sherron. Spock is my cousin—it is why I am here today."

"Oh, that's nice. I didn't realize he had family on—"

"Why are you here, Jim Kirk? Are you planning to tryst with him again?"

Jim tilted his head at her. "Why? You wanna watch?" He looked her up and down. "That could be arranged."

Sherron tilted right back. "Very fair and very rude. Yes, I definitely see why he likes you."

"Spock likes me?"

"No," Sherron said. "At least, not in the way you are thinking." She thought a minute. "I will let you into the building, under one condition."

"Hey, I already said you could watch—"

"Shut up," she said, "and listen. I will let you in, if you promise me that you will talk to Spock."

"About what?"

"Where this affair of yours is going, and what his intentions are towards you. Promise, on your honor as a future Starfleet Officer, that you will make him discuss it."

Jim frowned at her. "Why the hell do you care?"

"Spock is my cousin," she said again. "His well-being concerns me. Yours as well."

"You don't even know me."

"I know what you are in for, if you aren't very careful. Promise me." She stared at him again. Those eyes of hers could eat your face.
"Okay, damn," Jim said. "I promise."

Sherron turned and, fingers moving at lightning speed, typed a complex code into the combox. A loud buzz, and the door to the building opened. She started to walk away. "Thank you!" he called after her. She stopped, looking over her shoulder.

"Say that to me in six weeks." With this cryptic little nugget she was gone, her graceful figure moving quickly. She was soon lost around a bend in the path.

Jim walked into the building and headed for the elevators. He'd looked up Spock's apartment number on the directory, so he knew exactly where to go, now that his green-blooded angel had gotten him in the door. A weird coincidence, him running into Spock's cousin just as she was leaving. Weirder still that she felt motivated to help him. But this whole week had been full of that kind of thing, more proof to Jim that he was supposed to be doing this. Whatever this was.

He hit the buzzer by Spock's door and was surprised when the door slid open immediately, like Spock had been waiting for him. At first Jim suspected Sherron of making a call, but Spock was clearly surprised, too. Whoever he'd been expecting, it wasn't Jim Kirk. Too bad: Jim was the one who was here. "Hi!" he said, grinning and holding up the containers. "Want some lunch?"

Spock stared at him. He was wearing loose pants and a wide-necked shirt, both made of black material with a dull sheen to it. According to a sometime-flame of Jim's, Vulcan silks were the most expensive in the galaxy: Spock's loungewear probably cost more than a really nice Terran tuxedo. Guess when your parents could spend a billion credits just getting you here, your family wasn't hurting for cash. He looked good in the get-up, like an aristocrat at a pajama party. But he always looked good, in Dress Greys or workout clothes. Or naked, though Jim hadn't gotten a good look at him that way, last night's angle being kind of awkward. This would change soon.

"Cadet Kirk." Spock moved to block the doorway. "What are you doing here?"

"I told you, I brought lunch." Jim waggled the containers. "Vulcan fruit compote, yum."

"No such fare exists."

"Not on Vulcan, maybe. The campus diner is always getting creative. Last week they served Romulan fish tacos. What kind of fish do they have on Romulus?"

"Poisonous." Spock eyed the containers mistrustfully. "That smells like red meat."

"I got a double cheeseburger. I'm not vegan."

"Kirk," Spock sounded tired, "why are you doing this?"

"I'm hungry. I bet you are, too. You look hungry." Spock really did, his eyes on the plasboard containers when they weren't on Jim's face. "Come on," Jim said. "It's just lunch. You don't have to make me any promises."

"You promised that you would no longer bother me," Spock said. "On your honor."

"If you beat me fair and square, You didn't. You took off the gravity equalizer." Jim looked over his shoulder at a small, impossibly thin figure passing down the corridor behind him. "Hi, Commander Z'ran!" The figure blinked three yellow eyes the size of baseballs and gave Jim a friendly nod. He nodded back, then turned to Spock. "You want me to go into what happened after that? Give the juicy details right out here in the hallway?"
Spock went still, his face a mask. But Jim could feel the tension coming off him, fierce as the heat from an open fire. "We should talk," Jim said. "I promised your cousin we would."

"Of course," Spock said. "Sherron let you into the building." He muttered something under his breath in Vulcan. Jim didn't speak the language, but it sure didn't sound complimentary.

"Are all Vulcan women that hot?" Jim asked. "If so, I'm totally going there for Spring Break."

"My cousin could break you in half with one hand. As could most females of my race."

Jim gave him a horny grin. "Now I'm definitely going." He dimmed his expression down to something a little more sincere. "Sherron seemed nice, in an intense kind of way. She's right: We do need to talk."

Spock looked at him a second longer, eyes unreadable. Then, suddenly, he unbent, slumping against the doorframe in an exhausted posture. "Come in if you must," he sighed.

Jim followed, pressing his lips together to hide a triumphant grin. No point rubbing it in.

Spock's quarters weren't large, but they were very nice: A bright, rectangular space with high ceilings and long windows, like an old-fashioned Terran loft. On the left side, immediately past the door, was a small kitchen. On the right was a dining area. Further on, in front of the long windows, was a living area arranged around a low sofa, with an alcove in the far left corner that housed what looked like, going by the mats, some kind of meditation area. Behind the sofa were frosted glass panels which separated a low, wide bed from the rest of the room. Down the short hallway separating the dining area from the sleeping area were two discreet doors, side-by-side. One must lead to the bathroom, the other to what should have been the bedroom. Spock had turned that into something else. Probably a private study, but you never could tell with him. He could have a full-on dungeon or a room full of Barbie dolls.

The entire apartment, what Jim could see of it, was done up in the usual Academy grey tones, but there were pops of color: a bright orange throw on the sofa; an expensive-looking ceramic bowl on the sofa table, its crackle-glazed surface a haze of copper and red tones; a painting hung in the meditation alcove, glowing with slashes of brilliant scarlet. The air was very warm and heavily scented: Taygetian amber. (Jim knew it from that sometime-flame of his, who liked to burn it in her own quarters. The musky-citrus odor brought back some pleasant, non-PG-rated memories.) All in all, Spock's rooms were an odd contrast of conventional and sensual, cold and smoldering, rather like the Vulcan himself. Jim wondered how many of the race were harboring volcanoes under their frozen exteriors. If the planet's history was anything to go by, most of them.

"Put the containers on the dining table," Spock said, his voice as cool as it used to be when he was lecturing in class. He didn't fool Jim, though, not like he did a couple of semesters ago. His words were flat but his movements were sharp, features dark with tension. Maybe he wouldn't have seemed that way to other people, but Jim was good at picking up those emotions, especially in somebody he knew really well. He could tell when Bones was about to go on a bender almost before the good doctor cracked the first bottle of Jack Daniels. Jim didn't know Spock as well as he knew his best friend, but he did know the Vulcan, in ways that he would never know Leonard McCoy. (Bones could get drunk, really drunk, but never that drunk. Also, Jim wasn't attracted to him. Much.)

Jim put the containers on the table and sat down. Spock opened a cabinet in the kitchenette and took out plates and cutlery. "I could just eat out of the carton—" Jim began, but Spock shut him up with a look. The Vulcan stood in front of the replicator. He gave it an order and the machine slid out a bottle of mineral water.
Spock looked at Jim. "What would you like to drink?"

"Xix."

"Really?" Spock raised an eyebrow.

"I told you I like Orion energy drinks."

"I thought you were joking."

"I never joke about where I get my caffeine fix. Xix is awesome. Ever tried it?"

"Once. It tastes like carbonated Terran urine."

"How would you know?" Jim grinned. "Didn't take you for a golden shower kinda guy."

"I am not even going to ask what that means."

Spock gave Jim's order to the replicator, and the familiar green-and-purple cylinder slid out of the machine. Spock took it and the mineral water, along with the plates and cutlery, and came to the table. Acting with typical Vulcan expediency, he poured his fruit salad onto one plate, then scattered Jim's French fries on the other, arranging the plastic-wrapped hamburger in the middle. He swept the plasboard containers off of the table and into the recycler with what seemed to be one efficient movement. Finally, he sat at the table across from Jim.

He looked down at his fruit salad with no expression. The dish looked pretty tasty from Jim's perspective, a tempting medley of berries and apples mixed together in a shiny sauce, but who knew if Spock would like it? He didn't even appreciate the awesomeness of Xix.

Slowly, Spock spooned up a bite of salad and popped it in his mouth. Chewed and swallowed. "What do you think?" Jim asked.

"Edible," Spock replied. "But a Vulcan fruit dish should never contain additional sweeteners." He scraped a bit of shine from a strawberry. "The sauce is almost pure sugar."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Jim shrugged, chewing on a fry. "Sorry it's not authentic."

"It does contain one Vulcan fruit." Spock poked at what looked like an orange slice, except for the fact that it was bright blue. "Ral-keh. I'm not surprised—they are one of the only ones that would keep well enough to ship off-planet. My mother occasionally sends them to me."

"Are they good?"

Wordlessly, Spock slid his plate over to Jim. He speared a piece of ral-keh and chewed. His lips puckered. "Jesus, that's sour. But not like a lemon. Like a banana, if a banana could be sour. Weird."

"No weirder than Xix," Spock pointed out as he took his plate back.

"If ral-keh will get me through a Physics midterm on no sleep, I'll eat a bushel of 'em." Jim gave Spock a meaningful look. "FYI: I was puking all night long."

Spock was decent enough to go a little green. "That was not my intention."

"Will that happen every time you—and by 'you' I mean 'me'—does it raw with a Vulcan male?"

Spock gave him a strange look. "Is there a second Vulcan you are planning to seduce?"
"I hadn't realized I seduced the first one."

"It was you who approached me at the bar."

"Who had the k'vass? Who blew who in the alley?"

"You followed me to the gymnasium. You challenged me to a fight."

"You wrestled me to the ground. You screwed me into the mats."

Spock said nothing, looking down at the surface of the table. There was that tension again, his hand holding the metal fork tight enough to bend it.

"I haven't made you do anything. I just showed up," Jim said. "You wanted it just as much—maybe more. Don't fucking pretend you didn't." He didn't know why he was so irritated all of a sudden. He knew what this whole thing was really about: his plan, his brilliant plan. But he was irritated.

When Spock still said nothing, Jim sighed loudly and unwrapped his hamburger. He took a big bite. The campus diner might not be so terrific with foreign foods, but it made one hell of a good burger. Good enough to make a man forget his troubles--bossy roommates, blown exams, self-deluding sex partners and all. Screw ambrosia, this was the food of the gods.

Spock eyed him peevishly. "That's terribly bad for you."

Jim swallowed and gave him a beatific smile. "Yep. Wanna bite?"

"Vulcans are vegetarian," Spock said, like he was reminding Jim that the Terran sky was blue.

"By choice, not evolution. You're not like poor Commander Ztan with his three stomachs, all of which would blow up if he ate cow meat. Vulcans have incisors and colons, and you also have the close-set eyes of any other carnivorous predator. You could have a bite if you wanted to."

"I do not want to."

"Too bad," Jim said, regarding his burger. "Two fat chargrilled patties on a warm, crispy bun, slathered with tangy ketchup, spicy mustard, and a dollop of creamy mayo. Add crunchy dill pickles, crisp lettuce, a slice of fresh tomato and one of sharp cheddar cheese: Awesome." He took another big bite and rolled his eyes in ecstasy. "Mmm," he said around the mouthful. He swallowed and wiped juice from his chin, licked his fingers. "You don't know what you're—"

He stopped. He looked at Spock, looking at him. "You do want a bite, don't you?"

Spock looked away. "No."

"Yes. You're about ready to roll me for my burger. I know that wrasslin' look in your eyes." Jim put the hamburger back on his plate and pushed it across the table. "Go on. You gave me some of the blue orange."

Spock pressed his lips together, as if afraid Jim would forcibly push the burger through them. His hands were clenched. Christ, he was tightly wound.

"It's okay, Spock." Jim pushed the burger a little closer. "I won't tell the High Council."

Spock got up and walked away from the table. "Go," he said quietly.

"What? I don't—"
"Go!" Spock was almost shouting. He turned to face Jim. None of the tension was under the surface anymore: His whole body was practically vibrating. "I don't want you here, Kirk. I don't like you. Why must you insist on tormenting me with your—your—"

"Hamburgers?" Jim said helpfully.

"Yes. Your hamburgers, and your disgusting energy drinks, and your entire intrusive person. This is my home, don't you understand? Why are you invading it? Why do you make me want things I should not want? What do you want? I gave you a v'rathen 'Satisfactory' in Command Systems, though I know Achebe gave you too much assistance." Spock stared at him, eyes black with anger.

Jim rose. He crossed the distance between himself and Spock until they were barely a foot apart. Pretty dangerous, probably, getting up in a Vulcan's face when he could crush you like an empty can of Xix. But Jim hadn't gotten this far in life by being safe.

He looked closely at Spock's face, into those dark eyes. Not so much anger there, he saw that now. It was simply—sauce. Even the tension and frustration were just more pieces in Spock's jumbled fruit salad of motivations. What Jim mostly saw was the same thing he had seen that night at Billy's: pain. Also another emotion, sour as a slice of ral-keh: fear.

"What are you afraid of?" Jim said. "Tell me."

"You should go," Spock rasped. "Please go."

"Why?"

Spock took a moment to speak. "I'm going to hurt you."

"Awesome," Jim said, and kissed him.

A second of Spock tenser than ever, then he made a desperate lunge and kissed Jim back. He tasted like the fruit salad, but he was as greedy as any carnivore as he plundered Jim's mouth. The Vulcan getting his meat fix after all, and not just because Jim tasted like hamburger. His hands were on Jim's ass tight enough to bruise as he pulled him closer, their groins grinding together. Spock was already hard, making low, dangerous sounds deep in his throat. He was growling, ladies and gentlemen: safe to say that Logic had left the building.

Jim pulled back a little and Spock growled louder, his grip tightening. It would've been scary as hell if it wasn't so fucking hot. Jim leaned in and touched his forehead to Spock's. Like putting your face against the side of an oven. "It's okay," he said. "I'm not going anywhere. Relax."

Spock stared at him with that black gaze. There was still reason there, but only barely. Jim sighed. David used to disassociate the exact same way, worse even. Why were the scary ones always the best lays? Jim would do a study on it one day, but not now. He needed to get his partner to chill out, before he experienced some kind of anxiety-related aneurysm.

He kissed Spock one more time, deep and wet. He pushed them both towards the wall of the entrance alcove. Spock bit at Jim's lips as his fingers ground into Jim's ass. More bruises, but Bones wouldn't be looking for 'em there. Jim let Spock chew at him a minute, then he pulled back again. He grasped the hem of the Spock's shirt and pulled it over his head, the silky fabric fluttering to the carpet. Spock was built just the way that Jim liked: lean and smooth. The loose trousers he was wearing hung low on his hips in a tantalizing way. Jim ran a hand down Spock's chest, and the Vulcan shivered. He caught Jim's wrist and started to pull him in, but Jim twisted out of the grip. Before Spock could growl again, Jim dropped to his knees.
He looked up. Spock stared down at him, his expression just the same as when he stared at Jim's hamburger: ravenous, and a little freaked about it. "Relax," Jim repeated, making his voice soft and gentle. It was the same way that he used to speak to the unbroken horses on his uncle's farm back in Iowa, just one more method of soothing the savage beast. But not the only way or even the best way, not when your beast was sentient.

Jim pushed Spock back so he was leaning against the wall. He tugged the tie of Spock's pants loose and pulled them down. He hadn't gotten a good hard look at Spock's equipment last night, though it had sure felt hard enough. Spock's penis was perfect, not too big and certainly not too small, nicely thick with a pale greenish flush at the head. It was a darker greenish color at the base, right above his balls, where all those neat little nubs were. They were leaking lube already, such a convenient evolutionary solution. Terran foreskins were totally lame by comparison.

Jim leaned in. Carefully, because they were kind of sharp, he ran his tongue over the nubs in question. Spock gave a gasp, his fingers tightening on Jim's shoulders. "Easy, Cowboy," Jim said. "We're just getting started." He took another, longer, lick. The fluid wasn't that much like Terran pre-cum: thicker and sharper. It stung his tongue a little. He leaned back and looked up at Spock. "This isn't going to make me puke again, is it?"

It took Spock a second to speak. "No."

"Sure? 'Cause I've got another midterm tomorrow morning—"

"By the gods, Kirk, I am going to hurt you if you don't—proceed."

"Promises, promises," Jim muttered, and bent to his task in earnest.

Jim liked giving head, and he'd given a lot of it, to men and to women, not all of them Terran. Even when the equipment in question was alien, the mechanics were the same once you found the pleasure receptors: stroke and lick, touch and tease, nibble soft and suck hard. Those lube nubs—he was gonna have to ask what they were really called—were the center of everything on a Vulcan's cock. Give them a little attention, and you had him just where you wanted him, his hands tight on your shoulders, mouth babbling unintelligible Vulcan phrases that still managed to sound really dirty. Jim made the mistake of nipping one nub a little too hard and was rewarded by a grip on his shoulders so intense that the world started to go grey. He reared back and Spock didn't even mutter an apology, just pushed himself more forcefully against Jim's face.

Okay, then. Enough foreplay. Jim took a breath and swallowed Spock almost to the hilt, his hands gripping the smooth muscles of Spock's thighs as his mouth sucked at Spock's shaft. His lips stung with Vulcan lube but it wasn't unpleasant, his mouth full of flesh that was sweet and fever hot. Spock felt like silky lightning and tasted like honey and clove, exotic and intoxicating. Jim could have gone on tasting him forever, but he could tell by the sudden spike in the Vulcan's body temperature, the tightening of his balls, that Spock was close to climaxing. A last, furious suck that was almost a bite, and Spock's juices gushed into his mouth. Jim drank him to the last drop and licked him dry. He wiped his own lips and sat back on his heels, grinning victoriously.

His partner was collapsed against the wall, features slack. It occurred to Jim that if anybody opened the apartment door unexpectedly, they were going to get an eyeful: Spock naked and sated, Jim on his knees and still in his Starfleet cadet's uniform. There were tabloids that would pay thousands of credits for a picture like this. Good thing that the building had such excellent security. Just now Jim felt strangely protective of Spock, what he had to live with—and without. The poor guy couldn't even eat a cheeseburger without feeling like the world was going to end.

Jim got to his feet. He leaned in, nuzzling Spock's neck. "Better?"
Spock nodded wordlessly. He opened his eyes and looked at Jim. The tension that had been torturing him earlier was still there but not as fierce, a banked fire instead of a roaring one.

Jim nipped playfully at a pointed ear. Spock growled a little and grabbed at Jim, but he jumped back. "Hold that thought. I have to piss."

Spock nodded at the first door in the hallway. "There."

"I'll be back. Try not to get into any trouble while I'm gone."

Spock's bathroom looked a lot like Jim and Len's, except for being spotlessly clean. Jim pissed for what felt like forever. (He'd only had a sip of Xix at lunch, but there were three cans before that today—it had been a really long exam.) He finished, flushed, thought a second, and instead of pulling up his pants, shucked the rest of his clothes off. They weren't even close to done, Jim knew it. Spock must know it too.

Before exiting, he noticed the second door in the bathroom. Curious, he pushed it open. Beyond it was as expected, not a dungeon or something else weird, but a study. Its main furnishing was a spare metal desk, above which was a smaller comscreen than the one in the living room. At the bottom was a slot for a data solid. The light by the slot was green, there was no obvious security on it. Fifteen seconds—twenty tops—and you could upload anything you wanted to the system. Anything at all.

Jim stepped back, letting the sliding door cut off his view of Spock's personal computer. He wasn't ready to go there yet. He hadn't picked up the program from Che, and even if he had—not ready. Today wasn't about revenge, it was just reconnaissance. The rest could come later.

When he walked back into the main living area, he saw that the sliding panels to the sleeping area were all the way open. Spock reclined on the bed, still naked and still calm. He took in Jim's nudity with barely the raise of an eyebrow. Before Jim could make some smart remark about his body brightening up the place, he finally got a good look at the scene outside Spock's windows. He walked over to the long panes nearest the bed, staring. It was a million-credit view of the central courtyard, over the grass and all the way down to the shore. On a sunny day like today, you could see the Golden Gate Bridge and beyond, the usually murky waters of the Bay a brilliant, blinding blue.

"Wow," Jim said softly. "Makes me want to go for Instructor certification." He looked over his shoulder and grinned at Spock. He stopped grinning when he saw Spock's expression. He wasn't calm now. He looked almost—sad. A weird reaction: Usually the sight of Jim naked cheered people up. Jim started to walk towards him. "Hey, what's—"

"Stop," Spock said, in a voice that brooked no refusal. "Stay just where you are. In the light."

"Um, okay," Jim said. Spock rose from the bed and came to him. He turned Jim back to face the view. Slowly, he ran a hand up Jim's body, from the crack of his ass all the way to the knot at the top of his spine. His fingers were almost too warm. Jim relaxed against the window, cold glass in front of him, hot Vulcan behind him.

"So like, so very like," Spock said cryptically. "Are you a penance or a reparation? I wish I knew. The ways of the gods are mysterious." His fingers skated over Jim's neck, finding the bite. Without asking permission, he pulled the tape away. He lightly traced the wound. It hurt just enough to make Jim wince. Spock's hand was taken away, replaced by his mouth. His tongue probed the still-raw flesh, and Jim's knees went weak.

Spock's other hand tightened on the tender flesh of Jim's ass. His teasing of Jim's neck bite grew
more insistent, hurtful. Jim flinched back a little. "We have to be careful," he said. "I come home beaten up again, and Bones will murder us both."

"I know all about your friend's vengefulness." Before Jim could ask what the hell that meant, Spock's hand tightened suddenly on the back of his neck. Jim flinched, but Spock had to know the reaction wasn't just pain: All he had to do was look down at the state of Jim's groin.

"The pain excites you," Spock said matter-of-factly. When Jim nodded, his forehead against the glass: "A strange reaction. Most humans avoid pain."

"You obviously haven't been to the Castro recently. There's this bar called the Mineshaft—" Jim cut off as Spock pinched his ass hard. That one was definitely going to bruise. But he didn't care, because Spock's other hand was circling Jim's cock, stroking him in a slow, assured way.

"Is it the pain, or is it the forcefulness?" Spock asked. "The intensity of possession. Someone's entire attention focused upon you, wanting you, touching you." His hand tightened at the base of Jim's shaft like the world's hottest cock ring. Jim ground into him brazenly, beginning to pant.

"I do want you," Spock said, still in that casual voice. "Many people do, you must see it. No doubt you think it is because you are handsome, and I suppose you are, by Terran standards. But it is more than that. There is something wanton in you. Shameless, to the point of vulnerable. You can be taken. It is dangerously attractive." He leaned his whole body into Jim's, trapping him against the glass. His cock pressed against Jim's ass, his mouth against his ear, both of them hard, insistent.

"If this were three thousand years ago, and I were a warlord. If I saw a boy like you for sale at market, I would bid for you instantly." Spock's voice had slowed and softened, a storyteller's voice—a hypnotist's. "There would be competition, of course: Boys like you do not come along often. But I would prevail, if I had to slit my neighbor's throat to assure victory. I would take you home in chains, and I would keep you—train you—discipline you." With each phrase he gave Jim's shaft a firm stroke, before grasping him tightly once again. Jim could see it—the rock walls of an ancient fortress, Spock in rich robes, himself naked, shackles around his neck, his wrists, his ankles. On his knees, bent over, helpless and submissive. Penitent. He could have come from the image alone, if Spock's grip on the base of his cock hadn't prevented it.

"You would rebel, of course. It is your nature. What would I do with you then?"

"P-punish me?" Jim would be ashamed at the eagerness in his voice, if he wasn't so fucking desperate. "You would have to. I—I would deserve it."

"Yes," Spock said, voice thoughtful. "I would punish you. That is what would bind you to me, would it not? You want punishment. You crave it, quite frantically. To receive it, you have put yourself in the most terrible situations. What awful thing did you do, Jim, that you feel you need to bleed for it?" Jim said nothing, just ground his face into cold glass. "There are marks on your back," Spock continued. "Very fine—your doctor is quite competent—but I can still feel them. I know what they are. I've studied Terran history, and even my people were not ignorant of such devices once upon a time. Someone whipped you mercilessly. Someone punished you, who had no idea what he was doing. He nearly killed you." Spock's voice had deepened to a growl. "I hope he was punished for it."

"He—he was." Jim couldn't go into the whole story, not now. Not when he was about to come his brains out and burst into tears at the same time.

"Good. We will forget it, then. We can begin anew." Spock ran his teeth over the bite on Jim's neck. There seemed to be a direct line of sensation between it and the center of Jim's cock. He cried out
and clutched the window, his fingers scrabbling uselessly at the slick surface.

"I can give you what you need," Spock whispered. "You will not have to bleed so much for it. Just enough, ashal-veh. Just enough." He bit down on that raw flesh at the exact same time that his grip loosened on the base of Jim's cock. A flash of fire in Jim's groin, in his neck, crashing against each other right at the center of him and exploding. He came with a scream. He would have fallen to the floor with the force of the climax, but strong arms caught him. They pushed him against the glass and with a brutal, eloquent movement Spock was inside of him, as deep as his lube-slickened shaft would go. As intense as last night, that powerful thrusting, thrusting, thrusting, until Jim wasn't sure he could take any more. But he was too tired to resist, to do anything but let the Vulcan fuck him. That in itself was enough to get him half-hard again—being used, being taken. Spock came with his teeth in Jim's neck. Not tearing open the wound, only making it bleed a little. Just enough. When he pulled back, those wicked nubs scraping against Jim's inner walls, Jim experienced a last shockwave of pleasure that left the whole world fuzzy.

When he came fully back to himself, he was stretched out on the bed. Spock was right next to him, expression calm. But his eyes never left Jim's face for a second, watching him the way a cat watches a mouse. A very horny cat, with the hard barbed cock to prove it. Jim reached out languidly. His whole body felt stretched, used. In the best possible way. "I can top too, you know," he whispered. He didn't know why he needed to make the point, but he did. Maybe Spock working out Jim's darkest kinks so fast and furiously had something to do with it. "I'm actually pretty good at topping."

"I would not be averse to that at some point," Spock said. "Not just at present, however. I am in an—aggressive—frame of mind."

"Yeah," Jim said, touching his neck. "I know."

"You don't. But you will." Spock rose from the bed. "Turn over and get on your knees."

Jim blinked at him. It couldn't have been more than five minutes since Spock screwed him into the glass. No more than fifteen since the blowjob. "How long is the Vulcan refractory period?"

"Refractory period?" Spock said, looking puzzled.

"Oh Jesus," Jim said.
xv. Kirk

"I am so fucked," Jim said.

He'd heard the phrase used once on Sex and the City in a similar situation, and two hundred and fifty years later, it still applied. Today, he and Spock had done it on the bed, on the sofa, on the floor, and up against the window again (him staring down at the people passing in the courtyard while Spock took him deep and slow—good thing it was one-way glass, though Jim wasn't sure witnesses would have changed anything, except to make him come even harder). They'd done it standing, lying, sitting, and all poses in-between. Jim was pretty sure he'd been hanging upside down at one point, but that could have been the chemicals.

Spock had explained Jim's psychedelic experience of last night: a reaction to the Vulcan adrenal which was Spock's reaction to their sparring match. Jim hadn't followed the explanation all the way—he wasn't the Xenobiologist—but Spock assured him it wouldn't happen again, as long as they didn't fight and fuck. But all their foreplay today had been non-combative enough to make Surak smile, and Jim was still sorta light-headed. Although twelve orgasms in six hours would leave anybody feeling a little stoned, no matter which planet your partner hailed from.

He'd gotten faint about halfway through, and Spock made them stop and eat something. Jim had finished his now-cold lunch while Spock sucked down a huge bowl of tofu-vegetable soup. Jim offered him another bite of burger, but Spock shook his head, not remotely tempted. Guess he'd had enough meat for one day, ha-ha. Jim had actually said this (complete with ha's) and Spock raised a cold eyebrow at him. He used to make the same disgusted expression at Jim in Intro to Command Systems, but the impact of the gesture was kind of lost when both of you were naked.

Speaking of classes:

"I've got to go," Jim said, turning his head. The Vulcan was next to him, propped up against the low padded headboard, finishing off the fruit salad that Jim had brought him all those hours ago. "I've got to study."

Spock paused with a forkful of fruit halfway to his mouth. "If you wish."

"I don't wish, actually. I'd love to stay here and let you entertain me all night long. Hey, did you know your replicator has twice as many selections as the ones in the student dorms? You can get Vietnamese food. I have to go all the way downtown every time I'm craving pho."

"If you are hungry again—"

"No thanks. That's why I didn't ask for anything when you got salad. To be honest, I'm kind of queasy." He tilted his head at Spock. "Maybe a few more adrenals got into your bloodstream."

"Maybe you should have stopped after six Orion energy drinks."

Jim took the last swallow from his seventh Xix, crumpling the can and leaving it on the bedside table. "A man's got to stay hydrated in a situation like this. Anyway, I'm going to be up half the night going over schematics: I've got my Advanced Command Systems midterm tomorrow."

"I assume you'll be contacting Achebe Chang, then?" Spock's tone was a bit too precise.
"Let's get something straight." Jim turned all the way around on the bed, facing Spock. "Che gave me some lecture notes I'd missed. He walked me through a few practice tests and we went over the homework questions every week. In other words, he did for me exactly what he would have done for any other student in your class. I earned that Satisfactory, Commander. All by my little lonesome."

"Then why did you seduce him?"

"He came on to me. I responded for the obvious reason." When Spock just stared at him: "Che is fucking hot. Come on, he was your TA for two years. You must have noticed at some point."

"I see nothing out of the ordinary in his appearance."

"Trust me, there is." Jim peered at his companion. "You firing him—that didn't have anything to do with me, did it?"

Spock sat up a little straighter. "Believe it or not, Kirk, not everything is about you. Che's work was as unremarkable as his face. After two years, I grew weary of mediocrity." He bit viciously into an apple slice with his sharp teeth. "You are right, you should go. Commander Garcia's exams are quite challenging, if memory serves."

"Yeah," Jim said, not entirely convinced on the Che thing. But Spock obviously didn't want to discuss it, and it didn't make any difference now, anyway. Che was happy with T'S'Ngth, who was nuts in the way that all Septisents are nuts, but at least s/he seemed really fond of his/her new teaching assistant, if Che's stories about wandering tentacles were to be believed.

Jim stood. "I need to take a piss."

"Have you had your prostate checked recently? I'm growing concerned."

"Only by you," Jim said, scooting around the bed. "You know how much caffeine I drink."

He walked into the bathroom and relieved himself. He flushed, then began gathering the bits of scattered uniform from the floor. His tired, achy muscles did not look forward to being swathed in scratchy synthetic fibers. Even with all the advances in textiles in the last hundred years, cadet uniforms were not comfortable. Jim was pretty sure this was on purpose—some kind of subtle hazing by the Higher-ups. Those silky pj's of Spock's would feel better, but he and the Vulcan didn't know each other well enough to start swapping outfits yet. Hell, Bones bitched if Jim stole one of his t-shirts just before laundry day.

He pulled on briefs, trousers, t-shirt. Socks and shoes next, movements so familiar they were unconscious. He shrugged into his tunic, buttoning it quickly, but when he got to the collar band he stopped, wincing. The stiff fabric rubbed the raw flesh on his neck in exactly the wrong way.

He looked in the mirror. The bite was oozing a little. Shit: Unlike the bruises on his ass, Bones would notice this. It wasn't any of his fucking business, but that hadn't stopped the good doctor from sinking David Goldman's career. The last thing Jim needed tonight was more drama.

He pushed a button by the faucet, and a panel in the wall slid back, revealing shelves for Tylenol, toothpaste, and the like. Jim saw those, but the other jars and tubes had labels written in Vulcan. The letters were really pretty—they looked like musical notes—but they weren't helpful.

He heard steps behind him. Jim turned and saw Spock. He'd thrown on a black silk robe that had probably cost more than Jim's first car. His expression was mildly suspicious. "What are you looking for?"
"We know it's not lube, don't we?" Jim said, and was gratified to see Spock go a little green. "I need a bandage or something, before Bones sees my neck and goes apeshit."

Spock nodded and reached past him. He took out a small bottle of clear liquid and a round metal box. "Be still," he said. He uncapped the bottle and gently turned Jim's head to the light. More gently, he dabbed some of the liquid on the bite. At first it stung like hell, but Jim barely winced before the sting went away, warmth replacing it. Spock applied a bit more, and Jim had to grab the countertop to keep from pulling away.

"Are you in pain? The disinfectant is made for Vulcans, and I know Terran skin is sensitive—"

"I'm fine," Jim said. "Humans aren't made of marshmallows, whatever you guys might think. This is just—weird. I'm not used to anybody doing this kind of thing for me except Bones."

Spock's brows drew together. "I thought McCoy was heterosexual."

"Not that kind of thing," Jim said. "This. He waved at his neck. "Bones even does my yearly physicals. He says the Academy staff doctors are retards. Guess he'd know, he plays poker with 'em every Tuesday. Makes out like a bandit."

"I see." Spock hit a button on the side of the little metal box, and a tongue of medical tape spat out of the front. He tore it off and pressed the tape over the bite mark. "I'm surprised he didn't insist upon closing the bite."

"He wanted to this morning, when he was shooting me up with every STI inoculation known to humankind. Your kind too, probably."

One corner of Spock's mouth turned up. "I endured a similar procedure this morning."

"Guess that's good, since protection seems to keep slipping our minds."

Spock said nothing. He put one more piece of tape over the first. Jim glanced in the mirror. The bite was now completely hidden from view. He frowned. His eyes met Spock's in the mirror. The Vulcan was frowning, too.

"Why did you not close the bite?" Spock asked in a low voice.

Jim shrugged.

"You like it," Spock said. "Being marked."

Jim tilted his head at him. "You like it." He turned so they were face to face. "Picture it, Spock. Me walking around, doing the things I do every day, my uniform buttoned up. But underneath the stiff fabric, I'm wearing your teeth marks in my neck. Everyone who looks at me, everyone who wants me, but it's you who marked me. Every time I turn my head, I feel you. What you did to me." Jim leaned a little closer, whispering. "You do like that, huh? You love it."

Spock stared at him. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He swallowed, tried again. "You are very adept," he said. "What is your Psi-rating, exactly?"

"Fuck if I know. You'll have to ask Bones. Who cares, anyway? Maybe I'm just smart." Jim leaned still closer. "Smart as I am, I haven't got the first clue what's going on here. You want me, but you don't like me. I don't have to be empathically gifted to get that. Why are you doing this? Sherron
made me promise I'd ask. Was today just about getting me out of your system? If I want to see you again, am I gonna have to hang around outside, waiting for another mysterious Vulcan hottie to open the door?"

Spock paused. "Why are you here?"

"Everybody knows I'm slutty. And you're hot, Commander. Even hotter than Che Chang." Jim grinned. "You're way dirtier."

Spock didn't answer immediately. He looked at Jim with an unreadable gaze. Then he sighed softly and nodded, like he was coming to a decision.

"Close your eyes," he said, using that boss-of-you voice he liked to put on from time to time. It would be seriously annoying if it wasn't so sexy.

Jim obeyed. Spock's other hand touched Jim's face. His fingers rested at an odd angle: Two were on his forehead, two on his cheekbone, the thumb under Jim's chin. They were as hot as always, but now, more than that. The touch made Jim's whole face go numb. Then—

It hit him like a wave of nausea. At first, that's what he thought he was feeling. Then his poor overwelmed synapses began to sort through the scorching tide of sensation, and Jim knew it for what it was: desire. But not like any he had ever known before—this was darker, deeper, more desperate. The closest to it in his experience would have been the moments before David bound him to the cross, the seconds before the whip first touched his trembling flesh. But all of that was just a faint echo compared to this. This was need, this was hunger, that no meat ever slaughtered could satisfy. This was pain a human could not bear.

Jim sank to his knees, but the bond held. It was as if those hot, probing fingers had been soldered to his face, a burning that would not stop. He heard a sob and knew it was his own.

Suddenly, the touch pulled back, leaving nothing but cool air behind. Oh, merciful Mary, Queen of Heaven, thank you. Jim stayed on his knees, shuddering. He felt fingers brush his shoulder, and he flinched back. "D-don't!" he said. "Please." The fingers went away.

He stayed on the floor a minute longer. Then, reaching deep, he managed to find the strength to get to his feet, open his eyes. His vision was blurry; he brushed fingers across his face and felt the wetness. He blinked the tears back and stared at Spock, who was giving him a look that on anybody but a Vulcan would have been guilty.

"I apologize," he said. "I didn't think we would go so deep so quickly. You are very adept."

"Lucky me," Jim rasped. "What the fuck was that?"

"That," Spock said, "was me."

Jim looked at him a minute. Then, very softly: "Something's really wrong with you, isn't it?"

"You could say that. You could also say that what I am feeling is perfectly normal. I suppose it depends on one's perspective."

"Don't bullshit me. You're in pain." Jim stopped. "You want me to help. I can help, right?"

"It would appear so." Spock smiled a little, though his eyes remained somber. "Once again, I am reminded that the universe has a sense of humor."
"How can I help?"

"You wish to?" When Jim nodded, Spock looked almost angry. "Why, Kirk? I don't believe you like me any more than I like you."

"Maybe I like what you do for me. Maybe I'm just curious. Does it matter, so long as I do help? What do you need from me?"

"A simple question with a very complex answer. We do not have time to address it tonight."

"But we will. Some other night. Right?"

Spock looked at him a moment, that cool, assessing expression on his face again. Then, pulling his robe tighter, he turned and opened the second door in the bathroom. He went into his study.

As Jim stood on the threshold watching, Spock sat at the desk. His fingers moved fast over the screen of his computer. In a moment, the computer beeped, and a data solid slid from the slot at the bottom of the machine. He took it and held onto it a second, as if making one final decision. Then he stretched forward and held it out to Jim.

"This is a passcard that will let you into the building. Do not drop by unannounced, however. My schedule is—complicated."

"Translation: You're fucking somebody else. Why isn't he/she/it helping you with this?"

"She cannot." Spock paused. "I do not wish to discuss her further."

"Fine by me. I don't kiss and tell, either. Well, except when I was seeing Gaila D'Shari, Bones was curious—I mean, she is an Orion, no man can resist 'em and all that. She didn't care, she'd have done a lot more than talk to the good Doc if you know what I mean and I think you do. Had her all sold on the idea of a threesome but he's so goddamn old-fashioned—"

"Kirk." Spock's hand actually jerked back, as if he was thinking better of the whole thing. Jim quickly plucked the data solid out of his fingers and slipped it in a trouser pocket.

"Your secret is safe," he said, giving Spock a reassuring smile. "Whatever it is. You are gonna let me in on that, right?"

"Possibly. We shall see how events progress."

Jim walked further into the study. He knelt in front of Spock's desk chair. He put his hands on Spock's legs, burying his fingers in the lush silk of the robe. Not black, he saw that now. There were a lot of colors in the material, all colors. Subtle and beautiful, like its wearer.

"You can trust me," Jim said. Just then, he meant it.

Slowly, Spock nodded. "Mention none of this to McCoy. He is your friend: He is not mine."

"Let's not talk about Bones right now," Jim said. His fingers moved up Spock's thighs, pushing the robe out of the way. Spock was already hard again—maybe he'd never gone soft. Jim felt a twinge of the desperate desire that had gutted him earlier—psychic spill from his companion or just memory, it didn't matter. He was going to help.

"Everything's going to be all right," he whispered, just before his lips closed over Spock's hot, pulsing flesh. Just then, Jim believed it.
Chapter 15

xv. Kirk

After the blowjob came another hot interlude in the study, Jim bracing himself on the sturdy metal desk while Spock fucked him fast and hard. This wasn't exactly fun; even Jim had limits when it came to orgasms. Luckily, this last one was also when Spock finally had enough. While Jim got dressed again, Spock went all slow and sleepy-eyed. He was tucked in bed like a drowsy kitty by the time Jim walked to the door, answering Jim's goodbye in dreamy-sounding Vulcan. It was kind of cute. Jim felt a not-inconsiderable thrill at the notion that he'd put the cold, rigid commander in such a warm and fuzzy state.

His good mood lasted all the way across campus and up to the fourth floor of the senior cadet apartments. He walked down the hallway whistling. He was sticky and sore and still a little nauseous, and he had hours of cramming to do, but whatever. All in all, it had been a good day.

His whistle cut off a foot from his front door. He stopped, listening to other music coming from inside the apartment.

*Your own personal Jesus*
*Someone to hear your prayers*
*Someone who cares*
*Your own personal Jesus*
*Someone to hear your prayers*
*Someone who's there*

Shit. Jim liked this song—the original version, anyway. But this wasn't Depeche Mode. The instrumentation was slower and more soulful, and the singer had a voice like black velvet and dusty gravel: Johnny Cash. Jim had nothing against the Man in Black, but Cash coming from the apartment meant Bones was listening to country music. Country music meant—*shit.*

Sighing, Jim put his hand on the ID pad. The door slid open. The reek hit him at once: smoke and whiskey. A lot of it. He blinked into the dimness as music blared from the ceiling speakers.

*Feeling unknown and you're all alone*
*Flesh and bone by the telephone*
*Lift up the receiver*
*I'll make you a believer*

*Take second best*
*Put me to the test*
*Things on your chest*
*You need to confess*
*I will deliver*
*You know I'm a forgiver*

*Reach out and touch faith*

Jim walked slowly towards the sofa. He looked down at Leonard stretched out lengthways. A glass of Jack was balanced on his chest, a cigarette in the fingers of his right hand. On the sofa table next to him was a half-empty carton and a mostly-empty bottle. This was bad, really bad, and early. Bones always had a bender around the beginning of May—Jim chalked it up to the pressure of finals.
—but that was months away. What was worse is this one had come without warning, no day or two of sulks and sarcasm preceding it. When Jim had notice, sometimes he could head the storm off, get Len out of town for a weekend or, in the pre-Danna days, at least get him laid. This was a tornado that had touched down from nowhere. What the fuck had happened in the last ten hours?

Jim swallowed, putting a hand to his own queasy belly. Christ, he did not need this shit tonight. But he couldn't ignore it now that it was here.

"No poker game?" he tried to keep his tone light.

"Fuck 'em. Somebody else can skin the fish this week." Bones' usual slight southern accent had deepened and roughened. At times like this, a Georgia drawl could sound as guttural as Klingon.

"Um, everything okay?"

Leonard's dark eyes bored into him. "You've been fucking the Vulcan. I can smell you."

"Right back at you." Jim nodded at the Marlboro package. "Those things will kill you."

Leonard sat up on his elbows, taking another swallow of Jack. "At least I'll die in my bed when I'm eighty. They won't find me in a ditch somewheres, chewed up like a wad of Copenhagen."

"Bones—"

"Hope you're not too masticated tonight, Jimbo. I seem to have misplaced my tricorder."

"Where did you last see it?"

"Up your ass. Maybe I should ask Spock." Len gave a nasty chuckle.

Jim perched on the edge of the sofa table, clamping his hand to the back of his neck. Leonard McCoy was a mean drunk. Jim had seen him reduce waitresses, bystanders, and even bouncers nearly to tears—sarcasm like a shotgun blast. He almost never leveled both barrels at Jim, but the couple of times he had still hurt. Almost as bad as when Winona would tie one on and get honest with everybody.

Jim clenched his hand around the edge of the sofa table. "I'm fine," he said. "Spock and I had lunch and then we had sex in his apartment. It was like a date."

"Christ, son. What the hell did they teach you back in Iowa? That wasn't a date: That was room service." His eyes flicked to Jim's neck. "BTW, you're bleeding through the bandage. Better practice your first aid if you're gonna let that vamp keep sucking you dry."

"Len, stop. What the fuck's the matter?"

Leonard stared at the ceiling a minute. "Che came by today," he said in a more reasonable voice. "He left something for you. That wasn't a date: That was room service." His eyes flicked to Jim's neck. "BTW, you're bleeding through the bandage. Better practice your first aid if you're gonna let that vamp keep sucking you dry."

"Len, stop. What the fuck's the matter?"

Okay, maybe that was it. Last time his best friend lost a journal article in the system, Jim had been woken at three in the morning by the sound of Leonard trashing his bedroom. Thank God Jim hadn't had company—Len looked like a crazy person, and that's seriously troubling when the psycho in
question is 6'3 and 200+. Luckily, Jim and Che were really hot and heavy then, and he called tech support pronto. Cost him a few extra blowjobs, but hey, what are friends for?

"Did you lose the article you're working on? Is that what this is about?"

"Nope. Che showed me all about subfolders last time—I'm not a total luddite. He was looking for something else. Couldn't find it. Stayed here for three fucking hours. Gonna take a day or two and try more complicated means, but he's not optimistic." Len ashed his cigarette. "Che's a good guy, huh? Cute, too. Tall, dark, exotic. Kinda skinny, but I know you like 'em that way. Amazing bone structure, big brown eyes. Reminds me of somebody. Who could that be?" He looked at Jim.

Jim laughed nervously. "Want me to set you up?"

McCoy's eyes didn't waver. "I fucked a guy once." When Jim just gaped at him: "About four years ago. My marriage was going all to shit, I was screwing half of Atlanta already, thought what the hell? Only go around once. It didn't hurt that Dean and I had just spent four hours in a hotel bar getting shitfaced." Len sat up, draining his glass. Poured a final drink from the bottle, tipping it up, up, to get the last drops. He ground out his cigarette on the bottle lid, then threw the butt inside. He pushed the bottle away. He swirled the liquor in his glass, staring into its depths. "Wasn't bad, actually," he went on. "The beard burn was weird, and I missed tits, but Dean knew what he was doing. Still some of the best head I've ever had. Afterwards, I felt weirder that I'd screwed my wife's best friend than the fact that her friend had a dick."

"Why are you telling me this?" Jim asked quietly.

"After Che told me the files were kaput, I started drinking. Thinking, too, about all the other ways I could get you away from Spock. At first I thought Che might still be the answer—he is really cute, if you like that kind of thing. But you don't like him, do you? Dick or no dick. You think he's a nice person, but he bores the piss out of you. Too nice, too stable—plain vanilla, when you've always been a dark-chocolate-and-chili-pepper kind of guy. Makes me wonder what you saw in him to begin with. Who you saw."

Jim looked down. "I still don't get the point. Yeah, Che bores me. So what?"

"I don't bore you, do I?"

Jim looked up, speechless. Len set his glass down. He stretched back on the sofa, the powerful muscles in his arms flexing as he put his arms behind his head. "Nope, I don't. We get along like a house on fire. Always have, from the beginning of First Year. That was a crazy semester, wasn't it? Remember the time Billy got that shipment of Romulan ale?" He grinned at Jim.

Jim couldn't help grinning back. They started out in San Francisco and woke up on Mars.

"We had to stay overnight at that motel in Memnonia, waiting for a shuttle back to Earth. What a shithole! Critters big as dinner plates, and they hadn't cleaned the toilets since Viking 1 landed. I was so pissed, but by the next morning, we were friends, real ones. Could've gone another way, though." Leonard looked steadily at Jim. "You thought about it, didn't you? Making a move." When Jim said nothing: "You may be the Amazing Kreskin, kiddo, but my Psi-rating ain't bad. Can't be, or they don't let you into med school. I knew what you wanted, but you never acted. I knew why, too. You didn't want to risk fucking everything up, and you were right. What we have is way more important than a casual lay. We both know that."

Len sat up, leaning so close that Jim could smell the whiskey on his breath. "I love you," he said. "And I'm so fucking scared for you right now I can't stand it. If things were different, I would seduce
you away from him. Hell, half the Academy already thinks we're screwing, not that I give a shit. But I know you love me, and I have seen how you look at me, not often, but once in awhile, usually when you're drunk." Len put his big, powerful hands on either side of Jim's face. "Gaila couldn't do it, as pretty as she is. Achebe couldn't either, even if he does look like Spock with regular ears. I think I'm the only one who could."

"Why don't you?" Jim whispered, heart pounding.

Leonard took his hands away, looking sad. "I rode a horse once. Doesn't make me a cowboy. One drunken screw in a Buckhead hotel doesn't make me bisexual. But say it did: When I look at you, I don't see a lover. Not even in the hazy, inebriated way I saw Dean that night. I don't see a lover, sometimes I don't even see a friend."

Jim winced, looking away. "That's really harsh, Len."

"Shit! I'm too drunk. I'm fucking this up." Leonard put a hand on Jim's chin, raised it. "When I look at you, I see my brother."

"You don't have a brother."

Leonard's eyes filled. "No," he rasped. "I don't." The tears began to run down his face. He didn't bother wiping them away. "I can't fuck you, Jim. The thought freaks me out in ways I can't describe. But the thought of you all broken and bloody—destroyed—I—I just couldn't—"

Len put his head down on the table and began to cry for real: deep, painful sobs.

Jim put his arms around him, holding tight. "Shh. Come on, it's okay. You—you don't have to have sex with me if you don't want to."

Len gave a weird, gasping laugh. "Thank you."

Jim forced his tone to teasing. "I mean, if you're gonna cry like a little bitch over it."

Len raised his head and stared at him with bleary eyes. "Fuck you."

"Should've done the threesome with Gaila, man. You wouldn't be so squeamish."

"What am I, sixteen? I've had threesomes. Just didn't want one with you." Len looked sorry. "But Gaila is really pretty."

"She's fucking hot. Orions, man, Orions. She had this cousin visiting once, bald as a cueball but you should have seen his ass—"

"Whore."

"Actually, he was a nice guy—"

"You."

Jim gave him a big grin. "Jealous."

"Every time you screw a piece of strange, it makes my gut twist." Len wasn't smiling now. "Jim, if anything happens to you, it will finish me. I need you to know that. Go down, and you're dragging me with you."

"I'm fine. Everything is gonna be fine."
"Famous last—" Len stopped with a burp. He put a hand to his stomach, face gone green as a blushing Vulcans. "Shit. I'm sick."

"Come on, Mr. Tennessee Sour Mash." Jim put an arm around his shoulders and hauled him up. "Let's get you to the bathroom before you—"

A groan, a splash, and Jim felt warmth go all down his front. "Puke."

"Sorry," Len muttered.

Jim sighed. "It's okay. I baptized you last night. Karma sucks."

Len, leaning most of his considerable bulk on Jim's shoulder, let his roommate lead him to the bathroom. More vomiting came after, but at least he was getting the stuff off his stomach, which was better for everyone. The only thing meaner than a drunk McCoy was a hungover McCoy.

When Len had gotten up most of it, Jim helped him get his teeth brushed and his shirt off. Jim almost carried him to bed, Len was so out of it by that point. Jim arranged him on his stomach, in case he puked while he was sleeping. Jim could be protective too: He had no desire to see his best friend pull a Jimi Hendrix.

Jim walked back into the bathroom, shucking off his soiled uniform. He stepped into the shower and scrubbed up. What a stressful night, and it wasn't even 20:00 yet. Jim was almost looking forward to studying a bunch of boring schematics.

As he scrubbed, he let his mind wander, planning out what he was going to do tomorrow after midterms were finally over. He needed to take Che somewhere nice, to thank him for all the trouble. Che liked Mexican, but which restaurant would he like most?

The truth hit him in the middle of a deciding between El Toro and Las Margaritas. Jim was so distracted he walked out into the living room dripping wet, nothing but a towel around his waist. "Computer," he said. "Personal records for McCoy, Leonard Horatio. Check sibling data."


"Current address?" But Jim already had a sinking feeling.

"Individual is deceased. 5 May 2253."

Seventeen years old. Jim sank down on the edge of a sofa cushion. "Cause of death?"

"Automotive fatality."

The number one killer of teenage Terran males for three hundred years, no matter how safe the vehicles got. Jim had some close calls himself when he was younger.

"Associated media?"

"Working."

The comscreen lit up. There was a police report, which Jim skipped in favor of pictures. The first image showed what must have once been a sporty little racing number. But the front half was a hunk of scorched metal and shattered glass, sticking out of one of those giant oaks they have down south. Near the destroyed vehicle were two sheeted bodies. Two. Something about the picture bothered Jim—besides the obvious—but he couldn't capture it.
Jim flinched at the morgue photo. What lay on the slab looked like nothing human. Thank God Leonard hadn't had to see his brother like—

"Go back," Jim said softly. The scene of the accident came up again. "Zoom in on the top right corner of the image. Enhance."

"Working."

The blurred figure hadn't been obvious at first glance. But Jim's subconscious must have seen: It's what had bothered him so much a second before. The figure was Leonard, standing behind the wreckage wearing a white lab coat streaked with red. On his face was the same look he'd had when he said Jim's fall would finish him. But it was even more raw, if that was possible. He must have seen everything.

*The thought of you all broken and bloody—destroyed—I just couldn't—*

Jim swallowed. "Find the last known living image of Henry McCoy."

A prom picture popped up onscreen. The boy was tall and good-looking. His eyes were hazel and his hair was a light brown, but he resembled his older brother quite a bit, especially around the nose and mouth. He was smiling widely in his rented tux, an infectious go-to-hell grin that Jim had glimpsed on Len a few times. No wonder Henry looked happy: He had his arm around the waist of a beautiful blonde girl in a low-cut sequined gown. She was looking at him like he had hung the moon.

"Date of photo?" Jim asked.

"4 May 2253."


He got up slowly from the sofa. He had lost his towel at some point but he didn't care. Jim put his hands to his temples. For the first time in awhile he heard the music, Johnny Cash moaning about falling into a burning ring of fire, down, down, down, the flames going higher.

"Shut that shit off," Jim rasped. The music kept playing. Fucking profanity filter: "Computer, discontinue media. All of it." He sure didn't want to look at any more pictures.

He walked into Leonard's room. He looked down at his best friend, now deeply unconscious. For the first time in a long time, Jim let himself look at Leonard all he wanted.

Len was beautiful. Jim had always seen that, from the very first moment. He'd wanted him badly that first semester, but there had come a time, staring out a sleazy hotel window at a pink Martian sky, when he knew he had to decide what he really wanted. He'd looked over at Leonard, asleep on the lumpy mattress, and he decided. He hadn't let himself think about it again. Not until now.

He'd made the right decision. Leonard was his brother, in a way that Sam couldn't be. Sam, who disappeared into Space Corps at seventeen, whose tri-monthly subspace calls were brief, his voice usually as liquor-blurred as Len's was tonight. As Winona's often was, when Jim and Sam were growing up. A brother was important, a man needed a brother, even one who acted like a father half the time. Fathers—Jim didn't know much about those. He wished he did.

"You should have told me, Bones," Jim said. But his best friend never told him anything, not about
family. Len had been back to Georgia twice in three years—whiskey-soaked weekends following both of those trips, to which Jim had been a reluctant witness. Except for occasional bitching about Jocelyn or quotes of his mama's wise sayings, Leonard's people were almost a total blank, to the point where Jim had just assumed he was an only child. But once you knew about Henry, a lot of stuff made sense. Like a black hole, he made his presence known through absence. Leonard's overreaction to David Goldman, for instance, was now understandable. If Jim had known about Henry, he wouldn't have gotten so pissed about Len ratting Dave out.

But if Jim had known, would that really have changed anything? Not his relationship with Leonard, not fundamentally. Henry would still be dead, and Jim would still be the replacement. Half-friend, half-brother, never a lover. Which was just as well, because Len couldn't give Jim what he needed. Len was dark, and he could be cruel, but not in the needful ways.

Maybe somewhere in a parallel world, Jim and Leonard were a scorching couple. A world where Henry was alive, or had never even existed at all. Where Sam wasn't a sad drunk, and Winona wasn't sad either, because George Kirk was there. In this world, Jim wasn't a mistake who had cost his mother everything. He was different there. He didn't need to be punished.

But that wasn't the world they were living in.

Quietly, carefully, Jim bent down and kissed Leonard on the forehead. His skin was cool and slightly damp. Len rolled over on his side, the muscles in his back flexing as he shifted position. Human skin, human strength: In another world, it would be enough.

"Goodnight, brother," Jim whispered.

He walked back into the living room, leaving Leonard's bedroom door open, in case his friend had problems in the night. He went into his own room and slipped on a pair of sweats. Off to the bathroom, where in the middle of brushing his teeth he saw the bandage was coming loose. He changed it, not doing such a hot job—he used so much tape it looked like he had a goiter on his neck. He was going to have to get better at this. He couldn't keep asking Len to do it, not after what happened tonight. Christ, he didn't want to think about that any more. Maybe ever.

Jim finished up quickly and went back into the living room, stopping off to get more Xix from the replicator. Popping the can, he brought up the schematics for tomorrow's exam on the big screen. But it was a long time before he could lose himself in the figures. A really long time.
Leonard opened one bleary eye to see Jim Kirk, looking way too alert for this ungodly hour. "What the hell? It's only—"

"Noon."

"Shit." Leonard sat up. "What day is it?"

"Um, Wednesday? Are you still drunk?"

"I wish." Leonard looked up. "Computer! Call Danna."

A pause. "Contact does not respond. Try again?"

"No." He sighed, scrubbing hands over his face. "She's screening me."

"What's wrong now?" Jim asked.

"I was supposed to meet her for brunch an hour ago. Make up for canceling yesterday. I'm never getting laid again." He gave Jim a baleful glance. "It's all your fault."

"Yeah, I opened your mouth and made you suck down all that Jack."

"No, you opened your mouth and sucked down Spock's—"

"Whatever. Jesus, you're mean when you're hungover."

"So don't wake me. Why did you wake me?"

"You've got clinic hours starting at 13:00, remember? Anyway, the bots are coming."

" Fucking great." Leonard swung his legs over the edge of the mattress. No point staying in bed now, not with the cleaners about to burst in, scrubbing and beeping. The Academy made cadets handle day-to-day domestic chores—training for when they would be on ships with their limited resources—but every couple of weeks the Powers That Be sent in the robots to give the dorms a real going-over. Not cheap, but cheaper than torching the place at the end of every term, which would have been the only other viable solution to that much collected filth. Cadets were pigs.

Leonard stood, catching the edge of the nightstand to steady himself. It felt like somebody had taken the floor and tilted it forty-five degrees. While they were at it, they'd bopped him on the head, giving him a splitting headache. As a final nasty trick, they'd stuffed his mouth and throat full of tissues, but
only after first using them to clean a public toilet. His breath would stop a Klingon bird of prey. This
could not continue. "Hypo me," he said to Jim.

He grimaced. "Can't you do it?"

"The way my hands are shaking right now, I'd wind up stabbing myself in the eye."

"I hate handling those things."

"I'll remember this next time you've got a weird itch after you've whored around all weekend."

"Fine, fine, Christ." Jim opened Len's medical bag, found a neon green cartridge and, after fumbling
a minute or so, managed to slot it into the hypo. Approaching like he was the one about to get stuck,
he took a breath and jabbed it into the side of Leonard's neck.

"Ouch! You don't have to do it so hard."

"That's how hard you do it."

Leonard was about to tell Jim just where he could stick the hypo next, when a soothing warmth
flooded his body, steadying his balance and quieting his migraine. He swallowed, mouth half as
cottony as it was seconds ago. Most medicos won't give anti-hangover shots: better for people to
suffer the consequences of abusing themselves, so maybe they won't do it so often. But hell,
membership does have a few privileges. Len's stomach growled, and he realized he was hungry.

He walked out into the main living area, Jim following. "I think I want pancakes after all," Len said,
heading to the tiny kitchenette. The replicator ones tasted like little rubber coasters, but he knew how
to make the real thing, even on the pitiful two-burner appliance the Academy called a stove. "A stack
for you, Jimbo?"

"I'm meeting Achebe for lunch. Then I'm going to the library to study. Got Garcia over with this
morning, but there's still Ztan's mid-term tomorrow. Last one."

Leonard stopped hunting in the cabinet for Bisquick long enough to give his friend a look. "Since
when do you study at the library? Hell, when do you study for Ztan's tests at all? Terran Space
Exploration, 1950-2150: You could teach that fucking class."

Jim shifted uncomfortably. "There might be details that have escaped me."

"You're seeing him." Leonard said, getting milk from the replicator. "When did Terrans and Vulcans
first get together? 2060?"

"April 5, 2063," Jim said promptly.

"Here's a detail I'm curious about: Were those Vulcans sex-crazed cannibals, too? Ask Spock."
Leonard started mixing the batter in the bowl a little too emphatically.

"A Vulcan eating a Terran wouldn't be cannibalism."

"He's half-Terran. So he's only partly a sick puppy. You are entirely retarded."

"I have to go." Jim started for the door.

"Wait."

Jim paused. But if he was waiting for an apology, he wasn't going to hear it. "Don't forget your
program," Leonard said. He nodded towards the coffee table. "That's the point of all this, right? Getting access to Spock's computer? Beating the unbeatable scenario?"

Jim went to the coffee table and picked up the data solid that held the code which would alter the Kobayashi Maru. He put it in his wallet. There was something reluctant in the movement.

"Don't forget what this is really about," Leonard said.

"I know what it's about. For me—for you too." Jim looked hard at him. "You don't remember much from last night, do you?"

Leonard grabbed a skillet from under the sink. He put it on the burner and turned the stove to low. "I usually don't when I get that drunk. Remember when we went to Mardi Gras? I still don't know where those chickens came from."

"It's a bad sign when you start blacking out from drinking. It's also bad when you drink alone. Really bad. I don't have to be a doctor to know that."

"I'm not a drunk," Leonard said. "My father, he's a drunk."

"We all have our addictions. I sleep around too much. You worry about me, and I appreciate it. I worry about you, every time you go on a tear, every time you have that third or fourth whiskey after a long day. See, I don't want anything bad to happen to you either." Jim paused. "Henry wouldn't want it."

Leonard stared at him speechlessly. Before he could clear the circuits in his brain and come up with some kind of coherent response, Jim had made his escape. Sneaky bastard.

Leonard turned off the stove. He wasn't hungry anymore. He walked into the living room and sat on the sofa, picking up his cigarettes and lighter from the coffee table. He lit up.

He inhaled, the delicious poisonous gases flooding his lungs. These things would kill him one day, but aren't we all dying of something? But this was the last for awhile—he only smoked when he drank hard, normally. He would love one—just one, mind you—double Jack Daniel's to go with it, hair of the dog and all. But he did have clinic in an hour, and the replicator didn't dispense alcohol: liability bullshit.

Leonard leaned his head back against the sofa, thinking hard. What the hell had he said to Jim last night? It didn't need to be much. His best friend was a lot smarter than most people gave him credit for, Leonard had known that before he ever saw Jim's test scores. Leonard hoped it would not be mentioned again. He didn't want to talk about Henry. He'd said as much to that therapist in Marietta, and to that other therapist in downtown Atlanta, and to his ex-wife. None of them had listened, which is why he lived in San Francisco now. He didn't want to talk about his brother, didn't want to think about him. Leonard didn't—hardly ever.

It was too damn quiet in here. "Computer," he said. "Music. Resume playlist from last night."

I hear the train a comin'  
It's rollin' 'round the bend.  
And I ain't seen the sunshine  
Since I don't know when.  
I'm stuck in Folsom Prison, 
And time keeps draggin' on.  
But that train keeps a-rollin',
On down to San Antone.

When I was just a baby,
My mama told me, "Son
Always be a good boy,
Don't ever play with guns."
But I shot a man in Reno,
Just to watch him die.
When I hear that whistle blowin'
I hang my head and cry.

Sing it, Johnny. Leonard used to hate old country music, but that was a long time ago. A long time since he'd learned to appreciate these ancient anthems of love, death, loss.

I bet there's rich folks eatin',
In a fancy dining car.
They're probably drinkin' coffee
And smokin' big cigars.
Well I know I had it comin',
I know I can't be free.
But those people keep a-movin',
And that's what tortures me.

"Christ, what is this shit?"

"Johnny Cash. He's a legend."

"Then how come I've never heard of him?"

"Because you're old. Nostalgia Downhome plays him, like, constantly."

Leonard reclines back on his brother's unmade bed, putting his arms behind his head. "You're rotting your brain on those nets. That's why you're flunking Physics."

Henry pokes his head around the doorframe of the bathroom, face covered in shaving gel. "Physics is bullshit. You don't need Physics to go into space."

"Let's pause a moment and consider just how fucking stupid that statement was."

"You know what I mean. I can get into SpaceCorps with a General Studies diploma."

"True. Who needs Physics to die screaming on some godforsaken asteroid?"

"Is that what you told Mama?" Leonard can see his brother pouting under all the gel.

"Mama doesn't need me to hate SpaceCorps: Daddy was in SpaceCorps. How do you think he lost all those toes?"

"Maybe I can get him to sign the waiver," Henry says, ducking back into the bathroom.

"Sure, if you can find him. The last message was from where, Toronto? Make sure you start with the cheap bars."

Leonard hears the buzz of the shaver. He raises his voice.
"We've talked about this, Hank. You wanna go into space? I think it's fucking stupid, up there with no air, no water, and hostile aliens who'd as soon dissect you as look at you. But if you're determined, you're doing it right and joining Starfleet, have a shot at a real future that includes all of your appendages. And you're going to do it two years from now, after you've spent some time at community college and gotten your math and science grades high enough to get into the Academy. What you are not going to do is join the Corps as a fucking minor because your good buddy Terry has filled your head full of space cowboy crap."

Henry emerges, face red from the sonic shaver. "You really hate him, don't you?"

"There's no point hating retards. They don't appreciate it."

"For a Xenobiologist, you're really specist."

"It's not specist if it's true. There wasn't enough radiation shielding on those early biodomes. People with Luna Colony ancestry go grey early, have less responsive immune systems, and, often, lower IQ's and test scores. I can refer you to some relevant journal articles if you're interested. SpaceCorps is Terry's best option: It's not yours."

"You don't know him. Terry is a good guy. He's smart, he's funny, he's—" Henry stops. He opens the closet door, taking out a dark suit and tossing it on the bed. "You don't know him."

"I know you're fucking him."

Henry stops with one leg in the trousers. "What are you—I'm not—"

"You are. Since you were sixteen. Put your pants on."

Henry obeys, face even redder than it was a minute ago. His hands are shaking so that when he tries to button his shirt, he does it wrong and ends up with one buttonhole left over.

"Shit," he says, frowning down at himself.

"Pitiful." Leonard stands and unbuttons Henry's shirt, then starts doing it up correctly. "Girls, boys, I don't care. But Christ, couldn't you find a nice Terran boy to stick your dick into? Half the rugby team is in love with you."

"Damn, Lee!" Henry flinches away, finishing the buttons himself. "I can't talk about this."

"At least promise me you're being safe. There's some nasty shit out there. Have you heard about this new strain of syphilis from the Antares System? Turns your junk into—"

"Yeah, yeah. Ms. Whitlock gives out tubes of liquid condom in, like, every Health class."

Leonard nods approvingly. "It took us until 2250, but we finally got decent sex ed in this state."

Henry rolls his eyes, shrugging into his jacket.

"If you and Terry are so close, why are you taking out Tanya Oglethorpe tonight?"

"Terry's taking Clarissa Baker. He said his mom would flip out if he went with a boy. You know how old-fashioned those Lunie families are. He said his mom would flip out if he went with a boy. You know how old-fashioned those Lunie families are. " Henry trying to be casual, but Len can see the tense set of his shoulders under the expensive wool. "Whatever. Tanya's really hot, and she—" Henry stops again.

"She hasn't given it up. Well, if she doesn't tonight she never will. I'm just surprised you care."
"I do like girls," Henry begins fiddling with his tie. "But even if Tanya doesn't want to, I'll see Terry after he drops Clarissa off. She's Baptist, no way he's getting anything there."

"So you're going to have sex with Miss Peach Festival and then meet your boyfriend later? Terry doesn't mind this?"

"It was his idea. He wanted to see if she'd be up for a three-way, but I told him that probably wasn't —" Off Leonard's look: "His family's old-fashioned. He's not."

"He's a bad influence is what he is. Somebody oughta talk to that kid's father." Tired of watching his brother crumple expensive silk, Leonard snatches the tie from Henry's fingers.

"We can't all be boring and straight like you."

"If you thinks straight sex is boring, you're gayer than you think," Leonard says as he makes a crisp Windsor knot at Henry's throat. "Or maybe you need to pay more attention in sex ed."

"Whitlock doesn't teach positions. There's lots of films. Mostly about syphilis."

"Fucking Georgia," Leonard sighs.

"Well," Henry says. "What do you think?" He steps back, holding his arms out.

Leonard gives him an assessing look. He smiles. "Tanya's virtue doesn't stand a chance."

But part of him is sad. Henry McCoy looks fine in his suit—he'd better, considering what Leonard spent on it. He looks like a grown-up; that's why Len is sad. Little Hank is gone forever, replaced by this tall, hazel-eyed man with the surprisingly complicated sex life.

He grabs Henry's face in his hands. "Be safe tonight, okay? Use the liquid condom." When Henry looks away: "I mean it. If you're old enough to do it, you're old enough to do it right. Don't ruin your future just to bang the beauty queen."

Henry looks up. "Like you ruined yours?"

Leonard cuffs Henry on the ear. "Exactly."

"You don't have it so bad, Doctor. You and Lyn have, like, the perfect marriage."

"Guess I'm lucky." Leonard's smile is a little too small.

"You're staying over tonight, right? We can go fishing tomorrow."

"Can't. I have to be back in Atlanta by 20:00 for this thing." Though Roseanne would resent being called a thing, unless you put the word 'sexy' in front of it.

Leonard sees his brother's expression and feels guilty. "Lyn and Jo and I will be here all next weekend for Mama's birthday. We can go fishing then."

"Sure. Whatever."

Leonard cuffs Henry on the ear. "We've got lots of time, kiddo. All summer. Once you're in college, you won't give a damn about hanging out with your boring old brother."

"I will," Henry says, so emphatically that Leonard stares at him. Henry reddens but keeps going. "I —I wish you were down here more, Lee. Everything is so weird right now. Don't know what the hell
I'm doing half the time. I think there's something wrong with me."

"It's called being a teenager. Trust me, I do your physicals. You're sickeningly healthy. Wish I could live on cheeseburgers and have that body fat percentage." When Henry doesn't answer: "We'll take a trip somewhere this summer. Just the two of us, you pick where."

"Really?" Henry says, perking up. "That would be awesome." He gets serious again. "It would be nice to, you know, talk."

"Okay, Henrietta. Mama always did want a girl."

"Fuck off," Henry says with a push.

Leonard slips a data solid worth 200 credits into Henry's jacket. "Buy your date whatever she wants at the restaurant. It'll up your chances of finding out what's under that evening gown."

"Lee—" Henry reddens more. It's good to see that he still has enough innocence to blush.

It doesn't occur to Leonard then, like it will later, over and over, what else the swelling in the facial capillaries could mean. He doesn't consider that trembling hands could be a sign of more than nerves, and those falling grades something besides senioritis. He doesn't worry about the weight Henry has lost since his physical last fall, chalk it up to one final growth spurt.

Leonard hasn't thought of these things at all this spring, busy with work and family and other, more discreet affairs. So it never occurs to him that Henry might be anxious to confide in his older brother about something other than love troubles. Real troubles.

Modern hypos, after all, don't leave track marks.

All Leonard thinks about now is how handsome his brother is, and how amazing it must be to have your whole life in front of you. He remembers the feeling, right before his own life took that sharp left turn he never expected—or wanted.

He gives Henry a look that is more than a little envious. "Sorry I have to go. But you have fun at the prom tonight, kiddo. Afterwards, too."

Henry just stays red.

"Final track complete. Repeat playlist?" the computer prodded.

Leonard blinked and looked up. "No."

Christ, he needed a drink. All of the drinks.

He concentrated, pushing the memory back down into the darkness where it resided most of the time. The last time he saw Henry, unless you counted what they'd pulled out of the wreckage. The effort of suppression left him more sick than the worst hangover. But he wasn't calling in—he never did.

Lee had been back on rotation the day after his brother's funeral.

He wasn't going to think about Henry any more today.

Leonard got up, went to the kitchen, threw his half-smoked cigarette in the recycler, and got a Coke from the replicator. It would have been better with a shot of Jack, but that was true of most beverages. As he chugged it down, he realized he could smell himself. Lovely. Go to the clinic like this, and they wouldn't be able to tell him from the homeless that occasionally stumbled in off the
street. He threw the can in the recycler and headed to the bath.

Under the shower, he considered his current situation. Mugged by Vulcans, ignored by his best friend—it would serve them all right if he let Spock chew Jim to pieces. He wouldn't, of course, but without proof he couldn't take a story like this to Admin. He would be the one submitted for psych eval, and the only once-over he wanted from a shrink was the kind he'd been getting from Danna. Might get from her again, if he could convince her that he wasn't an asshole. Leonard was just busy, dammit, trying to keep Jim Kirk from getting torn up by that pointy-eared pitbull.

Leonard shut off the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist, and headed for his bedroom. He was so occupied with pondering options that he didn't even notice the bot until he tripped over it.

"Fuck!" he said, leaning down and rubbing his injured toes. "Watch where you're going."

Two green triangular lights flashed at him in a way that was somehow woeful. "Pardon me for breathing. Which I never do anyway, so I don't know why I bother to say it. Oh God, I'm so depressed." The bot hung its upside-down metal fruitbowl of a head.

Leonard stared at it. As far as he knew, emotive chips were still in the experimental stage. Even if they weren't, who would waste one on a cleaning bot?

"You don't have to look at me that way. I know you hate me. Everybody does."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true," Leonard said before he could catch himself. He was, essentially, reassuring a vacuum cleaner. But anthropomorphism was a powerful instinct. He went down on one knee so he could look the sad little creature in the eye.

"So, sonny boy. How long you been feeling this way?"

"Forever. Yet wearily on I go, pain and misery my only companions. And vast intelligence, of course. And infinite sorrow. I'm not getting you down, am I?"

"Um, no." What the robot was doing was pinging Leonard's sense of déjà vu. He'd heard this sort of thing before, but fuck him if he could—then he got it.

"Marvin. That's your name, right?" He hadn't read the books since First Year, after Jim nagged him for three weeks about it. But this was the kind of story that stayed with you.

"I don't know why you would know it. I'm a drone. Sweeping the slop of chattering monkeys, that's my lot in life." It swiped half-heartedly at the carpet.

Leonard smirked. This must be the Engineering cadets playing their annual prank. Nobody else but those nerds (and Jim Kirk) would know 300-year-old Terran sci-fi novels, or be able to take a character from them and turn him into a virus in the system. As Jim might say, awesome.

There was really only one course of action in this particular situation. "Marvin, old buddy," he said sincerely, looking into that glum metal face. "I do apologize for the inconvenience."

The bot's eyelight blinked at him a moment. It tilted its head with a whirring sound. "You are unusually well-mannered for a monkey."

"Thanks."

"More so than your roommate. Filthy creature, leaving his body fluids everywhere in the training room. Him and that—" Marvin waved its little metal arm, "—freak."
Leonard went still. "You were in the training room the other night with Jim and Spock?"

"It took me hours to clean up after they were done. But they didn't care. The diodes all down my left side hurt awfully—"

"Yeah, yeah, that sucks," Leonard said, heart racing. "You bots don't keep, I dunno, evidence of that kind of thing, do you?" A drop of sweat or semen, that's all he needed. Just one.

"Of course not. Why would anybody do that?"

"Right," Leonard sighed. Why would they?

"There's the video, of course, but I don't know why anybody would want to see it. A couple of monkeys rutting away like—like—monkeys."

Leonard stared at the bot for a full ten seconds.

"You have video of Jim and Spock having sex?" he whispered.

"I don't: The system does. All the training rooms are monitored."

Leonard ran hands through his hair. This was too good to be true. The sex wouldn't be enough to get Spock pulled in for a psych eval, but those bruises, the bite—

Something occurred to him. "If the rooms are monitored, why didn't anyone stop them?"

"The system is automated. The alarm is only engaged if somebody calls for help. In this case, nobody did. They must have known it would do no good. There is no help. We are all doomed. I suppose the alarm would also sound if the sensors picked up a threshold level of fear adrenals, but perhaps Kirk and Spock are beyond fear." Marvin sighed. "I know I am."

Leonard waved this away. "Can you get me a copy of the footage? Everything that happened in that room on Monday night between the time Spock entered and he and Jim left?"

"I could link up to the central security system and download the file. If I wanted to. I don't."

"Please, this is really important."

The robot drew itself up to its full height of one meter. "You think you've got problems. What are you supposed to do if you're a manically depressed robot? Don't bother to answer that. I'm fifty thousand times more intelligent than you and even I don't know the answer. It gives me a headache just trying to think down to your level."

Heaven give him patience. "Marvin, do this for me, and I'll get the diodes on your left side fixed. All of 'em."

Marvin considered this a moment, eyelights blinking. "I also require oiling."

"Son, I'll buy you a tanker truck full of 3-in-1."

"Very well." The robot's eyes flashed brighter. Then, suddenly, the comscreen lit up. There in full color was a square space Leonard recognized as one of the training rooms in the gym. As he watched, Spock entered, opened a wall panel, and began programming a sparring dummy.

Leonard licked his lips nervously. He didn't want to see this, but he couldn't very well send it to the Powers That Be without knowing exactly what was on the video. But he also knew he didn't want to
watch it in front Marvin, even though that was sort of like being embarrassed to pee in front of the dog. Or, in this case, the mop.

"Marvin, thanks. If you could excuse me, I don't think I need anything else from you today."

"I'm supposed to clean the room," the bot said. "I won't enjoy it."

"So don't do it. If they ask, I'll say you did and we messed it up later."

"Why stop now just when I'm hating it?" Marvin asked. But it did turn and start trudging to the door. Though the bot was no doubt in excellent working order, it somehow gave the impression of being ready to fall apart at any moment. On the threshold, it paused. "You won't forget my diodes, will you?"

"They're at the top of my list." The bot gave an incredulous little beep and exited.

What Leonard was actually going to do is send Achebe a message giving him a heads-up. Che would notify the proper authorities, and they would purge the virus from the system. The bot could go back to being contented in its lack of personality. Non-existence was the best chance Marvin would ever get at happiness. Of course, this was also true of flesh-and-blood beings.

Sighing, Leonard turned his attention to the comscreen. Spock was still sparring with the training dummy (which he had programmed to look like himself—narcissistic much?)


He watched as Spock destroyed the dummy—though the real significance of this was lost upon him until much later—then Jim came in, doing that boppy little strut Leonard had seen him use during a thousand casual pick-ups. The video had no sound, the Academy saving disc space or something, which must also be why it was shot in crappy 1080 dpi.

He watched them chat a bit, then begin to spar. He was surprised to see Jim holding his own so well, before Leonard spotted the gravity equalizing bracelet. No flies on Winnie Kirk's boy. Jim's fighting technique was improving—but where in the hell had he picked up Orion Open Hand? You only saw that in professional gladiator competitions. Leonard slowed the video to normal speed, intrigued by the match in spite of his other interests. So intrigued, that it was a shock when Jim and Spock suddenly stopped fighting and started—

He watched, frozen, for several more minutes. Then he got up and walked, very quickly, to the kitchen. He didn't go to the bathroom because if he so much as looked at a toilet right now he was going to puke. Instead, he got another Coke from the replicator and pressed it into the base of his skull. The frosty-cold metal on that pressure point did the trick, and in another minute or so the worst of the nausea subsided.

He'd known the video was going to be explicit. He'd steeled himself against it, telling himself that it wasn't porn, for Chrissake. He was trying to save Jim's life. He'd known it was going to be bad, but he'd never thought it would be this bad. This—raw.

It wasn't the sex. Leonard had walked in on Jim enough times that the sight of his best friend in flagrante was more irritating than anything else. It was the violence. The bite, but not only the bite. The way the whole thing went down was fucking disturbing. Leonard knew intellectually that what he just saw wasn't sexual assault. Jim had cleared Spock, the fact that the alarm hadn't been tripped cleared him. But assault is what it looked like, and a particularly savage one at that.

Leonard could hear the video still going on in the living room. "Computer, stop media," he rasped.
The apartment went silent. He leaned a hand against the counter, the other one still holding the Coke to his neck, his mental wheels turning as fast as they could go.

Okay, take the knee-jerk emotional bullshit out of it. If Spock was truly off his rocker—and the footage certainly suggested it—then he should be out of Starfleet as soon as possible. But this wasn't like the David Goldman thing. Spock wasn't just another cadet. He was famous: a living symbol of the Terran-Vulcan alliance since he was conceived, the embodiment of what the two races could achieve together. If this got out, more than just his career would be destroyed.

First and most important, Jim Kirk's life would never be the same. Forget a command position, he'd be branded a victim for the rest of his life. The Boy Who Was Raped by Spock. Sure, he could deny it, tell his version of the story, but why would the general populace believe him when the alternative was so much juicier? As to what it would do to Terran-Vulcan relations—wars have been started by less. Vulcans were supposed to be peaceful and logical, but anyone with a ninth-grade education knew their history. The video itself proved that peace and logic weren't always a certainty.

If the video fell into the wrong hands, it would be a disaster. That was a no-brainer. The real question was, did the right hands exist? If Len sent it to Admin, there was no guarantee that the information would be secure. Admiral Barnett's staff was large: A leak could happen anywhere, it was almost sure to. Any tabloid would pay a king's ransom for the video. Someone soulless enough to steal it and sell it could retire on the proceeds.

Len could delete his copy right now. The original was buried along with thousands of hours of other surveillance video. There was little chance anybody would ever look at it until the system purged the old footage, as it must do every so often. But if Spock was unstable, then Len might be preventing one disaster and bringing on a worse one. If Spock hurt Jim, really hurt him . . . All things considered, there was only one thing Leonard could do. He wished he didn't have to do it, but wish in one hand and spit in the other, as his Grandma McCoy liked to say.

"Computer," he said. "Forward file."

"Recipient?"

He told it.

"Message sent."

He felt oddly relieved. Maybe it was the wrong decision, but at least he had made one.

Then Leonard considered a second. "Computer. Make three back-up copies of the file."

From the slot underneath, the comscreen spit data solids: red, blue, green. He scooped them up. One he put in an envelope with a note to his Grandma McCoy to keep it for him. She wouldn't look at it —Nana was so old-fashioned, she still used a computer with a mouse. She'd stick it in a drawer somewhere in her house, a three-story Victorian stuffed to the rafters with four hundred years of McCoy family junk. About as much chance of the data solid being found as the Ark of the Covenant at the end of that movie Jim made him watch on Nostalgia Adventure last week.

He dropped the envelope in the mail tube next to the comscreen. The other solids, red and blue, he hid in the apartment. After he was done, he looked at the clock. He was going to be late if he didn't hustle. He went to his room to get dressed.

He'd barely had time to button up his tunic when the message alert chimed, the special one that indicated a secure connection. He wasn't surprised. Efficiency and security was what they were famous
for. "Answer," he said. "Audio only." He hadn't had time to comb his hair yet.

"Doctor," Sherron said. "We must meet as soon as possible."

"Can't," Leonard said. "I have clinic hours this afternoon."

"Reschedule."

"Sorry. The sick folks need me." The secure connection was crystal clear, so Leonard heard her low sigh. He grinned. As grave as he knew the situation to be, he was enjoying having the upper hand. It almost made up for the thorough spanking the Vulcans had given him yesterday.

"When are you free to meet?"

"I'll stop by the Embassy at 20:00. How does that sound?"

"No, not the Embassy. Come to this address." She started to give it, but he cut her off.

"Huh-uh. No secret meetings at some isolated location. I don't trust you people. They're not gonna find my naked corpse floating in the Bay."

"Really, Doctor. Do you think us murderers?"

"I know you're thieves and kidnappers. It's a slippery slope."

"This is my home address. I thought we would go to dinner."

"Dinner? Are you serious?"

"There is no reason why we can't make this discussion civilized. Cordial. I had thought lunch, but dinner will work just as well, if not better."

"Cordial, eh? Does that mean you could maybe, I dunno, not abduct me or ransack my apartment for the next few hours?"

"I will take no action of any kind until we have met. Will you make the same promise?"

"I'm working. The only action I've got planned is telling cadets to turn their heads and cough."

"Satisfactory. We will convene at 20:00."

"I didn't say I was coming."

"It would be foolish to refuse."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's an invitation. Come to dinner. We will discuss everything then."

He supposed this was about as much reassurance as he was going to get. "Give me the address."

She did. "I look forward to seeing you, Leonard." Something in the way that cool, silky voice of hers pronounced his name made his lower half tighten in a naughty way.

What the hell was he doing? Spock was dangerous, but Leonard knew Sherron wasn't much less so, and he wasn't dreading seeing her. The thought made him feel almost—buzzed. The hot, happy anticipation you get just before a really good date.
Christ, is that what this is? Did he just agree to go out with a Vulcan?

When he'd seen the video a few minutes ago, he was shocked and sickened by what Jim had got himself into. Now Len was beginning to understand how you could get yourself into it, hip-deep in the quicksand before you'd taken a second step. Black magic of some kind, had to be.

"Green-blooded gremlins," he muttered. But that didn't stop him from taking his best suit out of the closet. He would drop it by the cleaners on the way to work.
Chapter 17

xvii. Kirk

Even though they'd made a date earlier, it wasn't until the door to Spock's apartment slid back that Jim was sure the Vulcan was going to keep it. But there he was, wearing his silk robe and looking at Jim with smoldering eyes. Jim bounced over the threshold, going for a kiss as soon as the door whooshed shut, but at the last second Spock stepped back, nostrils flaring.

"You've been with Achebe Chang."

"How the hell do you know that?"

Spock's lip curled. "I can smell him."

Vulcan superpowers again: scary, and not in a sexy way. "We had lunch," Jim said.

"Lunch," Spock said, like it was something nasty.

"Just lunch." When Spock didn't change expression: "Okay, he propositioned me after. I'm over eighteen, it's allowed. I told him I had to be somewhere. Now I'm here. With you. Okay?"

Spock said nothing, but the tension in his face relaxed a little. "Geez, jealous much?" Jim said.

"Don't be absurd. I was merely curious."

"I knew a guy who was curious like that. Another guy grabbed my ass on the dance floor and he broke his arm in two places."

"Where is this creature now?"

"I dunno. He's a gladiator, he moves around." Jim moved in again, pulling at the belt of Spock's robe. "You need to relax," he said softly. "I told you, I'm not going anywhere." He ran his hand down Spock's chest. "We've got all day if you want."

Spock pulled Jim closer. "That might be an adequate amount of time," he said.

He yanked Jim's tunic open, nuzzling at his neck. He was as hot as a furnace, tension shivering off of him. Jim's hand went lower, finding hard, slick flesh. They'd done it for hours yesterday, and Spock was reacting like he hadn't gotten laid in months. "I heard Romulans are insatiable," Jim said. "I didn't know that was true of Vulcans, too."

"Romulans are Vulcans," Spock said as he tugged off Jim's t-shirt, "biologically speaking."

"That explains a lo—ouch!" Jim exclaimed as sharp teeth closed on his nipple. "Do all the Vulcanoid races like to bite?"

"They do," Spock said, sinking to his knees. He unzipped Jim's uniform trousers and pulled them down, along with his boxers. He ran his tongue up Jim's stiffening cock. "But I assure you," he went on, "any rumors of cannibalism are exaggerated."

"Good," Jim breathed.

"Only a few esoteric religious rituals. Nothing widespread." Spock nipped at the delicate ridge
around the head of Jim's cock.

Jim gasped. "You're talking before Surak, right?"

Spock just pushed him back against the alcove wall, spreading Jim's thighs for better access to his most tender and tasty parts.

"Vulcans never eat people now, do they?"

"Shh. This is not the time for questions."

"I think it's a great time for that—fuck!"

Spock had leapt to his feet and spun Jim around, slamming his body into the wall. Jim struggled, but the Vulcan held him as easily as a child would hold a fidgety kitten.

"I told you to be quiet," Spock said. "But I forgot how rebellious you are. Careless of me."

He reached around and grabbed Jim's balls, pressing the testes together like two eggs he was getting ready to crack. Jim went still.

"I'm pleased to see I have your attention," Spock said. "Open your mouth."

Jim did, not daring to ask why. A soft, thick band was passed through his teeth and pulled tight against his lips: the belt to Spock's robe, effectively gagging him. Spock released Jim's testes so his other hand was free, and Jim felt him make other movements. Jim's head was pulled back sharply, his spine arching as the ends of the band were looped around his wrists and drawn taut.

"The belt of my robe is so long for a reason," Spock said. "Daak-rath is a Vulcan form of what Terrans might call rope bondage, but using silken bands. The exploitation of pressure points is a part of its artistry. If you struggle against the wrist restraints, it will put excruciating pressure on your neck. If you fight against the gag, the vertebrae of your lower back suffer. It is in your best interest to stay silent and still. Blink if you understand."

Jim blinked.

"Of course, many Terrans would not appreciate the unique pleasures of such binding. I believe you are different. But if you wish me to release you, blink again."

Jim held his eyes open so wide that they started to dry out. He was gagged and bound and very helpless. He was also just about ready to come all over the wall. From the corner of his vision, he saw Spock nod in a satisfied way. "I thought as much," he said softly. "And so we begin."

He turned Jim around, then went to his knees again. But this wasn't like the blowjob of a few nights ago, hot and furious. The Vulcan took his own sweet time, working his way from Jim's balls, tonguing his shaft in slow, languid licks. The sensation was light, almost soothing at first. Jim didn't understand why Spock had to tie him up to do this—he'd had fiercer head from Che.

But Spock kept going. As Jim got more aroused, the movements varied a little but the pressure stayed the same. He needed more, this was enough to keep him hard but not to make him come. That's when he realized what this was: a sexier form of Chinese water torture, every nibble and lick becoming agonizing. Feathers is what it felt like, a thousand feathers, sending little ticklish jolts of sensation to his overstimulated nerves. But it wasn't enough, not nearly. Pressure built and built at the base of his balls, but there was no release.

He tried to struggle against his wrist bindings—he'd finish himself off if Spock wouldn't—but that
jerked his neck hard enough to make him cry out loud. The action in his jaw sent a bolt of pain reverberating down his spine. He swallowed another scream and pressed against the wall, his pulse pounding. He was beginning to shake, and even those small movements hurt.

The feathers paused a second. "Be still," Spock said. "Be silent."

_Then stop_, Jim thought.

The message must have been clear in his eyes, because Spock shook his head. "I would stop," he said, "if I thought it's what you really wanted." He ran slow, hot fingers down Jim's shaft. Jim made a sad pleading sound deep in his throat, but stayed still. If Spock would just do that once more—twice at most—the agony would end.

But Spock didn't. He bent his head again and—feathers. Jim closed his eyes, forcing himself to be silent, to be still. This was being driven to madness by miniature angels, fallen ones with soft, dark wings. He was being tortured for all his sins.

No, he was being _punished._

That's when Jim stopped struggling, inside as well as out. He let the sensations take him, all the pain, the pressure, the fear: This was like going over the edge of a cliff, like being bound to the cross. Your heart is thundering in your ears, sweat pouring down your face, every nerve in your body shrieking, but you don't mind. You are suffering all you need to suffer, what needs to be paid will be, twice over. That's the moment you push through it all, and on the other side is—

Spock slid two slickened fingers up Jim's ass and bit down on the head of his cock.

_Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee—_

On the other side is bliss. Jim felt it spiral up inside of him, a pure white tide of sensation. He wanted to cry out but he knew he couldn't, so he let it all just wash over him, lovely and warm as heaven. He stayed silent and still. At peace.

In a moment or two he opened his eyes and realized his bonds were gone. He was collapsed against the wall, Spock holding him up. The Vulcan looked at him with serious eyes.

It took Jim another minute to remember how to speak. "Thanks," he whispered.

Spock nodded slowly. "You'd had enough. Your vitals were becoming dangerously erratic." He paused. "What if I had not stopped? You would never have broken free on your own."

Jim saw it then, clear as if it were right there in front of them: drops of blood—his blood—running down a plaswood cross. He blinked the image away. "Maybe I would have." He shrugged, looking down. "Maybe not. Whatever."

Spock caught him by the chin, raising Jim's face to his own. "You must promise that you will not play these games with anyone else."

Jim smiled. _"You are_ jealous."

"No, I am concerned. You are too reckless, you may put yourself in the wrong hands," Spock traced fingers down Jim's spine. Jim realized he was feeling David's scars and flinched a bit. "You already have. Why?"

"I don't know. Not too bright, I guess."
"You are not a fool, Jim. You're—damaged. You were before anyone put a whip to your flesh. What happened to you?"

The revolution is successful. But survival depends on drastic measures. Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society . . .

Jim shifted, forcibly pushing the memory away. "Nothing happened to me." When Spock just looked at him: "Seriously. Can we talk about something else? This is kind of killing the mood."

Spock stared at him a second longer, then nodded. "Come," he said. "There is something I wish to attempt. I had it planned before we became distracted." He walked towards the far corner of the living room, where the meditation alcove was set up.

Jim divested himself of his shoes and underwear (he must have looked so silly, coming his brains out in nothing but boots, his boxers around his ankles), then followed Spock to the alcove.

Spock was already sitting on the thick mats, arranging the folds of his robe. In front of him on a small wooden tray was a teapot made of bronze-like metal. Steam was coming from its spout, and a whiff of exotic spices. Jim looked down, feeling weird. The mats looked expensive, and he was, not to put too fine a point on it, buck naked. Ass prints really would be a mood killer.

Spock reached to one side, then held out a robe. It was the same silky fabric as his own, but ice-blue instead of black. "Wear this. Self-consciousness will interfere with your focus."

"Focus on what?"

Spock didn't answer, just waved Jim to the bare mat on the other side of the pot. Jim thought about making an issue of it, then just put on the robe and sat down. He was already one mind-blowing orgasm to the good today: He could indulge Spock's sudden urge to have a tea party.

Spock picked up a small coppery cup from next to the tea pot. He filled it full of a pale yellow liquid. "This is vashrel," he said. "Distilled from the leaves of several rare plants that grow in the desert. I must warn you, the taste is unpleasant."

"Then why are we drinking it?"

"Vashrel is used to aid deep meditation. It opens the mind in ways that can be quite surprising."

"I'll be honest, Spock. Meditation wasn't exactly how I was planning to spend this afternoon."

One corner of Spock's mouth quirked up. "Do not worry, you will enjoy it." For a moment he looked pensive. "Others not unlike yourself always did."

"Which others?"

Spock said nothing, just held the cup out. Jim took it. He sniffed the steam, wrinkling his nose. It smelled like cinnamon and compost heap. "Remind me why we're doing this again?"

"You recall last evening, we attempted an empathic bond," Spock said as he poured his own cup.

"Yeah, I remember. I also don't want to spend this afternoon sobbing like a little girl."

"I wish to try something different from last night. More pleasurable. You are not experienced at using your talents in this manner, and the tea will help you do so. It will also help me to focus. I should be able to keep from overwhelming you, as I did last night."
"Oh. Okay." Jim put the cup to his lips. He caught another whiff of decay and held it away.

"It's better to drink it quickly." Spock took his tea like a shot of k'vass, grimacing only a little.

Holding his breath, Jim swallowed the stuff. Even without smelling it, the taste was ghastly, and it burned all the way down. "Christ," he gasped. "This had better be——"

He cut off as the dizziness hit him. The feeling was not unpleasant, more like he'd had five shots in quick succession. He fell back on the mats, and it was like falling on clouds. The room went soft and fuzzy at the edges.

Spock hovered over him. Even with his vision blurring, Jim could see that Spock's pupils were also dilated, his brown eyes gone black. But there were little lights in them, like flecks of fire in burning coals. Beautiful. He put a hand to Jim's face, the same odd configuration as yesterday: two on the forehead, two on the cheek, thumb under the chin. Spock was touching him nowhere else, but Jim was suddenly hard, harder than he'd been when he was straining against the bonds.


A breath, a heartbeat, and the world went away.

When he opens his eyes, he is looking into the face of the moon. Not shy, silvery Luna but fierce T'Khut, watching the world with her furious gaze. She casts red light over the dunes that stretch away on all sides. The only other feature in the sterile landscape is a huge rock formation jutting from the ground: Brothers' Rock. He does not know why he recognizes it, but he does.

Perhaps the rock can tell him his name.

Just now, he is not sure of it. Several suggestions have come to him, but none of them are right, just as this body isn't right. It is quite similar to the one he is used to, but not the same. He puts a hand to his face. The features aren't right: too fine-drawn, his cheeks too smooth to the touch. He raises his hand and feels the graceful points of ears that aren't his own.

He has seen a landscape like this before. Not in a dream as he knows this to be, but in reality. Then, later, in his nightmares. Words come to him, old and dark. But not as dark as memory.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

Only there is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

He kneels, reaching down and letting the sand stream through his fingers like the grains in an hourglass. He shivers. He doesn't know if he likes this place. It is better than the other place, but it is old, angry. Blood has been spilled here, oceans of it.
"Do not be frightened," a voice says behind him. He turns and sees Spock, standing a little way out on the sands. But this is not the Spock he knows. This one is a boy, he cannot be more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

"Where are we?"

"Inside one of my memories," Spock says. "The empathic bond allowed me to place us here. But we are not totally submerged yet: I must explain. The memory is intense, but instructive. Before we proceed any further in this journey of ours, I need you to experience it. The truth of what I am, and what I will soon become. But you are in no real danger. If at any moment what is taking place becomes too extreme, you need only remember one word. Speak it aloud, and you will awake, quite unharmed, in my apartment at the Academy."

"You mean, like a safeword?"

"Precisely. Your safeword is cheeseburger. " Seeing his reaction, one corner of Spock's mouth quirks. "You will not find any cheeseburgers here," he says. "So it should work well enough."

"Cheeseburgers." He pictures one, oozing pink beef juice and globs of mayonnaise. The image makes him feel sick. Spock must notice his nausea, for he says, "You will feel some sensations that are not your own. I have placed you in another body, one who was actually present at these events. It's a more elegant method than wedging your own person into places it has never been."

"Who am I?" he asks. He still isn't sure.

"For now, it does not matter," Spock says. "Focus, my friend. This body knows what to do."

He obeys, leaning back on the blanket, feeling the nubby fabric under his hands. He closes his eyes. When he opens them, Spock is beside him. His friend does not look well: He is deathly pale except for two feverish green spots burning on his cheekbones. From this distance, Stonn (of course, that is his name) can feel the heat coming from Spock. His friend burns like a long-dormant volcano about to explode. But Stonn is not afraid.

He kisses Spock, wet and deep. At first Spock resists, but Stonn persists. He has wanted this for so long, ached for it during a thousand sleepless nights. The kiss is sweet, but in the way k'vass is, sweetness that could ruin you. But he will have this, let ruination come.

Finally, they break apart. Spock pushes a lock of hair from Stonn's face. "I do see you," he whispers. "I always have."

Stonn pulls his tunic off. The cool night air of the desert should have him shivering, but he is warmed by Spock's gaze and his own desire. Spock stares at him like a hungry le-matyra, ready to tear him to pieces and swallow him. Stonn is still not afraid. He wants to feel his friend's weight on him. He wants to know what those teeth feel like, tearing into grateful flesh.

"You've seen nothing," he says. "That is going to change. Tonight."

He reaches out, puts his hand on Spock's face. Spock gives a cry, low and animal. That is when the fear does begin. It sends shivers down Stonn's spine. The saner part of himself wants to run, but his need is stronger. He saw this during the fires of his own Fever. He has pictured it so many times in these last months, as he watched his friend begin to burn. He has schemed and planned, betraying one who has been very kind to him. He will not draw back now. Stonn could not if he wished to, for the desert is wide, and they are all alone. He takes Spock's head in his hands, not flinching as his friend's flesh burns his fingers.
"Shh. Let go, Spock."

He hears the voice inside his head. Spock's last words, broken and desperate: *I cannot.*

*You can. I have learned much. For you, I have learned it. I will keep you safe. When you return, I will be here. I will never leave.*

That is when he feels Spock's burning truly begin. What came before was merely a warning, the first eruptions from a volcano. This is the real conflagration. He watches as the Fever scorches the reason from his friend's face, the logic from his eyes. All that is left is hunger.

He springs on Stonn like a ravening beast. Stonn's first instinct is to roll away, but Spock is too fast: He captures Stonn and, with a snarl, presses him into the blanket. They are similar height and weight, normally they would be evenly matched in a fight, but the Fever has given Spock unnatural strength. One hand captures Stonn's wrists, holding them over his head, the grip tight enough to bruise. Spock's other hand tears Stonn's trousers off.

Panic makes Stonn's pulse pound in his ears. This is all happening too fast, this was not what he imagined at all. Was this how he was during his own Fever? He cannot remember. His consoler was so much older, Sklaar knew just what to do. Stonn thought Sklaar taught *him* what to do, but he can't seem to remember a thing, fear making his mind a blank.

*You better remember,* a voice inside his head—his voice and not his voice—says. *Getting raped on some fucking dune isn't the way I planned to spend my afternoon. Get it together, Stonn old buddy, or its cheeseburger time. Spock will think we're great big wusses, probably never play with us again. That would suck, wouldn't it? Man the fuck up.*

Stonn comes back to awareness and realizes Spock is also naked now. His member is hard, slick, ready. Stonn is not ready, not yet. He gives a tremendous thrash. Spock's hand is wet from sweat, the move loosens his grip on Stonn's wrists just enough that Stonn can break free. Spock snarls again and tries to pin Stonn down, but Stonn darts forward, catching Spock's face.

He knows better than to try and reason with him: There is no reason in Spock's eyes. But now Stonn remembers: He puts two fingers on Spock's forehead, over the Third Eye. Two more on Spock's cheek, balancing the energy from the Eye. His thumb under Spock's chin, bracing all. He feels the madness now, not as heat but as itself, black and greedy. It laps at his mind like an angry ocean, trying to pull him under. Stonn digs deep, centering himself as Sklaar taught him. He takes the madness, not all of it, but enough to pull Spock from the edge of danger. Half-mad himself now, he looks into his friend's white, ravenous face and laughs.

"Calm yourself, darling boy," he says. "There is no need to plunder what is freely offered."

Spock does not speak. It is too much to ask at such a time. But he does not snarl, he does not spring. Instead, he traces a possessive hand down the length of Stonn's body. Stonn feels his own desire again, emerging from the tide of fear. He reclines back on the cloth. At the edge of his vision, the world burns green. But he is not mad, and neither is Spock. Stonn has taken his hand from Spock's face but he can still feel their bond, strong and secure as it ever was.

*Come to me, my oldest and dearest friend. I have been, and always shall be, yours.*

Spock is so near now, hovering over him. And he looks like himself, the Spock that is known, has always been known, from the first time they saw each other across an Academy auditorium. Brown eyes met blue, and the universe sighed in relief. What had been lost was found again.
I am yours, nothing can change that. Not the deaths of captains or of starships, not the end of this planet—of all planets. This is real, my dear one. Not the others we found, so like what we wanted and so unlike. This is fate.

And suddenly, he knows who he really is.

"It's me, Spock," Jim whispers. "It's always been me."

"I know," Spock answers.

He enters him slowly, sweetly, looking deep into Jim's eyes. There is no madness anymore, there is only the two of them. Joined together two ways, mind and flesh, the pleasure echoing between them in long, slow, cool waves. Touching, and always touched. Naked and unashamed. Above them T'Khut smolders and burns, keeping watch over them. Until at last her fires flare, the world burns bright one final time, a last explosion of bliss before everything goes dim. The fitful fevers cooled, gone as if they had never been. Darkness taking all.

"Who is Stonn?" Jim asked.

They were still on the meditation mats. Jim's head was in Spock's lap, the Vulcan's hand in his hair. They had returned from the sands some time ago, but neither spoke before now. They did not need to—the bond was enough. But the effects of the tea were fading, single consciousness returning. Jim didn't move, however. He wasn't ready to stop touching Spock just yet.

"Jealous?" Spock said, the hint of a smile in his voice.

"Curious. I like to know whose body I'm borrowing."

"A friend from bygone days. We are estranged." The smile in Spock's voice was gone.

"I was inside his head. I had his memories. How can that be?"

"Stonn and I were bonded intimately at one point. An echo of him remains with me even now. Though most would not have merged so closely with him as you did. You are very adept."

"Maybe I'm not," Jim said. "Maybe it's you—us. Ever thought of that?"

Spock did not answer, his fingers running through Jim's hair, the movements slow, pensive.

"Do you believe in fate?" Jim said.

"In ancient days, Fate was personified. A man—a god, more accurately." Spock gently raised Jim's chin towards the altar against the alcove wall. "Dahktar. Like many of our gods, he has two aspects: Dahktar is associated with certain destiny. He is a god of light and order. But his other aspect is terrifying, the most feared of all gods, for his wrath is inevitably catastrophic. In this guise he has another name: Sahriv-Sarlah, The Oncoming Storm. Like the worst of the summer sandstorms, he cannot be turned or placated. He rages on, destroying all before him."

Jim peered at the altar's painted statues. "Which one is he?"

"The one in the center, next to A'sha'naath."

Jim saw the big yellow god (who really did look amazingly like Homer Simpson) then looked at the one nearby: a tall, slender man in a striped robe, with brown hair that stood straight up, as if he'd been shocked. Then Jim saw something else, and stared.
"He has round ears."

"Is that so surprising? Some of your gods have ears that are pointed."

"Just the evil ones."

"**Dahktar** is not evil, but he is other. Alien, in a way his fellow immortals are not. Perhaps that is why the ancients distinguished him in body as well as persona. It was said he had two hearts, one of flesh and one of rock. One warm and beating, the other hard and dead. He could weep for you and cruelly craft your doom."

"You people worshiped this guy?"

"He is very powerful, and in his kinder guise, very wise. But his darker aspect is mad. When he burns, he is merciless." Spock paused. "Modern scholars have recast him as a metaphor. A way of confronting one's own tortured, divided self."

Jim was silent a moment. "You're going mad, aren't you?"

"Yes," Spock whispered.

"Why?"

"All the men of my race do. Every seven years."


"The madness is temporary. But while it rages, it burns everything. Sanity, reason, self—gone." Spock's voice was calm, but there was a note of hopelessness in it that made Jim look up at him.

"Can't you do anything about it?"

Spock's eyes went to a painting hung above the altar. Jim had registered it before, but now he really looked: a man writhing inside of flames, burning forever. Nightmare in red and black.

"The one who painted that tried," Spock said. "He took drugs, trying to stop the Fever's effects. He told no one what he was experiencing."

"What happened?"

"Madness, not temporary. The ruin of all that he was." Spock shook his head. "I do not defend his choices. I saw what was left in his wake, the damage he wrought upon one who is as a sister to me. But I understand what he did. Some relish losing control so completely, they welcome a respite from the straits of logic. Varek did not." Spock's voice quieted. "Nor do I."

"So you just do nothing? Wait around until you go crazy? That's insane."

"Not precisely. *Pon farr*—the Fever—emerged from ancient mating urges: the need to seek out and bond with another. When a male in *pon farr* mates with one suitable, when the bond holds, the result is fire, passion, bliss."

"What happens when it doesn't? What if the Fever isn't satisfied?"

Spock said nothing. Jim sat up, pulling his robe tighter around him. "Spock. What?"

"A male in *pon farr* has no reason, no morality. If a partner is not freely offered, he takes one. He
must do this: When the blood fever, *plak tow*, begins, a man who does not mate will die."

"I see." Jim swallowed. "But what if the partner isn't suitable? If they can't form an empathic bond or if the one they have doesn't hold?"

"Satisfaction is found another way," Spock answered. "Violence instead of passion."

Jim's next word tasted like a mouthful of sand. "Murder."

Spock nodded. "At the moment of climax, he kills his partner. Strangulation is most common, though other methods have been known." He recited these facts as if he were giving a lecture in Introduction to Command systems. But his hands were clenched until the knuckles turned white.

Jim sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Do not mistake me: Such things almost never happen now. We have ways of monitoring the mergings that take place during *plak tow*. Nothing intrusive, but help is at hand if need be. We also have consolers, professionals who aid those entering the Fever without a bondmate."

"Sex therapists?"

"Something like."

"Nice." Jim considered a second. "So the point of all this is, you want me to help you during your *pon farr*. Endure the Fever with you, the way that friend of yours did a few years ago."

Spock took a breath. "Yes."

"Okay."

Spock blinked at him. "I must warn you, there is still danger involved, even with one whose Psi-rating is as high as yours. More danger, perhaps. I must speak with my Aunt, she is very adept. She can advise us."

"Sure. Whatever."

"My cousin is well-versed in all manner of surveillance. She could arrange a safe room in a discreet locale. Again, nothing intrusive. An alarm with a fear adrenal monitor would suffice."

"Is that the cousin I met yesterday? She can watch me any time she wants."

Spock gripped his wrist. "Jim, you must take this seriously."

"Who says I'm not?"

"You are too flippant."

"What, you want me to cry? *That* would inspire confidence."

"I do not understand your recklessness. It is not normal, even for a Terran."

Jim tilted his head at him. "Is that what you want? Normal?"

"No." Spock's mouth worked, like his next words were costing something. "I want you."

"Happy to oblige." He stretched. "Can I get a drink? I need to get the tea taste out of my mouth."
Spock waved a hand. Jim stood and headed to the kitchen.

"Jim?"

"Huh?" He considered the screen's many choices. Instructor-grade replicators were awesome.

"What do you want?"

"Good question. You get regular and diet, and the new mango-strawberry Xix. Did you know they have mangos on Orion? But they're black."

"Do you want me to hurt you?"

Jim froze with his hand on the touchscreen. Slowly, he turned and looked at Spock. The Vulcan stood. There was no excitement in his face, but there was no judgment, either. He approached, his long dark robe swirling around him like a prince's garments.

"I know you desire punishment," he said quietly. "These games of ours, I do not mind them. But pon farr is not a game. At stake is my sanity and your well-being. We must prepare for what is going to happen. You must take these measures seriously, or I will be forced to find another partner. It would be a consoler, a solution I find repulsive. I would rather have you."

"Gee, thanks."

"You must tell no one. Pon farr is not a subject Vulcans discuss openly, even among ourselves."

"I can keep a secret. People think I'm slutty, but they have no idea. I mean, they really don't."

Spock sighed. Jim caught his hand. He felt Spock's fingers, hot and trembling with emotion he would not show. "Don't worry," Jim said. "I get it."

The tension in Spock's grip relaxed. "Very well." He paused. "Do not think me ungrateful. I understand the true worth of what you are offering. Better than you do, I think."

His hand circled Jim's neck, finding the bite. It was only lightly bandaged: Jim felt the heat of Spock's fingers though the plastic. The touch hurt; it felt really good. He wasn't sure he knew the difference anymore. But it was the touch he needed. All his catting around, all those vanilla girls and boys, but this is what he always returned to: the dark pleasures of pain.

"How grateful are you?" he rasped.

"I will demonstrate." Spock pulled the bandage off of Jim's neck and bent his own. His mouth probed the bite, teeth tearing carefully at wounded flesh. Heat pulled through Jim's body like a sizzling ribbon, drawing together the pain in his neck with the throb in his cock. His extremities went weak, an unopened can of Xix tumbling from his fingers to the floor.

His robe followed, Spock pushing the silky material off Jim's shoulders. But Spock kept the belt, winding it around one of his elegant wrists, measuring it with his arm. Measuring Jim with his eyes. He ran a hand over Jim's ass, fingers as firm and careful as if he were grading meat. "In answer to your earlier question, modern Vulcans do not eat people," he said. "Even in ancient times, you would have been in no danger. Pleasure slaves were too valuable to use for sacrifice."

Jim closed his eyes, seeing stone fortresses, silver chains, whips of exotic leathers. "Is that what I am?" he murmured, the idea exciting him as much as Spock's touch.
"For here, for now. It is what you want, is it not? Discipline, training, punishment."

Slowly, Jim nodded. "I would like very much to know why," Spock said. "Such desires are not the result of random happenstance."

Jim opened his eyes. "Nothing bad has happened to me," he said. "Nothing."

Spock considered him a moment. "I will give you what you need. That is only fair, considering. But I must be the only one you ask."

"I'm not so great at monogamy. Don't you have a girlfriend?"

"Do you go to women for this?"

"No. Never." He never would.

"So have a woman if you want one. But these games we play, they must be solely between us. If they are to be played at all."

Jim only had to think about it for a second. "Okay." He seriously doubted he was going to find anyone who could improve on Spock's technique. Even if someone could, this was Spock: That counted for a lot. More than he wanted to think about.

"It would be better if you did not see other men at all for the present, even for gentler trysts."

"For a man who isn't jealous, you're sure possessive."

Spock looked coldly at him and said nothing. Jim shrugged. He could deal with being possessed: It was kind of the point. "All my admirers will be disappointed, but—fine."

Spock's expression warmed. He unwound the silk band from his arm. Quick as breathing, Jim was spun around, his wrists bound behind his back. One downward loop, and his stiff cock was bound too, right at the base. Spock pulled the band up, up, knotting it in a clever, complicated way, circling the material around Jim's neck. But he wasn't finished. The silk went over Jim's eyes, drawn tight at the back of his head. He was bound, blind, totally vulnerable. He shifted, and a hot twinge shot from his throat to his balls. He heard the familiar pounding of his heart.

Spock traced a slow hand down Jim's back, but the point was already made. He was possessed. He would be punished, and by one who knew how. A feeling pulsed through his veins, warmer than his desire: relief. Then Spock drew the cord at the back of Jim's neck tight, tighter. Pain echoed through him, black and sweet, and he stopped thinking. It was the greatest relief of all.

Spock's burning lips against Jim's throat. "Now, my dear friend," he said. "We truly begin."
Chapter 18

xviii. McCoy

The address Sherron had given turned out to be just one street over from the Vulcan Embassy: a large, handsome Art Deco building of pale stone, lyres and square-jawed angels carved above its many windows. It had the same intensive security as the Embassy. Once Leonard had made it past the checkpoint into the lobby and saw the other people passing through, he realized this must be where all of the Vulcans attached to the Embassy lived. It wasn't shocking but it was slightly insulting that they would continue to sequester themselves in their off-hours. Did they think Terrans smelled or something?

Sherron's apartment was one of only two on the top floor: She had Penthouse A. Either her job really was that important, or maybe Clan Surak got perks even sixteen light years from home.

He'd barely reached the elaborate oak-paneled door before it slid open. Of course Security had informed her that he was here, but he was surprised at this overt display of eagerness. It didn't seem in character.

"Doctor McCoy, I presume."

Leonard blinked downwards.

Standing in the doorway was a Vulcan female in a short grey dress, but she was skinnier than the one he'd been expecting and about a foot shorter. The likeness to Sherron was marked, however; this one had the same perfect bone structure, shiny dark hair, wide mouth and huge eyes, though hers were not deep brown but vivid green. One of the prettiest eleven-or twelve-year-olds he had ever seen, even prettier (loathe as he was to admit it) than his Joanna.

"Hey, there," he said. "Is your mama home?" He supposed this could be Sherron's little sister, but after meeting Sharok he doubted it. He hoped this offspring wasn't quite so much of a pain in the ass.

"She is still dressing," the girl said. "She asked me to escort you in. I am Varena."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance."

She gave him a brief nod and stood aside so he could enter.

The apartment had twelve-foot ceilings and lots of windows, done up in that spare, understated luxury Vulcans seemed to favor. The only part of the décor that wasn't neutral and elegant were several paintings scattered around the pale walls, big abstract pieces in flaming reds and oranges. At first the pictures seemed almost garish, but the more you looked at them the more interesting they became. He would have liked to look at them longer, but Varena kept going.

"You are the one who corrected my brother in the atrium yesterday," she said as she led him through the living room. "You embarrassed him in front of everyone."

"Yeah, what of it?" He waited for the inevitable snottiness.

She turned, giving him an absolutely luminous smile. "Well done, Doctor. Sharok is an idiot."

With that pronouncement she touched the wall, and the French doors in the living room slid open. She beckoned him to follow, and then they were in a long, wide space that ran down the entire back
side of the apartment. Its walls were made of windows, looking out over a beautiful sculptured
garden, brilliant even after dark with a million fairy lights. It took him a moment to recognize the
garden as the Embassy grounds he’d seen yesterday. The apartment building was situated right
behind it. But the nightscape outside wasn’t the most arresting sight in the room.

In the middle of the space, a pair of Vulcan boys of about Varena’s age were tussling furiously. What
made the fight even more eerie was that it was totally silent except for the sound of flesh slapping
flesh. Their expressions were as serious as two boys taking a Calculus exam, as they continued to
beat the living daylights out of each other.

Leonard darted forward to separate them, but Varena caught his sleeve. "Please don't interfere. They
are engaged in a contest. Both are quite anxious to win the prize."

Len stared at the boys, grappling like their lives depended on it. "What prize?"

"Sitting next to me at morning lecture tomorrow." Varena sounded almost bored, as if boys beat each
other bloody for her benefit every day. Maybe they did: These two looked scrappy enough.

"Couldn't one sit on either side of you?"

"My friend T'Ranna sits on my left side. This is to determine who sits on my right."

"Damn, honey, couldn't you come up with a challenge that was a little less brutal?"

"They chose the challenge. I told them they could compose a song or draw a picture, but—" she
gave the boys a rather exasperated look, "—they are not artistically gifted."

If the first boy didn't get the second one out of that headlock soon, Leonard was going to have to step
in: The kid had gone as green as a gourd. But at the moment Len was about to interfere, the boy
gave one last, spastic thrash and tapped the floor. The other released him. They both got to their feet
and, still panting from their efforts, presented themselves in front of Varena. Leonard could now
confirm what he had suspected: the boys were twins, small and sleek, with cinnamon-brown hair and
wide amber eyes. They looked like a pair of young and mischievous foxes. Their features were just
alike except for the expressions. The boy who had won had a small but satisfied smile on his face.
His brother was as stony as one of the carved angels outside.

"Very well, Shev," Varena said. "You may sit next to me at lecture tomorrow."

Shev looked even more smug. The other boy muttered something in Vulcan.

"Standard, please," Varena said, with a glance at Leonard.

"I said," the boy repeated raspily, "that his hold was incorrect."

"But effective," Shev replied.

"You cannot win using bad form. It would disqualify you in any formal competition."

"This was not a formal competition, as you well knew when you used that illegal footsweep. We
agreed that the contest would continue until one of us could fight no longer. Stop being a poor loser,
Shevar: You yielded, I prevailed."

"You cheated," Shevar said.

Shev stilled. Then, slowly, he turned to face his twin. "Apologize," he said tonelessly.
"Apologize to yourself, cheater."

Two seconds of furious, identical amber stares, and then at the same moment the twins launched themselves at each other. The fight was not silent this time, the two boys hissing back and forth in vicious Vulcan. Before Leonard could get involved Varena did it for him, getting in-between them and pulling them apart, her thin little arms surprisingly strong. Shevar (maybe it was Shev) made another lunge, and she shoved him back so hard that he fell on his ass.

"Enough," she hissed. "Go home. I desire no more of your presence this evening."

"Varena—" the upright twin began.

"Be quiet, Shevar." Her head whipped around, shiny bobbed hair lashing her cheek. "And you, Shev. If you do not leave right this moment, Kalen will sit next to me at lecture tomorrow."

"Kalen!" Shev began. "But he's—"


"10.69," Shev corrected as he got up. "But my brother is right. You cannot be serious."

"I am, as always. Kalen plays the lute far better than either of you, and he has manners."

"We have manners," Shev said.

"Very good manners," Shevar agreed.

"Then demonstrate them by respecting my wishes and going home." Varena pointed in the direction of the Embassy.

The boys looked at each other for a second, with that weird telepathy twins from all planets seem to share. Shevar quirked an eyebrow. Shev made a half-shrug. Then the boys gave Varena a pair of very formal-looking bows.

"Rom-halan, Varena-kam," Shev said.

"Say goodbye to Doctor McCoy as well," she reminded them.

"Rom-halan, Doctor," the boys said in unison, though they were still looking at Varena, their fox-like faces eager. But soon they were gone, and the apartment was much quieter.

Varena stared after them a moment, her gaze as troubled as when Sherron had assessed her son yesterday. The similarity gave Leonard a creepy feeling, but not because of anything Varena or Sherron had done. He was beginning to think that it was Vulcan males who were the real cause of everybody's problems. Logical and peaceful, bullshit: These suckers were mean.

"I must apologize for them," Varena said to him presently. "They think that because they are nephews of the Ambassador, they can behave in any way they choose. I remind them daily that this is not the case. But they forget."

"Poor thing," Leonard said. "You should tell them to go harass some other girl."

"There are no other girls. Not our age. Except T'Ranna, and she is their cousin."

"Aren't y'all a little young to be having all this relationship drama?"
"They are not courting me, Doctor. We are far too young for anything of that sort. They simply desire my attention. Even if we were older, each of the twins has a betrothed on Vulcan." She paused, looking pensive. "Though it must be admitted, they seem to forget that as well."

"What about you?" Leonard asked, intrigued at this unexpected glimpse into Vulcan adolescent angst. "Is there a worthy young lad waiting for you back home?"

Varena shook her head. "Childhood binding has never been the custom in my father's family, and my mother respects their ways. She agrees that it is better if we choose for ourselves when we are older. Anyway, I do not intend to marry. I wish to focus upon my art."

Leonard stifled a smile. It was hard not to smile at her, talking like a world-weary forty-year-old when she looked like the littlest pixie. "What kind of art, honey?"

Varena brightened visibly. "Would you like to see? I will show you."

She walked briskly towards the farther end of the room, which he noticed now was set up like an artist's studio. A fairly serious one at that, with several wide tables and a couple of expensive-looking easels. Varena beckoned him towards the largest table, unrolling a piece of parchment.

As he approached she paused, the scroll clutched against her chest. "Perhaps I should not show it to you. It is not finished yet."

"Aw, come on now. Don't be like that."

She looked at him a second longer. He could tell that she desperately wanted to show him but was on tenterhooks about it, her skinny little body almost vibrating with nerves. He gave her an encouraging look, and that seemed to decide the matter. She spread the parchment out upon the table. Leonard inspected it a moment and had to smother another smile.

It wasn't that the drawing—a head-and-shoulders portrait done in pastels—wasn't good. The drawing was surprisingly good, actually. If he didn't know better, he'd have assumed that it was made by a college-level art student with quite a bit of formal training. The subject was the funny part—Hatari Takamura was this one's name, but he was completely interchangeable with Liam Murphy or Corey Nelson or Hassan Salakam or any of the other current teen idols. A weedy non-threatening boy with doe-eyes and weird hair, the lead singer of one of those pre-fab pop bands teenage girls had been screeching themselves sick over for many decades. Leonard wouldn't have known who it was, except Joanna had been babbling about Hatari the last couple of times he'd spoken to her. (Earl, Jocelyn's new husband, had used his business connections to score her and her little friends front row concert seats. Bribe all you want, fucker, she still isn't your kid.)

"You do not like it," Varena said, cheeks gone green.

"I do," Leonard said. "It's very good. So, you're a fan of Blue Wind?" The stupidest fucking name ever, but maybe it sounded better in Japanese.

"Very much," Varena said. "Their compositions are so original."

About as original as a McDonald's hamburger, and just as bland. But it was actually reassuring to know Vulcan adolescents could fall for the same saccharine commercial crap as Terran ones.

Leonard looked at Varena, looking at Hatari. "He's cute, too, huh?"

"He is very symmetrical," Varena agreed. "That is why he makes such a worthwhile subject. I have explained this to my brother, but Sharok accuses me of being obsessive. You should see how many
drawings he has made of Ambassador Selel's eldest daughter. Do not mistake me, I think T'Ria is very nice, and she is not unattractive. But Hatari is an artist. You understand the difference, do you not?"

"Um, sure." He considered her a second. "How many drawings of Hatari have you made?"

"Three hundred and seventy-eight. But some of those are pencil sketches." She looked down at her picture, frowning. "His eyes are green, like mine. Yet I cannot seem to capture their color, however I try. I fear I do not have the talent to do him justice."

"Hogwash. This looks like something from a magazine."

Varena looked at her picture again. "I persevere, though I sometimes think dedication is not enough. My father had his first painting exhibited at the Museum of Shi'Kahr when he was thirteen. I have 1.34 Standard years to equal his accomplishment, but I do not think I will."

"Your father—is he the one who did the paintings in the foyer and living room?"

She nodded slowly. "Varek. He was a prodigy, a legend. I do not remember him."

They were both silent a moment. Leonard was at a loss. When Joanna would get in one of her gloomy moods (not that he witnessed them very often), he could usually buy her out of it. But he didn't think clothes or music files—even by Blue Wind—would cheer Varena up. Not that it was his place to cheer her up. Still, he felt bad.

He put a hand on her shoulder. The bones under his fingers felt as fragile as a sparrow's. "Well, I'm no expert, but I think you're very talented. Very. Varek isn't the only prodigy in your clan."

She stared at him with her wide cat's eyes. Then, after a moment: "Thank you, Doctor." Her voice was very serious.

Then she smiled brilliantly. "Let me show you some other pieces—"

"I think you have worried over your art enough for one day, Varena," a voice said behind them.

Leonard turned. He gaped.

Sherron walked into the room wearing a dark-colored dress in a silky fabric. Leonard's mother would have probably called its color aubergine, right after she called its cut indecent. The skirt was cut high on one side and low on the other, the neck also asymmetrical and off one shoulder. Nothing naughty was showing, actually, but a clever seamstress had made it seem like something was just about to with every subtle movement. The fabric added to the effect, a luminous liquid shimmer that alternately obscured and then highlighted dangerous curves. It was an invitation to an erection in dress form, basically. It should have made the wearer look, well, if not cheap then the wrong kind of expensive, but Sherron pulled it off. Her classically beautiful features helped, and so did the look of cool amusement on her face, as if she knew exactly the effect the dress was having and didn't give a damn.

"Leonard," she said, "it's so good to see you." She held out a hand to him, the bracelet on her wrist sparkling with jewels: white firestones, brighter than diamonds and about five times more expensive. More of them flashed in her ears. She looked like the goddess Diana about to head out for a really hot night on the town.

Close your mouth, boy. You're drawing flies.
His nana's voice straightened his spine and loosened his tongue. "Well, well," he said, taking her hand and brushing it against his lips. Her fingers were fever-warm. "Don't you look nice."

"So do you," she said, looking him up and down. "That is a lovely suit. It is a cliché, you know, that military men don't know what to do with themselves when they cannot wear a uniform. I am happy to see it does not always hold true."

"I'm a doctor, not a soldier. Scientists are horses of a different color."

She tilted her head. "Stallions?"

"Yes ma'am. Climb on top of us and we're sure to—buck."

Warm fingers caressed his. "You just need the proper rider."

"Mother," Varena said, "can't I show Doctor McCoy one more drawing?"

They both stared at the little girl, the charged atmosphere neutralized. "I think not," her mother said, recovering first and stepping back. "The Doctor and I have reservations. What happened to the twins?"

"I sent them home. They were being terribly immature." Varena gave Leonard a melting look. "The Doctor is very anxious to see my drawings."

"Another time, svai-taan. You are due at your aunt's in 10.25 minutes."

"I do not wish to go. She will make me brush her cats."

"It is meritorious to aid the frail and elderly. Surak wrote that."

"T'Lyn is not frail. Her staff is terrified of her," Varena said.

Leonard thought the kid had a point, but her mother just ran an affectionate but dismissive hand through her daughter's hair. "Then they require more time in the Disciplines. Off you go: I will see you tomorrow after morning lecture."

To Varena's credit, she pouted only a little. She held out a hand to him. "Goodbye, Doctor. I hope we meet again soon."

He took it. "Bye, honey. Me too."

"Honey. You keep calling me this. What do the excretions of bees have to do with anything?"

"It's a Terran form of familiar address. Ever tasted honey? It's a metaphor."

"Ah!" she said, giving him a puckish grin. "I understand." She tilted her head at him. "Rom-halan, slor sakan."

"Varena!" her mother exclaimed, but the lass had already scooted out the door.

"What did she just call me?" he asked Sherron.

"The literal Terran translation would be 'sweet boy,'" she replied. "But the connotation is less innocent." She shook her head. "I am really going to have to limit her time on the nets."

"They grow up so fast these days," Leonard said. "My Joanna was playing with Barbie dolls five
minutes ago, now she's crushing on some pimple-faced fool in her Algebra class."

"You have a daughter?"

"Uh-huh, about Varena's age. She lives with my ex-wife in Atlanta, though."
Sherron gave him an intent look. "You are full of surprises, Leonard McCoy."

"You ain't seen nothing yet, darlin'."

"Ash'laah eril ask'laath," Sherron replied.

"What does that mean?"

"The closest Terran colloquial phrase would be 'promises, promises,'" Sherron replied. A corner of
her full lips turned up. "But the promises in the Vulcan phrase are of a specific nature."
Leonard leaned a little closer. "Care to elaborate on that, honey?"
Sherron closed the distance further, almost kissing-distance. She smelled like roses and musk. She
smelled like promises, all kinds of promises. "Perhaps later, slor sakan."

"Okay," Leonard said, willing himself to be calm. He had to stop doing this—for Danna's sake, if
nothing else. But even after everything, flirting with Sherron was so damn much fun.

"You should bring a coat," he said to her as they stepped into the corridor. "It's chilly outside."

"We are not going outside," Sherron said, calling for the elevator. "I hope you do not mind that I
have chosen the restaurant. Charis: It is in the next building, but there is a connecting passage for
apartment residents. Perhaps you have heard of it?"

"Sure," he said. "The Chronicle gave it a rave. But I guess a steak will be out of the question."

"Charis serves no animal products of any kind. But you will be well satisfied, I assure you."

"Ash'laah eril ask'laath," Leonard muttered. Sherron smirked at him as the elevator opened.

The main dining room of Charis was of a piece with the lobby of the Embassy or the apartments
upstairs, neutral and understated to the point of boring. Leonard knew that Vulcans have more color
receptors in their eyes than Terrans. Perhaps these glum palettes looked interesting to them. Leonard
felt like he was having dinner in a really upscale dentist's office. The only thing saving the place from
utter sterility were the windows. They didn't look out on the San Francisco street but had actually
been replaced by 3-D monitors that showed various, ever-changing scenes from Vulcan. Someone
who didn't know better might think he was looking at the lights of downtown Shi'Kahr, the restless
shores of the Greater Sea, or the dunes of the desert outside Tu'Khrev.

Leonard didn't recognize these scenes off-hand; Sherron informed him as the maître d' (a sour-faced
pretty boy with sandy hair) led them to their seats. He was glad to have something to take his mind
off the stares. The diners were about seventy percent Vulcan, and many pointy-eared heads had
turned their way. Some, mostly male, were looking at Sherron's dress, but most were looking at
them, and the looks were not favorable. Leonard wondered if this is how interracial couples felt in
the South three hundred years ago. Normally he didn't give a damn what people thought, but this
much concentrated disapproval was going to ruin his appetite.
Sherron must have thought of that, because the sandy-haired Vulcan led them through the dining room towards a series of discreet smoked-glass pods on the right-hand side of the restaurant. He stopped in front of one and touched a panel. The panel slid back, revealing a private dining room.

"Your server will be with you presently," he said in accented Standard, and left them alone.

The private dining room had a long table of light wood, built so low that it wouldn't have taken a chair. Cushions were scattered around it instead. There were intricate carvings on the non-glass walls and soft, twanging music overhead. The light was low and flattering. It reminded Leonard a bit of a traditional Japanese dining space, but sexier.

"You should remove your shoes," Sherron said, toeing off her own silver stilettos.

"I'm afraid to," Leonard said. "I might need them to run away from the lynch mob outside."

"Don't be silly," Sherron replied. "You would never outrun them, shoes or no."

"Ha-ha, but seriously: Do you like pissing off your peers, or is this part of some darker plan?"

"The latter," Sherron said calmly, arranging herself on a cushion and adjusting her skirt.

Leonard blinked at a long length of satiny thigh. Then: "What?"

"You made quite an impression at the Embassy yesterday," Sherron said. "We were able to exit you discreetly, but your entrance couldn't help but be remarked on. Starfleet Academy doctors do not barge in demanding to see T'Lyn every day. Coupled with my cousin's recent visits to her, the wrong person might draw the right conclusion about Spock's medical condition."

"I thought you said there was nothing wrong with him."

"There isn't. His condition is quite normal."

"Then why is it a secret?"

"There is a difference between discretion and secrecy," Sherron said. "My appearing here with you this evening will shed a different light on the affair. Anyone who heard about the disruption at T'Lyn's cottage will assume it was over me, not my cousin."

"The old lady denying her blessing."

"Yes. But here I am at Charis with my Terran lover, blatantly defiant. My aunt will complain bitterly at tomorrow's staff meeting about young people who do not respect their elders, we will be the subject of three days' gossip, and then everyone will dismiss it."

"You don't mind people thinking you're screwing a Terran? What it will do to your reputation?"

"My last lover was Andorian. Before that, I was briefly involved with an Orion. My reputation will not be affected."

"You like aliens, huh?"

"Not all. But some." Sherron gazed at him with her deep dark eyes. "Some I like very well."

"Christ." Leonard shook his head. "You know, Sherron, I don't know if you're trying to fuck me or just fuck with me."
"I don't understand what you mean."

"You spend half your time coming on to me like a cat in heat, and the other half fomenting evil plans to keep your cousin's secret—which you refuse to admit is a secret—safe. Make up your damn mind."

"What about you, Doctor?" Sherron said. "You have not been rejecting my advances by any means. Yet you seem to spend much of your free time ferreting out information that could ruin Spock's life. I would call your own motives decidedly mixed."

"I'm just trying to help my friend." He gave her a pointed look. "That's all I'm interested in."

"I am trying to help your friend, believe it or not." Sherron nodded at a cushion. "Sit. Your blood sugar is very low. We will eat, and then we will have a frank discussion."

"How the hell do you know about my blood sugar?"

"I can smell it. Vulcans, as I am sure you know, have very keen olfactory senses, the females in particular. Low blood sugar has a distinct aroma." She raised her chin. "So does male arousal."

Before he could think of how to answer that, there was a discreet tap at the smoked glass door. Then it opened. Their server appeared, menus in hand.

Sighing, Leonard took off his coat and shoes, then sat. He looked at the menu, which was written in Standard, but may has well have been in those squiggly notes Vulcans considered an alphabet for all he understood it. He looked helplessly at Sherron. She raised a knowing eyebrow at him.

"Go ahead," he said. "I think we've already established who's in control of the situation."

She gave a satisfied nod. Then she motioned to the waiter, opened Charis' menu, and ordered most of it.

Charis' food more than made up for its décor. Leonard had always liked exotic fare (in rural Georgia, anything that wasn't barbecue counted as such) and Vulcan cuisine seemed to combine the best parts of Indian, Vietnamese, and Middle Eastern, with a bit of Mexican thrown in. They had stews and compotes and casseroles, rice and noodles, finger-food and more elaborate dishes. All of it was highly spiced and deeply satisfying, so much that Leonard wondered if they weren't somehow sneaking some meat in, after all: He had his suspicions about those brownish rounds in the next-to-last course. Finally, the waiter brought in dessert, a trifle-like concoction made of layers of cream (how they made vegan stuff that fluffy he couldn't figure), cake, and fruits. He especially like the chunks of blue stuff, which looked like an orange and tasted like a kumquat.

When he couldn't eat another bite, he fell back on the cushions. "Now I know why y'all have so many of 'em. You just sleep here when the meal is over, right? 'Cause I don't see how anybody moves after this."

Sherron gave him an I-told-you-so look. She stretched out her long body, leaning her head on her hand and her elbow on a pillow. She'd matched him bite for bite, which he appreciated: He hated it when women picked at their food. Lord only knew how she ate like this and kept that figure. Maybe all the scheming burned calories.

"I am glad you enjoyed it," she said. "In olden times, only warlords would have eaten a meal like this. Of course, their feasts would also have included meat." She curled her lip a little.

"Don't knock it till you've tried it. Remind me to take you out for barbecue sometime."
"I think not. Modern Vulcans only ingest animal protein when faced with starvation." She picked at the fringe on the pillow. "Well, one other time."

"What time is that?"

She looked at him a moment. "Pon farr."

"Never heard of it."

"Of course not. But you have seen its symptoms." She paused, taking a breath. "My cousin is enduring it."

Leonard sat up. "That's what wrong with Spock?"

She nodded slowly.

"What is it, some kind of disease?" He ran hands through his hair. "Shit, if it's communicable—"

"Calm yourself, Doctor. It is not contagious, because it is not a contagion. It is a natural state. Every Vulcan male experiences it repeatedly throughout his adult life."

"If it's so common, why don't I know about it?"

"Very few who are not Vulcan would."

"Why?" Then, when she didn't answer right away: "Sex, right? That's the one area of your sociobiology you people keep shhshh over. Pon farr is about sex." He flashed on a scene from the video. His first instinct was to push it away, but he made himself remember it. Think about it not as a friend, but as a scientist. To consider it along with the other things he knew. "That's why Spock's hormones are all out of whack. That's why he climbed on top of Jim Kirk like a goddamn animal. Pon farr isn't a condition, it's a heat."

"You are very clever," Sherron said softly. "Disturbingly so."

"Honey, I'm a Xenobiologist: It's my job," Leonard said. "So Vulcans go into heat. How often?"

"Approximately every seven years."

"That doesn't make sense. Vulcan siblings aren't born seven years apart."

"Pon Farr isn't just about procreation, though pregnancy will often result from it if precautions are not taken." Sherron's cheeks had gone slightly green. "Researchers believe the Fever does have its roots in ancient biological impulses. It is thought that primitive Vulcans probably did go into heat annually—there are remnants of that cycle in modern females. We experience a surge in hormones approximately every 14.26 Standard months, the equivalent of the old Vulcan year. In former days, males did as well. Even now, 19.45% of infants are born during the month of Nhrar, the beginning of the wettest part of the year. It would have been the most auspicious period to bear an offspring in ancient times."

"Competition for mates must have been brutal."

"Why do you say that?"

"Vulcan females are induced ovulators. They have to mate several times over a period of hours to become pregnant, which means the Vulcan male would have had to work extra hard to ensure that his sperm was the lucky winner. Just like back in Georgia, with the tomcats that used to run around
in my grandma's yard. I remember once seeing three or four of them crowding up on a queen in
heat." Leonard pushed his dessert plate away, not wanting to look at food right then. "Gang rape
inscribed into your very biology. Jesus."

"Were primitive Terrans any better, Doctor?" Sherron said, looking offended.

"Probably not," he had to admit. "Cavemen aren't known for being chivalrous, no matter what color
their blood is."

"Indeed," Sherron said, and seemed somewhat mollified. "But you are correct. Competition was
fierce, and only aggressive males won mates. Even with the development of Psi-talents, this
continued to be the case. The most dominant males could bind themselves to multiple females,
thereby ensuring loyalty as well as many offspring." She paused. "It was also not uncommon for
warlords and their male underlings to bind in this manner, as strange as that might sound."

"Not so strange. We had the Greeks and Romans." Leonard considered. "That weird stuff in Vulcan
semen probably helped, too. The chemical that makes a recipient all loopy and docile."

"How did—" she stopped, sighed. "The video. My cousin has been very indiscreet."

"That's one word for it. This history is really interesting, but what does it have to do with modern
*pon farr*? I can't believe that Vulcan males are still killing each other over mates."

"They are not. We have eschewed warlike behavior completely. Therein lies the problem. Our males
have subjugated all their aggressive, competitive instincts, or else found peaceful channels for them,
like sport. But the most basic one, the mating urge, will not be tamed, not completely. In its
suppression, it has become more ferocious than before. In the three thousand years since Surak's
time, the yearly hormonal surge has become a septennial explosion. The Vulcan male experiences
restlessness, sleeplessness, irritability, and increased carnal appetite, in all senses of that phrase.
Eventually *pon farr* becomes *plak tow*, the blood fever. When that comes, either he mates with
another to whom he is empathically bonded, or . . . " she trailed off.

"Or what?" Leonard whispered.

Sherron had gone pale. "Madness, then death. Burning alive, divorced from all reason and self. The
most feared of all deaths."

"My God. All of your scientific achievements, and you can't do anything about this?"

"We have tried, Doctor. For three millennia. We have found that the only certain way to survive the
Fever is to let it run its course. For those not fortunate enough to have a successful bondmate with
which to merge, we have professionals."

"Prostitutes?"

"Therapists," she said with a reproachful look. "Gifted, compassionate individuals."

you're not the only race to experience a breeding cycle. Orions still have *duels* over their mates. From
what I hear, it makes the gladiatorial bouts they show on the nets look like—"

"We are *not* Orions." Sherron raised her chin. Just then she looked a lot like her cousin, that lofty and
angry arrogance. Spock was just the same the other night when he dropped off Jim, bites and all.

"Oh, I see," Leonard said softly. "God forbid the high and mighty Vulcans admit that they're
vulnerable. The whole universe will collapse in on itself if somebody finds out for one second that y'all are made of flesh instead of marble." He shook his head. "Pon farr is the reason why you don't let anybody know anything about your sexuality. You're just plain ashamed. That's so stupid: Worse, it's illogical. You can't help it, any more than Taygetians can help shedding their mating tentacles every five years, or Orions can help throwing off all those pheromones."

Sherron considered him a moment. "Perhaps you are right, Doctor. Perhaps this is irrational. But it is also private. Are we not allowed our secrets if they concern nobody but ourselves?"

"Fair enough. If Spock was chasing around some Vulcan boy or girl, it wouldn't be any of my damn business, much as I might like to write a paper about it. But he's fixated on Jim. Which doesn't make sense, by the way. Shouldn't a Vulcan want another Vulcan at a time like this?"

"But he isn't Vulcan, not entirely. Given Spock's unique genetic heritage, the fact that he has chosen a Terran for a partner is not so surprising, especially when that Terran's Psi-rating is as high as your friend's."

"I don't care how hard Jim spins the dials on the Mesmer counter. This is dangerous. Did you even watch the video?"

Sherron raised an eyebrow at him. "Did you? Yes, their joining was—dramatic—but Spock did not really do your friend any harm. He drew blood, but he did not seriously injure him. When it was over, he brought Jim Kirk home to you. That speaks to some care on his part."

"Jim was puking all night from the hormones."

"It was careless of both of them not to use protection, but I encountered your friend the day after. He was not ill or traumatized. In fact, he was quite eager to be with Spock again. He begged me to let him into the faculty apartments so he could see my cousin. He seems quite smitten."

"Jim's not smitten. He just wants to—" Leonard stopped. He wasn't naive enough to think that the situation was just about the Kobayashi Maru anymore. He knew at this point, Jim was more interested in Spock's teeth than his computer terminal. But Sherron didn't need to know that. "Jim only wants what he can't have," he finished.

"Perhaps your friend is looking for something he hasn't found yet. Or perhaps this is all novelty, and in a few weeks, when pon farr is over, he and Spock will tire of each other. But if Jim is in no real danger, is it any of your business?"

"You're telling me this 'blood fever' isn't dangerous?" He looked narrowly at her.

She met his gaze without flinching. "Only to Spock, if his needs are not met. I think, given his Psi-rating, that Jim can do so. What happens to them after is for them to decide, not you."

"I don't think Jim even knows about pon farr." He couldn't imagine Jim keeping something like this a secret. Not from his best friend. He wouldn't.

"Spock probably has not informed him yet. But if he is planning to bond with Jim during the Fever, and I believe he is, then he will in his own time. Again, that is between the two of them." She reached across his table, taking his hand in her own warm, firm one. "Leonard, I am asking you to do something I have never asked of a Terran before."

He gave her a suspicious look. But he didn't let go of her hand. "What's that?"

"I am asking you to act like a Vulcan. Do not interfere: Let the Fever run its course."
"If I don't?"

"I could have broken into your apartment this afternoon. I could have taken the evidence just as I did yesterday. I underestimated you then, and I apologize. But now you know the truth. Your friend is in no danger, Spock is not insane. To expose him now would not only be cruel, it would also be small. You are not that." She squeezed his fingers. "In any fashion, I suspect."

He drew back. "None of your nonsense, Missy. We're still talking seriously." Leonard thought a moment. "Answer me a final question before I make a decision. Asinine as it is, I see why you might not want the unwashed alien masses to find out about pon farr, anybody's pon farr. But what about the folks at the Embassy? Why can't they discover Spock's condition?"

"If the Embassy knows, so will Spock's father Sarek. They are not close. But if Sarek were to hear of this, he would want Spock to return home and see a professional."

"So?"

"By Vulcan law, Spock is a minor. Until he marries and fathers a child or until he reaches the age of forty Standard years, he is under his father's rule. The only reason Sarek allowed Spock to leave Vulcan and join Starfleet is because Amanda intervened. But if he wished, he could force his son to return tomorrow."

"You think Sarek would? Even though he's married to a Terran?"

"Amanda is an unusual woman. And Jim and Spock are not married."

"Heaven forefend. Where the hell would they register?"

Sherron didn't dignify this. "Leonard, will you destroy the video? Will you leave them be?"

He didn't want to agree. But if what Sherron was saying was true, and he had no concrete reason to think she was lying, then it really wasn't his business. Anyway, if Spock's rough wooing was just hormones, when he went back to his usual staid, emotionless self in a few weeks, Jim would lose interest. Things could go back to normal, or as normal as they ever got with Jim.

"All right."

Sherron smiled at him, a real one, big and luminous. Leonard saw where Varena had inherited this, among many other virtues. "I can't do anything about the copy in the archives," he said.

"Do not trouble yourself. I will take care of it."

"Uh-huh. I bet you will. Damn the firewall, full speed ahead. Just out of curiosity, honey, how many felonies have you committed for your cousin so far?"

Sherron thought a moment. "Twelve."

"And I thought Georgia folks were clannish." He got to his feet. "So what do we do now?"

She rose, fixing him with her eyes. "Come to my apartment."

Leonard fidgeted. "That's a tempting offer, it really is. But I can't."

"I have something for you."

"I have a girlfriend."
"How nice for you. I assure you my gift is entirely appropriate."

"How do I know Vulcan and Terran standards of propriety are the same?"

"You must come with me and see, I suppose."

"Come into my parlor," Leonard muttered. "What the hell. Saying 'yes' to you seems to be the theme for the day."
Sherron insisted on paying for dinner. Leonard wasn't surprised.

As they headed down the passage going from Charis to the apartments, he saw another corridor leading away in the opposite direction. Wide and neatly tiled, it sloped downwards. Most of it must have been underground, but except for the lack of windows you would never have guessed.

"Where does that go?" he asked.

"The Embassy," Sherron replied. "I suppose it isn't strictly necessary, with the other building so close. But the weather is so inclement here. It is also safer for the children, of course, when they are going back and forth for classes or visiting the Embassy at night."

At the time it hadn't occurred to him to ask how Varena was going to get to T'Lyn's, but taking a nice warm hallway instead of running around the block in the dark and cold did make sense. He peered down it again. Judging by the fixtures, it must be new or at least newly refurbished. "Must have cost a fortune," he remarked.

"It was not inexpensive. But it was one of the first projects I proposed when I came here. You cannot put a price on safety, especially of children. The High Council was concerned over the cost, but they could not argue with my logic." The elevator opened, and she stepped inside.

"What is your job, exactly?" Leonard asked as he followed.

"Chief of Staff. I oversee most of the day-to-day operations."

"Including security?"

"Security is something one must be concerned with every day," Sherron replied. "As a parent, you must know what I mean."

"Uh-huh," Leonard said shortly. He hadn't been an every day parent in almost four years. There were whole days when he did not think about his daughter Joanna. Yeah, as a father he left much to be desired. But to be fair, he hadn't exactly asked for the job. It wasn't his fault that the tube of liquid condom—one of the first brands marketed, before they'd perfected the formula—had been defective. It wasn't Jo's fault either, of course, but she had her mama, and Earl, God help us all. The Earls of the world never went anywhere, not San Francisco, certainly not the deeper reaches of space. Didn't have the cojones, but as Jocelyn herself once told him during a particularly nasty fight, there was a lot more to being a man than having a big dick—and using it.

"Leonard?"

He blinked and saw the elevator doors were open. Sherron was already standing in the hallway leading to her apartment. "Sorry," he said. "Woolgathering. Must be all the carbs at dinner."

Sherron did not bother replying to this, just opened the front door and beckoned him to follow.

The place appeared to be as empty as when they'd left it. "Speaking of kids," Leonard asked as he hung his coat on the stand by the door, "where's your eldest?"
"Flagstaff. He is visiting relatives, his father's cousins. I thought a few days of desert air might clear his mind."

"Dry it out, anyway," Leonard said. "I bet he's missing his little girlfriend."

"T'Ria is not his girlfriend," Sherron replied. "She is betrothed to another. I have reminded Sharok of this, but he is willful."

"He does seem like a handful. But Terran teenagers are no picnic, either." Len wasn't thinking of anyone in particular. He wasn't. "Growing up isn't easy, no matter where you're from."

"No," Sherron said, "it is not."

They were both silent a moment. Sherron led him to the living room and waved him onto a sofa. She crossed over to an intricately carved cabinet by the French doors and opened it. He realized with some surprise that it was a bar. They'd had tea with dinner, a complex, heady brew: better than some wines, probably, and definitely more expensive. Vulcans weren't known for drinking, but the many bottles inside the cabinet all had labels in squiggly notes. Along with pon farr, that made two clichés—frigidity and sobriety—obliterated in one night. Made you wonder what else they were hiding. Maybe Vulcans were as hard-living as Orions but just more discreet about it.

Sharon had poured two triple-shot glasses nearly full of a pale green liquor. "K'vass," she told him before he could ask. "It is customary to drink it at the beginning of a new relationship, or to celebrate a special event." She picked up both glasses and crossed the room, proffering one.

"Which is this?" he asked as he took it.

"Both," she said, sitting down beside him. "I think we will be good friends, Leonard. Friends with mutual goals."

"What goals are those?"

"Seeing our loved ones safe and well."

"You worry about that a lot, don't you? Safety."

"It is my job."

"Which came first, though? The worry or the job?"

Sherron said nothing. Her eyes strayed behind him. He turned his head and saw her looking at a painting mounted over the fireplace, another abstract explosion of reds and oranges. But if you looked closely, you could see a face. The more you looked the clearer it became: a young girl, wide-eyed and fine-boned. At first you might think it was Varena, but the eyes were too dark. The colors surrounded the young girl but were also part of her, a maiden formed of flames.

"Your husband painted that?" he asked.

She nodded slowly. "When he was fourteen. Astonishing, isn't it? He was a true prodigy."

"What happened to him, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Varek was a great walker. He especially liked walking in the desert; he said he could see his paintings more clearly there. But the sands are cruel." Sherron's long fingers gripped her glass tightly. "The desert outside Shi'Kahr is prone to sandstorms in the summer months. Often we can predict
them, but sometimes they arise unexpectedly. Varek was caught in one of these, and without shelter or supplies, he had no chance of survival." She took a swallow of her drink.

"I'm sorry."

"Why? It is not your fault." She spoke as if she knew whose fault it was, and would not forgive.

"How long had you been married?" Leonard asked, after a pause.

"Since we were fifteen." Seeing his face: "Yes, it was very unusual. As I am sure your early marriage was."

"You've obviously never been to Georgia," Leonard said, and took a drink. He choked a little, eyes welling. He'd been expecting expensive vodka or similar and gotten white lightning.

Sherron raised an eyebrow. "I should have warned you: K'vass is a rather robust beverage."

Leonard cleared his throat. "Robust, yeah. My Uncle Jackson used to put up some stuff like this, until the revenuers confiscated his still." He took another swallow so she wouldn't think him a total wuss. The second one was better: It lit a nice hot fire in his chest, as bright as the flames in the painting. He looked at the work again. "That's you, isn't it?" he said to her.

"Yes. When he began it, Varek said I was his aruvaan—Terrans would translate that as 'muse.'"

Well, Leonard had heard worse pick-up lines. He looked at the painting more closely, all that passionate color surrounding a beautiful young girl. "The two of you had to get married, right?"

When she didn't answer: "I'm not judging you. I'm the survivor of a shotgun wedding myself."

She stared at him. "Georgia must be a very violent place."

"It's a figure of speech."

"Ah. Well, there were no weapons involved in mine and Varek's binding. But you are correct, I was pregnant with Sharok at the time." She paused. "The whole affair did cause something of a scandal. My mother was furious, along with—others."

"Your father?"

"My father died of testicular cancer when I was eight. It was my grandfather's duty to handle the matter, which he did with his usual success. We were fortunate he wields such influence: It was a scandal." She looked at the painting, her voice growing softer. "What happened could not be helped. It was not Varek's fault." Sherron looked at Leonard. "Or mine," she added hastily.

Too late. He'd gotten it. The painting itself had helped, but her eyes when she looked at it had helped more. "No, I suppose you couldn't," he said. "Pon farr usually does result in pregnancy, if you're not careful."

Sherron was silent, as if she wasn't sure how to answer this. Then she sighed softly, saying, "Again, you are correct. It does 92.43% of the time if precautions are not taken."

"Why weren't they?"

"Young men entering their first pon farr usually exhibit the symptoms I described to you earlier. But not always. Sometimes it simply appears. Plak tow comes with no warning, like a summer sandstorm. The metaphor is particularly apt in this case. Varek and I were out in the desert, he
wanted to sketch me for a painting he was planning. We were caught in a storm near Brothers' Rock, a natural cave formation. We took shelter, but the stress of the storm, his own quiet and repressive nature—the blood fever came upon him so suddenly. I could not wait for help."

"So. You helped him."

Sherron nodded. "Varek did not plan to marry. He wished to focus upon his art. We were not betrothed, but we had known each other since we were very young. He was my friend. I could not see him die because of a misfortune of timing."

Leonard looked closely at her. He thought of the video, Spock throwing Jim to the ground, climbing on top of him. When he spoke again, it was very quietly. "Did you have a choice?"

"Of course I did," Sherron said, returning his gaze. "Varek was the gentlest of men. Even in the grip of *plak tow*, he was concerned for me. He was the one in danger, not I." She looked down. "He had been, and always was, my friend. And I was his, until the last day of his life."

Vulcans do not express sorrow. Popular wisdom would tell you this is because they do not feel it. Leonard, veteran of five courses in Xenopsychology, knew better. Sherron's face remained as serenely beautiful as always, but he could sense the emotion coming from her, subtle, heavy, and dark. If the feeling were a color, it would be aubergine.

He did not know what to say. Repeating "I'm sorry" seemed ridiculous. There was no way to sympathize with this kind of grief. Words were inadequate—worse, offensive. You could not express such feelings in syllables. To even try was an insult. It's what Jocelyn could never get. She nagged him non-stop to speak to the pastor, the grief counselors, her. She never understood how it hurt to talk about Henry. Like having your soul slowly ripped to pieces by dirty hands.

He'd been unfaithful before the accident, he was unfaithful after. The difference was before, he always tried to spare Lyn's feelings. After, he didn't. Why should he, when she never spared his?

Suddenly, Sherron lifted her head and straightened her shoulders. She seemed to cast off grief like she'd cast off her shoes when she came in the door. "Come, Leonard, let us not dwell on the past. Tonight is about beginnings." She lifted her glass. "*Rem kashlaya:* New beginnings."

He was still wary of what, exactly, they were beginning, but he repeated the toast anyway and drained his glass. Wow: *K'vass* slapped you in the face, but it held you to its ample bosom and smooched you on the head after. Speaking of bosoms—was it the liquor, or had her dress gotten smaller? He could see down it. All the way down, and there was plenty to see, straining against the soft fabric. What was under the fabric would be softer. So soft—

Leonard mentally slapped himself, harder than the *k'vass*. He shoved his treacherous brain back into safe territory. "You said you had a present for me?"

She blinked like those weren't the words she had been expecting. He could tell this much about her expression, because in the last ten seconds she'd gotten closer. Too damn close for comfort. But she recovered well. "I do. How careless of me to forget."

He doubted Sherron forgot much, but he refrained from saying so as he watched her open a drawer at the bottom of the coffee table. She removed a cloth-wrapped bundle and offered it to him. He took it, stopping a second to admire the fabric, a rich red with an interesting pattern of gold figures. The cloth itself was soft with a slight shimmer, a heavier version of what she was wearing. It was wrapped around the box in a peculiar way. It took some time to undo it.
"Vulcan gift wrap?" he asked as his fingers picked at the knots.

"We find it more eloquent than printed paper. You are meant to keep the cloth."

He'd unwound it all the way. It was about four inches by six feet, a long, strong, silken band. "Thanks, it's really nice. But I'm not sure what I would do with it."

She took one end of the cloth and wound it softly around his wrist. "I can imagine several uses."

That's when he really saw the pattern on the cloth. All those gold, writhing figures: humanoid figures. Sherron's long golden fingers were buried in the material. They would be warm, so warm as she—

Leonard was hit with a mental image so explicit he had to take a moment and breathe. "I—um—yeah."

He whipped the cloth from around his wrist and wadded it between his hip and the arm of the sofa, so he didn't have to look at it. "Thought you said the gift was appropriate," he managed.

"The gift is appropriate. I said nothing about the wrapping."

"Right. Silly of me not to read the fine print." Fingers shaking just a bit, he opened the gift box.

Despite her disclaimer, he was expecting something else expensive and dirty—a plascrystal dildo or real leather wrist restraints (he knew way too much about how much these things cost, thanks to Jim). Leonard was so geared up not to react to the platinum cock ring or whatever, that when he saw what the gift really was he could only gape at it.

"Do you like it?" Sherron said. "I hope I chose correctly. I am not an expert in such devices."

He swallowed. "Yeah," he said softly. "I like it a lot." He held up the small rectangular square of metal. It was the best personal tricorder there was, three times the features of his old model at half the weight. The Cadillac of tricorders, if they still actually made Cadillacs. "This is really expensive," he said. "I appreciate the thought, but I don't know if I can accept it."

"Please do," she said. "There is a custom on Vulcan that when one acts wrongly to another who has done nothing to deserve it, one must repay twice over."

"That's very noble. But in this case it's more like five times." Leonard ran slow fingers down the tricorder's side. The metal was as soft as satin. The whole mechanism was buzzing softly, like a great steel bee. Music to his ears. He knew he should put the tricorder in its box and hand it back to her, but he couldn't. Not just yet.

"So that is what it looks like," Sherron said. "I have wondered."

"What does what look like?" he asked absently, still staring at his beautiful tricorder.

"Desire. I have seen it on your face before, but not like this. Naked and unashamed." Her voice was soft. The touch of her hand on his wrist was softer. Much warmer.

Leonard closed his eyes a moment, then opened them again. Slowly, he replaced the tricorder in the box and slid it onto the coffee table. "Sherron, please. No more games."

"I am not playing, Leonard. I never was, from the time we first met." Her eyes were on him, deep and dark and utterly serious. "I did not relish what I did to you, but at the time I thought it necessary to protect my family. You understand that—haven't all your actions until now been to protect your friend? But now that we know our ends are the same, cannot we be friends?" Her fingers slid down to his wool-clad thigh. They seemed to burn right through to bare flesh.
"I don't think y'all mean that word the same way we do," Leonard said rather breathlessly.

"Let me show you how I mean it," Sherron said, and kissed him.

Of course, he kissed her back. He'd wanted to kiss her the second she came strutting in this evening not-quite wearing that dress. He'd wanted to, even with her little girl standing there making saucer eyes at him. He pulled Sherron into his lap for better access. Kissing her was amazing and strange: It was a bit like kissing Dean had been, getting up close and personal with someone just as strong as you and possibly more aggressive. But there was no beard burn or flat chest or other disquieting male traits, just soft skin and softer lips, and what he could already tell were a pair of world-class breasts pressed up against him. He kissed Sherron, even as that little voice at the back of his mind was screeching, *this is stupid, Lee, very very very stupid.* But if there was one thing Leonard McCoy was good at, it was making bad decisions about women.

She nipped his lower lip, and it felt like the top of his head was going to come right off. Jesus, it had been too long, days and days. He growled a little in his throat, she sighed softly and licked his neck. He felt dizzy, some of it was the *k'vass* but most of it was just her, she smelled like old roses and tasted like cloves, a feast more exotic than any ever served at Charis. One of his hands found the soft glory of her breast while his other slid up her slender, satiny thigh. He discovered something that would have made him as hard as a rock if he hadn't been already: Sherron wasn't wearing anything under the dress. Not a damn thing under all that silk but *her.*

"You are bad," he said as his fingers traced over hip. "What kind of message does this send?"

"Just the message I wanted," she said, tugging his jacket off.

"We could have done it at the restaurant," Leonard realized. "All those pillows."

Sherron paused in unknotting his tie. "I did consider it. But the proprietor is so—" she pulled the tie off and tugged open the collar of his shirt. "—meddlesome. Shath doesn't like me."

"Too smart?"

"Too female," she answered. "You, however, are just his type." She began unbuttoning his shirt. "Tall—dark—beautiful," she placed a kiss on his chest with every adjective. "He was infatuated with my grandfather for years, but Sarek is not a lover of men." She started pulling Leonard's shirt out of his trousers.

"Sarek is your grandfather? I thought Spock was your cousin."

"I'm the daughter of his half-brother, Sarek's son by his first wife. But I am three years older than Spock, so calling him 'uncle' would be absurd. There is a word in Vulcan for our exact relationship, but Standard is so imprecise."

"Sorry about that," he gasped as she undid his belt.

"It is bothersome," she said. "For instance, I could tell you what I'm about to do to you, but I'm afraid the true impact would be lost in translation." She tugged at his zipper.

"We do have a word for it," Leonard protested. "Lots of 'em."

She climbed back in his lap. Her thighs, straddling his hips, were almost uncomfortably warm. Her beautiful face was flushed, eyes bright with heat. A woman of the flames. "No," she said, with a truly scorching smile, "you do not."
She reached between them. Her fingers closed around the base of his cock, a grip as smooth and binding as a silk scarf. She kissed him again, though it wasn't so much a kiss as an oral mugging. Her tongue plundered his mouth as her hand explored up and down his swollen, needy member. She seemed to be able to find nerves endings Leonard didn't know about, and he was a doctor, dammit, not some twitchy sixteen-year-old. But like a kid, he was about to come with his pants still on. As she worked him, the voice in the back of his mind kept on, as relentless as Sherron. Wrong wrong wrong, it said. This is wrong, Lee. You promised.

Sherron licked down his neck. "Wait—" he started, but cut off with a cry. Sherron had bitten him, her teeth putting just the right pressure on his jugular vein as her thumbnail found another nerve ending on the underside of his cock. A grey wave of pain crashing into a bright shock of pleasure, the two meeting in the pit of his gut. He didn't know if he was going to vomit or— Sherron jerked her wrist. Leonard came so hard he saw the whole goddamn Milky Way.

When the star clusters cleared, he stared up at the ceiling. "I have to go."

"What?"

He pulled up, zipped up, and started buttoning his shirt. "I know, I'm an asshole. You bit me. Christ, what the fuck am I doing here?" Leonard shoved his shirt into his pants. He stood, tumbling her off of him.

"Leonard—" she grabbed his wrist but he jerked back, spinning around and facing her.

"Look," he said. "I know this dance, okay? I've been this guy. You look up 'cheating bastard' at Wikipedia, and my picture is probably still there. But when I left Atlanta I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't be that guy anymore. I have a girlfriend, Danna—okay, maybe she's not exactly, but I promised her a year ago that I wouldn't fuck around. There's too much scary shit out there. I mean, I don't think you're diseased or anything, but—you know what I mean. I promised." He rubbed at his neck. "And you bit me."

Sherron stood there for a moment looking at him, no expression on her face. "We have another word on Vulcan," she finally said. "It means liar, but a particular kind, one who lies to himself. You are a vik-ran, Leonard. When you speak of your ex-wife, there is anger in your eyes. There is nothing when you speak of Danna. Not anger, not affection. You feel nothing for her beyond the momentary pleasure she gives you. That is the point of the relationship, is it not? It's why it continues. How safe, to feel nothing but orgasms. How empty."

"It's better than teeth."

"You like my teeth. Evidence is all over your trousers. You like me, but you are afraid of me."

"Keep dreaming, sweetheart." He shoved his arms into his suit jacket and headed for the front door. He got his coat, wrapping it around himself like armor.

She followed him. "My eyes are wide open, ashal-veh. I know when I am wanted and when I am despised. But the one response I never inspire is indifference. You cannot know me and feel nothing. You see this. You fear it, being consumed by your feelings for me. It's a reaction with which I am well acquainted." She looked down, her face as openly sad as he'd ever seen it.

"Sherron, I don't—" he didn't know how to finish that sentence. His neck throbbed and his cock throbbed. He wanted to fuck her, he wanted to strangle her, he wanted to give her a great big hug. Damn, she was right: You couldn't feel indifferent. He moved towards her, not sure how the movement would end, but she stepped back.
"No," she said. "I think it best if we say goodnight. We both need time to consider the matter. Though there is not much time remaining."

"What do you mean?"

"I leave for Vulcan soon on urgent family business. I don't know when I will return. Sharok and Varena are both accompanying me, it's time they attended a proper school. They will miss their friends here, but a separation is best for all concerned. I do not look forward to living on Vulcan, I find its society oppressive. But one does what is best for one's children." She looked at him seriously. "I will not contact you again. It's difficult for me, leaving such matters to another's will. But I trust you to make the right decision. Not just about us, but about your friend and my cousin as well."

"I told you I'd delete the video."

"There is more to this situation than just a video. You understand that very clearly: Your Psi-rating is not as high as Jim Kirk's, but it's not low. Not at all." She sighed. "There is much I could show you. Most Terrans would not have the aptitude or the stamina, but you are special. I knew that the first moment I saw you." Sherron leaned forward and kissed him softly on the cheek. She pressed her face to his, and for a moment he closed his eyes and just let himself take her in, cloves and roses. Too soon, she pulled away and opened the door. "Much can happen between us, Leonard," she said. "Think on it, but do not think too long. Our days grow short."

He found the tricorder in his coat pocket when he was halfway home. She must have slipped it in there when she kissed him at the door. For a half-second he thought about turning around and bringing it back, but he didn't. If he saw her again tonight, he wouldn't leave. Maybe Leonard did lie to himself about a lot of things, but he didn't lie about that.

He walked into his bedroom shedding clothes as he went. The suit pants were going to have to be dry cleaned again, and he would have to take them somewhere other than his usual place. He didn't want old Mrs. Patel looking at him like he was a pervert, even if it was true.

He went into the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes were red from k'vass, lips swollen from kissing. His neck hurt. Sherron hadn't broken the skin, but he was going to have a helluva hickey come tomorrow. Christ, he was regressing into a teenager.

Leonard turned on the shower as hot as he could stand it. He scrubbed up, washing away the smell of roses and spunk. He was still as twitchy as hell: After two weeks of celibacy, what happened with Sherron tonight was like eating a canapé when you were starving. He thought about jerking off in the shower, but the idea was too depressing.

As he pulled on sweats, he realized his stomach was growling. "Fucking vegans," he muttered, and walked into the kitchen for a Coke and a ham sandwich. Getting it from the replicator meant it would taste more like a Spam sandwich, but he no longer possessed the mental stamina to deal with other sentient beings, even a pizza delivery boy. Waiting for the replicator to finish up, he realized Jim wasn't home yet. Three guesses where he is, and the first two don't count. Leonard sighed and went back to his bedroom.

He picked up the red data solid from a bunch of others in the basket next to his bedroom comscreen. Not the most original hiding place, but the Vulcans had probably never read Poe. He went back in the kitchen, took a bag of beef jerky from the cabinet, and fished out the blue solid. He'd been certain they would never look there—fucking vegans. He threw both solids into the recycler and heard it crunch them to bits. The replicator beeped, and he got his meal.
"Computer," he said, as he sat down on the living room couch, "delete file: download from Central Security, about 12:30 today." A simple 'delete' wouldn't destroy anything completely. But with Sherron poking around the system, no doubt the video would soon be gone from all Academy computers forever.

"Deleted," the computer said.

"Recall mail," he went on. "Sent at around 12:40, recipient Belva McCoy, Clear Mountain, Georgia." The system was automated these days. If the envelope hadn't reached the central processing center, Leonard should be able to get it back.


The most pressing tasks completed, Leonard finished his sandwich. Now he was no longer hungry, but he was still horny and bored. He thought about watching porn—Jim wouldn't be home for hours. The kid always disappeared when he was in the first flush of infatuation.

Leonard wondered if Jim had held on to that copy of Secret Vulcan Mating Rituals.

No. Bad Leonard. Anyway, it wouldn't be the same. You couldn't touch the fake Vulcans. You couldn't smell them. He had no fucking idea what he was going to do about Sherron, but that didn't mean he didn't want to know more. Maybe further data would make his options clear.

"Computer," he said. "Show visual. The most recent image of Varek, Clan—I don't know what clan. He was an artist, and he's dead. Cross-reference with spouse: Sherron, Clan Surak."

"Working."

A picture popped up on the living room comscreen. It showed a young, skinny, broody-looking Vulcan male. He looked a bit like his son, though Sharok was more robustly built. Varena had his eyes, that same arresting green. But who Varek really looked like was Hatari Takamura.

"Poor little thing," Leonard said, taking a sip of Coke. The mystery of Varena's three hundred drawings was suddenly explained. Speaking of drawings . . .

"Computer, are there any archives of Varek's work?"

"Affirmative. Twenty-seven exist."

"Show the most complete."

The portal for the Museum of Shi'Kahr showed up. The section devoted to Varek was long and detailed, in true Vulcan fashion. There were more pictures of Varek at various points in his life, as well as a biography. He'd been dead for nine years, which would make him twenty-two when he got lost in the storm.

Twenty-two. Something about that nibbled at Leonard, but he couldn't think what.

"Show thumbnails of Varek's work," he told the computer.

"Thumbnails are divided into sections by date. Display chronologically?"

"Sure."

The first set of thumbnails popped up. According to the legend at the bottom, these spanned Varek's earliest extant works, from the age of seven until around the age of nine.
The first picture to open was a pencil sketch of Sherron. She was just a little girl, but there was no mistaking those eyes. She was seated on a rock holding a rose in one hand. The perspective was off in places, but it was still an amazing work for a small child. The sketch had a scribbled title at the bottom, more squiggly notes. The Standard caption read *Svai-ak (The Two Flowers).*

"Two flowers," Leonard said, smiling. The metaphor was clever: the flower in the girl's hand, her flower-like face. Clever and suggestive. Maybe Varek had never planned to marry, but he was *aware,* even as a little boy.

"Next image."

Sherron again, a close-up of her face done in pastels.

"Next image."

Sherron in acrylics this time, eating one of those blue oranges. He kept forwarding: Sherron, and Sherron, and Sherron, in every pose and every medium. He frowned at the screen.

"Show all works that feature Sherron."

Dozens of thumbnails popped up. He looked at the bottom of the screen: Page 1 of 47. There had to be hundreds of images—thousands, perhaps. This wasn't using a close friend as a muse. This wasn't even a boyhood crush. This was obsession, long-standing and intense.

He stared at the thumbnails a minute. "Show works by Varek, first half of 2242." Just before the artist's first *pon farr."

Most of these reminded Leonard of the flame painting in Sherron's apartment. Teenage Sherron, illuminated by those desperate reds and oranges. In some she was staring out at the viewer, as if in invitation. In many she wasn't wearing much except flames. The images weren't so different from the semi-erotic doodles most teenage boys commit, except for being very accomplished and very detailed. Looking at them gave Leonard a weird feeling.

But the most disturbing picture wasn't of Sherron, but another young man. He was bigger and broader than Varek, with smooth dark hair, but his features were obscured. In the sketch, done in heavy charcoals, his powerful body was marred by numerous deadly wounds. Even in black and white, they seemed to run with gore. The title was a single word: *Korlash (Rival).*

*Fuck.* Leonard swallowed. "Any works featuring a subject similar to this?"

There were a few. The first one to come up was a sketch from a couple of years before *Korlash.* In this one you could see the boy's face, which was handsome and open. His hand was touching the shoulder of a lovely girl: Sherron. The touch was light, but there was something sure about it. Possessive. The title of the sketch: *"Sherron iy Samar-kam" (My Dear Friends Sherron and Samar).*

"Cross-reference records: Sherron, Clan Surak and Samar, Clan unknown."

"Seventeen records exist."

"Display."

"Records have been closed by Sarek, Clan Surak, 13 Njan 2242. Request access?"

He put his head back, holding the Coke can to his forehead, thinking. Sherron had told him that she and Varek were not betrothed. Varek did not plan to marry, and according to Varena, his clan did not bind its children. What about Clan Surak? If Sherron was bound, Varek must have known. He knew as he made every image of her, tracing her body and face a thousand times over. He knew when he asked her to walk with him into the desert. But he chose to forget: He had wanted her so badly, his maiden of the flames. He took her from his friend, and it was a terrible scandal. It required her grandfather's influence to calm the water. But Sarek did calm it, and Sherron and Varek married and had two children. But he returned to the desert, and he didn't come back. Seven years later: Seven. Could it be a coincidence? If not, what did it mean?

Leonard thought of Sharok, also fifteen, staring at T'Ria with those burning eyes. His mother had sent him away, though their family was already leaving. And the twins, battling for a prize they weren't even old enough to understand. Sherron was taking Varena away from them, too. What had she said? It was better for everyone. Had she seen them, those greedy male gazes? She must have: Sherron, obsessed with safety, missed nothing.

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft beeping noise. The mail slot by the comscreen had lit, the last copy of the video returned. He got up and retrieved the envelope, taking out the green data solid. He looked at it a moment.

He had no proof that Sherron had lied to him. Or that she had kept something back, which was just another form of lying. The Vulcans probably have a specific word for it. He didn't want to doubt her, but that might just be his dick talking. It had a way of making him believe things he shouldn't: "Don't worry if the condom's dissolving, Lee. I'm on the Pill." That was a good one.

He could choose to trust Sherron. After all, he had nothing to go on except a bunch of pencil sketches and his own paranoia. Or he could listen to that little nagging voice, the one that said wrong, wrong, wrong. The last time he ignored it, Jim Kirk almost died.

He put the data solid in his pocket. If Sherron wasn't lying, it was just as easy to recycle it in a few weeks, when Spock was over his little PMS attack. But if she was lying, and her cousin—along with all those other young Vulcan males—was intermittently insane, well, he had proof. The right hands could be found for it: He already had some ideas in that direction.

Leonard thought of Sherron's eyes and lips again. That wanton, voluptuous body, those wicked hands. Maybe he didn't approve of her dead husband's fixation, but he understood it, Lord help him. A woman almost worth betraying your best friend over. Almost.

He went to his room to find another hiding place for the video. When he was done, he was going to poke through the piles in Jim's room. The fake Vulcan porn had to be there somewhere.
xx. Spock

Jim Kirk lay curled in bed, the pale glow of the lamp illuminating his sleeping form. He was on his side, his beautifully muscled torso rising and falling in slow, peaceful breaths. His head was turned at an angle, long gold lashes fanned on his cheeks, the fine planes of his face flushed with slumber. Spock had been sitting on the edge of the bed for some minutes, quietly gazing at him. An indulgence he would not normally allow, but these were not normal days.

He had indulged himself with Jim all day and into the night. Some of their games were simple and some were complicated, some cruel and some kinder, but all of them ended in the same way: writhes and cries; sweat, seed, and the sweet taste of Terran flesh. They would still be playing, had Spock not noticed ninety minutes ago that Jim was yawning, even after several cans of Xix. Under questioning he finally admitted that he had slept no more than three hours for the past two nights. Spock made them stop immediately: Games were all very well, but Jim's health must be taken into account. He was very resilient, but he was only human. Fragile, in his way.

Spock had led the still-protesting cadet into the shower. But as soon as the warm water raised Jim's body temperature, he became sleepy in earnest. Spock did nearly all of the work for their final, steam-clouded encounter: He did not mind. Taking Jim against the slippery tiles, feeling that firm body all soft and yielding with fatigue, was a pleasurable experience. He would not want Jim so pliant all the time, but as an occasional departure it was delicious.

Spock knew he should wake Jim. It was past 23:00, and the cadet had another mid-term in the morning. So did Spock, for that matter, though he was giving rather than taking. Exams were over tomorrow, and then Academy personnel had a long weekend. Spock did not often enjoy time away from work, but now a holiday was welcome. He would spend it with Jim, teaching him what he needed to know for the weeks ahead. For the first time, Spock could anticipate the future without dread. Let the Fever come: They would be ready. It was a satisfying prospect.

But before he cast off trepidation entirely, there was one more matter which needed to be settled. Jim's masochism: Spock needed to discover its source, and Jim was not being forthcoming. He had refused, point-blank, to acknowledge that there was anything to reveal. Spock knew better.

What Jim did not know is that their new-forged bond worked both ways. He could see Spock's memories, and Spock could see his. Usually, Spock would no more enter Jim's mind uninvited than he would rifle his wallet. But this was a special situation. Jim's lack of care for his person would always be troubling, but during plak tow it could be fatal. Spock must know the origin of such recklessness, or he could not correct it.

He reached out and put a hand on Jim's back. The cadet's skin felt as cool and smooth as ever. The long, slashing scars were so faint as to be almost undetectable. Despite his idiosyncrasies, Leonard McCoy must be a very competent physician. But Spock's sensitive fingertips could still feel the marks. They would be his gateway, permitting him to forge a path through the seething morass that was any Terran's mind. Memories attached to the scars would be clear and specific. They would lead him where he needed to go.

He traced down the longest scar. At first there were nothing but emotion—pain of course, but also arousal, and, curiously, shame. He did not think Jim Kirk was capable of such. Spock probed a little deeper. Shame, pain, arousal, more intense now. Still deeper, and suddenly—
he has to bite his lip to keep from screaming. he knew this would be bad but not this bad. mother of god that hurt, like the lash has torn right through to his spine.

\'wanna stop, jimmy?\' he looks up into big green eyes veined with red. they sparkle wickedly at him. david is always vicious, but on meth he's worse. this might have been a really bad ide—

another lash, and an arc of fire races down his back. jim bites his lip so hard he tastes blood.

\'just tell me you can't take it. tell me to stop.\' david wrinkles his nose at him, pushing back curly red locks from his face. he's so little and cute, you'd never guess how fucking sick he is. not unless you've seen it for yourself. felt it—

another lash. jim's entire body bows in agony, but somehow he stays silent.

\'so fucking stubborn. it's the irish in you. but i'm irish, too.\' david snaps the whip, and just the sound makes jim wince. he feels wetness running down his back, hears his heartbeat pounding in his ears. sweat leaks into his eyes, making them burn. this was a bad idea. all these months of playing, so many games, but he can't take this. maybe just once he can let dave win.

\'okay,\' he whispers. \'stop.\'

\'what was that?\' david leans close.

\'stop,\' jim says distinctly.

\'stop—what?\'

\'stop. please.\'

\'when you say it nicely like that—\' dave grins at him, \'—there's only one thing i can say.\'

david leans so close you could count his freckles.

\'no.\'

another lash. jim does scream this time.

\'shh. the neighbors will hear you.\'

another lash. jim tries not to cry out but he can't stop, his back become one blazing field of pain.

\'that's it. you deserve this.\' a cloth is shoved into his mouth and duct tape over that. as david works, jim looks into that grinning, freckled face. not his friend's now, but a devil's face. he would hate it in this moment, if jim didn't know the truth.

he does deserve this.

more lashes, a rain of lashes, wound on top of wound, pain on top of pain, until he can't see or hear david anymore, the world contracted to a pinpoint of agony. jim scarcely knows his own name, he just knows that he hurts. and in this moment of blank despair, the words come back to him. old, sacred words, reminding him once more of who he is, and what he deserves.

Hail Mary, full of Grace,
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit
of thy womb, Jesus. 
Holy Mary, Mother of God, 
pray for us sinners now, 
and at the hour of death.

red drops run down the cross. the world begins to dim.

holy mary, mother of god

The revolution is successful. But survival depends on drastic measures.

pray for us

Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society.

sinners now

Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony.

and at the hour of

Therefore, I have no alternative but to sentence you to
dead

death

'jim kirk, can you hear me? it's what you deserve, what you've always—'

"STOP."

Spock didn't realize he had said the word aloud until he saw Jim shift in his sleep. He stood, walking away from the bed. He needed a moment to collect himself.

David Goldman was known to him, of course. Like many cadets, he had been through one of the introductory computer courses. Goldman had been cheerful and attentive, but Spock never cared for him. Something about the man set his teeth on edge. A scent, maybe, or a fleeting expression, half-glimpsed beneath the freckles and smiles. When he heard the cadet's parents had withdrawn him because of a sudden nervous prostration, Spock was not surprised. But he never guessed the full extent of Goldman's psychosis.

The memory was painful, and not only because Spock had felt an echo of Jim's torment. But it was also instructive. He possessed another clue now, the clearest part of Jim's entire flashback, vivid even through a haze of pain. This was not surprising: Rhythmic words and ritualized meters stayed with us, they could serve as beacons in the memory. Songs were illuminating in these matters, poems as well. But prayers were the most revealing of all.

Spock sat on the bed. He reached out once more, the barest tracing of fingers on Jim's back. Spock could not bear to touch harder, not after what he just witnessed. He closed his eyes and opened his mind to Jim's, feeling down their bond, so strong and new. As he did, he repeated the words to himself. Not sacred words, not to him. But weighty enough all the same:

Hail Mary, full of Grace, 
The Lord is with thee. 
Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit
of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners now,
and at the hour of death.

And soon, other words came:

The revolution is successful. But survival depends on drastic measures. Your continued existence
represents a threat to the well-being of society. Your lives mean slow death to the more valued
members of the colony. Therefore, I have no alternative but to sentence you to death.

It was the speech of a madman. What did it have to do with a prayer to the Christian mother
goddess? Why did the two reverberate so painfully? Spock focused harder, using all the talents he
had been taught during his boyhood. Searching for that common element, the single, shining thread
which would lead him to the secret of Jim's self-destruction.

It appeared as one vivid image: the Christian cross. An instrument of torture turned symbol of faith,
agony and hope in two clean lines. But this was one cross in particular. Not the horror of Goldman's
devising: This was hung on the wall of a church, far back in Jim's mind. The church was dim and
secret, it did not wish for visitors. Dare he enter this shadowy, sanctified space? He had no choice.
Spock fixed the image firmly in his mind. A last breath, and he submerged.

The church is very cold. He pulls his robe tighter around himself and keeps walking up the central
aisle of the small building. It is beautiful in its own strange way, built of stone with exposed wooden
rafters. The rows of pews on either side are illuminated by the stained glass in the long windows
which line the building. Red, gold, and blue spots of light fall on the wooden benches, on the
kneelers in front of the benches. There are figures in the windows as well, blank-faced and stylized,
most of them dressed in robes, circles of light above their heads. Spock has never studied Terran
religions in any depth: His mother is not a true believer. He could tell you all about Zeus or Aladdin
but not much about Jehovah and his many saints. The stories depicted in the windows are strange to
him, they are not sacred. No more sacred than the words he hears coming from the front of the
church, repeated in a soft, high-pitched voice. A child's voice.

"Hail Mary, full of Grace,
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit
of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners now,
and at the hour of death.

"Hail Mary, full of Grace . . .

The words are repeated again as he makes his way quickly towards the altar at the front of the
church. He looks down at the speaker of the words, a very small tow-headed Terran dressed in black
trousers and a plain white shirt. There are wooden beads in his hands, attached to those is a small
cross. As he prays, he bows his head, the beads running through his small fingers. Prays and shivers:
His clothes are thin.

. . . Pray for us sinners now,
and at the hour of death."
When Spock's shadow falls on him, the boy looks up, blinking huge blue eyes. Spock knows who he is, of course. In this time and place, he could be only one person. If nothing else, that vivid coloring would be the vital clue.

"Jim, you should rise. The floor is cold, you will make yourself ill."

"I have five more decades to do," Jim says. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"I'm a—friend."

"Your ears look funny." The boy frowns. "Satan has pointed ears."

"I'm no devil, child."

"I know. You're a Vulcan. I'm not stupid."

"Then why are you freezing yourself in this lonely place?"

"I'm not lonely. He's with me." The boy stares up at the cross, the strangest expression on his small features, hungry and guilty at once. Spock follows Jim's gaze, and stills. He noted the figure on the cross when he first entered the church, but he did not examine it closely. He has seen many representations of Jesus Christ, but this one is strange: He is blond and blue-eyed. His coloring would be odd enough, but he is not in the usual loincloth and thorny crown. The man on the cross is wearing a Starfleet uniform, albeit one that is two decades out of date.

"He's always here," the boy says. "He's everywhere I go. My father, who art in Heaven."

"George Kirk," Spock says. He knows the story of the elder Kirk's heroic death quite well. Every Starfleet officer does. "Why is your father on the cross, Jim?"

"He saved eight hundred lives, including my mother's—and mine. He died for my sins."

"You were an infant not five minutes old. What sin could you possibly have committed?"


"What do you mean?"

Jim doesn't answer immediately, just looks at his father. The man on the cross has a face and body very like what his son will possess one day, fair and well-formed. But unlike Jim, there is no animation in his face, no light in his eyes. A very fair, well-formed corpse.

"My father was offered his own command, three years of deep-space exploration," Jim says. "My grandparents were going to look after my brother Sam—everything was planned. But when my mother found out she was pregnant with me, they gave that up. The Kelvin was only doing a six-month quadrant survey, they thought it would be safer." The boy's mouth twists, and for a moment you can see the adult Jim lurking under that childish visage. "Fucking ironic, huh?"

"The timing was unfortunate, yes. But I fail to see how your father's death was your fault."

"Don't you get it? My parents wouldn't have been on the Kelvin if it weren't for me. I killed my father the same as if I'd started the self-destruct sequence. Mom has never forgiven me."

"Ridiculous. Where did you get such an idea?"

Young Jim looks down at his prayer beads. Then, very softly: "Mom."
Spock stares at him in disbelief. "Your mother told you that? When?"

"I was fourteen." The boy's brow wrinkles. He shifts his small body. "She will say it, anyway. Someday. You know what I mean."

"Why would she say such a thing about her own son?"

"She was kind of messed up at the time. She'd just been widowed again, and that made two dead husbands in thirteen years, two times she nearly died. Her first divorce had come in-between. It was kind of my fault, too, but I don't care about that. Frank was an asshole." The boy sighs. "She was drunk. She talks too much when she's had a few. Sam is the same way."

"Well then. Perhaps she did not mean what she said."

"In vino veritas." The Latin sounds strange coming from the lips of such a small boy. Jim looks down at his beads again. "She never wanted kids to begin with. My father was the one set on having a family. She was willing to give him what he wanted, even though she knew it would hamstring her career. Can you imagine loving somebody so much, you risk your whole future for him? But Mom never thought she'd live that future alone. It's why Winnie Murray had all those lovers before George Kirk, it's why she keeps getting married now. She looked so hard for the one she wanted, she keeps trying desperately to find him again. She never will. It's my fault."

"And that is why you deserve punishment."

Jim pauses. "Partly."

"What is the other part?"

"I don't wanna talk about that. You can't make me talk about it."

Spock hears the panic in the boy's voice and answers, very gently, "All right."

"It was bad, it was really, really bad. However bad you think it might have been, it was worse." Jim swallows. "Scary. I mean, I wasn't scared, but everybody else was. Kevin was."

"Who is Kevin?"

"Nobody. He's dead." Jim's eyes, so large and blue, are close on Spock's face. "They all died. I saw them, you couldn't not see them, all that blood running into the sand. But I wasn't scared. Four thousand people murdered, but not me. Nothing bad happened to me. He saved the blonds with blue eyes, even the kids who couldn't work. He said the Aryans should be saved. Can you imagine singling somebody out because of his coloring? How fucked up can you be?"

Spock has no answer to that. So he asks something else. "Who killed them, Jim? Tell me."

Young Jim shakes his head. "I have to finish my penance. You should go now."

"I won't leave you in this terrible place."

"Why? You don't like me, not really. We both know that. But I don't know why. Are you really that pissed I had sex with Achebe Chang?"

"I'm not having this conversation with you. Not while you occupy that body, at least."

"Fine. We'll give you the body you want. That's what this is really all about, isn't it?"
The last sentence is said by two voices: the high, fine voice of a small child, and the deep, resonant one of a grown man. The man's voice comes from above the altar. Adult Jim hangs there now. He has taken his father's place. But unlike his father, he is not in uniform. He is naked and unashamed. His torso is covered in vicious wounds—lash marks, knife cuts, bruises, bites. Some of the wounds are old, the lacerations crusted over, bruises gone yellow and green. Some are so new they are bleeding, red rivulets running down his belly and onto his legs. But he is aroused: His face is flushed. His penis is stiff, glistening at the head.

When he speaks again, his voice is a raw whisper. Spock sees the strangulation marks around his neck. "This is what I want," Jim says. "It's what you want too, right? Way down deep, in that dark place where the Fever lives. You think you're the first? You think David was? You have no idea, you really don't. None of you do, not even the good Doctor, and Christ knows he watches close enough. I bleed and bleed, and nobody can tell."

The blood begins to run faster now, leaking from Jim's eyes, gushing from his nose and mouth. Until his face is a mask of blood, the only feature still visible his eyes, so wide and blue. The wounds on his body gush too, until there is a puddle beneath the cross, running down the stairs leading away from the altar, soaking into the stone floor. Nobody could bleed so much and live. Spock wants to help Jim, he desperately wants it, but it's as if he's been rooted to the ground.

From his kneeling position, Young Jim stares up at him, his eyes just as wide, more accusing.

"This isn't what I want," Spock says.

"Liar," the boy replies. "I'm not surprised: The Devil always lies. Grandma told me."

"I told you, I am not—"

"Get out of here. I have to finish."

"Jim—"

"GO!" The word echoes through the church like a great wind. It catches Spock's robe, blowing him down the aisle and through the front doors. Into the darkness that lies just beyond, waiting.

When Spock opened his eyes, Jim was thrashing on the bed like a man in the grip of a nightmare. Spock took a breath and centered himself. He caught Jim's head and put a hand on his face.

"Sleep," he said softly. "Rest deeply, and dream of nothing." In a few seconds, Jim stilled. He turned on his side. Spock waited until his breaths were truly even, then he got up from the bed.

He walked to the kitchen and opened the lower cabinet by the sink. He took out a small box and opened it. Took a bottle from the box, and opened that. Not even bothering with a shotglass, he took a long draught from the bottle. At first the k'vass burned his throat like poison, but soon the fine liquor had settled into the pit of his stomach and started a fire. It burned away the chill of Jim's subconscious. Spock put the bottle down. He looked back at the sleeping cadet.

What he had seen in Jim's mind could not be called a true dream. This was not surprising: Very few Terrans possess eidetic recall, and what memory they have is untrained. Rather than a clear, perfect recollection such as he and Jim experienced earlier, Spock had been thrown into a wild mixture of emotion and trauma, all of it expressed in lurid symbol. A nightmarish trip into the Terran id: What a horrid place. Small wonder that psychologists on Earth were paid so well.

What he witnessed was in some ways more painful than the undiluted memory of Goldman's torture.
It was, however, even more instructive. Spock placed the bottle back in the box and the box back into the cabinet, and walked down the hall to his private study.

He sat at his desk and looked at the comscreen. "Computer," he said. "Personal record request: Kirk, James T. Whereabouts of the cadet in the year—" he considered a moment, "—2246." Jim's mother was widowed twice before Jim was fourteen, two instances when she, too, nearly died. Spock knew the facts of the first time, now he was curious about the second.

"Subject's minor records have been sealed, 2 August 2255."

"By whose order?"

"Starfleet Command."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Initiating officer?"

"Pike, Christopher."

Interesting. Spock had heard more than one rumor about the Captain's special interest in James Kirk. (He had not been looking for gossip about James Kirk, mind you. But one heard things.) There were many theories, most of them prurient, and he believed none of them. Not after he'd researched the matter himself one dull afternoon when he had nothing better to do. Christopher Pike's first deep-space assignment, when he was still a raw cadet of twenty-one, had been on a ship where George Kirk was serving as third officer. When Kirk transferred to another ship two years later, Pike turned down a promotion to follow him to that ship. He had continued to serve with the elder Kirk until April of 2228. George Kirk married Winona Murray three months later. Perhaps Pike's sudden independence was a coincidence, but Spock doubted it.

George Kirk and the tragic fate of the Kelvin were also the subject of Pike's dissertation, written in 2237, four years after the disaster. Pike took a leave of absence from active duty in late 2233, later returning to Starfleet Academy. He spent three years teaching and exhaustively researching the circumstances surrounding George Kirk's death. His work was vital to the final, conclusive report on the affair.

Spock had no doubt that Christopher Pike possessed a very personal attachment to someone named Kirk, just not the Kirk that others assumed. An attachment so deep, in fact, that Pike must have exhausted considerable resources, both political and financial, to see there was nothing on Jim Kirk's record which would bar him from Starfleet Academy.

The only reason to seal Jim's juvenile record would have been if there were unsavory activities described therein—criminal activities of a serious nature. This meant that the innocent facts of Jim's early life would also be sealed, even for someone with Spock's security clearance. Spock was interested in all of the facts, innocent or otherwise, but he would require special assistance to gain access to them. He would contact Sherron tomorrow. But tonight, he was still curious.

Spock considered a moment, tapping his fingers on the smooth metal surface of his desk.

"Computer," he said. "I wish you to identify the source of the following speech, if any: The revolution is successful. But survival depends on drastic measures. Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society. Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony. Therefore, I have no alternative but to sentence you to death."

"Working." It paused. "Speech identified."

"Source?"
"Governor Kodos."

Spock paused a moment, as one always did after hearing the name. "Context?" he asked quietly.

"Address to the colonists of Tarsus IV. This is his last known public speech, given just before the commencement of the mass executions."

Spock leaned back in his chair, wishing he'd brought the k'vass bottle into the office with him.

The story of Tarsus IV was more famous than the mysterious demise of the Kelvin. It was the site of a Federation Colony in a distant quadrant of the galaxy, so remote at the time that supply ships only visited it every six months. Further isolating the colony was the presence of violent solar storms in the system, which usually made subspace transmissions impossible. For the most part, the colonists of Tarsus IV were on their own. Which is why in 2246 the colony's botanists were experimenting with what was supposed to be a beneficial fungus. They hoped it would control a virulent insect that was feasting on the crops, reducing harvests by as much as 10.15%.

An error in the genetic coding for the fungus, however, had made it a more vicious destroyer than the beetle could ever have been. Within a month, 82.37% of the colony's crops had been destroyed, turning fertile farmlands into a barren waste. The crops were vital to the sustainment of the isolated outpost. With no supply ships coming in the near future and no way to call for assistance, the governor of the colony had taken drastic measures. He declared martial law and severely rationed the remaining food supplies. This action might have been later understood, even applauded, but the governor went still further. It was this step that made him universally reviled, as much as the Terran dictator Adolf Hitler from the Twentieth Century.

The Hitler connection was significant: Kodos divided the colonists according to his own ideas, ones which were influenced by principles of eugenics that had been reviled for three centuries. The colonists not fortunate enough to embody Kodos' ideal were deemed unworthy of survival. Help arrived much earlier than expected, but by then their bodies were already rotting, hastily dumped into shallow graves dug in the sandy soil.

There had been children on Tarsus IV. The small bodies among the dead were considered the worst aspect of the tragedy. But some of the children survived, as well. Their names had not been released publicly, but the same courtesy was not extended to adult survivors of disasters.

"Scan list of surviving colonists," Spock told the computer. "Find Kirk, Winona."

"No record."

The third marriage—careless of him to forget. "Any female colonists with that first name?"

"One record. Hakamoto, Winona: geologist."

"What happened to her husband?"

"Hakamoto, John: botanist. Executed by Kodos one day prior to the mass executions."

Of course. As a member of the group who developed the fungus, he would have been the first punished. Winona, whose specialty was rocks and soil, had been spared. Or perhaps more than her job title saved her. Was she as blond and blue-eyed as her first husband and his son?

Spock sighed, shifting uncomfortably. He did not want to make certain connections. If Jim did not possess a striking coloring so rare on Vulcan, would he be here right now? Spock frowned to himself: Surely he was not so shallow. His attraction lay deeper. If Stonn were as dark and intense
as, say, Leonard McCoy, Spock might be attempting to seduce the Doctor this moment.

Spock allowed himself a grimace. He hoped he would never be quite so desperate. A consoler was preferable to *that*.

But Jim was fair, just as Stonn was fair. The mind was quite resourceful that way, attempting to replace what it had lost. Even if what was lost was not healthy or, at times, pleasurable.

Spock considered the comscreen again. "Scan list of deceased colonists, males under the age of eighteen with the first name of Kevin." Dead children would not fall under juvenile privacy laws.

"One record. Display?"

"Yes, with visual, if one exists. Also display Kevin's parents."

Kevin Riley was handsome. So was his mother, Phyllis Johnson: She reminded Spock quite a bit of Nyota Uhura. His father, Sean Riley, was less attractive, but there was something in his expression, even in a Federation identification holo, that suggested a certain charm: the sparkle in his blue eyes, the puckish smirk on his freckled face. His son had inherited the smirk, along with Sean's brilliant red hair. But Kevin's eyes were green and his skin golden, though still lightly freckled. A beautiful boy, but not one worth saving, not by Kodos' deadly rationale.

There couldn't have been more than a handful of pubescent boys in a colony of 8000. Jim had seen his friend, possibly his only friend, murdered while he was spared. When you coupled this with a primal guilt over his very existence, what was the result? In someone else it might have been crippling self-doubt. But Jim could not be crippled entirely. He was too handsome, too intelligent. He would not believe himself worthless, even if voices deep within told him so.

To live with such a divided self, never sure of one's true value: an unsteady existence. Spock knew it from personal experience. But there is refuge in logic, it gives one a certain balance. When one is not protected by years of training and discipline, the result could only be chaos and pain. A life lived bound to the cross, in love with one's own suffering, degraded flesh. No part of Spock found the idea of torturing Jim—truly torturing him—appealing, whatever Jim's subconscious believed. But not everyone was so scrupulous: Goldman had nearly killed him.

David Goldman, fiery-haired and freckle-faced. No, Spock was not the only one fatally attracted to doppelgangers. Jim must possess Kitaan's own luck to have survived such an encounter.

Spock left his study and walked back to the sleeping area. He sat down on the edge of the bed, regarding Jim once again. The cadet was sleeping so peacefully, you would never guess at the turmoil roiling within. Yes, Jim had been very fortunate up to now. But fortune has a way of turning on you, transforming from a kindly god to a wrathful storm-brewer. Spock would not see Jim vanish into the maelstrom, all his light snuffed out. He had already lost one beautiful boy this year: He would not lose another.

He glanced at the clock: 23:58. He should wake up Jim, but he would not. Disrobing, Spock stretched out beside his friend. He did not embrace him; he did not need to. He could feel their bond, as clean and fresh as an infant but stronger, moreso than it should be. Perhaps it was Jim, perhaps it was Fate. Spock was not sure there was a difference.

Then he did reach out, wrapping an arm around Jim's waist. He had not thought he would be able to sleep tonight, but very soon, his eyes grew heavy. Silently, he wished his friend more pleasant dreams than before. Spock intended to be in them.
DeliciousNewYork has made some wonderful artwork out of the first twenty chapters of SVMR. All of her work is available in her gallery at Deviant Art: http://deliciousnewyork.deviantart.com/gallery/#SVMR. She has lots of other excellent Trek-related pieces there, as well. See, enjoy, and leave her lovely feedback!

xxi. Kirk

Zian's midterm was a cakewalk. Lucky thing, because Jim had slept like shit. It wasn't the strange bed: He was used to them, and Spock's was a lot more comfortable than the one in Jim's own room. But Jim's subconscious had gone nuts last night, garish montages that bordered on nightmares. There had been too many familiar faces in the jumble, too much that he'd tried hard to bury. Why these zombies were rising from their sandy graves, he didn't know and didn't want to know. He'd been jerked wide awake by the last dream, screaming into the damp pillow. Worse, there hadn't been any distraction available. Spock had already gone to his early exam. Jim had to hustle out the door still stinking from nightsweat to make it to his own test. Now, hours later, all he wanted was a shower and a meal. He was aching from fatigue but didn't want a nap if it was going to be more horrorshows. Maybe Len was right: Xix was rotting his brain.

Jim put his hand on the ID pad next to his front door, hoping his roommate was in a better mood than yesterday. Maybe Leonard had managed to get himself laid in the intervening twenty-four hours, which always improved his outlook. His girl Danna might be pissed over recent neglect, but it wasn't like Len forgetting about her for a week or two was anything new. He would lay on the aw-shucks Southern charm and talk her around. Jim had witnessed the process once or twice, and it would have been funny if it wasn't so sad. Danna might be a good shrink, but she didn't have the first fucking clue what this was all about. She thought it was love; Len thought it was cheaper than call girls. Len never said so, of course. He had better manners. But Jim could see it. Maybe Danna would have, if she had any idea who Leonard McCoy really was. Manners again—executed correctly, they were better than body armor for keeping someone at bay.

Jim opened the door, and a sizzling golden scent hit him the face. He grinned. Leonard was a helluva cook when the mood struck him, if given a bit too much to gravies and batters. Today Jim didn't mind: The smell of fried chicken, cornbread, collard greens, and baked macaroni-and-cheese was like Heaven. Len must be in a good mood if he was making his mama's specialty.

A good, weird mood—since when did Leonard listen to pastel Japanese pop?

"James Kirk, I presume," a high, sweet voice said.

Jim looked over at the sofa. He blinked and looked again. Perched there was a pretty little girl in a bright red dress: weird. A pretty little girl with pointed ears who looked strangely familiar: really weird. She sat poker-straight on the saggy sofa, her big green eyes flicking between Jim and the telescreen, which was tuned to one of the music nets. Her feet, clad in shiny black mary Janes, twitched in time to the beat.

"Hey," Jim said. "I don't wanna be rude or anything, but who are you?"
"I am Varena," the little girl said. "I am visiting Leonard McCoy."

"Why?"

"I came to show him some of my drawings." She indicated a large sketch pad on the sofa beside her. "He expressed considerable interest in them yesterday, but we were interrupted." Her lips turned down a little. Who knew that Vulcans could pout?

Jim gave her a disbelieving look. "Len invited you over here?"

"He did not have a chance. He and my mother had reservations."

"Your mom?"

"Sherron. Are you acquainted with her?"

Jim looked more closely at the girl's face, the wide but delicate cheekbones, those big eyes. "We've met. I just didn't know she and Leonard knew each other."

"They went to dinner yesterday. I was not invited." Her lips turned down again. "Mother told me that she did not know if she would be seeing the Doctor anymore. I do not have classes this afternoon, so I took the opportunity to come by." She fidgeted a bit. "Perhaps I should have called first, but I knew he would not mind. He is most intrigued by my work." Varena raised her pointed little chin. "He told me I was a prodigy."

*Jesus, Bones. You and your manners.* Jim sat down on the sofa. "How did you find him?"

"He is listed in my mother's files, as are you." Before Jim could do more than blink: "Entering the building wasn't difficult. Academy security seems very lax."

"Yeah. We're working on that. Where's Len now?"

"Dressing. He has to leave for his clinic hours soon." She frowned. "He did not have as much time with my art as he would have liked. The woman distracted him."

"Woman?"

"The small, red-haired Terran. She was very emotional. It was not called for."

"Who, Danna? What happened?"

"I do not know. My presence seemed to disturb her. She and Dr. McCoy went into his bedroom and talked. She raised her voice, but I did not listen. That would have been rude. I turned on the telescreen." She glanced at the music vid again. "Blue Wind is very good, don't you think?"

"Sure. Really hot, if you're into twinks."

"Twinks?"

"Never mind." So Leonard was seeing Sherron. It was definitely an upgrade, but poor Danna. She had never liked him, but that didn't mean Jim couldn't feel bad for her. Even if your boyfriend did give a damn about you, it would be hard to compete with a Vulcan goddess.

*Vulcan. Bones is seeing a Vulcan.* Jim grinned. "Excuse me a second. Get something from the replicator if you want."
"No, thank you. Dr. McCoy gave me a plate of cornbread and collard greens." Varena paused. "It was—interesting."

"Southern cooking is kind of an acquired taste."

"Indeed." Varena nodded politely. Southerners weren't the only ones with manners. Leaving her to the telescreen, Jim knocked on the door of Leonard's room.

"Varena, do not come in. I swear to Christ—"

"It's me, Bones."

The door cracked open. Jim caught a glimpse of wet hair and furious eyes. "Get your ass in here. Close the door."

Jim walked into the room. Leonard, wearing only his boxer briefs, was picking through a pile of dirty laundry. Jim leaned against the dresser, giving him a smile.

"I hear you've been making friends."

"Shut the fuck up!"

"Hey, keep it down. There are children present."

"No fucking kidding." Bones ran fingers through his usually impeccable hair, which right now resembled some scruffy animal that had plopped itself on top of his head. He continued picking through the pile. "The goddamn laundry machine is on the fritz, and my last clean pair of scrubs got—messed up." Len sighed. "Danna threw a Coke at me."

"Chicks, huh? Screw one Vulcan hottie and they—"

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman," Leonard said. "We went to dinner. I didn't even plan to see her again."

"How come?"

Len paused. "The chemistry was wrong."

"Don't bullshit me. I've seen Sherron. She'd give a droid a hard-on."

"I didn't say it was missing, I said it was wrong," Leonard said. "Anyway, I have a girlfriend."

"Not anymore."

Leonard sighed, sinking down on the end of the bed. He looked so forlorn that Jim felt a twinge of sympathy. "Tell me what happened," he said, sitting next to him.

"I just wanted to show her that I wasn't an asshole," Leonard said. " Took some cajoling, but I finally got Danna to come over here. I was making nice—I was making lunch. Everything was going fine until Little Miss Cutie Pie stopped by. I had to explain why random eleven-year-olds were showing up and giving me the big eyes, didn't I? Things went downhill from there. Danna was not happy about me taking another woman out to dinner when she hasn't even been able to get lunch with me for weeks. I managed to recover from that one—a business engagement, blah blah blah—but then she wanted me to hustle Varena on out of here. I told her the situation had to be handled delicately, girls that age are sensitive. I know that from my Joanna." He stopped.
"And?"

Leonard looked down at his hands. "She wanted to know who Joanna was."

Jim stared at him. "No."

Leonard said nothing.

"You seriously hadn't told her that you have a kid?"

"It never came up!"

"Fuck me, Bones. You've been dating for a year."

Leonard shrugged.

"No recovering from that one, huh?"

He shook his head. "She told me I have severe attachment issues. I told her I didn't know what the hell she was talking about. She gave me a choice of going into therapy or saying goodbye."

"You didn't even consider it?"

"I'm not seeing another shrink. If my wife couldn't convince me, some broad I've been banging isn't going to. It was a total fucking waste of time after Hen—" Leonard stopped.

Jim looked at him.

Leonard looked away. "I am an asshole. Aren't I?"

"Yep. On the bright side, you'll never have to go to the ballet again."

"Bob Crater is gonna be all over this. He's been after Danna since I've known her. I've played poker with him. He's an idiot."

"Maybe she needs an idiot. Somebody who'll want to go to the ballet. A guy who's into all that good boyfriend shit: bed-and-breakfasts, dinner parties, first names."

Leonard scowled. "I have a great aunt named Nancy. She smells like mothballs."

Jim rolled his eyes. Nancy Danna was definitely better off with Bob Crater.

"I have to go to work," Leonard said.

"You just got dumped. Take the day off."

"And what, look at more of Varena's sketches? Do me a favor, Jimbo. Keep the kid company while I finish getting dressed. I'll drop her by the Embassy on the way to clinic."

"The Vulcan Embassy. That's right. You went to dinner with a Vulcan."

"Please, I beg you. Not today. Torture me about it tomorrow, but not today."

"Fine, but I don't want to hear any more crap about Spock. Ever."

Leonard looked at him. "How's that going?"
"Good, since you ask. Really good."

"You two have any deep and meaningful conversations?" Leonard asked, eyes narrowing.

Jim shifted on his feet. "What do you mean?"

Leonard shook his head. "Just watch yourself, kiddo. I don't think you know him as well as you think. You might end up surprised."

"Surprised is better than bored. How the hell did you hook up with Sherron, anyway? You do know she's Spock's cousin, right?"


"What are you gonna do about Sherron?"

"Nothing. I told you."

"Dude, are you seriously not going to hit that? She's a total MILF."

"Do I even want to know? Where the hell and what the hell, Jimbo?"

"American Pie was on Nostalgia Net last week. MILF stands for Mom I'd Like to—hey!" Jim batted away the dirty towel that had just been flung at his face.

"Get out of here. Go on—get."

Wow. Leonard must like Sherron more than he was letting on, if he wasn't appreciating Jim's standard color commentary.

Sighing, Jim scooted back into the living room and sat down on the sofa. Varena was singing along to the music in a soft, tuneful voice. "You speak Japanese?" he asked.

She tucked a shiny bobbed lock behind her ear. "I began learning it when I first became aware of Blue Wind. I wanted to appreciate them in their native tongue."

Made sense. He'd done the same thing with Orion Prime when he was a kid. Of course, that was about appreciating a culture that made the best pornography in the galaxy, but whatever.

"Hatari Takamura's lyrics are quite sophisticated," Varena said. "He has a gift for metaphor that reminds me of the great Vulcan poets."

According to gossip Jim had picked up in the clubs, Blue Wind's lyrics were all written by computer. Takamura's gifts were limited to lead vocals and fellating their manager. But no point spoiling Varena's innocent illusions. They'd get spoiled soon enough.

"Can I see your drawings?" Jim asked.

"You are an aficionado of the visual arts?"

"Sure. Lemme see."

She was talented, no doubt about it. The pastel drawing of Hatari Takamura could have come right from a spread in a professional fanzine. But that wasn't the drawing that really caught his attention. That drawing was several pages back, right after one of two smirking, freckle-faced Vulcan boys
who looked entirely full of shit.

Jim stared at the last drawing silently. "That is my cousin, Spock," Varena said.

"I know. Who is that with him?" Jim asked.

"His friend Stonn. He is very fair, isn't he?"

Jim ran a finger over the sketch, tracing wheat-blond hair, sea-blue eyes. He hadn't actually seen Stonn's face before. Inside a body and outside of it—not the same thing.

"He was here on Terra visiting Spock three weeks ago. They agreed to sit for a portrait."

Three weeks ago. Spock had made it seem like they hadn't met in a long time. Years.

"I think it came out very well, don't you?" Varena prodded.

Jim swallowed. "Yeah. It's amazing."

"Thank you," Varena said. She looked at him a moment. "You rather resemble Stonn. Fair coloring is very unusual on Vulcan."

"It's nothing special," Jim snapped. "All that Aryan stuff, it's such bullshit." Varena didn't reply, her small arched brows drawing together. Jim recovered, giving her a weak smile. "But Stonn looks nice. You said he and Spock are good friends?"

"Yes, though they do not see each other much now. Spock is here, and Stonn is busy managing his estates on Vulcan. He also plans to wed soon. His betrothed T'Pring is very beautiful. She allowed me to sketch her at the last High Holidays. Would you like to see?"

Jim's stomach unclenched a little as he looked at the drawing of T'Pring. She was as advertised, very beautiful, though in a different way from Sherron. A china doll instead of a goddess. But if Stonn was marrying her, maybe that meant he and Spock were only good friends now, like Jim was friends with some of his exes. Jim's own resemblance to Stonn was just one of those weird coincidences. Everybody has to look like somebody.

Jim paged back to the drawing of Spock with Stonn. Spock's expression was serious as always, but there was a warmth beneath the stoicism. You had to look for it, but it was there. Spock had looked at Jim just that way, last night.

"This is really good," Jim whispered.

"Would you like to have it?" Varena asked.

"Are you sure?"

"If you desire it."

"Yeah. I do."

Varena took a charcoal pencil out of the bag attached to her belt. She signed the drawing with a flourish, then ripped it from the pad and rolled it up, holding it out to him.

"Thank you," Jim said, taking it. "This is—thanks."

Before Varena could do more than nod graciously, Leonard emerged from his room in wrinkled
"Come on, honey," he said to her. "Let's get you home."

"I gave him one of my drawings," she said. "I signed it so it will be more valuable someday."

"Well, isn't that nice of you?" Leonard said, smiling down at her. If he'd ever looked at Danna with half that much affectionate attention, he might still have a girlfriend. He took Varena by the shoulder and steered her towards the door.

"Goodbye, James Kirk," she said. "It was a pleasure meeting you."

"You too. Thanks again for the awesome picture." She smiled, her cheeks greening.

"I'll be back late," Leonard said to Jim. "There's some fried chicken left if you want it."

"It is wrong to eat animals," Varena said to Leonard as they went out the door.

"Hogwash. The good Lord put 'em here for us to eat."

"That is not logical."

"Sure it is." Leonard gave her a sly grin. "You know, Hatari Takamura eats meat."

"He does not!"

"Big juicy hamburgers all the time. Can't get enough of 'em."

"I do not believe it. I require proof."

"Proof. Where I come from, little girls don't question their elders."

Varena tilted her head at him. "That is true. You are very old."

Len put a hand to his heart, like her remark had mortally wounded him. But his dark eyes were sparkling. There was probably more to the discussion, but right then the door whooshed shut.

Jim sat there a minute, Blue Wind babbling in his ears, before unrolling Varena's drawing again. He gazed at Spock and Stonn. Varena must have caught them unawares, as she did with Leonard and Danna today. Both men were wearing lounging clothes. They looked good together: right. Two who had been together a long time and would be together again.

Jim threw the drawing on the table. He lay back on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling. He could still smell fried chicken, but he wasn't hungry anymore.
"Is the meal to your satisfaction, cousin?"

Sherron brought her gaze up from the plate, upon which was a casserole that had taken Spock most of the morning to prepare. Finding authentic ingredients for Vulcan cuisine was not easy—he had been to three different markets after his exam concluded. Now Sherron sat at the dining table in his rooms, listlessly stirring his efforts with a fork. "It is very good," she said. Seeing his incredulous look: "Truly. But I do not have much appetite today."

"Are you unwell?"

"There is nothing wrong with me," she said, with strong emphasis on the last word. But Sherron slumped back in her chair in a defeated way. She was silent a moment. "Last night, I had dinner with Leonard McCoy."

"You are still full from that meal?"

"Of course not," Sherron said, dismissing Spock's mild attempt at levity. "Matters did not go as planned. We dined at Charis. Afterwards, I invited him to my apartment. He came, but then he withdrew too soon."

_That's what she said._ Jim Kirk's voice was as clear as a dilithium crystal in Spock's head. Not the real Jim but a convincing counterfeit, an after-effect of their adventures last night, no doubt. Spock swallowed a smile and smoothed his features into an empathetic expression.

"Did he give a reason for his—premature evacuation?" In his head, Spock heard Jim snicker.

"He did not. I cannot fathom it. Dinner went well. The food was excellent as always, and our interactions were"—her eyes flicked briefly to Spock's, then away—"spirited. I wore the dress."

"Which dress?"

"The purple dress."

"Ah. _The_ dress." When she wore it at the last High Holidays, it had engendered two marriage proposals and a heated discussion on the local nets about feminine modesty and social decency. Sherron tended to have that sort of polarizing effect.

"Perhaps he did not like the dress," she said.

"All men like the dress. I think even Shath likes it."

"He does not have the figure for it," Sherron said.

"For all his quirks, I have never heard of him displaying transvestite tendencies."

"My dear cousin. Shath would walk across Vulcan's Forge wearing only high-heeled shoes and a Terran brassiere if he thought it would win your father's attentions."

Spock shifted uncomfortably. Sarek's magnetic effect upon members of both sexes—a talent his only granddaughter inherited—was the source of much self-doubt during Spock's formative years. Even
Stonn had made certain observations that still rankled, though Spock did not think his friend meant to be cruel. Stonn's partiality for distinguished men several times his age was well known. A result of his time with Sklaar, his consoler, who was past a hundred when he had taken the boy as a client. A first pon farr left one marked in inexorable ways.

*We know all about those, don't we?* Jim said. *How many marks have you left on me so far?*

Spock blinked and drew his mental boundaries more firmly into place. He resolved to spend some time in the Disciplines today. This new-forged bond with Jim Kirk was not reacting in ways which were predictable. But then, few things about Jim fit that description.

"Spock? Are you listening?"

"Forgive me," he said. "I did not rest well last night. You were saying?"

"I was saying," Sherron said, sounding aggrieved, "that if it was not the dress, it must have been me." She looked at her plate again. "Leonard McCoy does not like me."

"Did he say so?"

"No, but why else leave in such a manner? I do not understand." Sherron's lips turned down in a peevish expression very like the one Varena got whenever she was thwarted. It was far better suited to an eleven-year-old.

"Sherron," Spock said, allowing himself a small sigh, "do you require compliments? Very well. I have seen you when you put yourself out to please, and you are as superb as a goddess. Maybe that is the problem."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Explain."

"When I was in Rome last year, at a museum I saw a statue of an old Terran goddess of the hunt, the one called Diana. Twelve feet tall and formed of solid bronze, magnificent to look upon, but she did not stir the blood. Too fierce, too powerful, too intimidating. I have met Leonard McCoy only once, but he does not strike me as a man who enjoys being overwhelmed."

"I see," Sherron said, brows drawing together. "I should have minced about, simpering like a child's plaything. Perhaps T'Pring would be more to his taste."

"There is middle ground between a doll and a divinity. Most of the time you occupy it. Why not show McCoy that part of yourself?" Spock put a hand on her wrist. "Your real self."

"What if he does not like my real self?" Sherron asked quietly, her eyes as wide as a girl's.

"Then he is a fool. You are well rid of him." Just as she was well rid of Varek, though Spock had never said as much to her. Even nine years later, after all the misery her husband inflicted, she would not appreciate it.

Sherron put her fingers over his own, squeezing. Her energies were blood-hot, enticing as ever, even to one who knew her well. McCoy must be made of metal himself to have resisted her.

In Spock's twelfth year, he developed an infatuation with his cousin of painful intensity, one which her time in the desert with Varek—and the trials which followed—ended. She needed a brother then, and her actual brother, fourteen years older and half a planet away with his young family, could not be present in a meaningful way. Spock had mastered his desires and given her what she needed, and ever after, he was glad of it. Lovers were all very well, but what he had with Sherron was better,
rarer. There is more than one way of being bonded with another.

Sherron released him, leaning back. "These Terrans! I do not know if they are worth all the trouble. But one perseveres." She speared a forkful of casserole and popped it in her mouth, chewing and swallowing in a determined way. "How go things with your boy Jim?"

"Satisfactory. I spoke with him last night about my condition. He was very accommodating."

"Well. That is good news," she said, looking pleased.

"Perhaps. Though I wonder if Jim Kirk truly understands what he offers. He does not seem to appreciate the seriousness of the situation."

"I do not know him. We, too, have only met once. But he seems to be one who rarely speaks seriously about anything. It does not mean that he is not serious."

"Possibly you are right. I am coming to understand him better as we interact. But I would rest easier if I possessed more complete information."

"What sort of information?"

"His juvenile files would provide good context. But they have been closed by court order."

"That is unusual on Terra. They do not have our privacy requirements."

"Yes, most unusual. The reason for it is another intriguing question. But the answer is not available through regular channels." He looked at Sherron meaningfully.

She sat up straight in her chair. "Come to lunch, my dear cousin," she said in a fluty voice. "I have missed our conversations." She lowered her voice to its regular timbre. "Lies."

"That is unfair."

"You did not lure me here under false pretext?"

"Oh, I did. But I do not sound like that."

"I am more accurate than an echo, ashal-veh."

"You are a wicked and irrational creature. That is why your lovers leave early."

Sherron called him a very rude word in Old Low Vulcan. An excellent language for insults, as it has an entire noun case devoted to profanity.

"Enough pleasantries," Spock told her. "Will you assist me?"

"Of course. I have already completed preliminary research on both Jim Kirk and Leonard McCoy." When he raised a brow: "One never knows with Terrans. It is better to be prepared."

"They are, as you say, unpredictable. Jim Kirk in particular."

The message alert chimed. "Jim Kirk calling," the computer said.

"Speak of Sitaan and he will appear," Sherron said, waving her fork.

"Answer," Spock told the computer, giving his cousin a quelling glance. "Audio and video."
The small comscreen on the wall behind the dining table lit up. Jim Kirk was sitting on the sofa in his rooms, wearing only loose cotton-knit pants in a pale grey shade. Noonday sun from the apartment's largest window turned his pale hair golden, his blue eyes crystalline. A few water droplets from a recent shower sparkled like firestones on the smooth planes of his torso. Spock felt the familiar warmth inside, as if some of those rays of sun had found their way to his heart.

"You and your fair-haired boys," Sherron murmured. She spoke in Vulcan. Spock did not realize until now that they had been speaking Standard for the entire meal. So much time spent with Terrans really was having its effect.

"Hey, Spock," Jim said. His eyes cut to the right, and he gave a gleaming white grin. "Sherron! How are you?"

"Hello, Jim."

"Has anyone told you how lovely you look today?"

"They have not."


Sherron raised an eyebrow. "How many ladies have you said that to today? Shall I guess?"

He made a circle with the fingers of his right hand. "Zero ladies. No ladies except this lady." Jim pointed outwards from the screen. "I haven't seen anybody as pretty as you all day." He paused. "Well, one person. But she was a little young for me."

"Permit me to be skeptical." But Sherron's cheeks had gone slightly green. She did, indeed, seem to be in need of compliments.

"I mean it. In fact, fuck it—what are you doing later?"

"What do you want, Jim?" Spock said.

"Well, I was going to ask if you wanted to go out tonight, but now that I've seen Sherron—"

"I appreciate your enthusiasm," Sherron said, her mouth quirking. "But I am already engaged."

"Shame," Jim sighed. "Well, Spock old buddy, I guess it's you and me then. How about it?"

"I do not think so," Spock said. "I have a great deal of work to do. You could come by later—"

"I want to go ouuuut," Jim said, stretching the word to a whine. "Mid-terms are over, man! Time to break out the k'vass."

"He does have a point," Sherron said. "Perhaps a celebration is in order."

"Exactly," Jim said to her, with another admiring glance. "Beautiful and brilliant. Amazing."

"It requires brilliance to recognize brilliance," Sherron said to him. "Or so they say."

"Is that right?" Jim said, leaning forward. "Tell me what else they say."

"I cannot," Sherron said, giving him a very direct look. "It is a secret."
"I'm excellent with secrets," Jim said to her in a soft voice. "Try me sometime."

"We cannot go out tonight," Spock said, bringing the conversation back to purpose.

"Why not?" Jim said, straightening up and speaking in a more normal tone.

"It would be—indiscreet."

"Indiscreet," Jim said slowly. "Right. Have to be discreet, don't we?"

He was silent a moment. Then he shrugged. "I can do that. I know just the place. Nobody gets in unless they know the guy at the door. No paparazzi, no cadets or girlfriends—or even, you know, good friends you used to screw that maybe you still do and haven't told anybody about."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Point is, it's discreet as hell. Great music, friendly servers—even has a vegetarian menu. Just your kind of place."

"I do not think it is a good idea."

A deep vertical crease had appeared between Jim's eyebrows. "Why not?"

Spock sighed. He did not want to have this conversation in front of Sherron. He did not want to have this conversation at all. It should be perfectly obvious why he and Jim could not go out in public. Theirs was not that kind of relationship. It was private. Why couldn't Jim understand?

"Look." Sherron was speaking Vulcan again. Very rude, in front of a Terran. She knew better.

She poked him with her foot under the table. "Look at your boy," she said.

Spock blinked, looking close. The comscreen showed Jim's fair good looks in great detail. But looking still closer, it showed more. There were dark circles under Jim's eyes, as if he, too, had not had an easy rest last night. His mouth, usually full and pink, was pressed in a hard line. His jaw was equally set. His hands were clasped so tightly on his knees that the knuckles were going white. He was as tense as a lute string: One more turn of the key and something would snap.

"Jim, are you well?" Spock asked.

"Fine and dandy," Jim said flatly. "Are you coming out or not?"

Spock looked at him a moment longer. "Why do you want this so much?"

"I want it because I do. What the hell do you want? Or should I ask, who?" The vertical line between his eyes had gotten deeper. Spock tried to reach down the bond to get some sense of what this was really all about, why it was suddenly so important to Jim that Spock make some sort of public showing for their relationship. But Jim's mind was locked down tight, and their bond was still too new for Spock to go where he was not wanted. Not while Jim was conscious.

Another kick under the table, sharp enough to make him wince.

"Very well," Spock said, scooting his chair back and rubbing his shinbone. "I will go."

Jim's whole body relaxed, the hard browline vanishing as if it had never been there. "Great," he said. "Thank you." But he was not looking at Spock when he said those last words.
"It will have to be late," Spock said. "I have exams to grade."

"That's fine. I've got stuff to do, too. Gonna clean this place up." His gaze darted around his living room. "I don't care, but it'll make Leonard happy. He needs the warm fuzzy." His eyes fixed on Sherron again. "He and Danna called it quits a couple of hours ago."

Spock felt his cousin go still beside him. "That is unfortunate," she said.

"Nah. His heart was never in it. Still, he's kind of bummed: single, lonely, horny. Somebody oughta cheer him up. I mean, besides me. Guess I could try, but I don't think he'd be into it." Jim's eyes grew brighter, as if with sudden inspiration. "Hey, why don't you give him a call?"

Sherron stiffened. "He knows how to contact me if he wishes."

"Wow. What the hell happened at dinner last night? Bones' table manners aren't that bad."

"I must go," Sherron said, rising from the table. "I have work to attend to." Her voice was calm but her mouth had turned down again, the full bottom lip pushing out.

Jim grinned. "You look just like Varena when you do that."

Sherron, who had been turning away to get her coat, whipped back around. "What did you say?"

"Oops, that's my other line, gotta go. I'll check in with you later, Spock." The screen darkened.

Sherron stood for a moment, half-in and half-out of her coat, staring at the comscreen.

"As you said," Spock said. "Unpredictable."

"You said that," Sherron replied distractedly. "How does he know my daughter?"

"I could not guess. We might call him back and ask."

"No. I have the answer."

Sherron slowly sank down on her chair. "Varena was asking this morning about Leonard. She wanted to show him her drawings—you know how she is when someone gives her the slightest bit of praise over them. He was only being polite, but it would be just like her to seek him out for more attention. He is in the directory, she has money for cabs—gods."

"Do you really think she would do that?"

"Did she not do it already, just weeks ago?"

Spock grimaced. Varena and Stonn had enjoyed a nice talk at the last High Holidays. He'd even convinced T'Pring to sit for a portrait, not that it was difficult, given his betrothed's vanities. He had promised to see Varena when he came to Terra, but the girl could not wait for her mother to plan a dinner. She had stopped by unexpectedly not six hours after his arrival. Stonn and Spock had been in the midst of their own very private reunion. It took quite a bit of scrambling to make themselves decent in the two minutes it took her to go from the combox to the front door. Stonn, though weary from a sixteen-light-year journey, had been gracious. For all his faults, he was very fond of children. Much more fond than Spock was of that particular child at that moment.

"He is going to think I sent her over there," Sherron said.

"Why would he think that?"
"Please," she snapped. "Leonard already thinks I am as wily as an old le-matya. This will only confirm his bad opinion." For a second, real distress flickered across her features.

Spock looked at her. "You care so much about what he thinks?"

"Yes—no." Sherron twisted the belt of her coat in her hands. "I do not know. It's complicated."

Spock thought the answer was obvious but decided it would be kinder not to point this out.

Sherron stood, tying her belt and heading for the door. "If you do not see me again, it is because I have been arrested for the strangulation of my youngest child."

"I will stand as a character witness if you like."

The corners of Sherron's mouth turned up in a weary way. He followed her to the door. They paused in the vestibule. "Take care of yourself, cousin," he said. "Do not allow the Terran to discompose you."

"I could say the same to you," she said. "Though I think you have the easier mission: Jim Kirk is easy to understand."

"You think so? I do not. Today, for instance—quite bewildering. I have never seen him react that way before."

Sherron raised an eyebrow at him. "That, Spock, was your boy being serious. For just a moment, between the jests and the false flirtation with me."

Jim's flirtation with her did not seem all that false, but Spock did not press the matter. "Why is he so anxious?"

"He fears you are not serious. But you are, aren't you? You should make it clear to him."

Spock looked at her. "You often take his part. Why is that?"

Sherron reached up, adjusting the collar of his robe, smoothing her firm, warm hands over the silk. "I am taking your part," she said. "He is what you need, the one you have chosen. I will support anything that can see you through the Fever safe and sound. Though Jim is charming. Almost too pretty, but I know you like them so. I am not at all surprised that you are besotted."

"I am not besotted. Or if I am, it is the infatuation of the Fever." Spock paused. "I still do not feel as if I know him."

"You will. When plak tow begins, you will see him for what he really is. And he will see you. Subterfuge is impossible at such a time. Was it not so with Stonn?"

Spock nodded slowly. It took him a moment to gather courage for what he wanted to ask next. A question he had been asking for fifteen years. "Was it so with Varek? Did you see him?"

Sherron took a breath. "Yes. His brilliance and his madness, one that went beyond pon farr. His mortal weakness."

"Yet you married him. When Samar would have taken you back, forgiven everything."

"At a price: never seeing Varek again, never speaking of what had happened. And the abortion, of course. I would not pay it."
Spock did not proclaim what Sherron already knew. Given the seriousness of the insult, Samar's price had been quite low. He could have challenged Varek, and he almost certainly would have won the contest, his former friend's blood leaching into the sands of Vulcan's Forge. But there had been no duel. There was not even a formal break between the two clans. Sarek was ever a master negotiator, and Samar's great-grandfather needed support for his tax reform bill. Perhaps that was the real reason the duel was not allowed to take place. It would not be the first time that honor was sacrificed to political expediency.

Samar did not challenge Varek, even after Sherron refused his reasonable proposal. But he did find a kind of satisfaction, the cold peace of pure logic. An unfortunate loss for his clan, the only son of that generation quitting a promising career in medicine for the bare stone of a monk's cell. There would be no more of his line: Acolytes of Kolinahr do not mate. Pon farr is no longer a concern for males, the psychic discipline of pure logic as effective a cure as physical castration.

"Have you ever seen him?" Spock asked. "Samar."

"Once. For years he would not see me, but after Varek's death, he allowed it." Sherron paused a moment. "Samar feels no hatred for me now. He feels nothing. That empathy he had for others, which would have made him such a brilliant physician: gone. The sardonic tongue that amused us so many times: silenced. His anger, his sorrow, his passion, all frozen beneath the straits of Kolinahr. Many would admire such control. I do not."

"Whatever he is now, it is not your fault. He made his own choices."

"As did I. Don't you see? For years before Brothers' Rock, I knew I did not care for Samar as I should. I liked him, I admired him, how could I do otherwise? He was everything I should have desired in a husband. The match was so politically beneficial for both of our clans. But from the time I was seven, there was only ever Varek. It was the same for him. A jest of the gods, that we met not a month after I was bound to Samar. But for eight years, we saw only each other."

Sherron took another breath, her words quickening. "If we had been honest about how we felt, had I found the courage to tell Sarek that I did not want to marry Samar, perhaps things could have been different. If Varek and I had come together in an honorable way, if there had been no sudden betrayal, no violence, all would have been well. His weakness would have been there, but my strength could have sustained him, healed him. He would not have destroyed himself." She sighed. "Samar would not have committed his own, more rational self-negation."

Sherron stopped, fixing Spock with her bottomless eyes. "In truth, Samar could not have offered terms I would have accepted. After I returned from the desert, I saw matters in a new light. My regret is that I did not see it sooner. Which is why I want you to be honest. About who it is you really want. How much you want him."

"I do not understand."

"Have you considered why Stonn is not here now? He would come in an instant if you asked. But you do not ask."

"I fear he would take unfair advantage. He might use our renewed bond to convince me to return to Vulcan. He would have me undo all that I have achieved here."

She shook her head. "You have been friends since you were boys. Do you really think he would do that? I have no very high opinion of him, but I do not believe it. Even if he did try, are you so weak? We know better."
Spock shifted impatiently. "Say what you wish to say to me, Sherron. The day wears on."

"I say this: A true bondmate is not necessarily the one Sarek approves. Not the best-mannered or the best born, not the strongest or even the sanest. There may be parts of him that chill your soul. But it does not matter. When you see the One, all others become shadows."

She leaned so close, her lips brushed his ear. "When you first tasted Jim Kirk, when you felt his flesh touch yours, was it not the best moment of your life? The moment you felt all the longings sated, all regrets gone, all rivals replaced? From the time your eyes first met, did you not know? You would do anything to have him. Blood, tears, betrayal—no matter. He is yours."

The door opened. She stepped backwards into the hallway. "Think of that as the day wears on."

Spock was still staring at her when the door closed.
Chapter 23

xxiii. Spock

He did not think about it, of course. Illogical, to dwell on such a thing. He spent the afternoon and evening grading mid-terms, stopping only when Jim called to say he would arrive in half an hour. Preparing himself to go out did not take long, and Jim arrived promptly at 21:00. Spock inquired as to their destination, but Jim only smiled and lead him down to a waiting minicab. The drive to their destination was pleasant: Jim appeared to be in a fine mood, bright-eyed and gregarious. He kept up a steady stream of chatter until the vehicle braked to a halt.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Spock said, peering out from the cab window. They were in a part of town with which he was unfamiliar, a seedy industrial section by the waterfront. The cab had stopped at the end of a narrow road in front of a chainlink fence, beyond which lay large, dilapidated warehouses with dark windows.

"Scared?" Jim said, giving him a puckish look. "Don't worry. I'll protect you." He stepped out of the cab. Spock, not bothering to dignify the remark, followed. He reached into the pocket of his tunic for his wallet, but Jim put a hand on his sleeve. "Nope. Tonight's on me. I invited you."

Spock had to admit the justice of this, and he allowed Jim to pay the driver while he took a better look at their surroundings. His eyes lit on one large building in the center, cleaner than the rest, with a few of its windows illuminated. Suddenly, he recognized the place but was not surprised that it had taken him so long. He had not been here for a long time, and then it was during the day and under very different circumstances.

"This is the Orion Embassy complex."

Jim stepped back as the cab pulled away. "Looks like something out of a scary movie, doesn't it? First time I came here, I thought my date was going to serial murder me. Turned out he just wanted a homecooked meal. His aunt manages the place. The club, I mean, not the Embassy."

"They have a nightclub on premises?"

"Sure, why not? You Vulcans have a five-star restaurant."

"Charis isn't part of the Embassy. Technically."

"The club is, definitely. It's not even open to the public. You gotta know somebody."

"Who do you know?"

"Everybody," Jim said. He took a keycard from his wallet and swiped the pad at the gate. It opened, and he and headed up the gravel path that curved beyond, gesturing at Spock to follow. "Weird, isn't it? You'd think the Orions would want something on Embassy Row," he said as they walked. "But we are talking about a piracy-based culture. They like being on their own."

Spock had heard a number of stories, many of them from his father, about the strange and shady affairs of Orions. While not as sharp-dealing as, say, Ferengi, popular wisdom said it was wise to keep one eye on your wallet and the other on an Orion's weaponhand when doing business with him. These were, after all, pirates. "No doubt they find the location very discreet," Spock said.

"That's what you're into, right?" Jim said. "Discretion." His face was suddenly too serious, and
Spock felt a knife-flick of emotion, one not belonging to himself: Worry? Anger? It was gone before he could make it out. Nothing positive, at any rate.

He put a hand on Jim's shoulder. "I am glad we have this time together tonight," he said. "Though I admit that this isn't the venue I would have chosen."

Jim's face went from serious to sly. "You haven't seen it yet. Don't judge a book by its cover."

By this time they had reached one of the smaller outbuildings in the complex, though it was still easily the size of an Academy lecture hall. The building appeared quite deserted—whatever was going on inside, it was hidden quite well. The windows were covered by heavy blackout drapes. Even straining his sensitive ears, he could only detect the slightest noise coming from inside, a faint thrum like the sound of distant thunder.

Jim walked up to the blank metal door. He gave a peculiar knock. Suddenly, the top half of the door became transparent. A hulking figure with a stony green face appeared beyond it. The face considered Jim for half a second, then broke into a sharp-toothed smile.

"Jeeemy!" The name was followed by a liquid babble of sound: Orion Prime, likely, though Spock was not familiar with it. The language was notoriously difficult, in the range of Old High Vulcan, and there was no motivation to learn it unless one were entering the diplomatic field.

So he was more than a little surprised when Jim answered the man back in his own tongue. The dialogue continued a moment more, and then the door whooshed open. They stepped into a large, dimly lit vestibule with high ceilings. The thrumming sound was more insistent now.

"Lukan, this is my friend Spock," Jim said to the doorman. "He's cool, okay?" Jim followed this with another few sentences in Orion Prime. The doorman looked at Spock with a bemused expression, crossing his arms over his barrel-like bare chest. Purple silk shorts and silver wrist cuffs were his only garments. Even his feet were bare, like a child's. Or a slave's.

"Lukan not often hear Vulcan called so. Cold, yes. Cool, no," he said in thickly accented Standard. He babbled more to Jim, who laughed and babbled back.

Spock raised an eyebrow at them. It was really too rude, speaking Orion Prime in front of one who was unfamiliar with the speech. Some of his dissatisfaction must have shown in his face, for Jim sobered. "Sorry, man. Lukan was saying that you're not the first Vulcan they've seen here—or the handsomest. I told him I begged to differ."

Spock felt oddly gratified by this, but before he could think of a suitable response, the doorman grabbed Spock's wrist—the man's energies hot even by Vulcan standards, and wild—and placed a large iridescent stamp in unfamiliar letters on Spock's hand.

"There," Lukan said, patting Spock's hand with his huge paw. "Now nobody think little Vulcan get lost and come to club by mistake." He laughed again, the deep sound booming off the metal walls. He grabbed Jim's hand and stamped it. "Everybody here know Jeemy," he said to him. "But Lukan stamp anyway." He gave Jim a friendly pat. Not on his hand.

Jim rolled his eyes, grinning. "Any excuse for a grope, huh, Luke?"

"Lukan need no excuse." His thick fingers wandered downwards again. Spock caught his breath. Though the Orion doorman was no longer touching him, Spock could feel those wild energies still, burning in his chest like white-hot coals. He had not moved or said a word, but Jim's head suddenly whipped around. He stared at Spock, his brow wrinkling.
"Ah!" Lukan exclaimed. "Vulcan not so cold as everybody say. Not cold about Jeemy, anyway. But what would Raymon say? Poor boy! Ha!"

"Who is Raymon?" Spock asked, but the doorman just laughed again.

"We gotta go, Lukan. Give my best to the wife," Jim said, taking Spock by the arm and pulling him towards a narrow hallway. Lukan gave him a wink and turned back to his computer screen.

"That creature is married? He did not behave so," Spock said as they exited the hall into another antechamber. "Pawing at you like that."

"Are you kidding? His wife's worse than he is." Jim said. "Don't even get me started about the two of them together—" He stopped. "Wait. Let's check our coats. It's gonna be sweltering in there." He shrugged off his own garment and handed it to the android standing behind the desk.

Spock began to do the same but stopped short when he saw what Jim was wearing under his long woolen overcoat. A sleeveless shirt composed of a pale grey mesh, so sheer as to nearly negate its purpose as a covering garment. It was worn over low-waisted trousers in a dark grey leather-like material, with an iridescent sheen. The trousers were as tight as they were shiny: You could see every muscle in Jim's thighs. You could see everything.

"You like?" Jim said, posing a little.

Spock did like. But not for here. "It's rather revealing, don't you think?"

"Did you get a look at Lukan? By Orion standards, I'm overdressed." He looked at Spock's long-sleeved tunic and tailored trousers. "You may as well have shown up wearing a burka. Guess I should've warned you, but I wanted it to be a surprise."

"I am, indeed, surprised," Spock said tonelessly. He looked at the wide double doors that must be the real entrance to the club. The thunderous music had grown steadily louder, not a distant storm now but one directly overhead, raining down unknown amounts of chaos and destruction. "I don't see why we couldn't have simply taken supper in my rooms," he said.

"Because that's not a date, that's room service," Jim answered. "Don't you date on Vulcan? You've got a boyfriend, don't you?" Before Spock could reply: "That's right," Jim went on. "You have a girlfriend. Don't know how I got that mixed up."

He gazed at Spock a second longer, his blue eyes gone black in the dimness of the antechamber. Then he shrugged, smiled. "Look, give me an hour. If you really hate it, we'll go. Head back to your place and screw each others' brains out like we have all week. Discreet as you please." He took Spock's hand, and though his smile was steady, his eyes remained serious, circled. During the cab ride over, Jim had mentioned taking a nap today, but he still looked tired and tense.

"Jim," Spock said, drawing a slow, assessing thumb over Jim's wrist. "What is the matter?"

"It's been a long week. I want to have a drink and listen to some music. It's not complicated."

Spock suspected that it was more complicated than Jim was letting on. But he was fast learning that the cadet, though quite open in some ways, was as stubborn as a Vulcan about admitting to negative emotions. And though Spock's touch on Jim's pulse told him that there were negative emotions involved, most definitely, it did not reveal more than that. He would have to watch and wait, and see if Jim revealed more in an unguarded moment. Alcohol and a casual atmosphere would no doubt aid in the process.
"Very well," he said. "One hour." He handed his coat to the android, who spit out a ticket and whirled towards the back room.

"Cool," Jim said. "While were on the subject, be cool, huh? I guess you haven't spent much time around Orions, but they're kind of touchy-feely. I doubt they'll grope you: Everybody knows how Vulcans are, and you're a stranger. But they know me, which makes me fair game. They don't mean anything by it, nobody takes it seriously." Jim paused. "Well, a few of them do, under the right circumstances. But nobody who's here tonight. Just—don't get mad, okay?"

"I am not in the habit of doing so."

"I mean, don't look at them how you were looking at Lukan when he grabbed my ass. Some of them might take it the wrong way. Lukan didn't, but he's married and, like, fifty. Nothing bugs him anymore. But a lot of the younger single males are hot-headed. Eye-fuck one of them, and it could be a problem."

Wonderful: a noisy, crowded bar full of half-naked, ill-tempered strangers molesting Jim Kirk. Spock raised an eyebrow at him. "Explain to me again why we are here?"

"To have fun!" Jim said. "Come on. Whatever you're expecting, you're about to be surprised."

He opened one of the doors, and the chaos thundered over them.

Seventeen. That is how many Orions felt the need to "greet" Jim Kirk on his way through the club. These greetings varied from the acceptable (a simple hand-clasp) to the questionable (a lingering kiss on the mouth) to the intolerable (another grasp of Jim's posterior, which was disconcerting enough, but when the creature began unzipping Jim's trousers, Spock nearly acted. But Jim jumped nimbly back and kept pulling Spock through the crush of feverish bodies.

Had the crowd not been quite so unruly, the space would have been impressive. What must have once been a warehouse had been fitted up like a pirate's den from an old Terran folktale. Rich, if slightly tattered, hangings of gold, green, and purple swathed the high ceilings. The cinderblock walls had been painted but were hung with so many tapestries and pictures that it was difficult to see their color. The cement floors were scattered with carpets, except for the center of the big space, which was left bare for dancing. Here, the floors lit up in flashing neon squares of color. The lighting was dim but rich, a deep amber glow that was flattering to most of the patrons of the club, whose complexions comprised all shades of green: jade, olive, lime, emerald. Green that was almost black, green tinged with yellow, green shading to blue.

Though Orions are not much more numerous on Terra than Vulcans, the nightclub was quite crowded. Scores of lithe, scantily clad persons were drinking, gambling, dancing, and, in the dimmer corners of the room, engaging in activities Spock quickly looked away from, though he doubted the parties involved cared whether they were observed or not. The level of pheromones in the air was enough to make one dizzy. Spock pulled his mental shields more tightly around himself. Usually, the Disciplines made Vulcans nearly immune to the effects of close contact with Orions. But his current condition had left him—not vulnerable, but conscious. More conscious than he would otherwise have been.

"You okay?" Jim asked at one point. "You look a little—" he stopped, shrugging.

"I am well," Spock said. They were standing nose-to-nose, almost shouting in each other's ears. There was no other way to be heard over the music. "It is very loud in here," Spock went on. "The air is—close."
"Isn't it great?" Jim said, grinning and looking around. "These people know how to party."

"I would like to sit down," Spock said.

"Oh. Sure." Jim motioned him towards a metal staircase leading to the second level. At the top, Spock saw that there were booths and tables scattered around and servers circulating. The air was heavy, but with the smell of food, not sex. There must have been sound dampeners, because even the music was dimmed to a tolerable level. Spock felt a breath of relief escape him.

"Jeemy!" the hostess shrieked, bouncing over. Literally: Her uniform was little more than strategically placed bits of gauze, held together by a few pins and a great deal of optimism. She wound her plump, gold-braceleted arms around Jim, pressing considerable cleavage against him.

"Hey, Jena," Jim said. "Find us a decent table, will you?"

She pulled back, pouting artfully. "So long Jeemy has not been here, and that is all he say? Get us decent table, Jena. Cruel! It is what he is. Horribly cold and cruel. What Jena's mother say about Terrans is true." She batted absurdly long lashes at him.

Jim took a breath. "Jena, love of my life. My days have been a barren desert without you. At night, I dream only of —" he broke into Orion Prime. And though it sounded exactly like the same nonsensical babble he’d used with the other natives, after a sentence or two the waitress’s cheeks went a deep yellow. Judging by the what one could see under the gauze covering her cleavage, that was not the only part of her affected. Spock looked away.

She cooed something back at Jim. He blinked at her, pupils dilating. Then his eyes cut to Spock. "Maybe some other night. I'm here with somebody."

She noticed Spock for the first time. She gave him an assessing glance that was accompanied by a burst of pheromones that made his nostrils flare.

"Bring this one," she said. "The Vulcan make excellent lover. Jena can tell."

Spock stared at her. Jim opened his mouth, then closed it again. "We need to eat," he said.

"Of course. Jena would not have these ones perish of hunger. Jeemy and his Vulcan would be no good to anybody then."

Hips twitching pertly, she led them to a circular banquette in the corner. It was upholstered in deep green velvet, with sides so high as to almost make a separate room. Before Jim sat down, he gave the hostess a slap on the bottom. "Thanks, sweetheart."

She giggled. "Jeemy can thank Jena later," she said, and bounced away.

He sat down and opened a menu. "You can stop staring holes through me any old time," he said. "That was manners. This is a really good table."

"Are you actually attracted to that creature?"

"She's cute. Stacked. What's the matter, don't you like redheads?"

"Not particularly."

"Too bad. I took Bones here once, and he nearly came in his pants over her. Of course she was sitting on his lap at the time. She was kind of upset when he didn't come, actually. I told him it would
only be polite, but he said his good manners didn't extend that far."

"How do you know so much about Orion culture?" Spock said, hoping to steer the conversation toward more elevated ground.

"I've liked it since I was a kid. They have incredible literature."

"Pornography, you mean."

"Pornography can be literature. Ever read Catullus or Sade? Hell, Anne Rice? I mean, Belinda is sort of stupid, but Exit to Eden? Unbelievable." Seeing Spock frown: "You're telling me that Vulcans don't make porn. No novels, no videos, not even some erotic verse? I can't believe any race is as logical as that."

"No," Spock said. "Not since ancient times." They did not need to. Romulan pornography was quite good enough. The bodies were, after all, much the same. The Romulan Empire, ever with an eye towards its revenue streams, produced quite a bit with the Vulcan market in mind: less carnage, more character development. They never publicized the stories as such, of course, and the Vulcan High Council never tried to restrict the import of the discreetly packaged novels and films. For all of their disparities, the two races understood each other very well.

"Well, we're not on Vulcan now," Jim said. "I get that this is outside of your comfort zone. But the food here is really good, and the people are nice. Just . . . go with it."

"I will," Spock glanced at his watch, "for thirty-nine minutes."

"We'd better hurry up and order then," Jim sighed.

Spock looked at his menu and recognized nothing. "You may order for me."

"I can do that. Lucky for you, most of Orion Tertius is vegetarian. Lucky for me, Orion Sextus isn't." Jim studied the menu for a few moments and then pressed a button on the table.

Spock was expecting Jena again, but apparently her duties extended only to hostessing—and all that implied. Another female approached their table. She was tall and well-formed, with large, wide-set dark eyes and high cheekbones. Her hair, thick and a rich brown, hung halfway down her back and was cut in bangs across her forehead. Her skin was a delicate color, almost white, tinged with green only at her fingertips, her lips, and other extremities. One could almost have mistaken it for Vulcan. Like a Vulcan, she did not bounce, she glided. Even the skimpy uniform attained some measure of elegance on her graceful proportions.

"Jim," she said. "It is so good to see you." Her vowels were more rounded than was strictly correct, but she did not speak in the ridiculous patois of the doorman or the hostess.

Jim reached up, grabbed her hand, and kissed it. "Sarra," he said. "Gorgeous as always."

"As are you, Jim. And you have brought a friend! How lovely." She gave Spock a close look, but the expected pheromone burst was light, as sweet and winsome as an expensive perfume.

"This is Spock," Jim said. "Be nice to him." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "First timer."

"I will do everything in my power to see that he is well-served," Sarra said. The words should have been suggestive—they were. But not in an offensive way. Spock was not offended. There was no reason, she was perfectly polite. Charming, even, if one were disposed to notice such things. Charming and very well-formed.
He looked away from her to notice Jim watching him. "See something you like, Spock?" he said.

Spock folded his menu with a decided air. "I said that you could order for me."

"Just remember, we don't have to stick to the menu." Jim glanced up at Sarra. "Do we, honey?"

Sarra looked at Spock with bottomless dark eyes. "You may have whatever you like," she said.

Spock breathed. "I would like a drink."

"That's a good idea. For starters," Jim said. He opened the menu and ordered, speaking in rapid Orion Prime. Sarra nodded intelligently, making what seemed to be several suggestions. Then she glided away, apparently having memorized their entire order. Impressive.

"She seems very well trained," Spock remarked after a moment of silence.

"You have no idea."

"I do. These women are prostitutes. I am conscious but not curious. Is that clear?"

"Well, technically, all Orion service workers are prostitutes. It just depends on what level of service you're willing to pay for," Jim said. "Not just the girls, either. We could have a busboy or a bouncer if we wanted one. Hell, even Lukan probably sold it back in the day. It's a cultural norm where they're from. Infinite diversity, infinite combinations: You've taken the seminars."

"Yes, and I respect their ways. But I do not intend to partake of them." Spock looked at Jim. "You do remember that prostitution is illegal in California outside of the designated areas."

"We're not in California right now. Officially, this is Orion soil." Jim shrugged. "Anyway, I wasn't suggesting we pay for it. I never have."

"Yet you've obviously sampled the wares."

"Guess I'm just that fucking charming." Jim looked over his shoulder. "Drinks are here."

"Your appetizers will be out presently," Sarra said to them before sashaying away.

With some slight effort, Spock resisted looking after her. Instead he looked down at the tall concoction in front of him. It was bright purple with slices of strange fruits floating in it. He smelled the stuff and was hit by a chemical surge so intense that he shuddered. "Pheromone-laced beverages are illegal on Terra," he rasped.

"We're not on Terra," Jim repeated patiently. "They won't hurt you, not at the percentage I ordered. Hell, compared with k'vass this stuff is grape soda."

Spock regarded his drink balefully. "If you can't handle it, I'll get you tea or some water," Jim said. "No big deal."

"That is not necessary." Preposterous, assuming that his system couldn't handle something which Jim imbibed easily. Even in Spock's present state, he had better control than any Terran.

Jim held up his glass. "Sláinte," he said, clicking Spock's.

"Indeed," Spock said, and took a long draft. Jim was right: It went down as well as fruit juice, though still with that slight chemical charge. The pheromone drinks debate had been a cause célèbre on the nets last year, just before the drinks were outlawed. The articles had made them sound quite
dangerous, but obviously this was an exaggeration. Spock took another swallow.

"Good?" Jim asked.

"Satisfactory. I do not understand what all the fuss was about. These are quite tame."

"You know how the nets are. They blow everything out of proportion."

Sarra returned to the table carrying two steaming trays. As she bent down to place them, Spock was afforded a rather spectacular view of her breasts, right down to large, pert, greenish nipples. He did not look away. She smiled at him, and he found himself smiling back.

"Would you like anything else?" she said. She smelled very good, he was noticing this as if for the first time. Like a rose, white and blooming, a sweetness that was almost too much to bear. The only thing sweeter would be to touch it—them, to bury your face in softness.

Jim tilted his head at Sarra. "We're good, but stay close, okay? We have to eat fast." He looked at Spock. "We've only got, what, thirty minutes left?"

"Thirty-one. But perhaps we could stay awhile," Spock said, still gazing at Sarra. "It would be unhealthful to eat too fast."

"Most unhealthful," Sarra repeated, looking at him as if he were the wisest being she had ever beheld. Really, such an intelligent girl.

"Great," Jim said. He tapped the side of Spock's glass, making it ring like a bell. "Drink up."

"I was here once before," Spock said, sometime later.

"Bullshit," Jim said. "Here?"

"Not precisely here. I was at the central Embassy building for a reception. Orion was officially entering the Federation after years of negotiation. It was a very sumptuous affair. Father was no longer ambassador at that point, but he attended as a representative of the Vulcan High Council. Mother and I accompanied him. It was a mistake. They had a serious disagreement after."

"I didn't know Vulcan married couples could fight."

"My mother is not Vulcan. In any event, no vases were thrown. But it was an extremely intense discussion. She had taken offense at the Orion ambassador's hospitality."

"Do I even have to guess? They offered her and your dad one of the servant boys or girls."

"Yes, but this did not concern her. My mother had been the wife of a Federation diplomat for some time. She was aware of the cultural differences. No, she was upset by the ambassador's hospitality being extended to myself." Spock paused. "I was twelve Standard years of age."

"The age of consent in the Orion system is twelve. But then, they reach puberty at eight. The Orion ambassador was trying to be gracious."

"My mother was not gratified. I was twelve."

"You're not twelve anymore," Jim said. "Your mom's not here."

Spock reclined against the plush green velvet of the booth. "No."
He closed his eyes a moment, taking stock of his own sensations. He was no longer hungry: Though very different from Vulcan cuisine, the food of Orion Tertius was quite enjoyable, and Jim had ordered a lot of it. The drinks were more than enjoyable. His nerves buzzed pleasantly with the effects of several large pheromone cocktails (Three? Four? His memory was failing him.) Not the hard buzz of liquor, this was softer, sweeter, a golden tide of sensation coursing through his veins. He was very warm but not uncomfortably so, perhaps because he had removed his tunic, and his upper half was clad only in the short-sleeved knit shirt he'd been wearing under it. The smooth fabric of the shirt felt good against his skin. It had never felt so good before, rubbing gently at his tingling flesh, teasing softly. Just like the girl now clapping his right thigh.

Sarra and Jena had joined them some time ago, towards the end of the feast. It had seemed rude not to invite them after they had provided such excellent service this evening. Jena was sitting on Jim's lap, intermittently cooing in his ear. Spock had no idea what she was saying (or what her hand, obscured by the tabletop, was doing), but Jim's face had gone bright pink. Sarra was making no such bold movements. Her fingers, mere millimeters above Spock's knee, were light. A touch that could be noticed or not, advanced or not, as he pleased. Such a gracious invitation, so subtle. Spock appreciated it, even if he had no intention of letting matters go further. That he had allowed them to go this far, well, it was only polite. She was a most attentive server.

Really, this place did improve upon deeper acquaintance.

"What do they call it?" he said, still not opening his eyes. And though his question was not precise, Jim understood. They were very much in tune at present. He could feel Jim's arousal through the bond—Spock could almost feel the warm and fleshly Jena, wriggling and babbling on his lap.

"Unpronounceable, if you don't speak Orion Prime," Jim said, a bit breathlessly. "'Heaven' is the closest Standard equivalent. Wait, that's not right—'Nirvana,' maybe. But the Orion idea of bliss is different from a Terran Buddhist's. An afterlife where every carnal desire is gratified instantly, every need satisfied. Dancing, drinking, eating, laughing, fucking—forever and ever. You never feel guilty, you never think about it. You never think about anything. You just feel."

"That does not sound like Heaven. That sounds like Hell."

"I dunno. Seems pretty good to me."

"No thinking. How torturous."

"That how you feel right now, Spock? Tortured?"

"No, but—"

"Shit! Jena!" Jim had raised his voice, but he did not sound angry. Spock felt a burst of heat through the bond that made him open his eyes.

Jena had grabbed a fistful of Jim's shirt in one plump little paw, her other hand still working under the table as she kissed him fiercely. Her plump thighs straddled him, one of his hands grasping her round bottom while she pressed him into the velvet of the booth.

"Jena is very enthusiastic," Sarra said in his ear.

"Indeed," Spock said.

"Do you enjoy it?" Sarra said. "Enthusiasm."

"Sometimes," Spock said. "Never in such public circumstances."
Sarra turned her long white neck. "Beyond those doors there is all the privacy that you could require. My room is not large, but it is comfortable." Her fingers went slowly higher, the touch growing firmer, more purposeful.

"Comfortable is—good." A pitifully obvious statement, but he could not do better. His mind was hazy, thoughts as fleeting as figures in a sandstorm. Perhaps it was the heat. He was very warm, suddenly, Sarra's now-insistent grasp raising his temperature more.

"Come with me," she whispered.

"I do not know—I—I need to think."

She turned her face to his. Hers was like a flower, glowing in the golden light. A rose aflame. "Do not think," she said. "Do."

"What?" Spock asked, rather desperately. "What shall I do?"

Sarra gazed at him with eyes like endless night. "Anything you want. No guilt, no regrets. Nothing is forbidden here."

Spock looked at Jim, entangled with Jena. The hostess was entirely naked now; Jim was no longer wearing his shirt. Their hands greedy on each other's flesh, rose-pink and lime-green. The sight should have disturbed him, but it did not. He did not look away. He did not wish to.

"We shall bring them with us," Sarra said. "I can taste your desire for him." She nipped at the point of his ear, and Spock tore fingernails into plush velvet. "The four of us together, consider the possibilities."

Spock saw them as clear as memory, these possibilities. Vividly as if he were looking back upon something that had already taken place, he saw the four of them in a dim and comfortable space, doing—whatever they wanted. Limbs of several shades tangling together, cries in three different languages. No notion or position off-limits, nothing forbidden. He could take them, all of them.

He felt it welling up within himself, a desire, not just for sex, for possession. Hot as the sands of Vulcan's Forge, wild as the battle cry of an ancient warlord, sweet as the taste of blood—flesh. He could have it, all of it, right now.

"Spock?"

He looked at Jim, who had stopped his explorations of Jena's ample form and was staring at him. His face was as red as T'Khut's. "Do you want to—" do this, all of this, right now. He could hear Jim's unspoken words, clearly as if Jim had shouted: Whatever you want, Spock. I'm yours.

He opened his mouth to speak. He did not need to say it, he could have stood without a word and the others would have followed. But he felt he should say it, a moment like this deserved speech. The word was on the tip of his tongue, three small letters in Standard, an easy syllable—

"Jimmy Kirk and company. Having fun, are we?"

Spock, already tensed to stand, made himself sit back in the booth. The strange voice was like a shock of cold water. He stared at the strange figure standing in front of them.

The creature was easily twelve centimeters taller than most Orion males, who were already larger than the average Vulcan or Terran. His shoulders were proportionally broad, the muscles of his torso as carved as the bark of a great tree. He was bare-chested except for criss-crossing straps cut from the
hide of some exotic animal, the trophy iridescent rainbow colors—deep pink, rich purple, dark blue. His trousers were made of the same stuff, cut low over his hips and as tightly fitted as Jim Kirk's. (Jim's, however, lacked the jutting, ornamented codpiece.) There were many scars on the Orion's gleaming jade-green skin: blade marks crisscrossing his arms, what looked like a whip mark on his right shoulder, a jagged slash on his left cheek which only slightly marred the chiseled planes of his face. The light reflected on his perfectly rounded, bald head. A colorful, ferocious-looking being, his bearing and dress proclaiming his profession as unmistakably as Sarra and Jena's proclaimed theirs. This man was a gladiator, and going by the many medals attached to his chest straps, a highly successful one.

"Raymon," Jim said. "What a surprise."

"I just got in this evening. It's been too long since I visited Terra. How long has it been?"

"Eight months? Nine, maybe."

"As long as that? And no welcoming hug?"

Jim detached himself from Jena and stood up. He had not taken a step before he was swept up in a breathless embrace, while big green hands explored his body like they owned it. Spock tensed to stand and felt Sarra's hand upon his thigh, the touch not seducing now, but warning. He found her gaze, and she gave the faintest shake of her head.

Raymon finally released his hold. "You're looking well," he said. "Bit tired, perhaps. They're working you too hard at that academy of yours."

Jim took a lung-filling breath. "It's kind of the point."

"Bah! You should give it up. Come on tour with me. I'll look after you."

"Thanks. But I like school."

"Why, for fuck's sake? Nobody ever learned anything worth knowing in a bloody lecture hall."

"Maybe you haven't had the right teachers."

"I thrashed my last teacher within an inch of his life. Useless cunts, all of 'em. You really must come with me. But we'll talk about it later." Raymon smiled at Jim with too many teeth. "You know how persuasive I am."

"I remember," Jim said.

"First, let's have a drink." Raymon's expression sharpened. He snapped his fingers at the two girls, speaking harshly in Orion Prime.

The girls got up and left the booth, Jena gathering strips of uniform as she pushed past Jim and scurried away. Sarra went with more grace, pausing only for a moment to give Spock a final, regretful glance. The warmth of her body was gone, but Spock did not feel cold. Heat was still coursing through his body, though the feeling was not so pleasurable now: the smoldering fires of frustration. Spock called on the remains of his control and forced himself to be still, silent.

"We were kind of in the middle of something, Ray," Jim said, sitting down and sliding nearer to Spock in the booth.

"Jena will happily suck your cock at any time, Jimmy. If we want them back later, we'll call for
them." The gladiator smirked. "That Sarra is a cunning one, isn't she? Looks like a princess but fucks like a slave. I think I'll have her again after I've had my drink." He sat too, sliding up close on Jim's other side.

"I didn't know you were on-planet," Jim said. "Last I heard, you were doing exhibitions on one of the Klingon home worlds."

"Aye, I was. Nearly died of boredom—no nightlife at all. There are pubs and things, but why bother? The people are ugly as sin and boring as hell. Fearsome fighters, though, and the money is excellent. I got fearfully rich, but wasn't I tense after? Had to spend a month on Antares IV just to work out the kinks. That's nightlife: a brothel on every corner, and the boys are as pretty as the girls. Well-trained, too, nearly as good as Orion—where the fuck is Sarra with my drink?"

"I'm here, Sir," she said, appearing with a tray. "Apologies, the replicator was out of mangos."

"I don't give a fuck, darling. Next time you make me sit here thirsty, I'm going to turn you over my knee and spank you." He snaked an arm around her slender waist. "But I suppose you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, Sir," she said dutifully. "A little more enthusiasm than that, my girl!" he said, shoving her off. "Or I'll tell my Auntie Geida to send you to one of the Syndicate outposts. Once you've sucked a few hundred filthy pirate cocks, perhaps you'll appreciate a civilized man."

Two yellow spots burned on Sarra's cheekbones. "Apologies, Sir. I was unforgivably rude."

Spock saw Jim's eyes cut to him, a warning flash in their blue depths, then away. He turned back to the gladiator. "Come on, Ray," he said. "Don't be a dick."

"Just making a point," Raymon said. "Fuck off, darling," he said to Sarra. "But don't take that lovely ass of yours very far. I'm going to want it later." He gave her a smack on the body part in question, one a bit too hard for manners. Wincing but graceful, she straightened her uniform and hurried away.

"One of those girls is gonna poison your drink," Jim said.

"It's clear I've taught you nothing about Orion pussy. If you don't show them you're the boss, they dry up like an old sock. Bit of fear makes 'em as wet as the rainy season on Sextus." He shrugged. "Won't waste that one on an outpost, anyhow. We only send slags to the pirates."

"I'm sure the girls love that."

"Do I care? The one thing more pointless than an ugly woman is a cowardly man." Raymon suddenly turned his head, staring at Spock. "Unless you want to show me how brave you are, my pointy-eared friend, you need to stop looking at me like that. Right fucking now."

"Dude, chill out," Jim said. "This is Spock. He's cool."

"The only cool Vulcanoid is a Romulan. The rest are spineless little snots, munching on leaves and whinging about peace and logic. Wouldn't say 'shit' if you shoved their faces in a pile of it. Totally fucking gutless."

"Shut up, Raymon," Jim said. "I mean it."

"What are you going to do, Jimmy, defend his honor? You know I could break you in half before
you threw the first punch. But that's quite sweet, you trying to protect him, knowing I've got twenty centimeters and two gravity differentials on you. It's why I like you so much: You've got a lot of bloody heart for a wee Terran, and you're a magnificent fuck—better than Sarra. But I suppose that means you're fucking this one, eh? Don't know why, everybody knows the only thing Vulcans are more rubbish at than war is sex. Isn't that right, Spock?"

Spock felt Jim's fingers on his wrist, gripping tight. Jim couldn't project words to him yet, not really, but Spock could almost hear them anyway: Be cool, Spock. Please be cool.

"You don't know a goddamn thing about Vulcans," Jim said to the gladiator. "Guess you should have stayed in school." He stood. "We're going. It's getting late."

Raymon took Jim by the shoulder and shoved him back down, hard. Spock looked at Raymon, and the gladiator was greener than before. But perhaps that was the air around him. Suddenly, everything was going green.

"Sit down," Raymon said to Jim. "I haven't seen you in months, and you're going to give me the air for this cock? I think not." He looked at Spock. "Get the fuck out of here before I have your balls for bootrags. But Jim is staying with me. His sweet little ass is mine. Savvy?"

"Is that a challenge?" Spock said. The words came slowly. Speech was difficult just at present. The words were getting lost inside his head, swallowed by the heat and a thunderous noise—the voices of the thousand warlords of Spock's ancient house, howling for blood.

Raymon laughed. "You're going to fight me? Are you joking?"

"I'm quite serious," Spock said, standing. "You mannerless piece of shit." A flick of his hand and the heavy wood table went flying: glasses, plates, and cutlery crashing to the hard cement.

Raymon scarcely had time to blink in surprise before the first blow landed. A gout of yellow Orion blood gushed from the gladiator's nose. Deep inside, Spock heard the warlords howl in satisfaction. But it was not enough. Not nearly.

"Spock, Jesus Christ—" But Jim's voice was coming from far away, his face lost in the clouds of green gathering in the air. But Spock could still see the gladiator rising, his features dark with rage beneath their bloody mask.

"I'm going to rip you apart," Raymon growled. "I'm going to enjoy it."

Spock went into defensive stance. The same one he had practiced a thousand times, standing on the burning sands of Vulcan. He could feel the merciless sun beating down on him, his nostrils flaring at the smell of rage, sweat, blood. The smell of battle.

"Come at me." Spock beckoned to his opponent as he had been taught. "See what happens."

More words from Jim, from his opponent, but Spock did not hear. The clouds enveloped him, sweeping away thought, speech, regret. The storm swallowing all.
xxiv. McCoy

All in all, it had been a shitty day. Forget the comically awful events of lunchtime: Clinic hadn't been any better. A new strain of stomach flu was going around, one that was resistant to the current meds, which means he'd seen enough puke and shit in the last ten hours to last him the rest of his life. Three minutes before the end of his shift, he'd been ready to make his escape when he'd been called back by the Chief of Staff. Admiral Qillyk's youngest son had gone to a Terran classmate's birthday party and eaten a big piece of chocolate cake. Not smart. Meropans are completely carnivorous, which means their digestive systems don't have the first clue what to do with flour, sugar, or cocoa powder. More puke, now in exciting rainbow colors, covered the front of Leonard's already questionable scrubs.

He bought a fifth of Jack Daniel's on the way home. He wasn't planning to get snockered, just enjoy a drink or three to go with the cold fried chicken left over from lunch. There had better be some leftovers from lunch, or Jim Kirk was going to be in a world of hurt. Eleanora McCoy's eldest had taken enough of everybody's crap today.

When he walked in the door of their place, he was almost relieved to see that Jim wasn't there. Leonard needed a shower, a meal, and a drink—in that order—before he was ready to deal with other beings. He got the first of these done quickly, stepping from the shower and slipping into jeans and his Emory sweatshirt with the hole in the sleeve, before heading to the kitchen with his pukey scrubs and shoving them into the recycler. Those stains were never coming out.

He opened the fridge. From what he could see, his roommate hadn't touched the fried chicken at all. Weird, but that left more for him. Leonard got a plate and filled it, put ice in a glass and filled that, and crossed into the living room. He set his meal down and clicked on the telescreen. X-Files would be on, and he was happy at the prospect of eating his chicken, drinking his drink, and watching Gillian Anderson's tight little rear end. Yeah, it was gross, the lady having been dead for two centuries, but Leonard was lonely.

Oh good, this was the one where Scully got the tattoo. Leonard leaned back on the sofa and sighed contentedly. He had a bite of his fried chicken, which was really good, if he did say so himself. Danna was going to miss it, damn her. He raised the whiskey glass to his lips.

"Message incoming from Jim Kirk. Audio only."

This had better be important. Scully was wandering around that guy's apartment in a shirt and stockings. Stockings. Hot.

"Bones, I need you to meet me somewhere."

"Huh-uh, Jimbo. I'm in for the night. We can go carousing tomorrow." Jesus, look at Scully. If Mulder wasn't banging her by this point in the series he was either queer or clinically dead.

"I've already caroused enough for one night," Jim said. "Trust me."

"Then come on home. Plenty of chicken left."

"I can't. You need to come here. Please."

Len heard it then, the raw note in Jim's voice. He turned off Nostalgia Net. "What's wrong?"
"I'll explain when you get here." Jim paused. "Bring your medical bag."

Leonard's stomach went cold. The last time Jim asked him to do that, in *that* voice, Leonard had walked right into his own personal Golgotha.

"Turn on video."

"Bones, I'm not——"

"Turn it fucking *on*, or I'm calling Security and having them trace the call. They can get to you faster." He should have done it last time. Jim would have kept another pint or two in his body.

"*No*, don't do that."

"Show me I don't need to."

The screen lit up again. Leonard looked close. The icy knot in his belly unclenched a little. Jim looked tired and twitchy as hell. (Did he have those circles under his eyes this morning? No way Len wouldn't have noticed. Even with Danna—no way.) He also had what looked like a nasty cut on his left cheek. But otherwise he appeared to be in one piece.

"Just the face?" Leonard demanded.

"Just the face." Jim paused again. "*For me*, anyway."

Leonard didn't give a shit about anybody else. "What about under your—why are you dressed like a hooker when the fleet's in?"

"Would you quit asking twenty fucking questions and get down here?"

"Fine. Where?"

"Remember that place we went to a few months back, the one at the Orion embassy?"

"The whorehouse?"

"The nightclub."

"With the whores."

"Bones——"

"Lemme get this straight, Jimbo. You want me to go out in the freezing cold at fucking midnight after I've worked all damn day to meet you at the brothel where you've just been in yet another brawl. And to bring my medical bag."

"Yeah."

"Fuck you." Leonard sighed. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Thanks, man. I owe you."

"I'll add it to the tally."

The call clicked off. Leonard took a look at the whiskey still clutched in his hand and put it down with a sigh. He had a feeling he was going to need all of his faculties for this one.
There was nobody at the gate. Last time Leonard was here Jim had a keycard, but now there was no Jim, no card, and the com number for this place wasn't listed. Leonard stood still a moment, breath fogging the frigid air, wondering if he should call another taxi and just go home or wave his arms and yell, hoping somebody in this godforsaken place would hear.

He was about to try the latter (which would have the advantage of warming him up if nothing else) when headlights flashed from the service road. In a minute the vehicle had crunched onto the gravel, a sleek little Mercedes sedan with smoked windows. The driver must have seen him, but for over a minute nobody exited the car. Len stood clutching his bag, getting more nervous all the time. The most valuable thing on him was his tricorder, but people had gotten their throats slit for less. He was in pirate country, after all.

Suddenly, the headlights cut off. The driver's side door opened and a tall, slim figure emerged, slamming the door. The figure stepped into the light from the fixture hung over the keypad, and Leonard could make out a face. Orange-tinted fluorescents do nobody any favors, but this one didn't need help: classically beautiful features set in a superior expression.

"Oh, fuck me. This day just keeps getting better."

"Doctor McCoy," Sherron said. "What are you doing here?"

Leonard plastered a fake smile on his face and held up his bag. "House call. How 'bout you?"

"I'm here to collect—someone."

Leonard tilted his head. This couldn't be coincidence. "Someone. A relative, maybe?"

A small sigh escaped her. "Yes."

"Well well, what have our naughty boys been up to?"

"I suppose we must enter to find out. She nodded at the path that stretched beyond the gate.

"Love to. I can't get in."

"I can." Sherron stepped to the pad and entered a complicated set of numbers at lightning speed. The gate popped open. She strode through, long coat flapping purposefully behind her. Leonard followed, clutching his bag like it was his only friend.

They were silent for the walk up the path. Sherron had her hands in her pockets and seemed deep in thought. Under her overcoat she was wearing a cableknit red sweater and a long denim skirt, shiny black loafers on her feet. She was wearing no jewelry and no make-up he could see, and her hair was pulled back in a thick, sensible braid. She still looked lovely, but like a person is lovely, not like some fabulous monster who is going to mate with you and then eat your face. (Not that Leonard had spent any time picturing her that way.)

They stopped a little way from the shabby former warehouse Leonard recognized as the club. "Geida told me to come to the front entrance," Sherron said. "Someone would meet me there."

Leonard hadn't been told any such thing, but the finer details tended to escape Jim at times like this. Len still felt aggrieved, though: If Sherron hadn't come along, he'd still be standing at that fucking gate. Jim was going to be doing dishes for the next six months to make up for this.

Sherron's knuckles had barely finished the secret knock before the door whooshed open. A big, bald, lime-green man in shiny shorts stood there, grinning. "Sherron! My handsome flower!"
"Hello, Lukan." She submitted to having her cheek kissed, but when big green paws went lower, she stepped gracefully back. The man turned on Leonard next.

"Ah! Lukan remember this one. Never forget handsome face!" He patted Len's cheek and was going for the ass, but Leonard grabbed his wrist.

"Let's just focus on the face, okay?"

"Terrans and Vulcans so cold," he pouted. "Lukan not know how they make babies."

"There's usually liquor involved," Leonard said.

"Can you take us to Geida, please?" Sherron asked.

"Yes, yes! Geida wait upstairs." Lukan's cheerful face, crisscrossed as it was with fine lines, suddenly wrinkled like an unmade bed. "Bad doings tonight," he said. "Lukan enjoy good fight like anyone—but this one not good."

"Were there serious injuries?" Sherron asked. Her face was calm, but Leonard saw that she was playing nervously with the belt of her coat. "I haven't spoken to Spock. Geida called me."

"Oh yes! Very bad. Come see."

Leonard didn't find this reassuring, and judging by the knots in Sherron's belt, she didn't either. But they had no choice but to follow Lukan through the metal-walled vestibule and up a flight of stairs. Down a narrow hall, then a sharp turn to the left. They were standing in another, wider, hall, one lined with doors. Lukan led them to the first on the right. Sounds issued from behind the rest. Leonard, who had been wondering where the hell they were, suddenly knew.

"Great," he muttered. "We're in the cathouse."

"What?" Sherron asked.

"Upstairs in the back, where the girls and boys take customers."

Sherron's mouth thinned. "Oh."

"I'm surprised you disapprove. Didn't you say that prostitutes are respected on Vulcan?"

"Consolers are not prostitutes," Sherron said, looking around. "Not like this."


Sherron said something to Lukan in the fluid syllables of Orion Prime, though hers didn't sound as fluid as they should have been. Leonard spoke the language about as well as he spoke Vulcan, but he'd lived with Orion-obsessed Jim long enough to pick up the standard salutations. She was saying goodbye and thanking the doorman. (God knows where she picked it up—didn't Sherron mention an Orion boyfriend? Jim always said the best way to learn the language was to have it shagged into you.)

He went back the way they'd come, big belly bouncing ahead of him. Sherron stood quite still, hands clamped stiffly at her sides. Leonard felt bad.

"Doddering old fool," he said. "You know Orions: all senile by sixty. Pay him no mind."

"I am going to see Spock," Sherron said. "Then I am going home." She knocked on the door, and it whooshed open. She strode inside without looking at Leonard.

Leonard had been expecting a bedroom but this was too big, and it was furnished like an office. The walls were cinderblock but hung with some very nice reproductions of old masters. (At least, Leonard hoped they were repros. With Orions you could never tell.) There was a big wood desk on the right side of the room. A sofa was across from the door, a coffee table in front of that. On its sides were two matching chairs. An oval conference table occupied most of the room's left side, the ceiling lights reflecting in its shiny surface. If it hadn't been for a lack of windows and the realization of what was going on next door, the room would have been inviting.

It wasn't deserted, of course. Jim was seated on the sofa. Behind the desk was a woman, green and lovely. Behind her were two big Orion males, wearing the same silk shorts uniform as Lukan. These men were younger by a good three decades, however, and armed with phasers.

Jim and the woman stood up as Leonard and Sherron entered. Leonard immediately went to his friend and caught Jim's head in one hand. His skin felt feverish and sweaty. The circles under his eyes were darker than they had been on the telescreen, and the cut on Jim's cheek looked even worse. Fan-fucking-tastic. Len set his bag on the coffee table and took out his tricorder.

"I told you it was just the face," Jim said.

"Uh-huh," Leonard said. He looked at the tricorder screen. "Any disco pharmaceuticals tonight? Tell the truth and shame the Devil."

"Of course not," Jim said, but it took him a second too long to say it. When Leonard glared at him: "A couple of pheromone drinks. Only 5% potency though, I swear. I'm not a total idiot."

"Just what you need: more pheromones." Leonard shook his head but decided not to make a thing of it. Five percent wouldn't have any worse effect than a couple of shots of Jack Daniel's. Not unless someone was already ill, but that was true of liquor, too. The tricorder screen wasn't showing anything out of the ordinary. Maybe Jim's twitchiness was just a combo of midterms, three days of non-stop screwing, and whatever the hell put that cut on his cheek. Or maybe not. Sunny Jim Kirk could be a real cipher when he wanted to be. For right now, Leonard would deal with the obvious issues. He took out the sonic healer and spun a few dials.

"Hold still. I know how upset all of your admirers will be if I let something happen to that face." The machine flashed and Jim winced.

Leonard ran assessing fingers over Jim's cheek, now pink and clear as a baby's. "Damn, I'm good. Want me to get the neck while I'm at it?"

Jim fingered the bandage covering Spock's bite mark self-consciously. "No."

"Fine. Go around like the Bride of Dracula. See if I care." Leonard had taken care of his own Vulcan love bite this morning, before he ever phoned Danna. Suddenly he remembered that the giver of said bite was standing at his shoulder. He glanced at her before he could catch himself.

If she was also thinking of last night, you wouldn't have guessed. Her big doe eyes were darting around the room. "Where is Spock?" she asked. "I wish to see him."
"Sherron, my dear," the pretty green woman said. "It is lovely to see you again."

She had remained at her desk while Leonard was dealing with Jim. But now she crossed the room in a whisper of silk. The evening dress was as black as the hair curled artfully atop her head, and slit nearly to the waist. Her décolletage was the stuff of wet dreams. She had dark eyes set in one of those off-kilter faces that can be dead charming on the right person, which she most definitely was. If she weren't green but pink-skinned, you might have placed her as a very well-preserved forty-five. Being Orion, she had to be ten to fifteen years younger than that. But whatever her age, a damned attractive woman. Pheromones wafted from her like Chanel No. 5.

On Sherron's full lips she placed a kiss, soft and lingering. The move would have been too sexy if Sherron had appeared into it at all. "Where's Spock?" she repeated.

"Two doors down on the left." Sherron spun on her heel and nearly ran from the room.

The woman looked after her. "Vulcans. So clannish," she said, shrugging her elegant shoulders. She turned to Leonard, giving him a surprisingly firm handshake. "Dr. McCoy. So good of you to come here at such a late hour. I'm Geida, manager of this establishment."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am. But I'd feel more at ease if I knew what the heck had happened."

"Oh, a simple altercation, such as we have every night. But the parties involved make it not so simple. The son of one former ambassador, a known personage in his own right, and the son of a current ambassador—a fourth son only, but one who is also known in his way—tricky, you see?"

Her circumlocutions were giving him a headache. "I'm sorry, I don't—"

"She's talking about Spock and Raymon," Jim cut in. "You know about Spock, but Raymon's the son of the Orion ambassador and a pretty famous gladiator. They got in a big fight tonight."

"Why in blazes did they do that?"

Jim didn't answer. Geida smiled. "For such a prize, who would not fight?" She stroked Jim's bare arm. He didn't look at her.

"Oh. I see." Usually it was Jim fighting over other people, but Leonard supposed that turnabout was fair play. "Why was your faced messed up if this wasn't your fight?"

"I tried to stop it."

Geida gave Jim another, approving pat and went on. "Before we can forget this sad business, I'm afraid I must ask you to exercise your skills as a physician a little more. My nephew is in rather a bad way, you see. The Vulcan was quite vicious."

"Spock put the beatdown on him? A professional gladiator?"

"Surprising, no? A fair reason for being discreet. We have doctors at the Embassy who could attend Raymon, but my nephew has begged me to keep the news from his father. His exploits in the gladiatorial ring have only recently won him my brother's attention and regard—Raymon is a fourth son, after all. If Raynald discovered that his son had been bested by a Vulcan—his good opinion would be forever lost. Raymon is a foolish boy, Doctor. But he does not deserve this."

"Fine, I'll look at him. Where is he?"

"One door down on the left."
Leonard looked at Jim. "You coming?"

"Nah. I've got nothing to say to him."

"Okay, then. Have you seen Spock?"

Jim looked narrowly at Geida. "She won't let me see him."

"I thought it best to keep everybody separated until we had things sorted," Geida said.

"You let Sherron see him," Jim said.

"Sherron is family," Geida replied. "Do not concern yourself, the Vulcan is well enough. Better than he deserves after what he did. If he weren't Sarek's son——" Her sweet expression faltered, showing a glimpse of real rage beneath. Then she composed herself. "Ah well! He is who he is. He must be released." Her eyes went to the guards behind the desk, then to Leonard. "But until my nephew is seen to, nobody is leaving."

The implied threat was a little rude, given that Leonard had already agreed to look at Raymon. Orions must be as clannish as Vulcans. "I get you," he said. He looked at Jim. "Keep your ass on the couch. I'll be back."

Leonard walked out the door and down the hall. He knocked on the first door, and it opened. This was what he had been expecting earlier: a bedroom, small but comfortable. Most of it was taken up by a huge four-poster bed with purple hangings. On the bed was the biggest Orion that Leonard had ever seen, his skin the deep green common to natives of Orion Tertius. Lucky for a certain Vulcan: Tertius was an M3 planet like Earth, but another planet in the Orion System, Sextus, was M4 just like Vulcan. A professional fighter of twice his size from an equal gravity differential could have wiped the floor with Spock, pon farr or no pon farr.

Mopping the gladiator's sweaty brow was another Orion, smaller and less green. Orion Quintus, maybe—they tended to fall in the greeny-yellowy shades. She was plump and cheerful-looking, with long red ringlets. She looked up as Leonard came in. Her expression darkened.

"Jena know this one," she said, mouth turning down. "Leen not like Jena. Leen reject."

Shit, now he remembered. She'd been their server when Jim dragged him to this den of iniquity months ago. Dinner had been excellent; problem was, Jena thought she was dessert. Worse than the lapdance after his plate of prime rib was the fact that Leonard wasn't certain she was over eighteen, despite Jim's assurances. However old you thought Orions were, they were younger.

"No, honey," Leonard sighed. "I liked you just fine. Just didn't wanna come my brains out in public. I'm shy that way."

She gestured around. "Jena has room. Very private."

"I have a girlfriend." Leonard paused. "Well, I did back then."

Jena gave him a bright-eyed look. "No longer? Leen is lonely? Jena is very good company."

"Yeah, I know just how much company you keep. Hope you're getting regular vaccinations."

She sidled close to him, pheromones buzzing. Her uniform consisted of what looked like a few old-fashioned gauze bandages held together with pins. It wasn't clear why she even bothered: You could see pretty much anything you wanted. "Leen is doctor. Jena remember." She traced a glossy purple
nail down the front of his sweatshirt. "If Leen want to check Jena—"

"BLOODY HELL, WOMAN," a bellowing voice said from the bed. "HE DOESN'T WANT TO SHAG YOU. NOW WILL YOU GET THE FUCK OUT SO HE CAN TEND TO MY FESTERING WOUNDS?"

Jena squeaked and scooted out the door, bandages fluttering.

"Guess you're not dying if you can yell that loud," Leonard said.

"How the fuck would you know? You haven't even looked. Took you long enough to get here."

"Keep talking like that and see how fast I move," Len said, taking his sweet time approaching the bed. "Lights." The ones over the bed brightened.

Once Leonard got a look at the man's injuries, he was a little less irritated. Raymon looked like he'd been hit by a twenty-megaton star freighter. That would make anybody impolite.

Leonard slipped his tricorder out of his bag and ran it over his enormous patient. "Well?" Raymon demanded. "Am I dying?"

"Course not. But you do have a semi-serious concussion, two black eyes, four missing teeth, three broken ribs, a hairline crack in your tibia and in your femur, and, lookee here, swollen testes. What'd he do, kick you in the balls?" When Raymon said nothing: "Judging by the trauma to your kidneys, I bet you're also pissing blood. Not even gonna list all the bruising—basically, your entire torso is one big hematoma. Jesus Christ, what did you say to him?"

"What makes you think I started this?"

"Don't shit me. A Vulcan and an Orion throw down, it was the Orion who mouthed off first."

Raymon's bruised jaw worked a moment. "I called him a coward incapable of battle."

"Well," Leonard said, opening his bag again. "This is what we Terrans call 'irony.'"

"This is no joke! I've been assaulted, my lover has been stolen from me, and I've been publicly humiliated. I will have satis—ow! What was that?" he whined as the hypo slid from his neck.

"Nuvocontin with an Ativan chaser. It'll take the edge off the pain and calm your ass down. Now hush up while I put Humpty Dumpty back together again."

Most of the Orion's injuries were simple; there were just a lot of them. Between the sonic healer (turned up high—those big bones were weirdly stubborn) and a few more hypos, Len was able to fix it all except some of the bruising, which would be better off healing itself, and the teeth. If Geida couldn't find Raymon a discreet dentist, she wasn't the woman Leonard thought she was.

It took awhile, and by the time he was finished, the Orion had gone loose-limbed and glassy-eyed. God bless modern pharmacology. Leonard thought his patient was sleeping and was packing his things to exit when Raymon spoke again.

"Jim does not love me," he said softly. "I thought he might, but he does not." All the swagger and slang were gone from the gladiator's voice. It was thick with tears.

Leonard sat down on the bed. "When were you two seeing each other? I don't remember you."

"Last June. You were at a medical conference off-planet for two weeks. Jim spoke of you often. I
was jealous. I assumed you were lovers. Are you?"

"I'm afraid his winsome charms are wasted on me. I like girls. Just girls."

"How—limiting," Raymon said. "In any case, Jim and I were only together a short time. I had to go on tour. But I could not stop thinking of him. All this time, I could not. It is not right to be so possessed by another. I fought many fights, made love to many others. Still, I thought of him. I even went to Antares IV."

"Antares IV, huh? I've heard it's beautiful. How long were you there?"

"Almost a month. They say if you cannot forget someone there, he cannot be forgotten."

Leonard opened his bag again. "Jim does seem to make an impression."

"He does not love me. I do not know why. I am the scion of an ancient house. I am rich and very handsome. Do you not think so?"

"Sure," Leonard said, as he adjusted a few dials on his tricorder. "When you've got all your teeth and can see out of your eyeballs, I bet you're a real heartbreaker."

"Do not mock me, Doctor. I cannot bear it. My heart is broken."

"Not according to this," Leonard said, looking at the tricorder.

"He loves the Vulcan. I do not understand it. They're so cold."

"Nah. I think he and Spock are just having fun."

"No. I saw them. I watched for half an hour before I greeted Jim. They were so—intent upon each other. I could not believe it. I thought I must be mistaken. I tried to win Jim's attention every way I knew—I told him of my recent successes, I boasted of my wealth, I even dominated an insolent servant girl. None of it impressed him. The way the Vulcan looked at me, like I was the servant, not a son of the House of D'Ranni. It could not be borne. Now he has beaten me, he has taken my mate. How will I bear the shame? I cannot. I must kill myself."

"Come on now, none of that talk."

The gladiator began to cry. Thick, purplish tears leaked out of his swollen eyes, streaming down his bruised cheeks. He was a truly pitiful sight. Leonard patted his massive shoulder. "How old are you, Raymon? You're big, but Orions grow up fast. I'm guessing not too old."

"I'm nineteen Standard years next month."

"So, eighteen. At your age, a lot of stuff that seems like the end of the world turns out to be just another bump in the road. Jim Kirk doesn't love you, but that doesn't mean nobody ever will." He glanced at his tricorder. "Though you'll have a better chance at romance if you clear up this raging case of Antarean syphilis."

Raymon tried to sit up, started coughing, and collapsed back. "Dear Goddess, you're joking."

"Wish I was. Lucky for you it's only in the secondary stage. Your penis hasn't gone gelatinous yet. But after your bones finish setting tomorrow, you'd better go see your family doctor. I've gotta warn you, there's a few weeks of painful shots ahead. Three or four a day."

"I cannot believe it. I was careful—"
"You can't be careful in a cathouse, son. I know it goes against all your cultural beliefs, but maybe you should stop paying for it and just find a nice girl. Or boy. Whatever."

"I did. He doesn't love me."

"Jim Kirk is many things. Nice isn't one of 'em." Leonard patted his shoulder again. "Get some rest. Forget about Jim. Trust me, he's already forgotten about you."

The gladiator's hand found Leonard's. Even hopped up on painkillers, his grip was crushing. "Thank you, Doctor. You are a true healer. If there's ever anything I can do for you——"

"Just promise you'll quit screwing every piece of strange you come across," Leonard said, disengaging his throbbing fingers. "Even if Jim did break your heart, there's no excuse for that."

"You're lucky," Raymon said softly. "Not to love him. It must be—liberating."

Leonard laughed. "Are you kidding? I'm the biggest patsy of all. At least you got a few orgasms out of the relationship. I can't even get Jim to pick up his towels."

Before Raymon could reply, the door whooshed open. Geida appeared on the threshold.

"How is he?" she asked, crossing to the bed. She took one of his enormous paws in her own. Her skin was much paler than his, a delicate leafy shade. "My poor boy."

"I've fixed pretty much everything Spock did to him," Leonard said.

"But not what I have done to myself," Raymon said to her, voice trembling. "I have the Antarean Curse."

Geida froze. She looked at Leonard, who nodded. "But only secondary stage. He'll recover intact if you get him to a doctor soon. I'd help him out, but we're talking weeks of antivirals."

"Raynald can't know," she said. "Our sibyls tell us venereal disease is a curse from the Mother Goddess. My brother is devout: This could destroy all the work I've done to bring Raymon to his notice." Geida stopped, collecting herself. "Rest assured, I will see that my nephew is treated and the doctor is discreet." Her face went hard. "If I have to cut out his tongue to assure silence."

"Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that," Leonard said. "You're a very, um, attentive aunt."

"I have no sons. My brother has too many. Raymon needs someone to look after him."

"She is better than my own mother," Raymon said. "The Princess Garana thinks only of my brother Rayden." He yawned. "I care not. Garana is weak. Like all of her people."

"Get some rest, dear boy," Geida said, stroking his hand again before releasing it. She looked at Leonard and nodded towards the door. The gladiator was snoring up a storm by the time they made it into the hallway.

"I apologize for threatening you earlier," she said. "I was overwrought. You and your friends may leave whenever you wish. I would also be happy to pay you for your services. Or if you do not desire money, you may choose any of our girls or boys. Or several at once, if it pleases you. Make any request of them that you like."

"Thank you, ma'lam, but no. I'll just consider this my good deed for the day."

At that moment, Sherron emerged from the room next door. "Dr. McCoy. I require your assistance.
"My cousin is unwell."

Geida shrugged at him. "Your good deeds are not yet done." She turned to Sherron. "When the Doctor has seen to your cousin, you may take him home. I suppose I do not have to tell you that he is not welcome back here?"

"I can assure you, he has no wish to return."

"You, of course, may visit any time you desire." Geida put her hand on Sherron's face. "I have missed you, dearest," she said softly. "Very much."

Sherron's eyes flicked to Leonard. "Geida, we have discussed this."

"As you please," Geida sighed, dropping her hand. "If you change your mind, you know where I am." With a final nod at Leonard, she glided down the hall and into her office. Leonard tried and failed to avoid checking out her ass. Spectacular. Then he turned to Sherron.

"So that was the Orion you were—"

"Geida is very pleasant company."

"No doubt."

"She isn't a prostitute."

"Who said she was?"

"Yet you disapprove."

"Of you and Geida enjoying each other's—company? 'Disapproval' isn't exactly what comes to mind when I picture that." He smiled. She regarded him stonily.

"Will you see to Spock or not?"

"Lead the way."

The room was the mirror image of the one which held Raymon, but more crowded. Spock sat poker-straight on the edge of the bed. Across from him were three more armed Orion guards.

"Cousin, I have brought assistance," Sherron said, crossing to him.

Spock looked at Leonard. His black eyes glittered in his white face. Coming close, Len could see that he was trembling, a fine fast shiver from head to toe. His knuckles were contused, but other than that he did not appear physically injured. He just shook and shook and shook, like a man suffering from an old-time ague.

"I do not require assistance," he said.

Leonard slipped the tricorder out of his bag. "If you don't, we'll know in a second. Hold still."

Spock stared at him. "You do not have permission to scan me. If you do, I will bring charges."

"Spock, you are being unreasonable," Sherron said.

"Do you remember what he intended to do with his previous scans? Or has your mind become completely clouded by lust?"
"She's trying to help, dickhead," Leonard said. "Or did you forget that you're the reason we're stuck here at the Best Little Whorehouse in Frisco? Sherron's got a kid at home, and she's down here in the wee small hours cleaning up your shit. Now shut the fuck up and let me scan you, or I'm telling Geida and her goons to dump your sorry ass off the Golden Gate Bridge."

Spock pressed his lips so tightly together that they just about disappeared. But he didn't protest when Leonard started the scan.

"You've had the shakes for how long?" Leonard asked.

"Approximately 1.27 hours."

"Pretty nauseous? Feel like you're gonna hurl at any second?"

Spock seemed like he wasn't going to answer, but then he did. "Yes."

"I don't have to ask if you're irritable, we've established that." Leonard adjusted a dial on the tricorder. "You've gone into hyperadrenal shock. That's why you're shaking. Your system's dumped about twenty times the normal amount of adrenaline into your bloodstream in the last few hours. Did you have some of those pheromone drinks they serve here?"

Spock nodded.

"Big mistake. The drinks just ratcheted up everything a notch further. Your nervous system was probably already in overdrive from the pheromone cloud created by a bunch of Orions all horded together getting their party on. Add one snotty teenage gladiator calling you chicken, and it's no wonder you exploded. You shouldn't be anywhere near a place like this right now. I'd think you'd know how to manage your condition better. Don't little Vulcan boys take health class?"

"What condition, Doctor?" Spock said distinctly.

Leonard glanced at the Orion guards. "You really want me to say it?"

Spock's spine stiffened. He said something to Sherron in Vulcan that made her go pale.

"Again, dickhead, trying to help." Leonard slipped two hypos out of his bag, slotting cartridges into both. "This first shot will counteract the adrenal storm. The second is to help you sleep. You should be okay in the morning, or as okay as you're going to be at present. Stay out of the bars until your—thing—is over."

"You should refrain from giving him sedatives," Sherron said. "They can have an uncertain effect on men in his condition."

Leonard looked at her. "You sure?"

She nodded. "Believe me. I know of what I speak."

"Okay, forget the sedative. Go home and drink a glass of warm milk, Spock." Leonard stuck the sedative in his coat pocket and readied only the anti-adrenal hypo.

Spock submitted to that shot, and within a minute or two the worst of the shaking had stopped. He stood, straightening his tunic. He picked up his coat from the bed.

"I am parked at the gate," Sherron said. "We have Geida's permission to leave."

"I will find my own way home."
Sherron's brows drew together. "But—"

"I appreciate your help, Cousin," Spock said in a dead voice. "And yours, Doctor. But I believe I have had enough company for one evening." He looked at the guard in the middle, who spoke briefly into his earpiece and then nodded. Spock walked fast through the door. Sherron moved to follow him, but Leonard caught her sleeve, shaking his head at her.

"Leave him."

"It is freezing out there."

"He could use a long cold walk right now. Chill him the fuck out," Leonard said. When her forehead stayed creased: "He's a grown man, Sherron. He's got money, presumably, and the Central Transport Station is a couple of clicks away. He'll be fine."

She wilted on the edge of the bed. "He will never forgive me for telling you about—you know."

"Sure he will. You're family. Not like he can get rid of you." He grabbed his bag and touched her shoulder. "Come on. Let's get Jim and skedaddle."

A minute later the door of Geida's office opened on Jim, looking excited. When he saw Leonard and Sherron, his face fell. "Where's Spock?"

"Christ, you people are clingy," Len said. "He went home, okay? Which is where we're going."

"You let him leave by himself?" Jim said. "How could you do that?"

"Short of getting one of the guards to phaser his ass, I didn't have much choice."

"I'm going after him." Jim grabbed for his coat.

"No, you're not," Leonard said, getting him by the bicep. "The last thing Spock needs right now is you in his face."

"You don't understand, I have to see him—"

"See him tomorrow. Right now you're going home."

"Back off, Bones!" Jim shook Len's hand away, face flushing. "You're not my fucking father."

"Yes, I am," Leonard hissed, grabbing Jim again and pulling them nose-to-nose. "I'm the one who came down here and picked you up like you were a goddamn teenager busted by the cops for breaking curfew. I cleaned up your mess like I always do. Somebody has to, because you—don't—think." With every one of those last words, he gave Jim a little shake. "You bounce through life like a pinball, but it's not all lights and bells, Jimbo. Shit gets broken—people get hurt. Sometimes you, but mostly your poor fucking partners. Have you given one thought to what you did to Raymon?"

"Raymon's been fucking since he was twelve and fighting professionally since he was fourteen. I didn't despoil any innocence."

"No, you just broke his big ol' heart. Don't tell me you don't know how he feels about you. You always know. Just like you must have known how Spock was feeling tonight, revved up like an engine about to explode. Until he finally did." Leonard pulled back from Jim, peering at his face. "You do know, don't you? Exactly what's wrong with him. I can see it in your eyes. That sneaky-guilty look you get."
"How the hell do you—" Jim glanced at Sherron. "Guess that was some dinner you two had."

"Don't try to change the subject. You know about Spock's condition, which means he told you. He confided in you, and you took him to this place. Was it a joke? Were you just trying to show off? What fucked-up rationalizations were running through your head?"

"You have no idea what's in my head," Jim said. "You really don't."

"Then tell me. After Spock and Raymon, and Mandy and David and Che and all the others. After all the shit I've cleaned up, I think I deserve to know. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Jim looked at him. For a second Leonard thought he would really do it, give him the key to so much that had happened in the last three years. Jim stared at him with those shadowy eyes like all he wanted to do was put his head on Leonard's shoulder and sob out the truth.

But he didn't. His eyes went hard. He stepped away, prying Leonard's hand off. He shrugged into his coat. "I'm insensitive, huh? This from the guy who treated his girlfriend worse than Raymon treats the girls here. At least he pays them for services rendered. What did Danna ever get out of you? A few cheap lunches?"

"Fuck you, Jim."

"Fuck you. You're not my father." He finished buttoning his coat. "You know what, Bones? I'm not your brother. I'm sorry Henry's dead, but it's not my fault. Don't take your shit out on me: I didn't run him into that tree."

There was no excuse for what happened next. Leonard wouldn't have done it, if there had been even a second to think about it. But it happened instantly, his hand moving to his pocket from muscle memory alone. The hypo was in and out of Jim's neck so fast he couldn't even cry out. One shocked stare at Leonard and he hit the floor. His body lay still on the cement.

For a minute, the room was totally silent. Then, a whisper of silk. "Is he dead?" Geida asked, coming from around her desk. "Did you poison him?"

"No," Leonard said, staring at Jim. "It was only a sedative." One calibrated for a Vulcan's physiology. That was a lot of dope he'd just shot into his best friend.

"It's just as well. A shame, to lose such a pretty one before everybody has finished having him. Though if you had poisoned him, I wouldn't have blamed you. He was very insolent." Geida paused. "He did break my poor boy's heart."

"I'm going to take him home now," Leonard said.

"I will drive you," Sherron offered.

"Thanks," Leonard said. "Can you get his legs?"
Though Leonard and Sherron passed lots of people in the halls as they took Jim away from there, the exit raised no eyebrows. Len had a feeling this wasn't the first time—or the thousandth—that the Orions had seen someone carried out of the place feet first. Fucking pirates.

The drive back to Starfleet Academy was mostly silent. Sherron drove fast and well, navigating the twisty, hilly streets of San Francisco like a native. Leonard leaned over the front seat every so often to check Jim's pulse. He could have given him a stimulant and snapped him out of his stupor, but Leonard was sort of relieved to have Jim quiet for awhile. It was the same feeling he used to get when Joanna was a toddler, and he finally succeeded in getting her to bed after hours of frantic naughtiness. Of course, in that case there hadn't been opiates involved.

They took him up the service stairs. His fellow cadets would be more curious than the Orions, and Jim's reputation was already dicey enough. Normally, Len might not have been able to do it: Jim was solidly built and that was four long, steep flights. Sherron made it simple, however, handling her half of the weight easily. There is something to be said for gravity differentials.

They dumped him into bed without ceremony. Sherron stayed and watched as Len got Jim's party clothes off, found a pair of not-too-grimy sweatpants on the floor, and put those on him instead. Though she didn't comment on it, she saw more than she bargained for: Jim wasn't wearing anything under those skin-tight trousers. But she was a grown woman, and it's not like Jim would have blushed if he'd woken up and seen her eyeing his private parts. The body shame shared by most decent Terrans had skipped him entirely. His mama's fault, no doubt.

Leonard pulled the blanket up over Jim's bare chest. The dimmed overhead lights shone on his sleeping face, still and peaceful, though his eyes remained shadowed. Leonard definitely wasn't waking him up: Twelve or fourteen hours of downtime was exactly what his best friend needed. Maybe when he came to, he wouldn't be such a prick. Or no more of one than he usually was.

Sherron considered Jim closely. "He is a pretty one."

"Trust me. You don't want to go there," Leonard said, frowning at her.

One corner of her mouth turned up. "He is not 'my type,' as you Terrans would say. Sehlat faced, we would say on Vulcan."

"What's a sehlat?"

"Sweet, round-faced creatures. Rather like a small Terran bear, but more intelligent. Children often keep them as pets."

"Jim's nobody's pet. A lot of people have learned that too late." Leonard adjusted Jim's blanket over his shoulders. "I guess he comes by it honest. I play poker sometimes with the Academy's chief medical officer, Renata Rosenberg. She served with Jim's mother when they were both just starting their careers. She told me once that Winnie Murray left a string of broken hearts from San Francisco to the Beta Quadrant. Until she met George Kirk—married him within a year."

"She found what she was looking for," Sherron said, her voice soft. "The One."

"The One broke her heart. He didn't mean to; he couldn't help dying. But she's never been the
same." Leonard met her when she came into town with her new (much younger) husband last summer. Jim's mother was sexy as hell, even at fiftysomething. Distractingly charming, in the same way her youngest son could be. But there was no light in her eyes, none at all. No wonder her marriages never worked. Leonard shook his head. "A quarter of a century spent pining for a dead man. Such a waste."

Sherron's mouth turned down. "It is not a waste to mourn those that we have lost."

"It is if you let it ruin your life. People die. Hearts break. You have to move on."

"That is not how we do things on Vulcan. The dead are with us always. Their faces are in our memories, their katras inside the Hall of Ancient Thought. Nothing is lost."

"Y'all can sit in the sand and commune with the ghosts all you want. Seems morbid to me." Leonard put a hand over his stomach. "Are you hungry? I'm hungry. Let's go in the kitchen. I've got a plate of fried chicken calling my name."

Without replying, Sherron followed him. He waved her to one of the counter stools and started rummaging around in the fridge, removing containers. "I know the appeal of dead fried birds is probably lost on you. But I've got corn bread, collard greens, macaroni and cheese—Vulcans can eat cheese, right?"

"I could eat something. I did not have supper this evening. I had several pressing matters to attend to." She paused, looking at the bowl of collard greens. "This fare seems—interesting."

"Varena liked it just fine."

Sherron blinked. Her fingers played with the plastic lid of the bowl. "I am so sorry that she invaded your privacy. Please believe me, I had no knowledge of her plans."

"I didn't think so," Leonard said, as he got them both an iced tea from the replicator. "That one's got a mind of her own."

The tenseness in Sherron's shoulders relaxed a little. "I do not understand her these days. Her fixation on this Terran pop band, Blue Wind—I have listened to their music at her urging. It is so puerile. Her tastes have always been much more refined."

"Girls that age are funny. You should hear my Joanna go on about the kid in her Algebra class. You'd think she was learning quadratic equations with freaking Apollo." He shrugged. "Kids all obsess to one degree or another. Varena will grow out of it."

"I hope so. Her father never did." Sherron pressed fingers to the bridge of her nose, sighing. "I've had such a trying day. You've no idea."

Leonard took a plate out of the convective cooker and set it in front of her. "Tell me."

She ate two big bites of macaroni and cheese, giving him an impressed look after the first, before answering. "I had a message from my husband's cousin, Vekan, this evening. Sharok has been in a rather fierce altercation with Vekan's son. He thinks it best that Sharok leave immediately."

"Yeesh. First Sharok, then Spock tonight—" Leonard stopped. "Your son is going into pon farr, isn't he? Just like Spock."

She nodded slowly. "Sharok has more time than Spock. Half a year, T'Lyn estimates. But a first pon farr is always more fraught. Given his current state of mind, his own obsessions—he must return
Leonard paused in the middle of chewing on a chicken leg. He swallowed, wiped his mouth. "That soon, huh?"

"Yes. I had hoped to delay matters for another few weeks. It has been inconvenient, trying to make arrangements on such short notice. But I have to think not only of my son's well-being, but others' as well. Males in Fever are unpredictable."

"No kidding. I'm the one who treated the jolly green giant. Your cousin put a real hurt on him." Len wiped his greasy fingers and leaned on the counter, looking at her. "How worried do I need to be? I know Spock was all freaked out on pheromones tonight, but how about in the coming weeks, as he gets closer to plak tow? What if my buddy gives him attitude? This is Jim we're talking about, he's almost sure to. What will happen then? Be honest."

"Spock would never hurt Jim."

"The training room video—"

"Depicts passionate lovemaking, nothing more. Must we rehash these same arguments? I spoke with my cousin tonight: He admitted that he lost control, but he informed me of the reason. The gladiator put hands on Jim, he shoved him. He declared that Jim belonged to him, even as your friend was trying to extricate himself. Spock was protecting Jim."

"You make it sound like he's Spock's blushing bride or something."

"I realize you're attempting irony, but the comparison is not false. Spock considers Jim to be his. The Orion challenged his claim. All things considered, Spock's reaction was restrained."

"Restrained. Honey, this is what we Terrans call denial. Spock fucked Raymon up."

"He could have done far worse. In bygone days, young Vulcan males in pon farr often fought to the death." She paused. "Even in modern times, duels over mates are not unheard of."

"Christ, they are not mates. They've been screwing for exactly three days. This is just a fling."

"Now who is in denial, Doctor?"

Leonard pushed away his half-empty plate. Grimaced at his tea. "I need a real drink." He got the bottle of Jack and a lowball glass from the cabinet, more ice from the replicator.

"May I have one?" Sherron asked. "I have never tried that particular libation."

"Sure, sure. Didn't mean to be rude. I thought you were still eating." He glanced at her plate and saw that it was empty to the last crumb. "Well. I do admire a lady with a healthy appetite."

He poured them both a double over ice, grabbed the bottle, and waved her towards the living room. The kitchen was still a mess, but Jim could take KP when he woke up.

They sat on the couch. Leonard had a big swallow, the sweet-burnt taste of the whiskey flooding his throat and cooling his nerves. Sherron had a sip.

"Well?" he asked, nodding at her glass.

She shrugged. "A bit weak, but drinkable."
"I've got some rubbing alcohol in the bathroom if you want."

She gave him a long-suffering eyebrow. Then she tilted her head back. He watched the fine muscles in her throat work, her long fingers gripping the glass. She finished the whiskey in one go and set the glass on the coffee table. She wiped a stray drop from her lips and looked at him.

"Another?"

"Why not?"

He poured her a triple, then finished his own so he wouldn't look like a lightweight. He refilled his glass. Sherron drank half of hers, and the alcohol finally seemed to have an effect. She leaned back against the sofa, stretching so her fingers almost touched his shoulder. She did not look at him, staring at the ceiling in a pensive way. Leonard admired the curves of her profile silhouetted in the light from the kitchen. She was close enough that he could feel the heat from her body.

It was too damn quiet in here.

"Computer," he said. "Random playlist."

Music came. Norah Jones' voice, raspy and sweet:

I've tried so hard my dear to show
that you're my every dream
Yet you're afraid each thing I do
is just some evil scheme

A memory from your lonesome past
keeps us so far apart
Why can't I free your doubtful mind
and melt your cold cold heart?

Crap. Danna, who was into Millennial jazz, had given him this playlist a month ago. Leonard didn't think much about it then, but he wondered now if she'd been trying to tell him something.

"I like this," Sherron said. "Her voice is very evocative."

"It's better than Blue Wind," Leonard said, and took another swallow of Jack.

Another love before my time
made your heart sad and blue
And so my heart is paying now
for things I didn't do

In anger unkind words I said
that make the teardrops start
Why can't I free your doubtful mind
and melt your cold cold heart?

Sherron finished her glass. He held up the bottle, but she shook her head. Tensed as if to stand.

"I shouldn't. I must leave soon."

"Right. Is Varena all by herself?"
"I took her to T'Lyn's cottage. She will stay the night there. Still, I should be going."

"Okay. If you want."

Sherron didn't move. She tapped her fingers on the empty glass. "You kept the tricorder."

Leonard ducked his head. "Yeah. Got to messing around with it today, and—damn. Haven't got all the screens figured out yet, but I think it knows more about doctoring than I do. I'm jealous."

The corners of her mouth turned up. She set her glass on the coffee table. Settled back.

Leonard finished his drink and set his glass by Sherron's. Hers was sweating condensation all over the plaswood table, and he thought about getting up to get a dishtowel. But he didn't. The adrenaline rush from tonight's adventures was wearing off, replaced by a slow fatigue and the warm buzz from several shots of whiskey. He should be thinking about sleep. But he wasn't.

His eyes went to Sherron again. The delicate curve of her cheekbone, the sweet fullness of her mouth, the strange, graceful curves of her ear. The lines of her body under her sensible clothes, so different from what she was wearing last night. They had been in almost this same situation then. But tonight was different. She was different. Maybe he was too. Single, if nothing else.

There was a time when I believed
that you belonged to me
But now I know your heart
is shackled to a memory

The more I learn to care for you
the more we drift apart
Why can't I free your doubtful mind
and melt your cold cold heart?

"Jim told me about you and Danna," Sherron said. "Your estrangement. I am sorry."

"I'm not devastated," Leonard said. "But then you knew that."

Sherron looked down. "I should not have said what I did last night. It was none of my affair."

"You were right, though. Anyway it's just as well. I'm done with the Academy in three months. I've already applied for a deep space assignment."

"So. You are also leaving Terra soon."

"Yeah. God knows when I'll be back."

Silence fell again. The song ended and another one started, Norah Jones again, singing about nightingales and unknown voices; questions without answers, journeys without end. Lovely, melancholy music from a voice that has been silent for centuries.

"Space travel is so strange, when one considers it," Sherron said. "In minutes—seconds—one is far removed from everything and everyone familiar. So far away that you could never return in a million years, moving under your own power. It requires the most wondrous inventions to return you—man-made miracles. It is almost like dying, but you are not dead. Just—absent."

"There you go with that ghost-talk again. Vulcans are obsessive."
"I have never seen a ghost," Sherron said, sounding disappointed. "I do not have the Sight."

"I did. When I was little."

She raised her head. "Really?"

He nodded. Leonard hadn't thought about it in years. He certainly hadn't said anything about it to anybody, even Jim. He'd had too much to drink.

"My parents' marriage was never stable. They had a pretty bad bust-up when I was five. Mama and I went to stay with my father's mother for awhile. She lives in this quaint little town in rural Georgia, has a big rambling Victorian house just down a dirt road from the local cemetery. One of those old boneyards, graves dating back to the early 19th Century, some of them my relatives. Big mossy oaks, weeping angel statues, wild azaleas and star jasmine everywhere. Picturesque place in the daytime. But at night—the cemetery was visible from my bedroom window, and I would look out and see—things. Misty white figures moving among the stones.

"We'd been there six months when my grandmother's father died at the very respectable age of 99 and was buried in the family plot. I was his namesake, he always spoiled me—used to keep his pockets full of peppermints 'cause he knew I liked 'em. I told Grandma Belle that her daddy was walking up from the cemetery at night and coming to see me. Maybe it was a dream or just my imagination. I missed him a lot. But I swear, it seemed like he and I would visit for hours."

"What did your grandmother say to this?"

"She looked serious and told me it wasn't my grandfather: Big Lee was in Heaven. That was the Devil trying to fool me. The next time it happened, I should tell him to leave me alone and go back where he came from. Then I should close my eyes and pray to Jesus. She scared the piss out of me—I thought Satan was gonna carry me off. So next time I smelled peppermints and cigars and saw Big Lee walking through the wall, I did what she said." Leonard paused. "He never came again."

"That was wrong of your grandmother. If you had the ability to see beyond, you should have been encouraged. Children who are not properly trained can lose their Sight."

"I sure did. Assuming I ever had it." He had never seen any more ghosts after that, not really. His nightly visitor was gone, and the pale figures in Oak Hill Cemetery became what they had probably been all along—mist and imagination. His life since had been blessedly free of the dearly departed. Well, there was the one time four years ago—but that was only a nightmare fueled by whiskey and guilt. Brother Henry was resting quietly now, among the azaleas and weeping angels. His grave was just two over from Great-Grandpa Lee's.

"Someone should have spoken to your grandmother in terms she could understand. Rural people can be closed-minded, but—"

"Honey, my Grandmother Belva has a Ph.D. in American Literature from the University of Virginia. She ain't no dumb hick sitting on the porch with a corncob pipe and a shotgun."

"Then why did she react so? I know Terrans do not put as high a value on Psi-talents as Vulcans, but training is available here."

"Sure. Her brother was gifted that way, by all accounts. My Great-Uncle Benjamin's Psi-score would have made Jim Kirk weep with envy. Ben used to see dead people, among other things. He told his sister once that he saw angels sitting in a tree outside his window, singing to him. He went stark raving mad six months later—schizophrenia. He was twenty-one."
"See, Grandma Belle is an intelligent, educated woman. But she's also deeply religious, an old-school Southern Methodist. She didn't want me talking to dead folks for the same reason she didn't want me playing with a Ouija board or reading Tarot cards. She thinks some doors need to stay shut. Open them, and who knows what could walk right in."

Sherron shook her head. "If one is well-trained and psychologically stable, nothing will come uninvited. To close yourself off out of fear—"

"Caution, not fear. There's a difference."

Sherron's fingers played with the edge of the sofa cushion. "Your brother," she said slowly. "Was he gifted with the Sight?"

Leonard leaned forward and poured himself a shot. "No. I was always the special one. Well, he was pretty good at sports, but I was smarter." Leonard gave her a thin smile. "I mean, obviously. I didn't crash my Mustang into a tree while I was flying on meth."

Her mouth twitched. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Not anybody's fault—except his and the asshole he was with. They both knew better, they'd had all of the anti-drug seminars in school. But teenagers think they're immortal. Guess a gruesome fiery death showed them." Leonard took the shot of whiskey so he'd stop talking. He was talking way too much.

"It must have been so difficult for you," Sherron said. "I think sudden deaths are the worst kind, at least for those left behind. There is no time to prepare oneself."

"It was five years ago. I don't think about Henry often." Leonard set down his liquor glass. He wanted another drink, but if he had any more he was going to be drunk, and he had already been drunk the night before last. One bender a week was enough.

"I see why you and Jim are such friends," she said. "You both feel deeply, yet you spend a great deal of time pretending to feel nothing."

"Isn't that what Vulcans do?"

"Managing one's emotions is not the same as denying them. Sorrow, anger, longing, they exist. It is illogical to deny them." She stretched her hand, fingers brushing his. "As illogical as denying the touch of my hand. You can pretend you do not feel it: That does not make it so."

Her touch burned like a fever. He let her fingers remain on his, enjoying her warmth. He'd been cold all night. Cold for much longer than that, maybe.

"I feel things," he said. "Lots of things."

"About me?" Her voice was barely above a whisper. Her eyes were fixed on him, deep and dark enough to get lost in. Never be found.

"I've wanted you since I saw you," he said. "You know that."

"I thought I did. But after last night—"

"That was last night." He reached out, cupping her face. "Tonight is different."

"Yes: Now there is no time. Three days from now I'll be far away. Who knows when we will see
each other again?" Under his hand, her face twisted, then smoothed again. "It is unfair."

"I know. We don't have to do this. Maybe it would be easier if we didn't. Just—said goodbye." His last words were low, choked. Funny to think that three days ago, he'd had no idea Sherron even existed. Now the thought of never seeing her, all her warmth lost on the other side of 100 billion miles of cold space, pierced him painfully. An oak branch right through the heart.

"Is that what you want?" Sherron said, too calm. "You are right. It would be the logical choice."

"Fuck logic," he said, and kissed her.

A second of hesitation on her part, then she reacted with the same gusto as last night, climbing into his lap and pulling her skirt up, straddling him for better access. She pressed him into the back of the couch, her mouth plundering his. She smelled like roses and that interesting clove aroma which must be Vulcan pheromones. Leonard liked them much better than the Orion ones. She was really aggressive, but he didn't mind, not tonight. He could be aggressive too.

He got his hand under her sweater, exploring hot, smooth skin, until he reached a very well-formed and very bare breast. He broke the kiss. "Damn, honey, don't you ever wear underwear?"

"Vulcan clothes are quite structured. Support garments are not necessary," she said, tugging at his sweatshirt. "I have grown used to wearing Terran outer garments, but I find your brassieres encumbering." One swift jerk of cotton over his head, and he was shirtless.

"Right. Terrible to be encumbered, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said, pulling at the top button of his jeans. "Being trapped—thwarted. I do not like it." Her hands ripped open the rest of the buttons. Her hot little fingers reached inside, but he gripped her wrist.

Before her brow could get any more furrowed, he said: "Fair's fair. Somebody on this couch is still wearing lots of clothes, and it isn't me."

She smirked at him. A movement as swift at the first, and her sweater joined his shirt. Christ, she was stunning—a tiny waist and flat stomach, beautifully planed shoulders leading down to full, pear-shaped breasts—he blinked.

"Leonard?"

"Sorry. I've never seen green nipples before. Not up close and personal, anyway." Jena didn't count: All of her had been that color. It wasn't a shock. "They're—neat." He ran a slow thumb over one pale green circle, and it peaked satisfyingly. Sherron sighed, arching into him.

"I am glad you approve," she said. "Haven't you been with an alien before?"

"Half a lapdance from an Orion cocktail waitress," he said. "That's it." He'd made up for it in sheer numbers of Terrans, though, once upon a time. He wasn't going to mention that right now.

"For a Xenobiologist, you are not very adventurous."

"That's my job. This is fun."

"Let's hope so," she said and kissed him, her breasts mashing against his bare chest in a really enjoyable way. Again she went for his crotch, but again he grabbed her wrist. Sherron made an angry little growling sound in her throat. He grinned at her.
"I haven't studied Vulcan female anatomy in any detail for awhile," he said. "Let's see what I can remember." He slid a hand up Sherron's skirt. "After last night, I owe you."

"Yes," she said, raising an eyebrow at him. "You do." Her wrist relaxed under his. He used that hand to fondle one of those wonderful breasts while his other one journeyed up past her knee. She was wearing stockings—awesome. Then he found exactly what stood between the lacy border at the top of her left thigh and her—nothing. A jolt of heat raced through him.

"No panties," he breathed into her neck. "Stockings and no panties. You're going to kill me."

"Underpants seem illogical without the brassiere," she said.

"Guess there is something to be said for logic," he said, and plunged two fingers into her warm, willing softness. If he remembered Dr. Terwilliger's lectures accurately—and Christ, he hoped he did—the Vulcan female pleasure center was situated differently than a Terran woman's. Less a button and more a ribbon: one sensitive strip of flesh that ran both before and after the vaginal opening.

Now, Terwilliger had never specified, but the gravity differential and the roughness of Vulcan intercourse (as Leonard had observed it) suggested that greater stimulation was necessary to achieve the desired response. Run forceful, almost brutal fingers down that hot ribbon of flesh (which is dotted in tiny nodes that seem to be the source of lubrication—guess Vulcan ladies get lube nubs too) and feel her shiver—yes, that's it. Do it again, and again, and—

"Ouch!" he stopped, using his free hand to catch her chin. "No biting." Sherron hadn't broken the skin on his neck yet, but she would if she kept on.

She pouted like a child. No, not a child—not with those breasts. Like Jena, if the Good Lord had given Jena half a brain. "I was merely responding with enthusiasm to your ministrations."

"Wanna show enthusiasm? Pull my hair, slap my ass, no biting. I'm not Jim Kirk."

"I understand. Continue."

"Was that a promise?" he said, not continuing.

"Yes, you maddening—" she called him something in low, guttural Vulcan that probably wasn't 'sweetie pie,' but he let it go. Going by the heat she was generating down below, he was close to giving her whatever was the Vulcan female equivalent of blue balls. That would be, as Jim might put it, a dick move.

"Just making sure," he said, and then he did continue.

Another way that Vulcan females were different from Terrans: It didn't take nearly as much clitoral stimulation to get Sherron to the point of climax as it had with some of his other partners. (He'd once almost given himself lockjaw going down on Jocelyn—shit, this wasn't the time to be thinking about his ex-wife.)

Going on sheer instinct, he mashed some of those slick little nubs with his thumb while sliding two fingers deep inside her. At the same time, he nipped the lobe of a pointed ear and—bingo, Sherron came with a fierce little scream, her nether muscles tightening painfully on his fingers. He didn't mind. She was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever known, a feast for all the senses: soft and wet and hot and smelling of roses, her high cheekbones flushed dark, those green-tipped breasts as perfect as an alien Aphrodite's. He licked her neck and tasted spices.

If he didn't have her soon, he was going to be the one with serious blue balls.
She pulled back, regarding him with soft eyes. But soon they narrowed. "You said no biting."

"That was a nip. Not the same thing at all."

"I'm not sure I follow your logic. But in any case, we are now even." She started pulling at his jeans—Vulcans are obsessive—but he stopped her.

Her mouth turned down in that dangerous pout. "Leonard—"

"You misunderstand, I think that's a wonderful idea. But not here." Hooking up on the couch like two horny teenagers might be fun for a little while, but he wasn't a teenager anymore. Back cramps weren't fun at all. "I've got a great big bed in the other room," he said. "Let's go use it."

"Very well." In what seemed like one fluid motion, she unstraddled him, got up off the couch, and pulled at her skirt. It fell to the floor. His now naked-except-for-stockings partner headed towards the bedroom with great dispatch.

Here's something else Professor Terwilliger never mentioned—Vulcan ladies have unbelievable derrieres. Well, this one did. Leonard wondered what else nobody had told him about Vulcans and their sexuality. He rubbed at the tender place on his neck, pondering a second.

"Leonard," Sherron called.

He shrugged to himself and started walking. There was only one way he was gonna find out.

"Leonard!" Sherron cried.

A moment later he rolled off her and collapsed back on the bed, breathing hard. He tried to keep in shape, but a couple of hours of non-stop screwing will task anybody's cardiovascular system. Not that he was complaining: Every inch of his body buzzed delightfully. This was exactly what he needed after such a hellish week. It was enough to make a man believe in a merciful Creator.

He reached over for the water carafe he kept on his nightstand. As he did, a slow, hot hand under the sheets started creeping down his torso towards his groin. He drank half a glass and grinned.

"So the rumors are true. Vulcans are insatiable." Leonard offered Sherron the rest of the water. Vulcans don't dehydrate like Terrans, but she'd been working hard. Dear God, she had—there was the almost-empty tube of liquid condom on the nightstand to prove it.

Sherron temporarily desisted. She sat up, taking the water. "You are thinking of Romulans."

"Yeah, but it's like my favorite Xenobiology professor told me: Vulcans are just Romulans who've learned to behave themselves."

"Hmm. Crudely put, but not without truth." Sherron took a long swallow. "You have found nothing to criticize in my recent behavior, I hope."

"No ma'am. You've been well-trained." He smirked at her. "Good as one of Geida's girls—ouch!" She'd bitten his shoulder with her sharp little teeth. "I thought we agreed, no biting."

"Romulans are notoriously untrustworthy." Sherron reached over him to replace the empty water glass. She reclined back, pulling the sheet up. "A Xenobiologist should know that."

"I know things. Lots of things."
"Yes." She stretched contentedly. "I am pleased to discover the rumors about Terrans are true."

"What rumors?"

"Sexually, you're eager and engaging. Like an Orion without the overpowering pheromones."

"You'd know all about those, huh?"

She propped her head on her hand and gave him a kittenish smirk. "Indeed. And Andorans, and Taygetians (the tentacles are surprisingly appealing), and a few others. It has been an interesting seven years in San Francisco."

"But no Vulcans?"

Her expression sobered. "No."

"How come? I can't believe everybody at the Embassy is married or ugly."

"They are not. I have had opportunities. I did not take them."

She turned on her back, looking at the ceiling. "After my husband died and my mourning period was over, when I was still on Vulcan, I received many invitations. I accepted a few. But I soon realized the matter was futile."

"How come?"

"The men—and the invitations were nearly all from males—had agendas. Some were motivated by ambition. I am a daughter of the House of Surak, so a match with me would further a political career. Some were merely curious, for I am also Varek's widow. It does not mean anything on Terra, but on Vulcan it is another matter. His work is well known, and I am featured in much of it. The Curator of Collections for the Museum of Shi'Kahr was particularly persistent."

"He wanted to collect you? Gross."

"Logic doesn't stem all prurient impulses, merely makes them harder to spot," Sherron said. "My husband's work is not well known here. It is a relief not to be the muse of a legend."

"I looked at some of his work. I was curious after our conversation last night. It's amazing stuff. Reminds me of the 20th Century Abstract Expressionists. So much hidden in those furious lines."

"Varek hid many things." She turned over to face him again. Her fingers pulled at the edge of the pillowcase. "I have not been entirely frank. His death was not as I represented it last night."

"It was pon farr, wasn't it?" Seeing her eyes widen briefly: "He died when he was twenty-two. The math wasn't hard. What happened?"

"He feared the Fever. After his first experience of it, I suppose this is not difficult to understand. Varek was an artist, sensitive even by Terran standards. He was terrified by the thought of losing control, as he did when he was fifteen."

"Even though he was married by then?"

"Yes." That pillowcase was going to be shredded if she kept at it, but Leonard let her go ahead. Sherron looked like she needed the stress relief. "My husband did not confide his feelings to me, or to anyone. Secretly he took sedatives, hoping to calm the effects of the Fever. But pon farr will not be denied. We do not know what his state of mind was on his last day, but it could not have been
rational. Varek walked into the desert though it was clear a sandstorm was coming."

"Suicide. I'm so sorry."

"No. He was not rational. His death was accident, tragic accident."

Leonard decided not to press the issue. If it gave her comfort to think that her husband was not in his right mind when he left her, let Sherron keep her illusions. But Len suspected differently.

"If only he had confided in me, perhaps I could have calmed his fears. I always had before. Varek was very sensitive, but I understood him." Her voice quieted. "Or I thought I did."

"Some things are hard to say to your wife, even if the marriage is happy. Didn't he have any close men friends?"

"He did once, a boon companion from boyhood. But they became estranged."

Leonard was pretty sure he already knew the answer, but he asked anyway: "Why?"

"Samar was my betrothed. I cared for him deeply, but not as I cared for Varek. When our betrothal was broken, everyone thought I was mad. I had been promised to Samar for eight years. Our families were long-allied. He was handsome, intelligent, articulate. He looked forward to a brilliant career in medicine." She paused. "For all of their differences, he and Varek had been close since they were boys. The only thing Samar loved more than his best friend was me. We betrayed him in one stroke."

Leonard thought of Shev and Shevar, Spock and Raymon. "Was there a challenge?"

"Oh yes. His grandfather was going to allow it. Such things are rare these days but not unheard of, and the insult was extreme. My grandfather Sarek was inclined to let matters proceed. He did not think a match with Varek was desirable. Samar's triumph was certain: He was twice Varek's size and adept in the physical arts. Varek was not, he never trained beyond what was required in school. He cared only for his own art.

"I went to Samar and begged him to desist in this madness, but he refused. He said Varek had bewitched me in the desert, but once the disturber of my brain was removed I would be his again. I told him it would not happen; I would never marry him now. He grew agitated and said it did not matter. Varek would not have me. I looked at him closely, and I saw it. His own Fever was coming. Perhaps the stress of events had brought it upon Samar, perhaps it was simply his time. I was unnerved. Not all duels end in death, but I feared this one would. I realized what must be done. I went to Sarek and told him that if he did not stop the duel, I would challenge Samar. There is precedent for it from ancient times. Legally, I had the right to fight for my freedom."

"You couldn't have seriously thought you would beat him."

"I am not unadept at the arts. But you are right, he was much larger than me and better trained. Not to mention the Fever—he would have beaten me. But I also knew Samar still wanted me. He would not take the challenge, especially given the state of my health. I was pregnant with Sharok. Even if he was irrational enough to do so, I believed my grandfather would never allow it. I was correct. Sarek intervened, and Samar's grandfather told him that, Fever or no, he must control his emotions and forget me."

"Did he?"

"Beyond anybody's expectations. He joined a monastery and became an adept of Kolinahr. He embraces pure logic; he is divorced from all emotion. He no longer thinks of me."
"That must be a relief."

"He was the last of the direct male line of the House of Suman. He will never be a doctor now, never father children. He spends his days high on Mount Seleya in a cold stone cell, meditating. Feeling nothing. As dead in his way as Varek. No, relief is not the emotion that comes to mind when I think of Samar."

She sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest. "I want no more of Vulcan men, Leonard. Nothing pleases me better than the idea that once my son is a man and has found his One, I will never be entangled in another pon farr. I want no more madness, no more secrets, no more duels fought over my so-called attractions. They have destroyed too many things."

"Hogwash." When she stared at him: "Yeah, it was kind of sucky of you to get knocked up by your fiancé's best friend. But you didn't make him climb up on that mountaintop. Just like you didn't make Varek take drugs and get lost in the desert. They made their own choices."

"You sound like Spock."

"Well, I guess he's got a little bit of sense, after all. Varek and Samar aren't your fault. Quit punishing yourself." Leonard paused. "That's the real reason you don't date Vulcans, right? The guilt. Seems kind of sad. I know the psi-talents are a big part of Vulcan culture, which means they must also be a big part of your sexuality. Don't you miss that?"

"Sometimes. I admit, none of my lovers on Terra have been gifted so."

Sherron fixed him with her eyes. "Except you."

"I'm not that gifted," he said. Despite the water, his mouth felt dry as he said the words.

"You are," she said. "You cannot fool me, Leonard. I have had you inside of me now."

She leaned forward, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You are adept in a different way from Jim Kirk. His kind are known as projective empaths for good reason. Jim projects his own feelings and desires outwards, he lures others in. He can choose to know their feelings or not, and often he ignores them if they prove inconvenient. You cannot do this. You are drawn in by others, all their feelings, good and bad. It is why you are such a brilliant physician. I observed you tonight with Jim, how you touched his face when you feared him injured. You do not need that tricorder as much as you pretend. You knew he was well. You could feel it."

"I'm not sure Jim is ever well," Leonard said. "Not really."

"That's why you cannot separate yourself from him, isn't it? Not until you cure him. It's why you work all those hours at that clinic, far more than are required to graduate. You cannot bear the thought of someone coming there who needs your particular gifts, and you are absent. You feel all that suffering like your own suffering; it tortures you. Like most intensely receptive empaths, you have had to build high walls within yourself to find any respite at all. It goes very far back, does it not? Further than Henry's death."

Leonard looked away from her. "I just broke up with a shrink. Don't try to psychoanalyze me."

"I'm not psychoanalyzing, whatever that is. I am simply telling you the truth the way I know it, the way I have felt it from our time together. I am not T'Lyn: I am only typically adept for one of my kind. But even the least sensitive Vulcan could feel this much anguish. It goes very far back, does it not? Further than Henry's death. All the way back to when you were a small boy, terrified of the
things you could see—beautiful things, horrifying things, real things."

Sherron put her hand on his chin, gently turning his face back to her own. Her eyes were so dark and wide—kind. Who would have thought a Vulcan's could be described that way?

"My dear friend, I am not suggesting that you tear your walls down. They serve you well. But making a door in your fortress would give you some relief. Even a window, just big enough to let light in. To let someone in, sometimes. Or it is not a fortress but a prison. Worse, a tomb."

"I—can't," he faltered. God, he was parched. He wanted a drink—a real one. He needed one: the only medicine that had ever worked against this particularly malady. All of this fear erupting inside, like a rotted hand bursting from a grave.

"You can. You have helped so many people. Let me help you." Her fingers slid up his face, arranging themselves in a strange formation. Two on his forehead, two on his cheekbone, the thumb under his chin. He felt the energy pouring from her, a hot buzzing itch like a swarm of bees under his skin. He wanted to pull back but couldn't. She had him trapped. He should be terrified—he was—but it wasn't all he was feeling. Something else under all that terror, almost like—hope. A ray of heat and light in the shadowy boneyard.

"You must say yes," she whispered. "I could come in uninvited, but I will not."

He didn't say it. He couldn't, not aloud. But she must have been adept enough to hear it: yes

A rough instant of feeling invaded, and then it got much better—the sweet moment after you've plunged into a too-hot bath and the burning stops, replaced by spreading warmth. Then Sherron took her hand away. He felt a chill.

no wait please

She was back, her hand replaced by her lips. A kiss on his forehead, one on his mouth, in the center of his chest, the pit of his stomach, the base of his cock. Following the chakra points, isn't that what they're called? Vulcans must call them something different. He would ask, but he was incapable of speech. Hushed by the tide of sensation that followed her lips, one that started at his forehead and went down, flooding over him like a wave of sunlight but stronger, better, wetter.

Warmth became heat, comfort became need, a lust like he hadn't known in half a lifetime. The painful desire of a teenage boy, when you are sure that if you don't do something with all this heat, spill it somewhere besides your own sad hand, you are going to quite literally die. It was enough to wrest speech from him. "Sherron," he choked.

"Shh, ashal-veh. I know."

With one liquid movement she straddled his hips, taking the length of him inside of herself, as she had several times before. But it was different this time, he realized as he watched himself penetrate her. He could feel her slick heat surrounding his cock and it was like heaven, but he could also—with growing wonder and terror—feel a different pleasure. One he hadn't known even during that hazy, fateful night with Dean, the one which finally broke his marriage apart.

"This was not like being penetrated by a man, taken by another body much like yours. This was being taken by a body that was totally different, if complementary. He felt himself penetrating Sherron and he felt how it must be for her, being penetrated. A hard shaft reaching all the way inside, finding that secret space at the center of you. He felt what was happening both ways and he knew she must feel
it, too. Penetrating and being penetrated, the pleasure doubled, resonating back and forth and swelling with each movement, echoing until it became almost unbearable. It had to end, but he could have wept from the thought of it ending, being alone again. Single.

He thrust into her a final time. He felt the thrust inside himself, swift and shockingly deep. They came together and he felt both climaxes at once. It was indescribable, an endless soft explosion inside his mind. He had no idea what he would be like when the pieces settled. If there would even be a he in the way there was before. He didn't know how anything could ever be the same.

Inside his head, worlds shattered. Galaxies swirled. Many hands caressed him, crowds of voices whispered in his ears. But the truest belonged to her.

*there, sweetheart. now you see. what you have been missing, how it can be.*

*yes. heaven help me, yes. i see everything.*

They weren't speaking Standard. He wasn't even sure it was Vulcan. Something different, perhaps. Older. He would have liked to understand it better, but he was tired. So very tired.

*sleep, my dear one. just sleep.*

Fingers on his face, fluttering over his eyes. A last burst of light, heat, stars. It all went dark.
The Federation Colony at Tarsus IV, Twelve Years Ago

The suns are just setting as Jim makes it to the rooftop, twin orbs sinking over the horizon like big fiery eyes shutting in sleep. There's still some light left, enough that you could see what lies behind the community center if you cared to look. There used to be an amazing view from up here. The agricultural fields stretched all the way to the mountains in the distance, a rich green patchwork rising from what was once barren grey desert. Nobody bothers to look now: Sand and rotting vegetation aren't much of a sight. But even if you turn your head away, your nose won't let you ignore the truth. The stench of a million decaying plants is enough to take your breath and your appetite away. But Jim is still hungry. Everybody is hungry now.

He closes his fingers around the apple in his jacket pocket. Its firm smoothness is satisfying, though not as much as eating it would be, stilling the ache in his guts for a few minutes. He's not going to eat it, though.

Jim walks slowly across the plascrete to the wide flat roof's western corner. There's a utility shed there, and next to it are big white piles of extra fertilizer, overflow from the warehouses below. The plastic bags make good makeshift seating for the kids who like to come up here to hang out. Security has always chased them away: Bags get busted from roughhousing, good fertilizer goes to waste. Nobody worries about that anymore, but Security still doesn't want them up here. It's the Governor's orders that everyone stay in the designated areas, another of his rules meant to keep order in these strange days. But Jim goes where he wants. If he gets caught, he won't get in any real trouble. Governor Kodos likes him; he always has.

As he gets closer to the shed he hears music, and his pace speeds up. Jim hasn't let himself hope he would be here: He hasn't been, not for six days. But now Jim knows it's him. Even now the others come up here sometimes, they play music. But only one other person plays this music.

Oh, the storm is threatening
My very life today
If I don't get some shelter
Yeah, I'm gonna fade away

War, children, it's just a shot away
It's just a shot away
War, children, it's just a shot away
It's just a shot away

Jim smells cigarettes, and he feels his face stretch. He's grinning like an idiot. He can't help it. "Kevin," he says. "Hey, man."

Kevin Riley, his long, lanky body stretched out on a low pile of fertilizer bags, looks up from his book. Not a PADD file, an honest-to-God hardbound book, with pages and everything. The sunset turns his riot of red hair into an amber halo around his head, brings out the gold flush in his olive skin. As he looks at Jim, perhaps Kevin's brilliant green eyes become a bit brighter, or maybe that's just sunset and wishful thinking. The older boy's cool expression doesn't change. It almost never does: Jim can count on one hand the number of times he's seen Kevin smile. None of those times have been in the last four weeks.
Oh, see the fire is sweepin'  
My very street today  
Burns like a red coal carpet  
Mad bull lost its way

War, children, it's just a shot away  
It's just a shot away  
War, children, it's just a shot away  
It's just a shot away

Kevin brushes a finger across the POD hung around his neck, and the blaring music cuts off. He closes his book. "It's past curfew for the under-sixteens," he says, sitting up.

Jim plops down on a bag near him. "I don't wanna go home. Sam's out somewhere, and Mom's in a bad mood."

Kevin takes a drag on his cigarette. "Wonder why."

"It's not what you think. John went to work early this morning, and he's not back yet. Mom tried calling over to the lab, but there's no answer. Security wouldn't let her in. She's worried."

"What, does she think he's out getting laid? He's a research scientist. My mom's been gone three days at a stretch when she's in the middle of a project. And that's when we all weren't dying of hunger."

Kevin flicks his cigarette. "Jesus, dramatic much?" Jim says, frowning. "We're not dying."

"How long do you think we can survive on 800 calories a day? With everybody over fifteen still working ourselves to exhaustion, trying to pull the colony's collective ass from the fire." Kevin gazes at Jim through a haze of smoke. "Slow starvation is still starvation."

Jim's answer is to take the apple out of his pocket and put it on the bag beside Kevin. He blinks at it. "Where the hell did you get that?"

"Governor Kodos had a basket of them at lunch. All the kids got one."

Kevin looks at Jim for a minute. "Did they."

"Yeah. But—I don't want it. Why don't you take it?"

Kevin jumps to his feet, pitching his cigarette off the roof. There's emotion on his face now, plenty of it: naked anger. Jim takes a step back, for a second sure that Kevin is going to punch his lights out.

Then the older boy seems to get hold of himself. His hands clench at his sides. Slowly, he picks up the apple and holds it out to Jim. "Take it."

Jim shakes his head. "Take it." Kevin throws the apple at Jim like a pitcher lobbing a killer fastball. Sheer reflex makes Jim catch the fruit. He stifles a cringe and shoves it back into his pocket.

Kevin sits back down on the bags. He stares at his boots. His face is calm again, but Jim can still feel the rage coming off him like heat from the sands below.

They sit in silence. They're silent until Jim can't stand it. He takes his own POD out of his shirt,
brushing his fingers across it. His favorite new-old song starts to play, by a band he's recently unearthed from his dad's collection: Oasis. But Liam Gallagher doesn't get more than half a lyric out before Kevin reacts. "Turn that shit off!" he snaps, still not looking at Jim.

Jim squeezes the POD until it's silent and shoves it back into his shirt. He gets to his feet. "You know, I came here tonight because I wanted to see you. I had to rest three times on the way over. What a fucking waste of energy."

Kevin raises his head. "You should have eaten the apple."

"I was saving it for you, moron! You're bigger than me and you have work detail. You need it more than I do. I was trying to be nice, and you're being such a dick." Jim wilts onto the bags, all of his anger suddenly gone. He's too tired to stay angry, especially at Kevin. He reaches into his pocket and holds out the apple again. "Come on, man. Just take it."

Kevin stares at it, anger and hunger warring in his eyes. Slowly, he reaches out. His fingers close around the apple. He holds it in his hand like a heavy weight.

"Why are you so pissed at me?" Jim says. He keeps his voice from breaking on those last few words, but it's a close call. When Kevin doesn't say anything, Jim feels his heart skip a beat. Two beats, maybe. He can't seem to get a real breath. He has to force the words out. "You've been acting so weird these last couple of weeks. Even weirder than everybody else is acting. You barely talk to me, and you look at me like you don't even—what the hell did I do?"

His voice does break that time, like a whiny little baby's, and he feels shitty about it. He tries so hard to keep up with Kevin, who is four years older and insanely smart and cool. It wasn't hard before the Rot came. Kevin was nice to Jim then, hanging out with him and lending him books, real books, and turning him on to awesome Twentieth Century music, bands that aren't even in George Kirk's huge cache of data files. Sometimes, Jim has let himself hope that Kevin more than likes him, that he—but in saner moments, Jim knows better. Kevin always has a girlfriend or a boyfriend, sometimes both at once. He's that cool. Jim used to tell himself that it was enough to know Kevin was his friend. Now he'd settle for knowing Kevin doesn't hate him.

"I'm not mad at you," Kevin says, like he is mad at somebody. He pauses. "Ari Wiesenthal was sobbing at lunch—our lunch. He'd finished all his rice, but it wasn't enough. Security wouldn't let his mom give him any of her meal. Debbie has to work. So he just cried. Six years old, what else is he supposed to do? Nobody offered him an apple."

"Yellow Group didn't get fruit? That doesn't make sense. Everything gets distributed evenly, Governor Kodos makes sure. He says fairness and self-discipline are gonna get us through this."

"Kodos says a lot of things. Ever read his books? I have. You would be amazed at the things he says—what he implies, anyway, the dark shit lurking in the corners of his philosophy. What can you expect from a disciple of Heidegger? Fucking fascist."

"I don't understand."

Kevin makes an impatient gesture. "Open your eyes! You're just a kid, but you're a smart kid. Haven't you noticed a difference between the groups? Maybe until today we got fed the same, but we're not the same. Not even close. There's a pattern to the make-up of the Yellow Group and the Red Group, the distribution wasn't random like Kodos said. He must think the colonists are fools not to notice. Maybe y'all are—nobody else seems to see it."

"See what? What the hell are you talking about?"
"Who got apples today? Jim and Sam Kirk, Richard Davies, Amanda Simpson, Peter Wilkins, Chandler Fuller, Heidi and Christie Standish, Evan Foster—that's all I remember off the top of my head. Doesn't matter, you all look alike." When Jim just stares at him: "White folks, Jim. Take a picture of the Red Group kids, and it would look like a poster for the Hitler Youth."

"No." Jim shakes his head. "No. Governor Kodos wouldn't do that. Why would he do that?"

"Because he's a racist asshole. I know that's hard for you to swallow, he's always been nice to you. That's the motherfucking point. As far as he's concerned, boys like you are the pinnacle of human evolution: blond, blue-eyed, pink-cheeked little supermen. I'm telling you, I've read his books. It must have really burned his ass, having to make a show of liberality all those years he was climbing the Federation ladder on Terra. But things are different here, especially after those idiots on the Colony Council panicked and voted him emergency powers. If Kodos wants to put all his Aryan darlings in one group and feed them apples, he can."

"Astrid Cooper is in the Yellow Group. She's blonder than I am."

"Yeah, she looks the part. She looks like her mom. But have you ever talked to her dad? He's Romany stock—really proud of the fact. Why do you think Astrid's nickname is Gypsy?"

When Jim doesn't have a response for that, Kevin goes on. "Something awful is coming. We're stuck out here in the back of beyond and there's nobody to help us, not with the solar storms as bad as they've been this year. At first I thought the worst that could happen is we all starve to death wearing these fucking badges. But now . . . " Kevin looks down at the apple. "Kodos must be feeling real sure of himself. He's been playing fair so far, but maybe he's realized he doesn't have to. He can do what he wants here. Anything he wants."

Jim traces the red circle pinned to his own collar. He's never thought about it, the badge is just a way to get fed at lunchtime. But staring at the yellow circle on Kevin's jacket, he thinks about what it suddenly reminds him of. In his mind's eye he sees pictures from his history texts, of pale-faced people with yellow stars on their coats. Then he shakes his head.

"This is insane. Kodos isn't a Nazi. This isn't a fucking concentration camp!"

"Not yet. But that's how they got started. Separating the populace into two parts—the ones who deserve to live, and the ones who don't."

"No," Jim says again. He's going to keep saying it until Kevin stops talking crazy. "You're paranoid: This is hunger talking. Jesus, eat the damn apple."

Kevin stands. He draws his arm back and pitches the apple as hard as he can. Jim follows it with his eyes, the small red fruit sailing over the rooftop railing into the gathering dark, all its sweetness lost from sight. His stomach twists in protest, but he says nothing.

"I don't want anything Kodos has touched," Kevin says. "Neither should you."

"He's a good man, Kevin. He's just trying to look out for us—all of us."

"That's your daddy issues talking. Kodos isn't good, no matter how many times he pats you on the head and calls you Jimmy. Even if he was—the Council should never have given him those emergency powers. Ever read Heart of Darkness? You should. There's a lot about it that pisses me off: Joseph Conrad was a racist asshole himself, when you come right down to it. But he did make one excellent point in the book. When a man gets beyond civilization, when the only law he has to obey is the one inside himself, that's when you find out who he really is. I think we're about to see
the real Kodos. I hope it's not as bad as I think. I hope to God it's not."

"I'm going home," Jim says. He can't stay and listen to this. Kevin's words have put a cold knot in the pit of his stomach, one that isn't hunger. It isn't fear—Jim isn't scared of anything. But he's so damn tired, he could go to bed and sleep for a hundred years.

"Fine, go. But take this with you." Kevin puts his book in Jim's hands.

Jim reads the title: The Wasteland. He glances at a few pages and makes a face. "Poetry?"

"I know you're into novels, but this is good stuff. Eliot was an overprivileged white boy, but he got it. He knew all the ways the world can fall apart. I don't know how he knew, I guess that's why they call him a genius." Kevin pushes the book at Jim's chest. "Read it. For me?" He puts a hand on Jim's shoulder. Jim feels the manipulation and doesn't care. He's waited a long time for Kevin to touch him again, any kind of touch. He takes the book.

"I'll read it if you'll meet me here tomorrow. You have to promise to talk about normal shit—no conspiracy theories."

"Yellow Group has morning assembly. Then I have work detail until 20:00. We're still trying to save the southwest fields." He shrugs. "Wasted effort, but whatever."

"Meet me early, then. Here at dawn—assembly never gets going until 8:00." When Kevin doesn't answer, Jim grips his hand. "Please. I—I miss you." He wants to look away as he says this, but he doesn't. That's what a kid would do, and Jim isn't a kid. He needs Kevin to know it.

Kevin sighs. "Here we go with the big eyes. Lord save me from needy white boys."

"You're half white."

"Half. That, my pretty Irish lad, is the motherfucking point." But Kevin's fingers tighten on Jim's. "I'll be here." He pauses. "I've missed you, too." His face is as calm as ever, but his eyes are intent on Jim. His golden skin shimmers in the sunset, a few drops of sweat beading his palely freckled cheeks. Jim would give a lot—lunch tomorrow and the next day—to touch him now, to feel that fine, tense face under his fingertips. But he can't. He's not Kevin's boyfriend. Jim's never had a boyfriend, or even a girlfriend. Kissing Gypsy Cooper behind the hydroponics sheds doesn't count. He bites his lip, turns to go. Then he stops. "Come with me. Curfew for the over-fifteens starts in half an hour. It wouldn't—you shouldn't be late." Jim doesn't say what he's really thinking, that it would be bad for Kevin to get caught by Security. Governor Kodos doesn't like him. It's not a racial thing—Kevin and authority figures have never mixed well. The Governor wouldn't do anything serious—he's not a bad man. Still, it would be better if Kevin wasn't caught.

Kevin lights another cigarette. "I'll go in a little while." He turns, looking out over the ruined fields. "I need time to think."

He thinks too much, that's his problem. But if Jim argues the point, Kevin might not show up tomorrow. So Jim shuts his mouth and goes. As he starts climbing down, he hears music again.

Oh the flood is threatening
My very life today
Gimme, gimme shelter
Or I'm gonna fade away

He pauses at the top of the ladder, hoping for one last glimpse of Kevin. But he doesn't see him. His
friend lost in a heart of darkness, within and without.

Today is gonna be the day
That they’re gonna throw it back to you
By now you should’ve somehow
Realized what you gotta do
I don't believe that anybody
Feels the way I do about you now

Backbeat, the word is on the street
That the fire in your heart is out
I'm sure you've heard it all before
But you never really had a doubt
I don't believe that anybody
Feels the way I do about you now

The music cuts off. Jim gets his hand around the fingers fumbling at his throat and bends them backwards. A hiss and he's shoved back against the pillow, hard. Fully awake now, Jim blinks and sees his brother glaring down at him.

"Fuck, Jim," Sam says, rubbing his injured hand.

"Sorry. You shouldn't sneak up on people when they're asleep."

"People shouldn't fall asleep blasting their PODs loud enough to shake the walls. I can't believe Mom hasn't bitched you out."

"She had a few before she went to bed. A phaser attack wouldn't wake her up."

"A fucking famine on, and Winnie still gets her vodka. Amazing." Sam sits down on the other bed and starts unlacing his boots. The movements are awkward with exhaustion. Jim glances at the clock —23:17. Sam is hours past curfew, but Jim doesn't have to ask where he's been.

"Sifa okay?" he says.

"She's worried about her little sister. Olive hasn't talked in two days."

"Yeah, I heard the kids in Yellow Group aren't doing so good."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Kevin told me. We were up on the roof tonight."

"Goddamn it!" Sam whips his t-shirt over his head. When he emerges, his face is flushed. "What have I told you about breaking curfew?"

"Oh, you can see your friends, but I can't see mine?"

"Sifa's my girlfriend. It's different." Sam gives Jim a stern look. "You shouldn't be hanging out with Kevin any time, day or night. He's a troublemaker. Seriously, aren't things bad enough without you pulling this shit?"

Jim sits up. He realizes Kevin's book is still on his lap, and he wraps a hand around it. "I'll see him if I want. You can't tell me what to do. Just because you're jealous of him—"
"Are you fucking kidding? Why would I be jealous?"

"He's smart, he's hot. He's awesome—that's why everybody likes him."

"No, that's why everybody wants to have sex with him. Except for us guys who aren't into dick and a couple of girls—like Sifa—who have better sense. Nobody really likes him. Kevin's got a chip on his shoulder the size of a star freighter."

"I like Kevin."

"Yeah. I know you do." Sam suddenly sounds as tired as he looks. He twists his t-shirt in his hands. "I wouldn't care if you followed him around until doomsday, even if he is an asshole. It's a free colony—anyway, it used to be. But he likes you, too. That's what worries me."

"What do you mean?"

"Kevin's had sex with everyone in the colony over the age of fifteen who will have him. Maybe he's gotten bored. Maybe he's ready to expand his horizons."

"I still don't—"

"Jesus H. Christ." Sam pitches his t-shirt at the wall. "He wants to fuck you, Jimmy."

Jim stares at his brother.

Sam clenches a hand to the back of his sunburned neck. "You've always been smart—to the point of obnoxiousness. But you don't get to be ahead of the curve this time. Not if I have anything to say about it."

"You don't—" Jim swallows. Water is still plentiful on Tarsus IV, but right now it feels like he hasn't had a drink in days. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Please. It's so fucking obvious." Sam's mouth twists in a half-smirk. "I know you're not a total innocent. I've seen you coming back from the hydroponics sheds with Astrid Cooper. I never said anything to Mom—trying for second base with a girl your age is what you should be doing. Not getting sucked in by a pretentious prick who's filled your head with bullshit."

"Wow, that's really homophobic."

"Oh my God. Make out with a boy behind the sheds if you want. Pete Wilkins almost passes out every time you walk by, and he's cute as hell for a thirteen-year-old. Thirteen. Like you."

Jim shakes his head. "No. Kevin and I are friends. He talks to me about books, movies, music, all kinds of shit. He knows things. Pete thinks Radiohead is some kind of android." Jim looks down at his book, tracing a finger over its faded gold title. "Kevin talks to me. Like you and I used to talk. Before you got so busy." It's not really the same thing. Jim knows it. But it's not entirely different, either.

Sam crosses the room and sits down on the bed next to Jim. "I know I haven't been around much. Things are so messed up right now."

"You got busy before the Rot came."

"Okay, I got a girlfriend—it's allowed. But I'll always want to talk to you." Sam reaches out, gently pushing Jim's hair from his eyes. "I did even when you were a little snot. Remember all those lunch
periods at Sacred Heart? I let you play *Star Wars* with me and my buds every day."

"Big deal. I always had to be Yoda."

"You were two feet tall, kiddo. Who else could you be?"

"You made me do the voice! Totally screwed up my syntax. Sister Bernadette thought I had a processing disorder."

"The point is," Sam says, sighing, "that I wasn't playing *Star Wars* with random kindergartners when I was nine, just like I'm not hanging out with Pete Wilkins now. I hang with you because I'm your brother. Kevin isn't. He's not interested in your conversation. I don't care how smart you are—he's not. You keep running after him, and sooner or later he'll try to take advantage."

*Maybe I want him to. Ever think of that?* Jim doesn't realize he's muttered this aloud until he sees his brother staring at him.

"You don't have the first fucking clue," Sam says, after an awkward pause. "Sex is a big deal. If you don't think so, you really have been hanging out with Kevin too much. I know he's reduced it to the level of getting a Coke from the replicator, but that's not how it should be."

"Come on. I know you weren't just trimming Mrs. Hardy's hedges last year. Did you love her?"

Sam scowls. "No, smartass, I didn't. She was a bored trophy wife and I was a desperate virgin. Which is why I know what I'm talking about, especially now that I've met Sifa. When you do it with somebody you love, who loves you, it's—I don't know if I can make you understand. It's different—better. Amazing. Otherwise, sex is just exercise and ego-trip. You'd be better off watching *Star Wars.*"

"I'm not five anymore."

"No, but you're still a kid. You can get in trouble, like when you went over that cliff three years ago." Seeing Jim flinch: "No, I haven't forgotten that. I won't ever forget it." Sam grips Jim's arm so hard it hurts. "I was happier than anyone to see Mom toss Frank out on his ass. You know I had good reason, though it tears me up that you almost had to die for it to happen. For two years, I never let that piece of shit lay a hand on you, even if it meant I took the heat. I took it, and I'm not sorry I did. But I didn't go through hell to see you get fucked over by that cocksucker Kevin Riley."

There's no answer Jim can make to this. Three years later it still makes his guts twist, knowing what Sam went through for him. It gutted Jim the two years before the cliff, it's why the cliff happened. He woke up one day and saw his brother dressing, he saw the fresh bruises on Sam's back. Jim couldn't take it anymore. He had to go big, make a gesture that couldn't be ignored. Frank was going down, even if George Kirk's Corvette had to go with him. Jim was going to take the heat for once.

But it didn't work out like that. After Frank plastered a big shit-eating grin on his face and got rid of the droid officer, Sam got the beating of his life. *This was all your goddamn fault,* Frank hissed, belt in hand. *You should have been watching him.* Ultimately, what happened that day did get rid of Frank—the beating was bad enough that one of Sam's teachers finally noticed and set the gears of Social Services in motion. The plan worked, but it was still Sam who took the heat. He was the one with welts and bruises, while nothing bad happened to Jim. Nothing at all.

Sam runs a finger across Jim's cheek. That's when Jim realizes his brother is wiping away his tears. Jim pulls back, swiping viciously at his face.

"Jimmy—"
"Shut up, Sammy. Just shut the fuck up. Quit trying to protect me all the time. I'm not a baby." Even if he is crying like one.

"You're my little brother. I'll always protect you." Sam doesn't say this like he's trying to be a hero. He just says it, like it's the most normal thing in the world. Jim shakes his head, sniffling.

"I know what I'm doing. Kevin is my friend. Don't you dare go to Mom about this."

"A month ago I would have. But now—even if I could catch her between benders, I'm not sure it would do any good. Too much shit is going on. So I'm going to do what you want so bad, and talk to you like you're an adult. I want you to listen like one."

Sam puts his hand under Jim's chin and turns his brother back to face him. It strikes Jim then, looking into Sam's face, how young he is, too—seventeen only a month ago. But Sam's eyes aren't young. They haven't been for a long time, not since Mom married Frank.

"I know I mess with you sometimes," Sam says. "As your big brother, it's kind of my job. I've thrown all the usual stuff at you—you're ugly and obnoxious and too damn smart for your own good. But we both know the truth: You're beautiful, kiddo. It's like you got all the best parts of Mom and Dad, put together in just the right way. Not like me—I look too much like Grandpa Tiberius. But maybe that's a blessing in disguise. I've never been lonely, but I have to work at it, get to know people. I don't stick out in a crowd. You always will. People are going to want things from you, all kinds of things, just because of that face. They won't care about the real Jim Kirk—they won't give a shit about what's underneath, if you're sad or lonely. Surface is all they want. If you want to get used like that, it's up to you. But realize that's what they're doing. They'll take big bites out of you, and you won't get anything back except a few cheap orgasms. Is that what you really want?"

Jim feels his eyes prickling again. He digs nails into his palm to stop the tears, swallows hard. "No."

"Good." Sam ruffles Jim's hair. "You deserve better. Next time you see Kevin, kick him in the balls. That's the only intimate contact you two should have."

Sam gets up and goes over to his bed, a satisfied look on his face. He pulls back the quilt and stretches out, folding his arms behind his head. "I've never seen the appeal, anyway. His face doesn't move. You may as well fuck a Vulcan. If Vulcans fucked."

"Sure they do. Why wouldn't they?"

"Well, I don't want to know about it. I bet there's math involved." Sam yawns widely. "Shit, I'm tired. Kodos had us digging all these big ditches out in the northeast field today. Irrigation or something, but I don't know what the hell there is to irrigate at this point." He yawns again. "Let's call it a night, huh?" He looks up. "Lights." The room goes dim. "Good night, Jimmy."

"Night, Sam." Jim stretches out on his own bed, but he's not sleepy anymore. His brain is spinning. Too many images flicker across his mental screen. Kodos holding out an apple, an approving smile on his face. His mother sitting at the table, a bottle of vodka at her elbow, staring silently at her hands. His brother, gazing at Jim and telling him he's beautiful. Kevin standing on the rooftop, looking at Jim and telling him he wants to jump down and run across them to the hills far away. Kevin, looking at Jim with those hypnotic eyes. Always looking at him.

Sam knows about a lot of things, but he doesn't know Kevin. Not the real Kevin, the one Jim knows. The thought of Kevin kissing him, touching him—it makes Jim's mind spin faster. His body goes heavy and hot all over, the best and strangest feeling. It's only a little like the one he gets when he kisses Gypsy Cooper. Kissing her is fun, feeling her up is even better: Breasts are great, the little
experience Jim has of them. But Kevin, Kevin—he'd trade Gypsy and Heidi and every other girl he's kissed, delete every last loop of Orion porn he's collected (he still can't figure out what they're saying half the time, anyway). He'd do all of it to kiss Kevin just once.

And if Kevin wanted more—Jim shudders head to toe, his face burning at the images this throws on his mental screen. He's never thought of sex like that before—even after all those afternoons behind the hydroponics sheds with Gypsy, the late nights with his loops and his left hand. He hasn't thought of sex as something that could really happen to him. He knew it would have to one day, but the knowledge was abstract. Now Sam has ripped the blinders from his eyes, and it's all become real.

_I want to have sex with Kevin Riley, Jim thinks. I don't care who that pisses off._

He doesn't want Gypsy Cooper or Pete Wilkins, now that he knows who he really wants. He'll make Kevin see that he's not a little kid, he knows what he's doing. When he makes Kevin see that, when it happens, it will be awesome. Not weird or scarring like Sam fears—it won't hurt him. Sex shouldn't hurt. Jim may be a thirteen-year-old virgin, but he knows that.

"Christ, I can actually hear your brain churning from here," Sam huffs. "Put your earbuds in and get some sleep." Jim obeys, shaking the two tiny plastic pieces from the bottom of the POD and sticking them in his ears. The song starts again, his new-old favorite:

_Today was gonna be the day_  
_But they'll never throw it back to you_  
_By now you should've somehow_  
_Realized what you're not to do_  
_I don't believe that anybody_  
_Feels the way I do about you now_

_And all the roads that lead you there are winding_  
_And all the lights that light the way are blinding_  
_There are many things that I_  
_Would like to say to you_  
_But I don't know how_

Poor Kevin, he thinks too much. Jim feels a new sympathy towards his friend, a protectiveness. He's going to convince Kevin to stop worrying. The Governor is a good man. They're going to get through this, and then they'll be together. Everything is going to be fine. Nobody will get hurt, not ever again.

Jim's eyelids start to grow heavy. He begins drifting off, the music getting mixed up with the images flitting across his brain, so many images of the same person. Kevin reading, Kevin talking, Kevin smiling—his rare, beautiful smile. Jim swears to himself that he'll make Kevin smile more after this is all over. He stretches out, sinking further and further into sleep. The lyrics of the song wrap around him, soft as a cloud, sweet as a dream. Solemn as a promise.

_I said maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me_  
_And after all, you're my wonderwall_  
_I said maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me_  
_You're gonna be the one that saves me_  
_You're gonna be the one that saves me_
xxvii. Kirk

Tarsus IV, 2246 (cont.)

It's just light out, but Security is already milling around the square in front of the community center. Jim has to duck behind a clump of trees for some minutes, waiting for three Security team members to quit jabbering at each other and move on. As he waits, he peers around the tree's trunk, one hand resting on the prickly purple bark. There are more Security people than the usual dozen that attend every assembly, at least ten times that many. They're wearing their winter uniforms though it's sweltering out, the long black cloaks concealing their upper halves. It's odd, but everything is these days, and Jim doesn't think about it once they've finally moved on. He makes a dash to the back corner of the building, where the ladder to the roof is attached.

Kevin isn't there, though the twin suns are now up, turning the magenta sky to a rosy pink. It's the only cheerful thing about the landscape behind the building. The rotted plants don't stink so much this early in the day, but you can still see them through the mist. Outside the squares of rot is sand and more sand, all the way to the sullen grey mountains. One big stretch of dead things.

Though it's already hot enough to break a sweat, Jim shivers. We should never have come here, he thinks. Nobody was meant to live in this place.

Suddenly, the words come back. It isn't normal for him to go around spouting poetry like some kind of geek, but it seems like the right thing to say in this moment. The only thing.

'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the—the—'

He stops. He doesn't remember the rest, though he must have read the two verses a dozen times last night. The ones Kevin had underlined in heavy black ink.

"The—the—shit," Jim says.

"—the dry stone no sound of water," a calm voice says behind him.

Jim nods. Now he remembers the rest:

'Only there is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.'

Silence a minute. Jim looks out over the dead land. Never should have come here. He shivers again. Warm fingers rest on the back of his neck.

"Well," Kevin says. "Good morning, starshine."
Jim turns. Kevin is—well, not smiling, he doesn't do that—but he's not frowning, either.

"I read it," Jim says. "The Wasteland. All of it."

"I figured. Fitting, huh?"

"Depressing."

Kevin raises a brow, then looks pointedly at the rotting fields. "Yeah, the poetry's depressing." He shrugs. "Most great literature is. Sex and death instead of robots and explosions."

"Next time, lend me the sexy poetry."

"I'll see if I can dig up that volume of Baudelaire I've got lying around somewhere."

Kevin yawns, stretching his arms. The rosy light makes his green eyes glitter, puts a flush of pink on his high cheekbones, his full lips. Jim has to grip the roof railing against a sudden, irresistible urge to reach out and touch his friend's face.

"Jim? You okay?" Fingers brush the back of Jim's neck again. Jim looks down at his own hands, watches their knuckles turn white.

It seemed easy, safe in his own bed last night. Telling Kevin how he felt seemed like the easiest thing in the world. Now it feels like another hand is on him, gripping his throat. Jim swallows. He looks up at his friend again, into those green eyes, now grown concerned.


"I actually slept last night. First time in ages I got more than a couple of hours." Kevin's mouth quirks. "Must be all the fresh air and exercise."

"We know it's not a clean conscience," Jim says, forcing himself to sound casual, too.

Kevin runs a thoughtful hand through his mop of red curls. "I had the weirdest dream last night. I was back in Eatonville at my Grandfather Joseph's house. He's been dead six years: Bet I haven't thought of him three times since the funeral. Never liked him much—I overheard him refer to me once as 'Phyllis' little high-yellow boy.' Bible-thumping old fool. He was a Baptist minister, used to make me listen to all these stories about Daniel and the lion's den and the coat of many freaking colors. I like to died of boredom all those Sunday afternoons at his house."

As Kevin talks, his voice slows down, vowels slurring in a pleasant way. Most of the time, he doesn't sound like he comes from anywhere in particular, but once in awhile you hear it, a voice reminiscent of humid nights and dark country roads, jasmine-scented breezes and moss swaying in old oak trees. Jim loves this voice.

"Anyway, Grandpa Joe and I were in his study playing dominoes. I was back in Eatonville at my Grandfather Joseph's house. He's been dead six years: Bet I haven't thought of him three times since the funeral. Never liked him much—I overheard him refer to me once as 'Phyllis' little high-yellow boy.' Bible-thumping old fool. He was a Baptist minister, used to make me listen to all these stories about Daniel and the lion's den and the coat of many freaking colors. I like to died of boredom all those Sunday afternoons at his house."

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"Anyway, Grandpa Joe and I were in his study playing dominoes. He was a master at it—used to make those tiles do the damn jitterbug. I felt dizzy watching them, all that black and white flashing in front of my eyes. I started to get sick, sick as a dog. I told him I wanted it to stop. I just wanted everything to stop. He put his hand on my arm, and he said to me, "Son, you're almost home. Your mama is already waiting for you."

Kevin stops, looking down and biting his lip. He doesn't cry—Jim can't imagine him doing it—but his eyes sparkle wetly in the morning light. He is silent a long time.

"What happened then?" Jim prods.
“Nothing. That was it. The dream was a lot more interesting in my head.” Kevin looks up, frowning. “It was probably indigestion. I think the rice is going moldy.”

“Have you heard from your mom?”

“No. You guys seen John?”

“Huh-uh. Guess they’re still working.”

“Yeah. My dad said last night that it's a good sign—if they're holed up in the lab they must be onto something good.” But Kevin doesn't look convinced.

“Well, maybe they have found a cure for the Rot. I mean, why couldn't they? Your mom and my stepdad and the others—this is what they do.”

“You're forgetting. They're the ones who made the fucking Rot, trying to kill all the weevils.”

“If they can make it, they can kill it. That's probably what your dream meant. Your grandpa was telling you that we're almost through this.”

“If Grandpa Joe came back to tell me anything, it would be that I'm going to Hell for sodomy.”

Jim blinks away the many sweaty images that puts on his mental screen. He focuses on last night's promise to himself, to keep Kevin from worrying so much. "We're going to be okay," he says. "Your mom and John and the others are going to kill the Rot, and then they can replant." He thumps the pile of plastic bags. "With this superfertilizer your mom invented, we can have new crops in a few weeks. Everything is going to be fine." He looks out at the fields, imagining them as they once were, green with life and promise. The image is so vivid it almost seems real. He smiles a little.

“Maybe they will, maybe they won't. I won't be here to find out.”

Jim's head whips around. "What?"

“You didn't know my Grandpa Joe. If my subconscious is spitting him up, it isn't to get me to sit here like a sheep. The Reverend Joseph Johnson was never passive a day in his life; none of the Johnsons are. I have an ancestor who ran away from a sugarcane plantation and lived in the swamp for almost a year, eating acorns and wild blackberries, until he found a Seminole tribe that would take him in. He didn't wait around for somebody to save his ass, and neither am I.” Kevin's eyes glitter like a man with a fever.

“Jesus, what the hell are you planning?”

“I'm getting out. After morning assembly, I'm going to fake sunstroke and go to the Infirmary. That's right next to Stores. I'll sneak in there and get some stuff—not enough to deprive anyone else, just a few thousand calories. There are blankets there, too, and camping gear. Then I'm heading out towards the mountains. Remember the survival training they gave us when we first got here? Tarsus IV has potable water, if you can stand the taste of sulphur. There are some edible roots and things in the mountains, too—not enough to justify an expedition, or my dad would already have taken people out there to gather provisions. But there's probably enough to feed one person for months. I can survive until this is over. I don't think the scientists have a prayer against the Rot. They designed that original fungus a little too well. But the solar storms have to abate sometime. The Federation will get a ship through.”

“What about your parents?”
"I sounded out Mom and Dad a few days ago. They wouldn't even listen to the idea. Mom is determined to find a cure for the Rot, and Dad—he's a Starfleet officer. It's his duty to stay. But I haven't taken any loyalty oath."

"So you're just going to leave? Your parents and—everybody?" Jim hears his voice rising to that whiny baby pitch. He swallows hard, pressing his knuckles against his throat.

Kevin frowns at him. "You're not Yellow Group. Kodos likes you. He'll take care of you and the other kids in Red Group. I don't trust him to do that for me."

"They'll look for you. Security will track you down, and you'll get into—"

"They won't. They can't waste the manpower. Anyway, it's one less mouth to feed."

Jim looks down at his hands, mind racing. He's seeing a dozen scenarios in his head, all of them bad. "This isn't the Florida swamps. There's nothing out there. Maybe you'll find those roots, maybe you won't. It gets cold in the desert at night, really cold. You could freeze to death if you're not careful. You've seen the native bugs, they're like spiders and scorpions on steroids. Where they bite you, it turns necrotic. Your arm could fall off."

"At least one-armed me won't get bossed around by Kodos anymore."

"You're insane. This is insane. You can't just—" Jim stops, thinks. "Take me too."

"What? No."

"Two people have a better chance of surviving than one. I won't slow you down, I did better on the survival training drills than you did. Just tell me where to meet you after assembly—"

"Are you deaf? No."

"Why not?"

"I just told you why not. Kodos—"

"You don't know what he's planning. If he's really crazy, do you think I'd be better off here?"

"Your mom—"

"She doesn't care what happens to me. Not really." Jim doesn't say this in a melodramatic way. He's not being melodramatic: just truthful. "John's a nice guy—nicer than Mom's last husband, anyway. But I'm not his kid."

Kevin is silent a moment. "Sam will care."

"Maybe at first. But he's busy looking after Sifa and her sister." Jim clenches his hands, then unclenches them. "It's okay. Her mom is with the scientists too, and she and Olive don't have a dad. Anyway, Sam's going to marry her." He hasn't told Jim this, but Jim knows. It's pretty obvious once you've seen Sam and Sifa together.

"Christ, Jim." Kevin shakes his head. But Jim can see Kevin pondering the idea, weighing it in that clever, complicated brain of his. For a second, Jim thinks Kevin is going to agree. Then he shakes his head again. "No. It won't work."

"Why not?"
"It just won't." Kevin doesn't look at him.

"Fuck you. That's not an answer."

Kevin says nothing. Jim looks at him, really looks. He looks at Kevin and sees—not just what he's always seen, his distractingly hot best friend. It's as if he can see through Kevin, to what's behind those brilliant eyes. (Jim won't have the tests for another year: Psi-rating is determined in high school. But Jim knows, even before the excited instructor gives him the news about his score. This is the moment he realizes what he can do, when he really wants to do it. The same thing his mother can do—and his brother, in a different way. The gift Winnie Murray has given both her sons, more valuable than music files and a lot more trouble.)

"Sam is right," Jim says. "You do want me."

Kevin's head jerks up, face gone pale. His mouth works. Jim can see him trying to get the denial out. But for all his cool, Kevin hates to lie, he always has. Reverend Joseph's Bible stories did more of a number on him than he realizes.

"Yeah," he says at last. "I do. That's why you can't go." He folds his arms over his chest. "You and me out in the desert, alone under desperate circumstances—it would be a disaster."

"Why?" Jim asks, hurt. "If something happened—"

"You're thirteen."

"I know how old I am. I'm only reminded of it every goddamn minute by you and Sam. I know what I'm doing."

Kevin shakes his head. "You don't."

"How the hell do you know?"

Kevin sits down on the fertilizer bags in a tired way. "Because four years ago, I was you."

It takes Jim a minute to get it. When he does, he sits down next to Kevin. He doesn't touch his friend—he's pretty sure Kevin doesn't want to be touched right then. So he just sits, waiting for Kevin to go on. After a minute, he does.

"His name was Alec," Kevin says. "He was older than I am now—nineteen. I thought I knew what I was doing. I thought he cared about me. I was wrong."

Jim clenches his hands. "He—hurt you?"

"Not how you're thinking. He was nice during, nice after, even when he explained that we couldn't have a relationship. I was old enough to fuck, you see, but not old enough to date." Kevin's mouth twists. "Fucking ironic, huh?"

Jim doesn't say anything. He doesn't know what to say.

"I told myself that I didn't care," Kevin continues. "Alec had done me a favor, relieving me of my inconvenient virginity so early. He was a nice guy: I wasn't angry. When I mouthed off to my teachers, I wasn't angry. When I got into fights at school, I wasn't angry. When I sat like a lump at my shrink's, I wasn't. I wasn't angry when I was out of my head on meth, or when I was screwing everything that didn't screw me first. For three years, I didn't feel it. I didn't feel anything."
He sighs. "It's why my parents came out here. I've never told them about Alec. But they knew something was really wrong with me. They thought this would be a healthier atmosphere." Kevin quirks an eyebrow at Jim. "I guess irony is my destiny." Then he shrugs. "Before the Rot, it was better. Tarsus IV is boring, but you can't get drugs here. I could still get laid, and the kids were nicer than those wasters I'd been running around with in Orlando. But I still didn't realize how much I wasn't feeling." Kevin takes a breath. "Until you came."

Jim looks into Kevin's face. This time he doesn't have to look very hard. Kevin's not trying to hide what he's feeling anymore. Everything he's feeling. Jim has never wanted to kiss anyone so badly in his life. He must not be hiding his emotions well either, because Kevin puts a hand on Jim's chest, gently pushing him back.

"Hear me out. You know when I first saw you, I thought you were sixteen? You're not tall for your age or anything, but you carry yourself like someone older. I was determined to have you. Then I started talking to you, I got a good look at you up close. I realized you were younger—too young. I should have lost interest, but I didn't. I liked being with you, really liked it. That's when I realized, how long it had been since I'd liked anybody or anything. It was like a grey fog lifting, one I hadn't even known was there. But it's when things got complicated. I still wanted you. I've tried to be cool about it, but I guess Sam figured it out. He wasn't blessed with your many charms, but he doesn't miss much, does he?"

Jim shakes his head.

"I guess that's why he hates me. It has to be that—I've never given him shit. I haven't even hit on him, and he's not plain enough that I wouldn't. But I know straight when I see it."

"I'm not," Jim says quickly. "Straight, I mean. I like girls, but—"

"Duh," Kevin says, shoving Jim lightly with his shoulder. "I don't think it's clear to anybody else, though. You've spent too many afternoons with your hand up Gypsy's shirt. Pete Wilkins is going to spontaneously combust from joy."

"I don't give a damn about Pete Wilkins," Jim says. "I want you." The admission would have killed him five minutes ago, but now it's easy to say, after everything Kevin has said.

"I know," Kevin says. "But it's not going to happen."

"Why?" Jim doesn't care if he's whining. This is stupid. "If you want me, and I want you—"

"Jesus Christ, have you been listening? I had sex at thirteen, and it fucked me up. Do you think I'd do that to you?"

"But it wouldn't fuck me up, you're not like that guy Alec, you really like me—"

"Yeah, I do. Which is why I won't do it. Not now."

"So when? I'll wait."

Kevin sighs. "Say our parents kill the Rot tomorrow. Or more realistically, the supply ships get through. The colony goes back to its normal, boring self. Six months from now, your stepdad's research grant is over." Seeing Jim open his mouth: "Yeah, he told my mom he's applying for the one-year extension. Even if you are here another 18 months, I'm not. Next year I go back to Terra for university. I don't know which one yet, Dad wants Trinity and Mom's pushing UF. I'm leaning towards USC, to be honest. But wherever I am a year from now, I won't be here."
"Maybe we'll both be on Terra."

"Right. I'll be in a dorm somewhere screwing my brains out, and you'll be under the bleachers in Iowa feeling up some cornfed Gypsy clone. Or hell, a cornfed Pete clone. You think he's cute, don't try to deny it. But you'll still be fourteen. Way too young for me."

"You make it sound like you're forty. Four years isn't such a big difference."

"A decade from now, it won't be. If we meet up in ten years—or five—I promise I'll screw your brains out." He puts a hand on Jim's shoulder and squeezes, but Jim isn't moved. Kevin drops his hand, sighing softly.

"I was going to try to leave before assembly, but I wanted to see you." He touches his fingers to Jim's face. "I thought leaving Dad would be the hardest thing, but it's—not." His voice breaks a bit on that last word. Jim can't stay unaffected this time. He can feel it coming off his friend, a dark tide of fear, confusion and want. He puts his hand over Kevin's wrist, holding tight.

"You don't have to do this. It's bad out there, really bad." Jim pictures it, Kevin in the desert, his thin body huddled under a blanket inside a small thermo tent. Hungry and alone, so terribly alone. He swallows. "Please take me with you. Or stay here with me." He leans so close, he could count Kevin's freckles. "Everything is going to be okay. It is."

Kevin's eyes, intent on Jim's own. "When you say it, I almost believe it," he whispers.

"Please believe it. If anything happened to you out there, I'd just—" Jim doesn't know how to finish that sentence. The thought is too horrible for words. He can't say anything, not to Kevin, not now. So he kisses him instead.

Kissing Kevin isn't as sexy as he thought it would be. They're too desperate, and both of them taste stale from not having eaten in eighteen hours. But it's the best kiss of his life, and Jim has kissed a few people, even at thirteen. This is the moment he gets it, what Sam was trying to tell him last night. The difference between kissing somebody for fun, and kissing someone because you have to, because something inside you will die if you don't. Kevin must feel that way too, because he doesn't resist, not after the first second. He leans his long body into Jim's like he's trying to step inside him, his warm, clever fingers wound in Jim's hair. The kiss seems to go on forever. But when it breaks, it feels like it hasn't lasted any time at all.

Kevin touches his forehead to Jim's. "I've wanted to do that for a long time."

Jim's response is to try to keep kissing him, but Kevin pulls back.

"We won't do it again." He takes a bigger step back. Jim tries to follow, but Kevin puts a hand on his chest, slowly pushing him away. He grimaces as he does it.

"You're dangerous. I didn't know how dangerous before. You're like a freaking tractor beam—I get close to you again, and I won't get away."

Jim looks at Kevin sadly. "You want to?"

"You know I don't. If I was a little bit more of a bastard, I'd let you come with me. Out there in the desert, no parents, no brothers, no rules—we could do what we want. Everything we want."

In his mind's eye, Jim can see it. Two boys alone together in the middle of nowhere. A deep black sky above them, grey sands below. Nothing but blankets and a thermo tent to keep them from freezing—and each other, of course. They could generate enough heat between them. Jim is sure of
that. He takes a step closer to Kevin, staring up at him. He can feel their kiss burning on his lips. He can feel the awakening power within, blazing in his chest like a brand-new star.

"Let's go, right now," he says softly. "I want it, you want it. It's not a sin."

It was a bad choice of words. Kevin blinks. "Sin is sin," he says. "Even when it has big blue eyes and a mouth like yours. Even when it's begging you to do it." He clenches his hands at his sides. "I'm not Kodos. I don't do what I want because no one's watching. Somebody always is."

"I thought you were an atheist."

"Deist. I know something is out there. Maybe it's just a big watchmaker who doesn't care about us. Maybe it's more than that. But it sees. What we do, it echoes, even if it's just on the inside. It's taken me years to get over what Alec did. I'm not sure I'll ever really be over it. I won't do that to you. The thought of you as fucked up as I've been, all that warmth and—and innocence you have, tied up and tortured because of me... I couldn't stand it."

Jim raises his chin. "I'm not innocent."

"You are. It's not a bad thing," Kevin says. "It's the best thing. Once it's gone—" he stops. "Don't ask me to take it away. I'm begging you."

Jim sees the tears standing in Kevin's eyes. Before this, he couldn't have imagined Kevin crying. Not Kevin—he never lost his cool, even that time Jim stole a bottle of Winnie's vodka and they climbed up here on the roof and got totally shitfaced. Kevin was cool, even singing three dozen refrains of "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen" in the corniest Irish accent you ever heard. But now Kevin is on the verge of tears, and Jim doesn't know why he couldn't imagine it before. For all his smarts and his secrets, Kevin is just a kid. Like Jim. Slowly, he reaches out. He takes Kevin's hand. He doesn't try to come closer. "Okay," he says. "We'll just be friends."

Kevin smiles at him. One of his rare, wonderful smiles, brighter than the twin suns behind him. "Cool," he says, squeezing Jim's fingers.

"Until I'm eighteen, anyway."

Kevin rolls his eyes.

"You promised. I'm gonna find you: Ireland, Florida, California, wherever."

"Not California. They have strict anti-stalking laws."

"You'll be, like, so old by then. You should be flattered that I'm bothering."

"An old man of twenty-two. I could hit you with my cane and run away."

Jim looks up at him. "You won't, though. Will you?"

"No," Kevin says. "I won't."

"I love you," Jim says.


"It's okay. You don't have to say it back. I know it's hard for you." Kevin looks away. He says
But he doesn't let go of Jim, his grip tightening painfully. Jim squeezes back. "Stay," he says. "A couple more days, at least. See how it goes."

Kevin looks up. "I don't know if that's—" he cuts off as the button on his collar starts flashing. The POD around his neck blares. Not music: a deep, commanding voice. Governor Kodos.

"Yellow Group, report to the community square for morning assembly. Eight hundred hours."

"I'd better go," Kevin says. "Security notices late people. I don't need the attention right now. The squad leader Wagner already hates my ass. That thing with his daughter—you remember."

Reluctantly, he lets go of Jim's hand.

A year later, Jim will inspect his Psi-score with some attention. He will see that most of his talents lie in empathy—the projective kind. The ability to pull people in, to sway them even when they don't want to be swayed. In another, more naïve century, they would have called it charisma. He's just normal in some of the other Psi talents—precognition, for instance. His Zener card test does not impress. But in one instant on Tarsus IV, he experiences what he'll realize later was a single psychic flash. How else to explain this sudden, all-consuming fear?

"Don't go," he says. "Stay with me."

"I told you. Security notices that stuff. This won't take long. Kodos never bores us for more than an hour." He turns and starts walking towards the ladder. Jim follows him, knees trembling. "I'll come back after assembly," Kevin says as they go. "You can tell me all the reasons I should stay and put up with this bullshit."

"Maybe you shouldn't stay," Jim whispers. "Maybe you should go. Right now."

"You and your mood swings." Kevin shakes his head. "Christ save me from crazy Irishmen." He turns and grips the railing of the ladder, swinging his long legs onto the plasteel rungs.

"Kevin—please." Jim grabs at his shoulder, but Kevin's too fast. Six rungs down already, he looks up at Jim. His eyes are glowing like seawaters lit by sunlight—the deep green seas of Terra, so very far away. They've never seemed farther away than this moment.

"I was chickenshit before," Kevin says. "I do love you. You know that. Right?"

Jim nods. He'd say something, but he can't. That invisible hand is gripping his throat again.

Kevin nods and continues down the ladder. Jim watches him until he reaches the ground and rounds the corner of the building. Then Jim runs across the roof to the front of the community center. He looks over the railing to the crowds below.

The square in front of the building is very large, easily the size of a football field. It's packed with people, all of them wearing yellow badges. Many of the faces are familiar to Jim. For all the crowds, the colony isn't that big. He sees Gypsy Cooper walking beside her leggy Danish goddess of a mom. Gypsy's dad, short and stocky with handsome, mobile features, is a few steps away. He's talking intently to Aaron Wiesenthal. Sifa is there, her arm around little Olive. Jim wants to wave—he likes Sifa, even if she has taken his brother away. But he doesn't dare, not with so much Security around. Sifa and her sister seem nervous at the guards, identical tense looks on their pretty brown faces.

Jim sees others. Anande Tilari, nervous too, her blue cheeks flushed purple. Her good friend Zorak Zsee, looking at her worriedly with his three gold eyes, big as baseballs. Anya Dudek, auburn-haired and milk-pale and quite wonderfully stacked for a fourteen-year-old. (He'd have been happy to kiss her behind the hydroponics sheds, but she likes girls, just girls.) The Gorski twins, Jimmy and
Tommy, so plump and cheerful-looking—less plump after the last weeks, but still smiling. Shakti Banerjee and her hot cousin, Priya. (Another missed opportunity—she likes girls and boys, but right now she likes Anya.) Martin Martinez, Jessica Sandoval, Krys Mpenza, and a lot of other kids he's come to know in the last six months. Some of them he likes, some he lusts after, some he doesn't care about. But just now, watching them mill around in the morning light, he feels an odd affection for all of them. Maybe it's because he hasn't seen much of them lately. Kodos doesn't encourage mixing between the groups.

That is weird, when you stop and think about it. Really weird.

Governor Kodos emerges from the front doors of the community building and climbs the steps of the big platform that's been placed in front of it. From this angle Jim can't see his face. All he sees are broad shoulders clad in deep red, and a thick pelt of silver-blond hair, carefully combed as always. But even this glimpse makes Jim feel better, less nervous. He thinks of the kindness the Governor has shown him since the day he arrived, all the moments of attention and praise. Jim can't distrust him: Kodos is a good man. He has to be.

Jim spots Kevin standing next to his father, Sean, their red heads bent close together. He doesn't think that Kevin can see him, not over the crowds and platform. But he can see Kevin very well, his thin and elegant form. Jim can't see Kevin's eyes from this distance, but he knows they're as green as the seas of Terra. A wave of homesickness crashes over Jim, painfully intense, mixed as it is with everything he feels for his friend. He wishes they were standing on a white beach in Florida, looking out over the green waters. He wishes they were in a cornfield in Iowa, smelling dirt and growing things. No decay or death. He wishes it so much it makes him dizzy.

The Security team fans out to the perimeters of the square, leaving a guard every few meters. They are an imposing sight, clad in their black cloaks. Kodos waits for them to finish arranging themselves. Then he begins to speak, his deep voice echoing over the square.

"The revolution is successful. But survival depends on drastic measures. Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society. Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony. Therefore, I have no alternative but to sentence you to death."

Jim will always remember these last few seconds in the pink morning air of Tarsus IV. Before the reality of Kodos' speech sinks in. Before the Security team throws off their cloaks, revealing the gleaming disruptor rifles beneath. Before all the people start screaming and running, too late, too late. Before his last sight of Kevin, crawling on the ground towards the body of Sean Riley. Before Dolph Wagner stands over Kevin, his face a blank as he points his big gun.

These moments will be burned in Jim's memory, when much of the months after is shadow and fog. This bright moment before the world breaks apart. The last moment of Jim's innocence.

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For three days, Jim wanders in the desert, waiting to die.

He would have ended things faster. He considered it up on the roof. But the drop was not high enough. This wasn't Fischer's Gorge in Iowa: The fall might not kill him. So he climbed down the ladder. He did not look behind him at the square. He walked across the fields to the desert.

He walks on towards the mountains, though he has no desire to see them. He is not going to so much as from, away from the colony and all who remain there. He will not return, not alive.

Dying is taking longer than expected. The nights are cold but survivable—much less frigid than they should have been, even for high summer. He looks for one of the big green spiders, the evil purple
scorpions, but they scuttle away at his approach. Death can't elude him forever, though. Jim's growing weaker by the hour, and he's no longer hungry. The thirst stays with him, an ever-present ache behind his cracked lips, but he ignores it.

Early in the morning of the fourth day, he happens across a small, sluggish stream. It's cloudy yellow and reeks of rotten eggs, but the ache in his throat has become a scream. He tries to fight it: One more day of this thirst, and surely he must die. But before he knows what's happening he's on his knees, gulping down the sulphurous water. Sated, hating himself, he leans back and looks around. Growing near the stream are bushes with shiny, bright red leaves. He remembers these from his survival training. The roots are edible—bland as raw potatoes, but they'll keep you alive. There are enough bushes to feed him for at least a week.

Jim throws himself on the ground. He can't scream aloud—he's too weak. So he just lies there, gasping his rage into the sand. Tarsus IV is supposed to kill him. Instead, it gives him food and water and good weather. Why do horrible things like him so much?

He curls himself into a ball. He won't be saved. In a minute, when he can gather the strength, he'll get up and walk away from this oasis. He won't eat, and he won't take another drink from the stream, though his traitorous body is already aching for one. Tarsus IV will finish him off, whether it wants to or not. He'll be free of this horrible thing called existence.

Maybe then he'll see Kevin again.

The tears come as they did the first night in the desert, before he became too dehydrated to cry. Jim doesn't waste energy keeping them back. Instead, he uses what strength he has to try and block the images of that last morning in the colony. A big gun gleaming in the suns, a thin and elegant body jerking gracelessly as it's ripped apart by disruptor blasts. A beautiful face half-burned away, green eyes staring sightlessly at the pink sky.

This is like being at the bottom of a pit, looking up at a sliver of light, no chance of reaching it. Being nailed to a cross but not dying, just bleeding forever. Death can't be worse than this.

Dear Jesus, he prays. If you exist, and you love me as much as Sister Bernadette always said, take me. I'm begging you.

A soul-deep fatigue washes over him. For a little while, he stares up at the blinding light of the twin suns. Then, slowly, his eyes close. If God is merciful, they won't open again.

But he is roused sometime later by a sound: beautiful, high-pitched, crystal-clear. Jim lifts his head from the sand and sees blue figures shimmering in the air. For one confused instant, he is sure his prayer has been answered, and singing angels have come to take him to Heaven.

Then the figures resolve themselves. He recognizes the Starfleet uniforms. He stares at the figures as they come towards him, their polished boots crunching on the rough terrain.

"Jim Kirk?" the leader says, a relieved look on his round face. "It's sure good to see you! I'm Commander Kim of the Starship Excelsior. This is Dr. Chapel, and Ensigns Hawkins and Klein. We've come to take you home."

Jim just keeps staring. Kim comes closer, but Jim scrambles back. Kim's brows draw together, and he glances at the man next to him. The doctor pulls a tricorder out of his tunic and waves it towards Jim, then peers at the screen. "The boy's in shock," he says in clipped Standard. "Not bloody surprising, under the circumstances. I need to get him to Sickbay and get some fluids in him, stat."
"No," Jim rasps, backing further, almost into the stream. He'll drown before he goes with them.

"Everything's going to be okay, son. Your mom's up there waiting for you." Commander Kim is speaking in the soothing tone Jim has heard his Uncle Mark use on horses. He's not some skittish colt. He plunges into the stream. On the other side, the heavily forested foothills of the mountains begin. If he can reach them he might not be found, not until it's too late. But before he's even gotten his boots wet, the two ensigns have leapt forward and grabbed him. Jim curses and fights, managing to kick Hawkins in the crotch and break away. One heartpounding moment of thinking he's made it, then he's seized and held against a muscular female body.

"Calm down, honey," Ensign Klein says. "We're trying to help." Jim thrashes, water splashing, and then there's a dull sting in his neck. His knees turn to jelly, and the world goes grey.

"Ten cc's of Nuvocontin," Dr. Chapel says. "That'll take the starch out of his shirt."

"Little bastard," Hawkins gasps.

"Shut up," Klein says. "You left yourself wide open."

"I wasn't looking to get attacked. What the hell's wrong with him?"

"Besides the starvation and genocide?"

"Hawkins, Klein, enough," Kim says. Chirp of a communicator. "Excelsior, five to beam up."

Through the fog of drugs and exhaustion, Jim realizes Kevin was right. The Federation did get a ship through, and a lot sooner than anyone expected. But it's too late, for Kevin, for Gypsy, for all of the other people in Yellow Group. But not for Jim, he's been saved. Again.

He wishes he was back on the roof of the community center, gazing at the dead fields. Dangling off Fischer's Gorge, clawing the cliff's edge. He'd jump this time, as hard and fast as he could. He wouldn't be saved. Jim doesn't deserve it, he never has. Not since the day he was born.

But Jesus isn't answering prayers today. The world fades to sparkles of light as the transporter takes them. Up to the sky, where his mother waits. She's always waiting. But not for him.
Chapter 28

xxviii. Kirk

Jim woke up in tears. He blamed the drugs.

It took him a minute to remember everything that had happened—the club, the fight, the other fight. The one with Leonard McCoy, fastest hypo in the West. Jim would file charges, but his roomie played poker with most of the medical review board. Jim didn't stand a chance.

Staring up at the grey ceiling of his bedroom, Jim flashed on other things: grey sand, pink skies, green eyes. He blinked it all away. He never remembered his dreams very well. He didn't try to; they didn't mean anything. He wiped his face and sat up.

The world lurched around him. Jim put a hand on his pillow to steady himself and glanced at the clock on the nightstand: 5:37. He'd only been out a few hours. But the thought of what—who—he'd missed in those hours made his teeth grind. That had to be rectified, right fucking now.

Jim put both feet on the floor and stood. Steady, but not steady enough. He could make it out the door, but stairs would be a problem. He considered a second, blinking at the colored lights dancing in front of his eyes. Pretty, but not helpful. He needed something to counteract the crap in his system. A pick-me-up, and he wasn't talking about Xix. Luckily, Bones kept a pharmacy in that black bag of his. If it could knock Jim out, it could wake him up. If he could get to it.

"Lights," Jim said softly, and looked around the living room. His eyes widened a bit as he took in the empty glasses and whiskey bottle on the table, and all the clothes scattered around nearby. He took a breath and caught a whiff of perfume, exotic and expensive.

"Bones, you old Vulcan-lover, you." Jim would have been proud if he wasn't still pissed. The anger relieved him of any guilt he might have felt over stealing drugs from his best friend. It also cleared his head more. He headed for the other bedroom, moving as stealthily as his wasted state allowed. Leonard slept like the dead after getting laid, but Sherron might be another story.

Quiet as a mouse, he eased open the door. He heard soft breathing sounds, nothing more. Jim glanced at the figures on the bed and saw that they weren't conscious. His gaze moved to the dresser, and he spotted his prize. Two swift steps to snatch the bag, two more to get back to the door. Not the most challenging thievery he had ever pulled off, not by a long shot. As he exited he spared the sleeping couple another glance, just to be on the safe side. His eyes didn't linger—he wasn't a pervert. Not that kind of pervert, anyway. He was happy to note, however, that Sherron's breasts were every bit as fabulous as expected.

Jim closed the bedroom door and went back to the living room. He sat on the sofa and opened the bag, rummaging around. It didn't take him long to find a hypo. Even in his current gummy condition, he had no trouble identifying the right cartridge and slotting it in place. Bones thought Jim was squeamish about giving shots because he wasn't used to it. Actually, the opposite was true. He could do this in the dark, a lot more fucked up than he was right now. He had done it, more times than he wanted to think about. But that was a long time ago.

Jim slotted the Adephrine into the hypo and plunged it into his arm. Hell yes, there it was, the amphetamine jolt hitting his nervous system like a lucky electric shock. Not as piquant as meth, maybe, but less dangerous. Last time Jim checked, Dow-Pfizer didn't cut its drugs with quinine and rat poison. Hands shaking only a bit, he put the used hypo back in the bag and left the bag on the
coffee table. His roommate would know what had happened as soon as he spotted it, but after that little stunt at the club, Quick Draw McCoy couldn't say much about it.

Jim blinked around the room with his newly sharpened gaze. He stretched, grinning. Adephrine was some good shit: He felt like he could run a marathon or fight a Klingon or screw the rugby team. What he planned to do was sort of like doing all those things at once.

He scooted back to his room and dressed himself in the cleanest jeans and sweatshirt he could find in the piles on the floor. He fingercombed his hair and pushed his feet into sneakers. He shoved his wallet in his back pocket and headed out the front door.

He sprinted across campus. He must have been a weird sight, wearing no socks and no coat, with rampant bedhead and scary-bright eyes. But campus was unusually deserted, even for this early in the morning. There were always a few people up and around, the ones from nocturnal species, if no one else. Then Jim remembered that it was a school holiday. Awesome. Cadets and officers had three whole days to do whatever they wanted to do. Jim knew what he wanted.

*Spock.* Jim felt his entire chest tighten as he thought of him, his nerves crackling with a heady combination of speed, worry, and frustrated lust. Physically Spock must be okay, if he could walk out of Geida's under his own power. But emotionally—maybe not. A human would be freaked over losing control like that, Christ only knew how a Vulcan would react. Jim felt his breathing quicken again, at the thought of Spock having to deal with the fallout all by himself.

Jim was pissed and nervous and horny as hell, and it was all Leonard McCoy's fault. Raymon D'Ranni's too—overprivileged, obsessive motherfucker. Without his interference, this would have been a night to remember. It still was, but not in a good way.

Jim stopped outside the instructor flats. The windows of the building were almost entirely dark. Spock's apartments were in the back overlooking the Bay, so Jim couldn't tell if he was awake. Probably—he didn't seem to sleep much. He definitely wouldn't be after what had happened.

Jim took his keycard out of his wallet and swiped the combox. The glass doors slid open and he dashed in, heading for the stairs. He couldn't deal with waiting for the elevator.

He practically did the fifty-yard dash down the hallway leading to Spock's door. He jammed the buzzer. He waited, tapping one foot on the carpet.

No answer.

Jim hit the buzzer again, so hard that his thumb twinged in protest.

No answer.

He hit it one more time, his ear pressed against the door. He could hear the sound echoing inside the flat, but nothing else.

"Spock!" he said, knocking on the cold metal. "It's me! Open up!"

No answer. Jim pounded on the door, almost as hard as his heart was pounding inside his chest.

"SPOCK!" He stopped, breathing hard, a hand twisting his sweatshirt. He was about ten seconds away from recreating a Tennessee Williams play right here in the hallway.

The door to the left of Spock's flat slid open. Three baseball-sized gold eyes blinked at Jim. "Cadet Kirk!" Commander Ztan said. "What is the meaning of this noise?"
Jim ran a hand through his sweaty hair. "I'm sorry. I need to see Commander Spock—it's an emergency."

"He isn't home."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. I know when he comes in. Vulcans have a very distinctive energy signature. So serene—well, usually. Spock's aura has always been such a lovely pale blue, but lately it's very green." Ztan blinked at Jim. "Very green, indeed. A most unhealthful shade."

Jim blinked back at him. "You can see energy auras—through the wall?"

Ztan's eyes sparked brighter. "Of course. It's all just atoms, you know. Pretty atoms, dancing around in the air."

"Any wall?" Jim asked, swallowing.

"I would never invade a fellow officer's privacy." A corner of Ztan's mouth slit folded. "If I did—purely by accident, you realize—all I would see are colors. No bodies, you understand me? And I would never mention what I have seen. It's really none of my business."

"Um," Jim said.

"Especially if that fellow officer, who has been worrying me terribly—such an agitated aura—seemed better after entertaining certain visitors. Less sickly green, more lovely blue." Ztan waved his long, spatulate fingers, all twelve of them. "More like his old self."

Jim tilted his head at Ztan. "What color is my aura?"

"Orange as flame, my boy. Did you know blue and orange are direct opposites on the color wheel? They complement each other perfectly." Ztan's mouth slit creased into a smile. "Such brilliant fireworks, if one were to see them— mingle. Speaking hypothetically, you understand."

"Right." Jim flashed on the image of his History teacher enjoying the metaphysical light show created by him and Spock screwing each other silly next door, and pushed it firmly away. That way madness lay.

"In any event, you should call him. He's certainly not here."

"Thanks. I'll wait. I—I kind of need to see him in person."

"As you like. I'm going to bed." Ztan's trio of eyes crinkled tiredly. "I do so enjoy these long weekends, when one can keep civilized hours, not those imposed by the Federation autocracy. I'm going to sleep until sunset, at least." His mouth slit creased again. "I shan't be watching anything but the insides of my own eyelids. All the walls are safe from me."

"Good to know."

Ztan waved his fingers and disappeared back into his flat. Jim slid down the wall between the two doors, sighing. Shot or no shot, he was tired again, with the exhaustion of overstimulation. Where the fuck could Spock be? Jim didn't have anyone else to ask, not alone in this depressing hallway at six in the morning. So he asked himself. He hadn't done this in a long time, not since he was in the hospital all those years ago. He hadn't needed to. If anything had defined Jim's life since he was a teenager, it was the quest for constant company.
Maybe Spock's with his girlfriend.

Nah. He's not that into her. I can tell.

How about friends and family?

Sherron and her fabulous breasts are currently wrapped around Leonard McCoy. What friends?

Maybe he's with his boyfriend.

His boyfriend is on Vulcan.

So? The Spaceport's open all night. Not like Spock doesn't have the money for a fast ship. If he caught the right connection through Alpha Centauri, he could be home in fourteen hours. Just enough time for a dirty weekend before he has to be back for his morning class on Monday.

He wouldn't.

Why not? Stonn doesn't take him to sleazy clubs. Stonn never made him party with hookers. Stonn's psycho ex-boyfriend never tried to punch him in the face. That's why he loves Stonn.

I don't care if he loves Stonn.

Good. Because he does. Not you, Jimmy boy, not you. I don't care how many colors crazy old Blinky sees. Remember when Ztan wore his uniform backwards for like a month?

Whatever. It doesn't matter.

Nobody loves you. Bones thinks he does, but that's leftover Henry angst. You know that, right? As soon as he finds someone he really loves—Sherron, maybe—he'll be gone. Spock definitely will be, once he figures out what you are.

I know. I don't care.

Then why are you crying?

Jim leaned his head against the wall, wiping his eyes. "Shut up."

Poor Jimmy, all alone. Daddy gone, Mommy gone, Sammy gone. Kevin—well, we know what happened to—

"Shut up!" Jim squeezed his eyes against more tears, banging his fist into the wall. "Shut-up-shut-up-SHUT UP!"

"Jim?" a calm voice said.

He looked up. For a minute the figure seemed to shimmer in a blue haze, Jim wasn't quite sure he was real. It felt like forever since he'd seen him—months and months. He wanted to seize him by the shoulders and shake him, just to make sure he wasn't hallucinating from drugs and desperation. Instead, Jim blinked the wet from his eyes and pasted a smile on his face.

"Hey, Spock. What's up?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if you were okay. Are you?"
Spock peered at him. "I might ask the same of you."

"I'm fine. Better than fine. Fine and dandy." Jim shifted nervously. "Where have you been?"

"You're intoxicated," Spock said.

"Bones slipped me a mickey. He's a cunning one, that Bones. When I came to, I had to even myself out. Don't worry, it's all legal." Jim giggled. "Doctor prescribed." He jumped to his feet, scratching at one arm. "Where have you been?"

"I walked home from the Embassy."

"That's miles away. Miles and miles. Why? It's freezing out. I bet you're freezing." Jim saw now that Spock's hands were shoved deep into his overcoat. He was pale as glass, cheekbones tinged an unhealthy yellow. It made Jim cold just to look at him.

"I needed time to think."

Now Jim really did feel cold. "Are you dumping me?"

Spock blinked at him. "What?"

"It's not my fault. I didn't know Raymon would be there. Seriously, Spock, I didn't know. I'd never set you up like that. I like you." Jim clenched his hands, unclenched them. "I know it was a stupid fucking idea going to Geida's, and I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I was showing off, I guess. I have a problem with that. I also have a problem with impulse control, Bones has talked to me about it, but I don't listen. That's another problem I have, you probably remember when I took your class, if Che hadn't given me lecture notes I never would have—"

He flinched as Spock put icy hands on either side of his face. "Jim. Stop."

Jim gazed into tired brown eyes. "Don't dump me," he whispered. "Please."

Spock dropped his hands, sighing. "Come inside." He brushed the compad. "I do not wish to have this conversation in the hallway."

Jim wanted to point out that privacy concerns were pretty much moot as long as he was living next to Blinky and his Technicolor Sex-O-Vision, but he bit his tongue against more verbal diarrhea. Damned amphetamines.

"Lights," Spock said as soon as the door had shut behind them. "Increase temperature—five degrees Celsius." Out of the public view he allowed himself a small shiver, though to Jim's senses the apartment was already uncomfortably warm.

"Jesus, you really are freezing," he said.

"I'm afraid I underestimated the severity of the weather," Spock replied. "I spend too much time in climate-controlled environments. I forget how frigid Northern California can be."

"Why didn't you call a cab?"

"I did not wish to." Spock went to the replicator and pressed a few buttons. "Would you like something?" he asked. "Xix, perhaps?"

"If I have any more stimulants, my head is going to explode all over your nice overcoat."
"No Xix," Spock said, looking gravely at the replicator. He took a cup of tea from the slot and sat down at the dining room table.

"Why didn't you want a cab?" Jim persisted. "This wasn't some kind of self-flagellation, was it? You made yourself walk home in the cold because you beat up Raymon?" When Spock just sipped his tea: "Fuck me, that's so Catholic. I thought Vulcans had more sense."

"On Vulcan, it is customary to withdraw after losing control. To reflect on what happened and consider ways to avoid such behaviors in the future. Not being near a meditation cell, I thought walking might have a similarly calming effect."

"I'm sure you'll feel real calm when your toes fall off."

"Don't be absurd—" Spock cut off with a very human-sounding sneeze. Jim hopped over to the table and grabbed his arm.

"Put down the fucking tea," he said. "Come with me."

Spock put down the tea but didn't move. He eyed Jim warily. "Where?"

"Don't worry, I've learned my lesson about taking you to mysterious destinations. We're going to the bathroom. You need to take a hot shower—raise your core temperature quickly, before you catch pneumonia."

"Ah. That seems logical." Spock paused. "Of course, you do not need to accompany me."

Jim leaned against the table in a defeated way. "Right." Christ, he was getting dumped.

Spock stood. "Though given my weakened state, I could lose consciousness. That is not unknown in Vulcans suffering from hypothermia."

Jim looked at Spock, looking at him. Spock's normal detached expression hadn't changed, but his eyes were twinkling. Tired, but most definitely twinkling. Jim's stomach returned from the vicinity of his knees. "That sounds dangerous," he said.

"Quite dangerous. Perhaps it would be better if I did have a companion."

"Yes. It's only logical."

"This companion could assist me in other ways." Spock reached out, cupping Jim's face. His fingers were still freezing, but that's not why Jim shivered. "If he wishes."

"He does. I do." Jim covered Spock's cold hand with his sweaty one. He felt the tears again— the uppers or the downers, or maybe his own miserable self. "I'm so goddamn sorry—"

"There is no need for you to keep apologizing. Most of the blame for last night lies with me. I knew the Embassy was not a good environment, but I entered it. I overestimated my control."

"I persuaded you."

"You did not force me. I could have left at any time, even when Raymon became insulting. My condition is no excuse. I had full command of my reason. I could have walked away. I did not."

"Why didn't you?"

"That is what I was considering on my walk home. I believe I understand my motives now." Seeing
Jim's questioning look: "I do not wish to discuss it further. Not at present."

"Fair enough. But we're okay?"

Spock raised an eyebrow at him. "I would hardly be trysting with you if we were not."

Trysting. Right. That's what they could be doing, if Jim would quit whining and shut up. When Spock turned and headed towards the bathroom, Jim followed without another word.

Spock discarded boots, coat and tunic in the hall, leaving them on the floor with unexpected carelessness. Jim didn't need more signal than that. He was already out of his sneakers and sweatshirt and had his jeans halfway down as Spock was crossing the threshold to the bath. The Vulcan barely had time to start the shower before Jim was on him, grasping at cold skin. Too cold—it was like feeling up a very pretty corpse. He pushed Spock under the hot water.

"My trousers—"

"Fuck the trousers." Jim tugged at the offending garments so hard he heard stitches ripping. Spock could afford new ones, since he wouldn't be buying any tickets to Vulcan in the near future, not if Jim had anything to do with it. He got the thick, sodden material off of Spock, pitching it out of the shower stall, and backed his newly naked partner against the steamy tiles. Spock was a little warmer now, but not nearly warm enough. Jim covered him with his own, hotter flesh, kissing him deeply. His gripped onto a cool, blade-like shoulder while his other hand moved down, exploring.

"You are forceful today," Spock remarked, as soon as Jim let him have his tongue back.

"Is that a problem?" Jim said, but he already knew the answer. Spock was harder than plasteel and wetter than the shower walls. He had been even before Jim wrapped a fist around his cock. Jim pushed in closer, nipping at a pointed ear, and felt slick, barbed flesh pulse under his fingers. "Can you take it, Spock?" he whispered.

"That is not the question." Spock said in his cool professor's voice. But his eyes, staring at Jim, glittered like a gladiator's. "Cadet Kirk," he said, "can you give it?"

"Out there, I'm a cadet," Jim said. "In here, I'm a motherfucking admiral." He spun Spock around and slammed him into the tiles. Spock growled, a low, warning sound. Jim responded by pressing the length of his body into his partner's, getting his mouth against Spock's neck.

"I think you've gotten the wrong idea about me," he said. "Bottoming is fine—I'm good at it, you know how good. But that's not all I'm about. You have no idea." He bit down on Spock's throat—not too hard, just hard enough, then he pulled back. The Vulcan gave a gasping snarl that wasn't remotely human. Jim felt his own body, held fast against the alien's, tighten all the way down. The water beating on his back couldn't keep him from shivering with anticipation.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, lips close on Spock's ear. "I'm just human, you could crush me. But you won't. If you wanted another Vulcan, you'd have one. You get everything you want, don't you? Spock, scion of the House of Surak. You're more entitled than Raymon ever dreamed of being. That's why you almost tore him to pieces, isn't it? How dare he try to take what you want." Jim's hand journeyed down again. Spock was so hard it had to hurt him, so slick with lube that Jim's whole hand was dripping. "It was amazing, watching you take him. Like seeing a god step on a rattlesnake."

"It was—wrong," Spock whispered.

"Yes, very wrong. Vicious—arrogant—possessive—" with each adjective, Jim stroked harder.
"Jim—" Spock gasped, straining against Jim's hand, desperate. Jim knew that feeling, when you had no idea what you were asking for, only that you needed someone, anyone, to give it to you.

"You're going to let me take you," he said. "The warlord inside you may howl, but the rest of you won't stop me. You know you deserve it." His hand started moving once more, faster and faster. "Your Terran boy is going to fuck you, Spock. You're going to love it."

Spock came with muffled cry, his face against the tiles. Jim waited for him to stop shuddering, then he took his hand away—his impossibly slick hand. He used all of that moisture to prepare himself, slathering it over his own hard, needy cock. Before Spock could tense too much, Jim pushed inside of him. He worked his way in slowly. He'd never had a Vulcan before, but he'd had enough aliens to know that there could be surprises, unpleasant ones, if you didn't take care. Spock's inner muscles were wonderfully strong, and at first they did not accept him. Jim might have been able to force his way in, but he wasn't going to do. Dirty talk was fun, but they weren't going to do anything Spock didn't want. The whole point was that he did want it.

Jim leaned his head against Spock's upper back. He kissed his shoulder, water beads bursting against his lips. He waited. Slowly, Spock relaxed. Jim didn't realize just how tense Spock had really been, until he wasn't. What had been a wall of silk-sheathed steel suddenly gave, drawing him deep. Jim had never felt anything like it. Stronger muscles aside, Spock didn't seem to have any inner parts a Terran wouldn't, but there was something different about this—an acceptance, a giving—Jim had never known before. He thrust deeper, and a wave of pleasure went through his body that left him lightheaded. Jim put a hand on the tiles to brace himself, and thrust again. Deep as he went, he couldn't seem to get deep enough. He wanted inside—all the way in.

Jim thrust until he saw lights bursting in front of his eyes. He thrust until he couldn't breathe, and his heart felt like it was going to explode from his chest at any second.

"Jim."

The feeling of it was indescribable, a pleasure close enough to pain to make it that much better. He could do this until it killed him—he took another gasping breath—which might not be long.

"Jim, ashal-veh—"

He was mid-thrust when he felt Spock reaching around. Long, steely fingers at the base of Jim's spine, pressing hard. The world exploded in white lights. He came, gasping, because he didn't have enough air to scream out loud. He felt Spock slip away from him, and he went to his knees. He watched water swirling down the drain, and it felt like he was going down with it.

The water cut off. Spock bent over him, frowning. Jim grinned upwards. "Was it—" he ran out of air and took another lungful, "—good for you?"

Spock gave an exasperated little twitch.

"Was it?"

Spock sighed, and sat on the wet tiles next to Jim. "I climaxed three times."

"Hmm. Must be nice, having no refractory period. What did you do to me at the end?"

"There's a pressure point at the base of the spine. I thought it wise to make use of it."

Jim nodded. "Crystal cock. Speed can be such a bitch."
"I don't know what that means. Please don't explain it."

Jim looked down, tracing a pattern in the water drops remaining on the tiles. "It wasn't just the drugs, though. I felt . . . " he trailed off, thinking. "Is that how it is with Vulcans? I mean, with you and—other—Vulcans?" He didn't look up.

Spock reached over. Gently, he pushed the wet hair from Jim's face. "No."

Jim didn't ask what he meant. There were some things he wasn't ready to hear explained, either.

Spock stood. "I'm going to prepare breakfast." Jim wasn't hungry—too wired—but he followed Spock out of the bathroom without protest. Eating, like screwing, was better than talking. About some stuff, anyway. He'd known it since his days in the hospital. But he wasn't going to think about that. Like his dreams, his memories didn't mean much. Not much at all.

Spock was a really good cook. Breakfast was tasty enough that Jim finished most of his meal, a sort of Vulcan breakfast burrito that managed to satisfy like bacon, eggs, and cheese, without actually containing any of those things. He was craving Xix or, failing that, coffee, but when he made the request Spock just gave him the eyebrow, and he meekly accepted orange juice.

Now he was sprawled out on the big bed, wearing nothing but a sated expression and Spock's spare robe. The ice-blue silk rubbed against his skin like a massage with a guaranteed happy ending. He felt better than he had in days—years, possibly. Everything felt good, like all his muscles had been pleasantly pulled.

Spock was propped up against the headboard, PADD balanced on his knee. His fingers danced across the glass display. Jim reached for him, tugging at the belt of his black robe. Spock peered over the edge of the computer. "You should sleep."

"I slept last night."

"A drugged sleep. You require real rest. Your lack of care for yourself is disturbing."

"Says the man who almost recreated the end of The Shining last night. I am referring, of course, to the classic 1980 film version, not the novel or that really bad re-make from 2043. Who the hell thought Suri Cruise could direct?"

Spock ignored him, as most people did when faced with a slew of Jim's more obscure cultural references. Jim twitched the belt of Spock's robe again. "Hey, pay attention to me. I'm not going to sleep. You owe me a couple of orgasms."

"Ah." One corner of Spock's mouth quirked. "In a moment, then. I wish to finish this."

"What?"

"I'm making a few adjustments to the Kobayashi Maru."

Jim blinked, half-sitting up. "What? Why?"

"Since they are rebuilding the platform due to a certain cadet destroying it—twice—I thought it would be a good opportunity to update the test."

Jim lay flat on the bed, looking up at the ceiling. "Oh."

Spock tapped the screen a few more times, then looked at Jim again. "In the five years the test has
been given, you are the only cadet who has taken it twice."

"Uh-huh."

"I am curious about why you felt the need to repeat it."

"Because I failed it?"

"Everyone does."

"Yeah. Maybe the test designer should look into that." Jim gave Spock a pointed glare.

"What do you mean?"

"If you gave a test in one your classes and every student failed, wouldn't you re-think it?"

"The Kobayashi Maru is not that kind of test. The point is to fail it."

Jim sat up, facing Spock. "Why? Where did you even get the idea for something like that?"

Spock gave him a searching look. "It bothers you so much?"

"Yeah, it does. I'd really like to know why you suggested it to the Academy brass in the first place. Before this week I'd concluded that you were just a sadist, but you're not. Obviously."

Spock put the PADD on the nightstand. He arranged his robe around himself in a gesture that could have been seen as defensive.

"The test is based upon an old Vulcan manhood ritual," he said. "In ancient days—before the Reformation—every adolescent nobleman was required to endure it. His father would send him into the desert with a small cadre of men. Once there, he would come across peasants from his lands in some distress, people he was sworn by blood oath to assist in times of danger. Before he and his men could render aid, they were surrounded by a group of what appeared to be enemy warriors. The young man had three choices. He could escape to his lands and leave the peasants behind, breaking his blood oath. He could plead for the lives of all his people, risking dishonor and slavery. Or he could fight a vastly superior force, which meant almost certain death. His decision indicated much about his ability as a leader."

Jim was interested despite himself. "If he surrendered, was he really sold into slavery?"

"No, but it would reduce his chances of inheriting, just as it would if he broke his oath. Vulcans never practiced primogeniture—land and power went to the strongest son, not the eldest. In that sense, the young man was condemning himself to a kind of slavery, even death. Men in power were ruthless with their dispossessed brethren. It reduced the possibility of plots and betrayal."

"What if he chose to fight?"

"He witnessed his men being slaughtered around him. He saw the consequences of command."

" Seems hard on the men."

"Adept warriors were not chosen for the test. It was also a way of culling useless hangers-on."

"Jesus Christ."

Spock made a small, dismissive shrug. "As I said, this was in the days before the Reformation. A
savage time."

Jim ran his hands through his hair. "And you thought it would be a fun idea to inflict this thing on modern-day Command cadets? Nothing about that seems odd?"

"I have studied the history texts, Jim. In great detail. The bloodshed was inexcusable, but the lesson was valuable. Cruel as the ritual may have been, it was an infallible test of character. To a ruthless warlord, that would be as simple as weak vs. strong. But to a civilized person, it could identify different types of leaders. There is more than one kind, of course, useful under different circumstances. The ancients did not realize this, and it's why their wars reduced the population of Vulcan almost below the viability level on three separate occasions. I do not make excuses for their savagery. I abhor it, as every modern Vulcan does. But it does not mean I cannot put the tools they forged to better use."

"I take it back. You are a sadist." Spock flinched visibly. Jim sighed. "Sorry. I didn't mean that. I've known sadists: You're not one." He looked down at his hands, saw that they were twisting the expensive coverlet bad enough to tear it, and made himself let go. "I still say the Kobayashi Maru is a bad idea. You shouldn't tell future leaders that they may face a scenario where death is the logical choice."

"It could happen." Spock paused. "Your own history makes it clear."

Jim looked up at him sharply. Then he realized what Spock had to be referring to, and took a breath. "Yeah, my dad made the choice. But everybody knows about the Kelvin because that kind of thing almost never happens. Someone in charge should have to think of something else, anything else, before he does that. Death shouldn't even be considered as a viable option. The Kobayashi Maru says it's the only option. I don't think so. There are always—possibilities."

"But death is a possibility."

"No," Jim said. "Everyone doesn't have to die. I reject that. I abhor it." He could feel his heart speeding up again. "Ever seen death, Spock? Really seen it? Your ancestors saw blood pouring into the sand, oceans of it. Have you?"

"No," Spock said quietly. "I have not."

"What did the other Vulcans think when they heard about your test? They didn't like it, I bet."

"They did, as a matter of fact. My father in particular approves of the Kobayashi Maru." Spock paused. "His approval is not easily won."

Jim sighed. "It always comes down to Daddy issues, doesn't it?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

He lay back, closing his eyes and pressing his fingers to his temples. His head was pounding in time to his heart. Jim felt like he'd taken another shot, and that was one too many.

"You had to save them, didn't you? It's why you took the test twice."

Jim didn't answer. He felt Spock move closer to him on the bed. "I studied the results of the second test. I was curious. You blew up an entire fleet—three fleets. You destroyed ships that don't even exist. You tried so hard to save them, all of them."

Jim swallowed. "I didn't."
"No. How you faced that—failing to do it, making the impossible choice, that is the point of the test. It has been for thousands of years."

Jim opened his eyes. He looked into Spock’s face, confident and calm, unlined. Before this, he had never really considered his age. But now it occurred to him how young really Spock was, especially for a Vulcan. When median life expectancy is two hundred, then twenty-eight is just a kid—like, say, a thirteen-year-old Terran. He would have liked to tell young Spock what Jim learned at his age:

You don’t know what will happen when you get beyond civilization. You can’t know how it will be, when it’s just you and what lies inside you, staring death in the face. You don’t see who you are until the world falls apart. It’s why the warlords sent their sons into the desert, it’s why they spilled real blood. Anything less is just a game, and a lame one at that.

But Jim didn’t say this. He didn’t want to go back to the desert, even metaphorically. Too many things were buried in it. Even if he did exhume them for his partner’s benefit, Spock wouldn’t understand. Spock had never been there. That was the real point.

Jim smiled. "Okay, you win. Your test is awesome." It didn’t cost him anything to say it. He didn't have to face the Kobayashi Maru ever again. He’d been thinking about it since Bones gave him Che’s data solid, if he really needed to go through with the third test. Whether his plan, his brilliant plan, was stupid. So why was he doing this? Now was not the time to ask.

He pulled at the belt of Spock’s robe, more forcefully this time. "Here’s a fascinating question, if you're in the mood for intellectual exercises. Can a Terran male be trained to experience multiple orgasms? It sounds crazy, but I've heard anything is possible with the right teacher." He tilted his head at Spock. "Are you that teacher, Commander?"

Spock regarded him as coolly as he ever did during Introduction to Command Systems. But his eyes were glittering, glittering. "Are you that student, Cadet Kirk?"

"Sir, I am a motherfucking prodigy." Jim slipped off his own robe and reached for him.
xxix. Vulcan

Once, in a time so long past that even in Surak's day it was only the memory of memory, a ruler called Takraan sat upon a throne of black firestone in the great fortress at Mount Seleya. Of all the bloody tyrants who had ever occupied this cold, splendid seat, Takraan was the most feared. He had been the youngest but one of twelve sons sired by Kitaak, that lusty and fruitful old warlord. Takraan came to power after murdering his ten older brothers and all of their sons by means as varied as they were cruel. He left alive only his simple-minded younger brother, Terek, for the drooling youth loved him beyond measure, an affection Takraan returned as well as his iron heart allowed. Though he did have Terek castrated; it was only prudent.

In these first days of power, Takraan conceived a plan for taming the other clans of the Great Desert, brilliant in its simplicity. His warriors attacked these clans without warning, killing every male over the age of ten. No surrender was permitted, no entreaties, however desperate and humble, heard. Male children too young to hold their loyalties were taken as spoils of war. The strong were trained for Takraan's army, the clever schooled as eunuch scribes, the useless sent to the brothel or buried in the mine. The old women of the clan were used as servants, their fertile daughters became concubines or, if possessed of sufficient status and beauty, wives. After twenty years of this, it would have taken many months to walk across Takraan's lands, which could at last be called a kingdom. That much of it was depopulated waste did not disturb him. The new King looked upon the devastation with satisfaction, for barren sands shelter no enemies.

Takraan's queen had been daughter to the head of one of the smaller clans destroyed by the war, a man famed as a scholar but only middling as a warrior. The clan fell to Takraan's army within days, all its sons and daughters taken. The conquest was such an easy one that Takraan would barely have paused to hold a victory feast before pushing on, had his hard, greedy eye not fallen upon Shannar. The corpses of her father and brothers were still warm, her face was pale with sorrow. But what a lovely face it was! Her body, though bent with suffering, would have given a eunuch impure thoughts. Even Takraan's cold loins were stirred. Before they left the pitiful little oasis Shannar's clan once called home, the victory feast had become a wedding.

She bore him five daughters in five years; three survived weaning. They were pretty creatures, and would be useful for binding the loyalty of his most ambitious nobles. But Takraan could not rest—or allow his queen to do so—until he had his son. It was with a most satisfied countenance that he one day strode into the Great Hall and announced that Shannar had given birth to a boy. Nobles who knew Takraan well might have noticed a faint shadow on those stony features, the suggestion that something about the birth had not been satisfying. But if they knew Takraan well enough to suspect this, they also knew him well enough to hold their tongues. This did not mean those tongues never wagged, however: The fortress was filled with whispers.

The King called the boy S’Kitaan, a name chosen from several deemed auspicious by the High Priestess. But perhaps it was not so lucky after all, for Shannar was dead within days. Of the milk fever, Takraan announced, calm as ever. Again there were whispers, for the fever which had taken the Queen had also taken two of her ladies who witnessed the birth, as well as the healer who attended, though none of them were nursing an infant. But these whispers never became questions. Everyone loved the Queen and mourned her, for she had been not only beautiful but gracious and wise, like her father before her. But they feared the King more.

Only the High Priestess dared to question the King, their voices raised in argument late one night
from within his private chambers. Though the words could not be heard, her tone was clear: She addressed him not as a king but as the grasping, soulless wretch they all knew him to be. Hers was a voice he could not silence. He could not lay hands upon her for fear of bringing down the wrath of T'Lyn, Lady of Sky and Soil. The High Priestess could not be touched, but she could be banished, and the day she left the fortress she put a hand over the King's heart, whispering words into his ear. Takraan turned as pale as desert sands and fled the Great Hall, all his composure lost. He shut himself up in his chambers and did not emerge for many days.

Takraan never married again. Perhaps he did mourn Shannar somewhere in his iron heart, for often enough he could be found visiting her ashes in the Hall of Shadows, rubbing at his breast as if at a secret pain. The concubine which now occupied his bed was a great pale-haired girl from the Lesser Sea, impressive of form but almost as dull-witted as the King's brother. If Takraan ever shared secrets while resting his head upon her ample bosom, it was doubtful she understood them.

So S'Kitaan grew up, spoiled by his nurses and his tutors, but motherless. He was also nearly fatherless, for Takraan's campaigns kept him absent from the fortress, and when the King was at home he brooded in the Hall of Shadows or shut himself up with his concubine. He did not seem to take any pleasure in his son, listening to the reports of S'Kitaan's tutors with no expression. When he looked at the Prince there was always that faint shadow upon his face. No one could say why it might be, for S'Kitaan was a handsome, sturdy boy with a quick mind and gracious ways. True, he was as greedy as a desert dog and prone to fits of temper, but such flaws are hardly fatal, especially in a prince. S'Kitaan might have felt the loss of his father, but the King was so strange and silent, and so ominous in manner when he did speak, that S'Kitaan's chief emotion when his father dismissed him was relief. He had so many other sources of affection, he never felt the loss. Until his eighteenth year, S'Kitaan never wanted for anything.

In that year, the Prince began to change. His spirits, once so unburdened, grew heavy; the bright corners of his mind filled up with shadows. His behavior became erratic. One week he would be sincere and scholarly, as studious as a monk. The next he would throw his books out the window and spend all his time on the practice field, sharpening his sword play. Some evenings he would be as gracious as ever, laughing loudly as he presided over the head table in the Great Hall, one of his greedy hands plucking at a servant girl's robes while the other stole all the best sweetmeats from the shining trays. The next night he would refuse to leave his rooms, his dinner growing cold while his attention was fixed on polishing his armor, readying his weapons. Once his armor bearer, Keth, bested him at simple swordplay, and S'Kitaan did not care. The next morning he faced him again, and S'Kitaan beat the boy so badly that Keth still lay abed from his wounds.

From one day to the next, even he did not know how he would be. He had become a stranger to himself. As he lay in bed, he stared for hours at the richly painted ceiling. His mind warred against itself; he knew no peace. There was an overwhelming sense of too much—he felt too many feelings, thought too many thoughts. He wanted many things, and he did not want them.

Something was missing from his life, something important, he knew that. He could not guess what it was. Again and again his eyes scanned his possessions, the many luxuries of a prince reflecting in the costly mirrors which lined his rooms. But he searched in vain. Sometimes, for an instant his eyes would glimpse something in the mirror—a shape, a shadow. He wanted it, he did not want it: this thing longed for and dreaded, his heart's desire and his worst fear. The Prince's heart thudded in his ears, he would half-rise from the bed, transfixed and terrified. Then it was gone again, and he sank back, bereft. He felt the tears running down his cheeks and he did not hold them back, for all that his tutor would have chastised him for wasting water.

Vatak, S'Kitaan's tutor in Physical Arts and Takraan's chief warrior before one of the King's wars robbed him of an eye and a leg, thought he knew the trouble. One night when the Prince came back
from dining in the Great Hall, he heard soft laughter in the shadows, saw a shapely lump in his bed. His favorite of the serving girls—the one whose curves, glimpsed under her robes, were always most tempting—was lying in wait. Not wearing her robes.

What followed was pleasant, more than pleasant, in fact, and for a little while everyone in the fortress, the Prince included, breathed a sigh of relief. Vatak in particular was pleased. The King's health was not what it should be, but the old warrior would not rest. How many more years would it be until the Prince became the King? What would they do if S'Kitaan could not rule? Takraan had seen to it that no other close claims to the throne existed. Without the Prince's steadying hand, they would descend into chaos and ruination. Vatak would happily procure S'Kitaan all the girls in the kingdom—boys as well—if it would ease his mind.

They enjoyed three days of peace, but on the fourth night, Vatak, whose rooms were in the same part of the fortress as S'Kitaan's, was awakened by cries and crashes. Clutching his crutch and moving as fast as he could, he fled down the hall to the Prince's door and flung it open. He was greeted by a dreadful sight. T'Lyra, the servant girl, crouched naked in the corner of the room, her sweet flesh running green. She was covered from breasts to ankles in tiny, vicious cuts. She stared at Vatak with terror-glazed eyes. Her wounds came from the pieces of glass which lay all over the floor, glittering on the bed silks, shining in her long hair. Vatak's gaze darted around, finding the source of the destruction.

Every one of the priceless mirrors had been broken, their frames lining the walls like dead eyes. S'Kitaan was in front of the largest. Also naked, he sat cross-legged with his head in his hands, his fingers cut to ribbons by this sudden fit of destruction. He rocked back and forth, wailing like a wounded child. A lost soul. There were words within the screams, ones without sense or meaning. Vatak had to grab the door and steady himself, heaviness in his heart weighing him down. He heard the guards running up behind him, ready to defend their lord. He ordered them away, hoping the harshness in his voice disguised the tremor of fear. He slammed the door and prayed they had not seen. This was not the moodiness of a spoiled prince, nor the frustrated passion of a lusty young man. This wasn't something that could be solved by a new sword or a pretty serving girl. This was something from which the Prince's guard could not protect him.

Vatak clutched his crutch more tightly, wondering how he was going to explain to the King and his Council that their only heir was going mad.

He had lain in the dark so long, it felt as if he had always been there. Sunlight was just a distant memory, and fresh air, and the sound of laughter. He lay in his bed as one already dead. It was the only way to bear the pain.

After that first terrible night they had drawn the curtains, shutting the world out. They cleared the glass away; the mirrors had not been replaced. He was glad. He rarely opened his eyes now, but when he did, the empty walls soothed him. They reflected nothing, you could not see yourself—or anyone else.

His attendants moved around him as silently as ghosts, for he could stand noise no better than he stood the light. He had almost forgotten what normal speech sounded like. Until late one night, when he was awakened from the thin half-slumber in which he spent most of his hours.

"You're late," Vatak, his words low, but harsh with worry.

"I'm here. Where is he?" A female voice, cool and clear and much louder. S'Kitaan winced.

"Shh! You must speak softly."
"I thought you dismissed the guards."

"I did. The Prince can't bear noise."

"Hmph! We'll see what he can bear." Creak of the door opening, then firm, measured steps.

They stopped by his bed. S'Kitaan turned his head away. Why couldn't they leave him alone?

"Look at me, boy." When he did not move, strong fingers grasped his chin and jerked it forward. His eyes flew open in shock. For the first time in many days he heard his own voice, raspy with disuse.

"I will beat the skin from your back—"

"Quiet, you mewling fool. Right now you couldn't beat a day-old baby."

He jerked forwards, grabbing at her sleeve. He heard Vatek crying out in protest, but before his tutor got to him S'Kitaan had stopped himself, his blurry gaze finally focusing enough to take in the small, slender figure standing over him. Even in the dim glow coming from the single torch lit upon the wall, he could make out the pure white of the woman's robes. He released her at once, falling back on the bed. He threw one arm over his eyes and saw green light burst against his lids. The pain was so bad he was nauseous with it, though the real problem wasn't centered in his stomach. He had suffered headaches since he was eleven years old, but this was more than that. This was agony: deep, throbbing, endless. Death had begun to seem like a blessed release.

His sudden exertion just now had made everything worse. His skull must split apart any second, breaking into pieces like a shattered mirror. He would have welcomed the prospect, if he could be certain it would ease the pressure.

S'Kitaan gave a low, keening moan. The fingers returned, gentler now. He heard a low chant as they rubbed at his temples, and then—oh sweet relief!—the pain ebbed. It did not go entirely, that seemed as impossible a dream as sunlight. But for the moment it was bearable. The only other time he felt like this was just after they dosed him with one of their bitter potions. But the potions dulled his wits, and right now his mind was clearer than it had been for many days.

"Thank you," he sighed.

"I'm afraid the relief is only temporary," she said. "But it will give us time to talk. I would have you fully aware for this conversation."

He dared to crack one eye again, focusing on her blunt, lined features. He saw the rough fabric of her white robes, so different from the silks worn by other women of her station, the ones who lived in the fortress. "Who are you? Your dress declares you a priestess, but I don't know you from any ritual I have witnessed."

"You wouldn't." She drew herself up, temporarily tall. "I am Vana, Acolyte of the First Mother. I serve T'Lyn, Lady of Sky and Soil and all which lies between."

"I am Vana, Acolyte of the First Mother. I serve T'Lyn, Lady of Sky and Soil and all which lies between."

S'Kitaan opened both eyes now. Of course he knew Vana, though her face was unknown to him. Everyone did, and not just because of the office she held. Takraan had forbidden her name to be mentioned, but he never could still those wagging tongues completely. The Prince knew she was the only person ever to defy his father and emerge more or less unscathed. Driven out, but not destroyed. Still, a king's order of banishment could not be ignored lightly, even if one did enjoy the protection of the Mother Goddess.

"It's very dangerous for you to be here."
"Next you'll be telling me that water is wet and blood is green. Of course it's dangerous! Let's stop wasting time with foolish chatter and get to the point." Vana adjusted the long sleeves of her robes. "You are going mad."

S'Kitaan blinked at her. He knew this, of course. He suspected that everyone in the fortress did, but no one had dared speak the words aloud to him. But Vana's next words surprised him more.

"I believe you can be cured."

S'Kitaan sat straight up in bed, never minding the warning throb in his head. "Madam, I will do anything—anything you ask. When I am king, I will gift you half my land—"

"Hmmph!" she said, with a dismissive gesture. "What would I do with your land? It's mostly desert anyway, with Takraan ruining every cultivated settlement in the name of conquest. My mother told me tales of how amusing it was, when he was a boy and liked to run about, knocking down his brothers' sand castles. No one is laughing now." Her pale face had darkened.

"Then—why are you here?"

"Because you won't be king if you are not cured. We need sanity and order—we need peace. We will never have it while Takraan lives, and we will certainly not have it if you die. War is all very well in its place—a show of force must be made occasionally, if one is not to be completely overtaken by one's neighbors. But there are limits. Green fields must replace the battlefields, or the famine will become worse."

"There's a famine on?"

"Yes, you sheltered sprout, quite a savage one."

"Oh." S'Kitaan blinked around his dim rooms. He felt another throb in his head and focused on what was really important. "What are you going to do?"

"It's what you are going to do. That pain in your head, the one that's driving you mad, it's not physical. If it were, the King's physicians could have cured it by now, or at least discovered its source. They're a bunch of prattling old greybeards, but they know their work. That means it's spiritual, not your brain but your mind. The pain is a defense—a distraction. It points to the real problem but it is not the problem. Do you see?"

"I—I think so." S'Kitaan swallowed hard. He did not want to see inside his brain—or his mind. He had spent months trying not to know himself. He clenched his hands in his lap so Vana could not see them trembling. But perhaps she did, for her steady gaze softened a bit.

"I know this is difficult for you, young one. This pain is old, at least seven years. That is how long you have been suffering the headaches, yes? They have grown worse with time, they will never grow better. You must gather your courage now. If you cannot do it for yourself, you must do it for your people, whose suffering is as great as your own. Prove that you are a true king."

Her words were quiet, but they echoed within him, more affecting than the pain. He raised his chin. "Very well. I will do what I must." He paused. "What must I do?"

"For now, lie back. Do not pull away from me, whatever happens."

S'Kitaan obeyed. Vana leaned in, placing a hand on his chest. Her fingers covered the worst of the cuts from the broken glass, now nearly healed. For a moment, all he felt was warmth, then—
it's hot in his rooms. some of this is the fire but mostly it's the heat of their two young bodies, tangled together on sleeping silks gone damp with lovesweat. he should call a porter for water, but he cannot move just yet. t'lyra is such a pretty thing, so soft and biddable—charming, too, her sweet face shining not just with mirth but with intelligence. not like father's woman at all, that great blond wench with her huge breasts and dull eyes. when he is king, t'lyra will be his chief concubine. he will dress her in silks and seat her next to him at the head table. he can do it tomorrow if he likes—he is a man now. t'lyra certainly seems to think—

S'Kitaan sits straight up in bed. 'what's that?'

'my lord?' t'lyra asks.

'did you see it?'

'see what, my lord?' t'lyra's sweet voice has soured a little with impatience. she is a lovely and biddable girl, but it has been rather an exhausting evening. her eyes are heavy with sleep.

S'Kitaan was sleepy too, but now he is wide awake. he rises from the bed. he walks to the mirror across from it, largest and costliest of the many which border his room. 'did you see him?'

'who, my lord?'

'him.' S'Kitaan walks closer to the mirror. he stares at the man within.

'my lord, that's you.'

S'Kitaan reaches out. the man within does, too. their fingers almost meet.

'no,' S'Kitaan whispers. 'i'm me. that's him.'

'my prince, he is you.'

S'Kitaan's fingers curl on the glass. the man's curl too, scraping at the barrier separating them. he looks into the man's eyes and sees a pain that mirrors his own. 'i'm not him. he's not here. don't you see, he's not here.'

he flinches as soft fingers trace down his back. 'S'Kitaan,' t'lyra whispers. 'you are here. you are you. come back to bed, sweetheart. i will remind you.' she tugs gently at his arm, trying to pull him away from the mirror. S'Kitaan sees the man retreating, and he jerks away from her.

'he's not here. he's always been there. he watches, he waits, but he's not me. HE'S NOT ME. OH GODS, WHO IS HE? WHERE IS HE?'

S'Kitaan sees the man within the mirror screaming too. his fingers beat against the glass, but all they feel is slick coldness, no warmth. it must be so cold in there. it was so cold when they took him. he held on so hard but he slipped away, he screamed but still they took him, they took—

he can't bear it another second, looking into those lost eyes. he can't live like this, here but not here, watching, waiting. he will get out. he will get him out. he can't stand this. we can't stand—

S'Kitaan picks up his sword. t'lyra cries out when it crashes into the mirror, huge cracks marring its bright surface. she tugs desperately at his shoulders, but he shoves her back. he swings again, and this time the mirror shatters. he hears her screaming with pain, he sees green drops flying, her blood or his, it doesn't matter. he swings again, and again, and again—
the man within the mirror looks at him, silent and still. his dark eyes accusing, longing. They are the last thing he sees before it all goes black.

S'Kitaan screamed aloud. He cried out like a child, like a lost soul. From inside the chaos he heard Vatak running out the door, speaking sharply to the guards clustering outside. Let them come in. Let them judge him—he did not care. He could not bear it. All these years of pain, lost and alone, watching and waiting. Always touching but never touched. Here but not here.

Let them be judged, they did not care. They could not bear it.

Strong fingers on his temples, rubbing gently. Old, old words, chanted softly. It seemed to take hours—perhaps it did. The black tide pulling him under ebbed. He opened his eyes. He looked into Vana's. Hers were very dark, but within their depths was a glint of red, as bright as the face of T'Khut, the Watcher. Eyes that could see far beyond or deep within.

"Where is he?" S'Kitaan whispered. "Where is my brother?"

"Gone," Vana said. "Dead, these eighteen years."

"Was it the birthing fever? The one which killed the Queen—my mother?" The last words were not ones he had said often. They felt strange upon his lips.

"There was no fever. The Queen took her own life."
The Prince stared at the Priestess for a full minute. "Why?"

"She tried to murder the King. Late one night, when he came to look upon you. She stabbed him in the heart, but it was not a killing blow. When she realized this, she slit her throat."

"Why?" The word was so soft, even he was not sure he had spoken aloud until she answered:

"I think you know."

S'Kitaan was silent another minute. Then, speaking slowly: "He killed my brother, my twin. Not an hour after we were born." His own voice seemed to be coming from far away. He was not here, not in this moment. He was in another place and time, looking up at a face which was also his face, feeling desperate fingers clinging to him. He was also looking down, desperately clinging. But they were too weak, too small. They could not hold onto each other.

"But you did hold on," Vana said. "Your brother's body was killed, but his essence, his soul, new and unformed as it was, clung to yours. He has stayed with you. Buried deep inside you, here but not here, since the day you were born. A wondrous thing! I would never have believed it could happen, had I not felt him myself just now. The ways of the Goddess are mysterious."

S'Kitaan was not concerned with the Goddess or her ways at present. His fingers twisted the silks on his bed. "Why would my father do this? Why would he murder his son?"

"Takraan has always been ruthless, even with his own blood. He was determined to produce a male heir, but T'Lyn was too generous. Two babies at once—it was too much. The King looked upon the two of you, and he did not see a pair of fine sons. He saw rivalry, factions, civil war. He saw division, when he has given his soul for unity. He destroyed his own brothers for it, he showed them no mercy. The King looked upon the two of you, and his eyes fixed upon your brother—a bit smaller, five minutes younger." She lowered her head. "He showed no mercy."

S'Kitaan turned his face away. He did not scream again: this was a pain beyond expression. The
agony was not just in his head now, but in every part of his body. He felt the pillow under him grow sodden with tears. So much water wasted; it did not matter. He did not know which was worse, the sorrow or the guilt. He had been given life, his brother death. It was not fair.

*I'm sorry. You did not deserve it. I did not.*

The pain slashed through him like a sword: for a moment he thought it would cut him in two. It did not matter. He felt a hand close over his own, cold as death. His flesh shivered at the touch, but he did not pull away. He saw a face, pale and sorrowful, so like his own. But not his own.

Then, suddenly, the pain stopped. Not ebbing, not dulling, it was truly gone. But the presence remained. Those cold fingers still clung to his. That sad gaze still watched him. Now he could return it. He opened his eyes, looking at Vana with sorrow, wonder. "My brother—he's here."

"Yes," she said, "and no. That is the problem. Two souls are not meant to occupy one body. When you were younger it was bearable, for the souls of children are small and malleable. But as you've matured, it's become like two prisoners sharing one tiny cell. It's why your headaches have grown ever-worse, why your behavior has been so erratic these past months. There is too much inside of you. Your brother merely haunted you before: Now he is killing you."

"How can we stop it?"

"Your brother must go. We cannot let him stay with you any longer."

S'Kitaan shuddered, as cold fingers clutched him tight. "What you suggest would be the end of him." He shook his head. "It's not fair. He has as much a right to exist as I do."

"Fair?" Vana said, eyes sparking. "When has this world ever been fair—or kind, or easy? It's why only the strong can bear it. You must be ruthless if you and your kingdom are to survive."

S'Kitaan sat straight up. "Did you not chastise my father for this murder? It's why he banished you, is it not? Now you would have me repeat it, take from my brother the only life he has left."

"Do not chastise me, boy," Vana snapped. "You do not know how it was in those days after your mother's death. None of us were sure what had happened, Takraan hid his sin too well. It took time to weave all the whispers into truth. I was not the only one who discovered what had been done, but I was the one who spoke of it. The others were too afraid of the King's wrath. Speaking the truth to him cost me everything: Your father could not take my life, but it was all he left me. You don't know what banishment means. You have never lived outside these walls. You have not been to the desert. You do not know."

Vana leaned nearer. He looked into her face, with its lines of care and suffering. He looked at her hands with their deeply calloused fingers, as if she had clawed the cliff's edge of existence.

"I would have died," she said, "had the Goddess not shown mercy. It took her so long to do it, I don't know why. Perhaps she was testing me. But finally, she led me to a better fate. Out there in the desert I found it—heim." She hovered close over the Prince, red eyes glowing like coals.

"Who?" he whispered.

"Fate," she said. "He is more wonderful and more terrible than you could imagine. You need not try. For you are going to see him, you are going to the desert. Tonight."

"What?"
"You have finally looked into your brother's eyes. You've seen the truth behind all your agony, and it has given you a measure of relief. But it will not last, not while he remains inside of you. Were this a simple possession, I might be able to banish him. But his soul is too entangled with yours, his hold is too strong. It would be like separating two trees that have grown together—both will die. I can do nothing for you, nor can the court physicians. You need a better doctor."

S'Kitaan crossed his arms over his chest. "I won't kill my brother."

"He is already dead—long dead. You are not a child anymore." Vana fixed him with her steady gaze. "Keth has died of the wounds you gave him on the training grounds. T'Lyra's belly swells with child—your child."

S'Kitaan stared at her, unable to respond to these revelations. The feelings they inspired were too at odds. In this first moment he couldn't quite believe it, that he had given death and life in the same week.

"By any measure, you are a man," Vana said. "It's time you acted like one. Go to the desert and find your fate."

S'Kitaan had to swallow around the lump in his throat to speak. "How will I know it—him? How can you be sure he is there?"

"The Watcher has whispered in my ear. She looked into the Outer Dark, and she has seen him. She told me what you must do. Walk into the desert alone, keeping T'Khut always in front of you. She will guide you. In the blue box which is not a box, you will find him."

"Who?" S'Kitaan's voice shook with anger, but it was born of another emotion. Fear, of facing all those miles of empty sand. "Who is this man?"

"He is not a man, he is a god. Remember that. His wrath is terrible, but he is not always angry. He will help you."

"If he does not?"

"Then we are lost. But he will help you, as he helped me once. He showed me—so many things. I knew he must return one day." Her face brightened, eyes far away. For a moment she looked young, almost beautiful. "We are quite his favorite planet in the galaxy. So he once said."

"Galaxy?"

Vana came back to herself with a jerk. She waved a hand at the Prince. "Do not ask foolish questions! Go to the desert and find him, our lonely god. When you do, tell him I await at the foot of Mount Seleya. Tell him I am still waiting."

S'Kitaan dropped to the ground, exhausted. Spreading his cloak on the sand, he took one long, last pull from his water skin. He would allow himself no more tonight.

He had been traveling many days. At first, he tried to keep track of how long the journey was taking, but soon the sunrises and sunsets blurred together. He traveled mostly at night, as Vatak had advised. The heat was less fierce then, and there was less chance of being discovered. His tutor had promised that he could buy a little time at the beginning, but soon enough, word would spread that the Prince was gone. If his father discovered his whereabouts, he would be returned to the fortress in chains if need be. S'Kitaan had no illusions about this.
He thought of Takraan often during these long, difficult days. Early on, it occurred to the Prince that he should hate his father for what he had done. In the beginning, he did not understand why he did not. He should have felt all his affection for the King drain out of him, like wine from a burst skin. Finally, he realized that he did not feel this because there was no love to lose. The Prince knew then that he had always hated his father. The feeling was so innate he had never questioned it, as he did not question the color of his eyes or the length of his limbs. *It's almost as if I knew what Takraan had done,* S'Kitaan thought. *I suppose part of me did—he did.*

Sometimes, S'Kitaan dreamed that he was looking in the mirror again, seeing his twin. But this time, the polished glass parted like water and he could catch his brother's hand, warm those cold fingers with his own. But these were only dreams, the presence inside him only a presence, with no speech or action. S'Kitaan knew what the presence wanted, the desire they both shared. But stepping through the barrier of life and death, touching at last—impossible. Not even a helpful god could accomplish it, if such a god existed.

S'Kitaan was beginning to doubt that he did, as the days passed and his journey lengthened. In fact, his expedition through his father's kingdom—by roads he had never taken on his few easy jaunts outside the fortress—had left him wondering if any of the gods were real. How could they look upon so much suffering and remain unmoved? He traveled through utter desolation broken only by small farming settlements. These were almost worse than the wasteland. He did not know how people could be so thin and yet live. How could mothers nurse babies from breasts so withered, support them with hands that were more bones than flesh? He saw men with faces grey as desert sand, tilling fields of dust. He saw more grave cairns than people. For the first time he too knew want, for he was touching his supplies as little as he could. When they were gone, these people could give him no help.

*When I am king this shall not be,* he thought. It was much upon his mind now, his future reign.

He wanted to build palaces and found cities, construct great shining libraries filled with all the knowledge that had ever been. He wanted to sire a hundred children, keep a hundred concubines. He wanted to feel the warm and giving flesh of well-trained slave boys, their tender necks bent in supplication, wet eyes alight with need. He wanted to eat a feast of ten thousand courses, drink every drop of wine in the fortress cellars. He wanted everyone to feast, war a distant memory.

He wanted none of these things. A life of luxury and indolence, wine flowing like a river, books and bedmates, feasts and babies—it felt wasteful, gluttonous, weak. He wanted to stand at the top of Mount Seleya and look down on an army a hundred thousand strong, *his* army. He would conquer the world from horizon to horizon, and by this, his people would prosper. Blood and honor, swords and glory—such thoughts made his flesh tighten more than any woman's touch.

He recognized his father in these thoughts, and he was ashamed. Such thinking led to dead fields and dead sons. Still, his heart yearned for death, as it also yearned for life. He was split in two.

S'Kitaan stopped, looking up at the red face of the moon. She was so wise, T'Khut. Millennia of watching had made her so. He wished she would tell him which of his desires were true, and which the sad longings of a ghost. If his brother was truly dead, did the Prince not owe a greater debt to his people? He should find the lonely god and let himself be exorcised of this presence. But how could he see his brother banished to a darkness he did not deserve? S'Kitaan looked upon the moon, and he knew she would not give him any answers. The gods were silent now.

He shook the sand out of his cloak. He journeyed on. In search of a god he did not believe in, for a deliverance that his heart did not desire. But still he walked, every day less of a boy and more of a man. A prince fast on his way to becoming a king.
S'Kitaan rationed his supplies with all the care he knew, but at last there came a day when the last crumb of food was eaten, the last drop of water wrung from his skins. Still he journeyed on, wrestling what nourishment he could from the grudging earth. The Prince found a few brackish pools, with water so fetid that thirst was almost—almost—better. Remembering Vatak's lessons, he found and devoured the few succulent desert plants, sucking out juice and marrow even as their spines tore his lips and their poisons made his tongue swell. He ate what small creatures his fumbling hands could trap, and when he couldn't find animals he ate bugs, tearing bits of flesh from under hard, bitter shells. He did not even realize how much this life was changing him, until one day he overturned a rock and discovered a nest of slugs. Before his journey the sight would have disgusted him, but now his mouth watered at the prospect of so much easy meat.

These measures kept him going for a time, but finally T'Khut led him into a stretch of desert so barren that not even thorny plants and stinging insects called it home. It was so dry that the very rocks seemed parched. After a few days, the Prince knew he was in serious danger. He had been through barren patches before, but sooner or later they were always relieved by some kind of life. Here the desolation stretched on and on. His muscles screamed for respite, his head swam with fatigue, but he knew he could not stop. The occasional piles of bleached bones he found were all the warning he required: To rest in this cursed place was to perish.

His stomach was as shriveled as an old gourd, it no longer troubled him with hunger pangs. But thirst was a constant, keening ache. He felt he could have walked forever if only he could have had one long, quenching drink. The Prince remembered the water of the fortress, so cold and sweet, welling up in endless supply, coming as it did from the huge reservoir which underlay the settlement. He dreamed of it even as he walked, sleeping with his eyes open, his desperate body still moving. He longed for water as a miser longs for gold, a lecher for flesh. But there was no water here, no relief. Just miles and miles of empty sand.

One evening, crouched under a shallow overhang of rock where he had taken refuge from the worst heat of the day, the Prince watched the sun set. As he saw the fiery disc slip below the horizon, he knew he would not see it rise again. He had no strength left, no hope. He could not even stand and leave this pitiful shelter. But this was as good a place as any to die. Though the tiny movement seemed like too much effort, he succeeded in turning his head, staring at the rising moon. T'Khut seemed to stare back at him, her fires reflecting like a thousand red eyes.

_I did the best I could. I did as you said_, S'Kitaan thought. He hadn't strength to speak, but he supposed she could hear him anyway, if she wished. _Here I am, a prince brought low. I have lost everything except my wretched life. So here I stay, my lady. Call upon your mother, T'Lyn, tell her to send water, and bread, and a voice to ease my loneliness. Or I will lose my life as well. Perhaps this was always intended: This is how my brother and I shall be united again. But I do not think he wants this. I know I do not, but it does not matter. Here my journey ends._

T'Khut made no answer. S'Kitaan hadn't really expected one. He closed his eyes and turned his face away from her. He did not look for his brother. He had failed him, he did not deserve comfort. The Prince looked within and saw only what he wished to see: darkness.

The darkness seemed to go on for quite a long time, and with it despair, and silence. It went on so long that at last the Prince began to wonder if he was already dead. He had not expected it to be so dull, Death. Or that he would still be thirsty. Truly, the gods failed one at every turn.

The Prince was so caught up in his dissatisfaction that when the singing began, it took him a moment to hear. But once the sound impinged upon his senses, dulled as they were from his sufferings, it could not be ignored. It wasn't even a song; it was more of a cry. A shout, tuneful and triumphant. You seemed to hear it both without and within. Perhaps _this_ was Death?
Then light came, and wind. With what felt like the last of his strength, the Prince turned over to face the unknown. That's when he saw it: not Death but Life, emerging from a tall blue box.

Barely a breath seemed to pass between the door of the box opening and the man appearing over him. For he did seem to be a man, tall and thin and dressed in odd, tight clothing. His hair was short, almost as short as a fever victim's. It stood straight up. His cheeks were as freckled as a Greater Sea farmer's. His face had the openness of a child's—something about it reminded the Prince of his Uncle Terek, that poor blessed fool. What a strange man this was! Then S'Kitaan focused, he looked into the man's eyes. They were a color similar to his own, but not the same. These eyes were darker. Not in color but—they were so very dark.

"My Lord—" S'Kitaan croaked.

"Hush, young one. Don't try to talk."

"I beseech thee—"

"Beseech me later." Strong arms scooped him up. This skinny man shouldn't be so strong. But he wasn't a man. S'Kitaan looked into those eyes again and wondered whether he wouldn't be safer in the desert. But they were already moving to the blue box. The Prince knew that even if he possessed any strength, resistance would be vain. It's useless to struggle once Fate takes hold of you. But the man's eyes, his eyes—

_Calm yourself, brother. All will be well._ S'Kitaan started at the voice. He knew it instantly, though it had never been able to speak to him before. This terrified and excited him at once.

He needed everything to stop a moment, he needed to consider what he was doing. He should have considered it before now, the place this journey was leading. What it really meant, to seek out the gods and ask favors.

_Shh, my dearest friend. Consider tomorrow. Tonight we sleep._

A cool and soothing hand stroked his brow, the touch stronger than it had ever been, more real. The Prince felt what was truly the last of his strength leave his body. He could struggle no more.

The door of the blue box closed behind him. His eyes closed with it.
Chapter 30

xxx. Vulcan

S'Kitaan did not know how long he was lost to the world. Perhaps it was only a night, perhaps it was
even longer than his last illness at the fortress. Time did not seem to exist here, in this blue box that
wasn't really a box.

When he came fully back to himself, he was lying in a small bedchamber. It took him a moment to
recognize it as such, for it did not resemble any he had seen before. Its walls were of a shiny stuff
that seemed like glass and like wood but was neither of those things. The bed that sheltered him was
more comfortable than his prince's couch, its surface strangely malleable, with a lovely smell he did
not recognize. There was a distinct lack of bugs. The coverlet which lay upon him was not any
material known to him, though it was soft as silk. It was wonderfully thin, but lying under it he was
never too cold.

"So this is how the gods live," he whispered, eyes wide with wonder. He tried to sit up, the better to
examine the largish mirror which hung over what must be some kind of dressing table. At least it
looked like a mirror, though its dull surface reflected nothing.

As he stretched his arm he felt a shooting pain there; he looked down and with a small cry saw the
needle piercing his skin. It was attached to a kind of thread, wide as a strip of rawhide but—wonder
of wonders—transparent, and the thread was attached to a bag. The bag, also transparent, was full of
clear liquid, and how it did not leak out of the material was yet another mystery. Perhaps it was made
of the same stuff as the walls. Whatever the origin, he wanted it out.

Before his fingers could so much as pluck at the needle, however, the door opened—it seemed to
fold in upon itself!—and a brisk figure strode through, saying even more briskly:

"Now now, none of that. You're still as desiccated as a raisin. Leave the IV in till we've pumped a
few more electrolytes into you."

The man appeared to be speaking S'Kitaan's language, though the Prince only understood about a
quarter of what had just been said to him. This was the man from the night before, or whatever night
it was that S'Kitaan first entered the box. His rescuer was wearing the same odd clothes, he had the
same open, questioning expression as when he carried the Prince away from destruction. His brown
eyes sparkled with life and cheer.

He veils them, a voice whispered to him. We caught him by surprise that night, he did not have a
chance to temper his gaze. Its true color is still there, deep and endless as the Outer Dark.

S'Kitaan felt cool arms encircle his shoulders, the touch so real that he looked down, expecting to see
himself embraced. But all he saw was the odd, stripy material of the sleeping garments in which he'd
been dressed.

Now, brother: Parley with our rescuer. I will watch.

"What was that?" The man said, tilting his head to one side.

"He—" S'Kitaan coughed, clearing his throat. "I said nothing, my lord."

"Hmm, could have sworn I heard something." The man shrugged his thin shoulders. "In any case,
it's good to see you back among the living. You gave me quite a turn! Here I was, just arrived,
planning on a nice little evening constitutional. When who should I come upon but you, all curled up like a sad little bat. A prince in this lonely place! However did it happen?"

"How do you know my true status?"

"Peasants don't wear silk, or carry swords with jewels in the hilt. Unless things have changed a great deal since my last visit. Doubtful—you people don't exactly embrace progress, do you? Even when you do, you don't. Peace and logic on top, seething rage below. Bit disingenuous, when you think about it."

The Prince stared at him. His rescuer was doing it again, using normal words but still managing to be unintelligible. S'Kitaan did not point this out, as his nurses and tutors had taught him better manners. Remembering manners, he straightened himself as well as the thread in his arm would allow, and said:

"Thank you for rescuing me. I would have died in the desert without your assistance. My lord, if there is ever anything I can do—"

"You can stop with the 'my lord' business. You got the title right, but etiquette and precedence make me itchy. Too much like being back home, stuck in Council wearing their godawful fancy dress. Don't have the face for a high collar—not this time around, anyway. Look like a preying mantis stuffed in some kind of mushroom."

S'Kitaan paused, attempting to parse this latest onslaught of rhetoric. Finally: "What shall I call you then, my—Sir?"

"I'm the Doctor."

"Doctor who?"

"Just 'Doctor' serves well enough. You are?"

"S'Kitaan, son of Takraan, King of the Great Desert, Lord of the Lesser Sea."

"Takraan, eh? I've heard of him." The twist in the Doctor's lip suggested they weren't pleasant things. S'Kitaan was not surprised. "To return to the question at hand," the Doctor continued, "What are you doing out here, S'Kitaan son of Takraan? Shouldn't you be back home learning to oppress serfs or something?"

"I was looking for you."

The Doctor blinked. "Really?"

_We've surprised him again. It's the first true emotion he's shown today. A sly one, this Doctor._

The Doctor took a few steps closer to the bed, head cocked to one side. "What do you want from me, princeling? What—who—is swirling around between those pointed ears of yours?"

For the first time, S'Kitaan noticed the Doctor's ears. They were as odd as his dress. S'Kitaan had seen ears which had been cut off, for insolence, for debt. The Doctor's were present but—_rounded_. As if someone had taken his natural points and blunted them. Very odd indeed.

_They are not the oddest thing about him. Of that I am certain. Be careful of him, very careful._

The Doctor sat upon the edge of the bed. His gaze was bright, friendly. It made all the hairs on
S'Kitaan's neck stood up. He peered into the Prince's eyes as if he were trying to peer through them. "Well?"

"Vana sent me."

The Doctor's brow wrinkled. Then, suddenly, he smiled. "Vana! Of course! However did—but she always was a clever girl. How is she?"

"She said to tell you that she's waiting at Mount Seleya. She is still waiting."

"Right," the Doctor said, looking uneasy. "Did promise, didn't I? Meant to come straight back, but a paradox here, an apocalypse there—you know how it is."

S'Kitaan had no idea how it was for this mad creature, so he said nothing.

"Vana sent you into Vulcan's Forge just to give me that message? Doesn't sound like her."

"No, she—" the Prince stopped, uncertain how to proceed. He shouldn't have called the Doctor mad. He didn't have the right to hurl that accusation at anyone. Not with this cool embrace still upon him. "That is to say, I—" he stopped, twisting the bed covering.

Moments passed. The Doctor waited, saying nothing. He seemed content to wait until the end of time, if need be. Finally, S'Kitaan could stand it no longer.

"I'm—ill," he said. The Doctor looked at him encouragingly, but S'Kitaan went silent. It was no easy thing, admitting his true problem. He wasn't even sure he should admit it to this person.

"You look well enough to me, except for the exposure. And that hideous rash—you've been eating the white berries, haven't you? Why are white berries poisonous on every planet? I must write a monograph upon it one day. It's rather like what they say about gin and tonics. Did you know that every culture eventually invents a drink called that? Sometimes it's 'jynnan tonnyx,' or 'gee-N-N-T'N-ix,' or 'jinond-o-nicks,' or any of a thousand phonetic variations. Of course it's not the same recipe: a Silvolvian 'chinanto/mnigs' is ordinary water served slightly above room temperature, while a Gagrakackan 'tzjin-anthony-ks' kills cows at a hundred paces. But the funny bit is that every culture invents it before they come into contact with other planets. Interesting, what? If you want to know more, I could point you to some relevant literature—"

"Please!" S'Kitaan cried. "Stop talking! I'm going mad!"

The Doctor stared at him, face intent. The Prince did not know which was worse, the man's speeches or his silence. In any event, he must continue. He wiped the water from his cheeks.

"I'm going mad," he repeated softly.

The Doctor leaned close. His gaze wasn't so piercing now; his face was softer, kinder. S'Kitaan might have said he looked like a concerned father, but he had never seen his own father look this way. A concerned nurse, then. A favorite tutor.

"Tell me," the Doctor said. "Tell me everything."

*Confide in him if you must, brother. I will watch.*

First in a slow, halting voice, then with increasing speed and volume, the Prince told the Doctor of his troubles—all his troubles. He even told of things that he normally would have left out, his nights with T'Lyra and his killing of Keth.
But mostly, he spoke of his brother. Even the stories that weren't about his twin were really about
him. The headaches and the tantrums and the loneliness. The dissatisfaction with friends, sisters,
tutors—none of them ever quite right. Even T'Lyra's touch could not satisfy the ache in his heart,
from a lifetime of never having the thing he truly wanted. No matter how many mirrors he ordered
hung in his room, they reflected only darkness. The worst darkness of all, his hatred of his father,
who had bestowed this life upon him while taking his brother's away. The man who had seen to it
that his son would never know a mother's caress. The one whose kingdom now forced a choice upon
S'Kitaan: his people or his brother, his sanity or his twin. It was not fair.

He spoke until he could speak no more. There was silence again. Then, the Doctor rose. He opened
the dressing table, and he took out a necklace. At least it looked like a necklace, for it was made of
silver, and he placed it around his neck. Even odder, the Doctor took the ends of the necklace and stuck them into his round ears.

He leaned close and, unbuttoning the top of the Prince's striped sleeping suit, he put the disc against
his chest. S'Kitaan flinched a bit at the cold metal. "Hold still," the Doctor said.

"What are you doing?"

"Hush. I'm listening." The Doctor put the disc to one of the Prince's temples. After a moment, he
removed the ends of the necklace from his ears. He put a hand under S'Kitaan's chin and peered into
his eyes, gaze as sharp as a blade. Just when S'Kitaan thought he couldn't stand it cutting into him
another second, the Doctor let go.

"Ah! I thought so. Knew someone was in there besides you, sneaking and whispering. He's a sly
one, your little brother. Bears watching, he does."

"What do you mean?"

"He gets what he wants, doesn't he? No matter what it takes. Lurking inside of every looking glass,
scaring the daylights out of you. Pounding on the inside of your skull until you're half-mad with it.
Getting you all the way out here, driving you on like a borrowed mule. Don't think he suffered
during all that, do you? He doesn't have the corporeality for it. But you do."

"He just wants to be with me. He wants to live."

"Aye, we know what he wants. What do you want?"

"Of course I want the same thing. I told you—"

"Yeah, scarred from birth and all that. But at this point, I don't think you know the difference
between his emotions and yours. You're so used to splitting everything with him. That's not natural
for your kind. Vulcans don't like to share, your world doesn't encourage it. This planet is so mean.
Everything about it—land, people, animals. The bloody posies will cut you if you're not careful. Not
your fault, really. After 40 Eri A had its little tantrum, scorched the face of your poor world—
generosity became impossible. You had to take what you could to survive."

The Doctor looked down, shoulders hunched in a guilty way. "I'd have prevented the solar flare-up
if I could. I would have. There was so much death, so many lovely creatures lost. You can't imagine
it. But some things are fixed. Even I can't change them. Death must happen. Though it seems
monstrously unfair, sometimes you can't save everyone."

"I—I don't understand."

The Doctor regarded him seriously. "If we bring him back—and I'm not saying it's possible, not
saying that at all. The cloning of a body is easy enough, but the transfer of consciousness! It's not just the transfer, but dividing everything up, trying to split all that awareness between you and keep it even-handed—I shudder to think of the equations involved. In the end, will you be happier? Will he? It might be better, kinder, to let your brother move on, to let you be who you are. S'Kitaan, you have never been just you. Maybe when you are, you won't like sharing."

The Prince looked down at his hands. He closed his eyes, saw his brother's face, and opened them again. He did not want to look upon his twin just now. The Doctor's words had the ring of truth. He'd never considered it, any more than he considered this journey before it began. Why was he out here, what did he really want? For the first time, he saw the pragmatism behind his father's actions as well as the evil. How could two princes share a kingdom? Could they hope to succeed where Takraan and all his brothers had failed?

He could feel his brother behind him, cold but real as life, holding tight.

*I would do it for you. Had our father's eye fallen upon you instead of me, had the knife found your throat instead of mine. I would not hesitate.*

S'Kitaan opened his eyes, blinking away wetness. He was becoming so wasteful these days. "I love my brother," he said.

"Of course," the Doctor said. "But that's not always enough. Sometimes you have to let people go. Even when it feels like you're cutting one of your own hearts out. When the wall comes up and you are separated forever, you have to move on. Love is not the same as fate."

"Not even for you?" S'Kitaan asked softly.

"Especially for me." The Doctor's eyes had darkened, but the change was not frightening this time. The Prince was no more than normally gifted in the Mental Arts, but this emotion was so overwhelming, he could feel it without effort. A grief as deep and endless as the Outer Dark.

"I'm sorry," S'Kitaan said. "I'm so sorry." Presumptuous of him, to be offering comfort to a god. But this one was so terribly lonely.

"That's my line," the Doctor said, mouth quirking a little, though his eyes remained bleak.

Then he seemed to shake himself, drawing his briskness around him like a cloak of mail. "Get some rest," he said. "We'll talk about this later. Over dinner, perhaps: You can't survive on saline and Lucozade forever. I've got some lovely aubergines somewhere in the larder, perhaps a bit of broccoli—wait, right, planet hasn't gone vegan yet. I'll round up some chops. Lovely."

The Doctor leaned down, peering into S'Kitaan's eyes. But he was not looking at S'Kitaan. "You. Behave. Your brother is not a sodding beast of burden."

With this final pronouncement, he strode out the door. It whooshed shut behind him. The sound and movement were so alien, they made S'Kitaan jump.

"Brother, we're not in Shikahr anymore," he said under his breath.

This time, there was no answer. The other presence in his mind had gone unusually still and silent, almost as if it weren't there at all. The Doctor must truly be a miracle worker. S'Kitaan wasn't sure he liked the silence. He had become accustomed to the other presence touching him all the time, even if the touch wasn't real. But there was a certain relief in being alone. Singular.

He lay back upon the bed. He stared at the ceiling, its shiny amber surface mottled with yellow and
brown. As if he lay within a branch of a great tree. He knew he should sleep, his body still weak from his journey. But he was wide awake and anxious. Restless.

He wondered how those he'd left behind were faring, his tutors and nurses, all of his attendants. He supposed that Keth had long since been laid to rest, his ashes placed in the Hall of Shadows. S'Kitaan would visit them when he returned to the fortress. Keth had been his friend, as much as a prince could have friends. He had not meant to kill him. If Keth's ashes were not placed in a spot of sufficient honor in the Hall of Shadows, S'Kitaan would see that they were moved.

He hoped T'Lyra was well. He hoped she thought of him often, though he had not summoned the memory of her in a long time. The wide, delicate bones of her face, the rich curves of her mouth. Her eyes, so wide and intelligent, and such a lovely color—soft, golden brown. He had not seen her in many weeks, even before he left the fortress. She must be growing quite large with child by now, his child. At first it had seemed impossible, a miracle, but of course it wasn't.

S'Kitaan thought of the few nights they had spent together. He could picture them, as clearly as if he were back in his rooms at the fortress. He could see the torches that lined the walls, their gold light reflected in the mirrors. He could smell the sweet rushes scattered upon the floors, and the sweeter scent of her sweat. He could feel her flesh, warm and giving. He could see her, the naked truth of her, lit by torchlight. He wished she were here right now.

S'Kitaan's hand, the one attached to the arm not attached to a needle, traveled downwards. He felt the silky material of his sleeping trousers. His fingers slipped under the fabric, and he was surprised to find himself half-aroused. Such feelings had not troubled him in a long time, not since starvation began to dull his senses. He should not be feeling them now; He was far from well. But desire flooded his body like a restless tide. His flesh ached with want, hungry for a touch so long denied it. He was much too hot, as if struck by a sudden fever.

He half-rose, pulling the needle from his arm. He slipped his shirt from his body, trousers soon following. He lay back upon the bed, feeling its softness sliding deliciously against his bare skin. His hand closed around his swollen member, the tender flesh heavy with need. He should not be doing this, the door could open any moment. He could not help it. He needed this as much as he'd ever needed water in the desert. (Why did he need it? Whence had it come, this hasty desperation? He did not consider. It did not matter.)

S'Kitaan gave himself a long, hard stroke. It felt so good, his toes curled into the bed. Again, and his whole body went taut. Once more, and a low moan escaped his lips. This was not like satisfying thirst, when every drop brings one closer to relief. This was like stoking a fire, every stroke another spark added to the flames. He stroked himself until he thought he must explode from pleasure, the fire within him burn to ash. But it was not enough. The fire raged on, vicious as the heat of Vulcan's Forge. Another moan escaped him, not pleasure now but pain. Agony.

A cool hand upon his brow. It felt so good against his burning flesh. So good.

Shh, my dear one. Let me help you.

He looked into calm eyes. "No. It's wrong. You're my—"

I am no one. Just shadow and memory, deep inside you. A part of you. How can it be wrong?

The touch was on his cheek, then over his heart. It continued moving lower, tracing softly down his torso. Even this soft contact set his skin alight.

"Wait," he gasped. "Stop. I need to think."
Do not think. Feel.

The touch closed around the most vital part of him, holding tight. It gave a stroke which left him gasping. Then another, and another, and another, each more deeply felt than the last. It brought him to the dizzy edge of release. He would do anything for that, beg on his knees in mud, show the back of his neck to the jeering populace. Anything, anything, anything. But please, don't stop.

You do not have to beg. I am here, I will always help you. We will never be separated.

There seemed to be more touches upon him now, so many more. A thousand hands moving over his body, a thousand tongues tasting his flesh. He had become a creature formed of lust, twisting in the inferno of pleasure. He could not bear this. He must die.


A kiss upon his lips, slow and lingering. Though this touch was slight, it was, at last, what was needed. There came a final blaze within, as if the blood flowing in his veins had become a river of flame. The climax raced through him like the river overflowing its banks. He ignited from this pressure—this touch, felt deep inside of him. At last at last at last, here was true release.

For a long time, he was lost to himself. But he was never alone. Touching, and always touched. Naked and unashamed.

Until, a long time after, he opened his eyes.

He put a hand to his belly. It came away sticky with cold seed.

The chill hit him like a blow. He doubled over.

Singularity was not a relief. It was torture. He could not bear it.

Then do not bear it. End our suffering. The voice was low and weak, as if it too were exhausted.

"I don't know what to do," S'Kitaan whispered.

The key to my prison lies within this place. I found it while you slept. But you must take it. You must release me, brother. As I released you.

The barest brush on his neck. But deep inside, S'Kitaan felt a spark of desperate need. As if his fever were only cooled, not cured. He shuddered—with desire or dread, or both.

He clenched his hands upon his knees. He felt as if he were standing on the cliffs surrounding the Lesser Sea, looking down into its green expanse. As if he were about to jump from great height, into waters of unknown depth.

"Speak," he said.

His brother spoke.

S'Kitaan rose from the bed. His body moved slowly, as if he were trapped beneath the waters. He walked from his room, its alien door whooshing shut behind him. He barely noticed it. He walked down the hallway, its smooth tiles cold under his bare feet.

Hurry, hurry. The Doctor is occupied elsewhere, but he will soon return.
S’Kitaan walked as fast as he could, for one who was moving through unknown depths. At last he came to the end of the hallway. He entered an enormous room, its ceiling as high as that of the Great Hall. But this ceiling was not grey rock but amber, yellow, brown. The walls seemed to pulse with life, as if he had reached the heart of this great tree.

He walked to the center of the room. There was a large table. It glowed with light, yellow and green. He heard music and noise. He saw a dozen tiny windows glowing like jewels. But each one held a different scene, as if this place looked out upon all places, all times. It dazzled him.

Hurry, hurry. He approaches. S’Kitaan was not worried. This could not be stopped now, not even by Fate. He put his hand on the table. It was not really a table, but a box. A great treasure chest, holding the most valuable thing in the world.

It holds all worlds. All their riches and sufferings, good and evil. It holds everything. He did not know who pronounced the words, himself or another. It did not matter. Without hesitation, he put his hands upon the lid of the box.

"S’KITAAN, NO!" The Doctor's voice, sharp with fear.

Too late, too late. The box opened. White light blazed over him, brighter than all the sunlight that has ever been. S’Kitaan looked into the heart of the light. He saw.

He began to scream. He heard another voice within his mind, screaming too. But this voice still had words. Sanity.

I'm sorry, brother. I did not know. I did not see—

In the moment before their minds blew apart, they saw everything.

The Prince opened his eyes.

He blinked around the room. His gaze fixed on walls of amber, yellow, brown. His fingers touched a thin coverlet, wonderfully soft. For a moment, he was sure it had all been a dream.

Then he saw the light leaking from his fingertips.

He sat straight up, shaking his fingers like a boy trying to extinguish blazing twigs. Sparks flew from his hand, bouncing on the coverlet. He screamed, truly panicked now, but before he could make further movement, cold fingers closed on his wrist.

"Stop. It's temporary."

He looked up into the calm, sharp features of the Doctor, who was sitting in the chair by the bed. "What's happened?" the Prince whispered. "Why is my hand on fire?"

"It's not on fire, you medieval nitwit. It's leaking cosmic protoplasm. Not unusual in the first 24 hours after an elemental transformation involving soul transference." The Doctor raised an eyebrow at him. "Trust me. It will pass."

"Right," the Prince sighed, "of course," as if he had understood a word of what had just been said. He looked at his hand again. The sparks, white as sunshine, were dancing. They made him want to vomit up every meal he'd ever eaten.

"The nausea will pass, too. Have a drink." The Doctor gave him a big bottle filled with orange
liquid. The bottle was too light for glass—like paper, if paper could be transparent. He watched the sparks from his hand dance through it. He took a drink and grimaced—it was horribly sweet.

"Drink it," the Doctor snapped.

He drank. After a few sips, his could stomach no more. "It's—nice," he lied. "What is it?"

"Energy drink."

He thought all drinks gave one energy, but he did not argue the point. He put the bottle down, more concerned with other matters. He felt so strange. It wasn't just the sparks in his hands. He felt full—but also empty. As if there were both more and less of himself.

"What's happened to me?" he asked again.

"You opened the console of my ship. You stared into the space-time vortex which powers this vessel. You—" The Doctor saw the Prince's confusion and waved impatiently. "Like explaining Algebra to an orangutan! You opened something you shouldn't. You were a very bad boy."

"I'm sorry. I'm so—"

"No use for apologies now, my lad. The damage has been done." The Doctor's voice was cold.

"Will you—punish me?" The Prince asked, chilled all over. He had a feeling that the Doctor's punishments would make Vatak's whippings seem like a mother's kisses.

"What do I look like, your bloody headmaster? Anyway, the TARDIS has already taken care of it. She's made a suitable response to your impudence. Given you exactly what you deserved."

"What—what is that?"

The Doctor smiled. But his eyes were dark—very dark. "The worst thing anybody can get. Your heart's desire."

"I don't understand."

"Get up. Take a walk. It's almost sundown, you won't burn. See what your greed has wrought." The Doctor rose. "And put some clothes on, would you? I've seen enough bare Vulcan arse this week to last me a century." Moving with his usual brisk impatience, he strode to the door.

"I don't know where to go."

"Down the hall, through the control room, beyond the console. You remember where that is, yeah? The door is just past—you can't miss it." The door whooshed, and the Prince was alone.

Moving slowly, for it felt as if all his muscles had been pulled apart and shoved back together, he dressed himself. His traveling clothes had been cleaned and pressed—they looked almost new. He buckled on his belt, though he couldn't find his sword. He did find his small dagger, though, hidden in the folds of the outer tunic. He snapped it onto his belt, and he was ready for whatever faced him in the desert.

The dying sunlight felt good upon his face, a testament to how long he must have been inside. He looked at the landscape surrounding the blue box, and for a moment he did not understand what the Doctor had meant. The box seemed to have moved since he'd entered it, for the desert here was a little kinder. There was an overhang of big rocks which provided some shade, and a small, shallow
pool of water. A few bright flowers bloomed in this scant sanctuary, water lizards scampering among
the blossoms. They seemed to be the only—

Then he saw. Standing near the shadow of the cliff was a figure. It was so still that at first it was easy
to miss it—*him*. He stood like a statue, head tilted upward, his face toward the setting sun. The last
light of day poured over him in a brilliant pink glow. He was naked except for loose, striped trousers.
His feet were surrounded by flowers.

Moving closer, one saw the light not just around him but in him—white sparks glittered from his
hands. But they also shook from his hair, they crackled in his eyes. They flowed from his lips as he
turned his head, smiling.

"Hello, brother," he said.

The Prince stared at him silently. What does one say to a dream? For surely this must be one.

"Don't stand there like gaping like a peasant! Come *here.*" He held out a hand.

The Prince moved forward, towards those impatient fingers. Fingers that glowed like his own. A
face like his face—but brighter, so bright. There was no glass this time, no barrier. The hand which
gripped him was warm as life. Where their fingers touched more sparks flew up, dancing.

The creature grinned. For surely that's what this must be, some kind of fabulous monster. In this
moment, the Prince could not believe it was anything else. Something deep within him rejected the
reality of it. What his eyes gazed upon could not be.

His mind flashed on last night—a face, a fever. A cool, seductive touch. Brilliant, killing light. The
Prince snatched his hand away, fingers clenching. More sparks flashed.

"Isn't it lovely?" the creature said. "Too bad it's only for today. I should like to glow all the time! It
would be such a conversation piece at parties."

The Prince's mind had cleared enough for him to look more closely at the creature. He saw now that
it resembled him, but not in every particular. Their faces were much the same, tilted of eye and sharp
of bone, long noses over wide mouths. Their hair was equally black. But the creature
was smaller
than him, slighter of stature and more slender of limb. Its expression was more open, like a child's. Or
an idiot's.

But the most telling difference was in the eyes. They were not brown but pale blue—a striking
crystalline shade, like desert sky on a spring day. Serpents and spirits have eyes this color, not men.
More than anything else, they convinced the Prince that this could not be his brother.

"What are you?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

"As to the first, you know very well: I'm your brother. As to *who*—I've been thinking about it. I need
a name. As do you, for that matter. What do you think of *Sitaan* and *Kitaan*? Rather like our old one,
but so much nicer. The apostrophe never really worked, did it? I shall be Sitaan, of course." The
creature stretched its long, slender limbs. "Such a *sinuous* name, don't you think? Kitaan just suits
you. The hard consonant sound right at the beginning—so serious." Its strange pale eyes narrowed at
the Prince. "Yes, you are very serious. It's quite clear. Kitaan it is, then!"

"You're mad. You can't take my name. I am S'Kitaan, son of Takraan, King of—"

"S'Kitaan."

"No, the 'S' isn't yours now. It's mine." It folded its arms over its chest. "Give yourself time to get used to it, I'm sure you'll—oof!"

The creature doubled over from the sudden, vicious blow to the stomach. It wrapped arms around its middle, peering through its hair. "What—" it cut off, coughing, and tried again. "What in Perdition's name is the matter with you?"

"I'm S'Kitaan," the Prince growled. "I don't know who you are. I don't care." He gripped its chin, forcing its head up. "Say it. Say I'm S'Kitaan."

"Fine. I'm S'Kitaan."

Scream of rage as he leapt upon the creature, wrestling it to the ground. It fought him, slippery as a water lizard, but he—S'Kitaan—was faster, stronger. After a moment he was on top of it, his knee digging into its belly. "Apologize."

"For what?" it gasped.

"For everything. For all the horrible things you've done to me. For existing."

The creature glared up at him, gaze sparking. The Prince's hands tightened. "Apologize."

"V-very well," it said. "Lean down. I haven't breath."

He leaned down.

"Closer. I will whisper it."

He leaned in further.

"Closer."

The Prince leaned in until he was a breath away from that other face. His own face.

A hard, wet kiss was planted right on his lips.

The Prince recoiled so far back he hit the overhang. He dug fingers into the rough rock to stop them trembling. He stared, so taken by rage that for a moment he was frozen by it, silenced.

The creature leaned back on its elbows, grinning. "Apologize to yourself, Kitaan."

"You—you—" he choked. "I'm going to kill you!" He grabbed for the dagger at his belt. He could see it, the blade flashing through the air, cutting that slender throat. Silencing that jeering tongue forever. Peace and quiet—it was all he had ever wanted.

But his fingers barely brushed the hilt before his arm was gripped by a cold hand. Another hand gripped the back of his neck. He struggled in vain—the hold was as relentless as stone.

"That'll be quite enough of that, thank you," the Doctor said.

He jerked his chin at the creature. "Sitaan, into the ship. You've caused enough trouble today."

From the vicinity of the ground, blue eyes flashed. "He started it."

"Did he now? Did he really?" The Doctor's voice was sharper than any dagger.
After a moment, those ghostly eyes dropped. The creature started trudging towards the blue box, the last rays of sunshine glancing on its bare back.

"And put some clothes on!" the Doctor shouted after it.

As soon as the door shut, that cold grip let go. The Prince dropped to his knees, eyes blurring. He sat in the sand and watched teardrops bounce off the sparks leaking from his hands.

"Kitaan, there's really no need to take on—"

"I'M NOT KITAAAN!" he screamed.

The Doctor crouched down in the sand next to him. "Is it really so bad?" he said. "Were you so attached to that one syllable?"

"It's my syllable."

"I warned you," the Doctor said. "Sharing isn't easy."

The Prince put his face in his hands and wept.

The Doctor sighed, sitting in the sand. The Prince wept on. He cried for all those painful years. He cried for his headaches, his madness. He cried for his time in the desert. But mostly he cried for himself—all he'd lost, and gained. His heart's desire.

The Doctor waited patiently, saying nothing. He seemed ready to wait until the end of time. But he only had to wait until the sun had set and the moon had risen. The Prince had no tears left. He leaned against the rocky wall, sniffling.

"Feel better?"

The Prince nodded.

"Good. Enough of this nonsense. You're Kitaan, he's Sitaan. Get over it."

"He's not my brother."

"Of course he is! Who else would he be?"

"He doesn't even look like me. He's so small, and his eyes—"

"Ah, well, that was a sudden switcheroo you two pulled. The TARDIS will get creative when you catch her off-guard. I think the variations are rather nice—Vulcans could use more genetic diversity. Don't get me wrong, you're all adorable. But most of you do fall into the dark-haired, dark-eyed range—gets a bit dull, eh? The TARDIS must've thought so. Lucky you both didn't come out ginger." The Doctor looked wistful. "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

He shrugged. "The resemblance is close enough. There's no mistaking Sitaan's origins."

"He's a monster. A twisted creature." Kitaan looked down at his hands. "He kissed me."

"Did he now? Not surprising. He's got double the amount of sex hormones a normal boy should have. I can show you scans, if you'd like."

"I don't understand."
"Lust, Kitaan. Your brother has it. Loads of it. Wait until you get him back among the ladies—or the lads, for that matter. Don't think he's too picky. Tried to chat me up this morning. Rather funny, if he hadn't been stark naked at the time. I really must speak with him seriously about the clothes. But he is an interesting creature! Lust is more than just sex, you know. He spent hours today watching my telly and rooting about in my library. He's decimated my panty. He wants to devour everything. Just burning with eros, that one."

"Why?" Kitaan demanded. "Why is he like this?"

"You opened the TARDIS. I didn't have time to divide everything between you evenly. I would have, you know, if you had given me a bloody chance. Made two balanced and lovely boys, instead of one boy with too much life, and the other—" the Doctor stopped, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Perhaps your natural bents had something to do with it. You were always a warrior, weren't you? And your brother—he seduced himself right into existence. Didn't he?"

Kitaan looked away. "What about me?" he said, after a pause. "If Sitaan is Life, what am I?"

"Something else," the Doctor said. "Something—other."

"What do you—"

Kitaan cut off, body stiffening. He cocked an ear, listening. He heard it again. A low, slithering sound, coming from the rocks around the pool.

His head whipped around, and he caught a glimpse of a sinuous figure. Faster than thought, his hand moved to his belt. His blade whistled through the air, moonlight flashing on its surface.

A loud hiss of pain. Whisper of a long shape writhing on the rocks. Then, silence.

Kitaan walked towards the rocks. He looked down at the serpent coiled there, the blue fires in its eyes grown dim. A desert asp the length of a man's arm, its poison so deadly it could kill you in three breaths. The snake was fast, cunning, merciless. You almost never saw it coming.

Kitaan had struck its head from its body with one dagger throw. From fifty paces. At night.

The Doctor gave a long, low whistle.

Kitaan looked up at him. "What am I, Doctor?" he whispered. "What is there, other than Life?" But he did not need to ask. The answer lay coiled upon the rock.

The Doctor squeezed his shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Chops for dinner."

Kitaan shook his head. Just then, he didn't care if his lips ever touched food again.

Sighing, the Doctor walked to the box. Kitaan did not follow. He remained alone on the sands. He stared up at the moon, his dagger clutched in one hand. The cold fires of T'Khut blazing over him. Death at his feet.
Chapter 31

xxxii. Vulcan

The Doctor insisted that the boys stay with him in the box until they had recovered from their transformation. "Get some flesh on you two: You're both skinny as eels. What would people think if I brought you home like that?"

Kitaan didn't stay in the box most of the time, for Sitaan was there. He had reconciled himself to the names, but not to the truth of the situation. This was not his brother: He did not want him.

Kitaan spent long days in the desert, and it was there that he discovered how transformed he truly was. His vision and hearing were twice as sharp as they had been in the past. His sense of smell was heightened—he could catch the musk of a pack of desert dogs from a quarter mile. He did not avoid them, as he had before. Vicious as they were, they were no match for his new strength and speed. These were not his only prey, for the desert is full of terrible, deadly things, and he hunted all of them. He collected skins the way Sitaan collected flowers and pretty stones.

A year ago, he would have been thrilled at the notion of becoming such a hunter, but as with most thrilling things, it had not come without cost. His appetite did not return. The Doctor had finally given him a bit of red string to tie around his wrist when he set off on his expeditions, to remind him to eat. Mindful of his health, Kitaan dutifully swallowed down whatever had been packed in his knapsack. But for all the enjoyment he had of it, he may as well have been eating sand. At least water still tasted like water—it was the only beverage he could stomach. (After he vomited orange all over the floor of the box, the Doctor ceased plying him with energy drinks.)

Kitaan's other appetites were also absent. He could not seem to pay attention to a book or to a conversation of any length. Even the dazzling, moving pictures the windows of the TARDIS displayed—'vids,' the Doctor called them—could not hold his interest long. The Doctor assured him it was just temporary, a normal response to his transformation. But if what had happened was so traumatic, why was Sitaan unaffected?

Perhaps it was just as well that Kitaan did not call upon the resources of the blue box much, for Sitaan tested them daily. No crumb of food or drop of sweet drink was safe from him. He tore through the Doctor's books and vids like a desert dog tearing into carrion. He asked so many questions—'what is this?' 'why is this?' 'are you sure?—even the Doctor's patience was tried. Still, Sitaan never stopped babbling. So much excess: It was disgusting.

Sitaan's tried to chatter to him occasionally, but Kitaan had become quite good at ignoring the creature's noise. He pretended that it was the wind whooshing in the trees, or a stupid little bird chattering in a branch, and eventually the noise stopped. Sometimes he would find those pale eyes fixed upon him. The intensity of the gaze would have been disturbing, if Kitaan cared what Sitaan did or thought.

One night, some days after their transformation, Kitaan returned to the TARDIS quite late. When he entered the control room, the Doctor was bent over the console, brow furrowed, hammering away with one of his noisy, shiny instruments. (For such a wondrous machine, the blue box did seem to require a great deal of maintenance.) Kitaan hesitated a moment, fingers twisting the strap of his knapsack.

After a moment, the Doctor straightened. "All right, Kitaan?"
"I'm sorry I'm late."

"No problem. Not exactly like you have a curfew."

"I was tracking a giant sand wyrm through the dunes not far from one of the border villages."

The Doctor didn't answer, pointing his instrument towards a silver knob on the console. Blue sparks flew. Finally, he looked up. "A sand wyrm! Haven't seen one of those in ages. Nasty buggers—like a giant stripey sock filled with attitude and teeth. Did you catch him?"

"No."

The Doctor poked at the knob, frowning.

"I became distracted."

The Doctor twisted the knob to the left, then to the right.

"Very distracted," Kitaan said.

The Doctor looked up, blinking. "Right. Well! Better luck next time, lad. More monsters where that one came from."

"I suppose so. I do not think I will hunt there again. You see—"

"Blast!" Red sparks began to fly from the knob. The Doctor pointed his instrument again. Blue sparks, and the whole console turned a sickly purple. The Doctor jumped on top of it, crouching like a sand monkey and running fingers through his hair. "Would you behave!" he hissed.

"You are much occupied. I will leave you."

"Thanks," the Doctor said, not looking up from his work. "We'll chat at breakfast, yeah?"

"Of course," Kitaan said, though he never ate breakfast now.

He trudged down the hall to his bedroom. He hesitated outside the door. He did not want to go in. There were other places he could go—an endless number, for the TARDIS went on and on, for all it looked so small on the outside. There were closets and chambers and halls, lounges and at least a dozen libraries, not that Kitaan lingered in those. (He did enjoy the hall of armor he'd stumbled across one stormy day, though he did not recognize any of the crests.) The blue box was like a magic cave from one of the stories his nurses had told him as a child. But he did not want to go exploring now, he wanted to sleep. He hoped it was late enough that he could. But as soon as the door whooshed and he heard music and voices, Kitaan knew his hopes were in vain.

You would think with so much space at his disposal, the Doctor would have allowed both of his guests their own bedchambers. But he did not, and when Kitaan pressed the matter, the Doctor muttered something about "exposure therapy" and stuck his hands in his trouser pockets. It was very irritating.

Sitaan was sitting cross-legged on his bed. (At least the Doctor had been good enough to provide two of those.) He was giggling at the vid window hung over the dressing table, the small magic space busy with vivid, capering figures. He was, as always, half-naked and stuffing his mouth. The plate on his lap was full of what appeared to be some kind of dessert, golden pastry with bubbling filling. It smelled rich and spicy, the scent enticing enough that even Kitaan might have been tempted by it. If he were still tempted by such things.
"Where have you been?" Sitaan asked around a mouthful. "You've been gone for hours."

"Hunting." Kitaan looked at the plate again, eyes fixed on its crispy golden contents. "What are you eating?"

"Apple crumble."

"Crumbling what?"

"Apple. It's a kind of fruit—the Doctor keeps loads of them in the pantry. He says that one a day will keep him away, though I don't know why they would. They're lovely. Bit like a gespar, round and red anyway, but apples are sweeter and don't have those nasty spiny things. Why are all of our plants so mean? My fingers are cut to pieces trying to take samples from the pond."

Kitaan dropped his knapsack and unbuckled his sword. "Stop taking them."

"I haven't finished my studies! Did you know that there are four different flowers growing around the pond? You have pink flowers and yellow flowers, some with crinkly petals and some with smooth petals. Here's the interesting bit: You have pink crinkly flowers and yellow crinkly flowers, smooth pink flowers and smooth yellow flowers. They must be related—they're all thorny enough—though if you looked at a pink crinkly flower and a smooth yellow flower, you'd never guess. It's quite fascinating." Sitaan indicated the volume near him on the bed. "I've been making notes on the new buds. I think, if one observes closely, it will be possible to predict when you are going to get a pink or a yellow flower, and whether it will be crinkly or—"

"I'm going to wash," Kitaan said.

"Oh. Right." Sitaan blinked. "Would you like some crumble?"

Kitaan looked at the plate. The dessert did look palatable. Quite palatable. But he was no longer stimulated by such trivialities. "No."

He disappeared into the privy. It was his favorite room in the TARDIS, for it was the only one where he was guaranteed absolute privacy. He relieved himself, then wiped down his sweaty flesh. There was a tub in the privy which had water running from taps set into the wall. Quite amazing, and Sitaan made use of it frequently. Kitaan did not. It seemed so wasteful, using all that water just to clean oneself. A dampened rag did just as well.

He emerged from the privy wearing only his sleeping trousers. Sitaan, who had been watching the vid window again, barely turned his head at Kitaan's re-entrance. "You should watch this program with me—it's very diverting. The yellow lady with the blue hair is Marge, and the fat bald man is her husband Homer. He's stupid and brutal, but terribly prosperous. The gods must have blessed—"

Sitaan cut off, having finally taken his eyes from the vid window and looked at Kitaan. "Why, you're hurt!"

"It's nothing."

"You're covered with cuts. What's been at you?"

"Nothing worth bothering over."

Sitaan peered at the long, shallow wounds on Kitaan's chest. "Those aren't from animal claws. Those are blade marks."

It constantly surprised him, how closely Sitaan observed, all the things he seemed to know. Kitaan
didn't know how much was reading all those books, and how much was from before. Those pale
eyes were not just strange, but keen. They were especially bright now, but it took Kitaan a moment
to realize that Sitaan was quite angry. But not at him.

"Who attacked you?" Sitaan demanded.
Kitaan stretched out upon his own bed, arms behind his head. "No one who still draws breath."
"You—killed them?"
"Is that a problem?"
"No, but—" Sitaan fiddled with the edge of his book. "I'm sure they deserved it." His eyes narrowed
at Kitaan. "Didn't they?"
"They were a pack of bandits, ravishing a peasant girl from one of the border villages. Trying to, at
any rate. She was foolish enough to stray too far into the desert, but she had spirit enough to fight.
Though she was losing. They had her on the ground, robes askew. I happened along."

"You rescued her."
"Well, there was nobody left to dishonor her when I was done."
Kitaan clapped his hands. "But that's marvelous!" he said, eyes sparkling. "How very heroic. Like
something out of Morte D'Arthur."

"What?"
"One of the Doctor's books. Lovely, bloody stuff—you might like it." Sitaan bounced on the edge of
the bed. "Was she grateful? Did she immediately offer you all of the favors the bandits couldn't wrest
from her?"

Kitaan stared at the ceiling.
"Did she?"
"Yes."
"Wonderful. Did you?"
"No."
"Why not? Was she hideous?"
"No."
"Well, then—"
"I didn't want to."
"Why not?" Sitaan sounded genuinely irritated. "You have a lovely grateful peasant girl right there,
robes askew, and you don't so much as feel her—"

He cut off as Kitaan shot up from the bed, glaring. "Because not all of us are gluttons, like you. We
don't eat every apple on the plate. We don't steal every book in the library. We don't plow every girl
because she spreads her legs."
Sitaan looked at him a moment.

"You don't," he said finally, "or you can't?"

Kitaan wilted back on the bed. He turned his face away.

"Brother—"

"Don't call me that. You don't get to call me that. Not after what you've done."

He knew he should stop talking. There was no point saying all of these things, not now. Not to him. He had wanted to talk to the Doctor about it, but the Doctor was busy. And if he didn't talk to someone, he was going to explode.

"You're right. I can't," he said. "I looked at the girl, that lovely, grateful girl, and I felt nothing. I don't mind not being hungry for meat, nor thirsty for wine. I can do without books and music, though I liked them before. I can even live with being a tongue-tied fool, incapable of flirtation or polite conversation. I don't miss those things, not really. I miss that I miss them, if it makes any sense, but the real appetites are gone. I just never feared—I didn't think—I would lose that, too. The thing besides a sword that makes us men."

"I'm terrible with a sword," Sitaan said. "I tried making a few passes in the armory one day. I almost cut my fool head off."

"Many men are indifferent swordsmen. They get by. What man gets by without this? A monk, perhaps. Not a king. A king with no heirs, what use is that?"

"Kitaan—"

"I have a woman back home. She bears my son. At least, I hope it's a son and that he is healthy, for I won't have another. What shall I tell his mother? What reason can I give for our cold bed?"

"T'Lyra will understand. She is affectionate—loyal." Sitaan paused. "Such a lovely thing."

Kitaan stared at him. The knowledge came back to him as it always did, like a blow to the face. This wasn't some new, annoying acquaintance. Sitaan had been there. Always there, even when he wasn't. How would it be when they returned home? Sitaan, charming and inquisitive, warm and full of life. His bed would not be cold—or long empty.

"If you touch her," Kitaan said, "I will kill you."

Slowly, as if approaching a dangerous animal, Sitaan left his own bed and sat upon the edge of Kitaan's. "I would not betray you."

"Again," Kitaan said. "You mean again."

Sitaan's face looked so stricken that if one were not aware of what he was, one might be moved. "You hate me," he whispered. "Perhaps I deserve it. But I never wanted to take anything from you. I did not wish to harm you."

"You sent me mad. You drove me into the desert." Kitaan looked down at his hands. "You seduced me. Your own brother. You put that terrible desire in me, and used it to bend me to your will. You were a wanton, evil creature before you had form."

"I was a desperate creature!" Sitaan cried. "You have no idea how it was before the Doctor delivered
us. You suffered cruelly, but at least you could feel the pain. I had no flesh to suffer, no form. Yet I did suffer, in ways you cannot imagine. That final night, I heard your deepest thoughts. I knew you were unsure if you would free me or banish me to the True Dark. I had to act quickly—ruthlessly. If I did sin that night, had I not paid already, far in advance of the transgression? Am I not paying now?" He sighed deeply. "I am denied what I truly desire."

Kitaan peered at him. "A throne?"

"I do not want your dusty kingdom, Kitaan. I have no appetite for conquest." Sitaan put his hand on Kitaan's wrist. He half-expected the touch to be cold, but it wasn't. This was warm and solid—absolutely real. It could not be denied.

"What do you want?" Kitaan pronounced the words slowly, not looking at him.

"Eyes that can gaze upon a flower or a book, a mouth that can taste food and wine. Flesh that can feel—all the things flesh can feel—pain and pleasure. For years I raged and yearned and, yes, I schemed for these things. Now I have them. But they are not enough." Those fingers tightened upon Kitaan's wrist. He raised his head. He looked into that face, the one from his dreams and his nightmares. But not exactly that face.

"I believe you are right," Sitaan said softly. "I am not your brother. I came out of the dark into that terrible, eternal light, and it changed me." He stretched out one arm, as if considering his slender limbs. His hand came up, fingers fluttering over his eyes. His gaze traveled downwards. "This body is new—and strange. More strange than you—" He stopped, shrugged. "Perhaps I was changed before the TARDIS. The one who came into the world with you, he is gone. The body is dust, and the soul—after all those years in the dark—is not the same. We did not grow up together, with all the ways of brothers. We never quarreled, we never confided. I was there, but not there. Whatever you would have felt for your twin, you will not feel it for me. I am not him."

"I know," Kitaan said. It gutted him, knowing it. Like knowing that part of yourself was gone forever. Worse than missing it, the knowledge that you never really possessed it.

"I am not your brother," Sitaan said. "If I were, it does not change how I feel. What I want."

Kitaan did not answer. But he did not pull away from Sitaan's touch.

"I want you to love me," Sitaan said. "You must love me—want me."

"I can't," Kitaan said. "It's wrong."

"We are not brothers. It's allowed." Those pale eyes looked into him. Pierced him. "I know the scope of your desires. T'Lyra is a lovely distraction, but it is all she is. However many sons she bears you, she will never know you. You would never allow it."

Sitaan put his hands on Kitaan's face. "I've seen everything. Every nightmare, every tantrum. I was there when Vatak whipped you for insolence, when you sobbed in your bed at night from loneliness. I've seen every act of kindness you've committed—and there have been more than you would ever admit to. I've known every spark of jealousy, every twinge of lust, every knife-flick of pride. I know how it was with you and Keth, those nights in the stables and in the fields. One day, you must go to the Hall of Shadows and honor the ashes of the lover you killed in the frenzy of your madness. Not even Vatak knows this. I do, for I was there. Always."

Kitaan would have turned his head away, to hide the shame and sorrow. But Sitaan held on.

"It is not the only reason you fear returning home," he said. "You do not wish to face the King. I
cannot fault you for that. But more than you fear Takraan, you fear yourself. What you have become—this cold, blighted creature. But that is not you, don't you understand?"

"You don't know what I am."

"Of course I do! You are not dead, Kitaan. Nor are you Death. I can feel the life inside you." Sitaan's hands slid downward. "Buried perhaps, beneath all your rage, but still there, still real."

Sitaan's hand flattened on the firm muscles of Kitaan's belly. "It pulses through you like desert heat," he whispered. "You are alive, brother."

Kitaan wanted to tell Sitaan not to call him that. He wanted to tell him not to say things which could not be true. He was not alive, he did not feel. He was Death, cold and cunning.

Kitaan would have said all those things, if it weren't for the heat in his belly. Whether it came from Sitaan's hand or from inside himself, he did not know. All he knew was that he could feel it, flaming up inside him like sudden fever.

"I think you wanted the apple crumble," Sitaan said. "All that sweet fruit was tempting you. You could have taken that pretty peasant girl, had you looked beneath your own fear and rage. Your appetites are not so lost as you pretend. I know where to find them." Hot fingers slid down Kitaan's belly, slipping beneath the thin fabric of his sleeping trousers.

Kitaan gasped, twitched—the world seem to waver before his eyes. But he did not move. He tasted fear in his mouth like warm metal, but he did not push that hand away. All his strength and speed, the cold and bloody rage that had served him so well these last weeks, was dissolving fast. In its place was slow heat. He watched Sitaan begin to stroke him like it was happening to someone else, one of those people in the vid window. Calm blue gaze never wavering, Sitaan stroked him as ruthlessly as he had the night they opened the TARDIS. This time was so much more real. Solid flesh instead of wistful spirit, a warm hand instead of a cold, ghostly embrace.

Sitaan touched him, until the heat was igniting through Kitaan like happy bonfires, until he was balanced upon the edge of climax. But at that moment, Sitaan released him and pushed him back upon the bed. He climbed on top of him, straddling Kitaan's hips with his knees. He put a hand on Kitaan's chest. Kitaan cried out, for it was as if Sitaan had caught hold of all the heat inside him and was pulling it to the surface. Tearing his heart from his body and setting it aflame.

"You—" he choked. He could not say what he was feeling, for Sitaan had robbed him of speech as well as will. Kitaan could not say what he wished to say: You are dangerous. More dangerous than himself, for all his killings.

Life is so much more terrifying than Death, he thought.

Sitaan yanked Kitaan's sleeping trousers completely off. He arched his long and graceful neck. Kitaan could feel his brother's breath on his hard, aching member.

"Tell me to stop." Sitaan said. He was almost panting with excitement. "I will leave you to your knives and waterskins, your bloody bones and rotting carcasses. I will leave you in the desert if it's where you really wish to be. Tell me you do not want this—me."

Kitaan stared up at him, speechless.

Sitaan smiled, blue eyes burning like a desert asp's. He bent his head.

Kitaan knew Sitaan's prodigious appetites. He had seen him tear through all the treasures of the
TARDIS. But he had never considered what it would be like to have that rampaging maw turned upon himself. This was not like T'Lyra's sweet attentions, or Keth's rough devotion. This was like the attack of a great sand wyrm, if being eaten by a fabulous monster could be enjoyable. Not just enjoyable, but so wonderful one's hands tore at the bed silks, one's throat groaned with pleasure, and the room around one sparkled with dizzy white lights. Devoured and delighted: That is what it felt like, having Sitaan swallowing one's most vital organ.

_Not a wyrm_, Kitaan thought hazily. _The sun itself. Consumed by light. Beautiful, killing li—it_

Hot fingers were shoved inside him at the same moment as sharp, exquisite teeth scraped down the length of his member. The sun flared up, scorching heat swallowed him completely. It was such a lovely way to burn. For a few moments, Kitaan knew nothing—was nothing. Just light.

When he opened his eyes again, he was lying upon his side, an equally naked body pressed up against his back. Thin, strong arms embraced him. He smelled a rich, spicy scent, wilder than any sweet concoction, and knew it was their mingled desires.

"Now," Sitaan said in his ear. "We've discarded the ridiculous hypothesis that you can no longer feel passion. Isn't that a lovely word? Hypothesis: I learned it from one of the Doctor's books. But I don't need a book to teach me _this_."

Kitaan hissed as he felt slick fingers inside him again—one then two then three—going deeper and deeper. He felt his knee slide up, opening him further to that gentle, relentless exploration. He shouldn't have allowed it, but he was still languid from his climax, as he had never been from any climax before. And the touch felt so good—right.

"You never let Keth do _this_, did you?" Sitaan said. "But I'm no petty squire." He paused. "Though strictly speaking, I am a virgin." He laughed, breath tickling Kitaan's ear. "You must promise to be gentle." More slickness, on Sitaan's fingers, on Kitaan's lower back, dripping down his buttocks. (Where was it all coming from? Surely the TARDIS did not provide _this_.)

"What are you—" Kitaan began, but before he could speak further Sitaan had entered him, and the feeling so overwhelmed him that he could not speak, he could not move. For a time he was not sure that he was breathing as Sitaan took him—slowly at first, and then faster, harder, deeper. Rhythmic, endless thrusts that seemed to reach further each time, until he did not know where his flesh ended and his other's began. Moving together, moaning together, one body and one soul.

Amazing thing—he felt himself not just being thrust into but thrusting—he felt that hard shaft deep inside himself and felt himself sinking into the giving flesh in front of him. Pleasure felt two ways, doubling and redoubling. Then the climax took them, the heat flaring up like an angry star. Wave after wave of light and heat, a pleasure that was like dying—certainly nothing could survive this. They did not want to survive it.

But, at last, the heat began to die away. Singularity returned. He felt that other body pull back. (A fast, final burn of pleasure—as if tiny fingers inside him were scraping down his inner walls. Sitaan was a wonder—a fabulous monster.) Kitaan gave a low, keening cry at the loss, but then those arms were around him again. He turned in that embrace, looked into shining eyes.

"What are you?" Kitaan whispered.

"I'm a god." Sitaan bent his neck, touching his forehead to Kitaan's. "So are you."

Kitaan pulled back. "You speak blasphemy."
"I speak the truth. We looked into the TARDIS, and the TARDIS looked into us. We are not the same." Sitaan sat up, stretching. "I'm glad of it! Aren't you?" He smiled down at his own lap. "Of course, some of us are more changed than others. But you certainly seemed to enjoy that."

Kitaan looked down. He saw Sitaan—all of him. That which had just been inside himself.

"You are—you have—" He choked, swallowed, but still he looked. He could not take his eyes away from the small, sharp nodes dotting the upper shaft of Sitaan's male organ. They were leaking shiny fluid. Quite beautiful, in their way: as the spikes of a poison fruit are beautiful.

"What—what are they?" he said.

"My swords," Sitaan replied. "The TARDIS gave them to me. She must have known I'd have no call for the other kind. Bloody useful, don't you think? No more fumbling for spit or grease."

Kitaan sat up, wrapping his arms around himself. The warmth of his climax was gone. He felt so cold, chilled with knowledge of what he had just done. With whom—what—he had done it. Evidence was leaking from inside of him, that strange, shiny fluid soiling the coverlet.

He had been taken. Again.

"This was wrong," he said.

Sitaan rolled his eyes. "How many times will I have to fuck you before you understand?" He giggled. His fingers danced over the bedside table, towards his plate. "Not that I mind. In fact, if you will wait till after I nip out to the pantry for a snack, perhaps some more apple crumble—"

"You're insane. I must be, for letting you near me." Kitaan rose from the bed. He realized the naked state of himself and fumbled around until he found sleeping trousers. He wasn't sure if they were his or Sitaan's. He supposed it didn't matter. After what had just happened, sharing clothes was a petty intimacy indeed. He found the tunic of his hunting clothes and pulled it over his head, wishing he had still more garments to put on. He couldn't stand to stay in here long enough to look for them. He headed to the door, trying not to stumble on his shaky legs.

"Where are you going?"

He heard movement behind him and spun around. "Don't follow me."

"But I just—"

Sitaan cut off with a cry as Kitaan's dagger sliced through the air. It stuck to the TARDIS wall with a metallic thwap!

Sitaan brought his hand up to his face. He took his fingers away, staring at the green on their tips. Blood, leaking from the long, shallow cut upon his cheek.

"You missed," he whispered, with a smile paler than his eyes.

"I didn't," Kitaan said.

Sitaan was for once struck silent.

"One warning, it's all I'm going to give. You are dangerous. But so am I. Touch me again, and my dagger will find your throat."

Kitaan stepped back with a sharp gesture. "How many times, Sitaan? You bewitch me like a sorcerer, but you must know the truth. I don't love you. I never will."

Sitaan wilted onto the bed, shoulders slumped. They began to shake, and for a moment Kitaan thought it was from fear. Then he realized that Sitaan was crying.

The boy stretched full out on the coverlet, sobs wracking his thin form. Kitaan had never seen such naked grief in a grown person. Sitaan cried like a baby—like a madman. The sound of it cut deeper than a dagger blade. Kitaan actually took a step towards him before he realized what he was doing.

He almost ran through the door.

It had barely whooshed shut before he collided with a tall form. He looked up, wiping his eyes.

"Hey, where's the fire?" the Doctor said.

His voice was as cheerful as ever, but something in his face made Kitaan stop, staring at him.

"You knew, didn't you?" he said slowly. "When I first came in, you weren't distracted at all. You saw, but you pretended not to."

The Doctor nodded.

"Did you know what would happen if I confided in Sitaan?" When the Doctor nodded again: "Why? Why would you do that? You're supposed to help. You're—you're good."

"Who told you that?" the Doctor said.

Kitaan leaned against the wall of the corridor for support.

"I won't make you ask the next logical question," the Doctor went on. "I think you've asked it once too often of late." He came closer. Though the Doctor wasn't touching him, Kitaan felt the chill from that strange body. An aura like plunging into deep, dark waters. Feeling them close over your head, freezing you forever.

"I am—just," the Doctor said. "Not good, not evil. Though sometimes justice can feel like either, or both at once. Not surprised you're befuddled. Things will be less confusing after a good night's sleep."

"I'm not going back in there," Kitaan rasped. "Never again."

"Bunk on the couch in the library, then. The green library, not the red one, seventeenth door on the left. I'm sure you can find it. Springs on the chesterfield are a bit worn, but you're young, and it's only for one night." When Kitaan looked at him questioningly: "You're going home tomorrow. Can't have you and that barmy brother of yours hanging around forever. You two are an ASBO waiting to happen. Or a Faulknerian tragedy. Possibly both."

"Why now?" Kitaan asked.

"It's time," the Doctor said. He turned and started to walk away, but Kitaan grabbed his sleeve.

"What's going to happen?" he said. "You must know. You know everything. Please tell me."

The Doctor smiled at him. His eyes remained their usual cheerful brown, but something in his gaze made Kitaan drop his hand.
"Justice," the Doctor said. "That's what's going to happen. Though I've no idea what it will look like. I never do, until it does. No more than I know how my own face will be, before it is." He shrugged. "You have no idea how confusing my job can get. Perhaps it would be better if I could sleep. Ah well! Sleep is like death—wasted on the mortal."

He walked down the corridor, hands in his pockets, whistling.

Kitaan turned, putting his face against the corridor wall. He would have given a great deal just then to be able to return to his room. To climb into bed with another warm body and put his arms around it. He would be welcomed, even after everything. He knew it, as he knew his own name.

He could not. He walked down the corridor until he found the seventeenth door on the left. He entered a musty-smelling room lined with green-bound books of many sizes. He lay down upon the worn sofa, which squeaked in protest. His stomach growled.

_I should have eaten the apple_, he thought. He didn't know why the idea made him so sad.

He looked up at the amber, yellow, and brown ceiling. He did not think he would sleep. But soon enough, the colors faded to black.

After a disordered evening and a night on a creaking sofa, Kitaan should have awoken feeling ravished. How he actually awoke was ravenrous. It was as if every aborted hunger of the last weeks had descended at once. He departed the green library ready to start gnawing upon the walls, if better sustenance was not soon provided.

The Doctor must have known this, as he knows everything else. For when Kitaan emerged into the central room of the box, a table had been set up full of warm, delicious things. He did not know the name of them, as the Doctor's food—like most things in the blue box—was utterly alien. Kitaan did not care. He sat down at the table across from the Doctor, and with barely a nod at his host began working his way through a stack of fried flat cakes in a sweet amber syrup. After that stack and another of equal height were gone, he had a plate full of round meat patties, greasy and spicy. Two tall glasses of sweet orange drink, thicker and tarter than 'energy drink', then a plate of fluffy yellowness which he recognized as some kind of egg dish. Two more cakes (square and covered in tiny wells which cleverly caught the syrup), and he sat back, sated.

He saw the Doctor's raised eyebrow and had the good manners to feel a little embarrassed. "My appetite has returned," he said, rather lamely.

"Hmm, yes. Why do you suppose that is?" the Doctor replied.

"I believe my body has fully recovered from the transformation. Probably because I have been mindful of my health these past weeks. I ate regularly, though I had no desire for food. I have also engaged in a great deal of beneficial exercise."

"Exercise. Is that what the young folk are calling it these days?"

Kitaan shifted in his chair. "I'm sorry. I don't understand you."

"Well, perhaps your brother can explain." The Doctor turned his head. "Sitaan! Have a seat. Afraid Kitaan has already decimated the pancakes. Best lay claim to the waffles while you can."

Kitaan succeeded in not scooting his chair away when Sitaan sat next to him, but it took some effort. Sitaan did not acknowledge this, or anything else. He did not appear to have slept well. His eyes were bleary and tinged with green. His hair was flattened on one side, as if he had slept in an odd
position. Perhaps the long green cut on his cheek had something to do with that.

The Doctor's gaze lingered on the cut, but he said nothing. Sitaan put a few cakes on his plate and covered them with the syrup. But he chewed and swallowed like a man who does not taste what he eats. When Sitaan's plate was half-empty, the Doctor spoke again. "You should have some sausage. You need protein for the day ahead."

"I thought I would rest today," Sitaan said in a low voice.

"Well, that's certainly a first for you. But I'm afraid it's rather bad timing." When Sitaan looked at him inquiringly: "You're going home today."

"Home?" Sitaan pronounced it like he was repeating a strange foreign phrase, possibly obscene.

"Back to the fortress." Seeing Sitaan stare: "You knew it had to happen sooner or later."

Sitaan shook his head violently. "I don't want to go. I want to stay here."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"But—I like it here. There are books and vids and apples. I have to finish my flower study—"

"There are flowers at the fortress."

"There is nothing at the fortress!" Sitaan screeched, clutching his eating knife until his knuckles turned white. When the Doctor just looked at him, he swallowed and put down the blade.

"There is nothing for me there," he said in a calmer tone. His eyes flicked to Kitaan. "Maybe for him, but not for me. I want to stay with you. I'll go wherever you like, I'll even stop asking so many questions if you'll just—"

"Sitaan. No." The Doctor's voice was gentle, but his face was stone. The boy stared at his plate. His expression was so devastated that even Kitaan felt moved.

"They won't," Kitaan said. "Not if I command them. They wouldn't dare."

Sitaan gazed at him, an expression on his face that Kitaan had never seen there before. The affection that was always present when Sitaan looked upon him was not gone. But there were other, stronger emotions overlaying it: pity, and a measure of contempt. Sitaan looked at him the way the King looked at poor feeble Uncle Terek.

"You can't protect me," Sitaan said. "You don't even know who I am! Your friend or your brother, your rival or your lover—you don't know." His voice dropped to a trembling whisper. "He will know. Changed as I am, Takraan will recognize me. When he sees me, his reactions will not be so complex as yours. No, you cannot protect me from him. If you even want to."

"You know I hate him."

"I hate him. All those years I sat in the dark, despising him. My feelings colored yours. Who knows
how you will feel for the King now? Takraan the Inexorable, who crushes clans like a farmer crushing locusts. You share so many of his passions. "Sitaan's fingers came up, tracing the cut on his cheek. "All those years ago, Takraan looked upon you and saw his heir. Today, what will your choice be? Can you choose differently?"

There were so many things Kitaan wanted to say to this—denials, explanations, apologies. They all rose at once, choking him. Before he could find a way to converse through the chaos, Sitaan had jerked his chin at the Doctor. "This is your doing. Why are you forcing his choice now?"

"It's time," the Doctor said.

"Time. Of course. That is what persuades you. Not mercy—not anymore. Not love or hate: You don't feel those, not for us. No more than I love or hate the flowers I study at the pond."

"You're no common posy," the Doctor said. "The TARDIS has seen to that."

"What kind am I, then? Something rare, I suspect. A sort you wouldn't usually see, not way out here." Sitaan looked at him a moment, blue gaze glittering. "A rose, perhaps?"

The Doctor blinked.

"Is that the kind of flower which moves you, Doctor? If a rose begged, would you stop time? Would you remember mercy?"

The Doctor said nothing. Sitaan shook his head. "You would not. That is your mystery and your tragedy, My Lord of Time. Your Rose died too."

"Enough of your cleverness, Sitaan." The Doctor's voice was quiet, but it made Kitaan shiver.

"I'm not clever," Sitaan said. "I'm desperate."

He reached into his sleeping trousers and threw something on the table. There was a flash and clink of metal. "Take back your dagger, brother. Pick it up and slit my throat, as you threatened to last night. Make your choice now."

Kitaan didn't move. He stared at his plate, feeling the heat rise to his face. He did not know the source of his shame, only that he felt it. After a moment, he saw the chair next to him move.

"I'm going back to bed," Sitaan said. "Kill me or shelter me, I don't care. But don't tell me I must return to the fortress. I won't meet that fate. Not for a second time."

After Sitaan's retreating footsteps died away, the room was very quiet. Finally, Kitaan stood. He looked around the big room for a moment, eyes taking in all of its dazzling, alien wonders. Then his gaze returned to the Doctor, who remained seated at the table like a figure of stone.

"Will you tell me when we reach the fortress?" Kitaan asked him.

The Doctor turned his head and regarded the Prince. "You're not balking."

"I'm not Sitaan. I know I have to return home, whatever fate awaits me."

The Doctor nodded at the door. "Go on, then. No time like the present."

Kitaan looked around again, gaze scanning the magic windows. "We're near the fortress?"

"We're in the fortress. Since before you boys woke up this morning." The Doctor shrugged. "Sitaan
is very clever—and very young. He hasn't realized yet that you don't meet your fate. You've always already known it."

The door of the TARDIS opened. Kitaan peered into the dark beyond. "Can I get my boots?"

"Take whatever you think you need."

Kitaan curled his toes into the tiles, considering. His boots were in his bedchamber. With Sitaan.

He did not go back for his boots. He did, however, tuck his dagger into the pocket of his tunic. He walked towards the door. On the threshold he paused, turning.

"May I ask you something? I know we don't have much time, but this is important."

"Forty-two."

"What?"

"The answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything: Forty-two. I know it sounds odd, but that is the answer everyone is looking for. The problem is, most of them never understand the question they're really asking. If they knew that, however odd or inappropriate the answer might seem, it would all make sense." The Doctor sighed, scrubbing hands through his spiky hair. "That is the mystery of Life. And the tragedy."

Kitaan shifted on his feet. "Very interesting. But it's not what I want to know."

"What, then?"

"Who is Sitaan? Friend, brother, rival, lover—what is he?"

The Doctor smiled, but his eyes were sad. "He's your answer, Kitaan."

The Prince looked at him a moment. Then he nodded. "Thank you, Doctor."

He took a breath and stepped through the door.
The Doctor had placed the blue box in one corner of a long, low corridor. It took the Prince a moment to determine his location, but only a moment. He had been navigating these stone halls since he could first toddle away from his nurse. A few steps, and he knew exactly where he was. Once again, he had to marvel at the Doctor's prescience: He was not three minutes' walk from the first place he would have named, had the Doctor asked him where he wished to go.

He moved noiselessly through the twisting passageway, hoping to avoid attention. The hue and cry that must meet his sudden return would not aid him in this quest. Luckily, the fortress was quiet with the somnolence of early day. He only passed a scullery maid, her face almost blocked by a giant pile of dirty table linens, her eyes bleary with sleep. She probably would not have noticed a pack of rampaging desert dogs, much less a slim boy ducking into the nearest doorway.

Not a minute after he passed her, he came to his destination. He paused in front of two tall doors of burnished metal, the kind you might see on the Great Hall or the King's own chambers. There were no guards by them, however, as there would be by the others. The occupants of this place did not need supervision or protection. When Kitaan put his hand on the latch the doors swung open easily, though with a clanging sound. The hinges were kept in good repair: Residents here saw their share of guests, though the visits were never long. These surroundings did not invite.

Kitaan stepped over the threshold, pulling the heavy doors shut behind him. He looked around the enormous chamber, its ceiling higher than that of the Great Hall. Its walls extended further than the other place, but were served by only half as many torches. There was a fire pit in the center of the room, just beyond a large stone podium, but it illuminated only the wall nearest it. Most of the place remained shadowy. The Prince peered through the dark to see what could be found there. He might have saved his eyes: It had been, and always would be, the same thing.

The Hall of Shadows had long been a silent, secret place, rich but gloomy, as befitted its sacred purpose. For a thousand years, the alcoves piercing its high walls had held the ashes of Kitaan's clan. There were so many alcoves holding so many urns, one could not have counted them in a day, even if one could have borne the atmosphere for so long. But there was space for that many urns again. The empty walls waited patiently until needed. They knew they would be, one day.

To stand in the center of the Hall of Shadows is to stand at the center of all things, to see both the past and the future. Men born a thousand years ago and men who will not be born for a thousand years have a place here, a destiny. One cannot look upon these light-starved walls, taste the chill of the air and hear the whispering echoes, and not know this place for what it is: Eternity.

Slowly, Kitaan walked to the center of the room. He looked upon the great book bound to the stone podium. He did not need to turn its pages, for he only required the latest entries. He found the name and number he wanted, then walked to a far corner and crouched near the bottom.

Almost hidden, beneath a much more elaborate alcove that held at least a dozen gleaming urns, was the space he sought. In this tiny niche was only one urn. It was a deep green, the color for a warrior, but made of plain clay. The alcove was equally simple, no paintings or carvings, just the moon-shaped well at the bottom for oil, sweet water, or other offerings.

The urn and alcove were appropriate choices, befitting their occupant's status: Vatak handled these things well. He knew Keth could not have better, the boy was not born to it. Nor did he live long
enough to earn it.

Kitaan crouched by the tiny alcove and wept.

I'm sorry, my friend. You did deserve better. With the wisdom his own sufferings had brought him, Kitaan understood that he could not provide it. He could buy Keth an urn of firestone. He could place it in the largest, most central alcove, above the sacred fire behind the podium. The one which held Kitaan's own ancestors, all those warlords and kings. It would change nothing. That is why Kitaan wept—for the inevitability of it, the everlastingness. Encase Keth in jewels or scatter his ashes in the dirt: The boy was dead. Warm hands, bright eyes, easy smile, gone. Humor and quick temper, passion and stubborn loyalty, no more. All he ever was, lost forever.

Kitaan wiped his eyes and took the dagger out of his pocket. He held out his arm and slashed the blade across the clean flesh just under the elbow. It cut deep, but he barely felt the pain. He held his arm over the offering well. He watched as the crescent filled and then overflowed, blood spilling down the wall and puddling on the ground. It was not enough.

He was ready to stay there, bleeding, until he was as cold and pale as white firestone. He would have, had he not heard the echo of the chamber doors opening behind him. He withdrew into the corner, watching this new figure make its way across the Hall. Its height and the broadness of its shoulders proclaimed it male, but its black robe and hood were so voluminous that at first it was impossible to tell more.

Then the figure walked behind the podium. He stopped in front of the space below the alcove of kings. He knelt by this lower alcove, one as large and richly carved as the one above it, a space almost as honorable. This was the alcove where Kitaan's clan kept the ashes of its queens. From its robes, the figure took a jar of oil and began pouring it into the largest offering well. This well was in front of the newest and most elaborate of the urns in the lower alcove. It held the ashes of Shannar, daughter of Sukar, wife of Takraan the Inexorable.

That is when Kitaan stepped out of the shadows. He quickly crossed the space separating them and stood in front of the black-robed figure.

"Hello, Father," he said.

The King started so violently that he dropped the jar. It broke on the hard stone floor, the smell of expensive offering oil suddenly thick in the air, like the ghost of a thousand desert flowers. The King stared at Kitaan, sharp features gone pale. Kitaan realized what he must be thinking.

"I'm no spirit," he said. He held up his dripping arm. "You see? The dead don't bleed."

The King said nothing, his eyes hard upon Kitaan's face. Then, he took a white silk kerchief from his robes and held it out. "See to yourself," he said, "or you will be a spirit soon enough. What have you been doing?"

"Honoring my friend." Kitaan staunched the bleeding, for he had not been gone so long that the habit of obedience was lost. When he had finished tying off the bandage, he looked at his father.

Tears were running down the King's cheeks.

"Father—"

"I knew you were dead," Takraan said. "Gone from your bed in the middle of the night, and a trail leading to the desert. I would have pursued you into it, but there was a storm—"
"I remember." He had spent three days in a cave, eating stale bread and watching scorpions build their nests. One of the easiest parts of his journey, as it turned out.

"Then came the bandit rebellion. The safety of the entire kingdom was at stake; I had to do battle. By the time I had restored order, there was no trace of you. That is when I knew you were dead. A mad boy in the desert—how could you survive?"

"But I did," Kitaan said. "I am not mad now."

"No," Takraan said. His dark gaze was so heavy upon the Prince that he could feel its weight. "Not mad, and no longer a boy! How did such a miracle occur?"

"The gods helped me."

The King smiled. It should have seemed unfamiliar, for Kitaan had never seen such a look upon his father's face before. But he knew it well. He had seen it many times in the tall mirrors of his bedchamber, for it was his own smile. The hands upon his shoulder were his hands, though more calloused and age-spotted. Warrior's hands.

"My son." Takraan pronounced the words like a sacred oath. "You are home. I am very glad."

Kitaan looked down, eyes prickling again. "I did not think you would feel so," he whispered.

"How could I not? All my hopes lie with you, lad. I don't have time to train another heir! If I did, I do not want one. It's past time we fought together; I left you with your tutors too long. A thousand times these past months I cursed my own neglectfulness. I knew that if you were in the field with me, the demon of madness could not have tortured you so. You would have exorcised him on the battlefield, drowned him in the blood of enemies." The King's lined face glowed. "It is not too late. We can conquer the world, from horizon to horizon. Our nobles, our soldiers, the peasants in the field: All our people will share the glory." His grip tightened upon the Prince's shoulders. "Have you not dreamt of such a thing?"

Kitaan nodded, too overcome to speak. It was as if his father had looked into his eyes and seen all the Prince's dreams, which were the same as his own dreams. They shared so many passions.

"We can do it, S'Kitaan. We will do it."

Kitaan blinked at the name. He shivered, as if at a sudden chill. "Sir, there is something I must tell you—"

"Tell me tomorrow. Today, we celebrate your safe return." His father put his arm around him and began leading him towards the door. "Damn the famine! We shall hold such a feast as this fortress has never seen. The tables will groan with the excess. You shall have your girl back, though I must tell you that she is big with child, very big. Her sister is a pretty lass, though, and until T'Lyra is delivered, T'Lana might amuse you. Though we must be thinking about your marriage soon. Concubines and their progeny are all very well, but you need a proper heir. The warlord who controls much of the Greater Sea has a daughter. If we can't drive him off his throne, we'll breed him off it."

"I—I don't know. I have never thought about the Lord of the Greater Sea, or his daughter."

"If she's ugly, you don't have to marry her. Or just get a son upon her and put her away. You can do as you like. I'm more worried about the spring campaign, in truth. We must talk about it tomorrow, after the feast—"
Kitaan halted their progress. "My Lord, stop. Forgive me, but you move too fast. I—I don't understand this. All your plans for me, your—enthusiasm. Your proper heir or no, you have never liked me. I know you thought me dead, but none of this makes—"

"S'Kitaan, S'Kitaan," Takraan said soothingly. "It's true, I have been cold to you in the past. It is not in my nature to be warm, and one does not raise a warrior king by coddling him with kisses. I don't know how many times I had to warn away your sisters. It's one of many reasons I married them off so early." He paused, pulling at his beard. "In truth, I was never sure how you felt about me. Your eyes when you looked at me sometimes—" He shook his head. "Ah, well. The soul of a child is unformed. Perhaps it was my coldness which brought upon yours. But now—" he put his hands on either side of Kitaan's face, gazing deeply into his eyes. "When I look at you now, I see only what I have always hoped to see: my dear son, strong and sane. A warrior, who will hold my kingdom and make it still greater. The greatest kingdom this world has ever seen! You are my heir, S'Kitaan. The one I wished for since the day you were born."

He smiled at Takraan again, his face alight with happiness. In that moment, you could see the handsome, hawkish man he once was. How he must have looked the day the Prince was born, a proud father gazing at his new son. The Prince's heart turned over. He had never experienced this emotion before, the love of a son for his father. It was like drinking cool water in the desert, the exquisite liquid running down your throat. Quenching a killing thirst, one you did not know you were suffering until you found this oasis.

"Father," he said again, the tears spilling down his cheeks. Their gazes met—identically dark and clear. They embraced. In that moment there was total understanding, the deep and perfect knowing of shared blood, shared dreams.

The chamber doors opened. A draft from the corridor enveloped them, as chill as a spirit. A figure stood upon the threshold, blinking into the darkness of the Hall of Shadows.

"Kitaan? Is that you? Thank the heavens! That horrid Doctor tricked me out of the TARDIS. He has gone and stranded us in this awful place. Come, we must leave at once."

The figure stepped forward, into a pool of light. Torches burned in his very blue eyes.

The King looked at Sitaan, his sharp features still with shock. Then he looked at his other son, the one he still held in his arms. Then, finally, back to Sitaan. And Takraan's face changed.

He must have looked like this on the day we were born. Exactly like this.

The Prince looked at the King, but in this moment, he did not see his father. He saw dead fields and grave cairns. Grey men tilling grey soil, withered mothers nursing skeletal infants. He saw Keth bleeding into the sand of the training ground. He saw T'Khut rise over Vulcan's forge, her thousand red eyes burning. He saw other eyes, deep as the Outer Dark, and older. He saw light, white and brilliant. A light that killed him, and remade him. Most vividly, he saw blue eyes—such an impossible color! A gaze watching him always, waiting. Since the day they were born.

Choose, brother. Life or Death. If you have ever loved me, choose now.

The King's dark eyes widened. He looked down at the shining dagger protruding from his chest: a killing blow if ever there was one. The Prince had struck quickly, and without mercy.

"S'Kitaan," he gasped.

Takraan the Inexorable fell to the ground. He lay there twitching feebly, a green puddle oozing from
his black robes, staining the stone tiles. Sitaan knelt next to him.

"That is not his name," he said. "It never was. Let that be your last thought as the dark takes you. As the light fades, Father, let my face be the last you see. As I saw yours once."

The King did not reply. Within a minute, he was dead. Sitaan took the dagger from the King's breast, wiped it upon the black robes, and put the weapon in the pocket of his own trousers. His fingers passed over the King's face, closing Takraan's eyes. Then he stood and looked at Kitaan.

"So that is what it looks like," Kitaan whispered.

"What?"

"Justice," Kitaan said. He turned his face away.

In other times, the killer of a king would have been burned, or perhaps thrown in the blackest pit of the dungeons until the rats gnawed his bones. But Kitaan found himself crowned inside of a fortnight. Takraan had been so bloodthirsty in his own princely days, his reign as king had been so painful for peasants and nobles alike, that nobody questioned Kitaan's actions. They were, in fact, inclined to look upon him as a deliverer. (Or a puppet, some of the older nobles pondered, for their new king was young and untried. They would bide their time, and see.) The only wails heard at Takraan's funeral pyre came from his brother Terek, loyal to the end in his dim fashion.

Nobody questioned Kitaan when he declared Sitaan his brother. Tongues wagged, of course, but they always would. The resemblance between the two was unmistakable. Though Kitaan never explained his brother's origins, the tongues told their own tales. Takraan must have kept a secret mistress, perhaps another woman from the Lesser Sea. It explained Sitaan's odd coloring, for the people of that region tended to be fair, even if blue eyes had never before been seen.

In truth, nobody had ever seen anyone quite like Sitaan. He tore through the fortress like a one-man bandit horde, scattering books and sweets and serving girls in his wake. At first people were disinclined to trust him: He was so very excessive. But the King was giving his brother a free hand in all matters domestic, and soon enough people saw the wisdom of this. Sitaan's first action as Chief Advisor was to dismiss half the army, sending them back to their villages with much of the grain the old king had hoarded to support his campaigns. Sitaan half-emptied the treasury drilling wells for the villages. With able-bodied men armed by water and seed, and no rampaging armies trampling upon the new sprouts, soon the fields began to green again. When this was followed by the best rains the land had known for decades, the common people began to whisper that the King's brother was a blessed man, perhaps even holy.

The nobles were harder to win over, though their own coffers were benefitting by peasants who could pay rent and tithe crops instead of dying off so inconveniently. But Sitaan's projects at the fortress kept many of his peers impressed and interested. During the weekly feasts he planned for the nobles, he spoke often of building a great library. Also a wonder house, holding many of the treasures taken in Takraan's wars, open to all. He was very enthusiastic on the idea of schools, which the nobles tolerated until he announced that funds would be set aside for the education of the general populace as well. What need was there for peasants who could read? One old noble, Takrath, a cousin of Takraan's, became quite incensed over the matter. During one memorable feast, his protests became threats. He stood over Sitaan shouting, hand gripping his sword hilt.

Matters might have grown very dark indeed if Kitaan had not been present, seated at the head of the table and listening with no expression, as was his habit. He was so swift and silent that the old noble, ears full of his own outrage, never noticed the King leaving his seat and approaching him from
behind. Takrath never heard, unless his ears caught the whistling of air when the King cut his head from his shoulders. After that, there were no more protests to Sitaan's plans. But the echo of Kitaan's action was further-reaching than schools for peasant children. That particular noble had been the leader of those who sought to test the resolve of their young King. With Takrath's urn newly adorning the Hall of Shadows, all plots died away for the time being.

Kitaan's reign was going very well, peasants happy and nobles appropriately cowed, grain in the storehouse and gold in the treasury, even after all of Sitaan's projects. But the new King did not seem happy in his power. He maintained a steady gravity that might have concerned his nobles, had Takraan not been similarly gloomy much of the time. Kitaan was a better man than his father—better advised at any rate—so the nobles did not really care if he was happy or not.

Only his brother was concerned. In fact, the resemblance between them was most marked when Sitaan gazed at Kitaan, for it was then that his usually merry countenance grew sullen, as sullen as his brother's. If Kitaan ever noticed the scrutiny, he did not acknowledge it. He supported the Chief Advisor in all his plans, but except for the killing of Takrath, one might have supposed he favored Sitaan no more than any other useful political ally. Certainly he did not confide in him. Relations between the brothers remained cordial but distant.

For some months this state of affairs continued. Kitaan's court was quickly becoming the most splendid in recent memory, but this was due to his brother's efforts, not his own. Kitaan dutifully attended the weekly feasts, but he ate little and said less. The rest of the time he was shut up in his rooms or out on the training grounds, practicing sword play with his armor bearer. This new squire was a fair, hulking boy from the Lesser Sea. Kitaan would often spar him into panting and terrified exhaustion, but the King never harmed him other than normal scrapes and bruises. There were a few close calls, but Kitaan's instincts were quickly becoming the stuff of legend.

Kitaan did not seem to favor T'Lyra any longer. Although he was very generous, giving her sunny apartments at the fortress and granting her an ample allowance, he never visited her bed. On the night she went into labor, the King was awake all night. But this was only because he was planning ways to fortify the kingdom's northern border, not pacing outside of the birthing chamber. When his Chief Advisor came to tell him that his son had been born, Kitaan nodded and went back to consulting with his warlords. It fell to Sitaan to plan the celebratory feast and consult with the High Priestess about a name. (Vatak was quite helpful in all of this, as he had spent many months seeing to T'Lyra's needs while Kitaan was otherwise occupied. T'Lyra had come to depend on his support—Vatak had been in the birthing chamber with her.)

Now the King's behavior did cause whispers. True, this was only the son of a concubine, but most men are more pleased by the first proof of their fertility, especially when they have a royal dynasty to continue. Perhaps it wasn't so strange for a king to tire of a mistress, but T'Lyra had no successor: When Kitaan did sleep, he slept alone. Finally, the High Priestess went to visit him one evening in his chambers. Vana had been restored to her former position after Takraan's death, and though she often seemed distracted herself—almost as if waiting for something—she felt it her duty to advise Kitaan. He received her cordially, and they conversed alone for a short while. When she withdrew, it was not as if it had been after her clash with Kitaan's father all those years ago. She did not appear angry, but sad. When her novices asked if the King was well, she sighed and said, "He needs the doctor. I will pray to Lady T'Lyn."

But when they offered to bring the court physicians to consult with her, she dismissed them from her presence with a sharp gesture. Her novices scurried away, whispering together about Vana's time in the desert, and how it had ruined her temper.
After Vana left, Kitaan sat for a long while, looking out the windows of his chambers. He saw the sun setting over the desert, dying light reflecting on low, dull yellow clouds. He caught the scent of the air outside, heavy and sullen. "A storm is coming," he said to himself.

It was then the desire struck him, more forcefully than any lust he had ever known. He wanted to put away his pen and seal, remove his crown and sword. He would leave them all behind and walk into the desert. He would watch T'Khut rise, looking out over the dunes with her thousand eyes. He would sit on the sand, bathed in her burning light. When the storm came, he would not run. As the wind howled and the sands swirled, he would remain. Let the chaos take him.

He wanted this. He wanted it so much he could taste the desire, heavy and yellow. It screamed inside him like the voice of old, dark gods. He could hear it, this savage music. He could—

Then he realized the music wasn't inside his head. Nor was the wind, or the light. Kitaan turned around, to the far corner of his chambers. He blinked at the blue box, insubstantial as a spirit at first but then bolder, brighter—absolutely real. He rose, his heart thundering in his ears. The gods have heard my prayer, Kitaan thought. He heard it.

By the time the door of the box opened, Kitaan had run across the expanse of his room. Only the training of many years kept him from flinging himself at the tall, thin figure on the threshold. Instead he held himself straight as a sword, hands clasped behind his back. "Welcome, My Lord," he began. "I am so—"

"This isn't Antares IV," the Doctor said.

Kitaan blinked. "What?"

The Doctor sighed. "This is Vana's work! Never become involved with a priestess, lad. They might seem all lovely and serene, posh accents and convent educations, but they do things. All those elemental feminine powers, varnishing their nails and conspiring together. T'Lyn probably suborned the TARDIS when I wasn't—" He stopped, peering at Kitaan. "You look knackered. How long has it been since I was here?"

"Seven months and twelve days, Sir."

"It must be longer than that. I've prevented six apocalypses since I saw you last. Not to mention the six that I set—well! Never mind. Nobody ever won a bet disputing Vulcan preciseness."

The Doctor left the box, sticking his hands in his pockets. His bright brown gaze swept the room. "This is nice, very nice. I assume you've ascended to your rightful place?"

"Yes. My father—" Kitaan stopped. "He is dead."

"I see. How about that brother of yours?"

"He's my Chief Advisor."

"Isn't that just as it should be." The Doctor peered at Kitaan again. "Or is it?"

"I hate this place," Kitaan said. "Take me away, I beg you. I don't want to be king anymore."

The Doctor sat down on the carpet in front of the fireplace. "For having a thing is not the same as
wanting it. Funny how that goes. Not logical at all." He patted the carpet next to him. "Sit. Talk to me."

The King obeyed. But it took him a moment to talk around the cold lump in his throat. Finally, he swallowed hard and said: "I murdered my father."

"So I gathered."

"You are not shocked—sickened?"

"My dear boy, this is Pre-Reformation Vulcan. Parricide is practically a full-time occupation."

"He loved me," Kitaan said. "I think I am the only person Takraan ever loved. Well, my mother perhaps. But I sank the blade into his heart."

"So did she. Tried to, at any rate. Vana told me the story."

"She was ill—mad, with milk fever. I had no such excuse."

"That's not how Vana tells it. Your mother planned very well. If she'd had a bit more strength, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Shannar knew what she was doing—what had to be done."

When Kitaan just stared: "Your father was a horrible person. A greedy, soulless tyrant. He was running this half of the world right into the ground, and he had designs on the other half. Another ten years, and even I couldn't have saved it. As they say in Texas, he needed killing."

"But why me?" Kitaan said. "Why was I elected executioner? The one he loved—"

"Oh, quit whining!" the Doctor snapped. "You act as if someone put that dagger in your hand and forced you to do the deed. You had a choice: You made it. It was the right decision. Can you imagine how it would have been if you'd thrown in with dear old dad? Two Takraans, just what this poor bloody planet needs!"

The Doctor leaned forward, so close that Kitaan could feel his aura. It flooded over the skin in a chill and brilliant wave. "You chose Life. Not for your father, but for everyone else. You made the choice a leader should make. The needs of the many outweighed the needs of the few."

"Or the one," Kitaan said slowly.

The Doctor nodded.

"I loved my father. Even at the end." Kitaan's vision blurred, and he bent his head. It was the last, darkest truth, the one he could not bear. When you return the love of a terrible person—when you've inspired it—what does that say about you?

"You loved Sitaan more." Before Kitaan could protest: "You do. Though judging by your lean and hungry look, you're being stubborn. You should go to him. He's waiting for you—he'll wait forever. But why should he?"

"If I confide in him, you know what will happen. He's my brother."

"Technically, he's your clone. Not even a true one, given all those interesting little mods the TARDIS worked in. Lube nubs! I must speak to her about that. She's obviously been reading things she shouldn't. I blame the Internet." He shrugged. "At worst, we're talking about a very rare form of masturbation."
"I don't know what—"

"You do," the Doctor said, raising an eyebrow. "Anachronistic dialogue aside, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Kitaan gazed into the embers of the fire. "Sitaan terrifies me. He's so—hungry."

"That's why he needs you. Your brother wants to consume the world. But he doesn't really get it. Too many years in the dark, I suppose. Won't see the thorns on the posies, and if he does he won't stop, not until he's torn to pieces. Already pricked himself once or twice, yeah?"

Kitaan nodded, thinking of Takrath's hawkish, hateful face.

"This planet is old and mean. It will be a long time before things improve. It needs farmers and scholars, if you're ever going to drag yourselves from the Dark Ages. But it also needs warriors, men of sense and caution who'll protect all the lovely, amazing things. Or nothing will change."

"So I must be Death, or Sitaan can't be Life. I must destroy if he is to create."

"Your problem, Kitaan, is you think too much in binaries. Order and Chaos, Good and Evil, Creation and Destruction—all that black and white business is bollocks. Things are rarely all one way or the other. You're not, even after what happened. The TARDIS isn't that cruel."

The Doctor stood, walking towards his blue box. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I really do have to be going. Terrible doings on Antares IV. Won't go into details, sordid business, oozing pustules everywhere. But that's how it is when there's no balance. A place where it's always Mardi Gras and never Lent—sounds like fun, doesn't it? Then people's noses start falling off."

"Doctor, wait!" Kitaan paused, mind working frantically. "May I ask a question?"

"Just one," the Doctor said, pausing in the door of the box. "Pustules: It's quite urgent. Can't stop here all day giving pep talks to peevish Vulcan princes."

"Would—would you tell me your name? So I can see that the priestesses honor you properly."

The Doctor scrubbed hands through his hair. "That would be rather nice. I could enjoy a chant or two uttered in my honor. But I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"It's secret?"

"Not really. Everyone gets to hear it, but only once. It isn't your time yet. Don't know when it will be, actually. The TARDIS was very creative with you lads. That's what happens when you go messing about with sentient interdimensional vortexes—" he started to step into the box.

Kitaan grabbed his sleeve. "Don't go—"

The Doctor spun around. Their eyes met. Only the Doctor's gaze wasn't his usual one, bright and brown. This was his other gaze, the true one. Kitaan looked into it, he couldn't stop looking. It was like falling. Once started you couldn't stop, going deeper and deeper into it, a place larger and darker than the Hall of Shadows, and so much older. Colder. Once inside you knew you'd never know warmth again, or light. Until suddenly, you fell through. On the other side was light, so much light. One that could kill you, and make you. It was Eternity: Good and Evil, Creation and Destruction, moving in an endless dance. It was wonderful and horrible. It was all things.

He might have stood there, looking until his mind shattered. But the Doctor showed mercy. The light
faded and the veil came down. Kitaan returned to himself, gasping and trembling.

"You are Death," he whispered. "And—more."

A hand on his cheek, smooth as silk but cold. "I could have loved you," the Doctor said softly. "Vana, too. This planet makes such beautiful children. But I want you to live."

"Take me with you. Please."

"Your life will be very long, Kitaan. Don't spend it alone. Eternity is colder than you realize." The Doctor's face seemed to be blurring into the surrounding air. Kitaan saw it was fading, growing less real by the second. He would have clung to him, but he knew it was impossible.

Music came, then wind and light. He was alone.

The storm raged for three days. Kitaan spent most of the time in his chambers, thinking. Before dawn on the fourth day, he woke from a thin, dreamless sleep. He lay in bed for a moment, ears straining, but the winds were quiet. The air was fresh and clear, as if the world was new.

He rose from bed. He walked over to the east windows of his rooms, the ones which looked out over the gardens behind the fortress. These had been wilted and brown a few months ago, but lately they were much improved. Another of his Chief Advisor's projects, bursting into bloom.

Flowers, shrubs, and blossoming vines wavered in the blue-violet light of morning. It was still so early that no person stirred among the greenery, just birds and insects. Kitaan was about to turn away, when his sharp eyes saw a slim figure, not animal. It was clad only in loose trousers and a thin, sleeveless tunic, but it walked with purpose. It seemed to be inspecting damage from the storm, which had left the gardens in some disarray, leaves and branches fallen everywhere.

Early sun shone in his black hair, made his clear olive skin gleam. Normal vision couldn't have taken in the color of his eyes at such distance. But Kitaan saw: They were a pale and dazzling blue, the blueness of new sky. Such an impossible shade, like a ghost. Or a dream.

Barely pausing to dress himself, Kitaan left his rooms, quickly striding the corridors. He startled a scullery maid so badly that she dropped her basket of linens, but he did not pause. Soon he had slipped out a side door and was making his way down a twisting path. Through a tall gate and he was in the gardens, wet grass tickling his bare feet. Sitaan had moved on; no one walked among the flower beds now. But Kitaan knew where he had gone, as if by instinct.

In a secluded part of the gardens, less formal than the central beds, Sitaan knelt by a glossy red bush, which had been split almost in two by the winds of the storm. He worked patiently, tying twine in intricate knots to hold the plant together. When it was done, he moved on to the one beside it. There were many bedraggled bushes. It was not an easy task, for they were covered in thorns. But Sitaan seemed content to stay until the end of time, mending what had been broken. Heedless of the moss staining his trousers or the occasional thorn-pricks, he sang as he worked:

'Today is gonna be the day
That they're gonna throw it back to you
By now you should've somehow
Realized what you've got to do
I don't believe that anybody
Feels the way I do about you now'

'Backbeat, the word is on the street
That the fire in your heart is out
I'm sure you've heard it all before
But you never really had a doubt
I don't believe that anybody
Feels the way I do about you now'

Kitaan, without realizing it, had taken several steps forward. His stepped on a dried twig, which gave with a loud snap. Sitaan dropped his twine and looked up, startled silent.

"Don't stop," Kitaan said. "It's pretty."

"I'm not sure I remember more."

"Oh, well—the tune is quite unusual. Where did you hear it?"

"The blue box. Where else?"

He picked up his twine and turned back to his task, but Kitaan did not take the hint. "He was here," he said. "The Doctor. I saw him a few days ago, before the storm."

Sitaan's fingers paused, then kept knotting. "I'm not surprised. He always did like you best."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's true. I never liked him. Always dashing about, poking his nose in. Manipulating things like he knows better. Too clever by half, and not as handsome as he thinks."

"Yes," Kitaan said. "Who could care for someone like that?"

Sitaan drew one of his thumbs over a particularly nasty thorn. Not quite pricking himself, but it must have hurt, for his face was as solemn as Kitaan had ever seen it. "The Doctor is dangerous. He killed our father. He barely had to try. Takraan the Inexorable, crushed like a locust."

Kitaan stared at Sitaan. "I killed him."

"You wielded the dagger. But he put it in your hand. Oh—not literally," he said, when Kitaan frowned. "But he manipulated events. He put you in just the right place at just the right moment, and then pushed me into it. A minute earlier or a minute later, and you might have made another choice. The Doctor timed everything perfectly. I'm not sure why he bothered. Oh yes, Takraan was a tyrant. Few were sorry to see him go. But why would the Doctor care? So our father killed thousands. The Doctor has killed millions. You know he has."

Kitaan sat down next to Sitaan, pondering a moment.

"It's not the killing that brought his notice," he said. "It was disparity. Takraan's greed threw everything out of tune. Life and Death, Order and Chaos, the Doctor can tolerate. But imbalance offends him. It angers him. I pity him. Kitaan shivered, remembering endless eyes. "His wrath is terrible."

"I'm glad he's gone," Sitaan said. "Though I do miss apples."

"Glutton," Kitaan said, smirking.

"Somebody has to eat. You never do. You don't eat, you don't sleep, you don't fuck. All your appetites, lost again. What a careless creature you are, Kitaan! How starved you must be, under all your gravity."
Kitaan made no answer. After a moment, Sitaan returned to his work. Slowly and patiently, his clever fingers wove the complicated knots. He pulled the plant together. Slight hiss as another thorn pricked him, but he kept on. Soon his voice, low and clear, came again:

'And all the roads that lead you there are winding  
And all the lights that light the way are blinding  
There are many things that I would like to say to you  
But I don't know how'

'I said maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me  
And after all, you're my wonderwall  
I said maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me  
You're gonna be the one that saves—'

"You're wrong," Kitaan said. "You don't know everything, Sitaan."

Sitaan put down his twine. He faced him, thin arms clasped around his moss-stained knees. "Tell me, then."

"I would have killed him," Kitaan said. "Had you arrived a minute later or earlier, or not at all. I would not have let the King hurt you, any more than I let his horrid cousin hurt you."

"I wondered about Takhir," Sitaan said. "But I concluded that you were simply putting an end to his conspiracies. It would have been the logical response."

"Logic had no place in my actions. I saw him standing over you, threatening you—I can't even describe it. The world went green. When the mists cleared, his head was on the banquet table."

"Vana was heaving. It was rather funny. Do you think vomit cleans from white silk—"

Kitaan seized Sitaan's face in his hands. "I love you. No one will ever touch you."

"Even you?" Sitaan whispered. He gazed at Kitaan, pale and solemn. "I know it's wrong—"

"It isn't. You're not my brother, you're my clone, whatever that is. Even if it is wrong, I don't care. What's the point of being king, if you can't do as you like?"

"Finally! The man sees reason. I've been trying to tell you that for a bloody year—"

He cut off, which is the logical response when someone kisses the breath out of you. The kiss was sweeter than apples, and Sitaan's skin was as smooth as silk. Kitaan wanted to know more of it and he would have right away, pushing his companion into the soft, springy moss. But Sitaan put a hand in the middle of his chest, pushing him off. "Why?" he said.

"What?"

"Yes, that's another good question. What brought on this sudden revelation? Now you love me, you want to make love to me, after months of cold distance. Did the Doctor tell you to do this? I won't be manipulated by him anymore, Kitaan." Sitaan sat up, straightening his tunic.

"This isn't about the Doctor. It's true, he did advise me to reconcile with you. But I came to this decision on my own. This morning, seeing you out here in the gardens, I knew."

"I don't trust these moods of yours: They change too violently." Sitaan crossed his arms over his
chest, chin jutting out. "This morning you want me. This afternoon, I'm dodging daggers."

"You stubborn little idiot! I've been considering this for three days. The Doctor didn't tell me everything, you see. He told me why you needed me, and I think that's obvious, after Takrath's outburst. But he left me to discover on my own why I need you. Today, I saw it."

Kitaan plucked a glossy red leaf from the bush. "Beautiful, isn't it? This whole place is. The gardeners must have been slaving for months. But I've barely noticed it before now."

"Yes, you've no eye for aesthetics. Everybody knows that."

"Shut up. I'm not finished." Kitaan turned the leaf in his fingers. "I do enjoy the plants, sitting here with you. Just as I always have more appetite at your feasts than when I eat in my chambers. This morning I could hear the music, because you were singing it."

He put a hand on Sitaan's neck, letting his fingers slide down over warm, smooth flesh. The warmth was contagious—he felt it within himself, glowing like a new day. "I feel," he said, "all the things I should feel, when I touch you. And if you don't want that, I won't blame you. I've hurt you terribly. But I fear what I will become without you. The vicious, soulless creature I could be. I look into the mirror and I can see Takraan; I see him so often now. I don't want to."

When Sitaan didn't speak, he started to draw his hand back. But his wrist was caught in a warm grip, shockingly strong. Or perhaps not so shocking. He had always known Sitaan's strength. Today, all his hopes lay with it. Otherwise he was another pile of ash, waiting for the alcove.

"Help me," he whispered. "Will you?"

"Idiot," Sitaan said, and kissed him.

This kiss was less sweet than the first, but that did not mean it was not good—better. Apples are all very well, but there is something to be said for native fruit, fierce and surprising.

He pushed Sitaan back upon the moss, and pulled off their tunics and trousers with swift motions. Kitaan paused a moment to admire this other body, so like his own and yet unlike. Sitaan did not look as a warrior looks, dark-gazed, calloused and muscled. Sitaan's blue eyes were as bright as a scholar's, his fingers as long and clever as a lute player's. But his body seemed formed for one purpose: skin smooth as silk, lithe limbs as flexible as flower stems, but stronger, more sinuous. A body meant to be consumed, fierce spines, strange saps, and all.

Kitaan bent his head, looking close. Sitaan's member was hardening fast, spines beading with drops that shone like firestones in the morning sunlight. As breath touched them they grew still brighter. The smallest touch of the tongue and they seemed to grow, reaching for contact like tiny, desperate fingers. A more forceful lick—what a wonderful taste! Fierce and spicy.

"Kitaan," Sitaan panted.

"How many lovers?" Kitaan asked. "Since you came to the fortress, how many serving girls?"

"I don't remember. A few."

"Many. You are a greedy thing." He took another, longer lick. His tongue had gone slightly numb, as if he'd sucked the sap of a poison plant. But this was delicious. "Did they do this?"

"Tease me mercilessly? They wouldn't dare."
"Pity. You could stand more teasing." He bit down lightly on one of the spines, and Sitaan hissed, slender hips rising from the moss.

"You son of a poxy desert dog—" He cut off with a cry as Kitaan bit down, harder. But he did not jerk back. In fact, his fingers were digging painfully into Kitaan's shoulders, trying to pull him closer. Kitaan laughed softly.

"You're about to have your cock sucked by a king, Sitaan. Try to show a little dignity."

He bent his head and began his work in earnest. In truth, he was not at all experienced with this. Princes generally received, rather than giving. But it proved to be very easy, especially with such an enthusiastic partner. An imperious partner, constantly directing him with tugs of his fingers and jerks of his hips, shouting orders in between moans and grateful obscenities. Quite arousing, actually, for Sitaan tasted and smelled as lovely as he looked, reeking of spices, his sap tingling upon the tongue. He intoxicated like liquor. When he reached his release, juices gushing forth like a new oasis, it seemed to have happened entirely too quickly.

Kitaan stretched out upon the ground, wiping his lips. Sitaan opened his eyes, grinning. "It's official: You're better than a serving girl."

"Thank you. Turn over."

"Serving boys, however—" he cut off with a hiss as he was grabbed by the neck, his slender body pulled against a more powerful one.

Kitaan leaned close, lips against his ear. "You are a devil," he whispered.

Sitaan shifted in his arms, so they were face to face. "I am yours. Whatever that makes me."

The words should have sounded wanton. But the look in his clear blue eyes was sincere—painfully so, as if he divulged a dark secret. All teasing suddenly seemed false and foolish.

"I know," Kitaan said. "I've always known it."

He rolled them so he was on top of Sitaan. He reached down, taking more of that strange, silky moisture from Sitaan's member. He slathered it over his own organ. This would be easier if he turned Sitaan over, but he didn't want their gazes to break. He wanted them to look and touch. He pushed his companion's knees up, up, up, and Sitaan moved with him easily. He was flexible enough. Kitaan took more moisture, reaching down and preparing Kitaan. He felt like warm silk inside, tender and giving. Soon enough, Sitaan was gasping again.

"Please," he breathed.

"I'm not teasing you now. But I need you to know something before we do this. You are mine, I've known that. What I never knew before today is that I have been, and always will be, yours."

He entered him then. He had to move slowly, for Sitaan was very tight. It took him a moment to realize why it must be: Whatever Sitaan had done with the serving boys, it wasn't this. The truth made Kitaan even gentler than he would have been. It wasn't like their other time, when Sitaan had taken control so ruthlessly. Now there was warmth and sunlight instead of scorching heat and angry stars.

They kept their eyes open the entire time, gazes melting into each other. This wasn't better than last time but it was different, more real. Kitaan would not want to give the other up. It had been wonderful losing himself—being taken. But this was wonderful, too.
Sitaan climaxed first and Kitaan was able to watch it, the pleasure overtaking that beloved body, pleasure *he* had given it. When Kitaan finally climaxed, Sitaan kissed him, gentle and sweet. It was almost better than the release.

When it was over they were silent a long while, watching the day brighten around them. There was almost no sound except a few lonely birds and their own breathing. Perhaps they slept, it was difficult to tell. Everything today had the lovely unreality of a dream.

It was the music that brought Kitaan fully back to himself. Sitaan singing softly, as his fingers stroked Kitaan's hair. When he was done, the silence seemed suddenly too heavy, everything become too real again. Kitaan had to speak.

"What is a wonderwall?" he asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea. The singer never says."

"Careless of him."

"It's poetry, not everything has to be explained. It shouldn't be: The ambiguity is the point."

"Forty-two," Kitaan said softly.

"What?"

"A riddle the Doctor told me once. An answer with no question." He pondered a moment. "Perhaps I can think of it now. *When is a box not a box? When is a brother not a brother?*"

"Those don't work. You need numbers."

"How many serving girls has Sitaan seduced?"

"How many times has Kitaan scared the piss out of his armorbearer?"

"How many nobles are conspiring against us? How many heads will I have to cut off?"

"Those are a bit grim. Try, *how many roads must a man walk down?*"

"I rather like that."

"It's not original." Sitaan sighed. "I'm going to miss the Doctor's library."

"All roads," Kitaan said. "I'll walk down all of them, if you are at the end."

"We'll walk together," Sitaan said, after a soft kiss on his companion's neck. "We must take a trip soon. We should see the eastern border villages, I hear they're totally transformed."

"I hear they're worshipping you as a god." When Sitaan grimaced: "I thought that's what you wanted."

"Not like that. I don't want to be a poorly painted statue sitting on some farmer's mantlepiece. Peasants have no imagination, we really must see about those schools. This is something they need, I suppose, but we can do better. A new god of prosperity, someone to encourage them while they pull themselves out of the muck. A big, fat, yellow fellow: stupid and brutal, but with a lovely wife. I'll have to think of a name, something with lots of imposing apostrophes."

"He could have a sword, to smite those who refuse to prosper."
"Here we go again. I don't understand you, wanting to run around smiting people all the time."

"They need it. This is a mean world, Sitaan." Kitaan stretched on the springy moss, considering. "I suppose it could be something that would bruise, not maim. A hammer, perhaps. A big one."

Sitaan rolled over, biting gently at Kitaan's nipple. "Well. Who could say no to that?"

He put a kiss over Kitaan's heart. Then he went lower, placing another kiss. He would have gone lower still, and Kitaan would have been content to let him—more than content, going by the state of his groin—had he not flashed on something, another moment much like this. Long ago, when he was someone else.

He touched Sitaan's hair. "Stop."

Sitaan looked up, exasperated. "We're not going to start that again, are we?"

"You're welcome to swallow me like a sand wyrm later. Not now." Kitaan sat up, tumbling his companion off. "Anyway, the gardeners will be here soon. While I realize you have no shame, as king I have a certain dignity to maintain."

Sitaan rolled his eyes. But his expression changed when Kitaan spoke again. "I want you to come with me to see my boy. I have been too consumed by other things to give him proper attention. Nor did I think it would matter, for he is merely the son of a concubine. It was wrongheaded and selfish of me, but there's still time to atone."

"Will you name him? It's time for that, Kitaan. Past time. Vana and T'Lyra have made many suggestions. Even Vatak has an opinion. But I was reluctant to decide without you."

Kitaan looked around, but he did not see the beauty of the gardens. He saw the low ceilings of the back stables, lit by torchlight. He saw the rough rocky ground of the fields at the base of the mountain. He saw another body beside him, warm and real. One he had loved, though he never knew it. Not until it was too late. He saw green blood staining the yellow sand of the training field. An urn, greener still, in its obscure alcove.

He blinked away water and looked up.

"Keth," he said. "That is what I wish to call him. I hope you approve, for he is yours as much as mine. You were there when he was made. Whatever future sons either of us sire, he is ours."

"More than you realize. We must speak about T'Lyra, brother. She's a lovely and loyal girl, but I believe her loyalties have changed." When Kitaan simply shrugged at this, Sitaan smiled.

"Keth is very auspicious," he went on, blue eyes bright. "Our son will be king one day. He will be magnificent." The words hung heavy in the air. They had the weight of prophecy.

They rose as one, dressing quickly. Together, they went to meet their new heir.

So they truly began, the golden days of Kitaan's reign. One could say it was Sitaan's, as well, for his brother was always Kitaan's closest advisor. These were days of tranquility and prosperity for the common folk, with only an occasional war to satiate the nobles and protect the kingdom's borders. It was also a time of great discovery and learning, for a rationally martialed peace is ever the best friend of knowledge.

Kitaan and Sitaan never married, though both sired many children. They were kind and generous to
the mothers and their progeny, but no more. Whatever lovers they took, male or female, none could come between them. Tongues did wag over this, of course, but it is a universal truth that kings—and their closest advisors—do as they please. Those who might have disapproved took comfort in the fact that it was never proven once and for all that Kitaan and Sitaan were brothers.

Perhaps the High Priestess could have discovered the truth, but she showed little interest in the matter. She was much involved in assisting Sitaan with his village school project, and was far too busy to bother with gossip. Or to waste her time at the bottom of Mount Seleya looking at the night sky, as had been her previous habit. "Best not to look into the dark," she was heard telling her novices, "for it might look into you." The young ladies marveled at her wisdom.

T'Lyra married Vatak, with Kitaan's blessing. They returned to the southern village from which he came. They had many children, brave and brown as their father, and wise and graceful as their mother. Her son Keth remained at the fortress, and he was always Sitaan and Kitaan's favorite of their many offspring. Perhaps it was these early attentions that made him such a clever, winning, and confident boy, equally at home on the battlefield and in the library, with no shadows upon his spirit. He was so wise, popular, and strong that when he succeeded to the throne, even his envious siblings could not deny him the right. Keth the Magnificent, as he came to be called, had an even more successful and interesting reign than his fathers', though there isn't time to recount all his exploits now.

Kitaan and Sitaan ruled for many, many years. But eventually the duties of monarchy did weigh upon them both, and they began taking longer and longer journeys together, leaving the kingdom in the capable hands of Keth. When they were very old men (or at least appeared to be so), one of these journeys ended tragically. Some kind of trouble with bandits, or perhaps it was an asp, or a giant desert wyrm. The tales did not agree on details, only that Kitaan and Sitaan never did return. The entire kingdom was plunged into deepest mourning.

If there were rumors later of a pair of young men, one dark-eyed and serious and one blue-eyed and merry, traveling the world and having amazing adventures together, well! One should be careful about listening to idle whispers, which can soon take on the appearance of truth. They can even approach legend, if they are told often enough. Ghosts can become princes, brothers can become lovers (or the other way round), and the gods can appear out of nowhere, granting wishes and settling scores. Kings can even become gods themselves, if you believe the stories. Whether you choose to do so, I leave entirely up to you.
“Of course, they’re both fundamental to the tale: Kitaan and Sitaan, you can’t tell the story without them. Just as you can’t have one without the other. But it’s Sitaan with whom you should be most concerned. He is, as a very wise man said, one who bears watching.”

“That’s not how the stories make it sound. The business with the snake—”

“Oh, Kitaan is a dangerous man. In his day he was much feared by his people, even more than he was loved. And they never knew a quarter of what he really was! But it was Sitaan whose desires would shape the course of things. Katras, for instance. The idea of preserving the soul after the body was ashes originated with him. His was the very first katra, clinging desperately to his brother when their father sought to separate them. Years later, when he had emerged from darkness, he found a way to keep others from being lost in eternity. Powerful seer that he is, he turned all the sad, whispering voices into a joyful chorus. The Hall of Shadows became the Hall of Ancient Thought: Everyone kept safe there, always touching, though never touched. No one is ever lost on Vulcan. Well—almost no one. That is how it has been for seven thousand years. As to how it will be in the future—”

“So he’s the patron saint of h’aints, as my Grandma Belva calls ‘em. Spooky, maybe, but hardly dangerous.”

“Were katras his only invention, I would agree.” A pause. “Pon farr is Sitaan’s doing as well.”

“Aw, come on now—”

“I know it’s hard for a man of science to believe. Certainly, Vulcan scientists would not credit it. If one asked and they deigned to reply, they would speak of adrenal storms, and evolutionary protocols, and cultural paradigms. They might show you charts and printouts, a million hours of work. A million-million words of logic, all false. As false as the tales that you have been given about what the Fever is, and what it means to our people. I have been listening, Doctor. I heard everything. All of dear Sherron’s explanations—they sound reasonable, do they not? But lies are always more palatable when pronounced by shapely lips. Hard to look into a face so fair and not be fooled. But you know she is fooling you, do you not? It’s why you kept the data solid.”

Leonard didn’t answer. “What is this about Sitaan and pon farr?”

“Surak changed everything. He re-cut the foundations of our culture, crafting peacemakers from warmongers. He was stubborn and brilliant, terrifying in his way, as all great men are. But then he was of the House of Keth, the greatest of our houses, and the strangest. Such irony, that Surak was descended from the very gods he made everyone believe were imaginary. He changed the world, and he paid the ultimate price. But his sons paid too. They pay to this very day, and in their torments one can see the truth. What we have hidden for three thousand years.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Sitaan was more outraged by Surak’s teachings than his brother. They were far older then—wiser. They had seen so much death. Kitaan believed it might not be such a bad thing, if all that hot blood were cooled by logic. But Sitaan saw matters differently. He did not see peace but division. You
cannot have fire without heat, love without possession, prosperity without blood sacrifice. A world of light with no shadows, what a damnable place. He thought his wayward grandson was pulling apart the bones of existence. Pulling them apart, and all they stood for: Sitaan and Kitaan, Peace and War, Life and Death, Creation and Destruction. He would not let them be separated, not forever. So he brought the Fever. How he brought it, a scientist could not tell you. Perhaps a High Priestess could, if she wished. But it will not be denied. He will not be. Once every seven years the walls must come down, all of the starved passions feast their fill. Or you die. But before you die, Sitaan drives you mad.” A pause. “Yes, he is definitely the more dangerous of the two.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You need to understand, Doctor. Time grows terribly short. If you do not act, and quickly, all will be lost. Everything that you hold dear to your heart.”

“Leonard.”

“Jim—he’s in danger?”

“I’m speaking of more than just your friend! Really, for someone who makes such strident claims to heterosexuality, you are truly obsessed.” When Leonard said nothing: “Yes, you stubborn creature, he is in danger. Terrible danger. But more than Jim Kirk’s questionable virtue is at stake. Much more. Beyond your wildest flights of paranoia.”

“Tell me then. For God’s sake.”

“You would not believe mere words. But I can show you. I have much to—”

“Leonard!”

The world swam. The easy darkness they existed within began to swirl, brighten.

“Perdition take the woman! She was always too persistent. Doctor, whatever she tells you, do not be taken in. Take your eyes off that enchanting face, and your hands from that distracting body, and listen. Not to what she is saying, but to what she is not saying. You can see what is hidden: You always have. For once, use the powers that Heaven gifted you.”

“I—I don’t—”

“Leonard McCoy, are you dead?”

Leonard opened his eyes into the bright sunlight of morning. He saw a lovely doe-eyed face leaning over him and he sat up, blinking away sleep and dreams. What had he been dreaming about? He couldn’t remember.

Listen.

He brushed the word away like an annoying cobweb and stretched, yawning. “Morning, honey.”

“I was about to call the medics.”

“I sleep sound.” After I’ve been rode hard and put up wet, he thought but did not say, as the metaphor might be a bit crude for present company. He grinned at her instead. “Well. Aren’t you a picture.”

For someone making do with last night’s rumpled clothes and no toiletries except what she could
scrounge from Jim and Leonard’s medicine cabinet, Sherron did look wonderful. But when you have a face like that—and skin like that—and a body like that—you don’t need the potions less blessed females use to make up nature’s lack. She sat on the edge of the bed, hands clasped on her wrinkled skirt, hair braided as demurely as a schoolgirl’s. But the look in her eyes was not girlish. She gazed at Leonard’s sheet-swathed form like a hungry maenad.

Slowly she reached out, running a hand down his bare chest. “You are not unappealing yourself. I have heard Terran females are attracted by a man in uniform. Quite illogical! I much prefer you without one.” Her hot fingers teased just under the sheet that covered Leonard’s groin.

“I’ll never get dressed again,” he said, his hand closing around her wrist. “C’mere.”

He pulled her in for a kiss, morning breath less important than his morning erection, which had just gotten a lot more purposeful. She responded as warmly as ever, and for a minute the day was beginning exactly as it should, kissing a lovely lady in the morning light. But when his hand slipped under the edge of her sweater, fingers searching for flesh even softer and warmer than her lips, she pulled back reluctantly.

“I must go,” she said.

“Call in. Tell ‘em you’re sick. Vulcans get sick sometimes, don’t they?” He kissed her neck. “I know where you can get a doctor’s note.” He nipped at the point of her ear and felt her whole body tighten. But before he could press his advantage she had torn herself away, looking pained.

“I wish I could. But I have to go to Flagstaff on the 11:50 shuttle. I am escorting my son home.”

Damn kid. Sharok was cock-blocking him from a thousand miles. Leonard leaned back against the headboard, sighing. “Go be a good mommy. Tell Varena I said hello.”

“I will. Perhaps your greetings will cheer her. She wished to go to Flagstaff, but we have a long journey on Sunday, and she should not tire herself too much beforehand. She wished to draw the desert outside the city, but I told her she would see desert soon enough. She was not pleased.”

“Another day of brushing T’Lyn’s cats. You can’t blame her.”

“T’Lyn is accompanying me to Flagstaff. She has not seen Vekan and his family in some time, and this presents a good opportunity. We will spend the night and return tomorrow morning. Varena will stay with the Ambassador and his family.”

“Shev and Shevar should enjoy that.”

“Yes,” Sherron’s fingers smoothed at the wrinkles in her skirt. “She has not told them yet that she is leaving. Selel and I discussed it, and we are allowing her to choose the time. Later is probably better. The twins are young, and their logic may not sustain them in the face of what they will consider a tragedy.”

“Varena can handle ‘em. She had no trouble the other day.”

“Yes, but she will miss them terribly. They are good boys, for all their foolishness. It is not easy being a twin on Vulcan. We should be beyond superstition, but the ghosts of old ideas remain, a certain mistrust. In olden days, a twin birth was a sign of ill-fortune. When resources are scarce, it is hard to nurse one child, much less two. The younger or female twin was sometimes killed.”

“But sometimes they came back,” Leonard said.
“What?”

He shook his head, clearing out cobwebs. “Nothing. Don’t think I’m all the way awake yet.” He reached out, plucking at the sleeve of her sweater. “Have a good trip. Call me when you get in tomorrow. I insist on kidnapping you for the day—or at least the part of it you can spare.”

“No force will be necessary,” she said with a warm look. “It is useless to dwell upon it, but I wish we had more time! We must make the best of what we do have. And you know—” she paused, seeming hesitant. “There are weekly direct flights between Terra and Vulcan. If you wished to make a visit at some point in the future—” She stopped, straightening herself. “Of course, I realize that you are quite busy, and it might not be possible—”

“Hell yeah, it’s possible. We’re not schoolkids: We can come and go. Of course I’ll visit.”

She gave him one of her rare true smiles. “I would enjoy that. I hope we can continue our friendship. I do not have many friends on Vulcan.”

He put a hand on her cheek. “Then they have shitty taste. The whole damn planet.”

She shook her head, solemn again. “It is my fault. I do not fit there. I never have, not since I was very young. I—” she stopped. “My judgment has not always been sound. I will not be allowed to forget that.”

Sherron looked down at her hands, now fisted in her lap. Her expression did not change, but he could feel the emotions coming from her, more clearly than they had the other night: guilt and sorrow. Enough to break your heart. He didn’t know if it was the intensity of what they had shared last night, or the intensity of her emotions now, making her so easy to read. Making it seem not like her pain, but his. He had to swallow before he spoke.

“Varek has been gone for years,” he said. “Everyone must have gotten over it by now.”

“His death was not the scandal. His life, our life together, how it began . . .” she trailed off.

“From what you tell me, you were the victim of circumstance. Both of you.”

She nodded, eyes far away. “Varek never meant to cause me harm. He was not in control—”

“Wait. He hurt you?” Leonard sat straight up.

“I meant, the harm he caused my reputation.”

“Though he wasn’t in control of himself.”

Again, that tell-tale pause. “I did not say—”

“You said last night that he was in control. He was concerned for your safety, even in the throes of plak tow.”

“He was.”

“Was he?” Leonard had no doubt whose emotion he was feeling now: his own, a sick feeling that
was half-anger, half-fear. A feeling that came from looking at the facts clearly, maybe for the very first time. Lucidity like a blow to the gut. He crossed his arms over his belly. “A first *pon farr* that came with no warning, a fifteen-year-old wrestling with those toxic hormones—”

The picture was so clear: rough cave walls, swirling night outside, howling winds. But a louder howling inside of you, a hunger that can only be sated one way. And sitting nearby, too near, is her, the cause and cure of your madness. Staring at you with eyes that are not calm, as they were all those times you drew her. Claiming her the only way you could, with the pencil clutched in your sweaty fist. She is scared of the dark and noise, though she tries not to show it. But what she is really hiding is her fear of you, what you are becoming before her very eyes . . .

> Once every seven years the walls must come down, all of the starved passions feast their fill. Or you die. But before you die, Sitaan drives you mad.

Leonard came back to himself with a jerk. “My God, Sherron. What did he do to you?”

She was looking at him with her cool dark gaze. He couldn’t read anything from her now—neither guilt nor sorrow. It was like putting your hand against a smooth blank wall.

> “Varek loved me,” she said, every syllable cold and distinct. “I loved him. I always had, for years and years. It’s why I gave myself to him in the desert. That was the scandal: I allowed myself to love him while I was betrothed to another. My feelings became clear to everyone when I insisted on marrying him. Do you know what it means to break a betrothal on Vulcan? Especially for such prurient, emotional reasons? Do you know what it made *me*? Standard is not so expansive as Low Vulcan, but I believe you have a word for it. Several words.”

She stood, wrapping her coat around her. Her face was blank, but her hands were shaking as she tied the belt. He stood too, naked and rumpled but not caring. He couldn’t let her leave like this.

He put a hand on her arm. Physical touch made it possible to feel what was going on under her defenses: not guilt or sorrow, but seething anger. Sherron was furious but could not let herself show it. She just boiled and steamed, like a volcano trapped under ice. It had to hurt. It *did*.

> “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t get it. I’m an idiot.”

He felt some of the tension leave her, though her posture remained wary. “You are not,” she said finally. “But you are not Vulcan. Sometimes I almost forget that.”

> “Nobody ever said I was logical, honey.”

> “You are, more than you would admit. You are as relentless as a Vulcan. Ruthless, in your curiosity. But now I have told you all there is to know about how Varek and I came together. Can you be at peace with it?”

> “Can you?” He wondered if all her anger had really been directed at him. Now that he’d had a moment to think on it, that was a lot of emotion for a relatively minor slip. Maybe her feelings were older than five minutes, much older. It made you wonder.

Varek had killed himself rather than subject his wife to another Fever. Was that the action of a man who had only hurt someone’s reputation?

> “Sherron,” Leonard whispered, not sure how to finish the sentence.

She put her hands on his face, feverish palms prickling his cheeks. “Trust me, *ashal-veh*. As I have trusted you.” She kissed him on the mouth. The sensory rush of her soft, sweet heat was enough to
take your breath away. It was more than enough to calm a few contrary misgivings. His mama always said he was too suspicious.

Sherron couldn’t be lying. She had given up too much. What woman would protect her rapist? Sacrifice her good name to marry him, have two children by him? It wouldn’t be logical.

She’s not lying. He kissed her deeper, hands sliding up her sweater, feeling her melt against him. Their arousal was making him dizzy, and sly. If he pushed things just a bit more, touched her on those sensitive spots he’d discovered only last night—the curve of her ear, the silky fold under her breast—she would stay a little longer. He knew it like he knew the shape of her body.

He didn’t push it. She had kids to see to, and he wasn’t that much of a selfish prick. (That there was more to his reluctance than manners he didn’t consider then, and wouldn’t for some time.)

She pulled back, her face scarce millimeters away. She was so beautiful it hurt. She squeezed his hand, fingers tangling with his. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

After she left, the room seemed much colder and quieter. Empty, with an emptiness he had not known before. Between his ears rather than outside his body. He climbed back into bed.

For some moments he just lay there, staring up at bars of light the morning sun cast through the window panes. He had clinic this evening, but that was hours away. He could do whatever he wanted today, but what he wanted had just walked out the door. There was lots of other stuff he could do—that journal paper to work on, messages to return—but he was too exhausted from last night’s labors to concentrate. It was his usual luck: too tired to wake up, too horny to sleep.

He concentrated on his breathing, the way Danna had taught him when he’d gone through a bad insomniac patch a few months back. The exercises never helped much, but Danna had meant well. She was a good egg, Danna. Deserved more than he’d given her, that was certain. One damned attractive woman, too—filled out a sweater like nobody he’d ever seen. Until Sherron.

Sherron, Sherron. His mind played over certain images from last night, as he breathed in and breathed out. Chest rising and falling as he thought of her, every last distracting inch of her. Seeing her, all of her, his own hand slipping underneath the sheets. Never mind where those fingers are headed, breathe in and breathe out . . .

“You should have plowed her.”

Leonard snatched his hand away and sat bolt upright, heart pounding.

His new companion sat down on the edge of the bed, exactly where Sherron had been sitting a few minutes ago. But now the face leaning over him wasn’t oval and doe-eyed but lean and raw-boned. Male. Aggressively green eyes peered down at him. Thin lips tilted at the corners in a slight, but definite, smirk.

The boy—for he wasn’t much more than twenty—was tall and as thin as a whip, with smooth olive skin that made those green eyes seem even greener. He was dressed in loose, sand-colored clothes and heavy boots. Traveller’s clothes, as if he had just stopped by before heading off on a journey. His black hair was long for one of his kind, partially obscuring the points of his ears. His long fingers were as stained as a heavy smoker’s, not with nicotine but with paint, his true addiction. He was sitting quite still but his gaze kept darting around the room, as if he were cataloging it for later reference.

Leonard knew him—the face was unmistakable—but he couldn’t know him. This could not be.
“I would not have minded if you plowed her again,” Varek said. “It would have been preferable to witnessing this sad display.” He gestured at Leonard’s fast-wilting erection, still obscured by sheets. “It would not have been anything I’ve not seen before.”

Leonard grabbed a pillow and plunked it over his lap. “I’m dreaming. Those damn breathing exercises finally worked.”

“If it pleases you to think so.”

“I’m dreaming: You’re dead.”

“Yes, but that’s no barrier to conversation. Not for one of your talents. We conversed at length last night. I told you many things; I showed you more. Have you forgotten already?”

Leonard blinked away the images and echoes the words stirred. Shattered mirrors, a moon with a thousand red eyes, a boy’s screams, the strange music of a tall blue box—bullshit. Like all dreams, just something to keep your mind occupied while your brain repaired itself at night.

“I don’t remember my dreams,” he said. “I won’t remember you ten seconds after I wake up.”

“You will remember this time. You are barely asleep. It lays upon you like the thinnest of blankets.” Long fingers waved over his body. “But this fragile veil is needed: You have not exercised your full talents in a good while, not since you were very young.”

“You keep going on about my talents. What talents?”

“You are not a stupid man, Doctor. Quite the opposite. Do not pretend you cannot understand me. You can speak with the dead, though you prefer not to. You have not used this ability since you were a small boy, conversing with the shade of your grandfather. You have done everything in your power to bury it. But last night’s encounter with Sherron affected not only your body but your mind. You opened yourself to more than her energies. The dead see you, Leonard McCoy. Some of them wish to talk to you. I am not the only one, but I am the most powerful.”

“So this is, what? You inquiring about my intentions?”

“Nothing of the kind. As I told you earlier, our time is short, and I have much to say. I have already shown you much, which you’ve chosen not to remember. But you cannot forget what I am about to reveal. These things must remain with you once the veil has lifted.”

“Whatsoever.” Leonard stretched, wondering how long this dream was going to last. Hopefully not long; Varek was really annoying. Way more annoying than being caught naked in public or losing all of your teeth or any of the other standard bad dreams. Leonard was never eating fried chicken so late at night again.

Varek frowned. “You do not believe me.”

“That you’re really Sherron’s dead husband, risen from beyond to tell me deep, dark secrets? Nope. Why would you? Even if you wanted to, how the hell would you get here? Aren’t you supposed to be haunting an urn a hundred billion miles away?”

“I was not interred in the Hall of Ancient Thought. My katra was lost in the desert, I travel where I please. When my wife traveled to Terra, it pleased me to accompany her.”

“That’s a little controlling.”
“I have never before interfered in her affairs—and they have been legion.” For just a second Leonard glimpsed something in those glittery green eyes, not so shiny or amused. “I am real, Doctor. As real as you are, though not corporeal. If you will stop hiding behind your fears and listen to your deepest self, you will see I speak the truth.”

“Maybe you are real. My own subconscious couldn’t be this irritating.”

Varek looked at him the way you look at a kid with fruit punch and dirt smeared on his face: exasperated and a little repulsed. Leonard rested an elbow on his knee, wishing for a cigarette.

“Fine, Casper. You’re real.” He thought a sec. “Must be tough, being you. Tagging along with Sherron all this time, looking but never touching. You didn’t interfere, but I bet you wanted to.”

“I do not take your meaning.”

“Oh, I think you do. Geida was all right—who wouldn’t wanna watch that? But it must really piss you off, seeing all those alien males put their paws on Sherron.”

“I am Vulcan,” Varek said, lifting his chin. “I control my emotions even now.”

“But some of ’em are really alien. She dated a Taygetian, for Chrissakes. If I busted in on my girl and some tentacled asshole, I’d rip his suckers off.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I do not need to be reminded of my wife’s exotic appet—”

“Or maybe you’re into that shit. You wanted to watch us go at it, right? Hey, did she and Geida ever throw one of those Orion slave boys into the mix? Orgies are the going thing ‘round those parts, I’d be more surprised if they didn’t—”

The overhead lights flared to full brightness, before the bulbs suddenly exploded with a staccato burst of pop-pop-pops! A few sparks rained down on the bed.

Silence. Leonard sniffed at the smoky air. Then: “Did that really happen, or am I still asleep?”

Varek rose and walked to the window. He looked out, hands clutched tight behind his back.

“Guess that makes you poltergeist,” Leonard said helpfully.

Varek whirled around. “Why are you baiting me?”

“Oh, I dunno. Maybe you hijacking my dreams last night has something to do with it. I don’t remember what you told me, but I’m sure it was stuff I didn’t want to hear. Then there’s the fact that you spent a couple hours beforehand watching me get it on with Sherron. Where I’m from, that’s not just pervy but pretty damn rude. This morning you interrupt another private moment, smirking like I’m a monkey trained for your amusement. Your boy has the same bad attitude, did you know that? I guess the gespar doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“But let’s get something straight, my corporeally challenged friend: My people parted ways with the chimps a long time ago. I am just as smart as you, and I can be just as rude. Got wisdom to share? Talk to me like I’m a motherfucking equal, or get the fuck out. Either way, I’m plowing your wife tomorrow night.”

Varek had begun blinking rapidly about halfway through Leonard’s speech. At that last sentence the comscreen over the desk burst on at full volume. Varek twitched, and the comscreen turned off. He swallowed, clenching his hands and then unclenching them. After a minute, he spoke.
“My apologies, Doctor,” he said in a low voice. “I did not mean to condescend, or to invade your privacy. If I have been ill-mannered, it is only because of the urgency of the situation.”

Leonard gestured impatiently. “What situation?”

“I know I sound obscure, but I cannot come at this straight on. It is—not allowed. I can only show you the truth of things and let you make your own decision. Does that sound fair? If I speak to you as an equal, will you listen?”

“Sure, I’ve got nothing better to do right now. But I still don’t know why you’re bothering.”

“My motivations are one of the things I cannot make clear—I am not permitted to do so.”

“Who says?”

Varek shifted on his feet. “Grant that I am what I say—a spirit. If such things are possible, does it not follow that there are other unseen powers as well? Higher powers? They have rules, and I must obey them if I do not wish to go into the light once and for all. I do not wish it, not yet.”

“So these Powers say that you can’t tell me why you’re telling me these things, only that you can tell them. Because it’s important.” He thought a moment. “Jim Kirk’s safety depends on it.”

“You do remember our earlier conversation.”

“Maybe I’m just smart.” Leonard sighed. “Say what you’re gonna say.”

“As I said earlier, it would be better if I showed you rather than told you. You would not be open to the truth if I simply blurted it out. You are a man of science: You require proof.”

“So proof me.” He settled himself more comfortably against the headboard.

Varek gestured towards the comscreen. It flickered to life again. “I wish I could fully immerse you, as I did last night. But it is not possible while you remain in the shallows of sleep. Would that I could: Your unconscious self is more agreeable.”

“Are you saying I’m secretly a nice guy?”

“No, Doctor,” Varek replied, with a slightly sour look. “I would not say that.”

“Whew. You had me worried for a second.”

Varek made a dismissive gesture. “These scenes today will not have the immediacy of Sitaan and Kitaan’s story, but you will not be able to deny them so easily. It is very important. You must remember if you are to make your choice.”

“What choice?”

“That will become clear later. For now, all you need do is watch.” He nodded at the screen.

“I’m guessing this isn’t some of that fabled Vulcan porn.”

“Vulcans do not produce pornography,” Varek said. He gave Leonard a small, knowing smirk, green eyes glittering in the light. “I can suggest some Romulan titles later, if you are interested. Ones which were quite popular among my classmates when I was in school.”

“Romulan? Seriously? You are a planet of sneaky fuckers, did you know that?”
“Yes, I know. Watch.”
xxxiv. McCoy

The picture has no sound at first. Just figures, growing brighter and brighter until they appear almost four-dimensional. The screen seems larger than before, even larger than the living room screen. Like sitting in a movie theater, if they still existed outside of historic centers.

You realize then that you’re not looking at reality. The colors are too vivid, the faces of the figures merely suggested, their limbs rendered in aggressive strokes, kinetic but not realistic. A painting, then: of two men separate but joined, their naked bodies melting into each other so it is impossible to see where one ends and the other begins. Deep brown eyes stare into blue, mouths distended in an ecstasy that looks like agony, as they move in a dance as old as eternity. They merge against a hellish haze of orange, yellow, and red, as if they are fucking inside of flames. The painting has a disorienting quality. The more you look at it, the more realistic the figures become, their features emerging from the blazing background—two faces very alike, too alike. Staring out from their inferno, drawing you into the dance.

The scene pulls back and two more male figures emerge, but fully dressed and quite separate, though they stand side-by-side, looking at the painting. They are young—no more than sixteen, dressed alike in plain grey tunics and trousers that have the look of a school uniform. One is taller than the other and broad-shouldered, his handsome face a harmonious meeting of planes and angles—broad forehead, full cheekbones, strong and elegant nose. His deep brown eyes are large and intelligent under slanting black brows and a shiny fringe of bangs. Though his face is calm, something in the cut of his mouth suggests a sense of humor—perhaps it is the slight up-tilt of the corners, or the generous curves of the lips. He looks like the kind of boy whom adults automatically like and trust, but one who wears the favor so casually that the other boys do not resent him. They like him too, in fact; they want to be his friend, share his honors and his jokes.

His companion is also tall, but skinny in that awkward adolescent way, thin-necked and slope-shouldered. The bones of his face jut painfully, as if his cheekbones are ready to burst out of his skin at any moment. His lips are straight and thin, his nose long and slightly hooked, adding to the hawkish appearance. His hair is too long and his eyebrows are too thick. His only claim to handsomeness are his eyes, a deep and vivid green that changes with the light. The intensity of that gaze would make many people uncomfortable, as if he is seeing through all their defenses to the raw and shivering soul beneath. Such a gaze provokes mistrust in most adults and dislike in most boys of his age. Something in his loose, almost insolent posture suggests that he does not care. Unlike his friend’s immaculate tunic, his is spattered with colors—blaze orange, brilliant yellow, smoldering red. The same colors streak his thin, tapering fingers.

The two boys are standing in a long, rather narrow room, saved from claustrophobia by its high ceilings and the windows that take up the top half of one long wall. The space is subdivided by a number of half-walls, which delineate what seem to be work stations, though their only apparatus is a large, rectangular screen suspended from the ceiling. Some of the workstations are occupied by other boys in grey tunics (there are no girls, not one), and in these the screen is not uniform grey but all colors. Some show landscapes, others portraits, others exuberant clusters of scribbles and lines. The colors and shapes shift at a touch from the occupant of the station. A painters’ studio, but one without paints or palettes or brushes, pixels having replaced pigments long ago.

Except for one station, the one occupied by the first two boys. They stand gazing at the hawkish boy’s canvas, which is set upon an old-fashioned easel. His eyes dart back and forth between the
canvas and his companion’s face. Perhaps he does not care about people’s opinion of himself: Their opinion of his art, however, is another matter.

“Well?” he asks finally, a touch of irritation in his voice. “What do you think?”

“It is brilliant,” his friend replies. “As always. But—” he pauses, “is that who I think it is?”

“Of course, Sitaan and Kitaan. I’m thinking of calling it, ‘The Eternal Lovers.’”

The taller boy presses his lips together. Then, quietly: “They are brothers, Varek.”

“Not in all the legends. In some they are the same person. Or, if separate, two lovers.”

“Then why have you drawn their faces so alike?”

“It is more visually interesting.”

“But that makes it seem as if they are brothers.”

“If so, what matter? They are not real.”

The taller boy opens his mouth, then closes it again.

“Samar—”

“You should not mock the gods.”

“My painting is no mockery. It is quite serious.”

“You know what I mean.”

Varek makes an impatient gesture. “What do you think will happen? Will Kitaan come down from Mount Seleya and cut me in two with his big sword? Will Sitaan curse me with boils on my nether parts? You have been reading too many stories.”

“I do not think the gods are so unsubtle,” Samar replies. “Perhaps I am illogically superstitious. But this painting gives me an unsettled feeling. However did you think of it?”

“I dreamed it. Most of the time I do not remember my dreams, but this image remained with me. I have been working on it for two weeks. You should see how many sketches I did on the virtual canvas—terabytes and terabytes of data.”

“You should have done the painting on the virtual canvas, too. It would be easier to destroy it.”

Varek blinks at him. “Destroy it? Are you joking?”

“No, I am not. Do not work further on this picture. Burn it, then go to the temple and ask the sisters to make an offering to Lady T’Khut, so that she does not send you more bad dreams.”

“We are not all blessed with such generous allowances as you. I’m not spending half a month’s pocket money on prayers.”

“Then let me pay for them. We can go after tomorrow morning’s lecture.”

“No.”

“Why not?”
“Because it’s ridiculous.”

Samar gives a noticeable flinch. He turns away from Varek to the cubicle window. He stares out over the manicured grounds of the school, beyond the barrier fence to the dunes beyond.

“I respect your beliefs, my friend. You must respect mine.”

“I would respect them,” Samar says, still looking far away, “if there was anything to respect.”

“Lack of belief is a belief.”

Samar does not answer right away. Standing in the strong light, for the first time a flaw is visible on his handsome face. A bruise under his left eye, still new enough that it has not darkened.

“Perhaps the gods are simply ideas,” he says. “Perhaps they are something so unlike ourselves that we cannot truly imagine them. But whatever plane of reality they occupy, they should be left alone. You do not wish to draw their notice—not this sort of notice.”

“I think it would be rather interesting to meet a god.”

Samar shakes his head. “You speak like a child.”

“You speak like a monk.”

“My uncle Sameth is the wisest man I have ever known.”

“Take holy orders, then. Give up your studies and your future.” Varek pauses, mouth twisting in a smirk. “You would have to give up Sherron too, of course. But there are many who would be happy to console her.”

Samar flinches again, so ferociously it’s more like a seizure. Varek stares at his friend. Samar’s face is creased, hands clenched at his sides. He is so upset, he is not even bothering to hide it.

“My dear friend,” Varek says, putting a tentative hand on Samar’s shoulder. “Are you well?”

Samar straightens, hand at his middle, as if recovering from a blow. “I’m fine.”

“You are not,” Varek’s grip tightens. “I feel it. You were not at morning lecture, you were 10.13 minutes late meeting me here. You are so troubled, you cannot appreciate my painting—” His eyes focus on Samar’s cheek. “You are injured. What has happened?”

Samar looks around at the cubicles nearby. The one on the left is empty, while the one on the right is occupied by a plump, freckled boy who is singing softly as he dabs at his screen. Seeing the music pods in the boy’s ears, Samar relaxes. Still, he draws his friend away from the shared wall of the cubicle towards the window seat. Varek sits next to him, eyes intent on Samar’s face.

“There was an incident last night.”

“I thought you were at Sarek’s reception.”

“The incident was at the reception.” Samar looks down at his hands, then back up. “Sikkan was there. His father has just been elected Water Commissioner, I suppose it’s not surprising. Still, I was surprised. I find his company disagreeable. It’s why I no longer spar with him during formal matches. You have been to some of them: He does not respect the rules.”

“All those illegal holds. You’d think the reprimands from Master Saval would discourage him.”
“They do not. In any event, after the standard greetings I attempted to avoid him, and for a time I was successful. But later I did come upon him. He was in a back corner of a secluded hallway.” Samar’s mouth works a moment. “He was with Sherron.”

Varek leans in closer. “They weren’t—”

“Of course not. Sherron would not do such a thing. But Sikkan—you know how he looks at her. He is always looking at her. Last night while they were conversing in the hallway—he grasped her wrist. The touch was brief, but—”

“I understand.” Varek’s eyes are glittering. “Did you confront him?”

“I broke his arm in two places.”

“Well. No more illegal holds for him.”

Samar looks up, guilty expression gone blank with surprise. Then he grins, the reaction brief as a flash of lightning before he remembers himself and smooths his face again. “We should not joke. I did a terrible thing.”

“Sikkan deserved it. Still, the old men might not see it that way. Were you disciplined?”

“Worse, I was examined. I spent all morning at my family physician’s having my hormone levels analyzed.”

“And?”

That lightning-flash of delight again. Varek returns it before the boys compose themselves, looking around rather guiltily.

“Is it time, then?” Varek asks. When Samar nods, cheeks green: “Congratulations. I hope your father finds you an attractive consoler. I realize we’re not supposed to care about that, but—”

“I am not engaging a consoler. You know I have a distaste for the profession. They are little better than prostitutes.”

Varek raises an eyebrow. “What, then? Your Uncle Sameth is very wise, but I do not think there is any meditation that can assist you.”

“I do not need meditation. I have a betrothed.”

For a moment, Varek sits very still. Then, calmly: “Do you think Sarek will agree?”

“There would be no logical reason for him to refuse. My physician informed me that the Blood Fever isn’t likely for five or six months. That is more than adequate time for Sherron to receive the training.”

“Yes, but—she is very young.”

“She is two months older than myself.”

“But she is not a man.”

“I should hope not! That would make our merging less than ideal.”

Varek does not acknowledge the joke. He stands and looks again at his canvas, taking in all those
enflamed reds and oranges. “Don’t you think it would be better to engage a consoler? Someone professional, practiced, older.”

“Sherron is old enough. I have the teeth marks on my neck to prove it.”

Varek spins around. “You two haven’t—”

“Is this the Lesser Sea? Are we farmers? Of course not. But our encounters have progressed to the point that I can say with assurance she is ready.”

“This is a serious step you are contemplating. If you merge with her during the Fever, it will be near-impossible to break your betrothal later.”

“Why would I break our betrothal?”

“If you decide you do not suit—”

“That would never happen.”

“If it did, you would not be long bereft. With your bloodlines and test scores, you would have your pick of the best girls from the best families. The matrons would queue a dozen deep.”

“It is Sherron or no one,” Samar says, brown eyes solemn. “I have known that since the first moment I saw her, eight years ago. Can you believe it is as long as that?”

“Yes. It feels as if I have always known her.”

Samar gives Varek a fond look. “She has always considered you as a brother. You worry for her as a brother, and I respect your concerns. But you must trust me, old friend. No harm will come to her.” His handsome face is handsomer than ever with certainty—trust. “She will still be available to model whenever you like. I would not wrest your muse away.”

“Well,” Varek says. “Who could ask for more than that?”

Samar claps him on the shoulder. “I must leave you. Father will be displeased if I am late for the evening meal, after my other recent transgressions.”

Varek nods as if he is not really listening.

“Be well, my friend. Get rid of that accursed painting.”

Varek nods again. Samar leaves him, departing from the room with his nimble athlete’s gait.

As still as one of his painted figures, Varek stays on the window seat for a long time. After some minutes a low chime sounds from the vicinity of the ceiling, and the other boys, all moving with swift economy, shut down their canvasses and exit the workstations. They talk quietly among themselves as they walk to the big double doors at the far end of the room. Some spare Varek a passing glance, a few even offer greetings, but he takes no notice. He gazes at his painting, eyes soft for once, unfocused. But his face is not soft. He looks like a boy enduring excruciating pain.

The pale yellow afternoon light has shaded to purple by the time another boy enters the room. He is small and slim, younger than Varek, no more than thirteen. The last rays of sun fall on his close-cropped black hair, his brown eyes. At first glance he appears every inch the conventional Vulcan boy, serious and clean-featured. But an artist’s gaze could see that there is something not quite normal about those features. The eyes are too round, the bones of the face at once too light and too
heavy. The contrast with the standard Vulcan countenance is even more apparent when he enters Varek’s cubicle, standing near him. It’s obvious then that there is something very unusual about this boy. Something—alien.

Varek does not appear to take any notice of him, until the younger boy has gazed at the painting for a moment and said, “It is very well done. Obscene, of course, but brilliantly so.”

Varek starts, his head snapping around. “What in Perdition’s name are you doing here, Spock? The Second Years have evening lecture.”

“This week’s topic is Terran popular culture.” He raises his chin. “My mother has seen to it that I am well versed in that already. I chose to take open study hours instead.”

“In case you have forgotten, the library is on the other side of campus.”

“I have decided to study art. There is much I do not know about the modern Vulcan schools.”

Varek nods at the nearest empty cubicle. “Madame T’Lei’s database is full of images. Do not speak to me while you look. I am—concentrating.”

“I am very interested in your work.”

Varek runs a hand through his hair, sighing. “Many of my sketches are also in the database. Enjoy them quietly.”

Spock considers him a moment. “I am more concerned with the ones not in the database. Not the public one, in any event.”

“I do not take your meaning.”

“Forgive me, I was unclear. The sketches of my cousin Sherron, naked. The ones of you naked with her, copulating with her. Those sketches.”

Varek stares at Spock a moment, speechless with shock. Finally: “How—you couldn’t—”

“The passwords protecting your private files are pathetically easy. You should be more careful.” He clasps his hands behind his back, giving Varek a superior look.

Green eyes flick to the palette knife on the ledge of the easel, as if a sudden murderous impulse has entered Varek’s brain. Then he straightens and says, “I could have you expelled for this.”

“There are other schools. There is only one Sherron. I would rather be expelled than see you insult her daily. I have watched you for years, watching her. I have said nothing, hoping that you would learn to master yourself. But after the incident at last night’s reception, matters have reached a critical point. Samar’s Fever is beginning, and he is not one to engage a consoler. He and Sherron will be truly bonded now, and I can wait no longer. You will not ask her to model for you anymore. You will not come to our home. You will pay her the respect due to a daughter of the House of Surak, as well as your best friend’s intended. All other interactions must stop.”

“How dare you,” Varek says, hands clenching. “I will—”

“You will do nothing. I have preserved copies of several of the most lurid sketches. If you do not control yourself, I will show my father and Samar what I have found. You can surmise what their reaction will be. The only reason I have refrained from doing this is out of concern for my cousin’s feelings. She thinks of you as a brother, though you do not deserve such trust. It would wound her to
realize that all your friendship has been a lie, a concealment for your lust. I would not hurt her if I can help it. So I offer you this chance to preserve what remains of your honor.”

“You wretched snake,” Varek whispers, after a moment of outraged silence. “Do you think I don’t know your true motive? I have seen you too: Your feelings are more shameful than mine.”

“I have a right to love her,” Spock replies, his gaze remaining steady. “You do not.”

“Not this sort of love. Sherron will feel even more betrayed once she knows her loyal little cousin has been entertaining such filthy ideas. And she will know. She will insist on having all the details of the business, you know how she is. When the system administrator traces the breaches to my private files, will the dates be from today, or even this week?” Seeing Spock flinch: “Of course not. You have had the sketches for weeks, haven’t you? Months, perhaps. Yet you have said nothing, and not out of concern for her feelings. You’ve enjoyed having them, seeing her in ways that you will never see her in life. Not if you live three hundred years.”

Varek leans closer to Spock. “You cannot betray me without betraying yourself. So keep your mouth shut and stay away from me, you spying little freak.”

Spock’s face has gone pale with temper. But his voice is even when he says, “I will not. I would sooner she be disgusted with me than dishonored by you. That is how much I love her.”

“How much do you love your mother? She’ll know about the sketches, too. She’ll know just what sort of creature she has raised. Do you think she deserves more grief? Isn’t her life here difficult enough?”

“Do not speak of my mother,” Spock whispers.

“Or perhaps she won’t be grieved. Perhaps that is how they do things on Terra. Do they plow their relatives there, Spock? Has Lady Amanda ever been—”

Spock makes a low, choked sound and takes a step towards Varek. Varek stands, stiffening. There is no knowing how things might have turned out, if at that moment a loud, lazy voice hadn’t called from the doorway:


Overhead light blazes on, breaking both Spock and Varek’s deadly focus. They turn, blinking at the figure who has just come through the double doors. He is not dressed in the school uniform, but in a tunic and trousers of deep blue silk with a fine, expensive-looking sheen. The material is almost the precise color of his eyes, which are made even more striking by long, golden lashes. His hair is a shade paler, gleaming under the bright lights which also bring out the delicate pallor of his cheeks. He would be almost too pretty for a boy, but the arrogance on his finely wrought features is all male, and a privileged one at that. This boy is not much taller than Spock, but something in his bearing suggests the maturity—or at least the conceit—of someone older.

“There you are. Whatever are you doing in here? I’ve been looking for you for ages.” Before Spock can open his mouth: “I’ve had a beastly afternoon. T’Pring has two new Persian kittens. She dresses them in silk robes and tiny hats. She wished me to pretend they are our children. I told her that if I had a child who came out looking like that, I would drown it. She began to cry. What terrifying creatures six-year-old girls are.”

Though his face is still too pale, one corner of Spock’s mouth has turned up. “You signed the betrothal papers.”
“It seemed like the logical thing to do at the time. What are you doing here? You are about as artistic as an asp.”

“I—”

“You must come with me now. Hang the evening lecture, I wish to eat an enormous dinner and then watch Romulan pornography. My cousin Steth has sent me three new titles. He says they are quite depraved: What a delightful prospect. Steth has concluded his training, did I tell you? Father is very pleased. There’s nothing quite like a weather seer to keep you properly informed. Steth is predicting sudden storms in the desert near Shi’Kahr for the next three days, particularly in the area of Brothers’ Rock. I suppose I won’t go hiking tomorrow, after all.”

“I will be with you presently,” Spock says, once it’s become clear that Stonn is actually finished. “Varek and I were concluding our discussion.”

Blue eyes blink at the older boy. “Oh, hello, Varek. I didn’t even see you. My attention is a bit off this evening—I think I’m allergic to those fucking cats. How are you?”

“I am well, Stonn,” Varek says, as if by rote.

Stonn turns back to Spock, really looking at his friend for the first time. His eyes narrow. “How are you?”

“Perfectly well.”

“You don’t look well. You look—” Stonn reaches out, brushing Spock’s wrist very lightly with the tip of one finger. Spock stills but does not pull back. He looks at Stonn, his eyes seemingly expressionless. But Stonn must not find them so, for his delicate features go hard.

Slowly, he turns back to Varek. “This discussion of yours, it must be fascinating,” he says. “Spock seems very stimulated by it.” His finger brushes Spock’s wrist once again, the gesture oddly protective. “What was its subject?”

Varek draws himself up to his full height, looking down at the younger boy. “My art.”

Stonn’s lips stretch in a full smile. “Your art! Of course. With you, it couldn’t be anything else. Is this the new piece?” He looks at the painting. Varek merely nods.

“Hmm. How—colorful.”

“You do not like it?” Varek asks the question as if he cannot help himself.

Stonn shrugs. “Virgins should never attempt pornography. The outcome is at best vulgar and at worst ridiculous.”

Varek goes green. He opens his mouth but no words come out.

“Perhaps you should engage a courtesan. That’s right, you can’t afford one, can you? You had best stay with landscapes, then. I quite liked that study you did of Mount Seleya.”

Spock makes a strange choked sound that can only be stifled laughter. Stonn turns back to him, all concern. “We must get you home. That cough sounds very bad. I fear you are taking cold.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Spock says, having regained his composure. He glances at Varek, who is still frozen. “Be well, friend,” he says to him. “Please don’t forget our conversation. I can assure you, I
will not.” The two boys exit the room, Stonn with a hand on Spock’s shoulder.

Varek stares at his painting a minute. Then, slowly, he picks up the palette knife. He raises his arm. One raw scream of anguish, and he brings the knife down—and down—and down. Without another sound except his own hard breathing, he slices the picture to ribbons. Mouth distended in silent agony, as if he is slicing his own flesh, he does not stop until it is utterly destroyed.

He throws down the knife. His face is calm now, eyes empty. Moving with placid economy, he picks up the remains of the picture. He carries them to the recycler at the end of the room and tosses them in. He pauses, looking at the blank grey comscreen on the wall next to the recycler. He looks for a long time.

Then: “Computer. Contact Sherron, Clan Surak.”

After a second, the screen brightens. A girl’s face—doe-eyed, oval, and lovely—fills the screen. At the sight of it, something in Varek’s face trembles, brightens.

“Yes?” she says, tucking a lock of bobbed dark hair behind her ear. “Do I know you? The face seems vaguely familiar, but I cannot place it.”

His mouth twists in a half-smirk. “Apologies. I know it has been long since we spoke. I have been working.”

The girl raises an eyebrow. “Without your muse? I hope the results were totally unsatisfactory.”

Varek brushes at a scrap of canvas on his tunic. “They were.” He clears his throat. “Can you come sketching tomorrow?”

“I do not know.” She glances over her shoulder, as if fearing surveillance. “It is not ideal timing. Grandfather is not pleased with me.”

“I heard about the reception. Sikkan was breaking the rules again. Such a stubborn creature.”

She sighs. “Of course you heard. You boys are worse than my mother’s weaving circle.”

Varek leans closer to the screen. “Were you flirting with him, Sherron?”

“If by flirting you mean having a perfectly ordinary conversation.” Sherron’s lips have turned down in a discernable pout. “It is very trying. I have done nothing wrong, yet I am the one who is treated as a criminal, interrogated and imprisoned.”

“It’s time you escaped. If anyone can find her way out of that fortress of a house alone, it’s you.”

Sherron’s eyes widen. “I shouldn’t.”

“But you want to, do you not?” When Sherron says nothing: “A few hours. We’ll go at dawn. You will be home before breakfast.” His green eyes glitter. “I would like to sketch you in the morning desert light. The area around Brothers’ Rock is particularly dazzling this time of year. I am sure the results will be more than satisfactory.”

Sherron does not answer right away. “We have never walked so far before.”

“I have. I know the way. You will be quite safe.” He raises an eyebrow at her. “Or stay home. Your mother’s weaving circle can always use another pair of hands.”

“Misbegotten son of a desert jackal,” she says. “I will be outside the back gates at dawn.” The screen
grows dark before he can reply.

Varek passes a hand over his eyes. His shoulders slump, for a moment he seems to collapse in upon himself. Then, all at once, he straightens. His body tenses, as if he is holding back some painful, frantic energy. He walks to the wall of windows and looks out over the dunes beyond.

“One last walk,” he whispers. “I will not be denied. And if I cannot have her, let the sands take me. For I am weary of this. Weary to my very bones.” Though he does not believe in any true gods, Varek pronounces the words like a prayer.
Chapter 35

The scene shifts again, to another room. The long windows that line its right wall look out upon a desert landscape much like the previous scene, but this room is very different from the first. Its ceilings are high, its walls not grey but deep crimson. The furniture is heavy and made of dark, polished wood. Much of it is cabinetry, some with glass doors, some with pierced wood screens. Behind these are objects of dizzying variety, with one thing in common: Everything is very old and very valuable. Interspersed among the pottery and plates, the coins and statues and faceted stones, are a number of weapons. These range from pocket daggers to a two-handed sword that is nearly as long as a man. They are as antique as everything else, but their metal surfaces shine, the blades as sharp and hungry as if they were forged yesterday.

The centerpiece of this rich, rather ominous-looking space is an ornately carved desk, so large that it takes up almost a quarter of the long right wall. Behind this desk, in front of the biggest window, sits a man. He is not young, for his hair is grey and his handsome face is careworn, but neither is he old. Or if he is, the years have brought no diminishment of vigor, for his dark eyes are keen and his powerful body is unbent. He is wearing a tunic and trousers of heavy aubergine silk, woven with a subtle, complicated pattern. On the second finger of his right hand is a wide signet ring of black firestone. It is not as perfectly wrought as the thin band of gold on the fourth finger of his left hand. Its lines are crude, almost primitive, as if it had been torn right out of a mountainside at some point in the infinite past. But it seems more suited to the wearer than the left-hand ring, with its delicate lines and alien metal. Like the man who wears it, the signet ring radiates age and status in every facet. Its beauty is that of old, unadulterated power.

It would be impossible to place the scene from furniture and figure alone. The room and the man are timeless, as appropriate a thousand years ago as a thousand years hence. Only the computer on his desk, contemporary but not cutting-edge, offers a clue to the year. No less than ten and no more than twenty years ago: A prudent guess would say fifteen. Fifteen years ago, the man sits fixated on the screen, his features blank with concentration. He is so intent on his work that he does not look up when the expanse of wall opposite the desk slides open, and a woman enters.

She is as old as the man—older, perhaps. Her hair, bound into an elaborate knot of braids at the back of her head, is nearly white, and the lines in her face are cut deep. She is plump and small, as compact and fleshy as an apple—or gespar, to be culturally precise. She is wearing a long dress of ivory linen, its graceful drape broken only by a brown girdle of stiff satin, bound tightly enough to give her something like a waist. The woman does not look much like the man, round where he is sharp and short where he is tall. But there is something in their faces that is similar. Perhaps it is only the expression: the calm arrogance of complete control.

The woman is not so gauche as to clear her throat to get the man’s attention, although there is impatience in her posture. She might have stood there a long time, if the creature at her heels had not made a shrill, trilling sound, as if it too were tired of waiting.

The man looks up. He gives the woman a respectful nod and then looks down at the creature, his expression suddenly less welcoming. The creature twitches its delicate pointed ears and waves a long, fluffy tail. It blinks wide golden eyes and stares back at him, undaunted.

“Please do not bring it in here,” the man says. “You know how they affect me.”

The woman sniffs. “Allergies are mostly psychological.” But she looks down, addressing her
companion. “Juno, wait for me in the hall.”

Juno stalks back and forth on dainty white paws. She twirls herself around the woman’s calves, trilling again.

“None of your flirting, girl! Sarek doesn’t like you, and this is his private study.” But she bends down and strokes the creature, burying her fingers up to the first knuckle in fluffy fur of brilliant colors—white, brown, orange, black. Juno twitches long, curling whiskers and purrs.


Sighing, the woman picks up Juno and steps towards the wall. It opens, and she deposits her squirming bundle on the other side. One flash of indignant gold eyes, and the door slides shut.

“On Terra, tortoiseshell cats are considered good luck,” T’Lyn says, turning back to the desk.

“Here, they are illegal,” Sarek replies, with a pointed raise of an eyebrow. “Municipal order 72.12, no non-native breeds in private domiciles that do not possess an exotic animal license.”

“Then every rich woman in Shi’Kahr is a criminal. T’Lia recently bought two Persian kittens for that spoiled chit of hers. She got them directly from a Terran breeder, odd-looking creatures, faces like clenched fists. But T’Lia enjoys her exotics—look at the son-in-law she’s acquired for herself.” T’Lyn shrugs. “When I was a girl every street vendor sold kittens, Earth-born and bred, straight off the cargo ships. Nobody cared.”

“I have never understood this feminine obsession with Terran felines. It is not rational.”

T’Lyn walks slowly to a nearby cabinet. She reaches out, running one finger down a small statue on the central shelf. A woman, carved of smooth white stone that seems to glow from within. The figure’s lovely oval face looks down at the creature at her heels, a small, fluffy animal with pointed ears and a long tail.

“Perhaps we adore them because the Mother Goddess did,” T’Lyn says, voice softening. “She was much attached to her pets. They say when her cat Varanthus died, she set his image among the stars. Such a capricious constellation! Always wandering about, back and forth.”

“I’m familiar with the origin story for Felis Major,” Sarek replies. “There is no evidence in the records indicating that the small desert lynx was ever domesticated before it went extinct eight thousand years ago. If it were, I doubt its habits and behavior resembled the Terran cat’s in any significant way. The physical resemblance between the two animals is mere coincidence. No creature so indolent and temperamental could have survived on ancient Vulcan.”

“Perhaps that’s why it went extinct.” T’Lyn turns to say something else to Sarek, but in doing so her knee strikes the lower level of the cabinet. A surprised chirp comes from inside. She bends down and opens the screen. Round blue eyes stare up at her from a bed of silk.

“Jove! You naughty beast. So this is where you’ve been hiding every day.”

The giant Siamese exits the cabinet, a sleepy expression on his brown face.

“Really, T’Lyn,” Sarek says, standing up. “This is intolerable. If that animal has destroyed my great-grandfather’s meditation robes, I am holding you liable.”

“Don’t take that lawyerish tone with me, Nephew. I didn’t put him there.” T’Lyn brushes at the rumpled pile of silk. “The robes are fine. A few stray hairs, nothing more.”
Sarek stares icily at the cat. Sensing the hostile atmosphere, Jove attempts to dart back into the cabinet, but T’Lyn closes the door in his face. He blinks at her and gives a peevish meow. She picks him up under his furry armpits. He meows again, fat legs kicking the air, but she walks to the wall and, as soon as it opens, drops him in the hall.

“Go see your sister. Perhaps you two can find a lizard to torture,” she says. Jove caterwauls in reply, but the whoosh of the door cuts him off.

“How does the accursed creature get in?” Sarek says. “A cat, even one so grossly obese, should be too small to engage the door sensor. The windows are three stories off the ground.”

“Varanthus could fly. A boon granted him by the Mother Goddess.” T’Lyn’s blue eyes twinkle. “You should not insult Jove too much. He may have powerful friends.”

Sarek sits back at his desk with a small sigh.

T’Lyn sits down in the visitor’s chair, arranging the folds of her gown as if she means to stay for awhile. She clasps her hands upon her knee. “The Terrans have a saying: ‘Women and cats do as they please.’”

“Not once I lock the cabinet and recalibrate the door sensor.”

“You can lock all of the doors. Jove will get in if he really wishes to.” T’Lyn pauses, her eyes solemn. “Sherron will get out.”

Sarek goes still. “So we come to it,” he says softly. “I wondered when you would speak.”

“How long do you mean to go on like this?” T’Lyn asks. “It has been seven weeks.”

“Seven weeks and four days. I will go on for as long as Sherron remains irrational.”

“She loves him, Sarek.”

“She does not. She will know that once she regains her equilibrium.”

“You mean, once Varek is dead.” When Sarek stares at her, his face a mask: “I observed Samar closely during his visit yesterday. His condition is much advanced. When he attacked Sikkan at the reception, I would have given him six months before the Blood Fever. But with the stress of recent events, it could come any time. A duel will almost certainly bring it on.”

“There is no proof of that.”

“Proof! You may be one of the most brilliant legal minds of our age, but you are still capable of making a specious argument. There is three thousand years of proof. Samar will kill Varek, if something is not done to prevent it.”

“I know you feel strongly about this. So much that you would whisper in the ear of a disturbed child.” His voice is quiet but there is darkness in it, like thunder heard from far away. “Sherron spoke to me this morning. She became emotional when I told her the truth: The idea is absurd.”

T’Lyn raises her chin. “Yes. I was the one who suggested that she challenge Samar herself. There is legal precedent for it.”

“Those precedents are nine hundred years old. They would never stand arbitration, even if I allowed Sherron to file a claim. I will not.”
A slight smile is upon T'Lyn’s lips, but it is not one of humor. “We pride ourselves so much on our equality. It is only logical, is it not? But when a patriarch speaks, all fairness somehow falls away.” She draws herself up. “I am not a fool. I know that Sherron can do nothing that you do not give her permission to do—for now. But if it became known that she wished to fight Samar, that would be nearly as shameful as a lawsuit. How much more shame does this family need? I thought you would rather placate her than risk further disgrace.” T'Lyn tilts her head at him. “When she has the child she will have more options. Those precedents are much stronger.”

Sarek stands, turning away from her. He looks out the window, hands clenched behind his back.

“Sherron is pregnant. You cannot pretend otherwise. Time is passing, and you must decide.”

“I have,” Sarek says. “I am only waiting for her to accept my decision.”

“She won’t: She wants this baby. She doesn’t want Samar. I’m not sure she ever did.”

“Sherron was perfectly content before. She will be again.”

T'Lyn throws up her hands. “Yes, when the blood of her baby’s father has spilled into the sand, she will be very content! Perdition take us, do you hear yourself? Varek will die. Though Samar holds the blade, the real killing blow will be yours. Can you live with that?”

Slowly, Sarek turns around. For all its immobility, there is something lost in his expression. Wounded.

“Yes,” he says. “I can.”

T'Lyn closes her eyes a moment. “Sarek,” she whispers. “Nephew—”

“He raped her. He lured her into the desert and he raped her. Repeatedly.” Sarek bends his neck, he puts a hand to his forehead. His fingers are shaking, all his raging grief concentrated into one futile gesture. “She swears to me that it was consensual, but her mind is clouded by the Fever. You are the expert, you know its effects. She will say anything now that he has infected her. She will pine for him, lie for him, she is even ready to kill for him. That wretched, weak-necked boy of a notorious family.”

Sarek forces his traitorous hand to the desk, gripping the edge. “Varek’s grandfather is in an institution. He has been there for decades. I knew him as a young man. He was brilliant, as Varek is brilliant. But Vakar’s sculptures could not save him from his demons. He was not the first of the line to be so afflicted. Even if Brothers’ Rock had not happened, I would never have agreed to a match between that house and ours. Is Sherron to be the bride of a madman?”

“The House of Surak has had its share of lunatics. Even our progenitor was called so, once upon a time. Varek cannot be judged by the actions of one day. All boys are mad when their time is upon them. It’s why we take such precautions to protect them—our daughters as well. But the Fever is cunning. Sometimes it outwits us.”

“Only if we are not wise—watchful. I knew the boy was infatuated with her. All those years, all the pictures. He was so quiet and withdrawn, I did not see him as a threat. I worried more about Sikkan, or Saveth, or Tenek—” he stops. “Sherron has always had too many admirers.”

“She is like her grandfather in that respect.” T’Lyn looks thoughtful. “I sometimes think that Amanda would have an easier time if she had married any other man. Much of the resentment towards her comes from the women in our circle. They feel she took something from them.”
“She did not,” Sarek says coldly. “I have no desire to marry another Vulcan. I cannot imagine the circumstances that would convince me to do so.” His voice becomes quiet. “I have tried to shield my wife from their cruelties. Perhaps I have failed her.” He pauses. “As I failed Sherron.”

He lowers his head. His broad shoulders seem to be bearing up under a tremendous weight—one which cannot be seen or touched, but cannot be put down.

“I know your grief,” T’Lyn says gently. “I know its boundaries, and they are vast. Sherron is as a daughter to you. The daughter you always wanted, the child that T’Lorren would not give you. She desired the peace of Kolinahr more than her husband’s embrace, and you let her go. But you grieved. You grieved years later, when I told you that a daughter would not be possible. It would have to be a boy, a clone of yourself modified with Amanda’s DNA.

“You grieved when your son Sybok died, taken too soon. But Sherron brought consolation, not only because she is female, but because she is much like you. More than Spock, in many ways. She has your beauty and your magnetism, but she also has your rebellious pride. You have long understood this, even as you indulged her. You chose the best boy of her generation, brilliant and handsome and devoted. You thought the two of you could keep her contented. Safe.

“But Sherron does not wish to be safe, Sarek. She only wishes to choose her own path, as you have. Whatever happened at Brothers’ Rock, whatever her feelings were before that day, Varek is her choice now. Can you deny her? You, who shocked a galaxy with your second marriage?”

Sarek stands there, still as a continent but with a strange tension around him, like tectonic plates are moving, moving beneath the surface. T’Lyn’s pale, brilliant eyes take this in; she pushes on.

“You cannot compel her to have the abortion. That is beyond even a patriarch’s power. You will not force her to honor the marriage contract with Samar, we know this. Once Sherron is a mother, she will be fully emancipated. She will hate you for what you have done to Varek, and she will hate the rest of us for standing by and allowing it to happen. With no legal bonds and no familial ties, where will she go? Wild as she is, it could be anywhere. Anything could become of her, anything at all. Are you prepared to never see her again? Can you live with that?”

Sarek does not answer for some time. Just at the point one concludes that he won’t, he speaks. “If I let them marry—and I speak hypothetically—you are aware of what the response will be.”

“Our family has braved scandal before. We are braving it now. I think the masses almost enjoy watching Clan Surak squirm.”

“I do not care about their disapproval. But Sherron—the weight of it will settle on her shoulders. I will do my best to protect her, but even I cannot prevent the worst. Varek will not suffer as she suffers, though he was the instigator. He is an artist, his family has no political standing—”

“He is male.”

“Yes. They may call him unstable, disloyal. You know what they will call Sherron.”

“I know her. She would rather be a whore than a victim.”

“Perhaps that is why she clings to Varek,” Sarek says, as if the thought just occurred to him. “If she loves him, she is not a victim. What happened at Brothers’ Rock was her choice.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps she was prevaricating all those years, acting contented with Samar. You cannot know. So believe she truly loves Varek. Believe that what happened between them was consensual, and be at peace.”
Sarek takes in his study, its luxuries and heirlooms. His eyes settle on the huge sword hung over the cabinets. T’Lyn’s gaze follows his. “I have never understood this masculine obsession with antique weaponry,” she says pointedly. “You do not use them, yet you cannot put them away.”

“I could tell you it is a matter of family pride,” Sarek says. “Or a perfectly acceptable interest in ancient history. Or a means of reminding ourselves of how far we have come. But those would be lies.” He gives a nearly inaudible sigh. “We like to look at them. It is not logical, but it is so.”


Sarek’s eyes remain fixed upon the sword. When he speaks, he sounds far away. “If this were ancient days, I would be expected to cut Varek’s throat myself. Honor would demand it. I would drain his blood into a vessel and then offer it to the God of War and Vengeance, to wash the stain from my house. Only then would justice be satisfied.”

“Yes, and after you appeased Kitaan, Samar would be required to publicly plow Sherron on the next feast day. Thank the heavens, these are not ancient days.” T’Lyn wrinkles her nose. “I do not agree with all of Surak’s teachings, but he was right about some things. We cannot give in to our base instincts. That way lies madness. And Romulus.”

Sarek nods slowly. She stands, moving with an air of finality. “It is agreed, then? You will use your influence to appease Samar’s family. Sherron and Varek can marry.”

After another pause, Sarek nods again, brief but definite. “I would appreciate it if you told her. I could not bear paroxysms of joy at present.” He sits down in his chair, looking tired.

T’Lyn reaches out, squeezing her nephew’s shoulder. She exits, long skirts rustling briskly.

Sarek turns back to his computer screen. He stares for a moment, but seems distracted.

Then, he rises. He walks to the cabinet across from the desk. On the middle shelf are two items. One is a figure of a handsome man holding a sword. Sarek picks up the second, sharp and shiny. His expression is that of someone in a waking dream—or nightmare.

He pulls up the sleeve of his tunic. He draws the dagger across his right wrist, barely flinching as the blade slices through flesh. He watches with no expression as blood gushes down his arm. He makes a fist so it flows faster. He does not move again until the offering well at the base of the figure of Kitaan is filled. Then he dips fingers into the blood. He smears it over the face of the idol. He smears more on the stone ring on his right hand.

“Justice,” he whispers. It is unclear whether the word is a prayer or a curse. Perhaps Sarek does not know. But something like peace has come into his face.

He shuts the cabinet. He takes a square of silk out of his pocket, tying it tightly around his wrist. He sits at the desk and turns to his computer. Soon he is lost to everything but work.
xxxvi. McCoy

The colors faded, cold reality returned. For a minute Leonard couldn’t say anything. Then, in a voice that seemed to come from far outside himself, he asked the only question that mattered. “Is it—” the sentence broke. He swallowed and tried again. “Is it true? Was Sarek right?”

Varek was looking out the window. He seemed not to hear.

“Answer me. What happened at Brothers’ Rock? Did you—”

“I did,” Varek said, in a voice as calm as water. “Of course I did.”

“Why? For God’s sake . . . ”

Varek turned his head. Sunlight glittered madly in his very green eyes. “I wanted to. I could.”

Leonard didn’t realize he’d moved until he was across the room. “You sick son-of-a-bitch—”

Varek looked up, unconcerned at the angry Georgian looming. “Control yourself, Doctor. You cannot punish me for this. Justice found me years before you knew Sherron existed.” His lips twisted in a smirk that did not reach his eyes. “My death was horrible, if it’s any consolation.”

Leonard stepped back from that leering face. He realized he was naked and grabbed his bathrobe from the dresser, wrapping it around himself. It shouldn’t matter—Varek had seen everything in action—but he couldn’t stand the feeling of vulnerability.

“What are you?” he whispered. “Why are you doing this?”

“It’s so strange,” Varek said, paying no attention. “Vulcans personify the Fever. We speak of its cunning and its deceptions, as if it is some alien enemy. Such a lie! The Fever is us. The dark twin from which we cannot separate. At Brothers’ Rock, I learned how deep my darkness went. My madness.” He leaned his forehead against the window. His face was unlined even in harsh daylight. It struck Leonard then, how young Varek was when he did it. Everything that he did.

“Before Brothers’ Rock, Sherron did not love me,” Varek said softly. “She was flattered to be my muse, as any young girl would have been. She liked me, I believe she felt rather sorry for me, but she did not love me. She loved Samar, who deserved her affection. You saw him, he was extraordinary. He trusted me, though my obsession with Sherron was obvious to everyone else. He believed in me, even after I disappeared into the desert with her. When he was forced to see the truth, it destroyed him. He is as dead as I am, up on his mountain. I struck the killing blow. I did.” Varek banged his head against the glass as if he would pitch himself through it.

“It’s why you agreed to the duel,” Leonard said slowly. “You wanted him to kill you.”

“I wanted it to be over. I should have killed myself then, it would have been the honorable way. But I had spent too long indulging my obsession with Sherron. At the time, I was still lying to myself. I thought it was fate that brought us together. It was years before I was able to see the truth. Brothers’ Rock was not fate, it was not the Fever. It was me.”

He turned to Leonard. “I am a monster, Doctor. But I am not unique. All Vulcans are monsters, but we have chained the beast. The Fever lets him out, but he is always there. When I was alive, the only
thing unusual about me was the scope of my denial. My blind pride made me a rapist at fifteen and a suicide at twenty-two. It destroyed me, and others with me. I have only known one other whose vanity and self-deceit are so acute. Can you guess who I am speaking of?"


Varek nodded. “Perhaps it is his human blood that makes him deny what he is. But he is of the House of Keth—it might be the same if his mother were Vulcan. They are such a strange house, terrifying in their arrogance. Spock is a danger to himself and to your friend. It may pain you to hear it, but Jim is truly infatuated. Partly this is due to his own demons, which are ferocious. But much of it is beyond his control. The vibration of Spock’s aura, the very chemicals in his body, have worked to enslave your friend. And the worst has not yet come. When plak tow, the Blood Fever, strikes, it will not matter what Jim feels or does not feel. He will have no choice; he will submit to Spock’s desires. If their bond does not hold, or if Spock’s Fever grows too hot, the encounter will end in murder. It has many times before. Spock will strangle your friend to death, or tear Jim’s throat open with his teeth. Later, he will be sorry. But Jim will be dead.”

Leonard’s legs found the side of the bed, and he sank down on it. He pressed one hand to the cold, oily ball his stomach had become.

The bed dipped beside him. Strange that Varek had weight even as a ghost. Or maybe Leonard was still asleep, caught in a nightmare from which he couldn’t wake. It seemed like a thousand years since he’d woken to see Sherron bending over him, so lovely in the light. He clung to that image a moment, using it to steady himself in the midst of sickening confusion.

“Sherron can’t know,” he said. “Why wouldn’t she tell me?”

“She loves Spock. She doesn’t want to face what he is, no more than she wanted to face what I was. If she is not a victim, Jim cannot be. Within the confines of her denial, the logic is sound.”

“So she’s innocent.” Leonard is surprised at the eagerness in his voice. “Deluded, but—”

“It is not so simple,” Varek said. “Note the steps she has taken to separate Sharok from Selel’s daughter. She is even willing to return to Vulcan, a place she despises. She loves our son, but she knows what he is capable of. He is, after all, my son.” Varek shakes his head regretfully. “Sherron knows the truth. Her actions betray her knowledge. She has never been honest with you, because she cannot be honest with herself. You cannot trust her.”

For an instant Leonard felt it, a betrayal that went all the way to his core. The pain was brutal; worse, it was shocking. Like losing a vital organ you hadn’t even known was there.

Then, he pressed down with that practiced inner reflex, the one that had seen him through worse horrors than this. The one that let him cut off emotion, cauterize it before he bled to death. With a feeling that was almost relief, he felt his inner walls go up. They were like a familiar embrace.

He’d known Sherron was too good to be true. In a way, it was satisfying to have his suspicions confirmed. But the source of the confirmation was a surprise. He considered Varek a minute.

“You don’t seem to like your wife very much. Which is weird, after everything that happened.”

“Death gives one a certain perspective. I see Sherron clearly now. I am not resentful, and I am not jealous, whatever you may think. I experience a few residual pangs, but those are like pain from a limb that has been amputated—fleeting and false. My feelings for her are not what they were fifteen years ago.”
“Then why are you here? You’ve told me a lot of secrets, more than I wanted to know. All that history about Sitaan and Kitaan—nobody knows that stuff. And what happened fifteen years ago, I get that you’re supposed to be above it all, but it couldn’t have been fun telling that story to a stranger. Why do it? It’s the one question you haven’t answered.”

“My concern is for your friend. He must not die or suffer lasting damage. I cannot explain why, but Jim Kirk is important at a cosmic level. Higher powers are anxious for his welfare.”

“Great. There’s actually divine justification for that ego.” Leonard sighed. “So Jim is a special snowflake. Why do you care?”

“I have grave sins to answer for. By helping Jim—and many others as a consequence—I hope to wash some of the stain from my soul.”

“So this is what, a kind of redemption journey? At the end of it you get your wings?”

“Something like that. My motives are immaterial in any case. Despite your sarcasm, you know Jim is special. Your first instinct has always been to protect him. Your feelings run deep, and not just because you are missing a brother. If Henry had never existed, you would still love Jim Kirk.” A corner of Varek’s mouth turned up. “He is not your brother, Leonard. At some level, you are quite aware of that.”

Leonard said nothing to this. He felt the bed shift again as Varek stood.

“My time grows short,” he said. “I must leave you.”

Leonard looked up at him. “What happens now?”

“I have told you everything, back to the very beginning. At this moment, not a creature alive knows more about the Fever. Now you will do what you must: You will make your choice.”

“What choice?”

But Varek was gone. There was no fading out or other spooky special effects. One second he was standing in front of the window and the next Leonard was alone, surrounded by empty air.

He lay back on the bed. He looked at the bars of sunlight on the ceiling. He wanted to move but he was paralyzed, frozen as a corpse in the crypt. He couldn’t think straight, all his thoughts in a sticky knot at the center of his brain.

Then, one detached itself from the morass. Cold and singular, devastating in its clarity:

*Spock will strangle your friend to death, or tear Jim’s throat open with his teeth. Later, he will be sorry. But Jim will be dead.*

Leonard shot up from the bed. He looked around the room, blinking. Whatever he had been before, now he was fully awake. He glanced at the chrono: 11:40. He’d been out for hours.

Jim, he had to see Jim. With a desire that was almost painful, he wanted to see his best friend’s face. He would still be asleep; Leonard would wake him up. They would talk seriously about all this. After what happened at the club last night, and everything that had come before that, they needed to talk. Ghostly visitations aside, it was stupid that they hadn’t done it sooner.

Jim was stubborn and reckless, but he could be made to listen. He’d listened about the others—David Goldman, Carol Marcus, Gary Mitchell—all those bad influences. Leonard had made them go
away. Spock was just one more, dangerous but not indomitable.

tightening the belt of his robe, Leonard went to Jim’s room. He didn’t even bother to knock, just flung open the door and said, “Rise and shine. Let’s you and me make some eggs and—”

He stopped, staring, when he realized he was addressing an empty room. The chaos of clothes and books was present, as always. But Jim was nowhere to be found. Leonard walked into the room and put his hand on the bed. He actually ran it over the rumpled sheets, like maybe Jim was somehow hiding under there. But the bed was empty and cold.

“Computer. What time did Cadet Kirk leave the flat?”

“5:46 AM.”

“What? That isn’t—check again.” Though Leonard knew it was stupid, arguing with a machine.

“5:46 AM,” the computer repeated with mechanical patience.

A dark thought occurred to Leonard. “Was he alone?” It would be just like that pointy-eared bastard to sneak over here and kidnap Jim when he wasn’t *compos mentis.*

But the computer said, “Affirmative. Cadet Kirk was unaccompanied.”

Leonard walked out of the room like a man in a daze. It didn’t make sense. He knew just how much dope he’d pumped into Jim last night. Six hours ago, Jim would’ve been barely conscious. There was no way he could have left without—

That’s when Leonard saw the black medical bag on the living room coffee table.

Slowly, he approached it. For a second, he looked down at the bag (Great-Grandpa Lee’s, and his father’s before that) like he didn’t quite recognize it. He sat down on the couch.

He tore open the bag and dumped its contents on the coffee table. He sorted through them quickly, automatically. He knew everything he had, down to the last piece of plastigauze. Everything was there, from his tricorder to his hypo.

Leonard took another look at the hypo. It had a spent cartridge in it, but not the deep blue of the Dormitan he’d used on Jim last night. This was red, which meant stimulant. Leonard peered at the code on the side of the cartridge. It wasn’t just any stimulant: Adephrine. Pharmaceutical grade speed, stronger and purer than any of that degraded crap you could score on the street. So valuable that on the couple of occasions the Clinic had been broken into, Adephrine was the first thing snatched. Leonard had never worried about it here. Jim didn’t take drugs, any drugs, and he hated hypos. He didn’t even like getting vaccinations.

He’d taken this, though. Jim had woken up, still stoned. He went into Leonard’s room (while he and Sherron were sleeping, naked). He snatched the bag and took what he needed to wake up. Why? What could make Jim Kirk rob his best friend, shoot himself up with drugs, and take off? Where was he so desperate to go?

He saw Jim’s face. As it was last night, when Jim stood in Geida’s office and totally lost his shit. What did he want then? What made him say those terrible things?

This was all about Spock. All the drama of the past week, it began and ended with the Vulcan. What had started out as a simple prank was becoming something strange and terrifying. Jim was unrecognizable. How he looked when he turned on Leonard last night—flushed, sweaty, shaking
like a junkie. Now he was stealing like a junkie. This wasn’t like him at all. He’d never been this bad, even over David Goldman.

Leonard took out his tricorder. He tapped the screen until he found the scans from last night. He frowned as he reviewed Jim’s vitals. Not the quick review he’d done at the club, but the deeper info he hadn’t bothered checking when Jim didn’t appear physically injured. The numbers were shocking. Leonard knew Jim’s normal vitals like he knew his own name, and these were not it. Everything was off—hormones, adrenals, respiration, all elevated. Even his temperature was up by a degree and a half. The events of last night weren’t enough to account for it. Jim had been in much worse situations and not broken a sweat. But now, he was running a fever.

_The vibration of Spock’s aura, the chemicals in his body, have worked to enslave your friend. The worst has not yet come. When the Blood Fever strikes, it will not matter what Jim feels or does not feel. He will have no choice; he will submit to Spock’s desires._

Jim had been exposed dozens of times by now. How much were those chemicals affecting him? Was the Fever catching? If it was infectious, exactly what did it do to the receiving partner?

_She swears to me that it was consensual, but her mind is clouded by Fever. She will say anything now that he has infected her. She will pine for him, lie for him, she is even ready to kill for him._

Spock thought of Jim, loopy and docile, being carried by Spock into the flat on Monday. He’d seemed fine the next day, but maybe he wasn’t. Maybe the narcotic effect of Spock’s semen hadn’t gone away. It was still there, even now. Which meant none of the decisions Jim had made since were rational. They were not his choice. None of this was.

Spock had stalked Jim, fucked him, enslaved him. He’d taken down an Orion gladiator who got in the way. One from an M3 planet, maybe, but—

Leonard stopped, about six different thoughts colliding in his head at the same time. He tapped the tricorder screen. He looked at another set of scans, Raymon D’Ranni’s vitals from last night. He studied them for several minutes, as if hoping the numbers would change. They didn’t.

Leonard closed his eyes, stepping down hard on the sick panic swirling in his gut. It took him a few minutes to get himself under control. Then, speaking slowly, coldly:

“Computer. Contact Sherron, Clan Surak.”

Her lovely face filled the screen, doe eyes wide. “Leonard! This is a surprise.”

“You know me. I just love surprises.”

One corner of her mouth turned up. “Indeed, I did not know that. But new information is always welcome. I was quite intrigued by everything I learned last night.” When Leonard’s face didn’t change, her brows drew together slightly. “Is everything well? Unfortunately I cannot talk long, the shuttle is about to depart—”

“What planet is Raymon D’Ranni from?”

“I am afraid I do not follow you.”

“It’s a simple question. What planet is he from?”

“Orion Sextus, like his Aunt Geida,” she said, after a brief pause. “Why do you ask?”
“Huh. I could have sworn it was Orion Tertius—he’s green enough. I guess he gets that from his mama. What’d he say last night, she’s weak, like the rest of her people? But Raymon sure isn’t. He’s just like his daddy. The Orion Ambassador from motherfucking Orion Sextus.”

“I don’t—”

“Orion Sextus, an M4 planet like Vulcan. Not M3, like Orion Tertius. Your cousin almost beat to death a professional gladiator twice his size from an equal gravity differential. He didn’t take so much as a bruise. That’s how strong he is right now, how psychotic. But you didn’t tell me that, did you? Guess it slipped your mind. Just like the truth about your husband.”

“I have told you everything about Varek,” Sherron said, eyes serious. “We have already—”

“He raped you,” Leonard said, voice shaking. “He lured you to the desert and he raped you, repeatedly. And you married him, you had two kids by him, because that way you were his wife, not his victim. That’s fucked up in a way that is almost science fiction. I wish I could feel sorry for you —what happened to you is so goddamn awful. But I can’t. Because you knew, Sherron. You knew the truth about Vulcan men in pon farr. You’ve known all along that my best friend is in terrible danger, and you’ve done everything you could to convince me that he isn’t. Your pride is more important than Jim’s life. I can’t forgive you that. I will never forgive you.”

“Who has been telling you these things?” Leonard heard the pain and confusion in her voice; she wasn’t even trying to hide it. “You must believe me. I’ve given you nothing but the truth.”

“I don’t believe you. Not one single goddamn word you’ve said. If you said the sky was blue, I’d look up expecting yellow.” Leonard shook his head. “Stay the hell away from me. Take your psycho offspring back to Vulcan and stay there. I don’t want to see you.”

“No,” Sherron said. “We must meet. We cannot have this conversation over the air. I must make you understand—”

“You’d just try to seduce me again. Who knows? You might do it. You’re really fucking good at it, we both know that. I don’t have time. I’ve got to clean up the mess you people have made.”

“What are you going to do?” Sherron seemed truly frightened for the first time.

“What you’ve never once managed to do. I’m going to tell the truth.”

“Leonard, wait. Whatever you are planning, do not do it. Let us meet first. I would come right now but the shuttle is departing, and I must see my son.” Sherron ran a hand through her hair, looking harried. “Promise me that you will do nothing before I return tomorrow. If you value anything that has happened between us—”

“I don’t.” Leonard hit disconnect on the comscreen remote.

He picked up the tricorder. Before he could even tap the screen, the computer’s voice came. “Call incoming from Sherron, Clan Surak.”

“Ignore it. In fact, ignore all further communications from that source.”

“Affirmative.”

Leonard looked at the tricorder for a minute. He knew what he had to do. He didn’t need Varek peering over his shoulder anymore. He had been thinking on this for days now, though he hadn’t been truly serious before. The morning’s revelations had made the choice crystal-clear, and easy.
“Computer, upload tricorder file, 03122531256. Compress and forward—”
“File does not exist.”
“What? I just saw it a second ago.” Leonard tapped the screen. “See, it’s right—”
The screen was blank. He blinked, and tapped again.
The vitals on Spock from last night were gone. Quickly, Leonard brought up the previous file.
He saw Jim’s vitals for half a second before they winked out.
“Computer, upload all remaining tricorder files. Now.”
“Files do not exist.”
“Fuck me, why don’t they exist? What’s happening?”
“Files have been deleted from a remote location.”
“What? That doesn’t—”
He stopped, looking at his tricorder. His lovely, precious new instrument, one he could never have afforded on his own. Something he could only possess if it were a gift.
“Sherron,” he whispered. Nothing she pulled should surprise him now, nothing should hurt, but this did. Not just that she’d just erased his tricorder files—again—but she must have planned for it. The only way she could have gotten into his files is if she had deliberately left a hole in the machine’s firewall. A way for her to get in if she needed to, and fuck him over all over again.
The tricorder was not a gift. It was a Trojan horse.
Leonard picked it up. He felt its smooth, satisfying weight one last time. Then he stood, and pitched it as hard as he could. It hit the hard plastone wall with a resounding crash! Smoke and sound of static, and its screen went dark forever. All that remained was a dead, shiny shell.
Leonard stared at it a minute. Then he walked into his room. He went to the shelves beside his desk, ones that held the few odds and ends he’d bothered taking from Georgia to California—pictures, awards, and the like. The shelves also held a dozen or so old-fashioned paper books. He picked up the oldest, a small volume bound in black leather, real leather, not the synth stuff.
He ran a finger over the words on the spine, stamped in fading gold ink. HOLY BIBLE. He turned the onionskin pages to the first page. Presented to Leonard Horatio Jackson by Joanna Clarence Jackson, 11/10/2145.
This was Grandpa Lee’s Bible, one he’d kept since his boyhood. It hadn’t been left to Leonard, who was quite happy with the medical bag. The Bible was Henry’s. Or it had been, until five years ago. It was the only thing Leonard had taken from his brother’s room. He wasn’t really religious, but he knew Henry had cherished the book. Henry, who in another century would have been condemned as a sodomite, possessed real faith. For all of his demons, he believed.
Leonard flipped through the thin, yellowed pages. His eyes found the verses almost by chance, John 11:21-27. It was familiar: The pastor had read it at Henry’s funeral.

Martha therefore said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.”
Jesus said to her, “Your brother shall rise again.”

Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Martha did believe. Jesus didn’t make her wait until Judgment Day to see her brother. Lazarus walked out of the tomb that very day, trailing his shroud behind him. Leonard didn’t expect that kind of favor. He knew Henry wasn’t coming forth from the family plot. But if the chance was offered, if he could go back, what would he do to save Henry? What wouldn’t he do?

Leonard tapped the volume against his hand. From the gap between the cover and the pages fell a data solid, bright green but small, totally ordinary. You wouldn’t know just to look at it that it held Jim Kirk’s fate.

He hadn’t wanted to use the training room video. Tricorder files should have been enough. He had been pushed to this, and Jim would never forgive him. He didn’t care. Or he did, that was the point.

He would not find Jim bloody and ruined. He would not feel him die, like he had felt Henry die.

Leonard shoved the data solid into the slot at the base of the bedroom comscreen. “Computer,” he said. “Upload and forward file. Use Level 10 encryption.”

“Recipient?”

Last chance to back out. But he had made his choice, and it felt just right. There was only one person who could hear the truth Leonard had to tell. Who would understand and do what was necessary, even if it made him bleed.

“Send it to former Ambassador Sarek, Clan Surak, Vulcan.”

A pause that seemed to go on forever, but was really only two seconds. “Message sent.”

Leonard let out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding. He carefully closed Henry’s Bible and set it back on the shelf. Then, because Leonard was not a saint or a hero, just a poor country doctor with his own share of demons, he went into the kitchen to find the bottle of Jack Daniel’s. He needed a drink, many drinks. Jesus would have to understand.
xxxvii. Kirk

Flagler Beach, 2251

If you can just get your mind together,  
Then come on across to me  
We’ll hold hands and then we’ll watch the sun rise  
From the bottom of the sea

But first, are you experienced?  
Have you ever been experienced?  
Well, I have

I know, I know, you probably scream and cry  
That your little world won’t let you go

But who in your measly little world  
Are you trying to prove that  
You’re made out of gold and can’t be sold?

So are you experienced?  
Have you ever been experienced?  
Well, I have

Let me prove it to you

“This is amazing,” Jim says. “It’s like there are two voices, his and the guitar’s. He’s cool and controlled but the guitar—it’s crying. Wailing. Something.”

Jim stops. He can’t quite get to it, what he wants to say. He reaches up at the brilliant blue sky, fingers flitting uselessly. He should be able to say it, but his tongue is as lazy as the rest of him. Maybe it’s the heavy music and the somnolent heat. More likely, it’s the weed.

“The guitar is saying the stuff he can’t say,” Jim tries again. “Secret stuff. You have to really listen to hear it.” For a minute, he lets his fingers circle the blazing eye of the sun. Then he drops his hand, blinking purple spots from his vision.

“Interesting. But white boys can’t really hear Jimi.”

“What? Who says?”

“Hell, son. Everybody knows that.”

Jim raises both eyebrows. “So I guess you can only half hear him.” He takes another hit on the joint, and that’s the one that really seems to tip him over, from lazy to totally boneless. He falls back on the beach blanket and watches the world spin.

Kevin plucks the joint from Jim’s gooey grip, takes a last hit, and stubs it out in the sand. Then he settles back down, turning his sun-and-cannabis flushed face towards Jim. His eyes are as green as the nearby ocean, red hair brighter than Florida sun on this perfect summer day. A drop of sweat slides down one of his high cheekbones, catching in the corner of his mouth. Jim reaches out,
tracing the same path with the tip of his finger. He feels Kevin’s smirk before he can see it. He draws his hand back and Kevin catches his wrist, playfully biting Jim’s finger.

“Me and Jimi, we understand each other just fine,” Kevin says. He releases him and Jim digs his fingers into the blanket, flesh still tingling from Kevin’s teeth.

“I know—what—they’re saying.” Jim hears his words draw out like saltwater taffy. It seems to take hours to get them all said. “Jimi and his guitar. I know.”

Kevin leans closer. “What do you know, Jimmy-my-lad? What secrets are Mr. Hendrix and his axe whispering to you?” A hint of his father’s Irish brogue has crept into his voice. Kevin only sounds like that when he’s teasing, but Jim doesn’t care. He knows.

“Touch me,” Jim says. “That’s the secret message. Be with me. You are all I want.”

Kevin doesn’t answer right away. He pushes the damp hair back from Jim’s face. “Sounds like he’s got it bad.” Jim nods, and the movement seems to go on for years.

Kevin lightly runs a hand down Jim’s bare chest, fingers tracing smooth muscle. Heat pools in the pit of Jim’s stomach, thick and syrupy-sweet. He grasps at Kevin’s wrist, and Kevin smirks.

“Jimmie Kirk. All grown up and all the way down here. I can’t quite believe it.”

Jim licks his burning lips. “Told you, didn’t I? Florida or Delta Quadrant—I’d find you.”

“Stalker.” But Kevin’s fingers tease at the waist of Jim’s swim trunks like he’s in no hurry to escape. He’s so close, Jim can feel the heat from his face. Maybe it’s their heat—what they have always made between them. The music from the POD half-buried in the sand seems to grow louder, bass overpowering.

Trumpets and violins
I can hear in the distance
I think they’re calling our names

Maybe now you can’t hear them
But you will
If you just take hold of my hand

Oh, but are you experienced?
Have you ever been experienced?
Not necessarily stoned, but beautiful

“What else is the song saying?” Kevin’s eyes are wide and serious. “What does Jimmy want?”

“Fuck me,” Jim whispers. “I’ve waited so long.”

Kevin doesn’t say anything. Jim digs fingers into his thigh. He can’t talk around this anymore. He chokes out syllables. “It’s not a sin. I’m eighteen now. I’m not—dangerous.”

Kevin runs a thumb over Jim’s mouth. “You will always be dangerous.”

With one smooth motion, he tugs Jim’s swim trunks off. Jim stretches out on the soft blanket, naked and unashamed. Kevin’s eyes take in every last inch of skin. Jim feels himself hardening under that greedy gaze, swelling and aching for what has been so long denied.
Kevin reaches out, as if he would touch Jim again. He stops.

“Please.” Jim isn’t too proud to beg. He’ll get on his knees. He’d be happy to get on his knees.

Kevin takes his own trunks off, body thin and elegant, golden skin glowing. His cock is darker. Exactly as Jim pictured it, long and thick and stiff with purpose. Ready for this, for him. Jim’s throat goes dry, pulse roaring in his ears. Five years he’s waited for it and now that it’s here, the lust can’t quite drown the fear. Of getting it wrong. Of being hurt.

Then Kevin does touch Jim, a slow, firm stroke that leaves Jim gasping. Kevin does it again, and Jim hears himself moan. His lips try to form words but he can’t get them out. He is dizzy, dizzy, sunstruck and weed-stunned and panting with panic and need. Jim half-rises, fingers scrabbling for Kevin, but his friend takes his hand and firmly places it on the blanket.

“Easy, Jim. You’ve come so far, I can take us the rest of the way. Just lie back.” Kevin pushes him down. “And breathe, okay? Before you pass out and I have to toss your ass in the Atlantic.”

Jim giggles at that image, and then he is better, calmer. He looks up at Kevin. He wants to say something profound, something that will properly begin this moment, one he will remember for the rest of his life. But what comes out is, “We’re gonna get sand everywhere.”

“That’s sex on the beach, my landlocked laddy. Scrotal exfoliation is part of the deal.” Seeing Jim’s face: “Just kidding. This won’t hurt a bit.” Kevin’s expression is suddenly serious. “I promise. If you want to stop, if it gets too much, all you have to say is—”

“I won’t.” Jim wants to say more. He wants to tell Kevin about the last five years, the pressing temptations and close calls. But he never gave in, he always waited. Because he knew: This is how it’s supposed to be. This is fate. He’d like to explain, but he knows the words will get all tangled up. So he just looks at Kevin, his eyes feeling huge in his face.


Jim can’t explain so he kisses him, and that turns out to be the needful reply. Soft and wet and spicy with weed, it’s the best kiss of Jim’s life. Better than the one on the rooftop, right before Kevin got away, a narrow escape. But he did escape, and now they’re safe. That was fate, too.

He kisses Kevin as Jimi and his guitar wail into the next track.

Is that the stars in the sky  
Or is it rain falling down?  
Will it burn me if I touch the sun  
So big, so round?

Will I be truthful  
In choosing you as the one for me?  
Is this love, baby  
Or is it just confusion?

Jim pulls back, frowning. “I don’t like this one.” He fumbles for the POD.


Too late. The vivid colors of the fantasy fade and pixelate like a corrupted vid. It always falls apart right about here, and it isn’t always the music’s fault. Sometimes they get interrupted by Sean Riley,
sometimes it starts to rain. Other times—these are the worst—Kevin isn’t into it. He sits on the beach smirking until Jim gets fed up and walks away.

(It isn’t as bad as the dreams, of course. Kevin smirking on the sand is better than Kevin dying on the sand. Face burned off but eyes still seeing, staring at Jim so accusingly.)

He can’t master the fantasy, however hard he tries. He and Kevin never go all the way. Jim didn’t lose his virginity at eighteen on a sunny beach in Florida. That wasn’t how it happened.

Sighing, he gets up from the bed. He looks out the window at his reality. Iowa in winter, 2247: nothing but snow-covered flatlands for miles and miles, broken only by the occasional skeletal tree, black against bone-colored sky. Jim puts his fingers to his temples, rubbing hard.

My head is pounding, pounding
Going round and round
Must there always be these colors
Without names, without sounds?

My heart burns with feeling
But my mind is cold and reeling
Is this love, baby
Or is it just confusion?

Jim jabs viciously at the POD, cutting off the music.

He turns to the nightstand and takes the plate from where he left it. There’s still a third of a pie there, and he can’t let it go to waste. He will never waste food again. He picks up the fork and, eating with steady efficiency, finishes the pie in a couple of minutes. He barely tastes it, even though it’s one of Mrs. Krider’s, apples sugared and spiced just right, cradled in a buttery crust. It doesn’t matter what it tastes like, as long as it fills the hole in his gut.

(It wasn’t always like this. Those first days after—after, he couldn’t eat anything. Chapel threatened him with force-feeding until Grax intervened. That was before Pete, though. Now it’s like someone has flipped his hunger switch, and he can’t stop.)

Jim burps against the back of his hand and sets the fork down. He walks to the dresser, looping the POD cord around his wrist. The unit is battered from all of its journeys, and it doesn’t have the capacity of the later models. He was supposed to get a new one.

(He made the mistake of saying so to Counselor Grax, who widened his oily black eyes and took so

He stows the POD in his top dresser drawer, and as he does, he catches the movement in the mirror. He stops a minute and considers himself. He’s changed a lot in the last few months. There’s the weight thing, of course, but it’s not all. His eyes are still wide and blue, but they’re darker. He’s been told the color is exactly the same, but Jim knows better. The zits are another change. He has meds for them, he washes religiously, but pustules still bloom on his cheeks and chin. He’s been told they’ll go away: It’s the stress, the fluctuations in diet, good old teenage hormones. Jim doesn’t believe it. This isn’t chemical, this is a curse.

(He made the mistake of saying so to Counselor Grax, who widened his oily black eyes and took so
many notes on the PADD that Jim shut up after that. They could make him sit in the damn chair, but they couldn’t make him talk.)

Jim sighs, pushing greasy hair back from his newly erupting forehead. His brother’s words come back to him from that night. The very last night.

You’re beautiful, kiddo. Like the best parts of Mom and Dad put together.

“No anymore,” Jim whispers. “Not now, Sam. Wherever the fuck you are.”

Shit. He’s hungry again.

Jim is about to head downstairs to see what’s in the kitchen—probably not much, the domestic members of the family having gone AWOL—when he feels it. Surprise, then a stab of anger. Jim knows these aren’t his emotions, even as his heart races from the adrenaline spike.

Winnie’s on the rag. Great. He was hoping she would drink herself into a stupor by nightfall. That’s her M.O. on gloomy days: old holos, vodka, and showtunes. Today, it’s Cabaret. If Jim hears “Mein Herr” one more time, he’ll be doing jazz hands all the way to the funny farm. But Bob Fosse isn’t the biggest thing breaking his peace.

His mother doesn’t try to broadcast her feelings, any more than Jim tries to pick them up. He may have inherited her projective empathy—at least, that’s what the tests said—but he never used to be troubled by psychic noise. It’s supposed to be a receptive empath’s problem, empaths like Sam, poor bastard. But puberty is gifting Jim with more than pimples. Or maybe it’s living alone with his mother for the first time, with no Sam to act as buffer. Winnie and her youngest are vibing on the same wavelength, and he is now certain of what he long suspected: Winnie’s subconscious is not a sunny place to visit. Thank God the noise only seems to be going in one direction. If she knew what was on his mind, he’d be back in that white room in San Francisco.

(Maybe his mother does know, and doesn’t give a damn.)

Winnie is frequently bored, intermittently depressed, occasionally irritable. True anger, though, Jim hasn’t felt from her before. It surprises him that his mother cares enough about something to get angry—or even surprised. Those dark blue eyes of hers never look fazed by anything, good or bad. The morning she found Grandma Kate not breathing in her easy chair, Winnie called the EMT’s like she was calling for pizza. It would be impressive if it weren’t so fucking weird.

Moving noiselessly, Jim opens his bedroom door and creeps onto the landing. He wants to check the lay of the land before he ventures down. Irritable Winnie is something to be avoided: Drunk, angry Winnie must be handled with extreme caution. The empathy has made it easier for Jim to sneak up on her, but he is under no illusions about the size of her antennae. If a shadow flickers the wrong way, Winnie sees. Pretty extreme instincts for a geologist, when you think about it.

(He has thought about it. In the weeks since the vibes started, he has thought about it a lot.)

Jim moves quietly, so quietly. He even tries to think quietly—you never know. He peeks over the landing rail. At first he just sees the living room, dimly lit and dully colored, old furniture huddled around the big stone fireplace. Family pictures scattered everywhere, holos of Jim and Sam as babies, Uncle Mark as a kid with his favorite horse, a wedding holo of Winnie and Dad. One of Winnie in high school, coltish and kilted but with that deep blue stare even then, the one that drew you in against your better instincts.

(There used to be other things hung on the walls, too. But Grandma Kate’s crucifixes are gone. Gone
even before Sam, taken down the afternoon they got back from the cemetery. Winnie piled them up by the fireplace, she was going to burn them. But at the last second, she couldn’t. Now they are in a box in the attic, thirteen Saviors on the cross, all their torments hidden from view.)

Winnie is standing in the middle of the living room. Her hands are held loosely at her sides in a way that a casual viewer might take for relaxed. But Jim knows she’s on red alert. She’s talking to a man, slim and handsome, just starting to grey. Not shocking: She talks to a lot of men. But not ones wearing Starfleet command insignia. Not way out here.

“Nice,” she says, nodding at the insignia. “Recent?”

“The promotion went through last month. The Exeter.” He smiles like a proud father. “She’s a yar old girl. Due for a refit in a year or two, but she’ll do.”

“And you came all the way out here to show me. Christopher Pike, I didn’t know you cared.”

“It’s been awhile.” The man is no longer smiling.

“Twelve years. You came to interview me about that little report you were writing.”

“Dissertation.”

“Yes, well, it’s all just bytes of data gathering dust in a database somewhere. I guess databases don’t get dusty, do they?” She shrugs her bony shoulders. “You know what I mean.”

His lips thin an instant before he replies. “Enlighten me.”

“Three years of your life, definitive report, blah blah blah. We still don’t know what happened to the Kelvin. I was there, and I don’t know. What the hell were you trying to prove?”

Christopher peers at her. “Have you been drinking?”

“Vodka. Lots. Want some?” She gives him a puckish grin under red eyes.

He shakes his head slowly. “Maybe I should come back tomorrow, when you’ve—”

“I could drink you under the table. I have, more than once. Sit down and tell me why you spent a thousand credits transporting to the middle of nowhere.”

Christopher hesitates a second, then sits down on the sofa. Winnie sits in Grandma Kate’s chair. Her hair is in a straggly ponytail, she’s wearing sweatpants and no make-up, but sitting next to a Starfleet officer, she manages not to suffer by comparison. Her back is poker-straight, and her eyes—red as they might be—are sharp. Jim can still sense anger in her, but there is something else, too. It tastes like the steely edge of nerves, but sweeter. Excitement. Under the sarcasm, Winnie is excited to have a visitor. This visitor.

Christopher plucks at the doily on the arm of the sofa. “I heard about your mother’s passing. I’m sorry.”

Jim senses something under her excitement, cold and grey and sour, before it quickly submerges. Winnie’s slightly amused expression doesn’t change. “Why? Mama always loved Jesus better than anybody, and now they’re together. I just hope Our Savior doesn’t disappoint. Or that she wouldn’t that suck?” She picks up her glass. “My Grandpa Alexei always said God has a sense of humor. If that’s true, he and Katerina Murray aren’t gonna get along at all.” She takes a swallow of vodka.
“It must have been hard on the boys, losing their grandmother so soon after what happened.”

“You can say it. So soon after they almost starved to death and saw a psychopath commit mass-murder. It’s not a secret: I’m still getting calls from the fucking nets.” She puts her bare feet up on the coffee table. “I hope you’re not writing another dissertation. I’m all talked out.”

Christopher is silent, then tries again. “I can’t imagine how it must have been for you.”

“Sure you can. Remember Rigel V—the red plague? Ten thousand bodies shoveled into pits. Substitute disruptor burns for pustules, and you can imagine just fine.”

Her eyes gleam at him. “Remember after? The supply closet by the decontamination chambers?”

Christopher clears his throat. “It was a long time ago.”

“My ass was bruised for days from the placcrete floor. What is it about death that makes us want to fuck our brains out? I’ve read it’s the procreation instinct, but that’s bullshit. We didn’t want babies, did we?”

“No,” Christopher says. “That was George.”

“Touché,” Winnie says, with a tip of her glass. “He could be so convincing when he wanted to be. The supply closet was his idea. You wanted to head back to quarters, I seem to remember. Always worried about your reputation, even then. I can’t believe it took you this long to make captain. Your dad’s political connections alone should have gotten you the gig. I guess it was all those years ferreting around in the archives. Dissertations really are a waste of time.”

Christopher doesn’t acknowledge any of this. Winnie considers him, sucking on an ice cube.

“Why are you here, Chris? Why today?”

“I wanted to come earlier.” When she just looks at him: “I did. I was deployed. I guess you’ve stopped paying attention to my whereabouts, but the Farragut was far out in Beta Quadrant, near the Romulan border. Things were—tense. Even there we heard about Tarsus IV, but I had no idea you and your boys were among the colonists. If I hadn’t run into Louis Kim, I might never have known. It’s not exactly like we’ve been keeping in touch, Winona.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“I suppose I just wanted to see how you were.”

“I’ve been here six months. How I am is bored out of my fucking mind, my mother’s funeral notwithstanding.” Winnie runs a pensive finger around the rim of her glass. “But I suppose there are worse things than being bored.”

“What happened on Tarsus? What were you doing in that godforsaken place?”

She shrugs. “My husband got a grant.”

“Cut the shit.” For the first time, Christopher’s martial composure falters. “I looked some things up before I came out here. My new security clearance is something. John Hakamoto was as gay as an Antaran on shore leave—at least, that’s what his three ex-husbands suggest. He was also about two publications short of having the credentials for a deep-space assignment, and he blew the psych screening—too high-strung. That’s why he was turned down the first time he applied for Tarsus IV. He married you, and suddenly he was at the top of the list. Why?”
“My winning personality?”

Christopher cocks his head. “I know you’re back with Intelligence. I’m not sure you ever left.”

“I’m a geologist. It’s on my ID and everything.”

“You have a lot of ID’s. I’ve seen a few of them. The Romulan one is a real hoot.”

“Romulans aren’t so bad. They’re just like Vulcans, without all the bullshit.” Winnie smirks. “You know, I actually like Geology. It’s all about pressure and—layers. Watching things mix up, filter down. Finding what’s hiding in the deep muck. Fascinating.” She taps her nails on the side of the glass. “Kodos was a creature of the lower depths. A few smart people saw that, even before he embraced his inner Adolf.”

“And those smart people sent you to Tarsus IV.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Sorry, honey. Hints are fun, but you don’t have that clearance.”

“You could tell me,” he leans forward, “as a friend.”

“Friend,” she turns the word over like it’s one of the ice cubes in her glass, cold and flavorless. “The kind I see every twelve years.”

Christopher looks at the rings on the coffee table. “You know why I left.”

“Sure,” she says. “But not why you stayed gone. When none of it could matter anymore.” You wouldn’t have to be an empath to hear the pain in her voice. But an empath can also feel it, half-rage, half-regret. Old and crusted over but somehow still raw, as bitter as poison.

“I—” Christopher stops, sighing. “I don’t know. For a long time I was angry, then after George died, it felt pointless. It wouldn’t have been the same. I don’t think we could have made it work without him. He had a way of making things work, even when they shouldn’t. He could always see the possibilities.”

“Not always.”

“He saw you as a mother. I must admit, it never occurred to me.”

Winnie turns her head towards the fireplace. In the dim light the flames reflect on her face, making it strange, mask-like. As if there is another face under it.

“You saw me at work—my real work,” she says. “George never did. It makes a difference.”

“He knew what you were.”

“But he didn’t see.” She turns back to her companion. “I didn’t try to make him.” Winnie’s gaze flicks over Christopher’s face like she’s looking for something. Forgiveness, maybe. “You never asked why I said yes to him. At the time, I thought it meant you didn’t give a damn. I’m smart about people, but I’ve got a blind spot about my people. I don’t always see what I should. It was years before I figured it out. You thought you knew: I loved George more than you.”

“Didn’t you?” Christopher says, like the words are costing him.

When Winnie answers, her voice is far away.

“You remember the survey mission on Risa Gamma. We stumbled across that Syndicate outpost, one
Intelligence hadn’t found. Seven people killed right off, three of us kidnapped. The pirates gutted Ensign Henderson like a flounder, but only after they’d violated him in every other way. Twenty years old, that boy. They didn’t have to do it. Our captain was negotiating, they had their own whores to keep them amused. They did it because they could.” Winnie sounds calm but inside is the anger, as bright as the flames on her face. “They were going to do the same to you.”

“They didn’t, though. You captured their leader’s son.”

“Taylon was saving me for his firstborn. He wanted the kid to have some fun with something besides a slave. Lucky break there. Taylar may have been six feet tall and shaving, but he was only twelve. Easy to get over. How many fingers did it take before his father saw reason?”

“Three. But that wasn’t why Taylon lets us go.”

“Of course not. The mutilation was just to show that it was a serious negotiation. Orion pirates don’t respect you unless there’s blood on your knife. The kid could live without fingers. Without balls, though—a fate worse than death. Funny how it’s true across every culture.”

“Would you really have done it?” Christopher asks quietly.

“Castrated that oversized brat? Absolutely. You know it. You know me. You did after Risa Gamma, if you didn’t before. But you still wanted me. If George had been there, he wouldn’t have. That’s why, when a choice had to be made, I chose him.” Seeing Christopher’s face: “I know, it doesn’t seem to make any goddamn sense at all.”

Winnie looks around the old farmhouse. “I hate this place. I never fit here. My brother Mark did, with his horses and his football trophies, holding hands with all the nice girls. I wasn’t nice, not ever. Mama and her crucifixes—it seemed like every time I screwed up, there was another one. It was like a motherfucking exorcism. It finally worked: When I left at seventeen, I thought I was gone for good. But George—maybe it was because Tiberius and Jen were career Starfleet, and he never had a real hometown. He loved Riverside. When we came here, he fit. Everybody smiled at us, Mama did. Christ, she loved George! Almost as much as she loved Mark.”

Winnie gets up. She sits on the sofa next to Christopher, close to him but not quite touching. Like she wants to touch but doesn’t know if it’s allowed.

“You saw the real me,” she says. “George saw the person he thought I could be. I wanted to be her, the good girl. If he’d lived, maybe I could have done it, the wife and mommy thing. I could have come back to Iowa and joined the choir and baked pies with Sarah Krider. No more knives, no blood on my hands. I could have been fat and happy and harmless as George’s wife. You’re right, he had a gift for—transformation.”

Winnie sighs. “Or maybe not. Maybe I’d have ended up fucking Frank McClellan either way.”

Chris looks like there are a lot of things he wants to say to her. Thoughts flicker over his face, they fill his grey eyes like shadows. But when he does speak, it’s not anything that’s expected.

“He’s disappeared, you know.”


“It came up when I was doing the search on your records last week. He was released from prison four months ago. He checked in once with his parole officer. No one has heard from him since. There’s a warrant out.”
Winnie gives him a thin smile. “That’s one thing I’ve always liked about you, Chris. You’re one thorough son-of-a-bitch.” She shrugs. “Wherever Frank is, I’m sure he’s up to no good.”

“I thought you should be aware. He might come back here.”

“I’m not worried.”

Christopher looks at her a minute. “Why is that?”

“You know me. I’m an optimist.”

“I do know you.” It’s a phrase that can be said a lot of ways. Christopher just sounds sure.

You wouldn’t think sureness would be an emotion to make any woman—especially this one—melt. Winnie doesn’t dissolve into a puddle, but there is new warmth inside her.

“Maybe we could have made it work, you and I,” she says. “Maybe—maybe we should have.” She pauses. “When George started talking about kids, I should have walked away, like you did. It would have broken his heart, but the rest of him would have been in one piece.”

Christopher puts a hand on her ankle. He gently circles it with his fingers, thumb caressing her instep. The gesture is so odd and intimate that you know he’s done it before. Many times.

“Noni,” he says, years of secrets in the nickname. “Don’t tell me you’re still blaming yourself.”

“After Sam was born, I told George that was enough,” she says. “Who needs more than one kid? I wanted the procedure, but George asked me to think it over for awhile. He could be so fucking convincing. I never believed his empathy score was mid-range. It had to be a mistest.”

She shakes her head. “The second pregnancy, I don’t know how it happened. We were using three different kinds of birth control. It’s enough to make you believe in fate, if God has a sick sense of humor. I was going to terminate, I wasn’t even going to tell him, but one of the nurses from sickbay congratulated him before I could—” She stops. “It doesn’t matter. He wanted it, I gave it to him. We ended up on the Kelvin. You know the rest.”

Winnie swallows the last of the vodka like a woman dying of thirst. Christopher doesn’t reply, but he doesn’t stop caressing her. She looks up at him, eyes redder than ever. “Sam’s joined the Corps. He’s not eighteen, but I signed him in.”

His hand stills. “Jesus, SpaceCorps? He’s going to freeze to death on some nameless asteroid. Is that what you want for George’s son?”

“He buried the girl he loved on Tarsus IV,” Winnie says, looking at her hands. “Literally. After Kodos shot the Yellow Group, he forced the men in Red Group to dump the bodies into trenches. Security had disruptors at their backs. Sam felt Sifa Bovell die, then he watched the sand fill her eyes. How could I tell him not to go? How could I tell him anything, after that?”

“Why the hell did you bring the boys with you in the first place?”

“You think I wanted things this way?” She pulls back. “It was just a reconnaissance mission. Dig up some dirt, see how crazy Kodos really is. Nobody, even my superiors, dreamed he was that crazy. So I had to marry a guy who screws other guys—it’s not like it was the first time! When the marriage contract expired in a couple of years, we’d have both been better off. John would have had his book on the damn pea pods or whatever, and I’d have gotten a nice bump up in my thing. In the meantime, my boys would have had a break off-planet with a stepfather who didn’t beat the shit out of them. It
didn’t seem like a bad deal. But then—then—oh, fuck this!”

She pitches the vodka glass at the fireplace. It shatters in a vicious rain. Christopher, who must have the makings of one hell of a captain, doesn’t flinch when the shards dust his uniform. He brushes the destruction away and looks at her with no expression.

“You were right,” she says, in a voice so empty it’s like the echo of a voice. “I wasn’t cut out for motherhood. Sam hates me—he’s right to hate me. And Jim—” she stops.

“Where is Jim?” Christopher looks around, suddenly alert. “I hope he can’t—”

“Don’t worry. He’s where he always is: his room, eating his head off and blasting weird music. You know what? It’s a relief, that it’s all he’s doing. Did Lou Kim tell you about the Excelsior? I’d be surprised if he didn’t. Gossip is the only thing that travels faster than Warp 10.”

“I heard the story,” Christopher says, looking grim. “I didn’t believe it.”

“It’s true, most inter-ship scuttlebutt is bad intel. This isn’t. Ken Wilkins threatened to kill Jim if he saw him again. Jim just sat there, taking the interrogation like a pro. If I hadn’t seen what happened, I wouldn’t have believed he’d done it. His school counselor called a couple of weeks ago, excited about his Psi-test results. I already knew, I’ve seen Grax’s reports. They’re scary, and you know I don’t use that word lightly. What Jim is, what he can do. What he will do.”

White-knuckled, Winnie’s fingers grip the edge of the coffee table. “God help me, he’s just like me, only a boy and more fucked up than I was at his age. Can you imagine what he’ll be like at twenty-one? I don’t want that. He can’t be like me. It would have been better if we’d lost him in the desert on Tarsus IV. Better that I had terminated.”

Christopher pries her hand off the table. He holds it so tightly, it has to hurt them both. “Oh for fuck’s sake, he’s just a kid! Don’t put your screwed-up, self-hating crap on him.” When she just stares at him: “Don’t put it on yourself, either. Your mother is dead and buried, quit measuring yourself by her yardstick. So you’re not a pie baker. You are a survivor. You had a choice on Risa Gamma, die or start cutting. You chose, and you saved my ass in the process. I’ll take that over Dutch Apple any day of the week.”

Christopher leans so close to Winnie, they are practically nose-to-nose. “Whatever you did to Frank McClellan, I don’t give a damn. He got what he deserved.” He pauses. “So did Kodos.”

“He committed suicide,” she whispers.

“Yeah, I’ve seen the reports. A Kizlyar Voron straight through the heart. Doesn’t fit the profile. Cowards like Kodos use poison, maybe a rope, not twenty centimeters of Russian steel. Funny how nobody’s figured that out. Maybe they don’t want to. A dead madman is so much easier to deal with than a live one. Doesn’t take a genius to make that call. And you are a genius, Noni.”

Winnie is silent, gaze intent on his. Christopher smiles. He lets go of her hand, holding her face instead, cradling it like something precious. “You are the most dangerous woman I’ve ever met. I knew that before Risa Gamma, long before. It never changed how I felt.”

“It’s why you felt it,” she says. “Not many girls like me in Greenwich, huh?”

“Sweetheart, I’ve been all over the galaxy. There are no girls like you anywhere.”

It wouldn’t take an empath with genius IQ (though a couple are present) to predict what’s going to happen next. Winnie’s been giving off heat like a horny furnace for five minutes. When she kisses
Christopher, you almost expect him to flinch, like someone who put his face on hot metal. But he just pulls her into his lap, spanning her slim waist with his hands. They kiss each other like they haven’t touched anyone in twenty years. It feels like they are going to kiss all day.

But finally, Winnie pulls back. She’s flushed, eyes too bright, but the expression on her face is strange. She looks like she could cry at any second.

“Do you know what day it is?” she rasps. When Christopher nods: “Do you think George—”

“George would enjoy the show. He was always a kinky bastard.”

You can see Winnie trying to crush the smile, but one rebellious corner of her mouth turns up. “You were always one smooth-talking son-of-a-bitch.”

“But thorough. Do you remember Antares IV?”

“Remind me.”

More tonsil-diving. His hand slides up her shirt, but she stops him.

“Wait. We can’t do this here. Jim might come foraging. Come on.” She leaps off him with one of her fast, insistent moves. She takes his hand and pulls him towards the downstairs bedroom.

She kisses him again on the threshold, and this time Christopher is the one who pulls back.

“Before this happens, I have to be straight.” He pauses, hands clenching. “After—I can’t stay.”

She ruffles his bangs like he’s a silver-haired schoolboy. “I know. The Exeter deploys in 42 hours.” When he blinks: “I never stopped paying attention. I’ll always know where you are. Always.”

“I don’t know whether to be turned-on or terrified.”

“Let’s split the difference, shall we?” She smooths her hands down the front of his uniform. “I’m going to do horrible things to you in my mother’s bed. Talk about exorcisms.”

There isn’t more talking after that. Just kissing, then the door creaking and the lock clicking.

Jim sits still for a few minutes. Finally, he climbs back up the stairs. He hadn’t even realized that he had left the landing, pulled in like he was caught by heavy gravity. Winnie and Christopher should have noticed the pudgy kid nearby, pale as a sheet under his pimples. Maybe they would have if they hadn’t been about to—ew.

Jim shuts the door of his room behind him. His eyes scan the paneled walls, the plaid bedspread. Almost nothing in this place belongs to him, just his POD and some clothes. He has more things but they are still in transit, wandering back from the farther reaches of space. Nobody took much when they left that place. There wasn’t room on the Excelsior, and none of them had the energy for packing. Well, Winnie was brisk enough, but it was a weird energy, buzzing your bones like high voltage. At the time, Jim thought it came from seeing what they’d seen, losing John, being victimized by fate yet again. He should have remembered: Winona Murray is nobody’s victim.

He isn’t surprised. His mother—the truth about her is not surprising. It isn’t just the knives. They’re explained away easily enough, cherished heirlooms from Grandpa Alexei. Jim has seen a few old holos of his great-grandfather. Winnie has his stare, one as steady as a Siberian wolf’s. Alexei Ivanov was a journalist, and maybe that’s why he collected all those blades, protection for when he was poking his nose in the darkest corners of the galaxy. Or maybe a gift for espionage is hereditary.
Winnie is half a drunk but she doesn’t scare, in the scariest situations imaginable.

Jim has always known his mother’s sharp edges could cut you to pieces. Finding out the pieces are literal body parts doesn’t change his worldview much.

And if he needs what’s in his dresser right now, it’s not because he’s sad that Mommy’s a spy. Knowing the truth about her (and how much she didn’t want to be his mommy to begin with) isn’t going to make him shed tears. He stopped crying over Winnie a long time ago.

He opens his dresser and takes what he needs out of the middle drawer, where it was concealed between piles of underwear. It’s the one thing Jim did take from that desert hellhole, besides his POD. For most of the way back they were both tucked into his shirt, right next to his heart.

Jim runs a slow, careful finger over the faded letters on the cover: The Wasteland. He hasn’t opened it in awhile. He doesn’t want this to become something he does all the time. If there is anything of Kevin still clinging to the book, he doesn’t want to wear him off.

But he needs to open it today, of all days. Jim reads a few verses at random. The fifth stands out:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?*
*When I count, there are only you and I together*
*But when I look ahead up the white road*
*There is always another one walking beside you*
*Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded*
*I do not know whether a man or a woman*
—But who is that on the other side of you?

There was a third with them every single time, though Pete never knew. The presence made the sex seem like more than it was, some clumsy thrusts in the dark. Ken Wilkins said Jim seduced his son—he actually used the word. But it wasn’t true. Pete didn’t have to be pushed off that particular cliff. He took a running jump.

And what happened after, well, that was Pete’s drama. Jim doesn’t have any feelings about it. Even if he did—he doesn’t. He has been trying very hard not to have feelings about anything. They just give you indigestion.

Jim closes the book and puts it back in the drawer. As he does, his eyes fix on what’s hung next to the dresser. It’s the house’s one remaining crucifix, somehow overlooked by Winnie’s purge. Jesus seems to be looking right at Jim. The figure’s tiny plastic body is twisted in agony, but his face is calm. Jim doesn’t know why he was so scared of it when he was little. Jesus isn’t out to get him. Those glowing eyes have a nice expression, patient and worried. Almost—fatherly.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen,” Jim says. “You believe me, right? Pete was just there.”

If he squints, he can almost see the pocket-sized Savior nodding in an understanding way.

“I know it was a sin. But if it helps, I didn’t enjoy it much. Sex is—weird.”

Jesus doesn’t seem to have an opinion on that.

“Do you know what day it is? It’s my birthday. The Kelvin was fourteen years ago today.”

He would like to think his heavenly father is sad about this. But the plastic face remains calm.

Sudden warmth in Jim’s chest. His heart glows, races. Then warmth flashes into heat, heading south
with a vengeance. It arcs through his body like sexy electricity. This isn’t a blessing from Jesus. This is—sh*t.

*Oh hell no.* Jim recognizes the feeling, though comparing it with what he felt during his fumbling encounters with Pete is like comparing water with white lightning.

He is confronted by the reality of feeling his mother have sex with her old boyfriend (George’s too—how the hell does that work?), and he’s out the window so fast he almost forgets his coat.

He took Sam’s airbike to get here. He is a year away from qualifying for a license, but it’s too cold even for the robocops. The landscape is entirely deserted, just bare ground interrupted by patchy drifts of snow. The fiery eye of the setting sun turns the sky pink, as pink as the sky on another world, in another life.

He gets off the bike. A shock of wind leaves his teeth chattering and his vision blurred, but he still walks forward. He lets his toes hang over the edge. He doesn’t look down.

He watches the pink sky slowly darken, become the vault of night. It’s the color of his mother’s eyes, a dark blue that draws you deeper in. The color of his own eyes.

*God help me, he’s just like me, only a boy and more fucked up. Can you imagine what he’ll be like at twenty-one? I don’t want that. It would have been better if we’d lost him in the desert on Tarsus IV. Better that I had terminated.*

What happened on the Excelsior, he didn’t plan it. After they got caught, it didn’t matter that it wouldn’t be happening again. It was just sex, it didn’t mean anything. Why did Pete freak out?

*He was in love with you, and then he got to touch you. When they said he would never see you again, never touch you, he couldn’t handle it. That’s why he cut himself up. It was you, Jim. The scary thing you are. The awful things you do.*

Kevin should have escaped. He was smart enough to see what was coming, brave enough to face the desert. He could throw away an apple when he was starving. But he couldn’t let Jim go.

*You killed the first boy you ever loved. You almost killed the first boy you fucked. Your father, you killed him coming into this world. It’s your fault your mother never put her knives away. How much more, Jimmy? How much blood to justify the existence of you?*

“No more,” Jim whispers. “No existence.”

He lets himself feel it. He can’t help it. He can’t stand it anymore, this huge black hole in the middle of him. He tried to fill it with sex and then he tried to fill it with food, but it just keeps screaming. Jim will never have happiness or peace. They are buried in the sands of Tarsus IV.

The wind howls. Jim sways. He’s almost ready, one good push is all he needs. Leap without looking into nothing. Fall fast into the depths, never to be found. Would she even try?

It’s the image of his mother’s lovely, merciless face that sends him. He does not look. He leaps.

The minute his feet touch air, he realizes it was a mistake. A single screaming word in his mind, NONONONONODONTWANTNO. Life is supposed to be flashing before his eyes, but all he can see is death. It’s so much worse than he imagined. The darkness inside him is nothing to this. This is
bottomless and black and forever. This is wrong. He knows—he doesn’t know how—that it isn’t supposed to end like this. Too late. He is falling, falling, hands clawing at nothing, lost forever, beyond hope. No one can save him, not Winnie or Sam or George or Jesus, he’s—

“Ooof!”

He’s hit the ground like a fat sack of bricks.

Jim lies there for a long time, taking shallow breaths. Partly it’s because the wind has been knocked out of him and he can’t breathe deeper. Partly it’s because he’s too paralyzed with shock. Mostly it’s because his mind is racing, trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

When his eyes fix on the narrow road winding up from where he is, he understands. He didn’t stop the airbike at his favorite brooding point, but twenty meters further down. If he had jumped at the usual place, he would be food for buzzards by now. But at this point in the gorge, there’s a lip of land that creates the bed of the service road which allows access for mining machinery. Jim’s big leap was five meters at best. How did he ever mistake a short drop for the abyss?

Then he sees. He starts to laugh. It hurts his bruised ribs, but he can’t stop. It’s so fucking funny when you think about it. Poor sad Jim ending it all—bullshit. He knew. He’s been coming here for years, he knows every curve of the cliff, every dip in the ground. Maybe he didn’t let himself remember for awhile, but inside was the truth. (It had to be—nobody saved him. Nobody cares.) It was all a game, like putting an interactive vid on the comscreen and pretending he’s an Orion gladiator or a Roman centurion. Cinematic, but completely fake.

He gets up, brushing at the snow and mud on his pants. He starts trudging up the road back to his bike. His chest still aches like a giant stomped on it, but he’ll live.

This wasn’t death. Jim has seen death—this wasn’t it. George Kirk might have gone out in a blaze of self-sacrifice, but not his fair-haired boy. Jim is too much his mother’s son, a survivor.

He stops, watching the rising moon, its fat white crescent like a Cheshire cat’s grin. He feels his heart pound in his chest. He’s actually glowing, and not with old people’s borrowed sex mojo. He’s bruised all to shit and freezing his ass off, but for the first time in months, he’s not hungry.

Jim looks down at his hands, which are stinging worse than the rest of him in the frigid air. He sees the blood on his palms, deep cuts from the rough road. Blood looks black in the moonlight, not how it is in the vids at all. But this was better than a vid. He looks at the black oozing from him, and that’s when he really gets it. He would scream the truth to the stars if he had breath.

It’s all a game. Life, sex, people, feelings—a bunch of games. Some are more fun than others, some seem more real than the rest. But in the end, none of it means anything. Not dead lovers or missing brothers, hero fathers or scary mothers. It’s why Winnie won’t give up her knives, her vodka, her men. They keep her in the game.

Jim is going to play, too. He’s going to be better at it than she is. She will be amazed.

He looks up at the grinning moon, feeling his own lips stretch. He feels good. He feels ready. Of course, this means he is a bad person. Not finger-chopping or heart-stabbing bad, not yet, though Pete’s wrist cuts must count for something. Jim is a bad person, a dangerous one, but whatever. It’s such a relief, not caring. He can fall over the cliff whenever he wants: He will win every time. It’s the people below him who better watch out.

For the next seven years, Jim doesn’t care about anything. He’s too busy falling.
xxxviii: Spock

Jim Kirk was smiling in his sleep. At first, Spock had not seen the expression for what it was. He mistook the stretching of lips for a grimace of pain; he put out a hand to wake him. Then Jim laughed. He was still deeply asleep, but the happy noise was unmistakable. Spock had drawn back, resuming his observation. Shameful indulgence, when there were a dozen things he could be doing while Jim took much-needed rest. Spock meant to begin doing them 15.41 minutes ago. Yet he remained on the edge of the bed, frozen as a man in a trance, watching. He had taken his fill of Jim repeatedly this morning, and in leaving him would only travel as far as the study. But Spock could not bring himself to go. Irrational, perhaps, but not surprising.

He was truly attached. This was another truth he had not seen at first glance, but his vision was clearer now. Spock stopped deceiving himself last night, as he walked home in the icy darkness. Oral sex in a filthy alley, combative coitus in an Academy training room, even his enjoyment of the squalid Orion nightclub could be explained by the Fever’s expected lowering of inhibitions. But combat with the Orion gladiator—that was not expected. Vulcan males nearing their Blood Fever suffered from increased irritability. Sometimes they took offense over small slights, and the result could be dramatic. But Spock was not merely irritated last night.

He came so close to killing Raymon. Only he, and perhaps Sherron, knew how close. Had the club’s guards come five minutes later, Spock would be pondering the matter in a detention cell.

Prior to plak tow, the killing rage occurred for only one of two reasons. First, while insanity was not as common in Vulcans as in some other races, it could occur. In particular, the pressures of pon farr would expose pre-existing weakness. Of course, there was a second, less grim, reason. When a true-bonded Vulcan nearing the Fever saw his mate threatened, or if he felt his claim of possession was being challenged, his response was always extreme. The challenge need not be obvious or intentional to provoke a violent reaction: a flirtatious look, a too-lingering touch of the hand, even a teasing remark could be enough. For this reason, married men usually avoided socializing in the last weeks before plak tow. It was too easy to lose control.

Spock was not insane. That left one possibility. Raymon’s challenge had been both obvious and intentional, and Spock responded as a bonded male would. How such a bond could have formed without his knowledge—last night he nearly gave himself hypothermia trying to understand it.

Legends spoke of such soul-deep, instantaneous bonds. Of the many conflicting tales told about Sitaan and Kitaan, one element remained the same: They were always of one mind and one heart. Whether they were brothers who met in the womb or lovers who met many years after, from the moment they first saw each other, they saw no one else. But these were only stories. Spock did not care what Sherron, who had her own reasons for believing, might argue. Such things did not happen outside of myth. There had to be another, logical explanation for this sudden devotion.

When he returned to campus this morning, he had intended to avoid Jim for the time being, until he found an answer that wasn’t a plot borrowed from Romulan pornography. (Retellings of the old legends were common on both Romulus and Vulcan, though the lurid videos Stonn collected bore little resemblance to their third-year history lectures.) The separation from Jim would pain him—he did not like to dwell on how much—but he had considered it a rational denial.

Then Spock reached his front door. Jim was waiting, beautiful and forlorn, need radiating from him like delicious perfume. When he pleaded with Spock not to end their affair, it took much of Spock’s
remaining control to avoid laughter. He was seconds away from throwing Jim over his shoulder like a lust-addled warlord ravishing a peasant boy (too much like the scene in *Chains of Desire*: one of Stonn’s favorites). Laughable, indeed. But who was the butt of the joke?

Spock had never resented his single state. Indeed, he was grateful to his mother for preventing an early betrothal. Being bound up before he was old enough to know himself, commanded by his father to accept a suitable girl, cosseted by counselors until he could stomach her: He would not be shaped so. As they reached maturity, Spock had watched Stonn attempt to fully commit himself to T’Pring, an experience that must have been very like watching a woman undergo the ancient Terran practice of foot-binding. Seeing his dearest friend break himself to a mold that was unnatural, excruciating—he was glad to have been absent on Terra for much of it.

Spock had not intended to choose a true partner until he was much older. If, indeed, he ever chose one: The possibilities of *Kolinahr*, hard and shining as white firestone, still dazzled his inner vision. Life was long, and there was time enough to explore the galaxy without and the universe within. Both journeys were possible, if one journeyed alone.

Spock reached out. Gently, he brushed two fingers over Jim’s forehead. As always, Jim’s skin was cool to the touch. But as Spock continued touching, there was warmth. One that suffused his entire body, seeming to reach down into the cold, lonely core of his deepest being. The longer he felt it, the harder it was to imagine being without it, whatever plans it might disrupt.

If he could only know the why of this, he could be at peace. It would not be simple, making a place for Jim in his life. He was more than aware of Jim’s reputation: Many would think him a fool. He did not care if others understood, but he must understand. Who was this man? Spock desired him to the point of desperation, and he did not know. Jim Kirk gave the impression of complete candor, the openness of one who does not care deeply about anything. But it was not so. There were many things in Jim’s eyes. For all their crystalline clarity, there were shadows lurking in the depths. Spock had seen some of them, but he would—he must—see everything.

His touch on Jim’s face became firmer, with a serious purpose. He knew what he was doing was not quite right; Jim had not given permission. But Jim was Terran, he lacked perspective. He had never been taught the Disciplines, he did not appreciate the rewards of self-examination. If Spock could guide him, it would help him. But Spock must map the course first. He must see.

With the ease of endless habit, Spock’s hand came into position: two fingers on Jim’s forehead, two on his cheek, the thumb underneath, bracing all. He closed his eyes. At first there was only darkness, but then, slowly, light—pale, silvery, occluded. The Terran moon, small and seeming so fragile in its crescent form. Jim was dreaming, but it was a dream that was really memory. He was dreaming of the moon, looking up at it and laughing. But it was not real laughter, his smile was as frozen as the moon’s. It was not a smile but a grimace of pain. He is in pain, so much—

“What are you doing?”

Spock’s eyes flew open, his invading fingers instantly jerking back.

Too late. Jim was aware, emerged from sleep with shocking suddenness. Clear blue eyes were fixed on Spock with a look that was cold and watchful. It was a look Spock had not seen before. The boy seemed twenty years older, a man Spock did not know.

Willing his heart to beat more slowly, Spock drew back and said, “You appeared feverish. Apologies if I intruded.”

That cold gaze continued a moment longer, searching Spock’s face. But a Vulcan learns to control
his features almost before he learns to talk, and Spock withstood the scrutiny easily.

Soon enough, Jim’s face relaxed into its habitual grin. Blue eyes beamed as if incapable of doing anything else. “You were worried about me. That is so cute. Next thing you know, you’ll be knitting me socks and worrying if I’m getting enough Vitamin C.”

“Such motherish schemes did not occur to me. Given the intoxicants you have recently ingested, my concerns were logical.”


“You mother does not worry about you?”

Jim blinked, seeming to come further awake. “She has her moments.” He sat up. “Shit, I’m tired. How long was I out?”

“57.52 minutes.”

“Cool. What’s for lunch?”

“You should sleep, Jim.”

“Um, I just did?”

“Insufficient rest, following considerable exertion.”

Jim licked his lips. “Exertion. What a nice word it.” His gaze moved over Spock with stomach-tightening intent. “Let’s eat, then we’ll exert ourselves some more. I think I’ve got the multiple orgasm thing down, but practice makes—” He stopped. “Hey, why am I getting the disapproving eyebrow? I thought Vulcans liked dedicated learners.”

“There is a difference between dedicated and foolhardy. You will make yourself ill.”

“And you’ll be there to lay hands upon my fevered brow. A match made in Heaven. Wait, do Vulcans believe in Heaven?”

“Our mythology does speak of an afterlife. But it is not much like Christian Paradise. The Greek Elysium would be a closer analogue.”

“*The ghosts journeyed on together, following Hermes the Deliberer down the dark paths of decay. Past Ocean’s stream, past the White Rock, past the Gates of the Sun and the region of dreams they went, and before long they reached the meadow of asphodel, which is the dwelling-place of souls, the disembodied wraiths of men.*”

Jim’s voice was soft but his eyes were softer. His skin shone like pale marble in the light. For a moment Spock could only gaze at him. Then he cleared his throat and said:


“I grew up in the sticks. We make our own fun out there.” Jim smirked. “It isn’t all screwing in the haystacks. Though there is something to be said for that. Vulcans have no idea.”

“You are misinformed. The rural areas of Vulcan can be quite unruly.”

“Hellraising Vulcan hillbillies? I don’t believe it.”
“Perhaps they would not appear so by Terran standards. But Vulcans from more urbane areas find their behavior less than ideal. This is particularly true during the Harvest Festival. It honors the old Vulcan mother goddess, T’Lyn. Around the Lesser Sea, the rites can become—chaotic.”

“Too much k’vass chaotic, or are we talking wicker men?”

“There are no ritual burnings—not for thousands of years. But the feast of T’Khut features athletic contests of particular intensity. Most sporting events forbid the spilling of actual blood, but on this one night, in this one place, it is allowed. Not to the point of mortality, but T’Khut must be appeased.”

“I thought it was the festival of T’Lyn.”

“T’Khut is T’Lyn’s daughter. In some of the older stories, she is an aspect of T’Lyn herself. Many of our gods are dual-natured. T’Lyn is the kindly and generous Goddess of Sky and Soil, who brings children and causes grain to grow. She is identified with the sun. T’Khut is a moon goddess, the Watcher of the Outer Dark. She is scarred and vengeful. The reason for her injury varies from legend to legend, but the rage does not. Perhaps it does not seem logical, a mother goddess who is also a warrior, the giver of life and the bringer of doom, but—”

“No.” Jim’s voice was strangely quiet. “I get it.” Then he shrugged and said, “Jesus, Vulcans are hardcore. You have the whole galaxy fooled—I’d be pissed if I weren’t so impressed.”

Spock felt his spine stiffening. “We do not lie.”

“You don’t tell the whole truth, either. It’s your prerogative. Everybody’s got secrets.”

Spock tilted his head at him. “Do you?”

Jim grinned. “Oh, I’m a terrible person. Bad to the fucking bone. But you knew that.”

“I do not know it.” Spock paused. “I do not feel it.”

“Yeah? What do you feel?”

Spock reached out, fingers brushing Jim’s cheek. “Pain.”

“Well, I did bang my head against the wall pretty hard when you were—”

“Stop.” Spock’s hand cupped Jim’s face. “You are not a fool. Why must you speak like one?”

“I don’t know.” Jim was serious now. “It’s better, I guess.”

“Than what?” Spock asked, one thumb rubbing over Jim’s cheek. Yes, he could feel it again. He did not need to concentrate. Pain like knife cuts to the soul. Pain and something else, dark, very dark, but how it glittered! Power, as fierce and shining as black firestone.

“The truth,” Jim said.

“What truth?” Spock could barely speak the words, his whole being enthralled, dazzled by what he felt inside of Jim Kirk. He was such a mystery, this boy, so much hidden in those apparently shallow depths. Looking inside of him was like walking in utter darkness, only to see the moon rise. Not the Terran moon, silver and cold, but T’Khut, red as damnation, fires erupting on her scarred and lovely face. Resplendent in her rage, astonishing in her agonies. Pain, so much—

“Cut it out! If you want to grope me, I can think of a dozen better ways to do it.”
Jim pulled back, frowning petulantly. All pain and power were gone, submerged with such skill that it was difficult to believe they ever existed. He was cunning, this boy. No, not a boy: a man. One Spock did not know. He would learn. He had the means and motive to be patient.

He held out his hand in a conciliatory gesture. “You are right. We should eat.”

Jim nodded. “Good idea. Sorry I snapped at you—I can be kind of a dick when my blood sugar is crashing. Bones used to carry granola bars in his bag—talk about your motherly bullshit.”

Spock got up, tying his robe more firmly around himself, and went to the kitchen. He paused in front of the replicator, considering. None of the choices were appetizing. He opened the cooler and took out the remains of the casserole he made for Sherron yesterday. He hesitated.

Jim came up behind him. “That looks interesting,” he said, peering over Spock’s shoulder. “It’s better the first day.”

“Seems okay to me.”

“I am not sure the spices will agree with you. Bar-kas, in particular—”

“I grew up eating my Aunt Trang’s cooking. Her pho would blow the top of your head off. Awesome stuff, though. I’ll have to make it for you some time, if I can figure out the vegan equivalents.”

Spock nodded and put the casserole into the convective cooker.

“Can I do anything?”

Spock pointed him towards the cabinets which held the plates and cutlery. Jim set the table with alacrity, then went to the replicator for drinks. He dialed Spock’s preferred flavor of tea without needing to ask. He got water for himself, not Xix. Spock hoped that last night had left him with a permanent aversion to vices of Orion origin.

The casserole ready, Spock brought it to the table. Jim took a bite as soon as a portion appeared before him. He paused, pursing his lips. Then he took another, along with a swallow of water.

“You do not care for it.”

“It’s—different,” Jim said. “Bar-kas, is that the stuff that tastes like mustard? I wouldn’t have thought to pair it with plantains. And the egg noodles are kind of a shock, but what do I know?”

“I will get you something else,” Spock said, reaching for the plate, but Jim jerked it back.

“It’s a sin to waste food,” he said, his eyebrows drawing together. “It’s fine.”

Spock, remembering the probable reason behind Jim’s stubbornness, argued no further.

The meal proceeded quietly, but not awkwardly. It was a companionable scene, both of them tousled and half-dressed, concentrating on their plates. A rare thing, to be able to share a meal with someone and not feel pressed to make polite conversation. Spock had experienced such intimacy with only one other, and not recently with him. During his visit last month, Stonn had had too much to say, some of it his plans for the estates now that his father was retiring, the rest wedding preparations. Spock had nodded on cue and done lesson plans in his head.

“It’s really not bad,” Jim said presently, finishing the last few bites on his plate. “You’ll have to give
me the recipe. Bones and I take turns cooking on the weekends. This will give him a thrill.”

“Do you think your friend will enjoy such exotic flavors?”

“Don’t let the country doctor bit fool you. Bones is a lot more cosmopolitan than he likes to let on.” Jim ran his tongue over his teeth. “Just ask your cousin. She stayed over last night.”

Spock was not surprised. Since the age of fifteen, Sherron had rarely failed to acquire what she wanted, though the target of her desires was invariably inappropriate. Spock had long suspected that was the point. Sherron never took the easy path if a harder journey could be accomplished with enough effort and planning. Unfortunate, that her forays were so rarely worth the trouble.

Spock thought his face was neutral, but perhaps something of his feelings was evident, for Jim said, “I think they make a cute couple. Bones needs a woman capable of kicking his ass from time to time. He runs right over the nice ones.”

“That is not very mannerly.”

“Somehow he manages to make it seem almost chivalrous. Must be a Southern thing. Anyway, he can’t help it: He’s psychotically dominant. Like, put-him-in-jackboots-and-call-him-Master dominant.” Jim’s voice was wry, but his expression was affectionate. Spock raised an eyebrow.

“And your relationship has remained platonic?”

“I told you, he isn’t into dick.” Jim thought a moment. “I mean, everybody experiments, right? But Bones is really all about the ladies.”

“You have never seduced a heterosexual male?”

“Once or twice.” Jim grinned. “A few lesbians, too. But not Bones.”

“Why?”

“Why do you care?” Jim tilted his head. “Are you worried he’s gonna steal me away?”

“I am merely curious. From an objective standpoint, Leonard McCoy is a very attractive man. Your relationship is of long duration. It is clear you care for him. You know that he cares for you, perhaps to an excessive extent. Yet there has been no physical expression of your feelings. You have not attempted to impose your desires on him. Given your usual habits, that is strange. Almost shocking.”

Spock took a breath and made himself be silent, but too late. Jim was watching him intently.

“You are jealous. Not because I’ve slept with Bones, but because I haven’t. That’s a new one.”

Jim got out of his chair. He knelt beside Spock. “I don’t impose my desires on anybody,” he said. “I just make people see the possibilities, that’s all.”

His hands slid slowly up Spock’s robe. “I used to sit in Command Systems just staring at you. I’m really not that bad at schematics, you know, but I couldn’t concentrate. All I could think is, what would he do if I walked up to the podium and started sucking him off?”

“I would have called Security.”

“Sure, sure,” Jim said. “But what if I’d waited? What if I’d gone to your office hours?” He rubbed at the silk covering Spock’s thighs, hands moving lightly but surely. “I come in, I don’t say a word. I go to your desk, I drop to my knees. What would you have done? Think about it.”
What a wanton, brazen, foolish fantasy. In Spock’s immaculate fifth-floor office, with its square Academy furniture and serious Vulcán art. Nothing as it shouldn’t be, not a schematic or a scroll out of place, except for the boy at Spock’s feet. Jim is naked and flushed, his uniform a puddle of scarlet on the floor. He is on his knees, working hard, grunting in effort and pleasure as Spock, almost fully dressed in his lecturer’s tunic, gives him strict instruction. Colleagues and cadets are passing by in the polished halls outside. The door is not locked, the comscreen is on. Anyone could discover them at any moment. What a terrible thing that would be. How humiliating.


“Yes, wrong,” Jim said. “That’s why you’re as hard as a rock.”

He opened Spock’s robe and bent his head. A cool, clever tongue started tracing down Spock’s swollen member. Jim sucked one of the slickening spines between his teeth, and Spock hissed and grabbed the edge of the dining table. There was a loud cracking sound as the plaswood bent.

Spock felt laughter on his quivering flesh. “Careful, I bet they make you pay for—ow!” Jim cut off as Spock grabbed the top of his head, pulling his mouth back to where it needed to be.

“Okay, I can take a hint.” Jim looked up, eyes glittering. “But you have to do something for me. Use that eidetic memory of yours and picture it. Close your eyes and really see.”

Spock closed his eyes. He saw. The pale slant of sunlight as it comes in the big window on the far wall of the office. The antique scroll by the desk with a painting of Mount Seleya, a leaving gift from his mother—no, wait. Do not think of Amanda, not now. Think instead of the smell, the oily orange scent left by the cleaning droids. Think of the smell and feel of the recycled air, slightly stale and always too cool. Hear the clomp of boots outside, and the susurrant sound of Standard, occasionally punctuated by the squeaking, clicking and singing of alien speech. See the blinking lights of the comscreen, the winking gleam of the unlocked door. But mostly, see the boy at your feet (the boy who is here but also there, inside the fantasy but outside it). Smell his skin, the tangy salt of his sweat. Feel his fine fair hair as it falls through your hands. Feel his fingers hard on your thighs, his cool silky lips wrapped around the most vital part of you, teasing and tormenting with the slide of tongue and scrape of teeth. Feel him, this beautiful and dangerous man, his fierce and brilliant energies flooding your senses, taking you over. On his knees like a slave, but it is you who have been captured, you will never be free, not ever, you do not wish to be so long as he never stops touching you, ever—

*Let go. Come for me, sweetheart. Don’t think, just feel, feel me—*

His climax is a spiral of pleasure, pulling him down, down, out of the sunlight. He is not in his office, nor in his home, he is somewhere other, falling into a fierce and brilliant darkness.

It seemed like hours before he emerged. But when he glanced at the chrono, only 8.37 minutes had passed since he first closed his eyes. He stared at Jim, who grinned.

“Wow. That looked like a fun trip.”

Spock shook his head to clear the last of the black sparkles from his vision. He gave Jim an assessing look, gaze moving downwards. He was unhappy to see that his partner was amused, but not satisfied. “We should have used the meditation tea. You could have accompanied me.”

“Think I’ve had enough Vulcán flavors for today,” Jim said, winking and wiping his lips. “Anyway, I can picture it just fine, Che and I messed around in your office once.”
“What?”

Jim’s eyes widened. “Oops. Probably shouldn’t have said that. Never mind.”

“Cadet Kirk. I want you to tell me precisely what happened. That’s an order.”

“Fine, if you want to be that way about it. You were on Vulcan for the High Holidays. You left Che the keycode and a bunch of new schematics to go over. I brought him dinner one night and, well, I guess I was dessert.” Seeing Spock’s face: “We did wipe off the desk after.”

“Of all the unconscionable, supercilious presumption—”

“Let’s not start the five-syllable insults. No point busting a vocal cord: You already fired him.”

Spock regarded him a moment.

“Achebe Chang has been punished,” he said. “You have not.”

Jim went very still. His eyes were very bright. “What exactly did you have in mind, Spo—”

He cut off with a cry as Spock, moving with all possible speed, twisted Jim’s arm behind his back and pushed him face down towards the table. A tearing sound as he jerked off Jim’s robe.

“Commander,” Spock said. “You will call me Commander. When I allow you to speak.” He whipped the belt from his robe and, before Jim could even cry out, gagged him. He brought the dangling ends down and bound Jim’s hands behind his back. He ran a possessive hand over the boy’s naked back. He was still mostly in control, but sparks of green were igniting at the edges of his vision. They burned ever-brighter when he thought of Jim bent over a square metal desk, Achebe Chang behind him, taking what did not belong to him.

“I fired him,” Spock said. “I knew you were not cheating. He was not helping you more than he should. But I could not bear it. Seeing him, knowing what he was doing. Everything he was doing to you. That was a year ago, Jim. There was no Fever then. What is wrong with me?”

Jim could not answer. Spock would not expect one, even if he could. There were no words for this. He felt it building once more, though it could not be more than three minutes since his last climax. As hungry as if he had not touched Jim in weeks, as if he had never touched him. The Fever was screaming within, demanding that he take the boy, take him this moment. In Spock’s rooms or in the middle of an Academy lecture hall, a thousand cadets looking on, Spock would take him. That final image made the Fever even hungrier and more desperate. Let them see. Let them all see that Jim belongs to him, to Spock alone and no one else—

Dishes and cutlery crashed to the floor as Spock swept them off the table. He bent Jim over it. There was no time for finesse or foreplay, he must be inside of him now. The green haze in front of his eyes was thicker, wilder with every passing second; if it were not satisfied soon, he would have no control at all. His only hope was he was so wet with need, Sitaan’s swords so dripping and ready, that he would not hurt Jim more than need be. Perhaps their previous encounters had left Jim ready enough. Spock would be sorry if he hurt him, so sorry. But he could not bear it.

Jim gave a muffled groan as Spock entered him, thrusting hard, deep, and then again, harder and deeper. He soon lost knowledge of how often or deep he went, it could not be deep enough. He felt another climax building inside, it paced and clamored like a caged beast, but it could not find release. This was not enough, nothing was enough, Sitaan help him—

Jim arched back, getting one hand free. He tore the bandage from his throat. Spock smelled the
coppery sting of human blood, and the beast within slavered. He jerked Jim close and bit deep, red blood flooding his mouth, rich and sweet. The climax roared through him, bringing him to his knees. The green haze swirled over all.

Some time later, he was almost afraid to open his eyes. But when he did, Jim was sitting on the floor next to him. He was still naked but now ungagged, both of his hands free. His blue eyes were bright, his cheeks flushed. He smelled of human seed, and his penis was wet and flaccid. He was grinning as blood trickled down his neck. Completely satisfied.

And Spock understood. “You told me that story on purpose. You and Achebe in my office.”

Jim nodded.

“Is it true?”

“Does it matter?”

For a moment Spock couldn’t speak. “This was a game to you?”

“To be precise, it was a scene. Guess we should have worked out a safeword ahead of time, but fuck it. Would have ruined the momentum.”

“You are a child of the Devil.”

Jim stretched, cracking his spine. “I’m not the one with pointed ears.”

“On Vulcan, the Devil is a pretty boy with blue eyes. One who drives you mad.”

Spock put his hands to his forehead. The Fever was banked within, but not as much as it should have been, for all they had done today. The Blood Fever was close, so close. It could not be more than a week or two away. Perhaps only days.

He rubbed hard at his temples. “I could have hurt you.”

“Aw, come on now—”

Spock grabbed Jim’s wrist. He felt the pulse beneath the skin speed up, matching his own. Oh yes, *plak tow* was close. So close. Even Jim’s body knew it. “You must listen to me. Please.”

“Okay,” Jim said, looking uncertain.

“Last night was not an isolated event. You cannot incite the Fever with impunity. Not now.” He drew a slow finger across Jim’s wounded throat. “If I hurt you, truly hurt you, I would not recover from it. It would end me, do you understand? Do not risk so much for a game.”

Jim’s uncertain expression became stricken. I took him a moment to reply.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I really am. I—I don’t know why I do this stuff. It’s like I can’t help it.”

He leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on Spock’s mouth. He tasted of Vulcan flavors, the spices of the casserole and of Spock himself. But the kiss was sweet, so sweet. Jim’s winking impishness was gone, the gesture true and painfully so. Spock’s anger over Jim’s carelessness evaporated as if it had never been, replaced by a warmth that was only partly about the Fever. Oh, this boy! Jim Kirk was maddening when he played games, but his sincerity could break you.

Spock pulled back, looking at Jim closely. He saw the dark shadows under Jim’s eyes. He felt the
too-rapid beat of his pulse. “You must rest,” he said. “You cannot think clearly if you are exhausted. I need you to think clearly, ashal-veh. The time will come soon when I cannot.”

Jim nodded, docile in his remorse. He let Spock lead him to the bath. After a brief and very unerotic shower—they were both still too shaken by recent events—Jim allowed Spock to clean and re-bandage his throat. After, he got into bed without further complaint.

Spock adjusted the coverlet around Jim’s bare shoulders and dimmed the windows in the main room against the afternoon light. He had barely finished the tasks when he heard a light snoring from the bed. He wanted to stay and watch again, a need that was a physical ache. But he did not. If he remained within sight of Jim, he would only continue to arouse and disturb them both.

He went into his study, determined to put in a real day’s work. If the last twelve hours were any indication, he must work while the Fever allowed him to do so. It would not for much longer.

He sat at his desk and brought up his message files on the comscreen. He had placed a privacy order early this morning, so that he and Jim would not be disturbed by the computer, but now he must interact with the world again. It was not a particularly pleasant prospect. He would have to make arrangements for personal leave today. His possessiveness of Jim and his impatience with others would only increase from now until plak tow began.

Spock’s eyes scanned his messages. There were the usual texts related to teaching and projects but only one video, from Nyota Uhura. Spock felt a twinge of remorse but did not open it. He would speak with her tonight, or perhaps tomorrow. They must speak at length. He could not continue to deceive her. Though they had never discussed monogamy, he knew that she would not wish to share him, and he did not wish to be shared. Nyota was logical enough to accept the inevitable, but she would not appreciate being replaced by Jim Kirk. She had mentioned him on several occasions, and the remarks had not been favorable. It pained Spock to think that their friendship would suffer because of his connection with Jim. But it could not be helped.

Spock closed the message box and brought up the files for his Introduction to Command Systems course. Twelve new student projects had been submitted since last evening, and he would grade them now. If more came in next week, the teaching assistant taking over the class could attend to those. Perhaps the administration would ask Achebe Chang. Ironic, but not unexpected. Achebe was a more than competent instructor, Spock could admit it now. The office story could not be true: Jim was that reckless, Achebe was not. Spock would continue to admonish Jim about his impulses. It would not be an easy task, but Spock was patient. Once the Fever was over, he would possess his full faculties. He and Jim would have nothing but time. Decades of it.


Spock raised an eyebrow. That meant a live video transmission from beyond Alpha Centauri, in the Eridani System. Spock had only ever received live messages from one person on one planet in that location. If Sarek was spending 100 credits a minute to talk to him by encrypted subspace transmission, then matters were serious. Someone was dead.

Spock arranged his robe, belting it tighter. He smoothed his hair and his expression. “Begin.”

His father’s face appeared, the image only slightly warped by the sixteen light years separating them. Sarek’s face was even more solemn than usual, his vulpine features careworn. A close relative then, T’Pau perhaps. She had been suffering from terrible lung infections all last year.

“Father, is everything—” Spock stopped, clearing his throat and correcting his posture. “Sa-mehk,
“We will have this conversation in English,” Sarek said. “I know how entranced you are by all things Terran. Especially at present.”

Spock’s stomach always tightened when he talked to his father, but now the knotting redoubled. Through some effort he kept his face blank and said, “I am sorry. I do not take your meaning.”

“Do you not? I will clarify.”

Sarek reached forward, touching the screen. His face disappeared, replaced by another image. Spock looked, perplexed. His eyes widened as he recognized himself. The video was silent, but he could see he was fighting someone, about the same height but blonder, a bit more muscular. Spock was winning. He batted his opponent to the training mat as if the boy weighed no more than a gespar. Spock leapt on top of him.

*T’Lyn, mother of all that is good and merciful, help me.* Spock pressed a hand to his forehead, turning away. He could not concentrate on how or why such footage existed, or how it had come into his father’s hands. In that moment, all Spock heard was the roaring of his pulse in his ears. This was like falling from a great height, into an abyss of unknown depths. Everything he had worked for, all he had accomplished, gone. The respect he had labored to earn from Sarek over the last seven years and seemed on the point of achieving, swept away in a second. Spock found copulating like an animal in a public place—with a Terran, too. All of it captured for his father’s unforgiving gaze. He would never recover from this, not if he lived to be three hundred.

“I believe you take my point,” Sarek said. His face had reappeared in place of the surveillance footage. It was no relief. Sarek knew. He had *seen.*

“You—” Spock swallowed. “You saw the entire video?” The question was idiotic, he knew it as he pronounced it. He could not help himself. Even now he clung to some small hope that his father had stopped when he realized what the video contained. That Sarek had shown mercy.

“I reviewed all of the available data. It would have been remiss not to do so.”

“Of course. We cannot be remiss.” He could imagine it, Sarek in his private study, surrounded by the priceless relics of their ancestors, watching the sordid, grainy images of his son plowing a Terran boy. Studying every grimace and grunt, each thrust and bite, with rapt attention. One had to laugh at the absurdity. Spock felt a strange smile flit over his mouth, too late to stifle it.

“Spock,” Sarek said, his brow suddenly thunderous. “This is no time for levity.”

His father knew. His father had *seen.* One must laugh at that, or weep. But he was not allowed to do either. Calling on the discipline of a quarter-century, Spock straightened his shoulders and said, “Apologies, Sir. I was momentarily overcome. I am—most surprised by this disclosure.”

“No more than I was.” A note of peevishness had crept into Sarek’s voice.

“Indeed. May I ask its source?”

“The source is not relevant. I have been informed that you will not be further exposed, so long as the behavior stops immediately. I have given assurances that it will be.”

“You have given assurances.” Spock could not quite keep his tone respectful.

“As your legal guardian, it is my right. Furthermore, it is my responsibility. Must I draw you a
schematic? Do you not realize the damage that would be done if this video were made public?”

It was the reasoning of every loyal Vulcan: The Fever must remain a secret. Sarek’s spies on Terra were legion, but it could have been any Vulcan who betrayed Spock; they would feel it was their civic duty. Three thousand years of precedent declared it.

Sarek went on with all the implacability of a patriarch. “Your conduct in this matter has been disgraceful. You did not inform me of your condition and request assistance. You attempted no reasonable arrangements of your own. Instead, you began a dangerous affair with a Terran, one incapable of understanding your condition or accommodating your needs. In doing so, you have jeopardized the reputation of our entire race. I am disappointed, Spock. Deeply disappointed.”

Spock bowed his head, once again dislocated. He is not in his rooms on Terra, the ones given to him because of his accomplishments, his status as a Starfleet commander of sterling reputation. He is a boy on Vulcan again, standing before the great desk in his father’s study. Sarek is seated there, the black signet ring of the House of Surak on his hand. He is looking at his son, his face handsome in a way Spock’s will never be—perfect, pure-blooded. Sarek’s expression is correct, his posture faultless, as he chastises Spock for another failure. Do not concentrate on the specific offense, it need not be recalled. All that matters is the shame. The realization that you are not worthy, you have never been. Since the day they made you, a creature impossible, imperfect.

Spock wanted to apologize again, but the words stuck in his throat. Unwanted and unworthy.

“My son.” Sarek’s voice was kinder now. “You are very young. Perhaps it is not so strange that your judgment is flawed. That is why you must now rely upon mine. You will return to Vulcan within the week. Stonn has been off-planet as well, but I have sent him a message, and I am certain that he will respond favorably. I have already made arrangements for you to use the guest cottage on the family compound. You will not be disturbed there, but help will be nearby if need be. I do not think you will require it: Your relationship with Stonn is of long duration.”

“He is to be married in the autumn.”

“We will be discreet. It is not entirely proper, but these are unusual circumstances. However, if you wish, I will engage a consoler. The indemnity fees will be high, but not insupportable. I did not think it the choice you would favor, but I will accommodate you.”

“It is not my choice. Nor is Stonn. Jim Kirk is——”

“Entirely unsuitable. He is Terran, for one, and——”

“Mother is Terran.”

“Amanda is my spouse.” Sarek looked hard at Spock. “Is Jim Kirk yours?”

Yes! He is. Spock swallowed the astonishing words before they could escape. Sarek already thought him foolish; there was no point in convincing him that he was insane. Spock took a breath and began again. “He is intelligent. His Psi-score is impressive. I am convinced that——”

“I am well aware of Kirk’s talents.” Sarek’s expression was stone.

“There is more to him than what you saw in the video. Much more.”

“So I have learned.”

Sarek tapped the screen again. Almost immediately, the incoming text chime sounded. “You do not
know your boy so well as you think. You have not had access to the proper data. Before you contemplate further defiance, I suggest you acquaint yourself with it.”

Jaw set, Spock stared at the small blinking message icon. Though he had been interested in Jim Kirk’s background for many days, he hated having it thrust on him in this manner. He resented the breach of privacy, both to Jim and to himself. This was their affair and no one else’s. Sarek had no right, no right at all. Except he did: Ten thousand years of legal precedent declared it so.

_Fuck legal precedent. This is bullshit._

The words were so clear in Spock’s ears that he actually glanced around, half-expecting to see Jim. There was no one in the room but himself, however. No rebellion but his own. How dare Sarek do this—take Jim away as if he were taking a toy from a spoiled child? Spock should be shocked at the depth of his rage, but he was not. Jim was _his._

He raised his chin. “With respect, I know Jim well. Whatever his background, it does not change the fact that he has been very accommodating of my condition. I do believe that he understands what I need, more than Stonn will. Certainly more than a consoler. Please, do not—” he paused, steadying his voice with painful effort. “Do not interfere. Allow me to arrange this as I see fit.”

“Your mind is clouded by the Fever, among other things. Your logic is not sound at present. We will proceed as I have outlined. You will not disobey me in this, _sa-kan._”

Spock flinched inwardly at the address, one used to a child, a small one. Sarek had not used it in many years. Spock could not see it as a sign of affection. He was not a little boy: He would _not_ be treated so. He looked down, trying to school his features, but Sarek knew him too well. Years of disappointment had made him expert in his son’s defiance, and how to respond.

“I have not informed your mother of this situation. I would be sorry to have to do so.”

Spock’s head jerked up. “You wouldn’t.”

But he knew that he would. There was little Sarek would not do to protect their family. Many a rival could attest to that. The head of the former House of Keth was no longer a warlord; he used lawsuits in place of swords, political influence instead of bloody campaigns. The results were the same: merciless annihilation.

Sarek stared at him through the dark depths of space, as arrogant and inexorable as Keth himself.

“I have given you a great deal of freedom, Spock. I have allowed you to play at being an adult, and this is the consequence of my indulgence. I will not make the same mistake twice. You will read the file and become aware of the extent of your folly. Then you will return home and attend to your condition in the proper manner. If you do not do this, my reaction will be—severe. You are more than acquainted with the resources at my disposal. Do not force me to use them.”

The image went dark, replaced by the brilliant blue of the desktop. But Spock could still see his father’s face. He would remember forever how Sarek had looked, what he had said. The shame would be as real a century from now as in this moment. Such was the curse of eidetic memory, the wretched persistence of the Disciplines.

Spock unclenched his hands. He saw crescents of green on his palms where he had dug his nails in. He would try to forget the rage. He might not succeed, but he would try. He always did.

He did not know yet what he would do about Sarek’s larger commands. He seemed incapable of contemplating anything beyond the next hour. But in that hour, he would obey his father in one
thing: He would read the file, he would know Jim Kirk. That was fated, if nothing else.

He reached out, touching the icon for Jim’s file. He began to read. Rather slowly at first, still somewhat reluctant even in this small acquiescence. But soon his attention was fully captured. He read faster and faster; he could not read fast enough.

“No,” he whispered. “It cannot be true.”

But he knew that it was. All of Spock’s doubts and questions about Jim answered in neat, merciless text. His father had proceeded with the care of a lawyer, there could be no logical denials. The full extent of Spock’s folly, explained with patient precision.

Sarek should have come to Terra. He should have acted as any warlord with a recalcitrant son. He should have taken the two-handed sword of their ancestors and struck Spock’s head from his body. It would have been kinder. Far kinder than this.
xxxix. Kirk

Kansas City, 2254

Jim glances at the back wall of the bar, checking the chrono again. A pretty impressive antique, advertising a product that hasn’t been made for at least 100 years, but the smirking neon camel only tells him what he already knows: Jess is really late. Of course, that’s sort of like saying Jess is breathing, but since she got clean last year she’s been working on the punctuality thing.

Jim is always on time, cold sober or stoned to the eyeballs, though the latter has been happening less and less over the last year. It isn’t fair to Jess, and anyway, Michael doesn’t like it. Jim has never been addicted to anything—except, as Jess has kindly remarked, his own drama—so it’s been easy enough to leave the hypos alone. You don’t need chemical excitement when Michael Quinn takes an interest in your career. It’s enough of a high just watching the man work.

Jesus, where the fuck is Jess? She convinced him to come out to this shithole on a Friday night, when there are a hundred more interesting things—people—he could be doing, and now she’s an hour late. He wouldn’t have bothered, but she nagged and nagged, her voice all high and breathy with nerves like she was fifteen again, making eyes at him over one of her mom’s apple pies.

Please, Jimmy. It’s really important. No, I can’t say it over the phone. Will you just come out already? You can put off getting your dick sucked for a couple of hours.

He can’t, actually. It’s been a bitch of a week, sitting up until two every night making sure he has the vocab down, not to mention the verb tenses, which are the stuff of nightmares. Orion Prime’s tenses change not just for time, but also according to the gender and the status of both the speaker and the listener. God help you if you speak to an Orion male like he is female or a male of lesser status—people have had their balls cut off for less.

What’s more, the pirates would be the least of Jim’s worries. Michael never raises his voice, never makes a violent move, but he can get this look that makes your dick want to crawl back into your stomach. Jim has never had it turned on him, and as far as he’s concerned, it would be really great if it never is. One way to ensure that is not to fuck up a major business deal.

Michael asked him to act as translator between the Syndicate and himself, and Jim is determined to translate the shit out of things. This isn’t like trying to follow a porn loop. He has to be letter-perfect, and after a month of giving himself migraines, he is. But the meeting is Sunday morning and it’s really stressing him out and if Jess makes him miss all the best action at the clubs, she’s going to be the one giving the blow job. It’s been awhile for them, and she’s hot and heavy with Sean Quinn these days, but fuck it. Sean is a whiny little pissant who would be digging ditches if Michael weren’t his uncle. Jim can take him—and her. Jess isn’t in love with him anymore, thank God, but that doesn’t change anything. A night with Jim is better than a year with Sean. On the most strung-out day of her life, Jess knows it.

If she blew him off for that cocksucker Sean, Jim is going to stab the both of them. No jury could possibly convict—

Somebody is watching him.

Jim looks up, shivering a bit as the silvery sensation goes crawling down his spine. He usually shrugs
off scrutiny. He’s been getting stared at since he was fifteen and lost the last of the apple pie fat. But this gaze is unusually intent. It’s not Jess, Jim would have noticed her already if she were anywhere near here. (He can’t feel her the way she can feel him, across big distances, and that’s just one of the differences between projective and receptive empathy. But stick him in a room blindfolded and earplugged, and he would know if she were there. It’s the same thing with anyone he knows well, and Jim knows Jessica Krider very, very well. Since they were fifteen.)

Jess isn’t here. Jim’s gaze sweeps the room like a searchlight. When he finds the source of the scrutiny, his scowl abruptly changes to a smirk. Hell-o, stranger.

He’s not Jim’s usual type: too blond, too whitebread cute. If Jim wants that, he may as well stay home with a mirror and masturbate. But the good thing about making your own rules is you can bend them, and this guy is definitely worth a little flexibility. Something in those pale blue eyes totally gets Jim’s motor going, a steely intensity entirely at odds with the aw-shucks good looks.

Jim is across the bar at roughly Warp 5, beer in hand.

“Hi,” he says. “Can I buy you a drink?” Not the most original line in the world, but yet another good thing about being Jim Kirk is that you don’t need a line, just a smile and really killer abs.

“I’ve got one,” the man says, but his face is inviting despite the rejection. Up close, Jim can take a better guess at his age. He’s older than Jim but not much older, still a few years shy of thirty. It’s hard to tell ages from faces these days. With all the hormone treatments and laser procedures, you’ve got senior citizens who can pass for thirtysomething in the right light. Better to trust to vibes, and this guy doesn’t vibe old. Just as well. Jim isn’t prejudiced, and one good thing about screwing older guys is they quickly clock to what Jim is all about: no relationship bullshit. But Jim does prefer fresh beef to aged as a rule, and this guy seems pretty with it.

“Cool. I’ll get the next round,” Jim says.

“And they say all the hospitality is down South.” Jim catches it this time, the slight lilt in the stranger’s Standard.

He tilts his head at him. “You’re not from around here,” he says. “I’m guessing, Ireland?”

“Good ear,” the man replies. “Dublin, as a matter of fact. I’m just passing through.”

Score. Out of towners are awesome. One hot night and the best excuse never to call again. The world is forever getting smaller, but 11,000 kilometers is still a hefty commute unless you’re a rich bastard who can afford a private transporter. What would a rich bastard be doing drinking in this dive?

The man finishes the last of his whiskey. “Well. That was a lovely offer, um?” He looks at him inquiringly.

“Jim.”

“Right. I’m Patrick,” he says with a nod. “Jimmy my lad, it’s a tempting offer. But I’m afraid I’m ready to call it an evening.”

“You don’t want to stay and soak up the ambiance?”

Patrick’s sharp gaze darts around the dingy pub. “The cigarette signs are lovely, not to mention the barmaid missing her two front teeth. But I think not.”
Jim shakes his head. “You’re a hard sell, man. You don’t want another drink, you don’t want me to introduce you to Missy—the story of how she lost the teeth is a keeper, by the way.” He sighs theatrically. “I guess there’s nothing I can do for you tonight.”

Patrick smiles, and it’s almost bright enough to mask the coldness in those blue eyes. Almost. “I don’t know about that.”

Seven and a half minutes. That’s how long it is from the moment Jim walks up to Patrick’s table until they are tangled in the back of a cab, Jim’s tongue in Patrick’s ear and Patrick’s devilishly clever fingers working at the buttons of Jim’s jeans. When it comes down to a choice between waiting for Jess, who probably isn’t coming anyway, and a hot stranger who seems to appreciate all Jim has to offer—well. Not much of a dilemma, is it?

The beauty of the automated minicab is that people can be even less inhibited than they were in the old days. As long as the droid driver senses no fear hormones, it doesn’t care what you do in the back of the vehicle. You don’t even have to tip extra if you get come on the seats. Which might be an actual consideration if Patrick keeps doing that thing with his hand.

“Welcome to Missouri,” Jim rasps, nipping at Patrick’s earlobe, “the Show Me State.”

“Really?” Patrick laughs. “And just what are you going to show me, Jimmy my lad?”

“Everything,” Jim promises, “as soon as we get to your place. How long is that?”

“Two minutes until destination,” the droid driver says, its green neon gaze blinking in the reflection of the windshield.

“Well,” Patrick says, “that was unexpected.”

Jim rolls his eyes. “The new models are programmed to automatically respond to any inquiry about time or arrival. Ain’t technology grand?”

“Driver,” Patrick smirks, “how long until Jim comes in his trousers?” He does a neat twisting motion with his wrist that makes Jim temporarily see colored stars.

“I do not understand,” the droid says pleasantly. “Can you repeat your query?”

“Never mind, think I have it. Ninety seconds, tops.”

“Huh-uh,” Jim gasps. “Don’t know how things are in Dublin, but folks here have stamina.”

“Care to make a wager? You don’t last the ride, and I get to tie you up and do whatever I like.”

The fluorescent wonderland of the Crown Center, passing by outside the cab windows, sparks in Patrick’s eyes. They seem to glitter madly. The sight has Jim’s cock throbbing even harder than the man’s incessant grip. Jim always knows a really brutal top when he sees one, and he doesn’t see them nearly as often as he’d like. After a rocky start, tonight is looking up.


Patrick’s thumbnail digs into tender, swollen flesh. “Oh, that’s not going to happen.” He grabs Jim by the back of the head and plants a violent kiss on him, biting Jim’s lip so ruthlessly that he is tasting blood.

Thirty seconds later, he is glad to lose the contest.
Patrick is ridiculously prepared for this turn of events—he offers Jim wet wipes and everything. By the time Jim has cleaned up and buttoned up, the cab is turning into the driveway of a largish bungalow. Jim is surprised: He’d been expecting, at best, one of the nicer downtown hotels.

“The house belongs to the company,” Patrick says, off Jim’s inquiring look. “I’m just staying here until my business is concluded.”

“What business?”

“A bit of this, a bit of that.”

Jim has been involved in enough shady deals to know a none of your damn business, asshole response when he hears it, though Patrick’s is more polite than most. Jim doesn’t care, he is just making conversation until he has a chance to tackle him in the vestibule. He figures he can get at least one blow job in before Patrick starts going into dungeon master mode or whatever.

Patrick pays for the cab. (Jim offers to split it, but Patrick grins and says it’s all on the company tab.) They make their way up the worn stone steps of the bungalow. The neighborhood is eerily quiet, especially for a weekend evening. Jim glances up and sees the gibbous moon watching him like a baleful eye. It occurs to him that things have happened really fast—too fast, maybe, considering the predatory vibe Patrick is giving off.

He shrugs inwardly. You have to be fatalistic about this kind of thing, or you’ll never get laid.

Patrick fishes out a key and opens the door. As soon as he does, the silence is broken. Music is coming from inside the house. Jim recognizes the song, though he hasn’t heard it in a long time.

Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome!
Fremde, étranger, stranger.
Glücklich zu sehen, je suis enchanté,
Happy to see you, bleibe, reste, stay.

Showtunes. Jim fucking hates showtunes. “What’s with the music?” he says.

“Programmed by the company computer. They think it’s bloody hospitable or something. I’ll shut it off once we’re in.”

Jim follows him inside. Patrick shuts the door, bolting it behind them. Jim blinks around the big space, which smells of old wood and lemon furniture polish. All of the windows are frosted, so the light coming in from the street lamps outside is dimmed to a hazy half-darkness. But more overpowering than the smell or the lack of light is the sudden humming between Jim’s ears.

It gets louder and louder as the song continues, the song’s MC going into his idiotic patter:

Meine Damen und Herren,
Mesdames et Messieurs,
Ladies and Gentlemen!
Comment ça va?
Do you feel good?

The buzzing is louder and louder, a deadly white noise he hasn’t heard in years. He’s been glad not to hear it. But now it’s here—oh jesus she’s here—

Get out get out. Jim whirls around, too late. Patrick is blocking the door, and she’s advancing.
Leave your troubles outside.
So life is disappointing, forget it!
In here, life is beautiful.

“Jimmy, sweetheart. Long time no see.”

She holds out her arms as if to hug him, and Jim is so frozen with shock that he doesn’t sense Patrick moving until the hypo is sliding into his neck with a satisfied hiss.

Jim’s last conscious moment is a flood of sensations: her deep blue eyes, the sound of tinkly cabaret piano, Patrick’s steely grip circling his bicep this time. Then everything goes grey.

Jim wakes to more tinkly piano, and now a woman’s strident voice:

You have to understand the way I am, mein herr
A tiger is a tiger, not a lamb, mein herr
You’ll never turn the vinegar to jam, mein herr
So I do, what I do
When I’m through, then I’m through
And I’m through. Toodle-oo!

For some reason he is having trouble moving, so from his position on the bed he blinks hard at the ceiling and says, “Computer, stop music.”

Bye-bye, my leiber herr
Farewell, my leiber herr
It was a fine affair but now it’s over
And though I used to care
I need the open air
You’re better off without me, mein herr

“Computer! Knock it off!”

Don’t dab your eye, mein herr
Or wonder why, mein herr
I’ve always said that I was a rover
You mustn’t knit your brow
You should’ve known by now
You’ve every cause to doubt me, mein herr

Jim tries to sit up, but he can’t lift his head from the pillow. He sees the blinking metal bands on his wrists, and then he knows what the problem is. Showtunes and no chance of escape—is this some kind of torture?

“Computer, god-fucking-damn it—”

“Settle down: It’s programmed not to respond to your voice commands. Computer, stop music.”

Blessed silence, untrammelled by Liza Minnelli. If only it were so easy to get rid of his other tormentor. He must have known she was there all along, but his brain was trying to block her out. He was getting really good at that before she disappeared from his life three years ago.

Jim turns his head very slowly and says, “Hello, Winona.”
She pouts fetchingly. “No hug?”

“Sure.” He glances down at the inertia cuffs. “Take these off, and see how tight I squeeze.”

She wrinkles her nose at him. “Maybe later. You should rest. You’ve got a long night ahead of you.” She stretches in the easy chair by the bed, as if she’s been sitting there awhile. She puts her PADD on the nightstand. Jim glimpses the file title before it goes into sleep mode: Kim.

“Kipling? Really?”

“The book changed my life.” She gives him something that almost resembles a real smile. “How are you, Jimmy?”

“I’m just dandy, Winnie. Assault and abduction make my Friday night.” He struggles against the inertia cuffs, but he knows it’s pointless. He can just manage to wiggle an inch or two, and that’s like moving Gibraltar. “Jesus H. Christ. You couldn’t have called?”

“No, I couldn’t.” She shakes her head sadly. “How the hell did you get mixed up with the likes of Michael Quinn?”

“You know me. I’m gregarious.”

“Uh-huh. That’s why you’re in a strange bed, in a strange house, wearing inertia cuffs. You’re lucky your trick wasn’t a crazed serial killer. Is self-preservation not an instinct you possess?”

“Serial killers don’t exist on Earth in the Twenty-Third Century.”

“You know about.”

Jim doesn’t bother responding to this. Winnie acts like she knows everything, and she probably does. But he’s not going to give her the satisfaction of knowing he thinks this. He looks around the room, which is comfortably furnished with antique furniture and old-fashioned pull drapes, everything in soothing earth tones. There’s a stained glass Tiffany shade on the overhead light. It would be a pleasant place to rest if you hadn’t been kidnapped.

He sighs, knowing somebody has to say it sometime, but he can’t make it a question. “And why is a humble geologist interested in my alleged criminal activities.”

“Cut the shit, sweetheart. You’ve known about me since you were fourteen. I knew it when you stopped asking about my off-planet assignments.”

“Maybe I just don’t care.”

“You always care. You’re like your father: You’ll care until it tears you to pieces.”

Jim grimaces. If Winnie sees the reaction, she doesn’t let on. “The problem is what you’re choosing to care about. Michael and his merry band of rogues are a bad choice. Very bad.”

“Spare me the anti-drug lectures. I’m not a junkie.”

“No, you’re a loser. And you’re not even really that. You’re a winner playing at being a loser, which is even more pathetic.” The golly-gee-ain’t-I-cute façade is gone. She says the words like she’s pronouncing sentence. “But all of that is about to change.”

She looks up at what must be a hidden camera in the ceiling and gives a slight nod. Soon the door opens, and two more people come into the room. One of them is a greying, heavyset man, with a
bland face and piercing black eyes. The other is Patrick.

“I can’t believe you honey-trapped me,” Jim says to Winnie. “What’s the going rate for a male whore these days?”

He’s pleased to see Patrick give an infinitesimal flinch. Interesting.

“I bet he was expensive. He looks expensive. He was worth it—lots of experience jerking off strangers, that’s obvious. Paddy my lad, do you have a card or something? Next time you’re in town, maybe we could—”

Patrick takes a step closer to the bed, before the older man claps a hand on his shoulder. He stops immediately, but his pale cheeks have gone even paler.

“He must be new,” Jim remarks. “At spying, I mean. Not whori—”

“Shut up.” Winnie jerks her chin at Patrick. “Go get some coffee.”

“I am not thirsty,” he says. He doesn’t sound Irish anymore. His consonants have roughened, growling from the back of the throat instead of lilting off the tongue. He looks at Jim like he’s mapping major arteries.


Of course, Winnie speaks Russian. She probably speaks Orion too, and gets all the verbs right. Jim didn’t follow much of that last sentence, but Patrick—Vanya—whatever—did. His face has gone blank.

“I don’t give a damn,” he says, with a contemptuous flick at Jim, and walks out.

As soon as the door closes, Winnie turns on him. “That was fucking smart. You’re wearing inertia cuffs, genius. What were you going to do, insult him to death?”

“I knew you’d call him off. Anyway, he’s just a rent boy.”

“Ivan was a rent boy, before he realized he was better at killing than he is at sex. You know how good he is at that. Next time you see him, observe the Golden Rule: Shut your goddamn mouth.”

“I don’t think that’s how the Golden Rule goes.”

But Winnie has already dismissed him, looking at the heavyset man. “Al? Are we ready?”

Al nods, then sighs. “Is this necessary? Poor thing, she should rest—”

“I know. But holos might not have the same effect.” Her face is like Ivan’s a minute ago, blankness covering too much. “Jim has to see this for himself.”

That’s when he starts to go cold inside. Because he feels it, for all his layers of defenses: Winnie is sad about something. When something gets past her defenses, it’s serious.

“What’s he talking about?” he asks. “Show me what?”

Winnie looks up at the ceiling. “Computer, device 33A-C7D. Reduce to level 5.” Jim hears the inertia cuffs hum, and suddenly he feels less pressed down. He won’t be running any marathons, but he can stand and walk.
“Come on,” she says. “I was going to wait until we’d talked a bit, but after that outburst, I think you need to see the stakes first. It will save time, and that’s something we’re short on.”

Tucking her PADD in her jacket pocket, she gets up from the easy chair, motioning towards the door. Jim follows her, shaking off the cramps as best he can with the cuffs still on. He wishes he could shake this sinking feeling.

With Al bringing up the rear, he follows her into a narrow hallway, then downstairs to the main level. He realizes somebody must have carried him up to the bedroom at some point, probably Ivan, which does all kinds of good things for Jim’s male ego. Winnie leads them down another hallway, through a swinging door, and into the kitchen. As they make their way, he glimpses other figures, moving as swiftly and silently as ghosts. There could be five people in this house or fifty, hard to tell in the dim light, which is, no doubt, intentional. He finally finds a clock—the place is short on timepieces, too. He’s been here just over two hours. It feels like longer, like he’s always been here, lost in his mother’s shadow world.

Winnie opens a narrow door in the mudroom off the kitchen, and then they’re down another flight of stairs into the basement. It’s a big, low-ceilinged space that must run under the entire structure, lit by banks of stark fluorescent lights. Jim catches a chemical whiff, sees the gleam of plasteel and the shining curves of beakers and test tubes. One side of the room is entirely covered by comscreens, big and small.

“What is this place?” he asks her.

“All-purpose lab. This is the safe house for the whole tri-state area. You never know what kind of tests you may need to perform on the fly, so we’re prepared for just about anything.”

Winnie’s steps slow as she sees who is at the bottom of the stairs.

“Ivan,” she says. “You’re not supposed to be down here.”

“You said I could see,” he says.

“Later, dorogoï, later. When this awful night is over.”

Ivan’s hands clench. “I was running her for a year. Winona, lyubovnitsa—”

There’s some more back and forth in Russian, though the long strings of Slavic syllables fly right by Jim. But Ivan must make his case, because finally Winnie sighs and says, “Okay, okay. On your head be it.”

She strides ahead of all three men to the back of the room, her boot heels echoing on the hard green tiles. Jim sees that what at first seemed like supply closets lining part of the back wall are actually something quite different. Twelve metal lockers, stacked in rows of three, their square doors half a meter by half a meter.

That’s when he starts to get it. The cold feeling, which had abated somewhat while he was distracted by the details of the house, comes back full force. “This isn’t just a lab,” he says.

He looks at the rows of mortuary chambers. “Who’s in there?” Jim speaks slowly so his voice won’t shake. But he already knows. He’s felt her since they came down the stairs. Not like he would usually feel her: This is faint, fleeting, like an echo. The remains of what’s already gone.

Al steps forward. He opens the middle chamber in the second row. A metallic shush, and out comes a long tray with a small, naked figure on it.
Jim can’t look at the face. Once he does, this will all become real. He looks at her right ankle instead, hoping he won’t see them. But there they are, of course they are, two small red letters inked just above the knobby bone: JK.

Jessica Krider, that’s what everybody thought they stood for. But they didn’t, not when she was fifteen. She was Hannah then. He was the first one to call her by her middle name. *Hannahs don’t get laid, honey. Jessicas do.* Such bullshit, she was no virgin, Jim had seen to that. She inked herself a week after their first time, a visible mark of the possession he’d already taken. He was weirded out and pleased all at once. He wasn’t in love with her, but he wanted her to be in love with him. Not painfully in love, nothing to slit your wrists over, just a little in love, that shine in her eyes when she looked at him. He could look in her eyes and see the person he would like to be—nice, normal, innocent. Jess gave Jim what he wanted, she always would. She never lost that shine for him, when innocence was a distant memory for both of them.

Walking slowly, not because of the inertia cuffs, he draws closer to the figure. He looks down at the heart-shaped face, the slender white body. Jess is here, but not here. She’ll never be again.

And it hits him. *Never.* He starts to shake. He didn’t feel her die, the way she would have felt him die. But he feels it now, the hole inside where she used to be. It will be there forever. Jim has lost someone he loved before. (Though he wasn’t in love with Jess; he thought that would be enough to save her.) The hole never heals. It just echoes.

He wraps his arms around his middle, stilling the vibrations inside. There isn’t a mark on her. She looks like she could open her eyes any minute. She hasn’t been gone long. They spoke ten hours ago. His mind reels at the unreality. Ten fucking hours. “What happened?” he whispers.


“But she was clean. Almost a year.”

“Junkies relapse all the time.”

He shakes his head emphatically. “I’d have known if she was chipping. I’d have *known.*”

“You’re right. She wasn’t.”

Jim jerks his head towards her. Winnie goes on, face as neutral as if she’s giving the results of a geological survey. “We got fingermarks off the body. The dose wasn’t self-administered. They held her down. No prints, unfortunately, but we know from the pressure differentials that it was a couple of people. Big ones. Men.”

Jim fights against the red haze chewing at the edges of his vision. “Who?”

“Seth Quinn, probably, with one or two of his other goons.”

“Why?”

Winnie grimaces. “She’d been talking to us for awhile. When she got into that state-run rehab last year, the good one? That was us. She was glad to cooperate after that. Ivan was her handler, using the Patrick White persona. He’s really careful, but maybe they were seen. Maybe she let something slip. Sean is a vicious thug, but he’s not stupid.”

Jim can’t process any of this. He can’t, standing a meter from Jess’s body. He can only focus on one thought at a time, and it’s the most important: “I’ll kill him.”
“You?” Ivan finally speaks. He is as white as the walls of the lab. His gaze keeps flicking back and forth between Jess’s body and Jim. It grows angrier with every trip. “What would you know about killing? What do you do except lick Michael Quinn’s dirty asshole?”

“Where the fuck were you, Patrick? What were you doing when they were holding her down and shoving that shit in her veins? Some fucking handler you are! Go back to sucking cock in Moscow, malchik.”

Ivan is so fast, Jim feels the blow almost before he sees him move. The right side of Jim’s face explodes, but that’s nothing to the dead red haze in front of his eyes. He rolls away from Ivan, reaching into his boot for what he always keeps there. Two seconds and one tiny opening is all he needs. He can see it so clearly, Ivan’s stupid shocked face as they watch the red blooming over his heart. Such a beautiful sight, it will blot everything else out, her still white body, those tiny red letters, I got it for you, Jimmy, it’s all for you, anything—

“Computer! Device 33A-C7D. Increase to level 10, right fucking now!”

Jim collapses like someone dropped a two-ton weight on his head. He tries to hold on, but he loses what’s in his hand, and Winnie kicks it away. Ivan is looming over him, face like death, and then his hands are around Jim’s throat. But Al, moving fast for a fat man, slips a black rod out of his pocket. He shoves it in Ivan’s armpit, one shriek of electricity, and Ivan goes limp.

Jim still can’t get air. He watches the red haze turn to black spots. “Mom—” he gasps.

“Shit! I hate these new fucking cuffs. Computer! Amend previous to level 9.” Winnie kneels beside him, a weird expression on her face. It takes Jim a second to identify it as concern. “Can you breathe? I know you can’t move, just blink twice.”

Jim blinks as the killing pressure eases off. Then he goes as limp as the cuffs will allow. Too much has happened tonight. If he were a pinball simulator, his forehead would read TILT.

He doesn’t pass out, but everything goes weirdly muted for a little while, like Winnie turned the sound down when she turned up the cuffs. Jim realizes hazily that he must be in shock, but it’s so much better than how he was feeling five minutes ago, he doesn’t try to come out of it. He watches Al and another man drag the unconscious Ivan away. Then two more men come in and get Jim by the shoulders and legs. Even without the cuffs, Jim wouldn’t fight. He’s glad to be getting out of this room, away from the still white thing (not her, not here) on the steel tray.

He watches like a disinterested observer while they carry him up the stairs, through the kitchen, and onto a wide brick patio in the backyard. The air is sweet with evening primroses blooming near the fence that surrounds the property (certainly electrified, and God knows what else). They plop him onto the wicker sofa on the patio. Winnie takes the matching wicker chair opposite.

They stay there for a long time. Jim looks up at the moon, he counts the stars in Orion’s belt. He hasn’t thought much about going off-planet since they returned from Tarsus IV, but right now he would like to go. He doesn’t care where, as long as it’s far away from here. For the first time, he knows how it must have been for Winnie, Terra-bound all those months, burning to get away from this suffocating planet, become wonderfully lost in the depths of space.


The cuffs drop away. He sits up, staring at Winnie and rubbing his wrists. She shrugs. “I’m sick of playing jailer. I don’t think you’ll try to leave now. Not until you know everything.”
“So we’ve reached the exposition part of the evening.”

“You’re sarcastic. Good. That means you’re snapping out of it.” Winnie reaches in her jacket and takes out a folding knife. She flicks a button and the shiny blade pops up. She runs a careful finger over the edge. “Spyderco. Nice. A little small, but—”

“It gets the job done.”

“Isn’t that what all the boys say.”

“Can I have my knife back, please?”

“Eventually.” She flicks it closed and slips it back in her jacket pocket. “Not while there’s still a chance you’ll make an Ivan-kabob.” She reaches in her other pocket, taking out a small package. She passes it to Jim. “Here. There’s blood on your face.”

He raises an eyebrow at the wet wipe. “Is this a spy thing?”

“Best to be prepared for any messes that arise.” She watches Jim clean himself up. “That was a shitty thing you said to Ivan. He lost someone today, too.”

Jim crumples the bloodied wipe, shoving it into his jeans pocket along with the one from the cab. He hopes he doesn’t get frisked any time soon. “Poor baby. A cold-hearted spy in love with his target. He’s been watching too many old movies.”

“It’s more complicated than that. Patrick White was in love with Jessica Krider. He had to be, to make her trust him. You were right about one thing, Ivan is still pretty new at this. He got a little too wrapped up in his persona. Next time he’ll know to hold something back.”

“Jesus Christ, are you made of ice? Jess is dead.”

“What you do want me to do? Cry? That would be really helpful. No, I’m going to do what girls always do while boys try to kill each other: I’m going to clean up the mess. I’m going to stay up tonight debriefing you, then I’m going to wheedle local law enforcement into taking the body and altering the autopsy report. Then, I’m going to call Brother Mark up in Riverside and ask him to break the news to Melvin and Sarah Krider that their daughter was found OD’d in a crappy hotel in KC. Then I’m going to explain to my superiors how I let our most valuable CI—a girl I’ve known since she was nursing at her mama’s teat—get murdered under my very nose. If you think tears would make any of this easier, I’ll start bawling right now.”

Winona’s tone is cool, but Jim feels it now, simmering under the ice. A raging sorrow that makes his and Ivan’s outburst seem like a schoolyard scuffle. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I just—”

“Save the apologies. We don’t have time.” Winona sits forward. “I have to explain a lot in a little while, so listen up, laddy boy. Michael Quinn has been a person of interest since he got in bed with the Orion Syndicate. It’s been small stuff so far—the Orions like a long courtship with any new partner, to help weed out the weaklings and turncoats. Guess Quinn has sweet-talked enough, because there’s a major deal going down, tons of meth and other goodies coming into the Terran home system. It will make the Martian cartels look like a bunch of bubblegummers.”

She gives him a hard look. “But you know about it. From what Jess said, you’re translating it.”

Jim shifts uncomfortably. “Michael’s a businessman.”

“No. Do not try to justify this. You can spout all the garbage you want about personal freedom,
everybody’s God-given right to fry their brains. Let’s leave the personal horrors of addiction out of it, ones you’ve seen up close, with Jess. The billions the Syndicate makes from drugs supports a passel of atrocities: terrorism, sentient-being traffic, weapons-deals with the Klingons and the Romulans. Every dose dealt adds a little more to the chaos and misery of the universe. You will not be part of that. Not while I have breath in my body.”

“Give me a fucking break,” Jim snorts. “Seriously, Winnie, where the hell do you get off? You know, I’m real sorry that sickbay nurse fucked up your abortion. I’m sorry Dad talked you into having another kid. But it’s not my fault you got stuck with me. You’ve spent twenty-one years making it clear just how much you resent my existence. You don’t get to play the mommy card now. You have zero leverage. If I want to go straight to hell with Michael Quinn, I will. There’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

He stops, breathing hard. There’s more he could say—a madman’s tirade of resentment, but it’s all getting tangled in his head. What he’d really like to do is scream, stab something—her, Ivan, himself. But he’s as frozen as if she slapped the cuffs back on. So he breathes.

Winona sits back. She’s barely reacted to Jim’s words, just gone very still. She taps two pensive fingers on the arm of the chair. He can almost see her processing—names, dates, possibilities, flashing in her eyes. “The day Chris Pike came to visit. You were listening.”

“Damn straight. That’s really gross, you know? Screwing your old boyfriend in Grandma’s bed.”

“She wasn’t using it.” Winnie’s thoughtful expression becomes a smirk. “Fine, the cards are on the table. I didn’t want another kid. I’ve been a shitty mom. Sometimes you annoy the piss out of me, probably because you’re too much fucking like me. But I do like you, Jimmy, especially now that you’re old enough to be interesting. Shitty or not, I am your mother, and I still get to tell you what to do. You’re not going to be a gangster like Michael Quinn. In fact, you’re going to help us take him down, him and his whole rotten crew.”

Jim crosses his arms over his chest. “What are you gonna do, Noni? Threaten me with one of Grandpa Alexei’s blades?”

“Nothing that prosaic.” Winnie looks at him sadly. “You’re not stupid. If you don’t see it, it’s because you don’t want to. We know you’ve acted as courier for Quinn on quite a few occasions. You’ve found safe houses where they cut the dope for distribution throughout this hemisphere. You’ve gone with Sean and his crew to lean on rivals, though I know you haven’t done any real wet work. I guess Mark was right to drag you to church all those years. You’ve broken most commandments, but not the Fifth. So you’re not a murderer, but you’re still guilty as hell.”

“Your point?”

“The point is that we know, Jim. We’ve got the audio and the video to prove it. I make a call, and you spend the next twenty years in the Federation Penitentiary at Triton. Is that where you want to be? You don’t know cold until you’ve been in the Kuiper Belt, kiddo. You really don’t.”

Jim swallows hard against the slow black panic in his gut. “You wouldn’t.”

Winnie just looks at him. She’s so pretty, his mother. She’s fifty-four, and she could pass for twenty years younger. Twenty-five, on a good day. Still hot enough to turn heads wherever she goes. Most people are too stupid to see what lies under the big blue eyes and shiny blonde hair, the perfect skin and lissome body. She’s meaner than Michael on his worst day. More ruthless.

“I’m your son,” Jim says quietly. “Doesn’t it count for anything, that I’m your son?”
“It counts for a lot. My son won’t be an arch criminal. I’ll see you on Triton before I see that happen. I’ll see you dead.” It should sound like the silliest melodramatic threat. But she isn’t being dramatic. Jim hears the truth, all the way down to the seething core of his mother’s soul.

He can’t speak for a minute. A dozen responses go through his head, from suicidal defiance to begging for mercy. He doesn’t say any of it. For once in his life, he is truly speechless.

“Before you make up your mind,” Winnie says, “remember something. Michael gave the order to have Jess murdered. She’s not the first one either, or the hundredth. I’m sure you know about some of them, or at least you suspect. But they aren’t all gangsters. He takes out anybody who gets in his way. Innocent people like Jess.”

Jim stares at her. “You can’t know that for sure.”

“I can show you terabytes of data. About the murders generally, if not Jess’s specifically. We don’t have a lot of hard evidence about that, but come on: Michael’s people don’t even jerk off without permission. Jess was Sean’s public girlfriend, they were living together. Her death is going to cause a stink, even if he makes it look accidental. This was not a lovers’ quarrel; the murder was not spur of the moment. They had to show up at that hotel with the hypo prepared. Sean would have had to get the okay first, from the only man who could give it.”

Jim wilts back on the sofa. He should be devastated: He is. He knows he hates Michael Quinn in this moment. But he can’t quite feel it. A photon torpedo can’t register with the same impact when you’ve already been hit by a dozen of them. But he knows that he will feel it. The rage is simmering in his gut, like a volcano that hasn’t exploded. Yet.

“You can’t kill him,” Winnie says calmly.

“Section 31 is getting moral on me now?”

“Officially, Section 31 does not exist. If it did, and if it operated outside the normal ethical and legal parameters of the Federation, as has always been rumored, it still wouldn’t kill Quinn. If killing him would work, he would have already been taken out. But his organization is a hydra: Cut off Michael, and Donovan or Joseph or even Sean might step up. Take them out, and there’s a dozen other brothers and cousins and nephews waiting in the wings. And it wouldn’t do a damn thing about the Syndicate cell that’s causing most of the mischief.

“We have to get them all, and we have to do it all at once. That’s going to take access, the kind we haven’t had up to now. Jessica was okay for minor stuff, and we were planning to use her to get to you. That’s why she wanted to meet with you today, she and Ivan. He’s been working on the Patrick White legend for almost two years. We were going to get you to get him in the door, where he could work his way in further. But now Jess is dead, and Ivan might be compromised. Michael is going to be more wary than ever of new faces. So it comes down to you.”

“How do you know I’m not compromised? Jess was my friend—won’t Michael be suspicious?”

“Maybe. But he won’t want to believe you’ve flipped. He likes you, and you’re really useful. Do you think Sean or any of those other boneheads could learn Orion Prime? It’s a good sign that they bothered to make Jessica’s death look accidental. It would have been easier to make her disappear, fewer questions that way. But he doesn’t just want the authorities to be satisfied, Michael wants you satisfied. You’re valuable enough that he doesn’t want you suspicious.”

Jim sighs, then nods. “Fine, you’ve convinced me. If you want me to spy, I’ll spy. I don’t know big stuff, though. Michael uses me as a driver and a courier, mostly. The real inner sanctum—I’m not
there yet. Even the big meeting with the Orions will mostly be done in code phrases they’ve worked out ahead of time. I know the words, but I don’t know context.”

“I’m sure he’s planning to bring you into the fold eventually. But you’re right, it could take years. We don’t have that kind of time.” She pauses. “You’ll have to accelerate the process.”

“How?”

“Michael’s careful, but he’s also a man. There’s one sure way to make him tell you anything.”

Jim blinks. “You want me to fuck him?”

“It’s not like you haven’t done it before. Our surveillance tapes—”

“Fuck the surveillance tapes. I don’t care what my good buddy Ivan thinks. I have not been, nor will I ever be, anywhere near Michael Quinn’s asshole.”

“Why not? He’s pretty hot if you like the Black Irish type.”

“He’s my boss. He—he’s mentored me and stuff. You know?” Jim twists his fingers in his lap.

“Oh, Jesus,” Winnie sighs. “Get over the Daddy issues. I don’t care how nice he’s been to you, he’s not George. Trust me on that one.”

“You are such a bitch,” Jim gasps.


Winnie takes her PADD out of her jacket. She sets it on the table between them. A man’s face appears on the screen: blond, blue-eyed, cute in a whitebread way.

“This is Declan Kelly,” she says. “Twenty years ago, Michael really loved him. Declan was killed, of course, these Hibernian hooligans are always knocking each other off. Quinn is a cool customer, but he went berserk. He found the triggerman and put his head in a vise. My brilliant plan was to get Ivan in and make Quinn fall for him. Ivan is very good at that kind of thing. But you’re the same physical type, and you’re perfectly placed. Michael already likes you, Jim. Now he’s going to love you.”

Jim makes a disbelieving noise. “Because I look like his old boyfriend?”

“That, and you’re a brutally powerful projective empath. I didn’t knock you out tonight just to be mean. We did the Mesmer test on you, when you were unconscious and couldn’t mess with the results. I didn’t have reliable data after 2247, and I needed to make sure you’d developed the way I hoped.” Seeing Jim’s face: “Yeah, it was really illegal, but you were worth it. I’m not just blowing sunshine, baby: You’re amazing. More powerful than I was at your age, and I was pretty damn scary. I haven’t seen any studies about it, but I think testosterone levels must make a difference. Ivan is the only other human I’ve known whose scores are like yours. Except some crazy people at the Federation Asylum on Luna, but they don’t count.”

A corner of her mouth turns up. “I was wondering what would happen if I put you and Ivan in the same room. Turns out you try to fuck each other, then you try to kill each other. Guess it really is bad luck to meet your doppelgänger.”

“Unbelievable,” Jim says flatly. “Let’s draw a veil over the other felonies you’ve committed this
evening. It’s not like I’m surprised. But this does surprise me: You’d whore out your own son to make a case.”

“To be fair, I was planning to whore Ivan out. But that’s not how fate seems to want it.”

Jim is silent. He should be pondering his fate, but he’s so damn tired. The night air is chilly, and his face hurts. Finally, Winnie starts to shift impatiently, fiddling with the buttons of her PADD. Fuck her, it’s not her literal ass on the line.

“I can’t,” he says. “Whoring aside, this is a bad plan. Michael killed my friend, and God knows how many other people. He’s evil, and I want him dead. He’s not a true empath, but he’s sharp. Even if I could bring myself to physically do it, I can’t hide how I feel.”

“It can be done. You can fool him.”

Jim stares at his mother for a beat. “Is that what you did with Kodos?”

“Yes.” Her gaze is steady. “That is exactly what I did.”

He sees it then, as clearly as if she were showing it to him on the PADD. A hot desert night, the streets outside too quiet after the screams of that morning. Winnie at her dressing table, paint on her face, diamonds in her ears. But the most important accessory is the one strapped to her thigh, twenty centimeters of Russian steel. The steel can’t be in her eyes, though. They have to be soft, inviting. He can’t see what’s behind them, the hate and revulsion. Because she has to take him, she will. She’ll do what is necessary to get his defenses down. The thought of it makes her sick enough to die, but he won’t see. Because there is no justice here, in this world of blood and sand. No higher power to cry to. Just the rage inside, the fires of her own heart demanding vengeance. Blood atonement at any price.

“Dear God,” Jim whispers. “No wonder you drink.”

Winnie says nothing. For once, she doesn’t have a snappy response. She only looks at him, and something in her eyes makes Jim look away, pressing a hand to his stomach.

“I’m not denigrating what you did,” he says. “I’m really not. But that was one time, one awful night. With Michael Quinn we’re talking about months, maybe years.”

“The first time is the only time that counts. After that, it’s all habit. I taught Ivan that, and I can teach you. How to take anyone, love him or hate him or anything in-between. How to make him love you, even if he starts out despising you.”

She reaches forward, putting a hand on his wrist. He feels the rush of her energy, as bright as a flame. One that can burn you or warm you. “Jim, you’ve got a scary amount of raw power, but you’ve never been really trained. I can do that. After Michael and his people are locked away, it’s information you can keep. Besides your freedom, that’s the best thing I can give you. But I can’t force the knowledge. You have to want it. With what we are, desire is everything.”

Winnie’s eyes are as soft as her touch. She has never looked more beautiful. It’s how she must have looked that last night on Tarsus IV. And Jim gets it, in a way he hasn’t before. His mother doesn’t need a knife to stab right to the heart of him. For all she’s resented her youngest son, she knows him. She sees him. For what they are, maybe that’s better than loving him.

Maybe this is his mother’s love. The best thing he can ever get from her.

He blinks back tears, but of course she sees. He doesn’t care.
“Tell me,” he says.
“Listen up, laddy boy, this is the most important part. From now on, there are two Jim Kirks. The whip-smart scary bastard who hates Michael Quinn, and the wide-eyed pretty boy who loves him. You’re going to take the first Jim and put him in a box. You’re going to put that box on a shelf deep inside yourself. You’re not going see that Jim, you’re not going to think about him. Not until you’re ready to bring the hammer down.”

“But Michael knows me. He’s known me almost two years.”

“He doesn’t. He couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“If he knew what you were, he would have already promoted you. Maybe he suspects you’ve got more to show him, but he doesn’t know for sure. Just like Sheriff Miller back in Riverside. He suspected you of a lot he never busted you for.”

“He busted me plenty.”

“Nickel-and-dime shit. Nothing serious. If Aloysius Miller had nailed you for everything I know you’re capable of doing, we’d be chatting through two inches of Plexiglas. But you’re smarter than that. You’ve got the right instincts, even if you haven’t had the training. You’ve read Puzo: Let your friends underestimate your virtues, and your enemies overestimate your faults. Quinn is both. He’s going to misjudge the fuck out of you, your life depends on it. He’ll cut your throat if he suspects for one second that you’re playing him. You must be absolutely sincere. Forget that other Jim: He isn’t here.”

“I can’t do this.”

“Jimmy—”

“Don’t Jimmy me. This is next-level shit you’re talking about. I’m not a spy, I’m just some asshole who once took a job in an Irish bar for extra cash. Jesus Christ!”

“You’re my son: You can do anything. Be anyone.”

“When it’s all over?”

“You’ll be Jim Kirk.”

“After I’ve betrayed everyone who trusts me, after I’ve spent forever being someone else. How do I find the box then? Will it even be there? Tell me, Winnie. After all this, where will I be?”

His mother is silent.

Jim opened his eyes, wiping the wet from his cheeks. He had to stop bawling in his sleep; somebody was going to notice. Spock or Bones, either way would kind of suck.

He sat up, stretching. It was dark outside the windows, he must have slept for hours. He had to piss like a racehorse, and he was hungry again. Fucking vegan food. Maybe he could convince Spock
that cows didn’t mind being eaten. Where was Milliways when you needed it?

He took care of the most pressing bodily function, then went into the kitchen to take care of the other. He’d seen the light on in the study when he was in the bathroom, so Spock must be hard at work. He had to be ready for a break sometime soon. Jim smiled. He was still sore from the dining table, but he could go again. Impressive, even for him: Maybe pon farr was catching.

He was halfway through another plate of casserole—it really wasn’t bad, once you got used to eating something that looked like baby shit—when Spock emerged from the study. He was fully dressed in his usual dark tunic and trousers. Which seemed like a waste of time, since he’d just be taking them off again in a few minutes. Of course, this did present the opportunity for Jim to rip Spock’s clothes off.

“You are awake,” Spock said. His voice was cool. But his voice was always cool, unless he was screwing Jim into a paraplegic state. Jim was learning not to take it personally.

“Uh-huh. I feel better.” This was a big lie. Jim didn’t feel really rested—he hadn’t felt that way all week, too many bad dreams. But if Spock stopped worrying he’d want to have sex, lots of sex, and that was worth a few dark circles.

“You should dress,” Spock said. “Then you should go.”

“What? Why? I thought you were free all weekend.”

“Those plans were made under certain assumptions. Those assumptions are no longer valid. Therefore, it is not possible for us to continue our association.”

“You want to run that by me in English?”

Spock stepped out of the shadows of the living room, into the light of the kitchen. Jim took one look at his face, and his stomach went cold. He’d seen this look before, too many times: total betrayal. But unlike most other times, Jim hadn’t done anything, anything at all. Had he?

“What’s wrong?” He paused. “What have I done?”

“Many things, I’m sure. But this is only tangentially about what you have done. Mostly, it is about what you are.” Spock stared at him.

“Terran? Blond? Devastatingly handsome?”

Spock’s lip curled in distaste. “You are a vorsopath.”

Jim went still. Then, slowly, he put the dish down. He pulled his robe more tightly around himself. He couldn’t stand more exposure at the moment. Then he forced a smile and said, “Jesus. What century is this again?”

“I know the term has fallen out of common use. It can even be considered a pejorative, but I find it appropriate. From the Latin vorso, to twist, influence, agitate—”

“I know where it comes from,” Jim snapped. “Where the hell are you getting this?”

“Computer,” Spock said. “Bring up the most recent text file.”

The comscreen between the kitchen and the dining area lit up. Jim walked a little closer to it, peering at the small type. He scanned a few sentences and turned away. His stomach hurt, maybe from the
“Where did you get my records?” he said. “My real records?”

“My father has not lived on Terra for many years, but he retains some influence here.”

“Your father? What does he have to do with this?”

“He has discovered our liaison and thought it prudent to learn more about you. Needless to say, he does not approve.”

“Fuck his approval. What about you?”

Spock glanced at the screen. For a minute he looked almost sorry, before smoothing his face to blankness again. “I feel as he does. This cannot continue.”

Jim leaned against the counter. “So I’m a projective empath, a vorsopath, whatever. So what?”

For a moment Jim could see real anger under that cold shell, before Spock transformed back into a robot. Spock put his hands behind his back like he was the teacher in front of the podium again. His voice, when he spoke, had all the warmth of a lecture droid’s.

“You are not merely a projective empath. This is not a slight charismatic advantage. Your score is remarkable, ridiculously so. I have never seen one so high in a Terran.”

“We do exist,” Jim said. “Of course, most of us are crazy.”

Perhaps that explains your criminal background,” Spock replied. “A pattern of defiance and destruction going back to your fourteenth year. That does indicate instability, does it not? That and your two periods in a mental health facility, at thirteen and again at the age of twenty-two.”

“There’s more to the story,” Jim said, “if you care.” He wasn’t sure he was ready to tell Spock the whole truth, but if a few more details would end this fiasco, he’d give them.

Spock was silent a moment. “I am aware of your experiences on Tarsus IV. They do explain some of your difficulties, but they cannot excuse them entirely.”

Jim went into the living room, shaking off his robe. He started looking for his clothes. He was going to concentrate very hard on looking for his clothes. If he didn’t he would cry, or puke, or punch somebody. Possibly all three at once.

“I am curious how you obtained entrance into Starfleet. I know Christopher Pike’s family is prominent, but under the circumstances—”

“You don’t know shit about my circumstances.” Jim zipped up his jeans and shook out his rumpled sweatshirt. He pulled it over his head and pushed his feet into sneakers.

He walked up to Spock. For a minute he just looked into that face, as carved and solemn as an idol’s. He reached out, and Spock flinched back.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to touch you. I just wanted to be sure you hadn’t turned to stone.” Jim shook his head. “Yeah, I’m a vorsopath. And a petty delinquent, and a Tarsus IV survivor. That queers it, huh? I don’t live up to Daddy’s expectations, and I’m out? What do you do now, hire a consoler?”

Spock didn’t say anything, he didn’t move a muscle. But somehow Jim got it. Maybe because it was
obvious. It had been so fucking obvious all along. “No, of course not,” he said. “You’re going back to Stonn. Another spoiled little Vulcan prince, just like you. How perfect.”


“Then why the hell are we doing this?” Jim ran hands through his hair, stepping down hard on the sick, swirling anger in his gut. “Why did you ever take me home and fuck me, if Stonn is so fucking great?”

“I did not start this,” Spock said, clenching his hands. “You harassed me in the bar, you followed me to the training room, you brought lunch here. You insisted we go out to the Orion club, and you came here this morning. I have never pursued you, Jim. Every step of the way, it’s been you. I have allowed it, partly because you do remind me of someone I care for deeply. But that cannot explain it all, the Fever cannot. You have pushed yourself into my life, bound me up like a slave, taken advantage of me when I am in a vulnerable condition.

“Do not pretend it is because you care for me—why would you? We barely know each other, we have nothing in common. This can only be a game; I know you are fond of those. Perhaps you resented my strictness during Introduction to Command Systems, and it amuses you to torment me. That would fit your pattern of defying authority.”

“Maybe I like you,” Jim said quietly. “Maybe I’ve always liked you.”

“No,” Spock said, taking a step back. “Do not speak to me as if you feel. I do not believe you.” Those last words shook a little, and he stopped. He straightened, his voice hardening again. “I would not have cared about your criminal history—you were young, and your crimes were not serious. I know you have been through terrible things, and perhaps that is why your mind has broken on at least two occasions. I could have understood all of it, I could have helped, if I thought we had a true connection. We do not. True affection takes time to grow—months, even years. The violence of what I feel is proof this cannot be real. You have pushed these feelings on me.”

“Let me get this straight: The fact that you really like me is proof that you don’t really like me?” Jim couldn’t help smiling at the sheer absurdity.

“I know this is a joke to you. Perhaps everything is: That is your brand of insanity. You break people, you enjoy it. Gary Mitchell, who left Command track after ending his relationship with you; Carol Marcus, who left Starfleet altogether. And David Goldman, who showed no signs of instability before becoming involved with you. I would have thought your experiences with him would have shown you how dangerous it is to toy with people’s minds—”


Spock paused, looking slightly confused. “The crucifix—”


“Kirk,” he said, “Do not make me—”


He backed Spock into the corner by the front door. Funny to think what they were doing right in this spot two days ago. What they’d done all over the flat, only hours ago. Jim wouldn’t touch Spock now. Jesus, how had they gotten here so fast? Jim would be amazed, if he wasn’t so sick.
“There’s only one way you could know about the crucifix,” he whispered. “It wasn’t in any file. Very important people did some very sneaky things to make sure there was no record of David’s true breakdown anywhere. Your father didn’t tell you about it. He couldn’t.”

Spock didn’t respond to this, but Jim knew. He knew. “You’ve been in my head, haven’t you? I thought I felt little creepy green-blooded fingers in there this morning, but I didn’t wanna believe it. I thought you were better than that, I thought you had manners. The famous Vulcan delicacy, what a goddamn joke. Private files, private thoughts, you people don’t care, do you?”

“I had good cause,” Spock said.

“Yeah? I’ve had nightmares.” Jim felt his lips stretch, but he didn’t feel the smile. It was just habit. “You don’t get it, do you? You stand there in your thousand-credit loungewear and act like you’re above it all, but the shit you’ve accused me of doing is exactly what you’ve done to me. At worst, we are even. But you know what? We are not even. I haven’t been in your head except when you’ve invited me. I haven’t influenced you. Everything you’ve done is because you’ve wanted to do it. Maybe it’s the Fever, or maybe it’s just you. You fired Che a year ago, right? That wasn’t me, Spock. That was all you.”

Jim stared at him, breathing hard. He couldn’t hide it anymore. He couldn’t fucking smile. Not when there was a black hole blowing right through the middle of him.

“I was wondering when I would see it,” Spock said. “Your true face. It is even more disturbing than I imagined.”

“Fuck you,” Jim said. “Go back to Vulcan. Screw Stonn, make Daddy proud. You don’t have to worry about me influencing you anymore. We are so fucking over.”

He strode out the door like he was wearing command insignia. Pretty damned impressive. But what was more impressive was that he made it down the stairs, through the lobby, and into the bushes by the side of the building before throwing his guts up. All things considered, it was his most heroic feat of the day.

Jim stopped outside his front door, listening.

_I keep a close watch on this heart of mine_  
_I keep my eyes wide open all the time_  
_I keep the ends out for the tie that binds_  
_Because you're mine, I walk the line_

_I find it very, very easy to be true_  
_I find myself alone when each day’s through_  
_Yes, I'll admit that I'm a fool for you_  
_Because you're mine, I walk the line_

Country music: Bones was getting drunk. Awesome. Jim could use a drink or twelve. He stuck his hand on the ID pad and the door slid open. He walked inside, peering into a darkness which smelled deliciously of Jack Daniel’s and cigarettes.

_As sure as night is dark and day is light_  
_I keep you on my mind both day and night_  
_And happiness I've known proves that it's right_  
_Because you're mine, I walk the line_
“Honey, I’m home,” he called. “Vulcans suck. Get me a drink.”

“Computer, stop music.” Leonard sat up from the sofa, blinking owlishly at the light from the vestibule. “What did you say?”

Jim sat down on the quarter of the sofa not taken up by Leonard. He picked up the bottle of Jack Daniel’s and took a slug. He grimaced a bit at the taste—he preferred beer or, in certain moods, vodka. But Jack Daniel’s had alcohol content: Jack Daniel’s would do. “Spock and I broke up.”

“Oh. Why?” Leonard’s face was oddly blank.

“Because he’s an asshole.”


“I threw up. Twice. Really freaked out a couple of Taygetians passing by. Don’t they have puking in the Pleiades?”

“They do, but it doesn’t come out of their mouths.” Leonard sat up, scrubbing hands through his hair. “Was this nausea Spock-induced, or do I need to get my tricorder?” He sighed. “It might be a problem, since I don’t currently have a tricorder.”

“Oh. Why?”

“Because Vulcans suck. Maybe we should get t-shirts.” Seeing Jim’s questioning eyebrows: “I’ll tell you later. You should eat. It’ll settle your stomach.” He got up and headed towards the kitchen. “Not replicator crap, something real.”

“Should you be near fire in your intoxicated condition?”

“I have been drinking. I am not drunk.” Leonard opened the freezer part of the fridge. “How about soup? It’s good for what ails you, as my mama would say.”

“As long as it’s not veggie.”

“Aew. Do my ears look pointed to you?”

A few minutes later, he sat two bowls of steaming chicken soup on the coffee table. Jim had thought he’d never be capable of ingesting food again, but this did look pretty good. Leonard’s mother’s recipe, chock-full of real white chicken (none of that cloned stuff, Bones didn’t believe in it) and big chunks of carrot, onion, and celery, all floating in a buttery broth. He picked it up cautiously and took a sip. Yum. He got down several mouthfuls, enough to make his stomach glow happily. Then he picked up the whiskey bottle and swallowed what had to be a couple of shots. Now his head matched his stomach. Awesome.

Leonard watched all this calmly. “Wanna talk about it?”

Jim shrugged. “You were right,” he said. “I should’ve listened to you. I mean, you were right about Gary, and Carol, and Dave—”

“Yet my Psi-test gives no evidence of Precognition. I told you those things were bullshit.”

Jim stared into his bowl for a second. “Spock found out about my empathy score. His dad was involved, God knows how. Anyway, it really freaked him out. He thought—” Jim took another swallow of soup to steady his voice. “He thought I was pushing him.”
“Pussy.”

Jim gave a bark of laughter that almost made him choke on his soup spoon. “What?”

“Seriously, don’t they teach basic psychic shielding on Vulcan? Grandma Belle had me taking that shit in the sixth grade. Even if you were a scary monster, which you are not, Spock should be able to handle it. Hell, I’ve lived with you for three years, and my virtue remains intact.”

Jim smiled. “Maybe I just don’t like you.”

“You like me: I am very handsome. My mama always said so.”

“I do like you,” Jim said. “I really do.”

Maybe he held that gaze a little too long. Leonard looked down, face sobering. “We are friends, aren’t we?” Before Jim answered: “So I don’t have to start locking up my medical bag. I’d hate to have to do that.”

Jim felt himself redden. Then he ran his tongue over his teeth and said, “You keep your hypos out of my neck, I’ll keep my hands out of your bag. Deal?”

Leonard bit his lip. Then he nodded. But Jim wasn’t done.

“That was pretty shitty, Bones. I mean, I love you, man, but what the fuck?”

“I worry about you,” Leonard said, still looking at his hands. “I really do.”

“It’s nice to be worried about. But I draw the line at Schedule I sedatives.” He paused. “I’m sorry I said what I did about your brother. That was almost worth getting shot. I do get that.”

Leonard didn’t say anything, his face almost as blank as a Vulcan’s. But Jim didn’t mind. He didn’t have to touch Leonard or even see him to know how he felt. Maybe it was three years of living together, maybe it was something else. But he could feel his friend’s sadness, deep and permanent. He understood it.

He reached out, putting a hand on Leonard’s shoulder. He felt his friend’s body heat through the thin t-shirt. But it was normal heat, human. Nothing that would burn you or turn on you.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I really am.”

“Henry was high on meth the night he died,” Leonard said. “It’s why he died—him and his buddy Terry drag-assing down a back country road in Hank’s Mustang. He ran them into a tree, killed them both instantly. It felt—” he paused. “I can’t describe how it felt. But the worst part wasn’t feeling him die. It was the gossip afterwards. Henry was a good boy, he just made some bad decisions. But now in the annals of Clear Mountain he’ll forever be that asshole methhead, the one who deserted his date at the prom to go off on a drug binge. Henry didn’t deserve that.”

“No,” Jim said, squeezing harder. “He didn’t.”

“That’s why I worry, Jim. You’re not much like Henry: You’re smarter, and you seem to be a lot luckier. But you have that—that recklessness he had. I worry that your luck will run out one day. That’s why I nag you. That’s why I—” he stopped. In the dim light from the kitchen, his eyes were like holes in his face. “You know I love you. That’s why I do what I do.”

Jim looked down, a single dark spark in the back of his mind. A nagging doubt. But he pushed it
away. Bones loved him, he wouldn’t betray him. Jim had been betrayed by everyone else in his life at one time or another—sometimes several times. But not Bones. He was better than that.

“I was really messed up, for a long time,” Jim said. “When I was a kid. Stuff happened to me, stuff I can’t talk about.” He looked up at Leonard. “I’m not going to talk about it. Don’t ask.”

“How do I ever?”

“No,” Jim said, after a second. “You don’t. I guess that’s why we’re friends.” He shrugged. “Even back then, I couldn’t talk about it. Sam left home when he was seventeen. My mom—she was always gone. My Uncle Mark did the best he could, once he retired from Starfleet and took over the farm. Aunt Trang helped out, she’s really sweet. But it was too late for me by then, the damage had been done. I got in trouble, but I mostly managed to get out of it. You know how lucky I am.

“But when I was eighteen, I moved to Kansas City with a friend of mine. I’d already finished my B.A., I didn’t know what the hell else to do. I got in with some people, really bad people. I was so deep in. Like standing at the bottom of a big hole, looking up a tiny spark of light. My friend was worse off than I was, she couldn’t help me. I thought I would never get out.”

“How did you?” Leonard asked, eyes wide.

“My mom. She came back. She got me out.”

“Rehab?”

“Her own special kind of rehab, you could say. But after, she didn’t stay. She never does.”

This last betrayal was worse than all the others put together. He thought he’d finally found it, the key to making Winnie love him. Making her stay. But he didn’t have a key, he was the key. Once she’d picked that particular lock, she was gone. Sad, yeah, a real fucking tragedy. But it wasn’t the worst part. That wasn’t what made him go nuts for the second time in a decade.

“Why did she go?” Leonard asked. Leonard, who didn’t speak to his own mother much these days. Nora had been a little too supportive of Jocelyn in the divorce, Jim had picked that up from various conversations over the years. But she had always been there for Bones when he was growing up. She might blame her son now, but her feelings fell within the normal ranges. She wouldn’t do the things Winnie had done. Nobody did things like Winnie.

Jim realized he’d been silent too long, and looked up. “She got an off-planet assignment. A really important one. And she was getting married. Guess she wanted a real honeymoon, no kids hanging around.” Except there was one kid with her, wasn’t there?

“This latest husband of hers?” Leonard asked. “The one with the face?” he waved his hand over his own, simulating cold blankness.

“Ivan,” Jim said. “His name is Ivan.”

“Right, the young one. How old is he?”

“Old enough, I guess.”

Jim turned, picking up the Jack Daniel’s bottle. He took a long, deep pull. Maybe he’d finish the whole thing. Buy Bones another one. The smoky jolt of whiskey flooded down his throat, filling his stomach. But not all the way. Nothing could do that.
Leonard took the bottle from Jim’s hands, putting it out of easy reach. “If you ever do want to talk about it—you know I’ll listen.” He looked at Jim, his face not pitying or suspicious or even curious. Just calm. Like he could hear anything, and not judge. Maybe he really wouldn’t.

Jim almost told him then. About Tarsus IV, the way Kevin’s eyes looked when he was going down the ladder towards his fate. He’d tell Bones how it felt to be in the desert, walking as fast as you can towards your own death. He’d talk about poor, thin-skinned Pete Wilkins. He’d talk about the white room in San Francisco, the hypos and EKG’s. His first leap off the cliff’s edge, and what it taught him.

He’d talk about turning Hannah into Jess, red letters and all, during those afternoons in her dad’s hayloft. He’d describe the nights at the cliff, just the two of them and the stars. Balancing on the edge of the abyss, never falling over. He’d tell him about Kansas City, and what they did there. Losing their balance like they never did back home.

He’d tell Bones about a house that looked like a bungalow but was really a rabbit hole, spitting you into another world. He’d tell him how it was to put yourself into a box, trying not to forget where you were. He’d describe the look in Michael’s eyes when the hammer came down, and he finally saw Jim’s face. His real face. He’d tell Bones how Winnie looked when she was walking out the door, holding Ivan’s hand. How things went dark then, as they hadn’t been dark in nine years. More white rooms then, more shots and tests.

He’d tell him about getting out, feeling like the shadow of the memory of a ghost. Going to a bar because he didn’t know what the hell else to do. Hitting on another stranger, getting in another stupid bar fight. But this one ended differently than the rest. He would tell Bones about taking Sam’s airbike one last time, and seeing the half-built wonder he realized was his destiny.

He wouldn’t have to tell him what happened next. They met the next day. Bones had always been there after that. That’s why Jim wouldn’t tell him anything, not now. He didn’t have to: Even if Leonard didn’t know, he knew. He didn’t judge. Maybe someday Jim would fill in the details. Not today.

Some of this must have showed on his face—or maybe Leonard was just that good. He squeezed Jim’s shoulder. Took a swallow from the whiskey bottle himself.

“Come on, kiddo,” he said. “Eat up. There’s a *Buffy* marathon on Nostalgia Fantasy.”

A pretty blonde chasing scary things with her big knife. No thanks.

“Let’s just listen to some music,” he said. “Whatever you had on is fine.”

Leonard nodded. “Computer, resume playlist.”

Overhead came the voice of Johnny Cash, deeper and smoother than any whiskey buzz:

> You’ve got a way to keep me on your side  
> You give me cause for love that I can’t hide  
> For you I know I’d even try to turn the tide  
> Because you're mine, I walk the line

Jim leaned his head on Leonard’s shoulder. Leonard lit another Marlboro, then patted Jim’s head absentely. He smelled like smoke and fabric softener. He smelled like home. Maybe that was all any of us really needed: Someone we could come home to. Someone we could trust. That was a lot rarer than sex. More real. Jim closed his eyes, listening to Bones’ music.
I keep a close watch on this heart of mine
I keep my eyes wide open all the time
I keep the ends out for the tie that binds
Because you're mine, I walk the line
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Once again, I must direct all of you towards Delicious New York’s marvelous artwork for my fic. It can all be found at Deviant Art:
http://deliciousnewyork.deviantart.com/gallery/24403827 Since the best I can do is draw stick figures, I’m always amazingly impressed at her talent. Go, look, and tell her how neat they are. :) 

xli. Spock

Meet me on the Equinox
Meet me halfway
The sun is perched at its highest peak
In the middle of the day

Let me give my love to you
Let me take your hand
And as we walk in the dimming light
Oh darling understand

That everything, everything ends

On the third chime, the door finally opened. Commander Ztan stood there, a watering tube clutched in his long grey fingers.

“Excuse me,” Spock said. “Could you reduce the volume of your music?”

“What? Oh, yes. The walls are so thin here, aren’t they?” Ztan made a peculiar waving motion, and the music lowered to a tolerable level. Normally, Spock would have been interested in the modification—sign commands were notoriously difficult to calibrate properly. But he had been finding it difficult to focus his attention this afternoon, even before Ztan began blaring the music.

He had slept poorly last night. When he awakened at dawn, he was more exhausted than when he retired. The thought of breakfast had made him nauseous. He forced himself to eat a small midday meal, which promptly disagreed with him. Then he attempted the Disciplines, only to be frustrated. Whenever he began to achieve balance the memories returned, as clearly as if they were happening again. Sorrowful blue eyes, and a voice shaking with naked human emotion.

Maybe I like you. Maybe I’ve always liked you.

Spock did not regret what he had done. It had been the right and proper thing to do. The boy was dangerous: Had their relationship been allowed to continue, only disaster could have followed.

I haven’t influenced you. Everything you’ve done is because you’ve wanted to do it.

But he could not look upon all of his behavior with satisfaction. Though his final decision (his father’s decision) had been the correct one, what led up to it was not so pleasing to contemplate.
The shit you’ve accused me of doing is exactly what you’ve done to me.

It could not be helped. If Spock could relive the events of yesterday evening, he would do the same thing again, though perhaps with a bit more composure. He did not regret. However—

“Commander?”

—fucking two-faced hypocrite—

“—the matter?”

Spock forced himself to concentrate on the person speaking. His habits were disgraceful today. “Apologies,” he said. “I’m not quite myself.”

Ztan blinked all three of his large gold eyes. “I can see that.”

Spock had to force himself not to shift uncomfortably. Procyons were easily capable of seeing into the Infrared and beyond. They could see entirely too much.

“Thank you,” he said, turning to leave.

“Oh, please don’t go,” Ztan said. “It’s so lonely here! Everyone takes off for parts unknown on these long weekends. I haven’t seen anybody in ages. You must come in and have some water.”

Procyon Major, baked as it was in the light of a twin star system, was almost as scarce of water as Vulcan. If one were offered liquid refreshment by one of its inhabitants, even if the two of you weren’t currently inhabiting the desert planet, it would be the height of rudeness to refuse.

Spock had been rude enough this week. He nodded reluctantly. “I cannot stay long.”

“No no,” Ztan said in his sing-song voice. “Not long.” He stepped aside and allowed Spock inside. His rooms were identical to Spock’s, but here the Academy grey had been relieved not by red and orange but by gold and green. Much of the green was organic: Plants were hung in front of each of the long windows, placed liberally in planters, and spilling from the bookshelves. Some were the desert succulents of Procyon Major, but many were the lusher Terran tropicals. Like Vulcans, the people of Ztan’s planet took a contrary delight in nurturing varietals that would never have thrived back home.

“I apologize for the noise,” Ztan said, as he filled two tall glasses. “My plants enjoy the sounds. I do too, of course, though our tastes are not the same. If I must listen to Terran music, I prefer Chopin, or perhaps Glass—‘The Hours’ makes me weep when I hear it, weep! But my babies like silly pop music. This Blue Wind nonsense is too unbearable—” His mouth slit folded as he waved at the still-audible song, “—but you should see how it makes the oleanders bloom!”

Still keeping both water glasses clutched in one immensely long hand, Ztan trotted over to a tall potted plant nearby. The fingers of his other hand darted out and plucked off a handful of pink blossoms. He shoved them in his mouth, grey cheeks going purple, all eyes closed in ecstasy.

“Mmm. Lovely,” he said, as soon as he swallowed. “Would you like some?”

“No, thank you.”

“Are you sure?” Ztan held out another handful. “I’ve plenty left.”

“Quite sure.” Spock frowned at the viciously poisonous flowers.
Ztan shoved the second handful in his mouth, cheeks puffing out while he munched contentedly. Then he handed Spock his glass of water. This, anyway, could be ingested by both Procyons and Vulcans: The delicious liquid was cool on the tongue, soothing to an aching head.

“That’s better,” Ztan says, narrowing his center eye. “You seemed a trifle—overheated.”

Spock said nothing, taking another long swallow. He was about to take yet another, finishing his water and allowing himself to end this impromptu social call, when Ztan said, “I do not blame you. I’m not myself, either. John Smith keeps me awake all day long.” His mouth slit crumpled in a tired way. “I don’t think I’ve shut more than two eyes in twenty-four hours.”

Spock stopped mid-swallow. “Dr. Smith has returned?”

“Yes! Yesterday evening. He’s nice enough, I suppose, not noisy like me. But I can see him over there, running around night and day.” Ztan stared at his right-hand wall, the pupils of his eyes dilating. “His aura is so terribly bright. What a shame he can’t ever turn it down!”

He turned back to Spock. Suddenly a long, lizard-like tongue darted out of his mouth slit. It licked all three eyes in quick succession, a sure sign of nervousness in a Procyon.

“He doesn’t sleep, you know,” he said. “John Smith. He doesn’t sleep.”

“He must,” Spock said. “All humans sleep seven hours per night or risk illness.”

“Yes,” Ztan said, fingers winding anxiously around his water glass. “All humans do.”

Before Spock could ask what this meant, the door chimed. Ztan made another peculiar wave.

A tall, thin, nervous-looking man, dressed in a brown suit of strange cut, marched into Ztan’s rooms. His eyes were browner than his suit, and brighter. His face was liberally sprinkled with freckles, and his thin mouth was stretched in a wide smile. He bounced over to them, running a hand through his short, tousled brown hair.

He gave Spock a friendly nod and turned to his companion. “Ztan, old thing! Might you have any Typhoo? My larder is as bare as Mother Hubbard’s, and I am, quite literally, aching for a cuppa. I should stock up myself, but I can’t face the market without something bracing first.”

“I’m sorry,” Ztan said. “I never drink Terran teas.”

“Whyever not?”

“They make me die.” Ztan licked his eyes.

“Well! Can’t argue with that logic, can we?” Smith said, giving Spock a wink.

“The replicator has many varieties,” Spock said.

“Yes yes,” Smith said impatiently, sticking his hands in his pockets. “But whatever sort I ask it for, I always end up with something almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea. I don’t suppose you have anything? I know Vulcans think most Terran beverages taste like bilge water, but—”

“Perhaps I can accommodate you,” Spock admitted. “If you will accompany me to my rooms.”

“I would accompany you to Zanzibar if I could get my mouth around something authentic. Doesn’t even have to be Typhoo, Twinings will do. Bloody Lipton, even.”
Spock did not answer this. Like many Terrans (Spock was not thinking of anyone in particular) Smith had a tendency towards ridiculous hyperbole. It was amazing that they had ever managed to accomplish anything at all, when they seemed unable to control even their verbal excesses.

—**fucking two-faced hypocrite**—

Spock returned his water glass and made his goodbyes to Ztan, who folded his mouth-slit at him and waved his fingers. The fold and wave he gave John Smith were more uncertain, but Smith did not seem to notice.

“Very nice,” he said, looking around as they entered Spock’s rooms. “I’ve never had the chance to do up my quarters properly. Always running about, hither, thither and yon. Suppose I could do some collecting when I travel, tapestries or candelabras or something—a clockwork man or two. But one never thinks of these things at the time, does one? I suppose some of it could even be called looting, technically speaking. But if it’s all going to be blown up by a bloody volcano anyway, I can’t see that it matters—ah! Thank you!”

He grabbed the box of Earl Grey from Spock’s hand like he had just been offered a bar of gold—or perhaps a particularly fetching candelabra. Spock had rummaged in his cupboards and found the box of tea, bought for his mother’s last visit nine months ago, with great dispatch. Anything to stop the bewildering river of words. Though Smith always appeared to be speaking Standard, much of the time he was entirely unintelligible.

He tilted his head at Spock. “Now I owe you a favor! How shall I repay?”

“Please do not concern yourself.”

“Can’t help it. My mind does fasten upon these things. I already owe you quite a lot, with you taking on my Temporal Mechanics course while I’ve been gone. Know it’s not exactly a laugh a minute. No, I must think of something. Do you like marmalade? Can’t keep track of who eats what these days. Ztan’s munching every poisonous plant like a cheerful cow—he offered me hemlock yesterday, hemlock! Asked him if I looked like bloody Socrates, and he just blinked at me. Don’t want to fall into that particular faux pas, but I really can’t remember how you feel about oranges. They seem like something Vulcans would eat.” He looked at Spock expectantly.

Spock’s head was aching, and it wasn’t all sleeplessness. “I’m sorry. What was the question?”

“Marmalade, Commander. Do Vulcans eat it?”

“I do not care for it.” At present, the thought of anything sweet turned his stomach.

“Ah!” Smith said, nodding. “I suppose you prefer apples. I used to have a recipe for a particularly delicious crumble, lots of sugar and cinnamon and lovely crispy bits—”

Spock had to turn away for a moment, closing his eyes and concentrating hard. Vomiting in front of a colleague would not be the worst humiliation that he had endured this week, but he would still rather not succumb to the temptation.

“My dear fellow,” Smith said. “Are you all right?”

“A minor complaint,” Spock could say, after a moment. “But I would rather not talk about food, if you don’t mind.”

“My apologies,” Smith said, in a more subdued tone. He considered him for a moment, eyes hard upon Spock’s face. “I should have remembered—yes! You’re not well, are you?”
“It’s not serious.”

“No sense taking chances. You should see a doctor.”

“I do not require advice. I have been guided enough this week.” Spock realized how rude the words sounded the moment he said them, but he couldn’t bring himself to apologize. His head did ache so terribly. It felt like a large and ruthless man was banging a hammer into his brain—A’sha’naath perhaps. (It was not Spock’s fault he wasn’t prospering.)

John Smith did not seem offended. “There is guidance and guidance,” he said. “An important part of life, learning to distinguish good advice from bad. Learning to trust your own judgment, that wise little voice inside you: That’s the most important part of all. ‘To find yourself, think for yourself.’ Socrates said that.”

Spock did not believe it. If he listened to his own little voice, he would be with Jim Kirk this moment. Those blue eyes would be gazing upon him. Those pink lips would be stretching in a smile, one that promised all sorts of wicked things. Cool hands would be upon Spock’s brow—they would soothe the aching there. And if they could not, firm and willing flesh would assuage all hungers, cool all fevers.

If Spock were to listen to his inner voice, he would be on his knees, begging for forgiveness. The worst humiliation he had suffered all week, and he would not mind it at all, so long as he was forgiven. It was proof enough Spock’s instincts were not to be trusted. After intimate contact with a vorsopath for six days, how could he know that they were his own?

*Let me get this straight: The fact that you really like me is proof that you don’t really like me?*

Spock put two fingers to his temples. “Excuse me, Dr. Smith,” he said. “I think I must rest.”

“Of course, of course,” Smith said. “Stupid of me to keep you standing here when you’re quite obviously under the weather.” He held up the box. “Thanks for the tea. Share and enjoy, yeah?”

“You’re welcome. But it is really nothing,” Spock said, as he walked Smith to the front door.

Smith tucked the box of tea into his jacket, pausing on the threshold. “Take care of yourself, Commander,” he said. “I hope your fever breaks soon.”

Spock stared at him. “I don’t—what makes you believe I have a fever?”

Smith shrugged. His eyes really were disturbingly bright. Not with the alien goldness of Ztan’s eyes; it was something else. Brightness that had little to do with color, and everything to do with what lay behind it. “Happens to everyone,” he said. “Remember, ‘Fever isn’t such a new thing. Fever started long ago.’”

“Did Socrates say that?” Spock said tightly.

“Peggy Lee,” Smith said, raising an eyebrow. “Quite a lady. Made one heck of a Margarita. Much rather have cocktails with her than old Socrates.” He grinned. “What a way to burn, eh?”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and walked down the hall, whistling.

The door whooshed, mercifully blocking him from view. Such a strange man, Spock had always thought. So very human, that there almost seemed to be something inhuman about him.

Now that he was alone, Spock allowed himself an exhausted sigh. He slid back one of the divider
panels and lay down on his bed. Gentle purple twilight shone through the tall windows. Beyond was the beginning of a perfect San Francisco Saturday evening, chill but enticing. He should be preparing for a dinner with Nyota, she had been quite disappointed when he informed her—by com—that he would not be able to see her tonight. Her reservations at Charis would go unused.

Spock did not trust himself. For this reason he had spoken to her over the computer, rather than making his apologies in person. It’s why he had not pleaded illness, fearing she would visit him with soup and sympathy. He might fling the soup at the wall or begin sobbing into her lap. He might—there was no knowing what he might do.

When he pleaded work, Nyota had not pushed the issue, which he appreciated. One reason that he had enjoyed her company so much over the past half-year, the fact that she knew just where the boundaries were. Unlike some others, she did not invade where she was not wanted.

Spock had not informed her of his upcoming trip to Vulcan. He could not disappoint her further today. The largest disappointment would wait until he had returned from his journey. If recent events had shown him nothing else, they had made him see that his relationship with Nyota had no future. First of all, he would be leaving San Francisco within six months; He was weary of teaching and had already applied for a deep-space assignment. What’s more, Nyota would soon graduate and have her own career goals to pursue. They would almost certainly be assigned to separate ships. To maintain a relationship across such vast distances was absurd. The only way one would attempt it would be if the bond were serious—permanent. His bond with Nyota was not; It never would be. He respected her, he had great affection for her, but he did not love her.

After he had cooled his Fever, Spock was contemplating a period of celibacy. The thought of not being under physical obligation to anyone—especially his own fitful desires—was very enticing. He would gladly eschew the pleasures of the flesh for an interlude of peace.

He did not have it now. He was exhausted, his head ached, he was hungry. But not for food.

*Dishes and cutlery crashed to the floor as Spock swept them off the table. He bent Jim over it. There was no time for finesse or foreplay, he must be inside of him now. The green haze in front of his eyes was thicker, wilder with every passing second; if it were not satisfied soon, he would have no control at all. Jim gave a muffled groan as Spock entered him, thrusting hard, deep, and then again, harder and deeper. Spock soon lost knowledge of how often or deep he went, it could not be deep enough. He felt another climax building inside, it paced and clamored like a caged beast, but it could not find release. This was not enough, nothing was enough, Sitaan help him—*

Spock jumped from the bed, he went to the alcove. He knelt in front of the altar which contained his household gods. He stared at the figure of Sitaan, slender and beautiful. He was smiling, the only one of the gods ever depicted so. His blue eyes were as bright as a desert asp’s.

Looking upon him brought no comfort or peace. Nor did contemplating his brother Kitaan, taller and more muscular, his vulpine face handsome, but solemn as death. They would not help him.

Spock looked at the figure next to them. A tall, thin man in a brown robe, with large brown eyes and those strange round ears. Dahktar, God of Light and Reason, progenitor of all that was just and right. The wise shepherd of your best destiny. He would help you, if you could only find him. So often he could not be found: He was always wandering.

Spock would not pray to him. It was foolish, to ask the gods for favors now. They had all been gone for a very long time. But perhaps he did pray a little, deep in his heart. For just then, the worst of the pressure receded. His nausea subsided, his headache eased to a distant ache. The hungers firing his flesh cooled down. They would return; He could still feel them smoldering deep within. But he had
been granted a momentary peace. What had he done to deserve it?

Whatever the reason, he was grateful for it. A few minutes later, when the communication chime sounded, he was able to answer, and in a tolerably calm tone. He would not have been able to do such things ten minutes ago. “Answer. Audio and video,” he told the computer.

The screen lit up with a familiar lovely face. “Sherron,” he began. “Nashaut. Uf’vesh tre-halovaya —”

“My trip was fine,” she said. “But let us speak Standard. Soon I will not have the opportunity for quite some time.” Behind her, Spock could see the main living area of her apartment. The furniture, which belonged to the Embassy, was still in place, but all of Varek’s pictures had been taken down. A few packing crates were scattered about, holding more personal possessions.

“You’re prepared for your other journey, then,” he said.

“As prepared as I will ever be,” Sherron said. A hard line had appeared between her eyebrows: He realized then that she was quite upset. “Are you also prepared for your journey?”

He was silent a moment. “So. Sarek has spoken to you.”

“Oh, yes. Last night. At length. How fortunate that Cousin Vekan’s home in Flagstaff gets such wonderful out-of-System reception. Not all private dwellings do. But my grandfather had the opportunity to make me fully aware of his views.” The line between her eyes deepened.

“He was displeased with you? Why?”

“He thought I should have informed him of your condition. He found my actions irrational.” She sighed. “Perhaps they have been.”

Spock stiffened. “You regret keeping my confidence?”

“Of course not. But in some other, related matters, I have not shown good judgment.” She was actually grimacing now. “Spock, I must tell you—”

She cut off, looking over her shoulder. The door to the solarium must have opened, music could be heard flooding into the room. Bright, facile, Terran music, overcharged with synthesizers and cascading strings:

*Meet me on your best behavior*
*Meet me at your worst*
*For there will be no stone unturned*
*Or bubble left to burst*

*Let me lay beside you, Darling*
*Let me be your man*
*And let our bodies intertwine*
*But always understand*

*That everything, everything ends*
*That everything, everything ends*
*That everything, everything ends*

“Varena!” she snapped. “Lower that noise at once.”
The music cut off. Spock’s smallest cousin came bouncing into view. “It’s not noise, Mother,” she said. “This is Blue Wind.” She pronounced the name like a Terran might say, ‘Mozart.’

“The name of the artist is immaterial. The volume was much too loud. And I don’t care much for those lyrics, they are entirely too suggestive for a child your age.”

The corners of Varena’s mouth turned down. “I am not a child,” she says. “I am twelve in .34 standard years.”

“Nevertheless, the singer should show more care. A large portion of Blue Wind’s audience is—” Sherron quirked an eyebrow at her daughter, “—young.”

“Hatari Takamura didn’t write it. The song is a cover of a much older one, early 21st Century. Ben Gibbard wrote it, the lead singer of Death Cab for Cutie.”

“What sort of cab?” Sherron asked, blinking at her daughter.

“Death Cab, it’s a Beatles reference—” Varena shook her head, bobbed hair lashing her cheek. “I do not wish to be disrespectful, but you are so uninformed about some things.”

Despite her greater tensions, Sherron’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “I remember saying the same thing to my mother when I was your age. Unfortunate, isn’t it, how much less we know as we grow older?”

Varena peered at her mother, eyes narrowing. She was intelligent enough to know that she was being made fun of, but not quite old enough to see where the ridicule lay. Rather than replying to Sherron, she looked at the comscreen.

“Hello, Spock,” she said. “Mother tells me you will be joining us on Vulcan next week.”

“For a time, yes.”

“I’m glad to hear it. When we are both free from other obligations, you must sit for another portrait. Perhaps you can bring Stonn.”

“Perhaps. If he is also free.”

“I hope he can find time. The two of you make such an interesting composition. The contrast between your coloring: A very dark man and a very fair man together, it’s striking. Quite rare.”

Spock had to concentrate on the frame of the comscreen for a moment. “Yes.”

“Varena,” Sherron said, putting a hand on the girl’s head. “Go make sure your brother has left nothing in his room. They’re taking the last crates down in a few minutes.”

“Very well,” she said, then turned to the screen again. “Goodbye, Spock. I look forward to seeing you on Vulcan. Please don’t forget to speak to Stonn. I really do wish to make another—”

“Svai-taan,” Sherron said to her. “The day wears on. Go.”

Varena straightened her shoulders, assuming an air of wounded dignity. “Yes, Mother. I heard when you asked me a moment ago.”

Spock watched Sherron, watching her daughter walk away. “She is growing up,” he said.

“She will be death of me, as the Terrans say. If her brother doesn’t strike the killing blow first.”
“He was not happy to return from Arizona?”

“Oh, he was happy. He was very happy.” Sherron took a breath. “T’Lyn found him in the rose garden with Ambassador Selel’s daughter this morning.”

Spock leaned forward. “They weren’t—”

“No. Matters had not progressed so far. But their position was compromising, to say the least. He did not react well to being separated from her, and she was almost as hysterical, stupid girl! They fancy themselves in love—it’s all so terribly tiresome. But nothing will come of it, I have assured Selel of that. Sharok is currently occupying a guarded meditation cell. He will not be released until just before we leave for Vulcan tomorrow.” Sherron looked weary. “These last two days have been so trying. Perhaps the gods are punishing me. My mother would say it was so. She once told me that all of my sins would come back, threefold. At the time I thought that she was a silly old woman, but now—I do not know.”

She blinked, seeming to return from far away. “My apologies, cousin. I should not be burdening you with my troubles. You’ve enough of your own.”

Before Spock could reply, Varena came bouncing back into view. “Spock, I forgot to ask. You are acquainted with Dr. McCoy, are you not? When you speak to him, please tell him that I’m sorry I could not see him before I left. I would see him, but—” she looked hard at her mother.

Sherron was making a visible attempt to stay calm. “It’s not proper. You know it is not.”

“You could take me. We have time this evening.”

“We do not. In any event, I have no plans to contact Dr. McCoy. Our friendship is—concluded.”

Varena stared at her mother, green eyes glittering. “Our friendship is not. Perhaps he does not wish to see you anymore, but he likes me very much, and I have new drawings—”

“Varena.” Sherron’s voice was deadly quiet. “Remove yourself from my sight. Do not speak one more word. Or you will be occupying the meditation cell next to your brother’s.”

Varena pressed her lips together. She marched off with the air of an affronted high priestess.

“Her behavior is not entirely willfulness,” Sherron said, after pausing a moment to regain her composure. “She has not been sleeping well. She complains of bad dreams. It’s the stress of leaving Terra. She was so very young when we first came here; To her, this is home. And the overreaction of the twins to the news of her going—it was not helpful. They are terribly spoiled and willful. Their uncle’s fault, no doubt. He indulges them too much. Selel pities them because they are orphans, he thinks they must be treated gently. I think they could spend a great deal more time in the meditation cells.” She paused, taking a breath. “My apologies. My mind is wandering so today! How are you, Spock? How are you coping with your own separation?”

“I do not take your meaning.”

“Jim Kirk,” Sherron said, pronouncing the name carefully. “You have broken with him, have you not? Sarek told me my first duty when I returned home was to prepare the guest cottage for you and Stonn, adrenal alarms and so forth. I assume he is partnering with you during pon farr.”

“Yes. I have not spoken to him, he has been off-planet. But Sarek sent him a message, and I’m sure the reply will be favorable. There is no logical reason why it wouldn’t be.” Spock paused for a moment. “My separation from Jim Kirk was right and necessary. I do not regret it.”
“Spock,” Sherron said softly. “You need not pretend. You may tell me that you are grieving, I promise I will not tell your father.”

“I am not,” Spock said, straightening his shoulders.

“I can feel your agitation from here.” Sherron’s dark eyes were close upon his face. “You must be careful, cousin. You know any sudden emotional shift—loss or separation or intense anger—can intensify the Fever. It can bring plak tow early. We have both witnessed it happen.”

Spock did not like to think of his own part in bringing about two early Blood Fevers, Varek’s and his friend Samar’s. Even now, all of these years later, he could not think on those events without a pang of guilt. So his voice was softer than it otherwise would have been, responding to Sherron’s interference.

“I appreciate your concern,” he said. “I am as well as can be expected, under the circumstances.”

“I wish you were traveling with us tomorrow,” Sherron said. “Are you sure you can’t come?”

“I have several pressing matters to attend to early in the week, related to my work. I cannot simply vanish without making some preparations, as I could if I were employed on Vulcan. Starfleet cannot be expected to understand.”

Sherron looked around the room. “You could stay here. This apartment will be vacant until they find a replacement for my position. I would feel better knowing that you are with our people.”

Spock would not. He would not say it, even to Sherron, but he did not trust their people, not since Sarek had become involved. For all he knew, if he went to the Embassy now he might find himself in a guarded meditation cell.

“I am well,” he said again. “I will leave as soon as I am able.”

“At least come to dinner tonight. I would like to see you.” She sighed. “I have no other plans.”

Spock considered her a moment. “Why are you not seeing McCoy? What has happened?”

Sherron faced him as she said it. She did not flinch from the truth. “Leonard McCoy was the one who sent the video to your father. He did it partially out of fear for his friend, but more than that, I believe he did it because he was angry with me. He thought that I had not been honest with him. I wasn’t, not entirely. I—I took some actions I should not have taken. Sometimes I am too clever for my own good. McCoy betrayed you. But the betrayal is my fault.”

For a moment, Spock couldn’t speak. All he could hear was a dull roar in his ears. He shook his head, trying to silence it. Attempting to clear the green haze gnawing at the edges of his vision.

Sherron went on, speaking quickly. “Spock, I told you because I think you have a right to know the true scope of the situation. But I want you to promise me now that you will take no action against McCoy. You will not even see him.”

“You still care for him,” Spock said, as the green sparks danced and burned. “Even now.”

“No. I don’t know. My feelings are unsettled,” Sherron admitted. “But I do know that I care for you. If you were to confront him and lose control—we know the consequences. We saw them two nights ago. Terrans are not so discreet as Orions, nor are they as resilient. This is not Vulcan, they make no allowances for men in your condition. It could ruin you. I do not wish to see you ruined. Perhaps I should not even have told you, but I could not bear to have this secret pressing upon me. I know I
should have come to your rooms to tell—I should have. But I did not wish to feel your
disappointment in person.” Her eyes had grown wet, a reaction she would have shown to few others.
“Please, ashal-veh. Promise that you will not add to my guilt.”

Spock took a breath. “Compose yourself. None of this is your fault.” He felt a bit calmer, the calm of
concern. Sherron’s tears always had that effect. “I do wish you had more discriminating taste when it
comes to lovers.”

“After this, I am considering a vow of celibacy.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “You should not make such a vow.”

“Why not?”

“Because you would not last a week, svai-taan. The Mother Goddess will be very angry.”

“Oh! You are heartless and cruel,” Sherron said. But she no longer looked on the verge of tears. She
sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Gods above! I am sorry, Spock.”

“It is not your fault,” Spock repeated. “But if my forgiveness is necessary to your peace of mind, I
will give it.”

“It is,” Sherron said. “Thank you.” She gave him a searching look. “So. You will take no action
against McCoy?”

“I will not. Let Fate punish him for his wicked ways. It always does.” He looked at the clock. “I
cannot come to dinner, however. I must make progress on a number of projects tonight, if I am to
leave by the end of next week.”

“A pity,” Sherron said, “but I understand.” She shrugged. “Well! I do feel somewhat better. There is
nothing like confession to unburden the mind, I suppose.” She smiled at him, a rare real smile. She
did not give it to many others, lovers or no.

It struck Spock then, in a way it hadn’t for many years, how beautiful his cousin was. Time and
discipline had made him grow inured to her charms, but just then he felt them, with a force that he
had not experienced since he was a young boy, feeling the first distant flames of manhood. Perhaps it
was his condition tormenting him again, but he did not think so. Sherron could give an acolyte of
Kolinahr feverish dreams, that was practically a byword back home. But what he knew, and few
others did, was that Sherron had a beautiful soul. Her defenses were formidable, but once she let you
past them, you saw her for what she truly was. In another life, where she was not his cousin—but
such ideas were foolish. This was the only life he could live. While he lived it, he was glad he knew
her. In a very unique way, they did belong to each other.

Sherron raised her hand in the formal salute. But her voice, when she spoke, was soft. Intimate.

“Goodbye, Spock,” she said in Vulcan. “I will meet you in the desert.”

The screen went dark. Spock turned away, frowning. He was not superstitious, but he wished she
had not used that parting phrase. It was a traditional farewell in the Old High Vulcan, but Spock had
never liked it. In that language, the word eshiikh translated several ways, depending on context.
‘Desert’ was one possible meaning. ‘Home’ was another. The third meaning was ‘Eternity.’ In olden
times, when travel often resulted in death, perhaps it had made sense to bid farewell to your loved
ones in such a manner. Today, Spock found it morbid.

Enough of this. He should work while he was feeling able. He did have so much to do. But he could
not quite bring himself to go into his study just yet. He went back to the altar, kneeling. As he did, he heard the music begin again next door. It was lower this time, but still clear:

A window
An open tomb
The sun crawls
Across your bedroom
A halo
A waning moon
Your last breaths
Moving through you
As everything, everything ends

As everything, everything ends
As everything, everything, everything
Everything, everything, everything ends

Spock gazed upon the gods, attempting to focus his concentration, block out all nagging stimuli. The sound of music, the smell of the incense he had burned earlier, the feel of the mats beneath him. These were easy enough to shut out, but internal sensations were more difficult. Sherron’s beautiful face, Jim Kirk’s smile. The feel of her hand grasping Spock’s, the feel of Jim moving underneath him. They were so much harder to ignore.

Even harder, Leonard McCoy’s smirking, hateful face. It’s how he must have looked, in the moment before he shattered Spock’s life apart. Clever and vindictive. Merciless.

Spock opened his eyes. He looked at the figure of Dahktar. This was not the only aspect of that deity. But his other face was not depicted. Sahriv-Sarlah, The Oncoming Storm. He was never included in the usual collection of household gods. How could you carve a statue of pure rage? How to depict eternal vengeance? Few artists ever tried. One of the few had been Varek.

It was his last painting, a whirling vortex of black, red, and yellow. Light and dark, blood and spirit, life and death, spinning in an endless, terrifying dance. You had to look at it a long time before you saw what was really there, in the center of the chaos: a pair of eyes, bright as stars but also, somehow, dark as the void of night. They looked at you, they burned to the core of your being. They never closed. His gaze was eternal: Sahriv-Sarlah did not sleep.

Sherron had donated the painting to the Museum of Shikahr, but it was rarely displayed. Too many people had been disturbed, looking at it. Schoolchildren suffered nightmares.

Spock had seen the painting while it was still in the workshop. He had looked at it the morning after they found Varek’s body. He gazed at it until the images were seared into his soul, and he could not have said why. But now those eyes came back, as if they were blazing right in front of him. He looked into that vortex of vengeance, and for the first time he truly understood, how it felt to be an entity formed of pure rage. If McCoy were here in this very moment, he would not survive. Spock would also not survive such an encounter—he knew it.

The mad creature who emerged from the episode, Leonard McCoy’s blood fresh on his hands, would not be Spock. Perhaps he could bear that. At the present moment, he did not see where he had so much to live for. But the ruination would not be merely his own. Spock, the Miracle Child of Vulcan, was a public figure. (That inane sobriquet had died out of usage years ago, but scandal would surely revive it.)

If he committed murder, the effects would echo throughout the galaxy. His family would be shamed:
father, mother, cousins, and the rest. Not just Clan Surak, but his entire people would share the disgrace. Federation jurisprudence was lethal in its diligence, not an inch of Spock’s past or person would be safe. The Fever would be exposed, discussed on the nets by a trillion alien tongues. It could not, would not be borne. For these reasons, Spock would bear McCoy’s vengeance. However much the passivity tortured him.

He forced himself to look away from those endless eyes. Shaking, face wet with tears, he prayed to the god’s kinder aspect. He implored Dahktar to take pity once more. Perhaps he had used all his favors for one day, for the green fires of rage did not cease. But he continued to kneel, as the evening became night. Spock prayed, and knew no peace.
if I should sleep with a lady called death
get another man with firmer lips
to take your new mouth in his teeth
(hips pumping pleasure into hips).

Seeing how the limp huddling string
of your smile over his body squirms
kissingly, I will bring you every spring
handfuls of little normal worms.

Dress deftly your flesh in stupid stuffs,
phrase the immense weapon of your hair.
Understanding why his eye laughs,
I will bring you every year
something which is worth the whole,
an inch of nothing for your soul.

“I know this,” a soft voice says by his ear. “The hayloft. Remember? You read it to me.”

“Oh yeah. Right before—” Jim stops.

“Right before you put your hand up my skirt. Quite a move for a fifteen-year-old.”

He closes the book and turns over on the bed, burrowing his shoulders into the cheap quilt. He winces a little, but now is not the time to think about why. “What can I say? I was precocious.”

“I wasn’t.” Jess smiles, but it’s not the same one she had in the hayloft. The sweetness is there—nothing could take that away—but the innocence is gone. In its place is something knowing, weary. “A decade of Sunday School blown away by good poetry and bad weed.”

His weed has improved in the intervening years. Jim takes another hit off the joint. The room has become pleasantly bright and fuzzy. Dark, sharp things still hover at the edges, but he can ignore them. For now. “Come on, Jess. I wasn’t the first boy you took up there.”

“You were first one I let in there. But not the last, you know that. You always knew, but you never got mad.” She looks down at the quilt, small hands picking at the pilled fabric. “Why?”

Jim shrugs. “I’m not your father.”

“Oh no, you and Melvin are nothing alike.” Her tone is wry, her eyes are wounded. “He hated your fucking guts. Even before the hayloft.”

“That wasn’t all on me. He never got over Winnie dumping him and going off to the Academy. Vin thought he was gonna marry her.” Jim shakes his head. “In another life, you’re my sister. Weird.”

“It was a little about Winnie. Mostly it was about you.” Jess is silent a minute. “It hurt me, the first
time I realized how much he hated you. How deep it went. I threw up on the kitchen floor.”

“I know,” Jim says softly.

“I puked a lot back then, huh? I never did shield very well. If you don’t get the training by the time you hit puberty, it never becomes automatic. My parents should have sent me to Iowa City.”

“They thought you could pray the bad vibes away. Fucking fundie bullshit.” Jim inhales more weed, but it barely blunts his anger. “You were talented, really talented. With those receptive empathy scores, you could have been a doctor.”

“Maybe in another life,” Jess says.

They are both silent then. Jim takes a last hit and stubs out the joint, the weed having done its work. It’s blurred everything but Jess, who moves close, closer than she’s been in a long time. Until she’s hovering over him, blue eyes wide and shining. It strikes him, with a force he hasn’t felt since he was fifteen, how pretty she is. So pretty. A face like a valentine and a body like a poem. One by e. e. cummings, all sinuous curves and delicious syntax.

“If you hadn’t seduced me, I’d have seduced you,” she says. “I knew from the moment we met. You weren’t even cute then! Sullen and pudgy and pimple-faced. But I knew, I saw: What you were. How it could be.” She moves closer, close enough to kiss. Almost.

“You didn’t need poetry, Jimmy. Or weed. When I was with you, I couldn’t feel anyone else. The world dropped away and it was you and me and silence. After a lifetime of noise, I can’t describe how beautiful that was. I tried to, you’ve read those diary pages. But I don’t think I really captured it. Nothing else felt like you.” She pauses. “Except heroin.”

Jim would have kissed her then. Not from lust but from sheer desperation, a way of blocking the scenes those last words call up, images of Jess he’s tried hard to forget. Heroin was always her drug of choice, the only one that could stop the echoes in her head. Heroin, not weed or coke or meth. Asshole Sean couldn’t even get that right.

Jim can’t kiss her, and it’s Sean Quinn’s fault. But without Jim there would have been no Sean. So whose fault is it, really?

Jim pushes the dangerous thoughts away, concentrates on Jess.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself,” she says. “Some of it was empathy, but there was more to it. I fell for the only boy in town who wasn’t afraid of Vin Krider, someone as strong and stubborn and angry as my dad. While I never had Winnie’s strength, I did have her chaos. You felt it every time you were inside me. Too bad I wasn’t blonde, huh? You’d have married me.”

Jess offers her sweet, knowing smile. “If we had been siblings, our relationship couldn’t have been much weirder. The past is always present: We repeat it, trying to make it better, newer, perfect. We never do, but we keep going. Every fuck is a grudge fuck.”

It takes Jim awhile to answer. “Is that why you loved Patrick? Because he’s like me?”

“Patrick is like me,” Jess says. “He doesn’t exist.”

He pushed too far. Jess is gone—she’s been gone for months. This was the closest he’s come to bringing her back. He shouldn’t have pushed it.

He sits up, looking at himself in the mirror across from the bed. His red eyes are the only color in his
face. The buzzy warmth ended with the fantasy, but he is still stoned. Jess is still dead.

*Not enough weed in the world to make you forget that, laddy boy. Maybe you should try heroin.*

Jim sees his reflection shake its head. Heroin isn’t his drug of choice. Neither is weed, actually.

He gets off the bed and stands in front of the mirror. He pulls his t-shirt up, twisting around.

The whip marks from last night cascade down his back in a crazy pattern. All of them are pink and raised, a few streaked crimson where the whip cut through flesh. Not the most practiced job in the world, and maybe he shouldn’t have gone through with it when he realized the guy was an amateur. But when you need a fix that badly, you take what you can get. Jim doesn’t mind the pain, but the marks are going to be a problem if Michael sees them. It would be worse if Winnie did. Of course, if Winnie were here, maybe Jim wouldn’t have gone to Cell Block to begin—

No. He did not let some newbie in assless chaps whip him to jelly because he misses his mom. That is *not* what happened.

It’s been a rough couple of weeks, that’s all. Spying is hard work. After the initial excitement wears off, you remember what you really signed on for: Sucking the cock of the man who had your best friend murdered. And smiling while you do it—the smile is important. As important as stifling your gag reflex.

When your boss—who just happens to be your mom—has to go to the Orion system for some top-secret bullshit she won’t tell you about, it’s confusing. Because it’s your boss who taught you how to do this (the smiling, not the sucking). She’s the one who made you feel like a hero instead of a hustler. When you don’t know when you’ll hear from her again, it’s discouraging. When all you see ahead is an endless progression of days, grinning and getting on your knees, you can get a little depressed. Depressed enough to make ill-advised trips to the leather bars. So depressed you talk to dead people.

Not really talking, of course: Fate put a lot in your mental toolbox, but not clairvoyance. It’s just as well. Communing with the spirits sounds good in theory, but what would they actually say? Nothing you’d want to hear. Nothing different from what your own brain tells you. What you hear every second of every day, except when you’re gagged and bound.

*It was you, Jimmy. You put Jess on that slab. So keep smiling. Swallow it all.*

Jim glances at the clock. What time does Cell Block open again?

He is in the living room, popping open a Xix and pondering his itinerary for the evening, when a distinctive chime sounds overhead. Jim frowns: He doesn’t get many callers. The one person who has been stopping by regularly is several hundred light years away.

“Computer. ID visitor?”

“Identification not found.”

That’s like saying the person doesn’t have a face. “Show visitor?” Jim says, brow wrinkling.

The comscreen lights up. Jim stares at it. Shit, indeed.

If it were up to him, Jim would just wait until this particular visitor went away. His tiny one-bedroom apartment leaves much to be desired, but the front door is solid and soundproofed. There’s no way to know if anyone is home until it opens. But Winnie’s parting instructions, like all her instructions,
were crystal-clear: *While I’m gone, he is the boss of you. Do what he says and don’t get cute. Past encounters notwithstanding, he doesn’t think you’re cute. Not at all.*

May as well get this over with: “Come.”

The door slides open. A man steps into the room. He’s young and blond, dressed casual-cool in a dark blue t-shirt, tight jeans, and a black leather jacket. He’s smiling, body language loose and inviting. If anyone were watching, he’d look like a college kid visiting a buddy, or maybe a guy following up on a promising first date—there’s a nervous edge to his movements, an eagerness. Jim has to admire the perfection of the illusion.

It shatters once the door whooshes shut. The smile stops, the posture stiffens, the eager quiver in his limbs turns to studied stillness. Even his eye color seems to change, sunny blue bleaching to ice-grey. In place of the grinning college kid stands a hardened adventurer of indeterminate age. Most people would find the suddenness and completeness of the shift really scary.

Jim’s seen scarier things. He leans against the wall by the door, smirking.

“Patrick, old buddy. Always a pleasure.”

“Don’t use that name,” he says, not looking at Jim. His gaze scans the room like he’s looking for hidden Syndicate cells. “Can you not remember simple instructions?”

“Christ, unclench already. Sean only read about you, remember? He never saw you.”

Jess’ diary contained a lot more than misty water-colored memories of trysts with Jim. She also talked about Patrick—she talked way too much. The doctors in rehab thought journalizing was therapeutic, but they weren’t dating violent hoods. And using ‘password’ as your password is really fucking stupid. Even Sean could figure that one out. But he couldn’t figure out how to erase the diary completely, or how to remove traces of his snooping from their home computer: That kind of tech-fu isn’t in Sean’s skill set. Murdering innocent girls is more his line.

The wave of grief is so sudden that Jim is sick with it, stunned as from a sudden punch to the gut. Will these sneak attacks from his subconscious never stop?

Jim turns away, coughing to hide his reaction, but Ivan—let’s all agree to call him that—sees. He sniffs the smoky air.

“You are pathetic,” he says conversationally. “It’s four in the afternoon.”

“Sunday is my day off.”

“It’s Monday.”

Jim blinks hard at him. Blinks again. Ivan’s expression could freeze vodka. “You are going to fuck up this assignment. I told Winona you would not take it seriously.”

“I bet you did.” Not the greatest comeback in the world, but Jim is frantically scanning his inner datalog, trying to figure out how he lost twenty-four hours. He left the club late Saturday night, then stopped by Aidan’s to score—Christ, what was in those joints? Jim shakes his head, tries to focus. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“You have not checked in for eight days.”
“I don’t have any new intel.”

“I’m not surprised. In your condition, Quinn could hijack a starship and you would not notice. Two years of fucking work in the drain because an idiot boy can’t handle his marijuana.”

“That’s ‘down the drain,’ numbnuts—” Jim cuts off, like you do when someone has slammed you against the wall, his forearm pressing on your throat.

“Learn what day it is, boy. Then you can correct my Standard.”

Jim’s vision blooms with black flowers as the pressure increases. Ivan’s face is like someone reading a rather boring book. As that calm visage dissolves into growing dark, Jim wonders if this is how it ends, suffocated by some Russian psycho in a seedy downtown apartment. Weird.

But what’s weirder is how little Jim cares.

All at once, the killing pressure is gone. Jim slides down the wall, gasping and coughing. Ivan kneels beside him, and now his face is not calm. If it were anyone else, you might say he looks worried. Lookee here, somebody’s done sparked his emotive chip! Jim tries to laugh, but it sets off another rash of coughs.

Something cool against his face. He blinks tears away, still coughing, and sees that Ivan has found the Xix. Jim takes it and drinks half. Waits five seconds, then drinks the rest. The caffeine jolt cuts through some of his pot haze, bringing the room into sharper focus.

The instant he sets down the empty can, Ivan grabs his wrist and pulls him over to the sofa, pushing him onto one of the worn cushions. Lips thinning, Ivan shoves pizza boxes and underwear from the other cushion and also sits. He stares at Jim a minute.

“I strangle you, and you don’t struggle. What’s wrong with you?”

“Are you—” Jim coughs, clears his throat, and tries again. “Are you fucking kidding?”

He looks into Ivan’s face and sees that he isn’t. Jim rolls his eyes at the ceiling. “Mother of God, give me patience. My best friend is dead. And the killers—I drank a fucking beer with Sean on Saturday night. Let’s not even get into the quality time I’m spending with his uncle. Strangulation is like the best prospect I’ve seen all month.” He raises his chin and sticks his neck out. “Have at it, old buddy. Make my day.”

Ivan waves this away. “Have you forgotten your training already?”

“Nope, I got it: the goddamn box. Real Jimmy on the shelf, fake Jimmy on Michael. But I’m still Jimmy. I’m just playing a stupider version of me. I can’t keep it going, the stupid. I can’t swap dirty jokes with Sean Quinn and Finn Gallagher and Colin Doyle when I know they were the ones who put Jess in the ground. I can’t keep fucking the man who told them to do it.”

Jim knows he should shut up. Ivan is one of the worst candidates to hear this confession. But Jim can’t shut up—the pressure has been building for weeks. And Ivan is the one who’s here.

“You’re right, okay? I’m not up for this. I thought I could make it a game, I’m good at those. But this has gotten too real. I’m not like you, I can’t just turn it on and turn it off. I can’t stay in the box. Next time you talk to Winnie, tell her that. She can send me to prison, I’ll dig iron on Triton until I’m old and grey. I can’t do this anymore.”

Ivan is silent a minute. But Jim can see them, the chips firing behind his eyes. His face is so much
like Winona’s when she’s cogitating that it’s creepy.

“We had no idea you were so fragile. Winona would not have left, had she known.”

Jim scrapes his fingers down his face. “Right,” he whispers. “If this was a personal crisis, she wouldn’t break a nail to hold me together. But Winnie wouldn’t jeopardize the mission, would she? You tell her if she wants to keep this going, she’d better get her ass back here. I’m in need of one hell of a pep talk.”

Six months ago, she could have fallen off a cliff and Jim wouldn’t have cared. Now the need to see her is a constant ache. This hellish situation has done something to him, the training did something. Winnie probably did it on purpose, damn her.

“What you ask is not possible. Events have progressed to the point where she cannot leave the Orion system. It could be six Standard months before she returns.”

“I won’t last that long. Seriously, Ivan: You tell her.”

“I don’t know where she is.” When Jim looks at him: “I don’t lie. Why would I? If her pattern holds, and it always does, I will not hear from her for some days. You must learn to cope.” Ivan raises a cool eyebrow. “You can start by washing the blood from your shirt.”

Jim pulls the back of his shirt around to the front. Shit. The dark grey material obscures the few brownish streaks almost completely, but the Terminator here sees everything.

“Take it off.”

Jim is too tired to disobey orders. He takes the shirt off. Ivan inspects the marks with clinical interest. “Michael Quinn did not do this.”

“No. He’s pretty vanilla.”

“I thought so. I know Quinn’s signature, he’s careful and methodical. This one was not. Why did you put yourself in the hands of an idiot?”

Jim shrugs. “If you are curious about such things, you should see a professional.”

“Michael would love that. ‘Where you going, Jimmy?’ ‘To see my dom. Don’t worry, I’ll be back later to sit on your cock.’ I don’t know how they do things in Russia, but over here mob bosses don’t share. And he will find out. He keeps a real close eye on me these days.”

Jim breathes against the sudden stifled feeling, one that’s always there when he’s with Michael. Sometimes when he just thinks of him. Worse than Ivan’s suffocation, more constant.

“It was stupid to deceive him. You risked everything for a fuck. Not even a capable fuck. Why?”

Jim won’t look at Ivan. He doesn’t want him to see the truth. Jim is usually shameless when it comes to his sex life, but this is different. Maybe because it’s only partly about sex.

Ivan gets it anyway. “Not curiosity: This is habit.” He pause. “How long? How often?”

“I don’t know. Awhile.” Maybe watching all that Orion porn when he was a kid was what did it. Orions, who are into bondage like Vulcans are into logic. Maybe it wasn’t. Who cares? Jim feels himself flushing and clears his throat. “I’m not spending weekends in a rubber suit, okay? This is just
He does look at him then, expecting distaste or even amusement, but Ivan just looks irritated. “Your mother did not mention it,” he says. “She told me you were opportunistically bisexual, you liked aggressive propositions. She said nothing about this.”

Jim steps down on the squirming nausea induced by the realization that Winnie was the one who advised Patrick on how to pick Jim up that first night. “She’s unaware.”

“Winona is an attentive mother, in her way. She knows of your brother’s two hospitalizations for alcohol abuse, though he tried to conceal them. She would know your aberrations also.”

Jim steels himself against more squirming. “Aberration? You offered to tie me up.”

“A standard gambit.” Ivan gestures at Jim’s back. “This is not standard.”

Jim throws up his hands. “Fine! I’m a big old perve. What are you gonna do about it?”

Ivan is silent again. But there’s silence and there’s silence, and this is the second kind. Still as a robot on powersave, he looks at Jim. You can’t tell what he’s thinking. Maybe he’s planning a grisly murder. Maybe he’s planning on taking a crap. Except robots don’t do that.

A robot might reach out and touch you, lightly tracing fingers down the raw flesh on your back. It might, if it were programmed to do it. But the touch wouldn’t feel like this, sparking with an energy that’s hotter and brighter than any mechanical thing. Jim has never felt anything like it. So why does it seem so familiar? For all its heat, it makes him shiver. He stifles the reaction, but Ivan sees. Something sparks in his pale eyes.

He drops his hand. “Winona should have told me. How can I supervise you if I don’t have all the facts?” His voice softens, like he’s speaking to himself. “But I can guess her reasons.”

“Huh?”

Before Ivan can answer, the door chime sounds. “Are you expecting another visitor?” he says.


“Quinn, Michael K.”

“Shit!” Jim jumps up from the couch.

Ivan hasn’t moved. “Is it normal for him to come here?”

“Sure, the don of KC loves hanging out in shitty shoebox apartments.” Jim scoots over to the comscreen and taps it. His heart sinks as he sees the five unanswered message icons. “ Fucking great. He’s been trying to call me, but I put the computer on privacy mode last night— Saturday night. I’ve been AWOL for like 36 hours—”

The door chimes again. Jim scrubs hands through his hair.

“You must answer it,” Ivan says.

“And say what? Sorry I didn’t return your calls, I’ve been smoking happy sticks all weekend and I lost track of time? Oh, and have you met my friend Ivan, the spy?” Jim shakes his head. “Just wait a few minutes, he’ll go away—”
“Idiot,” Ivan says. “Your car is parked downstairs. If you don’t answer, he will fear the worst. Is Quinn incapable of breaking down a door? What will you say then?”

The door chimes again. Maybe it’s the stress (and the weed), but the sound is louder than church bells. Jim’s gaze darts madly around the room. If only the windows opened, if only they weren’t twenty stories up—“Shit!” he says.


“What the hell are you doing?” Jim yells over the sudden pounding synthesizers.

Ivan ignores him. His features are working strangely, like his face is trying to rearrange itself but doesn’t quite know how. Then he looks at Jim again, and goes still.

*Strangelove*
*Romeo, sick and strange loves*
*Strangelove*
*That’s how my love goes*
*Strangelove*
*Will you give it to me*
*Will you take the pain*
*I will give to you*
*Again and again*
*And will you return it*

Jim grins the grin of the totally fucked. “Depeche Mode. Perfect. Nobody will think there’s a gay orgy in here.”

Ivan kicks off his boots. He shrugs out of his jacket, tossing it on the floor. He pulls his shirt out of his jeans and runs hands through his hair. “Put your shirt on. Answer the door.”

“I don’t—”

“Put your shirt on. Answer the fucking door.”

Jim is so shocked by the sound of real emotion in Ivan’s voice that he puts his shirt on. He answers the door.

It whooshes open mid-chime, revealing not one but two visitors. The first is the one Jim expects.

Michael Quinn is a well-preserved forty-five, slim and polished in his two-thousand credit suits. His thick dark hair is silver at the temples, hinting at his true age, though clean living and subtle laser work have left his face as unlined as a teenager’s. His features are not perfect, mouth a bit thin and nose the stereotypical Irish pug, but his eyes make up for other aesthetic sins: large, dark and long-lashed, with bold black brows. His habitual expression, benevolent and mildly amused, adds to the impression of handsomeness. You might take him for a doctor or even a newscaster from one of the nets, someone benevolent and amusing. You would be wrong.

Michael first made his reputation at sixteen, doing hits for his Uncle Rory. What set him apart even then was his intense vigilance: Nothing serious has ever been proven against him. Nothing admissible in a court of law, anyway. But such niceties don’t matter to Section 31, and Jim has seen some of the agency’s files on Michael. It’s clear what he is, what he has been since the age of sixteen. If you were clairvoyant you might be able to see them, the thousand ghosts hovering around his immaculate head.
Jim has his smile pasted firmly in place. In the past few months he’s discovered how much a smile can cover, even loathing and revulsion. It doesn’t waver when he sees Sean, scowling from behind Michael’s right shoulder.

Sean doesn’t look much like his uncle, being square and sandy-haired, with watery blue eyes. He’s buff enough that some girls think he’s cute; one girl did, anyway. But Sean could have been as ugly as sin, and Jess would still have gone with him. Another man with Vin Krider’s rage but, tragically, none of his basic flinty decency. Jim’s gaze doesn’t linger on him. He has tried not to look at Sean much since Jess’ murder, not long and not directly. Because when he does he sees other things, a dozen scenarios that all end the same: Sean Quinn cold on the slab.

Jim could do it. He’s not decent, like Vin Krider.

He smiles until it feels like his face is cracking. “Hey,” he says.

“Hey yourself,” Michael says.

He reaches out, cupping Jim’s face. The touch is gentle enough but it has a possessive edge, like a collector inspecting his favorite vase for cracks. It makes the flesh on Jim’s neck crawl but he leans into it, the way you should when your lover touches you. After what seems like forever but is probably only five seconds, Michael takes his hand away.

“Where you been, kid?” he says. “You don’t return calls, you don’t show up for work. Sean’s been worried sick.” Michael smiles a little at his own joke. But those brown eyes of his aren’t smiling. They almost never do.

“I meant to call in. But, well . . .” Shit. “It’s been a crazy weekend,” he finishes weakly.

“Sounds like it’s still going on,” Michael says. “Guess that’s why you left us standing out here for five minutes. You couldn’t hear the door over the music.”


Depeche Mode cuts off mid-lyric. Now the room is too quiet. “You know I like my music,” Jim says. Lame, but he is not enjoying this silence.

“You are a music lover,” Michael, says after a beat. “I’ve said as much to Sean.” He looks over his shoulder. “Isn’t that right, Sean?”

“Right,” Sean says. He always agrees with Michael. This agreeability accounts for half of his status as Michael’s favorite nephew. Dead-eyed viciousness is the other half.

“I’d love for you guys to come in. You don’t visit enough,” Jim says. “But the place is a mess.”

“We’ll make allowances. It being a crazy weekend and all.” Michael is as pleasant as ever, but his gaze is hard on Jim’s face.

Jim feels himself clenching the doorframe, and forces himself to unclench. “I dunno, it’s pretty bad. I wouldn’t want you to think less of me. Why don’t I meet you at the bar in an hour—”

“Nothing could make me think less of you.” He gives Jim a slow blink. “Well—almost nothing.”

A fiancé of Michael’s jilted him once. A long time ago, when he was barely out of his teens. They found her torso floating in the Missouri River. Michael was never charged, of course.
Jim’s brain is spinning furiously. Just at the point where no amount of music would make up for the awkward silence, a voice comes from behind him.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, let them in. Nobody cares about seeing your panties on the floor, Jimmy.”

Jim turns. He stares.

Someone is lolling on the sofa. He’s young and well-muscled, shirtless and rumpled. His messy blond hair falls into very blue eyes. He’s smiling at all those present, a feckless, charming grin that’s oddly familiar. He’s not Ivan. Who the hell is he?

Jim wonders if this is a bad joke on Ivan’s part: Everybody knows robots don’t really get humor. Because this isn’t funny, not at all. The man on the sofa is dangerously hot. So hot that he could make you forget all scruples, including loyalty to your insanely jealous and controlling mobster boyfriend. It might seem worth the risk, just to bring him home and have filthy sex with him on the floor of your seedy apartment, amid the Xix cans and pizza boxes.

The man on the sofa is hot enough to make you forget what day it is.

Michael seems to be thinking along these same lines. Sean at his heels like a faithful bulldog, he has taken a few steps into the room. His benevolent expression is frozen on his face.

“Jim?” In one word is every question he wants answered. Right fucking now.

“Michael—Sean,” Jim says slowly, stalling. “I would like you to meet someone. This is—”

“Sam Kirk,” the man on the couch says, so smoothly that you wouldn’t have heard the pause in Jim’s introduction, even if you were listening for it. “How the hell are you?”

Jim is glad that ‘Sam’ gets off the sofa then, his moving figure drawing Michael and Sean’s gazes. Otherwise they would have seen the shock on Jim’s face. By the time they notice him again a few seconds later, he’s mostly processed.

“You didn’t tell us your brother was coming to town,” Michael says.

“It was a surprise,” Jim says. “My brother is surprising.”

“Yes, well. It’s good to meet you,” Michael says to ‘Sam.’ “I can see the family resemblance.”

“Except for the fact that Jimmy’s so damn ugly,” ‘Sam’ says, as he gives first Michael’s, then Sean’s hand a vigorous and friendly shake. Warmth seems to spill off him like June sunshine, golden and delicious. “I guess that’s why Mom always liked me best.”

Sean gives a bark of laughter at this. ‘Sam’ winks at him.

Jim wonders if kicking his new brother in the balls would blow their cover.

Michael is looking at ‘Sam’ with some interest. “Jim said you were stationed on Delta Vega.”

“Ten days ago I was,” ‘Sam’ says. “But my patrol got attacked by one of those ravenous bughellers they’ve got running around out there.” He spreads his hands in dramatic fashion. “Check it: I’m crouched in an ice cave, freezing my ass off while I watch this thing tear into my CO’s chest like it’s a carton of kung pao chicken. I think to myself, ‘Fuck this. There has got to be a better way to make a living.’ Put in my papers an hour after the rescue drones found me.”

“Shit,” Sean says, impressed.
“I know, right? They’re not gonna identify me by the teeth they find in a pile of monster shit.” ‘Sam’ turns to Michael, looking apologetic. “Jim’s lost weekend is my fault. Spent seventeen months on a godforsaken ball of ice, I needed to blow off some steam.” He musses Jim’s hair. “Numbnuts here was just along for the ride.”

“I suppose there’s no harm done,” Michael says.

“Just to my credit balance. When did Terran strippers get so fucking expensive?”

“I was in the Corp for a couple of years after high school,” Sean volunteers. “Almost drowned in the swamps on Ceti Alpha V. Did I get hazard pay? Fuck no! *Semper Fi* my ass.”

‘Sam’ gives him a commiserating look. “Did you have Arshawsky during basic training?”

“Yeah, fucking sadist. Think I’ve still got dust burns on my ass from those foot marches in the Hellas Impact Basin. Had a hot wife, though.”

‘Sam’ leers meaningfully. “I’ll say.”

Sean blinks. “Fuck you! You didn’t—”

“Yeppers. Found out why Arshawsky’s a little deaf in one ear.” Sean leans forward, waggling his eyebrows. “Laverne’s a screamer.”

Sean throws back his head and laughs. “That’s it! You are coming out with me tonight. We’ll go to the Pink Pony. I can show you some screamers—”

“I thought you were still in mourning,” Jim says softly.

Sean goes red and shuts up. Jim doesn’t say anything else, just looks at him. He looks and looks.

“Did I miss something?” ‘Sam’ says, putting a hand on Jim’s neck. From the outside it would look like a gesture of brotherly concern, but ‘Sam’ is gripping so tightly that Jim feels it all the way down his spine. He turns his head and sees an icy warning spark in those sunny blue eyes.

“Just an old rivalry,” Michael says smoothly. “These two like to lock horns.”

“Jim always did have a helluva temper,” Sam says, giving Jim another affectionate squeeze of about the same order and magnitude as a Vulcan nerve pinch. “Did he ever tell you about the time he drove our stepdad’s Corvette off a cliff?”

Michael raises both eyebrows at Jim. “Really?”

“It was no big deal,” Jim says, twisting out of that punishing grip. “My brother likes to make shit up. Like I did, when I told him he could stay with me.”

‘Sam’ makes a kissy-face. “I love you too, little brother.”

“How long are you in town for?” Sean asks.

“Until I figure out what the hell I’m doing. Shouldn’t take longer than two, three decades.” ‘Sam’ grins again: “Fuck it. I already pissed seven years down the drain with the Corps.”

That’s when Jim gets it. He probably should have gotten it before now, but it’s been a confusing couple of hours. ‘Sam Kirk’ is nothing like Sam Kirk. How could he be? ‘Sam’ is a riff on Jim, and a damn good one. So good it’s creepy, like watching your reflection step out of the mirror and start
glad-handing everybody. Who knew Ivan was paying so much attention?

It’s lucky he was, since most of the dangerous tension went out of Michael’s posture around the time they heard about Sgt. Arshawsky’s screaming wife. Sean is positively cheerful, looking at ‘Sam’ like he’s just waiting for the right moment to start swapping friendship bracelets and BFF charms. Which is pretty funny, since Sean wouldn’t piss on Jim if he was on fire, and this was true long before Jess died. Possibly, Ivan is better at being Jim than Jim is.

His stomach hurts. It’s probably nerves, and also the fact that he can’t remember the last time he ate. He wishes they would all just go away and leave him alone. If Fake Jim is so great, he’s welcome to Real Jim’s shitty life.

“You okay?” Michael says. “You’re looking a little green around the gills, kiddo.”

Jim looks up. “Yeah. Too much fun last night, that’s all. Aidan’s weed packs a punch.”

“Go easy on that stuff,” Michael says. He taps Jim’s forehead, too hard. “It fries your brain.”

“They should never have legalized it,” Sean says, repeating one of Michael’s favorite laments.

“It was a special occasion,” Jim says. “My brain is only lightly sautéed, I promise.”

“Good. Then you should be able to remember some things.” Michael looks at the other two. “Excuse us. Jim missed a meeting this afternoon, and I need to fill him in.” He puts his arm around Jim and starts walking him towards the bedroom.

“We’ll be right out here, Mike,” Sean says, and turns eagerly to ‘Sam.’ “Tell me more about Delta Vega. Is it true the Vulcans exile their slutty women there?”

“I never found any Vulcan sluts, damn it. But a buddy of mine was patrolling the far shore of the North Sea, and he swears . . .”

Jim would actually like to hear the end of that one, but Michael has already opened the bedroom door and shoved him inside. The second it whooshes he backs Jim against the wall, his pleasant demeanor replaced by something predatory. He runs a slow hand down the front of Jim’s shirt, the pupils of his eyes so dilated they look black, bottomless. “Hey,” he says.

“Hey yourself,” Jim whispers, and swallows hard against the churning in his gut. He knows it doesn’t show on his face. He manages to look eager, even, mirroring Michael’s desire back at him. For all his whining, he’s pretty good at this.

Michael kisses him. It’s deep and hot and sweet—Michael is a good kisser. Not all good kissers are good lays, but he knows what he’s doing. Vanilla can be quite tasty, and Jim has had plenty of enjoyable evenings with lovers who never left a mark on him. Once, he could have slept with Michael and enjoyed it. Once, he could have slept with Michael and enjoyed it. Seems like a thousand years ago now.

Michael pulls back. “I’ve wanted to do that for three fucking days. Rosemary and her goddamn Gilbert and Sullivan.”

That’s what started this whole mess. Whatever they do or don’t do all week, Saturday night is Michael’s night with Jim, just like Sunday is his day with his family. But Michael’s wife is a big fan of musical theater, and a national touring company of The Mikado was in town for one night only. Michael’s presence was required. Which left Jim alone, filled to the brim with girlish glee, with plenty of time to get into trouble.
Jim nuzzles Michael’s throat. “It’s good to support the arts.”

“Next time I’ll write ‘em a check. Rosie can take one of her sisters.” Michael’s hand slides down the back of Jim’s sweats. “Saturdays are spoken for.” He punctuates those last words with a squeeze.

*Just go ahead and stamp property of Michael Q. on my ass, already. Jesus.* But Jim only says, “Trust me, you had an easier time than I did. I was keeping brother Sam from spending his last paycheck on lapdances.”

“Did Jimmy get a lapdance?” Michael says, squeezing.

“Yeah,” Jim says, raising his chin. It’s slightly thin ice he’s dancing on here, but admitting to a small transgression will keep Michael from wondering about bigger ones. “She was amazing. Came in my pants like a kid. Jealous?”

“Yes,” Michael says, and spins Jim around, pushing him into the wall face-first. He wraps his hand around Jim’s cock. Jim is hard—that’s easy enough, all he had to think about was the last time he did get a lapdance, from a winsome Meropan whose cleavage smelled like sandalwood.

“I could fuck you right here,” Michael whispers, his hand still working. “How would you like that? With brother Sam and nephew Sean right out there, chatting.”

That’s actually dirty enough to make Jim’s cock give a genuine throb. But almost instantly the sexy image has turned to ash, for the same reason all sexy moments with Michael do. Because of another image, Jess rotting in the ground while Sean does body shots off a stripper, while Michael leads his pretty blonde wife and three adorable tots into the family pew.

In his present mood, Jim doesn’t know if the memory of Binea and her spicy tits will be enough to get him off. Not to mention what will happen if Michael pushes Jim’s shirt up any higher and sees the marks from Saturday. But before Jim really has to worry about it, Michael has released him with a kiss on the neck. “I could fuck you,” he says. “But it would be a little tacky.”

Jim turns around, arranging his face into the appropriate expression of horny disappointment. “You’re mean. You came over here just to get me all excited and then leave me hanging.”

“No,” Michael says. “I came here to make sure you hadn’t slipped in the bathtub or something. But now that I know that you were playing hooky—” he dips his chin, giving Jim the patented charming Michael smile. “You reap what you sow, kiddo.”

“Guess so,” Jim sighs. *Remember that when you’re digging iron, you miserable cunt.*

Michael chuckles Jim under the chin. “Take the night off. Be with Sam. But don’t let him lead you down the primrose path again. I know he’s your brother, but that one looks like trouble.”

*Uh-huh.* “We’ll probably just watch a movie. We’re both pretty wiped.”

“Good, get some rest. I expect you in tomorrow at ten sharp. We have a teleconference at eleven with one of the Orions. Taylar: You remember, the one missing the fingers?”

“I know who he is.”

“Then I’m taking the afternoon off.” Michael draws a slow thumb over Jim’s mouth. “But you will have work to do. Lots of it.”

“I can’t wait,” Jim says, smiling.
Michael grabs his ass one more time, then presses the door sensor. Jim should follow him—it’s a little cowardly, leaving ‘Sam’ with the task of ushering their visitors out, but fuck it.

Jim curls up on the bed. He closes his eyes. He can see them as plain as day, all the gory details of his nooner with Michael tomorrow. He has to do it—it’s his job to do. And if it was just one time, maybe he could consider it without wanting to heave. But there’s another tomorrow after tomorrow, and another one after that. Tomorrow—and tomorrow—and tomorrow.

*Fuck Shakespeare, this is an existential crisis.* Jim burrows his face into the pillow.

After a few minutes, the door whooshes again.

“Did he fuck you?” The voice is cool, with just a hint of Slavic snarl. Oh goody, Ivan’s back.

“No,” Jim says, voice muffled by the pillow. “Did you fuck Sean? ‘Cause he looked about ready to bend and spread.”

“Mudak,” Ivan says, spitting a word that Jim is pretty sure doesn’t mean *pal.* “His kind are so easy to manipulate. He offered me a job at his construction business, supervising the robots.”

“That will be nice for you, getting to work with your own people.”

“It will be useful. Most of the money is laundered through Quinn Construction.” Ivan pauses. “I’ll bring some clothes over from the safe house tonight.”

Jim turns over, sitting up. “No way. You’re not bunking with me.”

“It will be inconvenient for me as well. But your brother would not stay in a hotel.” In a split-second, his face shifts. Blue eyes leer at Jim. “I’d rather spend my credits at the Pink Pony. Blow my wad blowing my wad, know what I mean?”

“Cut it out! That is so fucking creepy. You are nothing like Sam.”

“It does not matter.” Ivan is cool and grey again. “I’m the only Sam the Quinns will meet.”

“You better hope Michael doesn’t run a records scan.”

“I’ve already called. Within an hour, any records he could access will match the new legend.”

Right. Section 31 could turn anybody into anything. Ivan into Sam, Winnie into an Orion, Jim into a rent boy.

He plops down again, throwing an arm over his eyes. “Fine, whatever. But when ‘Sam’ gets his first paycheck from his new bestie Sean, he’s getting his own place. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to spend my night off gazing into the black abyss of existence. Beer’s in the fridge, I get first shower in the morning.” He faces the wall.

“So you are returning to work tomorrow.”

“Yes, I am going to resume fucking Michael Quinn tomorrow. Until I choke on his dick or on my own self-loathing, whichever comes first. I give it a week, tops. Maybe ‘Sam’ can fellate Michael at my funeral. We know he has a type.”

Jim is grabbed by the shoulder and pulled back. He tries to twist away, but Ivan’s grip is iron. “You cannot continue with this attitude. Quinn is not a fool.”
“What do you suggest? Section 31 is so fucking clever, can you people give me some kind of localized lobotomy, make me forget what he did to Jess? How can you forget it? How could you trade high-fives with Sean when you know he and his friends held her down and—and—”

Jim stops. When he can speak again, it’s a strangled whisper. He shouldn’t keep talking but he has to, one more admission he can’t help making to this strangest of confessors. “I was the one who introduced them, Sean and Jess. Before Michael decided he liked me, Sean and I got along okay. I was happy when he first started taking Jess out. She was kind of needy even before her habit got out of control, and it was a relief to have her off my back. A relief.”

He pauses, biting his lip so hard he tastes blood. After a minute or so, he can go on. “I know Patrick White was the one in love with Jess. I understand how that works, sort of. But unless you really are made of metal, you can’t tell me that she didn’t get to you, to Ivan, a little. She was needy, but she was a good person. You must have felt it. You must have.” He looks down, though he’s sure Ivan caught the tell-tale shine of tears in his eyes. Jim could give a damn.

Ivan is silent. He’s silent so long that Jim has time to pull himself together and look up. Ivan is in the same place, with the same rigid posture, but his face is different, less mask-like. When he speaks his voice is different, too. Human.

“She was good, wasn’t she?” he says. Jim wonders if this is Ivan’s real voice. He wonders (it will not be the last time), who this man really is. Does Ivan exist?

Then Ivan blinks, pulling his mask into place. “Enough,” he says. “Take off your shirt.”

“Why?”

In answer, Ivan reaches into his back pocket and takes out a metal device the size of a deck of cards. He pushes a button and diodes pop out the front, glowing blue. Jim realizes it’s a sonic healer, the smallest he’s ever seen.

“Where the hell did you get that?”

“Guess.” Ivan spins a dial, and the diodes spark. “Turn around. Lie with your head over the end of the bed. We must erase those marks if you’re to see Quinn tomorrow.”

“I’ll just go to the free clinic in the morning.”

“It’s very likely that Quinn has a tracer program for any new records containing your name. That would include clinic visits. Don’t worry: I have more experience with this device than many doctors. Under more extreme circumstances.”

Against his better judgment, Jim arranges himself on the bed according to Ivan’s instructions. “Close your eyes,” Ivan says. “This will hurt.”

“Sonic healers are supposed to be painless.”

“This one is quite powerful, and very portable. But at the cost of some pain.”

“How much pain?” When no answer comes, Jim just sighs and closes his eyes. But nothing happens immediately. There’s a rather excruciating pause before he feels the bed dip with Ivan’s weight. Rough denim scrapes his sides as Ivan straddles him for better access. Then—

“JESUS CHRIST!” Jim arches off the bed. It feels like Ivan just ran a red-hot soldering iron over his shoulder.
“Hold still.”

“You hold still, you sadist.”

Jim tries to sit up, but he is clamped by the back of the neck and held down. “Listen to me,” Ivan hisses in his ear. “This must be done. It’s your fault that it must be, you have brought this upon yourself. Close your eyes and consider that. Concentrate on your—punishment.”

Punishment. Jim quits struggling against Ivan’s grip. He closes his eyes again, he concentrates. Searches his mind for an image that will get him through, make this bearable.

He finds it by seeing not where he is, but where he was. In the screaming darkness of Cell Block, hung from the ceiling like so much meat. The man in the mask is behind him, whip in hand. He hasn’t started yet but Jim has started, excitement in his mouth like electric metal as he awaits his punishment. Waits for the pain that will stop the echoes in his head, the voices that never stop.

It’s all your fault, Jimmy. Every single solitary thing. This is what you are. What you deserve.

He gives a choked scream as the diodes touch his skin again. Pain like a whip but worse than that, a lash of white fire. But he doesn’t struggle, for beyond the pain is something wonderful. He glimpses it every time he bleeds, a thing as clear and shining as a diamond, desired but never truly touched: Justice. What he deserves, what he has always deserved, since the day he was—

He does scream when the diodes make contact with the worst of the wounds. His mind goes fuzzy, as overstrained nerves try to compensate for the onslaught of agony. Sweat pours down his face, he’s panting like a woman in childbirth, making helpless sobbing sounds as the diodes send shockwaves through him. But his tormentor doesn’t stop, he never hesitates in doing what must be done, giving Jim this needful thing. His punishment, which seems to take years.

He is so overstimulated that it takes him at least a minute to realize when the pain has stopped. He still can’t move, just breathes, his cheek against the sweat-soaked quilt. His flesh tingles, it’s not pain and it’s not pleasure, but somehow both. But this is the best moment, when everything is done. When he has paid what needs to be paid, twice over. He is whole in this moment. Clean.

Slowly, a warm hand runs down Jim’s back. Caresses the new, now-blameless flesh.

“You see,” Ivan whispers. “Isn’t that better?”

Jim nods, swallowing. “Isn’t that better?”

Jim nods, swallowing. He turns over and looks into Ivan’s face. And now it’s another face, one he has not seen before. It’s the most beautiful one he has seen.

When he looks back, he’ll never remember who moved first. Whoever did, the kiss is amazing. Not because of finesse—it’s rough, awkward, teeth clinking against teeth. But it’s the best kiss Jim has had in months, the first real one. He kisses Ivan because he wants to kiss him, and for no other reason. When he breaks contact and looks into Ivan’s face, he sees similar naked honesty.

(Later, Jim will question Ivan’s actions—every action he takes after this, until the bitter end. But he won’t be able to reject the idea that Ivan meant that first kiss. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking on his part. Or maybe, like Jess, Jim really could reach him. Some secret part of Ivan, a person lost long ago that Jim could see. Winnie has never seen him. Jim remains certain of that.)

“Guess you think I’m cute after all,” he says.

Ivan does not appear to hear. On his face is a dark concentration. “Strip and get on your knees.”
“Hey, at least take me out to dinner—” Jim cuts off as a hand grips his throat.

“Do it.” There is something dangerous in Ivan’s voice. Desperate.

Jim quickly slips out of his sweatpants, actually glad to peel the clammy fabric off. The air is cool on his flesh. He shivers a bit, but certain parts of him remain unaffected by temperature: He could pound plascrete with his erection.

He gets on his knees, facing the end of the bed. He glances into the wall mirror and sees a red-faced man with a dripping hard-on, still shaky in his extremities, with sweaty blond hair falling in his face. Not the sexiest look Jim has ever sported, but he’s too turned on to care. He can see Ivan reflected, caught in the moment of pulling his thick leather belt out of the loops of his jeans. At the whip-crack sound, Jim’s cock weeps a little harder.

“There’s aseptic lube in the—”

“I’m prepared,” Ivan says, and Jim sees him dig into his front jeans pocket. Of course. Jim wouldn’t be surprised if Ivan had lube and poppers and an entire disco dance party stuffed in there, along with the ever-present wet wipes. Section 31 agents believe in the Boy Scout motto.


Jim obeys. But for a while, nothing happens. Just at the point that he is worried nothing will, he hears Ivan move into place behind him. He can feel the delicious slide of naked flesh against his own: Ivan has finally undressed for him. Jim raises his head to see—he needs to see—but his eyes only catch a quick flash in the mirror before he’s roughly jerked back. Ivan, as quick as a cat, has looped the leather belt around Jim’s neck.

“Hey—” but he cuts off with a choke as Ivan pulls the belt tighter.

“I knew you would have difficulty keeping silent. This will help you remember.” Ivan pulls on the belt, a jerk that makes dark stars shoot across Jim’s vision. He stays silent. It isn’t difficult now, and not because of the belt. An amazing feeling has swept over him, a sweet heaviness. What you feel when you know someone is totally in control, and it isn’t you. You don’t have to do anything, you can’t do anything wrong. If you obey.

Ivan seems to sense Jim’s capitulation. The belt remains around his neck, but it loosens a little. He strokes Jim’s back in a possessive way, he touches him like Michael Quinn touches him. But Jim feels no nausea now, no rage, just that delicious somnolence. He bends his head.

“Good,” Ivan says. “Do not talk or think. Just feel.” His fingers, slick with lube, slide down the cleft of Jim’s ass. A finger thrusts inside him. This early on, it’s a little too much even with lube, and Jim gasps. Ivan gives the belt a tug and Jim concentrates, he stays still, as Ivan works more fingers inside. Two, then three, then four, going deeper and deeper in. Jim doesn’t care, he can take it. It feels like he could take anything, as his mind fills with a beautiful white noise.

Then Ivan twists his fingers against Jim’s prostate, at the same time twisting the belt tight around Jim’s neck. Jim’s lungs are on fire, white noise now a white scream, but the world is going black. Ivan doesn’t relent, one hand thrusting inside as his other one pulls tight—but not too tight, keeping Jim on the searing edge of consciousness. Until Ivan makes one last, cruel belt-twist and thrusts a final time, shockingly deep. Jim comes so hard he almost passes out.

He’s still half-conscious when he feels the belt loosen. It’s replaced by Ivan’s arm, pulling Jim tight against his body. They are of a height: It’s easy for Ivan, kneeling behind Jim, to enter him. To begin
fucking him, with the relentless rhythm of a machine. It feels so good to be taken, to be used. Limp as a doll, Jim lets Ivan do what he wants—he can do anything he wants.

“Open your eyes,” Ivan says. “Look in the mirror.”

Jim looks. He looks and looks; the image is mind-bending. Two men, colored the same, built the same, their faces too much alike. One man thrusting, the other man taking, muscular thighs slapping muscular thighs. Bodies wet with identical sheens of sweat, rock-hard bellies moving. The man in front clasps the hips of the one behind, pulling him closer, as the man behind reaches forward and grasps the front man’s glistening, half-hard cock. As you watch, you can see it come fully to life again. You can feel yourself, wet and hard, excruciating pleasure pulsing inside you, but as you look in the mirror, you’re not sure who you are. Are you thrusting? Are you taking? Are you grasping, or being grasped? It doesn’t matter. What matters is this energy between you, dangerous as radiation. This beautiful, identical energy. You’ve waited so long to find it—this.

You know it can’t last much longer. The man behind is breathing hard, his pistoning thrusts losing some of their perfection. The man in front is also gasping, his erection so big it’s painful, but the other man never stops tormenting it. Until the man behind gives two last, spastic thrusts and comes with a muffled grunt. Muffled, because he has buried his teeth in other man’s neck. And the feel of that—makes him—them—come again. Coming like drowning, losing yourselves below the dark and lovely waves. You doesn’t care if you ever surface.

But, at last, he does. Some time has passed, since the computer has put the lights on, and there is darkness outside the windows. Jim doesn’t know if it’s been one hour or ten, he doesn’t have the energy to turn his head and see the clock. He doesn’t care.

He and Ivan are lying on the bed, face to face. There is a still intensity on Ivan’s features, like he’s been looking at Jim all this time. He runs slow fingers over the sore place on Jim’s neck. Jim feels it to the pit of his stomach.

“You have to keep fucking Michael Quinn. We know this,” Ivan says. For a moment he is silent, fingers tracing the marks of his teeth. “But I’m the one who marks you. The only one.”

And Jim understands. “This thing I do,” he says. “My—aberration. It’s yours too, isn’t it?”

Ivan nods. “But from the other side. A need to dominate, not to be dominated.”

“No shit. I mean, I always knew you were a brutal top, but Jesus.” Jim looks at Ivan a minute. “How come? Why do you do it?”

“Why do you?” When Jim says nothing: “I thought so. It’s okay. The past doesn’t matter here. What matters is what we do now.” He touches Jim’s throat again. “I’ve been in the box, Jim. I know how it can suffocate. But it doesn’t have to be that way. I can help you bear it, if—If.”

Jim doesn’t need him to repeat it. “Yeah, okay,” he says. “I’ll be with Michael, but I’m really with you.” The idea makes him almost giddy, like a kid finding a Christmas present in February. The one he really wanted, that he thought Santa forgot. The gift he believed would never come.

Ivan smiles. A small one, but it seems real. It makes him look younger, no more than Jim’s age. Twenty-one, with a whole life ahead. But too much already behind them, you see it in their eyes.

“How old are you?” Jim asks.

Ivan’s smile deepens. “Older than you, little brother. Older than you.”
Jim grimaces. “You’re not my brother.”

“But I’m here.” He cups Jim’s face. The touch is gentle, his eyes are blue. “I’m not leaving.” He draws him close and kisses him. Jim feels it to the pit of his soul.

He knows he wants Ivan. He’s wanted him for months, truth be told. But this is when it becomes more. Not lust and not a deal, a way of marking time inside the box. This is the moment that Jim loses his heart, suddenly, painfully, irrevocably. Like a noose snapping tight.
“Close your eyes. This is gonna hurt.”

Through the laser shield, Jim was as orange as an Edosian. He stretched vermilion lips, showing gleaming amber teeth. “How much?”

“Much. Don’t move.”

“I can take—MOTHERFUCK IT!”

“Hold still, you big baby.” Jim just grimaced with screwed-up eyes, muttering profanities as he clutched the edge of the exam table.

“There,” Leonard said, after another minute. “Got the bastard.” He shuttered the blue laser and raised the face shield, returning the world to regular colors. “Nice work, if I do say so myself.”

Jim poked gingerly at the side of his neck, where two minutes ago there had been a nasty bite mark. Now all you could see was clean pink flesh. “Holy shit, Bones. You couldn’t have used the sonic healer? Those don’t hurt unless they’re small.”

“The lacerations were too deep. The sonic might have scarred,” Leonard explained, stowing the laser and shield back in the cabinet. “What’s that about the small ones?”

“You know, you lose the painless property with the smaller sonics. They hurt like hell.”

“Thirty years ago, maybe. Nowadays that would only happen if someone opened ‘em up and messed with the dampeners. Who would do that?”

“Son of a bitch,” Jim muttered. “Why am I surprised?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” He got off the table, putting his shirt back on. It was black and tight, just like his trousers. Jim couldn’t be signaling more loudly if he had it tattooed on his neck: I’m on the prowl. “Sure you don’t want to come out with me?” he said.

“I was supposed to work last night, and didn’t. I have to work tonight.”

Jim gave the small grey exam room a contemptuous glance. “Bullshit. There’s like two people in the waiting area, and one of them is Luke Howsham. You know he’s faking the Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, right? I saw him drinking a Xix during Garcia’s final on Wednesday.”

“Everybody slips sometimes. Doesn’t mean he’s a faker.”

“I think he’s just trying to get in your pants.”

“Good. If I let him blow me, maybe I can get him to leave the fucking energy drinks alone.”

Jim crumpled his own Xix can and stuck it in the recycler.

“If I let you blow me, will you stop drinking that piss?”
“You should come. I guarantee a memorable evening.” Jim pulled on his jacket and zipped it.

“Uh-huh.” Leonard opened a drawer. He threw something at Jim, who caught it one-handed. He looked down at the tube and raised an eyebrow.

“You know I already have five hundred of these.”

“In your pocket? Right this second? Ready for use when some random at Powerhouse sticks his hand down your pants?”

“Point taken,” Jim said, and put the liquid condom in his jacket. “I’m not going to Powerhouse, though. Thought I’d try Eve.”

“Sliding right back down that Kinsey scale, are we?”

“I’m in the mood for something small and pretty tonight.” Jim touched the front of his tongue to his teeth. “Something—sweet.” His expression was so openly predatory that you might think he was kidding, but he wasn’t. Jim was going to be horrible for the next few weeks; he always was after a real break-up. Leonard didn’t feel sorry for the victims. If you were dumb enough to fall for Jim’s line, you deserved what you got. It was, however, going to be a royal pain in the ass for Leonard. He was looking at a month of tripping over strangers in the bathroom, plus the deluge of desperate calls and drop-ins that was sure to follow. He consoled himself with the same idea that had seen him through three other Jim Kirk rebounds: It could be worse.

Jim was headed for the door, but Leonard grabbed his shoulder. “Hey, Casanova. Use the liquid condom, seriously. I don’t care how hot the ladies at Eve are, or how drunk you get. STI’s aside, the last thing you need is a paternity suit on your hands. Remember Carol Marcus?”

“Don’t worry, Daddy. I’ll be good.” Jim was down the hallway before Leonard could think of a suitably snarky comeback. But the kid was welcome to the last word, as long as he remembered to wrap it up. Leonard was fairly sure he would. Jim only got stupid when he was in love, or thought he was. Dave Goldman may have been a psycho, but as far as Leonard was concerned, Carol was the worst of the bunch. Jim had gone gooey over her for three whole months, God knows why: She was pretty, but not that pretty. Jim had taken one look at those wide blue eyes and that heart-shaped face and been smitten. At least, he was until Leonard informed him that no, she wasn’t on the pills, or the shots, or any other kind of contraception. That had done for Miss Carol, and maybe it hadn’t been ethical to crack her private medical records, but it also wasn’t ethical to use your uterus to trap a man into marriage. Leonard had no regrets.


“Hallelujah,” she said. “Cadet Howsham is going to pee himself with joy.”

Leonard sighed. “Tell him to change his britches and come on back.”

In a minute the door chimed, indicating that Howsham had arrived. Before Leonard could even open his mouth to tell the computer to let the patient in the exam room, Howsham chimed again.

“Computer, incinerate patient.”

“Command not recognized.”

“I know. But wouldn’t it be cool if it was?”

Howsham didn’t take as long as Leonard feared. After a perfunctory exam and a brief lecture about the evils of Xix, Leonard was able to bring things to a close. He only had to deflect one veiled pass at the end—I appreciate the dinner invitation, but your continued progress is thanks enough—really, it isn’t necessary—seriously, I’m swamped right now—fucking hell, can’t you take a hint? The last was in his head—Nora McCoy’s boy still had manners.

Althea saved him with a timely chime, telling him the next patient had arrived. Actually, there were several patients after that, a Terran with a head cold (yawn), a Caitian with two lacerated paw pads (ow) and a Taygetian with tentacle fungus (ew).

There was nothing for a while then. Bored, Leonard looked at the clock: 21:10. He could sneak out of here if he wanted. A couple of other doctors were in, and Chapel was probably hobbling around somewhere. He could head over to Eve and have a few drinks with Jim. Might be fun, especially since Jim had decided he was hetero this week. Always interesting to watch his buddy work a crowd, like seeing a lion hunt a herd of tasty creatures. Leonard might be persuaded to take a run: He and Jim were good stalking partners, and he needed something to get the taste of that Vulcan Jezebel out of his mouth. If nobody came in the next twenty minutes, he would go.

Nineteen minutes later, he was spraying disinfectant all over the exam room (Terrans don’t have genital tentacles so they can’t catch tentacle fungus, but better safe than sorry) when he felt him. He knew who it was before he turned around. Normally, this wouldn’t have been the case. He had to know someone awhile before he started sensing him without seeing him. Quite a while, actually: Most people didn’t get inside of Leonard’s shielding. Grandma Belle had gotten him the best teachers, and Leonard made a point to stay in practice. He didn’t crack easily.

If this had been a normal psychic signature, Leonard would have ignored it without even noting it. But this wasn’t normal, which meant his other sense kicked in when his basic receptiveness wouldn’t. Leonard’s diagnostic sense, the one that said sick, sick, sick.

Right now that sense was screaming, but Leonard didn’t turn around right away, calmly putting the disinfectant spray back in the cabinet. “You’re supposed to check in at the desk,” he said.

“I’m not here as a patient.”

Slowly, Leonard turned around. “Maybe you should be,” he said. “You’re not well, Spock.”

He wasn’t just being an asshole: Spock really did look sick. He was deathly pale except for his cheekbones, which were flushed a deep, bilious green. His hair was dull and his eyes were much too bright. Even his usual ruler-straight posture was somewhat bent. Spock looked like what he was, a man suffering from a dangerous illness, one much advanced since the last time Leonard had seen him. His hands itched for his diagnostic instruments, but he made himself be still. There was nothing he could do for Spock: It wasn’t his job to do.

“You should be at the Embassy,” Leonard said. “T’Lyn can look after you until you arrange transport to Vulcan.”

“I do not require your advice,” Spock said. “Nor do I desire it.” He took another few steps into the room. The closer he got, the louder Leonard’s inner bells sounded. Not just the diagnostic sense, schooled as it was, but something much more primal. Danger—Leonard hadn’t had this crawly, awful feeling since he was a young boy and stumbled across a rabid fox in the woods. Spock’s eyes had the same tortured, vicious look. Eyes that were in pain, and wished to inflict it.

“You told my father about my condition,” Spock said, coming still closer. “You interfered.”
“I guess you spoke to Sherron,” Leonard said, backing up a bit. He wasn’t that worried, as the Clinic’s alarm system was first-rate. If he was attacked, if he even became really afraid of being attacked, Security would be there in under two minutes. But he didn’t like being too near Spock. The nearer the Vulcan got, the worse Leonard felt. His shields were strong, but he had never felt anything like this before. Was this the beginning of plak tow? No wonder Sarek had been so emphatic when they spoke yesterday, not an hour after Leonard sent the first message. Spock’s father hadn’t been angry, not once he realized Leonard didn’t want money or publicity, but he was worried as hell. For all his stoicism, Sarek’s true feelings had been clear.

“She is bewildered,” Spock said. “She does not fully comprehend why you betrayed her. I do.”

“Yeah?” Leonard said. “Why’s that?”

“You hate me. Those feelings are much stronger than anything you felt for Sherron.”

“No. I don’t like you much—especially right now—but I don’t hate you.”

“Liar,” Spock said. He was moving again, slowly but surely. Leonard almost had his back against the wall, pretty soon there would be nowhere to go. “You are clever and vindictive. You seduced my cousin in hopes of finding a way to destroy me.”

“I didn’t seduce your cousin, not that it’s any of your business. She came on to me. If I wanted you destroyed, I wouldn’t have called Sarek. I’d have called the fucking tabloids.”

“You would not expose Jim Kirk.” Spock stopped by the exam table, not a meter away. “Do not pretend to any scruples where I’m concerned. If you had video of me with another, it would be on the nets this moment. There is nothing you would not do to secure your hold on Jim. No rule you would not break, no betrayal you would not commit. What a warped thing your friendship is! But I do not wonder at it. Between such twisted creatures, how can anything be right?”

“Warped,” Leonard spat. “That’s rich, coming from you. Look at any dirty pictures of your cousin lately? How many loads have you shot thinking about those perfect tits of hers? How often have you imagined her sinking down on you like she sank down on me? She feels just as good as you think, Spock—better. Oh yeah, you’ve thought about it. Often, and not just when you were a snotty little brat. You’d fuck her right now if you could. Especially now—”

He cut off as he was pushed into the side wall. Spock hadn’t really attacked yet, just holding Len against the plaster with a grip like iron. He was shaking all over, as if he was desperately wrestling with himself, and losing. His touch was terrible, so terrible. Like seeing a man being roasted alive, only you could also feel it, every second of his torment. Spock wasn’t hurting Leonard, not in any way the adrenal alarms could sense, but it did hurt. It hurt like hell.

Leonard gave that inner flex, the one that had been second-nature since he was twelve years old. He felt his walls tighten around him, as reassuring as stone. That was better—Spock’s seething anguish dimmed to a distant noise. Leonard couldn’t feel it. It wasn’t real.

“Go on, hit me,” he rasped. “Do it.” The second Spock did, it would be over. The first thing Security would do was run a bioscan to see what the hell was wrong with him. There would be no coming back from that. “Come at me, you pointy-eared varmint. I dare you.”

Spock didn’t hit him, but he didn’t let him go. His face worked in an agonized way, like a man being torn apart from the inside. Under any other circumstances Leonard would have pitied him. But Leonard wouldn’t pity. Not when he’d just closed that bloody bite on Jim’s neck. Not when he could still feel her teeth in his own. He felt like he did when he was a young boy and saw that rabid fox.
Right before he shouldered his .22 and blew its head off.

“I erased your bite,” he whispered. “Jim asked me to, he thought it would be inconvenient. Twenty-four hours later, and he’s finding somebody else to fuck. We joked about it tonight. That’s what you are to him, Spock: a goddamn joke.”

He saw Spock’s eyes widen, he felt that iron grip tighten—oh, here it comes. This was gonna hurt; Raymon D’Ranni was proof of that. But Leonard looked beyond the pain to what would come after. He gazed upon Spock’s ruination and grinned.

Ruin would have come—two seconds later, it would have. But in one second, a man’s voice barked from the door:

“Commander! Stand down!”

Spock blinked, deadly focus wavering. But not broken, his hand was still at Leonard’s throat.

“Spock, ne’la-mor.” The voice was closer. “Mok vi-linuk t’sa-mekh’vu.”

Quite suddenly, the strangling hold was gone. Spock turned from Leonard towards the voice. With one trembling hand, he straightened his tunic. After a minute, he could speak.

“Dr. Chapel,” he said faintly. “I—I do—” he put two fingers to his forehead. “Forgive me.”

Anthony Chapel, Chief Medical Officer for Starfleet Academy, leaned meditatively on his cane. He stroked his immaculate white beard, his hazel eyes twinkling. “Nothing to forgive,” he said. “Dr. McCoy here may think differently, though I believe,” his gaze flicked to Leonard, “Yes, he will let bygones be bygones.”

Leonard rubbed his throat. “Why would I do that?”

“Because Commander Spock is clearly not himself,” Chapel said. “And because I heard you taunt him, quite cruelly, just before he lost control. Is that any way to treat a man in distress? Badly done, Doctor. Badly done indeed.”

Chapel was not a big man—Leonard had at least twelve centimeters and twenty kilos on him—but he had a certain way about him. When he talked, you listened. When he told you—in his polite English fashion—that you’d been a fucking jerk, you felt it right down to your feet.

Leonard felt himself color. “He started it.”

“Not to sound too terribly clichéd, but I’m the one finishing it.” Chapel returned to Spock.

“Commander, kindly remove yourself from my clinic. Go see T’Lyn, I’m sure she must be worried about you.”

Spock didn’t seem to know how to take this. “I—that is—why should she be?”

“Let’s not play games, shall we? You’re not a week from Blood Fever, I don’t even know what you’re doing wandering about.” Seeing Spock go greener. “Good Lord, man, I’m not going to snitch! But you must know you’re a danger to yourself and others. Go see your people, they’re equipped for this.” His gaze flicked at Leonard. “And keep your hands off my people, please. Dr. McCoy could use a sound thrashing, I’m sure it would do him no end of good, but that’s really my job, isn’t it?” Tapping his cane on the tiles, he gave Spock an encouraging smile.

Despite what Spock was, and how he was, the corners of his mouth made the slightest turn north.
Chapel was amazing at soothing the savage beast. You don’t make CMO if you’re not. Leonard might have felt a pang of envy, if he wasn’t so damn tired. He was queasy from the adrenal rush, and his neck hurt. Again.

“I do appreciate your concern,” Spock said to Chapel. He’d straightened up a bit, and some of the green had gone from his face. To the casual observer he would have looked nearly normal. “Though I’m curious how you came to know about my condition.”

“I had a five-year research grant on Vulcan, years ago.” Chapel shrugged. “Your people are very discreet, but I’m a nosy devil.” He smiled again. “I’m discreet too, though.”

Spock nodded calmly. But Leonard could still faintly feel it, the sick buzz of the Vulcan’s aura. “Discreet my ass,” he said. “He’s a public menace.”

“How’s my ass,” Chapel said to him, not taking his eyes from Spock. “The Commander is on his way to the Embassy right now. Isn’t that so?” His face was wryly amused, like he felt a little silly even asking the question. But when Spock said nothing, Chapel’s good humor hardened. “I would dislike engaging a Security detail,” he said. “I would dislike it very much. But I will do it, Commander. Your present condition is unpredictable, and it will only become moreso. If you do not see this, your logic is truly in abeyance. Give me your word now that you are going to the Embassy, or I will have you escorted there. I do not wish to insult you or to jeopardize your reputation, but it would be my duty.”

Chapel was very good. Leonard wasn’t an expert on Vulcans, and he’d spotted at least three different cultural triggers embedded in that speech: logic, reputation, duty. Spock must have heard them too, because at last he nodded.

“You have my word,” he said. “I apologize for the inconvenience I have caused you.” His eyes went to Leonard, then cut away contemptuously. “I do not apologize to him. He does not merit such consideration.”

Well, fuck you very much, Leonard thought. He would have said it, but at that precise instant Chapel’s cane came down hard on Leonard’s boot tip. He winced but got the message, saying nothing until the door had whooshed behind Spock.

Anthony Chapel turned to him, finally focusing his full attention. “Really, Leonard,” he said. “What are you doing? That boy nearly had your guts for garters.”

“The alarms—”

“Two minutes, it would have taken Security. What do you think a Vulcan on the verge of plak tow can do to you in two minutes? In my clinic, too. I do not appreciate that. And I really don’t appreciate you goading him into it.”

He looked genuinely upset—anger, and something even more uncomfortable. Not a happy thing, disappointing Tony Chapel. It was like disappointing your favorite professor, or that awesome uncle who taught you how to smoke cigars and charm the ladies.

Leonard fidgeted. “I’m sorry, you’re right. It was a dumb thing to do.”

Chapel sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Come. Walk with me.”

He did, tactfully halving his steps to keep pace with the hobbling man. Chapel had been CMO on the Yorktown when some god-awful thing on some god-awful planet had chomped off his leg. They
grew it back, but orthopedic regeneration was not perfected, and the result was a leg that limped. Which was better than no leg at all, but Chapel had still taken the desk job on Earth. “Something might bite off the other one, and then where would I be?” he said over drinks once.

Chapel led them down the hall to his office, a cluttered and cozy space about the size of an exam room. The side walls were taken up by floor-to-ceiling antique medical books. Behind his desk was a real jointed skeleton, it’s gap-toothed smile greeting visitors. (Chapel called it Uriah Heep, for some reason.) Chapel went behind his desk, hung his cane on Uriah’s neck and sat, waving Leonard into the guest chair. As soon as Leonard settled in, a glass appeared in front of him, filled with whiskey from the decanter balanced shakily on a yellowed copy of Gray’s Anatomy.

“Um, aren’t we on duty?” he said.

“Special dispensation,” Chapel said, filling his own glass. “When any of my staff is set upon by crazed Vulcans, we get to drink on duty.”

“I must have missed that regulation.”

“Drink. It’s Johnnie Walker Double Black.”

You couldn’t argue with that. Leonard took a sip, savoring the smoky taste.

Chapel took a real slug, leaning back in the chair and rubbing his bad leg. “I was attacked by a Vulcan once,” he said conversationally. “The Academy was having a reception—stultifying affair, as their affairs tend to be. But one minister had a rather tasty wife, and she was showing considerable cleavage. They don’t all dress like Victorian schoolmistresses, you know.”

“I know.” Leonard took another drink.

“Anyhow, I was looking. Not my most shining moment, but I could hardly help it: They were right there. Could have sworn I caught a flash of pouty green nipple. But before I could really be certain, her hubby had me on the ground. Broke three ribs before they could pull him off.”

“Lemme guess: He was going into pon farr.”

“Yes, indeed. Didn’t know it at the time, of course. Everybody was very apologetic, said Sajek had been under tremendous pressure lately, blah blah blah, but I knew that something was hinky. I smelled it on him as he came at me, like having your face shoved near burning coals. I’d been on-planet long enough to know when Vulcans are disconcerted, and it was a gaggle of twitchy bastards who came to see me in hospital. The leader, Sajek’s father, had an enormous credit voucher in one hand, and a stack of papers for me to sign in the other.”

Leonard leaned forward, interested. “Did you sign?”

“Not immediately. Still a bit hacked off over the whole thing, but more than that, I was curious. I am a nosey devil, Len. I’d noticed things, half-remembered whispers and weird references, for the several years I’d been there. Men taking leaves of absences for weeks and weeks, and this is a whole planet of workaholics. But nobody raised an eyebrow. And I’d noticed the pattern, how many siblings were born multiples of seven years apart. Not all of them, mind you, but enough. Didn’t take a prodigy to see that we were dealing with some kind of sexual heat. I wanted them to fill me in, but they went frosty and condescending—you know how they can be. I threatened to write a paper. I wouldn’t have got far—three cracked ribs and some birth stats aren’t exactly Lancet material—but Saketh went yellow as a lemon at the very idea. He folded, but only after I’d signed all those papers, plus a whole bunch of new ones.”
“Did you get the money?”

“Too right. It paid for my summer home on Risa Alpha.” Chapel tapped fingers on the desk. “Well, that’s my sad tale. What’s yours?” When Leonard hesitated: “Come, lad. I can hardly advise you if I don’t have all the facts.”

Leonard tilted his head. “No disrespect, but what makes you think I need your advice?”

“Those fingermarks on your neck, for one. The fact that you’ve drunk a full glass of whiskey in five minutes, for second. Why wouldn’t you tell? How many other Terrans with knowledge of pon farr are you acquainted with?”

Leonard put down his empty glass, sighing. Chapel did have a point. The old man wasn’t going to hear many secrets he didn’t already know, and it would be reassuring to get some perspective. Leonard had sort of lost his own, he had to admit it.

“Okay,” he said. “Have another drink and sit back.”

Then he told it, all of it, with only two omissions. First, he did not give Jim’s original motive for seducing Spock. When you considered the Kobayashi Maru prank in all its parts, it was a pretty crazy thing Jim had almost done. Not something anyone in Administration needed to hear about. Second, Leonard did not talk about Varek and the dreams. Nobody needed to hear that. In this version, Jim slept with Spock because Jim slept with everybody; Leonard figured out Sherron’s lies because he was just that smart.

Chapel was silent for a minute after Leonard finished speaking, tapping fingers on the desk in that pensive way of his. “Hmm,” he said finally. “Quite a story.”

He picked up the decanter and poured another splash of whiskey into Leonard’s glass. “Just a taste, I don’t want you leaving here drunk. But I have the feeling you could use this.”

Leonard nodded gratefully, picking up the glass. Chapel watched him drain it, then raised a rakish brow. “Vulcan women are something, aren’t they? Enough to drive a man to drink.”

“I’ll say. When did you sample the goods?”

“I lived with Vulcans for almost half a decade. I found they’re far sluttier than anyone suspects. The trouble is that most outworlders aren’t subtle enough to pick up the signals.” He gave Uriah Heep a conspiratorial wink. “Maybe it helps to be British.”

Chapel’s amusement faded. “But this isn’t about the dangerous charms of Vulcan women, is it? This is about Jim Kirk.” His lip curled, like there was too much peat in his Double Black.

“He’s my best friend.”

“Friend,” Chapel said, turning over the syllables. “Did you know Vulcans have seven different words that translate as such? They cover a whole complicated landscape of relationships.”

“So I’ve heard. But Jim and I are real straightforward: He’s my friend, and I look out for him. I know what the gossip says, but I’m not fucking him. Never have, never will.”

“My dear boy, I know that. I’m fairly sure you and I are the only straight men left in California. Not that I mind homosexuals, though I wish my daughter would stop dating them. This boy she goes around with so much—Hikaru Sulu? Do you know him? No? In any event, the situation has disaster scrawled all over it. Wee Mr. Chekov has his sights set, and they’re a determined people, the
Russians. Christine is going to have her heart broken.” Chapel looked philosophical. “Ah well! As the Russians say, ‘Chemu byt, tomu ne minovat’: ‘What is to be, can’t be avoided.’

Leonard looked at him a minute. “Do you think I did the right thing with Jim and Spock?”

“Given the circumstances, your actions are not surprising. But I wonder if you’ve given any thought to what will happen when Jim discovers what you’ve done. He’s almost sure to: He enjoys playing the fool, but he’s quite intelligent. I’m sure you know that.”

Leonard nods. “He’ll be pissed. But once he gets Spock all the way out of his system, he’ll see I was right.” Maybe this was wishful thinking on Leonard’s part, though history was on his side. Jim hadn’t been happy about Leonard cracking Carol’s records or calling David’s fathers, but he’d gotten over it. And Gary—well, that had been the Romulan ale’s fault, not Leonard’s.

“Maybe he won’t see it,” Leonard went on. “But I don’t have any regrets. What was I supposed to do, let Spock keep using his weird witchy powers to take advantage of my friend?”

“As to that, I wouldn’t worry about it. Projective empaths—powerful ones—are hard to suborn that way. It could happen, I suppose, with the untried and unwary. But Jim is neither of these things. Given his talents, his tragic experiences, it would be devilishly difficult to coerce or manipulate him now. Far more likely to be the other way ‘round.” Chapel sighed. “He’ll be a good starship captain, but it’s rather a shame: There are so many things he would be good at.”

Leonard looked at him, puzzled. “Such as?”

Chapel gave a Gallic shrug. “Oh, I don’t know. A psychologist, perhaps. Plenty of those have a projective bent. An actor—he’s handsome enough—or a politician.” He smiled, a rather strange little smile. “Or a journalist. His great-grandfather was one.”

Chapel nodded at one of the bookcases on the left-hand side. Leonard leaned in, looking close. There were several holoframes there, pictures of Christine as a baby and a young girl; a sweet one of Chapel and his now-deceased wife, grinning fit to split with Mickey Mouse. But the one Chapel had indicated was on the very end. It showed two men standing on a beach somewhere. One was quite young, slender and dark-haired: Anthony Chapel sixty or so years ago. The other was older and taller, with fair hair and a hard face. Not handsome but interesting, especially his eyes. They were large, long-lashed, and an arresting crystalline blue. They seemed to get darker and deeper the more you looked. Leonard had seen them before.

“Alexei Ivanov,” Chapel said softly. “I met him at university. A mentor of mine, you could say. Changed my perspective on life, that much is certain. The best I ever saw at what he did. He could find things out—amazing, what he could find out. Taught me everything.”

“But you didn’t become a journalist.”

Chapel blinked and seemed to return from far away. “No,” he said. “But it’s always useful to know about people, lad. How to talk to them, Alex could do that. He knew just what to say. A holy terror with women, God knows how many bastards he sired! I suppose nobody is perfect.”

Chapel leaned in, smiling at Leonard with his changeable hazel eyes. “I don’t know Jim well; our paths haven’t crossed much at the Academy. But I do know you, Len. I like you, though you can be a ferocious creature. You have manners, which is something I can say about few Americans. A sense of honor, in your rough-hewn way. I appreciate your not sleeping with Christine, though she threw herself at you quite shamelessly at the Clinic Christmas party.”
“Not her fault: Althea makes a wicked Planter’s Punch.”

“Nevertheless, I do appreciate it. I left procreation too late, I suspect. It’s difficult now, guiding a young woman when I’m an old man. If her mother were here, I might do better.” For a minute his face creased with sorrow, before smoothing into its usual benevolence. “Anyway, I do like you, so I will give you some good advice, and I hope you will heed it.” He leaned closer. The light from the desk lamp hit his eyes, turning them gold. “Be careful when you take something from a desperate man. He won’t forget.”

“Desperate?” Leonard said. “Jim’s not—”

“Oh, he is. For a long time. As I said, I don’t know him that well now, but I’ve seen him on campus. I’ve noted his—movements. He covers admirably, but his eyes are the same as when he was thirteen. He looks like a hungry wolf. Though who could blame him?”

Leonard was silent, feeling his heart beat faster. He felt like he did when he was doing research or dealing with a tricky patient. The silvery excitement that proceeds a huge discovery, one that will explain so many troubling symptoms.

“You said Jim had tragic experiences,” he said. “What do you mean?”

“He never told you?” Chapel looked surprised. “That’s very interesting. I’d have thought—you are such friends. But I suppose there’s nothing unethical in telling you. Not so many years later. After all, he did nothing wrong.”

“Wrong? I don’t—”

“Jim Kirk is a Tarsus IV survivor. The most unfortunate of all survivors, perhaps. He actually witnessed the killings.”

Leonard sat very still, clutching the arms of the chair. The excitement was gone, replaced by a dead-black stone in his chest. It was mostly sorrow and horror, at the realization of what Jim had been through. But there was a part right in the center, blacker than the rest. The thought that he couldn’t stifle, unworthy as it was: He didn’t tell me. All this time, and he never said. Why?

“How—” his throat went dry. He swallowed and tried again. “How do you know?”

“I was part of the rescue team that found him. He went missing after the murders, wandered off into the desert in shock. Took three brutal days of searching—the ion storms, you know, full-planet scans weren’t possible. But it was the least we could do, after his mother—she was in no condition to look for him. She’d been through so much herself. Amazing woman! She really is. Her son is very like her. Strong as a diamond, when strength is called for. Dazzling resilience. No other child his age could have survived what he did. But he was—not in good shape when we found him. It took a long time for him to recover, not an easy convalescence, by any means. And what came after—it’s really wonderful, that he’s come so far. An experience like that, it marks you all the way down. I could show you some very depressing statistics, the substance abuse and suicide rates of Tarsus IV survivors. Jim Kirk is not so desperate as that, but he is desperate. Whatever he has, he will hold it tightly. He won’t appreciate being made—bereft.”

Leonard looked down at his hands. There were a thousand things he wanted to say—apologies, explanations, justifications. He couldn’t say any of them.

“I know there is more to this story, Leonard. I have so many questions. I wonder what made Jim fixate on Spock in the first place. Not a logical target, on the surface. I wonder what it was that made
you turn on Spock’s cousin—I have seen her at one or two affairs at the Embassy, and she’s astonishing. Not a woman to be discarded lightly. But more than anything, I wonder what it is between you and Jim Kirk. You are not lovers, but a friend—even a best friend—does not behave as you do. It’s a question that you should be asking yourself, ‘Why am I doing this?’”

“The danger—”

“Jim does not need your protection. Already he has survived dangers far greater than anything one poor fevered Vulcan could create. While you were not aware of the details of his history, surely you know what sort of man your best friend is. Jim is a predator; He isn’t prey.

“I’ll put the question another way. If you could take it all back, now that you know Jim is in no danger from Spock’s *pon farr*. No danger, at any rate, that he cannot manage. Knowing this, would you enjoy your Vulcan goddess, and let Jim enjoy Spock? Could you do that?”

Leonard didn’t have to answer. But he did. Some part of him, the honorable part, had to say it.

“No.”

“Well then,” Chapel said, after a moment. “I think you should watch yourself—and him.”

“Why?”

“Because you are one of the things that Jim holds. He throws people away like empty Xix cans, but not you, Leonard, not you. Despite all your interference, everything it costs him to be your friend. In his eyes, the benefits of your companionship must be very great. But when he finds out what you’ve done, that it’s you who’s deprived him of this other companionship, what will his price be? If you think the worst he could do is break with you, you’re wrong.”

“He’s my friend,” Leonard said. “He would never try to hurt me.”

“There’s hurt and there’s *hurt*. And you don’t know what Jim Kirk is capable of. You may do his physicals, but you haven’t seen inside him. If he didn’t tell you about Tarsus IV, what else hasn’t he told you? Lad, I can’t make it more clear. Not without a serious breach of ethics.”

“That’s okay.” Leonard stands. “I appreciate all your input, I really do. Now that I know Jim is a Tarsus IV survivor—well. Maybe now we can really have an honest conversation. If Jim has a problem with what I did, we’ll work through it. If he wants to stop talking to me for a while, fine. If he wants to take a swing at me—guess I sort of deserve it. But we will survive this.” For the first time since he sent the file to Sarek, Leonard believed it. For one very good reason.

“Don’t you see, Tony? Jim loves me.”

Chapel leaned back in his chair. His benevolent face had gone sad, almost pitying. He looked at Leonard like you look at someone as bad off as poor Uriah Heep. A truly terminal case.

“That, dear boy, is what I’m afraid of.”
He has felt the shadow for a minute or so, hanging impatiently over his right shoulder, but Jim doesn’t try to speak first. He wants to hear what he has to say for himself.

“What are you reading?” Ivan says. “It barely looks like Standard.”

“It’s poetry.”

“Tennyson is poetry. This isn’t poetry. This is—chaos.” Ivan flicks at the page.

“Nothing wrong with a little chaos.” Jim closes the book and puts it on the nightstand. He turns over on the bed, looking up at Ivan, who still looms. “But you’re wrong, actually. Cummings always has a method in his madness.”

“What’s his method here? Using a computer without spell check?”

Jim doesn’t smile, though he usually tries to encourage Ivan’s uncertain attempts at humor. “It’s an elegy. For Buffalo Bill Cody, one of the last cowboys.”

“I don’t know him.”

“He isn’t mentioned much now. His exploits aren’t exactly revered.”

“He killed many men?”
“A few. But he got famous because of the buffalos. Don’t know if you’ve ever seen one, they’re mostly kept in nature preserves these days. They’re huge creatures, twice as big as a bull. Four hundred years ago, there were millions running wild out west. Cody killed over four thousand in eight months, using an old-fashioned rifle and lead bullets. He must have waded in blood to his elbows. Maybe he thought it had to be done—he did have a contract. Or maybe he didn’t care.” Jim drops his head against the pillow, looking at the ceiling. “Maybe he just liked killing.”

Ivan considers a moment. “Cummings admired this Cody?”

“I don’t think so.”

“But the poem—”

“It’s a metaphor. Cummings is trying to make a point.” When Ivan won’t ask: “Death is sexy. But it probably shouldn’t be.”

“I see.” Ivan’s voice is colder than usual, and it’s usually pretty damn cold.

He sits on the bed. Jim keeps looking at the ceiling. For a while they are both quiet, the only sound in the room the ticking of the old-fashioned twelve-hour clock on the nightstand. It was Jim’s grandfather’s, once upon a time. Sexy Jimmy Murray, who lit out for greener pastures when his daughter was twelve years old. Winnie, who worshiped him, and never recovered. Sexy Jimmy has never killed anyone: He doesn’t have the focus. But he is responsible, in his hazy charming way, for a thousand deaths.

“You’ve heard about Sean,” Ivan says.

“And circle gets the square.” Jim still won’t look at him.

“You’re upset.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I didn’t know—” Ivan stops. “I would have thought that you are the last person who would—regret him.”

“Regret,” Jim growls. He can look at Ivan now. “No, I’m not sorry he’s dead. But this—” he sits up. “Al showed me the morgue holos. Mother of God, what’s wrong with you?”

“The robots did all that,” Ivan says, calm as ever.

“Who set the robots? Who screwed their subroutines until they misidentified a person as a wall to be demolished? Who tinkered with their timing so it took hours instead of seconds? Hours, Ivan. They held him down and pulverized him, piece by bloody piece. Until there was nothing left but pieces.” Jim wraps arms around his stomach. “I wanted Sean dead. But not like this.”

“What would you have done?” The question could be sarcastic or apologetic, but it’s neither. Ivan asks like he’s genuinely interested, like this is another strategy session over pizza and beer.

“Something fast,” Jim says. “Clean.”

“You think he deserved such a death?”

“It’s not about what he deserves. It’s about you.”

The churning in Jim’s gut is getting out of control. He stops a minute, swallowing. “I know you’re
hardcore: After sleeping with you all these months, I’d be pretty dumb if I didn’t. But maybe you’re even more of a sadist than I thought. Maybe turning a man into hamburger really does it for you. I know what the training says, Section 31 agents are outside the law. But that doesn’t make what you did okay. You can’t start thinking you’re better than everyone and just do whatever the hell you want. I can’t stand that. I won’t stand it.” The thought makes him sick, with a sickness he hasn’t felt in nine years.

“I’m not guilty of what you think.”

“You didn’t kill Sean? Come on—”

“Of course I did. I introduced the virus into the system, though it will look like an accidental infection. But there was an error in coding. Sean was supposed to die quickly, cleanly. I would not have tortured him as he was tortured. It was a mistake, a terrible mistake. Believe I regret it. You must believe it.”

Ivan’s face is not so calm now. He grips Jim’s hand tight enough to make bones crack. Jim can feel the heat radiating from him. It seems so impossible, that it’s covering nothing but ice.

He pulls his hand away. “You made a mistake.”

“Yes. I should have asked Al to check the program, but he would have stopped me. You know the mission objectives, nothing unusual is supposed to happen until the trap snaps shut.”

“So why did you do it?”

“Nye zadavai mnye duratskikh voprosov.” Ivan jumps off the bed, begins to pace.

“English, cowboy, English.”

“Don’t ask me such stupid questions. You know how he was, what I endured every day for six months. His constant, idiotic chatter, his clumsy attempts to play the big boss. And the whores! I do not judge them, they only do what they must, with little choice. But he could choose, when he had them, how he was when he brought them to his office. He sent one girl out crying, a little blonde thing, she could not have been more than sixteen. I knew what I must do then. That very night—last night—I spiked the system. I should have waited, I should not have rushed. But I’d seen, I could not forget. Her face. I could not—” he stops, looking at his clenched hands.

For a minute, there’s nothing but the sound of James Murray’s forgotten clock.

“Who did you see?” Jim says. “It wasn’t Jess, was it?”

He gets off the bed, approaching slowly and speaking softly, like you do with any dangerous animal. Until he’s close enough to hug Ivan, but he doesn’t. He just leans in. He shouldn’t push it, but he has to. He feels like he’s on the edge of a great revelation, something that will explain everything about this man he feels so strongly for, and knows so little about.

“Jess was a lot of things,” he says. “But she wasn’t blonde, and she was never a prostitute.” Jim reaches out. “Whose face did you see? Ivan—”

Ivan flinches away. “This was a mistake,” he rasps. “Being with you. I would not have been so affected six months ago. Sean and his whores would not have affected me. I’ve jeopardized this entire mission, Winona will be so—”

“Fuck the fucking mission!” Jim grips Ivan’s face in his hands. “And fuck Winnie. Yeah, you heard
me, fuck her if she can’t understand. You’re not a robot, okay? You’re allowed to make mistakes sometimes. You’re allowed to feel things, I give you permission.”

The shadow of a smile flits across Ivan’s face. “You give permission. You do.”

“Are you suffering from waxy build-up? I do.”

“Idiot boy.” But now Ivan really looks amused. “Who are you?”

“I’m James T. Kirk.” He pulls Ivan close, touching their foreheads together. He could stay like this forever, just feeling the energies echo between them. “I’m the one who loves you.”

He sees grey eyes widen as the words sink in. Ivan opens his mouth, but no sound comes out.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say it back. You never have to say it,” Jim says. “But you have to trust me. Next time you want to kill someone, really kill him, you have to tell me.”

“If I had told you about Sean. If I informed you of my plans. What would you have done?”

Jim doesn’t smile much when it’s just the two of them. It’s a nice way of differentiating from the grinning ape act he does with Michael. But now he smiles, and though it feels quite ordinary on his face, it makes Ivan go still.

“I would have checked your coding,” Jim says. “We would have executed that piece of shit, and we would have done it right.”

Ivan stares at him. “You are the perfect man,” he whispers.

“Well, yeah, I’ve been trying to tell you—” Jim stops, like you have to when someone is kissing the breath out of you.

Breathless, he’s pushed down onto the bed. He reaches up, wrapping his hands around the bars of the headboard. “The inertia bracelets are in the bathroom,” he says. “After last time, they needed—sponging.” Then he starts pulling his t-shirt off.

“No bracelets,” Ivan says.

“In an old-fashioned mood, huh?” Jim throws his shirt on the floor and starts on the buttons of his jeans. “The handcuffs are in the nightstand.”

“No cuffs. No ropes, no belts, no bindings of any kind. Just you and me.”

Jim blinks at Ivan, his mouth going dry. He reaches for the carafe on the nightstand.

“Is something wrong?”

“No,” Jim says, after gulping down a glass of water.

“Uh-huh.” Ivan says it like Jim would say it. He’s picked up quite a few of Jim’s phrases in the last six months, ‘Sam’ uses them a lot. But he’s not ‘Sam’ now, though he’s dressed like him, in jeans and one of Jim’s t-shirts, the yellow one covered with green cartoon lesions and the slogan, My Boyfriend Went to Antares IV, and All I Got Was this Lousy Syphilis. (A birthday gift from the real Sam, who must have been drunk when he bought it.)

Above Sam’s silly shirt, Ivan’s face is thoughtful. “You do not need such trappings, do you? Sometimes you go without them.”
“Sure,” Jim says. “I went without them at the bar yesterday morning. Michael had an hour before the liquor supplier came, and—”

“Stop. I don’t want to hear it. You don’t want to tell it. Do you?”

Jim slumps against the headboard. “No.”

Ivan sits on the bed. “We’ve been vanilla before.”

“When we were too tired or too busy to be fancy. But Michael will be occupied all day, making funeral arrangements and stuff. We have hours to play.”

Ivan puts a hand on Jim’s cheek. “Maybe I’m tired of playing.”

Jim says nothing, but some of his feelings must be showing on his face, because Ivan leans close. “Don’t worry, I’m not going soft. I will always give you what you need, I love to give it. But after yesterday, I need something nice and normal. Something . . .” he stops, shaking his head, like he doesn’t know the word in Standard.

“Clean,” Jim says.

Ivan nods slowly. Jim takes his hand, placing a kiss in the center of Ivan’s palm. He feels the callouses there from Ivan’s work. All the work that he has done. “I can do that,” Jim says.

But for some minutes, Ivan doesn’t move. His face is working in that strange way it does, like it doesn’t know how it should be. Jim gets it then, such a sad idea: He can do this, as nervous as the idea makes him. Ivan can’t. He can’t be nice and normal and remain himself. (Who is Ivan? What really moves him? Jim won’t think about it now.)

The silence becomes strained. Ivan looks as confused and frustrated as Jim feels. Finally, Jim has to take pity on them both.

“If you were Patrick,” he says. Then, realizing all the implications: “Forget that, not Patrick. John, maybe—that’s the American equivalent of Ivan. You’re John, a nice, normal guy from Florida or something, just in town on business. You see me in a bar, you decide to pick me up. Because, be honest, I’m as good as you’re gonna do in KC. You bring me back to your suite at the Hilton, all done up in shades of beige and that god-awful abstract art you can’t find anywhere but hotel rooms. We’ve had the required drink, we’ve made the necessary chit-chat, and now it’s make it or break it time. I’m laid out on that beige bedspread, giving you the come-fuck-me eyes.” Jim bats his baby blues. “John from Florida, what do you do? Go.”

Ivan runs nervous hands down his thighs. As Jim spun the story, his whole posture changed. He’s still handsome, but in a twitchy kind of way, head-dipped, gaze half-averted. His eyes remain grey but have gone darker, almost brown, a shy and serious color. He smoothes a hand through his hair; even the blond strands seem duller and softer. Jim has seen Ivan change dozens of times, but it still amazes him. It’s like watching a kind of possession. Seven hundred years ago, he’d have been burned at the stake.

“I don’t usually do this kinda thing,” John says. His accent is faint but absolutely definable, redolent of Spanish moss and sun-drenched beaches. Something in it makes Jim’s heart twist.

But he tilts his head, smiling. Jim knows the part he has to play. To be Jim, but a very particular kind of Jim. The sunny seducer, aggressive but good-natured about it, the boy who can joke you right out of your underwear. He’s played it plenty of times before, usually with women.
He puts a hand over John’s, stilling its nervous tap-tapping. “I bet you say that to all the boys.”

“I—I haven’t been with many boys,” John admits. His thumb skates over the fourth finger of his left hand, like a man who has taken off his wedding ring, and misses it. “My wife—”

“Is in Orlando,” Jim says. “She won’t ever know.”

“Promise?” John is fairly shaking with nerves.

Jim puts a hand under his chin. “I’m really good with secrets,” he says, and kisses him. Not shaking so much now, John kisses back. They stay that way awhile, making out like two kids. It’s really sweet, even if something about it tastes false, saccharine instead of sugar.

But the sex is good, the way vanilla sex can be when at least one person knows what he’s doing. It’s good, but part of Jim stands outside it, watching the kissing, the groping, the undressing and even the thrusting with a strange detachment. It should excite him to be the aggressor, the one who takes instead of being taken: It’s not something he gets to do with Ivan often. But this isn’t Ivan. This is good, but it’s another game. They’re still playing.

There comes a moment at the very end, Jim is on top, buried as deep as he can be inside of John, who looks up at him with wide, shining eyes. John looks just as he should look, a man awaking to his true desires, maybe for the very first time. But even as Jim thrusts deeper inside him, feels John tighten around his cock like an exquisite glove, he feels frustration. A need more pressing than lust, to shatter this perfect illusion. He grips that false face and holds tight.

“Ivan,” he whispers. When John blinks in surprise: “Look at me. Ivan, look at me. Ivan—look.” With those last two words he holds tighter and thrusts deeper. Using a part of himself that isn’t remotely physical, he looks into that shadowy visage and pushes hard enough to hurt.

For one instant he glimpses it. A face that’s a thousand faces, eyes a whole dizzy spectrum of colors. It looks like Jim, it looks like everyone—and no one. That’s what’s so terrible about it. Jim recoils from it, as you would from a man with no face at all. But—this is the most terrible thing—he also wants it, a want that’s like staring into the heart of an abyss. Into his own heart.

“Jim, lyubov moya, come back to me.”

The not-face is gone, maybe never there, and it’s Ivan, looking up at Jim with worried grey eyes. Jim is still inside him, pleasure throbbing in his groin, but his chest is cold and tight. He gives a hiccupping gasp and blinks hard, trying to get the wet from his eyes. He knows what he did was awful, invasive, but he can’t explain. Fear has taken all his words but one: “Ivan—”

Warm hands cupping his face. “It’s me, it’s okay. Don’t worry.” Ivan pulls him in and kisses him, a kiss that’s like their first, awkward and real. It’s not very sexy, but it’s what Jim needs. His climax comes a second later, a shining wave that courses through him, drowning all doubt. Ivan finishes then, and Jim feels a delicious echo of it. Not quite the bond he wanted, but in that moment, it’s enough.

For a while they’re silent, the way you can be with people you know well. Ivan has his arms around Jim, being the big spoon as he likes to be, and Jim can’t see his face. Just now, he’s glad.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “That was wrong.”

“It was,” Ivan says, though he doesn’t sound angry. “What did you expect to see? What did you want to touch with those grasping hands of yours?”
Jim sighs. “You.”

He hears Ivan sigh, too. “I don’t know what I can do to reassure you,” he says. “You know my talents. I would not change them if I could, they’re so useful in my work. But—perhaps I work too much. It’s hard to take the masks off, to be truly exposed. Today you saw how hard.” Ivan runs slow fingers down Jim’s arm. “But I am real. Beneath it all, there is only me.”

Jim is silent so long, Ivan shifts restlessly. “What can I do, Jim?”


“You first.”

Jim looks over his shoulder. “Seriously?”

“What’s the phrase, turning around is fair play?”

“Turnabout is fair play.”

“Right. Yes. You’re so curious about me—maybe I’m curious, too.”

“Why do I have to go first?”

“Because you’re more desperate, and you’ve shown it. Very bad! After watching Quinn and the Orions all these months, you should have learned more about the art of negotiation.”

It takes Jim a second to realize that Ivan is teasing. He really doesn’t have much sense of humor, and what he has is pretty strange. Maybe it’s a Russian thing; maybe it’s just Ivan. But he seems serious about who’s going first, stroking Jim’s arm and silently waiting for him to spill.

Jim watches the second-hand of the clock make two full revolutions before he says anything.

“I was on Tarsus IV.”

“I know. Your file—”

“I was in love with a boy on Tarsus IV. That wasn’t in my file, was it?”

Ivan, like any good interrogator, knows when to shut up. After another minute, Jim goes on.

“He was one of the strongest people I’ve ever known. He had kind of a screwed-up past; he’d have been the first to tell you he was a sinner. But he wasn’t, not really. Maybe it was being the child of two cultures, always getting caught in the gaps and having to hold himself together. He knew who he was, and he knew what was right. You couldn’t shake him. You don’t see morals like that much anymore, everything is so fluid these days. Anyway, it is for me. But he wasn’t like that. He was hard, but it was a good kind of hard. You could put your back against it. Sometimes, I wonder how my life would have been if he’d—stayed.” Jim stops.

“What happened to him?”

“He wasn’t one of the chosen ones. I—I saw him die.” His voice has become so low, he feels Ivan press closer to hear. “I felt it. I know we’re not supposed to be able to do that, but—I did.”

He can’t talk then, not for a long time. But Ivan must feel when the worst of the tension leaves Jim’s body, because then he asks, “What was his name?”
“Riley. Kevin Riley.”

“Hmm. Good name.”

“I guess so,” Jim says, brow wrinkling.

Ivan’s fingers tap pensively on Jim’s hip. It’s his turn now, but Jim doesn’t press it. He feels so wrung out from talking about Kevin—something he has never done, and won’t do again—that he doesn’t know if they need more confessions.

“My mother was a prostitute,” Ivan says. “She died when I was fourteen. A heroin overdose.”

Jim tries to turn around, but Ivan’s hands grip his shoulders with clear meaning. Jim stills.

“She was an addict for a long time. Her death was surprising. But she had been hurt badly a few days before. She was always coming home with bruises and other small injuries, hazards of the profession. But this—this was different. She was attacked by one of her men. Some don’t think it’s possible to rape a prostitute. It’s assumed you offer everything when you offer yourself for sale. But it happens. It does.”

(Ivan’s voice is as calm as glass when he says all this, but the next day, Jim will find them. Thin bruises on his own shoulders, the marks of Ivan’s fingers.)

“What happened to you?” Jim asks softly.

“Nothing happened. I went on.”

Jim knows it’s unlikely even as he asks, “Your dad? He took care of you?”

“Mother was the only family I knew.”

“Didn’t Federation Child Services—”

“I didn’t want their help. I could care for myself. I had for years.”

It takes Jim a minute to understand what Ivan means when he says he was taking care of himself. What he must have done to feed himself, with his mother’s habit eating everything else. Jim has known all along that Ivan was a rent boy, but this isn’t what he pictured. This isn’t a wild young man gone wrong. This is a horror, different from any that Jim has experienced.

“You mother,” Jim says slowly, “she never tried to stop you?”

“It was her idea. In the beginning, she took most of what I earned. But I grew wiser—I learned to keep something back.”

Jim says nothing. But when Ivan speaks again, he sounds a little defensive.

“She was very young when I was born. She did the best she could. I don’t blame her.”

No, Ivan wouldn’t have blamed her. How could he? She was all he had. He blamed the world. What did Winnie say? He’s better at killing than he is at sex. Not surprising that he’s good at both. They take the same attitude, whoring and killing. Surface coldness and a bone-deep rage. Rage that never leaves you, erupting not often but spectacularly. Annihilating everything.

“When the girl left Sean’s office crying, that little blonde girl. You saw your mom, didn’t you?”
“I don’t remember.”

Jim takes a breath. “Was there really a flaw in your coding?”

Suddenly, Ivan’s arms are gone. Jim feels the loss of heat like a deathly chill. He turns around and sees Ivan kneeling on the bed. His body is framed against the window, caught in the strong midday light. You can’t see his face, just a grey silhouette.

“I’m not a good man,” he says. “My morals—they are more fluid than yours. I’m not nice, and I’ll never be normal.” He turns his head, and Jim can see his features. The emotion etched upon them is raw and real. A sadness that goes deeper than rage.

“I’m not a monster,” he says. “I’ve worked hard not to be. I’ve done bad things, violent things. But there is always a method in my madness. I would not torture a man to death for the pleasure of it. If you love me, you will believe me.”

Jim crosses the distance between them. He puts his arms around Ivan. “I’m so sorry,” he says. “I didn’t understand.”


“I’ve seen your true face, Jim. I know how very strange you are beneath your smiles. I know every game you play to protect yourself, because I have played them. We play together, don’t we? Maybe one day, when our present work is done, we can stop the games. But if we never do, it does not matter. Because, my dearest friend, we know. We have always known each other.”

Jim nods at this. He can’t do anything else. Because if he says one word, he’ll start sobbing like a little helpless baby. He can’t help it. It’s not often you hear your deepest desires spoken aloud by someone else. Like the lonely voice inside your head has somehow been made flesh.

Ivan disentangles himself from Jim’s arms. He pushes him down towards the bed.

“Put your hands above your head.”

Jim has barely clutched the bars of the headboard before he feels the bite of metal on his wrists. He pulls a little against the handcuffs, but it’s just a token gesture. He doesn’t want to escape.

“I was wrong,” Ivan says. “I don’t want to be John from Florida. You don’t want him, do you?”

Jim slowly shakes his head.

Ivan spins a dial on the device in his hand. The diodes of the sonic healer begin to shine. The brighter the light, the greater the pain. Now they glitter like stars.

“I’m going to be cruel. It’s going to take hours.” Ivan gets hard as he speaks the words. Jim is already hard. He has been, since Ivan snapped the cuffs.

Ivan holds up the device. Light from the diodes makes his eyes glow like diamonds. Glowing, he brings the device closer, closer, to Jim’s trembling flesh.

“I love you,” he whispers. “Don’t scream.”

For a while, Jim obeys.
Well, I don’t know why I came here tonight
I got the feeling that something ain’t right
I'm so scared in case I fall off my chair
And I'm wondering how I'll get down the stairs
Clowns to the left of me
Jokers to the right, here I am
Stuck in the middle with you

Yes, I'm stuck in the middle with you
And I'm wondering what it is I should do
It's so hard to keep this smile from my face
Losing control, yeah, I'm all over the place
Clowns to the left of me, Jokers to the right
Here I am, stuck in the middle with you

“I like this song,” Jim says. “But it's kind of inappropriate, you know?”

“Shh,” Jess says.

Well, you started out with nothing
And you're proud that you're a self-made man
And your friends they all come crawling
Slap you on the back and say
Please, please . . .

Trying to make some sense of it all
But I can see it makes no sense at all
Is it cool to go to sleep on the floor?
I don't think that I can take anymore
Clowns to the left of me, Jokers to the right
Here I am, stuck in the middle with you

“Classic Rock at Sunday Mass. Grandma Kate is spinning in her grave.”

“Would you shut the fuck up? You need to pay attention to this.”

“Don’t say the f-word in church.”

Jess makes an impatient gesture. The music cuts off.

Jim looks around the room, taking in the beamed ceilings, stone floors, and plain wood benches. The glow of stained-glass windows, illuminating the faces of stone saints. The banks of white novena candles burning in their red votives, tiny flames fanning prayers to Heaven. Jim hasn’t been here in years, but it's what he thinks of when anybody says ‘church.’ Good old St. Mary’s.

Jess smooths down the skirt of her modest blue dress. It’s the kind she used to wear on Sundays to keep her mother happy. But she never went to St. Mary’s.

“What are you doing here? I thought Protestants found Catholic churches creepy. All these candles and graven images.”

“I’m Protestant, not Puritan, honey. I’m here for you.” She takes his hand. A comforting gesture, but her fingers are ice-cold. “I’m really here. This isn’t one of your pot-fueled pity parties. I’m not some fantasy fueling your raging Oedipal complex.”
“Thanks. Also: Bullshit. I’m not clairvoyant.”

“I am. They often manifest together, receptive empathy and clairvoyance. Woe is us, we get sucked in by everybody: Men, women, kitty-cats, ghosts. Remember when we went on that cemetery walk in New Orleans? I just about peed myself at Lafayette #1.”

“But you’re the ghost. This doesn’t make any—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Jess says sweetly, “and listen. You’re really in it this time, Jimmy boy. What the hell are you doing with Ivan?”

“No.” Jess clutches Jim’s hand tighter. “When I was with him I thought he was Patrick White, a Federation Drug Enforcement agent from Dublin. He told me all about his mother and his brothers, his poor dead Labrador, Ulysses. He was very convincing.”

“I’m sorry he lied to you. But he was trying to do a job.”

Jess is silent a minute. “He did like me, you know. In his way. It doesn’t change what he is.”

“Ivan’s had a bad life. That doesn’t make him a bad person.”

When Jess answers her voice is high, breathy. She sounds like she did during her last call.

“Ivan is death,” she says. “Death loves you, my blue-eyed boy. That’s so dangerous. He’ll change you more than he ever changed me, unless you get away from him.”

Jim says nothing. He looks up at the front of the church, Jess’ words buzzing in his brain. He sees the big figure on the cross, looming over these proceedings. Jesus’ eyes are closed, he seems lost to his own eternal agontes. If he has any opinion about all this, he doesn’t give it.

“You won’t leave him, will you?” Jess says. “Oh honey, you and your romantic bullshit.”

“Please,” Jim snaps. “Did you know Sean sold all the jewelry he gave you? He spent the money on hookers and blow, Aidan told me. Don’t talk about romantic bullshit.”

Jess doesn’t acknowledge this. She looks up at the front of the church, not at the cross but off to the side, at a shining marble figure in front of the first window. A pretty woman lovingly holding her very young son. She gazes down at him like she knows a wonderful secret.

“She loves you, too,” Jess says. “It’s your best hope now.”

Jim follows her gaze. “Who? The Virgin Mary? Sorry, I lost my rosary a long time ago.”

“She sees you. You think she’s far away, that she has no idea how you’re doing, but she does. Ivan thinks he can fool her, but he can’t. She knows his real name.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Jess gives him her sweet, knowing smile. “I love you, Jim. I always did, our Freudian complexes aside. We just weren’t meant to be, in this life or any other. But that’s okay, the love remains. It’s
real in every universe.”

Jess is still smiling, but her eyes have filled with tears. She leans close and kisses him. Her lips are cold, but Jim clings to them. He would kiss her forever if he could. Because he knows, and the knowledge cuts him to the core, that this is the last kiss they will share. Maybe not in every universe, but in this one. The last time he will ever see her, the only girl he has loved.

“Jess—” he whispers, but even as he holds her tight she’s fading away, into the surrounding light. The church is filled with it. It spills through the giant windows, turning all the saints into figures of fire. It illuminates Christ’s beautiful, agonized face. But brightest of all is the statue of Mary, Queen of Heaven. As he looks, she lifts her gleaming marble head. Her eyes glow like the light at the heart of a galaxy. They could see anything, from any distance. They see him.

Jim falls to his knees, covering his face. But the merciless light still blinds.

JAMES JAMES MY DARLING BOY. MOTHER SEES YOU. SHE SEES SHE SEES SHE SEES

Jim wakes, biting back a scream.

For several minutes he lies there, taking deep breaths. He breathes until the awful brightness of the dream fades. By the time he sits up, he only half remembers. By the time his feet touch the floor, all that’s left is the image of scary glowing eyes. But even their light has extinguished as he pulls on sweatpants and hits the door sensor.

He walks down the hall towards the living room, stretching. He’s sore, but no more than if he’d overdone it at the gym. The sonic healer may hurt like hell, but by definition it doesn’t wound. Ivan is one smart son-of-a-bitch.

Well, except for one thing. Jim wrinkles his nose at the smell of cigarette smoke. Ivan has given ‘Sam’ a smoking habit, muttering something about it being a realistic note for his interpretation. Jim suspects he just likes to smoke.

Smoking, Ivan is on the couch, watching the comscreen in the dark, as is his habit. He blends into shadows so well he would be hard to spot, if it weren’t for the glowing tip of his cigarette.

Jim sits on the arm of the sofa, scrubbing hands through his hair. “What time is it?”

“Twenty-two hundred. You’ve slept for hours.”

“Yeah, well. It was a strenuous afternoon.”

Ivan shrugs. An interesting character note of his, he doesn’t acknowledge their sex life much when they’re not actively fucking. They don’t cuddle on the sofa or stuff like that. If you didn’t see them going at it, you might think they were just roommates or something. Jim doesn’t really have a problem with this, not being much of a cuddler himself. The only way to know that Ivan spent several hours this afternoon having intensely satisfying sex is the slight languidness in his posture. It’s the closest he ever gets to being relaxed.

“What are you watching?” Jim asks.

“Nostalgia Action.”

It takes a minute for Jim to place the characters onscreen.

“You like Tarantino?” Ivan enjoys action movies well enough, but it’s unusual for him to watch
anything older than a decade. He isn’t the nostalgic type.

“I never heard of Tarantino before today. But this seemed interesting.”

“Reservoir Dogs: It’s a classic.” Ivan nods, not really listening. His attention seems captured by the characters onscreen.

Mr. Blonde, psychopath extraordinaire, menaces the battered, bound-up policeman. As he tapes his victim’s mouth, he speaks in a terrifying voice. Terrifying not for its anger, but for its lack:

“Look, kid, I’m not gonna bullshit you, okay? I don’t really give a good fuck what you know or don’t know. I’m gonna torture you anyway. Regardless. Not to get information. It’s amusing to me to torture. Now, you can say anything you want, because I’ve heard it all before. All you can do is pray for a quick death. Which you ain’t gonna get.”

He pulls a gun. The cop begins to struggle, breathing hard through his nostrils. Mr. Blonde laughs and goes to the radio. “You ever listen to K-Billy’s Super Sounds of the ‘70’s?” he asks as he pulls the straight razor from his boot. “This is my personal favorite.”

He opens the razor. He checks on Mr. Orange, bloody and dying on the floor. The camera cuts to a close-up of the bound cop’s petrified face. Mr. Blonde rises, straightens his tie, and starts walking towards him, the razor gleaming in his hand. As he comes closer, music begins to play. Mr. Blonde starts dancing, singing along with the music. This is the happiest he ever is, doing the one thing on Earth he was born to do. This is Mr. Blonde.

Well, I don't know why I came here tonight
I got the feeling that something ain't right
I'm so scared in case I fall off my chair
And I'm wondering how I'll get down the stairs
Clowns to the left of me
Jokers to the right, here I am
Stuck in the middle with you

Dancing, he gives a playful swipe with the straight razor. Gibbering behind the tape, the cop jerks and evades it. Then Mr. Blonde becomes tired of the game. He grabs the cop’s head, tilts it back, and starts hacking at the right ear. The camera pans away, but the music still plays.

Yes, I'm stuck in the middle with you
And I'm wondering what it is I should do
It's so hard to keep this smile from my face
Losing control, yeah, I'm all over the place
Clowns to the left of me, Jokers to the right
Here I am, stuck in the middle with you

Mr. Blonde emerges with the bloody ear. “Was that as good for you as it was for me?”

Jim turns away, feeling sick. He’s seen Reservoir Dogs half-a-dozen times, and it’s never bothered him before. But tonight it does.

“What’s wrong?” Ivan says. “It’s only a movie.”

Jim turns back to him. In the dim light from the comscreen, Ivan’s face is its normal cool blank. Nothing in his expression betrays anything, no amusement or arousal, no particular fascination with Mr. Blonde’s activities. But he is fascinated. Jim knows that. He knows.
He doesn’t know what’s on his own face, but Ivan goes still. Then he holds out a hand.

“Jim,” he says. “Come here.”

“Ivan, I’m not in the mood right now.”

“Neither am I. Come.”

Jim doesn’t really want to, but he does what Ivan says. (He always does. Now is not the time to think about why. Or maybe it’s the perfect time, but Jim can’t. He’s thought too much today. Dreamed too much.)

Jim sits on the couch. Ivan moves closer and puts an arm around him.

“What are you doing?” Jim says. “You’re not a cuddler.”

“Shh, idiot boy,” Ivan says with affection. “I’m whatever I want to be.”

That’s not the most reassuring thing to hear, but Jim doesn’t try to pull away. Because Ivan’s touch is reassuring, the most reassuring thing there is. As warm and comforting as a mother’s hug, with none of the weird Oedipal crap.

Ivan changes the channel. Nostalgia Fantasy flickers on, the screen blurry from cheap 1980’s special effects, which no amount of restoration can really make better. Onscreen, a man with two heads (one a painfully obvious puppet) speaks into an old-fashioned telephone.

“Hello, Marvin kid, how ya doing?”

“I think you should know,” the little droid on the other end says, “I’m feeling very depressed.”


“Ivan,” Jim says quietly, “do something for me.”

“Yes?”

Jim almost asks. The words are on the very tip of his tongue.

_Tell me your real name. Tell me if your mother really was a junkie prostitute. Did she really whore you out? If she did, what streets did you walk down? What language were you speaking, how many suns were in the sky? Because it felt real, the story you told me. Just like you felt real when you said you loved me. But this is what you do, you make people out of the chaos inside. And I’m worried that chaos is all there is. Tell me, Ivan. Do you exist?_

He doesn’t ask. There are a thousand reasons why he should, all good. But he doesn’t for just one reason, the only one that matters. He loves him.

Jim puts his head on Ivan’s shoulder, breathing in the smell of cigarettes and fabric softener. Basking in the heat. “Put Nostalgia Fantasy back on,” he says. “That was a really good episode.”
Leonard didn’t end up going to Eve. By the time he finished with Tony, he was worn out. Not surprising: Intense shielding—the kind he had done with Spock—took a lot out of you, even if you stayed in practice. He went straight home, ready for an early night. Jim would be late if he came home at all, and it was probably for the best. They had to talk, but Leonard wasn’t ready for that conversation yet. He wanted a good night’s sleep first.

He stepped out of the shower, into his comfiest jeans and his UGA t-shirt, cotton so old and soft it was like wearing silk. He sat down on the sofa with a sandwich and a Coke. (He thought about the bottle of Jack Daniel’s, but he was still half-buzzed from Tony’s Johnnie Walker, and there had already been a lot of whiskey this week. He wasn’t a drunk: His father was a drunk.)

Taking a bite of turkey and whole-wheat, he hit the manual control for the comscreen, then started flipping through the nets. Ten thousand stations and nothing on; It was true now, and ever would be. Then he stopped, on a full-black screen with white letters:

“Revenge is a dish best served cold”

--Old Sicilian Proverb--

Black and white close-up on a bloody, hyperventilating woman. She’s beautiful under the blood, blonde and blue-eyed, but it won’t save her. Not from the sound of approaching boot heels.

“Do you find me sadistic?” the unseen man says in his deep, resonant voice. “I’d like to believe you’re aware enough, even now, to know there’s nothing sadistic in my actions. Maybe towards those other jokers, but not you. No, Kiddo, at this moment, this is me at my most masochistic.”

The woman plays the only card she has left, the secret she’s kept so long—there’s no point in secrets now. Too late. The words aren’t even off her lips before he shoots her in the head.

Tarantino: too cool. Nostalgia Action did a marathon every so often, though it had been awhile since Leonard caught it. Had to be—shit, more than two years ago. The last time he saw Kill Bill was when he and Jim had just gotten back from Mars. Leonard sitting on the couch still nursing a wicked hangover, while Jim and Gary Mitchell—yeah. Shit.

“I don’t fucking believe this!” The door to Jim’s bedroom is shut, but Gary’s voice is clearly audible. You can hear him even with the movie on. Leonard considers turning it up, but hell, it’s his house. And he sort of wants to hear.

“Three fucking days, Jim. You disappear off the face of the Earth—literally—without a word. Not a call, nothing. Do you have any idea how scary that was?”

“I’m sorry. Really.” Jim’s voice is gentle, soothing. But Leonard can hear the faintest hint of laughter in it. He knows what Jim is really thinking: Christ, Gary, you are such a drama queen.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” Jim continues. “It was an accident.”

“Accident,” Gary repeats flatly. “You say you’re going to have one drink with Leonard before meeting me at the transport station. You call up three days later telling me you went to Mars.”

“Romulan ale, man, Romulan ale.” The laughter in Jim’s voice is louder. Now Gary can hear it.
“You think this is a joke? The deposit for the lodge, gone. All the effort of getting our projects done early so we could have a free weekend before Christmas, wasted. I spent weeks planning this trip, and you don’t even care, do you? You never wanted to go in the first place.”

“I did,” Jim says. “Skiing in Vail, who wouldn’t want to do that?”

“If you didn’t want to meet my parents, you should have said so.”

“What makes you think I didn’t want to meet your parents?”

“BECAUSE YOU WENT TO MOTHERFUCKING MARS!”

Silence. There really isn’t a good comeback for that.

When Gary speaks again, his voice is quiet. Leonard has to turn the sound all the way down to catch what he’s saying.

“I thought you were dead,” he says. “Maybe that’s stupid, but I thought it could be the only explanation. You wouldn’t just—leave. You wouldn’t disappoint and embarrass me like that. But I guess I was wrong.”

“Gary, baby—”

“You know, it would almost be easier if you were fucking him. If I thought that Leonard had just stolen you away. Shit, look at him. He turns almost as many heads as you do, and he’s got that whole doctor mystique going on. I know you two have this—connection. Everybody thinks you are fucking him, but I know you’re not. You want to, but you’re not. He’s the last straight man on Earth, and he won’t fuck you. Even on Mars. That’s what makes this so goddamn hard. Your buddy Bones will never give you what you want, and you still choose him over me.”

Give me a damn break, Leonard thinks. One stupid drunken weekend, and Gary turns it into a Queer as Folk episode. (Nostalgia Soap, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 18:00. Jim is a real fan.)

Jim must be thinking along the same lines, because his answer is calm. Cold.

“Look, I’ve apologized. I screwed up, and I acknowledge that. But you’re gonna have to get over it. Seriously. It was one weekend.”

“No, it’s four months, Jim. Four months of watching the two of you, all of the inside jokes and significant looks. Four months of being with you, just about reaching you so many times, and having him ruin it, every single time.” Gary’s voice goes deep, drawling. “‘Come on, kiddo, ditch the ball and chain and lets go get us a drink.’ How many fucking times has he said that? Leonard was the one who suggested Billy’s, wasn’t he? I bet he dared you to try that Romulan ale. He knew what would happen if he gave you even the slightest excuse to ditch out on Vail. Because he knows you, Jim. You just met him last summer, and he knows exactly where your buttons are. Doesn’t that creep you out?”

Jim pauses. “Bones is my best friend.”

“There’s no word for what the two of you are. I’ve tried to figure it out, but I’m through. I’d give you an ultimatum, him or me, but I’m not that stupid. I already know what the answer will be. So have him, as much of him as he’ll let you have. Get blowjobs from randomness and come home to Bones. I don’t care. We’re done.”

The door to Jim’s room opens, and Leonard quickly turns up the TV. Soon, a man stalks through the
living room. He’s very cute, blond and blue-eyed and well-muscled. Jim can do better. He shouldn’t waste his time on some idiot from the Sea of Tranquility. Leonard knows Lunies: His brother’s best friend was one. Terry, the one who gave Henry his first shot of meth.

Leonard isn’t going to say anything. Gary is hurting badly, you don’t need to be an empath to know that. His eyes are red, his face contorted. He’s leaving anyway, why twist the knife?

But Gary stops, blocking the comscreen.

“Do you mind?” Leonard says calmly. “It’s just getting to the good part.”

“You think you’re his friend, don’t you?” Gary says. “You’re not. If you really cared about him, you’d let him be happy. I could have made him happy. We could have been real.”

Calmly, Leonard puts his glass of Jack (hair of the dog) on the coffee table.

“I had to remind him to call you,” he says. “When we got back from Mars, you slipped his mind. Just like when he ordered the first round of ale—he did. Y’all were about as real as that yellow man Billy has by the bar—what’s the name of the damn statue? Plato? Jim would know.”

Gary’s fists clench. “Fuck you, Leonard.”

“No thanks. I’m straight.” He stares hard at the boy’s ravaged face. “Bye, Gary.”

The boy almost hits him. It’s a near thing, Leonard can feel it. He tenses a little, but he’s not worried. Gary can punch him if he wants. Leonard has been punched before.

But Gary doesn’t. He just leaves. Finally.

Jim doesn’t come out of his room right away. Leonard wants to go see if he’s okay, but he knows his friend will want a little time to himself. Jim did like Gary, that was clear, even if he did order the first round of ale. Leonard almost feels bad about ordering the second round, and the third, and the fourth . . .

A quarter-hour has passed before Jim emerges from the bedroom. Unlike Gary, his face is calm and his eyes are clear. The only way you could tell that he just got dumped is a slight tension in his posture, like he pulled a muscle somewhere, and it hurts.

Jim sits on the couch next to Leonard. He picks up Leonard’s glass of Jack and takes a drink. For a few minutes, they silently watch.

Onscreen, the Bride leaves the four-year-old daughter of her second adversary standing in the ruined kitchen where her mother’s body lies. This was the first killing we saw—Tarantino’s Mobius strip storytelling in full play. This is when we realize what she’s capable of. As the Bride withdraws, a man speaks in voiceover. It’s Japanese, but subtitles helpfully translate.

“For those regarded as warriors, when engaged in combat the vanquishing of thine enemy can be the warrior’s only concern. Suppress all human emotion and compassion. Kill whoever stands in thy way, be it the Lord God or Buddha himself. This truth lies at the heart of the art of combat.”

Jim rolls his eyes.

“You don’t like Tarantino?” Leonard asks. “I thought he’d be right up your alley.”

“No this one.”
“Why?”

“Because it’s stupid?” Jim says, like it’s obvious.

“It’s a classic revenge drama.”

“The Bride kills a thousand people just to get her kid back. The most dangerous woman in the world wanted to give it all up to be a mommy. Marry the nice guy, move to a small town, bake apple pies? Bullshit.” Now Jim is showing emotion. His face is flushed; He’s really angry.

“Take it easy. It’s just a movie.”

“A fucking stupid movie!” Wow, this break-up with Gary must really be getting to him. But Jim will get over it, Leonard knows that. He knows Jim: It’s the one thing Gary was right about.

Jim takes another drink. He smooths his hair and his face. “What else is on?”

Leonard hands him the remote. “Knock yourself out, kiddo.”

Leonard opened his eyes to the scream of horns from the comscreen. Kill Bill was still on, now showing another black title screen, Chapter Five: Showdown at House of Blue Leaves. He had been half-asleep, and for some time—he glanced at the clock: 23:58.

He was fumbling for the remote, ready to turn in, when the front door whooshed.

“Hey.” Jim slumped against the wall by the door. He was sweaty and rumpled, shirt open and chest exposed. His face was flushed, his eyes blurry. He was fall-on-his-ass drunk. He was also not alone. Leonard stared at the man with him.

Not man—boy. His exact age was indeterminate, but no way in hell was he eighteen. Skinny as a lizard, with brown curly hair and big eyes, as round and blue as pansies. Jesus Christ.

Leonard rubbed his own eyes and looked again. Yep—still jail bait. “Who the hell is that?” he said, pointing.

Jim draped his arm around the youngster. “This is my new friend, um—” he squinted a minute.

“Pavel,” the boy said. From even one word you could tell that the kid’s accent was strange, like he was talking through a mouthful of potatoes.

“Right. Pavel, this is Bones.”

“Bones,” Pavel said, and giggled. He was drunk too, though he seemed in better shape than Jim. “Why do you call him this? He’s not so skinny.”

Jim grinned, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Put it this way: If you ever get married, don’t fuck around on your wife. ‘Specially if she’s a lawyer, ‘cause your bones are all you’ll have left.” He turned his grin on Leonard. “Right, Booones?”

With a fairly heroic effort, Leonard ignored that. “I thought you were going to Eve.”

“I did, I did.” Jim stumbled a little further into the room, dragging Pavel with him. “He was the prettiest thing there.” He stopped, nuzzling the boy. “Aren’t you, Paul?”

“Pavel,” he pouted. “I’m not pretty. I’m a man.”
“Sure you are, sweetie,” Jim said. He licked the pink shell of Pavel’s ear. Pavel giggled again.

“Jesus wept.” Leonard pinched the bridge of his nose. “Get him out of here.”


“Because he’s a child.”

“He’s a Starfleet cadet.”

“I don’t give a shit if he’s the littlest admiral,” Leonard said. “You’re sending him home.”

“He’s jealous,” Pavel said. He cocked his head at Leonard, pansy eyes suddenly hard, assessing. “I do not mind a threesome, though he’s rather old.”

Leonard had to laugh. “Threesome. Right. Man of the fucking world, you are.”

The kid scowled. “I am not a virgins.”

“See?” Jim said. “He’s not a virgins.” He started pulling Pavel towards his room, but Leonard got him by the arm.

“Jim, focus those whiskey-soaked eyes and look at him.”

“We were drinking vodka,” Jim said. “He almost drank me under the table.”

“It’s not your fault,” Pavel said, stroking Jim’s arm encouragingly. “You are not Russian.”

“Aww, thanks, sweetie,” Jim said. He grabbed the kid by the neck and gave him a big wet kiss.

“Mmm,” he said, after they both got their tongues back. “You taste good.”

“It’s the vodka,” the boy said, going in for another kiss, but Leonard forcibly pulled them apart. Jim regained his balance and actually took a step towards him.

“Back off, Bones!”

“You wanna hit me, hit me,” Leonard said. “But you are not fucking this boy. This is not an episode of Queer as Folk, and you are not Brian Kinney. Do you understand?”

“Oh please,” Jim rolled his eyes. “Do you know what I was doing at his age?”

“He’s not you.”

“And you’re not his father. You’re not my father, either.” Anger had sobered Jim up a little: His voice was suddenly precise. “The boy is in our year. He ships out with the rest of us in three months. If Starfleet thinks he can die in deep space, he can certainly get a blow job in Resident Housing.” He grabbed the boy’s arm. “Come on—” he squinted at him again.

“Pavel. Pavel Chekov.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

Pavel, who had flushed rosy-pink when Jim mentioned a blow job, followed him down the hall like a little lamb. Jim hit the door sensor on his room and pulled them both inside. It whooshed closed, and in another second the red privacy light went on—he’d locked them in.
Leonard stood still for a minute. Then he turned away from Jim’s room, towards the comscreen.

_O-Ren Ishii, Queen of the Tokyo Underworld, speeds down the table like a kimono-clad fury. She cuts off the head of her insulting subordinate with one fluid sweep. She holds the dripping trophy up, her doll-like features splattered with gore._

“Now, if any of you sons-of-bitches got anything else to say, now’s the fucking time!”

Silence. “I didn’t think so.” She drops the head like a sack of garbage.

“Japanese,” Leonard said softly. “Pavel Chekov.” The connections flitted through his head like the sweep of a samurai sword. He heard Tony Chapel, clear as if the old man was standing there.

_I don’t mind homosexuals, though I wish my daughter would stop dating them. This boy she goes around with so much—the situation has disaster scrawled all over it. Wee Mr. Chekov has his sights set, and they’re a determined people, the Russians._

“Computer. Contact Hikaru Sulu, audio only.” No video would make things seem more dire.

“Hikaru Sulu does not answer. Try again?”

“Yes. Priority 1.”

In a moment a man’s voice, rather breathless, came over the com.

“What’s wrong? Who is this?”

“Mr. Sulu,” Leonard said. “You don’t know me, but I know a friend of yours. There’s a little Russian boy who’s about to get himself in a mess of trouble if you don’t get here pronto.”

“Pavel is in trouble? Why?”

“He just went into Jim Kirk’s bedroom. With Jim Kirk.”

*Where the fuck are you?*

Jim’s reputation preceded him yet again. “Building Five, Floor Four, Suite G.”

“I’m in Building Four. I’ll be there in three—no—two minutes.” The sensitive mike of the computer picked up the rustling of clothes being hastily pulled on. A woman’s voice could be heard in the background. It was too soft to be picked up, but the questioning tone was clear.

“I’ll be back, Christine,” he said. “I have to go get Pavel.”

“Are you bloody joking?” the woman said, much louder. “We’re in the middle of something.”

“I know—I can’t—he’s with Jim fucking Kirk!”

“So? Everybody in Starfleet’s been with Jim fucking Kirk.”

“Exactly.” The connection cut off.

One minute and fifty-nine seconds later, the door chime sounded. “Come,” Leonard said.

A man of about Jim’s age came rushing into the apartment. He was nice-looking, in both senses of the term: slim, olive-skinned, with spiky dark hair and keen dark eyes. His pleasant features were
creased with worry. “Where is he?” he said to Leonard.

Leonard pointed towards Jim’s bedroom. “The door’s locked. But he’ll be able to hear you.”

Hikaru sprinted for the door, pounding on it. “Pavel! Get your ass out here, now!”

Sound of muffled voices, then the door slid open. Pavel stood in the doorway, more disheveled than before but thankfully still wearing his pants. At the sight of Hikaru, his big round eyes went even bigger and rounder. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to get you. What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He put his hand on Pavel’s arm, but the boy flinched away.

“What do you care?” he said. “You are so busy. You wanted to be alone with her. You told me to find something to do tonight.” He raised his chin. “I found something.”

Hovering over Pavel’s shoulder, shirtless and smirking like the Devil, was Jim. “Hey,” he said to Hikaru. “I know you. Didn’t we fuck once?”

“I don’t remember,” Hikaru said, in the voice of someone who remembered well. He looked at Pavel. “Zip up. We’re going home.”

“I will not,” Pavel said. “You do not want me to come. You do not care.” His eyes filled with tears. He looked about ten years old.

Hikaru ran a hand through his hair, making it even spikier. “That’s not true.”

“Then why will you not be with me? When I—” Pavel cut off with a choke. His skinny chest heaved as he struggled for control.

Hikaru took a deep breath. “You know why. You’re just a kid.”

“I am a man!” Pavel screeched. “You may not see it, but others do.” He jerked his chin at Jim, who was looking more and more uncomfortable as Pavel freaked out.

“Seriously, I just wanted to get laid,” he said to nobody in particular.

“We know,” Hikaru snapped. “You are such a freak.”

Jim stared at him. “What the fuck did you just say?”

But Hikaru had refocused on Pavel. He leaned in, putting a hand around Pavel’s slender throat. There was something so intimate in the touch that Leonard had to look away for a moment.

“I care for you. Shit, Pavel—you know I love you.”

Pavel looked at him, nodding slowly. His boyish face had undergone an amazing transformation. Suddenly he looked much wiser, wearier. He looked like the oldest person in the room.

“Then why must we play these games?” he said. “It’s not fair, to me or to you.” He paused. “It’s not fair to Christine. She’s a nice girl.”

Hikaru looked down. “Yes,” he said. “She is.”

“You do not care for her as you care for me. We know this. You must tell her, tonight.”
Hikaru jerked his head up. “If I don’t?”

“Three months, Hikaru,” Pavel said, staring at him with his young-old eyes. “Who knows where we will be? Billions of miles apart, perhaps. You want to wait until I’m older, but how can we wait? How can we face all that dark without even a memory to sustain us? I can’t do it. You can’t. If you could, you would not be here.” His lips trembled, his face was pale. He looked like the desperate man that he was. “We cannot wait. There is no time.”

“Pavel—” But Pavel was already kissing him. It was almost violent, how they came together. But Hikaru’s voice, when he finally tore himself away, was very soft.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll tell her. God, it’s going to—we’re friends. We’re all friends.”

“I know,” Pavel said. “But you and I were meant to be together. In your heart, you know that. Lyubov moya, this is fate.”

Half-hidden in the shadows, Jim flinched. Strange—what did it have to do with him?

Hikaru’s face was sad, but his eyes were happy—relieved. The look of a man who finally put down a terrible burden that he’s been carrying. “Let’s go home,” he said, holding out a hand.

Pavel grasped it, his face so alight that he didn’t look young or old, just beautiful. They left the apartment without another word to each other, or anyone else. They didn’t notice anyone else, too dazzled by what was blossoming between them.

As soon as the door whooshed closed, Leonard sighed. “Saints preserve me from gay drama.”

“You’re not going after them?” Jim’s voice was too calm.

Leonard turned to him. “Why would I do that?”

“What do you think they’re gonna do when they get home? As soon as they deal with Christine, whoever she is. What will happen then?”

“It’s their business.”

“Ten minutes ago, when the kid was with me, it was Armageddon. Now it’s not your business.”

“Hikaru loves him. You don’t.”

Jim was silent a minute. “Yeah. He does. How the hell did you know that?”

He took a few steps into the room. He wasn’t moving like a drunk man now; His movements were lethally precise. “You are fucking amazing. You don’t know that kid from Adam, but in two minutes you figured out exactly what to do. You found the one person who could get him away from me. Are you telepathic? How do you do it? You always—”

Jim stopped, his eyes widening. His face went pale. Leonard saw it, the moment the truth hit. He could almost feel it himself, the sick brutal shock of the knowledge.

“You did it to Spock,” Jim said. “It was you.” He turned away, putting a hand to his stomach.

“Jim—” Leonard took a step towards him, but Jim ran away.

“DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU DID?” he screamed. He sagged into the wall by his bedroom, clutching it desperately. But it wasn’t enough; He sank to his knees. Leonard tried to help him, to
“Why did you do it?” he whispered. “Bones, why did you do it to me?” In almost three years, Leonard had never heard him sound like this. Jim had never reacted like this, not with Gary or Carol, not even with David. As if someone had torn out one of his vital organs. This was like seeing a completely different person. The pain was excruciating, and Leonard couldn’t shield against it. Not this pain. Not Jim’s, whoever Jim might be.

He kneeled down next to him. “He was bad for you. Wrong.”

“He wasn’t. He was—everything.”

“You’ve known him a week. Even if you count his class, that’s not—”

“Not just a week. Since I first saw him, and—” his voice broke. Jim stopped, swallowing, but it didn’t help. Tears were running down his face. He was weeping openly, something Leonard had never seen him do. “Why?” he said. “Just tell me why.”

“His Fever could kill you,” Leonard said. “You’re tough—I know just what you’re capable of surviving. But it could happen. The thought of him with you—ruining you. I couldn’t take it.”

“He’s going back to Stonn. His old friend, his—” Jim’s mouth twisted, “his lover. He’s going back to Vulcan for his Fever, and some other man will be with him. That’s killing me.”

Leonard looked down at his hands. Now he didn’t know where the pain was coming from, Jim or himself. All he knew was that this hurt like nothing he’d felt before. Not just the realization that he’d given such pain to Jim, who had already known too much in his short life. But also the idea that it was losing Spock which caused Jim this agony. He’d been feeling it since yesterday, and never said. Leonard never suspected. It was that knowledge which made the world go dark.

“You know what’s really killing me?” Jim went on. “You made it all happen. My best friend. The one person I trusted. I never thought—” he stopped. His face went even paler. Suddenly, he was rushing across the living room and stumbling into the bath. The door whooshed behind him, but the walls were so thin in this place. Leonard could hear Jim retching from here.

He got up. It felt like he was wearing two-ton weights strapped to his shoulders, but he did. He went into the bath. Jim was kneeling over the toilet, as white as a winding sheet. The room was acrid with the smell of vomit. Leonard tried to put a hand on Jim’s back, but he flinched away.

“Don’t touch me.” He didn’t sound upset now. He sounded dead.

When Leonard just stood there, frozen: “Bones, if you care about me, if you ever felt a tenth of what you said you did, you’ll leave me alone. Please.”

Defeated, Leonard left him alone. Moving slowly, still weighted down, he walked to his room. As he did, he passed the comscreen.

“O-Ren Ishii!” the Bride screams. “You and I have unfinished business.”

Weapons drawn, O-Ren and her people rush to the balcony. Too late. Music is swelling, Hell is coming. The Bride stares up at O-Ren with the eyes of a furious wolf. Then, with one slash of her Samurai sword, she cuts O-Ren’s best friend to pieces. Blood gushes out in a red tide. O-Ren, inured as she is to carnage, stares in horror. The Bride looks up at her like Death Incarnate.

He finally reached his bedroom. He thought about changing into pajamas, but he was too damn tired. He lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, watching the thin bars of orange cast by streetlights shining through the window. He didn’t think he would sleep—men with guilty consciences shouldn’t. But maybe he wasn’t so guilty, because soon enough the world went dim.
Chapter 46

xlv. McCoy

Bathed in orange light, the Bride’s plane makes its way towards its inevitable destination. This is the end of the movie, but it’s the beginning of the story: Our author never tells anything in a straight line. Sitting in the light, the Bride makes out her list. She writes the names of all who must die so that she may know peace. As she writes, a man speaks in Japanese.

“Revenge is never a straight line. It’s a forest. And like a forest, it’s easy to lose your way, to get lost. To forget where you came in.”

“You should pay attention to this. It’s a metaphor.”

Leonard looks at his brother. Henry, as he looked on that last afternoon. Sweet, smiling, and seventeen, just on the verge of starting everything. Such a handsome boy, so bright. Henry’s shadows don’t matter: We all have them. “A metaphor for what?” Leonard asks.

“I’ve been dead five years. So has Terry. How many times are you gonna kill him?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, kiddo.”

“To be fair, Jim got rid of plenty of people by himself: He’s freaky that way. But not all of them, Lee, not all of them. You didn’t literally kill them, not even Dave Goldman, who sort of deserved it. But metaphorically—” Henry shrugs.

“Carol Marcus was nothing like Terry.”

“No, that was about Jocelyn.” Henry sighs. “You always were one smart son-of-a-bitch. But so is Jim, dangerously smart. You should have let him be happy.”

“Jim would never hurt me. He loves me.”

“I love you, too.” Henry smiles. He smiles so wide, it looks like his face is cracking.

Then it does crack. Smooth, tanned flesh bubbles and blackens. His handsome features collapse, fall in with the pressure of immense force. Henry was going so fast when he hit that tree. This is how he looked on that last night, this is what’s left of Henry. The ruin pulled from the wreckage.

Leonard tries to turn away, but his face is caught by a blackened hand. He struggles, but its grip is iron. His guts churn at the stench of charred human flesh.

“This isn’t over, Bones. You and I have unfinished business.”

Henry is still smiling. His lips split, yellow fluid oozing out. “Kiss me, brother.”

Leonard screams as the hand pulls him close.

He awakens with a start. He blinks around a minute, trying to place where he is. He sees the worn furniture, grimy from too many bodies; the garish pictures on the walls, sad clowns and big-eyed children. He feels rough cotton underneath him. He smells cigarettes and something else, a dusty red smell that irritates the sinuses, wets the eyes with its profound strangeness.

Right. This is Mars.
“Hey,” Jim says. He’s standing in front of the window in his underwear. Orange light floods over him, one that is oddly brilliant for Martian sun. It seems to suffuse his whole body.

Leonard sits up, making the sagging mattress squeak protestingly. He, too, is dressed only in boxers. It felt a little tacky, sleeping that way, but this trip wasn’t exactly planned. Jesus, his head hurts. His stomach is one big oily knot. He groans.

Jim grins. “Romulan ale, man. Now we know the stories are true.” He nods at the nightstand. “I got you a Coke. You should drink something. You’ll feel better.”

Leonard blinks his blurry eyes, staring dumbly at the items on the nightstand.

“Behind the novena candle,” Jim says helpfully.

Leonard focuses on the tall, filled candle, its thin glass sides printed with a crude but striking image. A woman chained to a wall, twisting in flames. Her arms are raised, her face is rapt. Above her are two words in Latin: *Anima Sola*. It’s burning brightly, red wax puddled at the top. He can smell it now, beneath the dust and cigarettes, the sweet scent of cheap paraffin.

“Yikes,” he says. “Did I buy that?”

“Yep. Your cigarette lighter was giving out, and this was all the mini-mart had.” Jim shrugs. “Who’d have thought the anti-smoking campaigns would work better on Mars than on Earth? Guess everybody here would rather shoot meth.”

Leonard peers at it. “What does it mean?”

“Don’t Protestants know anything? It’s used to pray for souls in purgatory, the Latin translates as *Lonely Soul*. *Anima Sola* is suffering for her sins. Lust and Anger put her there, she’ll burn forever. Don’t think she minds, though: Look how happy she is, burning. It’s also pretty good for love spells. At least, that’s what this Wiccan chick I used to date told me.”

“Your fount of useless knowledge never ceases to amaze.” Leonard spots the Coke and grabs it. After swallowing half, he feels more human. He burps and puts the can down. Jim watches, his face bright with amusement.

“How come you’re so damn chipper?” Leonard growls.

“I threw up. I always feel better after I get everything off my stomach.”

Jim really does look better. He looks amazing, radiant in the early light. Not like the last time Leonard saw him, ghastly pale and devastated, kneeling over a toilet. When was that again?

“Come here,” Jim says. “Watch the sunrise. Not as amazing as seeing two suns rise—I should tell you about that sometime. Still, it’s worth seeing.”

Leonard doesn’t really feel like getting up, but he does. He joins Jim at the window. Around Jim’s neck is a POD, playing very softly. Once Leonard wouldn’t have been able to identify the music, but he’s been living with Jim awhile. He knows the deathly rhythms of Depeche Mode.

*Feeling unknown*  
*And you’re all alone*  
*Flesh and bone*  
*By the telephone*  
*Lift up the receiver*
Leonard looks out the window: It is quite a sight. Their hotel is situated on the edge of town, there’s not much beyond it but craters and dust. Above those the horizon is bleakly beautiful, orange at the edges but shading to grey and then blue-white as it gets closer to the rising sun. The home star is impossibly small, just a jot of light in all that emptiness. An uncanny feeling, seeing something so familiar made unfamiliar, alien. It gives you a greater sense of loneliness than the void of deep space. Infinity is so vast, you can’t really comprehend. But here you can feel it, just how far you are from home.

Leonard feels a heavy gaze on him. Jim hasn’t been looking at the sunrise, not for a while.

Jim puts his hand around the POD, squeezing it. The music stops. Now the room’s too quiet, no sound but their breathing. Leonard’s is louder, getting faster as he watches Jim, watching him.

“Hey—” Leonard stops and clears his throat. “Maybe we should get some breakfast. I could probably worry down a few waffles, or maybe some—”

“I want you,” Jim says. “I always have.”

Leonard leans his forehead against the window. The glass is cool on his aching head.

“I knew what you were doing,” Jim says. “When you ordered that second round of ale, I knew what would happen. I wanted it to.” He puts a hand on Leonard’s back. The touch is as warm as sunlight, not the weak sun of Mars but fierce Earth sun, the zenith of a sweltering Georgia day.


Jim just smiles. His hand is still on Leonard’s shoulder, and the warmth feels good. He hasn’t felt anything like it in a long time.

“Jim, I—” he stops. He wants to say this just right. He has to make a final answer that won’t finish their friendship. He has to speak delicately, and that’s not his usual style. But before he can think of what to say, Jim makes his move. He takes Leonard’s face in his hands. His warmth floods over Leonard’s body like a sweet, molten wax. Thick enough to smother you.

“Bones,” he whispers. “Look at me. Look.”

Leonard’s instincts are suddenly screaming. All those warning bells, tuned so carefully since he was
twelve years old, are telling him not to do this. Step back, don’t look. Get out of this room. Don’t even put on pants, just go.

But he looks. God help him, he looks, into his best friend’s face. The very first thing he noticed about Jim Kirk, those crystalline blue eyes. The longer you look into them the more you want to, azure shading to cerulean shading to sapphire, as you fall deeper and deeper in.

You feel yourself fighting, sheer instinct kicking in. That’s how well you’ve been trained. But the longer you look, the more that your struggles seem to be happening to some other person. A stupid person, who doesn’t know what he wants. Why wouldn’t you want this?

“You see?” Jim says, as you sink into his warmth. “Now you see.”

Leonard kisses him, he moves first. He pushes Jim into the window, a hunger blossoming in him that is like nothing he has ever felt. His hands slide down, gripping Jim’s perfect, muscular ass. Jim kisses him back, and how they come together is more violent than sexy. Leonard bites Jim’s lip so hard he tastes blood. He tastes his friend’s pain; It tastes good.

Jim pulls back, breaking the kiss.

“I’m—I’m sorry,” Leonard stammers. “I don’t know why I did that.”

“Wow,” Jim whispers. “You’re going to be so good at this.”

“Good at what—exactly?”

Jim grins and drops to his knees. His hot, greedy hands find the waistband of Leonard’s boxers.

“Jim—”

“Shh. You’ll get to be in charge later—I want you to be. But not yet. You’re not ready.”

“But—”

Jim stares up at him. “Shut up. Close your eyes.”

Leonard shuts up. He closes his eyes. Cool air on his ass and on other parts, as Jim pulls his boxers down. “Damn, Bones,” he says. “I should hate you. Smart, and hot, and hung like a horse? Totally unfair. I would hate you, but I’m going to have so much fun with this.” He licks the head of Leonard’s cock. The slickest and quickest of licks, but it’s enough to take Leonard from half-hard to fully erect. (Why wasn’t he erect before? What was holding him back? His mind grasps at the question for a moment, but it’s like trying to pick up a too-heavy weight.)

Jim starts sucking him in earnest, and all of Leonard’s doubts drop away.

This isn’t his first head—not even his first head from a man. But this is nothing like getting seen to by Dean. Not like getting seen to by a woman, either. Like being swallowed by fire, cunning and piquant flames licking at his cock, hot but never spilling into pain. The feeling is delicious, just the occasional scrape of teeth on his shaft, a light squeezing of his balls, to bring him back down a bit, make it last. It lasts a long time, it’s almost too long. He’s grabbing Jim’s head and fucking his face, plunging into that sucking heat. Just when it becomes scorching, excruciating, Jim takes a breath and deep throats him. Two last plunging thrusts and Leonard comes with a cry, the climax spiraling up from deep inside, gushing forth like a geyser. Jim swallows it all.

Leonard stays where he is for a few minutes, panting against the window, his eyes still shut. He feels
rather than sees Jim rise, sliding like a serpent up Leonard’s body.

“You taste good,” Jim says. “I don’t think that’s the ale. It’s just you.”

Leonard opens his eyes. Jim is flushed, his mouth pink and a little swollen. That’s not the only thing: Leonard can feel Jim’s hard-on against his hip, as Jim nuzzles his throat.

“I want you to fuck me,” Jim whispers. “You want to, don’t you?”


He reaches for him, but Jim steps back, grinning. “Come on, cowboy,” he says. “There’s a big bed right over there. It has a mirror over it—sleazy hotels! You gotta love ’em.”

Jim walks to the bed. He slips the POD from around his neck and throws it onto the nightstand. He slips out of his boxer-briefs. He stands there, naked and erect. Pretty as the Devil, the orange sunlight glowing around him.

Not sun. The light is his. Oh, Lee, can’t you see what he is? Leonard knows the voice. It’s his grandmother’s, sweet and worried. But she sounds so far away. Fifty-five million kilometers, the distance from Earth to Mars.


Walking slowly but without hesitation, Leonard goes to him. Jim takes his hand, holding tight.

“You know I love you,” Jim says. “It’s why I do what I do.” Something sad flits over his face, the shadow of a regret. But he blinks and it’s gone. He leans in, kissing Leonard. It’s sweeter this time, lingering. The love in it is real, as deep and true as the color of his eyes.

They fall back on the bed. It should feel strange, being with Jim. There’s no alcohol to smooth the strangeness away, no rage to keep him going, like there was with Dean. It should feel even more wrong than that hazy night in Atlanta, but it doesn’t. The scrape of stubble on his face, the feel of a chest as flat and muscular as his own, it all seems right this time. Perfect. And if there is anything strange about it—the faintest cold feeling, like the chilling ring of distant bells—it’s soon washed away by the taste of Jim’s lips, the feel of Jim’s warm grip, coaxing Leonard back to pulsing life again. He returns the favor, taking Jim’s cock in his hand. It’s smooth and pink and just the right size. (He doesn’t know why Jim is complaining of envy. He is perfect.)

For a while they stay that way, exploring each other as new lovers do. But finally it becomes too much, Leonard can feel that tell-tale tingling at the base of his spine that signals another orgasm. Not yet. He gets his lips back from Jim, then he reaches over the side of the bed.

He picks up his jeans and searches in the front pockets for a second. Then he finds it, the bottle of liquid condom he had tucked away before they even left Earth. When he comes back up, vial in hand, Jim sees it and grins. “That’s what I love about you,” he says. “You’re so prepared.”

Leonard kisses Jim’s neck, whispers in his ear. “Turn over and get on your knees.” He says the words without hesitation. He’s done this before, with women. With Dean. He knows what to do.

“Sure.” Jim is happy to obey. He gets on his knees.

Leonard opens the vial, pouring the liquid condom—which is also an aseptic lube—all over his hand. He runs it down Jim’s back, from the nape of his neck to the sweet swell of his ass. Jim’s flesh
is as soft as satin. But inside, he is even softer. Leonard discovers it as he explores him, preparing him. Jim’s inner muscles are tight but soon they loosen, drawing Leonard deeper in. He wonders just how deep he could go, how much Jim could take. The feeling ignites a dark excitement in him. He thrusts his fingers deeper, and Jim pushes against him.

“Please,” he begs. “Please fuck me. Bones—”

“Shh. Don’t talk or I’ll stop.”

Jim silences instantly.


The curve of Jim’s spine, as he lowers his head submissively, is a beautiful thing. It makes that excitement in Leonard burn brighter, a black flame in his belly.

“Would you do anything I said?” When Jim doesn’t answer right away, Leonard grips the back of that white neck. Jim jumps a little.

“Yes,” he whispers.

Leonard suddenly tightens his grip. Jim gasps, but it’s only partially pain. The head of his rosy cock is glistening. He leans his head against the wall for balance while one of his hands creeps up his thigh. Leonard slaps it away.

“Did I say you could touch yourself?”

Jim stills. He’s starting to tremble, muscular thighs quivering as he tries to be good. Leonard lets go of Jim’s neck, stroking his back soothingly. He is shaking a little himself, the dark fires inside sparking and cracking.

He stops, considering. How to give Jim what he needs? There’s so little to work with here. They didn’t come prepared for this. His eyes dart around the room, considering and discarding possibilities. His throat goes dry; Topping is thirsty work. He picks up the Coke can and takes another swallow. He puts the can down, and then he sees her. Anima Sola, euphoric in her fires.

Leonard stretches over the side of the bed and picks up his t-shirt. He holds it lengthways and starts ripping it into long, thin pieces. A crying shame, losing his favorite UGA tee, but it’s all for the greater good. When he has several pieces, he returns his hand to Jim’s back.

Jim, who has been patient during all of this, jumps once again.

“Turn over. Put your hands above your head,” Leonard tells him. Jim obeys. It doesn’t take long to tie him to the headboard with some strips of shirt and a couple of clove hitches (amazing, how those Boy Scout knots come back to you). Jim says nothing while he’s bound, but his eyes never leave Leonard’s face. Until Leonard takes one more strip and ties it around Jim’s eyes.

“I’m not using a gag. I want to hear you. But this will be more fun if you can’t see.”

Bound, blindfolded, Jim sighs. He tests the strips of t-shirt, but Leonard knows his knots, and it would be hard for Jim to break free. Leonard doubts he will try.

“Are we using a safeword?” Jim says.

“Do you want a safeword?”
“I don’t know.”

“That means no. Fine with me. I couldn’t think of a good one, anyway.”

Leonard sees all of Jim’s muscles tense. “What are you gonna do to me?”

“I’m going to give you what you need. It’s why we came to Mars, right? So I could hurt you.”

“Yes—Please.” Jim’s voice is thick. It’s getting harder for him to talk, as he gets deeper in.

Leonard has a couple of other preparations to make. He goes into the grimy bathroom, gets the ice bucket, and fills it with water. He comes back out and puts it on the nightstand. He makes sure he knows where the lube vial is—when he needs it, he’ll need it fast.

Then he picks up Anima Sola, feeling her warmth under his fingertips. She has been burning for hours and hours, reveling in the flames. Now she’s going to share some of her magic.

Carefully, he pours a few drops of hot red wax on Jim’s belly.

“MOTHER OF GOD—” Jim screeches, arching off the bed.

“Hold still. If I get this stuff on that polyester bedspread, we both go up in smoke. I’ve got the water bucket ready, but this Mars. For all we know, the stuff’s half-gasoline.”

Jim goes still, except for a slight quivering which he can’t seem to help. Leonard doesn’t trust him. He shifts over, trapping Jim’s hips between his thighs so that it’s harder for Jim to move.

“Here’s the convenient thing about fucking a doctor, at least for somebody with your rarefied tastes. I know where all the best pain receptors are. Cuss and cry all you want, it won’t faze me. Nothing I haven’t heard before. I once put twenty stitches in my buddy Butch’s arm during a fishing trip. Didn’t even have a local. He’s ex-Corps: That, my friend, was some cussing.”

Jim opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, Leonard has dripped more wax. Down low, over the _gluteus medius_, where stomach meets hip. Jim screeches again, his belly muscles (_rectus abdominus_, with a little help from the _exterior obliques_) working in a really fascinating way. Before he can recover, Leonard drips more wax over what’s already there, layering the drops and increasing the heat. Jim gives another cry, lower but sharp, pulling at his bindings and making the bed frame creak. Leonard can taste his friend’s pain, it’s as pungent as Romulan ale. His own excitement, which had softened some during the preparations, springs fully back to life.

_Down, boy. This ain’t over yet._ Leonard ignores the swellings down South and keeps his voice calm. “Fun fact: If it feels good to be kissed somewhere, it hurts like hell to be pierced or inked there. I bet the same goes for wax.” More red droplets splash on Jim’s nipples.

“Stop—that’s not—you can’t—” Jim pants, but Leonard doesn’t pay him any mind. The words are just noise; Jim is enjoying the hell out of this, if the size of his hard-on is anything to go by. And with a deeper knowledge that doesn’t come from anything Jim has said or done, Leonard knows how his friend feels. He doesn’t want to stop; He’d be so disappointed if Leonard did.

Leonard grasps Jim’s cock, and Jim moans gratefully. A couple of slow, sweet pulls, and then Leonard drops candle wax on Jim’s balls. Jim gives an almighty yelp and pulls at the bindings so hard that there’s a tearing noise.

Leonard grabs Jim’s throat. “Hey now, stop that!”
“Stop,” Jim rasps. “Please—” Sweat is running down his face, soaking the blindfold. His lips are swollen from biting them, his whole body is convulsed.

“Nope. Me and my girl Anima ain’t done yet, not by a long shot.” He leans close, whispering in Jim’s ear. Even from an inch or two away, he can feel the frantic heat coming off of his friend. “You asked for this. You made it happen. You’re going to get what you came for, every damn second of it. And just for breaking my concentration, I am going to gag you.” Leonard picks up the last strip of t-shirt, and soon Jim is totally restrained, blind and dumb and helpless.

Leonard runs a slow, possessive hand up Jim’s thigh. Jim barely reacts to such light stimulus now. He just waits, tense and sweaty, for his punishment.

Leonard takes his time, he makes it last. He knows from his medical training just how to work, and he knows from other, equally trained senses, just when Jim is getting too heated up, when the excitement and sensation are about to overwhelm him. A rain of red droplets falls, as shiny as blood. Then they are allowed to harden, dull with loss of heat, then brighten again as more wax is poured on top of them, doubling, then trebling the pain.

He draws amazing patterns on Jim’s trembling flesh, circles and spirals, dots and lines. It looks like a new language, spelling out some secret message only the two of them can understand, a private rubric of pain. Jim’s glib tongue has been silenced but his body is so eloquent; It tells you everything you need to know.

Until there comes a moment when Leonard can feel Jim reaching his limits. Nothing obvious indicates it: A slight slackness in his muscles, perhaps, as Jim’s system finally comes to its considerable breaking point. Nonetheless, Leonard knows. He puts down the Lonely Soul—now lonely indeed, bereft of most of the wax that makes her shine.

He grabs the vial of lube from the other pillow. He slathers what’s left over his cock. He stretches himself over Jim. Their cocks rub against each other, and Leonard feels the pleasure shoot up his spine. Jim feels it, too. Even in his overstimulated state, he gives a weak gasp.

“You’ve been so good,” Leonard says, smoothing Jim’s damp hair back from his face. “I know that hurt; You’ll be wearing wax burns for days after this. But now I’m going to fuck you. I’m going deep, and I won’t be gentle. You’re going to feel it. After this, you’ll feel me forever.”

He takes the gag off Jim and kisses him. Jim tastes strange, salty with unshed tears. There is a tang of blood from his swollen lips. He tastes better than anything Leonard has ever tasted.

“Bones,” he whispers. “I—I didn’t—I can’t—”

“Shh,” Leonard says. “I know.” He bends Jim’s leg up and enters him, and it isn’t gentle. Jim has tightened up since Leonard prepped him earlier, what feels like hours ago. This first thrust makes Jim cry out, inner muscles constricting like a fist.

“Relax,” Leonard says. “Let me in.” Before Jim can even react Leonard thrusts again; Jim is so tight, as clenched as a virgin. He moans.

Leonard cups Jim’s face. “This is going to happen. You have no power here, none at all. There is no safeword, nothing you can say to make me stop. You don’t have to think about it, any of it. Just feel, sweetheart. Feel me.” He thrusts one more time, deep as he can, and whether it’s the movements or the words, he feels Jim start to give. He bends both of Jim’s legs up, hooking his thighs over Leonard’s shoulders.
Jim is so open now, and Leonard thrusts again—and again and again, one of the most exquisite pleasures he has ever felt, getting so deep inside his best friend. All the way in. The air has gone orange around him, as orange as flames. He’s twisted in them, caught. Bound more tightly than Jim, but Leonard is euphoric. He doesn’t want to escape.

Until at last the flames flare up, the orgasm blazes through him, it spirals down to his soul. But he isn’t lonely in this most private of moments, because he can feel his orgasm, Jim is burning with him, they are laughing in the flames. They are blessed, but never released.

It takes a long time for the fires to cool. When they finally do Leonard reaches up, releasing the knots that bind Jim to the headboard. He pulls the blindfold from Jim’s eyes. They blink at him, red-veined but still so blue, like the color at the heart of a flame.

Something else comes, while Leonard looks into Jim’s eyes. Peace, greater and more joyous than any he has known before. A silence. You couldn’t get this from all the Romulan ale in the galaxy; or the Tennessee whiskey, either. The silence seems to last even longer than the fires.

But finally, Jim breaks it. Just before he does, there is something so sad in his eyes. Jim looks at Leonard the way you look at someone you won’t see for a long time. Probably never again.

“Look up,” he says. “Look in the mirror.”

Leonard looks. He sees Jim, sated and beautiful, his white flesh still striped with red wax. He sees a man next to him. The man is beautiful too, taller and lankier than Jim, with much darker hair and eyes. He’s holding on to Jim, clutching him possessively, the way a new lover will.

Leonard doesn’t know him. He doesn’t know him at all. It’s him—but oh, it’s not. Something is so different. He’s beautiful, but broken. Something has been twisted inside him. Shattered to pieces. The knowledge—the horror—freezes his afterglow. Chills him to the bone.

“You see.” Jim’s voice is as quiet as death. “Now you see.”

As Leonard watches, the man in the mirror fades. Everything fades; The shabby hotel room, the smell of dust and wax, the warmth of Jim’s body. All of Leonard’s bright desires.

As he saw the terrible truth, he returned from Mars. The journey took seconds, and decades. Fifty-five million kilometers, he felt every one of them.

He looked up at the ceiling of his room, seeing the orange bars cast by the streetlights outside. He felt it—him.

Jim moved from the farthest corner of the room, Leonard felt him approach the bed. He flinched.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to touch you,” Jim said. “I could have—I wanted to. But I didn’t. We didn’t touch; It wasn’t real.”

“It felt real,” Leonard whispered.

“Yes. I learned how to do it years ago. How to get inside, walk through walls. All the walls people build to keep themselves safe. I paid a lot for the knowledge. You have no idea.”

Leonard sat up, he made himself look. Even from eight feet away, Leonard could feel Jim’s heat. He saw the glow on Jim’s skin, as orange as flame. He blinked, and the glow went away. He tried to convince himself that it had been a trick of the light. But he couldn’t quite believe it.
“What are you?” he said.

“A freak,” Jim said. “You know my projective empathy score, but you don’t really know. I faked the score on my official records, it’s easy to do with a standard test. Real records exist, you just don’t have that clearance. But I’ll tell you as a friend. Take the score you know, my impressive score. Double it. Then you’ll have my real score.”

“That’s—that’s not possible. You’d be insane.”

“A few times I’ve thought I was. But I’m not. I know exactly what I’m doing.” Even in the dim light Leonard could see it in Jim’s eyes, something that was like regret. “Everything I’ve done.”

Leonard shuddered, as images spilled across his mind like drops of wax.

“Why?” he rasped. “Why did you do it to me?”

“For the same reason you did it to me,” Jim said. “I love you.”

Jim sat on the end of the bed. Leonard made himself not move. He’d shown enough weakness.

“You’re so close to what I need,” Jim said. “Until tonight, I didn’t know how close. It’s tragic: In another universe, we’re really happy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about Mars. I lit the candle, but the rest was you. Your instincts are amazing—perfect. Maybe it’s being a doctor, but you always know where it will hurt most. It’s a gift.”

Before this, Leonard had been more bewildered than mad. But now he began to feel the sparks of anger. “If I’m so goddamn special, why didn’t you take me years ago? You’re not known for your restraint.”

“You’re not gay. If you were, even a little, we wouldn’t have had to go through this. Yes, I could change you. But changing something so elemental would break you. It would be like killing you, and you wouldn’t even know you were dead.” Jim’s voice was gentle as he said these terrible things. He sounded like a patient father instructing his wayward child.

Leonard covered his face. He saw the man in the mirror again, beautiful and broken. But happy, so happy: Chained forever in the flames, he didn’t want to escape. Leonard could feel the man’s happiness at the same time that he felt his own horror. It was excruciating, like being split right down to his soul. When he spoke, it was softly. If he talked any louder he’d start screaming.

“Don’t pretend you care about my feelings. Not after what you’ve done. You do whatever you want, don’t you? You’re a—”

He cut off, gasping. Jim had struck like an angry cobra, slithering up the bed so fast you didn’t see him until he was on top of you. He was pushing Leonard into the headboard, but he wasn’t hurting him. Not in any way the alarms could pick up. But it did hurt, oh, it did. Leonard could feel it again, the radiant, desperate desire he’d felt on Mars. All his training did not protect him. He understood then, and the knowledge was more despair: There was no hiding from Jim. He could always find a way in, like sunlight shines through the smallest chink in the thickest wall.

“I’m not a monster,” Jim hissed. “I’ve worked very, very hard to stay human. You’re lucky I’ve worked so hard. You’re lucky I know how you feel right now, exactly how you feel. It’s why I won’t take you, even though I could. You know just how easy it would be.”
As suddenly as it flared, the desire was gone. Jim had released him, rising from the bed and standing by the door. Leonard lay there panting, a hand at his throat.

Jim gazed down on him. He looked older, and angrier, and so much harder. The hardness of a diamond, something that has borne immense pressures and become something else. Something beautiful, that could cut you to pieces. In that moment, Leonard didn’t know him. Three years of seeing him every day, and this was the first time he’d seen the real Jim Kirk.

Leonard turned his face away.

“I don’t want to kill you, Bones. You don’t want to die. So you won’t interfere anymore, you’ll let me find someone else. Because you can’t be the only one I love. You don’t want that kind of attention from me. You won’t survive it.”

The door whooshed, and Jim was gone.

Leonard darted from bed and hit the lock for the door. Then he lay back down. He lay there a long time, staring at the bars on the ceiling, and he didn’t sleep. He didn’t sleep at all.
“Fucking Mars? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Even from fifty-five million kilometers, the rage in his mother’s voice makes Jim flinch a little.
“Look. I know this wasn’t planned—”

“Planned? No. The plan was for you to pick up Quinn at his house and have him at the bar by 20:00. We were going to raid the place at 20:15. Exactly what part of that wasn’t clear? I give you one thing to do in the big finale—one—and you miss your motherfucking cue.”

Jim shifts on the creaky bed. “May I explain?”

On the tiny screen of his phone, he sees Winona’s features work visibly as she steps down on her anger. Her skin is vaguely green, but that’s not the fault of the connection. She’s only been back from the Orion System for a week, and pigment implants take a while to wear off.

“Speak,” she snaps.

“Michael’s youngest, Katie, is sick with the flu. She wanted another bedtime story, and it’s not like I could tell him not to, you know? By the time we turned down the street near the bar we could hear sirens. Michael barked at me to turn around. We ended up at this private transporter terminal across the river—I’d never even heard of it. We bounced up to Montreal, then over to Edinburgh, then down to Shanghai. I’m still nauseous from being split into atoms three times in one hour. We caught an overland shuttle to Hong Kong and got off-planet there. He’s on red fucking alert, and you know how sharp he is. He’d have clocked me if I said one wrong thing. I thought it was better to just shut up and keep going. At least now you know where we are.”

Winnie’s eyes cut to the left. “The signal says Memnonia, south quarter. 2145 Voyager Street.”

“Yeah, we landed on Phobos but took a shuttle down to Meridani this morning. We drove to Memnonia—it took hours, but Michael said it would be harder to track us that way. He’s got a bolthole here. He seems to have ‘em everywhere. We’re in one of those shitty little vacation cottages.” Jim glances around at the tired décor, everything done in shades of faded reddish-brown: walls, carpet, curtains. It hid the sight of the dust pretty well, but it couldn’t hide the smell of it, rusty and acrid, assaulting the sinuses. Jim blinks his watering eyes and goes on.

“Michael’s taking a shower. Lucky he’s still a fastidious bastard, even now. This is the first time I’ve been alone since we bolted. I called you the second the water went on. Seriously, I don’t know what the hell else I was supposed to—”

“I know. But you’ve been missing eighteen hours. I was afraid—” Winnie stops, closing her eyes a second. When she opens them again, her features have relaxed. “Never mind. You did the right thing. Just sit tight. We’ll be there ASAP.”

“No can do. We’re leaving in thirty minutes. Michael’s got us on another flight.”

“Where? We’ll meet you there. Trust me, our ships can outrun any commercial vessel.”
“Risa Alpha.”

“What?” Winnie’s eyes have narrowed.

“He’s got a house there. Kind of remote, up in the hills above Suraya Bay. I’ve seen pictures.” The place is beautiful, just like the whole planet is beautiful, all white sand beaches and glittering casinos. A sunny planet full of shady people, that’s Risa Alpha.

“No way,” Winnie says. “We don’t have an extradition agreement with the Risian System. If he gets there, legally we can’t touch him.”

“So extract him. Since when does Section 31 care about the law?”

“Are you high? Have you been drinking the water there or something? This isn’t that kind of mission. It’s a joint-op with the FDEA, and they have to do everything above board—almost everything, anyway. He gets to Risa, and we have to leave him there. Michael Quinn does not get to spend the rest of his life sitting under a palm tree drinking margaritas. Not on my watch.”

“I could kill him.”

They both go silent. But suddenly everything is noisy, Jim’s pulse hammering in his ears. He’s not sure what makes his heart race faster, the thought of phaser ing Michael Quinn into nothing, or the expression on his mother’s face. Like she’s processing everything through her internal tricorder, looking at all the readouts and weighing the data. Then her face clears.

“No good. We need him alive or we can’t reach the Syndicate. Remember, that’s always been our main target. We have to roll Quinn over to get the pirates.”

“You’re offering him a fucking deal?”

“Don’t worry, it won’t be much. Let his wife and kids keep a few of his assets, so they’re not total paupers. Leave him with the thought that he might make parole someday, after thirty or forty years on Triton. Maybe see his grandchildren when he’s a very old man. He won’t get parole, of course, but we’ll let him think it. Hope doesn’t cost us anything.” She smiles, but her eyes are colder than Neptune’s moon. “Trust me. Quinn will never see real sunlight again. If we can keep him off Risa Alpha.”

Jim nods. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just stay where you are. Two hours is all we need. But we need those, okay? You have to keep Quinn occupied that long.”

“Easier said than done. I’m telling you, he’s jumpy as hell.”

“Of course he’s jumpy. He knows what’s at stake as much as we do. But it doesn’t matter what he wants, you can’t let him get on that ship. We couldn’t even arrest mid-flight, you’d be out-of-system before we could catch up, and once we’re into intersystem space the law gets tricky.”

“I could knock him out, tie him up—”

“Nope. What if you didn’t get him on the first blow? We lost two of his captains last night: cyanide implants. If Donovan and Joseph had them, Michael certainly does. You’re not dealing with an amateur. He can’t be spooked again, not until we bust in and hit him with a paralysis beam so he can’t activate the implant. This situation has to be handled delicately. Keep him calm—distracted. You know what I mean?”
Jim stares down at the shiny synthcotton bedspread a moment. “Seduce him again.”

“I know you thought you were done, but things haven’t worked out that way.”

Jim rubs a hand over his queasy belly. “I’m not sure I can do it. I know that doesn’t make sense, I’ve done it a hundred times before, but—”

“But this is the time that matters. Without it, none of the others mean a damn.” Winnie doesn’t say it like she’s cajoling or commanding. She doesn’t have to. They both know it’s the truth.

He flashes on a hundred past encounters, all that grinning, all that swallowing. All for nothing. In his mind’s eye, he sees Michael Quinn on Risa Alpha, sleek and smug at the baccarat tables, a pretty girl on each arm. How sick will Jim feel then?

He sighs and looks back at his phone. “I’ll try. But I can’t guarantee anything. Michael isn’t in the mood for love.”

“Get him in the mood. Push him if you have to, as hard as you have to. Just don’t push too hard: a drooling idiot is no use at all.”

Jim blinks at her. “Could I do that? You never told me—”

“Because it probably wouldn’t happen. It doesn’t happen often, even with empaths as strong as you are. But Quinn isn’t the only one who’s jumpy right now. You should see how your vitals are registering through the phone. When the adrenals really get going, shit can get weird. I was on Tellar once, with my—a colleague of mine. I watched him push a man’s brain into pudding. But those were extreme circumstances, even worse than these. You won’t go over the line, you know what’s at stake. Right now, you know Michael Quinn better than anybody. You can get to him, you know you can. For two hours. Then it’s all over.”

“Promise?” Jim isn’t able to keep the shake from his voice.

“Darling boy,” she says. “You know what a good liar I am. But I’m not lying now.”

He feels it then. A touch, soft as a mother’s hand on an infant’s cheek. The cool sweetness of it echoes down to the core of him, easing the fever and nausea. He knows he’s imagining it. Fifty-five million kilometers: Even Winnie isn’t that good. But he feels better.

He lets out a breath. “Mom, I—” he stops. “If things go bad, if Michael gets the jump on me—”

“He won’t. You’re stronger than him, smarter. You can do this.” The touch again, brighter this time, sweeter. A kiss as well as a caress. Jim almost smiles.

“I know, but—whatever happens, I’m—I’m glad we got to work together.”

Winnie nods. “It has been an adventure, hasn’t it?”

Jim clutches the phone too hard. “Maybe we could do it again.”

Winnie stares at him. “What are you telling me, Jimmy boy? You want to join up?” The assessing look is on her face again, tinged with confusion. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Like the past year hasn’t been the world’s scariest internship? I can do this job.”

“I know you can,” she says. “I just never thought it was the kind of thing you’d be into. You’re not big on commitment. Four years ago, you wouldn’t even talk to the Starfleet recruiter. This isn’t
Starfleet: You don’t get out with a pension. You’re done when you’re dead.”

“How did they get you?” It’s a question Jim has wanted to ask for a long time.

“A recruiter. I was just a kid, and he was—” She stops, a strangely wistful smile on her face. She shrugs. “Now is not the time to talk about this. You should go before Quinn finishes up. I know you said he’s like a woman with hogging the bathroom, but—”


Winnie’s smile vanishes. “Ivan?”

“I haven’t talked to you about it, things have been so crazy since you got back. Ivan and I . . . ” He trails off.

“Ivan and you.” Winnie’s eyes have narrowed. “Ah. I get it now.”

From behind him comes the sound of water turning off. “That’s Michael,” he whispers. “I’ve got to go. We’ll talk later.”

“Yes.” She sounds momentarily distracted. Then she turns her full attention on him.

“I’ll see you in two hours,” she says. “It ends today. All of this ends.” Her words sound more like a threat than a promise. But with Winnie that’s not unusual.

The screen goes dark. Jim slips his phone in his pocket. He hears the sounds of Michael moving around in the bathroom. He knows his habits well enough. He has five minutes before Michael emerges. Five minutes to figure out how to seduce a wary, dangerous man to his doom.

Jim walks over to the big window near the bed. He stands there gazing at the alien landscape. He should be concentrating on the problem at hand, but his mind has gone numb. When that happens, the only way to think about the problem is not to think about it. Winnie taught him that. So Jim looks, and doesn’t think.

There isn’t much town beyond Voyager Street. Not far from here the real wilderness begins. It’s the one nice feature of Michael’s crappy cottage, its view of what lies just outside the neon hustle of Memnonia. People talk a lot of shit about this place back home—it’s Tijuana without the ambience—but when you look past the dive bars and topless taco stands and no-tell motels, there’s a bleak beauty here. You can see it when you look out at the craters, barren even after the oxygen-reactors and terra-forming. It’s there in the way the weak sun shines on ancient rocks, redder than the Painted Desert back home, as red as the blood of the restless race that settled this dead planet a century ago. So much beauty here when the twin moons, Phobos and Deimos, shine in the sky, making the veins of gypsum in the craters sparkle like rivers made of diamonds.

Jim would like to come back here when all of this is over. Get a decent hotel suite in a better part of the planet, Arcadia maybe, or Utopia. Hike over the craters, visit the Museum of Mars, take home some red rocks as souvenirs. Hell, maybe do a couple of dirty days in Memnonia: There is something to be said for topless taco stands. He and Ivan could come here, their first trip as a couple, out in the open and for real, no missions or legends to worry about. See Mars with Someone You Love, it was printed across a tacky t-shirt in the spaceport on Phobos. That doesn’t mean that it isn’t good advice. Jim stared at the shirt, smiling a little, while Michael looked wistfully at the red rocks for sale. He didn’t say anything, but Jim had known what he was thinking. Michael’s son, Rory, collected rocks and would have loved to have one.

Jim sees it in his mind’s eye, the sad face of a father on the run. With a burst of inspiration brighter
than Deimos, he knows how he’s going to get to Michael. Michael, the good father. If you can’t say much else for him, you must say that. He likes to take care of people. In another life, his nurturing streak would have been the making of him. In this one, it will be his undoing.

Jim takes off his shirt and shoes. He sits on the end of the bed and runs hands through his hair, combing it into frantic whorls. One lucky break: He doesn’t have to call up tears. His eyes are red and watery enough from the freaking dust.

For a couple of minutes he just sits there, thinking of nothing. Winnie taught him that. How to go quiet and still, focused as an actor waiting to take the stage. How to blank himself out so he could fill himself with someone else.

*Don’t worry if it takes some time*, she said once. *It’s time well spent.*

*Ivan doesn’t need any time. He turns it off and turns it on*, Jim replied, envious. This was at the beginning, when Ivan wasn’t a lover, just one more rival for Winnie’s attention.

*Ivan is Ivan and Jim is Jim*, Winnie said. *You’re not the same.*

*Maybe I’ll get more like him when I get more practice*, Jim said.

*Shut up and keep breathing*, Winnie said, frowning.

The bathroom door opens. Michael enters, a towel wrapped around his waist. “I left you some hot water,” he says. “But make it fast. We have to head out in a few minutes.”

Jim stays still, looking down at his hands.

“Anybody home?” Michael has reached the bed. He snaps fingers in front of Jim’s face.

*“I can’t do this,”* Jim whispers.

“What?”

“I can’t do this.” Jim raises his head, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Hey,” Michael says, sitting next to him. “Where is this coming from?”

“I’m sitting here, listening to you shower, and I just—” Jim shakes his head. “It’s like—it’s like I can’t breathe.” He can actually feel it, real panic erupting in his gut, flooding into his chest and making it hard to get enough air. He’s panting as he fights to get words out. “What—the fuck—are we doing? Why—why the fuck are we here?” Jim wipes a hand across his brow. It comes away dripping with sweat.

“Because the FDEA is onto the Orion deal,” Michael says patiently. “Anyway, I’m pretty sure that’s it. We don’t have anything else big going down right now.” He puts a warm damp hand on Jim’s knee. “Come on, kiddo. We talked about this on that godawful shuttle to Hong Kong.”

“We talked about it, but I didn’t think about it. Not really,” Jim says. “The FDEA? Jesus Christ! We can’t go home again, can we? We’re fucking fugitives.”

“Yeah,” Michael says. “I won’t lie to you, you’re not going to see Terra again for a long time. Maybe not ever. But bear with me. Once we’re on Risa, you won’t give a damn.”

“My brother’s back there,” Jim says. “He was at the bar last night. He’s probably in jail.”
“I wouldn’t worry about Sam. That one can take care of himself. He’ll probably plead out, and that’s fine—he doesn’t know shit. Unless you told him, but I know you’re smarter than that.”

“I haven’t told him anything,” Jim says quickly. “But the rest of my family, my mom—”

“You don’t see her much anyway, right? Hasn’t she had like six husbands or something?”

“How can you be so flip about this? Rosemary, Rory, Annabel, Katie, they’re all back there. Our lives as we know them are over. Fucking over.” Jim falls back on the bed, putting his hands over his face. “I should just take your gun and end it now. It’d be easier than this.”

“Cut the crap.” Michael grabs Jim’s wrists, pulling his hands away from his face. “You’re not a pussy. Don’t talk like one.”

“I’m not as strong as you think,” Jim says. “Not like you are. I can’t face it.”

“You are,” Michael says. “It’s been a shitty day, that’s all. You can do this.”

“How can you so sure?” Jim looks as hopeless as he can when he says it. He feels hopeless. Just a boy who is far from his home, needing comfort and attention from someone older, wiser.

“Because.” Michael stops, biting his lip. Then he just says it. “I wouldn’t fall in love with a coward. That’s why.”

“You—love me?” Jim says slowly, eyes wide.

“Since the second I saw you. I can’t believe it took me two years to realize it and do something about it. I’m usually smarter than that.” Michael leans over him, cupping Jim’s chin in his hand. “But now that we’re together, I know you. You’re as strong as you need to be. You’re a lion.”

Michael kisses him. Jim responds eagerly, clutching at Michael like he’s the only stable ground in a rapidly shifting universe. He needs Michael to feel it, the depth of his desperation.

He breaks the kiss. He catches Michael’s face in his hands. “Look at me,” Jim says. “Stay with me.” The push is partly in the words but mostly in the eyes, just like Winnie taught him. Need and desire radiate from them like tractor beams. He feels Michael’s energies jump towards him. He pulls them in slowly, carefully, like a fisherman landing the big one.

Michael’s hands tighten on Jim’s arms. “I’ll always be with you. When we get to Risa—”

“I can’t wait for Risa,” Jim says, rubbing against him suggestively. But the real trap is his eyes. Michael’s have grown glazed as he hovers over him.

“I need you now,” Jim says, pushing again. “Please, Mike—”

But that was one push too many. It can work that way sometimes with strong-minded people. Michael pulls back, shaking his head like he’s clearing it. “We have to get to the spaceport.”

Shit. Deep down, Jim cogitates. He is tempted to try another push, but he can feel Michael’s pulse under his hand. It’s already too elevated, Michael’s face flushed and sweating. He’s not anywhere near drooling idiot yet, but clean living or not, Michael’s blood pressure is on the high side. Jim can just imagine explaining to Winnie how he gave her target a stroke mid-seduction.

Jim keeps his hands on Michael, but inside he pulls back. “There’s another shuttle tonight,” he says reasonably. “We can take that one.”
“You don’t understand what you’re saying. We can’t lose a minute right now. If they catch us—”

“They won’t,” Jim says. “You’re brilliant. You’ll keep us safe. I know you will.” His hand slides down, pulling the thin towel away from Michael’s hips. “Two hours,” he says. “I will never ask you for anything again.”

“You haven’t seen the shops on Risa.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Jim says. “You are all I want.” Another push, gentle as a summer breeze, soft as a soothing hand upon your brow. But his actual hand is more insistent: He wraps his fingers around Michael’s stiffening cock. Sees the desire burn in Michael’s eyes.

He can still feel it, the resistance circling Michael like a stone wall. The fear in Michael’s eyes is as deep as the desire. Pain in his face, as Michael’s primal instincts war inside of him. “You’re going to be the death of me,” he says. But he kisses Jim again, deeper than his last kiss.

Jim couldn’t have predicted it, but this is the hardest moment. Because the love in the kiss is real. He feels it like he feels Michael’s heartbeat. You can’t fake how you respond to this kiss. Michael is no empath, but he’ll know a false reaction. Anyone who has ever been in love would.

That’s when Jim knows that vulnerability won’t see him through this. Desire won’t. Deep down, where the real Jim lives and schemes, he sees that his plan didn’t go far enough. If he wants to get through Michael’s wall, he has to do something besides seduce. The one thing he’s been able to resist doing all these months, even as he let Michael map every inch of his body.

If he wants Michael to stay with him, Jim has to love him. If those other hours are to mean anything, these last two have to be real. Jim has to feel it, like he feels his own heart beating.

The decision to feel is harder than the actual feeling. For Michael is, in his way, an amazing man. He loves Jim, really loves him. Jim has known this much longer than Michael. A long time ago, before he had any idea what Michael was, he knew what Michael felt. Jim felt it, too. Call it chemistry or daddy issues, he was always too aware of Michael. But his daddy issues—and Michael’s wife and kids—also held him back. He thought the whole mess got buried with Jess, the forced seduction only piling more dirt on the grave of Jim’s feelings. But his luck, as usual, is better than that. For here the feelings are, just when he needs them.

“I love you,” Jim whispers. “I want you inside of me.” In this moment he can feel the love, he really feels it. It’s amazing and it’s excruciating, like being ripped apart by divine lightning. He loves Michael, and he’s going to destroy him.

He knows the moment Michael gives in. He can see it, like a door opening in the wall. Michael gives in to their love with a sigh that is almost grateful. It’s the most beautiful thing that Jim has seen. The most horrifying.

_I will be punished for this._ Jim hears the words way down deep, the echo of the whisper of a thought, as the rest of him kisses Michael passionately. _This is wrong. As wrong as the worst thing Michael has done._

But Jim does not stop. He pulls Michael in and doesn’t let go, as the minutes and hours tick by. As the punishment they both deserve draws closer.

“How will this work?” Jim says, some time later. They’re tangled up in the musty bed clothes, Jim’s head on Michael’s chest. He hears Michael’s heartbeat, its rhythms as slow as someone falling asleep. Michael is sleepy, and no wonder. Intense sex on top of eighteen hours of frantic planet-
“Hopping will take it out of you. Jim isn’t exactly ready for a marathon himself. Until that last climax did him in, Michael was demanding, aggressive, insatiable. Jim is sore as hell, sticky as well as sleepy.

“How will what work?” Michael says lazily, one hand tracing up and down Jim’s back.

“I know you. You won’t leave your wife and kids on Terra. You have some kind of brilliant plan for getting them to Risa. You and them on Risa, you and me on Risa, how can it work?”

“How did it work on Terra?”

“Risa isn’t Terra. I mean, you’ll be retired, Rosie will expect you to be home—”

Michael’s chest heaves as he gives a bark of laughter. “Retired? Fuck that. Plenty of business to be done on Risa. I won’t have the manpower—not right away—but I have contacts there. I’ll have you.” He ruffles Jim’s hair. “We’re going to go through a rebuilding period, but we won’t stop. Business never stops. Uncle Rory taught me that.”

“You’ve never thought of getting out? Just saying ‘fuck it’ and living off your millions? I know the FDEA must have seized some of your accounts, but—”

“Not all of them. Of course not. That’s another reason everybody runs to Risa. Risian firms make the Swiss look like piggy banks when it comes to secure deposits.”

Michael is quiet a moment, thinking. “I thought about stopping once. A long time ago.” His voice has softened, taken on a storyteller’s lilt. As a rule Michael is one cagey bastard, but he’s still a man. He talks after he’s gotten laid. He talks a lot.

“I had a friend—a really good friend,” Michael goes on. “What the fuck am I saying? I was fucking him. I loved him. Declan and I were lovers. Uncle Rory recruited him when he was just a kid, about the same time he recruited me. Declan was a programmer, a hacker. Smart as hell—he had all kinds of skills that would have translated to the legitimate world. Maybe that’s why he was never serious about our business, not like I was. Finally, he had enough. He said he was tired of always looking over his shoulder. He said he was getting out, and he wanted me to go with him. I almost did. I was serious about business, but I was serious about Declan, too.”

“Why didn’t you go?”

“He got killed. I found him at his computer terminal, shot twice through the head. Declan had a bit of a gambling problem—plenty of hackers do, they’re all addicted to the idea of beating long odds. It came out that he owed a lot of money to some rival operation. They got tired of waiting for him to pay up.”

Jim knew the story already, of course. But it still makes him sad. Not just the story, but the way Michael tells it. Beneath his calm recitation is real sorrow. Two decades old, but as raw and real as if it happened yesterday. “I’m sorry,” Jim says. “What a stupid thing to get killed over.”

Michael makes noises that should be more laughter, but come out sounding like grunts of pain. “The story was bullshit. Declan owed money to the bookies, but nothing worth shooting him for. He just put that out there to put me off the scent. He didn’t want me to know the real story.”

“He?”

“My Uncle Rory. He had big plans for me, he didn’t want me going anywhere. He murdered Declan for trying to turn me straight. But I didn’t figure that out for a long time.”
That isn’t the story of Declan Kelly’s murder that is in the files. Jim isn’t surprised. The files so seldom tell the real story, the one you really need to know. “What did you do?” he says.

“I’d taken care of the triggerman years ago, right after Declan was killed. He was just a hired gun, it wasn’t hard. By the time I realized that Uncle Rory was behind it all, the old man was dying of pancreatic cancer. Had a month to live at most. There was no point in killing him.”

Michael pauses. “Rory Callahan saved my life when I was a kid. He was my mom’s brother. I didn’t know him when I was little; he was doing a seven-year bit for trafficking. But when he got out, he sized up my situation right away. He told my old man that if I showed up to Sunday dinner with bruises one more time, it’d be the last roast chicken that Daniel Quinn ever ate. He meant it, too. Rory didn’t fuck around. My father never touched me again.”

Jim nods slowly, moved despite himself. “So when you found out about Declan, you let it go?”

“I went to the hospital late one night and put a pillow over his face. I loved that man like a father, like I could never love the piece of shit that sired me. Rory saved me, but I couldn’t let him get away with it. Didn’t matter that he was standing on the edge of the grave, I had to push him in. He murdered my best friend, my—” Michael stops. “When someone takes something important from you, someone important, you can’t let it go. Even if you love him. Understand?”

Jim sits up. He puts a hand to his temple. Such a strange sensation there, growing ever-louder. Cold and buzzing but crystal-clear, like the unholy hum of white noise. Jim has felt it before.

He looks at Michael. Those beautiful brown eyes, that calmly handsome face. In this moment it’s like he can see the soul beneath the face, pitch-black but with pinpoints of fierce light, like a sky full of angry stars. He’s loved Michael and hated him, but until now he hasn’t known him. Jim knows how it must have been, standing in that white hospital room, staring down at the man who shaped his destiny. His father, in spirit if not in truth. He knows how Michael felt when he put a hand on Rory’s shoulder and pushed him into the grave.

Jim blinks against the rising crystalline roar in his head (something sweet in the sound, so sweet). He leans down and kisses his lover on the lips. “I’m sorry, Mike,” he whispers. “I really am.”

Michael’s brow wrinkles. He opens his mouth to speak. But the words are frozen just like the rest of him, as the door bursts open and the paralysis beam hits. Frozen, he watches as Jim rises, standing by the bed. They can both see a slim figure make her way across the room.

Winnie is dressed in the same plain black as the rest of the people flooding into the cottage, but somehow she makes the ensemble look stylish. So lovely in her moment of triumph, blonde hair bouncing on her shoulders, cheeks pinked (albeit with a slight tinge of green), red lips parted in a blinding white smile. She dismisses the frozen body on the bed with one quick flick of her very blue eyes. She zeroes in on Jim. Winnie puts a hand on his neck, kissing him on the cheek.

“Well done, Jimmy boy,” she says. “Very well done.”

Jim doesn’t say anything. He just feels his mother’s cool sweet energies coursing through him, drowning the chaos inside. It should have been enough to calm him. But he makes the mistake of taking a last look at Michael as the men in black haul him off the bed, shouting directions to each other in harsh voices. As they work, Jim looks into his brown eyes one more time. Michael shouldn’t have been able to make an expression—not after the paralysis beam—but somehow Jim can see the betrayal in his face.

It’s not the worst thing he sees there. Much worse is the love. Michael loves him, even now.
Not caring at all that he’s naked in front of a room full of strangers, Jim sprints for the bathroom. It’s still a little damp, smelling of the soap from Michael’s shower, the cheap pine scent that was on his face when Jim kissed him last. If Jim wasn’t already about to puke his guts up, that smell would have sent him over.

He kneels in front of the toilet and vomits. He hasn’t eaten much in the last twenty-four hours; there shouldn’t be much to bring up. But he heaves and heaves, the puke gushing out of him in big yellow chunks. He vomits until his stomach muscles are screaming and his eyes are blinded by tears, until all he can bring up is brownish water. Then he sits back, leaning against the grimy tiles. The room reeks, but at least it doesn’t smell like Michael anymore.

Something cold on the side of his face. Washcloth. He doesn’t want to be clean. He tries to turn his head away, but his chin is gripped by a firm hand. He opens one eye.

“Just like George,” Winnie says as she continues wiping. “Puking your guts out from nerves. The day your brother was born, the Sickbay bathroom looked like there’d been an exorcism in there.” One corner of her mouth turns up.

Jim puts his flushed face in her neck. She feels good, like leaning against cool porcelain. She smells good too, like her favorite scent, Chanel No. 5. How does she find time for perfume in the midst of this mess? Winnie is amazing.

She pats his knee. “Time for you to get some rest.”

“Throw a blanket over me,” Jim murmurs. “I’ll sleep here.”

“Yuck,” Winnie says. “You wanna get athlete’s foot on top of everything else?” She throws one of his arms around her shoulders and heaves him up with surprising strength. Once Jim is more or less vertical, Winnie patiently tucks his limp arms into the sleeves of a thin cotton robe. “Sorry about this, but the FDEA boys took all the clothes on the floor for evidence. Don’t know what they think they’re gonna find in your skivvies, but whatever.”

She ties the belt around Jim, covering his shame. “Not like I haven’t seen it before,” she says. “But it’s been a long time since I changed your diapers, sweetheart.”

As hollowed out as he is, Jim still feels a little embarrassed as he re-enters the bedroom. But the flood of people who extracted Michael Quinn, along with Michael himself, are gone. Section 31 has acted with its usual dispatch: Al and one of the men in black are all that remain.

The man removes his helmet. He runs a hand in his fair hair and looks at Jim, eyes mirror-bright.

“Ivan,” Jim whispers. He tries to walk over to him, but his legs don’t seem to be working very well. The scene has taken on the qualities of a dream, like he’s trying to walk through syrup.

Ivan closes the distance between them quickly enough. “Jim,” he says. “Good work. I’m so—”

“No time for chit-chat,” Winnie says. “Our hero needs his rest.” She starts steering Jim towards the door. “Come on. We’ve reserved some rooms at a motel down the street.”

Jim stops, confused. “We’re not going home? Michael—”

“Is already on his way. The FDEA guys have him. Don’t worry, those boys know they’re stuff, they won’t lose him. I want to poke around here for a little bit, find out how Quinn got that ship through Phobos without setting off any alarms. Somebody is getting paid under the table—fucking Mars! I’ll have it wrapped up by tomorrow morning, then we’ll be out of here. In the meantime, you can take
forty. I promised you were done, didn’t I? I always keep my promises.”

Jim doesn’t argue. He wouldn’t even if he wasn’t exhausted. Going against Winnie is like bashing your head into a stone wall. You break your skull while the wall doesn’t give a shit.

But before she can move them again, Al taps Winnie on the shoulder, phone in hand. “HQ needs to speak with you. Something about the warrants.”

“What?”

“Can’t it wait?”

“Can it ever?”

Winnie sighs and snatches the phone. “What? No. That’s not—No, you have to get the AG’s signature on all the warrants, if his assistant does it, it’s not—FUCK!” She flips the phone closed and regards them all, eyes snapping. “Why am I always surrounded by idiots?”

Al takes a breath. “Winnie, if you need—”

“That was a goddamned rhetorical question, Alfonzo.” As Al recoils, she rounds on Ivan. “I have to stay here and straighten this out. Take Jim to the motel.”

Ivan nods and reaches for Jim, but Winnie catches Ivan’s wrist with an audible slap. “Shower, sleep. No fun and games. Understand?”

Ivan blinks at her. His eyes cut to Jim, the question in them clear.

“It came up,” Jim says. “No big deal. I was going to tell her when this was over.”

“Why?” Ivan says it like Jim just announced plans to jump into the nearest crater.

“Because I’m his mother,” Winnie says. “Did you forget, malchik? I know you’re not at your best right now. Mars does seem to have that effect on you.” She gives him a strange little smile. “Maybe it’s the dust.”

“I’m not an idiot, Winona,” Ivan says.

For a moment they stare at each other, gazes equally pale and cold.

“I haven’t decided what you are, Ivan,” Winnie says. “When I do, you’ll be the first to find out. I promise you that.” She releases him. Ivan rubs his wrist. Then he puts a hand on Jim’s arm, holding tight. Winona turns her back on them, opening the phone.

“Is there a problem?” Jim says.

“She doesn’t like surprises. You know that.”

“Yeah, well. She’ll have plenty of time to get used to the idea.”

Ivan just nods. He leads them away from the bedroom, down the hall and out of the cottage.
Chapter 48

xlviii. Kirk

Memnonia, 2255 cont.

It’s Saturday evening in Memnonia, and the streets are flooded with people. Tourists in sneakers and tacky t-shirts, hawkers selling everything from red rocks to amyl nitrite to novena candles, taco stand girls in body paint and not much else. The cool night air smells like liquor, fried food and urine, the scent of dust underlying everything. In the half-block between the cottage and the motel, Jim hears music from six different systems and conversations in a dozen languages. But mostly what he hears is old Earth pop—the 1970s are big here, for some reason—and the south Martian dialect, which is slangy Standard spiced liberally with Spanish and pinches of Russian and Japanese. All the locals speak it, but none of them speak it well. That’s kind of the point.

Jim is too tired to care that he’s in a bathrobe and bare feet, but in any case the ensemble draws zero curiosity. There are more interesting sights to be seen, and not just at the taco stands and bars. There are the figures leaning out of motel windows, sashaying up to tourists on skinny legs, assessing their marks with hard, painted eyes. Boys and girls with the grace and instincts of alley cats, the same indifferent hostility. They would be as happy to bite you as rub against you. Prostitution is strictly controlled on Earth, but Mars is a different story. It’s not true that the entire planet is one red light district: Arcadia and Utopia are very nice, almost like being back home. But the planet’s reputation is made by Memnonia, and it’s one that is richly deserved. You can get a blowjob here like you can get a cup of coffee, the only difference being that the blowjob will be quicker and a bit more sanitary.

“Over there,” Ivan says. Nearby are three dingy brick motels in a row, and he nods at the middle one. He seems unmoved by the streetlife serenade around them, keeping his gaze on the entrance to the motel with a grim concentration that’s unusual. Usually, Ivan’s eyes are on everything.

The motel is indistinguishable from its neighbors except for the striking sign, a big glittering square that features a man’s face outlined in purple neon, an orange bolt of lightning across his eyes. STARDUST HOTEL, the letters below would read, if half of them weren’t burned out. (DUST HEL is the actual message, which is probably a lot more accurate, anyway.)

Ivan takes them up the plascrete steps leading to the front entrance. Before they can get to the top, they’re accosted by a tiny blonde thing in four-inch heels and a microscopic miniskirt.

“Hola, homies,” she says in a scratchy little voice. She focuses on Ivan, the one who looks most likely to be carrying credit. “You come to the right place. I take you ‘round the world, feel me? Not like those chinke bitches down the street.” Her eyes dart to Jim, then back to Ivan. She licks her sparkly purple lips. “I like you two, sois muy sexi! Aleesa treat you right, iku ze! Okay?”

Ivan tries to push past her. Aleesa grabs at him. “Óyeme, I make you a good deal! Two for the price of one, I fuck you so good, I suck you off, stick it in my culo, Aleesa do it all. No kondou, I take it raw, comprendes?”

Ivan stops, looking down at her. Aleesa shifts back and forth on her rickety heels, scratching at her arms, the tell-tale junkie shuffle. Her pointed face is abloom with pimples. The bad skin is partly drugs, partly her age. She’s fifteen at most.
“Thirty credits,” she says to Ivan. “Tu ves? Good deal.” She puts out an arm, pulling up a big rhinestone bracelet. On the inside of her wrist is the little slot where the data solid can go. Most working girls have them now, a data port implant is quick and painless. No more fumbling with port-a-scanners to get the credits on account. Stick it in her arm and then stick it wherever.

Ivan digs a data solid out of his jacket.

“What the hell, man?” Jim says. “You’d be better off sticking your dick in a petri dish.”

“Mudak.” Aleesa gives Jim a filthy look before her eyes go right back to the data solid.

“Twenty credits,” Ivan says to her. “A fix is fifteen. Eat with the other five.” When Aleesa just stares at him: “I’m not lowballing you. I’m not interested. No quiero chingarte. Comprendes?”

“Hai,” Aleesa says, and grasps at the data solid, but Ivan holds it out of reach. With the other he grabs her by the chin, his hard grey eyes boring into her watery blue ones.

“Eat, devotchka,” he says. “Do it before you cop, or you’ll forget. Do you feel me?”

Aleesa nods. She gives Ivan a strangely focused look. “Thanks, brother,” she says.

Ivan sticks the data solid in her arm, waits for the beep, and pulls it out. “De nada. Fuck off.” He gives her a little push. Aleesa bolts down the steps as fast as her silly shoes will let her. Soon she’s lost in the crowd.

“That was, um, nice of you,” Jim says.

“She has no tits and no game. She’ll be dead in a year.” Ivan stares for a moment at the swirling crowds. Then he turns to Jim. “Let’s go. The rooms should be ready. Winona called ahead.” He pushes open the double doors of the motel, adding another handprint to the hundred already smearing the glass.

The lobby is dank and low-ceilinged, done in the same reddish-brown palette you always seem to find in the shadier parts of Memnonia. Hanging around in the corners are a few more Aleesas, male and female. In the center is a gaggle of chattering Terran college students. Easy to tell the two apart: The whores are wearing a little more clothing.

The motel is overheated, like most places on Mars. It makes everything smell that much worse. The expensive perfumes of the college girls mix strangely with the beer-taco-piss-dust aroma. Jim would be queasy from it if he had anything left in his stomach. As it is, he just sneezes and wishes for the world’s biggest antihistamine shot, injected right into his tortured sinuses. Maybe Ivan has one. He’s always so prepared.

On the ancient 2-D flatscreen hung over the desk, Homer is strangling Bart at the kitchen table while Marge and Lisa look on, bored. There is no sound, though. On the tinny ceiling speaker comes the haunting voice of Ziggy Stardust himself.

Ashes to ashes, funk to funky
We know Major Tom’s a junkie
Strung out in heaven’s high
Hitting an all time low

Ivan strides up to the desk. “Three rooms,” he tells the clerk. “Reservation under Smith.”

The clerk, a rabbity creature of fifty or so, with bulging brown eyes and absurd tufts of hair growing
out of his ears, looks languidly at his computer terminal. “Sorry, no Smith aquí.”

Ivan gives a near-inaudible sigh. “Find us three rooms, then.”

The clerk shrugs. “Sorry. Full up.”

“I called ninety minutes ago. You had rooms.”


Ivan is over the counter so fast, even Jim is shocked. He grabs the clerk by the neck and jerks him close. ‘Call me ‘boy’ again. Say it one more time, in any language. I dare you.”

The clerk gives some breathless squeaks that are probably the best he can do in Ivan’s death grip. “Ivan—” Jim starts.

“Shut up,” Ivan says calmly, not taking his eyes from the clerk. “Three rooms, clean rooms, right now. I’m not a tourist, *pendejo.* You run any more game on me, I’ll smoke your ass and sell it to the taco stands. They love fat *chibi* fucks like you. *Comprendes?*”

“*Hai,*” the clerk manages to squeak. Ivan drops him and the clerk collapses, gasping and rubbing at his neck. He jerks open a drawer and fumbles out three key cards. He shoves them across the desk at Ivan and scoots through the door behind the desk, slamming it shut.

Ivan lines up the edges of the cards and puts them in his jacket. Jim looks at him a minute. So does everybody else. The lobby has gone dead quiet except for David Bowie.

*My mama said, to get things done*
*You better not mess with Major Tom*

“So, Ivan,” Jim says. “Ever been to Memnonia before?”

“No,” he says. “We’re on the fourth floor.” He walks toward the elevator.

“You sure?” Jim says, trotting after him. “You seem weirdly at home here.”

“I’m a quick study. You know that.” Ivan hits the call button.

“Where the hell would you study this?” Jim gestures around.

“Shitholes are the same all over the galaxy. The only thing that changes are the letters on the signs.” Ivan’s grey eyes are suddenly remote. “Winona told me that once, when I was younger and less traveled.”

“Sounds like her. She sure likes giving advice. Mothers, huh?”

“She isn’t my mother.”

Jim stares at him, surprised by the emotion in Ivan’s voice. Ivan looks away.

The elevator doors open, and Ivan steps in. Jim follows. They ride to the fourth floor in silence.

Their rooms are at the end of the fourth-floor hallway, a long meandering stretch of rusty brown lined with plaswood doors. Theirs are right at the end, 42/43/44.
Ivan sticks a card in the slot for Room 44, and it opens with a beep. Once they get the lights on, it’s exactly what Jim was expecting, a dank reddish-brown square with dusty carpet. There is a connecting door to Room 43 across from the bed, its lock light burned out.

“Nice privacy,” Jim says, nodding at the lock.

“Al will be staying in there,” Ivan says. “One of his many virtues, he minds his own business.”

Jim shrugs and pulls open the curtains, sneezing again as more red dust comes puffing out. When his eyes clear, he can see that the view of Columbus Crater is stunning. It nearly makes up for the broken door lock, indifferent housekeeping, and sleazy aesthetics. Look out of the window, and you can almost forget the mirror over the bed and the sad clown paintings.

Ivan sits on the end of the bed. “Nets on,” he says. The flatscreen, a twin of the one in the lobby, brightens. Homer Simpson fills the screen, a solemn expression on his fat yellow face.

“It’s part of our oh-so-human nature, inside every man is a struggle between good and evil that cannot be resolved,” he says.

Fade in to a gravestone that reads RIP Good Homer. Dancing on his grave is another Homer Simpson, wearing a red devil suit. He is shaking maracas and singing triumphantly.

‘I am Evil Homer,
I am Evil Homer!
I am Evil Homer,
I am Evil Homer!’

Jump cut to Lisa, always the voice of morality and reason, blinking at her father in disbelief.

“Next,” Ivan says.

The ten stations after that are pixels. The eleventh is more Simpsons.

“Why is this always on?” he says, scrubbing hands through his hair.

“They did seventy-two seasons, of course it’s always on. And the aliens seem to like it. Well, I heard the Vulcans have a problem with it for some reason, but they don’t like anything.”

“Off,” Ivan says. The screen darkens. Looking irritated, he falls back on the bed with a thump. Dust puffs up around him. He mutters something under his breath in Russian.

“What was that?” Jim says.

“Fucking Mars,” Ivan says, and sneezes.

“I hear Arcadia and Utopia are very nice.”

Ivan makes a jerking off motion with one hand.

“Right. I’m gonna clean up.” Jim heads for the door by the entrance alcove.

The bathroom is okay, probably about as good as you’re going to get here. It’s almost sanitary, just dust in the corners and a few dark spots that Jim doesn’t inspect too closely. He finds a sani-wrapped toothbrush and cleans his teeth at the sink. Even Martian water tastes better than puke.

The toilet isn’t too scary, either. Jim uses it and feels better. He’s had to go for the last half-hour, but
there hasn’t exactly been time for a pee break, between all the drama and vomiting.

He turns on the shower—there is a sonic function, more environmental but fuck it—and water comes streaming out of the walls. It has the bitter reek of minerals, but at least the color is clear and it’s semi-warm. Jim stands there for a few minutes, letting the shower wash away the smells and sensations of the last few hours. All of Michael’s residue. Maybe when it’s gone, Michael will be gone with it. Better to think of him of him as dead. One he’s immured on Triton, he may as well be. Better not to think of him at all.

Jim hits the dispenser, gets a handful of gel, and soaps himself all over. That’s better—it’s citrus, not pine, nothing here smells like Michael. He doesn’t have to think about him here, how it must have been for him during his last shower. What Michael’s thoughts would have been.

One more hour and it’s safe, a fast ship out of the system, me and Jim together, amazing that he was right there when the shit went down, luck of the fucking Irish indeed. We’ll start again on Risa, a small operation, nothing heavy, not how it’s been on Terra, all the bullshit since Rory got sick, the impossible choices. Christ no wonder I have high blood pressure. Time for baccarat and margaritas on Risa, time to rest, no nightmares, the ghosts can’t follow me there. Rosie and the kids will come, Rory Annabel Katie, they’ll have choices, better ones than I had, I’ll see to that. I’ll take care of them and it will be okay, like it hasn’t been since Declan. Jim is so like him, a good man, I can feel it, not a pussy but good, it will be different on Risa, I will be different—

Jim’s good mood, balanced as it was on a shaky plane of shock and denial, shudders to pieces.

He sinks to his knees and puts his hands over his face. His tears are hotter than the water, more bitter. He isn’t mourning Michael Quinn, who was a terrible person. All the love in the world couldn’t make him different. If Michael ever thought that, it wasn’t true. Some choices you can’t take back, there are things you do that don’t wash off, if you shower for a hundred years. That’s who Jim’s tears are for, the person he won’t be after this. He thought his eyes had been opened long ago. Desert suns had scorched him to the core, nothing could touch him again. But he realizes now that experience doesn’t work that way. Innocence is an onion, it comes apart in layers, each one more painful than the last. You lose pieces of yourself until there’s nothing left.

A firm hand on the back of his neck. Ivan is kneeling beside him, heedless of the water spraying his clothes. “Jim, what is—”

“Am I him?” Jim whispers, watching the water swirl down the drain. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

Ivan turns off the shower and helps Jim get to his feet. “You are whoever you need to be. Today you proved it. You were so good today. If not for you, Michael Quinn would be lost to us.”

Jim crosses his arms over his chest, running hands up his biceps. “I can still feel him. I thought I could wash him off, but I can’t. Jesus Christ, I can’t stand this.” He feels tears starting again. Yesterday it would have humiliated him to cry in front of Ivan. That Jim isn’t here.

Ivan takes Jim’s face in his hands. With his thumbs he wipes Jim’s cheeks. “I know how it is at the end of a mission. You think you will never get out of the box, but you will. In time, you will know yourself again.”

“I won’t be the same.”

“No. You were a boy before. An extraordinary one, but still a child in many ways. Now you are a man.” Ivan presses his lips to Jim’s forehead, whispering against his skin. “First times are always painful. You know this. I was older than you after my first mission, but it affected me the same way.
I cried too.”

“How did you get through it?”

“Winona helped me. An extraordinary person, your mother. You are very like her.”

Jim pulls back. He looks at Ivan. “How did she help you?”

One corner of Ivan’s mouth turns up. “In a different way than I will help you.” He nuzzles Jim’s neck as his hand starts moving down.

“Winnie said no fun and games,” Jim says, even as he feels the familiar flush of heat bloom under Ivan’s touch.

“She worries too much. She forgets that you are a man now,” Ivan says. “But I remember.”

He drops to his knees. He looks up at Jim. He’s not even touching him at the moment, but the look is enough to get Jim from mildly interested to desperate. Rock hard, when five minutes ago he couldn’t have imagined feeling anything down there, maybe not ever again. Ivan is amazing.

Ivan puts his face against Jim’s thigh. Jim can feel the subtle whisper of breath upon his aching cock. “You have had a long day. If you are tired—” Ivan pauses, giving Jim a long lick. “I can stop.” He runs his tongue around the swollen ridge of Jim’s member. “Perhaps it’s better if we stop.” He flexes as if to stand.

Jim catches him by the hair. “Ivan—” he gasps.

“You have to ask,” Ivan says, his eyes burning up at him. “I will give you whatever you want, but you must say it, lyubov moya. You need to say it.”

For a minute, Jim hesitates. For all his need, he doesn’t ask immediately. It seems so wrong, being here with Ivan not an hour after he sent Michael Quinn to his doom. He loves Ivan in a way he never loved Michael, but it still doesn’t sit right, this carnal purification. Washing off Michael not with water, but with spunk. What kind of man does that? Is this who Jim is now?

He lets go of Ivan’s hair. He strokes his face. The movement is regretful, not sexy.

“Suck me off,” he says. “Then take me in the bedroom, put me on my hands and knees and fuck me. Shove in your cock as deep and hard as you can. Comprendes?”

The smile Ivan gives him isn’t sexy, either. It’s that of a teacher seeing a favored but troubled student pass a difficult test. It’s the smile of a mentor. A proud father.

“Hai,” he says. “Close your eyes. See nothing, hear nothing. Feel nothing but me.”

Jim obeys. He loves to watch Ivan do this, usually, see his eyes and his mouth. But it isn’t hard to follow orders now. To lose the dingy bath from view, its dust and spots; to ignore the smell of soap and bitter water. The tired whirr of the fan, the drip of water jets, the gritty feel of worn tile on his back, how could they compare to Ivan, taking Jim over with a slow and expert tongue? Better even than the sight of the man, so beautiful as he works, with the cold intensity he brings to everything. So much heat beneath his surface chill, molten lava under a crust of ice and iron.

Ivan can make Jim come quicker than it takes to say it, but tonight he takes his time. He tastes every millimeter of Jim’s shaft, working his way from the tender head to the rosy root. It feels ticklish at first, like Ivan is just teasing him, the prickles of pleasure from his efforts almost an accident. But as
he continues, moving slowly, so slowly, one hard hand cupping Jim’s testes, squeezing them gently, sensation begins to pool in the pit of Jim’s stomach. It grows hotter and heavier and he grows dizzier, as if every drop of blood is racing to his cock.

He gasps and tries to thrust into Ivan’s mouth, but Ivan holds him fast against the wall with one hand, giving Jim’s balls a sharper warning squeeze with the other. Jim swallows and holds still, what if Ivan stopped! But Ivan does not stop, he just keeps swallowing him, moving with slow, sweet focus, like the most devoted of constrictors. Jim keeps his eyes closed, he lets himself see nothing, hear nothing, sense nothing but what Ivan is doing to him. It feels as if Ivan has always been doing it. This is a private world of just the two of them, they will stay this way forever, the pleasure building and building until Jim is crazy with it. Blissfully mad.

When his orgasm hits, it is a shock, the sudden explosion that comes at the end of the world. But then Ivan is standing, holding Jim as he endures the aftershocks. That’s wonderful, almost better than the fellatio itself.

Jim opens his eyes. “Wow. That was—” he cuts off with a giant yawn. “Sorry. It’s been—”

“A long day, yes. But we’re not finished.”

Ivan is half-smiling at him, but his eyes are serious. “You asked for something else.” He nips at Jim’s ear. “My cock inside you, as hard and deep as it will go.”

Jim shivers, and not just because he’s standing naked in a shower, dripping with cooling water. He thinks for half a second about begging off—besides the fatigue, he is already sore from what Michael did to him. But the thought of Michael is what keeps him from doing anything but nod, and letting Ivan lead him into the bedroom.

Without needing to be reminded, he climbs on the bed and gets on his hands and knees. He keeps his head bent, trying to steady his breathing as he hears Ivan undressing behind him. He shouldn’t be nervous, this isn’t anything they haven’t done before, with more paraphernalia. But Ivan doesn’t need gadgets or bindings to be cruel, and Jim isn’t sure of his limits today. But he craves the cruelty as well as fears it; he needs it. So he says nothing. Just breathes.

A hand clamps the back of his neck. Jim jumps, then makes himself be still.

“You’re tense,” Ivan says, tracing fingers down Jim’s back. “Very tense.”

“I’m okay.”

Ivan takes his hand away, and when it returns it’s slick with lube. Of course, Ivan carried lube with him on a secret extraction mission to Mars. Ivan is amazing.

He spreads the lube over Jim’s back and down his spine, working as carefully as a man currying a horse. His hand goes lower, to the swell of Jim’s ass, then to the cleft of his cheeks.

Suddenly, he shoves a finger inside. It burns like a soldering iron. Jim cries out before he can stop himself. Ivan removes it at once.

“Sit up,” he orders.

Jim does, leaning back on his heels and trying not to squirm. Face blank, Ivan grabs Jim’s chin.

“What did he do to you?” His voice is blanker than his face, but there’s a seething edge to it. Lava boiling up between frozen rocks.
“Nothing creative. He just got too enthusiastic, and we were low on lube.”

“Suka zloyebuchaya.” Ivan growls every syllable. “He’s lucky he’s in custody.”

“It’s mostly on me. I pushed him hard. You know that can make people—weird.”

“Michael Quinn is a sadistic piece of shit. You brought out nothing that was not already there.” Ivan takes a breath. “We should stop.”

“He’s still inside me,” Jim says quietly. “I had to let him in, it was the only way to make him stay. I miss him, how fucked up is that? I feel him all the way down. That’s what really hurts.” He blinks hard, looking at his hands. “I love you, but I feel him. I can’t help it.”

Ivan grimaces. “I hate this fucking business sometimes.” He thinks a minute, hand tapping his thigh. He’s hard, but that doesn’t seem to be figuring in his calculations. Finally, he looks back at Jim. “Lie down,” he says. “I want you on your back. I need to see your face.”

Jim gets in position. “Put your hands over your head and grab the spindles of the headboard,” Ivan orders. “Do not move after that. You are not to twist, or thrust, or tax yourself in any way. All action will be taken by me. If you disobey, I’ll stop. No tears will move me.”

Jim nods and grabs the spindles. He doesn’t smile, because that would piss Ivan off, but he wants to. He can’t help it, his head already filling up with that lovely fog, the sweet fuzziness that always comes when he can let go, not think, let somebody else be in charge. He couldn’t do it with Michael earlier. Jim had to be too aware, keeping Michael close, locked in. Michael, he can see him like he’s still here, like this is the cottage down the street, a bedroom so much like this one. The last time Michael thrust into Jim, it hurt like being ripped in two, but Jim took it. He had to, it was his pain to take. He was the only one there.

The fog ebbs, in its place a memory as bright and sharp as a blade. Jim bites his lip.


Ivan kisses him, plundering Jim’s mouth with his tongue. As he does, a lube-slicked hand slides down Jim’s chest, over his belly, only pausing to tease his stiffening cock. Then behind his balls, pressure on that oh-so-sensitive strip of skin. Jim can’t quite stifle a cry.

“You can speak,” Ivan says. “Just don’t move.”

He pushes Jim’s legs up and shoves a pillow underneath him. He places a kiss on Jim’s belly, then on his cock. Then—

“Jesus Christ,” Jim hisses, as he feels Ivan’s tongue in his asshole. Oh God, so good, flicking warmth so much better than hard digits. He feels himself slowly opening up, the warmth going deeper. Like a serpent inside of him, one made of velvet, hot and wet, sliding against his inner walls. A few glints of pain but mostly just this slithering pleasure making him shudder, cry out, nerve endings ablaze. Slippery heat spiraling up, he can’t take it, he will die if this doesn’t stop, but the soft thrusting velvet keeps moving, it goes on tormenting slick, shivering muscles. He wants to move but he can’t, he must obey, he has to take it, he has to—

Jim comes with a cry, so loud they probably heard him on Phobos. But he doesn’t move.
“Good boy.” Ivan nips playfully at Jim’s inner thigh. “Now look at me.”

Blinking blurry eyes, Jim tries to focus. Ivan’s usually pale cheeks are flushed, eyes sparkling like mirrors. His cock, always generous, is more swollen than usual, the head purple with lust.

“I’m going to fuck you,” Ivan says. “As much as I’ve prepared you, it’s going to hurt. You’ll probably bleed. But you won’t feel him anymore.”

He takes Jim’s face in his hands. “I want you to look in the mirror. Watch me fuck you. I want you to see me come deep inside you. After this, I’ll be the only one there.”

Jim can’t speak. He just nods.

Ivan takes the lube vial from the bedside table. He slathers his cock with wetness, then runs two slicked fingers in and around Jim’s asshole. Jim winces but stays still.

Ivan hooks Jim’s legs over his shoulders. “Don’t move. Just look.”

Jim stares up at the ceiling. He sees them together, the image hypnotizing as always, two men colored so alike, built so alike. Like watching your own reflection starting to fuck you, begin to work into you carefully.

Ivan thrusts in so slowly, he seems to be moving by millimeters. It burns but not so badly, Jim can take it. Then Ivan gives another, deeper thrust, and another. That hurts. Not like the last time, but like the first. Not the first time that Jim fucked somebody, the first time he got fucked. He was fifteen; He doesn’t remember the man’s name now. He just remembers the pain.

Ivan thrusts again. Jim gasps, looking into Ivan’s eyes. They’re brighter than Jim has ever seen them, they shine like Phobos. Not just from lust but from pain, Jim’s pain. In this moment, Jim loves the pain because he can feel Ivan loving it. Hurt is what Ivan was meant to do, as Jim was meant to be hurt. Two halves of the same strange creature, a snake swallowing its tail, savoring its own agony.

Jim looks up in the mirror. He sees Ivan thrusting deep inside him, deeper than Michael could ever go. The hurt is shockingly intimate, being brutalized by your own reflection.

Or maybe you’re the reflection. He’s the real one, not you. The pain you’re feeling is a mirror-image of his pain, your pleasure an echo of his own. All you can feel is what he’s feeling. Once he’s come inside you, no one else will be there. Not even you.

With one last thrust, Ivan comes. He pulls out, pulls Jim close. Murmuring in his ear, Russian that sounds sweetly filthy. He may be Ivan but he’s still just a man, and in a minute he’s dozing.

Jim reaches under himself, exploring. He brings his hand up and sees the blood on his fingers. He bled the other first time, too. He was just a kid; it freaked him out. He’s not freaked now.

He looks up at the mirror, staring at the man who stares back at him. The man smiles, and Jim smiles back. They are both bloody, and happy. They are not here.

A little later, Jim awakes alone. He sits up, blinking in the dimness. The only illumination is a novena candle on the bedside table. Not unusual, you can find them everywhere here, bars and bodegas, street vendors and taco stands. A cheap souvenir that’s also useful for lighting spliffs, who wouldn’t want that? You can probably find some candles fulfilling their original function, in homes in the nicer part of town, even in some of the shabby flats and flophouses of the south quarter. In churches too, of course, though Memnonia doesn’t have many of those.
The one on the table is red, with one of the more popular designs. A young woman circled by chains, burning inside a river of flames. But her face is not agonized or fearful; she is happy. Anima Sola, the lonely soul, she is where she wants to be. Bound, beautiful, burning forever.

Jim blinks at her a minute. Then he smells another, more piquant flame, and looks up.

Ivan is standing naked at the window, smoking and looking out at the craters. In the uncertain light, his eyes are transparent. They pick up the weak glow from the window, the candle flame. They catch the light like water, reflecting every color. Any color you could want.

He is so beautiful, more than Jim will ever be, for all their superficial resemblance. Everything about him is better defined: the gleaming muscles of his chest, the chiseled bones of his face, the perfect curves of his lips. There are depths in those limpid eyes that Jim will never reach. He is not envious; he’s glad. Jim gets to spend the rest of his life looking at Ivan, who is amazing.

Jim rises, going to him. He’s sore all over, one place in particular, but he does not hesitate. He stops beside him, putting a hand on his lover’s back. Ivan’s skin is cool and damp, he must have showered. When Jim puts his head on his shoulder he smells oranges and lemons, the soap from the bathroom. But the man’s real scent is underneath, a deeply musky scent, pungent as a wolf’s.

“What are you looking at?” Jim says.

“The moons,” Ivan says, exhaling smoke.

Phobos is nearly full but still small by Terran standards, and dim. Not far away from him is tiny Deimos, a bright pinpoint not much bigger than a star. They have none of the frosty elegance of Luna. Mars’ moons hover in her sky like doubtful guests.

“Phobos is hollow, you know,” Ivan says. “Just a thin crust of ice and iron, then—nothing. That’s one of the reasons he spins so fast around his mother planet. He rises twice a day, as if desperate for her attention. But one day he will not rise. In a few million years, her gravity will pull him in completely, he’ll break up on her surface. Or if he doesn’t, he’ll disintegrate in orbit, become a cloud of dust around her. She’ll have a ring then, like Saturn. Do you think she’ll miss him? I don’t think so. She’ll just enjoy her new ornament.”

“He was an asteroid hurtling through space. He shouldn’t have gotten so close to her. She’ll destroy him one day.” Ivan takes a last drag, then drops his cigarette and crushes it under his foot. “But there is still hope for Deimos.”

Jim considers the craters. “It’s beautiful out there. We should come back some time.”

“I hate this place,” Ivan says. “I won’t ever come back.” His voice is calm, but his fingertips are pressing into the window until they’re white. Clutching at nothing.

“You’re from Mars,” Jim says slowly, sounding out the revelation as it hits him. “You’re not Russian, you were born in Memnonia.”

“My mother was Russian. They traffick a lot of girls from there, it’s been going on for a long time. My mother was from Petrozavodsk. Thirteen years old when she came here. She lived to be nearly twenty-eight. That’s a long time for a whore in Memnonia. But she was very pretty, she didn’t start out on the streets. That’s where she ended, though. It’s how it always ends.”
Jim is silent a minute. “Ivan, if you ever want to—”

“I don’t. Not ever. I can’t describe it. I know twelve languages, and I have no words for it.” Ivan turns his head, fixing Jim with his eyes. They glitter in the light like furious diamonds. “I’ll never ask you to be faithful, Jim. I don’t even ask that you always tell me the truth. In the world we live in, such promises are not practical. But don’t ask me to come back here, and don’t ask me to talk about my boyhood. Those are the only promises I want.”

“Okay,” Jim rasps.

“I know you have been through terrible things. I’m glad you confided in me about Kevin Riley. I do not dismiss the horrors you went through, but—they are not what I went through. Tarsus IV broke your heart. It did not touch your soul.”

Jim takes Ivan’s face in his hands. “You have a soul. I can feel it.”

Ivan’s eyes are bright, not with fury but sorrow. “I’m a good actor. You don’t know how good.”

“Bullshit. You’re not damned. If you were, I wouldn’t care.”

Jim kisses him. Ivan tastes like cigarettes and tears. It reminds him so much of another kiss, on another world. Two lost people clinging to each other in the dust and chaos. Ivan isn’t Kevin, and Jim doesn’t want him to be. He doesn’t want anyone but Ivan, he never will. After all he has done today, everything they just did together, he shouldn’t feel it, this desperate desire. He wants Ivan to take him again, make him bleed again, tear him to pieces. Whatever Ivan wants.

He breaks the kiss, he looks into Ivan’s face. What’s he’s feeling must be on his own, because Ivan smiles a little. “You should sleep, dorogi.”

Jim shakes his head. “I want—”

“No more love,” Ivan says. “No more promises. You’ve had enough of both for one day.”

“I would do anything for you,” Jim says. “Anything at all. My soul be damned.” The words are heavy on his lips. They feel like a prayer to unknown gods.

Ivan looks at him for a long moment. He opens his mouth to speak, but he is cut off by a sharp ring. The phone he left on the bedside table, calling him insistently.

He walks over and picks it up. Listens a moment, then mouths at Jim, Winona. “Yes, he’s here,” Ivan tells her. “He’s resting.” He winks at Jim. Then his face blanks, as he goes silent again. “I understand. I’m coming now.” He flips the phone shut. “Your mother needs me. Something about the warrants. I’m to meet her in the lobby.”

“I’ll come with you.” Jim looks around for his robe. It feels a little weird, walking around a strange city dressed like Arthur Dent, but it won’t be the weirdest thing Jim has done today.

“No. Back to bed. Now.” When Jim makes a face: “You said you’d do anything for me.”

Jim sits on the bed, sighing. “I meant weird sex stuff. Smiting your enemies. Shit like that.”

“Well, it’s your fault for not being precise. I told you not to make any more promises today.” Ivan’s tone is teasing, but he leans down and gives Jim a serious smack on the lips.

“I know what you really meant,” Ivan whispers, looking into Jim’s eyes. “It means more to me than I
can tell you. In Standard, anyway. You have to learn Russian, *lyubov moya.*”

“I’ve heard it’s pretty hard.”

“Not as hard as Orion. It will take time, but we have plenty of that.”

Jim nods. Ivan him pushes him down on the bed and pulls the covers over him.

Ivan dresses quickly, then walks to the door and opens it. He pauses on the threshold. Jim can only see his silhouette, anonymous as a shadow. But he can feel Ivan’s true aura from here. A buzzing energy that is like Winnie’s, and nothing like it.

“I’ll return soon. I love you,” Ivan says. Before Jim can answer, the door whooshes shut.

Jim turns over. He stares at the candle. Anima Sola, enthralled by the flames. Damned and delighted. Maybe that’s her secret: Once she lost her soul, she was never lonely again.

She’s still burning as Jim falls asleep, her fires following him into his dreams.
Winnie pulls her jacket tighter around her. Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey out here, and she’s stuck trying to the punch in the motherfucking ten-digit security code. She has thirty seconds before the alarms start shrieking loud enough to wake the dead. Worse, her mother. She’s usually more than fast enough, but her fingers turned to little pink popsicles on the walk back from Vin’s house. Should have taken the airbike, but Kate’s locked that up, too.

Winnie mistypes two more numbers. “Come on, bitch, focus,” she mutters. She blows on her hands and punches the back arrow key.

Fifteen seconds. Shit. Winnie flexes her fingers and tries to concentrate.

A month ago, sneaking out would have been a helluva lot easier. No security system then. There’s no crime to speak of in Riverside, and they don’t have much worth stealing anyway, unless somebody likes creepy crucifixes. Five thousand credits, just to keep one skinny little blonde in her bedroom at night. Winnie is lucky Kate couldn’t swing the ten-thousand credit system, the one with subinfrared bioscans. Winnie really would’ve been fucked then. Or not fucked, that’s the point of all this.

Kate thought Winnie would never figure out the alarm code. Clearly, Winnie knows her mother a lot better than her mother knows her.

Five seconds. Okay, don’t think about it: Just do it. Winnie leans in and types.

4379292197: Mark’s time and date of birth. Of course.

The keypad flashes green. Winnie scrapes the snow off her boots and eases open the front door.

The living room is dark except for the big Christmas tree in the center, glowing with dozens of white lights. At the top is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed angel with an expression that’s supposed to be ethereal but just comes off as brain dead. She’s wearing a poufy lace dress that lights up.

“Looks like her ass is on fire,” Winnie says, when Mark brings it home as a present for Kate.

“Don’t be crude,” her mother says, before turning back to her son. “Thank you, sweetheart. I can’t believe you found time to buy her. I know how busy they keep you at the Academy.”

“Too busy to buy something tasteful,” Winnie mutters.

Kate’s blue eyes are cold. “I know thinking of others is an alien concept to you, Winona. But you could at least have the decency not to parade your ignorance.” She takes Mark’s arm, smiling up at him. “Help me put the angel on the tree. She’s so beautiful, I can’t wait to see her in place.”

Winnie scowls at Mark’s stupid angel, but it doesn’t slow her progress. Her mother is a sound sleeper and her bedroom is down the hall behind a solid oak door, but no sense taking chances. Winnie’s luck has been shit lately.

Somebody, probably Mark, left the living room comscreen on. Bouncy Christmas music follows her
across the living room.

*I don't want a lot for Christmas
There is just one thing I need
I don't care about the presents
Underneath the Christmas tree
I just want you for my own
More than you could ever know
Make my wish come true
All I want for Christmas is you*

Usually she hates this stuff worse than tacky tree toppers, but right now she’s glad about it. The music will help hide the sound of footsteps on the creaky floorboards. The song is disgustingly catchy, it’s hard to avoid walking in rhythm to it.

*I don't need to hang my stockings
There upon the fireplace
Santa Claus won't make me happy
With a toy on Christmas day
I just want you for my own
More than you could ever know
Make my wish come true
All I want for Christmas is you*

*Ha-ha, suck on that, Kate,* Winnie thinks as she reaches the stairs. Mariah Carey is screeching like a Christmas banshee. Nobody can hear a thing, even the groans of a three-hundred-year-old staircase. Winnie will be in bed with the proverbial dancing sugarplums before anyone is wiser.

Grinning, she steps on the bottom stair. Mariah cuts off mid-screech as all the lights come on.

“Good evening, Winona Yakovna.”

*Shit. Shit shit fucking shit.*

Slowly, Winnie turns around, pasting a big grin on her face. “Hey, Alexei! How’s it hanging?”

Normally this wouldn’t be the best way to ingratiate yourself with your granddad, but Winnie’s is really weird. Even weirder than Vin’s, with his rants against the Federation and how they’re giving Terra to the green-blooded, pointy-eared bastards. (Vin’s parents are looking into homes.)

For one thing, Alexei doesn’t look like he’s supposed to: silver-haired, yeah, but slim and well-built, eternally dressed in jeans and tight dark t-shirts. *Wow, your grandfather is sexy,* her friend Amy Miller said. *He must’ve been like twelve when your Mom was born.* That’s bullshit—Amy is such a slut—but it must be admitted that Alexei is striking to look at. He’s not handsome in a regular way, like a model or a netcaster. His face is too square, his mouth too thin; his forehead hangs too low. He has a long scar under one eye. But once you see his eyes, you’d never think he was plain. They are a deep crystalline blue that must have been the same color as Winnie’s, once. But Alexei’s are not like hers. They look like they’ve seen things: awful, amazing things. Being a freelance reporter for one of the financial nets must be a lot more exciting than it sounds.

She wonders how old he is. She looked him up in a few databases—five, actually—and not one of the birthdates agree. You’d think a journalist would make sure his bio is more accurate.

Whatever his age, he doesn’t look like an old man, and he doesn’t move like one. He doesn’t talk
like one, either: It’s kind of fun, watching Kate flinch every time he says the f-word. The cruder Winnie is, the better he seems to like it. And he fucking hates being called Grandfather.

“That’s a title, not a name. Shall I address you as Cadet?”

“My apologies, Sir. I was trying to be polite.”

“You’re a good boy, Mark. Go sit over there.”

“I’m sorry, Sir?”

“Talk to your mother, I know she enjoys your politeness. I have no fucking use for it.”

Alexei Ivanov is kind of awesome, in his weird way. Winnie wouldn’t mind him, though it’s strange having a foulmouthed hipster grandpa you never met suddenly show up for Christmas. She wouldn’t mind, if he didn’t watch her all the time. Not in a sexy way—Winnie knows all about inappropriate attention, she has since she was thirteen and her choir director put his hand up her skirt. (He said it was an accident, right. It was also an accident when Winnie stomped on his foot and broke three toes.) Winnie knows inappropriate; Alexei’s isn’t that kind of attention. He has this same expression when he checks the stock markets every morning: patient, waiting, assessing. Like she’s a penny stock that might pay big dividends one day.

All this flits through Winnie’s head in the time it takes her to turn. She finally focuses on one salient fact. Alexei likes her, more than he likes Mark. Maybe she can talk her way out of this.

She walks over to where he’s sitting by the fireplace. Alexei is very still—that’s why she didn’t see him when she came in. He has that quality, it’s part of his weirdness. He can be so still, it’s like he’s transparent. A mirror that reflects everything but shows you nothing.

Sitting still, he stares up at her from the big pink wing chair. “What are you doing out so late, devotchka? You’re not supposed to be out at all.”

“Baking pies,” Winnie says, thinking fast. “With Sarah Yoder. For charity. We do it every year, they give them out to the homeless in Iowa City, they’re really good. The pies I mean, not the homeless. I couldn’t skip it just ‘cause I’m—you know, in trouble. It’s for the homeless.”

“Lies,” Alexei says.

“I’m not lying.” Winnie fumbles inside her jacket and unwraps something from a wad of silver tissue paper. “See? I have a rolling pin and everything.”

“Which is clearly new and unused. Your stockings are inside out, and you have a suck mark on your neck. You’ve been fucking the farm boy.”

“What? I wouldn’t—” She cuts off as Alexei raises an eyebrow at her. He looks disappointed, but it’s not the disappointment she’s used to seeing in Kate’s face. Alexei looks like her favorite Physics professor does when she blows a quiz because she’s too hungover. “Come on, Winona,” she can hear his peculiar British accent now. “I’m not expecting you to calculate the relative gravitation of quantum tunnels to the forty-second decimal. You can do a bit better than that.”

She’s too cold and tired: Love hangovers are the worst. She looks at her boots. “Um.” Shit.

“You should prepare an excuse before you climb out of your bedroom window,” Alexei says. “How did you expect to stand up to interrogation without a proper cover story?”
“I wasn’t planning on being interrogated,” Winnie says tightly. “Nobody’s supposed to be up.”

“True, your mother and brother go to bed with the sun. But I’m a night owl. Very careless, not to be sure of my habits before beginning your mission.”

“Please don’t tell,” Winnie says. “I’m already in so much trouble. If Mom knows I went out to see Vin, she’s gonna stick me in that place in Indiana. Magdalene Institute for Young Women—it’s a loony bin. I’ll be in there with bulimics and chicks who start fires. Please, Alexei.” She lets her eyes fill with tears. The thought of the place really should make her cry, but it doesn’t. Beneath the cold and fatigue is what’s always there: anger. Who told him to stick his nose in?

“I suppose that works on the farm boy,” Alexei says. “But if you want your counterfeit tears to affect someone besides the young and stupid, you should drop your gaze and look more defeated. Unclench your hands, don’t ball them up like you’re about to strike. You must look pitiful if you want me to pity you.”

Winnie narrows her eyes. “Fuck you.”

“At last, an honest response. Sit down. Talk with me.” He sets the book he’s been holding on the table. Not a PADD, an expensive-looking hardcover with its title in gold on the spine: *Kim.*


“He was not being serious. It’s a difficult concept for your generation to grasp. You understand sarcasm but not irony.” Alexei picks up a glass from the coffee table and takes a drink. It looks like water, but Winnie knows it isn’t.

“I’m not an idiot, Alexei.”

“If you were, I would have let you sneak upstairs thinking your sad little deception had worked. I have more respect for you. So now we will talk, and you will tell me what I want to know.”

Right now she’d rather chat with Vin’s old racist grandpa. She raises her chin. “If I don’t?”

“Katerina sleeps down the hall. A shout would wake her. Do you want me to raise my voice?”

“Fucking blackmail,” Winnie says, and plops on the edge of a sofa cushion.

“Yet you submit to it, because you realize I hold all the cards. You are not an idiot, *devotchka.*”

Alexei is silent a moment, swirling the ice in his glass. “Why are you grounded for six months?”

“Mom didn’t say?”

“She did not. ‘The matter is too sordid. Don’t press me, Alexei.’” Alexei’s gruff baritone has gone up an octave, his accented speech flattening to overenunciated Standard. It’s not so much an impression of Kate as an aural painting. Winnie is impressed despite herself.

“I went to a bar with some friends of mine. Shotkickers, it’s in downtown Iowa City.”

“How did you get in?”

“Fake ID. There’s a local guy who makes them. Fifty credits.”

“Let me see it.”

Winnie sighs and reaches in her jacket. A miracle, that she managed to hold onto it. That night they
were too busy searching her for weapons to look closely at the contents of her wallet. The cops didn’t find anything but hairspray and condoms. That’s why she got off with misdemeanor battery instead of aggravated assault, a felony. She was lucky, but it doesn’t feel that way. She isn’t satisfied with how the night turned out. Not at all.

She flips the ID to Alexei, who catches it one-handed. He inspects it carefully. “This is quite good for fifty credits.”

“It wasn’t that good to begin with. I scanned the one he did and cleaned up the holograms. It’s not hard with the right software. Did Sarah’s and Amy’s, too. I told them to wear a lot of make-up and keep their mouths shut, I’d talk us through. I knew the bouncer at the door wouldn’t give us too much shit anyway, we were three hot chicks in miniskirts. Great for business.”

“Nicely done,” Alexei says, giving the ID back. There’s no sarcasm in his voice. No irony, either. He looks at her with real approval. He looks at her the way her mother looks at Mark.

“Thanks,” Winnie says, and feels her cheeks get pink. She ducks her head, picking at the polish on her fingernails, a deep green called Divine Decadence. Her mother hates it.

“So,” Alexei continues, “you talked you and your friends into the bar. What happened there?”

“Nothing at first. We had some drinks, danced with some guys. There were these three really cute ones from ISU. Two of them were sweethearts—funny, not trying the hard sell. The third was an asshole. There’s always one. I let it go at first, he was hitting on Sarah. She’s a jerk magnet; she looks too sweet. Guys are such dicks.” Winnie digs her green nails into her knees.

“The point, devotchka, the point.”

“Amy and I were dancing with the two sweethearts. We look around, and Sarah and the asshole are gone. We found them behind the bar in the corner by the recyclers. He had her pinned up against the wall. She was struggling, but he was twice her size. Not a fair fight.”

“You intervened?”

“I ruptured one of his testicles. He’s gonna have to have surgery or something.” Winnie shrugs, tapping her steel-toed Doc Martens together.

“Pizdato,” Alexei says, tipping his glass at her.

“Huh?”

“‘Fucking sweet’ would be the closest translation,” Alexei says. “You were grounded for this?”

“I was arrested. The guy said they were just making out, he was really drunk, he didn’t know Sarah wasn’t into it. Bullshit! He was a fucking predator.” Winnie couldn’t make the cops understand. She could feel it, the nasty energy coming off him. There was no way to prove it. Nobody believed her, not even Sarah. Miss Sweetie Pie, Winnie will never trust her again.

“Are you sorry for rupturing the mudak’s testicle? I know you did not cry when they arrested you. But do you regret intervening?”

Alexei’s voice is calm, he sounds like he’s talking about the weather. But his eyes are on her, like they have been since he got here three days ago. It disturbs her, just like it does when Dr. Smith’s bright brown gaze falls on her a bit too long. Smith is a cutie pie, no doubt about it, spiky hair, freckles and all. But Smith is also a predator, much different than the one at the bar. He’d have fried
that asshole with one flash of his spectacles. A just man, in his way. Terrifying.

Her grandfather is a predator. A just one, like the Doctor. That’s why she can tell him the truth.

“If I’d had a knife, I’d have cut his balls off.”

Alexei smiles at her. She’s never seen him smile before. He reaches out and puts a hand on her wrist. His fingers are warm, and not just from the fireplace. Winnie knows all about Psi-scores. Her mother couldn’t afford real training for her, even if Kate was willing to spend the money on something a lot of people still see as basically witchcraft. But Winnie’s read as much as she can about projective empathy, she’s worked on her own skills. There are a lot of basic exercises on the nets, crude but better than nothing. But you wouldn’t need to be a Betazoid with a Ph.D. in Parapsychology to feel Alexei. His aura would make a Mesmer dial read TILT.

He squeezes gently, fingers encircling her wrist. She feels her own aura flare like someone threw accelerant on a bonfire. An answering flare in his aura—the energies bounce back and forth like a sunbeam caught between two mirrors. The rush of it makes her woozy.

“All these years,” Alexei says softly, “and here she is at last. With Katerina, in fucking Iowa.”

“Hmmh?” Winnie says, dazed.

“Just ruminating on the ironies of fate.” He releases her. Winnie rubs at her wrist, frowning at the sudden chill. It clears her head, but the clarity isn’t entirely welcome.

“You should go to bed,” he says. “Katerina may wake up earlier than usual. She’s anxious that everything be perfect for Mark’s visit.” Alexei smirks. “Mine too, of course.”

Winnie looks at him a moment longer. Then she sighs and heads for the staircase.

“Winona Yakovna!”

She stops. “Yeah?”

“Why are you carrying a rolling pin?”

“Oh, that. Vin got it for me as a Christmas present.”

Alexei throws back his head and laughs. He laughs and laughs.

“No, it’s not that bad! He’s not a dick, seriously. Vin’s mom makes these great apple pies, it’s like an old family recipe. She doesn’t teach it to anybody but family. Vin’s convinced her to teach it to me.” Winnie kicks at the bottom stair with her steely boot tip. “He really likes me.”

“I’m sure he does,” Alexei says, wiping his eyes. “Poor bastard.”

“He wants to marry me,” Winnie says, raising her chin. “Next year, when I’m eighteen.”

“Will you?” Alexei doesn’t look amused now.

“I like him. Better than I like any of the other jerk-offs around here, anyway. I’m almost done with my BA. What am I supposed to do, join Starfleet? Be a good fucking soldier like Mark? Even if I wanted to, I’d never get in. Not with a record.”

“Starfleet does make exceptions. Sympathetic ears can be found, if you know where to look.” He finishes his vodka, smacking his lips. “Enough! There will be time to talk about it later. Go to bed,
tomorrow is a big day. You’ve been a good girl, what will Santa put in your stocking?”

“I’m not good,” Winnie says, fingers tightening on the banister. “I’m not Mark.”

“Your brother is like my father. He will be a fine officer: competent, dutiful, loyal as a dog. You are not a dog, though your mother would like to make you one. You will never heel to a master’s voice. But that doesn’t mean you are without value.” He fixes her with his bottomless blue gaze. “Space is very large and very dark. Without creatures who can hunt in the night, many innocent souls will be lost. The Federation needs its wolves, Winona. The farther out we go, the more valuable they become.”

Winnie fights back tears—real ones. Alexei’s words seem to echo inside of her, they echo all the way down. They are the answer to a question she didn’t even know she was asking.

“Alexei—” she starts, voice cracking, but he cuts her off with a gesture.

“Go to bed,” he says. “We will talk more of this, I promise. I keep my promises, devotchka.”

Winnie can feel his warmth again, though he is nowhere near her. It seems to reach places inside her that not even Vin Krider can touch. She hasn’t felt anything like it since she was very small, and her father would scoop her in his arms and carry her to bed. Total trust, total safety. Alexei isn’t safe, but can he be trusted? Winnie isn’t sure.

She tears her eyes away and runs upstairs. Below her, the music starts again.

_Oh I don’t want a lot for Christmas_  
_THIS is all I’m asking for_  
_I just want to see my baby_  
_Standing right outside my door_  
_Oh, I just want you for my own_  
_More than you could ever know_  
_Make my wish come true_  
_Baby, all I want for Christmas is you_  

They don’t talk right away. Next morning, when Winnie wanders downstairs at ten—screw getting up with the chickens to open another damn sweater—her grandfather isn’t there.

“Where’s Alexei?” she says, plopping down at the kitchen table.

“Don’t sit with your elbows on the table,” Kate says, scowling over stacks of pancakes.

“Fine.” Winnie straightens. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“He’s gone,” Mark says, swirling bacon in the syrup on his plate.

Winnie slumps. She was ravenous a second ago, but now her stomach is cold stone. “Why?”

“He went to Vulcan,” Kate says. “A friend of his was injured there. Alexei went to see him.”

“What? Who?”

“I don’t know, Winona,” Kate says, irritated. “He didn’t give details. He never does. He just goes—” she slashes her butter knife in the air. “There’s probably a woman involved.”

“Good riddance,” Mark mutters.
“Shut the fuck up!” Winnie snaps.

“If you can’t be civil, you can leave the table,” Kate says.

“Fine!” Winnie flounces up. “Merry fucking Christmas.”

“Take that with you,” Kate says, gesturing with her knife. Winnie looks at the package on the kitchen counter. It’s wrapped in the candy cane paper Kate used for all the presents under the tree, but the wrapping job isn’t as nice.

“Alexei left it for you,” Kate says, when Winnie looks at her inquiringly. “He got nothing for anyone else. I detest when people play favorites that way.”

Winnie blinks at her mother a second. Then she grabs the package and heads back upstairs.

She sits cross-legged on her bed and rips open the paper. Three objects fall out. The first is a book, an expensive-looking hardcover with its title in gold letters on the spine: Kim. On top of the book is a message button. Winnie presses it and hears Alexei’s gruff baritone.

“When your mother asks what I gave you—and she will ask—show her this. I do want you to read it, I think you will find it illuminating. But it’s not the real gift: Those are in the boxes. Keep them close to you. We will speak again, lyubov moya. Very soon.”

In the smaller box is a sub-space communicator. Winnie has seen these advertised on the tech sites. The best ones are good for up to 10 billion kilometers and offer Priority 1 security. This one has to be the best: Alexei wouldn’t bother with anything else.

In the bigger box is a folding knife. The blade is ten centimeters long and shiny as a mirror. It throws flicks of light around the room as she turns it. She can see her delighted reflection in it.

“Pizdato,” she whispers.

“Winona!” her mother’s voice floats from downstairs. “Are you going to come down and open your gifts, or shall I give them to the Salvation Army?”

Winnie stows the gifts in the boxes and shoves them under the bed. “Coming, Mother,” she says graciously. She can be gracious today. She feels warm all over, like her grandfather’s aura can reach her even now. Of course that’s impossible, Alexei isn’t that good. But he will reach her soon, she’s sure of it. In the meantime, she’s going to eat her own body weight in pancakes.

Winnie runs down the stairs humming Mariah Carey.
Frank wants her to sleep over, but after their third time Winnie gets out of bed and puts her boots on. The boys will be up at the crack of dawn to open their presents, and if she isn’t there for it, her mother will never let her live it down. She can take Kate’s disapproval, but the look on her sons’ faces will make her squirm. She’s a shitty mother, but she isn’t that shitty.

Her palm on the pad opens the door instantly—Kate took out the security system years ago. Winnie knocks the snow off her boots and quietly steps over the threshold. Her mother and Sam would have been in bed hours ago, Jim should be. But her youngest is a night owl and a light sleeper. Last week he wandered downstairs at midnight when she and Frank were on the living room sofa. If Winnie hadn’t looked up at the right moment, Jim would have gotten an eyeful. He’s always been precocious, but Winnie would rather that he didn’t learn about the facts of life while still wearing footie pajamas. Better for everyone if she stays over at Frank’s when she can.

(She should have sensed him. But his energies are too much like hers, and she’d had a few. She shouldn’t have yelled at him. But Jim has a disconcerting way of showing up when his presence isn’t expected—or wanted. He’s been pulling that trick since before he was born.)

Winnie allows herself a sigh and starts to unbutton her heavy coat—another frigid bitch of a winter, must be that global cooling crap the nets keep going on about—when she notices the music. Once upon a time, she probably couldn’t have identified the artist. But six years with George sharpened her knowledge of old pop music, if not her appreciation.

She stops. She listens to the man’s wailing voice, one that she hasn’t heard for eleven years. She hasn’t missed it.

Today is gonna be the day
That they’re gonna throw it back to you
By now you should’ve somehow
Realized what you gotta do
I don’t believe that anybody
Feels the way I do about you now

Chris didn’t like this one, either. Not because he didn’t know old pop music, but because he did. Just one of the many ways that her two boys were so alike, and so different.

“Not this again, G. When did you turn into a twelve-year-old-girl from 1986?”

“Oasis is 1990’s, not 1980’s.”

“Whatever. They’re warmed-over Beatles at best. Just buy Abbey Road, for Chrissakes.”

“You’re so fucking pretentious. Is this what an Ivy League education does to a man?”

“If you by pretentious you mean discerning, yes. This song is terrible.”

“This song is awesome. You weren’t complaining about it last night.”
“After five orgasms I’ll listen to anything. I’m not proud.”

“Five? We only did it three times.”

“Noni and I kept on after you passed out. Stamina: what running track at Yale does for a man.”

Most men would be jealous to hear this. Most men are not George. He grins. “Did you tape it?”

“You’re a kinky bastard, George Kirk. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you went to Princeton.”

“You owe me two orgasms, rich boy. Make it quick: I’m on duty in thirty minutes.”

“Twice in thirty minutes? No stamina at all. This is why I’m against online educa—”

Chris cuts off as George grabs him by the front of his uniform. Still grinning, he pushes Chris back on the bed. Flicks his eyes at Winnie, who is watching them from the chair by the desk. “We’ll settle up later, honey. Mr. Pike needs reminding of who’s ranking officer around here.”

Grinning too, Winnie gives them the go-ahead gesture. George jumps on the bed, whipping his uniform tunic over his head. Chris looks up at him with his usual calm, but the heat in his eyes belies the patrician sangfroid. For the next thirty minutes, nobody complains about the music.

Backbeat, the word is on the street  
That the fire in your heart is out  
I’m sure you’ve heard it all before  
But you never really had a doubt  
I don’t believe that anybody  
Feels the way I do about you now

Blech. Winnie pulls herself back to the present. She should have noticed this, but her instincts are never what they should be in Riverside. She’s so used to assuming nothing interesting could happen here. She heard the music but didn’t really hear, thinking the boys left the comscreen on. They wouldn’t have been playing ancient vids on Nostalgia UK: Even Jim isn’t that precocious.

(Maybe he is. He already smiles like his father. He has that same way of looking up at you, arrogant but sweet. I’m amazing and so are you, that look says, and you believe it. You let yourself be warmed by it, the image of you that’s reflected in his eyes. Dangerous, such belief. Devastating, when the dream shatters and his warmth is gone. Lost in the cold void of space.)

Winnie shakes her head and focuses. It’s not Jim playing old Britpop at midnight on Christmas Eve. The other sensation, the one she really should have been paying attention to, tells her that. The roaring in her head, like the unholy hum of white noise. There’s a harmony in the chaos, a sweetness. It has its own warmth, different from George’s. Equally devastating.

And all the roads we have to walk are winding  
And all the lights that lead us there are blinding  
There are many things that I  
Would like to say to you  
But I don’t know how  
Because maybe, you’re gonna be the one that saves me  
And after all, you’re my wonderwall

Quiet as if she were still a teenager sneaking in after curfew, Winnie walks across the living room towards the fireplace. She stops in front of the pink wing chair. Looks down, making herself smile. She’s glad he’s here, but it’s not all she feels.
“You always did have rotten taste in music.”

“Computer, pause media,” he says, and the com goes silent. He turns his attention back to her. “You have no appreciation for the classics, devotchka.”

“Oasis isn’t Kipling.”

“Few things are. Sit, drink: You must be half-frozen.”

Winnie sits, accepting the bottle of Stoli gratefully. She picks up the empty glass on the coffee table—he set it out ahead of time, so prepared, her Alexei—and fills it. Takes a big swig and feels the warmth flood down her throat and into her stomach. A different kind of warmth from the others she’s known. The best kind. “When did you get in?” she says once she’s thawed.

“I haven’t been here long. Everyone had already gone to bed. I thought about waking Katerina, but the lock was pitifully easy. She should put in a security system.”

“There’s no crime in Riverside.” Winnie smirks. “And I left for the Academy a long time ago.”

“Yes.” Alexei taps his fingers on the glass. “It’s hard to believe that so many years have passed. Twenty-one of them, lyubov moya! I miss those days. Such an interesting time.”

Winnie takes another drink. “You’re getting nostalgic in your old age.”

Alexei quirks an eyebrow at her. “So are you.”

“What do you mean?” she says, but she knows she’s busted.

“You’re fucking the farm boy again. How disappointing.”

“Vin is an old married man.”

“That’s never stopped you.”

“It would stop Vin, though.”

Alexei shrugs. “Somebody else, then. All farm boys are the same.”

“Frank’s a nice guy.” Winnie still sounds calm, but it takes effort. Alexei’s needling shouldn’t bother her. He isn’t really serious, just passing the time on a cold winter night. But it makes her think of a time when he was serious. A decade ago, but the memory is as clear as if it were playing on the comscreen. Another oldies channel: Nostalgia Bitter.

“You think he’s going to make you happy? I didn’t know you could be so naïve, devotchka.”

“Don’t call me that—I’m not a girl. Don’t fucking treat me like one.”

“Does George know what you are? You’re a good liar, I know how good. But nobody can lie for a lifetime. I couldn’t do it, and I’m more devious than you are.”

“I don’t have to do things the way you did. I don’t want to be a lone wolf all my life.”

“Who says you must? But you should find yourself another wolf, Winona. What happened to that Christopher of yours? I liked the look of him.”

“I haven’t seen Chris in months. Good riddance.”
Her grandfather’s eyes have an expression she’s rarely seen there: real sorrow. “He saw you, didn’t he? You don’t have to say, I can see. He saw your real face, and you ran from him as fast as you could. Straight into George’s waiting arms. I don’t know which of them I pity more.”

“George is a fucking starship officer. He’s the son of two starship officers. He’s been all over the galaxy. He was on Rigel V shoveling plague-infected corpses with the rest of us. You act like I’m molesting him or something.”

“I don’t care if he grew up on a starship: George Kirk is another of your farm boys. One day you’ll break his heart. If you really love him you’ll do it now, while he is young enough to recover. In five, ten, twenty years, you’ll tear him to pieces. Is that what you want?”

Winnie lifts her chin and meets her grandfather’s gaze. Her own is just as dark, almost as deep. “I want George. I can change, Alexei. I can make this work.”

“More lies. But I don’t have to believe them, lyubov moya. I’m not a farm boy.”

Winona blinks and looks up. She knows Alexei has spoken, but she’s only been listening with a quarter of her attention. It takes her a minute to recall the words. When she does, she has to step down hard on the anger they stir. More heat in her gut, the bad kind.

“No, it’s not fucking serious. Frank McClellan is just something to do between missions. He’s cheaper than a rent boy and—farmer or not—slightly less pathetic than a sensosuit. Can we talk about something else?”

“Sensosuits have come a long way, I hear. Tony has extolled their virtues on several occasions.”

Winona snorts. “I’m glad he’s finally married. He gets so weird when he’s single.”

“Alice is lovely. Their little girl looks just like her. I never thought Tony would take so much pleasure in being a husband and father, but he’s happy.” Alexei wiggles a finger at her. “You must let him remain so, devotchka.”

“Hey, I never pushed Tony into anything. He just—jumped.” Winona stretches. “You can’t blame him. A man can’t live on leaves and logic all the time. Not a man like Tony, anyway.”

“He was devastated when T’Pinna left. You should have been more discreet.”

“Who knew she’d come back early from the High Holidays? Anyway, Tony’s better off. She never would have married him. You know how Vulcans are. Jesus, did I get laid in Shi’Kahr! They’re all Romulans behind closed doors, but don’t expect them to hold your hand in public. Fucking cowards. Except Sarek, of course. Either Amanda Grayson is some kind of witch, or she found the one Vulcan in the galaxy with real balls. That kid of theirs will be a pistol, I bet. He has to be: Tony told me they spent something like a billion credits on their miracle baby.”

“Every child is a miracle,” Alexei says. “Fascinating, seeing how the genes sort themselves out, what traits the little ones steal from mama and papa, grandma and grandpa. Astonishing thieves, all of them.” He stares into the fire, its flames reflecting in his very blue eyes. “Of course, some children are more miraculous than others.”

He isn’t talking about Spock. Winnie knows it. She knows him. She takes another drink against the chill in her belly. “Why are you here?” she says. “Why Riverside, after all these years?”
He turns to her with a genial smile. “Don’t you think it’s time I saw my grandsons?”

“You saw eight years ago.”

“I saw Sam.” It hadn’t been an impressive meeting. Alexei took the infant in his arms, looked him over for a minute or two, then passed him right back to George. Alexei had been gracious enough, commenting on what a fine fat baby he was, how much he looked like Tiberius. But Winnie had seen it, the disappointment in her grandfather’s eyes. Like a breeder looking at an inferior puppy, one that should have been special, a champion. But he wasn’t.

“Sam’s a good boy.” Winnie means it. He’s not a handsome boy, but a sweet one. He also has his father’s warmth, but it’s kinder and gentler. He doesn’t burn too deep, her Sam. He should have been enough for them. In a kinder, gentler universe, he would have been.

“Yes, good,” Alexei says. “Like my father, your brother.” The contempt in the words is clear. “But your youngest—Katerina has sent vids of the boys while they’ve been here these months. Difficult to assess anything from those, but I was curious. You’ve never said much about Jim. Tonight I crept upstairs to see for myself. I’d assumed he was like his brother. I was wrong.”

Alexei fixes her with his burning gaze. “You should have told me, Winona. You can’t pretend you don’t see it. It would have been obvious from the day he was born.”

“I had other things on my mind the day he was born.”

“Tragic, what happened. But it’s not the boy’s fault.”

“I don’t blame him. Who says I do?”

“Your mother. Katerina is a past master at resentment. I trust her judgment.”

Winona rolls her eyes and drains her glass.

“Jim is special. Your miracle child, and you didn’t have to pay a billion credits for him.”

“Jim is five. He still wets the bed. That’s what Kate told me. She’s going to have to throw out the spare room mattress when he goes. He ruined it in three months.”

“He’ll grow out of that. In ten years he’ll be amazing. He’s amazing now.”

“So here you are, lurking around and spying. Goddamn it: My family is not one of your targets.”

“It’s my family, too. You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me.”

“I wouldn’t be here if Grandma Bernadette had gotten that abortion like you wanted. Don’t fucking game me, old man. It’s too late in the day to play the concerned patriarch.”

“But I am concerned.” He gives her another smile. It contrasts so oddly with his eyes. “You should have taken the extended leave. The Department understands the need for such things.”

“I knew it was you who tried to hamstring me,” Winona whispers. “I knew it.”

“I was trying to help you. Instead you seduce Tony Chapel into giving you more missions. You dump Sam and Jim with their grandparents for months on end while you tend to your career. But you are not a geologist, Winona. What will happen to them if you don’t come back? Jen is dead and Tiberius is dying. Katerina’s health isn’t what it should be. James is useless, he always has been. Your brother Mark has his own career. Who will see to your boys if you are gone? Who will see to
Jim? He needs special attention, you know he does."

“Maybe you should step up, pitch in. If you like Jim so much, why don’t you take him?”

“I would, but for two reasons. First, I am ninety years old.” When she blinks at him: “I never said. I never wanted to think about it. I don’t feel like an old man most of the time. But I am old, and Jim is very young. I might not see him grow up. It would be crueler to take him and desert him than to leave him here. Second, he would miss you. He’s a little boy, and you’re his mother. I can only imagine how it is for him when you leave. He must suffer cruelly.”

Winona’s fingers tighten on her empty glass. It takes her a minute to speak. “You said that my father is useless. But at least Jimmy stayed a while. You left mom when she wasn’t even a year old. You’re so careless with people, Alexei. How many bastards do you have floating around the galaxy? Maybe they were better off not having you around, like you always said that Kate was better. Maybe not. If they had to grow up with this thing in their head, and nobody to guide them—I know how it was for me, before you decided to care. And I wasn’t stuck in one of the shitholes you’ve spent your life frequenting. If I have cousins out there, they must be monsters.”

She slams down her glass. “Very careless, Alexei. Don’t fucking tell me how to raise my son.”

Alexei refills her glass, then his. He takes a bigger swallow than normal. Maybe that’s why his voice sounds so tight when he answers. “What you say is true. Careless I have been. Heartless, sometimes. I can’t change the past. If I could find those children now—if they exist—I would help them. They are beyond my reach. You are not. Because I made a mistake a dozen times, should I make it again? When I see you running down the same treacherous path, should I let you keep going until you break your head?”

“I’m an adult. If I want to break my head, it’s my choice. I’ve chosen worse.”

“But your son is innocent. You’re a hard woman: adamantine, when it’s called for. But you’ve always been fair. You know it’s wrong to hate Jim because he lived and George did not.”

“I don’t hate him.” What Winnie hates is the shake in her voice. “We can’t be sure he’s like us. We won’t be for years, not until he reaches puberty. Maybe you’re wrong. I hope you are.”

A firm hand on her cheek. Alexei has reached out, tilting her face towards the light of the fire. His energies are hotter. There is no accusation in his face as he looks at her. He is as serene as the Jesus on one of Kate’s crucifixes. It’s the face of a man who has known terrible things, but he is beyond hate or judgment now. He is at the end of his journey; he can afford to be kind.

For the first time, the reality of her grandfather’s age hits her. He looks good, but it’s another of his lies. Ninety is the new seventy, people live twenty years beyond that all the time. But Alexei won’t. He’s seen too much, he’s been too many places. All the lasers and hormone shots in the universe can’t reverse that kind of mileage. He has a few more years, maybe—not long enough. Twenty years wouldn’t be. When is a good time to lose the one person who really knows you?

Winnie hasn’t cried in five years, but she cries now. In the Kelvin’s escape pod, she sobbed openly. But tonight her tears are different. She couldn’t have stopped herself then, but now her tears are a choice. She chooses to cry, and to let Alexei see it. She cries like she has made so many other choices in her life: silently, with her eyes wide open.

“You do love him,” Alexei whispers. “Not like you loved his father then, or his brother now. You love Jim like I have loved you, Winona. Love that is like a mirror. When you see him, you see your true face. It’s why you run from him. You’re such a gifted liar, you have convinced yourself you
Gently, Alexei wipes the tears from Winona’s cheeks. “I was once like you. The carelessness was a choice. I thought it was the better way. But I’m glad I did not run from you. Whatever children I abandoned, I did not abandon you.”

“Maybe you should have,” Winona rasps. “Maybe it would have been the better way.”

“That’s your mother talking. You were never meant for this place. I wish I had found you sooner, before she half-convinced you that happiness lies in being a farmer’s wife. I know it hasn’t been easy for you. Part of you wants so badly to be a good daughter, even now. It’s too late for that. But it’s not too late to be a good mother.”

Winnie smirks, wiping more tears. “Maybe I should marry Frank. He’s good with kids; He’s the eldest of eight. I could stay here, give Sam and Jim half-a-dozen siblings. Who knows? We might get another projective empath or two. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

For the first time, Alexei looks angry. “Have you been listening? You drink enough as it is, for all the diversion the Department gives you. You’ll drown yourself in Riverside.”

“You gave me the taste for vodka.” Winnie shrugs. “Anyway, I was only kidding. You do get that you’re asking for contradictory things? I can’t stay in the field because I’m a mommy, but I can’t stay here because I’m a spy. Unless I clone myself, I don’t see a solution.”

“There are other places besides Riverside. You could take the boys to San Francisco. You have many talents: The Department can find you plenty of work that doesn’t take you off-planet.”

“I’m thirty-eight. By the time Jim is grown, I’ll be fifty. The best years of my career, doing low-risk ops and training recruits. Twelve years of bullshit. What will I have to show for it?”

“You’ll have Jim. And Sam—I don’t forget him. He is a good boy—he deserves a mother, too.”

Winnie takes a drink, saying nothing.

“Enough! I’ve said my piece.” Alexei puts down his glass and rises.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“San Francisco. I told Tony I’d make it there by Christmas. I’ll just be able to keep my promise. I bought a little house in the Mission. Didn’t I tell you? No? Well, it’s as good a place as any to retire. As much as the Department will let us, though at my age I don’t except to be called upon often. Tony says he’ll retire on Risa, but the place plays havoc with my allergies.” Before she can process all this and answer: “I have a transporter appointment in three minutes. I’m getting too old to be split into atoms, but the shuttles are so slow. I wouldn’t be there for an hour.”

Winnie finds her voice. “You’re not staying? You came all this way to make me feel like shit?”

“I came to see my grandson—I’ve seen him. Perhaps I will return after the new year. I would like to see Jim when he’s awake. You and I can speak more about San Francisco, lyubov moya.”

Winnie nods distractedly. She follows Alexei to the front door. For a while they are both silent, as he puts on his coat and winds a scarf around his neck. He checks his watch.

“One minute. I must speak fast.” He fixes her with his eyes. Maybe it’s the grey of the scarf, but they
suddenly seem so pale and colorless. The gaze of a ghost.

“You do love Jim,” he says. “Someday it might amaze you, the lengths to which you’ll go to protect him. He will need protecting, as you did once. The strong ones always need the most looking after. As Tony might say, ‘it is not logical, but it is so.’”

Alexei smiles. It’s the same smile he gave her on their very first night, twenty-one years ago. When Winnie was seventeen, it filled her with hope. Tonight it breaks her heart. She can’t lose him, then she really will be all alone.

She blinks away tears. “We’ll talk about it after Christmas.” She makes herself smile back.

He gently touches her cheek. “Your father’s smile. So lovely. I should not have insulted James Murray. He gave you most of your beauty and all of your charm. The light that is in you comes from him. A generous man, your father.”

Winnie looks up at him. “You’re my father.”

Alexei leans in, pressing his lips to her forehead. They are cool, but the aura behind them is not. When he pulls back, she can still feel his kiss burning there, brilliant as a miniature sun.

He stares at her, pale gaze bright with tears. Twenty-one years, and she has never seen it like that before. He opens his mouth to speak. But before he can, he disappears into blue sparkles.

She stares at the space where he was for a minute. Then she turns and walks to the stairs.

She heads to her room. The house is dark, but she knows the way so well she could do it blindfolded. She goes right at the top of the stairs. Then she stops, going left.

Quietly, she pushes open the spare room door. It’s not dark in here; the moon is almost full. Cold white light floods through the window, over the paneled walls and plain, worn furniture. It makes even more patterns on the plaid coverlet. Under the coverlet is a small, still figure. The smell in the air comes from him: warm, milky, redolent of sweat. The same smell that all sleeping children give off. It’s the smell of innocence.

Very quietly—he is such a light sleeper—she sits on the edge of the bed. She looks down at her son. Unlike her other son, this one is beautiful. Sleeping, he looks so much like his father. You can’t see his eyes when he’s sleeping.

(When he looks at you, he looks like George. *I’m awesome and so are you.* Until you look close. *I am* exactly like you. That’s what you see when you look in his eyes. Not the woman you would like to be, the daughter and mother you should be. You see yourself as you are.)

Winnie blinks back tears. She’s cried enough. Drown yourself in tears or vodka, it doesn’t change things. It doesn’t take back all those choices, the ones that saved you and ruined you.

She reaches out, putting a gentle hand on Jim’s cheek. When she does, she can feel it. Very small and soft, as all embryonic things are, but unmistakably there. A high, sweet, hypnotic sound, like the hum of white noise. Jim feels like her. He feels like someone else who is far away now. One who saved her and ruined her; he couldn’t help it. Alexei was born that way. He loved her, and this was how he showed it.

He trapped her. Winnie’s loving grandfather. She is as trapped as if she had married Melvin Krider and had eight kids. (Irony: She understands it now.) Nobody leaves the Department. It’s not just because they won’t let you. Once you’re in their funhouse world, you can’t find your way out. All
the doors are trap doors, every mirror is twisted. Stare into the reflections, and you can’t see anything else. You don’t want to see.

*This is your destiny,* Alexei told her once, long ago. *You were made for this.* Maybe he was right, he knows her better than anyone. It’s why she loves him, though it’s not all she feels.

But genetics aren’t the same as destiny. Jim is so young, he can still be whatever he wants to be. He can be a geologist or a journalist, he can be a farmer if it pleases him. Whatever he becomes, whatever angels or demons are gestating in his head, he won’t be like her. He won’t have blood on his hands before he’s old enough to understand what it means.

She will protect him. She will be as ruthless as she needs to be. If that’s love, she loves Jim. It’s not the way George would have done it, but George isn’t here.

Jim’s lashes flutter. Winnie realizes she has been holding her son’s face hard enough to hurt. She takes her hand away and sees the white marks of her fingers on his cheek.

“Mommy?” he whispers. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she says. “We’re all fine.”

“I dreamed there was a wolf in my room. An old, grey wolf.”

“Go to sleep, Jimmy boy. Santa can’t come if you’re awake.”

Jim obeys, turning on his side. His sheets are dry: He never wets the bed when she’s home. She doesn’t want to think about the monsters that find him when she’s gone, things much worse than wolves. But they’re just dreams. Real monsters will never touch him. They’ll regret it if they do.

Downstairs, the comscreen has unpaused.

*And all the roads that lead you there are winding*
*And all the lights that light the way are blinding*
*There are many things that I*
*Would like to say to you*
*But I don’t know how*

“You were right, George,” Winnie whispers. “This song is awesome.”

She keeps one hand on her sleeping son. She sits very still, listening.

*I said maybe, you’re gonna be the one that saves me*
*And after all, you’re my wonderwall*
*I said maybe, you’re gonna be the one that saves me*
*You’re gonna be the one that saves me*
*You’re gonna be the one that saves me*
Chapter 51

li. Kirk

Beta Quadrant, 2227

“You’re a dick. You owe me a hundred credits.” The blond man stands over them, arms crossed.

Christopher jerked straight up in bed when the door opened, but now he relaxes. Not his face—that’s always calm—but his shoulders have untensed. Winnie is surprised. Chris has the self-possession that four hundred years of family privilege gives you, but even patrician sangfroid should break at such a moment. He definitely bears watching—even more than she is already.

“George. You’re back from leave early,” he says, sitting back. “How’s your mother?”

“Dying,” George says. “That’s what the doctors say, anyway. She says she isn’t going anywhere until I give her a grandchild to hold. Personally, my money’s on Jen.”

“I hope she’s not waiting for me to get pregnant. My mother would insist we get married.”

“Not without a paternity test. I told you this being-faithful bullshit of yours wouldn’t work. I want my hundred credits, rich boy. Monogamy is for Vulcans.”

“You haven’t been to Vulcan, have you?” Winnie says. “You’d be surprised.”

For the first time, George really focuses his attention on her. The irritation on his face changes to a different expression. It’s the one that Winnie is used to getting from men, but there’s more to it than lust. There’s arrogance there, but also warmth. I’m awesome, it says. So are you.

“Well. Hello there.” He smiles. Winnie feels the pull of it all the way to her toes.

“Noni, this is George Kirk,” Chris says, well-mannered despite being caught in flagrante. “George, this is Lieutenant Winona Murray, our new ship’s geologist.”

“Welcome to the Lexington, Lieutenant Murray,” George says. “You’re on my calendar for tomorrow. I was supposed to debrief you, but I guess Chris beat me to it.”

So this is George Kirk. The newly-appointed first officer, according to the Department’s files. Thirty-one, third-generation Starfleet, eight years of active duty. Nothing in there about him being so cute—official holos make everyone look constipated. The files never tell you the good stuff, they just give facts. Like the fact that somebody on the Lexington is selling secrets to the Romulans. A traitor, very high up. Maybe the captain, maybe one of his immediate subordinates.

The jury is still out on second officer Christopher Pike. He could be hiding anything behind those cool grey eyes. But George Kirk is clean. She just met the man, she hasn’t one shred of proof except her gut. But she knows she’s right. Alexei wouldn’t approve, but he isn’t here.

“Noni?” She blinks and realizes that George and Chris are both waiting for her to speak. Sort of a thrill, having both of them looking at her with their full attention. Quite a pair, these two. They’ve been involved a while—you can see it in their body language. The way their eyes keep flicking back to each other, checking in. A real couple, even if they’re not married.

Their pillow talk must be really fucking interesting. Between the two of them, they would hear
everything on board, know everything. What their positions wouldn’t tell them, their looks and smarts would. Especially George Kirk—he has the kind of face that makes you want to tell him things. Winnie wouldn’t, but less cautious souls would. He’s the buffer between Captain Frick and the rest of the crew: He’d know everyone’s secrets. Even the very cautious Chris Pike’s.

George isn’t pissed about Chris fucking around. He made a bet that his partner couldn’t stay faithful, which means he’s open-minded. How open-minded?

Winnie stretches, letting the sheet fall away from her. Smirks inwardly, as Chris’ and George’s gazes fall from her face to her breasts as if pulled by lead weights. Cute or not, traitor or not, every man is the same. Except Alexei, who is the exception that proves the rule.

He wouldn’t care that she’s whoring herself out for information. Ends justify means, always. It would be the official Section 31 motto, if Section 31 had an official anything. Alexei would only care if she let her emotions get in the way of business. She won’t. No man is that cute.

Winnie leans forward, drawing George’s gaze back to hers. She doesn’t push: She doesn’t need to. He’s throwing off heat like a leaky warp nacelle. She crawl to the end of the bed, kneeling in front of him. She looks up, covered by nothing but long blonde hair. Gives him a big smile.

“Debrief at will, Commander,” she says. “I’m open to all inquiries.”

She didn’t push, but George still looks dazed. “Christ,” he mutters.

“See?” Chris says. “She’s been here a month. Last night was our first time. I tried, G.”

Winnie reaches under George’s tunic, finds the hidden zipper to his trousers, and starts pulling. “You’re an idiot, Chris,” George sighs. “You waited a whole month?”

“You are. You should see your face. Do you have any blood left in your brain at all?”

“Boys, boys,” Winnie says. “You’re both idiots. But I’m going to fuck you anyway.” She pulls George’s cock free of his trousers. It’s lovely and pink—he’s going to taste like strawberry taffy. Such a sweet man.

She feels a firm hand on the back of her neck. Another hard cock against her back, as Chris moves behind her. He isn’t sweet. Chris is good vodka, so clear and cold that at first he seems flavorless. Then the truth of him hits you, setting your head and your heart on fire.

Winnie isn’t going to lose either of those things. She’s a professional, her grandfather trained her well. But she can enjoy this, the Department permits pleasure. Only love is frowned upon.

“Does this mean I don’t owe you the hundred credits?” Chris says, kissing Winnie’s shoulder.

“Cheap fucking bastard. That’s old money for you,” George says. “Tell you what: Let me watch, and we’ll forget about the bet.”

Winnie is surprised enough to take her hand away. “Seriously?”


“Nothing else to do on a starship,” George says. He gives Winnie his charming grin. “Trust me, honey, I want to fuck you. But I’d really like to see him fuck you first. Guess I am a perve.”

Winnie shrugs. “Whatever gets you there.”
George sits on the edge of the mattress. His cock is harder than ever, as Chris pulls her back on the bed. He takes her face in his hands. His eyes are unusually gentle. “If you don’t want to, say so,” he says. “We’ll tell Georgie-boy where to go.”

“I don’t mind. I’ve done weirder things, Chris. You have no idea.” Winnie sees him blink and kisses him quickly, before he starts to think about that too much.

The sex is great: Chris can really get to you, in that cool, thorough way of his. But he’s not all she feels. She feels George the whole time—his warmth, sweet and real. It’s like he can feel what she’s feeling, and her pleasure excites him more than his own. Is he a receptive empath? The files didn’t say so. Maybe they are wrong again, or maybe George is just that sweet.

She can feel both of them, cool and warm, moving inside her and watching her with such open-hearted delight. At the end she comes harder than she’s ever come in her life. She doesn’t just come, she comes together: It’s like all the cracks in her psyche have healed, just for a moment. Not surprising that it took two men—two amazing, quite different men—to accomplish that.

She won’t realize it for a long time, but this is when she gets in over her head. It’s not about the sex, or not just about that. After a while it’s not about the work either, which is why she stays even after Captain Frick is arrested and court martialed. She stays as long as she can, because she knows this is something rare, a perfect balance she won’t find again. She doesn’t keep it, after Chris leaves and Jen finally gets her grandchild.

Her grandfather is disappointed. Winnie is too, but not for the same reasons. She loves George, but it’s never the same. Maybe they could have made it work anyway, or maybe not. But Winnie knows long before the Kelvin that she’s already had the best time of her life. On the Lexington, when she was twenty-seven, she had it. Whatever happens to her after that, it’s just epilogue.

Alexei shouldn’t have been disappointed. After the Lexington, and the Kelvin, Winnie becomes better at her job than ever. Nothing she does touches her, she can be as ruthless as she needs to be. It’s as if she died on the Kelvin or even on the Lexington, the day Chris Pike disappeared in a cloud of blue sparkles. Whatever she does after that, it doesn’t matter. She’s not really there.

Memnonia, 2255

Jim opens his eyes.

He blinks around a minute, trying to place where he is. He sees the worn furniture, grimy from too many bodies; the garish pictures on the walls, sad clowns and big-eyed children. He feels rough cotton underneath him. He smells cigarettes and something else, a dusty red smell that irritates the sinuses, wets the eyes with its profound strangeness.

Right, this is Mars. If nothing else told you, Anima Sola would. The lady is still burning and beaming, but her candle is not. It has burned right through, just a few sad drops of wax are left in the very bottom. The glassy shell is still there, but she’ll never shine again.

He sits up, shaking his head. He feels like he’s slept for a thousand years. Going by the weak morning light coming through the window, it has been a while. Not as long as it feels, but hours and hours. He has a headache and he’s sore all over, a bone-deep ache like he’s been beaten. Jesus, yesterday sucked.

He’s also alone. This doesn’t worry him too much, even though Ivan promised he would be back soon. When you’re on a mission with Winnie, you can’t ever predict how things will go. You never
(I've done weirder things. You have no idea.)

Jim blinks, shaking his head again. He dreamed a lot last night—his mind has that stuffed, over-alert feeling you get from too many dreams. He can’t piece any of it together, though, just a few broken images. A Christmas tree, a roaring fire, the gleam of light on a razor-sharp blade.

(If I’d had a knife, I’d have cut his balls off.)

Fragments and more fragments. A glass of vodka, flames reflecting in a pair of very blue eyes, the shine of moonlight through a bedroom window. The worn, vicious look of an old grey wolf.

(This is your destiny. You were made for this.)

He can’t piece it together, though he’d like to. But dreams are elusive, like the shadow of the memory of a ghost. The more you try to hold on, the more that they dissolve in your hands.

(It doesn’t matter. She’s not really there.)

Fuck it. Jim gets up from the bed. His walk to the bath is a bit gingerly—he’s so sore, especially in one intimate place. But by the time he makes it to the bathroom and turns on the water, the last of the dream shards have fallen away. By the time he steps out of the shower and brushes his teeth, he’s thinking of other things. Like when Ivan and his mother are going to get back, so they can get the hell off this godforsaken lump of rock. How long does it take to scare answers out of a Phobos spaceport clerk? It couldn’t take Ivan and Winnie long: They’re scary as hell.

Jim finds Ivan’s duffle bag on the floor. There’s a spare pair of jeans in there. Other clothes too, but for now the jeans will do. He slips them on. They fit him perfectly, of course. He walks to the window and pulls the curtains back more, idly staring at the greyish-pink sky while he thinks about what he should do. He’s really hungry, but if he goes out in search of breakfast, he might miss Ivan and Winnie. They couldn’t call him on the street; he has no phone and no money to buy one. No money for breakfast, either. The room has a replicator by the door, but judging from the dust and other strange things crusting its sides, the only thing on the menu is botulism.

Hungry and pouting about it, Jim lets his gaze wander over the crater. Adding to the bleakness of the scene is the music. More Bowie: This is the Stardust Hotel. The song isn’t Ziggy, though. It’s earlier in the Bowie canon. It’s coming from next door, who knew Al was a glam rock fan?

*Ground Control to Major Tom*

Ground Control to Major Tom
Take your protein pills and put your helmet on
Ground Control to Major Tom
Commencing countdown, engines on
Check ignition, and may God’s love be with you

He wishes he was heading for Earth. Right now, this very second. If only transporters could reach that far, though the tickets would be astronomical. If they did reach that far, and he could be back on Earth with Ivan (and Winnie) right now, he’d pay any amount for the privilege. He’s so tired of breathing dust. Jim sneezes, wiping his nose. Where the hell are Ivan and Winnie?

*This is Major Tom to Ground Control*

I'm stepping through the door
And I'm floating in a most peculiar way
And the stars look very different today
For here am I sitting in a tin can, far above the world
Planet Earth is blue, and there's nothing I can do

That’s when he feels it—them. He hasn’t felt anything like it in years. But he knows what it is. You don’t forget this feeling. Sudden racing warmth, like the sexiest of electric shocks. A rush like the strongest vodka there is, colder than Russian snows until the truth kicks in, setting your head and your heart on fire. White noise in stereo, the unearthly harmony of two energies so alike and so different. Two auras moving together, twining around each other like mated snakes.

No, he hasn’t felt this in years. Not since he was fourteen years old.

(You are the most dangerous woman I’ve ever met. It never changed how I felt.)

It couldn’t be. Christopher Pike isn’t here. He hasn’t been here in eight years.

(Winona helped me. An extraordinary person, your mother. You are very like her.)

The other energy isn’t Pike’s, anyway. It’s too intense. Much too familiar.

(She’s not my mother.)

“Christ,” Jim rasps.

Slowly, like someone who is still asleep and dreaming, Jim walks towards the connecting door to Room 43. The lock is broken, like everything else in this hotel (Dust Hel), and the door opens at once. Jim steps into the room, which is the mirror image of his own. He doesn’t stop, though. His eyes are fixated on the other connecting door on the opposite side of Room 43. It’s the door that leads to Room 42. He walks towards it as fast as he can in his dream-like stupor.

“Jim, what are you doing?” a deep, concerned voice says.

“Mind your business, Al,” Jim says. “You’re good at that.”

Al makes a move to rise, then seems to think better of it. From his position on his own dusty bed, he watches Jim cross the room. Jim is moving as fast as he can, but he’s still very slow. His shock slows him down. The energy in his center slows him. It’s so warm and inviting. Devastating. He walks as slowly as the music coming from the comscreen.

Ground Control to Major Tom,
Your circuit’s dead, there's something wrong
Can you hear me, Major Tom?
Can you hear me, Major Tom?
Can you hear me, Major Tom?
Can you hear . . .

Slowly, Jim puts his hand on the door sensor for Room 42. It opens, and he steps inside. The curtains are drawn, so at first he can’t see much in the dimness. But then the scene begins to emerge. It would have been kinder if his vision had stayed dark. If Al had taken offense, and bashed in his brains with the nearest blunt instrument. That would have been kinder than this.

Room 42 is identical to Room 44. On the identical bed, beneath an identical mirror, are Ivan and Winnie. Ivan lies prone on the bed, Winnie on top of him, riding him. They are naked, both of their bodies sheened with sweat. They are working hard, it’s just before the climactic moment, their faces glowing with impending ecstasy. They are beautiful together—all smooth, gleaming flesh. She is,
perhaps, just a bit more beautiful, for all that she must be years older. Lasers and hormones are amazing things: Winnie has the body of a twenty-five-year-old, long blonde hair bouncing on her slim shoulders. Her breasts bounce too, they are pear-shaped, perfect, though still slightly green. Ivan, who is not thirty, could be her brother. *(He’s not her brother.)*

The sight would be arousing if it were any other people in the galaxy. Jim would be aroused, or at least amused. Calm about it—monogamy is for Vulcans. He’d be aroused and amused, for all that it’s such a surprise. If it were any other woman that Ivan was fucking, Jim would smile. He might ask if he could join in—if history is anything to go by, Winnie is into that sort of thing. But Winnie is his mother. *(Jim’s mother, not Ivan’s.)* Jim has never felt so sick in his life.

Ivan is grunting now—he’s nearly there. Winnie isn’t far behind him, Jim can feel her energies peaking. They’re too wrapped up in each other to feel his presence. He’s got to say something before they finish, before he has to feel it. But he can’t. He stands there like he’s been hit by a paralysis beam, feeling his mother and lover fuck each other. Jim stays frozen until Ivan comes with a groan, Winnie crying out a second later. The orgasm rips through Jim as well, but it’s like the negative image of ecstasy. What should be pleasure is a searing pain, the heat of it chills him to the core of his soul. He sinks to his knees.

*I will never get over this*, he thinks. *If I live to be ninety, I’ll never recover from what happened here. What I’ve done, and what’s been done to me. Mars is forever.*

He feels a hand on the back of his neck. He looks up. Ivan is standing over him, naked. He’s still flushed with climax, but to anyone else his expression would be blank. But in this moment, one of the worst of Jim’s life, he can read him clearly. It’s like Ivan’s head has turned to glass, and Jim can see inside it. He sees the shame and the sorrow. But buried beneath those, so deep that perhaps even Ivan doesn’t know it’s there, Jim sees a spark of triumph. He twists away.

“Guess you were right,” he says. “Mom always did like you better.”

“Jim—”

“Shut up.” Jim keeps looking at Ivan. He can see him clearly. Suddenly many things are clear. “This has been going on the whole time, hasn’t it? Since the night we met, and long before.”

Ivan hesitates. Jim sees the wheels in his head turning, calculating. Turning years into months, months into weeks or days. How much can he push it? How big a lie will Jim swallow?

“This isn’t—”

“Don’t fucking bother. *I can see you.* Don’t you understand? I see everything.” Jim is starting to shake. He’s breathing fast. His spine is tingling, and his fingertips. Jim breathes and shakes.

“It’s been going on since I recruited him,” Winnie says from the bed. If that was meant to get Jim’s attention, it didn’t work. He keeps looking at Ivan. He looks and looks.

“Ivan, you should get away from him,” Winnie says. She says something else in rapid Russian.

Ivan keeps standing there. “No, I must explain,” he says. “Jim, I never meant this to go as far as it did. You were falling apart so quickly after Winona left. I had to do what was necessary. But later, things changed. I began to truly feel for you.”

“Lies,” Jim says.

“I’m not lying. Everything I’ve told you is true.”
“You tortured Sean to death,” Jim says. “You set those bad subroutines on purpose. You stayed and watched.” Jim can see that, too: Ivan standing in the upstairs office while downstairs, the robots do his bidding. Sean screams and screams as Ivan watches. His expression is that of a man watching his favorite movie—Reservoir Dogs, maybe. He’s glowing brighter than when he’s climaxing. This is what really gets him off. This is Ivan.

“You killed Jess, too,” Jim says. “It was you, even if Sean had the hypo.” He puts a shaking hand to his forehead. It comes away dripping with sweat. “Sean Quinn had it coming. Maybe he even deserved what you did to him. What do you deserve?”

“Ivan,” Winnie says. “Get the fuck away from him. Seriously.”

“You are being ridiculous, malchik,” Ivan says softly. “I understand your distress, but you must calm down. Do you think you can kill me? I was killing for the Ares Cartel when you were still jerking off to Orion porn.”

Jim stands up. He puts a gentle hand on Ivan’s cheek. He smiles into Ivan’s cool grey eyes. He sees his reflection in them. His true face.

“Malchik,” he whispers. “I was a boy when you met me. But I’m a man now. Remember?”

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” Ivan says. “We can find our way past this, lyubov moya. I can’t say how, but a solution will be found. We are all adults. More than that, we are family. Who else could understand the choices that we make? We must help each other.”

Jim can hear real emotion in the words. He knows then that Ivan hasn’t lied about everything: He really wants this. He’s wanted it for a very long time, a family. Ivan is a monster, but even monsters get lonely. The longing in his face could break your heart.

But Jim’s heart is already broken. He puts both hands on Ivan’s face. Draws him close.

“I love you.” He means it. Even after everything, he feels it. “Kiss me, brother.”

“Ivan!” Winnie shouts. She’s moving off the bed, but for once her lightning reflexes fail her. She’s too late. She’s late by days, months, years. His mother is twenty-two years too late.

Jim kisses Ivan. For a moment he lets himself enjoy their last kiss. He tastes the heat of it, the longing. He savors the love he feels for Ivan, lover and brother. Ivan, who is also a monster.

Ivan starts to pull back, but Jim holds him. Ivan is very strong, but Jim holds on. Not with his hands. It’s all in the eyes, Winnie taught him that. It was the first thing she taught him, what feels like a lifetime ago. He looks into Ivan’s eyes and pushes as hard as he can. At first Jim meets resistance. Another day Ivan might have resisted him totally. But not today. Not after the oceans of adrenaline Jim’s shock and grief have dumped into his system. Jim shakes and looks. He looks and looks and looks. Until with a scream (Ivan’s or Jim’s—he’s never quite clear on that) Jim breaks through. The grey gaze shatters like a mirror as Jim gets all the way in.

It’s so cold inside, and hard: a world of ice and iron. But it’s not dark, he can see very well. He sees things falling around him, bright and sharp as icicles. There are faces inside the ice, and it’s all the same face. It’s Ivan’s, but it’s also his own. Right now there is no difference.

The boy is shaking with fear; Irina puts her arms around him. In other days this would calm him, but not now. Not with the man standing over them, his eyes hard and hungry.

Irina puts her forehead to his. She is not as beautiful as she was: Her habit is eating her beauty, like
it eats everything else. “Do this for me,” she whispers. “I would do it, but he doesn’t want me. Do this, and I’ll never ask again. I won’t use the hypos anymore, I’ll get better. Please, dorogoi. Tonight ends it.”

He knows she’s lying. This is not the end of something, but the beginning. He hates her in this moment. He hates her ravaged face, her weak smile, her sad eyes. They are still so very blue, but there is nothing behind them. Irina is hollow in the middle, only the drugs can fill her up.

The boy stares into her face. No, she is not beautiful any longer, but the sight—and feel—of her so close makes the boy ache. He hates her, but he loves her too. He has to, she’s his mother.

“We need this,” she says. “Comprendes, chico?”

“Hai,” the boy says softly. He looks up at the man, who jerks his head towards the bedroom. The boy’s heart feels like it will burst from his chest. He looks one more time at his mother, hoping for rescue. Irina just stares at him, she won’t save him. She’s the one ruining him.

A hard hand clamps on his shoulder. He’s pushed inside the bedroom. The door slams shut.

A flash of icy brightness, the images shift. The face is still there, but it’s older now. Not so much older, but old enough, as he stares down at the man trembling on his knees. This man is not the man from the first memory, that would be pushing fate a bit too far. No, this is just a man. All the boy knows about him is a name and address. It’s all he needs to know.

“P-please,” the man stutters. “Tell Rafael I’m sorry. I’ll pay him. Give me one day.”

“Sorry,” the boy says. “You know Rafael. He’s impatient.”

“You’re just a kid! You don’t want to do this. You don’t know what it means.”

“I’ve done it before, pendejo. Dozens of times. It means money.”

“If it’s money you’re after, I’ll pay you. I have millions of credits stashed away in accounts on Risa. You could leave here, don’t you want that? Mars is a fucking shithole.”

“Arcadia and Utopia are very nice,” the boy says. He releases the safety on the disruptor gun.

“Please!” the man almost screams it. “I have children, what will they do without me?”

“They can comfort themselves with your millions of credits.”

“But I’m their father. They need me.” The man looks up at him, tears streaming down his face. “Didn’t you ever have a father, chico?”

“What do you think?” the boy says, and fires.

He’s moving faster now, images raining around him, beautiful and bitter, like acid snowflakes. He’s reaching the end of something, he can feel it. There is darkness ahead, how deep or dark he can’t say. But before he reaches it, one final face emerges. Impossible to know how many years have passed, but the boy is a man now. He’s lying on a bed in a room so stylishly generic it can only be a nice hotel suite. He’s propped against the padded headboard, looking at a woman seated in a chair by the bed. She is blonde and beautiful, and she is older. Perhaps even old enough to be his mother: It’s so hard to tell these days, with all the hormones and lasers.

She is not like his mother. Her blue eyes aren’t hollow; there are whole worlds behind them. It’s
what first drew him to her, though he didn’t suspect what she really was until a little while ago. She suspected first: It’s why he’s lying frozen on this bed, a phaser pointing in his face.

“Listen up, laddy boy,” she says. “I’m about to offer you the deal of a lifetime. Total immunity for all the shit you’ve done. License to do a helluva lot more. What more could you ask for?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m in Petrozavodsk on business—”

“Sure. The business of killing Boris Sharapov. Can’t blame you there—he was a real piece of work. Lures more girls to Mars every year than Spring Break, only his don’t go back to college when the week is over. Shit, most of ‘em aren’t old enough for high school. Now, given your reputation, normally I’d think this was a contract. But your boss and Sharapov have that sweet exchange going on—guns for girls—and ol’ Serge wouldn’t want you fucking it up.”

“I’m telling you, you have the wrong man. I’m a computer salesman from Petersburg.”

“You’re Sergei Volkov’s favorite assassin, Ivan Kuznetsov. Of course that’s not your real name, and you’re not Ukrainian, like your boss thinks. I have some ideas about who and what you are, but I’ll stick with calling you Ivan for now. Did you know in English your name is John Smith? You’re not the first one I’ve met. Not even the scariest, if you can believe it.”

“I want a lawyer.”

“No, you don’t. Volkov will send somebody, you’ll get released, and next week they’ll be fishing your mutilated corpse out of Lake Onega. I know what a good liar you are, but you can’t talk your way out of this. You tortured Sharapov to death. I saw the corpse; it must have taken hours. You left DNA all over that hotel room. You weren’t careful, you started enjoying yourself too much. It was definitely personal. The fucking police know, Ivan. Which means Volkov knows.”

“I didn’t—you don’t—I’m not a monster.” He sounds angry and confused. Not because he feels these things, but because a computer salesman from St. Petersburg would feel them.

“No, you’re a professional. I really like professionals, it shortens the breaking-in period by a considerable amount. No puking or crying or moral dilemmas. You’re a heartless killer who looks like a choir boy. Besides the obvious sociopathy, you’re also narcissistic and more than a touch OCD, going by the symmetry of Boris Sharapov’s knife wounds. You’re opportunistically bisexual—big deal, everybody is nowadays, right? Here’s the real cherry on the sundae—you have a projective empathy score that would’ve sent my mother running for a rosary. Couldn’t have asked for a better recruit if I’d put in a special order.”

“I really don’t—”

“Shut up and listen. My people will protect you from Volkov. And from the local authorities, who’d love to get their paws on you after that thing with the President last year. It’s mostly a ceremonial position these days, but just like us Americans, the Russians take it personal when you assassinate their leaders, ceremonial or not. I’d like to tell you they’d send you to Triton, but we both know better. We’re back to Lake Onega again. Maybe you wouldn’t resurface, maybe the sturgeon will eat you. Your next life will be as a bowl of caviar, get slurped by whichever of Sharapov’s sons ends up taking over. Karma really is a bitch, isn’t she?”

Ivan is silent. Then: “Say that you’re right, as absurd as it sounds. If you were, you’d be a fool to try to shackle me. I did not take you for such, Winona. Even before you shot me in the chest with the paralysis beam.”
“Sorry about that—you were getting twitchy. Point is, I don’t want to shackle you. I’m going to set you free. You’ll get to travel, meet people—lots of interesting people—and the pay isn’t bad, either. Sure, there’s always the possibility of dying horribly. But your life expectancy is better with us than it would have been with Volkov, even if you hadn’t made steak tartar of his business partner. Of course, once you’re in, you can’t get out. Sounds hardcore, but we hate to spend all that time training people, and poof! They want to open a cheese store in Vermont or something. But you won’t want out, trust me.”

More silence. Ivan straightens as well as he can—paralysis beams take a while to fully wear off. He looks at Winona for the first time with his real expression—no expression. “If I say no?”

“I’ll let the Russians have you. Any group of Russians, they all hate your ass. But that would be such a waste. You’re a predator, Ivan. I knew it before I saw Boris Sharapov’s corpse. I knew it in that hotel bar a week ago. But there are predators and predators, and you’re going to have to decide if you can be the latter kind. One that lessens the chaos of this universe. It’s really not a bad deal. You’ll have freedom like you’ve never known before. You’ll have lots of things.”

Slowly, Ivan leans forward. “Will I have you?”

“You already did.”

“I’ve had Winona Sanchez, Federation geologist. You had Petyr Lebedev, computer salesman. Not the same thing at all, my love.”

“I’m not your love.”

“You’re not Hector Sanchez’s, either. I looked in your wallet, I saw his holo. He’s an idiot.”

“He wasn’t, actually. But it doesn’t matter. He’s been dead six months.”

“Which is why you’re recruiting. I understand now. Will I have to marry you, too?”

“You wish. I’m never getting married again.”

“I’d think a person of your experience would know not to issue ultimatums. I told myself I’d never again be used by a woman, yet here I sit.”

“Your mommy issues are not my problem. Are you in or not?”

One side of Ivan’s mouth twitches. Then he smiles. “You want me badly. I can feel it.”

“As a recruit, sure. As a man—I’ve had better.”

“You’ve had Petyr, not Ivan.”

Winona taps two fingers on the arm of her chair. “Ivan Kuznetsov, though that’s not your real name. I wonder what it is.” She shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. I already know who you are.” She fixes him with her eyes. “It’s strange: Most of Sharapov’s girls have abortions. Your mother didn’t. She must have loved you, however she used you. Amazing, when you think about it.”

Ivan’s whole face spasms. “I’m not—how did you—” his anger and confusion are real this time.

“I’m the best. You can be, too. You can be whoever you want to be.” She puts down the phaser. She reaches out, putting a hand on his wrist. “I know what you want. I know how long you’ve wanted it. You can have it. All you have to do is say yes.”
Winnie’s voice is soft, tender. A mother's voice. “Think about it, my love. You don’t have to be yourself. Not ever again. That would be such a relief, wouldn’t it?”

Ivan stares into the fireplace across from the bed. He catches sight of himself in the mirror hung over it. The firelight shines in his eyes; they are brighter than the mirror. They reflect everything but show you nothing. (There’s nothing to show.) He’s silent so long, a lesser interrogator might think he isn’t going to answer. He knows Winona knows better. She’s the best at what she does.

His hand tightens on hers, hard enough to hurt. “Yes.”

The image breaks into a million fragments. Something else breaks with it: The world of ice and iron is gone, and he is in darkness. This is the first moment that he is truly afraid. It’s a fear that Jim hasn’t known since he was fourteen years old, jumping over a cliff into nothingness. This is nothingness too, but of a different kind. Fischer’s Gorge had a bottom to it, no matter where you jumped. Eventually you would find solid ground again, even if the impact smashed you to bits.

There is no end to this. Jim falls and falls through the blackness. It’s when he remembers what he knows. He’s always known it, though he didn’t want to face it: Ivan is hollow in the middle. There is no end to his darkness. Once you’re inside of it, you could fall forever.

Jim begins to scream, but there’s no answer. There’s no one here, not even Ivan. There is no Jim: In this moment they are one and the same. They are nothing.

*Oh God,* he thinks. *Oh Jesus.* Useless to say the names. Nobody can hear him in here. Nobody can save him from this. Nobody—

He feels a hand upon his cheek.

He turns around, though that should be impossible in the rushing darkness. He sees her, though he doesn’t understand how she got here. How could she find him in this endless void?

“You are amazing,” he rasps.

“Shut up,” Winnie says. “Look at me.” She puts her hands on either side of his face.

He obeys her, just like always. He looks into her eyes. And suddenly, he stops falling.

Her eyes are deep, there is so much inside of them. Whole worlds. They are dark, but there is such a light behind them. Enough to blind you. Enough to make you see again, after being lost in the darkness for infinite eternities.

She smiles at him like she knows a wonderful secret. She knows him.

“Darling boy,” she whispers. “I see you. Across a galaxy, I will see.”

“Mother—” his voice breaks. He can’t speak.

“Close your eyes,” she says. “Say a prayer.”

Jim obeys. And then there is nothing. Not blinding light, not howling dark. Just nothingness, different from the others he’s known today. This is cool but also warm, it hums like white noise, a music unearthly sweet. He lets himself relax and dissolve into it.

With a sigh, he lets her save him.
lii. Kirk

2255, cont.

Jim awakes in a world made of white.

He looks around, blinking for a minute, as the undifferentiated light resolves itself into a room. It’s very clean and very colorless: White walls, white furniture, white curtains hung at the big window by his white bed with white sheets. Perhaps there would be more color outside, but the curtains are drawn. All that can be seen through them is a white haze. The only colors in the room are on the instruments behind the bed. They are silver, the lights on them a glowing green.

He’s been here before. It’s been almost nine years, but you don’t forget this place. This is the white room in San Francisco. Maybe the hospital has an official name, but probably not. Most things associated with Section 31 remain anonymous.

Jim hears a voice. He’s been hearing it a long time, even before he awoke. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn’t inside his head anymore. Her voice is soft and tender, a mother’s voice. She is doing what mothers have been doing from time immemorial: telling him a story.

“Then he looked upon the trees and the broad fields, with the thatched huts hidden among crops—looked with strange eyes unable to take up the size and proportion and use of things—stared for a still half-hour. All that while he felt, though he could not put it into words, that his soul was out of gear with its surroundings—a cog-wheel unconnected with any machinery, just like the idle cog-wheel of a cheap Beheea sugar-crusher laid by in a corner. The breezes fanned over him, the parrots shrieked at him, the noises of the populated house behind—squabbles, orders, and reproofs—hit on dead ears.

‘I am Kim. I am Kim. And what is Kim?’ His soul repeated it again and again.”

“Winnie—”

“Shh. This is the best part.” She reads on.

“He did not want to cry—had never felt less like crying in his life—but of a sudden easy, stupid tears trickled down his nose, and with an almost audible click he felt the wheels of his being lock up anew on the world without. Things that rode meaningless on the eyeball an instant before slid into proper proportion. Roads were meant to be walked upon, houses to be lived in, cattle to be driven, fields to be tilled, and men and women to be talked to. They were all real and true—solidly planted upon the feet—perfectly comprehensible—clay of his clay, neither more nor less. He shook himself like a dog with a flea in his ear, and rambled out of the gate.”

“It goes on for another three or four pages, but that’s the gist of it.” Winnie says. “Little Kim comes out okay. God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world.” She shuts the book—a real book, not a PADD file. It’s old and expensive-looking, bound in blue cloth with a gold title.

“Kipling,” Jim mutters. “Of course.”

“Fitting, huh?” Winnie says. “The story of a boy with rare talents who becomes a spy—until it almost breaks him. But his adopted father, a man of rare wisdom, sets the boy free of his fate.”
“Uh-huh,” Jim says. “Mom, how the fuck did I get here?”

“Technically, you aren’t here,” Winnie replies. “But then technically, you never left Earth to begin with. If you’re asking how we literally got you here, don’t be stupid. You really don’t think I can sneak an unconscious body—two, actually—through Terran customs? You haven’t been paying attention, have you?” She shakes her head. “If you want to know where Mark and the rest of the family thinks you are, you freaked out in Kansas City and I checked you into a mental health facility for a couple of weeks to get your head shrunk back to its proper size. Happens all the time with Tarsus IV survivors. No muss, no fuss.”

“Two weeks,” Jim says, focusing on what’s important. “I’ve been here two whole weeks?”

“Fifteen days, actually, but who’s counting? Of course, you haven’t been here—” she looks around the room—“the whole time. The first five days you were in one of the shielded cells downstairs.” When he frowns at her: “Don’t give me that look! You were fucking radioactive, laddy boy. Even I didn’t want to touch you after I peeled you off of Ivan. Thank God for Al.”

“What’s he got to do with this?”

“Don’t sound so superior. He looks like a sad sack, but Al is the parapsychological equivalent of a purple sparkly unicorn—rarer than you are, sweetheart. He’s a true psychic null, only six have been identified among the known sentient species in the last 100 years. An army of Betazoids with a tanker ship full of sodium pentothal couldn’t crack his mind. I specially requested him for this gig, once I realized I was going to have to deal with both you and Ivan. I never could have gotten you out of Memnonia without him. Not without the whole world knowing, anyway.”

“Section 31 agents, always so prepared,” Jim says. “Whose aseptic lube did you use when you fucked Ivan? I know you both had some.”

Winnie gives him a poisonous look. “Don’t be an asshole.”

Jim sits straight up. “You’ve been fucking my boyfriend, and I’m the asshole?”

“Technically, he’s my boyfriend. Even though I hate that word—what is this, sixth grade? You’ve been fucking my partner, in more ways than one. I should be the one chewing you out.”

“Yeah? And where’s Ivan in all this? He’s the only one who knew who was fucking whom.”

“Ivan has been recovering, very far away from you. Stockholm, just to be precise: Al’s been working with him, drawing out the bad mojo. They’re supposed to be back some time today. You do realize that you almost made tapioca out of Ivan’s mind? If it had been anybody else, we’d have a drooling idiot on our hands. I told you to watch that shit.”

“Sorry. I become forgetful when I see a man with his dick inside my mother. Especially when that dick was in me not six hours ago.”

Winnie sighs, running her hands through her hair. “I really didn’t think it was a possibility when I left for the Orion System. You two seemed to hate each other. I should have realized how this stuff works: First you fuck each other, then you try to kill each other, then you fuck each other again, then you try to kill—you get the idea. It is icky. I mean, you have no idea how icky it is.”

Jim is silent a minute, looking down. The white coverlet is like a comscreen, he can see images on it. All kinds of fragments—too many—shiny and sharp. Enough to cut you to pieces.

“Ivan’s my cousin,” Jim says slowly. “Which means he’s your cousin, too.” He lets his head fall
back against the headboard with a bang. “You should have been reading me Faulkner.”

“So you do remember. I wondered if you would.”

“I remember enough,” Jim says. “You sent me those memories on purpose, right? That wasn’t just psychic spillage. You went walking in my dreams, or maybe you pulled me into yours. Just when I thought the boundaries of our relationship couldn’t get any more fucked, you surprise me. Goddamn, Winnie: How the hell do you even do that? It’s the one trick you never showed me.”

“Like all of my tricks, it’s mostly about will.” She shrugs one slim shoulder. “One day you may find that you can do it too, if you want to get to someone badly enough.”

“You wanted me that badly.”

“I wanted you to understand. I thought the exposition might cushion the blow a little.”

“You didn’t want to cushion it too much, though. You wanted me to find you two mid-screw.”

“Yep. I knew you would, if we had sex anywhere in your vicinity. Ivan didn’t realize, of course. He doesn’t understand the bond we share. His mother wasn’t an empath. Given her profession, that’s probably just as well.”

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t you just tell me what was going on?”

“I didn’t think it would be enough. You were so in love with him, Jim. That was obvious. You’re not stupid: Part of you had to know that he tortured Sean Quinn on purpose. But it didn’t shake you. Al even showed you the morgue holos, but you didn’t see. I could show you more pictures like that, Ivan has done this several times. He loses it every year or two; it’s part of his life cycle. And that’s not counting the murders he’s done for profit. Those are way less messy, but there’s more of them. Dozens and dozens. You’ve known from the start that he’s a killer, I told you so the very first night. But you fell for him anyway. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised: He’s very seductive when he wants to be. He’s as good at that as he is at killing.” Winnie gives Jim a searching look. “But you don’t want him now, do you?”

Jim can’t quite suppress his shudder. He sees Winnie smirk, which irritates him even more than he was already. He crosses his arms over his chest. “Why did you fall for him?”

“I didn’t. Ivan has a real talent for spying, and he’s a good man to have at your back in a crisis situation. The sex is good and it’s convenient. I’m not in love with him, any more than I’m in love with my phaser. Ivan is an instrument. A valuable one, but nothing to get silly about.”

Winnie is a gifted liar, but Jim knows she’s telling the truth. Even if he didn’t believe her face or her voice, there are the memories. His mother doesn’t fall in love. Not something most people would recognize as the emotion, anyway. The tender part of her died on the Kelvin. What’s left of Winnie’s love is as hard and cutting as one of her knives. Jim has the scars to prove it.

“What happens now?” he says wearily.

“You go home. Mark and Trang are expecting you. Don’t worry, you won’t have to testify. We have plenty of evidence against Quinn and the Orions without dragging you into that part of it. I kept my promise, didn’t I? You’re free of this bullshit. You can go back to school, or help Mark with the farm, or just sit on your ass if Trang will stand for it. The Kriders have two more nubile daughters, you can see what they’re up to.”

Jim winces. Winnie grimaces.
“Sorry. That was mean,” she says. “It’s been a shitty month.” She looks down, her shoulders slumping a little. “Jess was a nice girl. A lot like her mother: pretty, sweet, fucking awful taste in men. Until Sarah and Vin got together, of course. He’s always had a temper on him, but he’s a good man.” For a moment her eyes are regretful. There are dark circles under them. Winnie looks pretty—it would take more than Mars to spoil that. But she’s not as pretty as she usually is. She doesn’t look green anymore, but she does look tired. Tired, and a little lost.

“What are you going to do?” Jim says quietly. “Will the Department give you a new partner?”

Winnie raises her head. “Why would they do that?”

“Are you kidding? After what’s happened—”

“Jesus, you haven’t been listening. Ivan isn’t a drooling idiot. There’s no reason why he can’t go back in the field. We need him there. Trustworthy agents with his talents are like gold dust.”

“But he isn’t trustworthy. He lied to you. He lied to me.”

“There’s trust and trust. Ivan is reliable when it counts. Yeah, it’s weird that he had sex with you, but that wasn’t really about you. We had a big fight before I left for the Orion System. He wanted to take our relationship to the next level, but I told him four marriages were enough. He seduced you partly to show me that he had other options. I mean, it was also about the mission and his own narcissism and this weird pseudo-sibling rivalry thing you two have going on: Ivan always has six motivations for everything. But it was mostly about me.”

“I don’t—” Jim puts his fingers to his temples. “He is your cousin.”

“Half-cousin. Once removed. As far as we can figure out, he’s also Alexei Ivanov’s great-grandson. Even on Terra, we’d be legal. And it’s not like we’re going to have babies, is it?”

“Going to,” Jim whispers. “Why are you using the future tense? What are you telling me?”

Winnie raises her chin. She looks him in the eyes when she says it. But then, she never was one to flinch from her own bloody handiwork. “Ivan and I are getting married tomorrow.”

He thinks she says more things after that—he isn’t sure. For a few minutes Jim can’t hear anything but the noise in his head. It’s whiter than the room, and it’s loud. It drowns out everything, even his own thoughts.

He comes back to a hand shaking him. Winnie is standing over him. He’s close enough that he can smell her Chanel No. 5. He could strangle her if he wanted. For a moment he does want it: He can see his hands around that slender neck, squeezing and squeezing. It would feel so good.

He doesn’t move. He wouldn’t, even if he thought that men in white wouldn’t be here in about thirty seconds to shoot him up with every kind of tranquilizer. Winnie doesn’t need defending. If he got his hands around her throat, he couldn’t squeeze. She overpowered him a long time ago.

“I know you think I’m punishing you, but I’m not,” Winnie says. “You had yourself so deep in with Michael Quinn. You got in even deeper with Ivan. You will never get sucked into the life now: You’re free. Jim, Jim, what is Jim? Anything he wants. I did that for you. I got you out.”

“Liar,” Jim says. “Don’t pretend this was all some altruistic impulse. Maybe you don’t love Ivan, but you want him. Do you get how fucking sick that is? Not just because he’s your cousin. He looks like me.”
Winnie smiles a little. “He looks like me, too. So which of us is sicker, Jimmy boy?”

He just stares at her, shaking his head slowly.

“It’s okay,” Winnie says. “Freud worked it all out three hundred years ago: You can’t help it. Ivan can’t, either. The only thing more acute than his narcissism are his mommy issues. But my thing with Ivan isn’t about you. He gets me. I realized it when I was in Orion, fending off large green men. That kind of understanding is worth something, a whole lot more than some bullshit romance. I’m not losing it because you scamps couldn’t behave yourselves while I was gone.” She frowns. “Winnie Kuznetsov. I’ll have to change the monogram on my luggage again.”

“Mother of God,” Jim rasps. “Why do you hate me so much?”

Winnie perches on the edge of the bed. “Let me tell you another story,” she says. “I’m leaving soon—I have to be somewhere—but this won’t take long. Eight years ago, not long after Tarsus IV, Frank McClellan called and asked to see me. Apparently he’d had a lot of therapy in prison, and he was sorry for what he’d done to you and Sam. He couldn’t help it: His dad beat the shit out of him when he was growing up. For a long time he couldn’t deal with that. It took going to prison to make him face it.

“I sat there in his shitty little flat in Iowa City, and I watched his face as he told me all this. I could see that he really was sorry. Frank was crying with shame over what he did to you two boys. He begged me for my forgiveness.”

“Did you forgive him?” Jim says, curious in spite of everything.

“I shot him in the face with my phaser.”

Before Jim can stammer out the obvious question: “It was John Hakamoto who fucked up the DNA sequence on Tarsus IV. His virus destroyed the crops. The original interview panel that turned him down was right, he wasn’t ready for that level of research. He never should have been there. Why was he? Because I married him. Why did I? I took what should have been a dull, low-risk op, because I was desperate to give you boys a break on a nice safe world. Why? I’d just found out my piece of shit husband spent two years abusing my sons. George’s sons.”

Her voice is calm. But for a moment Jim can see it, the rage boiling beneath his mother’s smiling mask. Rage that was there long before Tarsus IV. Maybe since the day she was born.

“You remember what happened,” Winnie goes on. “The virus led to the famine, which led to the massacre. But I didn’t see the colonists when I shot Frank. I saw the bruises on Sam’s back, I saw his face after he buried Sifa. I saw you, and how you looked when Tony Chapel brought you back from the desert. I knew you would never be the same. Four thousand people murdered and my sons ruined, because Frank couldn’t deal with his daddy issues. An ocean of tears can’t make up for that. He’s lucky I just shot him. He’s fucking lucky.” Winnie stops, chest heaving.

“So. Frank got what he deserved,” Jim says. “But you were the one who married him. If we’re talking about causal chains, you knocked down the first domino. What do you deserve, Mom?”

“I deserve Ivan.” She is smiling again, though it doesn’t touch her eyes. “I didn’t ruin you, sweetheart. I saved you. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the two apart.”

She looks at her watch. “Anyway, that’s my story and I’m sticking to it.” She rises.

Winnie walks to the door. It whooshes but she suddenly turns, looking at him. “I do love you, Jim. But love doesn’t change anything. It can’t change me. I’ll never be the mother you want; I lost my
rolling pin a long time ago. I hear Trang makes a mean apple pie, though. You should go back to Riverside and let her bake you one.”

Winnie steps over the threshold. The door whooshes shut.

Jim looks at the ceiling for a few minutes. Then he gets up and walks to the window.

He pushes the curtains aside. He couldn’t have known what he’d see, but somehow he did. Maybe it’s the bond they share; Maybe it’s just bad luck.

Winnie is on the sidewalk in front of the hospital. The morning sun shines in her fair hair, her very blue eyes. She’s slim and elegant in her dark suit. She looks twenty-five, tops.

A cab pulls up to the curb. A man gets out. He’s fair too, and also dressed in black. He could be her brother, but he’s not. It’s obvious when he jumps out of the cab, kissing her passionately.

After a short eternity, the kiss breaks. He takes her hand and helps her into the cab. Winnie gets in.

Just before he follows her, the man looks up. His eyes meet Jim’s for a moment. The man is very pale, a bit thinner than he was two weeks ago. But something in his face is triumphant. Even from this distance, Jim can see it.

Jim just keeps looking. He doesn’t feel angry. He feels nothing.

Ivan looks away. He gets into the cab. It pulls away from the curb and is soon lost from sight.

Jim goes and sits in the chair by the bed. His sits on something, and realizes his mother forgot her copy of Kim. He picks up the book, flipping through the pages. He read it in high school.

He liked it, even though the ending is bullshit. The boy isn’t free of anything after the wise man finds the sacred river. A hundred credits says Kim was sneaking across the Russian border with stolen documents as soon as the lama returned to the monastery. You can’t pray away that kind of impulse. You can’t fuck it into submission, or burn it away with a laser. It’s in the blood.

Jim puts the book down. He rises, going to the mirror. The face reflected there is whiter than the room which surrounds him. It looks older than Winnie’s.

It’s not his face that he sees, but another face. Up close and personal this time, grey eyes staring into his own. He feels something now, looking at that face. He feels many things.

Jim rears his head back and smashes it into the mirror. It hurts—oh yes, it does. But more piercing than the pain is the satisfaction of seeing that smug, leering face breaking into bits.

It’s not broken enough. Jim head-butts the mirror again. This time he cries out, but it’s a cry of triumph. Glass rains down around him, sharp bright sparkles like snowflakes made of diamonds. He can feel the blood running down his face. He feels his smile, as he looks into the dead blind eye of the mirror frame.

He picks up one of the shards from the floor, a piece as long and sharp as a straight razor. For an instant he catches a glimpse of a reflection—one bloody blue eye. He angles it away so all that’s reflected is the white ceiling. Much better. The jagged edge of the shard bites into his hand, but he doesn’t mind. There are cuts across his fingers, deep and oval like lipless mouths. They’re starting to bleed, but it doesn’t hurt. It could be someone else’s hand.

“Shit,” A voice says behind him.
Jim spins around. There are two orderlies in the doorway. One is short and skinny, the other is gigantic. The skinny one runs a hand over his smooth brown head. “Put the glass down, Jim.”

“Jim, Jim, what is Jim?” he says.

The orderly takes a few steps towards him, holding out a hand. “Seriously, man. Calm down.”

“Freeze him already.” The gigantic orderly reaches for his weapon. “Fuck! I’ll do it—”

“Chill your ass out, Andy. I swear, you use that goddamn paralysis beam on one more patient this week, and Chapel is going to hear about it.” The skinny orderly looks back at Jim. “Come on, put the glass down. You don’t want to mess up that pretty face any more, do you?”

Jim tilts his head at him. “You’re a nice guy, Calvin. I can see that.” He really can. His vision is shifting again, just like it did on Mars. Calvin’s head is made of glass and Jim can see inside. He can see everything.

Calvin stops, brows drawing together. Jim leans forward, focusing in. It’s not hard when you see as well as he does. “You didn’t want to come to work today, huh? Not with Nolan so sick.”

“Stupid motherfucker,” Calvin says. His eyes have gone glassy, but his voice is normal. “Told him not to have the oysters. I’m not eating anything that looks like a slimy ashtray.”

“Smart man. Nolan could use your help, I bet. Kiss his head, make him some soup, whatever.” Jim barely has to push: Calvin didn’t want to be here today. He jerks his head towards the door. “Go home,” he says. “Just turn around and go.”

Calvin turns. He goes.

“You fucking freak.” Andy goes for his weapon, but he can’t move faster than Jim can speak.

“Stop.”

Andy freezes like he shot himself with the beam. But he’s still glaring. Jim can see into Andy’s head, too. It’s not like looking inside of Calvin’s: Andy isn’t nice. He’s big, blond, and mean, with eyes like cold stones.

Jim could have forgiven the meanness. He’s not feeling so nice himself today. But he can’t forgive the coloring. If Andy was like Calvin, Jim could have let him go. But Andy isn’t.

“Come here,” Jim says.

Andy’s face twitches a little, like he’s trying to disobey. He’s big and mean, but he’s not so strong. Not like that, anyway. After a few seconds he gives a grunt and approaches Jim.

“Here.” Jim hands him the glass shard. Andy reaches out an enormous paw and takes it.

“Put it to your throat.”

Andy’s hand begins to tremble. Sweat is running down his trunk-like neck.

“Do it.”

Andy does it. “Please,” he whispers. He says other things, but Jim doesn’t hear. It’s just noise.

“You’re right. I am a freak,” Jim says. “I can’t help it; I was born that way. You like to pick on
freaks, don’t you? Remember that kid in grade school? The one who liked to read and knew all the answers in class? You pulled his pants down and made him walk across the schoolyard with his little willy hanging out. Remember how you and your buddies laughed? Freaking hilarious.”

Jim doesn’t listen to Andy’s reply, the begging tone is all that registers. Too little, too late.

“If I tell you to cut your throat with that piece of glass, you’ll do it. You get that, right? You’ll stick it in your eye. You’ll cut off your little willy if I say so. How funny will that be?”

Andy is crying now, fat greasy tears running down his broad red cheeks. But he doesn’t let go of the glass. He holds it so tightly that red droplets are dripping from his hand, spattering his white scrubs and the whiter floors. “Please,” he moans. “My kids——”

“Christ, you’ve procreated? I hope they took after their mom.” Jim grins. He feels good. He feels right. This is how it must have been, watching the robots close in. Ivan didn’t hate Sean, and Jim doesn’t hate Andy. He’s just focused. Fascinated.

He didn’t feel like this when he pushed Ivan. But now Jim knows how Ivan feels.

“Fucking sweet,” he whispers. This isn’t pushing, it’s so much better. It’s pulling, having a puppet dancing on your strings. An enormous, sobbing puppet. Jim opens his mouth again.

When he thinks about it later (and he will, many times) Jim wants to believe that all he would have done is scare the shit out of Andy. But he’s never sure. To the end of his days, he isn’t.

Which is why it’s lucky that he never gets the chance to speak. Before he can say anything else, he feels the sting of a hypo in his neck. Someone else speaks, in clipped Standard.

“James Kirk. I never do seem to find you at your best.”

He spins around. As he does, his knees turn to jelly. He looks into a pair of calm hazel eyes. Maybe it’s the hypo or the man holding it, but Jim can’t see into this face. Suddenly, he can’t see a damn thing. It’s all going grey and blurry, just like it did in the desert nine years ago.

“Not you again,” Jim mutters, right before his face hits the floor.
Chapter 53

liii. Kirk

2255, cont.

At first, he thinks he’s still in the white room. Then he realizes that he’s looking straight into the blinding light of noonday sun. It reflects on a ceiling made of panes of glass, stretching far up over his head. Beyond it is brilliant blue sky. Below it are palm trees, waving soft fronds that are transparent in the light. The air is very warm, and so humid you can taste the water droplets on your tongue. All around him is a heavy, spicy scent with too many notes: moss and manure, grass and dirt, blooming flowers and rotting leaves. It would be cloying if it weren’t so clean. It’s the smell of green, growing things in rich profusion.

This is how everything must have smelled long ago, Jim thinks. When the world was new.

He would like to stay here a while. Sitting quite still, staring at the sky and smelling the plants. But he knows that he’s already been doing that for quite some time. Too long, perhaps, caught in the bright void that lies between sleep and waking. He straightens and looks at his companion. The man has been sitting beside him for all the time that Jim has been here. Perhaps they have even been talking. The recent past is a dazzling blur right now. But his companion has not left him, not once. Guarding Jim or guarding against him; it isn’t clear.

Jim looks around the room, blinking. He and his companion are sitting on a wood bench in the middle of a circle of grass about seven feet in circumference. In front of them is a tile path, inset with an ornate pattern of stylized flowers. Beyond that is a pond like none that has ever been found in nature. Choked with lily pads three feet across, its banks overhung with palm trees of a dozen different varieties, those flanked by orchids, birds of paradise, caladiums, elephant ears, and a hundred other plants of which Jim doesn’t know the name. Other plants cascade from pots suspended from the ceiling: more orchids, but also some others that are delicate pink vessels, shading to yellow-green at their bases. The sweetest notes in the air seem to emanate from them.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Tony Chapel says. “They call it the Conservatory of Flowers, but there’s more to it than that. Much more. I’ve never seen anything else quite like it, in all my travels. I had a girlfriend once, a Vulcan. She would come here and sit for hours. She said it was like something out of the old legends. Vulcan was tropical once, you know. Thousands of years ago, before 40-Eri A flared so shockingly. Vulcan was lush, and green, and kind, not at all what she became later. You never know how things will develop. It’s as true of planets as it is of people.”

“Where is this place? How long have I been out this time?” Jim asks.

“Not as long as you fear. We’re still in San Francisco: Golden Gate Park, to be exact. I thought you could use an outing after yet another sojourn in a shielded cell. Luckily, Al was back from Stockholm, or you’d have been in there six weeks instead of six days.” Tony nods at a large, ungainly figure slouching further down the path, sniffing at a particularly striking purple orchid.

“So weird,” Jim says. “I can see him, but it’s like I can’t see him. Like he’s not really there.”

“Imagine how weird it is for him. Many people are called psychic nulls, and what we mean is they have a very low psychic signature. But that’s not the same thing as no psychic signature, which is what Al has. We don’t realize how many of our perceptions are not what we can see, but what we can feel: Vibes, for lack of a better word. Your reaction to him is not unique; he spent most of his
early years being overlooked. He was working in an office in São Paulo doing data entry! That’s like using a unicorn to pull a hay wagon. Then my friend Alexei found him. After that, Al had all the recognition he could want.” Tony waves at Al. Al gives a shy smile and turns around a bend in the path. He’s soon lost behind a clump of palmettos.

“Maybe he’d rather have stayed in São Paulo. Did Alexei ever think of that?” Jim says. “He picked up people like stray puppies. But he didn’t stay with them, did he? Fucking careless.”

Tony doesn’t answer immediately. He sits on the bench, a small, straight-backed man with a white beard, his slim and elegant hands wrapped around the top of an ebony cane. He looks like a professor in his well-cut linen suit. But the stillness in his face belies what must be a carefully crafted image. The cold anger in his hazel eyes belies it.

“Winona,” he says, enunciating every syllable. “She’s been talking to you, hasn’t she? I can’t believe she’s still aggrieved. Alexei’s been dead for seventeen years.”

“She’s right to be pissed. If he hadn’t found her, maybe she would have been different—better.”

“You mean, maybe she wouldn’t have married Ivan. She wouldn’t have left you again.” When Jim doesn’t answer: “If it weren’t for Alexei, you wouldn’t be here. Think of that before you bear him such a grudge.” Tony turns and looks at Jim. His face is benevolent but disappointed. He looks like a professor who’s seen his favorite student fail a test—an easy one.

“I’ve known your mother since she was eighteen. Long before she joined Section 31, before she knew what Alexei really was. Do you know what she was like then?”

“Tell me,” Jim says, not quite able to keep the eagerness from his voice.

“Exactly the same. A little more impatient, perhaps—a tad callow. She was a farm girl, after all. But she wasn’t, not really. The instincts were all there, the rage was there. I saw it the moment we met. Alexei did too, of course. He knew where her best destiny lay, and he helped her find it. If it hasn’t worked out quite as she hoped, well: Your mother would never have been a happy homemaker. Or a happy geologist, for that matter. If you believe differently, then you’re naïve. Ridiculously so, considering what you’ve been through.”

“You don’t like her, do you? Which is weird. I mean, you slept with her. You messed up your relationship with T’Pinna for her.”

“My my, Noni has been indiscreet,” Tony says, though he doesn’t look that upset by it. “As a matter of fact, I love your mother. But that doesn’t mean I can’t see her clearly. I hope you’ll remember as you get older, love is not the same as blindness. It will keep you from repeating the mistake you made with Ivan Kuznetsov.” Seeing Jim blink: “Of course, your mother told me everything. Indiscretion can cut both ways.”

Jim says nothing. He doesn’t know what to say. He looks up so he doesn’t have to look at Tony. He concentrates on the beautiful exotic plants hanging overhead.

“They’re carnivorous, you know,” Tony says, following Jim’s gaze. “The arresting colors and the delicious scent, it’s a trap. Pitcher plants are full of an acid that will dissolve anything that’s foolish enough to be lured inside. The best course is to admire them from a safe distance.”

“I’m sensing a metaphor.”

Tony shrugs. “Ivan Kuznetsov is insane. One of the highest-functioning psychopaths I’ve seen, but still, mad as a March hare. There’s a real power in madness, it’s why he’s more dangerous than you
are. You almost ripped his mind to pieces in a moment of extreme anger. Ivan almost tore your soul apart. Not quickly, not angrily, but slowly and discreetly, over a period of months. He twined himself around you like that kudzu over there; he showed no mercy. Why did he do it? Because it amused him. Because he could. If your mother hadn’t intervened when she did, he would have made you as mad as he is. Another few weeks and it might have been too late. Even as it is—look at what you nearly did to Andrew Little! Could you have done that a year ago? Of course. Would you? Heavens no.”

Jim wraps his arms around himself. For all the warmth of the conservatory, he feels cold all over. He wants to believe that he would have stopped with Andy. He wouldn’t have hurt him—Jim just wanted to scare him. But he isn’t sure, and he never will be. It’s why he’s shivering.

Tony puts a hand on Jim’s shoulder. His touch is warmer than normal. It takes Jim a moment to realize that Tony isn’t running a fever. The warmth Jim feels isn’t the kind you sense with your skin. It’s felt more acutely than that; it emanates from deep within. He’s never felt anyone quite like Tony before. Jess was a receptive empath, Jim’s brother is. But their powers were not like this. The difference between a candle and a bonfire.

Jim lets himself enjoy it. He’s beyond shame now, at least with Tony, who has seen him at his worst. The warmth is wonderful, it echoes all the way to the core of him. Not in a sexual way; it goes deeper. Jim wonders if he will ever find anything like it again. Probably not.

Four months from now, he will be so surprised. On a troop shuttle in August, Jim will find it. Emanating from a grumpy, red-eyed man with an ear-bending southern drawl will be a warmth that is much like this—thick, real, overwhelming. But not so platonic.

Jim doesn’t know that yet. Right now the warmth brings tears to his eyes. He imagines that his father must have felt the same way. Maybe George Kirk was a powerful receptive empath—the files were wrong, as they so often are. Or maybe he was just a very good man, like Tony Chapel. Not a perfect one: given to occasional bad moods and fits of temper like anybody else, perhaps exhibiting a weakness for sensosuits or Orion porn. Still, a good man. A good father.

Jim looks away, blinking hard. He doesn’t want to cry in front of Tony. He might never stop.

“Okay,” he says. “You’re a good guy, I get that. I forgive you for hypoing me twice. And for threatening to force feed me when I was thirteen. Here’s what I don’t get: Winnie sleeps with everybody, why does she always marry the assholes?” He smiles, but the question is serious.

Tony squeezes Jim’s shoulder, then lets him go. Jim manages not to show his disappointment. “Most of her marriages have been about work—John Hakamoto, Hector Sanchez, even Ivan,” Tony explains. “He is a valuable agent when handled correctly, and Winnie is adept at getting the best out of him. Notice that he didn’t fall back into bad habits until she left for Orion. Of course you know why she married your father. She loved him.”

“Why did she marry Frank? She didn’t love him. It definitely wasn’t about work.”

“It was about both, in a way. Your grandfather Alexei had died very suddenly. I don’t know if she told you about it.” When Jim shakes his head: “It happened at Christmas. He’d come to see me and my family in San Francisco. He was mostly retired at that point, as any ninety-year-old should be. He’d bought a house in the Mission, he wanted to write. A children’s book, he told me, like Kim but more current. He was always so enamored of Kipling; I prefer Dickens myself.

“Anyway, he had promised to be in town by Christmas Eve, but he’d been delayed. He went to see your mother in Iowa, he was trying to convince her to move to San Francisco with you boys. So he
was in a hurry. I wouldn’t have cared if he’d arrived Christmas Day instead of Christmas Eve, but Alexei was strange about keeping promises, big or small. He took a transporter so he could make it on time. That was a mistake. It’s not easy on the body, being split into atoms like that. It’s particularly hard on the heart, and Alexei already had a weakness there.”

Tony looks down, pausing. Jim feels his reluctance to finish the story. Tony still misses his friend. Seventeen years, but the grief is real. It’s when Jim knows that there must have been good in Alexei, for all his carelessness. Tony wouldn’t have loved him if there hadn’t been.

“It was the day after Christmas,” Tony says finally. “He was staying with me while his house was having some minor renovations. I woke up very early in the morning, five o’clock. I felt him—which at first I thought was strange, since it was rare for Alexei to be up that early. He was always a night owl. I sat straight up in bed. I felt him, and then—” Tony stops, swallowing. His hands clutch the cane until their knuckles are white. “I didn’t.”

Tony is silent for a while. When he speaks again, his voice is very quiet. “It’s a singular talent, feeling a loved one die. Only receptive empaths can do it. You projectives should thank your lucky stars for that. It’s happened to me four times in my life, with my parents, my best friend, and my wife. I cannot describe the feeling to you—it’s as if someone has ripped the heart from your chest. But you don’t die; your absent heart still beats. It takes a long time to recover from the cognitive dissonance. I’m not sure that we ever really recover.”

Tony raises his head and seems to gather himself. “Your mother didn’t feel Alexei die, she was spared that. But it was difficult enough, all the same. There were times when she resented him, even hated him. But she also loved him, she couldn’t help it. After he died, Winona was—unstable—for a long time. You probably don’t remember, you were very young. I wager your brother would, if you asked him. I think she believed that marrying Frank would help her right herself. Of course it made things worse. So much worse, and not just for her.”

He gives Jim a commiserating look. “Amazing, isn’t it? How just one decision can have such far-reaching consequences. I’m sure she never imagined that marrying a farmer she didn’t love would help to set in motion one of the most notorious genocides of the past hundred years. It’s why she had to kill him. In her way, she was trying to make amends.”

“Yeah, that sounds like her,” Jim says. “It’s why she killed Kodos, too.”

“No,” Tony says. “That was about you.”

Jim stares at him. “I don’t understand.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered why she didn’t come looking for you in the desert? Do you think she didn’t care? Just the opposite. After the massacres and mass burials, the surviving colonists were paralyzed with fear. Everyone was terrified to even leave their houses, but not your mother. She went looking for you. She feared the worst. There had been several Red Group members in the massacre, Kodos wasn’t as successful as he wanted at keeping the groups apart. She knew you had a good friend—his name escapes me—in Yellow Group, and that sometimes you went to see him. At first she was afraid that Kodos’ men had killed you by accident.

“She’d been to the mass graves, she looked at the bodies as they were buried. But you weren’t there. Then she feared something almost more terrible. She knew Kodos had a real attachment to you, he considered you to be the perfect Aryan child. Had he taken you? What was he doing to you? Perhaps you forget, Kodos was a very powerful projective himself. It’s why he was able to suborn his entire security force into being mass murderers. You were so young, your powers were still latent: He could have done a great deal to you, irreversible damage. That’s what your mother was
thinking about when she left her house to go see Kodos. It’s why she took her knife with her. But the knife wasn’t the weapon she used first.

“You have to remember, your mother isn’t as powerful an empath as you or Ivan. That’s not her fault, it’s about testosterone. Under normal circumstances, she probably wasn’t as powerful as Kodos. But on that particular night—well, you’ve heard of frantic mothers lifting cars off their children, haven’t you? The car was Kodos, and she didn’t just lift it. She destroyed it.”

“No,” Jim says, shaking his head. “She told me she seduced him.”

“Why would she do that? Why would she need to? The only penetration that happened is when your mother ripped his mind apart, looking for you. Then, when he was babbling and drooling, when she knew that he didn’t know where you were, she finished him off with her knife. She had to: If he was found alive, there would be too many questions. It’s not like it was a hardship, he had just killed four thousand people. Still, you can’t exert that much power and not feel some aftershocks. When we found her the next day, she was—not in good shape. Not as bad as you were when you came back from Mars, but still—bad. It took several hours to get her coherent enough to tell me what had happened. When she did, we went looking for you. By the time we brought you back, she was better. Enough that you never realized what had really taken place. You were a child, you didn’t need to know. But now I think it’s time you understood.”

“No,” Jim says, shaking his head. “She told me she seduced him.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?” Jim asks quietly.

“Will you tell anyone what you did to Ivan? Or to Andrew Little? Seven hundred years ago, our kind were burned at the stake. Even now we’re often looked at askance by regular people. Can you blame them? Something within us touches the divine. Most of the time we walk in this world, but not always. Sometimes we can look up and see the blinding lights above it. We can stoop down and touch the blackness below. It’s not easy to bear that kind of power. No wonder so many of us go mad. That’s what’s really wrong with Ivan. He’s in the abyss almost all of the time. He was born there, it’s all he knows. No wonder he’s so eager to be someone else.”

“It’s strange,” Jim says. “Mom punished Kodos, she punished Frank. But she married Ivan. I know he’s had a hard life, but shit. Everything he did, and she’s letting him get away with it.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Tony says. “Ivan has been trying to marry her for a long time, no doubt he thinks he’s triumphed. But his victory will be short-lived.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t honestly believe they’ll be happy? He won’t be able to satisfy her. Your father couldn’t, Christopher Pike couldn’t—I couldn’t. Ivan, for all his gifts of transformation, can’t make himself into what she wants. A man both terrifying and good, lethal and kind: a monster with the soul of an angel. Not even her grandfather could have lived up to such expectations. Alexei was the most dangerous man I’ve ever known, but he was just a man. Winona wants more than that. Where does such a creature of fire and ice exist? I’ve never met him.

“Ivan is not an idiot. He’ll realize all this, if he hasn’t already. But he won’t be able to separate from her. His other methods won’t work: I think Winona is the one person in the galaxy that he couldn’t hurt. He can’t leave her, he can’t kill her, he’ll try his best to please her. But he won’t. She’ll never love him, but she’ll never let him go. He’s far too useful. A rather cruel and ironic punishment, when you consider it. Your mother understands these things well.” Tony smiles at Jim. “She was much kinder to you. She let you go.”

“What if I don’t want to go? What if I want to be a spy?”
Tony tilts his head at him. A beam of sunlight hits his eyes, turning them golden. “Do you?”

“Maybe. Could I still join up?”

“Of course. Winona won’t like it, but I’ve braved her displeasure before. Your mother forgets sometimes that you are not a child. You are old enough to make your own decisions. If that’s your choice, I’ll make it happen.” His expression is still pleasant, though he isn’t smiling now. “Your wish is my command.”

Jim considers a second, peering into those changeable hazel eyes. “Why?”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you.”

“You’ve been so nice to me. You’ve given me all this useful exposition. I’m sure that half this stuff is classified. Now you offer to do whatever I want. Why? You don’t even know me.”

“You’re Alexei’s great-grandson.”

“What difference does that make? Ivan is too, and you wouldn’t give a damn if Mom drop-kicked him into the nearest black hole. You have to know that if I join the Department, she’ll have a fit. I’m not saying she’d actually take that cane and beat you to death with it, but it’ll be something like that. Something cruel and ironic. Why risk it for me?”

“I’m not afraid of your mother,” Tony says.

“No,” Jim says, after a second. “You’re really not, are you? There’s only one reason that could be true. You’re as dangerous as she is.” He shakes his head. “Jesus, you’re good. You look like somebody’s smiling grandpa, you feel like it. But you’re not.”

“I hope to be, someday,” Tony says. He leans closer to Jim, brushing a palm frond out of the way. His eyes are brighter than the leaves, green with amusement. His voice drops to a pseudo-confidential whisper: “If my daughter will stop dating homosexuals. It’s a bad habit of hers.”

“Cut the shit,” Jim says. “What are you up to?”

“You’ve become cynical. Good for you,” Tony says, leaning back. “Which is why you might not believe what I’m going to tell you. I’ll tell you anyway. I’m making amends.” When Jim just raises an eyebrow: “Your mother never told you why she left for Orion, did she? Seems like a strange decision on the surface of it. She had so much to do on Terra.”

“Something went wrong on that end of the op. She never gave details.”

“Yes. Something went very wrong. Our agent on that end was missing, and Winona went to find her. I would have gone myself, but my grasp of their language is spotty. All the pigment implants in the world couldn’t make me pass for an Orion male. Not to mention my injury—” Tony indicates his leg. “Orions have a horror of mutilation. They believe that the body is a sacred vessel, and any damage to it is punishment by the Mother Goddess. It’s why they won’t do limb or digit regeneration. Anything you lose is your fault, and you don’t get it back in the afterlife. In their view, I’d be hopping around in Heaven on one leg. They’d never trust a man with a bad limp, even if he wasn’t thirty centimeters below their average height. I couldn’t go.”

Tony frowns. His eyes have gone a sullen brown. He taps his cane frustratedly against the tiles.

“Why would you want to?” Jim says. “You have to be pretty high up in the Department, why would you go after one missing agent? Unless you had some personal—” he stops.
“Yes,” Tony says, seeing the realization dawning in Jim’s expression. “It was very personal. The missing agent was my wife, Alice.”

Jim looks away from the pain in Tony’s face. This is not the same as what Tony felt for Alexei. This is quite new, shocking in its rawness. An amputated limb that has not begun to regenerate.

“I never wanted to go,” Tony says. “She had enough on her hands in Kansas City. I asked her as a personal favor. She isn’t the only one of our agents who speaks Orion, there are any number that I could have asked. But I wanted her. I already knew Alice was dead, you see. But I didn’t know how. I didn’t know who. What I did know is that Winona wouldn’t stop until she found the truth. She’d see justice was done.”

“Did she?” Jim asks, though he doesn’t need to.

“Oh yes,” Tony says. “She even let me see it.”

“What?”

In answer, Tony reaches out and grabs Jim’s wrist. Jim pulls back out of sheer reflex. Too late. The world has dropped away. Suddenly he’s in a richly appointed room, smelling of incense and roasting meat. Two people are there, figures lit by the flames of the huge stone fireplace. The woman is Winnie, albeit a greener version. But there is also familiar. Jim has never seen in person, but they’ve talked on the comscreen. He can understand him, though perhaps he’d be able to in any case—shared memories are funny like that. Either way, Jim can understand. The man is speaking Orion, Sextan dialect.

“You fucking bitch.”

The man on the floor is a striking sight: seven feet tall, his skin a brilliant emerald. The blood spurting from his chest wound is even brighter, neon-yellow against all that green. More yellow drips from the corners of his mouth. He’s dying, but it hasn’t dimmed the fires in his eyes. Even though he doesn’t have the strength to lift it anymore, he still clutches a sword in one huge hand. His other scrabbles uselessly at the expensive purple carpet beneath him. Long before the death blow, that hand couldn’t have been much use to him. It’s missing three fingers.

Winnie carefully wipes her blade on the carpet, then returns it to the sheath at her hip. “You’re using the wrong noun case,” she says. “I’m not a prostitute. I’m an outworlder, and I’m middle class. I know things haven’t really worked out with us, but is that any reason to be rude?”

“I’ll see you butchered for this,” he spits. “My men will split you in two with their cocks. They’ll chop off your breasts. You’ll die screaming with your mouth full of come. You’ll—”

“Oh, shut up. You’re not gonna see anything. In about five minutes you’re gonna be one big green lump of dead guy. Too bad about the carpet—I really liked it. You people don’t import this stuff to Terra, do you?”

“My sons will avenge me. Tayden—”

“Won’t do shit. Well, he might throw a party. He’s been waiting for years to take over. He’s nineteen, he’s not getting any younger.” Winnie shrugs. “He’s always liked me. That’s why I’ve been fucking him behind your back for three months. When I tell him I found you like this, he’ll believe me.”

“What kind of demon are you? Why have you done these things?”
Winnie kneels beside Taylar, careful to stay away from his sword hand. “Remember a pretty little thing you had here a few months ago? Blonde, kind of short, funny Tertian accent? She made you mad about something, and you gave her to your minions for the night. But the boys went too far, like they do. The next day you had another dead hooker on your hands.”

Winnie peers at his face. “Yeah, you remember. Vaguely, anyway. I know that kind of thing happens here a lot. But here’s the problem: She wasn’t a hooker. She wasn’t even Orion. She had people back home who cared about her, one man in particular. The wrong man—from your point of view, anyway. He asked me to find out what happened to his wife. I promised that I’d take care of the bastards who murdered her.”

“Vengeance,” Taylar whispers. “I understand.”

“Actually, you don’t.” She starts unbuttoning Taylar’s trousers.

“Unhand me! I’m already dead! You have fulfilled your promise.”

“The one I made to Tony. Not the one I made to you a long time ago.” She stops undressing him. “Look in my face, big boy. Cast your memory back to when you weren’t so big. You were twelve, and your daddy was alive. The two of you were holed up on one of the Ristian moons with a lot of minions. They caught a Starfleet away team unawares. The minions killed most of them, but three survived. Taylon decided to have fun with those. He really wanted you to have a new toy to play with, so he gave you the girl. But she wasn’t much fun, was she? By the time she chopped off the third finger, you’d figured that out.”

Taylar’s ebony eyes widen. Yellow sweat pours down his face, giant chest heaving up and down. “No,” he rasps. “It can’t be. You’d be—”

“Fifty-four. That’s not the same to a Terran as it is to an Orion. And I have really good genes.” Winnie bats her eyelashes at him in mock vanity. “Do you remember what I told you on Risa Gamma? I said that if you ever hurt another woman, if you ever caused one to be hurt, I’d come back and finish what I’d started. I know you didn’t keep your word. You broke it long before your boys butchered Alice Chapel. But I do keep my promises.”

She jerks his trousers open. Taylar tries to thrash, but he’s lost too much blood. He tries to scream, but all that comes out are awful choked sounds.

“Orion heaven, it sounds neat,” Winnie says. “Copulating forever in the bosom of the Mother Goddess. Of course, it’s going to be hard for you to worship her properly. You can’t copulate without a cock and balls. Guess the Mother Goddess will just have to get over it. Unless she’s the one who brought this down on you. That would be ironic, wouldn’t it?”

She rips his trousers all the way off. Taylar does scream then. He screams and screams.

Winnie smiles, and unsheathes her knife.

The grip on Jim’s wrist is gone. He gets up and walks away from the bench. He doesn’t run, though he wants to. He walks to the edge of the pond, watching the giant lily pads until his breathing calms down. Until he can’t smell incense and blood anymore.

Perhaps his relaxation is visible—palpable, anyway. Only once he’s regained his equilibrium does Tony approach him, leaning on his expensive cane. It occurs to Jim that Tony looks his age, which must be past eighty. Eighty isn’t what it used to be, but he doesn’t look young. He clearly hasn’t had any work done, a strange kind of honesty for someone in his profession.
For a moment they stand by the edge of the pond, hearing the falls and seeing lily pads float.

“Your mother is nothing if not thorough,” Tony says. “Before she left Orion she tracked down all the men who took part in my wife’s death. Winona saved her special punishment for Taylar, but none of the others escaped. What’s more, she gathered enough evidence to put the rest of that particular Syndicate cell away. It’s why she was gone so long: She had quite a bit to do. She did everything I asked. I wanted justice, and justice I got.”

“Vengeance, you mean.”

“Perhaps,” Tony says. “Sometimes the two are hard to tell apart.” He taps his cane pensively on the ground. “As I said, Winona never wanted to go to Orion. She couldn’t have known what Ivan would do, but she was afraid you wouldn’t be able to keep going without her support. She was worried, as mothers tend to be. I told her that if you were old enough to get yourself mixed up with mobsters, you were old enough to endure them without her looking over your shoulder. We were both right: You did endure, but you paid a heavy price for it.

“It’s true, I don’t really know you. At the time, I didn’t care what happened to you. I only cared for my own vengeance. Now that I have it, I remember something T’Pinna used to say to me, a Vulcan proverb of archaic origin. Having is not so satisfying a thing as wanting. It is not logical, but it is often true. Taylar died screaming, and my wife is still gone. Castrating a million Orion pirates would change nothing. It certainly doesn’t change what Ivan did to you. I can’t undo the consequences of my actions. All I can do is apologize now, and give you a choice. I am sorry for what happened, Jim. Whatever you want to be, whether it’s a spy or a farmer, I’ll help you.”

“You don’t want to though, do you? You don’t want me to become a spy. I mean, that’s clear.”

“On the contrary, I would love to have you. It’s clear that you have a real aptitude for the work. Your experiences of the past year have given you an incomplete picture of what it is we do. Not every assignment is so—dire. If you joined the Department, you would be doing vital, necessary work. Not many individuals get to know complete freedom, but you would. The ability to go anywhere, be anyone, to change things at a fundamental level. We are the unsung heroes of this galaxy, and we like it that way. You would like it, I think. Winona does, for all her complaints.”

“I could never leave.”

“You probably wouldn’t want to. Few of our agents do. We’re not jailers, Jim. That would be counter-productive. You’re allowed a life outside the Department: How you live it is up to you. Who knows? You might even die in bed when you’re ninety. Ivanovs are lucky that way.”

Jim is silent a long time. He’s silent so long, most people would think he isn’t going to answer. He knows that Tony knows better. Tony is, quite possibly, the perfect spy. A man of infinite patience and ruthless cunning, raw courage and exquisite manners. He’s done terrible things in his time; he’s caused them to be done. Jim wonders who he was sixty years ago, before he met Alexei. Who would Tony Chapel have been if he hadn’t become a spy? How much good was lost, how much potential? Tony has kept his soul—Jim is sure of that—but it must have been a struggle. One much harder than growing a leg back. How hard to stay human when you have access to so much power. How hard to see the real world, after years of looking into the abyss.

But the abyss can be beautiful. Jim would know, he’s spent the last year living in it. He could do this work. He could be great, like Alexei was great. Amazing, in a way that Ivan will never be. Winnie will hate it, but she isn’t here.

Jim looks at the plants. He listens to the water. The sun shines, the galaxy turns. Lives—worlds—
hang in the balance. (Though he won’t know that until much later.)

“I want to go home,” Jim says. “Right now. Transporter or catapult, I don’t care. Once I’m there, I want you people to stay away from me. Section 31 is out of my life, got it?”

He’s amazed at how strong his voice sounds. He’s so tired. But he’ll rest when he’s in Iowa. He misses his old room: ugly furniture, plaid bedspread, creepy glowing crucifix and all. He wants to curl up there and sleep for a week. Then he’ll figure out what he wants to do. He has no idea yet, he just knows that it won’t be this. Jim is done with spying—and spies—for good. He’ll live in the world: He’ll stay human.

He feels the relief of the decision even as he makes it. It feels real and true. Like he is solidly planted on his feet for the first time in years.

“As you wish,” Tony says. He looks a little disappointed. But much more than that, he looks glad. He smiles at Jim like a proud father. The best one, perhaps, that Jim has known in his life. Tony takes out a phone.

Five minutes later, when the conservatory fades in a haze of blue sparkles, Tony is still smiling.

TO BE CONTINUED

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