**Trapped in Amber**

by iam_spock (FanficbyLee)

Summary

The Enterprise is trapped in orbit, losing power, and doomed to crash. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy are trying to find the source of the energy net that is holding their ship on a pre-warp planet full of humans whose technology is not advanced enough to have created the shields. The surface of the planet is dotted with ancient crash sites, and they do not want Enterprise to join the list. They must save Enterprise, while protecting the planet's inhabitants from finding out there is life out there among the stars.

Notes

This was my entry for the Strange New Worlds short story contest. Obviously, I was not one of the winners, but I believe in this story and think it's the best piece of Trek fanfic I've ever written. I've broken it up into pieces because it's just shy of 10K.
Chapter 1

Captain’s Log Stardate 3674.5: *It has been three days since Enterprise was trapped in orbit around Haldus IV. Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and I have taken a shuttlecraft to the surface, attempting to find the source of the shield that surrounds the planet. The human inhabitants of the planet are pre-warp, which means the Prime Directive is in full effect. We cannot interfere with these people or let them know of life on other worlds.*

*They have limited space travel, several missions to their moons, but no manned missions beyond that, which means they do not have the technological know-how to create the shield that is draining Enterprise of power and will send my ship to her doom within another 36 hours. If we do not shut down the shield, Enterprise will join the other ships that crashed into the planet in the past 200,000 years.*

*Mr. Spock has found the nearest power source from our landing spot in a cavern outside a bustling city. We were able to blend in with the general population, hiding our alien nature, including Spock, and we are breaking into an archaeological dig site that is in the same location as the shield source.*

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Sloping walls led to a domed ceiling, surrounding the central roughly circular chamber. Spock tasted dust with each breath he took, but it was only natural to expect dust particles in the air when one was underground in a recent excavation. The dig site was lit with portable lights strung around columns and propped up on shelving units the scientific team had brought in to collect their treasures. He pulled out his tricorder, moving slowly through the site while Kirk and McCoy awaited his report.

“The shape and condition of the area suggests that this may have been the site of an explosion,” he pointed out as he crouched to brush dirt and sand from the glossy surface that made up the floor. His right shoulder was still tender from the crash landing of their shuttlecraft, but it did not hamper his ability to do his duty. He wouldn’t allow it to. “Great heat was needed to make this glass.”

“Do you think the scientists figured that out yet?” McCoy asked referring to the archaeologists that were exploring the site.

“I do not know if they have, but I have no doubt they will. These people, like most humans, are quite inquisitive and intelligent.”

“Keep talking like that, Spock, and I’m going to think you like us illogical humans.”

“If I did not, Doctor, I would not be in Starfleet,” Spock pointed out.

“It’s not what I was expecting,” the Captain said as he looked at the fossilized remains of one of those same humans on a table set up by the archeologists. “I thought we’d find advanced technology. That we’d find the key to the shield when we broke in here.”

“I am still picking up the energy signature, Captain,” Spock pointed out as he walked between the debris and signs of violence to stand near the row of tables covered with bones and other relics. “While most of this is indigenous to this planet, not all of it is.” He brought the tricorder closer, scanning a mound of what looked like pot shards but could have been shrapnel. “There are traces of metals that do not exist naturally on this planet in the rubble.”

“Like the crash sites you saw from orbit?” McCoy looked up from the bones he was studying to meet Spock and Jim’s gazes. “Because it’s not only the minerals. There are remains that aren’t
human mixed in here too. They’re pretty much humanoid from what I can tell, but they did not
evolve here. But this—" he held out his hands to indicate the chamber “—it’s been here for
thousands of years.”

“For at least one-hundred-ninety-seven-thousand years, Doctor.” Spock’s lips were drawn into a
tight line as he found a piece of something metallic on the next table surrounded by layer upon layer
of clay and limestone sediment that nearly hid the blueish material. “As is this. It is the same material
as some of the oldest crash sites I scanned from Enterprise. Logically it is from the original invaders
of this world.”

“We’ve getting more questions than answers, gentlemen,” Jim said as he placed the objects he was
looking at back on the table where he found them. “Can you pinpoint what in here is giving off the
energy, Spock?”

“Whatever it is, it is below this chamber. According to the information I read in the lead scientist’s
notes on the site, the archeological team is only concerned about evidence of human habitation in this
part of the cavern. They have not gone deeper.”

“Don’t make me say ‘fascinating’, Spock,” McCoy grumbled. “Just find out how we get down there.
This glass is too thick for us to get through with phasers.”

“They would also leave too much evidence of our interference.”

“Spock, we’re being as careful as we can be about the Prime Directive.” The Captain arched his
brows at his Science Officer and then paced around the chamber. “So looking for a secret passage
isn’t likely, but there are more tunnels out there. If we get far enough away from the dig site, we
might find a way beneath it. What I wouldn’t do for a Horta right now.”

“This chamber was more than likely damaged by invaders trying to find the one beneath. It is logical
to assume that we are not the first crew to try to shut the shield down to save a ship. It is unclear how
long the shield has been in effect, but the number of fallen ships has decreased a great deal in the past
ten to fifteen thousand years. From what I have been able to gather from my tricorder readings, the
human inhabitants of the cavern came much, much later than the alien remains. They were here first,
and they might have found a way inside that we have yet to discover.” He then tilted his head
slightly and arched a single brow upward. “Although yes, it would be most beneficial to have a
Horta with us as I do not think we will find a secret computer code or song to allow us quick access
as we have in the past.”

“Well since I can’t remember a single one of those leading us into a good situation, whether it was a
necessary goal or not, let’s see what we can find through the tunnels. Any idea of which we should
take first? There are three coming out of here, but I don’t want us to split up unless we have to.”

“Neither do I.” McCoy left off investigating more of the artifacts and walked toward the nearest
passage. “There’s no footprints in the dust on this one, and since that’s how we found our way in
here, seems to make sense that looking for where there aren’t any would help us go where no one
has gone before.”

“Logical.”

“Don’t tell him that, Spock. He hates it.”

“Which is why he does it, Jim.”
Jim didn’t bother to hide the smile that their banter brought him. No matter how dire the situation was, he could always count on Spock and McCoy to give him a little hope. He turned from the tunnels to the equipment shelves, where he found a small selection of climbing and caving tools. They were primitive by Kirk’s standards, but he had faith they’d be what they needed. He hefted a couple of bundles of strong rope that were meant for climbing, not binding something, and a jangle of carabiners, anchors, and just because they might need it a functional belay.

“Jim?” Spock queried as Jim approached him, handing Spock a bundle of the rope and a few of the other items. He knew Spock’s shoulder wasn’t bothering him enough to make carrying the rope difficult. Even injured the Vulcan was at least twice as strong as he was.

“Since you and the good doctor,” he answered with a nod of his head toward where McCoy was looking at one of the passages, “aren’t rock climbers, I thought it’d be a good idea to grab some of this. We don’t know how deep or steep whatever passage we’ll find will be.”

Spock nodded in agreement while adjusting the rope over his shoulder so that it did not interfere with his tricorder or his weapon should he need it, and Jim did the same. “Shall we?”

McCoy waited until the others joined him before lighting the flashlight he’d commandeered from the scientists’ equipment, saving their own technology until they absolutely needed it, which he hoped was soon. A quick scan of some ancient computer would be just what the doctor ordered about now, and then they could beam up to the ship and rush off to their next mystery aka discovery. Waiting for the Enterprise to burn up was not on his to do list.

He didn’t complain about the climbing gear, although he was no fan of Jim’s cliff climbing hobby, and he didn’t want to give him the chance to point out how lucky they were that he had experience. Instead he took his share of the gear and kept quiet.

Spock crouched at a fork in the passage, waving his tricorder as well as using his own fingers to investigate to surface. “Neither of these paths have been traveled recently. According to my tricorder, there is evidence of energy weapon use down this one. There are patches of glass along the tunnel that may indicate that the invaders came this way.”

“Then that’s the path we take.” Jim edged past Spock his phaser in his hand. He hoped it was too late for any of the archaeologists to suddenly feel the need to work on the site, and if someone did show up, he’d decide whether to stun them or toss his phaser into the darkness when it happened. But for now, he preferred to be armed.

It was cool in the tunnels. Every step they took or word they spoke shattered the ageless silence and made Jim wince. Somewhere beyond their limited vision he could hear the plop of water dripping from above into a puddle or pond. Stalactites and stalagmites reached for each other like the teeth of a giant beast around them to form columns, and he thought it was probably pretty when lit up.

“So these invaders came from off world, and they were attacking an underground complex. My question is, who built what’s down there? Do you think the humans might have lost their technology and civilization because of the invaders?” Now the pieces were beginning to fall into place or at least
“Unknown, Captain,” Spock answered while his own mind went over the data he’d gathered and their observations of the planet’s inhabitants. “It has happened in the past on other worlds. Vulcan had space travel before the time of Surak as well as the nuclear weapons that we nearly destroyed ourselves with. It is possible that these people also had to relearn, but from the evidence in the cave, the historical record, and other archaeological evidence, I do not believe there was an advance human civilization on this planet.”

“You mean the conspiracy web pages you found were right? This place was overrun by aliens?” McCoy asked recalling the mounds of computer research Spock had done by hacking into a pay-by-the-hour computer in a coffee shop.

“Yes, Doctor. They could very well have been correct. You must remember that mythology, while mired with folklore and magic to explain what man does not understand, is typically based on facts.”

“Like Apollo and his people.”

“Yes. Only in this case, the gods left their equipment behind.” Equipment that was once again seeking to destroy the Enterprise. Spock found it fascinating how often ancient technology took a profound disliking for the ship and her crew.

“Again.” McCoy tried to follow the sound of water and angled the flashlight into the distance and gave a smug smile when the beam reflected back from a slick surface. “Found the water, or some of it anyway.” He squinted and ran the light across the surface of the shining area from floor to ceiling. “That’s not just water. Think I found that secret door you were lookin’ for in the main chamber.”

Spock turned toward the glossy material, pointing his tricorder at the shimmering surface. “It appears to be alien in nature, a dense alloy not native to this planet, as expected, but I am picking up no energy reading from it nor evidence it is a machine or doorway. The floor between here and there is thinner than it was in the main chamber, but I am not detecting a passage of any sort in the immediate area.”

“Thinner?” The Captain edged forward, nearly bumping his knee into a jaggedly broken growth of calcified crystals. “Might be why they haven’t come in here to continue the dig. But is it thin enough for us to break through?”

“On purpose,” McCoy chimed in. Spock seconded that wish as he also had no desire to fall through the ceiling into an unknown cavern with no transporter capabilities to take them up to Sick Bay.

“I do not know how deep the chamber beneath us is, Captain. My scans echo back. I am able to trace the energy, but I have been unable to discover the size or shape of the area.”

“What if it’s not another cave?”

“That is also a possibility.”
While Spock and McCoy argued over the size limitations of the cave that might not be under them, Kirk decided to take a chance. The thin area wasn’t as level as the one in the main chamber with the glass floor. It was slightly domed, rising in the center of the oblong space between them and the water. He hunkered down on his heels, and picked up a few fallen rocks and tossed them across the room, listening for hidden bottomless pits.

The first rock skittered across the surface and then was lost among other fallen stones from the eons. The second toss hit the shimmering panel and bounced off before landing on the floor. Kirk stood slowly and began to walk carefully around the perimeter, trying to get as far as he could before his First Officer and Doctor caught him. His gut told him he’d be safe, and next to the two of them, he trusted it more than anything else.

“Gentlemen,” he said from several yards away, nearly to the artifact. “I think it’s part of a ship. There’s a starship buried here.”
“Captain!” Spock gave him his complete attention, while inwardly he chastised himself for not noticing Jim creeping into a dangerous area. “The ground may not be stable.”

“I know, Spock, but I think it’s fine. It’s been here for almost a quarter million years, right?”

“With our luck, today’s when the straw breaks the camel’s back, Jim.” McCoy let out a ragged sigh and looked toward the hidden roof of the cavern.

“You seem to have found a safe way to your location.” Spock pulled his tricorder forward, his brows knitting slightly as he tried different calibrations to see if what the Captain suggested was possible. “I believe you are correct, Captain. There is a ship buried beneath us. It may have crashed through the side of the mountain and came to rest here. The cavern itself is older, but this growth occurred since.”

“Which is why it’s fragile.”

“Not necessarily, Dr. McCoy. It is not uncommon for calcium and lime deposits to be different from one area of a cavern to another.”

“Can your tricorder find a way in, Spock?” Jim hadn’t moved. He didn’t want to do anything that could make the area as dangerous as Spock and McCoy thought it was. “I think that’s part of a wing or dorsal type fin. I doubt it’s the front end of the ship, so there’s probably not a way in from there. Unless… There’s water coming in around here someplace. The cave fought back. There’s got to be a weak part of the hull that we can go through. I’m sure the nose end’s a mess, and it’s also buried under glass and tons of stone—but the back end could be easier to get to.”

“Too bad we can’t look from the outside without the archeologists seeing us,” McCoy answered. “There was that waterfall. I bet the crash caused that too.”

It all began to make sense to Spock. One logical piece after another fitting against each other to build the complex equation he’d been trying to solve since Enterprise was trapped. His tricorder was an amazing piece of technology, but without access to the Enterprise’s computers, he was on his own to postulate what their next action should be.

There was also the fact that the shield originated from eighteen points over the surface of the planet, and if each was generated from a crashed ship, that somehow still had functioning equipment, they had a great deal of work to do while holding true to the Prime Directive before the Enterprise burned up in the atmosphere or made its own crash site—which would no doubt end any questions the residents of the planet had about life on other worlds.

“Finding a passage would be best. While it might be possible to cut through the hull with our phasers, they are limited, and we would be revealing too much to the scientific team on this site.”

“They are already literally on top of it, Spock. They’re bound to find this like we have,” Jim said as he continued toward the spire, knowing they’d be following him as carefully as they could. “I’m surprised they didn’t have this tagged for study.” He stopped before the fin of blue metal. It was
gnarled and twisted along one side, and if it’d had a pointed top in the distant past, it was long gone
to time or the original crash. He ran his hands over the fin, examining the damage from time and the
 crash itself. Patches of the metal were rough and others seemed to have merged with the stone, which
 wasn’t something he expected, but geology wasn’t one of his many hobbies.

“They more than likely know of its existence,” Spock said when he reached the Captain’s side with
 McCoy flanking him. The sound of water was louder now although Spock wasn’t certain that his
 human companions could hear or smell it as he did. “But it is too large to be moved, and they might
 not realize what it is. There is water behind it, more water coming from the mountain. According to
 my tricorder, the lake and waterfall are in fact above and behind the ship. If we are not exceedingly
careful, we might flood the ship and the cavern.” Which would doom them and Enterprise.

Jim gave up on the flashlight he’d taken and pulled out his Starfleet issued torch from the pouch he’d
 slung across his body; it was smaller and gave off a brighter beam of light. They each had one. A
 simple black bag that was designed to blend in with most humanoid cultures, and no one had paid
 any attention to the bags or the costumes they’d been wearing when they’d entered the city—even
 Spock’s knit cap to hide his ears had worked perfectly.

The torch gave off a bright beam that cut through the darkness behind the pillar like a wide beam
 laser. Dust motes danced in the light, and it reflected off the surface of several pools of water of
 varying size and probably depth.

“What if one of these is a tunnel that goes down?” he asked Spock as he crouched besides the
 roundest of the pools. It was nearly a perfect circle, which made him wonder if it was natural at all,
 and filled with tiny white fish. “We could swim to the ship.”

“A,” McCoy said with a level of sass Jim hadn’t seen in a long time. “Spock’s hurt. We can’t expect
 him to go into something like that. For all we know it gets narrower, and we drown while stuck in a
 tube. And B—I do not want eyeless cave fish nibbling on my toes, thank you very much.”

“Doctor, if it is the only way in…” Spock began to protest.

“Don’t even say it. It’s not the only way in. If the ship was connected to a tunnel of water, then the
 shield wouldn’t work—go ahead argue that I might be wrong—but logically I’m not. You know it,
 and so does Spock.”

“All right,” Jim agreed. He knew it was bad if McCoy was the one offering logical solutions. It also
 meant Spock’s mind was occupied with something else, and Jim hoped it wasn’t pain. “We’ll look
 for another way.”

Spock was distracted by his tricorder and something else, although he did hear his name mentioned,
 logic being used by McCoy, and mention of eyeless fish, but none of that mattered at the moment.
 He shut off his own light, letting his eyes clear. Vulcan had no moon, and his eyes quickly adjusted
to the darkness that surrounded him. Then he noticed a soft violet glow coming from the depths.
 Taking careful steps, he walked away from Jim and McCoy, and toward the dim light. When he was
 close enough to do a proper scan, Spock hunkered onto his heels and held his tricorder over a patch
 of brightness.
“Spock?” Jim’s voice echoed far too loudly in the cavern although Spock knew that he hadn’t raised it.

“There are microbes and fungi giving off bioluminescence, Captain. If you shut off your lights and give your eyes time to adjust, you may be able to see them. The growth is scattered about the cavern or as far as I can see, but it is coalescing in this area—as if it is growing toward or away from something else.”

Jim gave McCoy a shrug and then shut off his light and McCoy did the same. Both humans waited, their breath echoing in their ears while the fairy lights began to appear at the corner of their eyes. “I can see it,” Jim said. “Barely, but there is more near you, Spock.”

“I can see it too. Pretty,” McCoy added. “Is it from around here?”

“I am uncertain,” Spock answered as he returned to his feet and continued to follow the path laid out by the growths. “It may have originated on the ship and mutated or be a mutation of native fungi. There is a downward sloping tunnel here, Captain. It begins with a rather steep incline before leveling out. Although it is difficult to say exactly what we will find once we begin our descent. The material of the ship is causing too much interference with my tricorder to get a proper reading.”

“Say goodbye to the pretty lights, Bones,” Jim said as he flicked his light back on and headed toward where Spock was waiting. As they got closer, the bioluminescence grew brighter until they were able to see hints of it even with their lights on. The shaft Spock was standing over was brighter still compared to the ground above it.

“How deep is it?” McCoy asked standing over the edge and peering down. “We can toss one of our lights down there. See what we might be landing on. Hate to slip and end up impaled on a stalagmite.”

“Good idea, Bones.” Jim edged around the shaft until he reached the most gradual slope, which wasn’t saying much, and aimed his light down. It was nearly vertical. He could see a few handholds along the way, places where they’d be able to rest, but he could barely see the bottom. He was about to let go of the light when Spock’s fingers wrapped around his wrist.

“It would be better to send one of the scientist’s lights, Captain. Less chance of contamination should we not be able to reclaim it.”

Jim nodded and handed Spock his Starfleet light, then took the bulky, battery-powered, flashlights they’d stolen and sent it down the side of the chute. It bounced, jerked and tumbled. Jim held his breath as the light strobed from side to side, up and down, on the way down. Flashes of crystal growths and jagged rock formations were illuminated for an instant before being lost in the darkness once more. Then they heard a final thud and the light flickered but held steady at the bottom of the shaft, pointing away from them.

“OK, so it’s about thirty, thirty-five feet down. Nothing to impale us on the bottom. We’ll be fine as long as we’ve got enough rope,” Kirk told them as he dropped his rope to the cavern floor. He checked one stalagmite and another, looking to see what might be strong enough to hold up the three of them. Going down they’d have gravity helping and hurting them if they weren’t properly anchored, but climbing back out would be impossible if he picked the wrong one and it broke off—a mistake like that could be deadly.
“Captain, the fin of the ship is the most secure object in the area.” Probably the entire cavern from what Spock had seen so far, but he didn’t want to guess and be wrong.

“I’m not sure we’ve got enough rope for that.” The Captain glanced back the way they’d come and began unspooling his rope. “I’ll walk the most direct route I can back to it. You and Bones can hold this end of the rope. If I fall through, you can pull me out. But then again if I fall through to the ship, it’ll be a great time saver.”
“Hold still, Spock. I’m tired of watching you pretend your shoulder doesn’t hurt, and there’s no way in hell you’re climbing down that in the state you’re in,” McCoy said as he reached into his medical kit to get a hypo and something that would work on the Vulcan. It was always hit or miss with Spock thanks to his hybrid nature—although McCoy thought it might just be because the man liked to be contrary.

“I am fine, Doctor.”

“No you’re not. You’ve refused everything I’ve tried to give you the past three days, but we can’t have your arm giving out because it hurts too much. So Vulcan resolve or not—you’re getting a hypo.”

“Very well.” He held still while McCoy pressed the hypospray to his throat and closed his eyes while the medication worked through his system, which never took long with his quick metabolism. Spock could feel it numbing some of the lingering ache that he’d dismissed as unimportant until he was forced to remember how it felt not to hurt. It was a shame that the relief would not be permanent until he had time to rest and doubtless the climb would make his original injury worse, especially if the Captain or Doctor lost their footing on the way down.

“Don’t worry,” Jim said a few minutes later as he finished lashing the two lengths of rope together. The knots were good. He trusted his own training and skills to do the job, and the equipment was up to the task. His only worry was the anchor point, and if they had enough rope to get where they were going. The edges of the ship’s tail weren’t smooth, and he was afraid that if they took too long to climb that it might start to cut the rope. But it wasn’t an unusual situation. He’d tied off on plenty of rough rocks that did damage to his gear.

“I’m a doctor. Worrying is what I do.”

“You’ll go in the middle. Spock’s last.” McCoy’s look was concerned, but it wasn’t grim so Jim patted him on the shoulder as he stood. “Ideally, we’d go one at a time, but we don’t have the time or the equipment for that. You ready?”

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Jim didn’t like it. Climbing down was always more difficult than climbing up—they called it ‘climbing’ after all, not controlled falling, which was what they were doing now. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t see enough of what was beneath them, and it was nearly impossible not to worry about Spock and Bones. They had some training of course, everyone in Starfleet did, but he was the only one of the three of them that climbed for fun. He wished it was helping more.

He tried not to rely on the rope, letting his friends do that. He was still worried that their combined weight would end up breaking it or the ship’s fin would slice it through. He shook his head and let out a snort since he’d been the one teasing McCoy about worrying too much.

A thin ledge, if you could call it that, offered him a chance to rest for a moment. His arms were aching, and he hoped to hell that whatever Bones gave Spock would keep working until they hit the bottom—wherever that was. At least it was getting brighter the deeper they went as more and more
of the fungi lit the way. It was warmer too.

“You all right, Jim?” McCoy asked from a few feet above him. Beyond Bones, Jim could see Spock’s lanky form against the darker shadows that filled the tunnel.

“I will be once we reach the bottom. Just taking a breather. There’s—“ with a snap, the ledge Jim had been balanced on gave out. Gravity yanked him before he could do more than let out a yelp. The rope burned across his palm as he tried to stop his fall while his shoulders and hips were dragged over the rock face.

“Jim!” he heard them both call his name, and then another cry as a shower of gravel cascaded on him from above. It was happening. What he didn’t want. Bones and Spock were coming down on top of him, and there wasn’t a thing he could do to save them or himself for that matter.

He felt like he was falling for hours when he knew it was only a matter of seconds. Time didn’t exist when you were helpless, feeling your clothing and skin tearing along the way. Jim hit the ground too fast and with little warning. The air left his lungs, and he was seeing stars when first McCoy and then Spock landed on top of him.

“Captain?” Spock got up as quickly as he was able. He was bruised, but he was not out of breath. A quick inventory of his bones and flesh told him that he was no more damaged than he’d been before the climb. He stepped away and then assisted Dr. McCoy to get off of Jim. “Are you all right, Doctor?”

“I don’t know yet,” McCoy grunted with pain as Spock helped him sit back against the wall of the shaft. “Jim?”

“I’m alive,” he said and then coughed. The cough was followed with a pain expression that Spock took as a sign that they’d broken or bruised the Captain’s ribs by landing on him. “Did I give you something soft enough to land on?”

“It would seem so. I am in one piece.”
“Next time, I’ll take the blind cavefish,” McCoy said as he pulled out his tricorder and scanned the three of them. He got a few cuts and scrapes along the way of his own, but he was far more worried about Jim and the damned stoic Vulcan. The doctor grabbed the captain’s wrist and ran his medical scanner over a nasty gash in his hand and shook his head. “Tissue damage only. Deep, but the blood washed out any grit.” He pulled another tool from his kit and sprayed a sealing disinfectant across Jim’s palm. Then he applied a hypospray of painkiller without bothering to ask if Jim wanted it or not. “Try not to lift anything or hit anyone with that for a good fifteen minutes, and you’ll be fine. That’s the same stuff I gave Spock. Should cut the edge off the pain. How’s your shoulder, Spock?”

“It is fine,” Spock murmured as his eyes narrowed, his attention drawn elsewhere. “We are not alone.”

Both McCoy and Kirk looked up the shaft, aiming their lights in the same direction. “The scientists?” Jim asked.

“No, I am sensing a powerful mind, perhaps more than one. I thought I felt something before, but I was not certain.”

“But you’re sure now?” McCoy’s eye grew wide at Spock’s words and as the fungi growth around them began to glow brighter, making their flashlights almost unnecessary. As the trio watched a clear path was illuminated toward, what they hoped was, the crashed ship and the shield controls. “Looks like we’re following the Yellow Brick Road.”

McCoy felt like he was on a path through Wonderland as the colors and lights grew brighter, there were more and more clusters of the fungus, and the pods themselves were getting bigger and giving off more light. He cast a glance at Spock who still seemed distracted by the presence that only he could feel—something Leonard was pretty damned happy for to tell the truth. He had enough to deal with keeping the crew healthy mentally and physically without hearing voices.

“Any actual words or warnings, Spock?” he asked because the entire place was too nice to be safe. Fairy land was dangerous. He knew that from the Brothers Grimm.

“None that I can identify. Curiosity. Trepidation. Those are the feelings I am experiencing.” He paused to scan a large growth that looked like it was part fungus and part crystal. “Of course it is quite possible that something down here is amplifying what you and the captain are feeling and that is what I am sensing.”

“But you doubt it.”

“Yes,” Spock finished his scan and met McCoy’s gaze. “I am quite accustomed to brushes of your thoughts and feelings. I have learned to block the crew at large, but from time to time, I do feel the two of you as you are my closest friends—it is only logical. But it is not you that I am sensing.”

“Good to know,” Jim chimed in. He was limping slightly, which wasn’t a surprise, but McCoy didn’t like it. “Let us know if it starts screaming for us to get out.”

“I shall do so, Captain.” Spock’s senses were on high alert, as he listened with his ears and his mind
for some threat. The nature of the shield was confusing. It prevented alien ships from leaving orbit, but it had allowed their shuttle through the shield—even though it had landed nearly powerless because of it. It blocked transporters and communications. They could not leave, yet the inhabitants of the planet itself were safe and independent. It was an interesting quandary that he was hoping to finally have the answers to.

The shaft they’d come down opened out into a tunnel, and as they walked the walls were replaced by rock and crystal formations, lit from without by the fungi and from within by microbes and other materials Spock could not identify. It had also grown warmer, not to the point of being uncomfortable, but less of the cave’s perpetual chill was leaching through his clothing.

“Wow,” Jim said with a gasp as they climbed a small rise to discover a light filled grotto. Half of the great ship was buried beneath what had to be a good chunk of the mountain itself. Stalagmite and stalactite spears had pierced the hull, tearing sheets of it away. The aft was tilted upward, with its spire piercing a low point in the stalactite covered ceiling. The ship had been broken in two like an egg, and the fungi growth spread from the cracks in the hull outward, making it look as if the ship had been alive and bleeding when it died.

“But you’re not dead, are you?” Not if Spock thought there was something or someone alive in the ship.

“It’s beautiful. Broken, but beautiful,” McCoy added as he took in the sight of the wreck. He didn’t bother to ask if they were going down there. He knew Jim would insist, and Spock would find some logical reason why they should even if they didn’t have a reason to do it. They had to save the Enterprise, and the only way to do it was somewhere inside of a scrambled egg of a ship. “Looks like it was alive.”

“It is biomechanical,” Spock informed them as he gave up on his tricorder and went with his eyes only for information. “Or was. There is life coming from the ship’s interior, but I do not know if the ship itself is alive or if it was when it crashed. It is possible that it was grown and then euthanized before becoming a vessel. Until we investigate further, I cannot say for certain which.”

“Then let’s find out,” the Captain said as he began to walk down the slope of the grotto toward the main break in the bio-ship’s damaged hull.

“They or it knows we are here.” Spock fought the urge to stop and investigate more examples of the ship’s matter mingling with the cavern. The fungi were larger and brighter. Here and there fern-like growths peeked from between shattered stones. A trio of small streams also meandered through the area, bringing water to the plants and possibly animals.

“Is the heat geothermal or from the ship, Spock?” The Captain asked as he touched the bright blue fronds of one of the ferns, which quickly rolled up like a chameleon’s tongue from being handled. “Whichever it is, the plants seem to like it, and they seem to think they’re getting sunlight.”

“It is not geothermal. It is coming from the ship.”

“Radiation?” That was from McCoy. “We’re not going to start glowing like the fungus, are we?”

“None that is dangerous.” He felt the touch of the minds once more. “They are not warning us to
leave. I believe they wish us to go inside.”
Jim gave them both a look that said, ‘as if they could stop me’. He climbed around a thick tangle of ferns and shattered stones until he could fight his way to the largest visible opening in the ship. “It’s as if it tried to heal itself. Sealing off ruptures that could never be closed off again.”

“It is, or was, more than likely an automatic reaction, Captain, but obviously this damage was too severe.”

“But it tried for a long time.” Kirk tilted his entire body back to look at the great ship from top to bottom. “It wasn’t euthanized for flight, Spock. It was alive, and it didn’t die when it crashed. That’s why there’s so much of it melding with the cavern. And if you’re feeling it or them, then it’s still alive.” Turning toward the aft end of the ship, where the hull was darker, cracked, and there was less plant growth. “That part, where the tail goes through the ceiling is dead or dying, but this half isn’t.”

“Let me see if my tricorder can read anything,” McCoy offered. He was conflicted. Part of him wanted Jim to be right, because it was an amazing discovery, but then it saddened him greatly to think the ship might have been in pain from the crash for thousands of years. “I’m detecting some kind of energy, like Spock was before, but I can’t tell if there’s anyone in there—what I’m saying is if the ship’s been broken here for all this time, where’s the crew? Are they in there?”

“I don’t know if I’m hoping they are or they aren’t, Bones,” Jim said as he ducked down to enter the tear in the ship’s side. He left his phaser at his side, trusting he was fast enough to draw it if he needed it. They hadn’t warned them off, and he trusted Spock’s interpretation of the alien presence in his mind not to go in ready to shoot anything. “If there are any survivors, they’ll probably be in some kind of stasis.” Finding survivors in cryo was not one of Jim’s favorite things at all—thanks to Khan and his crew. They were the perfect example of let sleeping dogs lie.

Inside was warmer still, although not unpleasant. Jim took a cautious breath while Spock and McCoy joined him. The ceiling of the ship was bowed, knocked off the perfect center that it probably once had before the crash and the ages bore down upon it. Thin ribbons of metal, or bone, or a combination of both ran up the sides of the chamber to meet above. It reminded Jim of the inside of a cathedral or the ribcage of a giant animal.

Spock brushed his fingers gently over one of the ribs. It was smooth and warm. Spears of rock formations from the cavern had torn through the outer skin, marring its uniform appearance. The nodules of fungus were thicker around those points, covering the stone like glowing warts. He once again switched on his tricorder, hoping that now that they were inside that it would begin to function normally. The readings were different, and he was uncertain they were helpful.

“There is another chamber to the right,” he said pointing toward an aperture made of the same material as the ribs. He stepped carefully around a large out cropping of shining blue crystals to head for the door. So far he’d seen nothing that looked like a computer or control panel, and he hoped they’d find what they needed in the next room.
“I think that’s a weapon,” McCoy said turning their attention toward what might have been a canon of some type off to one side of the ship. There were four of them in different damaged states. The first two were indistinguishable from the rest of the debris within the ship, but the other two looked vaguely like a giant version of their hand phasers. “Hard to see ‘em, but the side we came in through has a set too.”

“Spock?” Jim asked while approaching the ancient weapon. “Any functioning equipment left?”

“None that I can see or find from my scans. Any mechanical or technological debris seems to have corroded away or been absorbed into the stonework. Areas of the ship itself, where water and silt have built up have been fossilized.”

“Like the tail section.”

“Yes, it was damaged too much and has slowly become part of the cavern system. Eventually, that will happen here as well. The energy that keeps the shield going must also keep this half of the ship alive.” Although Spock could not conceive of how it was possible after so long.

When they came to the circular door, it opened like a camera shutter, one layer at a time, giving them a small peek at what was ahead of them. Light. Warm, inviting, golden light washed over the three of them, blinding Kirk and McCoy who did not have Spock’s third eyelid that protected him from blinding light.

One of Jim’s hands had gone to shield his eyes while the other had gone to his weapon, but he didn’t draw it. Bright light didn’t mean they’d been attacked. He blinked until his eyes adjusted. His hand moved from his phaser to touch McCoy’s arm, to make sure the other was all right. McCoy’s nod was all he needed, as was Spock’s.

Once his vision cleared enough for him not to trip over the rounded doorstep, Jim entered the next chamber. It was warmer still. This time almost too warm as he drew in a lungful of air that reminded him of a tropical night on Risa.

At the forward end of the room was a twisted mass of glowing, golden matter. It was organic, flowing over the crumbling, corroded consoles that were arranged about the space. Long tentacle like spurs wound their way over, under and through everything, including the shafts of stone and crystal that had come through the hull.

“I think this was the bridge,” he told the others. “Or some kind of control center. Is that the source of the energy, Spock?”

“Yes, Captain,” Spock said as he took one last look at his tricorder before letting it fall against his body. “It pulsates at the same frequency as the shield in this area of the planet.”

“Weird place to have the ship’s shields, isn’t it?” McCoy chimed in with his brow knitted. “Not that they did any good considering what this place looks like.”

“It is not the ship’s defense shield.” The Vulcan tilted his head to the side and stepped closer still to the golden light. “It is in control of the shield and what is left of the ship.”
“And it’s alive after all this time…” McCoy murmured as he stepped closer to a knot of the glowing fibers with his tricorder. His brows were drawn together over blue eyes when he saw a dome of white beneath the pile of winding tendrils. “But not everyone made it out alive. That’s a skull. It’s humanoid, but not human.” His tricorder showed him the location of the rest of the skeleton beneath the alien mass. “Four fingers. Elongated skull. No tissue left to give me any other kind of reading.” But now that he knew what he was looking for, he was able to get his medical tricorder to locate another pair of bodies in the control room. “But as for our glowing friend, it’s not like anything I’ve ever seen before, which is not a surprise. Does it know we’re here?”
“We know you are here.” The voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once, speaking in English to the two humans and Vulcan to Spock. “You are not of this world.”

“Neither are you,” Jim pointed out. “I’m James T. Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise—the ship that’s been trapped in orbit by you.” He glanced over at Spock. “And the other ships?”

“It is logical to assume that the shield’s other power sources are also alive, Captain. Also what we are hearing is not verbal communication. It is telepathic.”

Jim arched a brow of his own at that and then turned back to the lifeform. “Do you have a name?”

“Names are irrelevant for my purpose. I am one of those who protect this planet.”

“And you’re doing a great job of it too,” McCoy grumbled. “We’d like you to let our ship go. We’re not your enemy.”

“Your enemies are long gone,” Jim said, taking control of the situation once more. “According to our research, your conflict ended when you crashed here over two hundred thousand years ago. We are from the United Federation of Planets, and we are on a peaceful mission of exploration. We mean you and this planet no harm.”

“We are the protectors,” it answered.

Spock felt a pressure in his mind as the being, or beings, attempted to reach through the walls that he kept carefully in place to prevent himself from accidentally touching another’s mind. His eyes narrowed at the presence, and he turned to the Captain. “It is attempting to read our minds, Captain.”

“We seek the truth.”

“It is polite to ask.” McCoy shrugged with an innocent look when Jim and Spock both cast glances at him.

Above the twisted mass of alien growth on a gossamer thin sheet of calcified rock, a pattern of lights began to play over the surface. Spock’s head tilted to the side as slightly familiar images flickered over the surface. The material was of the cave according to his readings, but it was interacting with the creature. The display grew dark, and Spock thought for a moment that it had malfunctioned until he realized he was looking at an image of space.

“We will show you our truth,” it said, as the display shifted focus from the distant star field to show the Enterprise. “You are invaders. All invaders must be stopped to preserve the life of this planet. Its life is sacred. It must be protected.”

“That’s what we want too,” the Captain said. He moved closer to the alien and the display. “Our mission is to explore strange new worlds, but we are not allowed to interfere with the people on those worlds. We came here to observe not to contaminate.”

“We’d have never come down here if you hadn’t trapped our ship,” McCoy said, unable to keep his voice as neutral as the Captain had.
“We came here from the fifth planet in this system,” the creature told them. “We came to this world, ignoring that life already existed here.” Above it the images on the display changed, shifting and flashing as the alien shared its memories of the past. Spock switched on his tricorder to record what they were being shown.

The surface of another world, its sky nearly as red as Vulcan’s, appeared on the crystal curtain. Great vats and pools filled with the bones and beginnings of more ships like the one they were standing in were shown to them. They watched, eyes wide, as one ship after another was grown to the proper size and then equipped with what it needed for space flight.

“They found us. The people of another world. Took what we were and made us something else.”

“Your people were conquered?” McCoy asked.

“Yes,” Spock said with a solemn look on his face. “They were invaded as well. Captain, they were conquered and enslaved. The ships. The ships are sentient.”

“We were forced. Made to destroy.” Ships, an armada, took off from the fifth planet, cutting across the star system to the planet they were now on, the fourth planet with its blue skies and human inhabitants. More fleets took to the sky. Different shapes, colors, and sizes, firing weapons at each other. Soaring over the grassy fields of the planet, laying waste to each other and destroying alien bases—ignoring the damage they were causing to the planet and the people on it.

“The Others did not care about the people of this world. We could not let them be enslaved and tortured as we were.” On the screen a group of ships broke from formation as the vessels themselves fought for control over the aliens. “They taught us to kill, and we did to save this world.”

“What of your world?” Kirk asked. He understood how the creatures felt. No one should be forced to serve another. No sentient creature should be made a slave, forced to kill, but beyond that he couldn’t help but admire them for fighting to defend the life on a planet that wasn’t theirs.

“We do not know.” Jim could feel the loneliness weighing down those words. Enterprise hadn’t flown past the fifth planet. It was on the other side of the binary stars at the center of the system. As usual they came to this world first, because they picked up radio charter and other obvious signs of sentient life.

“I’m afraid we don’t either,” he told the entity. “If you could let our ship go, we could find out. Our sensors have been limited because of the power drain. There are over four hundred people on the Enterprise, and they’re going to die if you don’t release us.”

The ship did not respond. The display returned to its original state, a blank sheet of limestone, with no more tales to tell. Jim looked at Spock and Bones, hoping one of them had something to say. “Is it talking to the other ships?”

“That is possible,” Spock said as he adjusted his tricorder. He’d been focused on finding alien technology not alien life. Once the filters were set to make biological and chemical readings the priority, it was getting three times the data he was before. “The energy readings resemble brainwave patterns.”

“They do,” McCoy agreed. “That’s why my readings looked so familiar. It’s sad, Jim. They didn’t want to hurt anyone. Crashing to kill the crews. Wish we could bring them home.”
“I do too,” Jim said with a sigh before giving the Entity his complete attention once more. “We understand why you did what you did to survive and save this planet.”

“They could not help themselves. We had to.”

“And they have no idea you did any of it. You’ve been here, watching them evolve, going from hunter/gatherers to building cities. They’ve learned how to fly. How to build skyscrapers, and they’ve been reaching for space—but they don’t know you’ve been taking care of them.”

“We could not interfere. If we did, they would think we wished to control them. Or they would worship us. We could not allow that.”

“Quite honorable creatures.” Spock admired them and their devotion to their own version of the Prime Directive. “You are aware that the inhabitants of this planet will discover you soon, are you not? They have begun exploring the caverns above you, and I estimate they will discover your location within the next six months. Their technology has advanced to a point where they will also be able to detect the shield that surrounds their planet and its source as we have.”

“It is inevitable that we would be found,” the Entity said. “We have discussed that eventuality in the past.”

“And what did you decide to do?” McCoy asked. “You’re goin’ to have to tell them the truth like you told us. It’s either that or you play dead, which might not be such a good idea either. They’d study you.”

“They are curious. They will study us whether we are alive or dead when they find us.”

“We saw wreckage of other ships from orbit,” Jim said to get the topic back toward Enterprise’s freedom. “Were some of them from the ones who enslaved you?”

“Yes, they came. We prevented them from taking this world.” Once again the display came to life, this time showing an array of ships that had been caught in the shield and destroyed over millennia. “It has been 457 years since the last ship was stopped.”

“Was it theirs?”

“No. They are no more, or they have lost interest in this star system.”

A chuckle shook Jim’s body when he realized arguing with the ship would be like arguing with Spock, which meant in the long run it’d be easier than he thought. It was protective, not angry or vengeful. It could be reasoned with, with logic. “You’ve met us now. We have done nothing to harm you or these people. Our goals are the same, and after you let our ship go, we’ll leave—or stay if you want us to. What happens to my ship, my crew…” he held his hands out from his sides to encompass everything. “…to this world, is up to you and your people.”

“Your ship is armed. Why have you not attacked us?”

“That’s a logical question,” he answered and winked at Spock. “If we attacked you, we’d be alerting the people of this world to our existence. We do not contact alien cultures until they develop warp
drive. If they proceed at the same pace as my people did, we can come back in fifty or sixty years. But not before that.”

“What happens to you if you shut down your shield?” McCoy asked before either Jim or Spock could. He knew they were both trying to save the ship, but he felt the need to see to the Entity’s comfort as well. “Will you be all right?”

“We do not know. We cannot leave this place. We are part of the planet now.” Which McCoy thought was pretty obvious with the way it’d spread through the grotto.

“You’ve been a silent partner for thousands of years. Kept watch over a pretty reasonable group of people,” McCoy said.

“They have wars,” the Entity pointed out. “But we do not interfere.”

“But that’s hard, isn’t it? Always hard for a parent to watch their kids screw up. But you have hope for them. You gotta trust them to protect themselves along the way too. Can’t you just let us go and put the shield back up?” McCoy thought it was pretty stupid that neither Jim nor Spock had asked that.

“No, if we break the shield, we cannot rebuild it.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“If you permit us to return to our ship and release it,” Spock said, bringing what he could to the argument for their freedom. “I will find out what happened to the world you left behind. Your people may still be alive.”

“We must discuss what you have shared with us,” the Entity informed them. Its glowing surface erupted in a cascade of colors, shifting from the gold they’d grown used to, to green, blue, and red.

For a brief moment, Spock felt other minds touch his, and when he checked his tricorder the readings showed patterns of energy from other beings. “The readings I’m getting match some of the other shield source points, Captain.”

“Then we wait,” Kirk said as he found a clean spot on the floor to wait while Spock and McCoy took more readings on their tricorders. He took out his communicator. It’d been useless for days to reach the ship, but he couldn’t give up hope. And he refused to feel helpless now that they’d made some headway, or he hoped they had.

It would have been easier if the shield controls had been computerized. If all they had to do was press a button or twelve and shut it down without altering the destiny of a world, but that all changed when they found out it was alive. He wouldn’t force it to let Enterprise go, even if that meant condemning his crew to death. All he could do was hope the Entity believed what they’d told it and could be made to trust them.

“James T. Kirk,” the Entity’s voice echoed in his head. The colors on its surface had returned to its original shade of soft gold like a summer day. “We have released your ship. The shield that protected this world is no more.”
Spock leaned over his sensors, getting as many readings as he could of the fifth planet. It had been a short trip on impulse across the star system. He would never admit it, but he was nearly holding his breath, waiting for a sign of life on the surface that would mean the ship entities had survived the conquest and rebellion.

“Anything yet, Spock?” Jim asked from the command seat.

“Nothing yet,” Spock began and then stopped when a blip appeared on his panel. “There is life, Captain. It matches the energy readings of the shield. I would suggest we keep our distance.”

“Good idea. Lieutenant Uhura work with Mr. Spock to find a way to send them a message from their lost family.”

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