A Tale of Two Tyrants

by VitaeLampada

Summary

Fourth part in an ongoing Spyota romance, taking the characters to the destruction of Vulcan in the 2009 film.

I get why this story is slow to accumulate hits -- it’s hard to sell the destruction of Vulcan.

But this story, more than what has gone before, shows why Nyota is Starfleet material and the best partner for Spock. Nero, of course, is one of the two tyrants. But there is someone else, someone from Nyota’s past, who gives her the chance to demonstrate courage and loyalty to a childhood friendship, as well as her commitment to Spock at his time of greatest need.

This work may not be easy to follow if read on its own. My take on Spock and Uhura is different, and the story will make reference to events from ”The Architecture of Emotion” (Part 1) ”Alpha Incognito” (Part 2) and ”That Friday in March” (Part 3). I strongly recommend reading those first.
Illusions

When the interference finally ended, and the Kobayashi Maru simulation resumed as programmed, Beckenbauer called out.

"Commander Spock, how the hell was your test disrupted?"

Spock had rejected two possible causes already, and was in the process of considering a third.

“I do not know,” he answered.

That was earlier in the day. Now the last member of the simulation team had wished him goodnight and left the arena boardroom. The debriefing had gone forty-seven minutes over time. Spock reviewed his notes from the meeting, and he conceded that Sub-lieutenant Jadillu’s theory, while unproven, provided the most plausible explanation.

He saved the notes on his PADD and switched the device to his private channel, so he could write a message to Nyota. He used her stylus -- the brushed titanium implement engraved with the sigil of clan Tetov’yth on the nib. She used his. It was a permanent arrangement. Spock was inclined to propose they make another one, given the highly satisfactory nature of their time as a couple. Tonight might be a suitable opportunity to ask. It was imperative, therefore, not to mar the celebratory nature of the occasion by making her wait without explaining why.

‘E’lev Nei’rrh (Nei’rrh my love),’

He chose to compose in Rhiannsu. Since Alpha Incognito, it had become their private language.

‘An unexpected incident occurred during the Kobayashi Maru examination. I have deferred the comprehensive analysis of the problem until Monday, and Gaila will review the programme tomorrow.’

The lingua franca of the Romulan Empire had an additional advantage: considerable vocabulary and idiom created to express the intensity of emotion between lovers.

‘My desire was to deprive you of nothing, Thermaenen Khialev (Little Mesmeriser), which you had planned. But my efforts have failed. Punishment is always your prerogative, and I submit to your will unreservedly upon arrival – for which allow forty-three minutes in anticipation of heavy traffic. H’levreinnye Nnerhai Aehallh (Your Love Devil Aehallh).’

After he sent this, he asked the simulation computer to confirm whether all its files had been closed and secured with new encriptions. It replied in the affirmative, and also told him the security systems had been reset as instructed. Only Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu could access the data banks over the weekend. Spock left the boardroom and walked the corridor which led to the stairs, and then walked the four flights down to the ground floor. The computer switched off the lights behind him, one at a time.

At the point he reached the entrance foyer, the entire simulation arena was in darkness, except for a single light which still shone over Spock’s head. As the main doors drew apart to let him exit the building, he heard the voice a second time.

- I don’t really love you, Spock. -

It was Uhura’s voice, unmistakably. The same words spoke themselves in his mind during the test
Spock left the building, convinced now that Gaila was correct.

Outside, the June evening remained warm, the minimum he could tolerate with less than two layers of warm clothing. In front of him, the sun was setting amidst ribbons of red cloud. In the distance, the space elevator made an impressive new addition to San Francisco’s skyline.

Thirteen steps led down from the arena to a broad concourse which functioned as the pedestrian entryway to Starfleet Academy. In the daytime it was crowded with students, faculty, visiting dignitaries. Now Spock saw only a single human seated on one of the many benches. This stranger was male, perhaps the same age as Uhura but his skin had a cool undertone which made it appear a shade darker. His hair was shaved around his ears and cut very short on the top. There was a tattoo on the left side of his neck, a black five pointed star. He wore an Andorian leather suit and some decorative Orion chain appendages. He looked in Spock’s direction when the arena doors opened, and stood up from his seat.

“Sir,” he called out.

The stranger closed the distance between them at a rapid walk, and met the Commander half way up the arena steps.

“Forgive me for detaining you,” he apologised, and bowed.

Spock returned the gesture as a courtesy. "May I assist?” he enquired

“This is my first visit to San Francisco.” The stranger turned at the waist and pointed behind him, in the direction of the space elevator. "Do you know the best way to get to the Hotel Sugureta?”

“I am going there myself,” Spock replied. “You are welcome to ride in my vehicle.”

The stranger faced him again, eyes wide.

“That is … thank you,” he stammered. “Very kind, thank you.”

“Logical,” Spock corrected him. "That is the only way I know to reach the hotel in a reasonable amount of time, and I have an unoccupied passenger seat. Please follow me.”

He heard the young man say, “very kind” twice more, as they descended the stairs and crossed the concourse, then walked round the back of the Academy administration building to the staff parking lot.

Spock considered his obligations to the stranger, according to Terran etiquette. During the drive, he would doubtless need to initiate more than one inconsequential and unchallenging conversation with this man – small talk. It was a skill he had developed “to a level of competence just below adequate” as Lieutenant Chalmers once told him. That would have to suffice.

He knew he could begin with introductions. Since the young man walked behind rather than alongside him, he was able to delay this task until they had reached the car and seated themselves inside.

“I am Commander Spock.”

“Emmanuel,” the stranger said. “I’m afraid I have no rank or title.”
Spock expected his passenger to initiate a handshake, but this did not happen. Perhaps Emmanuel knew something about Vulcans, and if so he was grateful. While Spock started the engine, steered the car out of the parking lot and onto Hubble Boulevard, his passenger remained silent. It would be easy to assume the young man felt comfortable without conversation. Easy, but premature. Spock knew he must make an appropriate foyer into polite human interaction.

“Will you stay long in San Francisco?” he asked.

This enquiry prompted his guest to lean forward and exclaim. "Well --,

Emmanuel spread out his hands, presumably to gesticulate. It seemed a new aspect of this human was about to reveal itself.

“It was not my original intention to visit at all, which is why you find me so little prepared. I arrived late at Rigel’s spaceport -- too late to catch the shuttle to Africa, or else I would have gone directly to Dar-es-Salaam.”

Spock said nothing. He was considering the cadence of Emmanuel’s last sentence, which leaned heavily on his final words. He was uncertain whether this was a personal affectation or intended to convey some meaning.

“That is where I grew up,” the young man continued, stressing ‘grew up’. “My father was Facilities Director for the African Academy until he retired.”

Spock nodded, as he knew he should, while turning the car off Hubble onto 25th Avenue southbound. The traffic slowed, but did not stall, which was better than he had expected.

“Dar-es-Salaam is a beautiful city,” enthused his passenger.

Emmanuel extended his vowel sounds, particularly when he used adjectives. “Beautiful beaches especially. Soft, white sand. And warm water – you don’t get that shock when you wade in.”

In his own mind, Spock agreed. During his time as a cadet, physical training had included open water swimming. After his first lesson and subsequent viral infection, a wet suit was procured as a matter of urgency to insulate him from the Pacific. Even in summer the contact between the water and his bare skin hurt. Immersion in the Indian Ocean, conversely, had caused him no discomfort.

To any of Emmanuel’s observations about Africa, Spock could have provided a response. This was where, according to Terrans, he often under performed in this peculiar form of interaction. He knew that a comment about his own visit to Dar-es-Salaam last December would establish a commonality between himself and his passenger, and that this was an important component of successful small talk. But to do this offered Emmanuel the freedom to make personal enquiries. On Vulcan no such liberty would be given or taken during a first meeting, or a second or a third.

Spock knew that humans exercised a measure of restraint as well, whether asking or answering such questions. But it differed from individual to individual. This was what made him reticent – he preferred to know the rules of engagement in advance.

Thankfully, Emmanuel seemed prepared to continue talking.

“And of all the beaches, I love those to the south of the city. Kijiji – it’s a private resort now, but when I was a boy …,”

The young man paused. This interval of speechlessness lasted the time it took for the traffic lights on
the intersection of 25th and Lincoln Way to go from amber to red to green, and for Spock to steer the car in the direction of the coast.

“Picnics,” the young man resumed, clumsily. “Sorry, I meant Kijiji used to be open to the public for picnics and such. It got very crowded in the hot season. I understand it’s much quieter now.”

Then, after another short silence, Spock noticed that Emmanuel had stopped looking out his window and turned his gaze on his driver.

“Have you ever been to Tanzania, Commander?”

There it was. Having received no reciprocation, Emmanuel took the only option which remained and started to ask questions anyway. There was no escape.

“Yes,” Spock replied.

“Ah, yes?” Emmanuel relaxed into his backrest. “How interesting. When was this?”

It was a simple decision. What Spock revealed about himself was his own concern. The choice he made was to protect the privacy of a person who could not be consulted.

“On the eighteenth of July, 2253. My first Starfleet commission after graduation was a short assignment on board the USS Titan. Admiral Xiang was the captain, and her crew was assembled and debriefed at the African headquarters.”

“Ah.”

They had reached the last set of traffic lights. The hotel’s expansive parking lot was just ahead.

“I presume you had little opportunity to explore your surroundings,” Emmanuel remarked.

“Your presumption is accurate.”

“Such a shame. And a pity your visit did not occur between December and January. If you prefer hot weather,” Emmanuel pointed at Spock’s sleeve, “much hotter than here, where you would not need a jacket, it would be the ideal location.”

Spock drove through the car park, aiming for the three lane porte-cochere in front of the hotel entrance.

“I suppose your responsibilities now would not afford you the opportunity for a second visit.”

Several doormen were on duty, to direct approaching vehicles to the nearest available drop off point. Spock obeyed the signal he was given, pulled into a bay and engaged the parking brake. Then he turned to his passenger.

“I hope you are able to complete your journey satisfactorily.”

Emmanuel smiled. “Thank you, Commander. Have a pleasant evening yourself. It was good to get to know you better.”

Then the young man climbed out of the car. He would not surrender his door to the waiting hotel staff, but closed it himself, turning round so he could look back through the window at his driver. He was still smiling.

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Fuck the Kobayashi Maru. Fuck all the Klingon WarBirds with their shields at one hundred percent, and fuck his cadet crew who just sat back and accepted their fate before the torpedoes had started to fire. Fuck the faculty assessors who said his anger was simply a form of grief he did not want to admit.

And fuck the Orion Computer Science faculty aide –

Or, if that much wasn’t on the cards, Jim Kirk would settle for her hand inside his uniform trousers. That is, provided he and Gaila could locate a fire escape or unlocked cleaners’ cupboard in this hotel. A room was beyond his budget. At a push, there was always the beach. The beach would be pretty quiet.

He was on speaking terms with Gaila again. He considered this his only positive achievement of the day. And she’d agreed to a date. Maybe that was because he’d suggested drinks at the Sugureta, the newest and therefore most desirable night spot in the city. The Tochi Bar on ground level would not win her back, so he’d been to the reception desk and purchased return tickets to take the elevator to the Seisoken Lounge and Restaurant, fifty-five kilometres up in the stratosphere, with a rotating floor treating patrons to an ever changing view of space through windows three stories high.

But Gaila was running late. Jim took a seat in the Sugureta lobby with a view of the main doors, but the only intelligent life coming inside was a Denobulan tour group. A literal swarm of sixty-two people (what else did he have to do except count them?) of which seventeen were children, crowded the plush carpet. The adult females were interesting, often taller than their males and elegant in the way they moved. Their eyes surveyed the room and studied any non-Denobulans in their line of sight. One of them smiled at him, invitingly.

He smiled back. Never hurt to have a back-up plan.

Then that particular female was distracted. Her fellow tourists were urging her to check out a new arrival, and Jim looked in the direction they were pointing. He reckoned the man they’d spotted, who was steering a path through all bodies in his way, and presenting anyone who dared to meet his gaze with a barely disguised scowl, was in his early thirties. Six foot two perhaps, sienna brown face and dressed in a suit Jim wouldn’t be able to afford even if he did manage to pass the Kobayashi Maru one day and become a Starfleet captain. Platinum body chains dangled from the suit jacket: filigree thin, coiled, double linked and herringbone – it was like this guy had decided to wear his bank balance.

Was he human or otherwise?

He seemed human, although his brown eyes had this look – how to put it -- like he knew things.

A clerk behind the reception desk approached Mr. Platinum and offered to assist him. Jim was too far away to hear the conversation. But he saw the clerk consult his computer, frown, consult it a second time, and then shake his head.

Mr. Platinum fixed the hotel employee with a stare that caused the latter to clutch at his own throat and keep his hand there.

When the stranger turned away from the frightened receptionist, he headed across the lobby in the direction of the Tochi Bar. He passed very close to Jim's chair. There seemed no reason, but something caused the expensively dressed man's focus to shift. It wasn’t more than a flicker, a glance so quick Jim might have missed it, if he hadn’t been wondering about the star shaped tattoo on the guy’s neck. And the look Jim got would have meant nothing, except that the instant their eyes locked Kirk heard the voice a second time.
It was Gaila’s voice, no mistaking it. He heard the same words in his mind that afternoon, when the Kobayashi Maru simulation was mysteriously interrupted.

Jim shook his head, and the voice disappeared like it had been nothing but a mosquito buzzing in his ear. Meanwhile, Mr. Platinum had gone, and Kirk spotted the real Gaila fighting her way into reception. One hotel doorman, a bellhop and two Denobulan females fought for her attention, jostled against her like puppies and talked over each other as the Orion tried to walk in one of her many pairs of precarious heels. Jim stood up, straightened his uniform jacket and marched into battle.

“Excuse me,” he shouted over the competing voices, “ladies and gentlemen, please, EXCUSE ME!”

And when they were quiet, he came alongside Gaila and slipped his arm through hers.

“She’s taken,” he told the others. “For tonight, at least.”

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Spock drove the car round the perimeter of the hotel to a secure, covered lot at the back of the building.

A barrier lifted to let him inside, where a numbered parking space waited for him. This was where the Sugureta had a second entrance, accessible only to those with a premium reservation code. Premium guests were provided with a private reception lobby and elevator shaft. According to Ensign Tiavro Dre, who secured the booking on Spock’s behalf, this facility wasn’t well known, not yet. But it doubtless would be. For now, it provided what he and Nyota wanted, the opportunity to enjoy the city’s attractions without being observed together by Academy students or staff.

During the elevator journey he rode in a comfortable chair, was served replicated tea by a service robot and had the option to activate the hotel’s video documentary about its structures and amenities. There was time to watch all the special features, including time lapse footage of the construction of the ground level building and the official ceremony which marked the lowering and connection of its link with Space Station Honshu.

At Mesosphere Level Five, the elevator secured itself to the airlock for Penthouse Three. The robot checked the integrity of the seal and atmospheric quality while a computer voice wished him a pleasant stay.

When the elevator doors opened, his view was full of stars.

Only the penthouses had this, the immense observation feature incorporated into the floor and walls and ceiling around the entrance, which accounted for half the area of the suite. It created the illusion that Nyota waited for him in self-powered suspension, floating in space, a star in the company of stars.

She wore her cadet uniform, the high-collared jacket whose bodice was sewn together in panels tailored for a close fit down to the hips. She stood to attention, her PADD clasped in both hands ready to read. The presentation was businesslike, typical of the student who had attended his Subspace lab over the last semester. He believed it safe to say their behaviour in the classroom, as professor and pupil, could not be faulted. They made eye contact only when Nyota asked a question. If, during practical work, she requested assistance, he would lock into her data feed from his own PADD rather than approach her station. He would ask for her cadet number to complete the connection, though he knew it already.
Neither of them had expected the peculiar tension which would accumulate as a result of their efforts. Before the need was understood or discussed, a solution began to create itself, starting on the third Friday in March. Nyota had asked him about midterm extra credit projects. They were in his apartment, and had not changed out of their uniforms. She addressed him as “Sir” in an attempt at humour, but something very different resulted.

Enacting prohibited behaviour proved unusually titillating. And so it became accepted, another part of their intimate repertoire, utterly illogical though it was. But even the katra of T’Shin advised there was no point expecting desire to take rational forms.

Nyota saluted him as he entered the penthouse.

“Good evening, Commander.”

“Good evening, Cadet,” he replied, “at ease.”

She did not move to greet him or smile, but activated her PADD so the light from the display illuminated her face. She had applied lanolin based cosmetic to her lips, to make them slick and reflective. Spock crossed the transparent floor to get closer to her.

“Permission to ask a question, sir.”

“Granted,” he said. And he halted his approach, leaving two meters of space between them.

“The frequencies of the signals I’m seeing—,”

“I will need to view your display on this occasion, Cadet Uhura,” Spock interrupted. “My PADD is currently downloading the mock relay transmissions for your exam preparation.”

He walked past her left side and turned one hundred and eighty degrees. Now he stood directly behind her, slightly off centre from perfect alignment so that he could see over her shoulder. Her hair was pulled to the top of her head and fastened there. Nyota cast a brief glance behind her before she returned her eyes to her work. The motion caused the ends of her smooth tresses to lift, swing and lightly brush his black instructor’s jacket.

“The frequencies are consistent with a Class 2 signal,” she told him. When she lifted her PADD to show him, her writing arm moved back too far and her elbow pressed gently against his stomach.

“But the textbook problem says we are intercepting communications between two Starfleet space docks,” she went on. “It does not mention an enemy vessel.”

He reached around her arm and took the stylus, his stylus, from her left hand. His fingertips tangled with hers and the electricity they exchanged made his tongue tingle.

“Have you determined the distance the signals have travelled?” he asked.

He also leaned closer and blew on the flat face of her earring pendant, so it fluttered near her jawbone.

“My calculations are saved,” her left hand, having nothing to hold, dropped to her side. As he used the stylus to retrieve her work, he felt her fingernails scratch his thigh in little circles. Had he actually needed to check her mathematics, this particular attention would have decreased his efficiency fractionally.

“You have neglected --,” he began to speak, but then her hand slid between his legs. She turned her
head slightly.

“Sir?”

She had searched for and found his scrotum, and was carefully identifying the firm globe of each testis by pressing into the loose skin which enclosed them, tracing over and round their circumference. Spock concentrated on maintaining his hold on the stylus.

“You may have made an assumption --,” he tried again, after a surge of sensation cut off his power of speech. “You may have --,”

“Commander,” her hand withdrew. She turned slowly to face him, tipped her head back and gazed up at him with innocent concern. “Is anything wrong?”

“No,” he said, and then, “yes.”

She stroked his jacket sleeve. Her voice became softer. “I don’t understand.”

His hand holding the stylus moved of its own volition, seemingly. It snaked round her lower back and pressed their bodies together.

“What we are doing,” he was rolling the stylus over the zipper of her skirt, “constitutes a violation of faculty/student fraternisation rules.”

“May I kiss you?”

They tasted each other tentatively, as if their lips and tongues were foods they had never tried before.

“Is that better?” she asked, when they finished.

“Yes,” he said, and then, “no.”

“You seem so warm. Would you be more comfortable without your jacket?”

She opened the front of his uniform slowly, giving her free hand time to appreciate the weave and density of his undershirt and the physiological terrain it covered. And when she finally reached the bottom, where the jacket overlapped his trousers, she stopped again to examine how her ministrations had affected him.

“I think we’ve found the problem,” she said, and unfastened his fly button.

“Cadet …,” the word came out distorted by involuntary exhalation, as she unzipped his trousers and adjusted the vent on his shorts to liberate a swollen lok.

“There.” She held him a moment, provoking a blood rush that pushed against her fingertips and tilted his erection higher.

“Sir, there are no rules where we are concerned. Also, there is no lingerie under my skirt which would impede our continued fraternisation.”

“I see,” he said hoarsely, and paused to swallow. “In that case, I must order you to lie down.”

Nyota obeyed as if this were part of a lesson. Spock let her take the stylus from him. She placed it with her PADD against the partition they could raise to screen off their sleeping area. Then he watched her remove her boots. She walked barefoot to a place in the middle of the clear observation floor, sat down and eased herself onto her back, letting the motion drag her skirt up round her hips.
Their relationship had been sexual for eight months. The time had allowed Spock to achieve the
tolerance his mother assured him he would develop for mouth contact with Nyota's body.
Rationing, therefore, had ended. He could kiss Nyota anywhere he desired, as often as he desired.
A craving remained for locations which had been most intoxicating, a psychosomatic reaction,
perhaps. He knelt between her parted legs and sampled the skin on the inside of each thigh in turn,
sucking her between his teeth.

“Commander,” she sighed.

It was the last line spoken in their strange role play. From then on she whimpered 'Spock' as he
nuzzled his way into her centre and ground her ko lok under his tongue. She panted “Aehallh,
Aehallh!” when she convulsed. In the aftermath of her orgasm he drew himself up and over her legs,
hovered near her face to quiet her with more kisses and eased himself inside her body. Then they
rocked together at the furthest reaches of Penthouse Three, building his fire and her residual burning
while it seemed as though they were no longer corporeal at all. The optical illusion of the transparent
floor, combined with heightened emotion, made it no effort to believe they had become pure erotic
energy, travelling in perpetual embrace across the galaxy.
“...but Divve, my second cousin, he thought differently. Lust and fear, he said, those were the two primal drives in most living things, right?”

There, thought Gaila. As soon as she used the word ‘lust’, Jim Kirk’s eyes stopped staring moodily at the polished surface of their table and looked at her. She’d got his attention, but it wasn’t going to be easy to hold it. Kirk was in a strange state of mind tonight. The view through the windows might as well be San Francisco bay on a foggy morning, for all he seemed to care.

She was tempted to say, “Not our best date, Jim.”

He was lucky the Seisoken Lounge was so spectacular. The drinks and stimulants were unparalleled, the clientele exotic and expensively dressed, the cosmic view which could be magnified right at your table better than anything. It made up for his half-hearted attentions.

“You don’t want to know how the story ended?” she asked.

“Sure--,” he blurted out, “sure I do.”

He started to play with his glass of Denobulan brandy, making it turn slowly on the spot, using one finger from each hand. Gaila envied that glass.

“Right,” she continued. “So Divve proposed a partnership with this invisible entity. But only if it gave itself a name. For contract purposes, you see, and because you need to be able to call for someone you can’t see. The agreement was that the entity should make customers fearful, so they wouldn’t delay payment or insist on discounts for their time with Divve's women.”

“It didn’t have a name?” Jim asked.

He was unfolding and refolding his cocktail napkin, and Gaila was thinking of slapping him. But the question saved him. It was a good question.

“Apparently its species don’t name themselves. But it told my cousin it often acquired names in the different worlds it visited. Divve told it to pick one of those, and it agreed to be called Redjac.”

She took a sip of her Finagle’s Folly. She liked how it came with its own cooling stand.

“I’ll cut a long story short,” she said, always pleased when she used Standard idioms correctly. Jim seemed to sigh relief.

“The partnership failed. Redjac couldn’t be told when to inspire fear, or in which person. He terrorised Divve’s own women, and when Orion females are afraid they can’t produce pheromones. It nearly bankrupted him.”

Jim balled up the napkin and tried to roll it across the table, but it came loose and flopped a few
inches from his hand.

“Right,” he said.

“Cadet Kirk,” Gaila put on her 'don't mess with the Faculty Aide' voice. "Were you listening to anything I said?"

“The whole thing,” he said. "Your second cousin tried to expand his business venture with help from a psychopathic, non-corporeal entity and failed because the entity truly was a psychopath.”

“And do you remember why I started telling that story?”

Jim lifted his glass and took a good swig of brandy. He swallowed, coughed, and said, “No.”

“I think you do.”

“Maybe I’m drinking to forget.”

Gaila decided the one thing that made Kirk unattractive was self-pity.

“I’m trying to tell you that a similar entity must have disrupted today’s test.”

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Pillow talk: Nyota taught Spock the meaning of the term.

He had always been more communicative after sex, though shok used to leave him less coherent. They were past that now. They could lie side by side on the penthouse floor and name the stars they recognised overhead.

Then, since his late arrival had given her time to explore the suite, she wanted to show him the luxuries offered by their accommodation. They changed out of their uniforms and put on their complimentary, Argelian cotton bathrobes. They perused the replicator menu together. Nyota suggested they try the pok-tar and Spock asked whether champagne might suitably accompany that. She gave him a look before agreeing to try. It made her more curious than she already was, but Spock would only say he had been informed that this beverage was associated with celebration. She decided to wait him out.

After dinner, she introduced him to the slippery delights of love made in the penthouse spa tub, and let him comb her hair while their bodies dried in the evapora. Then they slithered into cozy embrace beneath a downy quilt on their bed – fed and warmed and satisfied. She activated the penthouse robot, who brought them tea.

“Tanzanian Rungwe for you,” Nyota lifted the cup from the robot’s grip and passed it to him.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Peppermint for – I’m sorry?”

She turned her head so quickly it pulled a muscle in her neck.

“What did you just call me?”

Spock, clearly relishing this successful surprise, stared straight ahead and sipped his tea.
“I can’t be,” she said, “I still need Advanced Subspace.”

“A formality,” Spock answered. “Your exceptional aural sensitivity meant that the practical portions of your midterm and final exams were Advanced level. You need only fulfil the requirement for one hundred and twenty hours of real time lab work.”

She shrugged. “Okay. Can you guess what question I’m going to ask next?”

“Your tea is getting cold, Lieutenant.”

“Diversionary tactics will not be tolerated, Commander.”

Spock watched her rub the sore spot on her neck a moment, then turned to place his own tea on the bedside table.

“Captain Pike was able to secure a temporary placement in the communication labs aboard space station Honshu, commencing in three days’ time. If you are willing to take it --,”

He paused, but this was no longer stalling. He knew how strongly she felt about accepting opportunities received because Spock was Pike’s First Officer and she was Spock’s lover. Nyota gave him a hard face. But it wasn’t easy to sustain that expression. Had she really sat and passed Advanced level practicals?

“If I were willing to take this placement,” she said carefully, “how long would it take me to complete my real time work?”

“I would say six weeks, but I imagine you will find a way to meet the requirement in less time.”

“And when does the Enterprise begin its first systems tests?”

“In six weeks.”

Nyota took in a deep breath. There were a number of ways to tell him what she felt about his offer, and she wanted to give him a taste of his own medicine and leave him guessing. She took her tea from the robot, sat back against the upholstered headboard, and gave her best impersonation of finding it all inconsequential. Spock’s gaze felt like laser light on her face. She drank about half of her cup.

Then, when she felt he was sufficiently disconcerted by her silence, she simply said, “No.”

Spock watched her pull the quilt off her legs.

“No is the response to a polar question,” he reminded her. “Since I have not made such an enquiry, I cannot discern the meaning of your answer.”

“I was answering my own question,” Nyota told him. “I asked myself if this was the right thing to be doing.”

“And by ‘thing’, you refer to the temporary lab placement?”

He had walked straight into her trap. She was going to hide her smile, but it was too difficult.

“By ‘thing’ I mean drinking tea.”

She sat up and returned her cup to the robot; she asked the machine to take it back to the kitchen. Then she rolled over. Her face landed in the middle of his chest and she began a patient planting of
very soft, very wet kisses in a line between his nipples. She felt his hand come to rest on the back of her neck. His fingertips applied pressure to the muscle she had strained, all along it from her shoulder to just behind her ear, and then raked into her hair.

“I remain unsure,” Spock murmured, “as to your intentions.”

Nyota moved down, opened her mouth wider and sucked hard on his stomach until she needed to stop for breath.

“You can tell you are being seduced,” she said.

Spock’s grunt was acknowledgement combined with surrender. She moved lower down his body, and he had no more questions.

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“Honoured guests and employees ...,”

The Seisoken public address system delighted Gaila. Announcements were transmitted to receivers in the glasses which held their drinks.

“For those of you whose tables are facing Venus, you will shortly be able to see the USS Farragut dropping out of warp.”

Most people on their side of the restaurant got up. Gaila wanted to go with them, but Kirk just shrugged.

The Orion reached across the table and grabbed him by the epaulettes of his red jacket.

“Jim, you need to accept the Kobayashi Maru for what it is.”

“No,” he told her, “I don’t.”

“It is just code,” she rocked him back and forth as she said it. “Code you can’t change. Failing it isn’t failing – do you understand?”

“No. I don’t.”

Gaila let him go. She got up from her chair and stood behind him.

“The real test will be proving what caused today’s disruption. Would you like to help me with that?”

Most Orion females liked the smell of their own pheromone perfume. The scent of Gaila was part of the identity of Gaila, as much as the sound of her voice. When the fragrance didn’t have its usual effect, or when she had to emit more of it to get the usual response, it caused her a moment of insecurity.

It also started to attract attention from a greater distance. The nearby tables were empty, but there was a man sat at the bar in the centre of the restaurant who was now staring at her.

“Jim,” she said.

“It’s nice,” he said, and actually reached a hand behind him to find something to touch. Gaila stepped away.

“It’s the one thing that just … might make me feel better.”
“All right,” Gaila said. “If you promise to help me, I’ll take you back to my apartment. I don’t have a roommate tonight. Now let’s go watch the Farragut.”

They arrived on the Venus side of the restaurant with seconds to spare, and the crowd around the viewing walls stood four deep. That did not spoil the spectacle. There was a flash. The ship seemed to be the product of a small energy explosion, like the beginning of a universe. And then it loomed over them: gleaming underbelly, flashing lights and warp coils blazing blue. For a while, it transfixed them both.

Then Jim smiled.

Gaila smiled at him smiling, and leaned into his body.

“We’re going to get there;” she whispered in his ear. “The Kobayashi Maru will seem like nothing then.”

Pheromones, alcohol and Starfleet engineering at close range: this heady mix finally turned the tide. Kirk wrapped his arms round her and his mouth came looking for hers. Denobulan brandy and Finagle’s Folly made a truly fine combination.

- *Tiberious is not dead.* -

Jim’s voice.

Except that was impossible, while he was still kissing her. Gaila kept her eyes closed and tried to pretend she had not heard anything.

- *Tiberious is not dead.* -

The same words spoke themselves in her mind during the simulation disruption. It was Jim’s voice then and just as impossible.

- *Tiberious is not dead.* -

She broke their kiss.

“Hey,” the voice of the real Jim Kirk said as he blinked. “What’s wrong?”

He could already tell – her perfume had vanished. She scanned the room, and her eyes stopped when they caught sight of the man who had stared at her from the bar. He was still staring.

She should have recognised his face the first time. He may have been ten years older, but in human years he was still a young man.

“Jim,” she said, “let’s get out of here.”

***

They lay nose to nose, buried beneath the quilt, breathing air that was dense with moisture they had exhaled. Nyota scratched the bicep of his left arm. Spock reached up and caught her hand in his, squeezed her fingers gently. He transferred no thought.

“What,” she whispered. “What is it? You’ve been teasing me all evening.”

Her touch told him she had enjoyed the suspense and surprise. And she was not using her own telepathic ability to push against his mental barriers, behind which his second offer waited. Unlike
the lab placement on space station Honshu, this was a long term arrangement.

But he could not resist another diversion.

“There is one other requirement to earn your officer’s stripes.”

“The Kobayashi Maru,” she replied. He felt her body shift, and suddenly she shut off her mind so he could not tell what she was thinking.

“I understand you were invited to participate in today’s simulation, but you declined.”

“I did.”

“May I ask why?”

“Jim Kirk.”

“Cadet Kirk?”

“Yes,” she said. "I admit it’s not professional. I thought Alpha Incognito would knock some of the arrogance out of him. But he’s Captain Pike’s favourite and he acts like he’s the best thing to hit Starfleet. He really gets under my skin.”

Spock homed in on the breath she released with her words, found her lips and gave her a soft, slow kiss.

“Nyota, it could not be argued that his achievements resulted from anything except his own ability, regardless of the fact that Captain Pike has made himself Kirk’s mentor.”

“True.”

“And when you are commissioned to a starship, you will not be able to choose your crewmates. You will be ordered to work with individuals whose company you would not seek otherwise.”

“I know” she said. “He’s set his sights on the Enterprise, just like I have. I guess I just wanted to avoid working with him as long as possible.”

“In spite today’s failure, Cadet Kirk has asked to re-sit the test.”

“Do the Kobayashi Maru a third time?” Nyota asked. “Can you see why I find him so obnoxious?”

“There seems little rational thinking behind his persistence.”

“Exactly.” Nyota nested her head underneath his chin and sighed. “But you want me to accept his invitation, if he asks me again?”

“I did not begin this conversation to make that particular request.”

“Spock,” she used their entwined hands to punch his shoulder, “You are unbelievable. The katra of T’Shin would tell you off if she were here.”

“Speaking of your mother,” he asked, "what have you sensed through your bond?"

“That she is satisfied. So,” Uhura held the vowel at a pitch, like singing, “I expect we will soon be invited to transport ourselves to Onitsha and witness a bonding between Karimu and Chibuzo.”
Precisely, thought Spock. The katra of T'Shin had been temporarily transferred from Nyota to Tonev's human lover, where it was working hard to mediate marriage negotiations between her great-grandson and the Igbo geologist who had attracted him. Spock expected stern words from Uhura's Vulcan guardian if she learned that her daughter's relationship had not progressed in similar fashion.

“Nyota Uhura …,”

“Yes, Spock?”

“I would be interested to learn --,"

“Is this request,” she interjected, “the real reason you began this conversation?”

“It is.”

“At last! Please proceed.”

“May I confirm that I will not be interrupted again?”

“Spock, seriously now – no more delays. I have been very patient, don’t you think?”

He let go her hand so he could slip that arm around her back and pull her closer.

“I do,” he said. “Nyota Uhura, I ask whether you would consider --,”
“mke wangu” is Swahili for "my wife"

The Orion and her human slave left the restaurant. It infuriated him to let them go, infuriated him to wait in this third rate establishment, helpless, when he was so close to the person he came to find.

But waiting was all he could do, because he was alone now. He was only Emmanuel Francis Kasembe, and not Tiberious.

The waiter working behind the Seisoken bar did not know anything had changed. His name badge said Antonio, but Tiberious could read minds, especially fearful ones. Having threatened to expose the barman’s false identity to his employers, Tiberious was served his first bourbon on the house. Now Antonio offered Emmanuel a second free drink.

Emmanuel was tempted. Bourbon supplied reassurance and strength. He had promised himself, yes, it’s true, that he would find other, better sources of these qualities, or discover them within himself, though he had doubts whether they existed. Nyota used to tell him they did. She tried teaching him to meditate. She would plead with him repeatedly to go fishing with his grandfather or dust off his tennis racquet.

He owed her this much, yes?

Yes?

Yes, okay, yes. And he intended to show her that he could. Or should. Should.

Emmanuel nodded his head.

Still wary, Antonio thanked his customer for the pleasure of serving him once more. He got a fresh glass from under the counter, added an ice shard, lemon peel and three fingers of triple oaked. Emmanuel drummed his fingers on the marble counter, trying to convince himself that the seconds he spent without touching the drink were evidence that he was above his need.

And then one of the many restaurant guests who were gawping at the starship outside called out.

“Is that one of the hotel suites up there?”

Uncertain murmurs rose from people assembled near the tall viewing walls, and all of them were crowding in to get a better look. The same voice cried out again.

“It is! Oh my god, one of the hotel rooms has detached and it’s drifting away!”

A waitress ran up to the bar. “Antonio, call Security. Check they have things under control and get them to make an announcement.”

She may have thought Emmanuel would not hear. The restaurant had experienced a sudden surge of vocal expression from patrons and staff. People were talking in loud, anxious voices or arguing,
shouting for the manager or trying to make calls from various devices. Emmanuel left the bar and went to the spot where the first voice had raised the alarm, to see for himself.

The penthouse looked no bigger than a soap bubble. The sun would exert the most powerful gravitational pull on the tiny structure, and that was the direction it drifted.

The public address system transmitted a long, high pitched tone to quiet the crowd.

“Guests and employees, Security wish to assure you they are aware that a suite has been disengaged from the space elevator. There are procedures in place to handle such situations. Please remain calm.”

***

“Attention, Guests of Penthouse Three, attention. This is Hotel Security. Please remain calm. Your suite has been disengaged from the elevator shaft.”

Spock was out of bed and running before the announcement began. The initial shriek of the alarm startled Nyota, but her brain clicked into soldier setting a moment later and she followed him.

The announcement continued. “If you are qualified to operate the master controls in this suite, please use your guest code to access the panel located in your kitchen.”

Of course, Spock was qualified. He ran directly to the panel on the wall between the kitchen and hygiene rooms, activated the display and identified himself.

“Commander Spock, Security has recognised your guest code. Navigation settings are being transferred; expect full access in fifteen seconds.”

Nyota did not know how or when he achieved this – did not know there was a qualification which could be obtained.

“Computer,” Spock asked, “give us the status of all life support systems.”

“Gravity, pressure and temperature controls are functioning normally. Atmospheric controls in this suite have been compromised. We estimate critical degradation of air quality within nine minutes.”

For the first time, Uhura felt the difference in their rank and experience.

“Lieutenant,” Spock ordered, “supplemental oxygen supplies are stored in the cabinet behind me. Check the gas levels, test the breathing apparatus and bring them here.”

“Aye, sir.”

But she loved the razor focus that an emergency could generate. She opened one of the cabinet doors and checked the shape and weight of the gas tanks; she asked herself whether it was obvious how they should be worn. Negative, her own mind replied, check for directions. She opened the second door and found a PADD fitted to the inside. She set the instruction video running. Two minutes and ten seconds later she was wearing her own oxygen supply, and helping fit Spock with his.

She had estimated that their complimentary robes, once she had the chance to fetch them, could be worn over the apparatus and still cover them – just.

“Navigation controls indicate the USS Farragut is in Earth orbit,” he told her as she adjusted the
shoulder straps on his tank harness. “Convert your PADD to a subspace communications unit, open a channel and hail the ship.”

“And when I make contact?”

“Give them our coordinates from this control panel and request emergency transportation.”

“We need to get dressed, Commander.”

“In strict order of priority, Lieutenant, we need to ensure we survive.”

“Sir.”

Her PADD was still in the entrance foyer where she left it. When she recalled how it got there, the irony made her shake her head. They began their evening in uniform, acting out their Starfleet roles as foreplay. Now, completely naked, they played their parts in earnest.

As she waited for the tablet settings to appear, she considered something else. Had she been imagining it, or was Spock about to say what she thought he was about to say, just before the alarm sounded?

And then she heard Spock’s voice. It was as quiet as if they were still nose to nose under the bed covers, but speaking inside her mind.

- *I met your husband this evening, Nyota-

***

Emmanuel felt so enraged he forgot his second bourbon. He stormed out of the restaurant. He was aware that he knocked over a chair and pushed several guests aside because they did not avoid him quickly enough. One day, yes, he would explain to them why he could neither stop nor apologise, why it mattered more to get to the elevator – his private elevator which would take him up to the most exclusive suite in the hotel. As Tiberious, he bought it outright by handing over one of his platinum trinkets.

Once he was sealed away behind those elevator doors, Emmanuel gave full vent.

“I told you not to hurt her!!”

The voice responsive android, standing stiffly at the rear of the compartment, blinked.

“Good evening, Mr. Kasembe,” its blue silicon mouth spoke. “Did you enjoy your visit to Seisoken Restaurant?”

“You promised,” Emmanuel spat out the word, “promised.”

“Has something has caused you dissatisfaction?”

“Stop talking to me like that damn service robot.”

“Sir, I am happy to deactivate myself if my assistance is not required.”

“Deactivate,” Emmanuel ran a shaking hand over his face. “God, I wish it were that easy. I wish I could switch you off. Why do you still need to do this? Why?”

“Do what, Mr. Kasembe?”
“What you do …,”

More often now, Emmanuel relived the past. An odd thing, yes, because he wanted to forget that, and only look forward. Instead he’d remember impressions, like now when he could clearly see Nyota’s face the first time he told her she would need to start calling him by a new name. Her expression, by then, was always furrowed with anxiety when he was around, and her tongue all too ready to criticise. He thought it would impress her, his new found confidence and the credits he gave to her.

“How can you get our old windows frames replaced, mke wangu. And have enough left for groceries.”

She could not answer him. She nodded agreement mutely when he announced himself as Tiberious, and for the rest of that day she was quiet.

“You poison things,” he told the robot.

“Mr. Kasembe, are you saying you have been poisoned?”

“You! I mean you!!” Emmanuel shouted. He lashed out and struck the android on its padded upper arm.

“Code 77551,” the android turned his head and spoke to the elevator computer. A ceiling atomiser sprayed twice. The elevator came to a halt.

“Open the doors!” Emmanuel demanded.

“We are between floors, sir. For your safety, the doors are locked.”

“Open,” he waved a hand at the android. But it wasn’t right, that hand. Watery, and the fingernails yellow, yes, yellow like fried split peas.

“Oh …,”

He felt proud to have lowered himself to the floor before the aerosol drug made him do something undignified. The android came and squatted in front of him.

“Mr. Kasembe.”

Behind the robot’s glass eyes and their semi-transparent silicon lids, red lights burned. It reached out a mechanical hand and toyed with one of Emmanuel’s expensive Orion chains.

“Remember what you were.”

The android’s hand travelled up the leather jacket and cupped Emmanuel’s throat just under his jaw. The fingers clenched.

“Ten years ago, you were not fit to clean the floors in a hotel like this. Remember that everything you have, everything you are, is because of me.”

***

The penthouse navigation controls would not respond when given instructions. Spock tried to activate manual ignition of the thrusters, so he could utilise repeated bursts of power from the small engines to work against the pull of gravity and slow their drift. That also failed.
“Lieutenant.”

He sent a message to Security with his calculations of their trajectory, and requested an urgent response. They replied, and said they were investigating their options.

“Lieutenant?”

He summoned the penthouse robot, and asked what level of understanding it possessed regarding the emergency systems within their suite. It began to recite the full security manual, the same one Spock had already taught himself in order to qualify for enhanced computer access. He interrupted the mechanoid voice and told it to fetch their bathrobes instead.

“Lieutenant Uhura, have you made contact with the Farragut?”

He asked the computer to review life support functions again, and report. He glanced at the percentage oxygen measurement before he left the controls to find out why Uhura had not answered.

“Nyota …,”

She lay on her side. Her back was pressed against the dividing wall with their bedroom. Her legs were drawn up tight against her body, and her PADD was not visible anywhere nearby. Nyota’s hands covered her face, and she was trembling. Spock got down on both knees in front of her.

“Nyota, you have removed your nasal mask. You will need it shortly.”

She did not reply. She did not react to his voice at all. When he reached out and touched her shoulder she screamed, kicked her feet and flailed her arms.

“Nyota --,”

Now he could see her eyes. But she did not seem to see him. Her cheeks were wet with tears and she was crying even while she stared at him.

And then she began to scream again.

He fought her with regret, captured and pinned down her wrists with one hand while using the other to pinch the pressure point at the base of her neck. He allowed himself one unhappy exhalation of breath when her eyes closed and her body relaxed. Then he checked that oxygen was feeding through from her supply tank and refitted her nasal mask.

“Attention, Penthouse Three, attention.”

The voice came from the computer console in the kitchen.

“This is Major Sirko of the USS Farragut. If you can hear this transmission, please respond.”

Anastasia Sirko had replaced him when he resigned his post as Science Officer.

“Major,” he called out, as he lifted Nyota’s head off the floor, “this is Commander Spock. Do you read me?”

“You are a little faint, sir.”

He stood up with Uhura in his arms and carried her to the kitchen.
“We have detected and locked onto both life signs inside your suite,” Sirko told him. “Transporters are ready for immediate beam up.”

Spock started to say something, and then changed his mind. The penthouse robot had carried out the last instructions it received; it stood with both arms outstretched, one bathrobe in each hand. Yet the console showed they had seconds of oxygen left, and it was mapping how gravity would accelerate their journey nearer the sun.

“Please proceed, Major.”

***

The service android carried Emmanuel from the elevator into his suite.

“I am not being ungrateful,” Emmanuel said sluggishly.

“You only think of yourself,” the robot replied. It turned into the bedroom.

“You are an organic,” it said. "What you consume is what you are made from, and that sustains you.”

Emmanuel was dropped onto the bed. The change of air was helping to reverse the effects of the code 77551 drug. But he could not feel his legs below the knees yet.

“And what am I?” the android demanded, thumping its silicon chest.

“You are a terror,” Emmanuel said.

“And a terror requires terror. To carry out all these things you ask of me, I need to feed on it.”

“But not on her!”

“There was no one else. Her Vulcan consort does not respond to me.”

Emmanuel sighed in frustration. “There are hundreds of guests in this hotel. Hundreds of crew on board the space station and thousands of unsuspecting minds in San Francisco. I have not brought you to a desert!” he shouted.

The android folded its arms.

“You must promise,” Emmanuel managed, clumsily, to sit up. “Look, let me get my PADD. We will ring reception and purchase escorts. You saw the Orion – where there is one there are bound to be more. We’ll tie them up with bed linen, if you like. Gorge yourself on them, but leave Nyota alone.”

All the android’s lights went out. Seconds later Emmanuel felt the comforting surge of the entity as the two of them became a combined self -- Tiberious. He felt his body flood with energy.

-I promise-

***

Christine Chapel blinked. Never let it be said that anything shocked her -- as Chief Medical Officer on the USS Farragut she had seen just about everything. Maybe her eyes felt they should take another look, and be sure about what had appeared in front of her.
But after the fourth blink, there was no denying it. Commander Spock had just beamed into Transporter Room Two stark naked, his modesty preserved only by the beautiful and equally naked young woman he held in his arms.
Doctor Chapel did not curl the corners of her mouth into a smile, or raise her eyebrows in recognition. She did not state his name in an exclamation of surprise at this unexpected meeting. It was the first occasion he had seen her subdue her emotional responses to conform with Vulcan cultural norms. It was also the first occasion Spock found himself hoping for a human reaction from her instead.

She opened her communicator, made a curt request for a gurney and bedding to be brought from Sick Bay. Then she stepped up onto the transporter platform and aimed her tricorder at Nyota’s head.

Spock watched the doctor’s face intently. If the results of her scan satisfied her, he might see her flex zygomaticus and nasalis muscles momentarily, which would cause plumping of the flesh over her cheekbones. The doctor adjusted the angle of the tricorder once, touched its display on five different occasions, but showed no expression.

Before replacing the device in her holster, Chapel turned her head and addressed the nurse who walked into the transporter room with the gurney.

“Evans, the replicator database will contain an entry with Commander Spock’s measurements. Identity number 52-0215. Have it issue him a full set of off-duty day wear.”

While Evans accessed the nearby replicator and entered this information, the doctor set her communicator on the transporter controls and asked him, “What drove her cortisol and adrenaline levels up so high?”

“I am not certain,” Spock replied.

“With those hormones in her bloodstream, she should be wide awake. And probably screaming.”

“I can explain why Cadet Uhura is unconscious,” Spock explained. “Doctor, you will recall our last mission, when Ensign Marreex experienced an adverse reaction to a dose of quadroline.”

Chapel nodded once. “He destroyed an entire array of tissue samples and two life support units until you ran into Sick Bay and --,”

She stopped. Two vertical wrinkles appeared between her eyebrows. She pointed to Nyota.

“You did the same thing to her?”

“It was necessary to stop her from struggling.”

The doctor’s lips pursed, as if she would ask another question. Spock waited. The nurse approached them with the stack of newly replicated clothing.

“Let’s get the Cadet lying down,” the doctor said.

Spock followed her off the transporter platform. He adjusted Nyota’s head on the gurney’s small pillow and smoothed the hair out of her eyes. Chapel covered Uhura with a blanket.

“Now get dressed,” the doctor ordered him. “Evans, take this patient to Sick Bay and prepare a suitable dose of anti-cortisol based on the tricorder data. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”
While Spock stepped into the regulation briefs and trousers, Doctor Chapel asked him where the Academy had assigned him quarters. He found it a peculiar enquiry, but told her.

“Very nice,” she said. And she told him to get back on the transporter as soon as he was fully clothed.

Spock had inserted his left arm into the replicated shirtsleeve, and was about to button the cuff.

“Doctor?"

“I’m searching for your coordinates now,” Chapel said.

“Doctor, I do not wish to beam back to Earth without Cadet Uhura.”

Chapel looked up from the transporter controls, caught his gaze and immediately shifted her eyes away.

“Computer,” she said, “assign Commander Spock guest quarters on G Deck.”

“Cabin G1079 has been reserved,” the computer replied. “Commander Spock, begin speaking to activate voice recognition security.”

“Doctor,” Spock walked up to the controls, and stood directly in front of her so she had to make eye contact.

“I do not require accommodation. I intend to accompany you to Sick Bay.”

Christine Chapel finally relented. She sighed, open mouthed. The inner corners of her brows drew up, creating a diagonal fold in the skin immediately underneath them, and an overhang which pushed into her lashes and gave her eyes a drooped appearance, signifying sadness.

“I’m sorry, Spock.”

He waited. He buttoned the shirt without taking his eyes off her, until she understood that her response was insufficient.

“It might be better,” each word came out the doctor’s mouth as if it had been held back to undergo stringent quality tests. “Better for you and better for her, if you were not present when the Cadet regains consciousness.”

Peripheral vision told him the doctor’s hand was creeping along the edge of the control panel and stopping on the far left, where a certain configuration of commands would initiate a lockdown sequence. If requested, it would seal off the transporter room with a force field, hail Security on that deck and notify the bridge. It would also release a hatch on the operator’s side, containing a charged phaser set to stun.

“Christine.”

“Just --,” she interrupted him, “just in case.”

He could not fault her reasoning, given what she knew about him. And this misconception was his fault. Two years ago he ought to have initiated a discussion, a debriefing of sorts, before he left the Farragut. But he could not bring himself. He hid behind his cultural biases instead, which took for granted her mastery of the situation because she was female.

Of course, her courage was indisputable – she had voluntarily shut herself inside a maximum security
brig cell with an alien Science Officer whose symptoms could not be researched. The only source of information was Spock himself, and by then his fever had rendered him all but incapable of explanation.

Yet she was only human. Throughout his *pon farr* she operated alone, so how could she know what he might do to her? He had watched the distressing footage afterwards, from the Farragut's security footage: he knew he had been imprisoned because he beat his way through the locked doors of his quarters, dragged a junior officer from his chair and hurled him across the bridge and ripped the restraining bands off a medical biobed. When the ordeal was over, Chapel sustained a pulled hamstring, several bruises and a torn earlobe. How could she be certain this violence was not typical Vulcan sexuality, but only an example of how delayed treatment made the symptoms worse?

“Christine, I can assure you –,”

“Doctor Chapel, please,” she snapped back into her rank. “And this is an order – you may either return to Earth or confine yourself to quarters until my next instructions. Make your choice.”

***

Emmanuel slept now – such a waste of time.

It could be infuriating to work with flesh.

Why had they evolved this way? Their existence was arranged in alternating shift patterns of energy expenditure and energy replenishment. At least one species in this quadrant of the galaxy must have discovered a way to do both simultaneously, as Akuma did.

But this Akuma had not discovered them yet.

What was worse, Emmanuel no longer had the same quality of energy when he was awake. It used to be that their desires were aligned, just as their minds were united. That was when they were truly Tiberious – powerful and dangerous. They made and exploited alliances, defeated enemies, held captives to ransom and took whatever they wanted, whatever built them up. Emmanuel acquired immense wealth and notoriety. His partner enjoyed a diet that was rich in terror and pain.

But it was the nature of flesh to age. Having had several mortal partners, this Akuma knew their capacity and enthusiasm for risk would diminish over time. Emmanuel Francis Kasembe, it must be said, was a mortal with unusually short-lived appetites. Warning vocabulary had started to appear in his speech; he would talk of ‘settling down’ and ‘home’. He had grown fonder of those memories which dated back to the last time he lived on Terra and in particular of his wife, who had been and still was a pitiful source of nourishment.

Even when Nyota was terrified, she tried to fight him. She kicked and punched – this fear without a collapse of will was not satisfying. Hunger returned more quickly.

Hunger returned now. Emmanuel hired the escorts he promised. Two women came up in the elevator, but Emmanuel had no lust for them. He disabled himself with alcohol until this Akuma could not use his body as a weapon against the females. And though the pair of them were afraid of the ugly thoughts which Tiberious generated in their minds, familiar voices saying what they least wanted to hear, they supported each other. The females united against their common, invisible enemy and fled the hotel suite without collecting their fee.

The end was beginning. This was a suitable time to begin searching for a new partner.

***
Jim came as though sex was some kind of chore. He huffed like an old man instead of panting into her ear.

“Sweetie,” Gaila massaged his shoulders.

“Your stuff doesn’t work on me anymore,” he said gruffly, and rolled off her body.

“My ’stuff’ works just fine, thank you very much. Orions aren’t walking pheromone dispensers.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I can’t make myself. Well, okay, most times I can. It’s only when I’m really, really … uh,”

“Distracted,” Kirk finished her sentence.

“Distracted. Like my partner.”

“You were the one who thought this would work,” Jim chided.

That was not how Gaila recalled it, but starting a new argument wasn’t going to improve anything.

“Jim,” she sat up and grabbed her bra off the bedside table, to show she was being serious. “It can’t be a coincidence. The same voice I heard in my head during the Kobayashi Maru I heard again in the Seisoken bar. If my theory is true, then that entity could be following me.”

Kirk watched her get off the bed and search for the rest of her clothing, but didn’t respond.

“And if it followed me, the question is why?”

When she and Jim left the hotel, they asked one of the doormen to hail a cab. Gaila had been too edgy to care whether it was self-driving or not. An ancient Ferrengi picked them up and took them on the most indirect journey he could wrangle, making up excuses about overnight work on 125th and an accident on Balboa.

All the while Gaila nursed her fear. And she didn’t know whether what she feared was true, or just what the entity wanted her to believe.

But she thought of a way to eliminate one of those possibilities. The Ferrengi had dragged out their journey hoping for a sniff of Orion perfume and a lobe job. When he got neither they had to pay him full fare. Gaila sent the credits from her PADD, and during the seconds she waited for the transfer to be confirmed an idea came to her.

She found her miniskirt, and nearby Jim’s boxer shorts. She tossed his underwear onto his chest.

“Are you going to get dressed?” she asked.

“Why?”

“I need you to come with me to the simulation arena.”

“Gaila, it’s one seventeen in the morning.”

“This entity doesn’t need sleep.”

Kirk got up. He pulled his trousers off Uhura’s bed.
“You think it’s going to meet us there?” he asked.

“Let’s assume,” she said, “that the entity followed me because it’s interested in what I know about the Academy’s computer systems. Maybe it sees me, or my mind, as an entry point.”

Please, she said to herself, please let that be right.

“If we get some strange activity in the simulator now, we’ll know for sure.”

***

Back in the Captain’s chair.

The simulator furniture was new, a design he liked. Jim drove his hands along the white runways of the armrests before letting his fingers land lightly on their control arrays. He tipped his head back and recited the options from memory. On the left side: log recorder and playback, diary settings, emergency channels to Engineering, Security fore and aft, Sick Bay, Transporter Room One and three more which could be personally configured. On the right side there was a small data readout and chronometer, along with the alert alarm and override for weapons and shields.

“Ready?”

Gaila’s voice, transmitted from her console up on the Faculty observation level and broadcast through the simulator’s computer speakers.

“Ready,” he replied.

“I will fill in for your missing crew,” Gaila said.

Jim smirked. “Frankly, that will be an improvement.”

“Yes, but doesn’t it make more sense now? This entity lives off the fear it creates. So it probably wasn’t the Klingon fleet that got to everyone.”

“Oh well,” Jim threw up his hands, “if they were actually terrified into stupidity by voices in their heads, I’m supposed to be okay with that?”

“Jim --,”

“No seriously, Gaila, if that’s all it takes to make someone unfit for duty, is Starfleet really the best career option?”

“Ready?”

Her tone drew a line under that discussion.

“Born ready,” he assured her.

A field of moving stars appeared on the viewscreen, and all station computers on the bridge flickered into life. The navigator’s instruments moved without any human hands to operate them. If he were the kind of person who spooked easily, sitting alone in this chamber in the dead of night, those moving sliders might have set his imagination flying off in dangerous directions.

“Captain, we are receiving a distress signal from the USS Kobayashi Maru --,” Gaila began the speech his communications officer should make, to send them on their rescue attempt.
At the appropriate moment, he ordered Navigation to plot an intercept course, and the haunted controls were pushed and pressed and made the expected noises.

Plus one unexpected one.

-How interesting you are-

Jim lifted the hand that rested near the playback speaker on his chair, and stared at it a moment.

-Not the average flesh-

He was hearing this voice in his head. He let his eyes scan the bridge once. No more. And he refused to look behind the chair.

-And the memories you have, the risks you've taken. Tell me – is there anything you fear?- 

“Two Klingon vessels have entered the Neutral Zone and are locking weapons on us,” Gaila’s voice transmitted the warning.

“Raise shields,” Kirk ordered.

-There are no shields which can keep me out. Consider that fact, James Tiberious Kirk-

Jim ran his tongue over his front teeth slowly. Non corporeal entity – that’s what Gaila had said.

“Three more warbirds de-cloaking and targeting our ship,” the Orion continued playing her parts.

“Red alert,” Jim set off the siren. And then, with the sound drowning him out, he spoke in a lower voice.

“Who is this speaking? What’s your name?”

-Mortals name themselves so they may be spoken about by those who outlive them-

“Okay,” Jim said. “Has any mortal ever given you a name?”

-Many-

“Captain,” Gaila’s voice interrupted the conversation, “they’re firing on us.”

“Why are you so interested in me?” Jim asked the entity.

-I think I could help you-

“Captain?”

“Evasive manoeuvres,” Jim shouted the order too late. The simulator floor shook with the force of torpedo impact.

-You desire success in this simulation-

The virtual Klingon fleet scored two more hits.

“Shields at sixty-six percent,” Gaila warned.

-You witnessed the disruption I achieved here earlier-
Jim opened his emergency channel. “Engineering, put us in warp.”

“Engineering here,” Gaila responded. “Several warp coils are damaged. We're repairing what we can.”

“Computer,” Jim asked, “estimate our warp capability.”

“Warp one capability in three minutes.”

“We’ll be space dust by then,” Jim muttered to himself.

-Consider what we two might do together-

The fourth torpedo, Jim remembered, had been programmed to strike the bridge through the viewscreen, rip open the fuselage and hurtle the entire crew into space. He could see the weapon fire from the warbird directly ahead.

“You can alter the code for the Kobayashi Maru?” he asked the entity.

-Easily-

The torpedo was a golden fire filling the viewscreen.

“Could we talk later? I need to die first.”

After the blast, all systems failed. The bridge went pitch black and silent.

-I remain. Speak when you wish-

It was so quiet Jim could hear Gaila’s footsteps on the observation level. She activated the emergency lights on the armrests of his chair.

“Well,” she said, “I couldn’t detect any anomalies from up here. What about you? Anything unusual happen?”

She sounded as though she was hoping.

Jim put his hands behind his head and yawned.

“Nothing,” he said.
Christine Chapel checked her face in the reflective surface of a bioscan console. She practiced a smile and told herself to remain pleasant, no matter what. Then Nurse Evans walked in. He might have caught her in the middle of this strange self-coaching session, but he didn’t let his expression give that away when she turned round.

“What is it?” she asked, not damn well going to betray anything herself.

“Commander Spock wishes to remind you that the appointment you scheduled with him should have started thirty-three minutes and nineteen seconds ago. He’s asked for your ETA.”

“Have today’s transporter data files been locked down?”

“Yes sir. Confirmed with Major Sirko.”

“And where have you put Spock?”

“In the Sherman Boardroom.”

“Given him tea?”

“Offered him tea. He refused, sir.”

“Make it anyway. Use my best set, include all the usual accompaniments and call me when the tray is on the boardroom table.”

Christine called it her best. In truth it was a cheap imitation. Her great-grandmother got married in the middle of the Art Deco revival in 2127, when silver was not affordable and ivory unthinkable. But the online retail outlets did their best, and one of the wedding guests thought the Theodore Wende replica tea set would make a perfect gift. Christine inherited it. She liked the way the design suited the plain white replicator cups and saucers.

And it felt like old times, as she swept into the boardroom and wondered once again how the Commander managed to hold his body so still. He looked like a replica of himself.

“Well, good morning,” she chirped, and pulled out the chair that put the tea tray between herself and Spock. “How did you sleep?”

“I did not.”

“Ah,” she remembered, “of course, that isn’t always necessary. I’m sorry I was running late. Would you mind if I poured myself some tea?”
“No.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like some?”

“No.”

“Have you eaten already?”

“No.”

Well, at least he was willing to talk instead of just glaring at her. She put a slice of lemon in the bottom of her cup and added the tea as slowly as she could get away with. She helped herself to an Abernathy biscuit and broke it into four pieces that she set in a row along the edge of her saucer.

“Spock,” she began, “tell me how long you’ve known the cadet who was with you.”

“Cadet Uhura and I met one year and fifteen days ago, at the Dean’s Dinner.”

“Ahh.”

Christine smiled and nodded and leaned forward in her chair. None of this registered with Spock as a cue to tell her more. So she tried again.

“I think Chris Pike mentioned it when he got in touch a few weeks back, so I wasn’t sure. Has the relationship only recently become … serious?”

“Define serious.”

Christine brought her cup up to her mouth and sighed behind it, which made ripples on the surface of her drink. Then she took a sip.

“Sexual,” she specified.

Spock made her wait. Two more sips of tea and a portion of the biscuit were swallowed in spite the laser focus of his gaze. Maybe, if she checked her reflection later, she would see the burn marks.

“Christine,” he said finally, “as you are no longer my commanding medical officer, I do not believe I am obligated to reveal --,”

“Technically,” she interrupted him, “I should report what happened to Academy Medical.”

She cursed herself. Her attempt at pleasant was now as good as dead.

“Spock,” she started again, hoping to rebuild. “I would prefer to keep this private, as I’m sure you would. But before I can do that, I need to understand what happened to your cadet.”

Spock pushed back his chair and stood up.

“Doctor, are you saying that Uhura is unable to tell you herself?”

Chapel bit her lip. Oh hell, hell and hell this was not what she wanted at all.

“After a manner of speaking.”

“Refrain from idioms, please. Has she regained consciousness?”

“Spock, please sit down.”
Instead he clamped the table with both hands, so the tea cups rattled, and leaned across.

“I see no reason why I may not know this information, and I see no reason why --,”

“Spock!”

Chris Pike used to joke about ‘the Chapel bells’, and how they could be heard for miles. A few seconds later the boardroom door opened, and Evans put his head inside.

“Doctor, did you need anything else?” the nurse asked.

What a well-timed piece of diplomacy, Christine thought. Spock had a look on his face she remembered and knew better than to disregard. She imagined her best tea set was that close to being lifted off the table and sent flying. Whether or not the Commander would aim to miss her was debateable.

“You may as well clear away our dishes, Gavin,” she said.

That interruption allowed the atmosphere to cool. When the table was empty and Evans had shut the door on them Christine stood up.

“All right,” she said, “I didn’t want to come straight out with it, but I see we aren’t going to manage this any other way.”

Spock said nothing.

“Uhura regained consciousness a few hours after you were confined to quarters. I made her aware of how she came to be in Sick Bay, and I also told her you were on board. When I asked whether she wished to see you, she said she did not.”

“I would have respected her wishes,” Spock’s voice was flat, “as she doubtless needed rest.”

Christine turned her back. She wished he had let her break this gently.

“Spock, rest was not the issue. Uhura replicated civilian clothes and asked to be transported as soon as she was dressed.”

“She has returned to San Francisco?”

The doctor shook her head.

“She specified a different location. And she asked me not to give you the coordinates.”

Silence. As there would be. The cadet said he would not be happy to hear this news, but she also said that she had worried too much about the Commander’s happiness and not enough about the truth. So. Christine counted five of her own breaths, judged that they were calm enough and then faced him.

Spock had buttoned himself up tight. His face had become that mask he wore – though she knew how thin that disguise was and how his eyes could never quite cooperate.

“I’ll … my report to Academy Medical can wait a while,” she said softly.

She left him in the boardroom and went back to her office. She replicated a fresh cup of strong tea with, heaven forbid, milk and sugar, and sat down at her work station. She mused on her last subspace conversation with Pike. He had wished her happy Easter and laughed when she told him
he was nine days late. She gave him the latest gossip about the crew he used to command. He updated her about the Enterprise, mentioned his choice for first officer and when she tried to object he practically got out the pom poms and cheerleaded this dubious coupling.

Nurse Evans hailed her by communicator. He said Commander Spock had requested permission to beam down to the Hotel Sugureta, so he could collect his car from the parking lot.

“Permission granted,” Christine said. Then she drained the last of her tea, powered up her console and began to compose a message to her former captain.

***

Nyota arrived in the city mid-afternoon, when traffic was light. Rain fell steadily. It obscured the view through the windows of the taxi she reserved from the transporter concourse, but wet weather suited her just fine. The drops streaming along the surface of the plexi-glass reminded her of the tears she would hold back until she was safely at her destination.

But as the car drove past All Saints Cathedral she could make out its brown and white exterior, its distinctive bell tower and the twin walkways which led to the entrance. The transfer of the katra of T'Shin, from Nyota to Chibuzo, had taken place there. More than five hundred guests were invited, and just knowing that number of humans would be present during a Vulcan ritual made Nyota a little worried. But when it came time for the ceremony to begin, you could have heard a pin drop. Even the babies seemed to know what was happening, and did not cry.

The cab turned north. It steered its way along the residential streets that for a long time had no name, back in the 21st century when the new houses all had the same address – GRA Phase 1, Onitsha. Now, the properties had acquired the kudos of well-kept old age and established gardens, though some of the homes had been rebuilt in more contemporary styles. The cab driver took her to the top of Osisi Ube Way, which ended in a cul-de-sac.

He took her right up the long driveway to the shelter of the carport, for which she tipped him with the credits Doctor Chapel had given her from ship’s funds. Nyota would repay as soon as she got a new PADD and restored her files.

That left her outside the shutter doors at the back of the house. During her last visit, her identity and Spock’s were registered with all the automated systems in the house, and they were included in the security protocols reserved for family. So the doors would open for her; she only needed to show her face to the scanner. But if she surprised anyone on her way upstairs, an announcement would go to every occupied room on every floor and to several nearby houses, which all had extended family. Osisi Ube Way was almost a village.

Everyone would get excited about her arrival. She would need to keep her tears inside longer, and she did not think she could do that.

She decided to behave like a stranger and rang the service buzzer. After a minute or so the shutter doors rose, wobbled at their halfway point the way she remembered. Ikemefuna, the family’s automated butler, rolled out to greet her.

“We are not expecting deliveries,” its computer voice said.

“Ubochi oma Ikem,” she greeted the machine, “This is Nyota.”

Ikem pointed its integral scanner at her.
It had a friendliness setting for recognised faces. “Kedu ka ị mere?”

“I am very well, thank you. Is everyone well in this house?”

“We are well,” Ikem assured her. “You must come inside. We will give you refreshment and our company.”

“Ikem,” she touched the robot’s breastplate console, “First I must have a private meeting. Please save the message I type, and deliver it only to my brother. I will wait here.”

***

The receptionist on duty asked Spock to wait. The general manager of the Hotel Sugureta had left strict instructions that he must be informed when the Commander arrived to check out, and speak with him personally.

“Mr. Wouters is below stratosphere level, and should be with us in a few minutes,” the clerk said. “May I offer you any refreshment?”

Spock accepted tea in this case, as well as a complimentary table in the VIP breakfast room, because the receptionist was courteous and he was under no scrutiny here. The manager also – Arne Wouters opened their conversation by setting his corporate PADD on the table between and processing a full refund for the penthouse reservation. Spock was invited to join the operational team charged with investigating the incident. Mr. Wouters believed his expertise might help them interrogate their computer systems and discover the probable causes of the disconnection.

It was agreeable to be treated with respect.

Overnight, the USS Farragut had retrieved Penthouse Three with a tractor beam and reconnected it to the space elevator. Spock went up after breakfast to retrieve personal items.

He set himself a time limit, one calculated to keep him working as quickly as possible. He wanted to stay ahead of the memories that touching their possessions might evoke. As he gathered up discarded clothing, and collected Nyota’s toiletries from the counter inside the hygiene station, he took the additional measure of reciting Starfleet regulations out loud, in numerical order.

He went beyond his deadline trying to locate her PADD. It wasn’t inside any drawer, cabinet or wardrobe and it was not visible on the floor or on any piece of furniture. After stripping the mattress and finding nothing he interrogated the service robot. It was able to scan for the minute quantities of samarium in the drive motor. They found the device tucked between the headboard of the bed and the wall behind it.

During the return journey in the elevator, Spock continued his recitations, to prevent himself from asking when or how or why the PADD came to be in that location. Mr. Wouters arranged a valet to bring his car from the parking lot to the private entrance, and load the belongings into the trunk.

Spock was prepared for the human staff to make repeated expressions of regret, enquiries after his well-being and Nyota’s and other closing pleasantries, extending the time he would spend in reception by (he estimated) an additional ten minutes. He was prepared for handshaking. But the manager, receptionist and valet surprised him. They formed a line in front of the desk and wished him well with three simultaneous Vulcan salutes.

And so he left the hotel with only his own regret: that he did not know when he might have suitable reason to stay at the Sugureta again. He looked up at the space elevator one last time as he opened the driver’s side door of his vehicle. And he indulged himself in a single sigh.
A voice, coming from inside the car, asked, “Commander, is it possible to startle a Vulcan?”

***

Emmanuel appeared warmly dressed. Overtop the jacket of a dark green, two piece suit he had draped a sulfur yellow cloak, broad enough to be folded once. It cowléd high around his neck and pooled in his lap. Yet Spock noticed him shiver twice during the drive back to the Academy, and when the young man’s right hand extended out from beneath the cloak, the fingers trembled.

He did not reply to the question his unexpected passenger asked. Instead, he told Emmanuel that he would not wish to use force to remove him from the car.

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Emmanuel replied. “You want to know about your girlfriend’s PADD. And how will you find out, if you drive away without me?”

Spock decided to let him remain, but not on the basis of the young man’s insinuations. There was no reason to believe Emmanuel would tell the truth about anything. And while it was curious how he had learned about the PADD, it did not follow that his passenger knew more on that subject.

So as he drove the car through the parking lot to the nearest exit, Spock remained silent. He suspected Emmanuel would not.

“I knew her, Commander.”

Spock had to turn his head in Emmanuel’s direction to check for oncoming traffic. There was a sheen of sweat on the young human’s forehead.

“Are you unwell?”

“You heard what I said. I knew her. I knew Nyota.”

With the exception of his father and her brother, Spock had never heard the sound of Uhura’s first name coming from another man’s lips. It slowed his responses. He could have pulled out onto the road but hesitated, until the approaching vehicles were too close.

He waited for the next available gap.

“I thought,” Emmanuel paused to swallow. “I thought she would have told you about me.”

The lights at the intersection of 26th Avenue and Fulton Street had changed. Judging from the volume of traffic crossing, they were unlikely to be able to leave the car park until they changed again.

“I was important to her.”

Spock began a mental recitation of Starfleet Order 104, Section 3: “Should it be proven with admissible evidence that the flag officer who had assumed command was medically or psychologically unfit for command --,”

“Evidently, this has changed. I have to admit that Nyota does hold you in high regard. For example, she never wrote her name on my naked back with her stylus,” Emmanuel said.

Spock could not recall the rest of the order. His heart rate had increased by two beats per second.

“For me, she used her fingers.”
Spock put the car in neutral, engaged the emergency brake and then used the same hand to grab his passenger by the cloak and bring their faces closer together.

“However you have obtained your information, it is not with consent,” Spock twisted the cloak, making it snug round Emmanuel’s throat to strengthen his threat. He maintained his grip, to see if the young man had any advantage as a physical adversary.

But Emmanuel hung like dead weight in that grasp, and the sweat on his forehead was now visible in tiny droplets. When Spock released him, the young man fell back into the passenger seat, and was breathing heavily.

This effort of respiration meant that talking did not resume until they reached the Academy, and Spock chose a public space – in Parking Lot 7 between the Computer Science and Engineering buildings – rather than take this odious acquaintance anywhere near his apartment.

Emmanuel got out without being asked. Spock secured the vehicle with revised coding, locked the doors behind him and walked away at a speed he believed his passenger could not match.

“Check her files,” the human shouted after him, “All of them. They won’t lie.”

Spock did not respond, look back or stop moving. He went into the Computer Science building and took the nearest stairs to the third floor. He opened the door to simulation laboratory A, walked between the rows of empty workstations to reach his office. Once he had shut himself inside that small room, he paused a moment. But only a moment.

The blind had been drawn over his window. He could, by moving closer to the wall on the left side, look through the slender gap between the glass and its covering, and see where he had parked.

Emmanuel had moved away from the car, to the edge of the paved walkway near the building’s main entrance. Spock watched him take several heavy steps before the young man doubled over and vomited into one of the drains.
“Captain Pike?”

Chief Engineer Olsen was nothing but a high forehead and two grey eyes peering over the top of a cooling pipe.

“Lieutenant Commander,” Chris had to shout over the turbine noise as he approached, “what happened?”

“We aren’t getting a balanced feed from the injector coils. Too much antimatter for the deuterium.”

“Have you worked out the cause?”

“I think so, sir.”

“Think so?”

“We can be ready to run tests again in three hours,” Olsen offered.

“That’s pushing our deadline.”

“I’ll make sure we meet it, Captain.” the chief engineer assured him.

Pike gave Olsen a nod and moved on, strode further along the chamber to have a look for himself at the lattice matrix and its wasted dilithium crystals.

Not the right man – that’s what his gut told him.

With this much time to kill, he may as well beam off the Enterprise and get back to his temporary office in the shipyard. He was tempted to message Spock when he got there. If he described what happened, his first officer would know whether the malfunction should have been avoidable.

But once he had beamed down, and was raising Iowa dust with his boots as he walked from the transporter station to his cabin, Chris had second thoughts. It wasn’t best practice to replace senior crewmen once they’d been offered a commission. And arguably he had done enough of that in his time. Any more and he might lose the slender majority of Admirals who had voted to give him command of the new Starfleet flagship.

And Spock, he knew, had done something unprecedented. That Vulcan had actually booked a few days’ leave of his own volition, without needing to be persuaded by one or more senior colleagues, and without needing their suggestions for suitably restorative activities. Ordering him to find a partner continued to prove itself an excellent decision.

“Morning, sir.”

Ensigns Ganzorig and Rakoto looked up from their work stations and saluted him as he opened the door and walked into the little shipyard office.

“We didn’t expect you back today,” Rakoto added.

“Makes three of us,” Pike said. “Warp coils misfired. That’s blown a hole in my schedule, so I figured I might as well come here and try to get some work done. Any messages?”
“Doctor Chapel sent a priority two communique.”

“Christine?”

Pike strode past their desks and went into his cupboard-sized ready room. He put his palm down on his work console to activate it.

“Must be some kinda hot gossip,” he spoke louder, so the ensigns could hear him through the open doorway.

Ganzorig called back, “Oh, and this just in from Commander Spock – an urgent request for your security override to unlock some personnel records. Both are waiting in your cache.”

The files came up as diamond shaped icons in the middle of his display, colour coded to designate their importance. Chapel’s message was orange, which meant she would be notified only if Chris had not acknowledged receipt within twelve hours. Spock’s request was red. If Pike had still been on board the Enterprise, Ganzorig would have hailed the Captain and asked how soon the message could be reviewed, so that she could inform the Commander.

“Why the hell is Spock …,”

He chose the red icon, read the numbers for the records his First Officer wanted. He looked them up on the database. They were old files, going back to 2244, and made confidential by Admiral Levina Migiro when she had been head of Starfleet Africa.

They concerned Cadet Uhura.

Once Pike had typed in his identity number and cleared security, the first thing to download was a three paragraph summary of the file contents. He started reading, but didn’t finish. He had a hunch. He opened Christine Chapel’s file, glanced quickly at the subject heading and saw Uhura’s name again.

“Ganzorig.”

“Sir?”

“Starfleet Africa - what’s the name of Admiral Haroub’s assistant in Dar-es-Salaam?”

“Zuri,” Rakoto answered.

“Call her. See if I can beam over to Africa headquarters for a quick meeting with her previous boss.”

***

The waitresses were thrilled when Gaila told them Jim Kirk was coming.

“Are you guys back together?” Baby asked her.

They all had pseudonyms for work. Baby was actually Thilor Jashko, youngest member of Ngosreh harem and brunette. But during her shifts she always wore a platinum blond wig, candy pink lipstick and a fake beauty spot on her left cheek.

Gaila shrugged. “Yeah, I thought I’d give him another chance.”

For this she was given a round of applause from three pairs of manicured hands, plus a spiked cream soda float on the house.
“When will Jim get here?” Lulu asked. “If I make his drink too soon it loses its fizz.”

Zsa Zsa was serving tables. “I’ll see him first” she said. “I’ll shout.”

Gaila took a long draw on her straw and turned her barstool to watch the entrance. The 24th Street Diner had doors shaped like red puckered lips. Patrons did not enter; they were swallowed. The interior décor captured the combined ambiance of a scrubbed clean, chrome edged 1950’s American eatery with vermillion curtains, flocked velvet wallpaper and a proprietor who liked to be known as Nirvana Lovelace.

It wasn’t close to campus. City bylaws stipulated that Orion ‘establishments’ must not trade within a five mile radius of the Academy. But it only took one visit, the previous fall, for Jim to keep asking about the next one and the next. Baby said he did drop by once during the breakup, and they tried their best to make him welcome.

“But you’re the secret ingredient, Gaila. Lulu, what was it he said, exactly?”

“Sex without Gaila is like eating without a sense of smell,” Lulu (aka Deega Tisu) replied.

“He said that?” Gaila was taken aback.

“Oh wow,” Zsa Zsa was peeking through the curtains drawn over the front windows. “I didn’t know your loverboy had new wheels.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Gaila said. “Jim can’t afford a car.”

“Well, someone has just parked out – oh.”

Zsa Zsa closed the curtain, whisked the stack of empty plates off the table in front of her and fled into the kitchen. A moment later the scarlet doors opened and Commander Spock stepped inside.

He wore grey dress uniform, his hat tucked under one arm. Gaila slid off her chair. She was a little late with her words; her thoughts didn’t really know where to start.

“Commander? I thought you were on leave.”

Spock looked at the floor as he spoke. “Sub-lieutenant, please step outside.”

It wasn’t the tone of voice he used for conversation.

Gaila said, “Uh, sure.” She grabbed her PADD off the counter and gave Baby an uncertain little wave as she followed the Commander through the doors.

“I haven’t checked my messages since last night,” the Orion confessed, when they were on the sidewalk under the diner’s awning. “Has there been a distress call or something?”

“Get in the car,” he ordered.

***

What was this like? Heady, definitely heady. It reminded him of that space of time between the first two drinks of a night out and the ones after that, when he had that sense of being brilliant, witty and wanted while still in complete control. Except with this partnership, that was not alcohol talking.

When Jim and his new invisible acquaintance came through the doors of the 24th Street Diner, the
thoughts and emotions from all the minds in that eatery seeped out, and become breathable as air. Baby leaned over the counter to show him her cleavage, but he also caught a whiff of her admiration for his pelvis in blue jeans and a memory of what he had looked like without them. She could tell he was changed somehow, not the same Jim Kirk who had entered those doors a few months ago. Orions had to be able to read their customers.

And she was a little anxious. Jim sensed how energetically the entity latched on to this fragment of ill-feeling and drew it right out, magnified the particles so they were visible and floating round her head. Kirk could look her in the eye and say, with full confidence,

“So, beautiful, I got a message. Seems that Gaila has decided to dump me for a senior officer with a car.”

Baby pouted.

“Oh, now,” she said in her best Southern drawl, “I don’t think you have competition there. I think she’ll be back.”

“Really?” Jim asked. “If she’s coming back, why did you sell her drink to the girl at that far table?”

Baby’s unspoken question almost crystallised on the counter top – ‘You weren’t here when that happened. How could you know?’

The girl at the far table overhead, and called Zsa Zsa over.

Both waitresses were now anxious. Again, the entity seized the ugly emotion. It was plumbed and all its associated memories pulled out like intimate items from a bedroom drawer.

Jim got a satisfying erotic jolt from all the things it discovered. He took a seat at the counter facing Baby, leaned into her and helped himself to one of the points on her uniform collar. She giggled.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Wrong?” her glossy bottom lip protruded. “What makes you think anything is wrong?”

He let his fingers work their way inside the blouse. He could not tell whether the Orion waitress was exuding pheromones or not. His nose was filled with a humid mixture of her sexual response and reluctance, with top notes of building tension as she waited for him to explain.

“You shouldn’t let yourself think about that temporary job you had on the Haven homeworld two years ago,” he crooned as he stroked her left breast.

“How did you know about that?”

“You must have told me.”

The girl at the far table was shouting at Zsa Zsa, and demanding a refund. It was making other customers uneasy, Jim could sense. They were considering whether it would be best to leave.

“I’ve never told anyone about that,” Baby insisted.

“Baby, you must have,” he insisted. And before she could protest again, he caught her by the back of her neck and clamped their mouths together.

On either side of them, the spigots on the soda fountains blew off with a bang and streams of carbonated water sprayed in all directions. Lulu heard the noise and came running from the kitchen.
Now they were all properly afraid, because a very unhappy part of their personal history seemed to be repeating itself. Jim felt the entity exult in all that fear, and it gave him one hell of a hard on.

***

Orions had to be able to read people. They weren’t telepaths or empaths, just damn good observers and listeners. Gaila remembered Spock being like this once before, locked up like a vault and interacting with her on the basis of rank and nothing else. It had been the day a Vulcan named Lelar arrived at the Academy and claimed to be his wife.

He drove the car south, away from Starfleet. He went down Highway 280 to the part of Serramonte where all the historic burial grounds were located, but as they kept driving Gaila realised this wasn’t their destination. Then he turned east and the city ran out. The road ran like a creek through some grassy, uninhabited hills. Signs said ‘Welcome to Guadelupe Canyon Park’. Fifteen minutes of driving went by before Gaila was relieved to see civilization resume, and the Commander turned onto Highway 101 in the direction of the San Francisco Public Shuttleport.

If she was going to ask him a question, it had to be one that wasn’t trying to open up ‘the whole can of worms’ – one of the oddest Standard idioms she knew. Spock wasn’t ready to talk about everything, not yet. But if she asked a question he didn’t expect, and got him to talk about anything, she knew from experience the conversation would still be revealing.

“Sir, what made you choose to wear your dress uniform?”

He replied, “I keep a second uniform in my office locker.”

It wasn’t much, but it told her his last location. He was meant to be spending the whole weekend with Nyota. They should be together on the space station now, for their guided tour.

“Do you think I need to be in uniform?” she asked.

He twisted the grip of his right hand on the steering wheel, back and forth, just the once. Gaila smiled to herself. Spock’s gestures were often metaphors, so maybe he wished he could get a stronger hold on something.

“I cannot …,” he started.

His left hand copied his right. They had driven past the last of the shuttle hangars, and according to the car’s computer they were heading for a place called San Mateo.

The Commander cleared his throat. “With regard to the theory you postulated for the Kobayashi Maru disruption …,”

Gaila bit her lip and shut her eyes.

“Sub-lieutenant?”

“I’m fine,” she said, eyes still closed. “Honestly. Keep talking.”

“You elaborated on the experiences of your cousin Divve.”

Now she was the one wishing the Commander would shut up.

“You stated that the non-corporeal entity could read minds. Therefore, once Divve began their association he could never be certain whether his thoughts remained private. How did he discuss his
dissatisfaction with his employees, or make plans to part company with the entity?”

“Temples,” Gaila said.

“Elaborate.”

“Redjac would never enter Orion religious buildings.”

“Why?”

“It would not explain. Divve was devout – he believed the entity was subordinate to will of the gods.”

“You do not share his opinion?”

“It would not surprise me if temples were already home to different non-corporeal entities. Perhaps Redjac was less powerful than the temple residents, and could not encroach on their territory.”

The Commander nodded. At the next intersection, he turned off the highway.

“Computer,” he said, “direct us to the nearest place of worship.”

Gaila opened her eyes when the car came to a halt. The computer had navigated them into a parking lot, next to an oblong building made from a patchwork of grey stone pieces stuck together with a paler grey substance. It had decorative, arched openings along its broad sides.

“St Matthew’s Episcopal,” the computer announced.

They went inside. The Commander led her along an aisle which ran between two ranks of wooden benches, and when they had cleared all of those he turned right. Ahead there was an anteroom, divided from the rest of the church by an elaborate brass screen. Spock looked for and found a door which would let them enter.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“Terran churches often have a chapel to one side of the main altar,” he replied.

There were wooden benches here also, an arrangement of cut flowers on a metal pedestal, relief sculptures fitted to each of its three walls and a peculiar set of stepped shelves which held fifty-four stumpy, white candles. Eight were burning.

Spock sat down facing these tiny flames.

“I hope we have taken sufficient precautions to ensure our conversation remains confidential,” he said.

Then he told her everything, from the moment the simulation arena doors opened to let him out on Friday evening to the moment he closed his office door on Saturday and came to find her.

And Gaila had no trouble remaining silent throughout, because she was in shock.

Spock knew nothing.

She, Gaila Jadillu, a mere roommate, knew that Nyota Uhura had been childhood friends with Emmanuel Kasembe, oldest child of the Academy Facilities Director in Dar-es-Salaam. In the year they both turned sixteen, they suffered similar, personal tragedies which drew them closer together.
They decided this was love. And so they got married a year later, against the advice of relations from both families. They moved to Mombasa to set up home, to get far away from the disapproval.

She, Gaila Jadillu, who had not had sex with Cadet Uhura even once, knew all this. She also knew that the marriage turned bad, very bad, before Nyota was finally able to break free. Seven years passed without any contact between husband and wife. But the union was still sacrosanct, according to Uhura's maddening way of seeing things. And so Gaila had to use her network of Orion contacts to see if she could find out what happened to the man whose whereabouts was a mystery, Emmanuel who had begun to call himself Tiberious.

She, Gaila Jadillu, was told he was dead. Not by the most reliable source, it had to be admitted. But Orion custom defined marriage by how frequently partners shared a bed without sleeping in it. And by those standards Tiberious was about as much good as a corpse.

The katra of T’Shin also knew all this. And yet it was clear, as Spock described the young man who had ridden in his car, that he honestly had no idea how this stranger was connected with Nyota.

When he had finished his story, he stood up from the bench. He went to the stepped shelves and chose one of the unlit candles. He tipped it so the wick was set on fire by contact with one of the burning tapers and then he set it back down.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

Without turning away from the display, the Commander explained. On the occasions he could accompany Nyota to church, there was a similar arrangement of candles in the foyer. Uhura would always light one as a gesture of remembrance and affection for her biological mother and father. Sometimes, he said, she would whisper a few words as if the candle represented her parents, as if they could hear her. She would reassure them of her well-being, tell them she loved them.

Gaila nodded. She blinked several times, until she could be sure the tears that threatened to fall out of her eyes stayed where they were. She came over to where Spock stood and helped herself to a candle.

“Well,” she said, “anything is worth a try.”

She used Spock’s candle to light her own, and once she had put it back in its spot she pointed at the flame.

“Cutie Bootie --,”

Her voice nearly broke. She cleared her throat and started again.

“Cutie Bootie, we’re both sorry you felt you had to go away. You know, Orions get to hear the craziest stories, and Commander Spock is crazy about you so there really isn’t anything you can’t share with us, right? Um... I guess what we’re hoping is that this message will get to you somehow – though you know I don’t give much credence to this kind of thing and Vulcans would call it plain illogical. But there you are. That’s how much we both miss you. Enough to perform this completely ridiculous ritual because it feels good to think of you receiving our words and then maybe deciding it’s okay to reach out to us --,”

The ringtone on Gaila’s PADD echoed off the chapel walls and felt like a slap on her heart.
Readers, I apologise that I was not able to add this chapter before the weekend. I was away on business for two days and on Tuesday the 11th our cat Spider passed away. It was peaceful, and a relief because he had not been well. He used to be glad when I was writing, because he could sit on my lap, so I feel he would want the fanfic to continue.

Glossary of Igbo terms used in this chapter:
1. When Chibuzo says "Tufiakwa" it means, "God forbid".
2. "ụra mmiri ara ehi", the drink Ikemefuna prepares for Nyota, translates as "sleep milk" or "milk for sleep"

***

"You have made a serious error of judgement-

Chibuzo was five inches taller than Nyota, broader in the shoulders, back and hips, with a composed and unhurried grace which meant that when she spoke, it was a deeper and more resonant voice. In many ways she reminded Nyota of T'Shin herself. Certainly, she had the gravitas necessary to be the new carrier and mouthpiece for that respected Vulcan’s soul.

“I know,” Uhura replied.

The two women knelt side by side, elbows resting on the seats of cushioned chairs in one of the smaller rooms which All Saints’ Cathedral set aside for prayer meetings and counselling. Sub Deacon Ezeokoli greeted them when they arrived. When they explained why they’d come, he suggested they might prefer privacy.

“I wanted to live as if it never happened,” Uhura went on. “Even before I met Spock, I wanted to erase those years and begin all over again. When Gaila told me Tiberious was dead, I thought, why should I think or speak about him again? Because that would be giving him life.”

T'Shin did not answer immediately. But Chibuzo whispered, “Tufiakwa,” and reached over to squeeze Nyota’s arm.

"And yet you doubted Gaila-

“Well,” Nyota tried and failed to look for excuses. “To her, it would not be wrong to lie if that would stop me from resisting my attraction to Spock. I wanted her to be telling the truth. But I had moments when I felt sure Tiberious still lived. He had achieved a superior type of sight. You know that there were times I believed he was watching me.”

"Spock will experience great distress because he did not protect you. And greater distress because you chose not the make him aware of this danger-

Nyota bowed her head, clamped her hands behind her neck and pressed her face into the chair cushion. Chibuzo rubbed her back. Through the skin contact, Nyota learned that her future sister-in-law was grateful for the Sub Deacon; he was obviously a perceptive man and judged that two
women coming to church at an hour when most would be preparing themselves for a meal with family, must have a grave matter to discuss. Nyota could and did cry as loudly as she wanted.

The katra of T’Shin was reassuring.

-It is damage which may be repaired-

Chibuzo also. “If you show Spock what you have shown us, it will be clear that you did not withhold this knowledge because you still loved your husband.”

The second mention of Spock’s name prompted more tears. Eventually Nyota had to lift her head and tip it back because her nose was running. Chibuzo helped herself to a box of tissues on the coffee table nearby, returned to her kneeling position and mopped Uhura’s face. Then she leaned back, to evaluate her work.

“We should stay a little longer, until your eyes lose their redness.”

Nyota got up heavily and sat on her chair. Chibuzo joined her, opened the bag she had brought and pulled out her PADD.

“Access your files,” she offered, “and see if you have messages.”

“Thanks,” Uhura said softly.

There was a notice from the Chief Communications Office at Space Station Honshu, which nearly made her tear up again. But she resisted – she must become a soldier again, quickly. Then she saw the audio message from Christopher Pike. Before she opened that file she stood, the way she would do if her senior Commanding Officer had just walked into the prayer room.

***

“Computer,” Pike said, “prepare to record me speaking.”

The systems in Admiral Migiro’s house replied. “Ready to record.”

“Cadet Uhura,” he used his command bark. Levina, seated in front of him with her knitting in her lap, showed no disapproval.

“This is the first and last time you will go AWOL if you want to continue serving under me. I have been briefed by Starfleet Africa about your confidential files, and I intend to speak with Commander Spock --,”

He left a pause there, one he was certain the cadet would know how to interpret.

“Well, what do you think I’m thinking? You’re Communications track, for God’s sake. What gives you the right to withhold that kind of information? When, exactly, did you plan on telling us you were still married, and to someone who has that kind of power and abuses it? By hell, Uhura, if your husband decided to try out some of his tricks during the Enterprise system tests, your ass would have been demoted to the Farragut faster than you could salute. Then you’d have nobody to help you except your new buddy Doctor Chapel.”

He’d paced several rings around Admiral Migiro’s chair while speaking, and gave the old woman reason to chuckle. Hopefully the sound hadn’t carried.

“So these are your orders. At 08:00 hours on the 18th of June I expect you to report to Commander
Ali Ashnawy on Space Station Honshu, to begin your temporary placement. Failure to comply will
tell me that you have decided to follow a different career path. Show me what you’re made of,
Cadet – Pike out.”

Levina told the computer to stop and save the recording, and gave it instructions to send the file to
Uhura. Chris had not used up all the energy needed to cool his anger. He marched another five laps
around the Admiral’s chair, blowing off extra steam in sharp huffs of breath.

“She’ll be fine, I believe, Captain,” the Admiral said, taking up her knitting again. “You’ll see.
Uhura is strongest when she looks weak.”

***

Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu answered her call in Standard, then quickly switched to Orion. She shook her
head at Spock, an indication he took to mean that the caller was not the person for whom they had
been lighting candles. So he went to his own PADD, now that it seemed they were safe from the
entity’s interference, and activated it.

When he saw Nyota’s name in his listing for missed calls he walked out of the chapel. He found an
octagonal porch on the other side of the church and hid there, adjusted the volume on his device to
something humans could not hear and asked for a playback of her recorded message.

Warm relief flooded him when she mentioned Tonev/Karimu and Chibuzo; if she could not be with
him these were the next best people to look after her. When the message ended he replayed it for the
music of her voice, for the way she said his name and “I love you”.

She told him not to worry; she would be fine to catch a tram from the San Francisco public
shuttleport back to the Academy. Then she was interrupted. Spock could hear Karimu/Tonev in the
background, reminding her that if reducing anxiety was her aim, the best thing she could do was
allow Spock the option to meet her in Nigeria and be her escort for the journey home.

Nyota said, “Oh, of course, yes,” and did what her brother suggested.

Spock made a mental note to express his gratitude to the great grandson of T'Shin at the earliest
opportunity.

When Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu found him, he was listening to the message a third time.

“Is it?” she asked.

He turned up the volume and let her hear Nyota from the beginning. Gaila clasped her hands
together and looked up at the porch ceiling in an attitude befitting their surroundings.

“You’ll go straight to the shuttleport, yes?” she asked, when the message had finished.

“If I do that, how will you get back to campus?”

“Ah,” Gaila smiled, “well, it just so happens I’ve had good news as well. Aaaand…, it means I have
lift, one that is on its way here now. Will you be needing my help any time between now and
Monday? May I have permission to be dismissed?”

Spock raised one curious eyebrow, but did not pry.

“Permission granted.”
The Fire Empyrean 602: Nirvana Lovelace bought the luxury motive when the diner had raked in its third year of record profits. She had it customised with the ‘back seat bowl’ option, cushioned by a double layer of Responsif foam. Three way propulsion engines ensured the smoothest driving motion. It meant that passengers could be adventurous with their choice of positions, and never worry about losing their balance if the car took a sharp bend.

Gaila clenched her fists with excitement as the Empyrean drew into the parking lot of St. Matthew’s Episcopal. By now, she reckoned, Commander Spock would be in orbit somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, and she had wished him the best make-up sex ever. Now she wished it for herself.

Pink light spilled out when the car’s passenger hatch opened. Gaila broke into a trot (the best she could do in any of her shoes) and leapt over the footboard straight inside.

The car computer spoke, “Well, welcome. Why don’t you lose a little clothing and make yourself more comfortable?”

“Sub-Lieutenant,” said a voice from the back, “all clothes off, please. Now.”

She peeked over the edge of the bowl while she unbuckled her shoes. Jim was a work of art – literally. Gaila tried to remember that beautiful painting from her first year Terran Culture class … French artist, nineteenth century, inspired her to buy several velvet ribbons to tie in a bow knot round her neck. The facts wouldn’t come to her, but the image would never fade. Kirk, in his glorious nakedness, lay on his back in an uncannily similar pose.

“Oooh,” she blew out all her breath in admiration.

Jim chuckled. He lifted his hips and rocked them, pointing an impatient erection at her.

“Don’t waste it,” he said.

She felt like a girl, fingers so shaky she fumbled with familiar fastenings, skin clammy so straps dragged and caught. Her bra was still attached to one elbow when she gave up, clambered over the rim of the bowl and tumbled down into his arms.

Spock let himself into the house at the top of Osisi Ube Way at twelve minutes past three in the morning. The robot Ikemefuna, its voice settings suitably moderated for the late hour, greeted him in a murmur and informed him that his room was the same one he had stayed in when he last visited. Ikem accompanied him in the lift to the second floor, where it informed the Commander that Nyota had been awake as recently as thirty-seven minutes ago.

“She requested a glass of my special ụra mmiri ara ehi,” the robot said.

Spock thanked him. Before the lift opened he asked the automated butler to stay upstairs and wait for further instructions.

Chibuzo’s family had the means to extend generous hospitality. The entire second floor was guest accommodation, in four apartments. Spock could see four tiny lights outside these doors as he stepped out from the lift and surveyed the landing. Their colour told him only one suite was occupied. Ikem overtook him with a quiet hum of acceleration, stopped outside the correct door and tracked Spock’s approach so that he was allowed through exactly when needed.
The first thing which caught his eye, as he scanned the familiar sitting room, was a trail along the carpet where the pile had changed direction. One of the two armchairs had been dragged away. He set down the bag containing the few things he’d brought with him, and followed the markings in the direction of the faint illumination which had revealed them. They took him round the dividing wall and into the bedroom.

He found Nyota seated in the missing chair, which was placed a short distance from the foot of the bed, facing the open balcony doors. She held Ikemefuna’s drink in her lap, half consumed.

She looked up when he entered, but did not speak.

Spock found it difficult to decide what he should say. On board the shuttle, he had booked a privacy pod so that he could talk at length to Captain Pike and Admiral Migiro. Consequently, he now knew more. But for all practical purposes it was less -- the difference between what one might read in an officer’s incident report to Headquarters compared to the complex, moment by moment actuality as it affected the participants. He did not truly know what Nyota had experienced.

He had asked Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu for her understanding, before they went their separate ways. She turned down his request, drew from her impressive store of Terran idioms instead and urged him to get his information straight from the horse’s mouth.

He decided to turn round, and return to the sitting area. He lifted the remaining armchair, carried it along the same path the first one had taken, but chose carefully where he would place it. He allowed his armrest to touch hers. But only at the terminal corners, which Chibuzo’s grandmother had covered with crocheted slips to protect them from wear. It ensured that the angle of his seat did not face Nyota square on, because that implied interrogation, nor sit side by side where the wings would prevent eye contact.

Before he sat down, he used the nearest call button to summon Ikemefuna and asked Nyota if there was anything she needed. She shook her head.

When the robot whizzed into the room it scanned both their faces, and chose to address Spock.

It remembered that the Commander had developed a taste for the family’s zobo tea, produced from their own dried flowers and flavoured with pepper and cloves. Spock agreed Ikem might prepare this in the apartment kitchen, as his last duty before returning to his station on the ground floor.

Waiting for tea gave him the chance to study Uhura, and let her study him. He deduced that she must have attempted sleep; the bedding had been turned back and all the pillows indented. While lying down she had shed tears, because dried traces of salt were detectable on her temples but not on her cheeks. Perhaps Chibuzo had provided the kaftan and robe she wore, which matched the colour of her lavender-infused milk.

As he settled in the chair, he made a diplomatic enquiry after the health of everyone in the household.

“Spock …,” she chided softly, rolling her eyes.

“Was my question inappropriate?”

“You are on the robot butler's 'A' list. He would have greeted you with an update about the whole family.”

Spock allowed that this was part of Ikem's programming. But he added, “Nevertheless, I have noted a tendency among Chibuzo’s relations to tell their guests the same information a second time.”
Nyota had no counter argument. She attempted to sip her drink but made a face at the liquid and set the glass down on the carpet. That left her hands unoccupied. Normally not a cause for distress, but now he watched as she caught a corner of her robe and performed a number of pointless operations: fan folding and unfolding the cloth, inserting her fingernail repeatedly through a buttonhole, plucking at stitches along the scalloped hem.

“I --,” she started.

Then the robe became the victim of a violent attack. The fabric was sturdy enough to survive the twisting and pulling which followed, thirteen seconds of lost awareness in total. Nyota did not look at her hands. He was not sure what made her release the remnant at last and leave a damp, viciously creased curl of cloth in her lap.

“I have tried and tried to think of how I would begin to tell you …,” she said.

“It is not ne--,”

“Or how much detail? Did you want to know everything?”

“I have no op--,”

“Why couldn’t he be dead? If he were dead, like Gaila assured me he was, then the details would mean so little. In fact, I would be right not to tell you because telling you would be considered unhealthy. It would seem as though I was comparing you with him, when you aren’t the least …,”

She stood. He stood.

“You aren’t,” she insisted, throwing up a hand for emphasis. Then she placed it like a clamp over her scalp and closed her eyes.

He risked reaching for the skin just behind her elbow, which was pointed at him and nearly touching his jacket. And he sensed too much -- too many thoughts and memories and feelings in a mixture that was too murky to be read, and would be no easier to articulate.

“I do not ask you to torment yourself about what cannot be changed,” he said.

Slowly, her hand slipped down the side of her head, stopped when her fingers caught the top of one ear. Her skin was telling him why she could not sleep. In the silence, she kept expecting to hear that voice, then thinking she had heard it when she was only dreaming. But the dream would shock her into consciousness.

“And I will not allow him to torment you,” he added.

Just his fingers, travelling up her tricep muscle, intending to apply gentle pressure and entreat her to accept his help, was enough. She let herself fall against him, buried her face in his uniform jacket. When he put his arms round her she expelled a breath so violently it suggested the impossible, that she had somehow held it for the duration of their time apart.

Equally, it was easy to persuade her to go back to bed. At first he knelt on the carpet beside her pillow, his fingers on her meld points, regulating her thoughts so that she could relax. Then when Ikem returned with tea, Spock moved one of the armchairs to her bedside, drained his cup in silence and watched her sleep.

***
Two engines shut down at once. The Fire Empyrean 602 sent an advance signal to its garage, located behind the 24th Street Diner, so the doors were waiting open and the car could cut power and coast the last few meters.

And inside the back seat bowl, Jim felt the entity leave him. It was a sensation that took him back to that time he stole his brother’s car and drove it off road to avoid the police. He narrowly escaped before the vehicle went over a cliff and crashed at the bottom of the Des Moines River ravine. Dragging himself up and over the edge of that precipice with his bare hands – adrenalin had pretty much replaced the blood in his veins and he felt invincible.

Then, once he was arrested, identified, stripped and locked in the bare holding cell while his family were contacted, realisation of the sheer pointlessness of his actions, of his existence, landed like a block of concrete on his head. He had looked carefully over his naked body back then, because he was sure that he was shrinking.

He definitely was now. Gaila, poised to take his fourth consecutive erection into her mouth, had dark flushed cheeks and eyes ablaze with the joy of this unstoppable sex. And then suddenly Jim lost the source of his libido. It left him lightheaded enough to swoon, as the car came to a halt. The Orion brought him round by patting his face, and when he lifted his head groggily he saw his genitals looking about as attractive as a heap of dirty laundry.

Gaila started kissing the inside of his thighs, trying to rebuild the fire. He knew she was wasting her time.
Swahili phrases from Google Translator. When Nyota says, "Nimetenda dhambi dhidi ya mbingu na juu yenu" she is quoting from the New Testament, the parable of the Prodigal Son -- "I have sinned against heaven and against you".

“How much zobo tea did Nnnenne give you?”

Spock lifted a third copper tin out of the hamper and set it on his breakfast bar.

“She calculated that this amount, were I to consume one cup every other day, should last until our next visit,” he replied.

Nyota turned her back on him to put the other food gifts – freeze dried Ahimu leaves, fermented locust beans and ground agidi corn – into his kitchen cupboards. For the two days they stayed in Onitsha, Spock and Tonev/Karimu decided to make themselves kitchen hands under the supervision of Nnenne Ebele, Chibuzo’s maternal grandmother. On those days, the Igbo specialities the family ate were prepared by Vulcans.

Chibuzo had been delighted. Nyota should have been.

While they were there, a wedding date was announced. But already, it was clear that the household, and for that matter all houses along Osisi Ube Way, were absorbed with preparations. Dinner conversations revolved round how best to combine Christian and Vulcan rituals in the ceremony. A draft order of service and church seating plan could be accessed from the computer consoles in the guest apartments. In the back parlour, a local seamstress had laid out her fabric samples and patterns and was working on new outfits for the bride, groom, attendants and important guests.

And on the first floor, the apartment Karimu and Chibuzo shared was undergoing refurbishment, extending the space to include not one but two additional rooms. Nyota suspected her future sister-in-law was already pregnant, but keeping this fact secret while relatives dropped hints, made jokes and smuggled in gifts for a child who could not be openly mentioned.

Into this intense excitement, Uhura brought her unhappiness. And that, so many family members tried to reassure her, was the only reason she could not respond in the same way everyone else did. Once her circumstances changed, once she also had the same joy to anticipate …,

Nnenne Ebele, being the oldest person in the house, could say whatever she wanted and she did. Nyota is older than Chibuzo, she explained to friends who dropped by after church. Naturally, she is unhappy. By rights, she should be the first one --,

Nnenne paused at that point, and patted herself on the stomach meaningfully.

There was no relief from this well-meaning speculation. Even when it came time to return to San Francisco, several cars full of relatives and neighbours accompanied them to Onitsha’s shuttleport. They were caught up with saying farewell to Karimu and Chibuzo, who were scheduled to depart the same day. They would spend several weeks on Vulcan, meeting members of clan Tetov’yth and
extending invitations to their Terran bonding.

Nyota did her best to bear with it all. Now that she was finally beyond scrutiny, and Spock could not see her face, she let herself scowl at all the food packets and parcels.

Then she fixed her expression and turned back to the breakfast bar.

“Will I need any additional equipment or clothing on the space station?” she asked. “The Academy Dispensary is still open.”

Spock had finished flattening down the empty hamper, and considered her question while he carried it to the walk-in pantry.

“Crew accommodation is basic,” his voice echoed off the pantry walls. “You may wish to acquire an air mattress and pillow to make your bunk more comfortable. I can accompany you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

He came out, closed the pantry door and acted as though he had not heard her. “I presume you have accepted Cadet Sulu’s invitation?”

“Yes.”

An engagement party, no less. The accompanying photo on her PADD showed Hikaru and Ben sharing the seat on a hoverbike, gliding over the sunset sands at White Rock beach, where they spent the midterm break.

“Should you wish to purchase new clothing for the occasion, we may agree a date on our shared calendar, and I will drive you --,”

“Spock, I will be fine.”

He challenged her with a look.

“You cannot follow me around everywhere,” she said.

“May I suggest your choice of modal verb is inaccurate? I am able --,”

“You said yourself that we should continue to keep our relationship secret until after I receive my commission. What’s it going to look like if you and I are seen together in public repeatedly?”

“I find myself reconsidering my own recommendations in light of recent --,”

“No,” she cut him off. “Tiberious caught me by surprise so that he could frighten me. If I look like I’m trying to protect myself, that would suggest I’m still afraid and he will crave that fear.”

She had explained this to him already. He went to the breakfast bar and made a needless adjustment of the tea tins, moving them a few centimetres closer to his spice rack.

“And think of the future. If we serve together on a mission,” she added. “I might have to face danger without you.”

Spock nodded. Then he shifted the tea tins back to their original position. This micro lapse of rationality was endearing. She stepped close and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“You know how long it will take me to walk to the Dispensary and back. Add another twenty
minutes for me to find what I need and pay, chat with anyone I happen to meet. You are not permitted to come looking for me before that.”

When he didn’t respond she put herself face to face with him, placed her hands on either side of his head and treated him to the longest kiss they had shared since Penthouse Three.

“So I’m going now,” she let her hands drop back to her sides and stepped away. “Air mattress and pillow. Maybe regulation pajamas? I don’t own any yet.”

Without moving his head, he replied, “That would be advisable.”

***

Ben Song, of all people, also needed regulation pajamas.

“Nei’rrh! Just the person!”

Yeah, Nyota thought unhappily, aren't I just.

Ben put down his shopping basket and gave her a bear hug, with an added clap on the back. When he finally released this crushing grip, he asked, “Did you get our invitation?”

“I did,” she said. She didn’t realise, until he gave her a quizzical look, that she had been shaking her head at the same time.

“Sorry,” she tried to make a joke. “This is like meeting a whole new person. I don’t know if I can cope with this enthusiastic version of Ben Song who willingly wears Starfleet issued clothing.”

It was enough to rescue the situation. Ben laughed.

“I got a new job yesterday -- maintenance at Starfleet shuttle docks. Didn’t think being ground crew would need all that conformity, but then it’s only until the wedding. Speaking of which --,”

Here we go, Uhura thought. She made herself smile.

“We want the Alpha Incognito crew to be our attendants. Leonard McCoy has agreed to be best man; we were hoping you’d be maid of honour.”

“What about Jim Kirk?”

Ben made a strange face, an expression that wavered between a grin and a grimace.

“Yeah, Kiki saw him yesterday, tried to get him in conversation.”

He picked up his shopping basket and put a pack of pajamas inside.

“It’s … I don’t know. Hikaru said Kirk seemed a bit weird, but he couldn’t explain what he meant. We'll try again – gotta have someone to give away the groom.”

Twenty-nine minutes of talking later, Ben had laid out the whole maid of honour obligation: colour scheme, secondary colour scheme, how they wanted a nod to Romulan style and commissioned the same Vancouver dressmaker who had done the costumes for last winter’s simulation. Would she have a free weekend to fly north for a fitting? Did she mind having her hair done in the same style Nei’rrh wore for her audience with the Rh’iov?

She agreed to everything. It was the way of least resistance but also the quickest way to close the
subject. Nyota’s jaw hurt from the conscious effort to appear pleased. Once she had waved goodbye to Ben, she stood outside the Dispensary on her own. She saw her flagging, fallen expression reflected in her PADD display as she quickly sent Spock a message to tell him why she would be late getting back to his apartment.

And then she sensed it.

The feeling lasted a second. The day was hot and the outer wall of the shop hotter, yet Nyota shivered. She looked up from her PADD. She had walked round to the south side of the building where the back was fenced off and provided some privacy. No one else was there, but she was not fooled. She had been sighted.

She considered altering her message to Spock. His running times topped every record chart displayed along the walls of Tucker Physical Education Facility.

And then she went cold again. She waited for that hideous voice to rise out of her own thoughts and tell her exactly what she was trying to calculate: how quickly help could get to her if she needed it.

Nothing happened, but her resolve hardened. The message was sent unchanged. After that the PADD was switched off and shoved back in her shoulder bag.

“There,” she said. “I’m on my own. You may as well come and find me.”

And she turned, so that she would face him when his tracking ability brought him to the Dispensary and he came along the paved path which led round to the back. The last memory of Tiberious made bile rise in her throat. She swallowed it back and waited.

She was surprised to hear footsteps. Tiberious, over time, cultivated the stealth of a predator. If he ever made a sound in advance of an appearance, it was calculated. In Mombasa, he used to set the oven timer running; she would hear the tick, tick, tick, tick counting down the seconds and her heart rate would start hammering at twice the speed. For years after her husband disappeared, the sound of an alarm, almost any alarm, would make her feel nauseous.

But this was the sound of boots tramping the pavement. The owner of the footwear didn't care about making noise. They didn't lift their leading step clear when striding forward. The first thing to come past the corner of the shop was a small stone which the boots had accidentally kicked.

A second later the wearer of those boots appeared. And she was confronted with facts she could not match with her expectations.

“Hi,” he said.

The thoughts which did marry themselves inside her head had no business being together. It couldn't be ....

“Look, we know each other well enough, don’t you think?”

He propped himself against the Dispensary wall, put his hands inside his pockets in an attempt to make their meeting appear relaxed.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Your name,” he said. “It shouldn’t be Uhura.”

The cold wrapped round her heart as she finally accepted the only conclusion which would explain
what was happening now. The entity that turned her husband into a monster was trying new tricks. And she also considered how much simpler it made things, if this was true. She would have no difficulty hating both halves of this partnership.

“I mean,” Jim Kirk stood straight, “we’ve worked together, right? You even helped me correct my subspace logs.”

"Only because Len McCoy asked," she replied.

“We should be on first name terms now,” Jim concluded. “So c’mon, Uhura, tell me what the ‘N’ stands for.”

That threw her, for a moment. She thought the entity, if it was working with Kirk, would have told him that and more. She expected Jim to show her that he knew her best kept secret -- Uhura was her maiden name and not the one she ought be using, not legally. Why didn't he present her with more proof that he had somehow become the new incarnation of her old enemy? She studied his face carefully.

“What do you really want?” she asked, keeping her voice flat.

The blue in his eyes changed from the colour of noon to twilight. He removed his hands from his pockets and placed them on his hips.

“You need to take the Kobayashi Maru soon.”

She narrowed her eyes, and did not comment.

“I am offering you the chance to take part in the first successful simulation in Academy history.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Is that a dare?” he asked.

His tone, coming from deeper than the back of his throat and containing a note of threat, gave her flashbacks of the same undertone in Emmanuel's voice. She had no doubt now.

“Kirk,” she said, trying to lighten the mood. “You take it way too seriously.”

“Imagine if you passed.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Not interested in your commission?” Jim smiled, though it didn’t brighten his eyes. “Decided to follow a different career path?”

And echo of Captain Pike's words - was that a coincidence? It was a well-aimed shot.

“Not what I meant,” she snapped.

“Then what did you mean?”

“I’ll be part of your crew.”

“Good.”

“I have no other expectations.”
“Really?”

He took a step closer. Now she could feel that cold coming off him, weedling into her hairline like a dead man’s fingertips. She grit her teeth to make her jaw tight, and slipped a hand inside her shoulder bag.

“What about hopes?” Kirk asked. “Always good to have hopes. Want to know mine?”

In the slow motion way that critical moments happen, she watched his right arm rise, bend at the elbow and pivot at the wrist to make his hand ready to grip. The direction of his gaze would be the direction of his action, and his eyes were intent on her mouth.

She emptied her mind. It wasn’t needed; she had decided what she would do. When he leaned forward to take what he wanted she pulled out her PADD and swung it hard enough to make a cracking sound when it struck him on the cheek.

“Argh!!”

Kirk retreated, both hands cupped over his mouth.

“Bimatongue!” he howled.

Nyota waited while he exhausted profanity, until he realised that noise wouldn’t make pain go away any faster. While he was stooped over, letting drops of blood fall on the path, she spoke.

“I know what you have become.”

After a few laboured breaths, he said, “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t,” she warned him. “You can’t fool me. And the entity will tell you that, if you ask it.”

Kirk straightened up carefully. There was still blood in his mouth. She put her PADD back in her bag and dug out a packet of hand wipes.

“Here.”

Without taking his eyes off her he removed a single sheet, shook it open, draped it over his mouth and spat into it.

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” she told him.

He took a second wipe and cleaned his face, prodded the places which took the blow.

“And I could tell you where it will lead, if you don’t quit now.”

Kirk wadded up the bloodstained fibre sheets and stuffed them in a pocket. He checked the front of his uniform jacket for stains, brushed down the sleeves.

“You’ll get a message with the simulation date,” he said, "assuming your PADD still works.”

Then he turned and walked away.

***

Her PADD was fine. She sent Spock another message, deliberately neutral, telling him she had just seen Cadet Kirk and agreed to take part in his third attempt at the Kobayashi Maru. She told him she
would stop off at her apartment first, just to pick up extra t-shirts.

It was a serene, sunlit, uneventful walk to Messier Way. A California gull landed in Argelius Squire as she crossed it and waddled along beside her. She told the bird she didn’t have any food to share, but he held out until they had passed the Xenocultural Buildings and the bird saw what looked like a better gamble, a group of cadets having a picnic on the common.

When she reached Messier Cluster 18, there was scaffolding being put up next door. She greeted Delayne and Triste, the Ground Maintenance team assigned to the cul-de-sac. She let Triste follow her into the apartment to use the hygiene station, calling out Gaila’s name before they ventured near the bedroom, because the rule about no dates sleeping over had been relaxed a little.

But Gaila wasn’t there. While Nyota chose t-shirts from the dressing room, Triste told her the scaffolds were for roof inspection and repair, and should be up no longer than a day for each cluster. Nyota got an update about the week’s forecast before she could interrupt and say that she was going to be working in orbit, and wouldn’t need to think about weather.

Triste saw herself out. Nyota lingered in the bedroom, debating whether a second uniform jacket would be handy. There was time, she decided. She could ask Spock for his opinion. She draped the shirts over one shoulder, picked up her bag and walked through from the bedroom to the study, to go out the back door.

But before she could activate the opening, she was stopped in her tracks.

Did he still have those running shoes?

Summer of 2244, five weeks before T’Shin disappeared, Nyota took the tram to Quality Centre looking for the perfect birthday gift. Most of the things she wanted were outside the scope of her allowance, but the high-tops with iridescent rainbow uppers were on sale and they were so him. When Emmanuel wore them with white baggy trousers and nothing above the waist but a Maasai bead necklace, he looked amazing.

Now he sat in the middle of the garden, elbows resting on the knees of some drab shorts and the sleeves of an oversized shirt rolled up to the elbows.

He looked so tired.

Nyota pressed the door controls and stepped outside. Emmanuel turned his head long enough to see that it was her, and then turned away again.

“Maneno mema hutowa nyoka pangoni,” he said.

**Pleasant words will draw a snake from its hole** – what they used to tell each other after a fight, when one of them worked up the humility to say they were sorry.

“They told me Tiberious was dead,” she replied.

He didn’t answer, but rubbed the tattoo on his neck. He used to have seven stars, all different sizes, in a spiral. Nyota wondered when and how he lost the others.

“Your *baba* asks me about you,” she added. The last time had been a year ago, but it was accurate enough. “Have you seen him?”

Emmanuel smeared the heel of his hand across one eye socket, pulling the skin tight.
“Better sons live in his house now,” he said.

“Manny, you know, he would say, ‘Nimetenda dhambi dhidi ya mbingu na juu yenu’. He calls himself the Prodigal Father.”

“Yota, what does it matter, when I am such a long way from --,”

As he scrambled to his feet, Nyota heard the gate hinges creak and turned round. Spock crossed the lawn in three long strides and put himself between the two of them.

Emmanuel cowered.

“I came only to apologise,” he insisted.

Spock took another step towards him, and Manny backed away.

“Leave now,” Spock’s tone was barely restrained, “if you wish to do so by choice.”
Comparisons

Chapter Notes

Emmanuel speaks in Kiswahili twice during this chapter --

1. "Mwenye nguvu mpishe" is a proverb, which I found translated in a number of ways, such as, 'Let the mighty one slay me' or 'give way to a strong person' or 'you cannot fight those who are stronger than you'. Emmanuel is basically saying to Kirk, 'I'm the powerful one now, so you'll do what I tell you.'


During Starfleet’s developmental years in the 22nd century, it was noticed how Terrans speaking Standard would sometimes use gendered pronouns for inanimate objects, in particular referring to their warp capable vessels as if they were female. Vulcans chose not to use Earth's language this way. Firstly, because it was illogical to assign biological characteristics to machinery. But secondly, they refrained because they believed the practice reflected and promoted an unfortunate tendency in many human cultures to treat females like objects.

“Spock?”

“Yes, captain?”

“Think she can take one more?” Pike asked.

By ‘she’, the Captain meant the Enterprise. The malfunction with the warp engines had been identified and resolved. They were now in orbit round Neptune, accompanied by the USS Farragut, to test the newer vessel's shields.

Spock overlooked this linguistic lapse. Right now he was unusually grateful for the distraction of work.

“Starfleet standards recommend five hits to our saucer section,” he told Pike.

“Five it will be, then.”

Space Station Honshu had temporarily deprived him of Lieutenant Uhura's company. In light of this fact, as well as the unfortunate proximity of Nyota's husband, the Captain suggested his First Officer come aboard the Enterprise early. He could assist Chief Engineer Olsen until it was time for systems testing. When Spock politely reminded him about Cadet Kirk’s request to re-sit the Kobayashi Maru, Pike laughed.

“He’ll have that simulation memorised, you know. Can’t you change it, and try to surprise him?”

Spock had to admit he could not. He had secured the simulation files so that only Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu could access them, and he had not been able to find the Orion cadet. When he left her at St. Matthew’s Episcopal, she gave him the impression she would only be gone two days. But a week passed and she had not returned to campus. She did not respond to his messages or calls.

“I am sending the Farragut a fifth request for phaser fire,” Spock announced.
He wondered if Nyota knew where Gaila was. He had not tried to contact Uhura since she started her placement. He knew how demanding her work schedule would be; he did not wish to trouble her unnecessarily. And though he tried not to waste mental energy on their situation, they had parted company without resolving a disagreement. She did not think he ought to have threatened Emmanuel, or forced him to leave the South Axis property. He shared all his memories of Mr. Kasembe with her, but they did not change her thinking.

“That was Tiberious,” she had argued. “There was no entity with Manny when I found him in my garden.”

“Perhaps not,” he conceded. “But to access your garden, without being detected by Security or the Ground Maintenance team who were making roof repairs, he would have needed the entity’s assistance.”

He could not understand why she accepted his argument, but remained somehow dissatisfied with him.

The First Officer on board the Farragut responded to his request.

“Fifth phaser is locked in, Captain,” Spock said, "targeting D Deck.”

Pike laughed again.

“Can’t wait to tell Christine you’ve taken aim at her,” he snorted, and opened his hailing channel for Med Bay.

***

Space station life was dangerous.

Four hours out of every twenty-four had to be spent on core duties – Nyota was locked into her soundproofed pod on Operations level, listening and translating whatever subspace feed was assigned to her console. A few frequencies were interesting, most routine and some channels had little or no activity. Once she sat for forty-eight minutes in silence, extraordinary compared with her student life, which had started to seem very far away but she did remember how rare it was to have absolutely nothing to do, nothing to study, nothing to plan.

On Honshu everything was planned for her. After core duties, all crew were required to spend four hours contributing to the upkeep of the station. The mechanically inclined got the coveted jobs that kept the structure and its systems running. Nyota cleaned hygiene stations.

Two hours were scheduled for team building, exercises to test and reinforce the importance of working together and solving problems under pressure. One hour was spent in physical training, and one in emergency drills.

Ninety minutes were allotted for meals, but few could afford to take that long. In the remaining time before mandatory sleep shift, Nyota had to review any station notices, respond to messages, write and file her crew log, shower and do her laundry. Thankfully, Spock knew the regimen from experience. He told her he would be reviewing her logs as part of her commission appraisal, and so be familiar with her activities. He expected contact to be infrequent.

Danger made itself apparent after the first week. She was busy, but her brain not so much. And during those activities when thinking was optional (she could and did sterilise sonic shower cubicles in her sleep), when her mind was not provided with external stimulation, it turned inward and mined its own resources.
Mostly she tried to finish the process that started on Earth, but had been interrupted. Nyota never expected to see Manny again, just Manny, separated from the source of power that made him Tiberious. And so she never played that imaginary game where she pictured their reunion and explored the possible things she might say—or feel. It surprised her how his presence in the garden triggered recollections buried so deep she thought they’d never see consciousness again.

And these were very old memories. Beetle hunting, for example. Because she found Emmanuel sitting on the ground, Nyota’s mind revived a sensory impression of herself and Manny with his twin sister. At the age of six, the three of them used to apply their joint intellects to the task of capturing and identifying the different specimens of order Coleoptera which moved within the playground enclosure of Starfleet day nursery.

And Emmanuel had seemed so tired, which made him look like his mother. That prompted Uhura to recollect that whatever the three children did or did not do when they played together in the Kasembe house always hinged on Mrs. Kasembe’s energy levels. Nyota could sometimes persuade her friends to visit her home instead, but not often. The twins were not comfortable around T’Shin.

In the midst of all that remembering, Spock came through the gate and drove Emmanuel from the garden. And so the process was interrupted. Nyota found this annoyed her.

As it happened, Leonard McCoy was also working his practical hours on Honshu.

Uhura caught a glimpse of him during her induction, when she was taken to Medical to be ‘weighed and sprayed and spayed’ as one cadet put it. She saw him on two more occasions during team building, but always with a different group. And then, while standing in the mess hall line to get breakfast before her shift started, she suddenly realised it was Len wearing the apron, blue hair net and long heatproof gloves, to remove clean dishes from the steriliser.

He saw through her disguise too, the green cleaner’s coverall with matching silicon boots. He waved a plate at her, and got a fearful telling off from his supervisor.

During her next Ops session, he sent a hail to her pod.

“Bad time to talk?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said. “It’s quiet. How did you know where --,”

“Medical duty has its perks. We have to know the location of every crew member, especially the ones working in isolation like you. It might interest you to know that I’m monitoring your heart rate, blood sugar and B vitamin levels right now.”

“And they’re okay?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

They laughed together. Then there was a short gap where neither of them spoke.

“Looking forward to the Song and Sulu engagement party?” McCoy asked.

There was another gap. Nyota sighed.

“Well, thank the Lord for that,” he said. “I’ll need to save up all my cheerful, if I want to have enough to get me through that evening.”

“Len,” she said, “may I ask you something personal?”
“Go on.”

“You, um, you once mentioned your wife ….”

“The wrong kind of drinks will get me doing that.”

“How long had you known her before you got married?”

McCoy whistled.

“Oh well,” he said, “Jocelyn and I grew up in the same part of Franklin. It’s a pretty small, close knit place, I mean, our grandparents all knew each other. But she and I didn’t really get past small talk acquaintance until we were older. I’d say that was about three years.”

“And do you ever wonder whether you could get back together and make it --,”

“No,” the doctor interrupted, “no. That marriage is dead. Not the nicest death, okay, but at least it was quick.”

Nyota nodded, for her own benefit. That was how she felt. With all her free brain time she eventually worked through the rest of her memories. And she could also say that her marriage was dead. Emmanuel could never be what he had once been to her.

“Okay,” she said to McCoy, “But, um … say you heard that something bad happened to Jocelyn, or that she was getting herself in trouble and needed some help to pull herself together. Would that … bother you?”

The third gap of silence was appreciated. It meant McCoy was thinking.

“You mean,” he said, “if I got a message telling me her new fella was hurting her, would I buy her a shuttle ticket to come to San Francisco?”

“Or anywhere,” Nyota suggested, “anywhere she could be safe.”

“Yeah, course I would.”

He said it so tenderly. Nyota didn’t expect her own words to catch in her throat when she replied, “Thank you.”

“May I ask what I did to deserve gratitude?” McCoy inquired.

“You just helped me feel normal.”

And then a signal came through to her pod. She had to end their conversation. But she thought about it later, when transmissions were quiet, while eating dinner and again during the forty-three minutes of free time she had before sleep.

She understood now, the real reason she had been irritated with Spock. He could only see Emmanuel as a threat to her, to both of them. And while Nyota knew she could not categorically deny that possibility, to her Manny was more. Now she was faced with this new reality, that he was alive but clearly unhappy. She had to work through what that meant to her.

***

Emmanuel had seen his enemy. Wherever the entity moved, it left an energy signature; this could be detected and followed with a device Emmanuel wore like a wristwatch. And so he caught glimpses
of the young man who was stealing his source of power, stealing more of it as the days passed and Emmanuel had not achieved what he wanted to achieve in San Francisco.

But to steal his bed went further than he was prepared to tolerate.

The space elevator android informed him. Or rather, when he asked to be taken up to his room, it told him to go cool his heels in one of the bars instead, so he would not disturb the interloper named Kirk. Then the android winked, and used its silicon pelvis to mimic what was going on inside his suite.

Furious, he went to Sugureta’s VIP Reception and claimed that the mechanoid had malfunctioned. The manager replaced it with a lower grade model, but one that would take Emmanuel's orders. When they reached his penthouse he instructed the robot to go in ahead of him, lift the mattress off the bedframe and tip the occupants onto the floor.

The entity, he guessed correctly, would have to make a choice between the two of them. Given the options -- a naked, baffled white man whose body was tangled in silk sheets and the embrace of his Orion whore, or Emmanuel, two inches taller than Kirk to begin with, possessed of a clear head and a passing inclination to do violence, the choice would be simple. When a rush of strength filled Emmanuel’s body, he spoke.

"Mwenye nguvu mpishe," he snarled at his rival.

“Jim?”

The Orion expected her lover to furnish an explanation for what was happening, provide protection. She would not know he had just been disarmed.

“Hey,” Kirk said to him, sheepish but undaunted, “only a bit of harmless fun, right? Pity to keep such a beautiful place empty, in my opinion.”

“Get out,” Emmanuel said flatly.

He would not permit them to get dressed first. They could do that in the elevator. After they left, he instructed the mechanoid to strip the mattress and pillows to prepare them for steam cleaning. The bedding should be incinerated.

The robot used a hover function for mobility. It drifted almost noiselessly from bedroom to kitchen and back, carrying out his instructions. Emmanuel picked a location where he could see it at all times. And he waited for the moment the entity would use the robot’s sound system to make its excuses.

What he got from the mechanoid instead were cleaning options.

"The steam driven through the mattress can have added scent," it announced. "Would Mr Kasembe prefer any of the hotel’s standard fragrances: Pomegranate and Grapefruit, Cardamon, Lavender and Coconut or Aloe Vera?"

“This new fellow will not last,” he told the entity.

Or, the robot added, Mr. Kasembe could mix and sample his own perfume by choosing from the menu which was now showing on the kitchen computer console.

Emmanuel banged a fist on the wall behind him instead.
“Think about the other ones you thought would replace me. Goran Pellier, founder of the Kostadin Colony on Luna -- he only wanted to rig a sponsorship election. Ngollid of Jili needed to consolidate his position in trade negotiations with Sivvu Country. The Parnassa Collective gave you their eldest female on the condition you altered their inheritance covenants. And now this student, this macho ya bluu – I believe I have sampled your memories correctly – he wants to win a computer simulation? A game?”

The mechanoid said, “I will choose Aloe Vera for you.”

“Choose what you like,” Emmanuel told it. “You are aiming lower and lower over time. Because the people you select are selfish; they could never sustain a partnership. They use you to gain one advantage and then they will have nothing to do with you. You’ll see my prediction come true.”

“Replacement bedding is set for replication. Would you prefer a change of colour?”

“You insult me, call me weak. But I have loyalty, and loyalty is a strength.”

“So, we are staying with the same colour we had?” the robot asked.

“I would recommend that,” Emmanuel answered.

***

The bed was clean and remade.

Having chased away the other mortal, Emmanuel stood looking at the refreshed mattress. He would probably sleep. Or disable himself with whatever substances the hotel could provide, and these were many.

This Akuma could ignore all the things he was saying, could continue the effort to find a new partner. But Emmanuel knew him as well as he knew Emmanuel; it was true that no flesh had been as devoted to him as Mr. Kasembe.

So this Akuma decided to use the hotel robot, and ask more questions.

“You were not able to locate your wife a second time?”

Emmanuel sat down heavily on the mattress.

“No.”

“You could not find a source of information regarding her whereabouts?”

“No doubt the Vulcan has taken her somewhere, because they are both gone. He could see I was winning. Humility – another one of my weaknesses, according to you, but it gave me access to her heart.”

“Tiberious gave you access to the garden.”

Emmanuel turned his face away from the robot. He fell back on the bed, put out a hand and rested it on the pillow next to his head.

“Tiberious is a mutually beneficial arrangement,” he admitted.

Yes, yes, it was truth. This Akuma preferred strong mortals with more appetite for risk, but Emmanuel was correct -- the strong did not need this Akuma to achieve. They might use this
Akuma, but ultimately they chose independence and discarded him. Whereas the weak needed, always needed, and behind the need was fear, which was nourishment. Emmanuel was food now.

“What can I do?” the robot asked.

“Find her. Find a way to get me close to her without the Vulcan.”

***

Red alert sirens sounded on the Enterprise bridge.

“Shields up,” Pike ordered.

“Shields at maximum,” Cadet Sulu replied.

Spock had the live feed from the Farragut weapons array displayed on his console. He began the countdown. “Test phaser fire will impact in five, four, three, two, one --,”

Underfoot, the floor shook.

“Shields at ninety percent,” Sulu called out.

Pike opened the channel to Med Bay again. “Christine, did your walls stay up?”

Doctor Chapel’s voice replied.

“Everything looks fine. We’re starting to inspect the interior structures now, and I’ll report.”

Spock turned his chair to face the captain’s seat.

“We are done?” Pike asked him.

“I believe, sir, the crew will need the rest of this shift to assess the effect of shock waves on moving apparatus or items in storage.”

“Fine. Confirm that with the Farragut.”

Spock sent the message while the captain put himself on all channels and announced the end of testing for the next six hours and twenty-eight minutes. Briefing with department heads would commence at 16:30 ship time.

“Cadet,” Pike said to Sulu, “take yourself down to E Deck and assist Major Orlov with inspection of crew quarters.”

“Sir,” Sulu stood out of the Navigator’s station. “May I ask something before I go?”

"Shoot."

“I realise you both have commitments to the Enterprise, and I’m not certain how much Commander Spock would enjoy a frivolous human social gathering.”

When Spock looked up from his console he saw Pike glance in his direction and smile.

“But if you hadn’t chosen me for Alpha Incognito last year, Ben and I would never have met. We’d like to invite you both to our engagement party, even if you could only manage a brief appearance.”

The captain smiled. “Thank you, Cadet. Can’t say yes or no at the moment, but message us the
details and we will bear it in mind on the day. Dismissed.”

With only the two of them left on the bridge, the Captain remarked, “Our girl held up pretty well in her first fight, I think.”

Spock was very tempted to correct the Captain’s sentence. What stopped him was a moment of human reasoning, the disjointed Terran proclivity to compare things that were not comparable. But he had done it regardless. He had momentarily considered the Enterprise as if she were female, and in doing so came to the immediate conclusion that she was the only woman with whom he was both closely acquainted and completely confident that he understood the way she behaved.
Baby tried pinching him on both cheeks. Starting with his face –

“Hey now, where’s our crazy little demon gone?”

She made a big, candy pink pout right up close to his face. Kirk looked at her mouth, but not with any interest.

“Jim honey,” she said. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we have parked the car. There’s a party going on in the Stardome just over there. And you know what you love to do at parties!”

Then Baby shoved her hands deep into the Responsif foam under him. She must have found Jim Kirk’s other pair of cheeks and gave them a mean squeeze.

“Whoa!!” he shouted, and almost sat up. For a split second his blue eyes brightened, but the fire went out quickly.

“What?” he asked, returning to his slump in the back seat bowl. “What party?”

“For Hikaru and Ben,” Zsa Zsa said.

“God,” he ran a hand through his hair, “already? We just got our invitations.”

Lulu sat in the front of the car with Gaila, so she could put finishing touches on her friend’s lip colour.

“Jim,” Lulu chided, “the invitations came out nine days’ ago.”

Baby and Zsa Zsa tried pulling on his limp arms, to make him sit up. Lulu looked at Gaila and shook her head. She mouthed the words, “What do you want to do?”

Gaila presented Lulu with her brightest smile and a nonchalant shrug, to hide her disappointment.

She told herself she ought to be grateful. She had never had a week like the week Jim Kirk had just given her. With the kind assistance of Nirvana Lovelace, they had cruised around the Bay area in the Fire Empyrean 605, stayed free of charge in the best rooms at beautiful hotels and tested several mattresses to destruction.

The food, the drinks, the sunsets, the sex … it all reached a peak when he took her back to the Sugureta. And what exactly happened in that penthouse Gaila did not understand. Emmanuel spoke to Kirk as though they knew each other, but Jim insisted they’d never met. When Emmanuel threw them out, Jim talked about complaining to the hotel management. But it wasn’t heartfelt. From that moment Gaila’s sweet bubble of joy started to deflate. Before the space elevator got them back to Earth, Jim had fallen asleep in his chair. She managed to revive him, get him back to the car and the car back to Nirvana, but she never got Jim Kirk back, not even the one she knew before the road trip.

He claimed he wasn’t ill. She tried to contact Len McCoy anyway, but he was doing time on space station Honshu just like Nyota. And the other strange thing – when she powered up her PADD to send the doctor a message, it showed her three missed calls and two text messages from Commander Spock, all sent on different days. She wondered why these had not displayed before.

In the back seat bowl, Baby and Zsa Zsa had given up; Jim was too heavy. He nestled down into
the foam and closed his eyes. Gaila watched him settle, and then she looked back at Lulu.

“Any ideas?” she asked the diner waitress.

Lulu pressed a button on the dashboard which brought down a soundproof partition between the front and back of the car.

“Go to the party yourself,” she suggested. “We’ll try making him jealous. We’ll get him to imagine you dancing with the other guests, maybe hint that you won’t be coming back to the car if you get a decent proposition.”

The back seat tanoy light flashed on the dashboard. Baby’s voice said, “He’s snoring.”

Lulu rolled her eyes.

“Or if that doesn’t work,” she added, “we’ll give him one of Nirvana’s hyposprays.”

***

Nyota ran into South Axis apartment and threw her overnight bag on her bed. She went to Gaila’s side of the dressing room and ‘borrowed’ the outfit her roommate had purchased for their first Dean’s Dinner. A year ago she would never have contemplated taking this without permission. But she was grateful for the relaxed Orion approach to personal property, because she had less than an hour to get ready and Sulu wanted their black and white wedding colour scheme reflected at the party.

Gaila’s fitted, long sleeved jacket hung a little loose on her, and the front of the tiered, ruffled skirt ended several centimetres below Uhura’s knees. She went to the kitchen and found the pair of matching white pumps inside the pantry. The height of the heels made her bite her lip like they were already causing her pain.

McCoy had said he would only dance as an emergency measure. So she might get by.

She arranged her hair in a tight bun on top of her head, chose some earrings and drew two acceptable wings along her eyelids with a black liner pencil. She was digging around in Gaila’s chest of drawers, trying to find a clutch bag, when the computer security system announced there was someone at the front door.

Len surprised her. The man who said he was dreading the occasion turned up in a black velvet jacket, brocade waistcoat and a cravat fastened to his stiff collared shirt with a titanium pin. She opened her mouth to pay him a compliment, but wasn’t quick enough. The doctor pointed at her feet.

“What in God’s name--,”

“I know,” she said, “Gaila shoes. I didn’t get time to shop.”

He would not listen to her protests and used his PADD to ring for a cab.

“I’m acting in the best interests of your spine, ma’am.”

She held her tongue during the ride. When they reached their drop off point, and McCoy got out first so he could open her door, she readied herself to upbraid him about these archaic acts of chivalry. Except she didn’t set her leading foot down well when she stepped out of the taxi. Her heel wobbled dangerously. McCoy’s arm was right there for her to catch.
She had to settle for a frustrated sigh.

Security guards in the Stardome lobby scanned their faces to match their identities with names on the guest list. Then they were allowed to part the heavy white curtains drawn across the party entrance.

“Well,” Len said, when they had stepped through, “can’t say they haven’t made the effort.”

Ben and Hikaru rented the Polaris and Pollux suites because the exterior patio would give guests another way to move between the two rooms and meant they could invite more people. The Polaris was the ‘white’ space: an artificial cloud floated near the ceiling and the island bar was surrounded by snowy Doric pillars. Waiters moved between the white tables with trays of pale canapes.

“Food.”

They both said it at the same time. Space station fare, Nyota decided, was deliberately formulated to maximise nutrition but minimise enjoyment.

“Shall we find --,”

Len was interrupted by a clap on the back from Ben Song. Sulu appeared as well; it prompted the mandatory welcomes, congratulations, admirations, and jibes directed at Ben because his smile never rested. The second the happy couple excused themselves to meet new arrivals, the doctor stopped a passing waiter and lifted the last four hors d’oeuvres off his tray.

They ate standing up. Nyota took the weight off one foot at a time, hoping she wasn't making her discomfort too obvious.

“Think this is real avocado?” the doctor asked.

“Well,” she found a bit with her tongue and tasted it again. “If it’s not, there’s only one person I know who could replicate it convincingly.”

That person was standing right behind her. Uhura smiled when she heard the familiar voice.

“I’m not saying you don’t look good in it, Cutie B. But I personally think your assets are better served by more tailored styles. Especially … right … here--,”

Nyota spun round to grab Gaila’s hands before they went where they shouldn’t. She lost her balance half way there and fell into an Orion embrace.

“I love you too, sweetie,” Gaila said. “Hey, will you dance with me? Then I won’t get pestered and we could catch up.”

“Well…,”

“Uhura,” McCoy said with a mouthful of sandwich, “given how well you’re managing in that footwear, you may as well have someone hold you up.”

And Gaila used her pheromones to make Nyota’s toes feel less pinched.

To leave the Polaris, they walked together through an archway draped with white silk and lined with white carpet. On the other side, the Pollux suite was lit just enough for guests to see that there were tables along one wall, with a gap left for the patio doors. At the far end of the room, orchestra members tuned up on a stage. The rest of the space was dance floor – shining, reflective and black.

Gaila didn’t wait for music to start. She put her arm around Nyota’s waist and pulled her close.
They started a slow shuffle, cheek to cheek.

***

“Like your dress,” Uhura said.

“Thank you,” Gaila replied. “Got it from a boutique in Monte Rio. The owner makes the beads herself.”

“Monte Rio?”

Explanation would be required. Gaila remembered seeing a hovercoach stop in that little town, which was probably a shuttle service to Santa Rosa. But Cutie Bootie knew Orions avoided public transport (they were never that desperate for attention) so Nyota would be asking herself who gave Gaila a lift so far out of town.

“Is that where Spock drove you?”

“Oh,” Gaila said, “no. This was after you got back from Nigeria. Are you OK now?”

“Sure.”

Was that answer given too quickly? Too brightly? Gaila went with her gut.

“I’m sorry I got it wrong.”

“You didn’t,” Nyota said.

“I did. Tiberious wasn’t dead.”

“Umm,” was all her roommate would say.

The orchestra began to play. An underfloor system reacted to the different textures of sound from their instruments, and made streams of coloured light swim beneath their feet like tropical fish. It reminded Gaila of that crazy Christmas present Nyota gave Spock.

“I wish you and the Commander could go public,” Gaila said. “Sulu would have sent you a joint invitation and you’d be slow dancing with him now.”

Cutie Bootie did not reply. Hopefully that meant she was imagining those dances.

“I’m surprised you don’t have a date,” Nyota finally said.

Gaila had prepared an answer for this question during the short walk from the parking lot to the Stardome. She had used it twice already.

“Sweetie, Orions don’t come to dances with dates. That’s like bringing a packed lunch when you’ve been invited to a buffet.”

Uhura gasped. Gaila thought it was a strange reaction to her joke, until she felt a tap on her shoulder and glanced behind her.

“Excuse me,” a deep voice asked. “May I cut in?”

***
“It’s okay,” Nyota said, when her roommate seemed very reluctant to let her go. “Honestly.”

Suddenly, her shoes were hurting again. But the dance had given her the chance to get more practice moving in them. She stepped free of Gaila’s embrace and squeezed the Orion’s hand before she let it go, to try and reassure her.

Then she turned to face her new partner.

Manny had always been a superlative dancer. The orchestra played in three quarter time, a song she did not know but it was a lyrical piece. Once they had engaged their hold her husband said “Smooth,” close to her mouth and led their steps.

“You’ve been drinking,” she said, her nose wrinkled in distaste from the smell on his breath.

“I’ve missed you,” Emmanuel replied.

And another voice, not unexpected, intruded on her thoughts and gave a perfect imitation of Spock.

-Since you are clearly bonded to this human, I see no logical reason to continue our relationship-

Nyota didn’t fight against their dance. But she made herself difficult to steer, and moved slightly out of rhythm, to demonstrate what she thought about any clear bond between herself and Emmanuel.

“I knew it,” she said. “I knew you couldn’t give it up. That’s how you got into my garden. And how you got here without an invitation.”

“Always you resist me,” Tiberious said.

“And when are you going to take the hint?” Uhura snapped.

“You will not find a stronger partner than me.”

And the inner voice tried again, capturing that change of tone when Spock was angry and could not perfectly filter the emotion out of his speech.

-Nyota, your regard for Emmanuel is obvious. You have accepted his offer to dance, and allowed him to embrace you-

“Right,” she moved her head out of position to fix her husband with a hard stare. “Let’s establish what’s really going to happen here.”

Tiberious gave her a haughty look, but the glazed eyes of Emmanuel spoiled that effect.

“No more mind games,” Nyota told him. “They didn’t work seven years ago, when I didn’t understand them, and they won’t work now. You know I have friends here –.”

She glanced over his shoulder, looking for Gaila. The Orion’s beaded flapper dress had been sheer, but black nonetheless. And the black turban she wore concealed her flaming curls – Nyota couldn’t pick her out from the growing number of people on the dance floor.

“Don’t make me cause a scene and bring them running,” she said.

“I only want to talk to you.”

That was Emmanuel speaking.
“Then tell your invisible friend to get lost,” Nyota demanded, “so I can talk to the person I married.”

She braced herself for what would happen. Tiberious was like a second skin, a psychological and physiological exoskeleton. She knew what the result would be, and knew the exact moment the entity disappeared. She was left with a man who looked deflated, less comfortable in his white tuxedo, eyes afraid to meet hers, and more affected by the alcohol he’d consumed. She switched their dance steps and took the lead.

“Okay,” she said. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I want us to start over.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why, Yota?”

“Manny, why do you think? You’re not – we’re not—the same people we were back then.”

“We’ve suffered the same things.”

“No,” she argued, “That’s where we got it wrong. We thought we were compatible because we both knew what it felt like to lose our mothers. But we did not lose the same thing.”

She saw Manny’s jaw clench.

“T’Shin was abducted by agents working for the Vulcan High Council. They forbade her to communicate with anyone; she was only permitted to live if she acted like she was dead. She did not choose to leave me. I was able to see her again.”

“Stop it,” Emmanuel said.

“Manny, your mother …,”

The happy music coming from the orchestra made a perverse soundtrack to their conversation.

“She had your whole house redecorated to expose the timber beams in the ceilings,” Nyota went on.

“I said stop it.”

“That meant, at some point, she made a decision.”

"No--,"

"No, two decisions. The first one was to hang herself. The second was to make sure you found her body.”

***

Gaila figured the outdoor patio would be a good place to go, since few people were using it yet. She leaned her back against the railing and kept a watch on Nyota and Tiberious through the open doors, certain that something ugly was going to happen. But the two of them just danced. Danced badly, in fact.

Then she heard a noise and turned round to look over the railing. On the pavement below, the light from a transportation energy signature got brighter and brighter, making it clear that two people were being beamed to that location. As their outlines became more distinct, Gaila recognised Captain Pike
and Commander Spock.

The Orion moved before she was spotted. She considered returning to the Pollux room to warn her roommate, but that would be warning Tiberious, and she didn’t know what he might do. So she changed her mind. She hurried along the length of the patio (careful not to catch her heels in the spaces between the wooden slats) to the opposite end, where she could get back to the Polaris suite and find Leonard McCoy.

She’d tell him --

What would she tell him? That Nyota wanted to dance? No, the doctor was the worst party pooper (Standard idioms were so silly – what did poop have to do with parties?). Gaila was surprised he agreed to show at all. Then the right idea came to her -- she'd say that Nyota had sprained an ankle. Leonard would tell her off, but he’d get to the dance floor quickly. In the meantime she’d need to think of a way –

Something caught the back of her dress. The sharp pull after that took her feet out from under her -- what? She braced herself for an unpleasant meeting of backbone with floor.

But instead the landing felt soft.

“There you are.”

“Jim?”

Nirvana’s hypersprays contained *harta*, a stimulant that proved a useful pick-me-up for most species. That’s because it wasn’t potent, not in the usual doses. Gaila wasn’t sure you could give a human enough *harta* to transform them from exhausted disorientation to a state where they would gleefully hoist a female into the air and catch her.

“That’s a lovely outfit you’re wearing,” Kirk said, blue eyes like gas flames.

“Thank yourself,” Gaila replied, “you bought it.”

“So I did.”

“Jim, I just need to --,”

To transform a human from exhausted disorientation to ass-clutching, electric kisser — that much *harta* could have dangerous side effects. If Gaila ever got her own mouth back, if she was allowed to stand on her own feet again, she would do whatever it was she was going to do before Kirk seized her. And after that, she would tell Lulu and the girls to be more careful.

***

Cadet Sulu spotted them as soon as Pike pulled back the curtain so they could enter the Polaris room. Spock saw Hikaru grab his fiancé’s hand and pull him away from the conversation they had been holding with Professor Abdulov.

“Captain, Commander,” Sulu called out to them. And when they were closer he said, "So glad you could make it.”

Spock participated in the handshakes and congratulatory expressions, but was grateful when the Captain carried the conversation after that. He could, without appearing rude, scan the room to locate Nyota.
She sent a note to inform him that Cadet McCoy had agreed to be her escort to and from the Stardome. This had provided him considerable relief. The Enterprise warp coils were still not meeting their response times and he worked extended hours with the Engineering shift to try and bring performance up to standard. The decision to attend the party was taken between himself and Pike only seventeen minutes and eleven seconds prior to their beaming down.

He did not see her. He saw McCoy seated at the island bar by himself.

“Can we get you anything?” Ben Song pointed in the same direction.

“I think…,” Pike surveyed the room himself before he glanced in Spock’s direction. “We will stretch our legs a bit first. The Commander may want to try out your dance floor.”

Spock ignored the expressions on Ben and Hikaru’s faces – the combination of doubt, curiosity and faltering attempts not to smile or laugh. Very few people knew, but during his last mission on board the USS Farragut, Lieutenant Chalmers persuaded him to join her dance classes by procuring specially lined gloves which eliminated telepathic transfer. She taught him to waltz and fox trot.

On their way to the Pollux room, the Captain went so far as to brief him with a strategy they might employ to allow Spock a dance with Cadet Uhura that would raise no suspicions.

“We’ll find Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu,” Pike told him. “With any luck she’ll already be with Uhura and we can converse for a few minutes. You will ask Gaila to dance because she is your teaching assistant.”

“Of course,” the Captain went on, “it would be rude for me not to ask her roommate at the same time. We’ll do one song like that and then change partners. It will look completely innocent, provided you can tear yourself away after that.”

And he winked at Spock as they walked through the white archway into the next room, and let their eyes adjust to the dimmed light.
Kiswahili words used in this chapter:

"mume" = husband
"sukari yangu" = my sugar
"mwenye nguvu mpishe" = see notes before Chapter 10. A proverb with varied translations online, but I've decided to go with ideas like, 'let the stronger one prevail' or 'might makes right'.
"bwana" = Mister

“Have you forgotten your promise?” Emmanuel asked.

The orchestra had changed rhythm for their next number. Nyota watched Hikaru and Ben pass by her left shoulder, dancing a two-step. She couldn’t hear what Sulu was saying but she could read his lips. She bit her own in envy.

“What promise?” she retorted.

“You said you would help me. After mama died.”

Nyota just shook her head.

“You promised to train as a shuttle pilot,” she said. “Or no, that was the second promise, after you were fired from Tamarind Dhow where you promised to train as a chef.”

“How could I do anything without you?”

“Manny, you had me. I was living with you, cooking for you, cleaning for you and holding down two jobs.”

“But not helping me.”

“When – in my sleep?”

“You never made me feel strong.”

“Manny, I lost count of the number of times I tried to tell you--,”

“Choosing is strength and strength is choosing.”

She ignored his mocking imitation and finished the rest of the principle she used to tell him over and over, without effect.

“And if you want to be stronger, all you need to do is make one small choice and keep to it. Decide to go swimming, or visit your grandfather, or clean out a cupboard. Then you will have the strength to make a bigger choice, and that choice will make you even stronger. That was my help, mume, but you didn’t want it.”
“What kind of therapy was that?”

“What the only kind we could afford,” Nyota snapped.

“I’m a rich man now,” Emmanuel told her.

“Then look up the city business directory and get yourself the best doctor you can hire.”

“Yota, suka yangu—,”

Nyota stopped, and wouldn’t let him move her. His grip on her hand was cold.

“I mean it,” she said. “You need better help – not the kind you got from me or from a bottle or from that thing you allowed to live inside you.”

Someone crashed into the back of her, shoving her against Emmanuel’s body.

“Oh, sorry about that,” the offending party said, with a tone that had no apology in it at all.

The orchestra ended their song with a flourish, and all the couples broke apart to applaud. All, that is, except for the two pairs who had just collided in the middle of the dance floor: Nyota and Emmanuel one side, Jim Kirk and Gaila on the other. They stayed in formation, staring at each other.

***

Spock knew a place he could go.

Kahs-wan, for him, had been less an ordeal and more a liberation. The desert was not animate, therefore had no awareness of or interest in him, no opinion about his pedigree or his family. Alone in the Vulcan wilderness one simply existed or didn’t, survived or didn’t. The year before he faced his challenge two promising children from clan Skal were caught in a sandstorm and never returned, nor were their bodies found. His mother did not want him to go.

He was also caught in a storm. Perhaps he read the signs better, the change of pressure which made the air sit heavy on his shoulders, the warning cries of lara circling over his head or the number of sandworms that were visible above ground. But also he gave priority to choosing a place of shelter. There were plenty of caves and intersecting passages within the rock formations of Vulcan’s Forge, but they were not equal to the task of protecting him. He selected a cavity of space that was elevated and had three different ways of escape.

When the time came, he curled himself small in that place and listened to the eerie music of wind forced through the fissures and gaps around him. He had painted the ground around his body with juice extracted from pieces of kal’ta succulents, to ward off deadly arachnids. He counted his breaths and the number of times his stomach growled.

Naturally, he remained aware of danger. But also of peace. Peace because everything had been simplified; it was sufficient for him to exist. All additional considerations were unimportant in the face of death and therefore could be set aside. Peace fed him in a way he could not describe. When it was finally safe to emerge from the rocks, he stumbled out into the open, weaker in body but stronger in soul.

His father convinced his mother that the experience of kahs-wan would equip their son with resources he would draw upon later. This proved true, and especially so when he looked across the Pollux dance floor and saw Nyota being touched by hands which had a legal right to her, a right he
had wanted, had been at the point of requesting. And as he felt the storm build within – the urge to break every joint of every finger on those hands – he was sure his control would fail. He needed a hiding place.

“Captain,” he said.

But Pike was oblivious to the danger. He leaned toward his first officer and pointed at Emmanuel.

“Spock, is that him?”

Every word of the question felt like glass driven into his face. Spock could count his breaths, could hear them. And given how loudly the orchestra played, this suggested he might be in a worse state than he’d thought.

“Captain—,”

Pike was looking at him now, and frowning.

“Spock?”

“Permission to leave the venue, sir.”

Maddeningly, his commanding officer merely took a few more moments to study him.

“How about we get some fresh air on the patio?”

And Spock had to find the wherewithal to follow the captain round the perimeter of the dance floor. It meant Nyota and Emmanuel remained in his line of sight. In addition to finger joints, he now struggled against a boiling rage which had progressed to the thought of breaking larger bones, arms and legs.

It seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to reach the patio doors. Stepping outside, Spock felt no difference in temperature.

***

“Well, well, well …,”

Jim let go of Gaila, took two small steps to get himself shoulder to shoulder with Emmanuel.

“Who’s mwenye nguvu mfpshe now?”

Kirk ran a hand down the front of Manny’s jacket, pausing to finger the white satin on the lapels.

“Remember when we last met? You had the audacity to tell me that I was uninvited. What about you? Can you name either of the two people who are holding this party? Or tell me what they do?”

Of course, Manny had no answer.

“And I’m surprised your dance partner hasn’t alerted security.”

Kirk looked at her and his face was overwritten with the hatred she knew he now carried inside him.

“Cadet Uhura is usually so careful to hold the moral high ground,” he snarled, “and to make sure everyone else knows it.”
“Gaila,” Nyota said, without taking her eyes off the new incarnation of Tiberious, “let’s go.”

She tried to move away, but Emmanuel would not let her.

“I need you,” he pleaded.

“To do what?” she demanded. “Believe me, bwana Kasembe, if I knew a way to destroy what changed you into a monster, I would have done it.”

“He’s afraid, Uhura. Afraid of me,” Jim said.

“You should be afraid. Haven’t you figured this out yet? That thing inside you hates everyone. Humans are not its friends – they are its source of food. It will eat out your soul.”

Kirk just laughed.

“Soul …,” he chortled, as if it had been a punch line. “Is that what I’m supposed to call this pathetic waste of flesh --,”

He gave Manny a shove. The dance floor no longer had enough bodies, and so there was nothing to stop her husband from stumbling backwards until he crashed on top of a table.

“Gaila!”

Nyota turned, intending to beg her roommate to tell security. But the Orion was gone.

***

The Captain patted the patio railing with his left hand, a signal that Spock should come and stand beside him, facing away from the Stardome to view the adjoining parking area.

“Commander, I don’t want a long discussion about emotions and how Vulcans process them. May we work on the basis that yours aren’t in their optimum state right now?”

The Captain could have answered his own question by simply glancing down and noting Spock’s grip on the railing, which had already warped the wood grain.

“Sir,” was all he could manage to say.

“Fine. So we need a new plan.”

Yet Pike seemed in no hurry to formulate one. Spock heard the music stop, the guests applaud. A considerable number of them came outside and their shoes clattering on the timber floor seemed like so many mallets hammering on his skull. He decided to let his mind leave Earth, since his body could not. He retrieved the memory of his kahs-wan storm shelter and took inventory again of the fine details.

Forty-three pieces of debris, excluding grains of sand, had littered the shelf of stone on which he lay for most of his ten day test. Of these, eighteen were small stones or flakes of stone, three were tiny, dead invertebrates and seven were botanical fragments, mostly from the kal’ta. Eleven were rodent droppings. He provided the rest: a jagged shard of metal, possibly the lost fragment of a hovercraft’s fuselage which served him as both knife and spade, his canteen storing the handful of water retrieved by digging and a single hair which had fallen from his head.

His mother had concealed four portions of kreila by sewing them into the lining of his robe. The work was well done; he did not know he was wearing food until he accidentally caught and tore a
seam open. But it was not in the spirit of the exercise to bring sustenance, and so he returned them to her once he got home again.

“Okay,” the Captain said, “how about this?”

Spock heard the words. As he was climbing out of his own thoughts, he heard a collection of impact noises coming from inside and surmised that something weighty might have crashed onto one of the black glass tables they had passed on their way out of the Pollux suite. Pike left off speaking, turned round and listened also.

There were shrieks and shouts, the scrape of chairs dragged across the floor. When someone roared, “Get out!!”, the Captain gave his first officer a nod and they steered their way through the patio crowd back to the doors.

They were almost knocked down by a man in white who ran out that exit, heedless of anything in his path. He drove through more people to get across the patio, grabbed the wood railing when he reached it and vaulted himself over.

“That was --,” Pike began, but then a second man shot past them at equal speed.

“Kirk?”

The second runner did appear to be Cadet Kirk, and intent on pursuit. He went over the patio rail as well.

A pair of security personnel arrived ten point five seconds after that, but all they could do was observe the two men who were likely causes of the dance floor disturbance as distant figures racing across the parking lot.

“Well, there we go. Jim has fixed that problem for us.”

The Captain brushed the palms of his hands together in that Terran gesture signifying satisfactory closure. Spock didn’t respond because the comment implied that the mere chasing away of Emmanuel solved everything. It was not, therefore, a remark which deserved a response.

But working with Pike had proved satisfying precisely because the Captain seemed able to understand his first officer's silences.

“I know,” his superior said. “We still need that new plan."

***

From inside the car, Gaila watched Jim and Emmanuel run past the tinted windows.

“Look at him,” she said to Lulu, wagging the finger that pointed at the two men.

“Honey, we swear we didn’t give him anything.”

Furious, Gaila pulled open the glove compartment, started to pull out the contents and spill them on the floor.

“You’ve got everything in here,” she shouted. “Harta, Bolian nerve pills, jouze shots—maybe you even mixed stuff together --,”

“Gaila, we are professionals. We would never do that.”
“No,” she said, “there is no way he could go from snoring in the back seat to … to …,”

The glove compartment was empty. She turned to look at them all again, but she couldn’t see as well with tears in her eyes.

“You’re lying to me.”

Baby, Zsa Zsa and Lulu: their guilty fidgeting told her all she needed to know. Gaila wiped her face and reached across to open her door.

“Don’t go,” Lulu said. “The car can track his movements.”

“Good.” Gaila stepped out of the Fire Empyrean. “Because I’m holding you responsible for finding him and getting him to the diner safely.”

“You’re going back to the party?” Baby asked.

“How can I have any fun now? I’m going to the simulator arena. I may as well catch up on work.”

***

The orchestra were hustled back on stage before their next session was scheduled, to make some soothing music and restore the party mood after the disturbance. Sulu must have seen her standing by herself in the middle of the dance floor and walked over.

“You okay?” he asked.

Nyota nodded.

“Do you know what happened?”

She could see Ben approaching behind Hikaru's back. He came up and wrapped his arms around Sulu's waist, made them both sway gently back and forth. They made her feel better, and she was never going to say anything that would spoil this evening for them.

“There was someone here without an invite,” she said. “Don’t know how he got in, but Jim Kirk chased him off.”

“Good old Jim,” Sulu patted the hands that were holding him.

“Yeah,” she replied. Her smile was the perfect disguise for grit teeth.

“Do you think Kirk will come back?” Ben asked. “We haven’t seen him all week, and we still need to ask him about the wedding.”

Nyota shrugged.

“Oh,” Hikaru said, “speaking of which …,”

They wanted a third opinion about the venue. Sulu gave her their short list. She didn’t know that marriage ceremonies could be held at the top of the Golden Gate Bridge; she hadn't read the news feeds in detail and assumed the structural additions were just repairs and maintenance. She said she would come no matter where they got married, but suggested that the Hotel Sugureta, their second choice, had advantages.

“It means weather wouldn’t make any difference to the view. Plus, a space backdrop already fits
your black and white colour scheme."

Sulu was enthusiastic – he had been trying to convince Ben using the same reasoning. He tipped back his head to check whether Nyota’s arguments had won over his fiancé.

Ben said, “Let’s ask Captain Pike for his opinion.”

“My opinion on what?”

He had to be standing right behind her, for his voice to be that clear. Shock or no shock, Nyota knew she could not move quickly in her shoes. Her feet were so sore they burned.

“Sir,” she said.

Sulu asked, “Has Commander Spock left already?”

Uhura watched the floor as she carefully turned round, more carefully than necessary. Before she faced the Captain, she needed time to release a string of panicked, mental profanities. Spock was here? Shit. Shitshitshitshitshit.

“Didn’t you tell us he was going to show off his moves?” Ben joked.

“Well,” Pike said, “I was hoping. But Vulcans can be particular about choosing a partner, being touch telepaths and all.”

Nyota finally got turned round, finally lifted her head and found the Captain’s eyes waiting to make contact.

“I imagine he had a look round and couldn’t see anyone with whom he had established sufficient trust.”

There was just enough anger in his tone to prompt a few seconds of uneasy silence. Then Pike released her from his stare and smiled at Ben and Hikaru.

“But he’s not far away. He insisted I shouldn’t let him cramp my style, so I decided to let music take my mind off Enterprise weapons testing.”

He turned back to her and gave a little bow.

“Cadet Uhura, may I have this dance?”

Like she could refuse. She worried she wouldn’t pull off a convincing smile without heavy lifting equipment to move her face for her. But somehow she thanked him and held out her hand and even stuck out her tongue at Hikaru when he warned her that treading on her commanding officer’s toes would be detrimental to her chances of promotion.

Pike steered her away with a box step – correct but choppy. He took them to a different part of the dance floor, surrounded by different people.

“I’ve conducted some tricky one-to-one meetings in my time,” he admitted, “but to have one while waltzing is a definite challenge.”

Uhura expected the dancing to be the easy part, even with her aching feet factored in.

“Why are you still married?” Pike asked.
“Captain, until a few days ago, I thought I was a widow.”

“Your confidential file said Emmanuel Kasembe disappeared in 2251.”

“That’s correct.”

“And you were not unhappy about the separation.”

“Greatly relieved, sir.”

“So why not end it? Admiral Migiro says you were advised in 2256 that Federation law allowed annulments in cases where one partner is inexplicably absent for at least five years. But you declined.”

Nyota was given a short reprieve, because the song ended. Pike allowed her to let go, to stand beside him and wait for the next number.

“Sir, Emmanuel and I were children of Starfleet personnel; we grew up in the same residential compound. We’ve known each other as far back as we can both remember.”

When the music started again, Pike turned to face her but gave no indication they should resume their dance. She carried on with her explanation.

“Our families took holidays most winters at the same safari lodge. I was there the year his twin sister wandered off by herself and a lion attacked her. The rangers could not get to her in time, and they wouldn’t let anyone see her body. Even if his parents had been strong people …,”

“But they were not,” the Captain guessed.

“His mother hung herself,” Nyota said. “His father was able to keep his job only because he agreed to regular sessions with a counsellor the Academy appointed. But he would still disappear, now and then.”

They had become an obstacle on the dance floor, one that other couples had to avoid. Pike motioned with a hand and an inclination of his head, which sufficed to say ‘let’s get out their way’. They threaded themselves through the moving couples, making their own paths, and met up again against the wall in a corner of the room.

“So,” he said, “did you marry him to replace his sister or his mother?”

The question was so well deduced Nyota couldn’t help the wry smile she gave her commanding officer.

“Maybe both,” she confessed.

“Nobody could do that.”

“No. But I couldn’t cut him off, like the Admiral suggested. Before we were husband and wife we were friends. Maybe this will sound stupid, but I was not going to make myself another person who left him.”

Hikaru and Ben were dancing again. She loved Sulu’s white suit – it had tight fitting trousers but a flourishing, two tiered coat that passed his knees and billowed behind him when Ben made him twirl.

“It doesn’t sound stupid,” the Captain said.
Ben lifted his intended off the ground and did an aerial spin. He stole a kiss while their faces were close. Nyota checked, and saw that Pike was watching them too. They made compulsive viewing.

“But you are a lot like my first officer,” Pike went on. “You can get so hung up on a principle it narrows your focus, and you lose sight of the situation in all its aspects. When we arrived and he saw you dancing with Emmanuel, Spock nearly walked out.”

Shitshitshitshitshit.

“When you take a decision to support a husband who hasn’t shown the least interest in supporting you for the last seven years, you need to weigh up the impact on your existing relationship. How is Spock supposed to deal with this?”

And Uhura realised he had a point. Now Manny was back, he had become a big focus of her thoughts, eclipsing other considerations just like he did when they lived together. If it weren’t for the strict routine on the space station, she might have given up more time trying to make him better, just so she could feel okay about ending it between them.

“I’m sorry sir. You’re right.”

“Yeah, well, I’m no relationship counsellor,” the Captain said, “but I think you need to do something that clearly tells Spock where he stands. As your commanding officer, I’d like to suggest that annulling your status as Mrs. Emmanuel Kasembe would make a good first move.”
Captain Pike was wrong.

Spock wasn’t waiting on the patio. He wasn’t in the Polaris room or the Stardome lobby. Nyota went to the only other place she hadn’t looked, the first aid station. He wasn’t there either, but she did find Leonard McCoy.

Instead of greeting her, he pointed to an empty chair.

“Before you fall down,” he said.

She sat, took off her shoes and groaned.

“Bet you’ll tell me it was worth the pain,” the Doctor said. “They all do.”

Nyota ignored what he really meant.

“Too soon to tell,” she answered, thinking about her different dance partners.

McCoy huffed in satisfaction, and carried on working with the tricorder he held.

“What are you doing here?” Nyota wanted to know.

“That bit of trouble on the dance floor,” he explained. “Didn’t you see it? Nobody was badly hurt, but there were lots of cuts and bruises. Got crowded in here all at once, and I figured they could use some help.”

“You are hopelessly addicted to what you do,” she said.

“Thank you.”

It was an addiction with advantages. Once he’d finished with the tricorder he fetched her a glass of ice water from the bar and something stronger for himself and he told her what his patients had told him about the man who suddenly came crashing down on a table. Nyota listened like it was all news to her.

“Wonder if Captain Pike and his first officer saw what happened?” she asked.

“They were here?” McCoy asked.

One day she would tell him he was fed that line, just to confirm that he hadn’t seen Spock.

“Checking out their potential Enterprise placements, maybe?” Leonard asked. “I should do okay, if they spotted me hard at work. Who is his first officer, anyway?”

“Some Vulcan,” she said nonchalantly.

“Oh.”

Leonard’s face created frown lines. He wasn’t enamoured with Vulcans, she knew, because they would not share their full medical data with Starfleet. If that ‘goddamn dried up planet’ ever had reason to make a distress call, he had said once, the medical officers would have to treat any casualties by guesswork.
“Or by asking their patients,” he added with rancour. “And an unconscious Vulcan is about as communicative as a conscious one.”

He said it all again now, and made her laugh in spite everything.

He offered to take back her empty glass. “You must want to return to the party.”

“Not really,” she confessed.

Leonard didn’t need any encouragement. Together, they worked out a deception. McCoy used a radiation pen to break the surface blood vessels in her right foot and discolour the skin. He told Hikaru and Ben she had turned her ankle in those insane heels, and while he could speed up the healing process with a protolaser, tendons were funny things and she would need to rest them for full recovery. Then he called another cab. They left the Stardome with her in a wheelchair; the seat was low down so she couldn’t see much out the windows of the car, but she reached the comfort of South Axis apartment without needing to take a single step.

“A pleasure helping you escape, ma’am,” he wheeled her inside and parked her near the sofa. “Oh, and Stardome security say you can take the chair up to Honshu if you need it, and return it when we get our next shift break.”

“Really?”

It got her thinking.

“Could you sign off my injury officially? Do you think I might be excused from cleaning and physical drills for a while, so I could work more Ops hours?”

“Worth a try,” McCoy said.

***

Len told the cab driver not to wait, that he would walk back to his dorm. And anyhow, Messier Way was an impressive looking neighbourhood, one that was worth a better look on foot. He was strolling along, setting off the street lights and wondering what he would need to do to get himself assigned to one of these apartments when he heard a voice call out.

“Hello?” McCoy called back.

He got an answer, not words but a sound that confirmed someone up ahead was in distress. He changed his pace to a jog and started checking either side of the road. The voice called out a third time and he knew he was very close.

He couldn’t believe what he finally saw. There was scaffolding surrounding most of Cluster 11, two levels of tubular non-polarised metal. Jim Kirk had been strung up on the west face of the building. He was hanging upside down, spread-eagled, with his wrists and ankles tied to the cross braces.

“What the hell?” Leonard ran to him.

“Bones!” Jim croaked. “Thank god …,”

McCoy sized up the problem, walked all the way round to work out the safest way to get him down. Meanwhile, Jim was blabbing on about chasing a guy who wore a white tuxedo, and how his legs started to feel funny all of a sudden, like they were slowly fading away, you know--
“Jim, you haven’t been visiting that Orion diner again, and helping yourself to any of their crazy drugs?”

“No,” Jim said, and then, “Well yeah, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Of course it isn’t.”

Though it had to be said, Kirk didn’t sound like he’d taken anything. So McCoy untied both his hands, then climbed onto the upper level boards and told Jim to get ready to grip the braces as soon as he felt his feet come loose. Jim performed a clumsy but adequate flip before collapsing onto Messier 11’s lawn to rub his sore ankles.

“I know where there’s a wheelchair nearby,” the doctor said.

Kirk shook his head. “Be fine, Bones.”

A car came up the road and pulled over to the curb in front of them. It was a massive thing, a breadbox with dark painted bodywork and tinted glass, ugly as sin. How was he not surprised when the doors opened and out came that Orion waitress, the one who brought Kirk home after a New Year’s Eve party at the 24th Street Diner, the one with that ridiculous blonde wig.

“Jim!” she rushed over to him. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he said.

“Thanks to me,” Bones put in.

“We need to get you back. Do you want us to carry you?”

“What?” McCoy asked. “Jim, you don’t honestly want to go with them, do you?”

Kirk, as always, pretending to be thinking when his mind was already made up.

“The beds are nice there,” he replied.

***

He had never said it, but Spock always found a certain solace in the study of his mother’s face. And very likely she knew this. At the outset of any video call, she would hold back from speaking for several seconds. Spock would watch her polite efforts to conceal her emotions (more challenging with this call, since he had initiated the contact and surprised her). Yet she still tried to settle her features and present him with her least expressive self. Spock would see an aspect of her that he recognised in himself, because her eyes never fully cooperated.

Those eyes now seemed both curious and concerned. After the usual interval of silence, she made a simple statement.

“You are not in your apartment.”

“Affirmative. I am speaking to you from my quarters on board the USS Enterprise.”

She nodded. “How do these facilities compare with the accommodation you had on the Farragut?”

A very kind question. He was not quite ready to tackle the real reason for his call, not quite ready to see her reaction to the things he intended to tell her. She employed a tactic which had worked in these situations before, and steered the conversation towards a neutral topic instead.
“As first officer, I am allocated considerably more space. You will recall that my previous cabin had a total area of six square meters, of which a part measuring one meter by point seven five meters was sectioned off as a hygiene station.”

“It was compact.”

“Indeed. Here I have a total area of sixteen point six square meters, divided into three rooms.”

“Where are you standing now?”

“This is the first room off the entrance, which performs a variety of functions. It has a replicator, along with a table and chairs, where I may eat meals or hold meetings. There is an unfurnished corner where I intend to keep a firepot and a mat for meditation. I am speaking to you from my desk, and behind me you can see the consoles which allow me to monitor all on board systems.”

“So,” his mother said, “you find everything satisfactory?”

“Everything…,” he left an intentional pause, “here.”

“Okay.”

He watched her eyes shift. She sat at her own desk; he could see the dark red miniature rose which grew in a stone pot on the table beside her chair. He believed she may have given names to all her flowering plants. But to use them would be an irrational practice, unsuited to a Vulcan home and therefore certain to be remarked upon by his father. And so he had only heard her refer to this rhodentia as if it were a sentient acquaintance, calling it Eglantine.

She lifted a corner of her sash and wiped dust off Eglantine’s leaves.

“Will you have space for a flower?” she asked.

He had brought one of his saintpaulias ionantha on board. To help him care for it, he had purchased a special plinth which not only held the pot but also stored a reservoir of liquid nutrient which it would feed the African violet at timed intervals. The plant provided a centrepiece on his table.

But his mother would not care whether he informed her of this. The subject of flowers, in their conversations, always contained subtext. He was free to answer her question literally, or otherwise.

Hesitantly, heavily, he started to tell her about Emmanuel Kasembe. Not about Tiberious, or the things Tiberious might be capable of doing – he saw no good reason to burden her with that much of his anxiety.

“Unsettling,” she remarked, still careful to keep her gaze on Eglantine. “To discover the dead are not actually dead.”

He described the conversation he interrupted in Nyota’s garden, and how he had last seen her, dancing a waltz at Lieutenant Sulu’s engagement party.

His mother turned the stone pot, and dusted the leaves which had been facing the other direction.

“What has she said to you, in respect to her relationship with Emmanuel?”

“I am afraid our respective duties have restricted the amount of time we have to converse,” Spock admitted.

“It was not possible for you to talk at the party?”
Significantly, the simulated voice of his work console announced that the Captain had beamed back
to the ship.

“Acknowledged,” he said to the computer.

“Will the Captain wish to speak with you?” his mother asked.

“That is always a possibility. However, I am not aware of any ship’s business which needs to be
discussed.”

That Pike would very likely demand to know why Spock had not carried through his part of their
plan, he did not mention. He wanted to believe he had been considerate. Had he remained on the
Stardome patio, as instructed, his agitated state would not have been conducive to a discussion with
Nyota. He felt certain he would betray some emotion, and in doing so alert bystanders to the nature
of their relationship.

His mother now had a dust free miniature rose. She turned her eyes back to him.

“Spock, in this situation, the more talking you can do the better. How soon could you speak with
her?”

He consulted their shared calendar. Nyota was due to report to the space elevator at eleven hundred
hours San Francisco time, the morning after the party, and resume her duties on Honshu. It meant
there could be an hour to meet, possibly more if he offered to drive her to the elevator.

He told his mother he would need to ask Pike’s permission to beam down. She urged him to do that.

“Also,” she said, “if you think it might be helpful, I could come see you. I had to postpone all my
usual obligations this month, and I am on my own right now. Your father left yesterday for a
meditation retreat on Mount Seleya.”

This was an acceptable Vulcan way to make reference to *pon farr*. In the aftermath of fever, his
father would likely be gone three or four weeks, and his mother had used the opportunity during
previous absences to visit her home planet.

“With full testing of ship systems imminent,” Spock replied, “I expect much of my time to be spent
on board. I am also required to administer an Academy simulation exercise.”

When she nodded this time, her eyes had shifted again but he could not work out the object of their
focus.

“Then perhaps not,” she said. “I will go ahead and book a connecting shuttle to Seattle, and contact
your uncle Andrew. So I won’t be far away.”

She did not add ‘if you change your mind’. But Spock was sure she thought it, and so he did.
Having received her advice, he thought it only right to wish her a safe journey and disconnect the
call. But the far away expression on her face suggested she was considering her next words.

“Spock …,” she started.

He waited until the silence was awkward before prompting her. “Mother?”

She shook her head.

“I cannot make contact with Sarek right now, but I believe he will understand why I am going to tell
you this.”

Spock held himself in check, right down to the eyebrow that would otherwise have arched to reveal his curiosity.

“You know about T’Rea,” Amanda said.

“She was the female to whom my father was bonded as a child.”

“And you know that she died.”

“Yes,” he replied. “But I do not perceive how this relates to our conversation.”

“We also told you that T’Rea died before your father and I ... before we began to negotiate a relationship.”

“All these facts were relayed to me when I was a child.”

“Because you were being taunted at school,” Amanda said. “Your classmates called me a whore.”

Spock did nothing to control his grimace.

“It was upsetting,” his mother went on, “and clearly done to provoke you. However --,”

Her hands toyed with her sash, reminding Spock of the way Nyota had twisted the robe she borrowed from Chibuzo.

“There was some truth in their accusation,” she confessed.

Spock did not know what to say.

“Your father was single when we began our courtship,” she said quietly. “But I was not.”

Then, after a little more silence, she added, “And I wasn’t brave enough, at first, to be honest with him about that.”

Simultaneously, they both took deep breaths.

“Well,” she shook her head, “now I’ve said it, I realise it isn’t the best thing to discuss at a distance, or when you might have duties to attend.”

Spock was distracted, trying to regain authority over the neural storm in his brain, as it cycloned through its own memories to find hints and clues, while at the same time beginning to debate what conclusions should be drawn from this new knowledge. He managed to clear his throat, but took a few more seconds to speak.

“I should ... speak with the Captain about permission to beam down.”

“Do that,” his mother said. “That’s the most important thing.”

***

Christine Chapel kept quiet, but only until Chris had dismissed Spock and the Commander left them alone in the Officer's Mess.

“Is there really no one on Vulcan who would marry him?” she asked.
Pike shrugged off the remark. “Every relationship has its ups and downs.”

“You’re thinking Earth. Spock needs someone to stabilise him, not provoke him so badly he has to run away to keep his temper.”

“He did the right thing.”

“He shouldn’t have needed to,” Chapel insisted.

“Doctor,” he countered, “will any girl ever be good enough for your Spock?”

She feigned picking up her drink and pouring it over his head.

“He’s going to be your Spock soon,” she replied, “all yours. I won’t be there to save his ass. Have you got another female CMO in the running?”

Pike swirled the liquid in his glass and frowned at it.

“Shut up, Christine.”

***

Full moon.

It shone down on Spock’s garden, the cherry and bay trees, the semicircular bench and hanging baskets. Everything had a ghostly glow. Nyota leaned over the gate and told herself the reason she had wandered outside in the dark was medicinal. Green grass was the kindest thing for sore feet.

But the real motive was to check whether or not she could see the tiny light shining through a gap between the privacy screens in Spock’s study, which she could. That meant his security settings were on, which meant he was not inside.

She needed to see him. They needed to talk.

She pushed herself away from the gate and limped across the lawn to return to her own study. She shut the glass door and drew the screen over it so she wouldn’t be tempted to keep gazing out beyond the fence and hoping. The time in Dar-es-Salaam would be approaching 9am. Nyota powered up her console, chose an audio only channel, and entered Admiral Migiro’s number.

While the call connected, she stood on one foot to massage the sole of the other. The Admiral must have been doing some work, because she picked up right away. Nyota introduced herself while hopping up and down to regain lost balance.

“My child, I’m sure when you came to see me at Christmas, I told you to call me Levina.”

Levina – once Uhura pushed past that uncomfortable feeling of addressing the former Head of Starfleet Africa by her first name, the next request was simple.

“Yes, we will do that now,” the older woman agreed. “I remember most things, but you’ll help me with some of the details.”

Nyota listened to and identified the background noises she could hear along with the sound of Migiro tapping on her PADD or console display. When she and Spock visited last December to pay their respects, they met the Admiral’s pair of budgerigars. She could hear their faint chirrups and whistles. And there was a fan whirring.
“Here we are,” Levina said. “Federation Application 8.17.6, for the annulment of marital status, individual.”

A series of short beeps went off, followed by a pause.

“I am just filling in your name now. Forenames: Nyota Aminifu Halili – is that right?”

“That’s right. Admiral?”

Nyota heard a second series of beeps.

“Levina.”

“Levina,” Uhura corrected herself. “Is that an alarm going off?”

“Alarm?”

“That beeping I hear.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

There had been nothing wrong with the Admiral’s hearing, not that Nyota recalled.

“And your date of birth, dear. The year was 2228, but which month and day?”

The third time the sounds were louder. Nyota realised her mistake.

“Excuse me, Levina, the noise I’m hearing is at my end. I will be right back.”

How stupid she felt, opening the insulated door which muted any sounds coming from the kitchen and lounge. But what were these beeps? She thought she knew all the technology noises South Axis apartment could make, from the security system door buzzer to the sigh of the underfloor heating, when it reached cut off temperature.

But she and Gaila prepared all their food using the replicator or microwave, occasionally the countertop burners. They had never switched on the oven.

Nyota stared at the flashing digits on the oven timer, listened to its alarm which had never been set, and felt sick.
Disappearance

Chapter Notes

Glossary of non-English terms used in this chapter:
1. Au’e interj Aehallh, hwiiy mnekha! (Rhiannsu – “Oh yes, Aehallh, you are good”)
2. ya-ie’yakk (Rhiannsu - "armed and ready to open fire")
3. shetani (Kiswahili - "devil")

Ensign Ganzorig was brewing coffee, real coffee. It said something about the aroma, if that by itself made Chris feel less tired.

He told Doctor Chapel he needed to get some work done at his shipyard office. He could have stayed on board the Enterprise, but on the morning after the engagement party, he wanted a bit of distance between himself and Christine, maybe as much as his First Officer did. He wasn’t ready to give up on the future as he saw it, not yet.

“You take it black, don’t you, sir?”

Ganzorig placed the cup in the holder fitted to the wall of Pike’s ready room.

“I do, Ensign. That’s very kind of you.”

The junior officer stood straight. “Anything else, sir? We have pain meds in our first aid cabinet, if you have a headache.”

Did he look that rough?

“No,” the Captain smiled, “that won’t be needed. I did attend a party, Ganzorig, and I was up late but I didn’t go crazy.”

Truth was he lost most of his sleep while lying in bed. He couldn’t decide what to do if his goddamned former CMO turned out to be right. Without a partner, Spock could not take up his commission. But running the Enterprise without him would feel like cutting off one hand.

When his First Officer officer asked for two hours to beam down to Earth and speak with Uhura, Chris allowed him four and promised he would speak with Commander Ali Ashmawy on Honshu to see if he could negotiate more time.

“Do I have any important messages?” Pike asked the Ensign.

“Admiral Migiro called. When we said you were transporting here, she asked you to contact her as soon as you could.”

“Ah, good.”

He crossed the fingers on one hand as he pulled up Levina’s contact details on his console.

***
Spock was aware, as he parked his car in the Messier Cluster 18 driveway and got out, that he was observable by the team from Grounds and Maintenance who carried out roof repairs across the cul-de-sac. He hoped Nyota would be inclined to let him enter the building, so they would not be seen conversing.

The front entrance security system asked his name, recorded his reply and transferred an image of his face to South Axis Apartment. He clasped his hands behind his back and waited.

A written message from his mother cleared his PADD before he left the Enterprise. It had the details of her shuttle departures, the address and communications number of the apartment she would rent during her stay in Seattle and his uncle Andrew’s private PADD account which he already knew. At the end of all this information she had typed a single question: ‘Were you able to get time off?’

He responded in the affirmative. He had wanted to add a question of his own.

“Was your relationship with my father adversely affected when he learned that you were married?”

The front entry security system told him it was sending his identity details to South Axis apartment a second time.

Spock had never sought from his parents an account of how they met. During his last visit to Vulcan, his mother shared a few details, and left him with the impression of a smooth running series of meetings, diplomatic exchanges which eventually negotiated a treaty of permanent cohabitation. This seemed to reinforce a comment Sarek once made, that the decision to marry a human woman was reached logically.

What his mother revealed during their last call did not fit that impression. It suggested there may have been something less formal and more personal in the building of an acquaintance between the Vulcan ambassador to Earth and a Terran xenobotanist from Seattle. Spock was suddenly curious, and wanted to know more.

The front entry computer told him the second hail had received no response. It asked whether he wished to leave a message. He told the system to simply say he was waiting outside.

He got back into his car, and tried to think of reasons why she might not answer. Because she had criticised him for an inordinate concern about her safety, he set aside any theory which put her in danger. This left him with three possibilities: that she was asleep, or she had decided to catch an earlier departure of the space elevator to Honshu, or had seen him beam down into his own garden and decided to visit his apartment.

A glance at the domestic security settings on his PADD negated the last theory — no one was currently inside his quarters. And it was uncharacteristic for Nyota to sleep late. More likely she would take the opportunity to return to the space station and work additional lab hours.

An early departure might also explain why she had not replied to the message he sent before he transported to Earth.

He consulted the online timetable for the space elevator. Launches to Honshu left every three hours beginning at 05:00. Her name was not recorded on the passenger list for that first departure, therefore she might be travelling to the Hotel Sugureta or waiting in the lobby for the 08:00 service.

Before he started the car, he sent a communique to Captain Pike, asking whether he had been able to contact the space station’s commander.

***
Nyota saw stars and decided she was dreaming.

Spock should be in this dream too. She lay on her back, and the starscape seemed to extend beyond her perpetually the way it had when they were together on the transparent penthouse floor. He should be lying beside her, watching her point out the constellations. His hand should be pointing, but also failing to point, veering off its course to bump against her fingers and snake over the gap which separated them from her thumb. *Au’e interj Aehallh, hwiiy mnekha!* He would massage round her wrist joint and thenar swell of her hand until she was wet and squirming, and he was *ya-ie’yakk* – armed and ready to open fire.

He should be in this dream. She wanted him so much.

And then a transparent layer of perception was peeled back from her eyes, and Nyota realised she must be wrong. The stars she observed needed a proper explanation. She rolled over in the direction where she had wanted Spock to be. She saw a pair of high-top running shoes with iridescent rainbow uppers.

“What language were you speaking just now?”

Tiberious stood over her, looking down. The sight of him made her remember, and with the memory there was horror that gave her cramp and brought up acid from her stomach. Nyota pushed herself off the floor so she was sitting. She swallowed and felt the burn in her throat.

“What language?” he demanded to know.

“Romulan,” she said hoarsely.

She remembered the oven timer. When the alarm sounded a fourth time, Tiberious must have grabbed her from behind. She knew his voice, and he was too strong for her to fight. He clamped some kind of cover over her nose and mouth.

“Why do you need to know Romulan?”

Tiberious walked away. He left the transparent floor, through which the stars shone, and walked into the kitchen.

Nyota worked backwards through her dreams, trying to separate the real from the drug induced. This was the Hotel Sugureta, a suite like Penthouse Three that seemed larger. Had she come here the way she thought she had? She had a recollection of being carried through VIP reception, and seeing a face behind the desk she recognised but did not know why. But she smiled when spoken to, because she was just so happy, because she thought Spock was holding her.

“Romulan is not a Federation language,” he scoffed.

Tiberious picked up a wide based carafe from the kitchen counter, and poured some of its red liquid into a waiting glass.

“To join Starfleet, I need to be able to speak with enemies as well as allies,” she said.

He knocked back his drink in a single swallow.

“I wonder which one I am,” he slurred.

He put the glass down heavily. Nyota shook her head.
“I can’t believe I am going through this again,” she said.

“What?”

Uhura experimented, got up on her knees to see how her head would feel. She was fine.

“You,” she said, “You’ve probably drunk enough to be unable to talk or walk, but that shetani inside you is your puppet master. It moves your legs, your arms, your tongue – is that what you want?”

“You don’t care what I want.”

Nyota stood.

“Manny, no one could care more than me. But even if they could, it wouldn’t be enough for you.”

He waved her words away. The force of that action made him sway on his feet. He waited until he was still, then walked to the systems console and gripped it on both sides.

“It’s going to leave me,” he said.

“You’ve said that before,” she replied, “but you never keep your promise.”

“Not me,” he shook his head. “Not me. Not this time. This time, it wants to leave me.”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

Emmanuel clenched and twisted every muscle in his face.

“Manny?”

“Nobody cares …,”

He started to choke, and then heaved in a breath and let out his words in a long, high pitched cry like a wounded animal.

“I can’t …, I can’t …,”

Carefully, Nyota came closer, off the star dusted observatory area onto the opaque kitchen floor.

“Manny, listen.”

Emmanuel shook his head, scattering tears over the console screen.

“Manny, would you trust me?”

She risked another step.

“Manny, if you let it go, would you trust me to find help for you?”

He cried so hard his shoulders bucked and buckled. She did not know whether he agreed with her, whether he had even heard her.

“Manny …?”

“Yes …,”

His answer was barely a whisper. She still didn’t know for sure what that meant, and so she
stretched out her arm, and touched him on the shoulder. He turned, and his red-eyed expression was savage.

“It’s too late!”

“It’s not.”

“Look,” he said, and pushed himself away from the console. “Look for yourself.”

The console layout was identical to the one in Penthouse Three. The display was divided into quadrants -- Amenities, Events, Suite Facilities and an access link for data and communications. Overlaying that was the same option window Spock had opened to try and control the movement of their room after it detached from the space elevator.

Nyota looked back at the observation area, at the stars, looking for a point of reference which would confirm they were in motion. Then she turned to Manny.

“What have you done?”

“I can’t do anything.”

“Then what has it done? What is happening?”

She checked the display again. If the navigation readouts were similar to starships, the 0.15 in the bottom left corner could be their impulse power, and the constantly changing numerics in the centre of the screen their coordinates. The top left figure –

Nyota exhaled a shaky breath.

“How long, Manny? When did we leave the Sugureta?”

“Two …,” he started, and then stopped, sniffed. “Not sure.”

The top left figure on the display, if her guess was right, said they were one thousand seven hundred and twenty nine kilometers from Earth.

“Where are we going?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?”

She watched, incredulous, as he left the console. He staggered more noticeably as he went back to the kitchen counter, and reached for his empty glass.

“Til we run out.”

Her husband’s free hand stretched out, trying to grab the carafe. She beat him to it, and pushed the container away.


He just shrugged.

“Manny,” she said, “0.15 impulse power isn’t enough to counteract the sun’s gravity. We will probably get dragged too close, and burn up.”
Emmanuel slumped against the counter.

“S’why I’m drunk,” he said, and gestured towards the carafe. “You can too. We won’t feel anything.”

“I am not going to die here with you.”

“No choice,” he said.

She went back to the console, and started to explore options in the navigation panel. There was a selection to programme a course, and when she chose it, the default setting was a return to point of origin. She asked the computer to proceed.

The console display flashed off and on twice before a new panel appeared on screen to tell her access to this function was denied. Behind her, she heard Emmanuel pour himself another drink. She took a long, slow breath to try and keep calm.

“Why does the entity need to kill you?”

Her husband didn’t reply.

“Or me? It can go wherever it wants. It can pick anyone it wants.”

All she heard, at first, was the sound of his glass scraping over the counter.

“Addicted,” he said.

“You’re addicted to it,” she retorted. “But it …,”

She turned to look at him.

“It’s addicted to you?”

Emmanuel was trying, and failing, to lift his drink.

“And—and what, is it jealous of me,” she demanded, “because you want us back together?”

What he did with his head may have been nodding.

“Can’t—control you,” he said.

“Damn right it can’t.”

Nyota returned to the console. She pushed the navigation pane to one side; struggling with that wasn’t playing to her strengths. She choose the data and communications quadrant instead.

***

Len was in a good frame of mind when he got out of the cab. Turned out the driver grew up near Tuscaloosa. She gave McCoy a bit of news about developments at Emory, where the doctor got his first degree, where he and Jocelyn first set up home. The cabbie had been dating the manager of the university bookstore, until she found someone else and decided to relocate.

That was the point in her story when she pulled up in the driveway of Messier Cluster 18. Len got out. He waved to the maintenance workers who were up on scaffolding across the cul-de-sac. And he shook his head, remembering events that happened a little further down the same road the night
before. He hadn’t heard a peep from Jim.

The front entrance security system asked his name, recorded his reply and transferred an image of his face to South Axis Apartment. He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

He gathered from Hikaru and Ben that they hadn’t been able to get any commitment from Jim about the wedding. And that was strange. In fact a lot seemed strange when he thought about his Iowa roommate. Why, last week Jim had sent him one photograph every day from five different locations: Vallejo, Boyes Hot Springs, Monte Rio, Bodega Bay and Nick’s Cove. All the shots were taken outside swanky places Kirk could not afford unless he’d somehow rediscovered gold in California.

The front entry security system told him it was sending his identity details to South Axis a second time.

Gaila appeared in every photograph. Jury was still out, in McCoy’s opinion, as to whether she was or was not a good match for Jim Kirk. Unquestionably, she was smarter than him. But she didn’t do anything to rein in that boy’s natural impulsiveness.

And if Gaila wasn’t bad enough, there was that whole damn 24th Street Diner crew. They were supposed to be a harem, some kind of familial unit, but God knew what that actually meant and anyway, did Orions really ever settle down? That’s what Kirk needed – a partner he couldn’t leave, whose demands would keep him too busy to think about getting himself into trouble.

The front entry computer told him the second hail had received no response. It asked whether he wished to leave a message.

“Sorry?”

Uhura had agreed to be ready for half past nine. He told the security computer as much, and asked whether it had any message for him.

It searched its databank, and replied in the negative.

As he turned and started to walk back to the cab, one of the scaffolding crew came down to ground level and jogged over the road to meet him.

“I’m Triste,” the worker introduced herself. “Are you supposed to be meeting anyone?”

McCoy grunted his acknowledgement.

“Might not be related, but there was a car here maybe forty-five minutes ago. Did just like you – parked in the drive and stood at the entrance a while before they went away.”

Leonard raised his eyebrows in mild interest. “Might not mean anything.”

Then his driver lowered her window and put her head out. “Is she telling you about the other cab?”

“What other cab?” McCoy asked. He and Triste started walking to the car.

“This wasn’t a cab we saw,” the maintenance worker said. “Unless Vulcans do taxis.”

“Vulcan?” McCoy said, but with more incredulity.

“When I got your booking, I was loading the route map for this address,” the driver told them. ”And I noticed the last time one of our cars came here. It was just after 1am this morning.”
“So Vulcans don’t do taxis,” Triste said.

The doctor ignored her, started to think back. He and Nyota left the party at eleven thirty-five. That drive was ten minutes, twelve maximum. He left South Axis apartment before midnight. How long it took him to get Jim down from that scaffolding he wasn’t certain.

“Does your data tell you whether the cab picked up or dropped off,” McCoy asked, “and if it picked up, where it went?”

The cabbie asked her dashboard computer. It told them the car picked up two passengers for the Sugureta Hotel. And it had a security addendum – one of the passengers was unable to walk, and had to be carried to and from the vehicle.

“I don’t know,” McCoy said. “If that was who I think it was, she had a wheelchair. She wouldn’t have needed to be carried.”

He didn’t mention the injury was faked. He’d agreed to play it for real.

“OK,” the driver replied. “But it was definitely this address. Same apartment.”

Leonard ground the toe of his boot into the pavement and scowled. None of this was making any sense.

“I need to make a call.”

The driver switched off the cab’s engine. “How long will you be?”

McCoy opened the back seat and retrieved his PADD.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I can pay for the extra time.”

“I’m not charging,” the driver said. “Call it southern generosity. I just need enough time to think of a reason for the delay.”

The doctor smiled as he input Gaila’s account number and requested a video link.
Kyoko Sanchez had been very tempted to apply for her job under a false name. A lot of people her age did that. Pseudoculture shops would sell anyone a fully grown, real time alternate identity, complete with Federation birth certificate, photos, vids, exam results and medical records. A lot of her friends took the cheaper option and gave themselves spare names, used a new one whenever they needed a fresh start.

But she didn’t want to hide who she was. She got on well with her fathers Genzo and Emilio; she wanted to work in their hotel because she was proud of the business they’d built. The challenge was proving that what appeared to be favouritism was not. Fellow Sugureta employees either fawned on her, in the hope of ingratiating themselves, or else they were barely polite and bitched about her when they thought she couldn't hear.

But while they did that, she worked the least popular shift on VIP reception: 1am to 9am. And she looked after the android stock, even though that wasn’t in her contract.

Her boss, Arne Wouters, was not the fawning type. So when he arrived around 8am on Sunday morning, Kyoko didn’t tell him what was on her mind. She let him go straight to his office. She checked the arrivals report, and assigned a personal “welcomer” to each expected guest.

Sanchez rarely got to do welcoming. Guests who arrived during her shift were usually very tired and wanted their rest first, before anything else. But whenever she offered to cover dayshift (which she did -- another way of proving herself) she relished the chance to meet the people who had reserved the Sugureta’s penthouses.

Those guests – their names, faces and preferences -- stayed in her memory. Kyoko definitely remembered the young Starfleet cadet who came from Africa but spoke beautiful Spanish. They rode up in the space elevator together, and Uhura got an augmented version of the hotel’s history straight from the daughter of the men who envisioned it.

And there was no judgement in the cadet’s face, no strained expression that said, “Ugh – the owners’ kid. Bet she doesn’t have to work hard”.

Kyoko knew from the reservation that Uhura was sharing the suite with a male officer. When they got to Penthouse Three, the cadet kept her busy with questions about the replicator menus, ambient music and the contents of the ‘pampering cabinet’ in the spa room. She was a very cool customer, but you could see excitement in her eyes. She was planning to give her man one te quiero mucho evening.
Talk about surprise when that man in question checked in later, and turned out to be Vulcan!

Well, Sanchez had thought, Uhura didn’t judge me so I won’t judge her.

That had been less than two weeks ago. What Kyoko wanted to tell Mr. Wouters was that, shortly after she began Saturday graveyard shift, a woman she would swear was the same African cadet came into reception in the arms of a completely different male guest.

Mr. Kasembe referred to her as his wife. And the woman he carried seemed okay with that. *Eso que ni qué*, she looked blissful. They were both dressed in white formal wear, like they might have been to a wedding. So okay, Kyoko was going to take the man at his word, until the woman spoke to her in Spanish.

“*Es bueno verte otra vez.*” It’s nice to see you again.

Mr. Kasembe patted his ‘wife’ on the shoulder and said Sanchez must excuse her for rambling in unknown languages; Mrs. Kasembe was having ‘a difficult early pregnancy’.

Kyoko thought ”Mrs. Kasembe” just sounded drunk. But she knew she must be careful what she said to the would be husband. Her fathers told her Mr. Kasembe had purchased his penthouse outright, and made a big donation towards the construction of additional suites. So she asked him if his wife would like a consultation with the hotel doctor.

“No no,” he insisted, “that won’t be necessary. I am a qualified doctor.”

Once he had turned away to walk towards his private elevator, Kyoko shook her head.

She was suspicious as hell, but she didn’t know enough to say what exactly bothered her. So instead of telling Mr. Wouters later on, she finished the welcoming assignments and logged the last two calls she had taken. Three guests came downstairs to treat themselves to real food from the breakfast room, and Sanchez sent their orders to the kitchen.

Then it was 8:45am, and the day team arrived to relieve her. She let them take over the desk while she went down to the android storage for a quick check before she left.

The hotel stored its AI stock in a concrete basement, an area as large as the Sugureta's ground level. Kyoko had taken inventory before her shift began; she only needed to check whether any robots had been sent back for repair.

She read the computer stock entries more than once, to be sure she hadn’t been mistaken. Then she transferred the data to her PADD, signed off the AI register and returned to VIP reception. She went to her manager’s closed office door and knocked.

“Come in,” he said.

Mr. Wouters greeted her with an expression of controlled neutrality. “Good morning, Sanchez. Is there a problem?”

“I’m not certain, sir.”

A corner of his mouth twitched, making his thin moustache look like a jumpy caterpillar. He was waiting for her to impress him.

“It’s just that, I checked the bot stock, and we had an unusual number of requests for androids at two forty-three this morning.”
“How many?”

“How many?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Twenty-five different guests requested additional androids?” Wouters asked, incredulous.

“No sir. One guest requested all twenty-five. Mr. Kasembe in Penthouse One.”

Mr. Wouters sat back in his chair, refocussed his eyes on a point halfway across his desk, and appeared to be thinking.

“Did Mr. Kasembe pay the deposit on these droids?”

“He did.”

“Did he specify when he would return them?”

Sanchez nodded. “Today no later than fifteen hundred hours.”

“Were they – all the same models?”

Kyoko didn’t see how that mattered. She consulted her PADD.

“Ten G733’s, ten Linscient and five airborne.”

“Okay.”

Her manager appeared to sink into trance. His eyes gradually opened wider and wider, and then he must have realised and blinked.

“Mr. Kasembe is a rather eccentric guest,” he said.

To put it mildly, Sanchez thought.

“He is also a very important one,” Wouters added.

“I’m aware of that, sir. I wouldn’t have brought it to your attention, except …,”

And she told him about ‘Mrs. Kasembe’. Kyoko didn’t get a reaction until she mentioned Commander Spock.

“You think this woman is the same one who stayed in Penthouse Three with the Commander?”

Kyoko said yes and explained why. All the while Wouters pushed against his backrest until he was almost horizontal and staring at his office ceiling.

“I wondered,” Kyoko continued, “if we should contact Commander Spock and check—,”

“No,” Wouters said, and sat up quickly. “Even if you are right – especially if you are right – we have no idea what problems we might start if we tell one of these men about the existence of the other.”

“But the droids?”

Her manager shrugged. “I have no idea what he wants to do with so many robots. But he’s paid for them, and it’s not as if we will run short on a Sunday.”
“No,” Kyoko conceded, “that’s true.”

Now she felt stupid for bringing it up in the first place. Wouters was upright again in his chair and doing what he was doing when she came in – watching a marketing presentation for lava fountains. He had been trying to convince her fathers to install one in the Tochi Bar, to make it more interesting and attract more ground level custom. They weren’t sure that was the solution.

“Will you be joining your parents for breakfast?” her manager enquired.

“Yes sir,” she said, as she watched the video footage of the fountain inside the Gregorian, a competitor hotel just south of the shuttleport. They could boast a floor to ceiling transparent cylinder in the lobby, that spouted blue and yellow fluid mechanics to match their corporate colours.

“Give them my regards.”

***


The console menu let Nyota select these options. While she set up the alert to go out in four different languages, as per Starfleet protocol, she heard a single noise, all too familiar, and guessed that Manny had passed out on the floor behind her. She shut her eyes momentarily. That she should be reliving the nightmare that their marriage became, and the very darkest day at that …,

Seven years ago, it was a mercy he got drunk. A sober Emmanuel would have tied better knots round her ankles, so that she could not have escaped. A sober husband would have sealed up all the ways out of their house, instead of forgetting the flap on the back door for the dog. And if he’d been sober, he might have considered a shorter detonation delay on the explosives he’d packed beneath their living room furniture.

Hindsight convinced her that he really wanted that suicide pact to fail. She could only hope the same was true now.

She opened her eyes, checked the alerts again. Honshu should pick up the frequency first. One of her fellow crewmen would match up her subspace signature and cadet number, and it would confirm why she was late for her first shift.

But when she asked the console to send the messages, the display blinked once, and its well-modulated voice told her she would need to re-enter the guest access code.

Uhura slammed the flat of her hand on the console in frustration. Then she looked round the kitchen. She went to the fridge and scrolled through the notes display on the door. She made a quick tour of the entire floorspace, checking the tops of counters, tables, chests of drawers, armrests on chairs. How much time should she spend, and where to look? The code could be kept anywhere, or nowhere, except for one man’s memory.

“Manny!”

She crouched over his prone form and shouted into his ear. He did not respond to that, or to several slaps across the face. Uhura turned him over, checked his tuxedo. A folded scrap of coated paper came out from the pocket in the lining of his jacket. It was grimy from repeated handling, and had familiar looking scrollwork printed on the corners. Nyota shook her head.

Manny had hated the fact they married in secret, away from home, because none of their relations supported their requests to wed, and no local official would take the ceremony. Tanzanian weddings
were family affairs. Nyota tried to put a brave face on it. She designed and printed a few invitations, just for keepsakes.

That was what she got when she unfolded the paper.

“Emmanuel Francis Kasembe and Nyota Aminifu Halili Uhura request your presence as they make their wedding vows. Ceremony to take place at Mombasa Civic Registration Offices, Dedan Kimathi Avenue, at ten forty-five.”

Below that text, in larger characters, Nyota had the stardate printed in silver digits.

Operating on a hunch, she took the invitation to the console and typed that date into the guest access code field.

“Accepted,” the computer confirmed.

***

Genzo Mori and Emilio Sanchez built their offices overtop the Tochi Bar, but with a different view. They didn’t need windows facing the Tochi’s gardens; they had their own green space on the roof. They wanted to be aware of comings and goings, the energy of their establishment. So their workspaces looked out over the car park and main entrance. Their boardroom had a view of the external Honshu departure facility and the massive compression tower, and they often took meals there.

Kyoko arrived a little late. Her fathers had finished their soup. Genzo was cutting his tofu into pieces while Emilio mashed his with both chopsticks.

“Hey, mi Hermosa,” Emilio said as she sat down, “good night?”

Kyoko picked up her spoon and swirled her soup to find a piece of daikon.

“Why aren’t all rich men normal, like you two?” she asked.

Genzo smiled into his cup of tea. Emilio paused his tofu demolition.

“Ella es mejor que el dinero, eh, Genzo?”

“Without a doubt,” Genzo replied. “Did you meet an ‘interesting’ guest, sweetie?”

They loved her stories. She told them what she’d told Arne Wouters, but with the freedom to use more colourful adjectives and to make them groan when she described the lava fountain video.

“Oh, we’ll probably let him install one,” Emilio said. “But not just a Gregorian copycat. He’s got to give us an idea that’s fresh.”

Genzo set down his chopsticks and looked lost in thought. He addressed the boardroom computer.

“Yuka, could you link us with the security systems for Penthouse One?”

His husband and daughter gave him curious looks. Yuka, whose access was unlimited, confirmed the link.

“Could we get a report on the status of all the androids inside? Their location and whether they are functioning?”
He finished his tofu while the computer searched for that data. Kyoko ate her soup as though she might need to evacuate the room at any moment.

***

“Alert has failed.” The penthouse console apologised for its inability to send her messages, and asked Nyota if she wanted to try again. She did, and the second attempt also failed.

“Mrs. Kasembe …,”

A voice, a new voice, came from the bedroom, and began to move gradually closer.

“Are you experiencing difficulty with the communication facilities in this suite?”

The android was tall as her, with body cladding in a tropical shade of blue. It strode into the kitchen and stopped beside the console. It’s translucent, silicon eyelids imitated a slow blink and it leaned one shoulder casually against the wall.

Nyota got all that from a glance. She was still searching the console menus, in case some way existed to assess the computer fault and repair.

“The Hotel Sugureta have invested in the latest artificial intelligence to ensure you always have a helping hand while maintaining your privacy,” the droid added.

She could not see any option. She made a third attempt to send her subspace transmissions, and that failed.

“Mrs. Kasembe –,,”

“Please don’t call me that,” she said. “I intend to stop being Mrs. Kasembe as soon as possible.”

“Then I am already assisting,” the android assured her. “Your wedding vows included a promise to remain bound as husband and wife until death. I expect your deaths to happen shortly.”

Uhura stopped working and looked at the robot. The android pushed itself away from the wall.

“Tiberious,” she said.

“May I remind you that this label is a reference to my partnership with your husband, and not a true name. My state is nameless.”

She started a fourth attempt at communication.

“Is this how you will end,” the android asked, “hopelessly attempting to call for help, using a system I can easily undermine?”

“Hotel Security will notice that this penthouse has detached from the space elevator.”

“They already have. But as Mr. Kasembe owns his suite, he is free to detach it and take it wherever he wishes.”

The console informed her that her fourth attempt failed. Nyota fist her hands in anger, and then released them, stood straight and squared her shoulders.

“No Starfleet officer gives up in the face of death. You can kill me if that’s what you want, but I won’t let you break my will.”
And she determined she would not look at the robot again. She tried to send a fifth hail.

***

Yuka told them that, of the twenty-five androids, only one was active and currently located in the kitchen.

“The remaining twenty-five are on standby. Locations as follows: G733 times four are stationed inside the bedroom dressing area. G733 times five are in the evapora. All Linscient models are in the spa room and the airborne units are held inside the kitchen cupboards.”

Genzo and Emilio exchanged puzzled frowns. Emilio asked Yuka how many of the twenty-four inactive droids had been active since they were assigned to Penthouse One. Yuka replied that none of them had remained active longer than it took to reach Mr. Kasembe’s suite and store themselves away.

“See? Isn’t that weird?” Kyoko asked her fathers.

They both nodded.

“*Es como una cabra,*” Genzo said. “But he isn’t doing anything wrong.”

***

Spock parked his car strategically, where he could see who entered and left the Honshu departure bay. His PADD had checked the passenger lists while he drove to the hotel, and confirmed that no one named Uhura had taken the 05:00 lift-off, or had checked in for the 08:00. Vulcan concentration skill proved its worth; he stayed in his seat and watched the departure bay doors without reacting to distractions from 07:24 until the elevator doors sealed shut at 08:01.

Then he rang Captain Pike, who left a message during that interval.

“Sorry if I interrupted a conversation,” the Captain said.

“Sir,” Spock replied, “the only conversation I have had since I left the Enterprise is this one.”

“Uhura didn’t want to speak with you?”

“I have yet to determine Cadet Uhura’s location.”

“I see,” the Captain said. “Then you’re really not gonna like what I’ve got to tell you.”

***

Nyota held her resolve. Tiberious finally decided there was no advantage to keeping an android posted at her shoulder. The robot wandered away. Uhura thought she heard a door open and shut.

She had tried to send fifteen subspace transmissions without success. It did not seem unreasonable to pause those efforts, to take care of other needs.

She was very thirsty. If the entity could control any of the computerised systems, she suspected she might not get uncontaminated water from the replicator. She wagered that the suite would have some kind of built in supply for washing, and fetched a tumbler from one of the cupboards.

As she ran the kitchen tap, she puzzled over the five metal capsules that had been lined up along the shelf above the glassware. The same objects had not been in Penthouse Three. But she could not
spare them much thought. She remembered the supplemental oxygen supplies as she set her empty glass on the counter, and pulled the breathing apparatus out from their storage space under the sink.

She went back to the console and asked it for the status of life support systems.

***

The office android came into the boardroom to clear away their breakfast dishes. Emilio got up from his chair, gave his daughter a kiss on the top of her head and left for a meeting.

Genzo helped himself to the last of the tea. And he watched Kyoko. She, of course, knew she was being watched because she studiously avoided looking at him. Her father decided not to force anything, but turned his chair so that it faced the windows instead.

A correct choice.

“It’s just that --,” Kyoko burst out, unable to keep her thoughts to herself. “I could tell Uhura really loved the Vulcan Commander. She wasn’t faking it for my benefit; why should she?”

“Maybe the Commander is her secret,” Genzo said.

“Dad, if you wanted to cheat on Emilio, would you do it in the same hotel?”

Genzo chuckled. “There is no way to answer that without incriminating myself.”

Then Kyoko sniffed with her own amusement at the idea. “I mean, you wouldn’t pick up some guy and invite him up to the roof garden --,”

Genzo played along. “I’m sure I could get a bed in our gazebo.”

“Yeah, and when Emilio asks you,” Kyoko paused to giggle, “you say … you just say …,”

The joke was getting the better of her.

“I’d say outdoor air always makes me tired,” Genzo said.

Kyoko had her head back, eyes squeezed shut and the walls echoed with her laughter. That might be enough to take her mind off what was probably better left alone.

Genzo knew this Vulcan. He was the one Arne Wouters met, the one who beamed down to attend the first investigation meeting into the Penthouse Three incident. He was, like all Vulcans Genzo had met, courteous, contained and scrupulous about attention to what was factual. Secretly, father agreed with his daughter -- the Commander hardly seemed like the kind who would sneak around with another man’s wife.

And it also seemed like more than coincidence that Genzo should look out the windows and see this same Commander leaving a car parked near the Honshu departure lounge.
**Communications**

Chapter Notes

Glossary of Terms used in this chapter:

“Nash skladan tor na' S’chn T’gai Spock.” (Vulcan: “This message is for S’Chn T’gai Spock.”)

“Ko-mekh” (Vulcan: “mother”)

Kyoko finished her breakfast, and asked her father if she could use their executive bathroom to shower and take a nap on the couch in Emilio’s office. Genzo told her that was fine.

He stayed in the boardroom, ostensibly to finish a report he had started to type, but truthfully because he wanted to watch Commander Spock a while longer. The Vulcan stood a few meters back from the entrance to the Honshu departure facility. And he remained in that same spot, virtually motionless, for twenty-nine minutes. Once, Genzo saw him tap himself on the left shoulder of his uniform tunic and begin speaking, so he was in communication with someone.

At 10:17 according to the boardroom’s digital time display, Genzo saw Spock take a call from his PADD. At no time during the conversation did the Commander’s eyes stray from the departure facility, and Genzo wondered if there was a technical issue with the elevator. He asked Yuka to open a channel to Wilma Sylvester’s line in the Operations Office.

Wilma had to put him on hold because she received an alarm call at the same time. Outside the boardroom windows, Commander Spock finished his call, tucked his PADD under his arm, and resumed his stationary vigil.

“Genzo,” Wilma came back on the line, “ice build-up at stratosphere level. We’re dealing with it, so I don’t expect that to disrupt service.”

She mentioned a couple of other servicing issues, minor problems. Since they were talking anyway, Genzo diverted the conversation and checked which dates she had free for the next meeting to investigate the Penthouse Three incident. And before they signed off she invited him, Emilio and Kyoko to her fiftieth birthday celebration, a surprise she wasn’t supposed to know about.

“I found out it’s a beach party, so a few extra people won’t be noticed.”

Down in the hotel lot, a taxi drove between the rows of parked cars and pulled up behind the Vulcan Commander. For the first time since Genzo had started observing him, Spock paused his ceaseless watch over the departure lounge and turned to face the car.

***

Atmospheric integrity, time left 00:58:02.

Uhura had sent a total of sixty-seven failed distress calls, an average of one every ninety-nine seconds. In between, she accessed every other facility the hotel computer offered Mr. Kasembe on his premium guest account. She reserved a table for one in the ground floor breakfast room, purchased perfume, lipstick and a silk scarf with the Sugureta logo and chose the option for delivery
to the room. She requested a consultation with the beautician as soon as possible. She filled in the
guest satisfaction survey. She took her own photo and uploaded it to several postcards which she
mailed to Gaila, Hikaru, Spock and her own PADD, wherever it might be. She played a card game
with a group of guests all logged in from their various consoles, even revealed her first name.

The entity, of course, might be able to simulate all these responses and she might not be
communicating with the hotel at all. But she was determined to test its ability. The console offered
her a case of real champagne if she would contribute a testimonial for their next brochure. In
between distress calls sixty-eight to seventy-seven, two hundred and fifty words of gushing praise
were written and sent. In the middle of an otherwise Standard sentence, she included a phrase in
Spanish, ‘Por favor ayúdame, he sido secuestrado’ – Please help me, I have been abducted.

Atmospheric integrity, time left 00:31:10.

Nyota set off the fire alarm from the point near the suite entrance. It made an irritating buzz, set off
ceiling sprinklers which soaked her hair and ruined Gaila’s beautiful jacket and skirt. The display on
the door told her that an automatic signal had alerted Security.

When she ran back to the console in the kitchen, she reached for its display and bruised her knuckles.

“Nooo!!”

To protect the computer from fire damage, the alarm had activated a force field to surround the
mechanism. Nyota could no longer access; she could only read.

Atmospheric integrity, time left 00:25:13.

***

Genzo used his PADD to check the security cameras inside Emilio’s office. Kyoko seemed fast
asleep on the couch, wrapped in the quilt they concealed by purchasing a new coffee table with
integral storage.

He left his PADD in the boardroom, on his chair, to make it look as though he would return soon.
Yuka told him there was an incoming call from Arne Wouters; he told the computer he expected as
much and said he would see the hotel manager in person shortly. Then he left the executive level
and took the stairs which led straight down to VIP reception.

An Orion woman in cadet reds had climbed out of that taxi in the parking lot. Commander Spock
seemed to recognise and expect her, directed all his eye contact and words at her rather than the
second passenger, another student who had brought an emergency med kit.

The conversation, even when viewed from a distance, looked intense. After perhaps a minute of
exchange, the Commander and the Orion turned and ran towards the hotel. The medical student
looked confused, perhaps a little angry, but headed the same direction eventually.

Arne Wouters’ office door was directly opposite the ground floor stairwell. It surprised Genzo how
many people waited outside: Lazlo the manicurist, Sheila Xerr from Marketing and the newest recruit
to Security … Genzo recalled the surname McIver, but was not certain.

Before he could ask them to stand aside, Commander Spock strode through from the corridor that led
from reception.

“Mr. Mori,” Spock called to him, “I must speak with you urgently.”
An argument started, when Genzo tried to usher the Commander into Arne’s office ahead of the others. Sheila led the charge, so to speak – started to give her boss a list of their concerns and why it was critical they get the manager’s attention first. He was about to interrupt when she mentioned the name Kasembe and the focus of Commander Spock’s sharp gaze moved from him to her.

Mr. Wouters chose that same moment to open his door.

“You’d better all come in,” he said.

***

Atmospheric integrity, time left 00:12:22.

Uhura fitted Emmanuel with his breathing apparatus, praying he would not regain consciousness and try to remove it, or vomit into the mask. That was all she could bring herself to do. She had no desire to remain near him for however long they might survive.

She returned to the penthouse entrance. It had a greeting facility, which would allow guests to record a message and play it to anyone who came up the space elevator wanting access. Useless now, Nyota took a chance that it might be one thing Tiberious would leave alone.

She reworked the settings for a combined video and sound recording, checked her face in the preview display and took a deep breath before she let the camera run.

“Nash skladan tor na’ S’chn T’gai Spock.”

Speaking Vulcan would underline how personal this was. She wanted no doubt to remain in his mind, if she could not tell him any other way.

“If I am not able to speak with you again, I must assure you in the strongest terms that I retain the affection and high regard which caused me to claim you before the High Council. I understand that my recent actions have created uncertainty about our relationship. It was never my intention to resume a partnership with Emmanuel Kasembe, but to demonstrate my loyalty to our families and our childhood friendship by endeavouring to help him with his addictions.

Unfortunately, I now realise that what I actually provided my husband, by consenting to speak with him, was the means to continue to deny reality. He believes he could reform if we remained together. I have tried to convince him otherwise, and Admiral Migiro will attest that I contacted her to annul the marriage.”

Nyota paused, pursed her lips, hoped the bitterness would not show as she continued.

“But my husband has taken drastic steps to try and prevent a divorce.”

The simulated voice of the kitchen computer console interrupted, and issued a warning that air quality would significantly decrease within five minutes. Nyota switched to Romulan.

“Most beloved Aehallh, I am telling you so you will never have doubts again. I can think of no better way to use my last breaths. I adore you. I have never met a man who is your equal. I will die dreaming of you, of how it might have felt to dance with you. And I will deeply regret the pain you have suffered because of my foolish decisions – the one made when I was seventeen and the other now. Please take whatever comfort you can from my words. Our short time together has been a revelation; it has become my definition of love.”

A moment’s inspiration directed her hands. They reached behind her head, unclasped the necklace
Spock had given her. They used the chain to bind her left index and middle fingers together in the shape of ozh’esta. The vokaya pendant hung between the digits, resting against her proximal joints. Nyota extended this decorated gesture towards the camera, as if she could touch him. Then she took back her hand, adjusted its shape to present a Vulcan salute.

“Live long and prosper, ashayam.”

***

Spock had to exercise his authority, when it became clear that Arne Wouters and Genzo Mori were finding it difficult to process the amount of information their staff had to give. Several facts were clear. Penthouse One had detached from the space elevator shortly after three that morning. No destination coordinates were programmed into Navigation. Life support systems could sustain atmospheric integrity inside the suite for several hours, but that time had almost elapsed.

Long range scanners could not detect Mr. Kasembe’s room, nor had any distress calls been logged. What had been received were illogical requests for immediate delivery of items from the gift shop, an appointment with the hotel beautician and a submission for the corporate brochure.

Spock took over the moment Mr. Mori translated the Spanish sentence which had been oddly inserted into this Standard composition.

He spoke to the member of Security.

“I must access your computer records immediately. The subspace signals you have received will indicate the position and trajectory of the penthouse when they were sent.”

No one resisted his orders. The Marketing Manager fetched Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu from VIP reception, so she could interrogate the files. Genzo Mori gave access to Yuka, the computer system which held guests’ confidential data, and confirmed with video footage the presence of Nyota and Emmanuel inside the suite when it detached. Arne Wouters called Security to be assured they were continuing to send hails to the console inside Penthouse One, even though they had received no response.

Spock relayed everything by communicator to Captain Pike on board the Enterprise. The captain put the ship at his disposal, told him they would head for the last known location of the suite as soon as they had coordinates.

***

Atmospheric integrity, time left 00:01:18.

Nyota chose the dividing wall between the entrance to Penthouse One and the bedroom. The firm surface behind her back kept her posture straight as she settled herself on the floor, put on her breathing apparatus and fitted the mask over her nose and mouth.

Oxygen from the tanks seemed to open her head, to make reality that much sharper, and she shed tears. But she could not afford strong emotion; it would waste breath. So she closed her eyes. The bond with her mother had been faint, since the katra of T'Shin had departed for Vulcan with Chibuzo. But it was there. Nyota communicated no regrets – they could die with her. Some time back, she had decided what she would share with her Vulcan guardian in the event that Starfleet duty put her in a life-threatening situation.

-Ko-mekh, I take comfort in memories of you. Receive again my gratitude for your care and guidance during my childhood-
Her hands folded themselves in her lap, still clasping Spock’s pendant. Uhura chose a passage from the Kir’Shara to recite, a homily about the immensity of the universe, to help her achieve a state of peace while she remained conscious.

***

Coordinates were determined. Sub-Lieutenant Gaila transmitted them to the Enterprise while Spock asked to be beamed aboard ship.

Doctor Chapel and Chief Engineer Olsen met him in the transporter room. They wore full spacesuits and had one ready for him, along with a charged phaser. While he changed, Olsen contacted the bridge and asked the Captain for an update. Pike said they were scanning a three hundred kilometre radius from the last known location of Penthouse One.

“It may be possible,” Spock said, “that the entity working with Emmanuel Kasembe will detect our proximity. We do not know what action it might take. Perhaps it could distort our scans.”

“In that case, we’ll need something else,” Pike replied, “some other indicator of the penthouse location. Do you know whether the entity produces an energy signature?”

“Negative. But that assumption is plausible.”

“Let’s see what we find.”

***

The tiniest noise – a buzz, a crackle like static. From deep in meditation Nyota heard it, recognised it, and her mind went searching for the matching memory.

It was something she heard on the space station, during a team exercise. They had to find their way out of a holodeck maze, and one of their group figured they might benefit if they went back and freed a prisoner from a brig cell they passed along the way. When they used the external controls to drop the force field wall, it made a similar sound.

Uhura opened her eyes.

Instead of standing, she crept into the kitchen on her hands and knees. When she reached the computer console, she put out a hand carefully to see if anything would stop her touching the display. And she was rewarded for guessing correctly that the fire protection had been withdrawn.

Then she did stand, and worked quickly. There was no reason why this distress call, the seventy-eighth, should succeed where the previous seventy-seven had failed. She acted on a hope that the entity might have left, satisfied that her fate and Emmanuel’s were sealed and hungry for a new source of fear.

The console rewarded this second correct guess. It confirmed the signal had transmitted.

Her breath caught with surprise, and then it caught again because she could not get air. A vacuum shrank her mask until it fit tight against her face.

-Whoever finds you now will only pity you, because they did not reach you before your oxygen supply malfunctioned-

She clawed her way underneath the mask, tore it back from her mouth. The atmosphere left in the penthouse was residual; she could swallow it in gasps and only feel dizzy. She got back down on
the floor, somehow. While she concentrated on the hard labour of respiration, Tiberious forced her mind’s eye to view the worst scenario as if she were a fly on the wall, looking down on herself as she took her last breath. And seconds after that, Spock finding her, lifting her corpse and pressing her face against his.

***

“Transporter room,” Pike shouted. “We got a signal. Prepare to beam down.”

***

In her mind, Uhura remained outside her body. It made sense. What little she had studied about death told her that many humanoid species experienced this disassociation, the brain’s peculiar way of handling its own demise. But while there was uniformity in what the brain thought it saw, what it thought it heard could vary. Nyota heard a cacophony – bangs, slams, shattering, one siren and several crunches of impact against metal. She did not know what this was meant to represent.

And then it went quiet and dark. She did not know what to make of that either. She had reached the place where perhaps everyone arrived eventually, the threshold beyond which was eternal silence. She felt at peace. Did she have a katra? If so, what would it do?

She had a sense that she was breaking up, her atoms disentangling from their molecular arrangements to find a new purpose. She wished them well. She must have a katra, if she could perceive all this.

Pain, when it returned, came as a terrible shock. Her mind tried to banish the sensation, angry and unwilling to accept what it felt even when it could be specific about the exact nature of the discomfort. Her throat hurt.

Then slowly, undeniably, other parts of her body reported in like soldiers who had been missing in action. From the knees down, her legs were dangling in midair. She could not move her shoulders; all round her upper back she seemed pressed tight. The side of her face rested against an uneven surface that shifted under the skin again and again.

That motion finally tipped a balance, and she regained the power of sight. Her head slipped back and she saw his eyes, close to hers and dark with worry. A marvel – he had become yet more beautiful. And she knew where her left hand now lay, over the collar of her jacket. She lifted it, placed her fingertips against Spock’s mouth and realised the vokaya necklace was still tangled round her knuckles.
The blood ethanol levels amazed Christine most. She asked Evans to run his tricorder over Emmanuel Kasembe again, and he got the same results. Imagine, if the situation had been different, if she had to register a cause of death. She wouldn’t be able to say which killed him – suffocation or alcohol poisoning.

Evans, always astute, knew that the nod of her head meant ‘let’s move this one off the transporter’.

That left Spock on the platform, carrying his favourite cadet. Chapel noted that Uhura had regained consciousness, as they expected. Her bioscan gave no cause for concern.

She heard the cadet say to the Commander, “You’re hurt.”

Lucky was Christine’s opinion of his condition. Because he made a beeline for his beloved the moment they beamed into the penthouse, Spock did not give his usual diligence to observing his surroundings. That lapse put him directly in the line of fire when five airborne androids burst from the kitchen cupboard. One fired a laser that shattered his visor and burned through his spacesuit before he could grab it and smash its body on the floor. Olsen shot down two more, and that was when the rest flew away to fetch their reinforcements.

“It is not a serious wound,” Spock assured her. “Our Chief Engineer has sustained graver injuries.”

A big blue robot had been the next adversary to deal with. It marched into the kitchen and aimed its weapon arm at the Commander’s head as he was pulling off his helmet. But Christine had already ordered the transporter room to energise the couple out of there. Shots fired, but they passed through the space once occupied and struck Olsen in both legs.

Uhura knew nothing about the androids. Spock was having to explain what the Sugureta management advised them. Christine had been the last person left standing inside Penthouse One, as the nineteen remaining AI units emerged from their storage locations. She thought she was a dead duck. Then the blue robot ordered all his mechanical cohorts to hold their fire.

And he addressed her. “Can you repair my mortal?”

He pointed to Emmanuel, lying on the kitchen floor.

Christine hoped this was the entity’s attempt to bargain.

“If I try,” she offered, “will you let this one leave?” She pointed at poor Olsen, collapsed and writhing with pain.

The blue android agreed. Christine communicated with Evans, who had a critical response team waiting in Transporter Room One, and the Chief Engineer was beamed back to the Enterprise.

And then there was a tricky choice to make. Christine had done some homework on Emmanuel Kasembe, and all the aliases which might be connected to him: Tiberious, Nincor, K’Rus Hseia. If half the allegations were true he was dangerous, possibly guilty of many capital crimes in addition to this abduction and attempted murder. Some would say she wasn’t doing the Alpha Quadrant any favours by sparing his life.
But Kasembe hadn’t always been bad, certainly not before he met the entity. And she knew the Veassi psychiatric facility on Betazed specialised in cases of telepathic dependency. If they could wean the man away from the real source of his criminal inclinations, then that would be healing indeed.

Nevertheless, Christine questioned her real motives. Promising to look after Emmanuel also saved her own skin. And then there was the look Spock gave her when she materialised on the transporter platform with Mr. Kasembe.

The cadet became her unlikely source of reassurance. As Spock was describing the confrontation with the androids, Uhura was suddenly anxious.

“Where is Manny? Is he all right?”

Spock’s eyes lost all the tenderness they were betraying. He turned stiffly so Uhura would face the man Christine and Evans were laying out on a gurney.

“He should make it,” Christine said. “Though he’s tried bloody hard not to. We’ll dose him with an estannic to moderate the detoxification symptoms.”

Whatever misgivings she had about Spock’s relationship with a human woman, she had greater ones about the cadet’s marriage. Uhura ought not to lose sight of what this unconscious man had actually tried to do to her.

“Commander,” she said, “I will be asking Security to open one of the intensive care cells inside the Enterprise brig. Surveillance will be constant and treatment given indirectly as much as possible.”

She gave Uhura a look, one that tried to say, ‘you must know what you need to do now’, before she and Evans wheeled the gurney out of Transporter Room One.

***

Spock let one of his arms go slack, lowering Nyota’s legs until her feet touched the floor. He tilted her shoulders to give her a taste of carrying her own weight, but kept his hold on her back a few seconds longer. She rolled her neck, to see how her head felt.

“I think I’m okay,” she said.

He let her go. He stooped to pick up his damaged helmet behind him, and checked the floor for any fragments of polycarbonate from his visor.

Uhura watched him. She realised her brain hadn’t quite caught up, in spite everyone’s attempts to fill her in. She was still feeling the intensity, the finality of what she had said and done inside the penthouse, as if her life was truly over. Now everything had changed. She needed an entirely different plan of attack, but she felt a little blank, unsure where to start. She could step off the transporter platform, perhaps, to see how steadily she could walk.

“So ..,” she said the word as she watched her feet negotiate the move from a higher surface to a lower one, without any problem. “I’m on the Enterprise.”

Spock moved off the platform also, but did not speak.

“It’s not the way I expected to arrive.”

She looked at him, hoping her remark might prompt some dry comment. But he operated on full
Vulcan settings. He walked stiffly to the nearest disposal unit, dropped his helmet inside and turned back to her, clasping his empty hands behind his back. It prompted her brain to remember logic, and go looking for reasons to explain his behaviour.

Back came all the pre-abduction memories she had pushed aside during the crisis: Sulu’s engagement party, dancing with Captain Pike, the interrupted call to Admiral Migiro. And then, after what Spock had risked to save her, had she thanked him? She’d fussed about Emmanuel instead. What a mess. She needed more time to think.

“Are you required back on the bridge?” she asked.

“Not immediately,” he replied.

“Could I get fresh clothes?”

Spock accessed the transporter room replicator, entered her cadet number, and asked for a full set of off-duty daywear. Nyota stood behind him, made a face he couldn’t see as the machine issued mud grey twill trousers, grey button down shirt, black socks, black boots and standard issue black undergarments.

“You will need a place to wash and change,” he said as he stacked the items together, discreetly concealing the undergarments between the trousers and shirt. When he turned to hand her the bundle, he added, “We will stop at my quarters.”

She took the clothes and nodded without smiling. She smiled within, because there was hope. Things couldn’t be completely sour between them if he was offering to share his private space.

The sonics inside his shower pounded her skin and scalp and got her synapses firing. More than that, they got her angry. They helped her think like Spock, to relive the last two weeks through his eyes and feel the frustration every time Emmanuel came between them, in person or by way of conversation. The abduction had been brutal, perhaps the last straw. She would need to act just as fiercely if she wanted things to improve.

A senior officer’s quarters had the luxury of a hygiene station and sleeping area which could be closed off behind a door. Nyota stood naked at the foot of Spock’s bed, considering the neat pile of Standard issue garments she had placed there. They would not do.

She moved them to the top of his bureau. Then she opened his drawers one at a time, starting from the top. She didn’t expect to find much, but got what she hoped for. She chose one of his black T-shirts, shook out the folds, held it against her body. Long enough. She put that on, bent forward to get some lift into the roots of her hair, and then stood briefly in front of his mirror to check the result before she left the room.

Unsurprisingly, he stood with his back to the door. His ruined spacesuit had been removed, cast off over his table and chairs without his typical attention to tidyness. He stood in his black thermal base layers, facing a corner of his living area with no decorative additions, the kind of featureless view a Vulcan would set aside for meditation.

She spoke softly but with no lack of firmness.

“May I contact Starfleet Africa from your console?”

He did turn round then. Though his expression was perfectly controlled, the few seconds it took him to respond told her he was trying to make sense of her apparel.
“You may.”

She went to his desk, sat down, logged in to her own network and picked up the necessary details. The call went to Security, as it was after office hours, but the guards on duty seemed to know about her situation. They asked how she was, and told her they’d been instructed to put her through to any senior personnel she wished to speak with, no matter what time she made contact.

And Admiral Migiro (Nyota remembered to call her Levina this time) made it no secret that she was relieved. And a little encouragement was all it took for the older woman to pick up where they had left off.

“We must specify a date for the annulment,” Migiro’s gravelled voice came through the console’s amplifier, “which I imagine you will want to be soon.”

“Yes,” Uhura replied.

“So we’ll answer these other questions first,” Levina started to read the form. “Where annulment follows long term absence, in the event the partner returns, will provision be made for mediated negotiation?”

“No.”

“Will the partner be entitled to appeal against the annulment?”

“No.”

“Will the partner have any right of contact except through legal intermediaries?”

“No.”

“Quite so,” the Admiral agreed. “Captain Pike and myself will include our own notes to clarify the situation – stop some petty Federation official holding up proceedings to ask pointless questions.”

Nyota sent her signature and a copy of her second year Academy mug shot. Levina closed their conversation quickly, once business was done, promising she would deliver the application herself to the Federation office in the morning. With first priority completed, Uhura went straight to the next. She opened an internal comms channel.

“Computer,” she said, “please hail Captain Pike.”

Peripheral vision told her Spock was taking enough interest in proceedings to step away from his meditation corner.

“Pike here.”

“Captain, this is Cadet Uhura. Has Commander Ashmawy been informed of the reason for my failure to report for duty on Honshu?”

“He has. In view of circumstances, I have recommended your shift recommence at eleven hundred hours tomorrow, and he has agreed.”

“Thank you sir. May I enquire what hours Commander Spock is scheduled to work between now and eleven hundred hours?”

There was a pause. Pike would know she was calling from his first officer’s console. She watched Spock take another step nearer.
“I am due to conduct testing --,” he began.

“He was due to conduct testing on our weapons,” Pike replied, “in cooperation with the USS Farragut, in about thirty minutes.”

“Twenty-eight minutes, forty-four seconds,” Spock specified.

“However,” Pike continued, “we did have a diversion, and have yet to establish a rendezvous point with the Farragut. Our Chief Engineer is also undergoing surgery, and will be unable to participate until his injuries have been treated. At the earliest, we won’t be ready for another seven hours, which would be past the end of Spock’s shift. Would you tell the Commander he is rescheduled for bridge duty at twenty-one hundred hours ship’s time this evening?”

Nyota smiled. “I will, sir.”

“If he isn’t sure what to do with all that unexpected leisure, ask him to give you a tour of the Enterprise,” the Captain said, but he was barely keeping the laughter out of his voice.

“Thank you, sir. Uhura out.”

That was second priority completed. She looked up from the console at Spock, now standing as close as he could get without climbing over his own desk.

“Is there anyone else who needs to be informed that I am safe?” she asked him.

“The Captain was in constant communication with an incident team working from Hotel Sugureta, including Sub-lieutenant Jadillu.”

“McCoy had a cab booked to take us both to the departure area.”

“He brought Gaila in your stead. I expect she will have briefed him.”

Nyota waited, but Spock added nothing more. She stood out of his chair. His eyes followed her as she came round the desk; his forehead buckled as she put a hand on each of his shoulders and turned him so he faced her.

Then she sighed.

“Let’s not talk.”

“Nyota--,”

“I mean, if we talk – when we talk – something will go unsaid, or not be understood.”

She released his shoulders to pick up his left wrist. She guided that hand to her face, placed his index finger against her nasal bone. He understood her meaning now. But he pulled back.

“If there is anything you would rather not reveal--,”

She shook her head.

“If you know everything I know, I can be sure you understand.”

The stark difference. The entity felt cold, like a viral chill, whenever it had travelled in her mind. Spock bathed her with warmth. She didn’t try to guide him or add impressions. She took no part, only observed what he observed and how he processed the information. He started with a memory
they shared, the shuttle flight from Onitsha, and moved both directions in time. When going forward, he took some of her own thought detours, her recollections and self-examinations, misgivings – the conversation with McCoy about his failed marriage. He took time to consider the ways she had reasoned through problems.

And when he went back in time, he went far back. He picked a selection from her childhood memories of Emmanuel. Beetle hunting interested him, as well as swimming lessons, church picnics and holidays in Sabi Sands, all events she experienced as one part of a trio: Manny, Yota and Manny's sister Angel.

Evangeline Kasembe. He stood with the mourners at her funeral, filed past the small casket at little girl Nyota’s eye level and noted how that little girl could only look at Emmanuel during those moments his back was turned.

Then he stood with the mourners at a second funeral, where the husband of the deceased had collapsed and Nyota did not need to be careful about eye contact because Manny never showed.

When he came to her memory of losing T’Shin; Spock hesitated. Nyota was standing at the kitchen counter of the house in Dar-es-Salaam, confused because it seemed her guardian had started to prepare a meal for them both, but left without finishing. And then she went from room to room, saw other things that were out of character – a PADD left on but lying behind a chair, wardrobe doors ajar.

Spock made a sudden shift in their mind melt. She did not know why, but did not question. He detoured round the full realisation of her loss and the years before she enrolled in Starfleet Academy. He rejoined her memories at the engagement party. Curiously, the music interested him as much as the conversation during dances; presumably he was identifying the time signature and key of each piece for his own benefit. He also recognised the song that played when Kirk chased Emmanuel out of the Pollux suite, and knew the lyrics.

She felt the heat of his focus increase when he reached her memory of being abducted. Whether Spock realised it or not, he had moved closer; in addition to his psi presence she also felt the warmth from his skin very close to her face. The actions she took when she had access to Emmanuel’s penthouse console were reviewed. He stopped short of giving her a grade, but only just. Perhaps she should ask him to include one in her student files.

And then he was listening to the last words she recorded for him.

To Nyota they sounded unexpected, though she knew perfectly well what she had said. To Spock … Spock’s mind became a sound reflecting surface, her ardency came back to her as echoes and echoes of echoes.

I adore you – beloved Aehallh – I am telling you – adore you—never met a man who is your equal – beloved – telling you – deeply regret the pain – adore you – Aehallh – deeply regret – our short time together – who is your equal – my definition of love – adore you …

She did not get his reaction. When the echoes died away, both their minds were quiet. What she could hear telepathically sounded like conclusions falling into place, causing small synaptic chain reactions of thought, the substance of which he would not show.

He removed his hand from her meld points, and was waiting, watching when she opened her eyes.

“Computer,” he said quietly. “Please access the private data on my network and retrieve the audio file titled Johann Brahms Waltz Number 15, Opus 39 in A-flat Major.”
She had never let go of his left wrist. Nyota detached but he caught her fingers gently, re-positioned his hand and shifted his body into a textbook closed hold. The computer announced that it had found the file, and would play it. When the first soft, slow piano notes sounded, she felt his other hand press against her back. He paused for the first bar, then led her into the music.

The composer’s name had a familiar sound, the melody also but in a manner suggesting it had bedded into her subconscious as background. It was not a grand waltz. Uhura remembered competitions in the Stardome where the music swept partners into a dervish, building up pace that required an expanse of floor so the dancers could arc and spin and show off their costumes. Spock’s piece was restrained, the pianist’s hand light and lagging on the beat.

The two of them turned slowly at first, like twin stars rotating. Spock held his head as a dancing teacher might instruct him, tilted slightly away from his partner’s face. She was less obedient. Along his throat and right ear, where the android had burned his skin, a poreless sheen remained in spite some quick dermal regeneration. She wanted to kiss him there.

That sentiment passed through their joined hands and Spock responded by opening out their steps. If he had waltzed like Christopher Pike, that would have been enough to impress her. But his timing and sympathy with the character of the music as it welled up in a crescendo of passionate chords and died back again suggested a natural gift. He defined the dance in his own terms while keeping it correct. His mastery excited her.

And when Nyota could tell the piece was coming to its conclusion, she yearned for it to slow down and drag out in exactly the way the musician was playing the final bars. Spock bent her left arm at the elbow and curled himself into her as the waltz made a stately descent to the finish. Then they stood still in the silence, their foreheads pressed together.

“Spock--,”

“Hizhuk,” he hushed her. And after more silence, he added. “I am pleased we did not talk.”

Nyota smiled. He was right. Skin was already saying so much more. The vibrations travelling up and down her spine were the same ones going over his; they were in harmony again.

Chapter End Notes

If you would like to listen to the Brahms waltz that Spock and Nyota danced to, go to this URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jjkCmUO_ms
Surprises

Chapter Notes

Readers, we are winding down to the end now. On 7th October my university studies begin again. I have a plan which should allow me to bring this story to a conclusion in another three chapters. It won't go right to the last scene of the 2009 film, as I'd previously intended, but to the point where Nero's ship is destroyed and the USS Enterprise has escaped the singularity. Lots of plans for more fic, including my first attempt at Spones. Stay tuned, more details to come.

The USS Enterprise towed Penthouse One back to Earth with a tractor beam. They reached the space elevator at about fifteen hundred hours San Francisco time. The suite was reconnected by fifteen forty-seven.

At sixteen twenty, Security sent up a squad of Tentian 8600 androids, their largest models -- armour plated with triple rotating weapon arms, cutting grips and hover capability. They warned Wilma Sylvester in Operations that the room might need serious refurbishment, once the Tentians had made it safe.

But there was no trouble. The expected enemy, the blue G733s and LinScients, were found lying down in two rows of ten across the entrance way. Their mechanical heads faced the floor, and they were all powered down. The five airborne androids were fit for nothing but scrap. All the Tentians had to do was test the compliance settings on each unit, remove their firing mechanisms and generators and dismantle the bodies.

The different pieces came to Earth in stages. The first elevator load contained twenty heads, the second twenty left arms, the third twenty right legs and so on. The Tentians took these parts down to the hotel’s basement storage area, booked them in locked quarantine cabinets and chose a variety of locations throughout that vast, concrete encased chamber.

Tentians remained on guard underground. They were programmed to destroy any one of their own squad if they failed to carry out a transmitted instruction, or began to issue commands of their own. And every fifteen minutes a human Security employee ran scans through the basement to detect unexpected processor activity. No one in the department was stupid enough to think these measures would prevent a non-corporeal entity from possessing an android with dangerous intent. The aim was to exonerate the Hotel Sugureta in the event of a public incident.

Had they possessed sensors capable of picking up one particular energy signature, Security would have realised the entity was long gone.

They would have seen the creature as a pulse of light inside the elevator, waiting while the car was being loaded with the scrapped airborne. They could have tracked it down to Earth and seen how, once the elevator doors opened, the entity passed through reception, left by the main entrance and travelled across the parking lot. They could have warned the appropriate civic authorities that the energy trail was moving south along the Great Highway.
What mind melding brought home to Nyota was the depth of an individual. She probably knew Spock better than anyone. But guessing his reactions was still guessing. She usually got it right but there were times her assessment was off target.

It was true that she had teased him. While Spock calculated and set their destination coordinates in Transporter Room One, he had a voice at his shoulder making thinly veiled suggestions in Romulan related to the dexterity and sensitivity of his fingertips. When they beamed down to the driveway outside Messier Cluster 20, she took a quick look round to check they were not observed. As the foyer entrance opened, she reached across and tickled the soft centre of his right palm.

One more hand contact, as they reached his apartment door, was part of her plan. They had already had sex, christening the sheets on his Enterprise bed. This, she thought, was just post-coital flirting.

Except Spock had not arrived at post anything. The instant her hand touched his a second time, he embraced her, shifted her back against the door and pressed like he wanted to leave an impression of his body in hers. Between wet kisses he managed to mutter enough words to satisfy the security settings. The door slipped away as he slipped a hand between her buttocks and hoisted her off the floor.

That hand gave off electricity. Nyota heard herself squeak, felt a tremble rattle her up and down as she grabbed some part of his shirt to anchor herself through the quake. Barely inside the doors they halted; Spock pushed her between two coats that hung inside his small entry closet, so she was swaddled in wool. The kisses became fewer and lasted longer. They nearly forgot to breathe, releasing each other’s mouths just long enough to exhale.

“Nei’rrh--,”

“Aehallhl--,”

Meanwhile the fingers on the hand between her legs were pressing into her off-duty trousers, hunting for spots where the contact would make her shiver. What her hands were doing … she really could not keep track. When he backed out of the closet she was raking his hair, making it stand straight at the top of his head.

Spock surprised her by not turning towards his bedroom. Instead she was carried across the kitchen, set down on one edge of his breakfast bar. The hand between her legs, no longer needed for support, felt its way round to the front of her body and began to unbutton her regulation grey shirt. Nyota glanced over her shoulder just long enough to confirm that she had clear counter space behind her. Then she lay back, spread her thighs and welcomed the warm weight of his pelvis as it settled into hers.

She watched him unhook the front fastening on the black bra, and pause. His pupils were swollen, like the eyes of a cat mesmerised by the motion of a toy. Nyota folded back the cups to uncover herself.

“I need to be kissed here,” she told him, “eventually.”

She added the last word because he was gently shifting his hips, electrifying himself with the friction of rubbing against her. She clenched her abdominals, pushed back against him and smiled.

“May we have music again?”

On board the Enterprise, they made love to the accompaniment of his private playlist. It cultivated her taste for Claude Debussy and Gol Aba’Kur T’Saret. Spock asked the apartment computer to
access the same files and play them through the kitchen speakers alone, at low volume. Then he took a step back, so when he bent over her open shirt his mouth would touch down on a breast.

Raindrop strains of ‘Clair de Lune’ seemed to fall lightly on her senses. She scratched the back of Spock’s head -- deep, cruel cuts because he liked to feel the burn afterwards. Her nipple stiffened under his tongue and she reminded herself that he would need some clothing adjustment soon. He had been rock hard under his uniform trousers.

Piano and kisses worked at the same rhythm. Debussy’s music soared up to a little climax and Nyota got an ecstatic shock that arched her spine and tipped her head back. She could see Spock’s lounge behind her, upside down. His African violets, a year old, had been transplanted into larger pots. It would have been hard to explain the number of them in a décor that was otherwise so understated. She hummed with satisfaction. Spock removed his mouth from one breast to begin work on the other.

Nyota was biting her lower lip with pleasure when she heard the back door open. Only Gaila had security access, so neither of them stopped what they were doing. Then the door to the study slid aside, and Uhura gasped.

So did the upside down figure of Amanda Grayson.

“I’m so sorry,” the ambassador’s wife said, and quickly left.

In the immediate aftermath music played on. Nyota lay flat on the countertop with both hands clapped over her mouth, while Spock had staggered away and braced himself against his kitchen cupboards. Someone else came in the back door.


Spock was still trying to get his breathing under control, among other things. Nyota rolled on her side and gripped the breakfast bar in order to face her roommate.

“Cutie Bootie, you told me you were both going to beam down to our place.”

The Orion stopped in front of her, hands fisted on the hips of her grey dress uniform. Gaila hated the colour and cut of that outfit so much that wearing it was a sacrifice she made only under orders or for people she felt were deserving of extra respect.

“I had a plan all worked out,” she scolded. “The Commander’s mother was going to hide in here, and then I would invent some reason to go outside so I could fetch her back. It was going to be a wonderful surprise.”

“It …,” Nyota said weakly, because there was no way to make themselves look good. She had dropped hints about a detour while she was teasing him in the transporter room and it was enough for Spock to change his mind.

“We acted on impulse.”

“Then maybe Orion gods do exist,” Gaila said, “because you know I have been praying for this miracle. But what’s wrong with our breakfast bar? I would have cleared the dishes off for you.”

Spock pushed himself away from the cupboard. Apart from some strain at the front of his trousers, he had nearly recovered.

“Where is my mother now?” he asked.
“Sitting under your cherry --,”

Gaila blocked his way as he was shifting his body in the direction of the garden.

“Commander, she insisted you should continue as if she hadn’t interrupted.”

“Sub-Lieutenant --,”

“In-sis-ted,” the Orion pulled the syllables apart, as if her Vulcan employer had suddenly gone hard of hearing.

“And not that my opinion matters in relation to hers,” Gaila went on, “but I agree. You would be terrible company; you can say whatever you like about mind control.”

Nyota sat up, and tried to explain. “Spock would not want to keep her waiting.”

Gaila pointed at herself. “A tour of the Computer Science building and simulation arena, for which she has an expert guide, would last about an hour. That would be followed by theris masu and other refreshments at South Axis apartment, if you would like to join us then.”

Uhura fully expected Spock to ignore his teaching assistant, or argue. His clenched forehead muscles meant he was preparing some thought. She put her bra cups back together and fastened them.

“You are certain,” Spock asked, “that this is her wish?”

Nyota paused with her hands on the collar of her shirt.

“Sir,” the Orion put the question back to him, “what do you think? You know her better.”

So did Uhura. Were she and Spock now revisiting the same memory?

The few days they spent with Amanda and Sarek in Shi’Kahr the previous year had been heady. Uhura had fought for possession of Spock in front of the High Council, and she very much wanted her prize. Spock himself was coming to terms with a quirk of Vulcan biology which made his behaviour, well..., interesting. He had an infectious giggle. As far as Nyota knew, nobody else heard it -- the layout of the house meant Spock had a private wing far from his parents’ rooms. But his mother made discreet checks, now and again, knowing her son might not be in fit state to look after all his new partner’s needs.

They were caught out once. Spock would remember, because shok was not the kind of drunkeness which produced amnesia. They had acted on impulse then as well, got carried away on the sofa in his reception room and kissed until he was carefree and woozy but could walk with assistance. They had not reached his bedroom when Amanda came up the stairs.

Before she could apologise her son smiled at her, and extended his hand.

Amanda confessed to Nyota later that, after she left them, she locked herself in her own study and indulged in some human tears. “Because I can’t think when I ever saw him so happy.”

And Spock would remember that for a short time he embraced two women, who both helped him finish the journey to bed.

The silence in the kitchen now was verging on awkward.

“On this occasion,” Spock said at last, “I will defer to your judgement, Sub-Lieutenant.”
Gaila walked out a little taller. Ironically, the silence didn’t seem to improve much after the Orion closed the back door behind her. For a long time, Commander and Cadet exchanged sidelong, bashful looks at each other, as if they’d just been introduced and did not know how to make a good first impression.

“Perhaps,” Spock suggested, “I have been presumptuous in my --,”

“No,” Nyota interrupted. “No. Not at all.” And to prove it, she reopened her bra.

He nodded. But things still felt stalled.

“Stay here?” Nyota asked.

Spock cleared his throat. “I do not believe --,”

“Exactly,” she interrupted again. “Neither could I.”

She slipped off the kitchen counter, took his hand in passing and pulled him down the passage to his bedroom. They restarted the music there.

***

“Who is going to tell Nirvana?” Baby asked.

All three Orion women stood with their backs pressed against the door to Jim Kirk’s room.

A futile defence? Yes, they knew that. After all, the door had been replaced twice since the day the downstairs soda fountains exploded and a customer sued because they were served a second hand cream soda float. Now and then, their blue-eyed human guest could get very insistent. This was hard on the furniture and fittings.

That’s why they needed to think of a way to distract him while someone went for help.

Lulu said, “I will go. Would be risky if you went, Baby, because you’re his second favourite.”

On the other side of the door, Kirk was roaring.

“What the holdup, girls?”

“Coming,” Zsa Zsa pleaded.

“I’m aware of the problem, honey – it’s my body. Where’s my solution?”

Baby tried. “Boopsie, we’re trying to contact Gaila now. Could I get you a snack while you wait?”

Then they all held their breath. They watched the brass doorknob turn slowly, once to the left, once to the right. When he had been like this before, he’d yanked both mortice fittings and the bolt clean off.

“If you think you can cope,” Kirk replied.

Baby’s nostrils flared. She unbuttoned her shirt dress in fury, and would not accept help from Lulu or Zsa Zsa. He might be Starfleet command track and devastatingly hot, but no puny Terran was going to insult her by suggesting she could not handle him.

The dress hit the floor and Baby kicked off each of her high heeled sandals so they banged against
the door. Zsa Zsa reached out to straighten her colleague’s bra strap.

“[You got this],” Lulu said. Then she left the group and ran in the direction of their manager’s office. But when she reached the end of the corridor, Nirvana Lovelace was not in her usual working space.

So Lulu went downstairs. She walked across the floor of the diner, went behind the counter, searched the whole kitchen and checked the storeroom. She even opened the walk in chill rooms, but their boss was not in any of these places.

She went to the back door intending to check the garage, where the Empyrean Fire was kept. Outside, the 24th Street Diner owned a stretch of paved ground marked out as parking spaces. They rented two of these to the Buddhist Centre next door, because their Oshi mobile temple was too large to fit within their property boundaries.

Lulu spotted Nirvana through the Oshi’s windshield, sitting in the driver’s seat.

When Nirvana spotted Lulu, she beckoned her employee to come over. She opened the passenger side door. Lulu had never been inside this vehicle. The seat did not have much in the way of cushioning, and the air had an interesting scent.

“Thilulla,” Lulu used Nirvana’s Orion name, “have you converted?”

“I came close,” her boss replied. “I suppose you want must want some answers. You can see that what’s happening to us looks a lot like what happened on the Haven homeworld. You must be wondering why I haven’t done anything.”

“Oh,” Lulu tried to sound casual. “But you were only trying to help your baby sister.”

Thilulla/Nirvana frowned.

“I can’t keep it up, not even for Gaila,” she said. “We can’t open for business -- the dining room is a mess and Jim Kirk takes up all our time, not to mention a serious amount of cash. At this rate, he will bankrupt us.”

“He’s demanding that we find her. I’m afraid he’s going to start breaking things again.”

“Give him the car.”

“How long can he borrow--,”

“I’m not talking about lending,” Nirvana said.

“What do you mean?” Lulu asked.

Her boss patted the Oshi’s control panel. “I bought this instead.”

“You bought the mobile Buddhist temple?”

“We need a disguise, and also a space that will be safe from …,” Nirvana paused, “whatever we are dealing with. That’s what Divve told me when we escaped before. It doesn’t like temples.”

“But how did you pay for it?”

“I sold them the diner.”

Lulu’s jaw dropped open.
“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Nirvana scolded. “You know they’ve been wanting a way to expand. Now they don’t need to move.”

“But we do.”

Nirvana nodded.

“So this is our plan. Give Jim the car, let him go find Gaila himself. Then all of you pack up your absolute essentials and get down here. I’ll hire a property agent to clear out the rest and put it in storage.”

Outside, there was the sound of glass shattering. The two Orions looked through the windshield and saw the first floor window of Jim Kirk’s room had been smashed.

“Quickly,” Nirvana gave Lulu a little shove. “If he keeps this up, I’ll have to drop my asking price.”

***

Instead of tea at South Axis Apartment, Spock suggested they take advantage of an invitation he had just received from Genzo Mori, co-owner of the Hotel Sugureta, to bring guests and dine free of charge in their most exclusive Suiren Pagoda.

“At ground level,” Mr. Mori had stressed in his message.

Spock was relieved; he would otherwise have declined the offer. He explained to his mother how the arrangement would suit Nyota, who needed to catch the space elevator back to Honshu, and also allow him to collect his car.

Suiren, it transpired, was the Japanese term for a water lily. Mr. Mori met their taxi at the VIP entrance. He gave them access to the impressive gardens on the southeast side of the hotel, overlooked by the Tochi Bar. A gravelled path cut between the planted areas and eventually led them to the banks of a constructed reservoir. Here, a barge and driver waited. They were taken to the centre of this body of water, where there was an island occupied by a two tiered, red pagoda.

In the downstairs foyer they were introduced to their chef, his kitchen staff, and the waiters. The upper level was their private dining area.

Inexpert though he was at gauging the success of any social gathering, Spock believed the dinner satisfied all his guests. The menu was extensive and the chef sat down with them over aperitifs to determine the best dishes for each of them. Waiting staff expected to be summoned, so that there were no unexpected interruptions. In between courses, they could step out onto the balcony and enjoy the view.

Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu was distracted now and again by messages received on her PADD, which she felt obliged to answer. But on balance, this reduced the number of anecdotes she related to his mother while they ate, all of which revealed more about himself than he would have chosen to share.

Nyota’s right hand spent a great deal of time under the table, familiarising itself with the exact way his uniform trousers stretched and creased whenever he was sitting inside them. This, and not a pollen allergy, caused Gaila to sniff frequently and his mother to incorrectly guess the cause.

While the non-Vulcans enjoyed sculpted chocolates for their final course, he indulged. With Uhura’s fingers stroking his thigh, he considered the sturdy lacquered top of the table and how she might look lying naked across it, his idea of dessert.
He had to content himself with a single kiss, later, in the Honshu departure lounge.

His teaching assistant was adamant that she did not require a lift back to campus, that she was being collected. She went her own way after the space elevator departed. That left just one passenger, who allowed her son to fetch her luggage from VIP reception and carry it to his car.

The journey to San Francisco’s shuttleport passed in companionable silence. Peripheral vision told him his mother smiled to herself as she gazed out her window.

And at the shuttleport, the only words spoken were those the airline computer needed to establish that Amanda Grayson had arrived well in advance of her departure time, and to ask how many bags she would check in. They walked together through the concourse, through the restaurants and shopping precinct. His mother’s head was turned on two occasions, when they passed a retailer selling a range of Terran leisurewear, and on the sloping ramp that approached passenger security, where large aquaria had been set into the walls and stocked with tropical fish.

She did not ask to stop, or remark on any of the sights.

And when he could not accompany her further, she paused before the security entrance and saluted him with composed face, and added simply that she would send him a message to confirm her safe arrival in Seattle.

From deep within, though not so deep as had been his habit before meeting Nyota, he experienced the fleeting impulse to reach for his mother’s hand and draw her closer. Nothing more – he did not act on it because he had no idea how he would explain himself. In light of the day’s events, he thought it merely a side effect of the tension leading up to the rescue of Penthouse One, and the emotional licence of his responses after that, having saved what he thought he might lose.

But as he drove himself back to the Academy, the memory of the human woman in flowing, grey Vulcan robes, who passed through a door into a section of the shuttleport set apart by a semi opaque wall, so that her figure on the other side appeared ghostly …,

This memory he found difficult to stop revisiting.
When the Kobayashi Maru simulation ended, Beckenbauer turned away from the observation window and asked, “How the hell did that kid beat your test?”

Spock stood in the middle of the observation floor. He had been monitoring the programme code itself, as the simulation ran, and saw his meticulously checked commands overridden by a completely different set of instructions. It happened too quickly for a human eye to follow. Therefore, it happened too quickly for anyone using their hands to introduce this corruption at precisely the right moment. There was also no embedded trigger, nothing that could set off a hidden subroutine which might have been prepared beforehand.

So he had a very plausible idea concerning the cause. But until he could review the evidence more carefully, it was best to reserve judgement.

“I do not know,” he told Beckenbauer.

Then he left the floor. He went along the corridor which circled the upper level of the arena, to the secured office containing the positronic matrix that guided all systems inside the building. When he entered, Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu got up from her workstation.

“Sir,” she said, “I need to discuss something with you.”

He acknowledged the request with a nod, and noted that the air in room contained no trace of the scent normally present whenever she occupied it.

“I must make contact with Captain Pike first,” he said. “That should only take a few minutes.”

She hailed the Enterprise for him, requested a video link to the bridge and tilted her display so the image would be clearer from his height.

The transmission showed Pike standing behind his chair, reading from his PADD and imbibing a beverage from a ceramic cup printed with a Starfleet logo.

“Commander,” Pike looked up to greet the image of his First Officer, which had clearly been presented on the ship’s large view screen. “What’s news? How badly did Kirk fail this time?”

“Captain, I have the dubious honour of reporting that he has, in fact, succeeded.”

Pike gave the view screen a grave look, bent over the back of his chair to set the cup and PADD on one of the armrests before he spoke again.

“How?”

“Confirmation will require a review of the files and security footage --,”

“Cut to your gut,” Pike interjected, a phrase Spock knew was permission to leave qualifiers aside and proceed directly to his unsubstantiated theory.

“The simulation appeared to alter itself while it ran.”

Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu added, “It had to be that. I ran the programme five minutes before the cadets were permitted into the simulation area. It operated as expected.”
“How could that be done?”

“I would suggest that a certain non-corporeal entity might have been involved.”

“Kirk is in league with that thing?!” Pike shouted the question.

“It will require confirma --,”

“Of course, of course, of course” the Captain added, in more apologetic tone. “God damn, if that stupid kid has gone and …,”

Pike circled his chair twice, clearly agitated by the possibility.

“Put that test result in dispute until you have investigated,” he ordered. “And strike Kirk’s name off the list for this afternoon’s investiture. Pike out.”

The last image Spock saw before communication cut out was the Captain fisting one hand and punching the back of the command chair. His ceramic cup toppled off the armrest.

After that had finished the Sub-Lieutenant sat down, and returned her display to its original position.

“It might be prudent for you to break for lunch,” Spock suggested. “I expect our investigations will take considerable time.”

“Sir,” she said, “I need to say this now, because once I’ve said it you might not want me doing any investigating.”

Spock did not respond with the incredulity he felt. He made no motion with either his body or face, but simply waited for her to tell him more.

She sighed.

“It’s about me, Cadet Kirk and my older sister Thilulla.”

In all the time the cadet had worked for him, she had never before mentioned a sibling. Curious, he took his own seat, directly opposite hers, and gave her his full attention.

***

Stark, staring mad, McCoy thought. He had to be -- what other explanation was there?

“Is that going to be your lunch?” Leonard asked.

The second they entered the student dining hall, Jim grabbed a tray and a dinner plate and ran off to the dessert bar. McCoy watched him go, and shook his head. He joined the hot food line to get a bowl of soup. He found Kirk later at a table in the centre of the floor, holding court with some of his Kobayashi crew mates. He was working his way through an entire nine inch diameter devil’s food cake.

“You could call it late breakfast,” Kirk replied with his mouth full. “Didn’t feel like eating before now.”

Len sat down across from him, beside Parsifal Badineau who had fired photon torpedoes at the mysteriously defenceless Klingon fleet.

“Isn’t it great?” Badineau enthused. “We’ve finally done it. We’ve beaten the test that can’t be
beaten.”

McCoy opened a packet of soda crackers and broke them into his soup. He tried to smile, but he’d never been able to fake enthusiasm.

“Well,” he muttered, “we’ll see.”

Jim pointed his fork at the doctor. “Bones, what did you mean by that?”

“I wish I knew,” McCoy answered. “God man, you’ve been weird since the day you finally decided to leave those Orion girls alone and come back to the dorm. You don’t sleep through the night, you don’t eat properly. You’re horny as hell—,”

“Oh?” Kirk interrupted. “How would you know that?”

McCoy used his napkin to dry his face and hide the look.

“Well, you sure as hell aren’t studying. I know that. You never study.”

Jim frowned, and stuck his fork back into his cake. The doctor considered himself vindicated.

He also felt a little concerned. From where he sat, he could see the dining hall doors open, and watched Cadets Jadillu and Uhura enter. They didn’t usually eat here. And they weren’t lining up for food; it seemed pretty clear they were scanning the hall, looking for someone. Forboding was the mood which came over him, as two pairs of female eyes locked on their table and the women began to approach at speed.

Len pretended to drop his napkin on the floor and ducked underneath where it was probably safer. The right choice, as it turned out.

Gaila arrived first; he couldn’t see anyone above the knees but he guessed the Orion pulled Jim’s chair back sharpish and grabbed him in some way that made him cry out.

“Raikkal!!” she yelled.

And then she slapped his face – that noise could not be mistaken.

“You are a fucking little sneak, liar and absolute raikkal!”

He was making guesses at what kind of Orion insult had just been pinned on Kirk, when someone called out, “Doctor!” Len knew he’d have to show himself. When he stood up Gaila had both hands around Jim’s throat. Badineau and others were out of their seats.

“Hey, hey,” McCoy came round the table and tried to calm things. “We don’t want to bring Security over here now, do we?”

Uhura was with him on this. She touched her roommate on the arm. “Gaila, don’t make it worse for yourself.”

“He blackmailed my sister,” the Orion roared, “stole her car, ruined her business and forced her to move. And lied to me – about everything! Why I ever thought I loved you, you fucking lowdown, undeserving little piece of --,”

Kirk broke her hold easily, and stood up.

“You got what you wanted,” he said.
With her hands free, Gaila couldn’t stop them shaking.

“Is that what you think?!”

“What do you mean, is that what I --,”

“Is that what you think of Orions? That all we want is sex, and so we don’t need any of that fluffy stuff like honesty, or respect or even a crumb of consideration for the impact of your actions on our professional reputations? Is that it?!”

Sure enough, Gaila’s voice attracted attention. Half a dozen Starfleet security guards had entered the dining hall. McCoy tried to send a warning look to Uhura, but her expression suggested she was waiting for her turn to say something. She might not get the chance.

“Because of you,” the Orion went on, “I’m on trial. I’ve had to tell the Faculty assessment team about us, and most of them figure I rigged the Kobayashi Maru for you. Because of you, I could be expelled from the Academy. You tell me how that is getting what I wanted!”

That was as far as the argument was allowed to go. Before Jim could reply, a Security officer stepped between the warring parties.

“Ladies and gents, I’m asking you to leave,” the guard said flatly.

Jim looked confused, like he’d been asleep for weeks and woken up just in time to hear those last few sentences. He stared at Gaila like she was crazy -- now how would that not be the final straw, if Kirk had really done all the things she said he had? The Orion burst into tears. Uhura pulled her roommate into an embrace so she had a shoulder to cry on.

One by one, Jim’s adoring little cadre of cadets slunk out of the dining hall. McCoy assured the security guards that there wouldn’t be any more trouble, and like fools they believed him. Uhura honestly looked like she was trying to murder Kirk by sheer force of will.

When it was just the four of them left, her voice was cold as wind across a glacier.

“I warned you.”

Jim became all shifty-eyed, and didn’t answer.

“But you thought you would be different. You thought that sick partnership would work for you.”

“Partnership?” McCoy asked.

Uhura looked at the doctor. “Cadet Kirk won’t be joining us on the Enterprise this afternoon. He’s been struck off, pending investigation into this morning’s test.”

“What?!” Jim cried out.

“Captain Pike’s order.”

An electric prod to the throat would have been kinder, assuming Uhura would have acted mercifully and used it only once. Jim staggered back a step or two, and shook his head in disbelief.

“I told you,” she said. “It hates you. Give it time, and you’ll be just as pathetic as the man you took it from. Come on Gaila, let’s go.”

McCoy watched the two women leave. Jim, meanwhile, curled up like a bacon fat on a griddle and
needed the back of his chair to hold himself up.

“You said it would be foolproof,” he protested hoarsely.

His eyes were staring under the empty table, as if someone else were hiding down there now.

“You said --,” he insisted.

“Jim,” McCoy walked over to him. “Who are you talking to?”

“No!”

Kirk turned away, and started speaking to the unoccupied seat behind him.

“I do not need you. I can earn better things than this shit you’ve got for me. If this is all you’re good for, you can take a hike.”

“Jim?” Leonard asked again.

“Yeah, go find your sad little man, wherever he is.”

McCoy shook his head.

“The only sad one I can see is standing right in front of me,” the doctor muttered to himself.

***

Nurse Evans entered the clinical control centre inside the Enterprise brig.

“Doctor, the cadets are on the bridge now,” he said. “They’re just waiting for you – you’re presenting the stripes to McCoy.”

“Then they’ll wait,” Christine Chapel said. “I can’t leave yet.”

She pointed at her workstation, which gave them a view inside the maximum security cell. Evans drew up alongside and watched. When the nurse last saw their patient, Emmanuel Kasembe had been resting on his biobed. That was forty-five minutes ago. That same bed was now distributed in pieces across the floorspace – the pillows torn open with their filling strewn everywhere, sheets in tatters, and the mattress tipped at a strange angle against one wall.

Emmanuel was curled like a foetus against the base unit, trembling.

“Has the entity come back?” Evans asked.

“How else would you explain it?” Chapel said. “He’s been a model patient. You saw how he reacted when we said we would escort him to the Betazed Veassi facility.”

“He was ready to be helped,” Evans agreed.

“But now …,” Christine put his bioscan on screen. Kasembe’s blood pressure was high, his brain dopamine levels low.

“What can we do?” the nurse asked.

Christine folded her arms.

“The Veassi therapist told me that most of the ‘power’ these entities have lies in our belief that they
are powerful. That’s why they are drawn to individuals who are vulnerable, for whatever reason. Those victims already feel weak. They enhance the entity’s strength.”

Evans was nodding, but slowly. “Okay …,” he said. “So …,”

“So I need to help Emmanuel lose his fear of it.”

“How?”

“By showing him that I’m not afraid.”

She stepped away from the workstation.

“You take over. Deactivate the cell’s force field on my signal.”

But Evans gave his own signal, a hand held up with the palm open to call a halt to her plan.

“Sir, you can’t go in there with that thing! Look what it’s done to the bed.”

Chapel restrained a laugh, but not the smirk to go with it. Evans had been commissioned to the Farragut after Commander Spock went through pon farr. So the nurse could not compare the here and now with the kind of damage a blood-fevered Vulcan could do to the sleeping arrangements inside a brig cell.

“I’ll be fine,” she told him.

***

When they were twenty-seven minutes behind schedule, Spock left them all standing in their presentation line up on the bridge, while he went to see what was delaying Captain Pike. Left to right, they had been positioned in alphabetical order by surname. No one spoke about the cadet who would have been first.

“Bit unreal,” was all McCoy said.

“I’ve got my chair,” Sulu had his hands behind him, squeezing the Navigator’s back rest.

Uhura was eyeing up her station. Spock gave them permission to access their respective work consoles for two hours after the investiture, and familiarise themselves with the layouts.

After another six minutes, Chief Engineer Olsen came up in the turbolift.

“At ease,” he told them, “little technical problem in Security. But that’s fixed – shouldn’t be long now.”

Eleven minutes later, the Captain, First Officer and Chief Medical Officer arrived. The cadets quickly put themselves back in formation.

“Right,” Pike said, crossing to his chair. “Apologies for that slight change to schedule. On a starship, some things can’t stand on ceremony.”

Uhura glanced at Spock and he, in turn, risked a glance at her. It was a meaningful one, though she could not say exactly what it meant.

The ceremony, once it got underway, was simple and dignified. Pike made a short speech, thanking them each in turn for their dedication and hard work.
“Bear in mind,” he reminded them, “that this is just the first of many times Starfleet will demand these things from you, and almost certainly more. Maintain your commitment, and I see no reason why you won’t be attending future presentations.”

And then he handed each of his senior officers a small, metal case. Doctor Chapel walked over to their line up first and transferred the one in her possession to Len McCoy. They shook hands. Chief Engineer Olsen gave his to Sulu along with a hearty clap on Hikaru’s shoulder.

Then Spock came forward and faced her.

They had discussed this ahead of time, and agreed it was still too early for any noticeable betrayal of what they meant to each other. They had gone so far as to rehearse the important moment, to ensure what would be public and what would stay private.

When Spock held out the case, and she clasped it, there was no hand contact. During rehearsal she had smiled, for which she was half-heartedly chastised by the First Officer of the Enterprise. She promised not to do this during the actual ceremony, and was good to her word.

“Congratulations, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

He took a step back. Then, as arranged, he would say in his most inflectionless voice, “Arhem oelh’ha, a’rhea.” In Rhianssu, this meant, “I am joyful, my dearest.”

If anyone asked, Nyota would say it was simply an appropriate Vulcan expression of recognition for work well performed. The senior officers could be trusted to keep any doubts to themselves.

Pike wanted one last word before they were dismissed.

“When you come aboard next time, you’ll be part of a full crew, many of whom will have been in space for years. They’ve sacrificed much, and some have experienced the loss of a colleague. While I value you enough to commission you, you will be the newcomers. If I seem abrupt, or ask you something …, I don’t know …,”

He pointed at Uhura.

“Like, ‘Do you speak Romulan?’ when you know damn well that I already know. I’m doing that for the sake of the others. I want them to watch you earn my respect, just like they had to do.”

That made perfect sense. Pike gave Olsen the bridge and asked Chapel and Spock if they could meet in his ready room.

Nyota took her station with a little sigh of delight. She decided to run through the routine checks for shift start-up. The sensor calibrations were verified by taking readings from manually created frequencies. Officer’s notes from the last shift were sparse and contained nothing noteworthy, but she reviewed them. She ran routines to scan system activity for the four most common anomalies: activity by absent crew, activity at unmanned consoles, ship to surface transmissions greater than two thousand petabytes and console activity inconsistent with purpose.

With so few people on board, the scan results made quick reading. It left her with twenty-one minutes start-up time, so she did some additional random checks, calling up a report of all systems activity on board, sorted by crew authorisation code.

The Captain’s activities consisted mainly of log entries. His First Officer, by contrast, appeared to
have carried out a diagnostic on a fault with the ventilation on Deck D at eleven minutes past five that morning, written several memoranda, programmed his transportation coordinates to beam down to the simulation arena and to return him twenty-eight minutes before the scheduled time for the investiture. Seven minutes later he downloaded encrypted data from his PADD to the Enterprise computer, and initiated an equally protected analysis of the contents.

Nyota’s eye stopped at the next lines of her report.

Spock’s authorisation code had also been used to export a collection of personal files into packets suitable for subspace export, and sent these to the officiating elder of the Vulcan High Council, Lurruk V’Lanev.

Of itself, that meant little. What caught Nyota’s attention was start of this activity. She called up the bridge video stream, reversed it back to the beginning of the investiture ceremony. She compared the time signature on the moving images with the system log entries. Then she replayed the video, to be absolutely certain.

Spock’s files were accessed, selected and transmitted while he stood at the right hand side of Captain Pike’s chair, listening to his Commanding Officer address the cadets.
The bus was crowded. Gaila could not get a seat; she had to make her journey sandwiched between two Terran men in business attire and a Bajoran who carried a small, carnivorous animal inside a backpack. Thankfully, the Orion’s nose remained unhurt, though it was within easy biting distance.

Regarding the men, Gaila did not expect any trouble, because she had not given off scent for days. She could have tried to get a lift to the Forum. Boz Duarte owned a hoverbike and owed Gaila a favour. But Boz would have been curious, and wanted to know why Gaila needed to get there so much earlier than the rest of the cadets, and why she didn’t go straight into the main theatre.

Jim Kirk might still own a Fire Empyrean 602, but she never wanted to see him again.

Commander Spock owned a dual range, dual assisted convertible motive with plenty of room in the back seat. And today would mark a precedent, because he would drive Nyota to today’s mandatory assembly. They had decided it was now appropriate to be seen together in public, if only in the parking lot.

But right now, Spock could not risk being seen with his Orion teaching assistant. Not until after the verdict.

Gaila’s older sister Thilulla, who knew the Kobayashi Maru judgement would be decided today, sent her a text message.

You know your honour is intact, youngest one. If anything, I should be facing the Starfleet Admirals in your place. It was my decision to humour Kirk and his familiar. I knew the risks I took, but I took them for you because it was clear what this Terran meant to you, and how well he suited you. All of us wanted to see your relationship flourish.

The Oshi mobile temple, Thilulla went on to say, had been repainted somewhere between San Francisco and Tucson. It was now a sizzling, metallic pink, and on every side the word ‘Nirvana’ appeared in swirling, rainbow letters. The girls did brisk business in the Arizona desert. One customer had invited them to come and park up at his resort in New Mexico, and Thilulla was seriously considering the offer.

If the worst happens, tell me immediately. I have kept aside a room for you on the Oshi’s upper level. There is shoe storage in the roof!

The bus braked badly at Gaila’s stop. She apologised to the small carnivore for bumping against its carrier and worked her way to the exit door. She stepped out onto the pavement, stopped to straighten her uniform jacket and then marched in the direction of her final destination.

Starfleet Forum combined diplomatic offices with meeting rooms and three different theatres in a single, behemoth structure. It looked like one of the nest mound made by swarms of Orion hili flies, and was painted the same shade of grey as their dress uniforms. Its multiple entrances were known
by their numbers. Certain doors could only be accessed by invitation. Gaila approached the Security office in front of 11B and showed the guards her pass letter. She submitted to a DNA scan, and was allowed inside.

The letter included a map which directed her up one flight of stairs and left down the Cartesian corridor to Hearing Room 4. Another Security officer stopped her outside the doors, and used a communicator to ask the occupants inside whether they had reached a point in their deliberations appropriate for Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu to be admitted.

They had. Gaila was ushered into a grey space. Seated at the front behind two tiers of panel desks were three admirals, the Dean of Students and Commanders Beckenbauer and Youngbird from the simulation team. Commander Spock occupied a lowly observer’s chair, off to one side. The Security officer brought Gaila forward and made her stand level with her employer, facing the panel.

Admiral Gretchen Lui spoke first.

“Sub-Lieutenant, this committee was charged with reviewing the evidence and testimony of witnesses concerning any assistance you may have given Cadet James Tiberius Kirk to augment the Kobayashi Maru simulation held on Stardate 2258.74, and to give their recommendations to the Head of Starfleet.”

The Admiral, reading off her notes, turned the page.

“It is the view of this committee that no direct evidence of wrongdoing has been brought forward.”

Gaila let out some of the breath she had been holding.

“However,” Lui continued, “What evidence has been obtained establishes an intimate relationship between yourself and Cadet Kirk, and actions which, in the light of the simulation interference, suggest a strong motive and opportunity to provide assistance.”

Lui aired all her secrets: the disturbance during Kirk’s previous Kobayashi Maru, and how Gaila quickly offered up her knowledge about non-corporeal entities, the 2am visit she and Jim made to the arena, the luxurious vacation which could have served as a bribe.

What saved Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu, according to the committee report, were the number of positive character witnesses.

“The most consistent opinion given in testimony is that you would be too intelligent to seek short term advantage at such high risk, and in particular that you would not jeopardise the reputation or wellbeing of anyone with whom you closely associated. Therefore this committee has recommended two things. Firstly, that you will not face a hearing in front of your peers and the faculty at today’s assembly.”

Gaila let out the rest of her breath.

“But secondly, as a precaution, an undecided verdict will be entered in your Starfleet record. This will have no effect on your ability to remain in the Academy or receive a commission. But in the event of any subsequent disciplinary action, it will recommend that our evidence be brought to bear in that investigation.”

Admiral Lui closed her report.

“Off the record,” she said, “we received the most vociferous defence of your character from Commander Spock. To avoid any appearance of favouritism, we have also recommended that your
employment as his teaching assistant should cease, and that you should not serve under his command
during your first commission.”

Then the committee adjourned, and left to get ready for the assembly. When they were alone, the
Commander rose from his chair.

“The result,” he said as he approached, “is not ideal. I intend to lodge an appeal –,”

“No, sir, please …,”

Gaila pressed her hands together beseechingly.

“They could have expelled me for the things I was stupid enough to do. But they didn't. It will seem
better, don’t you think, if we try to work with this verdict?”

He gave her a look that might have been annoyed, but quickly corrected his expression.

“In that case, will you allow me to speak with Major Sirko about a permanent placement for you on
board the USS Farragut?”

“Yes,” she nodded while saying it, “yes, I .., that would be very kind.”

Too kind, that was what she felt. At this rate, the Commander was going to spoil her for future
employers. Gaila realised that she was copying his habitual stance, her hands clasped behind her
back. She did it so often now that Nyota had noticed.

And she wasn’t even trying to fill the silence between them.

“I had hoped to commission you to the Enterprise,” the Commander admitted at last. “It would have
been advantageous to serve alongside a crew member who understood Vulcan proclivities, and mine
in particular.”

“You will have Nyota for that,” Gaila replied.

But that wasn’t the point he was trying to make, she didn't think. She had to wait for him to decide
whether or not to say what he meant more directly, while choosing the words which would express
that in the least direct manner.

“We have both looked to you for guidance during … challenging junctures of our relationship.”

Gaila smiled.

“You will be fine,” she assured him. “You will work it out.”

He did not argue, but he did not agree either.

“You’ve said it yourself, that Vulcan couples resolve disagreements better because their minds are
linked,” she told him. “And since we are speaking of couples and linking – you will make sure I can
attend your wedding?”

Had she really made him so uncomfortable by asking this?

“Sub-Lieutenant …,” Spock adjusted his jacket unnecessarily. He turned his shoulders so he would
not face her, and looked round the room as if the answer might be written on one of the walls.

“Your question is premature. We have not agreed to be married; indeed, neither of us has broached
the subject in conversation.”
“Then when are you going to?”

“We …,” he didn’t let that thought get going, or the one after that. “Or rather, I ….”

Another furtive Vulcan glance checked the walls again, and then the grey, carpeted floor. Gaila freed up her clasped hands, shook herself and caught the faint returning scent of her pheromones.

“Looks like you could still use some advice. I say the sooner you are properly bonded the better. When can the two of you have some time alone together?”

“Once the public hearing has ended, we will have no obligations until the start of my bridge shift at twenty-one hundred hours.”

“Then take Nyota out. Get a table at Sreedharan, one of those they hide behind all the plants. Ask her. You’re going to be serving in deep space soon, when anything could happen. You need certainty.”

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When Gaila left, Spock accessed his PADD with the express intention of booking that table.

But he was distracted. There was a message waiting for him with his uncle Andrew’s signature code, which had been set with a time delay. The facts made no sense -- file data revealed that Andrew would have been awake from 03:38 that morning, compiling the contents. To forego sleep implied the missive was urgent, yet his uncle had taken pains to ensure Spock would not get the news earlier than fourteen minutes ago.

When he opened the message, video began to play. His uncle stood in the middle of his dimly lit kitchen, fully dressed but unshaven, with telling discolouration under his eyes.

“Spock,” Andrew’s recorded voice was hoarse, “I am half keeping my promise to your mother, and half breaking it.”

He paused, put the palms of his hands against his cheeks and dragged the fingers over his shadow beard.

"I just got back from the Seattle shuttleport," he went on. "Amanda received orders to return to Vulcan; there was diplomatic transport waiting in one of the launch bays to collect her. She wouldn’t tell me what was going on – she told me not to tell you anything. I’ve agonised about it all the way home. Anyway, if she kills me for disobeying her, I can handle it. I’m going to put this message on delay in case I change my mind after I sleep on it, presuming I can sleep on it.”

Spock was grateful for Andrew’s act of rebellion. The message provided the answer to a question, or at least the indication of an answer.

Shortly after the Enterprise investiture, when Nyota was given her Lieutenant's stripes, she showed him how his authorisation code had been used to send private data from the ship to the Vulcan High Council. It seemed that the entity, which had caused so much trouble already, hoped to cause them yet more. Spock checked those files. All contained the classified material concerning Nyota’s marriage to Emmanuel Kasembe.

Having reviewed this material, the High Council would learn that Nyota had not been eligible, under Vulcan law, to lay claim to another mate the way she had done in Shi’Kahr. And since the information appeared to have been volunteered by Spock, the Councillors would logically conclude that he wished to dispute her claim.
This could well explain his mother’s untimely return home. Very likely his father was also ordered to leave his retreat on Mount Seleya. The Vulcan government would almost certainly seek to reopen a political conflict which had appeared to be resolved. They would question again the wisdom of Sarek’s marriage to a human female and the management of their hybrid son.

And if these suppositions were true, it would only be a matter of time before Spock himself was summoned. Another battle for his independence would begin.

With all this in mind, he continued with his original intention, and made a dinner reservation at Sreedharan. As advised, he requested a private table. He and Nyota would need to talk. Whether a discussion about marriage would be appropriate in the light of Andrew’s information …,

Perhaps he would ask Gaila for her opinion.

***

"We've received a distress call from Vulcan," Admiral Barnett announced to the assembly.

"With our primary fleet engaged in the Laurentian system, I hereby order all cadets to report to Hangar One immediately. Dismissed."

A mass exodus of students and faculty made it difficult for McCoy to leave his seat. As soon as he could, he came down the stairs and stopped at the podium where Jim looked ready to spit nails and aim them at a particular head and shoulders which had disappeared from the theatre ahead of everyone else.

Len gave his roommate a single pat on the back. Just the one – he was sympathetic but not that sympathetic.

"Who was that pointy-eared bastard?" Jim wanted to know.

There were times to be honest, and then there was now. Jim would find out soon enough, once he got aboard the Enterprise, that he’d just crossed swords with its second-in-command. McCoy would be interested to see how Chris Pike handled that.

In the meantime, he didn’t want to get mixed up in any of this. Iowa Boy was on his own -- Leonard McCoy liked to think he was a patient man but he drew the line when he listened to Jim try and defend his damned fool decisions.

“I don’t know,” the doctor said, “but I like him.”

***

“I’m not going to order you to do it,” Captain Pike told him.

Spock was called aside by Security as soon as he reached Hangar One. He was led inside their compound, and the supervisor gave up his office so the Commander could receive a priority one communication from the Enterprise on a private viewing screen.

Having heard everything his captain had to say, it left Spock with the problem of interpreting the expression on Pike’s face. The transmitted image was sharp, but not capable of imparting any insight.

“You see my situation, right, Spock? I need you – that’s what this has always been about. This ship should not be answering a distress call because she’s not fully tested. But it’s Vulcan, and the Fleet
is elsewhere, so I know you will want to go. If we go, I need you on the bridge and I need you one hundred percent focused.”

“Yes sir.”

“Therefore, if what I’ve just revealed makes you the least bit unsure about your ability to comply with that order, I’m trusting you will do whatever is needed.”

There was a pause, and for a moment Spock believed he read his commanding officer’s non-verbal communication correctly -- the uneven camber of his shoulders, a change of pitch at the end of his sentence and the microsecond twitch at the corners of his mouth. Did the Captain regret what he had said?

"Pike out."

There wasn’t sufficient time for meditation on the matter. Spock could hear the megaphone announcements echoing off the hangar walls. The non-commissioned cadets were being gathered together so they could be informed of their temporary assignments.

Captain Pike had always been a great advocate for the peculiar concept called ‘thinking on your feet’. Spock believed simple problems could be solved while in motion or performing a menial task. To direct the mind along linear paths of cause and effect, combining factors in order or according to equation functions, multiplying coefficients with variables to achieve a result -- Vulcan children were regularly drilled to do this.

But to reach a decision about an unpredictable entity, where emotional factors carried the same weight as practical concerns? He knew no way to do that quickly.

Yet he must try. When Doctor Chapel and Emmanuel Kasembe left for Betazed, it was hoped that the entity would leave the Enterprise with them. Instead, it had decided to stay. So far it had caused no disruption to systems, but according to Pike it tormented the skeleton crew. It put their worst fears into words and made them hear voices when they were working on their own. Pike himself experienced it.

“Damn thing wouldn’t leave alone this morning. Kept repeating the same garbage – ‘I will make her afraid of me, I will make her afraid of me’.”

They agreed this could mean the entity intended more harm to Lieutenant Uhura.

Since there was no evidence that the being could travel through open space unassisted, and since the Enterprise would be the last ship scheduled to depart for Vulcan, Pike suggested it was in everyone’s interest that Nyota be temporarily reassigned to another Starfleet vessel.

Spock concurred. Yet, at the same time, both Captain and First Officer realised they were pandering to fears the entity itself had created. This was also dangerous -- Doctor Chapel and Lieutenant Uhura strongly believed the entity gained power this way.

This was the dilemma he had seconds to resolve. He left the office, thanked the Security supervisor and did what thinking he could while he marched out of the compound and into the hangar. He went straight to Major Saldana, who was at the Personnel workstation preparing final roll call, and authorised her to make the change. Then he decided to carry out his own tasks while walking an indirect path, one that wove its way between each of the parked shuttlecraft, to make himself more difficult to spot.

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“Major?”

“Lieutenant.”

“May I enquire about my posting?”

Major Saldana let her view the system record on her workstation, and explained that Commander Spock had spoken with her personally regarding the re-assignment to the USS Farragut.

Uhura could not argue. The Major played back her recording of the conversation.

Four hours ago, Spock had kissed her goodbye in the parking lot at Starfleet Headquarters, kissed her in full view of several dozen cadets and faculty. When their lips met, did he have this in mind, concealed from her?

***

“Commander?”

Relief. Spock felt relief when he heard her voice, followed by anxiety. He betrayed neither, but that was achieved only by choosing not to look at her.

“Lieutenant.”

“A word.”

Eye contact was the most powerful weapon she could use against him. But her voice was also deadly, and her ability to use words devastating. As any prudent commander would do, when faced with such superior fire power, Spock chose to turn and flee.

Yet their opening exchange had left him with some tactical damage. To employ a physiological metaphor, his body was warp capable while hers was not. And yet he could not, he did not even try to outpace her as he made his way to his next station. She stayed on his tail, while her voice kept up the attack.

“--demonstrate an exceptional oral sensitivity and I quote--,”

He experienced momentary failure in emotional restraint, a twitch in the major zygomaticus muscle on the left side of his face, the beginning of a smile. She had committed his grading notes to memory, a very Vulcan predilection. The next shuttlecraft was in sight. He would need to stop at its console to check the readings.

A mental order went out from his mind to his body, asking for emergency repairs. These were almost complete when he was forced to halt, turn and face her.

“--I’m assigned to the Farragut?!”

“It was an attempt to …,”

Within that pause, Spock considered what was, as well as what might have been. In so little time, Tiberious had wrought so much destruction. Tried to kill them both, tried to kill her and now, instead of elation because they were finally free to express their affection in public, they were arguing.

“… avoid the appearance of favouritism.”
Avoid …?

Put her on trial, put everything she had ever done or said on public record. Nyota knew she had achieved her commission through hard work, not favouritism. If anything, favouritism seemed the likely reason why she had been moved.

“No,” Uhura told him flatly. “I am assigned to the Enterprise.”

He was wavering. She could see that in his face. He looked down at his PADD, where she could see her record already onscreen. Had it always been there?

“Yes,” he replied, reversing the change while she watched. “I believe you are.”

As he walked away, he remembered their dinner reservation at Sreedharan. The table he specified to the head waiter was number thirteen, added after renovations opened up additional space in the northwest corner. They would have been partly secluded by walls which were needed only to maintain the structure’s integrity, with a view overlooking the bay at sunset.

He might require several such reservations now, to repair damage if nothing else.

But such concerns were not the best use of mental resources in an emergency. Spock found his warp drives, so to speak. He picked up speed and made a direct line for the transporter hub at the back of Hangar One.
Nero is gone.

They so nearly went with him.

For maybe an hour, survivor euphoria gave everyone working on the bridge that ‘can’t help smiling’ buzz. Then the reports started to come in. Admiral Barrett at Starfleet headquarters told them the Narada’s drill caused seismic disturbances and high waves when it fell into San Francisco bay. Many coastal buildings had structural damage and in particular the ground floor of the Hotel Sugureta filled with three meters of sea water. The space elevator could not be operated; guests had to be rescued by shuttecraft. Thirty-three people were known to have died and twice as many injured.

Then Cadet Kirk wanted to know Captain Pike’s condition, and the amount of structural damage inside and outside the Enterprise. He also wanted to make a detour. The new engineer, Mr. Scott, told him that without a warp core, the diversion would add a week to their estimated time of arrival back on Earth.

The two of them got in an argument. That was when the spell wore off for Nyota. She realised she had a headache and a swollen bruise just above her right elbow. Structural integrity reports backed up on her console from Decks B through G, waiting for their upstart leader to get over his sudden obsession with the Delta Vega outpost where he’d been sent to cool his heels. Jim suggested Mr. Scott take a shuttle there.

“Think about Keenser,” Kirk said, whoever that was.

“Keenser’s fine. He sent a subspace message.”

“When I say Keenser, I really mean Keenser’s guest,” the captain stressed.

“The wee man isn’t rude, sir. He will have been a very kind host.”

“I wasn’t suggesting --,”

It went on like that. Nyota pinched her nose, to create a pain more distracting than her head. She thought about South Axis apartment, and the mini hypos she always kept handy in the table by her bed. Then she thought about the other bed.

Gaila is gone.

The horror came up like something bad she’d eaten, tasting foul. She choked once, fought it back. At his station beside her, Spock turned in his chair.

“It’s all right,” her voice was feathery, until she swallowed and tried again. “Just a tickle.”

Kirk and Scott continued their crazy debate. She sat like stone, her heart swelling up with the names of the dead who were classmates: Brosomis, Eklara, Freda Hanover who supervised Wing 7 in Sato Hall, Kihka Grussinn the Tellarite, Boz Duarte. In Hangar One all these people had been standing nearby when the ship assignments were read out. Gaila’s face appeared in her mind’s eye -- the
Orion turning round to beam a smile at her roommate, so excited because they were going to be real soldiers now.

“Lieutenant Uhura?”

Kirk’s stress on her name gave away the fact she’d somehow failed to hear him call her the first time.

“Sorry, captain.”

“Have we got status reports from the other decks?”

She started to read them out. In a couple of places her voice caught and she pretended to have an irritation in her throat. That would conveniently explain both choking and tears.

“Ensign Alda,” Kirk said to her shift backup, “would you take over the comm? Bones should have something to help get rid of that cough, Lieutenant.”

“Sir,” she took the chance and bolted for the privacy of the turbolift. Once the doors had closed, she pressed her back against one wall, turned her face up to the ceiling, wailed and gasped and pleaded against reality.

“Gaila, Gaila, Gaila, Gaila—,”

McCoy didn’t comment on her tear-stained face when she arrived in Medical. He fetched her a glass of water, because her lamentations had given her hiccups. A painkiller made her feel lighter, but not happier.

“Jim told me you were coming. He says I can borrow your xenocultural expertise,” the doctor said. Vulcan is gone.

“I can’t persuade a single, damn one of them to go find their assigned quarters,” McCoy complained.

The Enterprise rescued two hundred and seventeen Vulcan citizens. Four elders transported with Spock, ninety-eight were scanned on the surface and beamed up to the various transporter rooms throughout the ship. Two Science Academy lab vessels and a crowded escape pod from a mining freighter managed to make contact while in flight and received permission to dock in shuttle bay.

Nyota followed the doctor to Storage Holds 3 and 4, where the evacuees had been assembled. They had already conducted their own census, and sent the details to comms for transmission to the Vulcan Embassy in San Francisco. Anyone injured had been taken to Medical. McCoy had run a medical tricorder over the rest, as many as would allow him.

Uhura looked for Ambassador Sarek. When she found him, she asked in High Vulcan why the group did not avail themselves of the accommodation they’d been offered.

The look he gave her was probing.

“When your guardian was lost, what was your greatest emotional challenge?” he asked.

She was about to consider when a new horror seized her. Their bond – she had not tested their bond.

“T’Shin …,”
The outburst was human. Several Vulcans standing nearby turned, to see who had failed to maintain control.

“I can’t feel it,” she said to him.

“Nor can I,” the Ambassador replied.

Leonard came over and put a hand on her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“This is the effect when a single psi bond is broken.” Sarek spoke as though the doctor were not there. “Imagine the breaking of many bonds, all at once.”

Nyota tried. McCoy watched intently. He didn’t know what was going on but it was pretty obvious he didn’t like its effect on her.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have dragged you here,” he said. “Most of the biobeds in Medical are full, but there’s a cot in my office. Why don’t you have a lie down first and --,”

“No, no. No.”

She realised it now. All those emotional ties, torn away, how deep the wounds would cut within the psyche. If one sustained enough of these, that individual might struggle with a sense of being insubstantial, unsteady – like the bombed shell of a building. Would the remains be able to stand?

She spoke to both of them, Ambassador and Doctor, in the same sentence.

“I couldn’t bear to be left alone.”

She advised McCoy that the better course of action would be to convert the storage holds, as best they could, into communal barracks. Then, instead of resting, she supervised the project. Ops and Security were contacted, told to empty out the furniture from the apartments designated for the evacuees. Mattresses were set out along the floors in rows, pillowed end against a wall. Partitions went up for a bank of temporary sonic showers and changing rooms. Sarek advised that the tables and chairs should be lined up in the centre of each space to make a single, shared working and dining area.

Ops provided fifty PADDs so messages could be composed and sent to any off-world contacts. And music, ambient and almost inaudible to human ears, piped through the comms channel for a couple of hours.

Leonard McCoy had let her get on with it, and gone back to Medical. When he reappeared some time later, he stopped by her side to consider the transformation. She pointed out how many Vulcans were already resting or meditating on their relocated beds. He grunted approvingly.

“When are you going to follow their example?” he asked. “Your shift ended ages ago.”

“So did yours,” she argued.

“Ah, but I have been making use of that cot you turned down.”

Then he spotted the Ambassador.

“Excuse me. I need help with a problem patient.”

She left the storage area, only to make McCoy think she had taken his advice. The idea of rest appealed to her body but her mind still begged for diversion, another way to keep itself busy. She
did look up her assigned cabin, walked to the location on Deck D and went inside. It was bigger than her quarters on Honshu, but not by much. She gave herself a sonic shower without removing her clothes, cleaned her teeth and brushed out her hair. That was as much solitude as she could stand.

A glance through the transparent doors of Deck D recreation room revealed a fair number of off duty crew inside. They slouched on the blue sofas or huddled round tables. Sulu and Ensign Chekov sat at one of the game stations; she could see the table surface display had been configured for backgammon. Neither player looked as though he was enjoying himself.

Not satisfied with joining them, she went back to Medical. She asked the intern who stood behind the In-Patient reception if it would be permissible to see Captain Pike, and got directions.

But Pike already had a visitor. As she turned into the ward, Uhura saw the back of Jim Kirk standing over the Captain’s bed.

“No,” Pike’s voice had authority even when weak. “You need to get back to Earth as soon as possible. The Vulcan embassy will want their people; they won’t accept that kind of delay.”

“But this is one of their citizens. I mean, time travel considered.”

“If it’s the same Spock that I know, he will wait patiently if asked.”

Then Pike turned his head on his pillow and saw her.

“Hello, Lieutenant.”

Jim turned round. Nyota saw both men exchange a look she might have called guilty, if she’d had any reason to believe they should be.

Then Kirk pointed at her and protested. “Why didn’t you tell me you were already in a relationship?”

Reason supplied – at some point they must have been talking about her.

“I believe what I have said is adequate,” she snapped.

“Uhura --,” Pike sounded like he was going to try and defend his favourite cadet.

“Captain, I’m sorry, but it stretches the limits of my patience to be respectful in his case. I’ll leave you both, so you can get back to your conversation.”

But as she turned on her heels, she heard Pike’s voice, louder.

“Lieutenant, Tiberious is gone.”

She put out a hand, so that it rested on the wall nearby, like she wanted to test its solidity.

“How can you be certain?” she asked.

“Because it went with me.”

She turned back slowly, to face the bed.

“That damned entity had been messing with my head before we got the distress call, taunting me, making threats. I decided the best way to control it was to humour it, see if I could keep it with me.
When Nero demanded I take a shuttle to the Narada, I didn’t have to try anymore, because I was honestly afraid. So I knew I would have company for the ride.”

“What happened after that?” Kirk asked.

“Well, it had a great time while I was being interrogated. Then I must have lost consciousness. When you arrived, Jim, I was still pretty shaken but I didn’t hear a voice inside my head.”

“Sir, when I arrived, there was plenty of fear on board the Narada. Spock had a load of red matter in collision course with their hull.”

Then Jim ventured a glance in her direction, quick, furtive.

Nyota took a long breath in and out.

“The only good thing to come out of this godforsaken day,” Pike grumbled. “Would someone please get me another blanket?”

Kirk left to find a nurse. When he was gone, Pike beckoned her closer.

“I’m sorry we tried to demote you,” he said.

Nyota lifted her eyebrows, startled. That memory had got lost, buried under everything else. To think about that confusing and annoying confrontation with Spock in Hangar One now felt like she had rediscovered a previous life.

“We thought the entity might try and hurt you again,” Pike explained. “But I can’t tell you how glad I am that you put up a fight and that Spock can’t stand to upset you. If you’d ended up on the Farragut --,”

The recollection of Gaila’s smiling face resurged, after all her efforts to keep her mind off it. Nyota’s head started shaking without her permission. “Captain --,”

“I know,” he said. “I know. I won’t go on about it.”

Kirk came back with two blankets. She helped him unfold them, lay them over the bed.

“Since we’ve been talking all round the subject,” Pike said, “how is Spock?”

Nyota could have answered. Though she hadn’t been on the bridge for over three hours, she knew.

“He uh,” Jim tucked the blankets under the Captain’s feet. “He refused to be relieved when his shift ended.”

Pike frowned. “You need to clamp down on that.”

“Sir,” Uhura protested, “he doesn’t have the same requirements for rest as humans.”

“That’s not the point. The Commander has a history of trying to disguise a problem by ‘working’ his way through it. You watch – he’ll refuse to leave the next shift as well. And the next. You don’t wait until then; you stop it now.”

Kirk rolled his eyes. “Sir, I think that will need to come from you.”

“Fine. Hail me from the bridge.”
“Spock, I’m not going to order you to do it.”

While Captain Pike’s voice came through the channel at Spock’s workstation, Uhura crouched beside his chair. Jim Kirk stood behind him, keeping out of sight. Leonard McCoy stood yet further back, armed with a hypospray in case there was trouble.

“But we’ve discussed this subject before. If you want to come down and justify your overtime in my--,” Pike chuckled, “my relocated ready room, I’ll consider your appeal.”

Spock did not move right away, but sat with his hands in his lap and his eyes seeming to fixate on the indicator light at the base of his scanner. He didn’t blink.

“Spock?”

Then he did, and shifted his eyes to discover that she was there, looking up at him.

“Sir,” he replied to Pike.

The face that looked at her was blank, not a product of control but of absence. He still had not made any attempt to leave his seat. Nyota put her hand over the command stripes on his left sleeve, rubbed the fabric against his skin.

When that did not generate a response, she grasped his wrist and gently pulled. Then he stood, rose to his feet as she did. He let her re-position herself at his side, put an arm behind his back and guide him off the bridge.

Inside the sealed turbolift, she tried lifting one of his hands and resting it against her cheek.

“Tell me,” she said, and began to move his fingers to her psi points. But he pulled them out of her grasp, held the hand up in the air for several seconds until she acknowledged this wasn’t what he wanted and that she accepted it.

“We could go see the evacuees,” she suggested.

“No,” was his flat reply.

She waited for something more, but he did not give it. She went to the controls instead and chose a short journey to B Deck.

He was pliant after that, allowing himself to be walked to his quarters. Once inside, he obeyed her suggestions as if they were orders: took off his uniform, put himself in the shower. Nyota found his thermal pajamas and laid them out on the bed along with a bathrobe.

Doctor McCoy, ever perceptive, had followed them after an interval. When she opened the door to his hail, he gave her the hypo.

“Cupric mellumyn, 100cc,” he told her, “calibrated to administer in two doses. Press the trigger once if he just needs to calm down, twice if he needs to sleep.”

She thanked him. Spock was cleaning his teeth in the hygiene station when she walked back to the bedroom; she recognised the drone of a sonic dentabit. She opened a drawer in his nightstand and hid the hypo there.

Choosing tea from his replicator menu took some thought. Vulcan varieties were ruled out, and
though he didn’t seem to react to caffeine it might interfere with the medication, if that were needed. While it was hardly a time for trying new flavours, novelty might provide distraction. She decided to infuse chamomile with lemon balm, in two cups.

Returning with the drinks on a tray, she found him standing at the foot of the bed. He had pulled on his pajama bottoms but somewhere after that lost focus. He held the shirt by its collar and stared at the wall.

She set the tea down on the nightstand and went back to him.

“You need to keep warm.”

His limbs moved heavily, as if he had already been drugged. She pulled one pajama sleeve onto his arm and walked round him to make sure the shirt was lifted across his back. He managed the second sleeve because the opening was already held up and waiting for him. Nyota zipped the front panels together, turned down the collar and then just smoothed the fabric that covered his chest and shoulders, up and down. She checked the expression on his face.

It was impossible to tell where he was. He made eye contact, but had nothing to offer – no depth, no flicker of thought or brightness of connection.

She helped this automaton put on his robe as well. Then she undressed and changed herself, borrowing a hanger from his wardrobe for her uniform dress and stealing the same black T-shirt from his bureau. It pained her a little that he showed none of the usual interest in this activity, could not even be bothered to watch.

So she ordered him to get into bed, but sit up against the wall. Then she climbed in beside him.

Tea, meant to be soothing, ended up an ordeal. Spock took his cup but made a grimace when he brought the rim under his nose. He kept it on his lap instead. After each effort of will to lift it up and take a sip he squeezed his eyes shut as though the liquid contained shards of glass. Between swallows recovery time was required -- so long that his drink grew cold. The last attempt made him shudder. Uhura rescued the cup and felt sure he was going to sick.

He turned pale, retched once. Then he made something of a recovery, albeit hunched forward and labouring to breathe.

“Okay,” she said.

She coaxed him down under the bedcovers with her, adjusted his pillow so it lay diagonally and could be shared. She made him lie on his side, nested his head between her breasts and just held him.

It seemed to take forever for his breathing to return to normal. Twice she was tempted to reach for the hypospray. At one point she teared up in anger, considering all the crimes which had been committed by those two tyrants -- Tiberious and Nero -- all the suffering they had caused, including his.

It got better, but so, so slowly. Spock let out a long, exhausted sigh and stopped shaking. She kissed the top of his head and smoothed his hair. Gradually his breathing began to even out, soften, though she doubted he would sleep, since she could not.

Detour or no detour, this was going to be a long, tiring journey home.
Chapter End Notes

Readers, this is goodbye for now. My university course begins next week, and I must read Othello (among other things).
Please be assured that there will be a fifth part to the "Soul Possessions" series. It will be titled, "Night is Not Yours Alone" -- a series of drabbles looking at how Spock and the other characters deal with their grief when they get back to Earth, and how the Enterprise crew begins to bond and become a close knit team.
I could not commit myself to a starting date for that yet. Give me a month to see how the coursework feels, and I should be able to put something on Tumblr and/or an edit to this note with an update.
Thanks for reading,
VL

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!