Death brings a moment of revelation that redefines more than a friendship. Certain bonds are not meant to be broken. Sometimes hope conquers all. And what Jim and Spock can accomplish together will change more than one universe.

There are two tie-in stories for RoH: "Hope for Tomorrow" by Aranel Took (http://archiveofourown.org/works/1070446) and "Lower Decks" by Aranel Took (http://archiveofourown.org/works/1091007).

Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction, written because the author has an abiding love for all things Star Trek and all the other original works referenced in this story. Any characters, settings, objects, or creatures from Star Trek and other original works belong to the relevant rights holders. The author will not receive any money or other remuneration for presenting this story online. The story is the intellectual property of the author, is available online.
Dedication:

1. This one's for you, Dad. Thank you for introducing me to Star Trek all those (by now *gasp* thirty-three) years ago. I know this is exploring strange new worlds, but I hope you enjoy it.

2. This is also for S. who was Kirk to my Spock whenever we played "Star Trek" pretend as little kids.

3. Last but not least, this is for everyone who ever wanted to stow away on a starship.

Much love,
Juno
And Death Shall Have No Dominion

Chapter Summary

Jim engages in reckless thrill-seeking behaviour and fails at weird Vulcan meditation techniques. ♦ Guinan lets Spock Prime talk about things he never wanted to talk about (if you don't want to pour out your heartache stay away from El-Aurians?). ♦ Joanna McCoy tells her dad how she hates him because sometimes not even the lure of a pony of her own is enough to win a girl's heart. ♦ And Nyota Uhura reflects on how long the next five years will be ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And Death Shall Have No Dominion

The heat was suffocating for a summer’s day in Iowa, the sun’s glare too harsh. Not the slightest breeze stirred the ragged remnants of tallgrass prairie clinging to the thin layer of gritty soil above the abandoned quarry. The cloudless sky pressed into upturned eyes with a painful, artificial blue.

The engine of the red ‘65 Corvette convertible roared. The tires spun in a tornado of gravel and dust. In a blur of blue and green the world rushed past him. The simple physics of a car thundering toward an abyss ignited a firestorm of adrenaline in Jim’s body. This time, he didn’t open the door at the last moment. This time, he didn’t throw himself out of the car, tumbling onto unforgiving ground with no thought about breaks or bruises, hanging on to the ledge for dear life. No. With a triumphant scream he closed his eyes, threw back his head – and stomped on the brakes. He hit the pedal so hard that a burst of pain exploded in his foot and flared right up to his hip. The four-wheel piston disk brakes engaged with a whining screech (the brakes and the optional big-block 396 had been the big hot stuff for the Corvette in 1965). Tires rattled and ground into rocks. The car skidded closer and closer to the chasm, pushing an avalanche of dirt and pebbles down the cliff. Then the ‘Vette tilted as the front wheels slid over the edge.

In the sudden silence the noise of the past seconds echoed as a painful tinnitus inside Jim’s skull. He let himself float in the frantic drumbeats of his heart. His entire body throbbed with the rhythm. He was alive. After a long moment he exhaled and let his hands drop from the wheel. His palms were hot and sweaty, his fingers stiff.

Jim took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

Bright green-brown with flecks of amber. He stared at himself in the rear view mirror.

“His eyes—” Spock’s first comment when Jim had woken for the second time in that private room at Starfleet Medical. What an illogical comment. Jim remembered feeling his lips twitch. His surprise at that detail, that he could still smile.

“His eyes—”

“... are just the way they are supposed to be,” Bones replied then, gruff. “Provided he
lays off weird alien drugs this time around.”

Jim huffed, a hoarse, choked sound, startling both of his friends. “But Spice is one hell of a trip.”

“And you’re one hell of an idiot.”

Jim hadn’t been able to come up with a good argument against that. Instead he’d drifted in the haze of the really good drugs, the legal kind, too, and stared up at Spock and McCoy. Content. Peaceful.

More than a year had passed since his death and his ... his reboot. Jim much preferred that term. His name and the word “resurrection” combined in the same sentence gave him the creeps. Reboot with an upgrade, he thought firmly. That will do. Not that he was real comfortable with that phrase, either, but he wasn’t in a position to complain.

Right. He was here for a reason, he reminded himself.

Space. A Vulcan meditation stone had nothing on a Chevy Corvette convertible hanging over the edge of a cliff.

Jim had stuff to think about. Sort out. Get a grip on. Or at least try to. Before they set out for their five-year mission of deep space exploration on Federation Day. Just three days from now. Captain has to get his shit together.

Position. In the cramped space of the driver’s seat, it was impossible to pull up his legs even into a wonky semblance of the loshiraq position. Instead he simply leaned back, pressing his legs against door and console for support.

Uncomfortable, he squirmed against the hot, sticky vinyl of the backrest, itching with perspiration. His foot ached from slamming on the brakes so hard. Discomfort was good, though. It made him feel alive. Sex did that, too ... But no. Simply breathing the dusty heat was enough. More than enough. Just fine.

Hands. He folded still sweaty fingers to keep himself from fiddling.

His inability to sit still drove Spock crazy, and not just during meditation lessons. He knew that. But Spock’s patience with him was endless. He knew that, too. His heart beat heavier at the thought, and a tiny shiver caressed his skin in spite of the stifling temperature.

Mind. “Concentration is like a dilithium-crystal,” he muttered the often heard definition, “an intense focusing of the energy, intelligence and sensitivity.” Ri’a’gra. He sucked at this. Suddenly the silence bothered him, and his hand twitched with the desire to switch on the car radio. In a bout of nostalgia, he’d programmed it with an authentic remake of a 20th century FM broadcasting show. Instead he inhaled deeply, breathing down into his belly, sinking into the sensation, in feeling his diaphragm distend.

For once he’d been the one to die for those he loved.

Another deep breath. Let the thoughts come and go. Let the emotions come and go. The goal is not to judge or to suppress, but to discern, to accept, and to control.

Dying. Not a good experience, that. He couldn’t recommend it as a strategy. For one, it hurt like hell. There had been no light, no one to welcome him on the other side – not that he’d expected that – just random auditory hallucinations. His mother’s voice, Pike’s voice, and another man’s voice
he hadn’t recognized. Perhaps his father. He hadn’t felt at peace. He’d been so scared. So scared. There’d been no comforting certainty of survival for those he’d tried to save, no knowledge that he’d made a difference. Only curses he couldn’t voice, words he never mustered the courage to speak, and a hand out of reach ...

Dying sucked.

He exhaled. Do not indulge in thoughts or emotions. Observe. Accept. Let go.

Dying seriously sucked. Coming back to life, however, did not. Most of all, because Spock was holding his hand when he woke.

His heart rate sped up again, with disconcerting thuds, and his stomach did that strange flip-flop thing again. When he tried to inhale, exhale, all with the appropriate technique, his breathing remained strained and shallow.

Watch your thoughts. Your feelings. Label them. Set them aside. Let go.

He swallowed hard. Therapy and counseling were well and good (for once he actually tried to cooperate). But he couldn’t help thinking it was kind of crazy of Starfleet to let him – let them – back out there. Not that he was complaining. After all, that put him back where he wanted to be, on the bridge of the Enterprise. The irony of that train of thought did not escape him.

Another breath. More like a huff, almost a chuckle. Not an appropriate breathing technique, that, either.

He may be something of a maverick. He even accepted that fact about himself, and no, he didn’t consider that a wholly admirable quality. But maybe that’s what Starfleet needed at this juncture. Still, he did take being Captain seriously. The responsibility for all those lives. That’s why everything had played out the way it did, after all. And why he sat here now and forced himself to acknowledge that there was no way a command team could ever be more emotionally compromised than they were, he and Spock.

Neither Spock (this Spock, that was; old Spock knew exactly why Jim had chosen to die) nor Starfleet were aware of how precarious his state of mind had been. But the bare facts were all out there. More than enough material to come to the correct conclusions. Various mission reports, debriefing protocols, extensive psych evaluations, as well as security camera footage of his death that he never wanted to see again in his life. All of that illustrated how he’d recklessly sacrificed his life when he might have had other, safer options at his disposal to get the situation under control. It put into harsh perspective how he’d been happy to die. Add to that how a Vulcan – supposedly in perfect control of the deep passions of his race – had given himself up to rage so completely that he’d commit murder for the utterly illogical purpose of avenging a Human.

Ample proof for how fucked up they were as a command team. The motivations Jim had managed to keep to himself were only nuances. Icing on the cake. How his actions hadn’t been about the good of the many. Yes, he hoped he would have done exactly the same anyway if Spock had never been born in either universe. But Jim couldn’t be sure. Because it had never been about the many. It was about the one. The Spock who knew. And the Spock who didn’t.

Yet in spite of it all, Starfleet were sending them back out there again. Together. Admittedly with a full mental health department adjunct to regular sickbay, and after months under close surveillance and turning him inside out with physicals and psych evals, but still. Just three days, and he’d be back on the bridge.
Exhilaration threatened to distract him, and he turned his attention back to the issue at hand. *Recognize the truth. Accept the situation. Achieve control in any event.* Could he do that? For the first time like, ever, he really didn’t want to fuck up. Not his job. And not ... everything else.

This time, he inhaled deeply, so deeply the tension extended down to his toes. Exhaled in a hyperventilating rush that clouded his vision with stars.

For the first time ever, he felt free. As if by dying in the warp core chamber he had repaid the debt of his birth and his mother’s final sacrifice on Tarsus IV.

His heartbeat pulsed in his tightly locked hands. His foot hurt, and his back itched.

Suddenly he remembered a fragment of a poem from the required Earth Lit 101 class at the academy that he’d come to enjoy in spite of himself:

> “Though lovers be lost love shall not;  
> And death shall have no dominion.”

Jim opened the door and got out of the car. “Computer, end simulation.”

He turned to exit the new holo-deck of the Enterprise. The sun and the sky still needed some work. The temperature had been much too high, even for Iowa. Or maybe he’d put in the wrong code? But all in all, the simulation wasn’t half bad. Even if he sucked at this Vulcan meditation thing.

◆

**Stardate 2260.126, 2000 hours, Starfleet Medical, San Francisco**

The elderly Vulcan known as Ambassador Selek to most – it was only logical to use the name Spock had given before when it had been prudent to obscure his true identity among his own people – in another time, in another universe ... in another life – stood on the rebuilt roof garden of Starfleet Medical in San Francisco and stared up at the sky. Velvet shadows of blue and black were already reaching for the fiery sunset that spilled over the sea and the western horizon. For a moment Spock indulged himself. He let his gaze rest fondly on a tiny pinprick of light above. Another three days the Enterprise would remain in orbit, until the starship would take off for Starfleet’s first, historic five-year mission of deep space exploration on Federation Day.

Farewells had been spoken the previous day; warmly, every word, every gesture filled with friendship. Afterwards, Jim and his younger counterpart had beamed on board. Now few crew members remained on Earth, and they would leave soon.

“I am forced to acknowledge that time and space still contain infinite unknowns,” Spock admitted, astonished at his own arrogance, most unbecoming his race and age.

Next to him the curvy, dark-skinned woman gazed at him with gentle eyes. “It bothers you that the past seems as unwritten as the future in your perception of this universe.”

“All that can happen does happen – and has happened – in equal and parallel universes,” he affirmed. A child’s long ago lesson, but true nonetheless.

“Thus in this universe Khan never was a ruler, but a rebel and one of the leaders of the revolution that saved humankind.”

“But still ruthless,” the old man observed, not exactly contradicting Guinan, but also not precisely agreeing with her – a comment vague enough to cause him discomfiture.
A most uncomfortable hero,” she commented, and added, with a shrewd look, “But useful, considering his successful secret collaboration with Admiral Pike and Captain Kirk to expose Marcus’ conspiracy. And the resources he has provided the Starfleet with.”

At the thought of just what those resources encompassed, Spock shivered. Yet he pressed on, although he did not understand why, “Unparalleled resources, arising from and leading to situations of unfathomable consequences. And J—”

He interrupted himself, allowing thought and emotion to swell and ebb. “And Captain Kirk …”

“Call him Jim,” the woman at his side encouraged, only smiling at the recalcitrant eyebrow raised at her in the dusk of the bay.

“But he is not …” An illogical refusal of a simple fact, unworthy of a Vulcan, and the underlying emotion inappropriate for his personal position.

“Oh, but he is,” Guinan countered, amused but tolerant. “This Jim may not be yours the way your Jim was. But he is still – yours.”

“And he should not have died!” Spock failed to keep his voice level. Not then; not there; not ever. With a deep, shuddering breath he accepted the turmoil the mere thought stirred within him. Emotions were recognized; labeled; accepted; set aside.

Guinan shook her head. “But he wanted to. Perhaps he needed to.”

For a long moment both of them stared across the dark waters and glittering lights of the bay. The breeze stirred the night-blooming jasmine in the garden at their backs, enveloping them in its sweet summer scent.

“He shouldn’t have had to experience such desires or necessities.” Spock bowed his head. The harsh, overly emotional inflection of his voice was unfortunate. He controlled his tone. “To be Vulcan is to embrace a philosophy, a way of life, which is logical and beneficial,” he whispered. “We cannot sacrifice a useful existence merely for – for personal redemption – for private grief – no matter how intense our passions are. That is neither logical nor beneficial. And yet …”

“And yet you, too, have desired this. And acted upon this desire,” Guinan supplied, voice and manner calm. “Guilt is illogical and unprofitable, too. Lay it to rest. He is alive; it would be wise to accept his gift.”

Again they fell silent. Time passed. Thoughts and emotions ebbed and flowed, were recognized, accepted, categorized, and finally – let go. Equilibrium was regained. At last the old Vulcan straightened. With an elegantly raised eyebrow he scrutinized his companion. “Fascinating. I have not felt compelled to speak of personal matters to any being for ninety-six years, three months, seventeen days and ten hours.”


♦

Stardate 2260.128, 1900 hours, Starfleet Temporary Quarters cafeteria, San Francisco

Joanna wasn’t talking to him.
The girl was barely eleven years old, and already she could pout for Earth. No, scratch that, for the Federation. Quite likely she was superior as a secret weapon against the Klingons to Khan himself that way. Leonard felt a sudden bout of relief and regret that he’d be spared her teenaged tantrums. In three days he’d leave with the Enterprise for five whole years. Joanna would leave Earth three days later to travel to Centaurus, where she would live with his sister and her husband, with the possibility of attending college on Cerberus in a few years. After her mother’s horrible death in the Vengeance catastrophe a year ago, that was the best possible choice for his daughter’s future. He knew that. But if he didn’t get himself killed on the upcoming trip, he’d get to see his kid again only when she was almost an adult. Life wasn’t fair.

Leonard stubbornly ignored a pang of guilt when an annoying voice in his head nagged that sending Jo to his sister was not the safest but “the most convenient option”. But resigning from Starfleet, leaving the Enterprise, was out of the question. No way in hell he’d let Jim go gallivanting across the galaxy all by his lonesome. His blood already ran cold at the thought of whatever mischief Jim might be up to right this moment, running riot on the Enterprise without proper supervision. Another thought popped up unbidden: Besides, someone had to be around to curb the suicidal tendencies of that bloody hobgoblin. Now that Nyota had ended her fling or thing or whatever it was that she’d had with Spock that job had been dumped in his lap, too. Leonard was even less suited for that task than for taking care of Jim. And if he couldn’t endure the thought of losing them, he sure as hell couldn’t deal with losing Jo. She was the best part of his life, and the only good thing that had come of his marriage.

“It’s the best option,” he repeated in an attempt to soothe the girl. “And you like Aunt Donna. And Uncle Fred. I know you do. The farm. The kerra’vein.” He tried to come up with a lure no little girl would be able to resist. “I hear you’ll have your very own pony.”

Joanna just glared at him, blue eyes blazing, with all the rage an eleven-year-old managed to muster. Suddenly he missed Jocelyn. For all her bitchiness, she’d always been able to talk Joanna off the ledge, make her see reason.

At a loss he stared at the cafeteria’s menu. This was supposed to be their extra special farewell dinner. He had known it would be difficult. He had not expected he’d be thinking of his secret liquor stash in sickbay before they’d even ordered.

“Cheeseburger with French fries?” he suggested hopefully. A peace-offering for the special occasion.

“There are families on board.” She didn’t even look at the menu, arms crossed, chin raised. Little rebel. She’d keep at him relentlessly until the last second. He just knew it. Dear lord, where did she get that stubborn streak from. Couldn’t be his side. Nope. No way.

“Yes.” He managed not to comment on that idiocy. Not enough that he’d be busy patching the crew back together after whatever stupid stunts they’d pull on a regular basis, now he was also looking forward to the joys of providing medical care to babies, toddlers, kids, and pregnant people. And aliens.

“So there’s really no reason for me not to come with you.”

“Yes, there is a reason, plenty of reasons, even,” he objected and found that her pouting had been easier to bear than her barrage of arguments. “A starship is no place for a kid. And the other kids that are coming are all part of families. So there’ll be people to look after them. And school. You need to go to school.”

“So? We are a family, too! And Aunt Christine said she wouldn’t mind looking after me.
Cheeseburger is fine.”

Christine Chapel, you traitor. Viciously Leonard punched their order into the touchscreen. “I need her on sickbay.”

“Janice said she’d help out, too. She always misses her little sister in space. She’d love to have me. And there’ll be a school. Spock said so.”

A conspiracy. Up until now he hadn’t been aware of the fact that Yeoman Rand even knew Joanna. Or the other way around. Whatever. He had never looked forward to getting on that damn starship like that before. “No. It’s much too dangerous. Your mother would kill me.”

“My mother is dead,” Jo snapped. “Because life on Earth is so safe.”

The slot in the wall opened and their meal appeared. Joanna proceeded to ignore the cheeseburger she’d been allowed for the special occasion. Leonard just stared at his salad. It wasn’t that he didn’t want Joanna with him. In fact, it was quite the opposite. He wanted her too much. And he was desperately scared of losing her. No. A pleasant, out-of-the-way planet and a life in the stable family unit of aunt, uncle, and cousins was a much better, much safer place for his baby than a starship. Or Earth. Because she was right about life on Earth was no guarantee of safety, either. Crazy Romulans could blow up planets, giant spaceships bury cities.

Joanna straightened her shoulders, sitting as tall as possible, obviously preparing to launch what she considered her ultimate argument. Leonard ground his teeth together and steeled himself for the inevitable.

“Jim said he’d protect me. He promised. He’s the Captain. And he said I could come.”

That was the worst argument she could have come up with.

“Jim just got himself killed,” Leonard snarled, fears and worries and rage of months seething inside. He could feel his pulse throb in his temples. “It’s a miracle he’s even alive. And it doesn’t matter that he’s the captain. He could be a green-blooded hobgoblin and that wouldn’t change a thing. I’m your father. And I’m saying no.”

“I hate you,” Jo shouted and burst into tears.

♦

Stardate 2260.128, 2000 hours, Deck 20, Rec Area

In the gym Nyota claimed one of the running cubicles and set climate and landscape to “Kenya, savannah, at dawn”. Then she picked a selection of traditional percussion pieces to accompany her workout. The drum beats would steady her rhythm and help her relax. She would have preferred to spend another night or two on Earth, but communications was one of the departments that had to be on board first to prepare for take-off. In consequence she’d been on board for weeks already before they’d finally leave orbit tomorrow evening. Engineering, of course, never really went home. For all intents and purposes, Scotty was married to the Enterprise.

Anyway, she was now officially not just communications officer on the bridge, but in charge of overseeing the development, installation, operation and maintenance of all communications systems for the whole ship. Time off-ship so close to the beginning of their mission was simply impossible, no matter what she might have wanted (or whom). So she had to make do with running in the gym. Thanks to the state of the art accouterments that at least was no particular hardship.
Nyota set an easy pace. Yes, she wanted to keep fit. But most of all she needed a run to clear her mind.

As if on cue, one source of her annoyance entered the gym and disappeared in a flash of science blue, black hair and pointy ears in the last of the running rooms. The other reason for her irritation was probably still in the new holo-room. Boys and their toys. Though why Kirk had to test the newest entertainment feature on the Enterprise with a simulation of Iowa of all places and temperature settings of Vulcan-that-was escaped her.

“*The hobgoblin and the hick,*” she muttered and increased her tempo. “*Idiots and jerks, both of them,*” she added for good measure, though without real conviction. *Men. Really.*

Officially, her relationship with Spock had ended six months (three days and whatever hours, minutes, and seconds ago ... She still missed his way of teasing her with his predilection for exact values of anything from time to food on her plate to words per sentence). Unofficially, it had been over long before that. In fact, she should have called it quits even before the Nibiru debacle. The signs had all been there, for far too long: no intimacy beyond moments of crisis, no indication that their relationship was growing, that their connection was deepening. No sex. They had friendship and trust, yes, certainly, and a solid measure of personal and professional understanding. But not more. That hurt – still did, as a matter of fact – and stung her pride, too. And then whatever hopes she might still have harbored had died with Jim.

Her stomach clenched at the memory, and she slowed down so she wouldn’t stumble over her own stupid feet. To have someone look at her like that ... to look at someone like that ... to lose all of that – all that could have been, all that should have been – within one and the same heartbeat ...

She focused on the horizon of the virtual savannah surrounding her and kept running.

“Then an honest to goodness *miracle* happens.” Each syllable one step, each pause one breath. “And they aren’t doing anything about it. Jim Kirk, finally grown up. Congratulations. But you’re doing it all wrong, buddy. That’s not how it works, not with Spock. Also, your timing sucks.”

In the interest of being honest with herself, she had to admit that Kirk so often rubbed her the wrong way because they were too similar. Both of them the determined, go-out-and-get-it type. She hoped she had more common sense than he did, but her own relationship with Spock didn’t support that idea. Or how the delayed happy ending between her ex and Jim bothered her. She should be thrilled that the boys were attempting to be all mature and professional about it. Only, she wasn’t. If they kept that up, the next five years would be very, very *long* years.

The comm blinked and beeped. She put it on screen. Her annoyance faded, replaced by a surge of happiness and a hint of apprehension.

“John.” She smiled. Now that he was done working for Admiral Pike as a double agent, Khan Noonien Singh was officially and legally John Harrison, and she knew he preferred his new name. In the aftermath of the Marcus conspiracy, they’d kept running into each other at Starfleet Command. They’d become friendly during endless hours of waiting for yet another debriefing, yet another hearing. At least every other day they’d also met up at Starfleet Medical, visiting Kirk. A classical hallway romance. “*So good* to see you.” Then she frowned, taking in the faint shadows of new bruises on the verge of being absorbed by his super-regenerative skin. “*How’s whatever Starfleet’s doing with you these days working out?*”

“*That’s classified,* of course. But what would you do with men like us if you had a fleet to rebuild?” He smirked wryly. Then he gestured for her to keep running, appreciatively taking in her appearance – snug running clothes, sweat and all.
She picked up her pace and pondered his reply, only to slow down again. But she did keep going. Well, she always did. Right. Fleet. Oh. Near indestructible test pilots would come in handy for getting the kinks out of prototypes. She inhaled deeply. At least he was alive, unfrozen, and while not precisely free, also not locked up somewhere safe with the key thrown away. In the backlash of the Eugenics Wars it hadn’t mattered that without Khan and his men the other Augments and their creators would have prevailed and ended up enslaving humankind. Dead martyrs had been easier to deal with than living superheroes then.

And, Nyota reflected uncharitably, if Starfleet didn’t need every man and woman they could get their hands on after Nero had decimated the fleet two years ago, maybe that would still be the case even today. Never mind that Khan had once again proven his loyalty to humankind, working with Admiral Pike as a double agent to expose and contain the Marcus conspiracy, even though the lives of his crew had been on the line the whole time.

“Right,” she said at last, because he was still waiting for an answer. John rubbed at his eyes. He had to be absolutely exhausted to allow himself such an ordinary, human-frail gesture. Her stomach tightened. “Don’t get yourself killed.”

That got his attention. Blazing eyes focused on her, his gaze almost tangible in its intensity, even on the screen. “You really do care if I live or die.”

Nyota stopped running and switched off the treadmill. Her heart wasn’t racing just because of her workout now. Her mouth went dry. She inhaled a shuddering breath.

“Of course I do.”

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead man naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.
– Dylan Thomas

Chapter End Notes

- Meditation: based on “Krakroa wh\'ltrion” at “marketaz.co.uk/StarTrek/Vulcan/med.html”
- Vulcan terms taken from Vulcan Language Dictionary (VLD), Compiled by Selek from Vulcan Language Institute, Marketa Z., Star Trek episodes and Movies, at “starbase-10.de/vld”
- the alien drug “Spice” referenced in this chapter naturally belongs to Frank Herbert’s “Dune”
• “space still contain infinite unknowns” quoted from TOS, “The Naked Time”

• “Everything that can happen does happen in equal and parallel universes.” quoted from the tie-in novel by Alan Dean Foster, Star Trek (2009).

• “To be Vulcan is to embrace a philosophy, a way of life, which is logical and beneficial,” he whispered. “We cannot sacrifice a useful existence merely for – personal redemption or private grief, no matter how intense our passions are. That would be neither logical nor beneficial. And yet...” refers to what Spock says about being Vulcan in TOS “Journey to Babel”: “It [being a Vulcan] means to adopt a philosophy, a way of life, which is logical and beneficial. We cannot disregard that philosophy merely for personal gain, no matter how important that gain might be.”

**Last but not least:** Many, many, many thanks to my alpha and beta reader, Star Trek advisor-in-chief, and best friend ever, Aranel Took, to Shefa for sharing psychological insights and expertise, and to Obsidianjg, my first-ever beta reader from way back in 2004, who has kindly agreed to wrestle yet another of my monsters into submission. All remaining mistakes are mine, and I can only ask readers to be gentle with me.

♥ **Comments are love!** ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.

If you have a moment, please also take a look at the tie-in for this story, *"Hope for Tomorrow" by Aranel Took.*
Chapter Summary

Pike and Sarek play a scandalizingly bad game of chess (Hey, did you think the only people who can play chess in the future are Jim and Spock?) and share some parenting insights. Joanna McCoy proves that she has learned a thing or two from Uncle Jim. Last but not least, Jim is determined to be a responsible captain and friend and takes it upon himself to talk to Spock about therapy – better him than Bones, he figures, which is quite correct and which goes at the same time better and worse than expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An Aching Kind Of Growing

Stardate 2260.128, 1600 hours, Starfleet Medical rooftop café

“So you do ...” Pike hesitated. He’d been about to say “feel”, but the point of this conversation was not to make the Vulcan Ambassador to Earth twitch. “... worry.”

Sarek offered him a look that was the barest hint less than diplomatically blank. “It is a father’s duty and privilege in both our cultures to exercise a suitable measure of concern regarding the welfare of his offspring.”

Pike translated that as “of course I worry, idiot”, and politely concentrated on the chess board on the table between them. They had claimed their by now traditional table in the rooftop garden café of Starfleet Medical in San Francisco. May sunshine warmed his back. The bright spring sunlight threw the many construction sites left from the wreck and ruin of the Vengeance a year ago into sharp relief. In two days the Enterprise was leaving on the first ever five-year mission of deep space exploration for the Federation. Just another day, and he’d finally be able to breathe. Pike would miss the kids, yes, and not just Jim, but young Spock, and that character of a CMO, too. But he couldn’t wait to see the Enterprise gone and out of Federation star space.

Jim had lost any chance at a “normal” childhood the moment he was born. Tarsus IV had marred his adolescence. The Nero incident ... well, no one had walked away from that one unscathed. Nevertheless, Pike hadn’t been seriously concerned. “Normal”, in his opinion, was a less than helpful construct for assessing men in the center chair. Pike also firmly believed in the resilience of hope, in men like Jim and himself coping with disaster. But now ... Pike shook his head. Staying on Earth now would turn Jim into a specimen. Into a thing instead of a person. Pike would have moved heaven and earth to get Jim out of here. Thankfully he’d only needed to push through the first five-year mission for deep space exploration of the Federation flagship with Command and the Federation Council.

Pike considered his next move, sighed and sacrificed a rook. His mind was not on the game today – not that it helped much when he was able to concentrate. He wasn’t a brilliantly intuitive player like Jim, and no one could out-logic a Vulcan at chess. However, if a casual exercise of Vulcan-human diplomatic relations in form of a strategical board game constituted the excuse Sarek
needed in order to keep talking about the kids, Pike was all for it.

Sarek and Pike had started meeting here over a year ago. Jim had been more dead than alive at the time, in spite of the miraculous effects of Khan’s blood. Pike himself had still been a patient here, after the bomb ruse to draw out Marcus had almost ended in a catastrophe. But Pike was Starfleet’s official liaison with Vulcan, a job he took very seriously. So even in those days there had been conferences and debriefings and consultations, most of them involving the Vulcan Ambassador to Earth.

Then Ambassador Selek had been transferred to this hospital. Apparently, the old man had fallen ill around the time Jim got himself killed, and for some reason the Vulcan healers recommended he should recuperate on Earth. Pike had no idea why, or what condition he suffered from to start with. Not a topic you asked Vulcans about. Not before Nero, and certainly not now. Vulcan healers thought an elderly VIP patient should recover on Earth from whatever the guy was suffering from? He got the best room in Starfleet Medical yesterday, no questions asked, no comments made, no press statement released. In this case, Pike was one of the chosen few who knew a few salient details about why that particular patient was so important – to all of Vulcan, but especially to Sarek. However, not even a Centaurian slug could make Pike pry for more information unless it was vitally important. But what even what little knowledge he possessed had served to form a connection with Ambassador Sarek – perhaps precisely because he never asked any questions.

Those factors combined had led up to this afternoon, an hour now routinely set aside each week for a game of chess, Admiral against Ambassador. At first their “casual” meetings had been pure protocol, and there had been no chess involved. Artificial diplomatic functions, stiffly executed, without any recognizable political or personal profit for either party. Playing chess had paved the way to a more constructive relationship, which in turn had been instrumental in getting Jim the hell out of here and back on the Enterprise. And now, Pike entertained the notion that “playing chess” had become a metaphor for two old worrywarts doing some of their worrying together. Sarek’s reply rather confirmed that suspicion.

“They’ll be okay,” Pike offered and leaned back into his wheelchair. Sarek raised an eyebrow at that statement, an expression Pike had observed in both the elder and the younger Spock as well. Pike suppressed an inappropriate grin and explained, “An illogical human statement without any decisive data to back it up; often intended to provide emotional comfort to the speaker himself.”

“Ah.” Sarek made his move. It was downright mediocre and could only serve to increase the length of an already tedious match. “My late wife was particularly adept at providing emotive commentary beyond the emotional control traditionally practiced by Vulcans.”

Which meant that Amanda had been able to comfort Sarek when even ancient Vulcan practices had failed. And possibly something like “thank you, my friend” in Standard.

For a while the two men continued to play in silence. One uninspired maneuver followed the next, merely to be thwarted by yet another dismal strategy that only served to prolong the game. Yet both men were content to keep playing, if only to enjoy the mellow, quiet atmosphere of the rooftop garden. When Pike caught a minute change of expression on Sarek’s face – a hint of a shadow of a frown – he experienced more than a hint of smugness. His ability to interpret Vulcan facial expressions had improved considerably during the last year. “May I inquire as to how your other ah... family member is faring, Ambassador?”

With the slightest exhalation, Sarek looked up. They both knew that Pike didn’t mean Sybok. Not that Pike was officially even aware of Sybok’s existence. Or any details concerning the top-secret assignment for New Vulcan that formed a part of the five-year mission of the Enterprise. “His
condition is satisfactory.” After a moment, Sarek added, “I will accompany Ambassador Selek back to New Vulcan when the Enterprise has left orbit. If the outcome of scheduled examinations on New Vulcan is – as expected – positive, I shall resume my duties here on Earth ... shortly thereafter.”

Pike smiled at Sarek’s concession of using less than exact terms to lay out his answer. After another sip of iced tea, he sighed. This could be construed at will as a reaction to the refreshing beverage or an emotional utterance and was therefore acceptable within the boundaries of polite conversation with a Vulcan. In an apparent non-sequitur he commented, “I may have no kids of my own, but I’m beginning to realize they’ll never get so old that a parent can stop worrying about them. Check, by the way.”

Sarek stared at the chess board with such a stony expression that Pike feared he’d pushed too far. But then Sarek just looked up with a clearly visible, wry twitch of his lips. “That has indeed been my experience,” he said mildly, before ending the game with a solid checkmate.

♦

Stardate 2260.129, 1100 hours, Starfleet Temporary Quarters

At first Joanna had worried that her outburst at dinner had endangered her plans. But as it turned out, her fit of temper had helped, rather than hindered. When her father came to the door of her room in the temporary accommodations for Starfleet personnel in the morning, and she’d responded with a muffled “Go away”, he’d actually done just that after asking her to “understand” once more and promising regular subspace messages. Why that hurt so much even though it was what she wanted (she needed him gone; he mustn’t notice her careful preparations), she didn’t understand. But it did, it totally did. In the end she spent another precious twenty minutes crying, before she was calm enough to hack into her dad’s PADD. Theoretically, Personal Access Display Devices should be, well, personal. But Uncle Jim had taught her a trick or two about computers, much to the chagrin of both her parents.

Well, she thought later, catching sight of her swollen eyes and blotchy face in the bathroom mirror, that should help my cover story, at least. She’d been in the theater group at her old school in Georgia. She knew a bit about how costumes and make-up made a performance more effective.

When she checked her dad’s comm logs, she couldn’t suppress a whoop of triumph. He’d asked her chaperone – “chaperone”, even thinking that old-fashioned term made Jo wrinkle her nose ... seriously, was that even still a word nowadays? – to leave her alone until dinner, expressing his hope that she’d have calmed down by that time. Leaving her be was his best helpless dad strategy. She’d counted on that when she’d formulated her strategy of escape. She took a deep breath. It made her plan more likely to succeed.

Jo wiped damp palms on her pants and picked up the phone to vid-call her best friend in San Francisco. She’d met Ari after her dad had forced her to go to school here, right after her mom’s death in the crash of the Vengeance. At first she’d hated it, being the country hick among the nerdy Starfleet kids. But then she’d met Ari at band practice. They were both playing the clarinet. Bass, too. And that was that. Best Friends Forever status achieved. You can’t both play bass clarinet and not be BFF. Law of the universe, or something.

“It’s a go,” Jo said, her heart pounding. “You’ve got the sound bites and vid footage ready?”

“Yep. Everything’s set up. Parents are out of town for the weekend. Some conference in New Orleans. And it’s their wedding anniversary. Mom’s been going on about a restaurant there, Sisko's
Creole Kitchen or something. They’ll be there for dinner this evening, making gooey eyes at each other – definitely not checking on us tonight. Brother dear has been appropriately blackmailed.” Ari did her best to sound confident and cool, but Jo saw that she was worried, what with how she tugged at her ponytail. “You’re sure you’re …”

“Yes, I am,” Jo said firmly. “Maybe not if I could stay here, with you … but there’s no way I’ll be dumped on some planet in the backyard of boondocks central.”

“Awww. I’ll miss you, too.” Ari took a deep breath. “Right, so when should I expect the first call from the dragon?”

“Around dinner time.” Jo explained, “Dad told her to leave me alone until then so I’ll have a chance to calm down and behave.” She stuck out her tongue. “So I’m going to leave her a note with your name, but nothing else. So she’ll spend at least some time looking you up. Thank goodness there are seven Delmar in the San Fran contacts details database. With a bit of luck you won’t be the first she calls.”

Ari nodded. “With what we’ve recorded for playback, we should be good for another day … at least until my parents return. Right.” Another deep breath. “And then I’ll tell them that you wanted to go back home. So they’ll be searching for you there.”

And not on the ship, Jo thought. After her dad had shot down her idea of joining the civilian contingent of the Enterprise right from the start, in that icy, harsh tone that told her there was no arguing with him, she’d been careful never to mention that idea to anyone but Ari. The counselor at school was convinced she desperately wanted to go back home to Georgia.

Jo remembered how Len had asked her about that, way back when they first started planning her escape. They’d been out on the paddock with Ari’s pony.

“How do you even think of stuff like that?” Ari had asked.

“Well,” Jo replied, concentrating on the pony. Misty was adorable. A Welsh white with black mane and tail. “I learned from the best.” She didn’t like the tone of her voice, but she went on regardless. “See, it was like this, my dad made that mistake with mom. He’d show her how important it was to him to see me whenever he could. And then mom would go and make it as difficult for him as possible. If he’d pretended that he’d just do what he had to because the court said so …”

The only thing comfortable about the ensuing silence was the swish of the pony’s tail. “You didn’t like your mom much, did you?”

Jo’s face felt unbearably hot. She couldn’t breathe. Somehow she still managed to reply: “No. Not really.” After a pause she rallied and added: “Also, Uncle Jim – the captain? He was, like, the best at survival strategies and tactical analysis and stuff. He told me you gotta give the enemy something they want to believe. And you must never ever let them realize what you really want. So there.”

And that, Jo thought, is why my plan is going to work.

On the vid screen, Ari shook her head. “I hope this works,” she told Jo. “The way I know my parents, I’ll be grounded for the next five years. So it better be worth it.”

“It will work,” Jo said emphatically. “And you better believe that I’ll be grounded, too, once they catch me. Put in the brig, most likely, on water and protein nibs.”
“At least you’ll be on a starship.” Ari sighed, wistful.

“I’ll message if they let me. And I’ll bring back some souvenirs for you. Like, weird alien artifacts or something. Roomies at the academy, I promise.” Jo ended the call.

With a fierce grin, she turned to her bed and pulled out her kit from underneath it. The most important part was her costume. She had to look like she belonged. In such a casual way that no one would look at her twice. That meant standard Enterprise ship’s clothing for civilians. In her case, a blue jumpsuit, gray wraparound tunic, and an old blue med jacket from her dad. A messenger bag with the Enterprise logo, the kind many girls her age lugged around. Not a big bag, but enough to hold her PADD, underwear, socks, an extra top, and toiletries. She broke her comm unit and dumped it into the recycling unit because she knew she could be tracked with that. Damn. All those pics and IM exchanges with Ari that she’d saved. But no matter. Her plan was more important.

Then she sat down at the desk and wrote her note: “Staying with my best friend Anrela Delamar for two days to say goodbye. Will be back in time for take-off. Bye, Joanna.”

A glance at the clock told her it was time to get going. She’d picked one of the last six shuttlecrafts scheduled to take civilians up to the Enterprise from San Francisco spaceport. There might be some kind of pomp and circumstance put on for the final shuttle. She couldn’t risk that. Until the Enterprise was too far away from Earth and any reasonable route to Centaurus to make her leave, she must not draw attention to herself.

Her plan was very simple. Another trick Uncle Jim had shared. Keep it simple. The more complex a strategy is, the more can go wrong.

Jo took the maintenance stairs at the back of the temporary quarters and quickly made her way over to the port facilities. Once there, the first thing she did was get her hair cut and died. Maybe that was overkill, but she’d rather be safe than sorry. There were people on board of the Enterprise who knew her. Although it was a big ship, she was bound to run into one of them at some point. If that happened before they were at a safe distance from Earth, she wanted to have the best chance to slip away unrecognized. She looked a lot like her dad, except for her eye color. Her mother had hated that about her. Anyway, extremely long black hair and bright blue eyes stood out a little too much. Short medium brown hair and dark brown contacts? Not so much.

Pleased with her new, much more nondescript appearance, Jo wandered through the crowded halls of the spaceport to the shuttle gates. It was always busy at the port, but Jo thought it was even worse today, with beings rushing around every which way. Or perhaps she was just nervous. She was glad that she’d done more than research where the Enterprise shuttles took off. Four times she’d managed to persuade her dad to take her up to the Enterprise. Therefore she knew where she was going, when she had to present her ID as dependant of a Starfleet officer, and things like that. Even where best to hide on the Enterprise – Mister Scott had told her that. He’d been delighted with her many questions. She also knew that an ensign would fly the shuttle, and that there’d be a list of passengers and that her name wouldn’t be on it. Her worst fear was that crew members would be among the passengers of the shuttle. Crew members who were well enough acquainted with her dad to recognize her and to know that she wasn’t supposed to be on the Enterprise.

But when she cautiously approached the crowd waiting at the gate to board the shuttlecraft, there was no one she recognized and no one paid any attention to her. She was just one of a dozen or so kids milling around or poring over a PADD or playing with their comm units while they were waiting. At last a man appeared at the gate, an ensign in engineering red with the badges of a navigator. He was pretty young, Jo guessed, around twenty or so. And he was seriously cute, with
light brown curls and gray eyes. He introduced himself as “Chekov, Pavel Andreievich, in charge of your transport today, ladies and gentlemen.” As expected, he produced a PADD and started reeling off the names of the passengers to enter the shuttle. He had a strong Russian accent, but Jo thought he sounded rather endearing that way.

Ten minutes later all other passengers had disappeared inside the shuttle. Jo stood in front of Chekov and did her best to look sad and sheepish at the same time. “Is there still room for me?” she asked.

“You’re not on the list,” Chekov said with a confused look at his PADD.

“Yeah, I know.” Jo ducked her head and held out her ID. “I’m Joanna McCoy. Jo.”

“Oh, you are the doctor’s daughter! I did not know that he has children. How very nice to meet you. A pleasure, really, a pleasure.” Chekov beamed at her. “So why are you not on the list?”

Jo shifted uncomfortably on her feet, glancing around nervously. “Errr... thing is, I’m not supposed to be on Earth right now.” For the first time in her life she was grateful that she flushed so easily. Her cheeks were burning right now. “But I had to say goodbye to Matt! He—” She broke off and dashed at her eyes, hoping that she still looked like a lovesick teen complete with crying jags. “He’s my boyfriend,” she whispered, “the first boyfriend I ever had, and Dad hates him. I swear Dad’s forcing me to be on the Enterprise just to get me away from Matt!” She balled her hands into fists to illustrate her fury at her father’s cruelty – and to keep them from shaking with nerves. Biting down on her lower lip, she raised her head and gazed at Chekov as entreatingly as she could. “Dad will kill me if he finds out. He’ll ground me for the whole five years. You must know how he is ...”

Chekov nodded. “Your father is a very fierce man,” he said, awe in his voice.

Jo exhaled a shaky sigh. “So do you ... do you think you could maybe take me with you even though I’m not on the list? And uh... maybe not mention it to my Dad when you see him?”

Chekov fiddled with the PADD, considering her request. A moment later he nodded decisively and beamed at her. “Of course I can. I know how it is, being young and in love. Is hard to say goodbye for five years, yes? But if he is a good boy, he will wait for you.” He put the PADD away. “You will have to join me in the front, though. Back’s full. Hope you don’t mind.”

Somehow Jo managed not to squee and spoil it all. Five minutes later she was strapped in on the co-pilot’s seat. Twenty minutes later they were on the Enterprise. And ten minutes later, she stood outside the shuttle bay, saying goodbye to Chekov.

“Don’t be too angry with your father,” Chekov said. “I am sure he means well. Fathers must protect their daughters.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Jo admitted grudgingly. “And at least I got to say goodbye to Matt. Thanks for helping me out, Mr. Chekov.”

“A pleasure,” Chekov said and bowed to her. “I hope I will see you again soon.”

“Yeah, me, too.” She grinned. “If I’m not in the brig for one reason or another ...”

Stardate 2260.129, 1230 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Office
On the day of their departure, the captain summoned Spock to his office for what he called “working lunch” before the Enterprise left orbit that evening. Spock tried to explain that he did not require sustenance at this point of the day. But Jim Kirk was nothing if not insistent: “Nonsense, Spock, a bit of salad won’t hurt you.” Now Jim was turning away from the replicator, precariously balancing various bowls on hands and arms, like a waiter in a Terran restaurant or the kind of circus acrobat called a “juggler”.

Something stirred inside Spock. A ... sensation ... a sentiment ...

He hesitated for a reaction time of 75.4 milliseconds, a rather mediocre value for a Vulcan male his age. Another testament to the “disadvantage” of his birth.

Illogically, he allowed the emotion to expand. One second. Warmth suffused him. His heart rate accelerated to 246 beats per minute. Two seconds. Relaxation akin to the harmony of meditation spread throughout his body and grounded him in the moment. Three seconds. His mind opened up, reached out, in ... relief ... appreciation ...

... gratitude.

Spock stopped the process precisely when Jim – it had been impossible for Spock to think of him as “captain” or even “Kirk” for twelve months and eighty-eight days now – reached the table and deposited his load with a sigh. Watching Jim opening and arranging bowls, Spock noted that his emotional experiment had lasted exactly 3.6 seconds, had elevated his subjective sense of well-being by 7.2 percent, and that he was now able to balance his hormone levels with an ease normally present only after a successful meditation cycle. Interesting.

Suddenly Jim froze mid-movement and stared at Spock, salad bowl in hand, hazel eyes wide and bright with curiosity. “I know that look! I know that look. You’re ... you’re feeling something.”

The expression of awe on the captain’s face was disconcerting. Spock increased his control over his facial muscles to an appropriate level. Jim’s face fell. “And now ... now it’s gone.” He frowned. “What are you doing? Are you on a diet or something? One feeling per day? Or what?”

“Vulcans do not ‘diet’,” Spock said and hastily busied himself with laying out plates, glasses, and cutlery. He noticed that Jim had chosen only vegetarian fare for this so-called business luncheon, in a pleasing selection of Vulcan and Terran dishes according to a harmonious scale of increasing spiciness. “We are in complete control of our endocrine systems.”

Jim grinned, adding the last bowl to the arrangement on the table. “Well, in that case you’ve got nothing to worry about. Dig in.”

To his surprise, Jim didn’t follow up on his uncomfortable conclusion about Spock’s latest experiment in managing his emotions. Instead he proceeded to pile his plate with a mountain of salad, disregarding origin and taste, pulled a couple of PADDs next to him, and promptly proceeded to smear salad sauce over the glossy surface of the PADD closest to his plate.

Spock considered the possibility that this action might be intended to distract him further from their initial exchange and was somewhat surprised at the comparatively high probability of 72.8%. That result did not sync with what Spock had come to consider as “normal” behavioral patterns for Jim Kirk. But it did fit a series of untypical interactions between them since Jim’s release from the hospital three months prior. He’d finally been “set free”, as he put it, in order to start preparing the Enterprise for their five-year mission. Since then, several instances of untypical behavior had demonstrated Jim’s capability of consideration concerning the attitudes and customs of another culture – namely, of Vulcan culture.
It had started with Jim using cutlery for every food he consumed in Spock’s presence, even for items traditionally eaten with hands by Humans. Next Spock had noticed that Jim had started to order only vegetarian dishes when they ate together. Last but not least, Jim – who was a very physical person, always reaching out to those he regarded as friends in many instinctive and, for his race and culture, socially appropriate ways – had become extremely circumspect about touching Spock.

Diplomacy and applied politics belonged to the core curriculum of Command track. Intimately familiar with the captain’s personal file, Spock was well aware that Jim had excelled in those subjects no less than in any others. Why Jim so often chose not to employ these skills in a productive manner, Spock couldn’t fathom. Since harmonious cooperation among the command crew – and between friends – were a universally desirable goal, Jim’s change of behavior should have pleased Spock. However, irrationally, it did not.

“Hmm, chickpeas,” Jim mumbled around a mouthful of salad. “Good stuff. And garlic. Hope it’s not too much for your taste. Anyway, here,” he thumped the PADD, “last minute dispatches from Starfleet HR. Updated fraternization rules. Seems they’ve realized that if they send a crew with so many young people out there for five years, celibacy isn’t going to work.”

Jim attacked a cabbage leaf with bizarre relish. Spock noted with mild concern that the circulation in Jim’s ears had increased to the point that their coloration had noticeably changed due to additional blood flow. “Right, I know such stuff is no issue for Vulcans, but it is for Humans, and many other humanoids. So. Relationships between crew members must never adversely affect morale, discipline, unit cohesion, respect for authority, professional conduct, or mission accomplishment etc. The perception of favoritism or misuse of position must be avoided at all times, natch. A meeting with one of the ship’s counselors is recommended to ensure that. For relationships within the same chain of command such a counseling session is required. If there are concerns, the counselor and the relevant superior officer will find a solution together with the relevant couple.” Jim had spoken faster and faster. Now he was running out of air, had to pause and inhale. “Also, which I am sure you know, but which I’m mentioning just in case you don’t, you get carte blanche for personal relationships, basically. Because of your unique status. And I’m sorry I have to talk to you about all of that. But I thought you’d maybe prefer me talking to you to Bones talking to you. Even though of course you’ll have to talk to him, too. At least when our next physicals are due, and he has threatened he wants to do them ASAP because he doesn’t trust Starfleet Medical. And that brings me to the next point on my list ...”

His next victim was a cherry tomato, and Spock successfully suppressed a wince at the way the juices splattered over the PADD and the sleeve of Jim’s uniform. He had not anticipated that a light meal of salads could turn into such a display of violence against vegetables. “Those counselors,” Jim explained. “They are sending four of them with us, two Humans, an El-Aurian, and a Betazoid. New regs say that in addition to our quarterly physicals we must endure a bloody therapy session.”

“Therapy session?” Spock frowned. Of course he was familiar with the basics of psychology and psychotherapy, not just pertaining to the Human and the Vulcan race, but also regarding the other members of the Federation and even more exotic races. Xenopsychology was essential for establishing a successful First Contact, after all. Additionally, psych evaluations were standard procedure for Starfleet officers. But regular meetings with therapists?

“Yeah,” Jim said, annoyed. “They want you to talk about your feelings four times a year.”
Spock looked scandalized.

Oh boy, how Jim could empathize. Therapists were not his favorite kind of people. He hated digging around in hurt and horror. It was so much better simply to get on with things. With life. Time heals, damn it. Maybe not all wounds, but the point of surviving was to move on, right?

But he did see the point of regular psych check-ups, especially on a five-year mission. There were some really awful cases of people running amok in the early days of spaceflight, including the Starbase 13 disaster. To this day, no starbase with that number had been recommissioned. Also, he wasn’t stupid. He knew that his personal preference for dealing with trauma was unhealthy. As captain, he could no longer afford the luxury of being an idiot because of personal hang-ups. And though he was loath to admit it, his weekly physicals with Bones and his chats with Guinan were a good thing right now.

“Think of it as another take on those standard debriefing psych evals,” Jim suggested weakly. “Or if talking really doesn’t work for you, I expect that the Betazoid, uh... Dr. Eli Elbrun could do a telepathic assess—”

“No!” Spock’s voice was harsh, bordering on emotional; he visibly shuddered at the very idea. Jim winced. He should have known, he really should have. A thousand Vulcan taboos plus the intensely intimate nature of telepathy, and Spock being a very private person even for a Vulcan ... He got up and walked around the table to slump in the chair next to Spock. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have suggested that. But you must know they sent him along with you in mind. In case you need telepathic intervention. He’s a buddy of M’Benga, trained on Vulcan.”

“No,” Spock repeated, calmer. “I am aware of the circumstances of Elbrun’s presence on the Enterprise, and it is ... appreciated. A logical and beneficial assignment. But unless telepathic intervention is an absolute necessity for the safety of the ship or ... my mental health, it is not ... not an option I will choose.”

“Okay,” Jim said, “okay.” He could feel Spock’s body heat, sitting so close to him, and suddenly he found himself wanting to touch Spock very much. Touch-telepath, he reminded himself firmly. And: This is – he is – too important to fuck up.

“Then talk to Guinan,” he suggested, searching Spock’s tense face. “She’s real easy to talk to, what with being El-Aurian. And she’s nice. Not intrusive at all. It’s just another standard Starfleet thing, really. I ... well, I tried playing the Vulcan card for you, but they wouldn’t budge. Seems you’re not special enough for that.” Jim frowned, wondering when Spock had become his definition of “special”.

“It ... is only logical,” Spock admitted reluctantly. “The emotional stability of the crew is important for a successful mission, and for all I am Vulcan I am merely one of many members of this crew.” He paused. To Jim’s surprise, he didn’t turn his chair away but toward Jim. “You ... you find it beneficial, talking to Guinan,” he said. “Why?”

Jim rubbed his hands over his face. “I didn’t use to do this therapy thing. Hated it, in fact. I mean, it wouldn’t change a thing, right? And I ... I was who I was. Not about to change or apologize for that. I mean, that was all I had left. After ...” He made a vague gesture. “... you know my file.”

Spock’s gaze was intent on him, intense, and damn, he had beautiful eyes. Not just handsome or attractive. Beautiful. “What has changed?”

Jim resisted the urge of rubbing his face a second time and hiding behind his hands. He thought
that talking about his feelings wasn’t much easier for him than for Spock. But his resolve remained firm.

“I have,” he said simply.

“Ah. The way you were ... cured?”

Jim nodded. “Yes, that.” And that was the easy part. “The – the reboot, you know what it did to me. I’m stronger than a normal human being now, my life expectancy is supposed to be about the same as yours. Before, I was about as telepathic as an old boot. Now my psionic potential is off the charts. Which is also why they are sending Elbrun and Guinan along. Khan is pretty stable for an Augment. But I was never meant to be superhuman. I could go crazy.”

“Never, Jim.” Not an expression of hope, or the reassurance of a loyal friend: a statement of an irrefutable truth.

“I think you’re right,” Jim said. “I sure as hell hope you are. But there are too many lives on the line to take any chances. However ...”

He took a deep breath. Spock was waiting for him to continue, ever patient. “That’s not it, not really.” Another deep breath. A helpless gesture, indicating Spock, then himself. “This ... us ...” he said softly, “It’s not just about me anymore. And you ... you deserve the best of me.”

For a moment he hesitated. More emotional honesty: He wanted to touch Spock. Had wanted to touch him again for over a year. Spock holding his hand had been the best part about waking in Starfleet hospital. Better even than not being, well, dead. But back on Earth, in the hospital, it had never seemed right. And the last three months had been so bloody busy.

Jim held out a shaking hand, fingers spread in the traditional ta’al.

And Spock ... without blinking, without hesitation, raised his hand as well. Gently he aligned his fingers with Jim’s and pressed back against his hand, a hot, unwavering touch. Somehow Jim knew that he was shielding carefully to protect Jim’s newly telepathic and thus extremely vulnerable mind. But in spite of the effort that must cost, Spock only withdrew his hand when Jim finally stopped trembling.

“Very well,” Spock said at last. “I shall endeavor to ... talk about my feelings to Guinan.”

♦♦♦

“When a child first catches adults out – when it first walks into his grave little head that adults do not always have divine intelligence, that their judgments are not always wise, their thinking true, their sentences just – his world falls into panic desolation. The gods are fallen and all safety gone. And there is one sure thing about the fall of gods: they do not fall a little; they crash and shatter or sink deeply into green muck. It is a tedious job to build them up again; they never quite shine. And the child’s world is never quite whole again. It is an aching kind of growing.”

– John Steinbeck, East of Eden

Chapter End Notes

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Some Of Us Forever

Chapter Summary

The Enterprise leaves orbit with some pomp & circumstance, including Admiral Abrams popping up to say bye-bye. Then they're off. Thank Bog. ♦ Meanwhile, a stowaway on board of the Enterprise has a tête-à-tête with a Jefferies tube. ♦ Later, there's a briefing. Jim does his best to be all competent & captain-ly. And if things get a little out of hand, it's really not his fault, because, emo Vulcan space gypsies. Then there's captain's dinner (who let the civilians on board?) and getting drunk with Bones, and then Jim can't sleep and ... yeah. There's Spock.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Some Of Us Forever

Stardate 2260.129, 1830 hours, Bridge, USS Enterprise 1701

When Jim entered the bridge, he couldn't suppress a grin. Hikaru Sulu still had the conn. Uncomfortable and ramrod stiff he perched on the very edge of the command chair. Jim wondered if the lieutenant would fall off the chair if he yelled “Booo” but quickly dismissed the idea.

It was, after all, a historic moment. That this moment was his ... Bemused, and somewhat in awe, he shook his head.

“Thank you, Mister Sulu,” Jim said and grinned when Hikaru jumped off the seat as if stung. “Uncomfortable?”

“I'm not ready to get used to it yet.” With a wry smile Sulu moved to the helmsman’s station. “Chair’s all yours, sir.”

Jim took a deep breath and sat down. During the long months in hospital, there had been times when he’d wondered if he would ever be allowed to reclaim this seat. Darker times still, when he’d doubted if he’d ever be fit to sit in this chair again. Today all reservations and reluctance had faded.

This, this was his. A bitter birthright, certainly, but also a home hard-won. He would forever respect the chair.

First things first. There were procedures to observe. Pressing the button for Engineering, he leaned forward. “Mr. Scott, how’s our core?”

“Purrin’ like a kitten, Captain,” the chief assured him without hesitation, pride in his voice. Jim shook his head, amused. Even with Spock’s help it would take weeks to figure out just what Scotty had done to the warp core this time. Not that Jim minded the chief’s creativity; Scott was brilliant. But as captain he should be aware of the number of safety regulations the Enterprise didn’t conform with – a mere three months after Starfleet finished repairing, refitting, and updating the
ship’s drives and weaponry.

“She’s ready for a long journey,” Scotty announced.

“Excellent!” Jim couldn’t stay put. Exuberance and excitement drove him to his feet. McCoy was hovering behind the chair with a gloomy expression. Leaving his daughter behind to send her off to Centaurus on her own was difficult for his friend. Jim clapped him on both arms, in a doomed attempt to cheer him up. “Come on, Bones – it’s gonna be fun.”

“Five years in space,” Bones muttered darkly. “God help me.”

Jim rolled his eyes and hoped the comment hadn’t been loud enough to be picked up by microphones. The start of their mission was being broadcast live to all Federated planets and then some. He turned to the next station on his list. “Dr. Marcus,” Kirk greeted the woman at the secondary science station. “I’m glad you could join the party.”

He wasn’t entirely comfortable with her presence. But she had earned the opportunity to prove herself and to move out of her father’s shadow. On Earth she would never manage. Jim knew all about that, and about what it meant that there was somebody, anybody, to give you the chance you needed. She smiled back at him. “It’s good to be here, Captain.”

At the back of the bridge, behind Bones, he glimpsed the imposing figure of Commander Michael Paul. With rugged features, sharp green eyes, and salt-and-pepper hair, the man was still lean and fit as a fiddle, although he was one of the oldest officers on board. Jim still wasn’t sure how he got that lucky. The man was a legend in Starfleet – the Xenopolitics officer with the highest ratio of successful First Contacts ever. Paul had resigned from active starship duty years ago to take care of his only child after his wife’s death. It was nothing short of amazing that Paul had signed on for a five-year mission now. With his daughter in tow, too (Lieutenant Carolyn Paul was a sciences officer who’d work as a teacher for the duration of their trip). No matter; Jim wasn’t one to look a gift genius in the mouth. Smiling, he nodded to the commander. It was good to have such an experienced officer on board.

Next, Jim turned to Uhura. One of these days he’d get her to allow him to call her Nyota. Another goal for this mission. “Communications?”

“Starfleet Command are hailing us – Captain.” She was all business, but her eyes were gleaming. And the way she said “Captain” told him she meant it.

“On the screen,” Jim ordered, stepping next to his first officer, who instantly moved half a step backwards.

Larger than life, commander in chief Admiral Abrams appeared before them on the display. His unruly black hair was swept up over a high forehead. Gray eyes sparkled behind retro glasses with thick black rims, ruthless-smart. “Captain Kirk, as commander in chief of Starfleet Command it is my duty and my privilege to issue the following orders to you and the crew of the starship Enterprise. For the next five years your mission shall be: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.” The admiral smiled. “Godspeed to you all – Abrams out.”

Anticipation overflowed into exhilaration. Jim turned to his first officer. “So. Where should we go, Spock?” he quipped.

Spock stood motionless, a warm column of strength, almost but not quite touching. He didn’t even raise an eyebrow at the inane question. (They had received the itinerary for their mission months
ago; additionally, Spock was the sole member of the crew who already knew the details of their
top-secret missions on behalf of the Vulcan High Council.) Instead he replied, his voice warm and
level, “As a mission like this has never before been attempted, I defer to your good judgment,
Captain.”

Jim straightened but didn’t move away. If anything, he leaned infinitesimally closer to Spock. Shit,
he thought, lightheaded with the euphoria of the moment, that’s it. Now.

“Mr. Sulu – take us out.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Sulu verified the coordinates on his screen. Jim had just enough time to draw a deep breath. Then
the helmsman punched it.

The familiar lights of the Terran system contracted around them, like diamonds on strings drawn
into the hollow of an invisible hand, just to be flung back into space a moment later. In a flash,
brilliant ribbons of lightning exploded, unfurling into the blaze of warp speed.

♦

Stardate 2260.129, 1400 hours, somewhere on board of the Enterprise

As soon as Chekov disappeared, Jo turned around and headed down the next corridor, doing her
best to project vibes of “I belong here, everything’s cool”. So far it had been almost too easy. But
she tamped down that dangerous surge of exhilaration. The hard part hadn’t even begun. She didn’t
know where they were going. She had no idea how long it would take to get far enough away from Earth and
any possible route to Centaurus for her to be safe. Bottom-line, she needed to hide as long as
possible.

That’s where her previous trips to the Enterprise came in handy. She’d done her level best to
memorize the floor plans of the entire ship. At least she probably wouldn’t get lost. But her best
resource remained Mr. Scott – thanks to the visit when she’d innocently asked him what he’d do if
he had to play “Hide and Seek” on the Enterprise. They’d all laughed; Mr. Scott, her dad, even
Keenser. And then Mr. Scott had given her all kinds of neat insider tips. With a bit of luck, she’d
get the last laugh now.

One important piece of advice had been to hide in the same place only once, and to stay where
people were actually allowed to be. Mr. Scott had gone on about how scans registered when
people happened to show up where no one should be. As if that was an insult or something, even
though Jo was pretty sure starship security systems were meant to do just that. However, she’d
taken Mr. Scott’s advice to heart. At least for a week, she wouldn’t spend a night twice in the same
place.

Her first hiding place was a Jefferies tube that formed a short, horizontal emergency connection
between two parallel corridors behind the turbolifts on deck twenty. At first the idea of being
inside a Jefferies tube had scared her. She’d said as much when Mr. Scott had praised Jefferies
tubes as hiding places. In horror holo-flicks the tubes were always endless, vertical tunnels full of
shadows, hollow noises, and monsters. But Mr. Scott and Keenser had shown her how Jefferies
tubes were pretty straightforward emergency shortcuts. Like this one. Emergency lights glowed at
a comfortable level. Perhaps twenty percent. Not very bright, but good enough. The temperature
was okay, too. Not warm, but also not cold enough that she needed a blanket. She was sure glad
that she’d taken her dad’s old jacket with her, though. Now and then she glanced at the time on her
PADD. The Enterprise was supposed to take off at 1900. As she waited, she noticed a couple of letters stamped into the metal of the tube: “G.N.D.N.” She wondered what that meant. And if she’d feel the moment the Enterprise left orbit, the second the starship went into warp. She kind of wanted to stay awake. After all she’d spent months waiting for that moment. But boy, was she exhausted.

In the end she closed her eyes and let herself drift off to sleep. Main thing, she’d made it onto the Enterprise. She’d stay hidden, and she’d stay with her dad, even if he had no idea that she was here at all.

♦

Stardate 2260.129, 2000 hours, Deck 10, Conference Lounge One

A few minutes past 2000 hours, at the end of Beta shift, the command crew milled into conference lounge one. Now that the PR shtick had been dealt with, and they were warping towards their first destination, it was time to get down to business.

Yeoman Rand had prepared the table with non-alcoholic drinks and PADDs on every place. She was a platinum punk of a woman with no manners to speak of, and one of the meanest hackers Jim had ever encountered. It was both reassuring and kind of creepy that Starfleet Command figured that particular combination of attitude and skills qualified her to work with him. But Gaila and the supercomputer of the Enterprise loved her, and Scotty had taken to calling her “lassie”. She was also the only one in the universe besides Spock who could make Jim do his paperwork on time and remember to use spell check. Within the last three months, Jim had come to appreciate her, abrasive personality and all.

Of course Jim had known that “five-year mission of deep space exploration” wouldn’t translate into the twenty-third century equivalent of “and they rode off into the sunset and went wherever they wanted to go”. Just how prosaic their orders read had been a letdown all the same. With a sigh, he settled down and looked at the members of his command crew: Bones, Uhura, Chekov, Sulu, Scott, Marcus, Paul. *Spock.*

“Ladies and gentlemen, our orders.” Jim tapped a few buttons, and the screen behind him flared to life, presenting the Starfleet seal on the cover of a fat folder. “I know we’ve been over all of that before . . .”

“... only three times every week for three months now,” Bones griped. “But by all means, oh Captain, my Captain, do enlighten us.”

Jim rolled his eyes and just kept going. Sure, this was repetitive. But that’s what successful missions were made of. Good prep work. Even leap-without-looking, sheer-desperation-will-make-it-work Jim Kirk knew that. If going over their itinerary, their various schedules, and all the damn details every day until they got back to Earth would save the life of even one red shirt, then that was how he’d spend his evenings for the next five years. “Each year of our mission is devoted to a specific major assignment. Explorations en route are up to the command team’s discretion, and I am looking forward to input from every department in due time.” A wave of his hand, and an overview popped up, with five subsections highlighted, one for each year of their mission.

“As you can see here, space is sort of like a piece of Swiss cheese.”

To illustrate, he switched on the holo-projector, then rose to his feet for more freedom of movement. That was the part of this latest debriefing Jim had actually prepared for. Most of all because he enjoyed playing with the new holo-projector. Above the wide, oval table a three-
dimensional, translucent image of chartered space formed in spiraling rows of cubed sectors. Federation space glowed blue; the Klingon Empire flared red, Romulan sectors lit up yellow. Darkness that faded away into thin air surrounded everything: uncharted space. But even the tinted portions of space formed by no means solid blocks of explored territory. Instead they were riddled with holes, blank spots on the map. Not at all unlike the famous Terran cheese.

“A traditional Russian cheese,” Chekov whispered, nodding sagely, “the Sviss stole the recipe.”

Jim grinned but went right on, “Our job is to fill up some of those holes, and to expand the cheese a bit around the edges.”

“And if that doesn’t stink I don’t know what does,” Bones muttered.

Uhura shook her head, indicating her disapproval of Jim’s approach, figure of speech and all. But he could see that her lips were twitching. Spock offered a blank stare. At least he didn’t comment. Jim scratched his head. He’d have to work on his speeches. Perhaps he could have Rand write them for him? Suddenly an awful thought hit him. If Pike hadn’t survived, he might have been the one to give that speech at the memorial ceremony for the victims of the Marcus conspiracy. He shuddered.

“Our first mission is in support of a member of the Federation in their hour of need.” Now very serious, Jim nodded to Spock. “We are to proceed to Mu Draconis and the planet Alrakis, or Arrakis. Or yes, Bones, *Dune.*”

In one of their previous sessions, the different names for the damn planet had led to heated arguments among the team that he hadn’t seen coming at all. Who cared if the dust ball was called Alrakis, Arrakis, Dune or Sandmite Paradise? Jim shook his head. At least today he could provide some useful details about this destination and wasn’t stuck with saying: “That’s where we go first; update the translators with that freaky Fremen dialect, and get me info about sandworm riding – sounds like a fun activity for shore leave.”

Vulcan High Council had meant *business* when they’d declared this part of their mission top-secret. Even *he* had been given the interesting details only this very morning. By Sarek. In person. Paranoid, the lot of them. Not that he blamed them. Not after Nero, and certainly not after an unknown party had abducted three Vulcan scientists from a climate research station on a remote desert planet to sell them on a slave market of an Orion colony a few weeks ago. Pure dumb luck that enough Section 31 agents had been present to rescue the Vulcans. (Weather forecasts, the guys had been working on *weather forecasts!* Somehow that made the whole thing even worse. So few had survived the Vulcan genocide, and now that very fact made it dangerous for them to just keep living their lives, doing their jobs?) Jim couldn’t get the log entry out of his mind in which Spock had stated how he was a member of an endangered species now. What a fucked up universe in which that translated into Fleet intel with astronomical going prices of Vulcans on way too many planets of known space. The latest “at risk” report of PATS (Planets Against Trafficking of Sentients) made Jim want to throw up and never allow Spock on any away mission ever again.

“The planet is the last known location of a Vulcan colony under the leadership of one Sybok. I guess Vulcans just can’t pass by desert worlds without natural precipitation. Our goal is to locate the colony so Mr. Spock can deliver a message from the Vulcan High Council.” Jim decided to leave it at that for the moment. Traveling at an average of warp six it would take them around two months to get there. Time enough to reveal certain sensitive details concerning Sybok and friends.

A bright purple line appeared in the projection to indicate their itinerary, complete with estimates of travel times lighting up along the way. He *liked* the new holo-technology. “From Arrakis we are to pursue a course to the Black Cluster to scout out a possible location for a starbase in order to
facilitate research on the effects of gravitational wavefronts. As Nero has shown us, our current navigational systems are not up to scratch when it comes to the impact of such phenomena.” He smiled at Spock. As science officer, Spock was looking forward to that part of their mission a lot; searching for a good spot for a starbase would provide ample opportunity for the science department to collect data on the Black Cluster and to contribute to important research projects.

“From there we are to make our way toward the unaligned space of the Sagittarian systems at leisure. Claiming areas at a strategic distance from the Romulan neutral zone have become a priority for Starfleet. So if at all possible we’re supposed to make First Contact and get people to sign on with the Federation right away.” He frowned at the display and failed to come up with something new to add to what they’d been going over for weeks, well, ever since Starfleet Command handed them their general itinerary. “Besides ‘the Teapot’ systems, Alpha Sagittarii – Rukbat – seems the best candidate so far.”

Thankfully Spock didn’t start a discussion this time. Last time the debate of what “strategic distance” meant and how the proximity of The Patriarchy might cause problems had taken until 0500 hours. Since Sagittarian sector was pretty close to the Kzinti, a race with a long tradition of deep space exploration, everyone anticipated that they’d find warp-capable societies in that area. However, taking into account the aggressive history of that species, chances were that visitors wouldn’t be received with open arms. Hey, a scant two-hundred years had passed since Earth’s last victory over the Patriarchy and the peace treaty of Sirius that tamed those warrior-cats. On Earth some people still clung in warped nostalgia to Terran territorial conflicts resolved several hundred years ago. Vulcans got twitchy when reminded of kerfuffles that happened a few thousand years in the past. And Klingons, well, best not get into that because there was no getting out of it, ever ... The bottom-line was that beings who’d suffered acquaintance with the Kzinti before the Terran 21st century might very well shoot first and ask questions later.

Jim expected trouble, and although they’d been over it a dozen times already, the bad feeling in the pit of his stomach persisted. Maybe that’s why he needed to sum everything up once more tonight. To reassure himself. Let me explain, he thought wryly. No, there is too much. Let me sum up. The famous quote reminded him that he should organize a movie night one of these days and force everyone to watch the historical Terran flicks he enjoyed. If only to get back at Rand for the captain’s dinner she’d scheduled for ... shit, in twenty minutes?

“Last but not least, we are supposed to return into Federation space to patch up a rather uncomfortable hole at a critical location between Romulan and Klingon space: the Regulus system.” Jim pointed at the base of a blue outlier of Federation space ensconced between yellow and red on three sides. If shit went down in that corner of Federation space, Regulus would the most important bastion to fall back to. Jim took a deep breath. There, almost done. He felt quite accomplished for having summed things up for the thirty-seventh time without boring his team to death (at least they didn’t look quite dead yet), thus ending their mission early.

“All of that should keep us more than busy for five years.” Nods and smiles followed that statement. Space was a big place; just getting from one destination to the next would take them between one and three months. The core of the Enterprise might be the most advanced warp drive yet, but even so a speed of warp eight could not be sustained for days on end. Most of the time, they would have to make do with warp six.

“Aye,” Scotty said happily. “An’ that’s assumin’ nothin’ goes awry.”

“Which we all know it will,” Bones groaned. “Just think about it: First we get to spend some quality time boiling our brains to mush in a worm-riddled and drug-infested desert. Then we’re supposed to play chicken with a whole cluster of black holes. Dancing around a damn abyss, that’s
“Especially since we are to fulfill another task for the Vulcan High Council throughout our mission,” Jim interrupted before Bones could go into full rant mode. With that announcement he had everyone’s attention once more. Time for the second Vulcan revelation this evening. He should send Sarek a thank-you note. “Time to brush up on Vulcan history, ladies and gentleman. Hopefully everyone knows that after Surak several factions left Vulcan to found new colonies, such as what is now known as the Romulan Empire. However, what may not be common knowledge is that there’s another contingent of Vulcans who... left the planet due to philosophical differences later on. Vulcans who have never settled down but have embraced a nomadic lifestyle.”

“Philosophical differences?” Bones put in, intrigued. “Was mugwump Surak not logical enough for them, or what?”

“Quite the opposite,” Spock replied mildly. “The V’tosh ka’tur believe in the necessity of actively experiencing emotions in order to control them. When their lifestyle became incompatible with the majority of Vulcan society, it... was deemed appropriate that they leave Vulcan-that-was.”

Bones stared at Spock. “You mean to say that there are...” He blinked, started over: “Just, lemme get that right: There are emo Vulcan space gypsies out there somewhere?” He flailed his hands. “Emo Vulcan space gypsies who got kicked out of the logic club because the rest of you guys didn’t approve of their touchy-feely flower-power ways? And now – after how many hundred years, the High Council wants them back?”

“If there are any Vulcans still out there,” Jim said firmly, “they should be made aware of the plight of their people. And that’s our job. We’ll interrupt our voyage at all major trade hubs to gather information in order to make contact with the V’tosh ka’tur. Whoever they are, and whatever philosophy they subscribe to. That will take a lot of time, but we have five years to get this done, after all.” He sat down and reached for a glass of water. His throat felt dry and scratchy after the lengthy monologue. “Questions? Comments? Have at it.”

♦

Stardate 2260.129, 2100 hours, Deck 8, Main Mess

When the discussion wound down, Jim would have liked to hole up in Engineering with Scotty, Bones, and Gaila. Celebrating their successful escape from Earth with whisky and Romulan Ale would have made the start of their mission perfect.

Instead harridan Rand dragged him off to his cabin to change into his damn dress uniform and then back to the mess hall to attend her stupid gala dinner. As if that wasn’t bad enough, she made him give a speech with an abbreviated version of Abrams’ farewell message and their orders, as far as that was appropriate for the unwashed masses. Jim decided then and there that from now on Rand was going to draft all of his speeches, always. In this case, revenge was captain’s prerogative. Even if he had to admit that she was right to insist – historic moment, first civilian contingent on a Starfleet flagship ever, first five-year mission and all.

Thing was, looking at all those faces in the storm of applause that followed his awkward impromptu speech, he was transported back to Iowa. Back to a time before Frank, before Tarsus IV, when he hadn’t understood yet what it meant to be his father’s son. Back to county fair potluck dinners with adults making boring speeches and him sharing silly jokes with Sam and their mother shushing them and sticky fingers and cotton candy and his mother’s laughter and ... He stared at...
the faces, at all those people looking at him – no, not at him, at the captain – crew members, their spouses, their children, at human beings and aliens. So many lives hurtling through space, all of them his responsibility. His people, in a way. He wondered if that was how the ancient kings of Earth had felt, all possessive and proud. The same instant, and perhaps for the first time ever, he understood just why Bones periodically got the heebie-jeebies over being stuck in what was not much more than a tin can yo-yoing through space. “Fucking scared” didn’t come close.

Thank goodness dinner was served then, and he needed to concentrate on his food. Eating was, and always would be, serious business for Jim. First of all, what with the million things he was allergic to, eating often amounted to Russian roulette with fork and spoon for him. Then there was Bones monitoring his messed-up metabolism (surviving a famine will do that to you) and moaning about vegetables and salad and “fish, Jim, fish, and steamed, not fried” and no damn carbs, and most certainly not for dinner. Finally, each and every meal constituted an intimate battleground for Jim’s often visceral reactions to the presence and the absence of food, which could swing from attacks of gluttony to painful revulsion from one meal to the next. However, no matter what, he always ate slowly, and he always consumed everything on his plate. He was also almost incapable of talking during meals. Demonstratively crunching away on that apple had been the hardest part of the Kobayashi Maru. He’d puked afterwards, too.

All of that – last minute preps and checks starting at 0400 hours, lunch with Spock, checking all stations before leaving orbit, his orders, security measures, the big moment with Abrams on the screen, the briefing, the torture of public dinner – added up. This was why Jim wound up in sickbay at 2200, tied into knots, staring into a glass of medicinal whiskey from Bones’s secret stash instead of sleeping. Also because he knew it would be one of those nights. A night when he’d be afraid to fall asleep like a stupid little kid. It was one of those things left over from ... well, that thing. Bones knew, of course. But he wouldn’t mention it. He’d just sit with Jim, however long it took, and happily express his personal disgust with the construction of the universe in general and the human body in particular. They’d share a few drinks, and if it was really bad, Bones would eventually bully him into manning up and enduring a hypo that would knock him out instantly for a few hours or into taking a couple of pills that worked a bit more slowly. That night, Bones needed it, too, the drinks, and the companionship. Leaving Jo behind ... Jim hadn’t seen Bones like that in a long time. He’d told his friend not to be an idiot and to take Jo along when the topic came up first. But of course Bones would have none of that. Jim had quite seriously considered kidnapping Jo. Tonight he wished he’d just gone ahead and done it.

♦

Stardate 2260.129, 2300 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Cabin

Gamma shift was already half over when Jim returned to his cabin. Wow, he’d live to regret that in the morning. He hadn’t accepted the casual offer of a hypo or pills. The buzz generated by the wine he’d had with dinner and the shots he’d downed with Bones should be enough on top of a long day to make him go the fuck to sleep.

No such luck. Jim didn’t even try complete darkness but kept lights at twenty to start with and left the door to his living area open. As he lay in his bunk with the skin trying to crawl off his back, he couldn’t deny that he might have a real problem. At 2400 he sat up, trembling, to glower at the bathroom door. He’d opened the door to the office adjacent to the living area at 2330 because hey, it was his office, his very own, private, awesome captain’s office, and why should he keep that door closed? Besides, better air quality and all that. But if he opened the door to the bathroom he shared with Spock as well, chances were that Spock would hear it. And worse, it might not be enough. Jim knew treatment existed for trauma-induced claustrophobia. Drugs and therapy and what have you. But bullshit. He hadn’t come back from death to be scared of doors.
Jim balled his hands into fists and squeezed his eyes shut. He had no idea how long he sat there like that, leaning against the wall, sweating and shaking, his heart trying to explode from an utterly fucked-up fight-or-flight impulse. A wisp of warm air made him open his eyes eventually.

The bathroom door was open. The other bathroom door was open, too. And in the darkness beyond he could just make out Spock. Dressed in a silken black robe, he sat on his meditation rock in a perfect loshiraq position, stone-still, as if he hadn’t moved or even breathed in hours.

♦♦♦

“We travel, some of us forever, to seek other states, other lives, other souls.”

Chapter End Notes

• Some lines of narrative summary and dialogue in the first scene of this chapter are quoted verbatim from the epilogue of the tie-in novel “Star Trek Into Darkness” by Alan Dean Foster.

• Arrakis or Dune are from Frank Herbert’s “Dune”.

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Spock spends quality time staring at his emotions. And his emotions stare back at him. ♦ Lieutenant Sulu and Lieutenant Leslie are less than thrilled when Commander Spock takes a vested interest in their careers. Nyota has comments and opinions. ♦ Jo meets people. And aliens. Also, replicated peppermint tea is actually not half bad. ♦ There's another briefing. And another sleepless night for Jim. Or maybe not, if Spock has anything to say about it. And he's determined to be heard ...

And Dreams Were Time Limitless

Stardate 2260.130, 0300 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin

When Jim finally slept peacefully, Spock let the light trance of his meditation fade away. He still didn’t move but allowed his gaze to drift to the sleeping form of his captain and rest there.

Relief.

And oh so many other emotions, twisting, twirling, twining around questions and answers, around problems and solutions.

So overpowering that Spock found it impossible to employ the methods of mental control that should be as natural for an adult Vulcan as breathing. But of course he was not, in fact, an adult Vulcan. He was a Half-Vulcan who had not yet achieved the biological maturity of his father’s race. It was illogical to assume that his hybrid psyche would respond like a full Vulcan’s in times of crisis. If he had to resort to a child’s techniques in order to restore equilibrium to his mind, there was no shame in that. It was only logical to use the most effective approach at his disposal.

A Vulcan child focused on a single emotion at a time, studying it as a young Human might examine a specimen under a microscope, both intrigued and repulsed by the wriggling, misshapen form of a dragonfly larva. To dissect the processes of their psyche, Vulcan children were taught various mental techniques from the moment of birth, tools as efficient as any surgeon’s laser-scalpel. Once a Vulcan child was satisfied with the analysis, the emotion would be stored in its proper place, a piece of less important data in the vast array of information kept accessible in a Vulcan mind. That accomplished, the Vulcan child would close the connection. The emotion had been recognized, analyzed, categorized, controlled. Once and for all – Venlinahr.

In consequence, an adult Vulcan normally had no need to endure emotions. They were already there: accepted, examined, labeled, internalized, sublimated. Even the most intense onslaught of emotions would neatly and instantly slide into place within a well-ordered mind. Present, yes, and powerful, too, but never disturbing the peaceful serenity of logic.

Spock’s mind, however, did not work that way. He suspected that he experienced emotions much
like a Human: to him feelings were always new, always unsettling ... always shamefully fascinating.

This influence of his human genes had forced Spock to become nearly as proficient in Vulcan mental techniques as a Kohlinar master. At the same time he remained neurologically unable to purge his emotions like an adept. Especially in times of stress, Spock found it impossible to process and dispatch emotions instantaneously and simultaneously as a full-blooded Vulcan would be able to. Instead he had to revert to an infant’s way of managing his emotions, over and over again.

Without looking away from Jim, Spock concentrated on the emotion that pulled most strongly at his heart. Relief. For a fraction of a second he gave himself over to the experience. The sensation proved to be not entirely unpleasant. A deep breath; tension bleeding away into the pause between two heartbeats.

Memories of days blending into weeks dissolving into months when in spite of Khan’s blood, Jim’s life had ... “hung by a thread”. Spock could not suppress a visceral reaction at the Human idiom he’d heard far too often – he shuddered.

Spock remembered a night in the room of Starfleet temporary housing assigned to him. He’d sat at an empty desk in that sterile, anonymous room. He’d stared at the calendar on his PADD and for the first time in his life, he had been unable to recall what day it was.

Eventually Jim’s condition had stabilized. Time, as defined by Starfleet standard clocks and calendars, had resumed its due course. The worst was over, at least in medical terms.

And now they were back on the Enterprise, back in space, where they belonged.

Oh, yes. Relief.

Spock closed his eyes and let the emotion fade away.


It was illogical, yes, inappropriate, to consider private, personal concerns a defining aspect of another being’s ordeal. Yet Spock had to acknowledge that in terms of Jim’s recuperation he remained unable to achieve the mental distance befitting a Vulcan. The unresolved intensity of the final moments before Jim’s death and the first moments after his return to life weighed on Spock’s mind, pressed into his psyche with the full impact of Vulcan emotions, ever present, never fading. The tension hummed in his mind, in his blood.

Every breath, every heartbeat echoed with the shared revelation just how their friendship could define them both – if Jim had lived – if Jim lived – and now: if they were ever granted sufficient reprieve and privacy to come to terms with what could be, what could be between them ... and to decide what they wanted there to be.

On Earth no such opportunity had presented itself. That was logical; circumstances were unfavorable. Taking into account Jim’s fragile state it was also more prudent to wait. However, that conclusion had not alleviated need or frustration. This, too, was logical within the context of emotional compromise. Spock was young yet, not even a mature adult according to Vulcan tradition and biology – a fact he was painfully aware of. Considering the circumstances and his Half-Human heritage, it was not entirely unexpected that reactions often displayed by human males of his age group should manifest in his hybrid mind as well. Up to a point, at least.
Breathing from deep within the k'rawhl, Spock could dissolve these dissonances, too. Now, here, in the comfortable familiarity of the Enterprise, he allowed himself to hope that an understanding could be reached soon ...

Although he was exhausted by this point, he forced his attention onward to dwell on the next emotion that assailed him.

*Concern.*

For thirteen months, two weeks, five days and seven hours, concern had been his constant companion. Jim’s physical and mental recovery had been agonizingly slow by the standards of 23rd century medicine.

No doubt the constant examinations and endless tests administered by Starfleet medics, psychologists and scientists had a negative impact on the process. As the first viable Vulcan-Human hybrid, Spock was used to such intimate scientific scrutiny from birth. Seldom had he been afforded the precious privilege of privacy, of body or mind. Jim had no similar experience to accustom him to his status as an object of research. He had not reacted well to be “poked and prodded at every turn”.

“He’s not a lab rat, damn you,” Doctor McCoy had ranted one memorable occasion, threatening to throw tribble zero at a neurologist’s head. “He’s a human being! And he’s saved the lives of every damn creature on this planet. If you want to conduct experiments, use the bloody tribbles. That much, at least, you owe him.” Spock himself had seen the scientist to the door. The man had not returned.

Spock had come to appreciate the grating bluntness and fierce protectiveness of Doctor McCoy, even if some of his precautions seemed to border on paranoia. For instance, from the moment Jim first regained consciousness to the day he finally beamed back aboard the Enterprise, the CMO had seen to it that Jim was never alone. There was always someone there, someone from the Enterprise, either in Jim’s room or in front of the door. One or two crew members, or a nurse or a medic.

*Spock first noticed these guards fifty-one hours after Jim had returned to the living. A clear lapse of attention on his part, due to sheer physical and mental exhaustion. The subsequent conversation with the doctor, however, he remembered very clearly.*

“Surely you don’t believe that someone will abduct the captain from Starfleet Medical?” Spock asked. “Certainly you cannot seriously consider the possibility that the man who defeated Nero would be—”


The doctor blamed Khan for the risks Jim had taken when the captain had collaborated with the Augment to expose and capture Marcus. Nevertheless, McCoy’s very human rage had been impressive to behold when the whole story was revealed – from the cruel rewards the “Robin Hood” of Augments had reaped for the brave rebellion he had led during the Eugenics Wars to Marcus’ ruthless exploitation of their position.

“I would argue that the political situation on Earth has changed since the Terran Eugenics Wars, since Khan and his men were denied a life in peace,” Spock countered. “Humanity has changed since then.”
Spock was still disturbed by the doctor’s assessment of his own race. But even more troubling than McCoy’s paranoid tendencies had been Jim’s reaction. The captain must have known exactly what McCoy was doing and why, given his background in tactics and survival skills. Yet to his last day at Starfleet Medical he pretended to be completely oblivious. Without fail, Jim expressed artificially naïve surprise and enjoyment whenever a visitor from the Enterprise “happened to be passing by” his hospital room ... at any of the twenty-four hours contained in a Terran day.

Yes, it was most beneficial to be back on the Enterprise. It was even better to be back in space.

Yet while some reasons for Spock’s concern had thus been ameliorated, others persisted. Such as Jim’s increasing claustrophobia or the nightmares that still tortured him.

Spock considered the most appropriate and effective means at his disposal to address these issues. A conversation with Doctor McCoy would be expedient; a continuation of Jim’s instructions in Vulcan meditation techniques would be beneficial; a suggestion to experiment with physical proximity only logical.

Tired as Spock was by now, formulating this mental list of strategies proved to be an effective, albeit unorthodox method of controlling this last triad of emotions he had chosen to observe.

Satisfied, he concluded that he had now faced the truth of his situation, in its full factual and emotional scope. Emotions and thoughts faded away, dissolving into the serene balance of C’thia.

All that remained was his focus: Jim, peacefully asleep in the dim light of his cabin.

♦

Stardate 2260.130, 1210 hours, Deck 5, Conference Room Two

“Lieutenant Sulu, a moment please.”

The clock read 1210 hours, the day after the Enterprise had left orbit. Regular as well as informal operational reviews were par for the course during the first weeks in space, so Hikaru wasn’t surprised at Spock’s summons. The first officer herded him into one of the smaller conference rooms beyond the officers’ ready room. Inside, Lieutenant Leslie was waiting for them. The lieutenant ranked next to Sulu among the Command division personnel on the Enterprise. Normally he had the conn on Gamma shift. Consequently it was the middle of the night for Leslie right now. That’s how he looked, too. His curly hair disheveled, he kept blinking rapidly – as if the poor man was wondering what was dream and what reality.

“Lieutenant Sulu, Lieutenant Leslie. In case the current command team is incapacitated, you will be required to take the conn as secondary command team,” Spock announced. “Taking into account the inherent dangers of a five-year mission that will take the Enterprise far from Federation space, the captain requires officers who can adequately take command in those circumstances. Indefinitely, should that be necessary.”

A human superior officer might have invited the lieutenants to sit down. Perhaps he even would have indicated the beverages arranged in the middle of the small conference table to ease the atmosphere of the conversation. Normally, Spock was very careful about observing such Human mannerisms. Now, however, Spock simply stood there, hands clasped behind his back, shoulders tense.
“Both of you have cross-trained in Command track at the Academy besides your primary qualifications in Sciences and Engineering,” Spock stated. “Qualifications that made you first choice for a five-year mission, where additional skills are a prerequisite for any officer. However, you still lack certain formal requirements as well as practical experience in order to qualify for the promotions that would enable you to earn a command of your own.”

Thanks to Nero, Sulu had never finished Command track at the Academy. No big deal, he’d figured. Eventually he’d get around to taking the additional training he needed to be eligible for the relevant promotions. Plus, he was content with his position as helmsman and head of astrosciences department. Leslie, who had the center chair on Gamma shift, was a similar case. Sulu rather thought, though, that he’d abandoned further ambitions in favor of Engineering. Much like Mr. Scott, Leslie was too much in love with the nacelles of the Enterprise to pursue a career in Command division.

“Starfleet Command agree that advanced Command training for the secondary command team is essential on a five-year mission,” Spock went on. “The course material for your remaining Command track classes will be made available to you on your PADDs and in the library. Examinations will be supervised by myself or Commander Paul and sent via subspace to the Academy for evaluation in due course. Next week we shall start with additional practical training. I have drafted a schedule for you that also indicates appropriate opportunities for further independent study.”

“But I have no desire to—” Leslie stuttered.

“At this point in time, I do not believe I am ready to—” Sulu added tentatively.

Spock nodded. “I am aware of that, Lieutenants. Your objections are noted but irrelevant. The needs of the many outweigh the desires of the few; in an emergency the availability of an alternate fully trained and experienced command team will be most advantageous. I believe a human idiom exists that is applicable to the state of affairs: ‘better safe than sorry’.” He raised his left eyebrow. “I presume you are familiar with that notion?”

“Yes ... sir.” Sulu, still dumbfounded, did his best to muster a professional reaction.

Leslie just stared at Spock. “Of course, Mr. Spock.”

“It is also the primary command team’s responsibility to oversee the career development of crew members and to provide suitable support for their progress,” Spock informed them, as if they had questioned his orders again. “As the probability of the secondary command team taking over temporarily during a five-year mission is 100%, it is only logical to ensure that you gain the qualifications and practical experience to perform perfectly in such cases.”

“Yes, sir” was the only possible reply.

Spock inclined his head. Then he turned smartly and exited the room without another word.

♦

Stardate 2260.130, 1300 hours, Deck 5, Officers’ Mess

Afterwards, Sulu met Uhura for lunch. He put his tray on the table next to hers and sat down, without really noticing the food in front of him.

“So what did Spock want with you?” she asked, chasing a Portobello mushroom across her plate of
“Insalata Mista”.

“I ...” Sulu started, still perplexed. He pulled himself together. “Spock’s after Leslie and me finishing up our Command track qualifications. You know how I never got around to taking the exams at the Academy.”

Nyota nodded. “I told you to keep it up, slacker. You’re not going to get your own ship if you don’t.”

Sulu stared at his plate. *Unagi donburi?* Where had that come from? Especially since he didn’t have much of an appetite after the conversation with Spock to start with. The phase “indefinitely, should that be necessary” haunted him.

“I’m not sure I want that. I’m not ready for the center chair. Nyota, you, me, heck, all bridge officers are trained to take the conn if necessary,” he said, “and yes, Leslie and I are next in chain of command should ... should something happen to Captain Kirk and Spock. So it obviously makes sense to ensure we’re adequately prepared to take over in an emergency. But things would have to get really, really bad for us to lose both the captain and the first officer. It’s a worst case scenario.” He poked the fish on his plate. That didn’t make the glazed eel any more appetizing.

Nyota regarded him thoughtfully. “But that’s exactly what Spock’s planning for.”

Hikaru paled. When he said that he didn’t feel prepared for that kind of responsibility, he wasn’t prevaricating. Of course he had the basic qualifications and the appropriate psych evals for Command. But first and foremost his interests lay with the astrosciences department, and he *liked* his job as helmsman. *Why me?* he thought. Finney and Mitchell, the lieutenants ranked right below himself and Leslie in chain of command were notoriously ambitious. They would have leaped at the chance ...

“Is there anything about this mission we haven’t been informed about yet?” Hikaru wondered.

Nyota shrugged. “Probably,” she said. “And I mean a probability so close to 100% that even Spock wouldn’t spend time arguing decimal points. But I don’t think that’s what’s driving him ...” She frowned again.

“You know him better than any of us,” Hikaru suggested, curious and apprehensive at the same time. “Any idea what’s going on?”

Nyota shook her head, a strange expression in her eyes. Hikaru wasn’t sure if she was reacting to his statement that she knew Spock better than any other crew member on a personal level or to his question. He waited for her to expand on the gesture. After a long moment of silence, she shook her head again. “Well, he has no reason to be mad at you. So maybe he’s taking you under his wing. I mean, you are the only one of your year who attempted what Spock accomplished – cross-training in Sciences and Command.”

“No idea,” Sulu said, giving up on food. He shoved the plate away. Eel via replicator simply didn’t work. “Doesn’t come across that way, is all,” he muttered, and added, mostly because the whole situation still irritated him, “Why didn’t you go for Command, by the way? I bet you’d love to be queen.”

“Actually, based on my entrance exams, I could have gone into Command track, if I’d wanted to,” Nyota said, killing another mushroom. “Starfleet would have let me, too. They still don’t get as many girls as they’d like with the right psych evals.”
“Then why didn’t you?”

Nyota grinned, pointing at him with her fork. “Cause without my skilled tongue and sharp ear, you’d be toast, my friend.” She speared another mushroom. “Seriously, though, Command is great for generalists, like Jim. The last bastion of the Renaissance man. But languages, absolute pitch ... The way the human brain develops, acquiring complex linguistic skills gets considerably harder the older you get. And if I have any crazy superhero powers at all, they are all linguistics and music. I wouldn’t give that up for anything.”

Stardate 2260.130, 0630 hours, Deck 6, Portside Dining Facilities

To leave her hiding place was hard on Jo’s nerves, but she couldn’t stay holed up in her Jefferies tube indefinitely. Sure, she hadn’t been picked up as an intruder by scans yet. Luckily, her dad had never revoked her basic clearance for the Enterprise after their first visit on the ship. But she wasn’t on the crew roster or the passenger list. If she stayed in a place where no one had a good reason to be for too long, eventually that would be noticed and then they’d look her up in the database. Which would mean ... game over.

There was no other way. She took a deep breath and slipped out of the tube, only to lean against the wall of the corridor casually before looking around. If anyone was nearby, she could excuse her behavior with curiosity. After all, she was a kid, and it was the first day in space. She was supposed to snoop around.

Thankfully, the corridor was empty, though. She would have liked to go to the officers’ mess. She knew the food was best there, and maybe she’d get to see Chekov? He’d been real nice, and so cute. But that was too risky. Much safer to go to one of the large dining areas on one of the decks with mixed quarters, where families and ordinary crewmen would eat. No one there would recognize her. Plus, this time of day – it was 0700 – it should be busy with civilians and people off-shift eating breakfast. There were many new people on board. It should be easy to blend in. Hopefully. She was thirsty, too.

Therefore Jo walked down the corridor to the main turbolifts and went up to deck six and over to the portside eating facilities in the middle of family quarters. The dining area was big and noisy and busy, just as she’d hoped. Most of the crew members wore the orange uniforms of Maintenance, but there were a few red ones from Engineering, too. No Sciences or Medical blue in sight. And quite a lot of civilians, kids included. Jo grabbed a tray and queued for breakfast. Cereal, fruit salad, toast and jam. A big glass of water. Her throat was scratchy; a reaction to the ship’s artificial climate, she guessed. The air was drier than she was used to. An extra water bottle for later and ... peppermint tea. She sat down at one of the long tables in the middle of the mess, so she’d be surrounded by people. Blend in, she thought. Don’t look like a lonely kid. Smile. Exciting first day and all.

Surreptitiously, Jo looked around. Two seats across from her two boys and their mother were sitting. The older boy nearly opposite might be one or two years older than she was. The little one didn’t seem old enough for kindergarten yet. The mother was thankfully occupied with talking to another woman next to her.

To her left, two women were seated, eating breakfast and chatting. A plump Human in civilian clothes with shoulder-length, straight brown hair and a generous smile, and a petite person with white hair and a bowl of liquid that looked a lot like soap suds in front of her. At first glance she appeared to be human, too. At second glance, not so much. More like someone’s idea of a Human.
Her skin and her long hair were perfectly white. She had a pointy, pretty face with huge eyes. And her fingers looked weird – an extra joint, perhaps? So, probably humanoid, but definitely alien. Noticing Jo’s interest, she gracefully inclined her head. “Gwaloth Canningham is my name, gentle being,” she said. “Textiles and fabrics replications. May your day be beautiful and bright.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jo replied. Somehow her head felt fuzzy when the other being focused on her. Telepath, perhaps? That could be really, really bad. “I’m Jo. And errr... have a good day, too.”

To her relief Ms. Canningham didn’t start shouting for security, alerting them to the presence of a stowaway on board. Instead, the alien nodded politely and turned her attention back to her bowl. Whew.

But then Ms. Canningham’s neighbor leaned forward. “And I’m Carolyn Paul, one of the teachers on board. I’m sure we’ll see each other again.” When Jo nearly jumped out of her skin with shock at that introduction, the woman just laughed, friendly and easy-going. “No worries, I’m not going to bug you with school stuff the first day in space. Enjoy your freedom while it lasts.” She actually winked at Jo. “School will start soon enough.” Then Ms. Paul turned her attention back to her breakfast and her conversation with her alien friend.

Jo took a deep breath and a fortifying gulp of tea and cast a glance to her right. Three seats down the table a group of three men in Maintenance colors were digging into a hearty breakfast (eggs, bacon, the works, and really black coffee – her dad would have lectured them on cholesterol and on caffeine addiction).

“So, you an M-kid, too?” the boy across from her asked suddenly. “I’m Gus. The brat’s Felix.” He frowned and added, “Mom’s Lyra, and Dad’s Eric. He’s on shift right now, though, hydroponics maintenance.”

“Hey,” she mumbled around a spoon of cereal. “I’m Jo. Ma’s sickbay tech. Father’s wherever. Back on Earth.” She made a vague gesture. She didn’t know enough about other departments to make up a parent working there. But she figured it was safer to pretend she was on ship with her mom. And there were not enough medics to go around. A tech should be safe enough, though.

“Sucks,” Gus said. He seemed kind of nice.

“Yeah, well.” Jo shrugged. She wondered what to say next. Something about school? That was always a good topic. “So, two days until school or what?” She cast a surreptitious glance in the direction of Ms. Paul, only to discover that she and Ms. Canningham had left. Jo couldn’t quite suppress a sigh of relief.

“Lasts days of freedom.” Gus sounded so gloomy that Jo had to laugh. He stuck his tongue out at her. “A few of us are meeting up for some zero-grav ball after breakfast. Wanna come? If you don’t play, we can always use pretty cheerleaders.” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll have you know that I was on the team in my old school. And we won, too.”

“Brill.”

And yes, that was kind of how Jo felt right now. The cereal wasn’t half bad, the peppermint tea was hot, and she had something to do after breakfast.
Another night, another briefing with the bridge staff spread out around the oval table of conference room one. Most of them, Jim included, clutching a mug of coffee. Four hours of sleep were not enough, especially since Jim hadn’t really slept a lot the last two weeks before leaving orbit. Tonight he should probably do the responsible thing and get some pills or have Bones hypo him. He’d at least consider that. Luckily, tonight’s meeting didn’t require a long speech on his part. Instead it was pretty boring details about ship’s routines and stuff. Plus Spock’s new pet project and finally his own proposal.

Spock was finishing up his talk about the alternate command team he was set on establishing. A good idea, Jim thought, what with such a long mission. At the same time it made him a bit queasy, because what Spock had in mind went way beyond training for temporary command. Spock wanted Leslie and Sulu ready to take over at a moment’s notice, and for good – when he and Spock wouldn’t be coming back. Not exactly a vote of confidence that his first officer fully expected that Jim would manage to get both of them killed next time. Still a good idea, though, Jim told himself. Especially with civilians and kids on board. We should be prepared for the worst. Sulu will be a kick-ass captain at some point anyway, so why not get him qualified now? Morosely he considered his coffee. Real coffee, strong and fragrant. Rand was a saint to keep him supplied. Coffee. Its color, a rich, warm black, reminded him of Spock’s eyes.

“Captain? Your proposal concerning away missions ...?”

Spock’s mild inquiry made Jim jump and spill coffee over his hand. “Damn!” he cursed, before adding, “Sorry about that. Not enough caffeine or enough sleep. Right. Away missions. So, it’s standard policy that a captain is normally never on away missions except for important diplomatic functions, and that the first officer is never on an away mission with the captain.” Everyone knew that. See chapter: Basics of Command.

“There are very good reasons for that, of course,” Jim went on. Uhura raised her eyebrows. He ignored her. “However, in our case there’s a problem with that. Under normal circumstances most of us would be stuck in junior positions for years. We’d be doing lots of routine jobs working with senior officers. With half the fleet gone thanks to Nero, we’ve been dumped into the deep end. We’re the youngest crew in Starfleet history, myself included. So yeah, it’s kind of awesome to be the youngest captain ever. But that also means I’m the most inexperienced captain ever.”

Blunt words. Uhura stared at him, as if he’d grown pointy ears. He smiled wryly. “Yeah, I actually do know that. And sure, there was Nero and the Gorn incident on New Vulcan and that Marcus thing. So I’m good in a major crisis, and yes, I’m aware of the fact that’s a quality you want in a captain. But fact is, apart from that I’ve got one major mission in a year of milk-runs under my belt. And that mission went pear-shaped in such a way that my first officer felt compelled to get me demoted.” Chekov looked ready to protest, so Jim raised a hand to ensure he wouldn’t be interrupted. “Now, I still think I did the right thing. Lives are more important than rules. But the point is, this mission shouldn’t have played out like that to start with.” And we could do a workshop or something to review the Nibiru incident, he thought. Maybe as a team thing in a week or two? To keep boredom at bay?

“Anyway. Experience, I don’t have it. Or not enough of it, definitely where routine missions are concerned. And that’s not going to change if I play by the rules and stay on the ship.” And he hadn’t signed up with Starfleet for the benefits and the – admittedly awesome – healthcare. If he didn’t want to end up an armchair admiral like “Coma” Komack, he had to get out there, and yes, plunge headlong into danger. When he glanced at Spock, he was surprised to see a hint of warmth in the Vulcan’s eyes. Approval? Huh.
“To cut a long story short, I’ve got to go on more away missions than what would be normally considered reasonable. And since Mr. Spock is the most experienced officer on the bridge, he’ll have to go with me more often than not. So with that in mind, I want Commander Paul to come up with a revision of the away team guidelines. Not just to accommodate me. We’ve got far too many young and inexperienced crew members on board to stick with conservative methods of putting together away teams.” Jim glanced at Commander Paul, then smiled at Chekov who promptly beamed as if he’d been awarded a commendation. “And that,” Jim was kind of proud that he’d managed to connect his proposal to Spock’s project with Leslie and Sulu, “is another reason why we really need a fully qualified alternate command team. I realize it’s a lot of extra work for you guys, but I think it’s the best solution.”

Across the table, Commander Paul nodded. “I’d like to borrow Yeoman Rand for that job, Captain. There’s no one on the ship she doesn’t know. I also want to involve Dr. Lestrade. He’s got a background in operational resilience.” He consulted his PADD. “We should have something ready to discuss at the weekly briefing. Is that acceptable, Captain?”

“Perfect, Commander.”

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Stardate 2260.132, 0100 hours

Oh yeah, another night, and again, no sleep.

Jim had been a responsible little starship captain the second night in space and had gone to get a couple of Zzz pills from Bones. But he couldn’t bring himself to drag his weary carcass down to sickbay again tonight. So he sat on his bed and stared at the bathroom door (still closed) and wondered what the fuck he’d been thinking when he’d accepted command again so soon in the first place.

Tonight, at least, he wasn’t shaking so hard. He was only tired. Exhausted, really. Didn’t remember the last time he’d slept more than four hours in one go. His eyes, he could almost feel them touching his skull, eyeballs all hot and tender. Gross. And he couldn’t stand the sight of closed doors.

Tired. And restless.

He got up. He simply couldn’t stay put, lying on his bed and staring at the bathroom door. He didn’t circle – there was no problem to solve, after all; he just couldn’t sleep. So he just crossed and recrossed the room, wall to wall, back and forth.

Abruptly, he stopped, drew back, and hit the wall with his fist. Not as hard has he could; he wasn’t crazy like that. He’d never hear the end of it from Bones if he broke his hand in a fit of anger over his fucking insomnia. He was simply ... tired. And frustrated. And angry. Also, sick of closed doors. So he hit the wall. A dull thud with a hint of crunching knuckles. The impact reverberated through his bones right up to his shoulder.

“Damn,” he growled. Inspecting his hand, he figured he was mostly okay; the knuckles would bruise black and blue, but he wasn’t bleeding and nothing seemed broken. And he did feel better, kind of.

He spun around, stomped to the bathroom and yanked open the door. In front of the other bathroom door he hesitated. Long enough to draw a deep breath. Long enough to frown. Then he opened that door, too.
And found himself nose to chin with Spock.

“I would see your hand,” Spock said in his typically mild tone. But his eyes were hard. This was an order, not a polite request.

Jim couldn’t help it, he laughed. God, how ridiculous. He held up his right hand and flexed his fingers to demonstrate that nothing was broken.

Spock captured Jim’s hand, holding it in his left. A heated, iron clasp. With the fingertips of his right hand he ghosted over Jim’s bruised knuckles, barely touching. The effect? A fucking ion storm overloading Jim’s nerves. Talk about ludicrous. He actually gasped for breath. Spock let go of his hand. But apart from that, he didn’t move.

“You cannot sleep,” he stated. “And the doors, they trouble you.”

Jim groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, well. Sentence one? That’s bloody obvious. Sentence two? It’s damn inconvenient how observant you are. Because, embarrassing. Three, do we really have to discuss that here?” He knocked his thumbs left and right against the door frame.

Spock moved backwards. “I believe the relevant Terran saying is ‘my home is your home’... Jim.”

Jim shook his head, but he did step into Spock’s quarters. The higher ambient temperature preferred by the Vulcan wrapped around him in a warm embrace. Spock went to sit on his bed, as straight-backed as he’d perch on the stool in front of the Science console on the bridge. Jim slouched against the wall next to the bathroom door. Irritated, he crossed his arms in front of him. “So.”

“I know Dr. McCoy has explained to you that all of your symptoms fall within normal range of aftereffects in a case such as yours,” Spock said gently. “I also know that he ordered you to seek out his aid to alleviate these symptoms with appropriate medical intervention.”

“So?”

“You’re being most ... obstinate.”

Jim huffed a laugh. “And that’s new how?”

“Jim ...” Spock raised his head. From one second to the next, his expression appeared no longer inscrutable. The invisible barrier that normally set him apart was gone. There was a rawness to his gaze, a vulnerability, that left Jim winded as if Giotto had hit him in the stomach with the full weight of his two-hundred-something pounds thrown into the punch. “If you refuse to seek the medical help you obviously require, I can only suggest that you allow me to aid you with achieving the rest you desperately need. Physical proximity would be a prerequisite, but I am positive that I will be able to stimulate your brain telepathically in such a way as to ensure a healthful slumber.”

“Stim—” Jim croaked. He shook his head, blinked and took a step towards Spock. “Stimulate my brain so I can sleep?!” Another step. Until he stood touching Spock’s knees. “Spock, when we get into bed together, I can promise you one thing: Sleep will be the absolutely last thing on my mind.”

Spock surged to his feet, and suddenly they weren’t standing in front of each other anymore, but clinging to each other like crazy. As if the other was the only fixture left in a universe spinning faster and faster out of control.

And finally, finally, Jim got his lips on Spock’s mouth. For a fraction of a second the choice
between bruises and tenderness flashed through his mind. But he wasn’t the only frustrated man in the room. He’d had no idea that you could kiss like that when there weren’t even tongues involved yet. Painful, crushing – the heat of Vulcan skin burned like fire on his chapped lips.

Only when oxygen became a serious issue, Jim jerked back, gasping for breath from deep within his body.

“Ahh...” That wasn’t even a proper sigh, more a barely audible exhalation. Jim had never heard a sound that sexy in his entire life, and he’d heard a lot of sex sounds over the years.

As if Spock had discovered Jim’s off-switch, Jim slumped down on the bed, flopping down on his back. Drained. Worn-out. Carefully, Spock lowered himself onto the mattress next to him. Close, very close. Touching, but not ... really touching.

“Come here,” Jim asked hoarsely, reaching, begging, with his left hand.

Spock hesitated. His eyes burned. Black coals, that’s what they reminded Jim of now, the way he stared at Jim’s hand. But a moment later Spock accepted his touch, interlacing their fingers. With a slow, deliberate movement, Spock turned and lay down next to Jim.

Jim wanted to kiss him again, for real this time, tongue and teeth and all, and he wanted to fuck him so much he thought he’d explode if he didn’t have Spock under him real, real soon. But just holding Spock’s hand did really crazy things to him, things he vaguely realized shouldn’t even be possible for a Human. Somehow he managed to roll onto his side, too. Somehow he grabbed Spock’s other hand.

Then Jim was lost, drifting in a haze of desire and dreams. In his dreams, time was limitless, and space was without measure, and none of that mattered, because he was with Spock, and Spock was with him.

♦♦♦

“When you were a wandering desire in the mist, I too was there, a wandering desire. Then we sought one another, and out of our eagerness dreams were born. And dreams were time limitless, and dreams were space without measure.”

— Kahlil Gibran

Chapter End Notes

♥ Comments are love! ♥

What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
The Universe In Us

Chapter Summary

Nyota just wants to eat breakfast in peace. Instead, she has to deal with a determined Jim – determined to make a fool of himself, that is. ♦ How to hide on a spaceship for seven days, the changing cubicle episode. ♦ Jim’s first physical on board. Bones is a hands-on doctor, and Jim is, surprise, surprise, a difficult patient. ♦ Guinan listens. And Jim surprises himself. ♦ Bad news and bourbon for Bones.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Universe in Us

Stardate 2260.132, 0500 hours, Deck 5, Officers’ Mess

Nyota was a morning person. Always had been, always would be. Even on a starship running on a 24/7 schedule where mornings didn’t really exist. When she was on Alpha shift, she got up at 0400 hours so she had time for a good workout and a leisurely breakfast. That was also the reason why she sat ensconced at the back of the officer’s mess behind a thicket of *ficus benjamina* with her breakfast and her PADD right now. After an hour running through a display of the Serengeti, twenty minutes on an auto-massage couch, and a long sonic shower, she was wide awake and wonderfully relaxed. She comfortably stirred a mug of fragrant Rooibos tea. (Real tea, not replicated, but from her own loose-leafed mixture, thank you very much.) The concoction glowed in a translucent red hue, and the subtle scent of spices swirling upwards in a wisp of steam made her sigh with appreciation. The millet gruel was replicated, but just four days into the mission, the plums were not. Pretty much a perfect breakfast.

She turned to her PADD and scrolled to the last message from John. She enjoyed his arrogant humor and biting sarcasm. His recklessness, not so much. One day he’d get into the kind of trouble not even his superhuman strength (or her timely intervention) would get him out of. Light-years away, she could only be grateful that so far, it hadn’t come to that. *Though not for lack of trying,* she thought, scanning his report. *Somehow* a prototype Klingon warbird had ended up on Earth. And now it was being thoroughly tested by John and his crew. She shook her head. *Boys and their toys.* Bizarre how the fascination of a centuries-old Augment with crashing an alien spaceship basically came down to that impulse. Nevertheless, it was true.

Footsteps made her look up. The captain was making a beeline toward her table. As Jim was not a morning person, she should have been safe at this hour. But apparently not. And while he appeared to be freshly showered, his hair was mussed, and his eyes had a frantic gleam to them. Spock was nowhere in sight.

“Uhura! Fancy meeting you here. Mind if I join you?” He gestured with a token mug of coffee. The scent told her it was from Rand’s special stash, at least. Nyota didn’t think she could have stomached the stink of replicated coffee.

“Captain,” she said, giving in to the inevitable. “Would you like to sit down?”
“Jim,” he reminded her and slid into the bench opposite her chair. “We’re off duty.” He put his mug down and dragged both hands through his hair, messing it up even worse than before. Lowering his gaze, he then proceeded to brood into his coffee. His posture was taut with nervous tension. At the same time his expression was less tightly drawn than it had been in months. “Also, this is kind of ... personal.”

Oh, great, Nyota thought. Didn’t expect that. Relief and irritation mingled. The way he and Spock had been acting, she’d steered herself to endure the vibes of unresolved sexual tension between the two of them for the next five months, if not five years. Good for them if they’d somehow managed to get a move on. She hadn’t enjoyed daily exposure to their UST. At the same time that didn’t mean she was looking forward to living and working with her ex’s new-found bliss right in front of her nose – while she herself was forced to redefine the meaning of “long-distance relationship”. Last but not least, she didn’t want to discuss any of that with Kirk.

“Captain ...” she started. But he shook his head.

“Jim,” he reminded her firmly, “even if I’m still not officially allowed to know what your first name is.”

She rolled her eyes. “Relentless” didn’t even remotely capture Kirk’s personality. She sighed. “Jim, then.” His sigh of relief was almost cute. Almost.

“Look, this is awkward,” he pressed on, ignoring her wince. “I get that. And that you think I’m an asshole, and you’re not even wrong. But I’m trying.” He stared at her, his strange new hazel eyes bright with intensity. “This is too important for me to mess up.”

Oh God. What have I done to deserve this?

“If you want to tell me about a change in the status of your relationship with Spock, consider the message received.”

Jim jumped so hard that he spilled coffee over his hand and the table. “Damn!” He grabbed a napkin to stem the flooding. Once he’d mopped up the splash, he twisted the stained tissue into a wad. “I’m really sorry, you know? Even though in a very selfish way, I’m not,” he muttered. “I figured you get that, what with ending things between you and Spock when you did.”

Strangely enough, she believed him. Maybe because semantically the first part didn’t make any sense at all, while emotionally ... yes. That. She studied Kirk over the rim of her teacup. With a pang she realized how troubled he looked. Older than twenty-seven, and more than exhausted. “Captain ...” she started. Suddenly she couldn’t keep up her customary level of annoyance with him. “Jim. I realize how exciting new love is. But just because your new lover is Vulcan, you still require sleep like an ordinary human being. Give it a try sometime. At least every other day or so?”

He snorted into his coffee. “We did, actually,” he said, managing to hide behind his mug. His ears reddened with embarrassment. “And I mean just sleep! Christ, Uhura, did you think I’d – I’d come talk to you right after I had sex with your ex for the first time?” He stared at her. Then he rubbed both hands over his face. “Shit. That’s exactly what you were thinking, right?”

“It’s Nyota,” she muttered. “And yes, I was.”

“Nyota.” He gazed at her like a ten-year old who had been giving a puppy for his birthday.

She rolled her eyes at him. Again. As if he hadn’t known. “If you didn’t, then what happened? Because I hope you didn’t interrupt my breakfast with a topic I don’t want to talk about because nothing happened between the two of you.”
“First off, let me repeat, I’m not that bad a jerk,” Kirk declared. “Honest. Even I am not that insensitive.” Ears still red, he turned his attention back to whatever revelations were lurking inside his mug. “A kiss,” he admitted at last. And the way he said that one word, so soft and surprised, that really hurt, all over again.

“Okay, well, one hell of a kiss,” he went on, in typical male obliviousness. “And then I kind of fell asleep. Or he made me. Vulcans. Whatever. When I woke, he wasn’t there, and you know how he is.”

“How?”

“About privacy. Alone time.”

“So instead of searching for Spock you decided to come here, spoil my breakfast, and tell me you’re finally getting somewhere with my ex?” Nyota gave up on her gruel. But there was no way she’d let the plums go to waste.

“Seriously, I’m sorry,” Kirk repeated with a stiff shrug. “It seemed the right thing to do. I’m honestly trying not to be a jerk here.”


“What?” Jim, already on his feet, halted and gave her a wary look.

“No making out on the bridge. Remember, I know how Vulcans do it.”

♦

Stardate 2260.132, 0800 hours, Deck 22, Textiles and Fabrics Department

“May your rest have been refreshing and your dreams uplifting, gentle being.”

Jo woke with a start, her heart pounding. For a moment she had no idea where she was. White walls crowded her in; a high mirror reflected her frightened, tired eyes. A stuffy, warmish scent pervaded the air. The door opening was covered by a curtain, and there was someone on the other side, talking to her.

Abruptly, she remembered. She’d hidden in a changing cubicle in the textiles and fabrics replications department at around 2300 the previous evening. She glanced at the clock above the mirror. 0800 hours! She must have slept right through the alarm of her PADD. Or perhaps she had forgotten to set it in the first place. Damn.

To hide in plain sight was at the same time easier and way more exhausting than Jo had expected. Easier because the Enterprise was so big, with more than twenty decks, and because a starship was on a 24/7 schedule. All over the ship people were awake and going about their business twenty-four hours a day, working Alpha, Beta, or Gamma shift. Kids were supposed to be on a regular Terran schedule. But at least for the time being, this first week in space, kids were underfoot the whole time, everywhere. Therefore hiding was more a matter of sneaking into settings where a kid her age was expected to be at any given time, but without ever being present for any kind of roll call. So she showed up for recess at the school to hang out with Gus. She slipped into the spa on Beta shift to play with some other kids and to get a few hours of much needed sleep where it wouldn’t come across too weird. Later she crept into movie theaters. And so on and so forth. At the same time she had to stay on the move more or less all day, and she never dared to stay in any one
hiding place for too long. She hadn’t had a good night’s sleep since before they left orbit. Which probably explained her oversleeping in the changing cubicle like that.

Jo sat up. Apprehensive, she peeked around the curtain and stared at the woman who’d discovered her. It was the beautiful white lady she’d encountered at breakfast the first day on the Enterprise. With dread settling in the pit of her stomach, Jo waited for the awkward questions and the demand to contact her parents, which would lead to her discovery. But the woman just smiled at her, sort of serenely. Again Jo experienced a strange, fuzzy kind of sensation in her head. Telepathy, she was sure of it now. But the woman – Gwaloth something or other, Jo remembered her name now – still didn’t ask why she wasn’t at school, why she wasn’t with her parents, or why she’d slept in a changing cubicle.

“Thank you,” Jo said at last, remembering her manners. “I did sleep well.” There was no reason to pretend she hadn’t spent the night here. It was kind of obvious from how she’d been curled up on the floor, using her messenger bag as a pillow, cuddling into a blanket she’d stolen from the spa.

Gwaloth smiled. “Would you honor me with breaking your fast in my company?”

“Breakfast with you?” Jo stared. Slowly she got it through her head that no difficult questions might be happening, and that her secret was, perhaps, still safe.

“Yes,” the woman said patiently. “For is it not customary for Humans to consume sustenance in company at regular intervals?”

“Yeah,” Jo said and nodded, “it is. And sure, can do.” She was almost dizzy with relief now. And quite hungry, too. Her stomach growled. “Can we eat down here? And can I ask you about your work? I’ve looked at some of those costumes on display here last night. They are fabulous. Awesome fabrics. And the clothes don’t look replicated at all ...”

♦

Stardate 2260.132, 1400 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

Bones was a hands-on doctor and always would be, a healer instead of a medical technician.

Sure, like any good surgeon he loved his high-tech sickbay with its top-notch diagnostic devices. He adored his tricorders as the miracles of 23rd century medical progress they were. He valued every single gadget that could help him save a life, from machinery that allowed bone and tissue and even organ regeneration within hours to hypos that eradicated even the most stubborn virus within minutes. Jim knew from painful experience that hypos were perhaps Bones’s favorite toys.

But Bones would always trust his instincts above and beyond technology.

Therefore, Jim’s first physical of the mission consisted not just of scans and blood tests, but of poking and prodding, of inspection, palpation, percussion, and auscultation, starting with his head and ending with his little toes, not leaving out anything embarrassing in the middle.

“Stop fidgeting, for heaven’s sake,” Bones growled. “Nothing there I haven’t seen before.”

Jim just groaned. There was any number of things he’d rather not be reminded of. Just how intimately acquainted Bones was with his body and all his bodily functions definitely made the top ten of the list. The reboot had reduced Jim’s physical capacities to that of a newborn baby at first. He’d been damn lucky that it had taken him just a few months to relearn how to walk, talk, eat, and yeah, use the toilet.
At last they were done, and Jim sprawled in the visitor’s chair on the other side of Bones’s big desk. With his best slouch he pretended not to be keyed up to the point of a panic attack.

“Stop freaking out already, will ya?” Bones sat down at his desk and called up Jim’s file on the screen of his computer, then swiveled it around so Jim could take a look for himself. “You’re not turning into Frankenstein, a homicidal lunatic, or anything else besides what you already are – a damn moron.”

“Gee, thanks, Bones. I love you, too.” But he couldn’t suppress a sigh of relief, as a good deal of tension drained out of him.

“See, here, and here, and here?” Bones pointed at the screen. “All those parameters have stabilized. In fact, they haven’t changed in any statistically relevant way for three months now.” Bones leaned back before he went on, going over the details. “Your life expectancy – provided you don’t do something stupid and get yourself killed – may not quite match that of a full Augment, but it’s probably right up there with Spock’s. If you watch your diet and keep in shape, you should end up a very spry two-hundred year old, at least.”

For a moment Jim was strangely aware of his heartbeats.


He hadn’t even thought of that before – how, without Marcus, his natural life span would have been around half of Spock’s. Always assuming, of course, he didn’t do something stupid and got himself killed long before old age could off him.

“Your physical strength has also increased,” Bones indicated the relevant results on the screen, “but not beyond the readings we got at the last four exams. So please keep in mind that you still can’t take on Spock or your average Klingon in your sleep. However, a guy like Cupcake shouldn’t be a problem any longer.”

“He wasn’t before,” Jim muttered. “And why do you keep mentioning Spock in every other sentence?”

Perhaps because the two of you have been joined at the hip ever since you woke up at Starfleet Medical a year ago? Possibly because he’s keeping my best nurse from work with his warped version of ‘human small talk’ out there right now – while in reality he’s just plain hovering, anxious like a mother-hen whose chick has been invited for tea by the fox?” Bones smirked, but the warmth in his eyes gave him away. Jim finally got the message. That was Bones’s way of saying that he knew, and that he was good with it. Somewhat abashed, Jim fidgeted and pretended to focus on the data displayed on the screen.

“Well, that’s the good stuff,” Bones went on. “Now to the less pleasant results.”

“I knew it,” Jim groaned, warm and fuzzy feelings dissolving into trepidation. “What? If I’m not turning into Frankenstein, what is happening to me?”

“Jesus, Jim.” Bones shook his head. “I’m beginning to believe it’s a stroke of genius that Starfleet Command has sent those psychologists along on this trip, because you definitely need that counseling. Okay, now listen closely, will ya?” He leaned forward, speaking slowly and clearly, as if Jim was about five years old and a bit dim to boot. “It’s perfectly normal that you still experience physical and psychological after-effects. During the restoration procedure every single cell in your damn body was rebuilt from scratch. But that doesn’t mean you are turning into anything. You use the transporter all the time, and you never worry about how your molecules get rearranged in the process! How often have I’ve put you into decontamination to repair minor radiation damage without you turning into Godzilla? The fact that it was possible to patch up irreparable damage with Khan’s DNA on a cellular level doesn’t change who you are. Think of it as a special kind of
stem cell therapy. That’s not much more than a 21st century version of chicken soup. Jim, nothing is happening to you. Your body and your mind are all yours. Got it?”

“If you say so.” Jim wanted to believe that. He truly did. But ...

“I do say so, and I’m actually qualified to, believe it or not.” Bones sighed. “What I wanted to point out are a few things we need to keep an eye on at the moment. First of all, your stress levels are way too high, and you’re not sleeping enough. At this point I’m willing to chalk that up to the launch of the mission. But I want to see you again in a week, and if it’s not better in two, we’ll have to think of something beyond a couple of sleeping pills, which you only take on random nights when you decide not to be a stubborn son of a gun to start with. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” Jim recognized when Bones wouldn’t be budged.

“Next – and that one should make you happy: You need to eat more. You lost another pound, and I’m not perfectly satisfied with your lab results. I’m going to put together some supplements for you that you will take as prescribed, and I’ve updated your dietary requirements. Also, your body chemistry is even more sensitive than it was before, so watch out for new allergies cropping up. I want you down here ASAP at the first hint of a rash, and not only when you’ve already reached the joyful state of anaphylactic shock. Additionally, I want you to use the heliotherapy settings of your bed lights for one hour per day. I don’t care when you do that or how or with whom – and that is not an invitation to tell me, either – as long as you’re doing it. And I will know if you’re not following orders.”

“Yessir.” Jim flipped off a mock salute. He didn’t mind the light thing, actually, and he wondered if his new diet would include a steak or a burger sometimes. Or perhaps even ice cream. He didn’t dare to get his hopes up in terms of chocolate. But a man could dream, right?

“Last but not least,” Bones paused and frowned. “The changes of your psionic potential. And if you don’t mind, I’d like to ask Spock to join us now.”


“Nothing happened to that,” Bones replied testily. “Which is why I suggested to ask Spock to come in and didn’t just call him in. But he’s one of three telepaths on board, and your reaction to allowing Dr. Elbrun to assess—”

“No,” Jim cut in. “No. No way, never, not happening.”

“Case in point,” Bones cried, slapping his hand on his desk with a solid smack. “Dammit, Jim. You gotta trust us.”

Jim leaned forward, propping his elbows on his thighs, face in his palms. “I do, Bones, I really do.” His voice sounded muffled and tired. “I just don’t want random people fucking with my mind.”

Bones sighed. “I get that, Jim. I understand. Which is why I would very much like to talk about this with Spock. You do trust Spock.”

Jim raised his head. And there were those palpitations again, of feeling just too much, too deeply. “Yeah,” he said, “yeah, sure.”

“So may I ask Spock to join us now?” Bones asked patiently, and Jim kind of hated how much sympathy there was in his friend’s and doctor’s eyes.

“Yes. Of course. Sorry for making your job more difficult than necessary.”
“That’s all right.” Bones got up and went to the door. “Mr. Spock, stop scaring Nurse Oli with your weird Vulcan ways and get in here.”

“Of course, Doctor. Though I can assure you that I have not, in fact, scared the nurse. We have merely discussed a science experiment concerning herbal remedies that is of professional interest to her.”

Bones rolled his eyes and returned to his seat. “Sit, Mr. Spock, and take a good look at the captain’s latest brain scan and his esper ratings, aperception quotient, and Duke-Heidelberg quotient.”

Spock settled down next to Jim and focused on the display. He didn’t say anything, but the way his left eyebrow jerked upwards sharply was rather telling.

“Don’t even say it,” Jim grumbled. “My brain’s fascinating, right?”

Spock met his eyes, and there was just enough of a suggestion of warmth in his gaze to make Jim stop freaking out. “Indeed.”

“Jim’s psionic potential is off the charts for a human being,” Bones said. Stabbing his index finger in Spock’s direction, he went on, “Not active, of course, or at least not yet, as far as I can tell. And nowhere close to yours. But then your ratings are way beyond what passes for normal even among Vulcans.”

“They are?” Jim stared at Spock. “Although you’re Half-Human?”

“Perhaps rather because he is Half-Human,” Bones suggested, when Spock didn’t seem to know how to react to Jim’s overt curiosity. “As Humans aren’t normally active telepaths or empaths, our expertise concerning extra-sensory perception is somewhat limited. So I wouldn’t know for sure. But let’s get back to the brain at hand.” He switched off the screen. “So far this development doesn’t seem to mess with Jim. The insomnia might have something to do with it, but not necessarily. I’m pretty sure the episodes of claustrophobia are only comparatively mild symptoms of PTSD. However, fact remains, his brain’s doing stuff it’s never done before, and in ways it wasn’t meant to originally. We need to be prepared for problems, and since Jim has decided to refuse working with Dr. Elbrun, there’s just one ... logical alternative.”

Spock frowned at Jim, who shrugged and gave him a rather pointed look. Nice to meet you, Mr. Pot. Remember how you practically told me to go to hell when I suggested allowing Dr. Elbrun anywhere near your brain?

“So what do you want me to do, Doctor?” Spock asked.

“Be aware of the situation. Keep an eye on the captain.” Bones ran his fingers through his hair. “I wouldn’t say no if you were to suggest some of your Vulcan voodoo. But since there’s no medical reason for it just yet, I won’t order you to attempt that. Yet.”

“An exploratory meld might be of merit,” Spock agreed. “Captain?”

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew a bit about Vulcan mind melds by now. When the thing with the psi-ratings first had come up on scans at Starfleet Medical, he’d done his homework. He’d researched human psionic potential as well as Vulcan mind melds and touch-telepathy, and assorted other kinds of extra-sensory talents. His first conclusion had been that he didn’t want that kind of mental contact with a random stranger, no matter if he was a therapist or not. And sure, not every meld would be as intimate and overwhelming an experience as the one he had shared with
Spock Prime on Delta Vega. He got that. But if he was honest with himself, he wanted it to be – if *his* Spock ever melded with him. He wanted all that he’d shared with the older Spock and more, so much more, and he sure as hell didn’t want to be in the position of a patient for it.

“Not thrilled with the idea, Spock,” he said at last. He took a deep breath. “Not opposed to it, either. But if it’s not necessary right now, I’d rather not. If that’s all right with you, Bones.”

Bones nodded, and that was good enough. But Spock’s expression rather hinted at an upcoming discussion of the matter in private. Yay, a relationship talk, and they hadn’t even had sex yet or anything.

♦

**Stardate 2260.132, 1600 hours, Deck 10, Observation Lounge**

Jim slumped back on one of the couches of the smallest Observation lounge of the Enterprise, wrung out, a headache pounding in his temples. Of course he could have scheduled the psych talk for another day, but he wanted to get it over with. He was just so tired of it all, the scans and the blood tests and the examinations and the discussions of results and ratings.

At least Guinan didn’t poke and prod, and she’d agreed to meet up here, instead of in her small office adjacent to sickbay. She glanced at the pretty colors of his latest brain scan, scrolled down the lab results and scanned Bones’s report. Now she put the PADD away, leaning back in the swivel chair.

She didn’t even ask, “How are you?”

Boy, how he appreciated that. He’d endured enough “helpful” therapy-type questions after Tarsus to last him for three lifetimes. They both knew why he was here now, right? And that he was doing his level best to get with the program. Not that he was sure how well this counseling thing was working out, but ... he was at least not trying to mess with her or sabotage the set-up on purpose.

“I kissed Spock last night,” he blurted out.

As soon as he heard himself saying those words out loud, he wanted to take them back. He hunched over, balling his hands into fists, waiting for the blow to strike, ready to jump – run – whatever—

When nothing happened, when Guinan still didn’t say anything, he looked up. She didn’t smile or frown. She appeared relaxed, her expression neutral.

“Aren’t you supposed to say something?” he asked.

“Do you need me to?”

*Interesting question.* Jim got to his feet. He just couldn’t sit any longer. He had to move. So he paced the room in silence. After measuring the distance from wall to wall with his feet for the fifth time, he went to the window that took up the whole front of the lounge, ground to ceiling. There he stood and stared at the streaming ribbons of starlight that now and again lit up against the expanse of empty black space, as the Enterprise sped toward her destination at warp speed.

There, right outside the window, waited death – cold, silent, fast, everything over in seconds. But also: opportunity, adventure. And ... *eternity.* He gazed outside, at light and darkness. That, right there, was what he’d always, always craved, as the best destiny he could imagine for himself. Not
because of the *Kelvin*. Not in spite of the *Kelvin*. But because ...

“Because ... we are part of this universe, we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts ... because the universe is in us,” he murmured.

Beneath his feet Jim could feel the Enterprise, a humming, soothing vibration, like the pulse of a living creature. Breathing deeply, he watched stars and space mingle and melt away. As he observed the galaxy rushing past him, some of the pressure lifted, some of the tension drained away. A minute, two minutes, perhaps three, slipped past.

Jim turned around and went back to the couch.

“Neil deGrasse Tyson,” Guinan said.

“Yeah.” Somehow he wasn’t surprised that she had recognized the quote. “And no,” he said slowly, “I actually don’t think I need you to say anything.”

For a moment he sat there, feeling strangely Zen, or *C’thia*, or something.

“I’m good,” he said, somewhat astonished.

“I’m good,” he amended, thinking of sleepless nights and closed doors and psi-ratings, “maybe not completely. Or all the time. But, mostly.”

He looked at Guinan. “I’m good. Spock’s good. And I think we’ll be even better together.”

The El-Aurian smiled.

♦

**Stardate 2260.133, 2000 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay**

At the end of Beta shift, the fifth day of their journey, Leonard had skipped dinner and was still locked up in his office, poring over Jim’s files (what else?). He told himself he’d get around to grabbing a bite before turning in for the day.

“Bridge to Dr. McCoy.” The purring voice of M’Res, the Kzinti communications officer on Beta One shift, poured out of the comm. “A subspace message from Earth for you, marked ‘private’ and ‘urgent’. The captain has been copied. Shall I reroute the message to sickbay for you?”

The kind of message no one ever wanted to receive. The kind of message that would change your life forever in an instant, and not because you won the Intergalactic Lottery.

Somehow Leonard rasped a reply. “Affirmative.”

“We regret to inform you ...”

Eventually he had to stop yelling at the comm unit. That bastard of a police officer simply cut off the connection. His helpless, furious questions, screamed at the top of his lungs – about how in hell a Starfleet appointed chaperone could lose his daughter and how the supposedly best police force of the Federation was unable to locate an eleven year old girl on the allegedly safest planet of the known galaxy – were met with a black screen. His attempts to call back, to get another subspace connection with the police of San Francisco yielded no result. The red light of the sickbay comm unit kept flickering in the relentless rhythm of connection failure, of defeat. *A subspace connection with Earth is temporarily not available.*
Then Jim was there, with Spock and Dr. Chapel hovering in the background. Reality condensed to the glass of bourbon in his shaking hands.

“Jo—”

“She’ll be okay, Bones,” Jim insisted. “They’ll find her. She’s a smart kid. She’ll be fine. They’ll find her. Kids do the darndest things.”

He wanted to ask Jim to turn around the ship. He wanted to beg Jim to forget about their mission. He wanted to plead with Jim to put his little girl above their orders, above everything. But he of course couldn’t. He clutched the glass of whiskey so hard that he thought it should break into a thousand pieces right there in his hands. But it didn’t.

“Jo ...”

♦♦♦

“The most astounding fact is the knowledge that the atoms that comprise life on Earth, the atoms that make up the human body, are traceable to the crucibles that cooked light elements into heavy elements in their core under extreme temperatures and pressures. These stars ... the ingredients for life itself. So that when I look up at the night sky and I know that yes, we are part of this universe, we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts is that the Universe is in us. When I reflect on that fact, I look up – many people feel small because they’re small and the Universe is big – but I feel big, because my atoms came from those stars. There’s a level of connectivity. That’s really what you want in life, you want to feel connected, you want to feel relevant you want to feel like a participant in the goings on of activities and events around you That’s precisely what we are, just by being alive…”

– Neil deGrasse Tyson

Chapter End Notes

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Chapter Summary

Kids do the darndest things. ♦ Spock talks about his childhood – and happiness is a very different place. ♦ Jim deals with a nightmare. ♦ There is a reunion. ♦ And a nap. ♦ And then ... routine sets in. Jim hacks into Spock's files, doors remain open at night, but nothing else happens, damn it. And then there's another briefing. Because this is the epic of briefings and debriefings, and I have it on good authority that is totally realistic for any kind of remotely military organization ever, so there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That Raggedy Madness, Our Actual Night

Stardate 2260.134, 0100 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

“Kids do the darndest things.” The thought ran in endless circles through Jim’s brain as he watched Bones drink himself into oblivion, as his heart broke for his friend.

Diplomacy under pressure wasn’t Leonard’s modus operandi, so Jim wasn’t surprised when his desperate ranting and raving had gotten him nowhere with earthside authorities. Plus Jim was sure that San Francisco police were indeed doing exactly what they’d told Bones ... namely, everything they could. But – and Jim knew that for a fact based on his own experience in the same situation, only in reverse – if a clever kid was determined not to be found, the best efforts of police and local education authorities wouldn’t be enough.

Nevertheless, Jim had taken the initiative and used his captain’s privileges to contact earthside authorities himself, San Francisco and Georgia State police, as well as Starfleet Command. He couldn’t turn the Enterprise around to go looking for Jo himself (though he’d been damn tempted for a moment when that horrible message had first popped up on his PADD). But he could damn well make people talk to him. Unfortunately, neither his authority nor his personal expertise had resulted in anything more constructive than replies along the line of “yes, we’re trying that, too”, “we are really doing everything in our power to locate her”, “we’ll keep you informed”, and finally, the eerie white noise of a cut-off subspace transmission.

Now all he could do was pour Bones another bourbon.

Such a surreal scene: Bones wilted in his chair, clutching his glass and gulping whiskey like there was no tomorrow. M’Benga in a visitor’s chair, disapproving, but supportive. Dr. Chapel, too, with a prim measure of bourbon in her glass. Nurse Oli in the background, her cheeks tearstained, her crush on Bones barely concealed under the pressure of the situation.

Jim downed a shot of his own. Then he picked up the whiskey again. *Damn, I really should have kidnapped her.*

He froze, bottle midair. *What if ...*
Impossible!

He looked around for Spock and was entirely unsurprised to find him just a few meters away, standing in the corner, unobtrusive, yet observant. Jim jerked his head in the direction of the door and slid out of the room. Outside, he sucked in a shuddering breath and almost choked on it. “Spock, I have this really, really crazy idea ... And I fucking pray that I’m right.”

Spock stared at him, both eyebrows raised in wary confusion.

“How about the bridge?” Jim ordered. “Now.”

Next thing Jim knew— in that special crazy adrenaline-drenched haze — he was looking over Lieutenant Jacoba Penn’s shoulder, Chekov’s counterpart on Gamma shift. (Pretty woman; tons of shiny chestnut hair in a neat ponytail.) He peered at the screen of her console, watching each tap of her slender fingers on the keyboard.

Jim did his best to maintain an appearance of calm control. When he noticed Spock’s gaze resting on his hands, he offered a wry grin— he was aware that his hands were trembling faintly with tension. But he also knew his voice sounded reasonably calm when he addressed Penn.

“Lieutenant, please run a routine check on clearances. Joanna McCoy.”

A second ticked by. Two seconds.

“Got her, Captain. Basic visitor’s clearance activated.”

Jim sank down on the center chair hastily vacated by Lieutenant Leslie. “Now ... please run a check for the ID. If she’s somewhere on the Enterprise.”

He felt Spock behind him, Vulcan body heat at his shoulder. There was a second, or two, or three, when he wanted to reach behind him and cling to Spock, to the solid burn of his hand, three times as strong as a Human’s grip, and seemingly twice as warm.

The Enterprise was a big ship, with many people on it, crew members and civilians. Scanning for IDs took longer than a few seconds, longer than a minute. He knew it wouldn’t take much longer than that. For the first time in his life he fully appreciated the meaning of the idiom “the longest minute of my life”.

“Horizontal Jefferies 22 B 2, deck 22.”

“I’ll be damned.”

♦

Stardate 2260.134, 0130 hours, Deck 22, Horizontal Jefferies 22B2

Jo wasn’t there.

But her ID was.

Jim collapsed against the curve of the tube, his back pressed against the cool metal. His heart was thundering, every breath an explosion inside his lungs. Stars crowded in on his vision. “She’s here, Spock. She’s on the damn ship.”
When his vision cleared, a warm hand rested on his shoulder, and Spock gazed at him in concern. “I’m fine, Spock, I’m fine. Just relieved.” Jim laughed, lightheaded, almost giddy. In his hand he clutched a small plastic card that showed the picture of a smiling, black-haired, blue-eyed girl. “If you were an eleven-year-old girl hiding on a spaceship, where would you be?”

“Never having been an eleven year old Human, male or female, I do not know how to answer that question, Jim,” Spock said, without giving an inch, a heated, solid mainstay in this bizarre situation.

Jim leaned back again, closing his eyes. “She’s here. That’s the most important thing. Nothing bad can happen to her here – and Spock, that’s not an invitation to list all the things that can kill a little girl on board. She’s here. Main thing. We just need to find her. Preferably without causing her and everyone else to freak out and panic.”

The wall of the tube at his back vibrated with the gentle hum that he thought of as the pulse of the Enterprise.

“We’ll find her,” he whispered. “And if I have to turn the whole ship inside out with my own bare hands.”

Thirty seconds, perhaps a minute, in other words half an eternity later, Jim asked Spock: “Where did you hide out as a kid?”

It never occurred to him to wonder how he knew that Spock had needed to hide. He just knew.

“There was a room,” Spock said slowly, “in my father’s house. A room with books. A ... library, maintained as a historical monument. No one ever went there. Printed books have been obsolete on Vulcan longer than on Earth; sentimental attachment to antiques is not socially acceptable in our culture. It was a room full of untold stories – stories no one would listen to. I felt at home there.”

“There’s no library on the Enterprise,” Jim said with a frown. He pushed off the hull of the tube. Anger on behalf of a lonely little boy spilled over and into how he smashed back the access door of the Jefferies tube, how he stalked down the corridor.

Suddenly he whirled around. “But there are places where kids go here for stories. Kindergarten. Playgrounds. School. Rec rooms. Movie theaters. We’ll check those first.”

They found her on deck eight, in a rec room for preschoolers. Fast asleep she lay curled up in an entity vaguely reminiscent of medieval Terran castles but made of foam cushions, colorful pillows and blankets – a “reading fort”.

“Take Bones to his quarters and get him sober,” Jim ordered, pushing Spock in the direction of the turbolift. “Have Dr. Chapel stand by. M’Benga and Oli can take charge of sickbay for the time being. I’ll be down with Jojo as soon as I’ve woken her and we’ve had a little chat. Twenty minutes or so, maybe half an hour. That should give you enough time to bring Bones back to his senses.”

Stardate 2260.134, 0300 hours, Deck 8, Kindergarten Rec Room 3

It didn’t help that Jo knew it was a nightmare. Because this was her mother, burning alive. Her mother, screaming and shrieking, until her face was melting away, until Jo saw the bones of her skull, until Jo choked with the stink of charred flesh. Her mother, grabbing at Jo and dragging her
into the flames and away from her dad, and her dad crying and calling her name and reaching for her—

Sobbing, Jo clung to the comfort of a familiar embrace.

“Jo, Jo, everything’s alright, everything’s fine. That was just a dream. Just a bad dream. I’ve got you, Jojo, everything’s okay, everything’s fine.”

Uncle Jim?!

The shock of his voice ripped away the horror of the nightmare, only to replace it with terror at her discovery.

“Uncle Jim?” Uncle Jim in his golden captain’s uniform, sitting cross-legged in a kindergarten reading fort? She choked on a startled scream, started coughing, then hiccupping. Uncle Jim just tightened his arms around her, drawing her completely on his lap, where he held her until she calmed down. Only when she had stopped crying and was breathing normally, he talked to her again.

“Oh, damn, Jojo,” he whispered. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done to your Dad with running away?”

She winced and burrowed her face against his chest. She didn’t want to think of that. Hurting her dad was the last thing she wanted. But obeying him in this case? Impossible.

“I couldn’t,” she mumbled. “Just couldn’t.”

“Yeah,” Uncle Jim said softly, rubbing her back, “I get that, kiddo. I get that.”

A bit later, he gently gripped her arms and held her away from him, until she was forced to look at him. “Better now?”

She nodded.

“What was the dream about?” he asked. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But I’d like to know.”

Mutely, she shook her head. Her throat constricted with the memories of dream and reality. At last she whispered, and it sounded more like croaking, kind of pathetic, “Mom’s death. The fire. Dad couldn’t reach me.”

“Oh, Jojo.” Uncle Jim pulled her back into his arms and squeezed hard. When he released her, his eyes were suspiciously red. She crawled off his lap and sat in front of him, cross-legged like him, concentrating on her toes. She hated it when grown-ups cried. And when people tried to make her talk about her mother’s death. At least Uncle Jim never did that.

“Alright now?” Uncle Jim asked. “Because there’s something else we need to discuss.”

He sounded stern, and she guessed that he was done with being nice. Well, he was the captain. And she was a stowaway.

She nodded.

“Can’t hear you.”

“Yes,” she managed. She still didn’t look at him. The mattress of the reading fort sported patterns
like cobblestones, but it was soft and warm.

“Would you please look at me, Joanna?” Uncle Jim didn’t yell. But there was something to his voice that made his question sound like an order.

She looked up. Yup, he wasn’t real friendly now.

“Good.” Uncle Jim gave her a hard stare. She still wasn’t used to his new eye color. “Tonight we got a subspace message from Earth, saying that you ran away to Georgia, and that they can’t find you. Your Dad’s been ...” He paused. She noticed how a muscle twitched in his right cheek, as if he was grinding his teeth. “Your Dad’s been very worried. I’m going to take you to your Dad now. He’ll be very happy to see you, but you need to know he’s been really very worried.”

“He’ll freak,” she said, and she trembled a little bit when she thought of her dad in a rage.

Uncle Jim sighed. There was sympathy in his eyes. “Yeah. Yes, he will.”

Jo swallowed hard. “Are you ... are you gonna throw me into the brig?”

“What?” Uncle Jim blinked at her. Then he actually laughed. “No! God, no. We don’t lock up kids in prison here. But I bet you’ll get grounded for a while, trickster.” With a groan he rose to his feet and climbed over the wobbly wall of the reading fort. “Well, come on,” he urged and extended his hand toward her when she didn’t move.

“Uncle Jim ...” she whispered. A wave of fear and desperation crashed down on her, to the point that she couldn’t have moved even if she had wanted to. “Are you ... are you going to send me back?”

Uncle Jim frowned. Then he lifted his outstretched hand and pinched the bridge of his nose. “No,” he muttered at last. “Wouldn’t do that even if I could. Which, luckily, I can’t. And now, let’s get going.”

♦

Stardate 2260.134, 0350 hours, Deck 5, Officers’ Quarters

When Jim reached Bones’s cabin, Jo was clutching his hand in a kid’s version of a death grip. Her fingers were icy, her skin damp with sweat. She was so little, and so damn scared. He remembered too well what an awful feeling it was to be eleven or twelve or thirteen, and to have absolutely no say over what happened with you, what was done to you.

But different from him at that age, she still had at least a father left who loved her. She had a father who had done his best to take care of her up until now, a father who would keep doing just that until she was an adult and ready to live her own life.

... And a father who would freak out all over her in approximately thirty seconds.

“Jo? Wait a sec.” Jim turned away and pulled out his comm. A glance at the display told him that forty-seven minutes had passed since he’d sent Spock to take Bones to his quarters. Thanks to Jo’s nightmare, their chat had taken a little longer than expected. Definitely enough time for Spock and Chapel to get Bones detoxed, then. He pressed the quick-dial button to contact Spock. “We’re here,” he said so quietly that Jo wouldn’t hear. “Are we good to come in? Have you told him already?”

Spock’s reply was just as soft. “The effects of intoxication have been neutralized with an efficacy
of approximately 90%. Dr. Chapel is here. He hasn’t been informed yet.”

“Great. On with the show. Kirk out.” He took a deep breath and went back to Jo.

“Alright, kiddo,” he said, bending over a little so he was able to look her in the eye. “Now remember: Your Dad really loves. He’s been very worried, but he loves you. A lot. No one will throw you in the brig, and no one will send you home or anywhere else. Got that?”

She nodded, all huge eyes and tremulous lips.

“Good. Then let’s face the music.” He put his hand on the key pad, and with a soft hiss, the door opened.

Bones was sitting at his desk, face buried in his hands. Spock stood a few steps behind him, seemingly at ease but practically ready to intervene in an instant, should that be required. Dr. Chapel sat in one of the two armchairs in the living area, a hypo and a medical kit on the coffee table in front of her.

“Bones,” Jim said. When his friend didn’t react, he tried again, louder this time, “Bones! I’ve got her. Jo’s here. She’s right here.”

“D-d-daddy?”

At the sound of Jo’s voice, high and scared, Bones looked up. He looked terrible – haggard, with waxen cheeks, his eyes sunken and bruised purple from lack of sleep and too much whiskey, and his lips pressed together into a tight, white line. And he was shaking from the detox and the shock.

Jim winced. No eleven-year-old should see their dad looking that way. Of course that was still loads better than watching your mother burn to death like Jo had. Also much better than some of his own memories – like watching his mother get shot in front of his eyes and then tossed into a mass grave along with his best friend because their IQ wasn’t quite as high as his own. Or his stepfather lying in a puddle of vomit and cheap booze on the living room floor, when Frank had finally managed to booze his brains out of his head for good.

Bones stared at Jo.

His throat was working, he swallowed convulsively, but he couldn’t speak. With a muffled gasp he got to his feet and staggered towards his daughter. He sank to his knees in front of her and pulled her into his embrace.

“Oh, Daddy!” With a cry, Jo flung her arms around her father’s neck, and started crying all over again, hiding her face against his shoulder.

♦

Stardate 2260.134, 0500 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin

“And there weren’t even any Klingons involved.” Jim slammed his head back against the wall in frustration and amusement. Loose-limbed with relief, he sprawled on the mattress. Without discussing it, they’d ended up on Spock’s side of the bathroom. “Or Romulans. Or...”

“It seems your initial assessment of the situation was correct,” Spock mused and sat down carefully on his bed next to Jim, back straight, posture perfect. It was his bed, so he was entitled.

“Hmm... what?”
Spock’s eyes glittered, as he turned to Jim. “I believe the human idiom you used was ‘Kids do the
darndest things’?”

“Oh, that!” Jim grinned. “Yeah, well. Been there, done that. I’m just glad Bones and Jo got a happy
ending out of it.”

Thank goodness for that. When they’d left Bones and Jo half an hour ago, those two had been
totally done in. With Chapel’s help Jim had put Jo to bed in her dad’s bunk, while Bones collapsed
on the sofa. To Jim’s secret amusement, it had been Spock who had tucked a blanket around their
sleeping friend.

Jim made a mental note to talk to Rand about having Bones’s quarters shuffled around in the
morning. One of the stateroom suites should do the trick, he decided. They didn’t need to keep all
of the visitors’ quarters available for this mission, just in case someone wanted to hitch a ride in
style. Plus, he wanted to keep an eye on Jo after that stunt. This kid was trouble of the best kind. No
way he’d allow Bones and Jo to move several decks away from him. He’d also done the captainly
thing and taken Bones off duty for three days and put Dr. Chapel in charge of rearranging the
sickbay shift roster. Sometimes, he reflected, it’s good to be king.

“May I inquire what you referred to with the expression ‘been there, done that’?” Spock asked,
interrupting his musings. Jim thought that glint in his eyes might be curiosity. About Jim. Cool. He
liked that. But he didn’t necessarily want to answer that particular question. At least not right now.
Jim was at once too wired and too tired to talk or sleep. Also, at this point it wasn’t worth it
anymore. In two hours Alpha shift started. And sure, as the captain he could just pass on the conn
and get some sleep. But if he hadn’t skipped a shift for Nero, he sure as hell would be up on the
bridge on time today.

“Hmm.” He considered what he might tell Spock about his childhood. About what was in his files
that Spock already knew. About what was not in there. And about how all of that didn’t really say
much about Jim.

Instinctively, he reached for Spock’s hand, rubbing a circle into his palm. Only when the Vulcan
couldn’t suppress a gasp, he realized what he was doing. Mortified, he dropped Spock’s hand and
jerked back. “Oh, damn. Sorry, man. I ... Damn. I’m so keyed up, I shouldn’t be anywhere near
you, I guess. I didn’t mean to overload you with my – my crap.”

He was already sliding off the bed, before Spock managed to grab his hand and hold it in a tight,
hot grasp. Jim could see in his eyes – his focus dazed, turning inward – how hard that simple tactile
contact hit him. “Don’t do that, Spock.”

But Spock wouldn’t let go. And never mind Jim’s awesome reboot powers, Spock was still a lot
stronger than Jim. “Do you think so little of me that you believe the remnants of your anxiety for
your best friend and his daughter would be off-putting to me?”

Jim froze, a new wave of shame washing over him. “God, no. Spock, no, of course not. Never.”

“Then accept my touch,” Spock ordered. “And while Alpha shift begins in one hour, twenty-three
minutes and forty seconds, there is also still enough time for you to sleep for a short period of time.
Twenty minutes will be most beneficial, physiologically and psychologically. Afterwards your
mind should be sufficiently refreshed and your alertness should be adequately increased in order to
discharge your duties on the bridge in a satisfactory manner.”

“Wait – what?” Jim sank back down on the bed and stared at Spock, incredulous. “You want me to
cuddle up with you for a nap?”
Spock raised an elegantly slanted eyebrow and held out his other hand, an imperious gesture.

♦

**Stardate 2260.160, 2000 hours, Deck 10, Conference Lounge One**

Things calmed down after the “Joanna Incident”, as Jim called it in his private log. Routine set in.

Two weeks into the mission, Jim stopped taking center chair for every Alpha shift so he could haunt the bridge and the various departments of the Enterprise at all possible and impossible times, twenty-four hours a day, so he’d get a feel for the different teams and units. Bones told him not to be a micromanaging asshole of a captain and to pretty please let people do their damn jobs. Spock, however, approved of the strategy. Jim suspected that was at least in part because it fit Spock’s own agenda, namely his pet project of developing a perfect secondary command team. The supposedly pacifist, humanitarian Vulcan promptly passed the conn to Sulu for each and every Alpha shift now – and proceeded to torture the poor man simultaneously with various simulations.

Because he was a responsible captain, Jim hacked into Spock’s program. The scenarios Spock was using on Sulu now made the Kobayashi Maru look like a walk in the park. With a girl scouts picnic and pink velvet cake. Jim spent a few fun-filled nights wrestling the sims into submission. He “died” four times, lost the Enterprise three times, turned the entire crew pink twice, and ended up a space pirate once. And people claimed Spock had no sense of humor. Because Jim definitely did have a sense of humor, he repackaged Spock’s sims and sent them via private subspace transmission to a holo-deck games competition.

Scotty easily managed to keep the warp drive purring at six, shifting down to warp four and up to warp eight at intervals that only made sense to him and Keenser. (And perhaps to the new Assistant Chief Engineer, Lt. Elena Amell, an expert in warp drive efficiency; Scotty kept raving about how lucky it was to have her on board.) Commander Scott was determined to thoroughly test the new capabilities of the Enterprise after the refit. Jim for his part had no compunctions about letting Scotty push the ship to its absolute limits while they were still in Federation space. They’d need those limits, and more, at some point. If there were any serious technical issues lurking in the system, he wanted them weeded out now. Because now they were still close enough to home that they could expect a reply from a Federation starbase before they died of old age, should all else fail. Later on, not so much.

And now it was almost time for their first stopover. Stardate 2260.164 to .167 would see the Enterprise in orbit around the planet Pyrithia of 26 Draconis, a trading post just beyond Federation space. With a little bit of luck they’d practice away team drills, get the word out about those Vulcan space gypsies, stock up on fresh veggies, and no one would get hurt.

But before every away mission, God put a briefing. Or two or three.

Jim wrapped his hands around a mug of Yeoman Rand’s awesome, authentic coffee and relaxed in his chair. With half an ear he listened to Spock’s introduction to the wonders of Pyrithia.

“26 Draconis is a triple star system in the Alpha Quadrant,” Spock explained. With a tap, he called up a projection of the star system. Cubes of black mist formed above the oval table. “Forty-six light years from Sol.”

Stars blinked into existence, forming patterns. On Earth, Ptolemy had called that constellation “Draco”, while the ancient Arabic astronomers had likened those stars to mother camels guarding a baby. Tracing the familiar lines in his mind, Jim wondered if similar myths existed to explain the stars that had been visible from Vulcan, or if such stories had been abolished after Surak. Not that it
mattered now, he guessed, with Vulcan gone.

“Two of the system components, an F and a K class star, form a spectroscopic binary that completes an orbit every seventy-six years,” Spock went on, zooming into the projection. Three glowing marbles hovered brightly above the table, one red, one white, one muted orange in color. “The composite spectral classification of the FK pair is G0V, which decomposes to individual spectral types F9V and K3V. The masses of these two stars amount to 1.30 and 0.83 times the mass of the Sol. In comparison they are metal-poor with a lower proportion of elements other than hydrogen or helium.”

Spock flicked on the wall screen, displaying the spectral analysis. Sulu was riveted, of course. His department had come up with the suggestion to pick Pyrithia for their first planetary layover so they could study the eccentricities of a trinary system besides discharging the political duties of their mission. When Spock had supported his proposal, Sulu hadn’t stopped beaming at the Vulcan for a week. Spock’s discomfiture at such open adoration had been very amusing.

“The third component of the trinary is a red dwarf M-type star with a spectral classification of M1V, separated by 12.2 arc seconds from the FK pair and sharing a common proper motion. The system is on an orbit through the Milky Way galaxy with an eccentricity of 0.14, taking it as close as 23.1 kly and as far as 30.4 kly from the galactic core. It belongs to the Ursa Major moving group in the vicinity of the Helaspont Nebula.”

Jim didn’t pay attention to the astrophysics. The Draconis 26 threesome was interesting, but it didn’t pose any dangers to the Enterprise and it didn’t require any special maneuvers or safety precautions. In other words, those awesome astrophysical details were irrelevant for Jim’s job. But he did listen to Spock’s voice. He concentrated on the pretty patterns of the holo-projection and let Spock’s voice wash over him, deep and gentle and clear ... He could listen to Spock for hours, and since Spock had lots to say at briefings, Jim indulged in the luxury of listening to Spock without hearing a word he was saying now and again.

Twenty-six days had passed since he’d curled up in Spock’s bed for that much-needed nap after the “Joanna Incident”. Twenty-nine days had gone by since the kiss. Jim tried not to frown. Since then ... nothing.

Well, almost nothing. By unspoken agreement both bathroom doors remained open at night, and as shipboard routine had set in, that trick was usually sufficient for Jim to be able to sleep. With that arrangement in mind, he concentrated on his PADD. Because if he looked at Spock now, he would frown. Sure, he connected with Spock in many ways besides via those open doors at night. They shared dinner in the officers’ mess on a regular basis, they played chess and board games in the rec room, they did workouts together, and just hung out in the ready room between shifts. But nothing more. And Jim ... Well, after the kiss, after the cozy intimacy of that damn nap (exactly twenty minutes, not a second longer, and how could twenty minutes be so short and so long at the same time, and how was it even possible to remember a nap like that, after twenty-six days?) Jim wanted more. A hell of a lot more. But for the first time in his life he was unsure of how to go about it. Even if he had known how to flirt with a Vulcan, there was already too much between them for deepening their relationship in such a casual manner. And Spock was ... Spock, damn it! Jim couldn’t just walk up to him and ask him for a shag. And besides, he wasn’t sure if a shag would be enough, wasn’t sure if fucking his brains out for weeks would be enough. Enough to satisfy this – this – need – or whatever it was he felt every single time he looked at Spock.

“Pyrithia is the fifth planet of the F type primary,” Spock announced, interrupting Jim’s reverie. Jim suppressed a sigh. Time to man up and concentrate. His first officer was getting around to the relevant bits of the briefing. “With an axial tilt of 27° and an orbital period of 380 days around its
primary, its seasons and calendar are similar to Earth. The surface gravity is 0.24027 g higher than Earth’s. The ratio of oxygen to nitrogen is constant at 23% to 75% in the atmosphere. With a partial pressure higher than Earth normal by 2.3566%, Pyrithia’s atmosphere is denser than Earth’s, but still breathable without special equipment.” On the wall screen, the relevant data flashed up in an orderly display.

“Geologically, Pyrithia offers the usual deposits of metals and minerals commonly found on Earth-type planets. Pyrithia’s flora and fauna are entirely unremarkable. The most noteworthy animals present on the planet are the Pyrithian bat – a flying mammal with white fur whose diet primarily consists of snow beetles and moth larvae – and the Pyrithian moon hawk, a nocturnal bird of prey and the natural predator of the aforementioned bat. In fact, what is most remarkable about the planet is that no intelligent life forms have evolved there.” In other words, Pyrithia was a boring disappointment of a planet. And with that, Spock was done with his part of the briefing. He put away his PADD and reclaimed his chair.

“Thank you, Mr. Spock, for your fascinating elucidations on Draconis 26 and Pyrithia.” Jim rose to his feet. Time to be captain, yay. “Without any intelligent life of its own, Pyrithia remains an unaligned planet. At the beginning of the 22nd century, Denobulan traders established an outpost there. Since then Pyrithia has risen in importance and has become one of the major trading hubs in this section of the Alpha Quadrant. It’s a favorite stopover for Denobulan, Kaelon, Vissian, Xindi, and Kovaalan merchants. Federation ships are welcome, too. That provides us with an excellent opportunity to get information about the V'tosh ka'tur, and to put the word out that the Federation seeks to establish communication with them.”

Jim called up a picture of the trading post on the screen. It featured a big spaceport surrounded by a sprawling city. “We’ll reach Pyrithia on stardate 2260.164 and stay in orbit for three days. Mr. Spock and I are on an away team the first evening. We’ve been invited to a dinner of the Pyrithian Merchants’ Guild. I have ordered Commander Paul to put together away teams at his discretion for our stay. The top priority of the teams will be to collect intelligence without drawing any undue attention to themselves. There will be three teams with three members each for every shift. Their specific missions will be coordinated with the departments involved.” He switched the display to a schedule of the away missions. “Briefings for the bridge teams on shift during our time in orbit every day at 0800 and 2000 for updates on the away missions and anything else that comes up. This should be the least challenging layover imaginable. The perfect opportunity to work the kinks out of away routines. I want us to make the most of it.” Jim switched off the screen and the holo-projector. “And that’s it from my side for tonight. Questions? Comments? Or are you ready for dinner?”

♦♦♦

“I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, well-ordered lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless emptiness.”

– Jack Kerouac, On the Road

Chapter End Notes

• Spock’s lecture on Draconis 26 and Pyrithia is Wikipedia mixed with Memory Alpha mixed with random bits of information about what exactly constitutes “breathable
atmosphere” found on some SF forums.

- If you’re into maps and want to follow the itinerary of the mission, I recommend [http://www.startrekkmap.com/](http://www.startrekkmap.com/)

- Per canon technically the speed of subspace messages is warp 9.99 (or speed of plot LOL). Since I like going with the idea that space is really a big place, the “Joanna Incident” is the last opportunity for real-time communication with Earth in this story for the next few years (and that may be pushing things, but hey, speed of plot is a time-honored device in SF). Subspace messages from Earth to Pyrithia take six days, thirteen hours, and thirty-two minutes, which I know thanks to the fabulous Star Trek Travel Calculator ([http://www.aerth.org/Constellation/star_trek.asp](http://www.aerth.org/Constellation/star_trek.asp)).

♥ Comments are love! ♥

What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
A New, More Fractured Light

Chapter Summary

Ping-pong politics have nothing on politics via vegetable soup. Pyrithia is supposed to be like, the easiest layover ever. And come on, what can go wrong with an away mission that mostly means that Gaila and two other female crew members get to go shopping? At least Dr. McCoy has pretty shoes and even prettier eyes. Jim is sick of all that secret shit. And on top of it all, he gets to have a sex talk with Spock that he really didn’t want to have, especially not like that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A New, More Fractured Light

Stardate 2260.164, 2100 hours, Guildhall, Pyrithia

The first course was plomeek soup.

Spock considered what that gesture, the offering of a Vulcan staple, was supposed to mean. The soup was not replicated; one look and one inhalation told him that. The ingredients currently cost a fortune. Was it intended as a compliment, a sign of respect and generosity? Or was the motivation behind the menu less benign? Taking into account the stares leveled at him by the Xinti and Kovaalan guild masters, cunning and cold, he deducted that in this case a bowl of soup constituted a veiled threat instead of hearty nourishment – a pointed reminder of how powerless the Federation had been to protect one of its founding members.

Next to him, Jim must have arrived at the same conclusion. He’d been tense from the start, barely able to hide his intense dislike of such diplomatic functions behind stiff Starfleet formality. Now he focused on the soup with a stony stare, abandoning all pretense at polite dinner conversation. A moment later he started eating without a word – and without scanning the concoction first for poisons or allergens. He ate slowly, the way he always did. Now and again he paused, savoring the taste with an expression of reverence.

Only when his bowl was empty, he turned to Spock. His hazel gaze was intense, searing. But when he spoke, his voice was soft, his Vulcan accent perfect. “Nam-tor shur temep-sharu na’tri-sochy.”

Spock felt his heart thud heavily against his ribs. How often had his mother comforted him in her emotional, human way with that proverb and a bowl of plomeek soup as a child?

“Soup is the gateway to inner peace.”

He picked up the spoon.
Stardate 2260.166, 1100 hours, Grand Bazaar, Pyrithia

Gaila scrutinized the partners for her away mission. Meeting them in person, her impression was even less favorable in person than the one she had gleaned from their public profiles. Their files were just a little too clean, a bit too ordinary. Something was off about them, about both of them. So much so that she had tried to get into their actual personnel files. Without success – the level of encryption was not of this galaxy. Gaila didn’t like files she couldn’t hack into. To have people with files like that on her team made her uneasy.

Carolyn Paul was a human woman, supposedly a school teacher for extracurricular projects, but listed as a lieutenant with the Sciences Division, Diplomacy & Xenopolitics Department. Ensign Gwaloth Canningham was a tailor in fabrics and textiles replications, working as a Quartermaster. She was also a delicate looking alien. Gaila didn’t recognize the species. Why was there no security officer on the team?

Of course Gaila knew that Commander Paul, the head of the Xenopolitics Department, had put together away teams that would be most effective for secret reconnaissance at Captain Kirk’s orders, even if that meant splitting up experienced teams. She knew those orders. She even understood Captain Kirk’s and Commander Paul’s reasoning. Three women out shopping was about as low profile as you could make an away team. It was a clever disguise, but Gaila didn’t have to like it. In this case, she didn’t like to go on an away mission with what amounted to a civilian in charge to start with. But what she liked least of all about their orders for this particular away mission was that they were not allowed to wear their uniforms. She was now dressed in a glittery Orion tunic with enticing cut-outs. While that costume was not the worst slave-wear traditional among her people, it was close. Too close for her comfort. Additionally, the Denobulans enforced a strict no weapons policy on Pyrithia, so she’d also have to do without the sense of security provided by a phaser set to stun. No, she wasn’t happy about this away mission. Not at all.

Gaila turned to Paul – who was dressed in tight red leather pants and the skimpy kind of tunic that only whores or cheap bodyguards wore on certain planets – and frowned. “You’re not pretty.”

For a moment, the woman stared at her, taken aback. Then she nodded. “Yes. I have big boobs and I’m fat.” She shrugged. “You’re green and on hormone suppressants. What’s your point?”

Gaila shook her head. “It’s not your weight or the form of your breasts I object to. That’s fine. You’re solid and soft in just the right way. I could go crazy for that. It’s your eyes I object to. They are too cold.”

“Great,” Paul said. “Now we’ve cleared that up, can we go?”

“That would be lovely.” Gwaloth put on and twirled in her gossamer robe. The fabric was green as moss, soft as powder. Vulcan yelas weave, an incredibly precious fabric now. Around her neck and her hips she wore heavy jewelry, precious metals and gems in hues of green that looked too antique to be replicated. She looked too rich by far to be a crew member of a Starfleet ship. “The Pyrithian fabrics bazaar is about to open. I need to procure certain materials for the textiles and fabrics department that are not available on Earth.”

Gaila sighed. Orders were orders. Shopping at the bazaar to collect information might even be fun. Still, she couldn’t wait to be back on board, putting on her uniform, leaving the past buried in the past.

“Once we’re down there,” Paul told her, “let Gwaloth do the talking. She knows what she’s doing.
Keep your eyes and ears open and don’t get lost. Oh, and carry her fan.” She thrust a ridiculous feathery something at Gaila.

A heartbeat later, the bazaar, light-years away from Orion, assaulted Gaila’s senses and transported her back to a place and a time she never wanted to live through again.

All those colors. Too many colors. Normal spectral colors in varying degrees of intensity, from colorful Tiburonian brocades to crazy Vissian polyester. Blinding fluorescents and mesmerizing alien hues. Shades she couldn’t even make out, but which made her eyes sting and burn. And the smells. The stink of raw, untreated yarns, the musky smell of Chameloid furs, the acrid tang of freshly died Capellan cloth, the musty scent of second-hand clothing, and the leathery whiff of shoes. The crowds. Customers and merchants milling about, pets under tables, and babies sleeping at the back of stalls. Too much noise. Haggling and shouting in a dozen and more tongues, from Andorian to Xindi.

Gaila nearly reeled, disoriented with the onslaught on her senses. But Canningham pushed right into the fray, drawing them into a labyrinth of fabrics and textiles. The ensign led them past mountains of Algolian velvet, rolls of Aaamazzarite shrouds, clouds of Xindi chiffon, layers of Ullian linen, around cyan pools of Arrakeen silk, and past piles of accouterments from Idanian scarves to Rigelian necklaces. Obviously, she really knew where she was going. At some point more or less in the middle of the market she slowed down. For some time, she meandered leisurely from stall to stall, until they came to a kiosk where a fat Ferengi squatted in pride of place, acquisitive and robust and eager for business.

“Master Kork!” Canningham exclaimed, rushing towards the stocky merchant. “How good to see you again after all this time.”

To Gaila’s surprise, the Ferengi dropped a kiss on each of her hands before drawing her into a tight embrace. “Gwaloth, dearest. My favorite customer from Kohlan to Khosla. It has been much too long. At least four years. I hope they were gainful.”

Canningham smiled. “Very rewarding indeed, Master Kork, thank you. And how is your business? I expect your acquisitions are as lucrative as always.”

The Ferengi smirked. “You know, my dear: War is good for business, peace is good for business. Business is business. So what can I do for you today?”

“I’m looking for desert fabrics and yarns,” Quartermaster Canningham announced, smoothing down her green gown to indicate what she was looking for. “The kind that used to come from Vulcan.”

Unobtrusively, Carolyn Paul drifted to her right. To all intents and purposes, the lieutenant was interested in nothing but the next stall’s merchandise, Andorian fabrics in various hues of blue. But Gaila noticed how closely Paul was watching every person around her, how attentively she was listening to conversations around her.


“You don’t say?” Ensign Canningham smirked at the man. Then she turned to Gaila, hand extended. After a stunned second, Gaila remembered the fan and placed it in her hand. The alien fluttered the foppish creation delicately at her face. “However, there are traders who ... specialize in similar ware, who have similar expertise. I know if there’s one person on Pyrithia who can get
me what I want, it’s you.”

“The V’tosh ka’tur,” the merchant said. “That’s who you want.”

“Indeed.” Canningham caressed her belt purse in a sinuous way. “And I can make it worth your while, Master Kork.”

“Profit is its own reward,” the Ferengi deflected demurely. But his large eyes glittered with greed. Then he sighed dramatically, dejected. “But I am desolate: I cannot help you, madam. There are none here, haven’t been for months.”

“Oh well.” The Quartermaster shrugged and produced a small PADD. “That is unfortunate. However, I do have need of certain other supplies ...”

Gaila used the opportunity of the subsequent haggling to stray around the kiosk and check out the other stalls for whatever gossip she could pick up. On the far side of Kork’s place, she thought she saw a familiar figure out of the corner of her eye. Someone dark and tall. Someone she hadn’t seen in so long she couldn’t place him anymore. Uneasiness pricked down her spine. Fear. She retraced her steps a little too quickly and hoped that no one had noticed. Paul looked at her questioningly, but she just shook her head. It was probably nothing. Old memories coming back to haunt her at an inopportune moment. When she reached Canningham’s side again, whatever deals the Quartermaster had been after were dealt and done with. Gwaloth Canningham and the Ferengi merchant were sharing small cups of a hot beverage that smelled like hot mushrooms with chocolate. “So you say I might have more luck at Khosla?”

The Ferengi nodded. “They don’t like the Xindi and the Kovaalan, those gypsies. There’s bad blood there – Vulcanoids of any sort don’t like to get press-ganged into military service.”

“Oh yes, well. Who does?” Canningham asked, raising her tiny cup in an elegant gesture.

“If the price is right ...” The Ferengi shrugged.

“Of course.” Gwaloth Canningham leaned in a little, exposing her breasts enough that the Ferengi sucked in his breath appreciatively. “Talking about Vulcanoids and price ... I’m not just interested in fabrics, you know. It’s all so precious now, Vulcan cloth, Vulcan craftsmanship. There’s profit there, Master Kork. You of all people know that.”

Kork groaned, an awful sound of greed and ... more. Gaila’s stomach lurched. But the ensign remained unfazed. Demonstratively, Canningham laid a hand around Gaila’s neck, the way you’d touch a lap dog or a kitten, and drew her flush against her side, an owner’s possessive gesture. With a flirtatious swirl of her fan, the woman slid another inch closer to Kork. “How about cheap labor, Master Kork? Should your recommendations pay off, and I acquire access to a regular supply of Vulcan fabrics, I’ll also need Vulcan laborers to turn those fabrics into pieces of art. You wouldn’t know anything about ... that kind of trade, would you?”

“Ferengi don’t engage in that sort of commerce,” Kork said, drawing his warped morality around him like a mantle. “When Vulcans were still slaughtering each other, Ferengi were already peaceful capitalists. With a stock market exchange of unrivaled opportunities.”

Canningham rolled her eyes. “Do I look like an Orion? I’m an honorable businesswoman trying to establish myself in a niche market. But a prerequisite for profit is expertise. And it would be an act of kindness. They’d go from being,” she fluttered her hand meaningfully, “to being gainfully employed laborers. With benefits, of course. Though I’m not sure how I feel about paid vacation.”
“Oh, you,” the Ferengi cackled, “you’re worse than my grandson. Sit with me.”

Canningham melted into the merchant’s side. Gracefully, familiarly. And she shoved Gaila onto her knees with a strength that belied her appearance as a frail, female figure. Gaila had about reached the end of her endurance now. But Paul stood at attention three feet away. The lieutenant was so tense that Gaila couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more at stake here than simple reconnaissance. Then Gaila felt again that prickle of watchful eyes on the back of her neck. She couldn’t get the idea out of her head that if she turned her head, she’d see someone lurking there ... someone she recognized, someone she didn’t want to see – ever again.

“That trade,” Kork was saying to Canningham now, “it is not plied here. You need to go to New Sydney for that. If you use your green pet as a ticket, the people you want to talk to should be willing to meet you. And that advice is free, by the way, given to you out of the endless generosity of my gentle heart.”

“Of course, Master.” Canningham exchanged revolting smooches with the Ferengi and pressed an additional bunch of credits into his lap.

Then the three of them moved on at last. Slowly, they made their way across the market. The Quartermaster studied the wares of all the stalls with an expert eye. She chatted at least with every other seller, sometimes striking a small bargain on the side, slipping a package of Bandi nets in her bag here, some Lytasan lace or Skorrian feathers there. They hadn’t come far when Gaila was certain that they were being followed. A glance to her left told her that Paul had noticed it, too.

“Fuck.” Carolyn Paul sighed. “Someone’s interested in us. Gwaloth?”

The alien indicated a shake of her head. “No one I know.”

“Gaila?”

“I’m not sure,” she said softly, affecting a submissive posture at Ensign Canningham’s side once more. “I ... at the kiosk, I thought someone was watching me. Someone who ... who knew me. Before. If that is the case, this will go badly if we can’t beam out of here ASAP.”

Carolyn Paul’s sharp gaze told her that she knew exactly what Gaila was talking about. Gaila might not have been able to get into Paul’s files. But Paul had obviously accessed hers. Not many officers on the ship had the clearance to view that part of her files. Why had Commander Paul shared that kind of information with the lieutenant before this mission?

“Damn. If we beam straight back, Gwaloth’s cover will be compromised. No can do,” Paul muttered. “Rats. I seriously lack superhero skills at self-defense. How about you?”

Gaila shook her head. “Just basics. I can dance someone to death, but I’m no good at beating them up. And the hormone suppressants make me slow.”

“Oh, this officially sucks,” Paul said. “Especially since your friend brought help. We need to get out of sight or we are screwed. Gwaloth can’t shift in the middle of the market.”

A few steps at a time, they strolled down the row and then drifted away from the market, pretending to chat, even affecting giggles, appearing to skip around a corner to disappear into the next lane ... fully aware that they were being followed, not just by one thug, but six – seven.

“Gwaloth – ready to go all salt vampire on those guys? That M-113 creature we looked at before?”

“Ewww.”
“Yeah, sorry about that. But somehow I don’t think those gentlemen want to invite us to share a Cardassian Sunrise in that cozy pub around the corner.” Paul pulled out her comm unit, tapping the button to request emergency retrieval. Then she turned around to face their pursuers. “We only need to stay alive until they can lock on to beam us up. Think we can manage that?”

Gaila didn’t reply. She kicked the first goon in the groin with the power and elegance that was the result of many years of dancing. Moaning, he went down on his knees, cradling his bits. Paul rammed her head into an attacker’s chest. Then she jerked upwards, nearly dislocating the man’s jaw. That must have hurt her about as much as the guy. Somewhat unsteady on her feet, she whirled around to punch the next assailant right in the eye, index and middle finger pointed straight ahead.

Behind them Canningham’s delicate female body writhed and contorted helplessly. Her precious dress split at the seams. Serpentine scales undulated under the fabric, as her humanoid appearance melted into a compact, slug-like shape.

Carolyn Paul and Gaila put up a good fight. But there were too many opponents, and they were too strong – professional brawlers at the very least. It didn’t take long until one attacker grabbed Gaila from behind, holding her firmly in place, while another did his best to beat her unconscious, quickly, methodically. Paul wasn’t faring any better. Now it was just a matter of seconds until it was all over ...

Suddenly a huge, hairy creature tore the man away who’d been holding her captive. Gaila got a glimpse of sagging folds, yellow eyes, and an inverted snout. With a roar, the beast bared several sharp, ivory fangs. The last thing Gaila saw before the white swirls of a Transporter beam obscured her vision was the creature grasping the face of one of their attackers with three sucker-like fingers.

♦

Stardate 2260.166, 1300 hours, Deck 8, Transporter Room

Somehow Carolyn managed to lurch down from the transporter pad. In that weird haze that precedes a faint she recognized the waiting medic. The CMO in person – Jo’s dad.

Now that wasn’t how she’d wanted to meet that man. She’d hoped he would show up for her office hours one day so she could tell him how well his daughter was doing, how the girl was flourishing on board of the Enterprise. Or perhaps at the upcoming parent-teacher conference, where she intended to show off some of the creative projects Jo’s class was working on at the moment. Damn.

Her knees buckled. As if in slow motion, the floor was sliding up to her. She collapsed at his feet. There was time to think that his shoes were very very shiny. Then sick hallucinations of mounds of fabric turning into quicksand swallowed her whole.

♦

Stardate 2260.167, 1700 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

When Carolyn woke, she found herself nose to nose with a furious Doctor McCoy. He had very beautiful dark green eyes.

“You were supposed to go shopping down there. Play with pretty clothes and shiny fabric, not get
yourselves beaten up within an inch of your lives!” he snarled.

She blinked. Her body ... so heavy. She couldn’t move at all. And she was so warm. Inside out. Outside in. As if she were floating in a tub full of liquid, warm chocolate. Gooey. Good. He really had the prettiest eyes.

“Damn, girl! Do you realize that the only reason you’re not dead is because those goons didn’t actually mean to kill you?”

“Lieutenant Paul,” she managed. She may be twenty-three years old, but she wasn’t a girl; hadn’t been one for a long time. And she’d bet her life – and Gaila’s and Gwaloth’s – on the idea that those thugs hadn’t wanted to kill them then and there. She was kind of glad that had worked out.

“Right. Then let’s start at the top, Lieutenant Paul. A concussion. Broken nose. Fractured cheekbone. Chipped teeth. All mended now, and your teeth are way prettier than before. Moving lower: a nearly dislocated shoulder, a cracked rib, bruised kidneys thanks to blunt trauma on the right side. The bone’s fixed, but you’ll be sore as hell for a couple of days. Oh, and of course, sprained fingers, with four nails torn straight off. Manicure will be a bitch for the next twelve weeks or so, I can promise you that. The regeneration of nails is hell on the nervous system. Not to mention assorted hematomas and lacerations. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was hoping that Wraiths could shapeshift a bit faster.”

“Well, don’t do that next time!”

Such beautiful eyes. Stubborn chin, too. She also kind of liked his hair, all ruffled and dark and soft. Noticing a man that way wasn’t like her. Especially not a man she didn’t even know. Most especially not a father of one of her students. That was ... that was ... unprofessional. And she felt so drowsy and warm and melty ... Whoa, she must have been in a bad way indeed if they’d had to drug her up to her gills like that. “Sorry, Doc. I’ll try.”

“That’s what they all say,” he told her, disgusted. “And then they clutter up my sickbay all over again.”

“How are Gaila and Gwaloth?”

“Alive.”

Her expression must have given away how that one word felt like another punch into the stomach. The doctor’s frown softened. “Gaila was not quite as banged up as you – she’s a twisty little thing with all of that dancing she’s been doing. Gwaloth’s just fine; she only needs to watch her salt intake for a while. Apparently there are some shapes that are harder on a Wraith’s constitution than others. So no more turning salt vampire for her in the near future. And now,” McCoy raised a stern finger, “you go back to sleep. You’ve got some healing to do yet before I’ll let you out of here.”

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Stardate 2260.170, 2000 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Office

The captain was not pleased. The forbidding expression of the first officer at his side was not precisely encouraging, either. Not even taking into account that he was Vulcan and was therefore supposed to look unemotional and cold.
Carolyn swallowed dryly and stood at attention just inside the captain’s office, ignoring the pangs of her barely healed injuries. No surprise there. Of course Kirk was angry after how that away mission had gone down. And she’d get chewed out by her dad later on in private, on top of this pleasant conversation. Awesome.

“What the hell happened down there, Lieutenant?” Captain Kirk growled from behind his desk.

She tried to focus on the wall above the captain’s left shoulder instead of his blazing hazel-green eyes. “I led an away team down to the grand bazaar of Pyrithia, the fabrics and textiles market. Quartermaster Canningham has a contact there, a Ferengi informant, Master Kork. Posing as an independent entrepreneur of considerable means, Quartermaster Canningham approached Master Kork in the company of Lieutenant Gaila, who was disguised as an Orion slave girl, and myself dressed in the livery of a common bodyguard. Canningham was able to gain some salient details pertaining to the V’tosh ka’tur and the—” She couldn’t face the first officer and dropped her gaze to the ground, concentrating on the tips of her shoes. “The slave traders specializing in Vulcans these days.”

“Great.” The captain didn’t sound thrilled. “What went wrong?”

“Unfortunately, Lieutenant Gaila was recognized by an Orion trader. He decided to get back his lost possession, with ... interest. We couldn’t risk beaming up straight from the market, or Canningham shapeshifting then and there. That would have compromised her cover. We had to get out of sight.” She hesitated. Then she drew a deep breath and looked up, meeting the captain’s furious gaze. “Lieutenant Gaila and I have only basic hand-to-hand training, sir. There were seven of them. And it took a little longer than I hoped for Canningham to shift into a salt vampire.”

“So far, so good. Shit happens,” Kirk said, his voice dangerously soft. “What I don’t get is how a school teacher and a tailor got the idea for an undercover adventure into their heads in the first place. And why you have a Ferengi informant on an unaligned planet outside of Federation space. Or why you believed you didn’t need a security team as back-up. Also, while the execution of away missions is generally at the discretion of the officer in charge, that rule in the handbook refers to standard missions. Not to clandestine shit like this one! You’re a lieutenant with Sciences Division. You should be aware of the fact that in a case like this one not just the relevant superior officer must be informed, but the commanding officer. Me. And there’s a good reason for that, too. Because with this kind of mission? If it goes pear-shaped, it may well affect the safety of the entire ship!”

He sucked in a deep breath with an irritated hiss. “And last but not least, let’s not forget the officer in charge of this mission. She’s listed in the database as teacher for extracurricular activities. Like creative writing workshops and stuff like that. Her qualifications in xenopolitics and diplomacy show up only in small print. And her file is interesting mostly because of all the things that are very obviously not in it. Anything you want to explain about that, Lieutenant?”

Carolyn bit down on her lower lip. Hard. The easy way out would be to fall back on her orders. Let her father field the fallout. That was his job, after all. But taking into account the Marcus conspiracy, she suspected that would just make things worse. She couldn’t ignore how the situation must appear to Kirk of all people. Her file locked up so tightly that not even Gaila had been able to hack into it. Her father sending her on an undercover mission that simply screamed Section 31. She could only hope that the information they had gathered was worth this shit storm – and blowing her cover now. “What do you want to know, Captain?”

“Everything.”

“This ... this will be a lot easier if I unlock my file for you, Captain.”
Without a word, he turned the screen on his desk and shoved the keyboard at her. Her file was already on display. With a deep breath, she called up the login page and entered her password. Then she turned the screen back to the captain and the first officer.

She tried not to think of the contents of her file. Of the pictures she knew were in there. Tried very, very hard. Didn’t succeed. She went back to staring at the wall.

“Well, hell,” the captain said at last and pinched the bridge of his nose. “It seems you’re very lucky to be with us at all, Lieutenant. But considering your complete file, I can only wonder once more: What the hell were you thinking, pulling a crazy stunt like that down there, three young women without any security?”

“If Kork had gotten a whiff of Starfleet, he wouldn’t have talked to Canningham. It was a necessary risk.” She inhaled a shaky breath. “And if we get those bastards,” she whispered, “a few broken bones are a small price to pay.”

“You are emotionally compromised by the mission at hand, Lieutenant,” the first officer said, his voice strangely gentle. “And Captain Kirk is right. You shouldn’t have left the ship. In fact, you shouldn’t be on the ship in the first place.”

“You don’t say,” she muttered, before she could stop herself. Remembering who she was talking to, she straightened, standing at attention once more, various aches and pains notwithstanding. “Yes, sir, I’m aware of that. I know that I’m the only one still alive who can recognize and identify Councilor Gav and his collaborators. The one witness who can link slave trade in Federation space with the Tellarite councilor and the Federation Council itself. But I can testify only if this investigation is successful. If we secure sufficient evidence to satisfy the Federation Supreme Court. If we figure out exactly how they operate and who is involved. Where the money comes from, where the money ends up. Sir.”

The captain was still scrolling down through her file, stone-faced. “She is safer here than on Earth, Spock, or anywhere else in the Federation for that matter,” he said with a nod at the screen. Then he looked back at her, shaking his head. “Minus shit like such undercover missions, of course.”

“We ... I didn’t expect any problems. It was supposed to be safe – meeting Gwaloth’s – Ensign Canningham’s acquaintance. Merely a matter of blending in and getting facts, sir.” She took a deep breath and straightened up once more. “That is my job, sir. I may suck at fighting, but I’m actually trained to do what I did down there. Go in and get info and come back alive. Sir.”

The captain nodded. “I get that, Lieutenant Paul. But you’re no good as a witness if you’re dead. So none of that, from now on. Even if you’re Section 31. While you’re on this ship, you’re my responsibility. I’m in charge here, not Section 31. And I’m damn sick of this secret shit. You may go, Lieutenant.”

He leaned over and pressed a button on his comm unit. “Rand, get Commander Paul into my office. Now.”

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Stardate 2260.170, 2200 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Cabin

“Remind me never to say anything about how easy a layover is going to be in advance,” Jim ordered. “Ever again.”

What with Lieutenant Paul’s debriefing and the following discussion with her father, Jim was too
wound up with anger and adrenaline to contemplate sleep. He was prowling his cabin and office like a panther his cage. Spock, obviously determined to stay until he’d gotten it out of his system, had stationed himself next to the connecting door. He was standing a step out of the way, hands clasped at his back. Attentive. A certain tension around his eyes betrayed that he was not happy with how the day had gone, either.

“The probability that an incident would come to pass was comparatively low based on the information at our disposal when we entered orbit,” Spock said mildly. “I initially estimated the risk of a significant crisis would not exceed a statistical likelihood of 34.5% – or I would have made my concerns known.”

“You’d have warned me. I know. And you’re pissed that information was kept from us,” Jim translated. “Me, too.”

Another trip around the desk. The problem right now was that he had time. Time to be angry. Time to think, and time to worry. They’d reach New Sydney in seven days, round about noon on stardate 2260.175. An acute crisis would have been easier on him. It would have forced him to keep his act together, to keep going, no matter what. This, however? Sticking to normal shipboard routine, having to make sensible plans after the kind of revelations dumped on him today was much harder.

He went over to his living area and slumped into an armchair. “Sit with me, Spock.”

Without a word, Spock moved to the other chair and settled gracefully into the ovoid shell of the lounger.

Jim tilted his head back and closed his eyes. “I don’t even know what I hate most about all of this.”

“Creating a list of irritants according to decreasing intensity isn’t a necessary prerequisite for a comprehensive analysis of a complex situation.”

Jim huffed, amused. “Top ten lists of stuff I hate about any given situation help me think.”

He didn’t even have to look at Spock to know that his reaction was a delicately raised left eyebrow. Warm affection flooded him, and his mind cleared a little as his anger simmered down. “Okay, I’ll give it a stab. Section 31—” He stopped abruptly. “No, actually. Not Section 31. Those damn bastards.” He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. “Slave trade in the Federation, and a kid ends up ...

Lieutenant Paul had probably broken a dozen regulations or so when she’d unlocked her file for him. He wasn’t sure exactly how many. Spock would know. Jim appreciated the gesture of trust. So far he’d taken file-locking as a convenient means to protect his own privacy and an insult to his curiosity where other files were concerned. Now he was willing to accept that in some cases personnel files better stayed locked up, good and tight.

After university, Paul had worked as an intern with PATS – Planets Against Trafficking of Sentients. That’s how it all had started. A smartass kid with ideals. She’d picked up on some leads, put things together with that outrageous intuition most people lose with experience. When she’d gone on to work for the Federation Council as a junior aid with the Diplomatic Corps, she’d kept working on her pet project on the side. And then she’d hit dirt. Oh boy, had she ever.

Ambassador Gav liked his playthings young and submissive. That such a girl might be more than she seemed had occurred to him much too late. It was extremely unfortunate that it had occurred to him at all. Only the greed of Gav’s collaborators had saved Paul’s life then. Instead of killing her, they’d sold her. And no matter how much Jim objected to Section 31, those guys protected their
own. They’d tracked Paul down and retrieved her. Jim shook his head. She must have been just down the floor from him at Starfleet Medical.

“... Jesus.”

It was telling that Spock didn’t comment on this illogical and very human epithet. The whole thing bothered him, too. No wonder, with the current “high risk” rating from PATS for Vulcans.

“Thing is, while I get that it was mostly bad luck how Pyrithia went wrong on her, the whole thing’s now my responsibility.” Spock opened his mouth, probably to remind him of the nuances of the chain of command regarding his position as the captain of the Enterprise and Commander Paul’s as the officer in charge of the relevant Section 31 investigation. “Spock, it is. My ship. My people. And she trusted me with all that shit. She didn’t have to. Plus, emotional compromise – I need to stop seeing fathers look absolutely gutted over the stunts their kids pull on this ship.”

“Under ordinary circumstances I doubt that Commander Paul would have been given the responsibility for this particular operation,” Spock commented.

“Bloody Marcus,” Jim muttered. In the wake of the Marcus conspiracy, Section 31 had become the object of intense scrutiny. Taking into account Ambassador Gav’s connections that didn’t bode well for Lieutenant Paul’s safety. “I certainly don’t blame Commander Paul for fighting tooth and nail to stay head of that investigation and then getting his kid the hell away from Earth, emotional compromise be damned.”

Jim rubbed both hands over his face. “One thing is sure: she’s not going on any more undercover missions.”

“I do believe that contrary to his assertions, her father appreciates your insistence in this matter.” Spock rose to his feet and went over to the replicator. “Would you like something, too?”

“You getting one of those tea things?”

Spock nodded.

“Yes, please. Not the spicy one, though – makes me break out in hives, and we’re not done here yet. No time for lolling around sickbay.”

“I wouldn’t expose you to any allergens knowingly, Captain.” That tiny, indignant flare of his nostrils was kind of adorable.

“Jim,” he reminded. “We’re off duty.”

“But we are discussing ship’s business.”

Jim rolled his eyes. Five minutes later he curled his fingers around a hot mug of peppermint tea and inhaled appreciatively. “So, New Sydney. I have a really bad feeling about that place. And that’s without Lieutenant Paul’s pet Ferengi telling us that’s the place to buy Vulcan slaves in this sector. I mean, it’s already listed in the official Starfleet handbook as a stronghold of the Orion Syndicate. Now Commander Paul says the local agent hasn’t checked in for a while. With field agents that may not be unusual, but it’s not exactly what makes me get the warm and fuzzies.”

“Master Kork seemed to think that cultivating the appearance of a competitor in the trade would ensure access to the target subjects.” Spock took a delicate sip from his Vulcan spice tea.

“Yeah, I know. But you’ve seen Gaila. I don’t think she can pull that off. We’re not letting Paul
down there. And Canningham may be able to shapeshift into anything from a rock to an Orion dancer, but she’s no actor. She doesn’t have the slang. So I don’t really see an option for another undercover mission . . .

“Taking into account the current PATS risk assessment for my species, it would be logical for me to pose as decoy,” Spock suggested evenly. “Perhaps my presence would also provide enough reassurance for Lieutenant Gaila to—”

Jim put down his mug with clank. “No.”

“Considering the circumstances, it is a logical—”

“No.”

“Captain, your reaction is irrational. You cannot allow emotions to interfere with a mission that may be vital for the success of such a crucial investigation,” Spock objected. His expression was devoid of any hint of warmth now, his eyes filled with cold determination.

“No,” Jim repeated a third time, jumping to his feet. Spock rose from his seat, too. They stood just a foot apart, and Jim ... Nausea and vertigo tore at his self-control. Lessons in emotional compromise sucked big time. He knew very well that one day soon he’d have to send Spock into mortal danger. So that’s how it would feel when it came to that. Like a black hole opening right at his feet. He didn’t like the feeling. At all. “Sorry, Spock. But no.”

Instinctively, he moved yet another step closer. He took in Spock’s face, the determined set of his jaws, the shadows of stubble at the end of a long day, the annoyed flare of his nostrils, the hint of anger lurking in those dark, dark eyes, the tension drawing up sharply slanted eyebrows. Jim inhaled deeply, fighting the urge to focus on those lips, so kissably close.

“We both know that I am emotionally compromised where you are concerned,” he said softly. “But you should also know that I can still do my job. I’ll always want to say no when I’m about to send you into danger. But I won’t. And that’s not why I’m saying no now.”

“Explain.”

“Canningham pretended she was looking for cheap Vulcan labor with the Ferengi because that works with a Ferengi. They don’t like slave trade, those guys. But they are all about profit. New Sydney ...” Jim grimaced. “New Sydney isn’t about that kind of slave, Spock. They don’t allow slaves near any type of heavy machinery and nowhere close to their precious pergium. That’s why Kork told her to use Gaila. It’s ...” He swallowed past the sick feeling constricting his gullet. “... New Sydney is where you buy sex slaves.”

Spock stared at him, uncomprehending. “How would that impact my mission?”

If Jim had allowed himself to imagine a conversation about sex with Spock, one thing was sure: this was not how he’d dreamed it up. “Spock ... Please forgive me. But there is no way I can make my point without making propriety run away screaming.”

Spock raised both eyebrows at that wonky metaphor. But obstinate Vulcan that he was, he wouldn’t back down without a satisfactory explanation.

“How much experience do you have?” Jim asked, as bluntly as he could. “Sexual, I mean.”

Spock was visibly taken aback – to the point where he shifted his body weight as if he wanted to take an actual step backwards. But then he replied, his voice level and completely without
reflection. “I have shared expressions of physical affection according to human traditions with Lieutenant Uhura, as you are well aware.”

“Yeah, I know. Hugs and kisses. That’s not what I mean. Sex, Spock. Have you ever had sex?”

“I have experienced three orgasms in my life thus far,” Spock said. “Once at sixteen. Such manifestations of biological maturity are natural and found among Vulcans and Humans alike. After the first such experience, Vulcans are taught how to control such bodily functions. In my case it was necessary to demonstrate said functionality to the medics overseeing my physical development. Hence the second time.”

_I must not project, Jim thought. I’m Human. He’s not. Or only half. And mostly Vulcan in upbringing. Must not. Project. Dammit._

He swallowed hard. He knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t help himself. “And the third time?”

Spock gazed at him, his pupils so wide his eyes appeared completely black. If Jim didn’t look away now, he’d do something stupid. He lowered his eyes. Another mistake. Those lips. Wide and sensual and so fucking _beautiful_. A breath away from a kiss, Jim hesitated. He could feel the heat of Spock’s mouth, and oh god, Jim wanted him so much it bloody _hurt_. But he drew back.

“Spock,” he said carefully, “I’m trying real hard not to mix up personal stuff with business here, but it’s kind of hard. See, in Human terms ... you’re a virgin. And yeah, I get that this is all different for Vulcans, and Human standards don’t apply, and they are probably stupid anyway. But you know what’s not stupid? That an individual’s sexual intimacy is safeguarded if at all possible.”

He shook his head. “... and even discounting my irrational Human hang-ups, there’s no way you can pull off that role convincingly without any practical experience. You’d blow the cover of the team within five minutes because you’d react the wrong way, superior Vulcan control or no.”

Jim recognized stubborn when he saw it, even if it was just a hard gleam in dark eyes, so he went right on, “Before you get any ideas about using your – your innocence as bait, I can tell you right now: not happening. Depending on the mission at stake there’s a limit to what’s acceptable as risk or personal sacrifice, in terms of safety and psychological health, but also regarding an individual’s ethics and culture. That limit? In this case, that’s it, right there. That’s not my emotional compromise talking, either. If you don’t believe me, we’ll go wake Doctor McCoy so he can declare you unfit for that mission. And trust me, he’ll do that.”

A long moment of silence. Heavy heartbeats measured the passage of time and did nothing to dissolve Jim’s tension, desire and apprehension and possessiveness and tenderness all mixed up and ready to _explode_. Spock’s face was a mask of perfect control. Jim had no idea what he was thinking now, what he was feeling now – if he was, if he allowed himself to.

At last Spock’s posture relaxed almost imperceptibly. “I accept your reasoning, Captain.”

Jim exhaled with relief. He wanted to say something else, but Spock’s gaze stopped him. “And ...” Spock shifted, leaning in this time, close enough that Jim could feel his body heat. “... I appreciate your wish to protect my ... my privacy – me. _Jim_.”

“Yeah, that’s me, defender of your innocence,” Jim muttered. He faced Spock as honestly as he could, no matter that he was flushing with an intense surge of heat. By now he must burn beet-red up to his ears. “I meant what I said, Spock. Every word. I’m absolutely certain it would go wrong. And the line I’m drawing in terms of personal risk in this case, it’s not about ...” He raised his hand in the narrow space of warm air between them. “... not about that. But I can’t say there’s no personal level to this. And that level?” He sucked in a deep breath, the scent of hot skin, a hint of
He put his arms around Spock, pressed against his body, hard. “If you’re willing to push the boundaries of Vulcan culture, if you’re really willing to risk that kind of intimacy, I want you to do that with me – for us. Not for some harebrained undercover mission.”

And then he claimed the kiss he’d been dreaming of for weeks now. “Mine,” he whispered against Spock’s lips. “Mine. I want you to be mine.”

♦

“The story of human intimacy is one of constantly allowing ourselves to see those we love most deeply in a new, more fractured light. Look hard. Risk that.”
– Cheryl Strayed, Tiny Beautiful Things

Chapter End Notes

“Nam-tor shur temep-sharu na’tri-sochya.” – “Soup is the gateway to inner peace.”
Based on a translation question at the Vulcanlanguage Tumblr (which is absolutely awesome if you’re into fictional languages; really, do take a look!):

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What’s the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Hell Is Only A Poor Synonym

Chapter Summary

New Sydney is a nightmare. At least Jim expected it this time. ♦ And Jim gets some action for once: Squished into the bosom of a bawd, he gets to rethink the attraction of the fairer sex. ♦ There’s more Section 31 shit, including dead agents and people getting stuffed into tons. ♦ Because that’s not enough trouble, there’s a pub brawl with Klingons. ♦ At least at the end of the day, the doors of the bathroom Jim shares with Spock are open ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hell Is Only A Poor Synonym

Stardate 2260.175, 0800 hours, Deck 10, Conference Lounge One

“We’ll enter orbit around New Sydney at 1200 hours, with the Beta Two team on the bridge for the first orbital shift and Mr. Spock in command. After we’re done with ‘parking permissions’ and other formalities, away teams and shore leave parties will beam down starting at 1600 hours. Mr. Scott is in charge of acquiring additional supplies of pergium at the Tigan Mining Consortium. He’ll be accompanied by Lieutenants Chekov and Keenser. Lieutenant Amell and her team will oversee the handling and stowing of the pergium on board.” Jim consulted his PADD before looking at the assembled officers. “New Sydney is not a holiday destination. Pollution problems thanks to the pergium mines are still its most pleasant feature. Less attractive is the fact that it’s firmly in the hands of the Orion Syndicate, and slave trade is practiced openly. We can only beam to official transport platforms. I’ve received a friendly message from New Sydney police that beaming frequencies will be interrupted outside those areas. Nevertheless, I want the transporter team on alert 24/7 while we’re in orbit. Additionally, three security teams are scheduled to stand-by in case of trouble. Starfleet’s less than welcome here, and we’re far enough from Federation space that we’re on our own should anything come up. Therefore my orders are simple: There won’t be any problems. Make it so.” His best stern stare was rewarded with serious nods all around the table.

“Lieutenant Marcus and Ensign Canningham will accompany me on an away mission to make contact with a Federation agent. We’re taking a full security unit. Cupc—my dear Lieutenant Giotto, Lieutenant Davison, and Lieutenant Brenner, tag, you’re it.” Jim smiled at the pleased expressions of the officers. After weeks in space, everyone was eager to get on an away mission, never mind how fugly the planet. “We’ll stay in orbit until 2260.178, 2000 hours. Commander Paul is in charge of scheduling the rest of the away teams and shore leave for those crew members who dare to apply for some. That’s it from my side. Everybody shoo except for my away people. I need you to stick around to discuss the details of our mission.” He frowned. “Mr. Spock, Commander Paul, you’re cordially invited to stay as well.”

Commander Paul and Spock looked less than pleased. Too bad. But with what was at stake neither Commander nor Lieutenant Paul would get a free pass for New Sydney from him. Plus, the security officers weren’t the only ones on board with feet itching to get off ship for a change ...
Once in a while captain’s authority came in handy.

“Capital of the planet is Jubbulpore, right next to the spaceport. From the transporter platform we’ll head down Joy Street to the Plaza of Liberty. We’re looking for an agent of the Federation – Colonel Richard Baslim – who will be posing as a beggar. Code name is Baslim the Cripple. I’ve transferred pictures to your PADDs. If he’s not out on the street, we’ll check the taverns; the Supernova, the Veiled Virgin, and Mother Shaum’s, some others. The man’s been out of touch for a while. But for a field agent on an unaligned planet, which is nine days subspace lag away from Earth, that doesn’t necessarily mean anything.” Jim had those details from Commander Paul, of course. But this was his away mission, so he got to do the talking, too.

“When contact has been made, this mission should be a simple matter of exchanging intelligence – data sticks for alms, most likely. Last but not least, Commander Paul had such a delightful description for the area we’re going to visit that I simply have to share it…” Another glance at his PADD. “Ah, yes: ‘between the spaceport at the end of the Avenue of Nine and the Plaza of Liberty, anything in the explored universe can be had by a man with cash, from a starship to Arrakeen Spice, from the ruin of a reputation to the robes of a Federation Council member with the councilor still inside.’ In other words: constant vigilance, people.”

Stardate 2260.175, 1600 hours, in orbit around New Sydney

“Alright, let’s get this show on the road,” Jim said and leaned forward to the comm pick-up. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to New Sydney. We’ll stay in orbit until stardate 2260.178, 2000 hours. Beta Two team is currently on command duty. Mr. Spock has the conn. Away teams and groups for shore leave have been scheduled by Commander Paul. If you haven’t read the file on New Sydney yet, I suggest you do so ASAP. As a reminder for those who have done their homework: New Sydney is an unaligned planet with a very diverse population and even more interesting crime statistics. Starfleet has no authority here. No one beams down without phasers set to stunning, and dirtside no one goes anywhere alone, not even to the toilet. Have a pleasant stay, and don’t get into trouble. Kirk out.”

Jim closed the line and stood. “Mr. Spock, have a seat.”

Spock’s face gave nothing away as he took center chair. All the same, Jim knew that his first officer didn’t like the arrangements that had been made for their time on New Sydney. And sure, he had a point. Personal safety was an issue. But Jim was sick of all that secret Section 31 shit. After Marcus, after what had happened on Pyrithia, he couldn’t trust Commander Paul blindly, just because he was Section 31 and supposedly one of the good guys. Yes, Paul’s investigation was a priority. But Jim’s job was also important. He was responsible for the Enterprise and her entire crew. It was high time to get in on the action.

“My team and I will beam down after we got Scotty and his pergium team dirtside. Keep a close eye on everyone on the planet. I want the transporter room crew to be ready to retrieve everyone ASAP, should that be necessary.”

“Yessir,” Lieutenant Copage Elliot, who normally had the conn on the shifts of the Beta Two team, acknowledged, standing at attention.

Spock said nothing. It wasn’t that Jim didn’t trust Lieutenant Elliott in the center chair – or any of the other Command division officers on the primary and secondary shift teams. He did, absolutely; or he wouldn’t have signed off on the make-up of the command crews to start with. He just felt
much better with Spock in the center chair while he was on the planet.

Stardate 2260.175, 1630 hours, Deck 8, Transporter Room

In the transporter room, Commander Scott, Lieutenant Chekov, and Lieutenant Keenser were already waiting to beam to the Tigan Mining Consortium, where they would finalize the acquisition of twenty-four kilograms of pergium.

The rare radioactive element of pergium was essential to maintain the environmental control system of the Enterprise. To be able to lay in an emergency supply of the stuff made Scotty look more relaxed than a dram of real Scottish whisky. Jim hadn’t thought twice about authorizing the expensive purchase, no matter how much the Finances Department had griped, what with the sum of bribes required to get past customs on New Sydney.

“Ready for your date with the pergium?” Jim asked.

Scotty laughed. “Nae, ready to hit the pub once we’re done dealing with them bampots at customs. New Sydney’s supposed to have some pure dead brilliant booze. Haven’t had a chance to get properly rubbered since Earth.”

“Vodka, they vill surely have vodka,” Chekov piped up, beaming. “Zis is a mining world; all miners drink vodka. Ancient Russian custom, rewered throughout the galaxy.”

Keenser remained, as always, expressionless. But maybe he was only thinking of a favorite Roylan brew that just happened to be served on New Sydney.

Jim had to stifle the urge to tell the kid not to drink too much. “Well, have fun, gentlemen.”

White flares of transporter beams enveloped the three officers, and they were gone.

“... and don’t get into trouble,” Jim muttered, now that they couldn’t hear him anymore.

Stardate 2260.175, 1800 to 2000 hours, Jubbulpore, New Sydney

Commander Paul’s briefing had been comprehensive. But nothing could have prepared Jim for the reality of Liberty Plaza and the auction block for live goods. The pens with the slaves were right next to it, and they reeked with the stink of unwashed bodies and vomit. The air was thick to choking with fear and grief. In front of the auction block, the beggars waited, adding their own touch of misery to the atmosphere. Starving, covered in sores, dressed in rags, they squatted and clawed at the passersby and wheedled alms from buyers who led their new slaves away.

Spread out in a semi-circle in front of the platform, seats were arrayed in casual rows for the rich and the privileged. Beyond the seats, to the left and the right, waited their servants and slaves, their bodyguards and drivers or bearers. The upper classes of New Sydney preferred sedan chairs to cars, at least in the city. Behind the seats of the rich, the crowds mingled – commoners and freedmen, street vendors and merchants, pickpockets and diddlers.

Jim circled the auction area slowly. He’d memorized Colonel Baslim’s face in a dozen disguises as well as a courier code. Commander Paul had assured him that Baslim would be on the lookout for Starfleet personnel, attempting to make contact on his own. But although there were dozens of
beggars around, tugging at his uniform pants and thrusting their bowls into his face, there was no Baslim.

Up on the auction block an Orion girl around Jo’s age was sold. The auctioneer ripped off her dirty shift to expose her too thin, childish body to the scrutiny of the audience. Jim could only watch in helpless terror as the child was dragged off by her new master, a man much older than he was. Another round. Still no Baslim. But Jim noticed at least a full squad of armed men in the dark uniforms of New Sydney police spread around the Plaza. Like customs, the term didn’t hold the meaning it did in Federation space. Officially, the organization might be called “police”. But in reality it was nothing more and nothing less than militarized thugs owned by the Orion Syndicate.

Sick to his stomach, Jim did the only thing he could – he turned his back on Liberty Plaza with its despair and depravity and headed back down Joy Street. Not that the atmosphere of that avenue was in the least bit joyful. Thick gray-green layers of fog pressed down on the city. The air tasted like chemicals and burned in his eyes. Grog shops and gambling dens, brothels and theaters lined the avenue, all of them garishly decorated and slightly sleazy. Holding tightly onto his phaser and his comm unit, Jim didn’t doubt that every word of the description of Jubbulpore that he’d quoted at the briefing this morning was true. And that was probably putting it mildly. Marcus and Canningham stayed at his side, while the security team spread out around them, one in front, and two behind. They passed the fancy front of a theater called Port of Heaven Cabaret. A fortune teller in the colorful dress of a space gypsy was camped out in front of it. Jim had Gwaloth pay for a reading in order to pass on a message for the V'tosh ka'tur. But when the Wraith returned to his side, she could only report that none of their ships had been in orbit for four years. Damn.

“The Veiled Virgin”, the first tavern on their list, yielded nothing but a refreshing glass of fermented fruit lemonade – sunberry crush. They didn’t have better luck at the next two places. The last pub on the list was the “Supernova”, the place where Scotty had wanted to go with Chekov and Keenser. If Jim’s team hadn’t managed to locate Baslim when they got there, at least he would be able to wash away the bad taste that lingered in his mouth in good company. But for now, their next stop was “Mother Shaum’s”, a tap room and a lodging house of certain repute on Joy Street near the crewmen’s gate to the spaceport.

When Jim entered the tavern, most tables were full, packed with a diverse crowd from commoners to spacemen. Beyond the main room, in the hallway between tap room and kitchen, he glimpsed a poor men’s counter, where even beggars could have a pint in peace. But before he had a chance to look around, he was bodily apprehended by a matron of voluptuous curves and epic dimensions, with bright red curls and purple lipstick, dressed in red gowns with tassels and ruffles in various designs and violent shades of violet.

“Let me introduce myself, Captain,” she purred, “I am Mother Shaum, the owner of this fine establishment. It is an honor to welcome you to my humble abode.” But the way she scanned the room was too hectic. She spared barely a glance for the rest of his team. Jim realized she was trying to discover if they were being followed.

“Come,” she urged, when she appeared satisfied that their entry hadn’t caused any undue notice. “Upstairs are private rooms. Follow me.”

Jim hesitated, considering the risk. In the end, taking into account his back-up of three security officers plus Marcus and a Wraith who could do a mean salt vampire, as well as the vicinity of the official transporter platform and thus three additional security teams on stand-by up on the Enterprise, he decided to go with her.

“Giotto,” he ordered. “You wait here. Try to be inconspicuous.” He pointed next to the stairs.
“Davison and Brenner, mingle, but don’t do anything stupid. You two,” he gestured to Marcus and Canningham, “come with me.” He turned to Mother Shaum. “Lead on.”

The pub owner headed up the stairs, massive hips swaying with frills of red fabric. But she didn’t lead them into a private dining room. Instead she took another stair up to the topmost floor, to her own private rooms by the look of it. In a cozy living room she left them standing between a couple of couches and armchairs with sage upholstery. She hurried across the room and disappeared through a door at the back – into her bedroom? For a moment Jim wasn’t sure if she expected them to follow her there, too. Thankfully, she returned a few seconds later, pushing a small figure ahead of her.

“Thank goodness you showed up on your own, Captain,” Shaum said. “With all them snoopers around, I’d no idea how to get hold of you for that rascal here without putting my own life on the line.”

Jim frowned. In front of him stood a painfully thin, young boy. He looked younger than Jo, perhaps eight or nine at the most. Dressed in rags he looked like one of the beggar boys Jim had seen at the auction block. His skin had a greenish hue. He stared at him with almond-shaped, black eyes under sharply slanted eyebrows. Long, matted black hair peeked out from under a dirty turban that hid the boy’s ears. “What in hell ...?”

“I am Thorby,” the boy said in a high, monotone voice. “Son of Baslim the Cripple. I have a message for you.” Closing his eyes, the kid started to rattle off a missive – in German of all things, one of the lesser known Earth languages still used by field agents of Section 31 when effective communication was more important than absolute secrecy: “An den Captain des Sternenflottenraumschiffs momentan im Orbit von New Sydney, von Baslim dem Krüppel: Ich spreche zu Ihnen durch meinen Adoptivsohn. Wenn Sie diese Nachricht empfangen, bin ich bereits tot—”

"To the Captain of the Starfleet ship currently in orbit around New Sydney, from Baslim the Cripple,” Jim’s translator echoed Thorby’s words. “I am speaking to you through my adopted son. When you receive this message, I am already dead ...”


“How would I know?” Mother Shaum shrugged. “The police picked him up. The word is, he died or poisoned himself, or something, before they could question him.”

Jim turned his attention back to Thorby. “Go on.”


“… I am already dead,” the translator went on. “My son is the only thing of value left to me; I entrust him into your care. I ask that you deliver him to New Vulcan or that you bring him to Arrakis, the colony of Sybok, son of Sarek, or that you arrange passage for him on any vessel of the V’tosh ka’tur, in the hope to establish his identity and restore him to his people. I trust in your good judgment in the matter. I have enjoined him to obey you, and I believe that he will; he is a good lad. Now I must face the end. My mission has not been without success; I am content.
“Farewell ...”

“There’s more.” Thorby opened his eyes, then squeezed them almost shut again in pain. A grimace of agony contorted his thin face. He went on regardless, “Correct authorization is required. Provide the code, please.”

“No, now, not here,” Jim cut him off. Baslim was dead. The information he was supposed to retrieve for Commander Paul wasn’t a data stick but a kid. And it looked like getting the data out of his head seriously hurt. Shit. “Baslim told you to do what I say, is that right?”

“Affirmative,” was the stoic reply.

“Good.” Baslim’s request, and the boy’s appearance – greenish pale skin, almond eyes, slanted eyebrows, hidden ears – he must be Vulcan. How had a Vulcan youngster ended up as the adoptive son of a beggar-cum-secret-agent on New Sydney? But that and any other questions had to wait.

“You’ll come with me to the spaceport and on my ship. Agreed?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mother Shaum interrupted, “You mean to take him on your ship?”

“Any objections?” Jim wasn’t in the mood for discussions.

The pub owner shrugged. “Huh, me? None at all. If you don’t care that the police rack him apart.”

“What?”

“Snoopers,” Mother Shaum said succinctly. “Six units at least, between here and the transporter platform of the spaceport. The frequencies outside official transporter areas have been jammed for two days. Every Syndicate copper on the planet is greedy for the reward put out on his head. And they monitor beaming. They’ll know the second you beam someone up who didn’t come down with you.”

“There’s a reward out for the kid?” Jim wanted to groan. Was that what the presence of those goons at the auction block and in the streets was about? Damn it! He’d had a bad feeling about New Sydney from the beginning. Really, really bad. Back on the ship he’d have to make time for another chat with Bones concerning psionic potential and esper ratings.

The matron just shook her head at him. As if he were stupid or something. “Why do you think I’ve hidden him in my own bedroom? He’s as hot as bubbling cheese.”

“Well, shit.” Jim scratched his head. He had to think fast. No telling if their presence and the personal welcome from Mother Shaum had already been noticed. There was no question that they had to rescue the kid, information or no information, and never mind Baslim’s request. There was simply no way Jim would leave the boy behind. No way in hell. But how to get him on the Enterprise if the Syndicate scanned beam-ups? How to smuggle the boy out of here and to safety? How could he hide a little kid in a way to fool security scanners? Then a thought hit him. A crazy idea, sure, but it just might work ...

He pulled out the comm and hit the code for Engineering, secret emergency frequency. He could only hope that line was as secret as Gaila and Uhura had promised. “Lieutenant Amell? Are the pergium containers up there already?”

“Almost, sir,” the lieutenant replied. “There’s been a delay with customs. They had to scan everything three times to make sure there’s only pergium in it and nothing else. Kind of warped
security measures for a planet that makes one third of its gross domestic product with smuggling. But we’ve got everything sorted out now. We should have them up in thirty.”

“Belay that,” Jim ordered. “Something’s come up. An ... extra shipment. Can you get down to the transporter area without rousing suspicion to help with stowing it? And make sure we’re alone down there?”

“We’ve got the all clear from customs. I can tell them I need to do one last safety check. They don’t care about radiation hazards here, especially now that we’ve paid the bribes. You wouldn’t believe the readings we took in the warehouse ... You need to go to warehouse platform 312a – and there shouldn’t be anyone in the area now. I can be down in ten, Captain.”

“Make that twenty, I still need to get there myself. Bring suits. For you, me, and a small one, kid-size. And some decontam foam. We need to get rid of the contents of a pergium container without triggering an alarm. Watch your back. Kirk out.” He put the comm away and turned to Mother Shaum. “Alright. We need to get the kid into the spaceport, to warehouse platform 312a. Can you help with that?”

“Of course, Captain,” Mother Shaum promised. “It’s the least I can do. Baslim was a good man.”

Stardate 2260.175, 2100 hours, Jubbulpore spaceport, New Sydney

Mother Shaum’s help consisted in stuffing Thorby into the seat cube of her sedan chair, and bundling herself up on top of him. Jim was forced on his knees in front of her, head obscenely squashed against her ample bosom. As a final flourish, she drenched him with the worst perfumed liquor he’d ever smelled. The idea was that he’d had too good a time with her. And because he was such a special customer, she was now aiding him to get back to his ship as unobtrusively as possible. To support the story, he sent Marcus, Canningham and the security team on to the Supernova. They could keep an eye out for trouble, and they more than deserved a pint by now.

The sweet scent of the liquor, the stuffy heat inside the sedan chair, and the swaying motion made Jim increasingly nauseated. He wondered how he’d ever thought that female breasts of ample size and softness could be a thing of erotic beauty. Thankfully, it didn’t take the chair long to reach the Traders’ Gate of the spaceport – twenty minutes, tops. Beyond the gate, the outlines of many warehouses loomed. Adjacent to each building was a transporter area, where shipments were inspected, customs were declared, and finally all goods were piled up on a platform to get beamed up to the relevant starships.

“Open up!” Mother Shaum snapped at the guards.

From the corner of his eyes, Jim realized with a measure of relief that there were only two guards at the gate at this time of the night. One was standing in the little watchroom of the gate barracks, the other was lounging outside, with a bottle next to his chair. Now he rose to his feet and came over. “My lady has a pass?”

The man bent forward to peer into the sedan chair. Promptly, Jim affected a swoon into Mother Shaum’s bosom, while praying he wouldn’t throw up on her.

“Oh.”

Don’t breathe and think of the Federation, Jim told himself, while his heart pounded like crazy and his stomach contorted.
“Oh,” the guard repeated. “I see. You err... you may pass. Ahem. Platform 312a.”

As promised, the platform was empty save for Lieutenant Amell. Jim stumbled out of the sedan chair and slumped down, valiantly fighting his need to vomit. On the transporter pads, twelve wine-barrel sized casks with the pergium sat ready for beaming. Mother Shaum pulled a dazed Thorby out of his hiding place inside the seat.

After a bone-crushing, breath-taking, brain-numbing hug, Shaum got back into the sedan chair. Urging the bearers not to dawdle, she disappeared in the darkness beyond the transporter platforms.

“Captain ...?” Lieutenant Amell asked cautiously.

“Everything’s fine,” Jim said and wheezed. An allergy on top of everything else. Great. Either the liquor or the perfume or both. “Lieutenant, we need to empty one of the tons and hide the kid in it. Do you have the suits and the foam ready? I’d rather not expose us to more radiation than strictly necessary. Spending hours in decontamination is no fun.”

Amell pointed at the equipment she’d spread out behind the containers.

He turned to Thorby. “Can you do something for me?”

The boy just stared at him, expressionless. Jim had no idea if that was Vulcan stoicism or shock.

“You need to get into the suit this lady here has for you. She’ll help you. And then you need to climb into this barrel here. Just for a short time. Don’t worry. You need to be very very still. Meditate, perhaps. It won’t take long. And then you’re safe. I promise.”

The boy didn’t move. Jim was pretty sure that Vulcan control had nothing to do with his behavior now. The kid looked more or less frozen in panic.

“Thorby, I know Baslim told you to do what I say. And I know you promised to obey him,” Jim said gently. Breathing was getting harder. Damn those allergies. And they were completely exposed out here. Any second someone could notice them. He’d order to beam them up right away in a pinch, of course, never mind the reward on Thorby’s head and the security scans of the local authorities. But the problem was, he had no idea how the PTTB of New Sydney would react – would they talk or fire without questions asked? He also didn’t know if they could or would send ships after them if the Enterprise simply warped out of the system as fast as Scotty could get them away from this hellhole. “Please, Thorby.”

Lieutenant Amell held out one of Keenser’s small suits for the boy. “C’mere, sweetie. Let me help you.” Without a word, with shaking hands, the child reached for the suit.

Stardate 2260.175, 2300 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

“Kid’s sleeping now,” Bones said and wearily sat at his desk. “I’ve given him as much of the good drugs as I dared. He should be asleep until tomorrow morning, maybe even noon. But Vulcan metabolism isn’t an exact science, especially at that age and in his condition. I’d like Spock to be here when he wakes, if that’s possible.”

Jim slumped back in the visitor’s chair. “Good. Thanks. Spock will be here.” He sucked in the last dose of his inhaler, and then put it away with a relieved sigh. “Okay, a summary will have to do. First the kid, then me. Spock should be back any minute now from breaking up that pub brawl. No
idea how bad that was, but there are probably up to eight crew members involved: Scotty, Chekov, Keenser, Marcus, Canningham, Brenner, Davison, and Giotto. No idea if everyone ended up hurt, but better be prepared.”

Bones looked ready to rebel, but Jim shook his head. “No time now. Thorby?”

“The boy is Vulcan. As in born on Vulcan; the scans are clear on that. Ten years old. Thankfully no trace of radiation made it through the suit. He is moderately healthy. Malnourished, worm-riddled, with old scars covering most of the body, but no recent injuries. He’s been whipped and abused in the past, but not in the last nine months. Slave tattoo on his right leg. Brain scan’s abysmal for a Vulcan – brain activity all over the place. M’Benga thinks it’s trauma and severed bonds, perhaps dating back to ... to when the planet was destroyed. I hope Mr. Spock will be able to make better sense of it. Maybe he can meld with the boy, look at him from the inside.” Bones shrugged helplessly. His eyes had a haunted look. No wonder after spending an hour counting scars on the fragile body of an unconscious child.

Jim tried to come up with something useful to say. But there was nothing, just the memory of the slave pens, the naked little girl up on the auction block, that pervasive, gut-wrenching stink of fear and grief. In the end he just nodded. “Thank you.”

♦

Stardate 2260.175, 2330 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Office

Jim had the miscreants lined up on the other side of his desk. For a moment he just sat there, thinking how much he wanted to be somewhere else and not deal with this kind of shit right now. One thing was sure, if there ever was an altercation with more people involved, he’d have to move happy hour to a conference room or the brig. Eight officers with expressions ranging from blank through sheepish to rebellious was the absolute maximum of what his office could hold.

Also, he’d have to talk to Bones. Jim thought he got the doctor’s message. McCoy wanted to teach a lesson about the limits of his tolerance for pub brawls, and how that affected the quality of first aid rendered on his sickbay. Jim just wasn’t sure about the effect on crew morale in this case. Eight officers limping around the Enterprise with black eyes and fat lips after drinking games with Klingons might not be the best idea Bones ever had.

“I want to know who started it,” Jim said. Most of all, he was pretty tired by now. He was in no mood for taking any kind of disciplinary action. With a sigh, he dragged himself to his feet and paced in front of the crew members standing at attention. Finally he stopped in front of Marcus.

“I’m waiting.” Marcus’s left eye was swollen shut. Her right arm was in a sling. Groggily, she blinked at him with her good eye. “Lieutenant Marcus, who started the fight?”

Marcus cleared her throat. “I don't know, sir.”

That was possible. If the fight had started before she and the rest of his away team had hit the “Supernova”. He turned to Chekov and did his best to keep a completely straight face. “Okay. Chekov, buddy. I know you. You started it, didn't you?

The kid flushed bright red. “No, sir, I didn't.”

Jim rolled his eyes. Of course the kid hadn’t started anything. Everyone knew that. But someone had started something, and someone was going to have to tell the captain something about how it all went down. The boy was simply the most promising candidate for providing the information
Jim needed. When he didn’t say anything else, Jim asked, “Well, who did?”

This was getting ridiculous. *I'm the captain, damn it, not an elementary school teacher!* Jim thought and almost groaned when he realized that he sounded just like Bones.

“I don't know, sir,” Chekov replied.

And that, Jim knew, was a lie. It was nearly midnight. By now Jim had been awake for twenty hours. He had smelled the stink of slavery up close and way too personal. He had nearly suffocated thanks to yet another awesome allergic reaction. In sickbay a traumatized little Vulcan was waiting to have his brains squished through a sieve because there was secret Section 31 data stored somewhere in his head. And now a member of his command crew was standing in front of him and lying to his face about a stupid pub brawl with some Klingon jerks.

“I don't know, sir,” Jim repeated, his voice harsh with sarcasm. “Brilliant. No more shore leave for you guys until I find out what happened.” That was the best idea he could come up with at short notice. He’d talk it over with Spock at breakfast tomorrow. Or with Commander Paul. He had to talk with the man anyway. “Dismissed.”

Out they went. “Scotty, not you.” In a last ditch effort, Jim stopped the engineer. “Talk to me.” Jim returned to his desk and slumped down. Normally he was not the kind of captain to sit while letting others stand at attention. But he was willing to make an exception tonight. “Who threw the first punch, Scotty?”

“I did, Captain,” Scotty mumbled. “They insulted us, sir.” Then he clammed up again.

“Scotty, it’s way too late for this shit. Would you please start talking, so we can go to bed? There are bigger problems on our plate right now than a damn pub brawl. How am I supposed to deal with the difficult stuff if you won’t talk to me about the easy things?” Jim smacked the table with a flat palm. Scotty blinked and finally met his eyes. Progress.

“Um... well, the Klingons, sir... Is this off the record?” Scotty shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

Okay, no, just ... no. Jim was now officially at the end of his tether. Ship’s discipline might not be his forte, but that was absurd. “No, damn it, this is *not* off the record!”

Scotty stared at him for a moment. Something in his expression must have given away how pissed off he was, because Scotty paled and kept talking. “The Klingons called you, uh... it doesn’t translate very well, what they said.”

“I suggest you try, Mr. Scott.” When Scotty grew even paler and swayed on his feet, Jim frowned, suddenly more worried than annoyed. “And for god’s sake sit down, man. Whatever did those Klingons do to you anyway?”

“Just a cut,” Scotty insisted. But he awkwardly sat down, favoring his right side. “And what they said, well, they called you something along the lines of wannabe Frankenstein and radiation roast. That’s when Chekov wanted to punch them, but I held him back.”

At first Jim only wondered how Klingons came to read Mary Shelley. “I see. And after they said all this, that's when you hit the Klingons?”

“No, sir. I didn't. You told us to avoid trouble,” Scotty said firmly. “And I didn't see that it was worth fighting about. After all, we're big enough to take a few insults. Aren't we?”

“Then what the hell did they say that started the fight?” Jim was grinding his teeth now, Bones’s
lectures about dental health be damned. How could a man who’d just been nearly filleted by Klingons be so stubborn?

“They called the Enterprise a garbage scow, sir.”

Jim threw back his head and laughed.

“Well, sir,” Scotty said, sheepish and rebellious at the same time. “It was a matter of pride, then.”

“Of course. They insulted your lady love.” Jim shook his head and rolled his eyes for good measure. “Dismissed. Oh… and Scotty, you're restricted to quarters until we have to get out of orbit.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. That'll give me a chance to uh... catch up on my technical journals.” Scotty grinned a little too happily at that idea, but at this point Jim simply didn’t care anymore.

Stardate 2260.175, 2400 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

Instead of heading to his cabin and going to bed, which would have been the sensible thing to do, Jim took the turbolift to deck seven and walked to the private room in sickbay where Thorby was sleeping.

He didn’t enter, just stood at the door. He didn’t even know what had compelled him to come down here again. Thorby wouldn’t wake up for hours yet.

The little boy looked lost in the big biobed. Someone had washed and combed his hair. It was much too long for a Vulcan and curling ever so slightly. The delicate tip of a pointed ear peeked through the glossy black strands on one side of his pointy face.

Next to the bed, Nurse Oli sat with a lit-up PADD. She was reading to the kid, in a very low, very soothing voice. And ... in Vulcan, Jim realized. He listened carefully. Vulcan ... songs? He frowned. Nyota had mentioned something about Vulcan songs, he recalled. Lieutenant Milekey, the guy in charge of the Enterprise music group was doing a remix of Vulcan and Terran songs as the group’s first big project. That must be the collection of songs Nyota had been talking about. He hadn’t known Oli was in the band.

Jim kept standing in front of the door for a while. Oli’s voice was gentle and calming. In his mind, however, Jim heard different voices. A boy’s voice and the voice of a dead man: “I am speaking to you through my adopted son. When you receive this message, I am already dead ...”

Stardate 2260.176, 0100 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin

When Jim entered his cabin, he gratefully noticed that the bathroom doors were open. Both of them. And Spock was still awake. Dressed in Vulcan robes of black silk, he sat curled up on his meditation rock in the tightest traditional posture.

Jim changed quickly, putting on standard black PJs – short ones. He kept the temperature in his cabin as high as Spock preferred these days. If he didn’t have to be prepared to get out of bed and up on the bridge at a moment’s notice and at any hour, he would have loved to sleep naked in that kind of heat. Without a word, he went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He even remembered to
comb his hair. Spock’s positive influence, no doubt. He’ll turn me into a neat freak yet, Jim thought with a wry smile.

A moment later, he stepped into Spock’s cabin. At once the other man unfolded from his seat, a quick, graceful movement. Just to stand in front of Spock now, at the end of this day, made life easier. Jim exhaled in a deep sigh. “I’m too tired to even talk about it all at the moment, Spock. Sorry.”

“The command crew has been kept up to date,” Spock reminded him. At least he hadn’t addressed him as “Captain”. Wearing nothing but PJs that would be too weird.

“Yeah, I know ...” Jim slowly shook his head. “But that’s not what I meant. I know you always know everything.” He rubbed at his eyes. They were burning with fatigue. “Not facts and briefings, Spock. *Talking.*”

“Ah.” Spock inclined his head. “An informal conversation to relieve the tension of the day.”

“Yeah, that. Only, I’m too tired.”

“There is no need to apologize for that, Jim,” Spock said evenly. “It is your need, not mine, that remains unassuaged, after all.”

“Told you I’m tired. And we need to get up really early tomorrow ... in a few hours ... later ... to get the hell away from New Sydney and out of this system.” He knew that didn’t make sense as a reply to Spock’s comment, but he wasn’t up to Vulcan politeness tonight. Jim took another deep breath, almost a yawn. “Spock?”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind tonight ... I just don’t want to be ...” He couldn’t even bring himself to say the word. *Alone.*

But he didn’t need to. Without another word, Spock drew him over to his bed. He climbed in first, then pulled Jim down to lie in front of him. Vulcan warmth enveloped Jim.

*Hmmm...* Nice. Like that nap after we found Jo,” he mumbled, already half asleep. “Just one more thing ...”

Eyes closed, he reached out in an awkward gesture with his right hand. Hot fingers captured his.


Jim didn’t know if he heard the reply, or felt it, or dreamed it: *“No, not alone. Never alone.”*

♦

“Alone. Yes, that’s the key word, the most awful word in the English tongue. Murder doesn’t hold a candle to it and hell is only a poor synonym.”

– Stephen King

Chapter End Notes
• Pergium used for the environmental control system for filter regeneration is canon for Voyager, Intrepid-class starships. But as pergium is also mentioned in TOS canon, it’s likely that it was already used in environmental systems on starships in 2260.

• “Constant vigilance” is of course a hat-tip to Alastor Moody from Joanne K. Rowling’s “Harry Potter”.

• Thorby & Baslim-the-Cripple are from “Citizen of the Galaxy” by Robert A. Heinlein. Thorby was human in that one, of course. The way the scene unfolds follows CotG canon. Parts of the description and the dialogue are based on or quoted directly from the book, for example the wonderful description of Jubbulpore, which is originally: “Its inhabitants brag that within a li of the pylon at the spaceport end of the Avenue of Nine anything in the explored universe can be had by a man with cash, from a starship to ten grains of stardust, from the ruin of a reputation to the robes of a senator with the senator inside.”

• The pub brawl & the interrogation scene are inspired by the TOS episode “Trouble with Tribbles”; parts of the dialogue are quoted verbatim from the script.
Pain Your Closest Friend

Chapter Summary

Jim has premonitions and encounters a naughty shirt. ♦ Spock is confronted with pain and a critical analysis of Surakian logic. ♦ Bones hates patients like Spock and Jim and traumatized Section 31 agents who insist that they are just fine. ♦ A few days later, Jim has time on his hands and sex on his mind ... and access to the ship’s computer. ♦ And Spock writes a really embarrassing letter to Sarek.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pain Your Closest Friend

Stardate 2260.176, 0400 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin

Three hours later, Jim woke with a start, cold sweat trickling down his spine, heart pounding. He twisted around and sat up, feet on the Vulcan-warm floor of Spock’s cabin. A dream? No. He would remember that, he always did. He could feel Spock slide out of from under the covers next to him. Turning his head, he caught Spock blinking a little more slowly than normal. No doubt he’d been startled out of ... perhaps not sleep, but at the very least deep meditation. Definitely not a dream.

“I think,” Jim said reluctantly, “we should make haste to leave orbit.”

“How?”

Jim took a deep breath. The sense of ... of ... he refused to even think the phrase “impending doom” – bad things to come was quite sufficient. Maybe not a premonition, but at least a very bad feeling in his guts.

“Yeah,” he said. “Now.”

Spock was already on his feet and reaching for his uniform. Before Jim disappeared into the bathroom, he hesitated for a moment. “Thanks for not telling me that I’m just paranoid.”

“There is statistical likelihood of 74.8% that New Sydney authorities will link what remains of the pergium spill at warehouse platform 312a with the disappearance of the sole dependant of the Federation agent who committed suicide while held in their custody. While I assess the probability that this logical conclusion will be reached before 1000 hours – when the next delivery is due at the platform – at currently below 28.9%, there is a statistically significant risk that the Enterprise could become the focus of suspicion sooner than that for various reasons,” Spock replied. “Sleep aids the human brain to form connections between perceptions below the awareness thresholds of the waking mind. It is not implausible to assume that your increased psionic potential as well as the presence of an actively telepathic mind in your vicinity may have sped up the process. Colloquially speaking, your ‘instinct for trouble’, which has always been more pronounced than in most Humans, may have been thrown into ‘high gear’ as a result. That has nothing to do with paranoia.”
Jim blinked. “Okay.” He scratched his head. “Thanks all the same. Wake Sulu and Chekov. I want a course out of this system that makes everyone think we’re heading straight back to Federation space. But instead I need us to go ...” He shrugged and gestured in a random direction. “That-away, wherever. Somewhere else, where they won’t expect us to go. Preferably somewhere that’s somewhat safe and not too far off course where Arrakis is concerned. Oh, and get Marcus, too. Just in case.” He rather hoped they wouldn’t need her today, but he’d rather have her twiddle her thumbs than do without the best the weapons’ specialist on board. “I’ll go drag Scotty and Uhura out of bed on my way to the bridge.”

“On my way, Captain.” With that, Spock was gone.

Five minutes later, Jim was standing in front of Scotty’s cabin. He leaned on the door chime. Nothing.

He waited a moment, and then banged on the door with his fists. When he was ready to kick in the door, it slid back and revealed a sleep-tousled young woman wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt with the slogan “Engineers Do It With Precision” stenciled on it in big yellow letters.

Jim gaped. “... Lieutenant Amell?”

The girl – in that outfit she looked more like a teenager than the Assistant Chief Engineer – stared at him with huge blue eyes. “Uh... Captain.”

She followed his gaze to her t-shirt. Flushing bright red, she crossed her arms in front of her.


“Yes, Captain.” Amell disappeared.

A few minutes later Scotty showed up, still tugging at his uniform top, looking dog-tired and pale. From the stiff way he moved, Jim suspected that his injuries were way more serious than he’d let on during their discussion. Damn it. “Scotty, I need us out of here as quickly as possible. I’m having Sulu and Chekov plot a course that will look as if we’re heading straight back to Federation space. But when we reach a safe distance from this damn planet, what we really need to do is warp away here so fast that no one can see where we are going or catch up with us. Can you do that?”

He frowned. Scotty didn’t look too good. “Or should I put Frank on the job?”

“Of course I can do it,” Scotty said, raising his chin. “Just need some caffeine and then I’m good to get my lady warmed up and purring like a kitten.”

Jim did his best to keep a straight face. “I sincerely hope you’re talking about the Enterprise, my friend.”

“Evidently,” Jim replied, thinking of pub brawls and insults to the Chief Engineer’s honor. Then he frowned. “Please tell me she’s at least eighteen.” What with Chekov’s age during the Nero thing he knew better than to assume that all officers on board were legally adults.

“Evidently,” Jim replied, thinking of pub brawls and insults to the Chief Engineer’s honor. Then he frowned. “Please tell me she’s at least eighteen.” What with Chekov’s age during the Nero thing he knew better than to assume that all officers on board were legally adults.

“It’s her lady and then there’s my girl, Captain,” Scotty said, as if the difference should be obvious.

“Evidently,” Jim replied, thinking of pub brawls and insults to the Chief Engineer’s honor. Then he frowned. “Please tell me she’s at least eighteen.” What with Chekov’s age during the Nero thing he knew better than to assume that all officers on board were legally adults.

“Of course she is,” Scotty retorted, indignant. “She’s twenty-two!”

“Way to go, Mr. Scott.” Jim sniggered. And because he simply couldn’t resist an opening like that: “Just keep them both purring, buddy.”
Scotty muttered something unintelligible. He patted his uniform pockets. Then he headed back into the cabin to grab his comm unit from the coffee table. Jim managed to get a glimpse of how Scotty drew Amell – who’d been hiding out of sight so far – into a tight embrace, murmuring something into her ear. Their kiss started as a quick, gentle goodbye between casual lovers. But it rapidly deepened into something more, something passionate ... something not at all casual.

Before Scotty could disappear into the turbolift across from his cabin, Jim added as a parting shot, “By the way, since nothing official has passed my desk yet – I’d definitely remember that – need I remind you that for permanent private relationships in the same chain of command a report from one of our counselors needs to be logged how you’re going to stay professional about it?”

Scotty froze and blushed. “Aye, sir. Errr... I’ll – I’ll be down in Engineering, getting the warp drive ready.” With that, he fled into the turbolift.

Jim grinned. Personally, he had decided to interpret that required counseling rigmarole as nothing but an embarrassing formality. What people did when a relationship got serious. What with that kiss and Scotty blushing like a boy, Amell was obviously not just a fling for Scotty. Mind, Jim couldn’t quite see Scotty tying the knot. But how cool would it be if the first wedding he got to officiate on the Enterprise would be for one of his best friends?

On his way to wake Uhura, Jim only remembered that she usually got up early for a workout when he ran into her in front of her cabin. “Sorry, no workout today. Need you on the bridge, now. We’re leaving, and I need you to notice if anyone’s checking us out.”

When she made to go back to her cabin to change into her uniform, Jim shook his head and tugged her toward the turbolift instead. “No time for that, sorry. Besides, you’re cute in that outfit. I bet John likes it.”

They stepped into the lift. “And how come you know about my private affairs, Captain?”

“I have my ways ...” Jim smirked. “Also, you just confirmed an educated guess.”

Thankfully the turbolift opened onto the bridge a moment later, so Jim got off lightly – he had to suffer just an annoyed look instead of a smack on his head.

♦

Stardate 2260.176, 0500 hours, the Bridge

Lieutenant Immamura jumped up, snapping to attention with perfect posture. Jim frowned. When had he become that kind of captain? But there was no time to worry about how intimidating he was now. “Sulu, Chekov – do we have a course?”

“Ready to go, Captain,” Sulu replied.

Jim bent forward and tapped the connection with Engineering. “Scotty?”

“We’re all hot and bothered down here, Captain, at your service,” the Chief Engineer answered promptly. “Just take us out of orbit and scanning distance.”

With a deep breath, Jim looked up, searching Spock’s eyes. His first officer met his gaze without hesitation. Jim looked out the observation window. New Sydney was an ugly planet even from this perspective – its skies a sick mixture of grey and yellow.

“Let’s get the hell away from here,” Jim ordered, hoping that they still had a head start.
When they left orbit, the comm unit lit up like a Christmas tree with hails. The weapons’ station also started beeping and blinking.

“New Sydney authorities are hailing us, sir,” Uhura reported.

“And attempting to scan the ship,” Marcus added.

“Will our normal shields suffice until we’re far enough away?” Jim asked. “I don’t want to arouse more suspicion than necessary.”

“I’m not sure, Captain. The scanners the authorities down there used on the transportation beams were extremely refined.” Marcus considered the readings on her console. “I could infuse the shields with a layer of static. That might do the trick without causing alarm. But it would interfere with communications.”

“That’s perfect,” Jim said. “I’m not in the mood for long discussions with them anyway. Uhura, at my sign you report a malfunction and cut the connection. For now, put them on audio only.”

“New Sydney to Enterprise, New Sydney to Enterprise.”

“Hi, Enterprise here, Captain James Tiberius Kirk. What’s up?” He did his best to sound unconcerned, as if he was sprawling in the chair and not on the damn edge of his seat.

“Your orbiting permission extends for a further forty-eight hours,” a harsh voice poured out of the comm, “Why are you leaving? Have there been any problems? The New Sydney Council is at your disposal to discuss any further requirements you may have.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry about that, but something’s come up. We’re needed back home. You’ll understand that I can’t go into details.”

Marcus stared at her console, then whipped around and made a frantic gesture. *Fuck.* Their scanners were even better than she’d feared. He pointed at her console and mimed sliding a knob to the highest setting. Then he pointed at Uhura and mouthed: *“Now.”*

Promptly, the audio connection began to crackle with static.

“Thanks for asking,” Jim went on to reply as smoothly as he could, “There’ve been no problems. None at all. Our stay has been ... awesome, really. But—”


Marcus pushed a button on her console and swiveled around to face Uhura, giving thumbs-up.

“New Sydney?” Uhura tapped on her keyboard, and then turned around as well. “The connection is dead, Captain.”

“How long until we’re out of scanning distance?” Jim turned to Marcus.

“At our current speed and course, five minutes, Captain.”

“Great. Keep an eye out for scanning activity, tractor beams or any shit like that. Chekov, if a ship in this system so much as burps, I want to know about it.”

“Yes, sir.”
“New Sydney is hailing us again,” Uhura reported.

“Send them white noise.” Jim balled his hands into fists. The seconds ticked by. One minute. Two minutes. “Marcus? Chekov?”

“Nothing,” Chekov replied.

“No new activity as far as I can tell,” Marcus added.

Another minute went by. Four minutes. Jim swallowed hard. They were just a random starship leaving a bit early. That was perhaps less than polite, but no serious offence. There was no reason for New Sydney to go after them, especially since they had paid good money for a load of pergium and customs bribes.

*Five minutes!*

“Punch it, Sulu.”

Outside, the stars bunched together and unfolded into the lightning ribbons of warp speed.

“Steady at warp seven,” Scotty reported. A minute later. “Should be able to keep her at it until course change.”

“Chekov?”

The navigator’s fingers flew over the keyboard. “Course confirmed toward Starbase 32 for one day and seven hours. Course change to Timor stardate 2260.177, 1200. Projected arrival in the Timor system at warp six in eight days and twenty-three hours, stardate 2260.185. Remaining travel time to Arrakis at warp six: stardate 2260.198.”


So far it looked like they’d made a safe escape. But he wouldn’t take any chances. Too many lives depended on that ...

♦

**Stardate 2260.176, 0800 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay**

Spock sat next to the boy’s bed, carefully monitoring his vital signs. He had considered melding with “Thorby” while he was unconscious. It would have been easier. But in the end, Spock had decided against it. That which was easier was not always the most beneficial strategy to choose. And this young one had been violated enough in his short life. Spock was loath to add to that, even if his intrusion on the boy’s mental privacy would be out of medical concern. So he sat and waited. He noted his apprehension, justified and understandable, and easily set it aside.

The rhythm of the child’s breathing was changing. His heartbeat accelerated. His lids fluttered. He was waking up. A second later, the boy lay frozen, holding his breath, his black eyes wide open and blank.

Spock did not move. He had lowered his chair as far as possible, even though that resulted in an awkward position, with his knees higher than his posterior. But that way, from the boy’s perspective, he would pose less of a threat. Spock also made sure that both of his hands were
visible, relaxed and motionless on the armrests of the chair.

“You are safe,” Spock said. “You are on board of the Federation starship U.S.S. Enterprise NCC-1701 under the command of Captain James Tiberius Kirk. I am his first officer.” He hesitated. Then he added with Vulcan solemnity, “I would offer you my name: Commander S‘chn T’gai Spock, son of Sarek, from the House of Surak.”

The boy did not reciprocate the polite greeting. He appeared paralyzed.

“We are currently at warp seven on a course toward Arrakis. We left the orbit of New Sydney and the Sappora system four hours ago. You truly are safe.”

The child just kept staring, cold, withdrawn, his control tight, his tension tangible.

Spock knew he was out of his depth. That was a fact to be accepted. Psychology was not his area of expertise, the treatment of traumatized children even less so, that of Vulcan children least of all. He considered what he knew of comfort. Plomeek soup and an ancient proverb; his brother’s interventions during his childhood; Nyota’s kisses, filled with kindness and carefully muted desire, not entirely unpleasant but forever tainted with his failure to reciprocate appropriately; holding Jim’s hand in Starfleet Medical – perhaps the most precious moment of his life thus far, but not an appropriate inspiration for resolving the situation at hand. Soup might be beneficial. While plomeek was not available on board, replicated carrot soup was similar and quite palatable. Most favorable, of course, would be a healing intervention such as his brother was capable of. But to take pain was a rare talent even among the best Vulcan mind healers. Still, even without that skill, a mind meld might at the very least aid in the assessment of the damage done to the child’s mind and psyche.

“I would have your thoughts,” Spock suggested, “to ease your pain.”

“No!” The boy shot up. He shook his head wildly, long hair flying, eyes blazing. From one second to the next, the child’s control evaporated and exploded into emotion, shocking in its unexpected violence. “No! My pain belongs to me. It’s mine. It’s all I have left. I will not share it or let you take it from me.”

The outburst reminded Spock of his own reaction to his brother’s attempts at psychological intervention on his behalf as he grew older and came to resent Sybok’s well-meant meddling. For years he’d held on to his pain then, with almost possessive pride, the one unwavering focus of his meditations.


Cast out fear. Cast out anger. Cast out pain. There is no room for anything else until you cast out fear, anger, pain. So says Surak.

“That’s easy for Surak to say.” The young Vulcan met Spock’s gaze. A fierce, feral expression glittered in his eyes. “I don’t remember much about Surak. But I do recall he was a hero. He never suffered k’la’sa of mind and body. He never was a slave. So what could his philosophy mean for me?”

In his mind, Spock saw another pair of black eyes, burning Vulcan-bright. He heard Sybok’s voice, hot with passion. “That’s easy for Surak to say. He never understood our emotions. He only saw the effects of trauma, the terrors of war. His philosophy is unbalanced. Its logic is lost.”
Then, Spock had tried to counter the argument. He had attempted to point out the beneficial influences of Surak’s teachings on the Vulcan psyche and society.

But his brother had just looked upon him with contempt. “You even fail to understand yourself. How can you pretend to understand your father’s people?”

Spock forced himself to focus on the child before him. He did not try to argue this time. Instead, he opted for honesty. “I do not know.”

The effect of his words on the boy was immediate. The fight went out of him from one heartbeat to the next. He slumped back down on the bed, gazing at the ceiling in silence for seventeen minutes and forty-three seconds.

“I was Thorbehrak,” he whispered at last, his voice almost inaudible. “My father and all of my House are gone. That much I remember. And now I have lost another father.”

Grief broke free from its prison in Spock’s mind, sinking razor-sharp claws deep into wounds barely sealed. “Tushah nash-veh k’du ... I grieve with thee.”

Stardate 2260.176, 1000 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

Leonard was in his office when Spock returned from his visit with the Vulcan kid. He sat down in the visitor’s chair prim and proper, the way he always did. But to Leonard, who’d come to know Spock pretty well during Jim’s time in Starfleet Medical, he looked ... brittle. Fragile. If it had been Jim looking like that, Leonard would have broken out his secret stash of liquor. He had no idea what to do with a devastated Vulcan on his hands.

“…”

“I am sorry, Doctor,” Spock said, his voice even softer than normal. “But I cannot help ... Thorby. He rejects – logic. Control. And he will not permit a meld.”

Leonard’s first reaction was surprise. Then his stubbornness tried to get a foot in the door. But by now he had more experience than that. He may not have the intuition and sensitivity of Guinan or Elbrun, but he wasn’t a complete dolt. “Thank you for trying, Spock. I’m sure it was still a good thing that you were there when he woke, fellow Vulcan and all.”

Spock looked gutted at that remark, his dark eyes as expressive as any human’s. Leonard didn’t like that. He’d been expecting Spock to break down since ... well, ever since the man hadn’t killed Khan. He’d kind of hoped that Spock would get it over with while they were still on Earth, but thanks to his Vulcan mind voodoo that hadn’t happened.

“I ... don’t think my presence was beneficial, Doctor,” Spock admitted. “Of course I will always be available for Thorby while he is on board. He is Vuhlkansu. But after my conversation with him, I do believe that Dr. Elbrun will be a better choice to aid him in his current mental state and to assist with the retrieval of the information Colonel Baslim stored in Thorby’s mind.”

“Thank you for trying anyway, Spock,” Leonard said. He frowned at the Vulcan. If Jim was a difficult patient, Spock was downright impossible. “I also want you to think about who might be the best choice for you to approach to help you with maintaining your own uh... balance. Logic.”

Spock was already opening his mouth to argue, but Leonard shook his head and cut him off. “I need you to be the smart one here. The one who swallows his pride to get the help he needs. Because Jim may be trying, but he’s still too stubborn for his own good. Don’t think I haven’t
noticed the song and dance routine the two of you have been acting out around Jim’s claustrophobic episodes. I’ve been in and out of his quarters often enough to notice which doors are open at odd times.”

“Doctor—”

Leonard sighed and wondered, not for the first time, when he’d started worrying about the damn green-blooded hobgoblin as much as he did about Jim. “I know the two of you have difficulty wrapping your minds around the concept, but you’re both more human than you think. You’re not infallible. You’re not perfect. You don’t have to be strong all the time. And there’s nothing wrong with asking for help if you need it.”

And because he wasn’t in the mood for any backtalk, he growled, “And now get the hell out of my sickbay, there’s a pretty lady waiting for her check-up outside.”

Stardate 2260.176, 1100 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

Carolyn Paul entered Doctor McCoy’s office with obvious reluctance. She had done her best to evade his clutches the last few days. But there was no way in hell he’d let her get away just like that. Not after the stunt she’d pulled on Pyrithia. She’d gotten herself banged up well and good, and then there were those old injuries he’d caught in the scans attached to her files without any details of the where and how and why. He didn’t like that. At all.

“I’m mostly all right, good as new, just like you advertised,” she said, even though you didn’t need glasses to see that she wasn’t. The woman was pale as a ghost. She’d lost weight, although she was still deliciously curvy from a purely aesthetic point of view. The purple smudges under her eyes that indicated sleeping problems were less attractive.

“Personally, I’d prefer it if you’d just scan me real quick, so I can get out of your hair,” she muttered.

Not another one of those, Leonard thought. I already have my hands full with Jim and Spock. Aloud he said with his best frown in place, “Thank you, Lieutenant, but I like you in my hair just fine. Please sit and let me do my job.”

She nodded, and from the way she settled in the visitor’s chair she seemed to accept the necessity of a thorough evaluation. That, more than anything else, told him that she was not “mostly all right”, and that she knew it, too.

“So how have you been?” he asked. If there were psychological issues involved, triggered by what happened on Pyrithia, he’d better ease her into the conversation.

“In many ways excellent,” Carolyn Paul said firmly. “At least, where my job is concerned. I’m doing those workshops right now, and you wouldn’t believe it how people take to that.” She beamed at him. Well, that was reassuring; she was still able to focus on the positive aspects of her everyday life. He made a note on his PADD. “The creative potential on board is amazing.”

“The what?” Leonard stared at her. Then he remembered that she wasn’t just a regular school teacher, but also involved in career development. (And in idiotic undercover away missions – but he wasn’t going to forget that in a hurry, not after spending so much time fixing her up afterwards.)

“Yes, I know! I’m surprised myself. It’s one of those new projects Starfleet HR has come up with,
to bolster the psychological resilience of the crew. I never imagined that so many officers would be
interested in participating.” She was honestly excited about whatever piddling scheme those
morons at HR had cooked up this time. Perhaps he should keep her talking until he knew what it
was all about – just in case he needed to come up with a good excuse why he couldn’t be bothered
to join the circus.

“And what might that be?” he asked warily. “I’m not sure I recall the details; it’s been kind of busy
around here lately.” He scowled. “At least in part thanks to you, Lieutenant.”

She ducked her head. Sheepish, with a side of mischievous. “Creative writing workshops. It’s
amazing. Mr. Spock and Mr. Sulu have started a project about haiku and tanka and those Vulcan
desert poems. Mr. Chekov is convinced that he can write the next great Russian novel, and the
thing is, I’m almost sure he’s right. He has such a flair for melodrama. And then there’s the fan
fiction program for current holo-entertainment I’m doing with the kids right now. Transformative
storytelling is such a great way to draw kids into literature. Has Jo read her latest story to you? If
not, you need to ask her about it. It’s amazing. Wicked and funny and sad all in one.”

Leonard noticed a distraction tactic when he was the victim, all right. He still couldn’t help taking
the bait. “Jo writes fan fiction?”

The teacher smiled. She has a beautiful mouth, Leonard thought. Generous and sensitive, where
Jocelyn’s lips had been thin and narrow. And her teeth were holo-star material now. “Oh, yes.” She
nodded. “Jo’s into Superman and Khan holo-comics.”

“She writes slash?! But she’s just eleven!” Leonard boggled. He remembered too well how his
sister had gotten into slash fanfic about a historical romance with vampires and werewolves. No
brother needed to know that his younger sister got off on gay porn like that. He shuddered.
Carolyn burst out laughing. “Oh, goodness, Doctor, you should see your face! I’m sorry, I’ll calm
down in a second.” After another giggle or two, she regained her composure, even though her hazel
eyes still sparkled with amusement. “Don’t worry. She’s not writing slash. I’m sure she’s aware of
it – she’s awfully mature for her age.” Now she looked at Leonard with a solemn, almost sad
expression. “Mature,” she reassured him, “not troubled. Look, thanks to being in charge of those
extracurricular projects, I get to hang out with the kids more than most of the other teachers. If I’d
noticed that Jo has any problems, I’d have contacted you at once. Jo’s doing really well. She has
friends, she’s working hard. I think she’s happy.”

He couldn’t help frowning again. Maybe he should have taken Paul up on one of her regular
invitations for her office hours. Maybe he should have attended that parent-teacher conference. But
he’d figured as long as Jo wasn’t in trouble, he’d do better to let her be. He’d tried to leave her
behind. And the way she’d reacted to that ... Well, he didn’t think he was one of his daughter’s
favorite people at the moment. “Really?”

Another smile that lit up Carolyn Paul’s face. She nodded. “Absolutely. As for her stories ... well,
how she writes her favorite characters – Khan and Superman – those are definitely couple
dynamics she’s writing there. But everything I’ve seen could be labeled ‘approved for all
audiences’. As you said, she is only eleven. She writes about friendship and trust and adventure,
with a dash of hurt/comfort. Her stories are good. You should read them sometime. Or better yet,
get her to read them to you.”

“Hmm.” He’d have to think about that. But now there was another matter to deal with, and he
wouldn’t allow himself to be distracted anymore. “Back to business, Lieutenant Paul. Tell me how
you’ve been apart from that.”
“Mostly fine . . .” She started but trailed off again.

Leonard raised his eyebrows. He was tempted to reply with one of Spock’s favorite phrases of how “fine” was an inadequate reply because it was not at all concise and way too open to interpretation. He’d also hoped after talking about her job and Jo, she’d be ready to open up a bit. But before he could find fault with her answer, she added, “Still sore. And just as you told me, my fingers are hurting like hell when I don’t take the meds you’ve given me. And don’t worry, I am taking them exactly the way you prescribed now after the one time I forgot about them.” She made a face.

Then she drew a deep breath. Abruptly, her smile was gone. Her posture had changed, too. She appeared tense now and too controlled, not at all like a creative writing teacher. “Actually, I’ve been having some . . . issues.”

She looked past him, at the wall, her face troubled. “Doctor McCoy, when you fixed me up, I’m sure you’ve noticed old injuries. Injuries that are listed in my file without any explanation.”

Okay, he hadn’t seen that one coming. He leaned forward, steepling his fingers. “Indeed. Go on, Lieutenant. I’m all ears.”

That she didn’t fidget at his tone but kept completely still was telling, and not in a good way. “May I access your console, sir?”

He turned the screen and the keyboard to her. She called up the private login page and entered some codes. “I’m with Section 31. That’s why my normal medical file is incomplete.” She didn’t look up, just stared at the keyboard. “I thought . . . I thought by now I was in a better place to . . . deal with things.” She hit enter and inhaled a shivery breath. “But I’m not. So I guess I have to act like a mature adult and ask for the help I need. Problem is, with my file I can’t go to the regular counselors.” She turned the screen back for him without looking at it. “Sorry.”

One glance at her unlocked file told Leonard why that was. Carolyn Paul leaned back in the visitor’s chair. With a stony expression she stared at the wall while she waited for him to go over the new information in her file. Now, that was reading material he could have done without. He cursed under his breath, but kept his temper in check. Paul needed help, not additional stress.

“Lieutenant Paul, there is nothing you have to be sorry about,” Leonard said calmly at last. “I may not be the best qualified psychologist and therapist on board, but I am qualified to help you. That’s my job. Just as it’s your job to make Starfleet officers write poetry and to undertake dangerous missions for Section 31. And while it has been . . .” He scanned the data on his screen. “… fourteen months since you were admitted to Starfleet Medical after your rescue, that is not a timeframe that would make anyone expect you to deal with new trauma as if nothing had happened before. It is normal for you to experience problems now.” He considered the physical and psychological aspects of her case. “How’s that shoulder doing? Considering your previous injuries, I’m guessing you’re still in considerable pain.” God, and those injuries had been awful, in a manner horribly reminiscent of medieval torture chambers. She was damn lucky to be alive.

“It’s very stiff,” Paul agreed. “And yeah, it still hurts quite a lot.” She grimaced. “The pain often keeps me from sleeping, and it gives me nightmares. Flashbacks, sometimes.”

Leonard nodded. “I’m not surprised. I’ll give you stronger pain meds, and something to help you sleep. You’ll need more physical therapy. I’ll put a regimen for you together. Additionally, I want to set up regular appointments for us to talk. Also, no more bullshit about being mostly fine or being sorry to bother me or something like that. You got a problem, you comm me. No matter what time it is. Is that clear, Lieutenant?”
Stardate 2260.180, 1600 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Cabin

Jim had time on his hands and sex on his mind. And he had access to interesting databases. A dangerous mixture, as most everyone on board of the Enterprise would agree. Therefore he lay comfortably stretched out on his bed and stared with interest at a high resolution picture on his PADD: Vulcan genitalia of the male persuasion. Right now he was torn between aesthetic appreciation, the base desire to jerk off and think of Spock ... and academic curiosity about what else might lurk in the databases.

One thing was sure, it was ... beautiful. In the strange, weird and wonderful – and slightly ridiculous way – that human bits were awesome, too. In size and shape it seemed similar, at least. However, it was very definitely green, pointy at the end (no surprise there, what with the ears, he guessed), and ... barbed. Which should have been scary, really, but when zoomed up, the spikes looked more like bristles. Soft. Not hard. Interesting. And there was a ring at the base that looked as though it might do something at some point. Swell up, maybe? More interesting. What with standard uniform pants being rather formfitting, Jim was also certain that the whole thing retracted, perhaps even completely. Because he kind of did appreciate how Starfleet’s tight pants accentuated what nature had bestowed upon men and women alike. And he really liked looking at Spock. So he would have noticed this beyond whatever balls Spock had – and so far he hadn’t given much thought to those because something was so, well, so obviously there, pants or no pants. The picture confirmed that impression, too. Vulcans had balls, and they looked pretty human, if larger and more hmm... attached to the body. That was also true for the Vulcan rear end and the relevant insides, including a prostatic body, thankfully.

And if Jim’s interest in those particular features of Vulcan anatomy was entirely self-serving, so what? However, to Jim’s disappointment, there were no descriptions, no accurate anatomical terms and most of all, no instruction manual – even though this particular picture was part of the ordinary sciences database (if you knew where to look). Damn secretive Vulcans.

Chewing on his lower lip, Jim forced himself to ignore the tight feeling of arousal in favor of scientific research. Genetically speaking – at the DNA level – humans were closer to Terran mushrooms than Vulcan people, according to Bones.

On the other hand, there was the law of genetic convergence. Jim still remembered that from xenobiology 101. Normally, evolution occurred through divergence of genes, proteins and ultimately phenotypes – hence the wide variety of genomes on Earth, for example. However ... and that was kind of a kicker, in terms of xenobiology: similar traits also evolved convergently in completely unrelated species, owing to similar selection pressures. Which was why so many wildly different humanoid species were still so similar in their genetic make-up that all kinds of human-alien hybrids could exist. Like Spock.

Though Jim knew, of course, that Spock was no accident but the product of careful genetic engineering. The thought occurred to him how now that he himself was part-Augment, they had more in common than before ... The next obvious question was how Spock had been created (if he matched the picture on Jim’s PADD). No doubt two principles had ruled the process: the Vulcan belief in IDIC, infinite diversity in infinite combinations as per the beneficial randomness of nature, and the priority of viability.

But that just left Jim staring at the picture of a perfect Vulcan penis on his PADD, pondering Spock with even more fascination. At first glance, Spock appeared to be all Vulcan, ears, eyebrows, unemotional intellect and all. Most likely that extended to his genitalia. It was a question
of viability and practicability, after all – plus his parents had meant him to grow up and live on
Vulcan. Jim also realized it was unlikely that Spock was exactly half Human and half Vulcan. It
was much more likely that his human heritage made up thirty to forty percent of his genes. Perhaps
even less.

Where did they go, Jim wondered, your human genes? What are they doing to you – what are they
doing for you? Does anyone know? Or even care?

He didn’t like that train of thought much, so he turned back to poking and prodding the medical
databases. Thanks to the current missions of the Enterprise involving the Vulcan colony on Arrakis
and the V’tosh ka’tur, there was tons of stuff accessible that he wouldn’t have been able to lay his
eyes on under normal circumstances. Details never mentioned in any of his academy seminars.

Twenty minutes later or so, arousal was the last thing on Jim’s mind. He exhaled in a sigh and
stared at the ceiling for a lengthy period of time. On the one hand, he wanted to go and throttle
Spock. On the other hand, he was ... oh yeah, even more scared of fucking things up for Spock
than before. He had already guessed that Vulcans didn’t do casual sex (you didn’t have to be a
genius to figure that one out). But the somewhat confidential content of the medical databases told
him that under normal circumstances sex meant telepathic Bonding for Vulcans, which in turn
meant life-long monogamous physical and mental commitment.

That self-sacrificing idiot of a first officer had honestly suggested pretending that he was a Vulcan

And then there was the part of the medical data on Vulcans that was seriously locked up. Secured
in a way that Jim knew it would be an actual challenge to hack into the files. Fun, in other words. It
was hard to resist that kind of an invitation. There was just one tiny little catch. He recognized the
style of the security code, although he’d never seen such code before. How was that even possible?
How could such elegant passages of code feel so achingly familiar and yet so alien?

Jim switched off his PADD and folded his hands over his stomach. What did that code remind him
of? He let his thoughts drift. When was the last time he’d even studied code at length ... admired it
for its elegance, its complexity?

... oh.

The Kobayashi Maru. Two years and two lifetimes ago. But the security stuff in the medical
database was not Spock’s coding. It was similar, but not the same. If you eliminate the impossible
... The other Spock, then. But why? It must be something incredibly important. A Vulcan secret.
Something vital. Something that Humans shouldn’t know about under ordinary circumstances.
Something private then. Intimate. Information the old man wanted them to have access to just in
case ... if something went very, very wrong with Vulcan biology.

Now even Jim’s curiosity flagged, leaving behind the uncomfortable feeling that he should talk to
his Spock and ask him if there was anything he should know about Vulcan mating habits ...

♦

Stardate 2260.185, 1700 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin

Spock stared at his PADD. He was in the process of composing a message to his father. A task that
was laborious at the best of times, and excruciating in this instance. Yet he did not see another
logical way to resolve his current dilemma.
His message would take one month, ten days, nineteen hours and seven minutes to reach New Vulcan. In consequence he had decided to confine himself to a written message. There was no logical reason to send a video transmission. Furthermore, there was no rationale to increasing the emotional difficulties he was encountering in the composition of this missive.

“Father,” he wrote and halted.

His older counterpart had told his – their – father that the scientists who had constructed his genetic make-up had failed in their efforts to spare him the time of madness.

In another universe, Spock knew that he had shared a betrothal bond with a Vulcan girl as was customary among his people. In this universe, his parents and the medics responsible for him had decided against that due to the lack of emotional control he had suffered from during his childhood. It would not have been beneficial to subject another child to his mental problems. Thus Spock had been spared the agony of a broken Bond when Vulcan was destroyed. Perhaps a minor difference between the two universes. Beneficial, in that he had been spared considerable mental trauma. Detrimental, in that he was less prepared than any other member of his race to enter into a Bond and to overcome the blood fever with the aid of his Bondmate.

The taboo surrounding pon farr was near absolute. It was not a topic for civilized conversation.

Spock was also of an age that left the choice of a Bondmate to his discretion. Hence his father had not made mention of the issue. It seemed likely – with a statistical probability of 89.75% – given the mission of the Enterprise that his father expected him to find a compatible mind among his brother’s people on Arrakis. Due to the different attitude of his brother’s followers regarding emotions and emotional control it was a logical expectation that Spock might find a better match for his mind on Arrakis than on New Vulcan.

“In this my life it remains uncertain when I will have to endure the Time,” Spock wrote. “Evidence has been laid out for you and me that it may not come upon me for another seven years. Yet as we approach Arrakis, I find myself considering the impact of the Time on a potential Bondmate, specifically on a Bondmate not of our people. I am aware that Mother’s view of the Time differed from the traditional Vulcan outlook on the matter.”

The memory of his mother speaking to him of the Time in frank terms and full of fondness tested his emotional control even after fourteen years. He wanted to cringe.

“Taking into account the fact that Mother’s constitution was not especially robust for a Human, I am at a loss to formulate a satisfying scientific explanation for her attitude. If you could take it upon yourself to enlighten me upon the matter, I would appreciate any information you see fit to share with me.”

♦

“... the Pain puts its arm over your shoulders. It is your closest friend. Steadfast. And at night you can’t bear to hear your own breath unaccompanied by another and underneath the big stillness like a score is the roaring of the cataract of everything being and being torn away. Then. The Pain is lying beside your side, close.Does not bother you with sound even of breathing.”
– Peter Heller, The Dog Stars

Chapter End Notes
Comments are love!♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Chapter Summary

Bones and Spock play pick-up sticks. Guess who wins? ♦ Spock and Jim talk about pointy-eared babies and Spock’s crazy brother. ♦ On Arrakis, Jim meets some smugglers and gets to see a sandworm. (But not to ride it. He also doesn’t get eaten by it, so all in all that’s a win.) ♦ Spock thinks Fremen stillsuits are nasty. ♦ Last but not least, they get invited to a Fremen dinner party.

Chapter Notes

“Everything that can happen does happen, in equal and parallel universes.” Therefore in this universe, there are no Harkonnens and no Atreides, no Padishah Emperor and no Bene Gesserit. Other people, however, seem to occur in any possible and impossible universe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dream Of Ecstasies, Sleep With Fears

Stardate 2260.194, 2200 hours, Deck 10, Observation Lounge

“So, Dune.” Jim prodded the illumination of the Mu Draconis system with his fingertips.

After the latest briefing, he and a few others had ended up in the smallest Observation Lounge. Scotty had produced a bottle of whisky, and Jim hadn’t commented when Lieutenant Amell had joined them, a quiet presence at Scotty’s side.

Sulu was there with his current partner, Lieutenant Barry Milekey of the Enterprise music group, supposedly engaged in serious astronomical observations. Jim thought they were just holding hands, though. Carol Marcus, Nyota Uhura, and Carolyn Paul made up the girly contingent, complete with umbrella drinks and giggles. Spock and Bones were playing pick-up sticks of all things, and Jim had appointed himself their referee. Mostly, he admitted to himself, so he could watch Spock’s hands. Chekov had excused himself because he wanted to write. Lieutenant Paul’s writing workshop was clearly messing with the boy’s mind.

“Dune, Jim?” Spock prompted and delicately tipped up another stick, ignoring Bones’s scowl.

Three days until they’d enter orbit around Alrakis, Arrakis, Dune, Mu Draconis 26.3, whatever. For a week they’d been on a schedule of daily briefings now.

They’d started out with what Jim called “travel guide” intros covering climate, culture, and biology. Interestingly enough, given his personal history with Spice and that crazy urge to use whatever shore leave he was entitled to as a captain to go sandworm riding. The guys from the Sciences Department were going gaga over Dune, cooing over everything from sandtrouts to
sandworm, from pre-spice mass to the Water of Life. Apparently even kangaroo mice and creosote bushes were the epitome of awesome. And the horrible storms that could tear the flesh from an unprotected man within sixty seconds flat were “fascinating”. Riiight.

Next came the xenopolitics session. Diplomatically, Arrakis was a nightmare. The indigenous population of Fremen was firmly pre-warp, so no official First Contact mission possible there. At the same time, the planet had long since been tainted by smugglers and pirates and surrounding galactic empires reaching with greedy hands for Dune’s singular resources. It had a spaceport of its own, and what passed as a merchants’ guild, with members that were privateers and criminals without exception. Add to that a commune of emotional Vulcans somewhere in the desert, and what you got was a diplomatic headache of special epicness.

“Just lay off the weird alien drugs, Jim-boy,” Bones said, frowning at the pick-up sticks. Strangely enough, he wasn’t losing. Spock’s fingertips were so sensitive that he kept overreacting and jostling the sticks.

“Should I say ‘but Spice is such a good trip’ now?” Jim rolled his eyes. “We’re supposed to secure an agreement for Spice trade with the Fremen on behalf of New Vulcan. So I think it’s a good thing there’s someone on board who actually knows what we’re dealing with from personal experience.” Thanks to his criminal history as a repeat offender in Iowa, he felt especially weird about facilitating drug trade as a starship captain now, even though it was officially sanctioned and therefore strictly legal.

“However, you are not the only one on board in such a position, Captain,” Spock commented, flexing his fingers in the air while Bones was picking up one stick after the other from the table top between them.

“Huh? I’m not?” Jim frowned. “Well, with five-hundred and whatever people on board, I guess—”

“I owe my life to the drug,” Spock interrupted him. His tone was mild as always. He might have been talking about the weather, if there had been weather in space. He ignored the interested looks from everyone in the room in favor of concentrating on the few remaining sticks on the table in front of him. It was his turn, and from the look of it, the game was almost over, and he’d have lost.

“But ... your eyes ...” Jim protested. Spock’s eyes were brown, without a hint of another color. Jim would have hated them to be blue. Not just because he couldn’t help an instinctive, visceral association of a certain shade of blue with the craziest kind of high he’d ever experienced in his life. But because he – yes, there was no other word, he might as well own getting all mushy like that – he loved Spock’s eyes. Just the way they were. Deep and dark and sometimes, just sometimes ... so warm. So incredibly human. More than human, even. More expressive, more passionate ... just more.

Spock raised his left eyebrow. “I said that I owe my life to the drug, not that I have ever been addicted to the substance.”

Bones forgot to count the points to secure his victory in pick-up-sticks. “So how did that happen?”

“A Vulcan fetus requires a telepathic connection with the mother in order to thrive. As even Humans with high psionic potential are incapable of actively forming telepathic Bonds, a solution had to be found,” Spock explained. “Spice activates latent telepathic abilities in Humans. While pregnant with me, my mother received the drug in a diluted form that enabled her to sustain such a connection with me. Once I was born, the therapy was discontinued.”

Jim had always been quick at putting two and two together in uncomfortable ways. Since he’d been
made captain, he’d at least gotten somewhat better at this thing called “discretion”. Right now he entertained the hunch that this conversation might lead to two things in the very near future: right into Classified with a capital “C” (because their Vulcan orders contained no explanations for anything, just instructions for what they were supposed to do) or into really private territory that Spock wouldn’t be comfortable with.

So Jim kept his comment curt (“Interesting.”) and shook his head at Bones. If that information was in any way medically relevant, Bones could drag Spock into sickbay later – whenever.

And then, because he couldn’t figure out a more graceful exit at short notice, “Spock, I know you’d love to get thrashed by Bones with those pointy sticks again, but I need you to go over something with me again ...”

He rose to his feet. “Sorry, guys. Enjoy the rest of your happy hour. See you for our daily briefing tomorrow night at the latest.”

Everyone groaned.

“Hey, at least we can sleep in tomorrow, what with the secondary bridge teams on duty the next five days. So no griping, people.”

♦

Stardate 2260.194, 2300 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Cabin

“Sorry to drag you away,” Jim said outside. “But what with Elena and Carolyn and Barry in there that was easier. I didn’t want to go all captain on them, saying the conversation has to stop now because they don’t have the right clearance. We need some downtime before we get to Arrakis.”

Spock entered the turbolift a step behind him. “I doubt that anyone but you and Doctor McCoy would be able to hypothesize the rationale behind that particular mission and its true objective based on my comment the way you did.”

“Not so sure; Carolyn Paul is one clever cookie.” Jim tapped the lift controls. “But I was more concerned because of Bones. You know how he gets with interesting medical stuff.” He concentrated on the closed doors. “Also, I didn’t want them to bug you about your mother.”

Next to him Spock inhaled, an almost emotional reaction for the Vulcan. Jim glanced at him from the corner of his eyes. Surprise ... and perhaps something else?

“You ... were looking out for me?”


Had he really wanted to say – what, actually? They weren’t lovers yet, for god’s sake. He’d never seriously contemplated being more than that before. Ever. Hell, more often than not he hadn’t even been friends with the people he’d had sex with.

“I am ... gratified,” Spock said softly, and then repeated in a more human vein, “Thank you, Jim.”

They exited the lift. “Want some tea?”

“I am not averse to sharing a ‘night cup’ with you.”

“Nightcap, an alcoholic beverage such as brandy or bourbon, consumed before going to bed,” Jim

“I am not averse to sharing a ‘night cup’ with you.”

“Nightcap, an alcoholic beverage such as brandy or bourbon, consumed before going to bed,” Jim
corrected him. “And you don’t drink alcohol—” He stopped in his tracks. “Oh.” He turned to Spock, taking in the faint crinkling at the corners of his eyes. “A pun. I’ll have to send Bones a memo. We’ll declare a shipwide holiday.”

A few minutes later they sat in the living area of Jim’s quarters, their “night cups” in front of them, Vulcan spice tea and peppermint infusion respectively.

“But I’m right,” Jim said, picking up the conversation from the Observation Lounge. “About the Spice trade thing.”

“To me the explanation is obvious,” Spock agreed. “But my medical history is unique at this point in time. To others the motivations behind the trade agreement sought by the High Council may not be as transparent.”

“I sure hope so,” Jim muttered into his mug. “Because if anyone finds out that you need Spice so you can use surrogate mothers, not only will prices climb to astronomical levels, but you’ll be vulnerable to blackmail. I wish you hadn’t said what you did.” And then he wished he hadn’t said that, because Spock’s face froze. Small talk, casual conversation didn’t come easy to him. “Hey,” he said warmly, “No harm done. And ... I kind of like knowing a bit more about you now than I did before.”

Spock softened again. “I already knew about your history with Spice. It seemed – fair to share mine.”

“Can you talk about your brother?” Jim asked. The High Council hadn’t provided much information concerning the Vulcan colony on Arrakis. Just that there was a colony and that its leader was one Ktorr Skann by the name of Sybok, son of Sarek. “What does Ktorr Skann even mean?”

Spock put down his cup. “For a Human you possess an uncanny talent of focusing on crucial and private data with a probability of up to 91.25% in the course of any remotely personal conversation.”

“I’m a very uncomfortable Human, is that what you’re saying?” Jim snorted. “Yeah, I know. That’s my special talent. Sorry. I’m not trying to pry, you know? But yeah, I am curious. Because it’s your brother. But most of all because of the mission. Sure, I’m good at winging it. But if I can find out more, information that may help me to get the job done, I actually prefer that to flying blind.”

“That is logical.” Spock picked up his cup again. “Sybok is my half-brother; a child of P... of an encounter before my father met my mother.” He flushed. A sudden green hue suffused his cheeks. But he went on, speaking as calmly as if he was presenting a report on the bridge instead of revealing intensely private and uncomfortable details regarding his family and culture. “Ktorr Skann means outcast, pariah. An individual banished from their House; considered dead by his family, with his very existence expunged from all records, and forever forbidden from returning home. Sybok refused logic and repudiated Surak. He left Vulcan when he was twenty-one, and I was fifteen. He and his followers called themselves ‘Army of Light’. Their plan was to find Sha Ka Ree.”

“A rebel.” Jim smiled. He was already looking forward to meeting Sybok. An emotional Vulcan. And Spock’s brother. Someone who had known Spock as a child ...

“A fanatic.”
Okay, touchy. Clearly there was some history between the brothers that went beyond philosophical differences. “So Vulcan High Council wants us to tell him that everything is forgiven and will he please come home? Is that even possible when he officially doesn’t exist anymore for you guys?” Jim grimaced; he could have phrased that more politely.

“The home Sybok was banished from is gone; of his House, of his family not many remain,” Spock said, voice and face expressionless. “He was regarded as one of the most brilliant mind healers in his generation, with unique insights into Vulcan emotions. He was especially adept at resolving mental trauma. There are certain problems among the survivors, issues that should never be discussed with others. His presence on New Vulcan would be beneficial.”

“So you hope he’ll agree to help out,” Jim said, wondering what kind of issues uber-rational beings like Vulcans wouldn’t talk about with anyone. Must be something awful ...

“Vulcans do not hope.” The tension around his eyes gave him away, though.

Vulcans might not give themselves over to such an illogical emotional response to a problem and its possible solution. Spock(s) did.

“He might be able to help Thorby, too,” Jim mused. “If he’s into Vulcan emotions like that. Dr. Elbrun isn’t getting anywhere with him. And we need the information implanted in his mind.”

Thorby didn’t cope well with the presence of most adult men. While he didn’t freak out at Bones, Spock, or Jim during normal interactions, he shut down completely at every attempt to retrieve whatever information Baslim had put in his brain – even with the correct authorization code. Requesting the code triggered an intense migraine. Hearing the code invariably led to a panic attack followed by catatonic withdrawal into a Vulcan healing trance. Dr. Elbrun’s theorized that some prior trauma was too intense to overcome for Thorby. At the same time, Thorby’s Vulcan mental barriers were too strong for the Betazoid to surmount without a serious risk of causing brain damage. If Sybok was really such a brilliant mind healer and such an expert with Vulcan emotions, he might be able to help Thorby. It was worth a try. However, he knew that Thorby was a sore spot with Spock, so he changed the subject.

“So you think Sybok found Sha Ka Ree? On Dune of all places?” he asked. Sha Ka Ree was the Vulcan version of Shangri-La. He guessed it made sense for a Vulcan paradise to be located on a desert planet. Even if he couldn’t really see Dune as that kind of place.

Spock gave a stiff shrug. He tilted his head a fraction, and Jim noticed how the corners of his eyes crinkled ever so slightly again. “Maybe he just liked the drugs.”

♦

Stardate 2260.207, 1700 hours, Arrakeen, Arrakis

Ten days after the Enterprise had entered orbit around Dune, Jim beamed down to Arrakeen, one of the planet’s largest cities. It had taken elaborate diplomatic rigmarole care of Commander Paul (with Jim backing him up and doing his best not to succumb to foot/mouth disease for once) to get the resident smugglers and pirates to agree to let them step foot on its golden sands.

Jim’s first impression was heat, of course. He slammed into it as if transported into solid magma, or as solid as molten rocks were going to get. Definitely didn’t feel like air, though. For a fraction of a second, before his brain registered his surroundings, panic exploded through his body in a flash of icy lightning. Transporter accidents happened. He inhaled with a gasp. Cinnamon fire seared his lungs, and he found himself blinking in the painful glare of sunlight reflected by metal-bright stone.
Spock at his side inhaled the heat with a deep breath that would have been a sigh of bliss for a Human. Watching him, Jim was suddenly in no mood to deal with smugglers and Fremen. Instead, he wanted to drag Spock off into the desert. He wanted to slather himself in sun screen and hide in the shadow of a date palm and watch Spock soak up the sun.

The smuggler to greet them was a harsh man, less than handsome. He was bald but for a few wisps of white hair. His originally pale skin had weathered into dry old leather where it was visible beyond the hooded burnoose that he wore over one of those protective suits favored by the Fremen. At his belt he didn’t just carry a phaser but a blade that reminded him of a Terran rapier. Eyes cutting like glass-splinters burned with a savage Spice-blue gleam. Along his jaw an ugly scar twisted as if someone had once attempted to cut his throat and failed, but not for lack of trying. Or perhaps a whip; Jim wasn’t sure what weapon left such a mark.

“Gurney Halleck,” the smuggler introduced himself with a surprisingly smooth and beautiful tenor. He reached out in greeting.

“James Tiberius Kirk.” Jim shook the offered hand. The man’s grip was firm, his skin hot and dry. “Captain of the USS Enterprise.”


Jim managed not to roll his eyes. Halleck and three-quarters of the known universe. Still, it was not the worst thing to be known for. “Nice to meet you. This is my first officer, Commander Spock. The head of our Diplomacy and Xenopolitics Department, Commander Paul. Our Chief Medical Officer, Dr. McCoy. Lieutenant Uhura, our Communications officer, Lieutenant Marcus, Science Officer, and Yeoman Rand, my personal aid.”

The smuggler just nodded at the other officers. Then he glanced at the Enterprise security team. Behind Jim and the others, six Security officers were standing at attention. Giotto had been pissed after Pyrithia, and the thing with the Klingons on New Sydney had done nothing for his mood. His insistence on a double complement of security, fully armed, was in part responsible for the delay. If Pyrithia and New Sydney hadn’t happened, Jim wouldn’t have waited for the smugglers to agree to additional security for their away team. As it was, he’d forced himself to be patient and let Commander Paul do his job.

Halleck smirked. “If I wanted to kill your captain, he’d be dead already.”

Jim hadn’t seen him move, but now he felt a knife, angled upwards against his stomach, pressing in.

“Before you could so much as damage the fabric of my captain’s uniform, you would lie in the dust at his feet,” Spock said, soft as ever, fingertips gently placed against the man’s neck.

“Damn your nerve pinches, you pointy-eared bastard – you probably could,” Halleck growled.

While the smuggler was distracted, Jim stepped back and grabbed the man’s wrist, twisting it along with his movement. A moment later he held up the knife. It was a slightly curved, double-edged blade, almost eight inches long.

“Interesting weapon,” Jim said and handed it back to Halleck. At his nod, Spock let him go.

“A kindjal,” the smuggler said. “Favored by certain Tzenkethi echelons. If you’re interested in weapons, you’ll have to take a look at a crysknife while you’re here.”

“I think not,” Spock interrupted, his tone uncommonly sharp.
Jim shook his head. If he couldn’t deal with the leader of the Arrakeen smugglers, he didn’t deserve to be captain of the Enterprise. “I do not draw blood for sport, Halleck. Nor do I have any interest in desecrating objects the indigenous people hold holy. But don’t think that I am not capable of doing both if you force my hand.” He permitted a hint of irritation to thread through his voice. “Can we get on with things now?”

Halleck grinned wolfishly. “Not just a pretty face, are you, Captain?”

“Very pretty, or so I’ve been told,” Jim agreed unfazed. “But not just that. Now what?”

“Now we meet with some of my colleagues at Keep Arrakeen. Tomorrow you will be equipped with stillsuits and we’ll fly out to the Shield Wall with a shuttlecraft to visit a Spice harvesting site. So you can see for yourself that we can deliver if we come to an agreement.” The man smirked. “In three days we’ll take you deep into the desert to meet the Fremen. You have been invited to stay at Sietch Tabr, one of the largest Fremen communities, to meet with one of their leaders, Naib Stilgar. There the trade negotiations you have requested will begin in a week.” He narrowed his eyes at Jim. “That’s quite an honor for offworlders. They must be curious about you for some reason.”

Jim shrugged. There were many reasons why people on strange planets were curious about Starfleet. Not all of them led to happy endings. So instead of answering Halleck’s unvoiced question, he let his own curiosity get the better of him and replied with a question of his own: “Will we get to see a sandworm?”

Halleck’s lips twisted into an expression that was more a grimace than a smile. “Hard to avoid those monsters if you mean to get anywhere close to Spice in the desert.”

Keep Arrakeen was massive, slabs of stone worthy of the pyramids of Earth. Inside the temperature was almost too cool. In a near endless vaulted hall, they were introduced to the other eleven members of the organization bizarrely called “Arrakis Trade Union” – all of them smugglers, pirates, and privateers.

An ancient Fremen woman named Shadout Mapes served Spice coffee on a silver tray in tiny, ivory beakers. Bones spent a few minutes fussing over it with his tricorder while the pirates watched, biting their lips not to burst out laughing. Then Bones declared that “Spice” as in Spice coffee was not a drug but really just ‘a’ spice, so everyone was allowed to take a beaker and try it. Jim discovered that on Dune, milk and sugar were not an option. Here coffee was black, bitter, and saturated with the sharp cinnamon tang of Spice. He wasn’t sure if he liked it or not. It was definitely ... different.

The meeting with the other smugglers went better than expected; they followed Halleck’s lead. Now that Jim had passed Halleck’s initial test, he seemed willing to go along with the plan Commander Paul had bargained for since their arrival in orbit. At least for the time being. Jim wouldn’t make the mistake of underestimating Halleck.

Three of Halleck’s “colleagues” were to accompany the delegation from the Enterprise the next day: Esmar Tuek, Liet Kynes, and Duncan Idaho. Tuek was a middle-aged smuggler of uncertain origin, the kind of man who had lost all visible trace of his planetary roots to space. Kynes appeared to be at least part Fremen, with his eyes blue in blue, and not just Spice-tinged. Idaho looked Human, not just humanoid, and his rigid posture was familiar – formerly of Starfleet, perhaps? Worth a poke at the database, at the very least.

Then they were presented with Fremen stillsuits. To Jim those full body suits looked like the long lost love child of an extra kinky latex outfit and a diver’s dress. Bones looked torn between fascination and disgust. Spock was as firmly on the “disgusted” team as Marcus was on the “oh
Kynes demonstrated how to wear a stillsuit on one of the Security officers, Ensign Kaplan. Step-by-step he explained how it worked: “A stillsuit is protective desert wear that functions as a high-efficiency filter and heat-exchange system. The skin-contact layer’s porous. Perspiration passes through it and is processed in the next layers, which include heat exchange filaments and salt precipitators. Body movements – walking, even just breathing – provide the pumping force. Urine and feces are processed in the thigh pads. Reclaimed water circulates to catchpockets from which you draw it through this tube in the clip at the neck. In the open desert, filters are worn across the face. You breathe in through the mouth filter, out through the nose plugs. In a Fremen suit human bodies lose no more than a thimbleful of moisture a day.”

At that moment, a shrill call filtered through the window sills high up in the walls: “Soo-soo-Sook! Soo-soo-Sook!” And then: “Ikhut-eigh! Ikhut-eigh!” A water-seller, Jim remembered from one of their travel guide-style briefings. A pointed reminder that it was water, not Spice that was the most valuable commodity on the planet.

The idea of drinking water directly reclaimed of your own piss didn’t seem very appealing. But even Jim could see how advantageous that kind of suit was on a desert planet. On a bigger scale, the reclamation systems of the Enterprise were not that different. “Efficient,” he commented to express an appropriate appreciation for the gift. “Cool engineering.”

Spock, however, looked grossed out. “As my physique is perfectly adapted to desert climate, I do not require such protective gear.”

“But I know you can sweat,” Jim objected. “And ...” He’d been about to add “and you have tear ducts, too”, but then he reconsidered.

“And I am in absolute control of my bodily functions,” Spock interrupted. “Captain, a suit like that could have a negative impact on my body.”

“He’s right, Jim,” Bones put in, eyeing his brand-new stillsuit with revulsion. “And for the first time in my life I wish I were Vulcan, too.”

♦

Stardate 2260.210, 1000 hours, Arrakeen, Arrakis

The shuttlecraft was big and battered, more carryall than shuttle, and not meant to transport people. Jim, Halleck, and Spock got to sit on proper seats behind the pilots. The others had to make do with benches alongside the walls of the craft. The simplistic strap-ons might snap their necks in case of an accident instead of saving any lives.

The Shield Wall was a mountain chain that protected the area around Arrakeen from the worst of the desert storms, as well as from worms. Most of the commercial Spice production was situated just beyond the shelter of the mountains, to give miners a place to run to when a worm attacked.

Beyond the shattered black fault lines of the Shield Wall, the barren rocks melted into sand. Crescents of dunes like waves of an ocean of sand ebbed and flowed in endless undulations to the heat-addled horizon. Now and again splotches of darker shades marked a spot that was not sand. Spice fields, perhaps, or cliffs.

“That dust cloud ahead is what we’re here for,” Halleck said. “It’s a factory crawler. The cloud means it’s in the process of mining Spice. Sand and spice are sucked up, and after the Spice has
been centrifugally removed, the sand is expelled. There’s no other cloud quite like it.”

“I see two ... three ... small skims up in the air around it,” Jim said, squinting in the desert-bright glare outside. “What are they?”

“Spotters,” Halleck explained. “They watch for wormsigns, so the harvester can get the hell out of there before it’s gobbled up for lunch.”

“Worms get that big?” Jim asked, shocked and awed at the same time.

Spock’s scientific curiosity was more pragmatic. “What does a wormsign look like?”

“If you’re lucky, it appears like a sandwave moving towards you,” Kynes put in from his perch diagonally behind them. “Big worms travel deep underground. Without seismic probes the only warning you get is a burp as it swallows you whole.”

“A sandwave, you said?” Spock interrupted. “Such as a ripple on the sand?” He pointed to the right.

Still distant, toward the horizon, but closing in on the harvester, the sands shifted in linear, rippling motions. Jim thought it looked like a big fish close to the surface of a pond.

“That’s a worm all right,” Halleck said. “And a big one.” He leaned forward to alert the copilot.

The man grabbed a microphone from the panel at the front and punched out a frequency selection. “Calling crawler at Delta Ajax niner,” he said, as soon as the connection went live. “Wormsign warning. Crawler at Delta Ajax niner. Wormsign warning. This is an unlisted TUA flight around two miles north-east of you. Acknowledge, please.”

First the speaker produced only hissing and statics, then a voice: “Acknowledged. Thank you.”

“They sound pretty cool about it,” Bones said, his eyes wide, his pale face distinctly green. Jim felt for his friend. The condition of the shuttle was not confidence inspiring; the pronouncement that a big worm could gulp down a whole spice factory without chewing even less so.

The copilot was talking into the microphone again: “Wormsign is on intercept course, your position, estimated contact twenty-five minutes.”

“Got it. Sharp estimate, too. Thanks.” The connection was severed.

“What happens now?” Jim asked.

“Carryall comes to pick up the factory crawler; the spotters will pick up any miners left on the sand.” Halleck nodded in the direction of the sand cloud. “Look.”

As he spoke, the sand cloud was dissipating to reveal not just the sandscraped contours of a beetle-shaped, funnel-snouted Spice harvester, but another big brute of a craft behind it. The carryall hovered for a moment above the harvester, then it connected with the other craft. Together, both machines lifted slowly, awkwardly from the sand.

The sand was dark at the spot. It looked almost wet. “That’s a rich Spice bed right there,” Halleck muttered. “Damn that worm.”

“It will be lost?” Spock asked.

“Wait and see.”
They watched as the spotters touched down to pick up the few men still on the surface. Just in time, too. The sandwave rolling toward the dark area of sand was building up height and gaining speed. Slithering sounds accompanied the tsunami of sand rushing towards the Spice bed.

“Shit,” Jim cried, his attention captured by movement on the ground. Three dark spots were running away from the Spice bed “There’s someone still down there! Where are the damn spotters?”

The spotters were nowhere in sight. The smuggler cursed under his breath.

“Get us down,” Jim ordered. “There’s more than enough room in here.”

“But not enough time,” Kynes said. “The worm is nearly upon us.”

“Nearly is good enough,” Jim snapped. “Down!”


The shuttlecraft dropped so suddenly that Bones looked ready to pass out. They seemed to sweep right over the heads of the running men, the shadow of the towering wave of sand closing in behind them. Then they touched down with a bruising thud. Kynes and Tuek dragged the door open, while Giotto, Kaplan, and Idaho leaned out, grabbed hands and dragged frantically struggling bodies up and into the shuttle.

“Close the damn doors,” Halleck shouted.

Ensign Hendorff and Ensign Shea pushed. With a shuddering clang, the doors slid into place. On the floor, the last of the spice miners gasped, “Blast off! The damn thing’s almost here.”

As the pilot bore down on the handle, the engines groaned and shuddered. The shuttlecraft jerked upwards so sharply that Jim was pressed painfully into his seat, and the unseated men in the back were thrown to the ground.

Spock touched his elbow, directing his attention back outside. The dark spot of sand was shifting, sinking into a gigantic, swirling maelstrom. Faster and faster the whirlpool moved. Sand and dust filled the air in a sudden storm. Instead of sand, Jim found himself staring into an abyss. A dark hole gaped beneath the shuttlecraft. White spikes taller than a grown man glistened and glinted in the glare of sunlight. The maw had to be at least twice as wide as the harvester was. The worm seemed to roar at them, but Jim couldn’t hear a sound. Suddenly, the air was thick with the cloying smell of Spice. His eyes burned and teared up. Coughing, he rubbed at his eyes. When he could see again, a dark, elongated shape with ring-like markings around its body was sinking back into the sands, as smoothly as if it were moving through water. Moments later, the worm was gone, leaving a trail of undulating dunes behind it. The sand in its wake was bright and yellow. Nothing was left of the rich dark hue of the Spice bed.

“Bless the Maker and His water,” Kynes intoned. “Bless the coming and going of Him. May His passage cleanse the world. May He keep the world for His people.”

“Bloody Fremen heathen,” Halleck muttered. Then he turned to Jim with a crooked grin. “So how did you like your first worm, son?”
On Stardate 2260.213, or the first of August 2260 according to the standard Terran calendar, the away team of the USS Enterprise on Arrakis approached Sietch Tabr, one of the main Fremen communities deep in the desert between the Tuono Basin and the Funeral Plain.

In spite of Bones’s best efforts, Jim had managed to get a sunburn, though thanks to the Fremen stillsuit only on his face and neck and on the backs of his hands. Thankfully, it also wasn’t bad enough for Bones to insist on using the dermal regenerator. Jim hated that thing, it made his skin crawl. He’d much rather run around looking red as a lobster was much better. Especially because he was pretty sure that his current appearance amused the hell out of Spock. At least Jim thought he could detect a very, very faint crinkling at the corners of his eyes every time Spock looked at him. Jim imagined it might mean that Spock was laughing himself silly inside by Vulcan standards. Strangely enough, he liked that idea.

Jim looked up the cliff they were supposed to climb. He’d been told that Sietch Tabr was located in some “rocky outcroppings” in the desert. Outcroppings, my ass, he thought. That’s a bloody mountain. A massive rocky island, randomly rising up above an ocean of sand. A natural fortress against worms and storms. The only way in was the steep, narrow cleft ahead of them. The chasm led so deep into the rocks that just a narrow slit of blue sky remained visible above the sheer crags high above them.

“Sietch,” Jim murmured, as he climbed the steep stairs behind Spock, tasting the sound of the Fremen word on his tongue.

Behind him, Uhura must have heard him. “It means ‘a meeting place in time of danger’. Very fitting for this place, don’t you think, Captain?”

He couldn’t argue with that. If only it wasn’t hotter than the fires of any kind of hell he couldn’t care to imagine, and an endless climb to get there ... He was really glad when they reached a wide cave at last. The room was low, with a domed ceiling, and lit with strange, glowing round stones. A kind of bio-luminescent rocks that produced a calm, unwavering light similar to Terran moonlight. Pretty.

Then their Fremen guide, a guy called Jamis, led them through the cave and then into another one. This cave opened up to a wide oval of bright blue sky on the other side with a breathtaking view of a sheltered basin that was perhaps seven miles wide. The purple-golden shadows of the desert sunset trailed across a few carefully tended vegetable gardens and orchards, surrounded by large fields planted at regular intervals with strange little bushes that nestled into individual hollows for extra protection from the harsh climate. Fragile trees ducked scrappy and wind-swept behind sheltering dry stone walls. Whatever growth the fields sported was sparse, straggling in the heat of the day and the cold of the night. Not an Eden in the midst of the desert, but just a garden; patiently, painstakingly wrested from a world that didn’t like green and growing things. Jim couldn’t help feeling respect for the Fremen. Not that he hadn’t respected them before; they were a proud people and ferocious fighters – it was not a good idea to underestimate them. But the universe was full of proud warriors. This almost-oasis was much more impressive.

On the other side of the basin, the cliffs were dotted with many holes, doors and windows. Most of them were illuminated with the red light of fire or the white glow of those strange globe-things. It was impossible to say how deep those caverns delved into the surrounding mountain walls. Jim guessed there might be anything from four to ten thousand people living in those cave houses. Their Fremen guide gestured proudly. “Welcome to Sietch Tabr.”
On the other side of the basin, Naib Stilgar, the leader of the Fremen met them. “Naib means ‘one who has sworn never to be taken alive by the enemy’,” Uhura whispered. Jim looked at the tall, robed man, at those fierce blue-in-blue eyes, glowing eerily in pits stained black to ward off the glare of sun, at hawkish features, a savage black beard and mustache. *Never to be taken alive ...* Jim figured that was the perfect title for this man.

Jim introduced himself and the away team. Stilgar just nodded. As if there was no question that they knew who he was. As if he couldn’t care less that strange offworlders had shown up on his doorstep. (Offworlders who wore bright uniform tops that fit way too tightly over the stillsuits and accordingly looked kind of silly. Offworlders who wanted to buy a shitload of drugs from him.) But to the whole away team’s surprise – and Spock’s palpable discomfiture – the Fremen leader bowed with practiced reverence to the first officer, before he turned on his heels to lead them into the cavern system and hopefully to dinner. Jim wondered if Sybok’s colony wasn’t as secret as they thought it was, never mind that after over two weeks in orbit around Arrakis their own scans still hadn’t picked up any sign of it.

First Stilgar led them into a huge foyer type of cave with a beautifully carved vaulted ceiling and many glittering glowglobes for atmosphere. Fremen women offered them basins of precious scented water and towels. The example of Stilgar and their guide made clear that it was expected of them to change out of their stillsuits. In front of everyone, and no separate changing cubicles for the ladies. Jim suppressed a groan. Personally, he had no issues with public nudity. Other members of the away team might feel different, though. Oh well. They’d just have to get over themselves. After all it was for a good cause: dinner. Only, putting those suits back on was a major pain in the rear. Perhaps they could get away with beaming back up from the basin instead of going back out into the desert? The Fremen weren’t enemies, even if they were not yet friends ...

Once they had changed into their uniforms and much more comfortable, they were beckoned into another big cave, a banquet hall from the looks of it. Thick blue and green carpets covered the floors, tapestries in similar colors hid the walls of the cave. Pillows and cushions in different patterns and shades of black surrounded low stone tables. More glowglobes in golden hues drenched the room in their warm, unflickering light. Incense perfumed the air. Spice-laced, of course. It was everywhere on Arrakis, in the food, in the air, in the ground you walked upon. Strangely that was not as unpleasant as Jim had anticipated. Perhaps because the concentration was many times lower than in the most diluted form of the drug. Or maybe because he really was more than a mere eighty-five light-years away from where he’d been when he’d tripped out on Spice the last time on a regular basis.

Once they had settled more or less gracefully on the pillows and cushions, Stilgar rose to his feet at the end of the table. A Fremen woman walked up to him. In her hands she held an ornate silver tray with a heavy ceremonial goblet and a large carafe. Stilgar picked up the decanter and poured a liquid into the goblet that looked like water. Then he picked up the chalice with both hands.

“We are sitting down as strangers here tonight,” he said and gestured first to Jim and the others, then to the Fremen on the other side of the table. “It is my hope that we shall rise as friends. Until then we will not speak of politics or trade or religion, but learn to know each other.”

“*Bi-lal kaifa,*” the Fremen intoned, while most of the away team just nodded. Bones added an emphatic “Hear, hear”, and Spock a soft “*Kaiidth*”.

He took a deep swallow from the goblet, then offered it to Jim.

“Stop,” Bones interrupted. “No offence intended, but this is standard procedure.”

“We would not harm guests in our halls,” Stilgar snarled.
Bones scowled at the Fremen leader, undaunted. “I want to believe you. But that doesn’t help. I still have to make sure that this stuff won’t kill the captain. He ah... has a delicate constitution.”

“That’s bullshit,” Jim said, rolling his eyes. “Just a few allergies. Bones, I think it’s just water with a bit Spice. But there shouldn’t be a lot in there. No stronger than the alcohol content in beer. Please forgive the doctor, Stilgar. He’s a...”

Bones studied the tricorder. “Yeah, water and a small dosage of Spice, the real thing, though, this time. Sure it won’t send you tripping?”

Jim bowed to Stilgar and took the goblet from his hands. He drank deeply. Then he passed the goblet to Bones for revenge. He hoped the Spice in the water wasn’t strong enough to do to him whatever it was Spice did (besides making sure that baby Spocks didn’t die – though in terms of saving graces that was kind of a big thing with him; even if his addiction resurfaced now, he’d just suck it up and deal – after all, he’d already managed once, and it hadn’t been too bad except for the eyes). Jim sighed. Of course there were worse things than Spice-blue eyes. But he’d just started recognizing himself again when he looked into the mirror. Damn.

The meal they shared with the Fremen went rather well. All food was simple and fresh, nothing replicated and nothing that caused Jim to break out in hives. As first course they were served a kind of onion soup, only it was made of grass. Onion grass. That was followed by many small bowls with salads and dips and things. The main course was desert hare roasted on a spit, which was not as stringy as expected, but rather delicious. There were also assorted vegetables, different kinds of bread to go with the hare, grilled cacti and cooked roots and things, so Spock didn’t have to starve. Light Spice beer, Spiced water, and mint tea were offered as beverages. Dessert turned out the best course yet, with something called “tabara”, some kind of triangular honeyed root cakes sprinkled with sugar and dried seeds and crystallized fruit. It was served with the ubiquitous Spice coffee, of course, as well as Spice liquor. Even Spock liked them, though he dared to take only two tiny bites because sugar tended to mess him up worse than what even one glass of Romulan Ale did to Scotty.

Stuffed and just a little bit buzzed from the Spice, Jim leaned back against the padded wall behind him. So far their stay on Arrakis was doing a lot to restore his faith in the universe. Not all planets were like New Sydney. Not all away missions had to end like Lieutenant Paul’s on Pyrithia. Jim harbored no illusions where the smugglers were concerned. But they were guys he could deal with, fair and square (with the necessary underhandedness and attempted blackmail thrown into the mix). He was also more than a little fascinated with the Fremen – they were the kind of people he’d dreamed of meeting when he’d fantasized about exploring new worlds as a kid. And he got a kick out of seeing Spock in the natural habitat of a Vulcan.

After dinner, a Fremen girl brought Halleck a weird stringed instrument that had Spock leaning forward with interest. The smuggler reacted with a crooked smile. “It’s a baliset. Nine strings, tuned to the Chusuk scale. A linear descendant of the zithra.”

“An instrument favored by Orion nobility,” Uhura murmured when she caught Jim’s curious glance.

Halleck must have heard her remark, because he met Jim’s gaze, his eye cold and proud. The beet-colored scar along his jaw stood out in the clear light of the glowglobes. A whip, after all, Jim thought sadly. But the smuggler just shrugged and started playing. After a short instrumental piece, he launched into a song:

“Orchards and vineyards,
And full breasted houris,
And a cup overflowing before me.  
Why do I babble of battles,  
And mountains reduced to dust?  
Why do I feel these tears?

Heavens stand open  
And scatter their riches;  
My hands need but gather their wealth.  
Why do I think of an ambush,  
And poison in molten cup?  
Why do I feel my years?

Love's arms beckon  
With their naked delights,  
And Eden's promise of ecstasies.  
Why do I remember the stars,  
Dream of old transgressions …  
And why do I sleep with fears?”

A love song. In Jim’s opinion the lyrics were more than a bit over the top. Except perhaps the last verse, which hit a little too close to home. But Halleck’s playing was exquisite, and his voice – smooth and spicy at the same time.

Jim couldn’t help himself. He turned his head, curious to see how Spock reacted to this impromptu concert. He knew Spock loved music, that music had been a revered art on Vulcan, and would be again on New Vulcan. But he’d never seen that for himself. It was even better than seeing Spock in the desert’s glare. Music ... softened him and brought a gleam to his dark, hyper-expressive eyes. Jim’s breath caught in his throat. Desire raced through his body and pulsed in his cock.

Then the song was over, and Halleck put the instrument away. Stilgar rose to his feet while the other Fremen shifted into a kneeling, submissive position.

“Now that we know each other in bread and water and Spice and song, it is only proper that you should meet the Sayyadina of Sieth Tabr, our priestess and friend of Shiav: T'Luminareth.”

Through the archway behind Stilgar a tall woman in black robes and with glowing blue-in-blue eyes entered and bowed gracefully to the assembled Fremen and offworlders.

At first Jim could only stare at her – at her ears, at her eyebrows – speechless. Then he turned to his first officer. “Spock! Spock!” he whispered urgently. “That wise woman, the Sayyadina, she’s – she’s Vulcan!”

“... I can see that, Captain.”

♦

Love's arms beckon  
With their naked delights,  
And Eden's promise of ecstasies.  
Why do I remember the stars,  
Dream of old transgressions …  
And why do I sleep with fears?  
– Gurney Halleck, in “Dune” by Frank Herbert
“Dune”, its settings, creatures, concepts, characters, and drugs belong to Frank Herbert/Frank Herbert’s Estate. Gurney Halleck’s song is quoted verbatim from the book. Parts of a few Dune scenes, including the dialogue, follow similar scenes in the book closely.

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Safe In Our Own Paradise

Chapter Summary

Sulu contemplates his chances of winning the “Angry Klingons” championship. (They were better before this briefing.) ♦ Jim and Spock are finally on their way to meet Sybok. When a worm attacks, passion flares. Or maybe just hormones. The result is definitely uncomfortable inside a tightly fitting stillsuit. ♦ Sybok may not be a messiah, but he’s definitely one of a kind. Jim thinks wanting to strangle your older brother is perfectly logical. ♦ To get men talking about their feelings is always difficult. If one of the men involved is half-Vulcan, all bets are off. Unless you’ve got a sneaky El-Aurian on your side ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Safe In Our Own Paradise

Stardate 2260.243, 2000 hours, Deck 10, Conference Lounge One

“If you think I don’t know what you’re doing under the table with your PADDs and comm units, think again,” Captain Kirk said, looking vaguely pissed off. Holding up his hand, he ticked off on his fingers: “Angry Klingons. Tetris with tribbles. Glomps vs. Gorn. You won’t beat my high scores anyway, so you can put your hands on top of the table and pay attention to this briefing like good little Starfleet officers now. Or who did you think ‘IWillKickYourAss1701’ is?” He frowned at them. “Of course I can also ask Commander Paul to rethink shore leave for the bridge teams. Up to you, ladies and gentlemen, up to you.”

“What?!” Scotty muttered next to Sulu and shot him an indignant glare. “I thought that was you!”

Hikaru Sulu did the only thing he could. He put his PADD in front of him. Then he rested his forearms on the table left and right of the device and concentrated on not balling his hands into fists. There went his Angry Klingons championship.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Sulu.” Kirk ignored the other PADDs and comm units that were pointedly arranged on top of the conference table. He turned to Commander Paul, who didn’t seem to know if he should laugh or add a stern glare of his own. “They’re all yours.” Kirk sat down.

“Thank you, Captain.” Commander Paul rose to his feet. “Since we’ve made a lot of progress during the last few days, today’s briefing should be comparatively short and painless.”

Chekov muffled a groan of disbelief that was thankfully ignored by the commander.

“To recapitulate: the trade negotiations with the Arrakis Trade Union and the Fremen are well under way. I expect agreement will be reached soon, and that contracts will be signed within a week or two. The smugglers are mostly grandstanding right now, pretending they can screw the Federation over. But they do want our pergium supplies, and they really want that trading license
for Federation starbases. It’s much more convenient to conduct what legal trading they do without the danger of being shot or imprisoned on sight.”

Hikaru snorted. He liked Commander Paul’s sarcasm a lot. Paul shot him a quick grin but went on smoothly, “The Fremen are a more difficult case. Basically, their price is breaking Prime Directive.”

Not everyone on the bridge teams kept up with the trade negotiations, so that snag in proceedings caused some muttering. Especially phrased that bluntly. With the nonchalance of more than thirty years in Starfleet service, Paul elaborated, “The Fremen want the Federation to help them radically terraforming parts of the planet. Turn the desert into paradise, that sort of thing – the universal utopia of the disadvantaged. Under normal circumstances that might effectively put an end to negotiations. There’s no immediate risk to the population; the Fremen have survived in those deserts down there for thousands of years. If they want to change their environment, it’s up to them to develop the necessary technology or the technological means to reach others who may help them. Those are the rules. There’s a good reason why we have them.”

“And that reason is not that rules are meant to be broken,” the commander said with a stern look directed at the captain. Sulu almost expected Kirk to object at this point. But although he frowned, the captain remained silent. “However,” Paul added with a wry smile, “reality rarely plays by the book. Arrakis is a contaminated planet. The Fremen are already in the official Starfleet registry of contaminated cultures. That’s our saving grace – or there’d be a lot more bureaucratic hassle. As it is, we expect the all clear without any delay beyond subspace lag. I anticipate that we’ll get orders to stay at least another month for a first evaluation of the planet’s climate, biology, and geology in preparation for the terraforming units.”

Commander Paul permitted himself a slight smile. “Once a preliminary agreement with the smugglers and the Fremen has been reached, I’ll also be able to schedule some real shore leave for everyone.”

“Not just a few hours dirtside, sir?” Leslie asked, hopefully. “A real vacation?”

“Yes,” Paul said. “Though not for you, Mr. Leslie, or for Commander Sulu, I regret to say. This is the last chance to get some of your exams graded and rated directly. Commander Spock has been adamant to make use of the opportunity.”

Hikaru’s good mood evaporated. He agreed with Spock’s reasoning that a fully qualified alternate command team was an advantage for the Enterprise on her five-year mission. He was also willing to concede that his efforts were advantageous for advancing his career. There was only one catch, and he couldn’t seem to get over it. The whole scheme was based on a worst case scenario. On the possibility that both Captain Kirk and Commander Spock were gone. Gone for good. And that ... Sulu stared at his PADD. He detested the very idea, and he disliked his sentimentality concerning it. He’d signed up for the five-year mission with Captain Kirk in center chair and Commander Spock at his side. That was how things were supposed to be; how he liked things to be.

Commander Paul didn’t seem to notice. He went on with his agenda for this briefing. Only Nyota met Hikaru’s eyes with a darkly comforting gaze.

“Captain Kirk and Commander Spock will be on an away mission on the planet for the next few days,” Commander Paul went on. “Commander Sulu, as you’ll have the conn in their absence, can you go over the schedule for the next week, please?”

Hikaru stood. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Jim and Spock exchanging a glance. Whatever they were up to, it was important. And ... The way they looked at each other ... Huh. Really?
He cleared his throat. “All right,” he said and switched on the screen. “Here are the preliminary shift rosters ...”

Stardate 2260.244, 0800 hours, The Great Flat, Arrakis

Jim wondered why in hell no one on this damn planet dealt in beaming coordinates. The first time they had to go anywhere on Arrakis, the method of transport was always via the most cumbersome means available. They’d flown that battered, unbalanced shuttlecraft out to the Spice crawler. They’d ridden uncomfortable, restive Kulons – desert donkeys only too happy to take a bite out of your ass if they could reach it – to the Shield Wall. Today, it was hiking through the deep desert to Sietch Jacurutu, the secret Vulcan colony on Dune. (Sadly, his attempts to score a sandworm ride hadn’t been successful so far. But he was working on that.)

Jim didn’t really mind the exercise, though, now that he’d moved beyond the boiled lobster stage and built up a nice tan. Especially since the trip provided ample opportunity to watch Spock in the desert sun. He always liked looking at Spock. That was a simple fact. But to see Spock in the desert ... Jim couldn’t quite pinpoint why that was so special. Possibly because the Enterprise was their chosen home, but space wasn’t a natural habitat for anyone. Perhaps because human beings did not enjoy such a special relationship with a certain climate – general factors such as the composition of a planet’s atmosphere and its gravity were more important for Humans to thrive. Maybe Jim was a bit in awe of Spock belonging to an alien planet like that, on such an instinctive level.

Anyway, Jim had been looking forward to this expedition so much that he didn’t even complain about getting up long before Alpha shift started. They set out from Sietch Tabr way before sunrise, Sayyadina T’Luminareth, Naib Stilgar, Spock and Jim. First the pilot of a small helicopter-type shuttlecraft dropped them off on some rocks deep in the desert. From there, they had to proceed on foot.

“It is a pilgrimage,” T’Luminareth told them, Vulcan-solemn. “And the highest honor we can bestow on an offworlder. Few have been invited to see Sietch Jacurutu.”

“Fewer still have been allowed to meet the Lisan al-Gaib,” Stilgar added.

The Fremen taught them the art of walking the sands of Arrakis. Steps and movements had to remain without rhyme or rhythm, or worms would come. So every step had to sound random, purposeless. That method of progress drove Spock crazy. Not very surprising – he was all about control and concentration, focus and efficiency. On Jim, sandwalking had the opposite effect. The randomness of movement got him closer to a meditative state than most anything he’d attempted so far. He slid down a dune, then stopped. After a few heartbeats, he moved again, only to halt once more after another breath or two. He imagined himself as a handful of sand blown on and on and on, scattered over and over and over again. After a few hours, he felt close to the desert. Jim wondered if that was how Spock experienced Arrakis when his gaze turned blank, when he grew inhumanely still, his face turned up to the sky. If Spock became a part of the desert in those moments, soaking in the heat from sand and sun in a primal, profound connection. Throughout their journey, Spock remained right in front of him, too; solid, straight, and just out of reach. Sometimes Jim fancied he could even smell him, which was of course rubbish. But he still imagined the scent. A mixture of skin and sun and sand and ... just Spock.

Late in the afternoon they reached a flat stretch of sand. Beyond, they could just make out the beginnings of another rocky formation like the one that housed Sietch Tabr. Jim rubbed his forehead with his sleeve and exhaled with a muffled snort into the nose plugs of his stillsuit.
Finally. Hiking in the desert is no walk in the park. Jim winced. *If that’s the best pun I can come up with, it’s really time we’re getting somewhere.*

“That’s drumsand ahead of us,” Stilgar said and pointed at the sandy plain ahead. At Spock’s raised eyebrow, he added an explanation, “That kind of sand resonates similar to the membrane of a drum. It amplifies sounds. Sietch Jacurutu is surrounded by it. Ahead of us is the safest, shortest passage. However, our steps will attract a worm. We have to hurry.”

“Cool,” Jim said. “Like a castle moat. Only with sandworms instead of ‘gators or piranhas.” He thought of the worm they’d seen when they’d flown out into the desert to visit that Spice crawler. The giant maw full of man-high tusks burping a cloud of raw Spice at them. Excitement welled up in a rush of adrenaline. He didn’t even need to look at Spock to know his first officer was scowling, making his best turtle face of disapproval over Jim risking life and/or limb for no good reason.

“I’ll stake out a thumper – a device with a rhythmic clapper – on the far edge of the drumsand to divert any worms nearby,” Stilgar went on. “The thumper calls to any worm in the vicinity, but it also distracts them from the sounds of our steps. At least for a little while.”

“And then?”

Stilgar smiled. “Then we run.”

Twenty minutes later Stilgar had planted the thumper, and they were waiting at the edge of the drumsand. Jim had removed the nose plugs and the mouth-filter of his suit. Those add-ons might be awesome for preserving moisture, but they hindered his breathing. He didn’t think that Stilgar would put them in mortal danger. That kind of thing was bad for trade negotiations; and the Fremen really wanted the Federation to help with their terraforming dreams. But he also didn’t want to end up as worm bait just because he couldn’t catch his breath.

“Start running at the first beat of the clapper,” Stilgar ordered. “Don’t stop until you’ve reached the rocks.”

“Right.” Jim’s heart started pounding before the thumper did. When it did, Jim jumped. Wow, was that thing *loud!* A Terran drum kit had nothing on it. The beats resonated almost painfully inside his ears, inside his skull.

The Sayyadina was the first on the drumsand. If Jim had thought the thumper was noisy, drumsand took drumming to a new level. A whole-body experience of percussion from the sound of it. Jim hit the sand and took off after the Fremen-Vulcan priestess. *Boom, boom, boom!* Each step reverberated through his bones. He ran. *Boom, boom, boom!* Spock remained at his side, while Stilgar took up the rear. Through the barrage of beats, thumper claps and footsteps, a new sound threaded, an abrasive slithering, first a whisper, then a hiss, then a storm unleashed right under their feet ...

“Worm!” Stilgar cried. “Faster!”

The dry sand, slipping and sliding under his feet, hampered Jim’s progress. Already he could smell the worm. The tang of raw Spice in the air choked him, made him gag. A renewed surge of adrenaline translated into a desperate dash toward the rocky ledge in front of him. His first step on the hard surface jarred his stride. He lurched and skidded on the pebble-littered slope. Behind them, the worm roared up from the sand. The ground shook beneath their feet. Jim stumbled. He was falling, tumbling toward the desert – but Spock grabbed him at the elbow and dragged him upward with an iron grip, into a narrow cleft, up a steep flight of stairs, into a cave. Behind them,
the sand exploded into a Spice-drenched turmoil of darkness and ivory fangs.

The noise of the thumper stopped, but Jim wouldn’t be surprised if his heartbeat was still loud enough to challenge the worm, the way it pounded in his throat. At the small of his back, he could feel Spock’s heart thudding even through the padded stillsuit. Instantly, the adrenaline rushing through his veins translated into arousal. Spock held him as if he’d never let him go. Jim’s dick pulsed inside the too tight stillsuit. When he gasped for breath, it had nothing to do with the exertion of running, and everything with Spock ... And Spock let go of him with such a violent jerk that Jim almost lost his footing.

Fuck.

Heat suffused him. His cheeks burned.

Damn touch-telepathy! Obviously not even a Fremen stillsuit could curtail a certain kind of emotional transference. Spock was positively shaking ...

Jim took three, four awkward steps back toward the opening of the cave. There, he leaned against the wall and stared outside, trying to catch his breath, doing his level best to will away his erection. Outside, in the wake of the worm, waves of sand flowed into crescent patterns. A few minutes later, the desert lay silent and bare in the brilliant glare of Mu Draconis.

“Welcome to Sietch Jacurutu,” T’Luminareth said, a smile audible in her voice.

At last Jim had himself under control again. “Good to be here,” he replied, turning around. He couldn’t help himself; instinctively, he looked at Spock, not at the priestess. Spock was still flushed, his cheeks tinged green, and he was breathing hard. Jim could make out the rise and fall of his chest even in the dim light of the cave. I want you, Jim thought. Damn, I had no idea I could want someone like that. For the first time since he’d been sixteen or so, he wondered if it was actually possible to die from sexual frustration.

Stardate 2260.244, 1700 hours, Sietch Jacurutu, Arrakis

They met Shiav Sybok, the Voice of the Outer World, in a room that reminded Jim very much of the great hall of Sietch Tabr. Massive round columns hewn into ring-shaped, wormlike segments supported a vaulted ceiling. Their capitals were crowned with carved rows of tusks. Subtle crescent patterns like waves of sand left behind by a worm adorned the yellow stone above their heads. Thick carpets and tapestries with utopian plant patterns in bright hues of blue and green added splashes of color to the cave. The cool moon-like light of glowglobes illuminated the vast room.

Jim already thought Spock was intense (and he rather liked that about Spock). But Spock had nothing on Sybok. Now, Jim knew from experience that there were perfectly ordinary human beings who could dominate a crowd just by entering a room. Khan, for example. Pike, up to a point. Those types didn’t even have to say something. They just had to be there and breathe. You just felt their presence, the force of their personality. And Sybok? Bloody punch in the gut, that guy.

Jim knew Sybok was just six years older than Spock, but it might just as well have been twenty-six. Part of it was all that hair, he guessed. Sybok wore a shaggy beard, and his hair flowed in a lion’s mane down to his shoulders. That kind of style tended to make people look older than they were. It was definitely not the skin. Arrakis climate might turn human skin into leather, but it had little effect on Vulcans. No, what made Sybok look older was the raw openness of his face. Laugh lines crinkled the corners of his eyes. Brackets of bitterness framed his mouth. A worried frown was engraved across the bridge of his nose. And Jim was willing to bet that one look from those piercing, Spice-blue eyes could make a sandworm heel.
“Sa-kai.” Sybok opened his arms. He met Spock in three long strides and pulled him into a tight embrace. “Tushah nash-veh k’du. The death of our people echoes in our hearts. I felt your soul cry out.”

Spock froze. Jim was positive he’d stopped breathing. He was probably mortified by his brother’s emotional outburst. He was very obviously overwhelmed by its physical expression. Jim was not prepared for the growl that emerged from Spock’s throat. “Unhand me. Now.”

Sybok dropped his arms and stepped back. “Sanu-tobeg-tor n’nash-ve,” he said. “I respect your pain.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “Then you have changed more than I thought possible, Sybok.”

Sybok, Vulcan outcast and Fremen messiah, sighed audibly. “I was an idiot, brother. Do you want that in writing?”

For a long moment, Spock just stared at Sybok, and Jim wondered what was going on inside his brain. Was he busy controlling the universal, perfectly normal and healthy urge to strangle an older brother? Or going over irregular Klingon verbs for a lark and the soothing effect? At last Spock nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I would appreciate that.”

Sybok laughed. Loud, relieved un-Vulcan laughter. He walked past Spock and held out his hand in greeting. “Captain Kirk, I am pleased to meet you.”

At the touch of Sybok’s hand, a flash of lightning split Jim’s skull. With a scream, Jim found himself on his knees, clutching his head with both hands. “FUCK! What the hell was that?”

“Spock, no!” Jim stumbled to his feet just in time before Spock could hurl himself at his brother. Fratricide was not on their agenda today, and Sybok looked much like Jim felt that moment ... chewed up and spit out again, plus pretty horrified. “I don’t think he did that on purpose.”

If Jim hadn’t clung to Spock for support because his knees weren’t quite up to the task of keeping him upright, Spock might not have listened. But given the choice between beating up his brother and helping his captain stay on his feet, he didn’t move and even wrapped a strong arm around Jim’s back instead.

“Emotional transference,” Sybok explained hoarsely. “I am sorry, Captain. That was most – most unusual. It was not my intention to harm you.”

“But you never touched me there ...” Jim lifted his hand to the left side of his face, tracing the primary meld points.

“What do you know of emotional transference?” Spock demanded, his voice a tense, pissed-off whisper. “Who melded with you?”

Jim frowned. Not a topic he could discuss in front of Sybok. He shook his head. “Not now, Spock.”

Sybok stiffened. He drew back, standing at attention, his hands hidden behind his back. Sybok winced. Then he cleared his throat and beckoned them towards the raised platform at the end of the hall. Pillows and cushions were scattered around a delicately carved stone table. “Please, sit down. You did not provide many details why you requested this meeting, but I expect there is much to discuss ...”

A few minutes later, Jim and Spock were seated across from Sybok. T’Saralonde, Sybok’s wife – a delicate Vulcan woman with Spice-blue eyes and a mischievous smile (a smiling, flirty Vulcan!
how odd, and how pretty!) – served them tabara and baklava and grapes. She poured Spice coffee for Jim and Sybok and mint tea for Spock. When she was done, she withdrew again into the shadows between the columns.

Jim took a sip of coffee. Then, somewhat belatedly, he remembered his manners. “Thank you for seeing us, Sybok. I have been given to understand it’s a special honor for us to be allowed to visit Sietch Jacurutu and the,” he hesitated before he attempted to pronounce the Fremen term correctly, “Lisan al-Gaib.”

“In Fremen mythology, Jacurutu has always been the home of outcasts and rebels,” Sybok said and raised a slanted eyebrow at his brother. “It seemed a fitting home for a Ktorr Skann.”

“Then I assume the accolade Lisan al-Gaib seemed a fitting substitute for the designation as Shiav of Vulcan?” Spock asked coldly. “Is this, then, Sha Ka Ree?” Although no syllable held even a hint of emotion, Jim rather thought that “this” would not translate as a compliment.

“Ah.” Sybok carefully placed his tiny ivory beaker with Spice coffee on the table. “No.” He laced his fingers in the traditional gesture of Vulcan meditation. “I am not a messiah. There is no Shiav; there is no Lisan al-Gaib.”

He stared into the shadows. “There is no paradise save the one we carry within us.”

For a heartbeat, he met Jim’s eyes, as if he wanted to add something. About that weird emotional transference, perhaps? But when Sybok went on, he addressed Spock again. Primarily, at least. “Messiah myths have been planted on many planets, have been implanted deep in the legends of many species. Humankind knows not just one, but dozens of such stories. The insidious seeds of crusade and jihad can be found in Vulcan, Kyros, Minbari, Thallonian, Bajoran, Fremen, and even Klingon culture – to name but a few.” Sybok shook his head. “I am unable to discern the purpose of this manipulation. But ...” Determination hardened his voice. “... I will not be made its instrument.”

“Fascinating.” Spock raised both eyebrows. “Yet the Fremen still call you Lisan al-Gaib.”

“Not when I can hear it,” Sybok said dryly and shrugged. “It takes more than seventeen years of beneficial and somewhat rational influence to undo the effects of centuries-long propaganda on an illogical species.” He quirked an eyebrow of his own. “Does that reassure you sufficiently, brother, to deliver your message? I do know you are not here merely to buy Spice.”

Spock inclined his head. “Indeed not. I am here as a messenger from New Vulcan, to pass on a request from the High Council.”

Jim wasn’t entirely comfortable with witnessing the whole scene. Sure, he was the captain. Definitely, he was curious. And yeah, he cared. A lot, actually. How could he not, after witnessing the end of Vulcan, after meeting old Spock, after ... falling in love with his Spock? But he wasn’t sure how he felt about getting involved in Spock’s family issues plus Vulcan myths and politics. Of course, if his relationship with Spock was supposed to go anywhere, he had to get used to that. He frowned.

Spock pulled a data stick from a pocket of his uniform pants and held it out to his brother. “The Vulcan Science Academy has compiled research data for you to review. Many survivors,” Spock explained, “struggle with mental problems that are beyond the skills of the few mind healers left alive. Additionally, there are ...” He hesitated. The tension around his eyes tightened into a frown. “... other issues, concerning the – certain times of our life. You know what I am talking about.” He cast a meaningful look at Sybok.
“Disrupted mating cycles?” Sybok asked without hesitation. Spock, however, well, he didn’t wince as obviously as Sybok had before. But he did close his eyes for the fraction of a second. Jim stared, now blatantly curious. Sybok remained unconcerned.

“I’m not surprised,” Sybok said. “It’s a natural biological process to stabilize an endangered population. Impregnation is virtually guaranteed during pon farr. A catastrophe with an existential impact on our species must naturally result in much more frequent mating times. And there are other factors to take into account. The trauma of severed bonds as well as environmental influences. The Cestus system is very different from 40 Eridani A. Seventeen years ago little new research was under way concerning our mating cycles. It would be beneficial if that has changed.”

Sybok regarded Spock expectantly, but Spock shook his head with a not entirely logical jerk. “Up until now, the Time has remained taboo, perhaps to the fatal detriment of our species.”

Jim was thinking fast, adding up the expression “mating cycles”, Spock’s acute discomfort, cultural taboos, and heavily encrypted files about Vulcan biology in the medical database of the Enterprise. So he’d been right to leave that alone. But now he thought that he really needed to talk with Spock. About things. Birds and bees and where baby Vulcans come from — i.e. pon farr.

Sybok’s strange blue eyes softened. He focused his attention on his brother’s distress. “Spock, do not be concerned. New research would have been helpful, but I and my people have made much progress in the last seventeen years. My best healers and I will travel to New Vulcan, and we will do everything in our power to help our people. We will leave as soon as travel arrangements can be made.”

Spock didn’t sigh with relief, but a certain tension melted from his body. “If you will permit us to beam aboard the Enterprise from here, we will inform New Vulcan at once, so that safe means of transportation can be organized.”

“Of course.” Sybok nodded. “Once the trade negotiations are completed, we can travel with Halleck to the next starbase and make our way toward New Vulcan from there, until a rendezvous with a Vulcan ship is possible. I don’t want to lose unnecessary time when lives are at stake.”

“Nemaiyo,” Spock said softly. His relief was palpable, painful in the raw expression in his eyes. “Thank you, brother.”

“But before you leave for tonight, we need to talk about you,” Sybok said, suddenly stern. With narrowed eyes he looked from Spock to Jim and back. “Why are the two of you not Bonded yet?”

Spock ... blinked, shocked speechless, or the Vulcan equivalent thereof.

“What?” Jim blurted. In terms of unexpected intimate questions that one would certainly make every top ten list he could think of.

Sybok ignored his brother’s shock and addressed Jim instead. “When we touched hands, Captain, there was a brief moment of telepathic contact between us. Your mind reached out for me. A purely instinctive reaction of a mind seeking its Bondmate. Perhaps triggered by the remains of what familial connections I once shared with Spock. But because I am not Spock, and not even of his House or clan anymore, your mind lashed out against me. That was the pain you experienced. Though it is unusual that you, a human being should experience any of this.”

“Huh.” Oh yeah, he and Spock had things to discuss. The confirmation that he was drawn to Spock in ways far beyond sexual desire or even the most desperate crush was reassuring rather than shocking. He kind of liked the idea that his mind was attracted to Spock’s. And his brain was
seriously weird since his reboot, so that might make him more receptive to what Bones liked to call
“Vulcan mind voodoo”. “Our doctor keeps telling me that my esper ratings are all messed up. So
that makes sense, sort of, I guess.”

Sybok raised his eyebrows. But after a moment’s consideration, he shook his head. “Yes and no.
For the moment I’ll disregard the fact that a human mind shouldn’t be able to react that way at all
and concentrate on what that phenomenon means for a Vulcan mind.” Sybok focused on Spock
again, glaring at him.

“Brother, what logic is this?” Sybok asked. Worry and reproach sharpened his tone. “You are fam-
telsu, never-bonded. The mating cycles of our people are out of control. Your prospective
Bondmate is human and barely recovered from severe trauma himself, if what I could glean from
one short touch is correct. Your unresolved relationship leaves both your minds at risk, vulnerable
to injury and incursion. And from his reaction to my words, I must deduce that you have not yet
spoken to him of the Time. Spock, this is unacceptable.”

Spock stiffened at the lecture and paled. Jim would have liked to tell Sybok to back off, but he bit
his tongue.

“Your reasoning is logical,” Spock admitted after a long moment of silence, his voice flat. “Do we
have your permission now to beam up to the Enterprise from here? We should transmit the
subspace message regarding transport arrangements to New Vulcan for you and your healers as
soon as possible.” Spock rose to his feet. Jim followed suit, pulling out his comm unit.

“Of course,” Sybok said. “Go ahead. And by Grabthar's hammer: Talk to your captain, Spock.”

Spock met Jim’s gaze. His eyes were completely black and ... Scared, Jim thought. He’s scared.
Jim had no idea what to say to Sybok, so he concentrated on the next step and hailed the
Enterprise. “Kirk here. Two to beam up, if you can get our signal from inside these rocks.”

Stardate 2260.244, 2200 hours, Deck 10, Observation Lounge

Jim sat at his desk in his awesome captain’s office and enjoyed a good sulk.

He hadn’t actually expected Spock to follow Sybok’s demands on the spot. But he had hoped for
Spock to say something. They had kissed, for heaven’s sake. They had ... cuddled, for fuck’s sake!
They had even shared a bed on two occasions, if in a disappointingly platonic fashion. He thought
he had made his intentions sufficiently clear since the very beginning of the mission.

So what’s the damn problem now? he wondered. Except of course he kind of knew. Jim grinned
wrly. Like the simple fact that we’re both in way over our heads. He tapped his stylus on his desk.
I don’t think that Spock is keeping things from me on purpose. He pinched the bridge of his nose.
What if Spock’s as lost as I am? Age can’t be converted between species like time zones on a
planet. Physical, psychological, and uh, in this case, telepathic maturity is more complex than that.
And we’re well, not precisely standard Vulcan mating material.

Jim raked his fingers through his hair. The way he was feeling right now, he figured he had two
options. Option one: Get drunk off his ass. Option two: Go talk to someone. Talking was the more
mature option. But not to Bones. Bones was no good with relationships. And he needed to spend
his evenings with Jo.

That’s how Jim ended up calling Guinan and, following her recorded message, on deck ten, in front
of the observation lounge. In front of Spock.

They froze, staring at each other.

If Guinan hadn’t chosen that exact moment to open the door, Jim thought they might have turned on their heels and run off in opposite directions. “Jim, Spock.” She smiled. “Do come in.”

The El-Aurian stepped back to let them pass. Jim didn’t hesitate. Spock still seemed to consider making a run for it.

“I suggest a game,” Guinan said. “Just to pass the time.”

Jim snorted. Yeah, right. As if the term “just” even exists for you, lady. But he did trust her. And he wanted to talk to Spock. Maybe he’d manage that with Guinan’s help? “Sure. I’ve got nothing else to do tonight. You, Spock?”

“If that is your wish, Captain.”

“It’s Jim,” he reminded Spock. “We’re off duty.”

“Isn’t it interesting how we use names and titles to reflect our desire for distance or intimacy – or our fears of the same?” Guinan smiled.

She led them inside. On a table between two couches, she’d already set up a game board. As if she had expected them. Which Jim wouldn’t put past her. “Sit down.”

On the other couch, next to each other. Jim would have grinned, but he didn’t want to make Spock even more uncomfortable than the Vulcan already was.

The game board was interesting. At its most basic, it could be described as a massive board of oiled wood with an exceptionally beautiful grain of meandering textures in purple hues. Many small, regular indentations covered the surface, surrounding one slightly bigger hollow at the center. The edge of the board was lined with bowls carved into the wood and filled with small, colorful, round stones. Gems, perhaps, or marbles.

“This is a very simple game,” Guinan explained and placed a translucent orb at the center of the board. “That is the Listener. The other gems are thoughts, feelings, fears, facts, questions, and answers.” She pointed at the bowls in turn. Thoughts were represented by blue marbles. Turquoise marbles would indicate feelings. Fears were black, but facts were white. Silver marbles symbolized questions, and answers were golden. “The only rule is balance. There must always be balance. A question for a question, a feeling for a feeling, a fear for a fear ... and always centered, always addressing the Listener. Not,” she admonished them with a pointed look, “each other.”

Spock raised his left eyebrow. Jim wondered if this rated a “fascinating” and settled for mouthing “interesting” at Guinan. He was rewarded with another set of raised eyebrows and allowed himself to ponder if there was such a thing as an eyebrow kink. Probably. He didn’t really want to know.

Jim took a deep breath and chose a stone. He might as well get on with it.

“What is pon farr?” he asked and placed the silver marble next to the translucent ball of the Listener at the center of the board.

Guinan nodded, as if that was a good question. Somehow Jim wasn’t surprised at her utter lack of surprise. Also, going by Spock’s reaction, who stared at him as if he’d lost all of his metaphorical marbles in one fell swoop, it was not just a good question, it was a damn good question. Guinan,
However, didn’t seem to pay any attention to them. Instead she set about preparing tea, an herbal infusion, going by the scent.

Forced to ask a question of his own, Spock picked up one of the small silver balls and weighed it in his hand as if it were a precious gem or a devastating weapon. “What exactly do you want from me?”

Another nod. “Very good,” Guinan said and pointed at Spock. “The last one to place a marble begins the next round.”

After half an eternity (or perhaps a minute or two), Spock predictably chose a white marble. A fact. “Sybok is right.” He aligned the white marble with the translucent crystal at the center of the board.

“The mind meld you wanted to know about?” Jim met Spock’s gaze. “Other you. On Delta Vega.” He carefully placed a white stone on the other side of the Listener.

“So it’s my turn again?” he asked Guinan.

The El-Aurian nodded and held out a mug of tea to him. Jim accepted the cup and focused on the steam drifting up from the surface, on the refreshing scent of mint.

Facts and fears. Thoughts and feelings. Questions and answers. Jim wasn’t sure if this was easier than talking to Spock the normal way. He still picked a black marble. “I’m scared of what’s in my mind. Emotional transference. Other-you mentioned that side-effect of melds. And it’s here,” Jim said, touching his forehead with index and middle finger. “Stuff. Before, it was like ... oh, a weight pressing down on my dreams. Since I woke, it’s different. It’s like scabs in my mind. Itching. I know I could scratch them off. I could look at what’s there. And I’m scared.”

Guinan raised her eyebrows but remained silent, concentrating on her tea. Jim thought she maybe just stuck around so they’d play by the rules. Spock looked sick. Well, Jim hadn’t really expected anything else. Strangely, he still felt better for it.

Spock’s eyes were as black as the marble he balanced delicately between index finger and thumb. “I am fearful that I will enjoy losing control.”

Somehow that fear kind of broke Jim’s heart. Being Vulcan was awesome. The logic, the bitchiness, everything. He loved that about Spock, all of it. But Spock was human, too. And that – passion, craziness, letting yourself go – wasn’t that what being human was all about?

It was Spock’s turn, and he took his time. When he picked a blue marble for a thought, his hand was shaking, and Jim was ready to call off the game. “I think of my parents. I know they loved each other. I know they considered their union successful by human and Vulcan standards. But when I consider them, all I can think of is how ill-equipped I am to follow their example.”

That was the moment Jim realized they were talking about getting married. And not just in the Vulcan way (not that there was anything “just” about a Vulcan Bond – Jim wasn’t that ignorant; all the same, a space jump from the Enterprise suddenly sounded like a grand old time ... just for the lark of it).

Jim picked up a blue marble of his own and put it opposite of Spock’s. He wasn’t quite sure if it was a thought or a feeling. But he figured that Guinan might let him get away with cheating once. “I think you are the best thing that happened to me in my whole damn life.” He considered his words and added, “In any life.”
All of a sudden, his next move was easy. Jim chose a golden marble. For a moment he rolled it around in his hand. Spock would never ask for everything. He could not. But the question was there, suspended between them. And Jim? Jim could answer. Catching Spock’s worried, dark gaze, he smiled and placed the marble confidently on the board.

“Yes,” Jim said.

“A soulmate is someone who has locks that fit our keys, and keys to fit our locks. When we feel safe enough to open the locks, our truest selves step out and we can be completely and honestly who we are; we can be loved for who we are and not for who we’re pretending to be. Each unveils the best part of the other. No matter what else goes wrong around us, with that one person we’re safe in our own paradise.”

– Richard Bach, The Bridge Across Forever: A Lovestory

Chapter End Notes

• “Lisan al-Gaib” is a term for messiah from “Dune” canon, “Shiav” is the canon equivalent on Vulcan and Sybok’s first name.

• The Minbari are actually from “Babylon 5”, but I don’t see why they shouldn’t occur in any parallel and equal universe ...

• “Grabthar’s hammer” is from “Galaxy Quest” and was included to make my best friend, alpha-reader, beta-reader, and general partner-in-crime, Aranel Took, squee.

• Guinan’s game is an original creation; I should probably get it made in real life ...

• Richard Bach, the author of this chapter’s quote, is probably best known for the tale of “Jonathan Livingston Seagull”. 

• Also, if you have questions about any odd details, please feel free to ask! I’m trying not to overexplain stuffs in A/N, but I’m always happy to chat about bits and bobs in comments.

♥ Comments are love! ♥

What made you smile? What made you frown? What’s the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Chapter Summary

Talking with Spock about pon farr is about as much as fun as you’d expect. Jim writes a letter to Bones and wonders just how angry his friend will be when he finds out what Jim and Spock are up to. Sybok may not be a messiah, but he is a Kwisatz Haderach. And he definitely has a thing for weird alien drugs. Jim finally gets to ride a sandworm. Last but not least, he finally gets Spock nekkid. And that’s all kinds of awesome.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Opposite States In Harmony

Stardate 2260.245, 0100 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Cabin

Jim pressed his right hand against the middle of Spock’s body, over his heart. A flurry of palpitations thudded against his palm.

“You are scared,” he said softly.

Spock’s eyebrows pressed low over wide, black eyes. “I am—”

“I know you do feel,” Jim interrupted him. His own heart was pounding, too. “Emotional transference, remember? When other-you melded with me, I could sense what he was feeling.”

“That is not what I wanted to say.” Spock minutely shook his head. “I will not forget what experience of the Vulcan mind you possess,” he added, sounding just a little bitchy. Spock, jealous? Of himself?

“Then what?” Instinctively, Jim moved another inch closer. That close, he could see Spock’s tension even more clearly. Around his eyes, in his lips.

“I am concerned,” Spock emphasized, “because Sybok is right. Our minds are – shockingly compatible.” He lowered his gaze to Jim’s hand. A hint of green tinged his cheeks.

“Is that how you could take my fear when I died, even through the glass?” Jim asked. He didn’t like thinking of his death; he disliked talking about it even more. He sensed that Spock shared that aversion. But Sybok and Guinan were both right. If they wanted to get anywhere with each other, they had to talk, and there had to be honesty between them, no matter how emotional or awkward.

Spock blinked, fiercely enough that Jim caught a glimpse of his inner eye lid. “But I did not,” he whispered. “I could not. A fact that has caused me – pain.”

Spock shifted on his feet, a hint of movement that brought him even closer to Jim, allowed their foreheads to touch, skin to skin. Jim inhaled. The skin contact, limited though it was, created an almost electric surge of tension between them. “Not all of it, no. But the moment our hands ... even
though we couldn’t touch ... it was not so bad then,” Jim insisted. That had been a different kind of bad – Spock’s hand, so close, but out of reach. “I’m sorry I didn’t mention it before.” He swallowed hard and drew back, meeting Spock’s eyes. “Bones reckons that’s what made you lose control so badly.”

Spock frowned, such a clear sign of distress that Jim was on the verge of simply pulling him into his arms then and there. It was difficult to remember that Spock would hardly find a hug comforting. Would that change once they were Bonded?

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Spock said, abandoning any attempt at Vulcan precision. “I confess I do not recall much of those hours. I remember your hand. After that, there is a haze – until Nyota caught up with me.”

“Shock,” Jim said, as matter-of-factly as he could. “That’s normal.”

“Not for a Vulcan.”

Jim wanted to kiss Spock. He wanted to fuck that terrible, haunted expression from his face until he was caught in a very different kind of haze, post-coital and blissful. Instead he forced himself to take a deep breath and walk over to the living area of his cabin. With a grimace, he sat on the couch and turned to the side so that his erection would not be as visible. He was determined to give Spock the space he needed to regain his tattered control. There was still a shitload of awkward topics they needed to discuss ...

To his surprise, Spock not only followed him but settled down at his side, almost, but not quite touching. “I am drawn to you,” he admitted. “Due to your restoration, your mind has become sensitive far beyond human norms. Even from a distance I am aware of you now, of your mind reaching out to me. If you touched my skin you might be able to sense my mental state as well.”

“Seriously?” Jim knew he should be, to use one of Spock’s favorite words, “concerned”. But he wasn’t. “Kind of cool.”

That got him a raised eyebrow. Jim chuckled – hey, at least that meant Spock wasn’t freaking out quite as badly anymore. “Arousal seems to increase the effect,” Spock added, as calmly as if he was commenting on the proper seasoning for plomeek soup.

Urgh. Awkward. Well, you knew it would be, Jim reminded himself. “You tend to have that effect on me.” Since Spock wanted physical proximity for once, he offered his left hand, palm-up. Jim knew that touching each other’s hands could be a form of intimacy among Vulcans. But it didn’t have to be – Vulcans used their unprotected hands in everyday life as much as most other humanoids. “So, talk to me about Bonding and about pon farr.”

Spock placed his right hand over Jim’s left, lacing their fingers. “What you feel between us is the potential to form an intimate Bond, such as the Bond that married couples share. A monogamous, life-long commitment.” His tone was neutral. His words held no insinuation that this concept wasn’t compatible with one James T. Kirk to start with. Perhaps his eyes betrayed a hint of wariness.

“You do know that I haven’t had sex with anyone since those three times in the hospital with that nurse?” Jim asked. “And that was just—”

“Doctor McCoy took it upon himself to attempt an explanation,” Spock said. “He told me that you ... needed to feel alive.”
Jim winced. *More awkward.* The sex had been good, the effect sort of what Bones had told Spock. But something about the encounter had been ... off. Wrong, somehow. “A telepathic Bond for life?” Before his own death, the implication would have been lost on Jim. Now it drove the air from his lungs. “Spock ... does that mean what I think it means?” He couldn’t stop himself. Shock made the words tumble out of him. “Does that mean there shouldn’t have been ... any survivors, after Vulcan?”

Spock closed his fingers around Jim’s hand. “Again your conclusions are almost too astute.” Vulcans didn’t sigh, or so Spock kept insisting. The way he inhaled now was close, though. “The answer, Jim, is both yes and no. Not every survivor was mated. Also, while it is correct that there is a strong compulsion, for most Bonded couples it is a choice to follow their partner into death. It is not an uncommon practice, but by no means ubiquitous. After the destruction of Vulcan, most survivors – my father among them – chose to eschew that option. The needs of the many outweigh the demands of individual grief.”

*“Tushah nash-veh k’du,”* Jim whispered. *I grieve with thee.* Another thought occurred to him. Before, he might have gotten mad at Spock. Never mind that it was idiotic to apply human standards to Vulcan – what even? Their telepathic Bonds were more than a cultural thing. To Vulcan biology, then. Now, although he was nauseated with shame at his instinctive reaction to Spock’s intentions, he was too selfish. Too weak not to want what Spock was offering. Not to be alone in his mind, *next time.* He swallowed hard. “That’s what you’re up to with Sulu and Leslie, aren’t you?”

“To have a perfectly qualified secondary command team is only logical on a five-year mission.”

Jim laughed. Spock’s plan was so fucked-up it didn’t even compute for him, with his human outlook on the universe. Not to mention pessimistic as hell. At the same time, Jim couldn’t suppress the devastating relief that swelled up inside him. “But that is where you draw the line, isn’t it?” he asked. “The limit of what you’re willing to do for the needs of the many.”

“I have never been able to live up to Vulcan ideals. I am overly emotional and selfish,” Spock replied. “And I find that with you, there is no logic.”

“Same here.” Jim smiled. “Of course I’m not even trying. Also, I’m ...”

He hesitated. What he was about to say, he’d never said to anyone before. The last time someone had even tried to say those words to him, well, that had been Gaila. Wow, had that been weird, and awkward, in a bad way. But looking into Spock’s eyes, holding Spock’s hand, it was different. Everything was different with Spock.

“I’m in love with you,” Jim said. “That’s kind of supposed to be illogical for a Human.”

Spock didn’t reply, but Jim didn’t expect him to. Their conversation had to be so far beyond the limits of Spock’s emotional tolerance, it was something of a miracle he wasn’t cowering in a corner, twitching, having a perfectly logical nervous breakdown.

“Oh, okay.” Jim said at last. “So, let’s talk about pon farr and then go to bed. Because I’m done in. And I get that there won’t be any action before we’re Bonded, but I’d still prefer to spend the night with you. If that’s not asking too much, that is. Which I’d totally accept—”

“Yes.”

“Oh – okay. Forget I asked—”
“Yes, I would prefer to spend the night together,” Spock said, lightly squeezing Jim’s hand. “Even though you are right – again. Before we are Bonded it would be ... difficult for me to do anything more than what we have already done.”

“Oh.” One of these days, I’ll get better at the subtleties of an intimate interspecies relationship, Jim promised himself. He kind of hoped that a telepathic Vulcan Bond would help with that. “So.” A deep breath. He wasn’t really in the mood to talk about mating cycles right now, but he was pretty sure it was better to get that particular discussion over with ASAP. “Pon farr. I think there’s stuff about that in the medical database, protected with hand-crafted encryptions by your older self that are a thing of beauty, by the way. Sybok said it’s a mating cycle. Does that mean Vulcans go into heat like ...” He trailed off. No. No animal comparisons. Not going there.

“To quote one of your favorite phrases: ‘Something like that.’” Jim would have appreciated the joke if Spock hadn’t let go of Jim’s hand, if he hadn’t moved away to sit stiffly on the edge of the couch, tension visible in every muscle. “It is a cultural taboo,” Spock said without looking at Jim. “A time of madness that strips away our logic, renders us violent and incapable of speech. Indeed, very much like feral beasts in heat. We must mate or die. The scientists who created me attempted to spare me from that affliction, but I have since been informed by my older self that ultimately, they failed.”

“Whoa, there.” Jim scooted forward on the sofa. For a second he hesitated, before he followed his instinct. He was a touchy-feely human being. Spock knew that. If Spock couldn’t deal with that, they had a worse problem than pon farr. So he slung his arm around Spock’s back and pulled him to his side, hard. “None of that. I get it’s different when it’s you, but ... Spock? Procreation makes most species in the universe look pretty damn silly. No need to be embarrassed.”

Spock didn’t pull away again, at least. But he stiffened even more. He sat frozen, nearly paralyzed. “It is illogical to be embarrassed about biological functions,” he stated, calm and cool. But his nostrils flared. Jim was used to interpreting the tiniest clues by now, in his on-going efforts to make sense of whatever was going on inside Spock’s mind. So he had an inkling of how upset Spock was, never mind what he sounded like.

“You told me that you’re afraid you might enjoy losing control,” Jim said slowly and frowned. “But you must know that I don’t mind that at all. I like risky, rough sex just fine, cutting loose and going crazy. But that’s not it, isn’t it? You’re terrified. Why?”

“Jim, even in the safety of Vulcan-that-was, with the structure of rites so ancient they have become biologically ingrained in our species, even with healers and helpers ready to intervene at once, pon farr has always remained dangerous,” Spock explained, his voice flat and expressionless. “Even Bondmates whose minds have been attuned to each other since childhood do not always survive. The risk is exponentially higher for homosexual partners. Even a Bonded male will be instinctively considered a challenger at first. I could kill you before I even realized who you are.”

“But you won’t,” Jim said firmly. “One, I’m a damn good sub if I want to be. I promise you won’t mistake me for a challenger. Two, your older self. I know old Spock won’t tell us shit, and he’s probably even right not to. But ... the fact that he’s here, old as he is? Doesn’t that already prove that you cannot kill anyone during pon farr? And three, don’t discount pure dumb luck. Sometimes things don’t go wrong just because they could. And last but not least? We’ve been over how I’m not ever going to let you die before. So there.”

“Jim.” Now Spock sighed for real, a shockingly human sound. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Jim wrapped both arms around Spock. He pressed his lips against Spock’s temple. First a kiss.
Then a truth. “No, I don’t,” he admitted frankly. “But neither do you. You’ve never experienced pon farr. And ...” Jim sucked in a deep breath. “Forgive me,” he whispered, his lips fluttering over Spock’s skin. “I am not saying this to hurt you. But – your mother? She must have survived it. And uh... I’m sure she was one hell of a woman, but ... Spock, I’m not exactly made of glass. Especially not after whatever Khan’s blood did to me. Your mom made it. She survived pon farr. We’ll be fine.”

To Jim’s shock and surprise, Spock leaned against him. He wasn’t shaking, but it was close. “My mother defied the most iron-clad tenets of our culture,” Spock murmured against Jim’s shoulder, not much more than a hoarse, painful whisper. “She told me not to be afraid. She said she cherished the Time. I was ashamed.”

Jim had no idea what to say. Except perhaps “Jesus” or “shit”. Not helpful. Instead, he held Spock. When he realized that he was close to falling asleep, he nudged Spock. “Don’t feel so bad about it all,” he said in a last ditch effort to pull thoughts and feelings into coherent sentences as gently as he could. “For a human teenager, the very idea that your parents have sex is mortifying. I know, illogical. But that’s how Humans work. That’s normal for us. You’re not ashamed of your mom now, are you? So why not believe her? How about you trust your older self? And perhaps even you and me? Just a little bit? We’ll be fine. We’ll Bond. We’ll get used to each other. You won’t ever mistake me for a challenger when your Time comes. We’ll be fine.”

♦

Stardate 2260.248, 0600 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Cabin

Jim stared at the text on his PADD, at the message that would be sent to Bones’s private comm line once he and Spock were on shore leave in the desert of Arrakis.

To leave Bones a note was both cowardly and a sign of trust. Cowardly, because it was what a kid would do if he already knew that what he was up to – sneaking out of the house to have sex – was wrong. It was also a sign of trust because Bones was the one person on the Enterprise who could stop them. Perhaps Bones even should.

For a Vulcan it might be rational to make plans for following his prospective Bondmate into death. After all, that was a normal biological impulse for his species and a culturally accepted practice. Jim, however, couldn’t justify his ready acceptance of the premise that way.

And it wasn’t about death – what he shared with Spock, what he wanted with Spock. There were many levels to their relationship. They were a damn fine command team; their differences and similarities meshed perfectly. They’d become the best of friends, shared meals, chess games and all. There was an almost inhuman level of sexual tension between them. Jim simultaneously smiled and winced at the memory of how his morning erection had affected Spock, who was still physically unable to reciprocate. So, yeah, many elements of a healthy relationship. But ... Jim pinched the bridge of his nose. There was an undercurrent of violence and death, too, and he’d be a fool to ignore that. Taking into account how they’d first met, the circumstances that had made them realize that friendship was not enough, and the threat of pon farr, maybe that was inevitable. Maybe it was enough to acknowledge those facts. It had to be, because he’d made his decision long ago.

With a sigh, Jim switched off the PADD. He didn’t think Bones would attempt to stop them or declare them unfit for command. He also knew that “angry” wouldn’t even begin to cover Bones’s reaction.
Jim picked up his backpack and went to meet Spock in the transporter room. They’d beam down to Sietch Jacurutu. From there, Sybok would take them out into the desert on a sandworm, far away from any disturbance, from any interfering brainwaves. They’d Bond, and they’d have sex. Bond and sex and *pon farr*: quite a bit of a chicken/egg paradox right there, with a bit of burnt omelet thrown in for fun. Sex strengthened the Bond that would keep the partners safe during *pon farr*, which in turn strengthened the Bond (to the point that the death of one mate could mean the death of the other). What came first? Jim wondered. *Pon farr or the mating Bond?* He grinned at Spock and stepped up on the transporter platform. *Main thing, we get to have sex. Finally.*

Bones had come to see them off. “You could at least pretend you’re going to enjoy yourself, Mr. Spock,” he said gruffly and frowned at Spock’s solemn expression. “Not that I understand how riding a sandworm can be anyone’s idea of fun.” Now he scowled at Jim.

Jim laughed. “Of course it’s fun! Like space jumps are fun. Or a workout with Klingons. It will be awesome. Next time you have to come with us.”

Bones shook his head in horror. “Mr. Spock, please bring the captain back in one piece. The Enterprise needs him.”

Spock inclined his head. Jim noticed how his eyebrows tightened. He wanted to squeeze his hand and tell him not to worry. But of course he couldn’t. “It will be awesome,” he repeated. “We’ll be back in three days. Relaxed and de-stressed, just the way you ordered. And until then Sulu and Leslie can put in some command team practice. Win-win all around.”

“Yeah, right,” Bones muttered. “Now off with you. And don’t forget the damn sunscreen, Jim.”

Stardate 2260.248, 0700 hours, Sietch Jacurutu, Arrakis

Sybok had granted them permission to beam directly into Sietch Jacurutu. In consequence, Spock expected that Sybok would be waiting for them when they arrived in the entrance hall of his sietch. He was not disappointed and nodded a greeting.

“A word before we leave,” Sybok requested. Without waiting for an answer, he turned and led them down the corridor beyond the hall and into his private office.

There, his brother picked up a small package from the table and turned to the captain. “I have a gift for you. Jim must take it before the Bonding. A phial of Water of Life.”

Jim paled and swallowed hard. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Sybok,” he said. “That stuff – it’s Spice, only a thousand times more potent. I’ve ... I’ve taken Spice before. I don’t handle it well.”

Hazel eyes wide and dark, Jim met Spock’s gaze. Spock thought he could detect fear, and shame. The addictions and tragedies of his chosen partner’s past troubled him. There was still so much they didn’t know about each other.

“I understand,” Sybok said, although Spock failed to discern how he could arrive at that assessment rationally. “But it is necessary. You must take it.”

“I do not see the logic in risking a relapse into addiction, brother,” Spock objected, uncomfortably reminded of his attempt at a human joke pertaining to Sybok’s choice of planetary residence. “As a Human he is incapable of regulating the effects of awareness spectrum narcotics on his dopamine system.”
“I know that, Spock,” Sybok replied impatiently. “But you are Vulcan. Once the Bond is established you should have no problem controlling any adverse effects.”

“That may be true,” Spock agreed. “But why take that risk? I believe it is well within my power to establish a Bond without the aid of psychoactive substances.”

Jim frowned. Apparently, it hadn’t occurred to him so far that Spock’s hybrid state might affect procedures. Spock was 97% certain that would not be the case. In spite of his problems with emotional control, he had always been a particularly strong and versatile telepath.

“That is true,” Sybok confirmed. “But you do not possess the information I have access to.”

“Do tell.” Jim’s curt request told Spock that he didn’t appreciate Sybok’s behavior either.

“Have you heard what the Fremen call me?” Sybok asked.


Spock felt cold; an uncontrollable physical response to emotional stimuli. “Kwisatz Haderach,” he said, concentrating on the Fremen word and the associated mythology. “The shortening of the way. A mind capable of unlocking genetic memory and achieving a state of prescient telepathy with the aid of neutralized worm bile.”

“And more than that,” Sybok agreed, “if the mind in question is a Vulcan mind. Or at least in my case.” He shrugged. “Provided with sufficient data, even computers can predict the likelihood of certain outcomes within a linear projection of time, albeit with limited scope and statistical validity. However, under the influence of Water of Life, I am able to discern not just one timestream but many, not just one universe but many.”

“Have you seen the older Spock?” Jim interrupted. Spock did not wince; his control was better than that. Once again Jim’s ability to cut to the quick purely by instinct baffled him.

“Indeed.” Sybok nodded. “He is one of the reasons why I know that the two of you will need the most resilient Bond you can form. Spice will activate your latent psionic potential, Jim. With the assistance of the drug, you can create an active Bond that will be as strong as the closest connection formed between the warrior-lovers of Vulcan myths, if not stronger. I have seen your past and your future. Not just once, but dozens of times. You must use the drug.”

Spock could not suppress the instinctive revulsion his brother’s words elicited in him. “This is most disturbing,” he said. With difficulty he managed to set aside his fear, his horror at loss of control, the agonizing helplessness faced with— “Our father once told me that I am capable of choosing my own destiny. Your words imply the rule of determinism as opposed to that of free will.”

“No,” Sybok countered, almost gentle now. “The basic assumption of quantum cosmology always holds true as far as I have been able to detect: ‘Everything that can happen does happen, in equal and parallel universes.’ Everything is possible, always. You are, and always will be, the master of your own destiny, free to shape the potential of your time and your space.” Sybok glanced at Jim. “Which is why I will not tell you more than I already have,” he said wryly. “Though I will not imply any universe-ending paradoxes – if only because so far, I haven’t encountered any. However, foreknowledge has the curious effect of limiting your options. The more you know, the less choice is left. This gift is intended to have the opposite effect.”
Suddenly Jim laughed. “You’re cheating,” he said, his eyes brightening with realization. “That’s what this is all about. You’re totally trying to cheat destiny, Sybok.”

Jim turned to Spock and reached for his hands. Carefully, deliberately. The turmoil of his mind surged into Spock, although he detected a creditable and not entirely unsuccessful attempt on Jim’s part to focus, channel, and shield his thoughts and emotions, fears and desires. “Spock,” he begged, “if this means we’ll have an ace up our sleeves next time we face certain death, then I’m for it. Please.”

To his astonishment, Spock realized that Jim did not intend to decide this matter on his own, in his typical impulsive and brash human manner, jumping in without looking. No, Jim truly wished for them to arrive at a decision together. Spock returned the pressure of his hands. “That you are here with me today as my Bondmate-to-be is proof that nothing is as certain as I once believed. If it is your wish that we should choose to use the drug, we will.”

With a sigh of relief, Jim let go of Spock and turned to Sybok. “Thank you. We’ll do it the way you suggested.” Abruptly, boyish excitement brightened his face. “So we’re going to ride a sandworm now?”

Sybok nodded. “Stilgar and the steersmen are in position beyond the drumsands. We’ll call a worm to ride, and we will take you out deep into the desert to an abandoned sietch. It is a sacred place, safe and isolated. A good place for a Bonding – or a vacation.”

♦

**Stardate 2260.248, somewhere in the deserts of Arrakis**

Thanks to the drumsands surrounding Sietch Jacurutu it wasn’t even necessary to use a thumper to call a worm. They just had to be fast enough to reach the next dune beyond the drumsand to safely mount the worm.

“Most likely one of the smaller specimens from nearby Spice beds will follow the sounds of our steps,” Sybok said. “It will be quite safe.”

Nevertheless Spock insisted on carrying Jim’s backpack in addition to his own, so Jim would have more freedom of movement. Jim wanted to argue, but as Spock was still at least twice as strong as he was, he kept silent.

Stilgar and the Fremen steersmen crouched beyond the flat stretch of drumsands, whiplike hook-staffs in their hands. These would be inserted between the ring segments of the approaching worm. To keep its sensitive interior away from the abrasive sands, the worm would not only stay above the earth but roll the opened segment as far away from the surface of the desert as possible. That way, strategically placed hooks could be used to steer a worm.

They were halfway across the drumsands when Jim heard a distant hissing of whispering sand, the first audible sign of a worm’s approach. Their timing was good. As soon as they reached the top of the sandy ridge where Stilgar and his Fremen were waiting, the worm rose from the valley between the dunes in front of him. Its circular mouth unfolded before them like the triangular petals of a giant flower. The smell of Spice dominated the air and made Jim cough. Above him, the massive flanks of the worm curved up like a moving wall, each segment of its body clearly outlined as it rushed past them.

The Fremen leapt and placed the hooks, one, two, three. Stilgar, the last to go, reached out his hand for Jim with an iron grip and drew him up along the side of the worm. He kept a tight hold onto
him until he was sure that Jim’s footing was secure. Sybok had inserted a hook of his own beyond
the next segment, parallel to Stilgar’s. Effortlessly, he scaled the worm’s side. Spock was right
behind him, bounding up the worm as if there was nothing to it.

The worm continued its rushing roll until they were exactly on top of it. Stilgar and Sybok added a
few extra hooks. Ropes with leather handles were attached to them for riders to hold on to. The two
steersmen went to work behind them. Soon the worm changed direction and began to move away
from the sietch into the desert. The thrill of dominating the brute force of this giant creature, the
rush of speed, the dizzying scent of Spice, Spock at his side – Jim felt like the ruler of the desert.
He couldn’t suppress an exultant shout as he grasped Spock’s hand in triumph. What a perfect
beginning for their shore leave!

At noon they reached their destination, a rocky outcropping deep in the desert with the ruins of an
ancient sietch, far away from civilization and interfering minds, yet safely within reach of the
transporter beams of the Enterprise. Spock had insisted on that as a precaution, just in case there
was an emergency.

“Don’t forget to take my gift,” Sybok shouted over the hissing of the worm’s passage and pushed
Jim toward Spock. “And now get down!”

They jumped. The sand rushed up to them in a blur. Before Jim could get his bearings, Spock was
already dragging him to his feet and in the direction of the rocks. “Run,” he shouted. “Or we’ll get
caught in the vortex.”

Together they ran across the sand, stumbling, sliding, until they the sand gave way to the harder
surface of rocks under their feet. Out of breath, his heart pounding, Jim collapsed on a boulder.
“Wow, what a ride.”

Spock remained standing, not a hair out of place, as calm and solid as if he had beamed straight
down from the Enterprise. But when Jim caught his gaze, his eyes were gleaming. Jim’s throat
constricted and his pulse sped up again. A different kind of exhilaration began to course through
his body.

For the first time ever they were really alone together, and away from it all, from the ship, the
rules, the responsibility.

Jim rose to his feet and walked up to Spock. “Hey.” He smiled at the raised eyebrow. “What
now?”

“I suggest we explore the area and set up our tent,” Spock said. “You also require sustenance as
well as additional hydration.”

“I’m not a plant,” Jim protested, “We’ve been over how I’m not one of Sulu’s sensitive mimosas.”

“I am fully aware that you are human,” Spock replied, eyebrows drawing together in a hint of a
frown. “Physical exertion takes a greater toll on you in this desert climate.”

“Hmm,” Jim hummed, relenting. Spock had a point, especially since he was really, really looking
forward to certain physical exertions. “Okay, you win. Lunch, then exploring, then setting up camp
... and then ...” He delicately brushed two fingers over Spock’s hand.

Spock inhaled sharply. “I see you have been talking to Lieutenant Uhura.”

Jim grinned, unrepentant and satisfied. “Not only to Uhura. Your brother has been very helpful, too.
It’s a shame that we’re too far away for spontaneous communications with New Vulcan, though.”
“Jim, you would not—”

At that un-Vulcan outburst, Jim laughed. “Of course I would! Who better to advise me on what gets you going than you yourself?” He pressed a quick, apologetic kiss on Spock’s mouth. His lips were too beautiful and too close to resist. “But I promise I didn’t. I ...” He wasn’t quite sure what to say. Spock’s relationship with his older self was uneasy. It was probably going to take a while yet before old Spock could stop feeling guilty over his mistaken warning about Khan and until his Spock stopped blaming his older self. He leaned in closer, almost touching, but not quite. “I won’t embarrass you knowingly,” he promised. “And I didn’t want to worry him. But ... if or when it is appropriate, I would like to let him know.” He stared into his Spock’s dark eyes. The knowledge of the depth of pain Spock was capable of enduring echoed deep within him. A stark reminder how there was more to this shore leave than desert camping and sandworm riding.

“Who else did you talk to?” Spock asked.

“Full disclosure?” Jim smiled. “I think that’s better with lunch.” Trailing his fingers over Spock’s arm, he linked their fingers. Hand in hand they walked deeper into the rocky cliffs and ruined walls until they found a shady spot with a breathtaking view of the desert.

Jim pulled some containers and cans out of his backpack and arranged them on a convenient rock with a flourish. Spock he served a selection of nutritious salads, while he claimed a can of cold soup for himself. Noticing Spock’s questioning eyebrow, he wrinkled his nose. “I don’t think you want that explanation before lunch.”

“Jim.”

Jim shook his head. “Eat first. Because you are right about nutrition and hydration, and I am not sure I can eat once I’ve explained, okay?”

That explanation sufficed, and they consumed their picnic in companionable silence. Once Jim had stowed away the empty containers again, he sighed in appreciation. “That wasn’t half bad. Okay, so you want the sordid details. It’s quite simple. I talked to your brother and M’Benga. Your brother already knows about us, and M’Benga will have to know sooner or later. Anyway, apparently it’s better for the Bond if I bottom.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Establishing clear roles initially will help with pon farr later on. Catch is, human beings don’t have perfect control over their bodily functions unlike you guys, and a desert environment is not helpful in terms of hygiene. Plus we shouldn’t return to civilization until the Bond is stable, which may take up to three days. So I had M’Benga help me with preps. Which means I’m clean inside out now, and I’ve had a nice hypo that will slow down certain natural processes for the next three days to the point that I’ll uh... stay nice and clean, provided I stick with non-solids.”

Amused, Jim noticed how Spock was reduced to blinking owlishly. He reached out and touched two fingertips on the smooth, hot back of Spock’s hand. “Also, I know that’s silly human ideas talking, but ... I want the first time to be good for you.”

“I—” Spock started. “I do not know what to say.”

Jim smiled. Another first. “You don’t mind?”

Silently, Spock shook his head. “I appreciate your consideration.”

“Good.” Jim stood. “Let’s explore and set up camp. I want to get out of this stillsuit.”
They soon discovered that the rock formations of their campsite were smaller than any other sietch they had visited. The cliffs didn’t rise above the level of the surrounding dunes. The lines of the rocky slopes were much gentler than any others they had seen before, softened by erosion. Only a single, deep cave remained at the center of the highest cliffs. But this cave held an amazing secret in its depth: a small pool of Spice drenched water, about as big as one of the fancy Jacuzzis on the Enterprise.

So that was the reason why this isolated spot was sacred for the Fremen. The water hole also explained the comparative abundance of vegetation, creosote and incense bushes, tunyon vine, onion and poverty grass. They saw desert hares and kangaroo mice, and once even a desert hawk, high above in the bright blue sky.

They set up their tent near the entrance to the cave, in the shelter of the cliffs and the remnants of ancient walls. As far as they could tell, it was the shadiest spot around, and out of the wind. Jim wriggled out of his stillsuit. The activity always reminded him of extracting a Jim-shaped sausage out of a way too clingy skin. At least Bones wasn’t here to make fun of him. When he stood buck naked in front of Spock, he scrunched up his face. “Urgh, I feel gross. Those insulating membranes are awesome, but I still end up uh... maybe not sweaty, but something not so nice. What do you think, we hit the pool? Or would you mind if I do? I get that you may not like water much.”

Spock stood at the entrance of their tent. He was staring at Jim. While his face remained expressionless, his eyes were not. Spock appeared to be captivated by Jim’s body, and Jim didn’t mind at all. He merely wondered how he’d get Spock to return the favor.

“I do, as a matter of fact, ‘enjoy’ water in that I find it pleasing to behold, an agreeable beverage, and comfortable upon skin contact,” Spock said mildly. “The environment of my childhood has impressed upon me to regard it as both precious and exotic. My skin does not absorb moisture as efficiently as a full Vulcan’s, but the sensation is still ... pleasurable. Also, though I do not normally sweat, there is no way to avoid dust in the desert. It would be beneficial to clean the areas of my body that have been exposed.”

“I need to stop assuming,” Jim muttered, smiling, “that just makes an ass out of me.” To follow up on that plan, he took another step forward, until he stood right in front of Spock. Although the tent was perfectly insulated, it was still hot inside. He hoped that Spock didn’t mind a bit of human sweat. “So how do we go about this?” he asked softly. “Is there a ritual? Anything else I should know about?”

“There are several rituals for van-lal t’telan,” Spock said, “But they do not quite fit our case. The standard procedure is the kan-telan, the Bonding between children with compatible minds. In Terran terminology that is more a betrothal than a marriage. The other rites lead up to koon-ut-kallif-fee, the formal marriage ceremony which is a part of pon farr. A Bonding between adults outside of pon farr is unusual, though not unheard of. It is ... more than a betrothal, less than a marriage. There are no fixed rites.”

“We’ll have to create our own ritual in that case,” Jim murmured, leaning in, once again physically drawn to Spock in a way he couldn’t quite process. “Something that belongs only to us. I like that idea.”

“Your reasoning is sound,” Spock replied. He didn’t draw back. Judging from the gleam in his eyes, he liked Jim standing so close and didn’t mind that he was sweaty and naked. “While the idea of a ritual belonging to particular individuals is foreign to Vulcan culture, I find that notion illogically appealing.”

“Getting clean is a part of rituals all over the universe,” Jim mused. Spock was right. Not even
Vulcans could escape dust in the desert. It coated his skin like fine powder. “So we can start with that. And then?”

“You should take the drug my brother took it upon himself to provide,” Spock said. “I will meld our minds and create a permanent Bond between us. It will be beneficial if you are relaxed. There are rhythmic verbal devices to aid with the process. I will teach you the phrases.”

“Sounds good to me.” Jim wondered if orgasm was an appropriate method of achieving the required state of relaxation. He didn’t want their first intimate acts clouded by mind-altering drugs.

On that thought he slid his hands under Spock’s uniform top. Naked skin, hot to the touch. Of course. On Arrakis, Spock could for once forego his customary long thermal underwear. And he didn’t seem to mind Jim undressing him. First Jim pulled the uniform top up and over Spock’s head. He took the time to shake it out before folding it carefully and setting it aside. Spock’s eyes widened at that uncharacteristic neatness, and Jim grinned. Then he reached up to smooth the Vulcan’s tousled, fine black hair. From the immaculate corner of Spock’s logical bangs, Jim trailed the tips of his right index and middle fingers across his face and to his lips. Spock remained passive, but his eyes widened even more, pupils blown wide, to the point that the iris was virtually invisible.

Oh yeah, Jim thought. That works. Humming under his breath, he drew back to take in the muscular chest, the green-tinged areolae, the generous black fuzz that condensed into a distinct pleasure trail further down. Curious, Jim ghosted his fingertips over Spock’s chest hair. Oh... “Soft,” he murmured. “Nice. Real nice.” More like fur, the tiny hairs straight and silky instead of coarse and curly.

With a cheeky grin, Jim knelt down. “Shoes,” he ordered. To his surprise, Spock lifted first his right foot, and then his left to allow him to remove his boots. If Jim had attempted that maneuver, he would have lost his balance and made a fool of himself. Spock, however, remained perfectly poised. Reaching for the waistband of Spock’s uniform pants, Jim looked up to meet Spock’s eyes. Discomfiture over naked facts might be irrational, but that didn’t mean Spock wouldn’t experience any.

“All right?” Jim asked. “Little kids on Earth have a game: ‘I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours’. Also, I should probably confess that I’ve seen pictures.”

Spock’s hands hovered over Jim’s but he didn’t stop him or push him away. “Pictures?”

“Research,” Jim explained. “I was curious and horny.” In fact, he was more than half-hard now. Still curious, and extremely horny.

“... logical.” Spock inhaled and dropped his hands again.

Jim pulled down the bottom of Spock’s uniform, over legs that were both slender and muscular. As Spock stepped out of the pants, Jim couldn’t help noticing that Vulcan feet were very pretty, too. Elegant, with long toes. Starting at Spock’s ankles, Jim moved upwards again, fingertips only, the lightest touch he could manage.

The picture, Jim discovered, had been accurate. Above large balls dusted with fuzz and closely attached to the body, a sheath protected the Vulcan penis. Green skin folds sheltered Spock’s dick. Sort of like petals surrounded by more of that silky black fur. Not unlike a human vulva, actually, though bigger and bulging outward, straining over the length within. Because it was not, in fact, completely withdrawn into the body. The opening of the sheath was just wide and long enough to expose a tantalizing length of smooth, green skin. Up close and personal and in 3D it was even
nicer than the picture on his PADD.

“Beautiful,” Jim sighed.

“It ...” Spock’s voice sounded hoarse. When Jim raised his head, Spock’s cheeks were flushed a bright green. “… is illogical to consider reproductive organs in aesthetical terms.”

Jim thought Spock meant to say that he was glad Jim liked looking at him. He smiled but kept any comments on erotic art to himself. (For the time being, anyway.)

“You said that without a Bond it is difficult for you to react to me sexually,” Jim said. “Does that mean it’s unpleasant when I touch you?” He couldn’t keep his hands to himself, just couldn’t. Gently, he outlined the sheath with his index finger.

Spock gasped, and his inner eyelid fluttered. “Not ... unpleasant. Intense.”

Jim pulled back. For a moment he didn’t move. His erection pulsed. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been that turned on. Much less the last time he’d needed and wanted to be that careful with a partner. Talk about torture. With a groan, he rose to his feet and gathered up a blanket, towels, a pull-out bucket from the standard survival kit, and a small bag packed with items that might come in handy.

“Alright,” Jim said, turning back to Spock, “Let’s go clean up.”

Even deep inside the cave it was still hot, as hot as in the tent, if not quite as hot as out in the sunshine on the sand. Sweat seeped down Jim’s back. But in spite of the heat, the atmosphere in the cave was pleasant. The clean, spicy scent of water laced with Spice filled the air. A row of dim glowglobes followed the curve of the rocky pool. In their light the water glittered like liquid silver.

Jim laid out the blanket and the towels. When he turned around, he was not surprised to see Spock scanning the water with a tricorder.

“The water is clean,” Spock announced. “Lightly laced with Spice, but the dilution is such that it will have no more than a marginal effect even when ingested. The concentration is 40.6% that of Spice coffee, 20.3% of Spice beer.” He put the tricorder on the floor next to the blanket. “I suggest we employ the bucket for our ablutions so as to avoid contaminating the only water source for the local fauna and flora.”

“Fine with me,” Jim said. He had an idea ... Maybe he could assume a somewhat submissive role in spite of having to take the lead for now. Spock was clearly not unaffected even by the subtle caresses Jim had managed to sneak into the process of undressing him. It was also obvious that he was really unable to reciprocate, much less take the initiative. “Would you prefer to sit down or stand?” Beyond the pool the ground dipped further to the deepest part of the cave. There were also a few boulders that might work as seats, a meter or two from the water hole.

“It would be inefficient to sit down.”

“Okay.” Jim led Spock to the back of the pool. “How about standing here? Used water should drain off, and filter back into the pond through crevices in the rocks.”

Spock stood motionless. The white light of the glowglobes illuminated the long, strong lines of his body with the perfection of a professional holographer’s spotlights. Jim’s breath caught in his throat, and his cock throbbed. “Shit, you’re gorgeous, do you know that?”

Jim didn’t wait for a reply. Instead he filled the bucket with water and opened the bag he’d brought
with them. A sponge, and Vulcan spice soap. When Spock attempted to reach for it, Jim stopped him. “Let me,” he murmured. “Let me be your ... dvinsu?” He wasn’t sure if that was the correct term. The connotation of submission was definitely there, but also the idea of simple domestic services.

The way Spock’s breath hitched and his eyes darkened even more told him it was the right word. *That’s a go,* he thought. *Now I just need to keep myself from coming ...* There was already a distinct edge of needy pain to his arousal. Not yet unpleasant, though.

Jim dipped the sponge into the water and wrung it out well. First he wiped it across Spock’s high forehead, before he carefully cleaned the dust from his face, mindful not to get near his sensitive ears. Then he trailed Spock’s throat from his chin to the delicious hollow between his collarbones. Jim’s heart was pounding now. An echo of his heartbeat throbbed in his ears and in his cock. Under his fingertips Spock’s pulse thrummed. *Oh hell, yes.*

Chest and back next. A bit more water, firmer touches. Soap suds massaged into fine, fur-like chest hair. Fingertips pressed on green nipples, until Spock’s eyelids fluttered. A daring hand, gliding along the elegant line of Spock’s spine, sliding down between the firm cheeks of his ass, stopping shy of his anus. More soap, more water. No words, just the sounds of ragged breathing, human and Vulcan. Arms next. But not the hands; he’d leave them for later. He’d even brought a second sponge for that, softer and finer than the first. Jim didn’t dare to use soap near the sheath. Gently he rubbed the wet sponge around Spock. Jim nearly came when the folds parted a little more, and Spock moaned, his hands opening and closing helplessly at his sides. Legs. At that point Spock slid down to sit on one of the rocks after all, as if his legs were about to give out. Kneeling to wash Spock’s feet was risky. The friction of bending over was almost too much. Jim needed a moment before he could stand and refill the bucket. Although Spock had claimed that his skin was not as water-absorbent as a full Vulcan’s, combined with the desert heat no towels were necessary.

When Jim returned, Spock’s eyes were glued to Jim’s erection and the glistening smear of pre-cum at the tip. “Fascinating, Mr. Spock, huh?” Jim teased, breathless and pleased.


“I think we can move to the blanket for the rest,” Jim suggested.

“Rest?” Spock blinked. God, he was stunning, flustered and enthralled like that.

“Your hands,” Jim whispered drawing Spock to his feet. “I saved the best for last.”

When Spock had settled into a graceful cross-legged position on the blanket, Jim grasped his right wrist. Tenderly, he held Spock’s hand over the bucket. With his free hand, he pulled out the fresh sponge. One long, slender finger at a time he washed Spock’s hands. Such beautiful, elegant hands. Perfectly manicured nails with a distinct green hue. And soft, so incredibly soft. Softer than a girl’s hands. Strong, too. He could sense Spock’s inhuman strength in the way his fingers twisted under Jim’s ministrations. Spock was shaking by the time he slid the sponge over his middle finger.

“Should I stop?” Jim looked up, concerned.

“... no ...” Spock frowned in concentration to be able to reply at all. “... just ... intense ...”

To see Spock like this – naked, shuddering, his penis even more visible than before, a little out of control already – Jim’s breath hitched. He was nearly undone with the raw beauty of the scene.

“Love you,” he whispered. “Love you so much.”
He put the bucket aside and knelt in front of Spock. “How do you feel about making me come? Just with your hands.”

“There is a strong compulsion to touch you,” Spock admitted. “An almost painful urgency ... a bizarre desire to taste you. I am familiar with the theory of human sexuality, but to experience it myself is ...”

“Reality is always different.” Jim drew Spock’s right hand up to his mouth, until his fingers grazed Jim’s lips. “I’m all yours. Anything you want. Just ask. I’ll tell you what feels good for me.”

Jim stretched out on his back on the blanket. “I won’t last long, though,” he warned. “Washing you, that was like the foreplay to end all foreplays.”

“Based on my research your control is better than that of ...” Spock bent over Jim. Hot fingertips stroked his hips, moving toward his erection. “... 77.8% of Human males of your age and constitution.”

“Just 77.8%?” Jim was surprised he could still speak. His surroundings were fast dissolving into a haze of desire now that he allowed himself to concentrate on his arousal and the sensations of Spock touching him.

Spock placed soft palms over Jim’s penis, at first as if measuring length and width, then pressing down to assess the density of his flesh. Vulcan heat combined with such deliberate pressure drove Jim beyond words right into the realm of moans.

“Ahh,” Spock sighed, apparently satisfied with the reaction. After a moment’s hesitation, he wrapped long, strong fingers around Jim’s dick. “I recall that friction is most pleasurable in this state of arousal.”

Either he was a natural, or it took Vulcans only three tries to become experts at hand jobs. Either that, or emotional transference extended to sexual situations in ways Jim couldn’t have imagined. Jim closed his eyes and gave himself up to Spock, to soft hands, strong touches, and gentle exhalations on tender skin.

When he knew he wouldn’t last more than seconds, he opened his eyes again. He met Spock’s gaze. Those blazing black eyes, hyper-expressive, focused on the task at hand. And those hands – their tight, nearly scorching friction made Jim shudder. Pressure gripped his balls, almost too much to enjoy. Balanced between tension and release, Jim gasped for breath. A fraction of a second later, he arched against Spock’s touch with a hoarse scream. His orgasm surged through his body in a scalding wave of ecstasy, as he spilled over Spock’s hand and onto his stomach.

Reluctantly Spock let go of him, trailing a gentle, curious finger over Jim’s spent penis, even dipping into his come. Jim watched, silent, still beyond speaking. Relaxation didn’t even come close to describe this level of post-orgasmic bliss.

Without a word, Spock reached for the bucket and the sponge and set about cleaning Jim up with careful, tender touches. Jim didn’t mind just lying there, allowing Spock the same chance to learn the details of his body he had enjoyed with Spock before. For long minutes Jim dozed, relishing the massage of soap and sponge and water and towel. Spock was nothing if not thorough. Much sooner than Jim would have thought possible, his cock stirred again, reacting to those sensible caresses with renewed interest. Jim inhaled a deep, shuddering breath. He’d been pretty sure that being with Spock would be all kinds of awesome. But given Spock’s biological and cultural limits, Jim had been unprepared for the intensity of this first encounter. And now ... now he wanted more.
Luckily he was not the only one. When Spock was done, he gazed at Jim with unveiled desire burning in his eyes. “Are you ready to move back to the tent now?”

“Yeah, let’s,” Jim said. “Can’t get much more relaxed than that. And I really want to feel your orgasm at some point today.”

“As I wish to share myself with you, Jim,” Spock said softly.

Hand in hand they made their way back to the tent, to conclude the makeshift Vulcan-Human ritual that would join their lives together as one and that would allow them to fully know each other’s mind and body.

♦

“How can one set these opposite states in harmony? There is only one way: through giving oneself completely. How does one give oneself? By forgetting the traumas of the past, and by not forming expectations about the future - in other words, the orgasm. How can one do this? Very simply: by not being afraid to err.”
– Paulo Coelho, Warrior of the Light

Chapter End Notes

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart

Chapter Summary

Vulcan voodoo and weird alien drugs don’t mix well. (Don’t try this at home.) ♦ Jim adds a new item to his top ten list of the most awfully awkward moments ever. ♦ But at least (at last!) there’s pay-off: sexy times! ♦ Bones has a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. And it only gets worse. ♦ Things get very, very weird. And there’s a worldship cameo.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart

Stardate 2260.248, somewhere in the deserts of Arrakis

They didn’t bother with dressing. It was hot, and they had plans that didn’t include clothes for after the Bonding. Together they laid out their sleeping pads and spread out blankets on top. It might be hot, but the rocky ground was hard, and they weren’t used to sleeping rough. It was only logical to think ahead, Jim thought.

Jim pulled the package with Sybok’s gift out of his backpack. The name of the drug, “Water of Life”, implied something nice and wholesome, like good Scottish whisky. The Arrakis version was anything but. It was gross. Seriously, catalyzed bile of a dying sandworm? The stuff was also stronger than any version of Spice he’d used before – during the years after Tarsus. When he hadn’t minded that his eyes changed color and that he couldn’t recognize himself in the mirror anymore. Then, he would have jumped at the chance to try “Water of Life”. But things were different now. He was different now. His apprehension must have shown, because Spock caught his wrist.

“You do not have to do this,” Spock said softly. “Any of this. Just your friendship is enough for me.”

Somehow that typical Vulcan selflessness helped. Because it made Jim angry. “But it’s not enough for me,” he retorted. “I want everything we can have, and more.” He took a deep breath. “Also, facts. Spice? This is the drug that allowed your mother to form a Bond with you long enough that you’re even here. Your brother may not be a messiah, but he’s definitely a kind of Vulcan supermind. And the two of us? We’ve already been through a hell of a lot together. I don’t believe it will be all pancakes and maple syrup from here on out. So, if your brother tells me that this drug can make us stronger? I’ll take it.” Jim lowered his eyes to Spock’s hand, those long fingers wrapped around his arm. “I just ...” he started, stopped, tried again, “Spock ... if that makes the addiction come back, please ... please don’t think less of me.”

Which was a stupid thing to say. Because a) a relapse was out of his control, and b) if Spock were to think less of him because of his Spice habit as a teenager, he already did so. To his surprise, Spock released him and raised his fingers to Jim’s face. His hand was close enough to the meld points that Jim could sense the heat of his higher body temperature on his skin. “Never, ashayam.”
“Alright.” Jim sighed and lifted the phial. It was a small glass flagon, filled to the brim, holding no more than a shot of transparent liquid. He pulled out the stopper and almost sneezed at the sharp scent of cinnamon tickling his nose and the back of his throat. He took a deep breath and upended the small flask, swallowing before the acid bite of concentrated Spice could make him gag.

“Bottom’s up.”

Jim had no idea if he even managed to say that out loud; the drug hit him so quickly. It seared through the mucous membranes of his mouth, burned into his stomach, and its scent went straight to his brain. Within seconds his vision changed, and Jim no longer felt connected to his body.

The drug opened up his mind like a flower, unfolding him petal by petal. A mere remnant of focus remained, barely enough to see Spock’s hand, to meet his eyes. He thought that Spock must move, must touch his face, must meld with him. But the air – time itself – turned solid around him. He tried to reach for Spock. But each movement stretched out in weird dimensions, as if his hand was dissolving into strands of sticky syrup. Or as if he had forgotten what a hand was. He couldn’t speak. When he moved his lips, silence spilled from his mouth. He sank into the stillness of space.

But the streams of the stars didn’t progress in a linear fashion anymore. Numbers were nameless and language lost all meaning. Instead, Jim was trapped at the center of a whirling web of times and places. Lives and deaths and rebirths spun in and out. Petal by petal was ripped off the blossom. The future turned into memories and morphed into a life never lived.

“My mind to your mind.”

Five. Words. Fingertips on his face. A number, a word. Meaning. Like the birth of a star in the silence of space. Memory. Like a rebirth from darkness and death. A sense of identity returned, an awareness of his body, mirrored in another mind. SpockSpockSpock. He was crying with the effort to pull his mind together, to direct it toward those words, those heated touches. He jerked under the hand that held him down. Not because he wanted to escape but because he no longer knew the difference between body and mind.

Spockspockspock...

“My thoughts to your thoughts.”

SONOFABITCH! Jim was slammed into a hard surface. A fist kissed his lips with a punch that rocked his head and made him see stars and dark, dark eyes. A ta’al, a smart turn on his heels: Live long and fuck you. Blue eyes. Hazel eyes. Such a crooked smile. A boy tumbled out of a car, stumbled away from a mass grave. I don’t believe in no-win scenarios. He threw himself into the fight with wild abandon. He was just a hick, and an addict, and next time, prison would be for real. He was viltah. He was at best a disadvantaged hybrid, at worst the bastard of a traitor and a whore. He was just a child who did not belong, a child who wanted to love his mother and didn’t know how. Nothing to lose is a win-win situation. A hand wrapped around his throat. Fingers dug in deep, defining bruises and a friendship. Asphyxiation burst into a supernova in his mind. Not confined by his skin, it exploded into alien senses. Fingers clawed into his wrist. Nails marked tender skin with green crescents and a mind forever. They both gasped for air and only wanted to feel the other again. Instead, they got missions and misunderstandings. Destiny’s a bitch ... and lonely drinks in a bar. And an ancient voice, light-years away: “Your path is yours to walk and yours alone.” Bullshit!

“Our minds, one and together.”

So you do feel ... The messy awkwardness of sex, the strange exhilaration of love. The gentleness, the brutality of it. The naked vulnerability. I have been and always shall be your friend. Bodies entwined, thrusting into each other’s depths. Hands pressed against glass. The needs of the one.
Sealed doors again. The universe was full of doors. I’m scared ... help me not be ... Hands, minds reaching—

Desert heat enveloped his naked body. Sweat trickled down his back. Vulcan-hot touches seared his forehead, temple, cheek, and jaw. The pressure of fingertips held his head in place with inhuman strength. Finally, deep breaths.

Then, thoughts: »Holy shit! Spock, what we just did, that shouldn’t even be possible!«

»The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture past them into the impossible.«

»In other words: We cheated, and you’re all for it. Now what?«

“Nam-tor du na'telan?” Spock asked, without relinquishing the meld.

“I am,” Jim replied and opened his eyes. He hoped they were still hazel. Why he was so obsessed with his eye color, he couldn’t say.

“Are you prepared for Bonding?” Jim reached out for Spock and framed his face with his palms. With his thumbs he gently wiped away Spock’s tears.

“Nash-veh nam-tor,” Spock whispered and leaned into Jim’s tender touch. “Kashkau wuhkuh eh teretuhr.”

“Our minds, one and together,” Jim repeated.

Chaos and order, emotion and logic, passion and serenity. How does that even fit together? Principles of the universe. And the universe in us. The connection deepened. Control didn’t matter anymore. Oh. We’re not that different, after all. No ...

“Estuhn wi ri estuhn,” Spock said, his voice gentle. His lips moved against Jim’s, almost, but not quite a kiss.

“Touching, yet not touching,” Jim replied and had no compunctions about deepening the soft touch into a kiss.

The need to touch was shocking in its intensity. He could sooner stop breathing than he could stop touching. But touching was wrong – inappropriate – and touching hurt – mental discomfort that needed to be controlled – because to touch meant to know, and knowledge was pain – emotional transference – because he was never enough – inadequate by Vulcan standards, ill-equipped for human relations. But the need to touch was awesome, a thing of damn beauty. He’d rather stop breathing than stop touching and being touched. Never mind how kinky that was, he thrilled at the memory of a hand around his throat. He wanted more of that. But other touches were good, too; a pat on the shoulder, a hug, a kiss, the human way or Vulcan style, a shared nap. He reveled in every friendly touch. In his own way, Jim knew what it was to go without – and to be reduced to a playground for the wrong kind of touches, the cruel, the hurtful, the debasing.

»Touching, to be touched, that’s a basic human need. It doesn’t have to hurt. (Look at it this way, Spock: Touching triggers a release of oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin. That reduces stress hormones. And that is beneficial for the balance and serenity of a half-Vulcan mind. You see, touching is logical. I’ll show you.)«

Spock barely withdrew from the kiss. Each syllable fluttered against Jim’s lips: “K'wuhli wi ri k'wuhli.”
“Apart, yet never apart.” Jim returned the whispered kiss.


“Nam-tor etek wuhkuh.” Spock withdrew his hands from Jim’s face. To Jim’s surprise the connection remained. Its warmth, its intimacy, and the instant knowledge of Spock’s thoughts.

>>The influence of the drug, Jim. For now you are as much a telepath as I am, if not more so. But that will fade.<<

A hint of concern melted through the Bond. Jim shook his head and captured Spock’s hand with Vulcan kisses. “We are one.”

>>We’ll be fine,<< he thought at Spock. »We are one. I’m yours.«

His nipples tightened in anticipation. He noticed how Spock focused on that small sign of arousal, how his eyes drifted lower and darkened as he took in Jim’s growing erection ... Spock inhaled, a deep shuddering breath through the mouth. The last three days, Jim had spent a considerable amount of time thinking how a connection between their minds would change their experience of desire. He did not expect Spock’s lust to hit him like the rush of heat and steam in a 230°F sauna. In spite of the heat, he shivered. From one second to the next, his cock was achingly hard.

Jim gasped for breath. To tear his gaze away from Spock’s black-blazing eyes took real effort. His reward was to watch Spock’s erection unfolding. Oh fuck, yeah. He’d had this irrational idea that Spock would be magnificent. Now he knew that it had been a good decision to use the bigger plug to get his body used to the idea of bottoming again. Also, he swallowed hard, those barbs were definitely bigger than the ones in the picture. Thankfully they didn’t look sharp. More like interesting. Kinky. That thickening base of Spock’s penis, too. Also, if not exactly self-lubricating, he was definitely slick, thanks to the sheath’s inner membranes, probably. Even without the special lube, it shouldn’t be too uncomfortable. Jim wanted to touch Spock and tell him how beautiful he was. He wanted to ask Spock what he wanted, and he wanted to give it to him. All of that, damn it, and more. Spock kept doing that to him: to want more, to be better.

As he handed Spock the lube, he remembered M’Benga’s and Sybok’s instructions. That supremely awkward conversation three days ago ...

♦

[Three days earlier.]

**Stardate 2260.245, 1300 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Office**

“Thank you for taking the time to meet me,” Jim said and nodded at M’Benga and Sybok, who’d settled into the visitors’ chairs in front of his desk. He wasn’t comfortable with going behind Spock’s back, but there was too much at stake. He folded his hands on his desk to keep from fidgeting. “M’Benga, what I want to discuss with you is primarily a private matter. However, the issue does concern Spock’s health and my own, so I’ll leave it to your discretion how to handle documentation. For the time being, I only request that you do not inform the CMO. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes, Captain,” M’Benga replied calmly. Jim liked that about the ship’s expert on Vulcan medicine. He was as imperturbable as any Vulcan, but with all the warmth of human compassion. As a result he was easy to talk to.
“Jim, please,” he asked. “Private matter, okay?” He wasn’t a prude to start with, and his long recovery in the wake of the Marcus conspiracy had further inured him to sharing intimate details of his body. But he didn’t care for being addressed as captain when the topic was essentially what happened to his ass.

“Very well, Jim,” M’Benga agreed. “Since Mr. Spock’s brother is here,” he inclined his head politely toward Sybok, “and you have mentioned Mr. Spock’s health as well as your own, I assume that you are considering a Vulcan Bonding.”

Jim allowed himself to take a deep breath. Thank goodness for smart guys like M’Benga. That made this conversation a lot less awkward. “Yeah,” he said. “That. So we’d have had this discussion at some point anyway. But Sybok alerted us to the fact that there’s a risk in putting it off.”

M’Benga turned to Sybok. “Is the compatibility that strong?”

Sybok nodded. “When we met yesterday, I greeted Jim with a simple handshake. The emotional transference was extreme.”

Jim frowned at M’Benga. “So you were aware of a problem concerning the two of us already?”

M’Benga shook his head. “I wouldn’t put it that way. I know that Mr. Spock is not Bonded, and that he is already late in undergoing pon farr. In addition, I have been advised that it is likely he will experience it at some point during the next five years.” The doctor regarded Jim with sympathy. “Everyone on the ship is aware that you and Mr. Spock are very close. Taking into account Mr. Spock’s situation, I confess that I have been hoping the connection between you might grow beyond friendship. But I am not a telepath. Since both of you have refused to see Dr. Elbrun for an evaluation, I am not in a position to assess the extent of your compatibility or the effects of mutual mental attraction. If a Vulcan mind healer – who is also a close relative of Mr. Spock – is worried about your mental safety, I am concerned, too.”

“Yeah, well, then I guess it will reassure you that we intend to go through with the Bonding as soon as I can get us some shore leave on Arrakis. Probably in three days, if nothing comes up,” Jim said. Now he felt really bad for refusing to work with Dr. Elbrun.

“Congratulations, Cap–” M’Benga broke off and smiled his relief. “That’s good, Jim.”

“Thanks, M’Benga.” Jim realized with a start that M’Benga was the first to congratulate him on his, well, marriage. In spite of the differences that was still the best term, as far as he could tell. Jim scratched his head. Talk about things he’d never expected to do in his life. “Why I’ve asked to meet you, what I want to discuss is, well, Spock is …” He didn’t think “freaking out” was a good way to put it, even if Spock was doing just that. “Well, he’s concerned for my safety. So I was wondering what I can do. To reassure him, to make things safer. I know there are traditional uh... Vulcan security measures, which are unavailable on the ship. But if there’s anything I can do, I want to know.”

“That is both logical and beneficial,” Sybok said approvingly. “There are indeed several techniques you can employ to increase your safety. I have overseen the Time of the members of the Vulcan colony on Dune for the last seventeen years. While injuries are inevitable, there has been no death so far. The most important element is a strong Bond. Your Bonding creates the foundation for pon farr. The more resilient a Bond is, the easier the Time will be for both partners. There are several methods to strengthen a Bond. For adults Bonding outside of pon farr, the most important method is to have sexual intercourse during or directly after the Bonding.”
Jim nodded. That made sense. “Spock said it’s more dangerous for two men?”

“That is correct,” Sybok said. “Any male will be considered a challenger at first. However, if clear roles are defined from the outset, the risk is lowered significantly. Especially if only one partner will ever go into pon farr.”

“So, you’re saying if I bottom from the start that will help when pon farr rolls around?” Jim asked. He’d done that before and liked it. At the Academy, with Gary. No problem there.

Sybok frowned. Human sex slang was beyond him. Thankfully M’Benga was present to translate. “Sybok, please correct me if I’m wrong. But it is my understanding that there is more to that technique than taking on the passive role colloquially called ‘bottom’ among Humans. Jim, in the context of pon farr, what we’re talking about is complete submissiveness until the partner at risk – in this case, you – has been recognized as Bondmate instead of challenger. The goal of Sybok’s strategy is to make that recognition instinctive. If the Bond itself is established on that basis, the risk of an escalation of violence should be much lower.”

Sybok nodded. “That explanation is accurate.”

“Okay,” Jim agreed. “Can do.” He’d do whatever it took. “Two questions, though. One, how submissive are we talking here? Can you give me parameters of acceptable behavior? Spock’s not Bonded; he has zero experience. If he’s not in pon farr, how is he supposed to act that dominant? I mean, he definitely has his moments,” Jim couldn’t suppress a grin, “but as a rule he’s not that aggressive. Two, is there sex life beyond the limits of pon farr role play? Not that I’m going to complain, but is it going to be safe at some point to hmm... diversify?”

M’Benga leaned forward. “Jim, you’re still thinking in human terms. But human standards do not apply in this case. This is not ‘role play’. We are not talking about who gets to penetrate, we’re not talking about erotic dominance and submission, we’re talking about an uncontrollable biological drive. There are no safe words in pon farr.” M’Benga didn’t manage to keep his concern from showing on his face as he went on, “Also, your perception of Spock as placid is skewed by your own propensity for aggressive behavior. For a Vulcan, Spock has a precarious history of violence. Near lethal violence. Violence that is already focused on you. If the details were known, he’d be regarded as dangerously unstable. The High Council might even pull him out of Starfleet and force him to undergo Kolinahr.”

For a moment M’Benga paused, letting his words sink in. Then he added with quiet authority, “When Sybok and I talk of submissive behavior, what we mean is that you don’t do anything except breathe on your own. You don’t move. You don’t talk. Just let it happen ... whatever happens. Technical problems should not be an issue. Spock’s development has been overseen by the medics of the Vulcan Science Academy. He has been taught all relevant details of human and Vulcan sexuality.”

M’Benga’s words hit him like a punch in the gut, and now Sybok looked worried, too. “What kind of violence has Spock displayed in the past?” Sybok asked.

Jim winced. “After the destruction of Vulcan, Spock was emotionally compromised, but he could not admit to it. I had to provoke him, make him lose control. It was my fault. There was an altercation. A fist fight, on the bridge. He choked me. I didn’t faint, but it was close. When your father intervened, he let me go at once. Then last year I was badly injured. After I collapsed, Spock went after the man he held responsible and nearly beat him to a pulp.”

“I did not know that. It is indeed worrisome; I will have to reflect on that.” Somehow Sybok sounded taken aback at this news. But how should he have heard of that before, here on Arrakis?
Neither story was common knowledge, and it wasn’t as if Sybok was still in contact with Sarek. “But to answer your questions,” Sybok went on, “the doctor is correct. You should remain as passive as possible until the Bond has been fully formed. For Vulcan couples that takes around three days. You may need more time. To aid the process, frequent intimacy in form of intercourse and mind melds is recommended. Once the Bond has become resilient, you are free to diversify as you please outside of pon farr.”

“I can do that,” Jim said. Under different circumstances he would have welcomed the prescription of “fuck as often as you can” with a lewd joke. Right now he didn’t feel like laughing, though. His mouth was dry. He had an inkling why Pike had pushed so hard to get him away from Earth on this five-year mission, and he was immensely grateful to his mentor for that. What he’d never quite understood so far was why Sarek had supported the plan so vehemently (well, vehemently for a Vulcan). Now the Ambassador’s motivations were a lot clearer ... Damn. It’s all my fault, Jim thought. Spock, how do I keep you safe?

“When you have arranged your shore leave, please come and see me about the relevant medical details,” M’Benga requested, very calm and matter-of-factly.

“Details?” Jim asked. Hadn’t they just discussed those?

“I can replicate traditional Vulcan lube for you, which Spock should be more comfortable with than the standard medical version,” M’Benga explained, as casually as if the topic was standard inoculations. “There are also ways to make anal intercourse easier on a body. Due to Spock’s physiology and his greater physical strength, preparations are advisable.” He didn’t say it, but “Captain” was the form of address that echoed in the silence of the office.

Jim was getting to the limit of his endurance in terms of sexual responsibility real fast now. “Great,” he said without any real enthusiasm. “We’ll do that. Thank you, M’Benga.” He rose to his feet, the other two men following suit. “Sybok, if you have the time, I’d like you to meet someone. A Vulcan boy we’ve picked up along the way. His name’s Thorby. Thorbehrak. He has problems, and our Betazoid counselor hasn’t been able to get through to him ...”

Stardate 2260.248, somewhere in the deserts of Arrakis

Yours, Jim thought.

He reached out and pulled his pillow toward him. Then he shoved it unceremoniously under his ass. Without taking his eyes off Spock he rose to his knees. Yours. (He wanted to reach for Spock and pull him into his arms. He wanted to kiss Spock and tell him that he fucking loved him, and then he wanted to fuck him.) With a careful gesture, he tilted his head to the left, exposed his throat. (He wanted to bury his hands in Spock’s black hair and ruin his logical looks. He wanted to bite kisses into Spock’s neck and call him dirty names until Spock protested how illogical he was and kissed back just as hard.) Without a word, he lowered himself onto the pillow again. As if in slow motion, he leaned back, further and further, until he lay on his back, arms at his side, ass tilted upwards, thighs spread wide. Yours. (He wanted to grab Spock and press himself against his body. He wanted to reach for that damn beautiful green cock of his and ask Spock if he liked his hands around his dick.) He closed his eyes and breathed.

Jim felt the heat of Spock’s body before the first touch. An electric current surging right into his dick. Holy shit. But Spock hesitated. As if he didn’t know what to do ... or perhaps – a sense of glorious anticipation began pulsing in Jim’s balls – because he couldn’t decide what to do first,
where to touch, what to taste.

The first touch was fluttering fingertips, stroking his sides, his waist, over his hips to the juncture of his thighs. His own skin was soft and cool like silk, while Spock’s fingertips were fiery embers on his body, and Jim felt both at the same time. He clenched his teeth and tried to focus on breathing. In and out. Out and in. But then a Vulcan-hot sigh scalded his cock. Just a soft exhalation, but by now Jim was so aroused that sensation went straight from damn hot to painful. He gasped for air. Breathe. Breathe. Just breathe. At least the pain kept him from grabbing Spock. Next came the careful, flat-palmed touch from before, measuring, assessing. Jim groaned. He couldn’t help himself.

That one small sound sufficed as a trigger.

“Mine,” Spock growled.

Spock ground himself against him. He pressed his penis against Jim’s cock and covered his body with his weight. Settling his forearms on Jim’s shoulders, he held him in place, trailing burning fingertips around his neck. Jim arched his back, instinctively pushing upwards, seeking relief. He couldn’t control that reaction any more than he could stop breathing. Jim might bench-press twice the weight Sulu did now, but Spock pinned him down easily, still twice as strong. The red-hot touch of Spock’s hand on his throat. The icy realization that M’Benga was right. Yours.

“Mine.”

Feverish fingers pushed into his ass. Not one, but two at once, digging in greedily. Again, the sensation doubled in Jim’s mind. On one level, he was being fingerfucked in his ass in the most perfect way he could ever have imagined. On another level, his hyper-sensitive fingers were sheathed in the silky flesh of his lover’s body, and that sensation was more intense than anything he could ever do with his penis. Joy and pain and sheer exultation.

“Jim.” Spock pressed his face between Jim’s neck and shoulder and nuzzled him, mouthing kisses and sighs into his skin. “Oh, ashayam.”

“Guh.” Jim thought he was losing his mind all over again. Involuntarily he pressed himself against Spock’s fingers, into his palm, demanding more.

“Is that satisfactory?” Spock asked suddenly, desperately. »Am I doing it right?« his thoughts whispered.

Jim couldn’t bear it any longer. He slung his arms and legs around Spock, holding on as tightly as he could, drowning, in over his head, perhaps in mortal danger, and still happy. With a kiss, he silenced his almost-lover. “Love you. Love you. Love you. Now please fuck me.”

Spock pushed in with a hard, awkward thrust. Jim discovered that the barbs were harder than they looked. He very nearly screamed. When Spock surged into him again, Jim nearly blacked out in bliss. Whoever managed to replicate that as a dildo would own the universe. “Spock, Spock, Spock!” he chanted, the need for silence forgotten as he urged his partner on, and on, and on, until the exquisite balance of pleasure and pain became too immense for him to hold, and he came in an incandescent explosion of lust and semen.

A moment later Spock slid his fingers over the meld points on the left side of Jim’s face. The connection between them intensified to the point that Jim felt himself slipping in and out of Spock’s mind with each thrust. To do nothing but breathe became easy. Jim floated. Beyond orgasm, beyond caring. But Spock’s urgency was still increasing with each stroke, each movement,
each touch, Vulcan control getting in the way of his need for release.

“Spock, Spock, Spock ...” Jim arched into his rhythm, impossibly aroused all over again, refractory period be damned. But it wasn’t enough. He tangled his legs with Spock’s. Still not enough. One hand reached for Spock’s face, the other grasped his neck, sliding around his throat. Not. Enough.

A hoarse order, shouted: “Now, Spock, now, damn you!”

Spock knew exactly what an orgasm was (the sudden discharge of accumulated sexual tension during the sexual response cycle, even for Vulcans or half-Vulcans a process controlled by the involuntary nervous system; resulting in rhythmic muscular contractions in the pelvic region as well as other involuntary actions; characterized by sexual pleasure and a general euphoric sensation). He had experienced it three times in his life. Often enough to be familiar with the procedure and its effects. He had found it not unpleasant and was not averse to experiencing it again, especially with Jim.

What he was not prepared for was the crazy clamor of love and lust that claimed him the moment he touched his new Bondmate.

At first Spock found himself caught unawares in the alien sensation of a San Francisco April shower, of “Yours”/“Yours”/“Yours” hitting him like hail. Jim’s desire drew him out into the rain and painted goose bumps on his body in the heat of the desert. When he reached for Jim, he staggered into the currents of a relentless river, soaking up Iwantyou–kissyou–fuckme–yourstupidhair–sogorgeous–markyou–kissme–fucking wantyou through his skin until he couldn’t breathe. Until he had to kiss Jim, had to claim him as his own – or drown.

Spock was drowning: He was sinking into Jim or into an ocean. He couldn’t tell. You were not supposed to dissolve into another’s body, you shouldn’t lose yourself in another’s mind. But Jim’s desire rushed into him with the force of a tsunami. With his right hand he clung to Jim’s mind, his only anchor now. His lust flooded his senses, until all he could feel was Jim, his penis pressed against Jim’s, his fingers buried in Jim’s ass. Jim’s arousal surged against him, into his mind, scraped him raw. For a delirious fraction of a second, Spock came up for air. He gripped Jim’s hips without regard for bruises and positioned himself. The sight of his penis pushed against Jim’s anus startled him, shocked him. Spock stumbled more than plunged into Jim. He was going under, losing himself in these terrible waves. In and out, in and out, an inescapable rhythm. Helplessly he flailed in the currents sweeping him on and on and on.

Until Jim screamed at him: “Now, Spock, now, damn you!”

A scalding riptide crashed over him and tore his control asunder, as he spilled himself into Jim’s depths, body and mind, and he couldn’t stop, couldn’t stop, couldn’t ...

Stardate 2260.249, 0300 hours, Deck 21, Spa & Pool

Leonard’s day started going wrong at 0300 hours, when Scotty woke him with a frantic comm: “You’ve gotta get down here. The girls are back from shore leave, and they are completely pissed. I can’t get them decent on my own. They’ll drown themselves, giggling like that. I’ve sealed off access. Override code is the captain’s birthday. Hurry!”

Then Leonard heard a shrill scream and a splash. He was out of his room and in the turbolift before
he realized that he was still in his PJs. When he barged into the spa area on deck 21, the scene that greeted him should have been a sight for sore eyes, balm for the soul of any man this side of the grave.

In the pool, giggling and squealing, frolicked Lieutenant Gaila, Lieutenant Amell, Ensign Canningham, and Lieutenant Carolyn Paul. Gaila, Amell, and the Wraith were buck naked, while Carolyn was wearing some kind of long shirt. Scotty was still trying to convince the women to emerge and get decent. High-pitched, drunken laughter told Leonard that Scotty wasn’t getting through. A second look at the frisky females told him that they’d need reinforcements.

“We’ll need help with them,” he told Scotty. “I’ll call Gwaloth's husband.”

“Aye,” Scotty replied. “I'll call Chekov. He's friends with Gaila, maybe he can convince her to get out.”

Leonard hurried to the next comm line. Had the universe gone mad? It was a woman’s duty to come and retrieve her drunken man, not the other way around!

When he turned back to the pool, the threat of her husband’s involvement had made Canningham come to her senses. She swam to the steps and hurried to her clothes, catching the towel Scotty threw at her. “My husband is never going to let me hear the end of this ...”

“I’m still not coming out,” Carolyn Paul cried, hiding behind Gaila. The Orion just laughed and swam away, leaving Carolyn exposed. With a shriek, the woman went under, flailing.

Leonard did the only thing he could: He jumped into the pool and grabbed Carolyn.

“Out we go, Missy, bath time’s over,” he growled and dragged her to the stairs. To his surprise, she gazed at him with adoring eyes and let herself be towed off without protest. That was almost too easy. When she refused to walk up the stairs, he was not surprised and hoisted her up into his arms. He couldn’t help enjoying her solid weight, her lush curves.

That way he managed to get her out of the pool. But to find himself with a squirming armful of happily drunk, soaking wet, half-naked Carolyn Paul had an immediate and unfortunate effect on his body. If he hadn’t noticed the slogan on her shirt next, he wasn’t sure what he might have done. But the thin fabric plastered to her breasts inevitably drew his eyes – to the slogan: “All I want for Christmas is the damn CMO.” His reaction was as unprofessional as that damn shirt. He pressed himself against her, hard enough to take her on the spot. Then he dropped her on the tiles like a hot potato.

Once reinforcements arrived, Gaila, Elena, and Gwaloth could be persuaded to dress. However, that didn’t help much. The shirts they grudgingly pulled on so Leonard and his helpers could herd them off to sickbay were no better than Carolyn’s, except that they were dry. Gaila’s read “Naked Muse of the Navigator Inside”. Elena’s spelled out “Thrusters On Full!”. Only Gwaloth’s was mostly harmless with the sigline “Mushiebrew Is Not For You”.

Damn right.

By 0400 hours Leonard had the women detoxed and maliciously sent them off without a hangover remedy. Cold, wet, and with the bluest balls in the history of mankind, he returned to his quarters to get ready for Alpha shift.

Stardate 2260.249, 0700 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay
At 0700 hours Leonard hadn’t even told his yeoman to get him a cup of coffee, much less given thought to inappropriate doctor/patient relationships when Lieutenant Paul waltzed into his office, looking hung over like hell, to declare that he was no longer her doctor or her therapist.

“You gonna press charges?” he asked, incredulous, still a vision of that damn shirt stuck to her full breasts in his mind. “For heaven’s sake, I couldn’t help myself.”

That was not quite true, and the reason for his bad mood. His arousal may have been involuntary. But drawing her tighter into his embrace, pressing himself against her body, even if only for a moment? Not so much.

“What? Me? You?” She stared at him in shock. “Are you out of your mind? You didn’t do anything wrong. I behaved like an idiot and all kinds of unbecoming an officer. As a result I have disciplinary action heading my way, and I’ll take it without a chirp of protest. I’ve put you in an impossible position, and it’s my responsibility to rectify that situation.”

He hadn’t really believed she would report him. Hadn’t had that kind of impression of her. Had even come to like her. But he knew all about bitches who would stop at nothing. He had good reasons to stay away from women beyond a fuck for fun.

“And how did that even happen?” he asked, indicating a long shirt with a vague gesture.

“How do such things happen?” she retorted, rolling her eyes. “Hormones? Pheromones? I collapsed at your feet and liked your shoes. You’re the doctor, you tell me. I’m sorry, though. It’s such a cliché.” She made a face and continued, “I’m also sorry for getting shitfaced and letting Gaila talk me into that shirt. And for interrupting your sleep. And for errr… provoking you.” She blushed like a little girl. “I should have switched doctors right away, when I realized I was developing inappropriate feelings.”

“Switching doctors? And how is that supposed to work for you?” Leonard chose to ignore her rambling excuses and poked an accusatory finger in her direction. “Because I know very well you weren’t going by protocol giving me access to your file when you couldn’t keep it together after Pyrithia.”

“I’m better,” Carolyn said stubbornly. “Our last three meetings we’ve only talked about Jo, Thorby, Chekov’s novel, your project for improving medical treatment guidelines for alien crew members, and how irritating Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock are. The meds are working. I sleep well most nights and haven’t had any panic attacks lately. If I need to talk, I can go to Guinan. She’ll listen even if I replace every important fact with ‘blubber nitwit oddment tweak’. I’m not allowed on any away missions anymore, so presumably the worst medical emergency I’ll have is a cold I catch from the kids at school. To treat a common cold Dr. Chapel doesn’t need access to my complete file.”

“You’re only stuck on board because there’s been no real reason for sending you into danger,” Leonard argued. “That can change the second Sybok pries the data out of Thorby’s mind that Colonel Baslim put there. Pyrithia messed you up so bad because I didn’t have the necessary medical information about you from the start, and I know you cannot hand that to Chapel like a piece of cake.”

Carolyn shrugged. “I’ll have to deal. And in an emergency I trust you to be professional and ignore that I have a stupid crush on you.”

“Jesus, woman. Who even calls that a crush anymore? Except Jo, of course.” Leonard forked his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Also, while I guess you can’t blame gravity for it, it’s not
exactly your fault. Such things happen. And you never let on when you’ve interacted with me up until now.” He had no idea why that pissed him off.

“Perhaps. But I shouldn’t have gotten drunk over it or jumped into that pool wearing that shirt. I should have been professional.”

“Damn right about jumping into a pool while you’re drunk off your ass.” He shook his head.

“Remind me again how old you are?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Lord have mercy and bourbon I pray.” Leonard groaned. “How about I just forget what you did, how I reacted, what you said, what I said, and we both go back to acting our age and being professional about it all?”

“No.”

“What? I just handed you a peace treaty, ready for signature and you refuse? Why would you do that?” He wondered if murder before coffee would be ruled as justifiable homicide.

“Possibly because I’ve decided that I don’t want to be professional where you are concerned.” She gave him a hard stare. “Also, I’ll still switch doctors.”

Then she turned around and walked out on him. Just like that. Also, there was no way she was switching doctors. Not while he had anything to say about it.

◆

**Stardate 2260.249, 1200 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay**

At noon, Leonard found himself missing Jim, who more often than not joined him for lunch. He scowled at his sandwich. Jim on shore leave on a desert planet where the leisure activities included riding giant sandworms – Leonard didn’t even want to imagine how wrong that vacation must go. And the only thing he’d been able to do about it was to remind Jim to put on sunscreen.

A moment later his PADD chirped to alert him to a message. A text from Jim, obviously written in advance and programmed to spoil Leonard’s lunch.

*Hi Bones,*

*Sorry to tell you this way. But that shore leave Spock and I are taking, there’s a special reason for it. We’ve decided to get together the Vulcan way, Bond and all. I could give you details, but that will just make you twitch and/or break out the booze, so I won’t. M’Benga and Sybok will tell you everything you want/need to know. Suffice it to say that Vulcan voodoo requires real privacy, and I’m looking forward to having a good time, too. Just in case and so you don’t freak out completely, I’ve listed the coordinates below. Fair warning: If you decide to peek with your scanner, I won’t be held responsible for what you see.*

*Take good care of the crew, especially Jojo and Thorby. See you in three days.*

*Jim.*
Stardate 2260.249, 1900 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

At 1900, Leonard was in his office and waiting for Sybok to finish his third session with Thorby. Leonard had come to care for the boy; not just as a doctor or because his daughter had become fast friends with the kid, but because he admired the boy’s stubbornness and innate resilience. In some ways, Thorby reminded him of Jim. They’d both survived atrocities and emerged ... not unscathed, no, but ... unbroken. And that gave Leonard hope in his own private hell.

In the last five days since Sybok had first beamed aboard, Leonard had learned more about Vulcans since medical school. That man was intense – think Spock squared, without the filters of logic and rationality normally installed by Vulcan biology and culture. Damn weird. But Leonard wouldn’t look a gift hobgoblin in the mouth. Especially if the information he got out of Sybok might help to keep the two Vulcans in his life safe. (And that damn fool Human getting mostly married to one of said Vulcans down on the planet right now.)

Leonard was doing his level best not to freak out. Judging from Nurse Oli’s wary looks, he wasn’t really successful. At least he hadn’t gotten out the bourbon yet, although he’d been damn tempted several times already (starting with the pool incident last night). Because even without Jim announcing his Vulcan marriage via PADD message (never mind that Sybok and M’Benga had done their best to reassure him that Bonding was “beneficial” for Spock and harmless for Jim), it simply was that kind of day (starting with fishing three drunk girls and a drunk Wraith out of the Enterprise pool in the middle of the damn night because they were too far gone to find the damn stairs or their shirts on their own).

Sybok entered his office and slumped on a visitor’s chair in a posture that was light-years from his brother’s most relaxed way of seating. Leonard took in the long hair, the ragged beard, the expressive face. Once again he wondered if the universe had a master plan that currently focused on teaching him that he knew absolutely nothing about anything, starting with his own child and his best friend, and ending with Vulcans and women.

“Any progress?” Leonard asked. (If he concentrated on Thorby’s problems, he wouldn’t go crazy worrying about Jim.)

Sybok sighed. “Not really. It is very possible that your Colonel Baslim has found a fool-proof way of securing data in a messenger’s mind. Of course it won’t be easy to replicate the method as it hinges on a Vulcan mind’s reactions to profound trauma.”

Leonard was torn between his – grudging – respect for Vulcan demands for privacy and his curiosity as a doctor and xenobiologist. Sybok noticed and raised an amused eyebrow. But he didn’t seem to mind explaining. “What keeps getting lost in translation between Humans and Vulcans is that Vulcan emotions are not just stronger than human feelings, but inherently different. Even more important, so are the emotional processes.”

Fascinated, Leonard leaned forward. “What exactly do you mean with that?”

“You didn’t think Vulcans nearly managed to extinguish their species even before we invented nuclear weapons because we used to be such an overly emotional bunch, did you? Not even Humans managed that spectacular feat of stupidity.” Sybok’s sarcasm was tinged with bitterness. He rubbed his palms together thoughtfully. “Human emotions, they come and go, isn’t that correct, Doctor? You experience various emotions at different stages of your life, triggered by a variety of impulses, minor and major, inside and outside. For you it is normal to eventually overcome your emotions and move on, and to experience them all over again. Letting go and making peace with the past is an important part of your mind-healing lore.”
“Hmm. Psychology is a complex area of study for any species,” Leonard hedged. However, he was willing to play along. “But so far, so good. Go on.”

“Vulcan emotions don’t work that way. If a healthy Vulcan falls in love, he stays in love. There is no way the feeling can lessen or grow more intense over time. Love is love. Pain is pain. There is no escape. That is why we need logic and control. Once Vulcan emotions reach a certain threshold of intensity, they cannot be overcome. Just as you cannot heal a broken leg by sheer force of will, a Vulcan overwhelmed by the rage of war cannot make peace. It is neurologically impossible. There are exceptions, of course. Surak was one, I’m another. A genetic quirk allows us a more versatile approach to emotions, even though it is still a far cry from the dynamic, flexible way of how Humans handle their feelings. That is how Surak could break the self-destructive cycles of Vulcan emotions in the first place. That is why I can embrace emotions up to a point, why I can ease the trauma of an injured mind,” Sybok explained. He offered Leonard a crooked smile. “My brother has inherited the benefits of both our species. He experiences the full depth of Vulcan emotions as well as the full flexibility of Human emotions. Unfortunately, I think he doesn’t appreciate how fortunate he is – if he is even aware of it.”

Suddenly, all academic curiosity and even his concern for Thorby were driven from Leonard’s mind. “Wait a moment. Do you mean to tell me that Spock may not know how his own mind works? And he’s down there in the desert right now, trying to Bond with my captain?”

“There is no need for concern,” Sybok reassured him. “Spock is an extremely talented and versatile telepath in his own right. For Vulcans to form a Bond is an instinctive, natural form of telepathy. There shouldn’t be any problems.”

Leonard shook his head. “Please forgive me, but I have to check that myself.”

He jumped up and hurried to the remote medical scanners in the main area of sickbay. He’d already saved the coordinates Jim had provided. So far he simply hadn’t checked on them. He did trust them. (Up to a point.) And he could not bring himself to begrudge them their right to privacy, to intimacy.

Thankfully, the weather was good, so the scans took just a few seconds to complete. Leonard stared at the results. He’d never seen anything remotely like that before. His blood pressure skyrocketed, pounding in his temples. With icy fingers he tapped the panel to bring the scans up on the screen for Sybok. But his hands didn’t shake. His reaction to crisis was that of a surgeon – perfect control, foul language, and a vicious temper.

“What the bloody hell is happening to them?” he snarled at Sybok. “Are those scans supposed to look like that? Or are modern diagnostic tools beyond your Vulcan voodoo?”

Sybok stepped next to him. “I am familiar with brain scans, Doctor. I did study at the—” He broke off and stiffened. “No. No, those scans are not supposed to look like that, not at all. Doctor, I need to examine them at once.”

“McCoy to bridge. Medical emergency on Arrakis, involving the captain and the first officer. Beaming down ASAP.”

He only took the time to call Carolyn and ask her to look after Jo and Thorby while he was gone, then he dragged Sybok to the sickbay transporter room.

♦

Stardate 2260.249, 2010 hours, somewhere in the deserts of Arrakis
Ten minutes later, Leonard ripped open the flap of a standard Starfleet tent somewhere in the deserts of Arrakis and froze.

Unconscious and naked, Jim and Spock were lying on the floor, their limbs entangled. Jim was on his back, a pillow under his ass, exposing him to their unexpected audience. Spock had buried his face in the crook of Jim’s neck. His right hand was still fastened to Jim’s face in a mind meld, while the fingers of his left were intertwined with Jim’s right. His penis was still firmly embedded in Jim’s ass. For a second, Leonard could only stare in shock, at the lewd display of their paralyzed, naked bodies, at the fragile ecstasy on their lifeless faces.

“What the fuck?!” he cried and aimed his tricorder at them. The machine lit up with a dozen lights, trilling alarms. Throwing it aside, he moved to tear Spock away from Jim.

But Sybok caught his arm in an iron grip. “Do not interfere just yet. You could kill them both. I shall initiate a superficial meld with Jim to ascertain what is going on.”

Leonard froze. “Why with Jim?”

“Spock initiated the meld. To disrupt his focus could be disastrous.” Sybok knelt next to Jim and trailed his fingertips over his forehead, a gentle, swift touch. Concern turned into anxiety. “I was right to stop you from separating them. For some reason they have joined in the mode of plak’tow, the blood fever, even though Spock is not in pon farr. They are physically tied together – an idiosyncrasy of the Vulcan member that normally comes into play only during the fever. They are also deeply melded, in the throes of their new Bond. Tearing them apart now would end them both, make no mistake about that.”

“Jesus.” Involuntarily Leonard took a step backward and swallowed hard. “But we can’t just leave them here like that!”

“No, that would not be advisable,” Sybok agreed. “Jim is not used to the climate. It is already affecting him. Could you beam them on board of the Enterprise the way they are? Without jarring their position?”

“Yes,” Leonard said. “It’s impossible to get them directly to a room from here, but once they are beamed up, they can be transferred to sickbay in a second step.” He pulled out his comm unit. “McCoy to Enterprise. Scotty, you there?”

“Aye, what can I do for you, Doctor?”

“I need you to prepare for beaming Jim and Spock up and then to quarantine room one. They are unresponsive and in ... in something of a state. Can’t be carried on stretchers.” Jesus. But how was he supposed to describe what condition they were in? “Get everyone out of there, Scotty. We don’t need an audience. Have M’Benga expand the bed to double. Can you make sure that they are not jostled in the process?”

“Sure can do. Give me a moment to clear the way and double-check their exact position – then I’ll get them up without a molecule or hair out of place.”

He pulled Sybok backward, so they wouldn’t interfere with Scotty’s analysis of the coordinates. “What the hell happened to them?” he hissed at the Vulcan.

Sybok shrugged helplessly. “I do not know. It must be the Spice.”

“Spice?” Leonard asked and shook his head. “No. No way. Jim would never use that again. It messed him up bad enough as a teenager. He’s been very careful here. The most he’s had is some
Spice water. He’d never take the drug.”

“I am afraid that is my fault,” Sybok admitted. “I insisted that he should take ‘Water of Life’ before the Bonding. I did not expect that it would affect both of them. Spock should have been able to control it easily. The meld must have transferred the effects.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” Leonard demanded. “Did you want to kill them all along? What kind of a sick bastard are you?”

“I wanted to save their lives,” Sybok replied, his voice shaking. “There was no other way ...”

♦

Somewhere, Somewhen

Jimspock drifted in space, and space was black and silent. But space was not empty. A silver web stretched out across the abyss. Spockjim drew closer, curious. Iridescent strands spun out and pulled them in. At the core they found a living, breathing entity of pearly spheres or soap bubbles or the almost translucent petals of magnolia blossoms. A world? Or a ship? Or maybe both?

As they glided closer, an eerie music greeted them. Trills and wails and rumbles, tinkling, warbling, rumbling. Welcome back? But they had never been here before ... Jimspock hesitated. One of the spheres moved towards them, enveloped them, in light, music, and a profound sense of peace and freedom. After a while, it withdrew again. Not yet. Not yet, but one day. A promise. The worldship or its inhabitants pushed them away, off into the depths of the unknown, toward unfathomable coordinates.

What remained was the silver bond that tied them together. The loose ends of the bond extended far into the blackness of space. One end disappeared in a distant, glowing ribbon, a nebula maybe, or some kind of energy anomaly. Spockjim sensed a pinprick of light at its center. A tiny spark, perhaps a lost golden star. The other end of the bond was tied to a precious, silver teardrop. Jimspock knew what these tears would taste like when they licked them from each other’s faces – of ashes and bitterness and love.

Naked, they clung together. After a while, they began to move in a gentle rhythm. They pressed against each other, flowed into each other. Desire pulsed deep inside them, drove their bodies and their minds to completion once more.

♦

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, “Is it good, friend?”
“It is bitter – bitter,” he answered;
“But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart.”
– Stephen Crane, In the Desert

Chapter End Notes
• The first effects of the “Water of Life” on Jim follow the description of “Dune”
canon; “The universe is full of doors” is also a quote from “Dune” by Frank Herbert.

• Vulcan phrases and rituals are based on “Vulcan Rituals and Ceremonies” at the Star
Trek Online Geekipedia.

• “Blubber nitwit oddment tweak“ is from “Harry Potter” by J. K. Rowling.

• The final scene features a worldship cameo from Vonda N. McIntyre’s tie-in novel
“Enterprise: The First Adventure”.

♥ Comments are love! ♥

What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let
me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for
another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can
receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my
story.
Jim and Spock redefine the meaning of “I’m stuck on you”. Bones does not appreciate that one little bit. ♦ Jo knows all about waking from her dreams screaming. But Thorby can’t even cry. ♦ Carolyn gets to babysit, and McCoy gets to be very uncomfortable. ♦ And Sybok is all kinds of awesome.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When You Fall, You Fly

Stardate 2260.249, 2020 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay

Five minutes later, Leonard stumbled from the transporter platform almost before he’d materialized. Gratefully, he noticed that Scotty had been true to his word: The transporter room was empty. He gripped Scotty’s arm. “For God’s sake, make sure they don’t get separated – that could kill them.”

Scotty stared at him, eyes wide with concern. “Ready when you are, Doctor.”

Leonard ignored Scotty’s alarm. “M’Benga?”

“Waiting for you in Q1.”

Leonard took a deep breath and pulled out his tricorder, ready to point it at whatever appeared on the transporter platform. “Do it.”

A fraction of a second later, the white whirlwind of transporter beams left behind two entwined, naked bodies in the middle of the platform. Without waiting for Scotty’s reaction, Leonard trained the tricorder on Jim and Spock. After a long moment of staring at the scans, ignoring the tricorder’s alarms and warning lights, he breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing had changed. At least something.

Leonard slipped the belt of the tricorder over his shoulder again and turned to Scotty. The Chief Engineer was staring at their naked friends. Blinking, he opened and closed his mouth a few times without making a sound, before he pressed out, “Holy—”

“Indeed,” Leonard snapped. “On my mark, beam them over to Q1. As uh... gently as you can. And then get Sybok back up here.”

Scotty gulped and nodded. Bones turned on his heels. As promised, M’Benga was already waiting for him in the antechamber of the quarantine room when he got there. “What happened, Doctor McCoy?” he asked, concerned. “Did something go wrong with the Bonding?”

“—the fuck should I know?” Leonard ground out and brushed past M’Benga. He stepped through the double entry into the quarantine room. An expanded hospital bed took up the center of the
room. Steeling himself, Leonard tapped his comm unit. “Scotty? We’re ready. Do you have the exact coordinates of the bed?”

“Verified and locked, Doctor.”

“Then go ahead.” Leonard took a step back to stand next to M’Benga, who had followed him into the room.

White swirls condensed into two bodies. Next to Leonard, M’Benga gasped. Leonard didn’t suppress an unpleasant smirk. M’Benga couldn’t have told him anything without violating doctor-patient confidentiality, but damn it! This need not have happened. This should not have happened, whatever it was.

“Got them,” Leonard confirmed with Scotty. “Now get Sybok up here, please.”

“Working on it. Scotty out.”

M’Benga was already at the complex scanners of the quarantine unit, fingers flying over panels. Scotty appeared with Sybok before the scans were complete.

“Doctor?” Scotty asked, hesitating in the door to the quarantine room.

Leonard shook his head, a tight, jerky gesture. “No time now, Scotty. I’ll ... I’ll tell you what’s going on as soon as I can.”

He turned back to the consoles. Screens lit up, scans started. Physical, neurological. Warning lights, beeps of alarm. The results were more detailed than those of the tricorder, but essentially the same.

In terms of Jim’s and Spock’s physical condition, the scans confirmed Sybok’s initial diagnosis. Although Spock was not in pon farr, the men were joined in a textbook version of the blood fever union. They were literally tied together thanks to the knot at the base of Spock’s penis. Apart from that, Jim was dehydrated after spending thirty-two hours in a desert climate without drinking. His well-intentioned preparations had left him low on fluids from the start, a fact that now acerbated his condition.

Neurologically, the best medical scanners of the Enterprise were unable to tell Jim’s and Spock’s brains apart. The scans would have made more sense if they had been looking at a single brain – a brain that was high as a kite on Spice.

At first Jim reacted positively to the lower temperatures on board of the Enterprise. But when Spock started shivering, Jim displayed the same symptoms with a delay of three minutes and forty seconds. In the end M’Benga and Leonard had to raise the room temperature to eighty-six degrees Fahrenheit before they were able to get Jim started on intravenous rehydration therapy.

When both men were resting comfortably again (or as much as that was possible without separating them), Sybok initiated another exploratory mind meld. This time, after a few moments of laying his left hand across Jim’s face, he also touched Spock’s forehead. At last he pulled away his hands and stepped back.

“Now what?” Leonard demanded, turning his back on Spock and Jim and facing M’Benga and Sybok.

“The Bond hasn’t settled yet,” Sybok said gravely. “An interspecies Bond can take longer to become entrenched than a Bond between two Vulcan partners. As far as I can tell, their condition is
stable; they are not in any mental distress. Therefore I suggest to leave them be, at least for another
day or two. The influence of Spice on their mental state should wear off soon. If any effects of the
drug should persist, Spock ought to have no problems controlling them, both for Jim and himself.”

“Why did you administer Spice in the first place?” M’Benga asked, clearly appalled. “That is not
standard procedure. Minds should be clear of any outside influence during a Bonding.”

“That is true,” Sybok admitted with visible reluctance. “I was ... taking a chance. Spice activates
the psionic potential of Humans. My stepmother used it during her pregnancy to maintain a
prenatal Bond with Spock. I hoped Spice would similarly enable Jim to form a stronger Bond with
Spock than would normally be possible between a Human and a Vulcan. I believe I was right.
From what I perceived in the meld, their nascent Bond is extremely strong. The brain scans support
that impression. I did not anticipate that Spock would lose control and allow the drug to affect them
in such a way. It is a most unusual reaction for a Vulcan.”

“Well, sex and drugs and rock ’n’ roll will do that to you.” Leonard scowled. “And Spock’s not
Vulcan. He’s half-Human, damn you.” He turned to M’Benga. “Your verdict?”

“Bonding and pon farr are the most intimate aspects of Vulcan life, Dr. McCoy,” M’Benga replied,
his dark face tense. “Thanks to my work with genetic hybridization techniques at the Vulcan
Science Academy, I have been privileged to learn more about the psychological and physical
consequences of Vulcan Bonding and mating than any human scientist before. But I have never
seen any brain scans of the process or the condition. I do not know if any exist – or existed, now
that Vulcan is gone. As I’m also not a telepath myself, I have to rely on Sybok’s conclusions. A
second opinion would be helpful. However, both Kirk and Spock have logged their refusal to let
Dr. Elbrun access to their minds outside a medical emergency.” He frowned and scrutinized the
displays of the scanners once more. “While the scans are extremely unusual, they do not indicate
any immediate danger for either brain. Their physical condition is satisfactory. Therefore I don’t
believe we have sufficient reason to involve Dr. Elbrun at this point. In consequence we need to
rely on Sybok’s assessment of their mental state beyond what the scans can tell us. Based on my
knowledge of the Bonding process, I do believe that Sybok’s proposal is valid. Kirk and Spock are
monitored closely now. We’ll be alerted to any change. At this point in time, it might be best not to
interfere with the process.”

“And the rest?” Leonard made an impatient, rude gesture. “Any suggestions for how to handle
their current ... attachment?”

M’Benga remained calm in spite of whatever apprehension or disapproval he might harbor
concerning the situation. “Spock is not in pon farr,” he stated. “Thankfully. However, the mode of
intercourse is definitely that of plak’tow – the blood fever. As you can see,” he pointed at the
screen of the relevant console, “Their bodies are tied together due to the knot at the base of the
Vulcan penis. For heterosexual partners that mechanism ensures conception during pon farr. I
didn’t expect that this particular phenomenon would also occur in a homosexual union. If this was
pon farr, there’d be nothing we could do about it. Since Spock is not actually suffering from
plak’tow, a mild sedative might allow us to separate them. However, I have no idea if or how that
would affect the Bonding process.” M’Benga tapped the panel and brought up additional scan
results. “Due to the medication Kirk received from me in preparation for the Bonding there are no
immediate medical concerns. Therefore my suggestion is the same as Sybok’s in that regard.
Monitor them and leave them be. Once the meds wear off and Kirk’s gastrointestinal functions
normalize, we can review the situation and the option of administering a sedative in order to
separate them physically.”

Leonard didn’t want to listen to them. Not to M’Benga and least of all to Sybok. He turned around
and forced himself to look at Jim and Spock.

*Jesus, Jim. Alien drugs and alien sex. You never do anything halfway, do you?* Leonard felt a crazy urge to separate them and lock Jim up somewhere safe for the rest of his life. But of course that wasn’t possible, and it would be wrong, too. Leonard did his best to ignore the naked facts in front of him and focus on their faces. They looked so damn young, so utterly exposed, and in spite of their particular positions ... strangely innocent. *Happy.*

M’Benga stepped next to him. “Leonard,” he said in a soft voice, “I know you’re worried; so am I. But what we’re looking at here is not just a medical condition. Our language lacks the words to express what this is. Formally, less than a marriage. But effectively, a closer union than any mere Human can hope for. We *must* respect that. As far as that is medically possible.”

“Damn it, Jabilo, don’t you think I get that?” Leonard snapped. “Do you really believe I’m that narrow-minded? Do you really think that I don’t understand how they are together?” He rubbed a shaking hand over his forehead. “That I don’t wish them happiness?”

After a long moment of silence, Leonard sighed. “I don’t like this,” he announced. “I don’t like this at all. But fine, we’ll do it your way for now. We’ll keep them here and monitor them. Sybok, you’ll have to stay on the Enterprise until this is over. You’re responsible for this mess, you help us fix it.” Leonard scowled at the older Vulcan. “I’ll set up a feed to our comm units from the monitors. I want both of you here at the first chirp of alarm.” He gestured at Jim and Spock. “Besides brain damage and infection due to prolonged anal contact we’ll have to figure out how to get Spock’s weight off Jim soon. That’s quite an awkward position they are in. It’s almost a miracle it’s not affecting Jim’s breathing yet, and we’ll have to watch out for circulation issues in his legs as well. Even if they snap out of this soon, Jim will be sore as hell for days, and not just in his ass, either.”

♦

Stardate 2260.249, 1900 hours, Deck 4, McCoy’s Quarters

Jo waited until Sybok had left. Then she barged into the room. Even on a starship as big as the Enterprise, space was a rare commodity. So Jo and Thorby shared a room now, their privacy protected by flexible plastic partitions that went around their bunks. Jo went straight for Thorby’s bed. She didn’t bother knocking on the privacy wall curving around his bed, because he’d never invite her in. Instead, she just pulled it back far enough to slip inside and sit down cross-legged at the foot of his bed.

Thorby looked awful, the way he lay on his bed, so pale that the delicate tips of his ears were almost translucent. His face was yellowish. Humans went green when they felt sick. Thorby went yellow, like old alabaster. (Jo had researched alabaster for a fanfic, because Carolyn had told them that they should check their clichés so they knew what they were writing about. She’d been disgusted to discover that alabaster often wasn’t smooth and white, but rather poriferous and yellowish. Not nice.)

Thorby didn’t move or say anything. Just lay there, looking very small, staring at the ceiling. “Hey, Thorbs,” she whispered, keeping her voice as low as possible. He probably had an awful headache now. He always had. It would take a while yet for the hypo to kick in. “Any progress?”

He shook his head, black eyes huge in the sickly, pointy face. He wasn’t real big on Vulcan mind control and logic. Logic hadn’t kept his planet safe. Mind control didn’t make the awful stuff that had happened to him go away. But he still blamed himself for not being better at it, for not being
“Don’t worry,” she murmured, “you’ll get there. That was only the third session with Sybok. It takes time. Back on Earth, after my mother’s death, dad made me talk to a therapist. That never helped, although I had dozens of sessions. Now I’m talking to Guinan sometimes, and you know what? She gets me. And that? Helps. And Sybok gets you, doesn’t he?” She was rambling. But Thorby didn’t seem to mind. Or at least he looked a little bit less pinched and yellow. “Now budge up so I can get in.”

Thorby shifted, and Jo snuggled against his side. Her dad had lectured her on how Vulcans didn’t like to be touched. But her dad was wrong. Vulcans might not like being touched in general and by random people. There were exceptions, though. For example, Spock liked being touched by Uncle Jim just fine. She’d noticed how his dark eyes gleamed when Uncle Jim jostled him a bit, the way Uncle Jim always did with people he liked, and also how Spock’s stern mouth kind of softened into an almost-smile when Uncle Jim put his arm around the back of Spock’s chair at dinner, which was practically touching. And Thorby, well, so far the only thing that made his nightmares stop was when she sneaked into his bed and cuddled him like a giant, pointy-eared teddy (or maybe the other way around, letting him cuddle her, as if she were his Jo-shaped comfort blankie). Jo knew all about waking from dreams screaming. Thorby couldn’t even cry. If she could help keep bad dreams away, she’d never mind getting up extra early to slip back into her own bed unnoticed. As a result she spent more nights sleeping in Thorby’s bed than not. By now they were as at home in the other’s nightmares as in their own.

“Main thing is, you’re safe, and the bad guys didn’t get the info your dad put in your head,” Jo insisted.

“But this is important,” Thorby disagreed. “People may be dying because I can’t control myself. Pop trusted me to pass on his message. It’s the last thing he asked me to do, and I can’t do it.”

“You’re not looking at it logically. Your pop had no idea when a federation starship would get to New Sydney for you to tell anyone about anything. He was no doctor or mind healer. He couldn’t plan for how weird Vulcan minds can be. You’re doing the best you can. Sybok said you’re making progress. You’re doing what you can. That’s enough.” She pulled Thorby into her arms. “Now shush,” she ordered, “and take a nap until Carolyn calls us for dinner.”

Stardate 2260.249, 2200 hours, Deck 4, McCoy’s Quarters

Carolyn Paul was sitting in Doctor McCoy’s living room, trying to concentrate on reading “Harry Potter” on her PADD. She had a thing for children’s books, the older and the more obscure the better. Especially in times of stress. Perhaps a strange preference, but well, everyone had a weak spot. At least hers didn’t come in a bottle or a hypo.

It had been quite a surprise that McCoy had called her to watch over Jo and Thorby when a medical emergency had come up tonight. After what had happened this morning, she had assumed he wouldn’t be talking to her again anytime soon outside ship’s business, if that. Not that she’d blame him. Even though there was no way she’d follow through on her threat. Yes, sure, she’d tried to provoke him and to get a rise out of him at the end of their argument – discussion – whatever. If she hadn’t been so horribly hung over and embarrassed and f...ing frustrated, she would never have said anything like that in the first place. But she had. She’d behaved like a jerk and made a fool of herself, and by rights McCoy should have reported her twice over. He hadn’t. In consequence, she had expected McCoy to at least ignore her from now on. That was what she would have done.
She switched off the PADD, unable to concentrate on the book anymore. Perhaps asking her to babysit was McCoy’s way of telling her that even if she was an infatuated idiot, he was capable of keeping everything strictly professional between them? To clarify that nothing had changed? In spite of the stupid shirt and his obvious attraction to her body at least? It was stupid, but she wished she could tell him how much it meant to her that she hadn’t freaked out over that. That she hadn’t panicked at his touch. That there hadn’t been any nightmares.

Carolyn sighed. It was probably just a matter of convenience that he’d called her tonight. She’d been helping out with Jo and Thorby for weeks now when McCoy was unavailable. So he’d just defaulted to her. She glanced at the monitor that Jo violently objected to and McCoy insisted on because of Jo’s recurring night terrors. But both Jo and Thorby were fast asleep. Thorby had been very tired after his session with Sybok today and gone to bed without complaint. Of course the Vulcan boy always did what he was told, and exactly what he was told. He almost never showed any hint of emotion or any sign of preference toward anything, with the exception of Jo. Thorby liked Jo; that much was clear. And for some reason, Jo was good with Thorby. Only Mr. Spock and Sybok were better at figuring Thorby out.

From day one – when Jo had appeared in sickbay for a visit with their new Vulcan passenger – Jo had told adults and other children what Thorby liked and what Thorby wanted, even though the boy rarely said a word or showed any other reaction. Upon questioning, Thorby invariably gave a reply that more or less supported Jo’s “translations”. Well, the intensity of his explanations and Jo’s translations never matched. Jo would say, “He totally loves that soup, give him another bowl already!” while Thorby might say “If that is acceptable, I would not mind consuming another bowl of soup.” Jo would push away another child, shouting, “Can’t you see that he hates it if someone’s close behind him? Stay off his back, idiot!” while Thorby, when questioned, only pressed himself against the nearest wall, eyes flat and feral, silent.

Jo had, in her way, adopted Thorby. And Thorby had let her. Carolyn and the other adults responsible for the children were at the same time relieved and concerned over the unlikely friendship. There was an element of codependency to the children’s relationship that needed to be watched. Jo meant well, but (much like her father) she could be a bit of a bully. Although Mr. Spock and Dr. Elbrun confirmed that Thorby did still have boundaries left that he would at least attempt to defend, he was extremely passive, even for a Vulcan child. Still, for the time being, everyone was grateful that Thorby had found someone he was able to trust at all – even if that someone happened to be an eleven-year-old girl.

Now that she had abandoned her book, Carolyn got up and retrieved a cup of rooibos tea from the replicator. Since Uhura had refined the code based on her private supplies of real rooibos tea, the replicated version was quite enjoyable. Carolyn wondered what kind of emergency kept McCoy down in sickbay tonight and hoped it was nothing bad. She’d heard nothing about any of the crew down on Arrakis for shore leave getting into trouble, so maybe it was just a burst appendix or something like that.

At 2300 hours, McCoy showed up, looking like hell warmed over. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Can you stay the night? That emergency, I ... I think it would be better if I stayed in sickbay.”

Shit, she thought, then it’s bad. Real bad.

“The kids are sleeping,” Carolyn said when he sat down, too exhausted to even launch into his usual interrogation about everything Jo had said and done. “There’ve been no problems. Jo’s worried, though. It would be good if you can talk to her tomorrow. How about some tea? Have you eaten anything at all?”
He nodded automatically, leaving it up to her to decide which question he had meant to answer. Another indicator for how serious the situation was. Like most medics he was awful about taking care of his own health. He routinely worked abnormal hours, ate whatever whenever he had the time, slept in snatches. She’d had heard rumors that his secret stash of whiskey was rivaled only by Scotty’s still. If he was shattered enough to accept tea...

She pondered what to get him. For her dad, she’d order a pint of lager and bangers and mash in a blink. But what was the equivalent in terms of traditional Southern comfort food? After a hard stare at the menu, she chose sweet iced tea and cheese grits with sausage. She hoped the replicator wouldn’t mess up. She hadn’t tried getting that particular type of ethnic cuisine out of it before and wasn’t really familiar with it. Thankfully, the combination seemed to be pretty standard because the replicator blinked green lights at her after no more than two minutes.

“Here you go,” she said and put grits and tea in front of McCoy. When he just stared at the plate, she reminded him gently, “You’re supposed to eat that, you know.”

Mechanically, he picked up fork and knife and dug in without a word. He didn’t notice what he was eating. She kept him company with another cup of rooibos tea. Only when he was done and she’d cleared the table, she dared to ask what was going on.

“How bad is it?” Carolyn asked, worried. “Can you tell me?”

McCoy sighed and rubbed his temples wearily. “Nothing to talk about yet. And nothing I could tell you even if there was.”

“I’m sorry I asked. I didn’t mean to pry, and I’m aware of—”

He rolled his eyes. “I know you are. Thanks for the food and for babysitting. And for ...” He frowned. “... caring. It’s a shitty thing to ask of you right now, but I’m afraid I won’t be around much during the next days and ...” Again he rubbed his temples. “See, that’s why I didn’t want to take Jo with me. I should be here, taking care of her, but I’m the damn CMO, and even if that makes me the worst dad of all times—”

Carolyn shook her head, silencing him. “It’s not a crime to have a job or to love that job. Even if it’s a difficult job that comes with awkward hours and tons of stress. Jo knows there are times when she can’t come first on board. She doesn’t mind.”

“Damn,” he muttered. “That’s not how it’s supposed to be.”

“What in life is?” Carolyn asked with a bitter shrug. “Doctor—”

“That’s not how it’s supposed to be.”


She blinked at him in astonishment. That was about the last thing she’d expected after their argument this morning, and certainly not in the middle of whatever emergency he was caught up in at the moment. Men, really. She forced herself to go on as if there was nothing to it. “Leonard, Jo doesn’t mind your job. She minds if you don’t talk to her. See that you make time for that, tell her what you can. I’ll take care of the kids until this is over, whatever it is. Don’t worry about them. Just remember that even a CMO needs food and sleep sometimes. You’re not an Augment, okay?”

♦

Stardate 2260.250, 0100 hours, Deck 7, Quarantine Room One, Antechamber
Leonard stood in front of the glass window that separated the antechamber from the quarantine room, a little light-headed from the hypo that had eliminated his tension headache. Inside the room the lights were dimmed, but it was more than bright enough to see the naked bodies on the bed. Hours after they had been beamed on board, more than a day after their Bonding, Jim and Spock remained unaware of their surroundings. Their physical condition was stable now. Their mental state was still bizarre. The worst Spice high Leonard had ever seen and Vulcan voodoo he didn’t even have a medical term for kept them deep in trance. They stayed oblivious of what was happening to them, of what they were doing to each other.

Leonard realized he should leave when they started to move. The scanners were calibrated to alert him the second their condition changed for the worse in any way. In consequence it was wrong to stay here, watching, when that was not the case. There was no reason for him to be here, and every reason not to be. Even as patients they had a right to their privacy, their intimacy. But he didn’t move. He remained where he was, frozen, staring ...

... as Spock moved his other hand to Jim’s face, as Spock cradled Jim’s head tenderly, because nothing in the entire damn universe was more precious than Jim ... as Jim reached in turn for Spock’s face with an expression of infinite joy, because the universe contained Spock ... as they began to move in unison, as they began to fuck in earnest, without opening their eyes, without saying a word, utterly lost in each other, mind and body.

Leonard couldn’t look away. Couldn’t look away as his best friend arched upward in his lust, as he pressed his flushed, erect penis against Spock’s stomach to increase the friction. Couldn’t look away as Jim gave himself up to his lover all over again. Couldn’t look away from Spock’s tear-streaked face, from his slender body thrusting into Jim’s anus – out of control, helpless in his need. So fucking beautiful.

When their climax registered on the scanners, Leonard stumbled from the quarantine room. He had no idea how he found his way back to his office, even though it was just around the corner. It was pure dumb luck that he managed not to come on the spot. He fell into one of the visitor’s chairs in his office. The impact jarred his lumbar vertebrae, but he didn’t care. He dug his nails into the arm rests to keep from touching himself, from jerking off.

I’m a doctor, Leonard reminded himself sternly. Not a fucking peeping tom, damn it.

But not even a strict lecture seemed to have an effect on his stubborn erection. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Damn it all to hell, he thought. That’s not my kink. Scopophilia does nothing for me. Only obviously it just had. He pressed down on his arousal with the heel of his hand, as if that would make it go away, and the feeling of shame that accompanied it. An erection is an autonomic response, he told himself, caused by a variety of stimuli. It’s not completely under conscious control. This is a normal, natural reaction to seeing something so ... so ... He wanted to downplay what he’d seen and the effect it had on him with dirty slang and more cussing, but he couldn’t.

“ Fucking beautiful,” he muttered belligerently. And happy. So happy. My best friend. And the damn green-blooded hobgoblin. Who’d become a friend, too, at some point during the turmoils of the past two years. And I have no idea if I’ll get them back with their minds intact.

Apparently that was what it took to make his erection to wilt. Fear. And dread. With a dash of despair.
Stardate 2260.250, 1500 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay


Thorby stood, looking a little jaundiced around the edges. The melds with Sybok were physically uncomfortable. They’d managed to get Thorby to admit that, at least. With Sybok’s help, Leonard had concocted a hypo that helped with the headache and nausea. But no hypo would help with the emotional fallout. Thorby was unable to fulfill his adoptive father’s last wish, and his failure was hurting him. Sybok and Mr. Spock did their best to assure the young Vulcan that it wasn’t his fault, but that didn’t help.

Carolyn wanted so much to hug the little boy, stubborn glare, pointy ears and all, but she knew better. What Thorby needed most was respect for what was left of his limits. Jo, however, wasn’t big on boundaries. She marched up to Thorby and hugged him close. Carolyn was ready to intervene with a sharp reprimand when she caught how Thorby closed his eyes for a second and inclined his head just a fraction, almost as if he wanted to rest his head against Jo’s protective shoulder – the girl was more than a head taller than he was.

“Go kick ass, Thorbs,” Jo ordered and stepped back.

Thorby nodded solemnly.

“Next time, you ask Thorby if he wants a hug,” Carolyn told Jo. “When we’re back, your homework is done. And I mean homework, not that fanfic you’re working on.”

“Yessir,” Jo replied with a salute. She winked at Thorby.

Shaking her head, Carolyn left the room with Thorby following close behind.

In one of the private consultation rooms in sickbay, Sybok and Leonard were already waiting for them. Leonard looked even worse than the previous evening, feverish and pale, as if his entire energy was borrowed from emergency stimulants by now. To her surprise, Mr. Spock wasn’t there. Carolyn frowned. Wasn’t he supposed to have returned from shore leave with the captain the previous day? It wasn’t like Spock to miss an appointment. Now that she thought about it, she realized that she couldn’t remember an announcement that Kirk was back and had taken the conn again. She shivered. *Goose on my grave,* she thought. *If something bad has happened to the captain and the first officer, surely I’d have heard something by now? But then she remembered what Leonard had said the night before, and worse, his expression as he’d told her that there was nothing to tell yet and that he wouldn’t be able to in any case. Please, no. We’re so far from home already. We can’t lose them both. What even happened? Then she gave herself a mental shake. Don’t be an idiot, Carolyn. You have no idea what happened. If anything happened at all.*

Thorby hopped up on the biobed without prompting and lay back. Carolyn noticed how tense he was, how he had to force his hands to relax at his sides. She marveled at the boy’s willpower, how he managed that.

Sybok sat down on a medic’s stool next to the biobed. His strangely expressive face was schooled into a mask of quiet control for once. “If you agree, Thorbehvak, I will meld with you. When I know your thoughts, I shall attempt to shift the blocks of pain and trauma in your mind that prevent you from accessing the information Colonel Baslim wanted you to pass on. I will do only that, and nothing else. I will not take away your pain or in any way interfere with your feelings beyond that. You can tell me to stop at any point, and I will.”

“Yes, sir,” Thorby replied. He closed his eyes and seemed to shrink, withdrawing into himself.
In an unguarded moment, Carolyn saw Sybok’s mask slip. Compassion flared in his eyes, a deep and painful sympathy. Sybok also looked tired. Not quite as exhausted as Leonard, but he definitely had the look of someone who was burning the candle at both ends. Yet when he turned to Thorby, he was completely calm again, collected, and incredibly gentle.

He rested the fingers of his right hand on Thorby’s meld points very lightly, barely touching him and making sure to keep as much distance between his body and the boy as possible. Sybok closed his eyes. His features grew rigid in a mask of intense concentration. Thorby groaned. At his sides, his hands twitched helplessly, balling into fists. Beneath closed lids his eyes wildly rolled back and forth in his head. Minutes passed that way until he relaxed with a harsh sigh. Carolyn glimpsed four tiny green crescents on the inside of one of his palms – bleeding nail marks – before he moved his hands closer to his body.

After a long moment Sybok sighed. “Ahh... Here we go.”

He opened his eyes and swayed. “That was ... most unpleasant.” Sybok swallowed hard. The agony, the bleakness in his eyes scared Carolyn. She very much wanted to say something, about how you could come back from what Thorby had experienced. But she knew that not everyone could find a way out of this kind of darkness. Some days, many nights, she wasn’t sure about herself. And she was human, used to emotional upheaval, and an adult, with a father to help her, and a goal in her life. (To catch those bastards. To put them on trial. To make them rot in prison.) Thorby had no one left. His planet was gone, his family dead, his adoptive father murdered.

Leonard pressed a glass of water into Sybok’s hand, an action that obviously amused the Vulcan. But he still drank the water. At last Sybok inhaled deeply. “I will now initiate a superficial meld that equates a light trance. Upon input of the correct code, Thorbehrak should be able to deliver whatever message Colonel Baslim has implanted for Starfleet to receive. You may want to record the information. Though now that I have been able to remove the block, Thorbehrak should be able to replay everything on demand as often as necessary.”

Carolyn readied a PADD that Mr. Spock had prepared for that purpose. The captain himself had assured her that the encryptions the first officer used were the safest he’d ever seen. Gaila had agreed.

Sybok placed his hand on Thorby’s face again. This time, he whispered the traditional words: “My mind to your mind, my thoughts to your thoughts.” Then he nodded at Carolyn. “The code, please.”

All of a sudden, Carolyn was shaking. Her heart was pounding, and her vision was fraying at the edges. Not now, she thought desperately. Can’t have a panic attack when Thorby’s so brave. And we need the data. I need to be alert now, not panicking.

A moment later, she winced at the painful prick of a hypo. Leonard put an arm around her. “Exhale,” he ordered. “Don’t think about inhaling. Let your body take care of that on its own. Again. All that breath you’re holding. Good. Now give Thorby his code.”

Leonard took the PADD from her hand, his index finger ready to press the symbol that would start the recording.

“PATS 1863 S31 ...” she started and then reeled off the lengthy activation code. When she was done, she concentrated on her breathing again, on exhaling instead of hyperventilating. Whatever medication Leonard had given her made her hyperaware of her surroundings and strangely calm at the same time. She also realized that he was still holding her. Before she could process that fact, Thorby started speaking. His voice was high and boyish, but perfectly Vulcan – utterly calm and expressionless.
“Code confirmed. Part one, New Sydney spaceport registry, stardate 2250 to 2260. Part two, bookkeeping files of the United Pergium Mining Consortiums, stardate 2255 to 2260. Part three, the transportation logs of New Sydney authorities, stardate 2257 to 2260 ...”

♦

“Sometimes you wake up. Sometimes the fall kills you. And sometimes, when you fall, you fly.”

Chapter End Notes

♥ **Comments are love! ♥**
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To Recreate One Another

Chapter Summary

Spock experiments with a human brain. Leonard runs into a door. ♦ Jim impersonates Sleeping Beauty, and Spock kisses him awake. Or something like that. ♦ Then they stage Romeo and Juliet in sickbay, and Bones wants to scream, “Damn it, my audition was for CMO, not The Nurse.” ♦ Afterwards, Lieutenant Carolyn Paul reminds him that he’s also neither a Section 31 agent nor a Security officer. (Yes, it’s that kind of day.) ♦ Last but not least, Jim and Spock receive a gift for their Bonding.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To Recreate One Another

Stardate 2260.251, 1100 hours, Deck 7, Quarantine Room 1

Spock came back to himself gradually, dragged into consciousness by harsh spikes of physical and mental pain. His first instinct was to slam down his shields, to cut off the intense discomfort, to isolate himself in the serenity of his mind. But at the center of his consciousness rested a warm weight, another mind, fast asleep, a *katra* in perfect harmony with his own: Jim.

Jim was the focus he needed. From one second to the next, Spock was wide awake, his mind ultra-aware, his body hyper-sensitive. It took every ounce of control he had left not to move, not to push ever deeper into Jim’s body, into Jim’s mind, and instead to meticulously assess their joined physical and mental state. Clearly, something had gone – no, not wrong. There was nothing *wrong* with them; he’d already know if that were the case. But *something* had happened ... *Ah. The drug – Water of Life. Spice.* Jim had been correct to be wary, then. Thankfully, Sybok seemed to have been correct, too ...

Carefully, Spock began to explore his Bondmate’s mind. He kept away from memories and feelings. There was time for that later. Instead, he concentrated on the brain regions involved in the biological mechanisms of addiction. He started at the limbic dopaminergic system. Next he traced the neurons influenced by Spice to the area of the midbrain associated with psionic ability in humanoid species. The effects of the drug on that particular cluster of neurons were profound. The basal forebrain was predictably affected as well.

Spock found it hard to resist the impulse to simply *fix* his Bondmate’s brain. The urge to protect Jim was so strong, so primal that to suppress the instinct hurt Spock in a physical way. Only now that they were Bonded, Spock also recognized how fatal the inherent imbalance of power in his relationship with Jim could be. Not enough that Spock was physically so much stronger than Jim – now he was able to control Jim’s mind. Never Bonded before, Spock had been unable to perceive the full potential of this most intimate telepathic connection. If he had, would he have found the courage to pursue this course of action nevertheless? He doubted it. For once, he was grateful for his ignorance.

Soon, he knew that Sybok had been right about Spice. The drug had indeed facilitated a connection
between Jim and himself that was unprecedented in its intensity. Even still immature – without the finalization of their connection during *pon farr* – their Bond was stronger than that of many Vulcan couples. With a strange sense of gratitude Spock realized that with this Bond, he would have no choice at the end of all things.

Upon further investigation Spock discovered that Spice affected Jim’s brain in two similar, yet very different ways.

On one level, the effects of Spice on Jim’s brain were similar to those of many other drugs used by humanoids. Spice impaired Jim’s dopamine system. It forced receptors to develop a hypersensitivity to the neurotransmitters released by the drug. It made neurons adapt until they required constant repetitive stimulation just to keep Jim’s brain functioning at a normal level.

On another level, the neuromodulatory influence of Spice altered the fundamental functionality of Jim’s psionic center. Spice activated dormant telepathic receptors, caused them to multiply and increased their sensitivity. Spice forced neurons to form connections between Jim’s psionic center and the area of his brain that constituted his conscious mind.

A comparison of the different ways Spice worked gave Spock an idea. What if he could separate the two levels? What if he were able to neutralize the addiction ... while keeping Jim’s telepathy alive ...

Yes! It was possible. He could assuage the agonizing need for the drug that screamed inside Jim’s unconscious mind even now. He could curb Jim’s helpless desire to experience the drug’s artificial euphoria over and over again. He could restructure Jim’s compromised dopamine system. At the same time Spock was able preserve the new functionality of Jim’s psionic center. But – at least until the maturation of their Bond in *pon farr* – it would still fall to Spock to activate Jim’s latent telepathy, to “flick the switch” in a way. He also had no way to tell how Jim would respond to the activation of psionic brain functions in absence of the dopamine-induced euphoria of Spice. But thanks to Spock’s careful manipulations, Jim would not be reduced to a passive partner within their Bond.

Relief meshed with exhaustion. For a moment, Spock floated within Jim’s mind. Purposeless and content in the warmth of Jim’s affection. Then he recalled Jim’s preoccupation with the possible effects of Spice on his melanocytes. He examined the current pigmentation of Jim’s iris and was forced to conclude that Jim’s apprehension had not been unfounded. The Water of Life had turned Jim’s eyes blue again. Thanks to Spock’s increasing familiarity with Jim’s mind, it cost little effort to increase the melanin levels in the stroma of his iris. However, Spock was unable to deduce what created the strange brilliance of a Spice-addict’s eyes and was unable to ameliorate that effect of the drug.

Gently, he withdrew into the confines of his own mind. As it had been his first experience with Spice since his birth, he encountered no problems in adjusting the dopamine system of his own brain. At the same time, he realized that thanks to the peculiarities of a Vulcan mind, a full-blooded Vulcan would not be able to alleviate the addiction easily – if at all – once it was an established habit.

Next Spock addressed his physical condition. Shame and humiliation suffused him when he realized he had *tied* himself to Jim as if he were mindless with the rutting of *plak’toq*. Instantly, he released the knot and sheathed himself. The pain was immediate and immense. Somehow, he managed to maintain enough control not to disturb Jim’s rest. But he could not contain his physical reactions to the stimulus. His tear ducts convulsively released moisture. As if from far away, he heard his voice rise in a choked scream. He grew aware that his limbs were shaking. With faint
astonishment, he realized he was close to fainting. But he must not! He knew he had to relinquish the meld first. For a terrifying fraction of a second he did not remember how, could not endure the thought of separation.

But like a benediction, words drifted into his mind and soothed him: “Estuhn wi ri estuhn. K'wuhli wi ri k'wuhli.”

Touching, yet not touching. Apart, yet never apart. His hand slid away from Jim’s face. Spock fell asleep.

♦

Stardate 2260.251, 1100 hours, Deck 7, Quarantine Room 1

The alarm sounded when Leonard had fallen asleep on his desk, his head on his arms, right next to a mug of real coffee provided by Yeoman Rand. A damn shame, that.

He was on his feet and out of the room before he was awake and promptly ran right into the closed door of his office. For a moment he leaned against it, a pain-filled “fuck” on his lips. Then he palmed the door open and ran to the quarantine rooms. Sybok and M’Benga were already in the room when he got there.

“What’s happening?” Leonard asked, pushing forward to get a look.

“Spock is awake,” Sybok informed him. “I believe he is attempting to control the effects of Spice on both their minds. We cannot interrupt him now.”

Minutes passed, while Jim’s scans were going off the rocker crazy. Leonard watched in shocked fascination as Jim’s brain was practically rewired on the spot. But apart from the fact that such a thing shouldn’t be possible in the first place, there didn’t seem to be any negative effects. Not that he’d be able to do much if there had been, damn Vulcan voodoo. Then, suddenly, Spock spasmed and wrenched himself backwards. When he jerked up his head, Leonard saw how Spock’s face contorted in agony, tears streaming down his cheeks. Spock was trembling with tension but couldn’t seem to move or to let go of Jim.

Without a word, Sybok rushed to the bed and captured Spock’s face with both hands. “Estuhn wi ri estuhn. K'wuhli wi ri k'wuhli,” he murmured, and again, “estuhn wi ri estuhn. K'wuhli wi ri k'wuhli.”

Leonard had no idea what that meant, but the words had an immediate effect on Spock. He gasped for breath, his hand slipped away from Jim’s face, and he collapsed at Jim’s side.

“What the hell just happened?” Leonard demanded. “What did you do?”

“Releasing the knot can be painful,” Sybok explained. “The physical pain made it more difficult for Spock to let go of the mind meld. I reminded him that he doesn’t need a meld anymore to stay connected to Jim. Their Bond is now very strong, very resilient.”


M’Benga was already busy at the console. “As expected, no physical damage. While releasing the knot obviously hurt him, he is anatomically a fully functional, fertile Vulcan.” He glanced at Leonard with a slight smile. “Vulcan anatomy is made to endure prolonged priapism during pon farr without ill effects. He should be cleaned up, though. I’ll take care of that with the mobile sonic
unit. He’s so out of it that I don’t think he’ll wake, no matter what I do.”

“How about Jim?” Leonard asked. “I’d prefer not to wake him, but I need to examine him now, too.”

“A mild sedative won’t affect the Bond anymore now, Doctor,” Sybok said. “If you agree, I shall ascertain the success of Spock’s intervention in a meld and at need increase the effects before you examine your patients.”

“Very well.” Leonard gestured at Sybok to go ahead. What else was he supposed to do? So far, Sybok had proved to be right more often than he’d turned out to be wrong, damn it.

Sybok placed his right hand on Jim’s face, his left on Spock’s. The meld lasted just a few seconds, then Sybok opened his eyes and drew back. “Spock’s work is excellent. I do wish he’d consider becoming a mind healer. His talents are wasted as a first officer on a starship.”

Leonard scowled, but Sybok ignored him and went on, “Doctor, as far as I can detect, Spock has managed to remove every trace of Spice addiction from both their brains. Due to the mechanism of emotional transference some symptoms may linger. But they should not be focused on the drug.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“For a while they may act as if they are addicted to each other,” Sybok explained without batting an eyelash. “Up to a point that is normal behavior for new Bondmates. A strong desire for physical and mental proximity, sexual relations, taking care of each other in every way. In this particular case those symptoms might be stronger than usual and last longer. You can think of it as intensified mating behavior typical for most humanoid species.”

“... right,” Leonard managed. “Tell me something else I don’t want to hear.”

Sybok raised his left eyebrow. Leonard wondered if Sarek shared that tick, and if the VSA used to have a file on the genetics of Vulcan eyebrow behavior. “I do not recommend separating them for a few weeks, not even for short periods of time. If possible, avoid situations in which one of them might perceive the other as threatened for any reason, as that can trigger a violent reaction.”


M’Benga cast a curious glance his way. Apparently his colleague expected him to kick up more of a fuss. Leonard just shook his head. If he was honest with himself, he’d known where Jim and Spock were headed pretty much since day one. Definitely since Jim woke after the Marcus thing. Heck, even Keenser must have noticed at that point. Still, it wasn’t a crime if Leonard had wished his best friend had ended up in an easier relationship. But of course “easy” wasn’t Jim’s style. Also, Leonard had witnessed Jim’s casual relationships. Even when things between Spock and Jim had been at their worst, their relationship had been saner than some of Jim’s supposedly easy lays. So now that Leonard had to face the facts of Jim and Spock together, he’d deal. He’d help Jim and Spock as much as possible. Never mind that a command team compromised by pon farr was a nightmare for the admiralty come true

“They won’t like it. Sulu will like it less. But that’s no issue,” Leonard grinned savagely. “Kids just got themselves signed up for a month-long vacation.”

“Sometimes it’s good to be the CMO,” M’Benga remarked.

“Betcha.”
Stardate 2260.252, 1900 hours, Deck 7, Quarantine Room 1

Jim opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Spock. Spock’s expressive brown eyes, just a few inches, no more than a foot away from him. So full of warmth. And inside his mind, Jim could feel that warmth. Like ... like a heating pad right inside his skull. A cozy connection that radiated contentment.

The next thing Jim noticed was that they were not on Arrakis anymore. He didn’t need to hear the beeping of monitors or see the flickering of screens out of the corner of his eye or feel the slight scratchiness of hospital sheets around his naked body to know where they were. The smell of sickbay surrounded them. But he wasn’t worried. Spock was inside his mind, and Spock was right in front of him. The only thing that was wrong was that they were not touching. And he could do something about that.

“Hey,” he said, surprised at how hoarse his voice sounded. He raised his right hand, index and middle finger outstretched – and gasped. Sore didn’t even begin to cover the pain that ripped through his upper body. “What the hell?”

Spock captured his hand and pulled it down to rest on the mattress. “Four days have elapsed since our Bonding,” he explained quietly. “An unexpected complication. I was unable to maintain control during orgasm. In consequence, due to the emotional transference caused by our mind meld—”

“My Spice high transferred to you? Shit. I’m sorry.” Jim winced. “And we were out of it for four days?” But that still didn’t explain why he was so damn sore.

“Not just ‘out of it,’” Spock replied. “We remained ...” He hesitated, clearly discomfited. “... as we were – for three days. There is a version of sexual intercourse among Vulcans that normally occurs only during pon farr. Apparently that biological mechanism can also be triggered by drugs. It prevents the partners from separating.”

Sometimes Jim wished his mind was a bit slower with jumping to correct conclusions. “That knot at the base. That’s what it does.” He buried his face in his pillow, trying to get a hold on himself, on the mixture of humiliation and arousal that gripped him. No wonder he was so sore. Actually, it was a miracle that he didn’t feel worse. Much worse. You didn’t need to be a doctor to know that a human body wasn’t made to— Urgh. Speaking of doctors. “Since we’re in sickbay, I’m guessing Bones checked in on us and ...” Jim squeezed his eyes shut. And that after he’d tried so hard to be responsible with everything and to cover his ass— Okay, wrong, wrong idiom. At least – he experimentally clenched – whew – at least Bones hadn’t taken it out on his ass. That was definitely the sensation of some serious regen plus a pretty strong local. Oy.

He turned his head again and cracked his eyes open. Spock hadn’t moved and regarded him with the calm, Vulcan serenity and just perhaps even a hint of amusement sparkling in his eyes. The warm sensation inside his mind sparkled, too. Or something. Jim wasn’t sure how to describe the experience. It was good, though. Very good, even. But the link wasn’t as close as it had been. Well, after five days the Spice must have worn off ... He couldn’t suppress the sense of loss at the thought.

Spock let go of Jim’s hand and brought his fingers up to his face. He touched Jim’s temple with just the fingertips of his index finger and middle finger – a Vulcan kiss. Desire rushed straight to his groin. His cock stirred.

“I am not certain how to proceed,” Spock admitted, and Jim was aware of his insecurity in – a kind
of shivery sensation inside his head that made him want to twitch and roll his head. “I believe the appropriate Standard expression is that I have a confession to make. When I neutralized the drug’s influence on your brain, I allowed certain effects to persist. Specifically the neural processes that activate your psionic center. You will require me to meld with you in order to initiate the process, but the result should approximate the state of mind you achieved with the aid of the drug.”

Jim blinked as he worked out what that explanation meant when applied to his brain chemistry. “You installed a switch in my mind?” he asked. “For my non-existent telepathy?”

“Latent telepathy,” Spock corrected. “Passive psionic potential does not mean that it does not exist, it means that—”

“Yeah, I know,” Jim interrupted him. “Wow. That’s ... inspired. Kind of crazy.” He smiled and squeezed Spock’s hand when his fingers trembled against his skin. “In a good way.”

“We will need to test the modifications I made in a safe, controlled environ—”

Jim’s laugh cut him off. “Once a science officer, always a science officer, huh?” He drew Spock’s fingers to his lips and kissed them. A sharp intake of breath and a ... hot spark in his mind and a spicy taste on his tongue. Guh. Even without actual telepathy the Bond was pretty damn awesome. And giving him ideas ... “I’m all for experiments.”

Before Spock had a chance to lecture him on what constituted suitable experiments in telepathy and other things, Jim managed to get his tongue on Spock’s fingertips. Just a quick taste, just a fleeting touch. The effect in his mind was more than just sparks, closer to a flare. But Jim caught the concern in Spock’s eyes and withdrew his hand from his mouth again. “Hey ...” He interlaced his fingers with Spock. He needed to touch him. In fact, he wanted to crawl over to him and press himself against his body, because he wanted to feel the warmth of his skin so damn much. “No worries. I know we’ve got to talk and figure out how this works for us, the Bond and all. Bones and M’Benga and your brother will want to talk to us, too, I guess.” He frowned. It was a small miracle that Bones wasn’t looming over them in full lecture mode right now, in fact.

“I requested privacy for us, should you not require immediate medical attention upon waking,” Spock explained earnestly. “I remember how much you disliked having an examination forced on you immediately upon waking at Starfleet Medical. To subject you to unnecessary stress is not beneficial. I was able to make Doctor McCoy see the logic of that.”

Jim couldn’t help himself. Cursing under his breath because every movement hurt like hell, he scooted over to Spock and squeezed next to the startled Vulcan under his much thicker blanket. Then he proceeded to kiss Spock the human and the Vulcan way. At the same time. Now, that was a kind of multitasking he could get into.

♦

**Stardate 2260.252, 2100 hours, Deck 7, CMO’s Office**

M’Benga and Sybok had already claimed the two chairs at the back of the small table in Leonard’s office. With a sigh, Leonard pulled his comfortable office chair to the front end of the table and sat as well. Yeoman Lawton came in with mugs of coffee and tea. Real coffee, real tea. At least something.

Thanks to pure stubbornness and a hypo he hadn’t deserved, Jim made it into Leonard’s office under his own steam. With a muffled curse he slumped into the chair next to the door. When Jim attempted to lean back, he had to bite on his lip to suppress a moan. Spock, first at his side, then
close behind, sat down in the chair next to him, posture perfect, expression carefully mellow.

_Not so very different from before, _Leonard thought. And yet ...

He narrowed his eyes at them. Sometimes, Jim’s shattered childhood and adolescence shone through his façade in painful cracks. Like now, the way Jim gave him a belligerent stare, his hazel eyes greener than before and feverish bright. He could have been seventeen instead of twenty-seven, introducing his first serious boyfriend to his father. Possessively, he linked his fingers with Spock, giving off his best rebellious Romeo vibes. The way Spock accepted his touch, dark eyes huge in his pale face wasn’t half bad as a Juliet impersonation, either.

Leonard didn’t particularly appreciate being cast in the role of Jim’s father in this particular episode of their space opera. But with Pike, Sarek, and the older Spock dozens of light-years and weeks of subspace lag out of reach, he was willing to accept the part. Someone had to, after all.

“Jesus, Jim, stop glaring at me, will ya?” Leonard said. “I’m not gonna give you any grief over your choice of a boyfriend.”

“Bondmate,” Spock corrected mildly, ears faintly green-tinged.

Well, that answered a few questions already. “See, that’s a much more constructive start for this conversation,” he told Jim. “Your relationship needs to be logged and Starfleet Command has to be informed. While Vulcan Bonds are exempted from Starfleet fraternization protocols, I suggest that you still get an official counselor’s report. You never know what will happen. At some point in the future, you may be grateful for any scrap of official documentation that supports your continued professional qualification as a command team. You’re getting on well with Guinan, so make an appointment with her.”

Jim relaxed enough to attempt to let go of Spock. But Spock would have none of that and kept a close, possessive hold of his hand. “Yeah, good point. We’ll do that,” Jim said. Ducking his head in a somewhat abashed fashion, he glanced at Spock. “There should also be some kind of public announcement I guess. Maybe even a party?”

“At this point I would advise against a party,” M’Benga put in smoothly. “Sybok has suggested that you may experience a more intense reaction to the Bond due to your special circumstances. You should get used to your new connection before you attempt to navigate complex social situations.”

Jim squared his shoulders and shifted forward in a protective gesture. “We’re fine.”

In his mind, Leonard ticked off the symptoms Sybok and M’Benga had provided before: increased need for physical proximity, possessiveness, protectiveness, irritability ... He suppressed a sigh. And those were just the effects of a new Bond. He was so not looking forward to Spock’s first pon farr.

“Yes, you are,” Leonard agreed. It hurt to see Jim’s surprise at that statement. That his best friend did never fully expect to be okay. Not even now. That Jim always had to fight for his optimism, an inch at a time. At least from now on, Jim would not face that battle alone.

“However,” Leonard forced his face into a scowl and his voice into a growl, “your mental and physical health is at stake here. Yours and Spock’s. Jim, I’m aware you don’t want to hear that, but you’re not an average John Doe anymore, and Spock never was a run of the mill Vulcan. We’re not going to take any risks we don’t have to. So you’re both on medical leave for a month.”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s a vacation, not a prison sentence, damn it. Jim, Spock will tell you that it’s perfectly normal for newly Bonded couples to take some time off
together. Think of it as a honeymoon.” That term made Jim twitch, and Leonard smirked a little before he turned to Sybok. “Your turn.”

“I would like to offer my help to you, both as a mind healer and based on my personal experience. I—I have been Bonded again for ten years now, Mated for six years,” Sybok said, fondly, although his eyes darkened— as if with grief, as if there was more to his explanation than a simple story of Vulcan Bonding and Mating. “You’ve met T’Saralonde, and I want to introduce you to our daughter T’Maire before we must part ways.”

Spock tensed. “T’Maire?”

Sybok nodded. His smile was for Spock, sad and full of sympathy. “Máire – the Gaelic form of Maria – was Amanda Grayson’s middle name”, he explained to the others. “I loved my stepmother very much.”

Jim (the same Jim Leonard had once accused of being worse than Spock in expressing emotions more complex than rage in the past) shifted closer to Spock, touching his cheek to the other man’s shoulder in a subtle show of affection and support. Spock relaxed a little, at least.

“If you permit me to do so,” Sybok told them, “I can monitor the development of your Bond in these crucial early stages. I can also teach Spock techniques that will help you in the future.”

“With pon farr and stuff? I tried to remain real passive throughout, the way Sybok and M’Benga told me to, but I don’t think I managed. It’s just not my normal style, I guess.” Jim bent forward, oblivious to his partner’s pained expression.

“From what I have gleaned in the diagnostic melds I have performed on both of you during your recovery, it was a very creditable effort,” Sybok said.

*Keep up the good work,* Leonard ad-libbed in his mind, entirely too amused by Sybok’s un-Vulcan ways. And although he didn’t want to imagine the sordid details, he couldn’t stop himself from dr awling, “Practice makes perfect, I hear.”

Jim’s instant blushing was funny. The way Spock tensed and drew back his lips in a soundless snarl less so. Sybok caught Leonard’s eyes and minutely shook his head. “Shut up and don’t move” was the message there. *Got that,* Leonard thought and froze. Damn. *Should have taken Sybok’s warning way more seriously. And I know how Spock can get when he loses control.*

Judging from how Jim’s eyes widened, he was thinking along similar lines. Suddenly he frowned and closed his eyes. A look of intent concentration on his face, he leaned against Spock, as boneless as if he were about to fall asleep. The effect on Spock was immediate. His tension eased. He slipped an arm around Jim, drawing him closer to his side. Jim opened his eyes again. He winked at Leonard, grinning.

Spock pressed his lips together, his face white tinged with green shadows. In spite of the uncomfortable moment just now, Leonard felt sympathy for the man. Control meant so much to him, and according to Sybok, had never come easy to Spock. Add to that the very real dangers of pon farr looming on the horizon, and the edge of fear to Spock’s mortification was only too understandable.

“Spock, everyone in this room appreciates how difficult this situation is,” Leonard said carefully. “For you and for Jim. It was not my intention to make light of it. Humor is a human way of dealing with awkward situations. My remark was inappropriate, and I’m sorry. I am aware of how much of a cultural taboo these topics are for Vulcans. Unfortunately, we cannot afford the luxury of Vulcan
propriety under the circumstances. So far, Jim has done his best to act in a responsible manner. I need you to do the same.”

After a moment Spock gave a curt, self-conscious nod. “Yes, Doctor.”

Jim didn’t move but stayed pressed into Spock’s embrace. “Also,” he said softly, “Bones is right.”

“Never thought I’d hear you say that, Jim.” Leonard shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “Spock, keep in mind that you’re in a much better place to deal with this than before. You’ve got a Bondmate. Your older self has made sure that we’ve got the information we need when the time comes. And now an expert mind healer can help you with whatever Vulcan mind voodoo there is to prepare for it. We’ve got your back, Spock.”

It was telling that Spock didn’t comment on how illogical that idiom was. It was even more telling that Jim didn’t try to make a lewd joke.

“On that note, there’s no reason to keep you on sickbay any longer,” Leonard announced. “There’s a surprise in Spock’s cabin for you. Since Jim sometimes must receive diplomatic visitors in his quarters that seemed the better way to protect your privacy.” He grinned. “Enjoy. And for heaven’s sake don’t tell me about it.”

♦

Stardate 2260.252, 2300 hours, Deck 4, McCoy’s Quarters

“Kids asleep?” Leonard asked as he stepped into his quarters. True to her word, Carolyn Paul had taken care of Jo and Thorby throughout the emergency. And different from the challenge she’d issued after the pool incident, she’d been absolutely professional in her interactions with him, never once letting on that she might have any feelings for him at all.

Carolyn put her PADD away with a smile and nodded. “Yes. Finally. There was a lot of whispering and even some giggling tonight – not only Jo, by the way – but now they are both asleep.”

“Good.” Leonard went to his desk and punched in the security code for the compartment where he’d stashed away the single malt whisky that Scotty had presented him with for his birthday. “Want a shot?” he asked when he pulled out the bottle.

“Is that Ardbeg?” Carolyn asked. “Seriously? God, yes.”

Leonard laughed and poured a rather conservative measure for them both, before he put away the bottle. With Jo around, a single glass had become his limit on the few evenings he had the opportunity to indulge (when Jo could be persuaded to go to bed on time and there was no emergency). He raised his glass, thinking he could like a woman who knew about good whisky. “Cheers.”

“Slàinte mhath.” She inhaled reverently. Closing her eyes, she took a sip. Leonard hadn’t known that a woman could look so blissful drinking whisky. Or that a man could experience a stab of jealousy over that.

“And to your health,” he agreed, settling in the other armchair. He leaned back, relaxing into the peculiar mixture of exhaustion and excellent whisky.

“Are they going to be okay, then?” Carolyn asked, completely out of the blue.

He shot up from his seat, almost dropping his glass. “How the—” He stopped himself at the last
second. His grandmother had raised him better than that. “What in— whatever are you talking about?”

“Goodness, Leonard, calm down. Don’t spill the whisky.” She put her glass on the table. “I was worried because you were so worried. Then I realized the captain and the first officer should have been back, but there hadn’t been an announcement that Kirk had the conn again. I wondered if I got the shore leave schedule mixed up. But I hadn’t. So I took a look at the public transporter log. Their return to the ship was listed. Then I asked the computer where they are, and the answer was in sickbay.” She chewed on her lower lip. “Leonard – I have no idea what happened, and I’m not going to ask for any details – but you should remember that there are security cameras practically everywhere on the Enterprise, including the transporter room. And ... we’re not sure, okay? But it’s not impossible that – that Ambassador Gav and his – business associates in the slave trade – that they have someone on board. Or even several people. Or ...” She shook her head. “You know there are other – interested parties. For ... that kind of thing.”

Leonard had to sit down; Carolyn was right. Marcus may have been a maverick, but he hadn’t been a lone operator. Politically, “Humanitarians for Earth” never had more support. The last elections had proven that. Worse, with Marcus as a martyr for their cause, the party’s fundamentalist branch “Humans First” was more dangerous than ever. Since the Marcus conspiracy, half a dozen acts of terrorism, from assassinations to bomb threats and kidnappings, had been linked with “Humans First”. And besides being a corrupt asshole and a slave trade supporter, Ambassador Gav’s loathing of Sarek of Vulcan was a well-known fact. Yes, Leonard had to admit, all of them (and every tabloid in the whole damn Federation) would get a fucking kick out of discrediting the command team of Starfleet’s flagship.

“If there’s any material out there that mustn’t get into the wrong hands,” Carolyn said softly, “you have to make sure that there’s nothing to see.”


Carolyn carefully picked up her whisky again. “Just bring it up with the captain next time you get the chance,” she suggested. “Mr. Spock’s a computer wizard. He can fix any footage you need to have fixed.”

Leonard stared at her. Sometimes he forgot who she was, what she was. That of course she would think of security, of files and footage, of evidence and blackmail ... He took a deep breath and raised his glass with a shaking hand. “You’re a menace.”

“Thank you.” She actually smiled at that. “I do try.”

Minutes passed in silence, both of them pondering the secrets hidden in the beautiful amber liquid in their glasses. “Leonard?” she asked at last, unable to conceal her concern. “I know I said I wouldn’t ask. But ... are they going to be okay?”

She cared, Leonard realized. Honestly cared. On a personal level. Even though she didn’t really know Jim and Spock at all. But of course it was that stupid, idealist compassion of hers that had gotten her into all kinds of trouble in the first place. He wasn’t sure if he liked that about her or if he hated that. “Yes,” he replied at last. There’d be a public announcement the next day or so; he might as well tell her now. “They Bonded, the Vulcan way. Something went a bit wrong there for a while, what with Jim being human and Spock not one hundred percent Vulcan. But it’s all right now.”

“Oh.” She put her palms together and raised her hands to her lips. “Oh,” she repeated, and her
whole face softened. “I’m so glad. That – that’s so ...” She trailed off, shook her head, and exhaled in a deep sigh. “I’m so glad,” she repeated and smiled at him. Such a goofy, radiant smile. As if he’d just proved to her that fairy tales come true after all, with rainbows and kittens and happy endings.

♦

Stardate 2260.252, 2300 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin

Jim might have made it from the quarantine room to Bones’s office on his own. But to his embarrassment, he wasn’t quite up to the trip to their quarters. If Spock hadn’t been there to drag him along, he would have probably just collapsed in the turbolift. Damn it, the human body really wasn’t designed to lie supine with a Vulcan on top and attached to it for several days at a time. A serious construction error. He’d mention that at the next opportunity.

He was shaking when they reached their quarters. Or Spock’s cabin, to be exact. Bones had promised them a surprise, and Jim was far too curious not to check it out right away.

“Oh my god,” he gasped when the door slid open. “Oh my god!” Breathless with laughter and exhaustion he leaned back against the wall. “They gave us a bed. A big bed!”

Spock stood frozen in the door until Jim pulled him inside his own cabin, still chuckling. “C’mon, Spock. It’s just a bed. It’s not going to eat you.”

“I sincerely hope not ...” Spock didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“It’s just a bed,” Jim whispered. “It’s a gift. It’s what Humans do when friends get married. Also, it’s practical.”

The door closed behind them, and Jim engaged the privacy lock with a few tabs on the keypad. When he turned to Spock, his ... his lover – partner – Bondmate – still hadn’t moved. Jim reached for his hands and held them, allowing Spock to feel his innermost self without reservation, a more immediate contact than the mental connection of the Bond, that strange heavy warmth at the back of his mind. He figured he got it. Because yeah, this? All real. No Spice, no desert. Just Spock’s normal cabin. Except that it wasn’t. Because there was this new, big bed shoved into the corner next to the bathroom.

Jim let go of Spock’s hands and forced himself to make it to the bathroom, to brush his teeth, comb his hair (all Spock’s fault; seriously, neat freak), take a piss, wash his hands. It was a heroic struggle to stumble into his own cabin to pull his PJs out from under his pillow and stagger back into Spock’s cabin. At last he slumped down on the new, awesome, big bed. Somehow he managed to man up and suppress a million groans as each movement reminded him of how many muscles he had and how sore they were. When Spock emerged from the bathroom, as immaculate in his sleepwear as in his uniform, Jim didn’t protest the hypo Spock produced. Apparently that was Bones’s idea of a Bonding gift. Sighing with relief as his various aches disappeared within seconds, Jim wasn’t about to complain.

Without further ado, Jim climbed in and stretched out on the wall side of the bed. “Not gonna argue,” he told Spock of the raised eyebrow. “I know you’re protective like that, mister. Haven’t forgotten how you shoved me behind you and against the wall during that kerfuffle with the Klingons. Now c’mere. Wanna feel you? Not much good for more tonight. Sorry.”

“Cease babbling, Jim,” Spock admonished. “That is a side-effect of the medication, and one which is mild enough for you to control.” But he pulled Jim into his arms with exquisite gentleness. “Now
sleep, *ashayam*.’”

“We are one, after all, you and I, together we suffer, together exist and forever will recreate one another.”
– Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Chapter End Notes

• Back in chapter 7 it was revealed that Carolyn Paul working for “PATS” (Planets Against Trafficking of Sentients) had discovered evidence that the Tellarite Ambassador Gav is the corrupt member of the Federation Council who’s in league with the slave traders. With his connections it’s not implausible to be concerned about spies or saboteurs on board of the Enterprise.

• “Humanitarians for Earth”/“Humans First”: in real life, people like Admiral Marcus don’t just appear out of thin air but are nurtured by a specific political climate and powerful supporters; also, fundamentalists love nothing more than a good martyr, and Marcus did an excellent job that way. (I’m just incapable of writing unpolitical novels, I guess. Sorry.)

♥ Comments are love! ♥

What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
**We Are Star-Met**

Chapter Summary

Morning wood and discussions of happiness. ♦ A lunch meeting with Sulu proves that Jim and Spock are not fit for duty yet, and that Spock and Jim know entirely too much about the meteorology of Arrakis. ♦ Later that day, Jim and Spock discuss babies and destinies. ♦ Meanwhile, on New Vulcan a lonely old man is waiting for a message from the Enterprise ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**We Are Star-Met**

**Stardate 2260.253, 0800 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin**

Jim woke with a hard-on, pressed against his lover’s ass, clinging to his hot skin. He knew Spock was awake, had probably been awake for hours. Not just because that was a Vulcan thing – Vulcan biology 101: Vulcans didn’t need as much sleep as Humans did – but because he felt Spock’s wakefulness in his mind. He was able to sense as much, but he was unable to do anything about it. Irritating. The sensation was similar to whatever remained in his mind from the meld with old Spock. Stronger, though, not as painful and much more distinct. He wondered at the similarity. Hmm. Well, their minds must be almost identical. After all, they were both Spock, give or take a century, a life, a universe.

And speaking of minds ... if he had to lie awake for hours with nothing to do, he’d be absolutely bored out of the same. There was almost nothing he hated more than being bored. (Except possibly being dead, and that only in advance and retrospect, because actually being dead, well, nothing to it. Which of course was the whole point.) He straightened and pressed a kiss between Spock’s shoulders. “Y’know, you don’t have to stay in bed just because I’m still asleep.”

Spock turned around. His fine black hair was just a little tousled, the most beautiful hint of a bedhead Jim had ever seen. He looked at Jim intently, eyes huge and so damn gorgeous. Jim swallowed hard. To have Spock here with him. Suddenly he wanted Spock so much it hurt. An ache in his bones, that kind of wanting. That deep. As if it had been there even before he was born. He liked it though. It was without doubt one of his happiest thoughts ever. And that? So weird.

“And happiness is weird,” he declared, perhaps abruptly, but still a perfectly logical conclusion to his reflections. “You know? Most of what I remember in terms of happy? If I mentioned some of those things to anyone but Guinan or Bones, it wouldn’t be real good for my career.”

Much like Guinan, Spock didn’t ask questions. But Jim wanted to answer them anyway. Perhaps one day words wouldn’t be necessary between them anymore. For the time being, though, words remained important. To make sense of themselves and what they shared. Damn, I’ll pass my next psych eval with flying colors, Jim thought with a grin.

“Driving a car over a cliff when I was twelve,” Jim said, “One of the best moments of my
childhood. I even wrote a holo-scenario about it this year. When I didn’t recognize myself in the mirror anymore after a Spice trip. I think I was seventeen then. I remember because things got better afterwards. Getting beat up by no less than four Starfleet cadets. (Five, if you count Uhura, and you totally should because she throws a really mean right hook.) That was a good fight. Bones offering me booze in the shuttle. Even though he ended up puking all over me. When I upchucked after the Kobayashi Maru.”

Sobering, he added, “Some saner stuff, too, though. Center chair, of course. Having that commendation stuck to my uniform top. D’you know, the first attempt, he actually stabbed my nipple? I think there’s still a scar. When I was told Pike would live. Thank bog Khan managed to warn me about that damn bomb just in time. Finding Jo in the reading fort.” A deep, deep breath, inhaling the scent of Vulcan-hot skin and the crisp, neutral smell of freshly laundered standard Starfleet bedclothes. It was kind of pathetic how he’d had to work up to what he wanted to say. But that he had and that he could? That in itself made him happy all over again.

“You,” Jim said.

Finally a reaction. “Me?”

“Duh. Who am I Vulcan-married to? And don’t start on finicky translation issues now. Point is, you.” Jim thought of his happy Spock moments. Getting choked by Spock on the bridge. Not a happy moment in an entirely healthy way, Jim knew that. But it was. Heavy and hot and dangerous, but yeah, happy. Spock returning to the Enterprise at the very last moment, drama queen fashion, just to pull Jim’s pigtails. Spock not dying on Nibiru. Arguing in circles around Spock with Uhura in the shuttle. His death instead of Spock’s. Waking up in Starfleet Medical with Spock holding his hand. He realized he could add even more moments to his list by now. Until he couldn’t shake the feeling that happiness might make up a sizeable chunk of his life. And that? So weird.

“Happiness is a complex emotion,” Spock said softly, “in my studies I have come across many different definitions, psychological, philosophical, theological, none of them satisfactory.”

Jim hummed his agreement. Happiness was weird. “And your own?”

“I shall endeavor to formulate one,” Spock promised.

♦

Spock gazed at the Human resting his head on the pillow next to him. Those brilliant hazel eyes, that fierce smile, the puzzled frown. Spock thought his personal definition of happiness might be condensed into three letters.

“Bones said to lay off my ass for another day yet,” Jim remarked suddenly, a greedy, mischievous glint in his eyes. “If possible,” he added pointedly, squirming a little closer. “I understand if it’s impossible. Would even ... appreciate it.”

“Most certainly not,” Spock said.

The conversation with Doctor McCoy, Doctor M’Benga and his brother had not been pleasant. He did not share the doctors’ optimism. He failed to understand his brother’s irreverent nonchalance; Jim’s willingness to submit to the humiliations of biological compulsions entirely alien to the human species shocked him.

“Oh, come on,” Jim complained. “I’m horny, and this is supposed to be our honeymoon.”
Jim surprised Spock with how effectively he pushed his feelings at him through the Bond – just how much he wanted Spock, now, right now, and how he didn’t mind a bit of pain, how much he trusted Spock, and how it wasn’t bad to be helpless with him, not at all—

“But I do not like that,” Spock whispered his reply, unable to keep his fear from bleeding across.

“Whoa, Spock ...” Given how sore Jim still was, Spock was taken by surprise at how quickly and thoroughly he managed to wrap himself around Spock’s body. Although Jim’s skin was so much cooler than his own, Spock was warm. More than warm. But Spock was still too unsettled from cataloguing his reactions to the stimuli he had been exposed to during the conversation with the doctors and Sybok to let himself be distracted.

“Emotional control has never come easy to me,” Spock admitted. “But now I find that ...” Now he knew why pon farr was so devastating. It was not so much the intensity of these passions that ripped away Vulcan control but their very nature. The impulses of the mating Bond belonged to an entirely different emotional system, to a different area of the brain, to a primitive response cycle, which translated emotion directly into action. “I failed to comprehend the complexity of the situation.”

“So you’re not perfect,” Jim said and pressed even closer, letting Spock feel his erection, his desire. “’s okay. You don’t have to be. Not for me. Because you already are.”

“That statement makes no sense whatsoever.”

Jim huffed a laugh into his skin, damp breath and hot, wet lips. The sensation should have been unpleasant, but went straight to his groin instead.

“So what did you figure out concerning your emotions?” Jim asked. Spock realized he had underestimated Jim’s capability for control and manipulation. How could Jim focus on their conversation in spite of his obvious arousal? And then he surprised Spock again by adding an explanation about just that: “It’s not that it doesn’t interfere with thinking. Lust, I mean. Feelings in general. But I guess the human brain’s pretty good at compromise that way. Or we’d have died out long ago. I mean, if we stopped thinking altogether as soon as emotions were invol—”

He broke off, startled at the wince Spock had been unable to suppress. “Okay, that’s enough,” Jim ordered. “You tell me what you’re so wound up over now.”

It was logical to share his thoughts with his Bondmate. It was beneficial. Shame was irrelevant. “You have been told that Vulcan feelings run more deeply than human ones. But that is beside the point. The nature and processes of Vulcan emotions are inherently different. And even that is, as the saying goes ‘just the tip of the iceberg’,” Spock replied. “The complexity of Vulcan emotional systems has eluded me so far. I can perceive them only now. Barely.”

“Because of the Bond,” Jim said, once again entirely too perceptive for a Human. “‘You weren’t Bonded before.’ He fell silent and seemed to focus his attention on tactile explorations of Spock’s shoulders, throat, and collarbone, until he halted. “Oh. Systems. Dude, making me pay attention to grammar when I really just want to have sex is so unfair.” Yet he didn’t seem to mind. He drew back far enough to meet Spock’s eyes with a steady hazel-bright gaze. “So you’re freaking out because you already have trouble controlling your normal emotions and now you have to deal with a second set and ...” Jim frowned. “So that’s why pon farr is such a killer, hmm? It doesn’t actually strip away your emotional controls. It switches off your normal emotional system.”

Spock couldn’t fathom the content curiosity he sensed from Jim. The way he was already directing his attention to Spock’s body again. In particular to Spock’s sheath and the way his penis reacted...
to Jim’s touch. “Hmm...” Jim sighed appreciatively. “So now that we’re Bonded you get aroused same as me?”

“No,” Spock replied, finding it hard to focus on Jim’s question with Jim’s finger tips trailing the most intimate parts of his body, “I have allowed my body to emulate your arousal. Without the Bond it would be difficult ... almost impossible ... for me. But without having undergone pon farr, I should not desire this.”

“But you do.”

“Yes,” Spock replied truthfully. “I do, very much.”

“Mhmhmhmhm...” Jim sighed and pressed himself against Spock’s erection. “Maybe it’s the human bits in you? Or my nefarious influence.” He grinned smugly. “So since we’re not supposed to have intercourse again ... Do you suppose a blow job falls within the parameters of passive behavior according to pon farr?”

Spock had absolutely no idea what to say, especially since the sensations Jim elicited with his touches were wreaking havoc with his already unbalanced brain.

“Probably not if I go down on you when you’re on your back,” Jim pondered aloud, unfazed by Spock’s lack of reaction. “But what if I’m on my knees in front of you and you just fuck my mouth?”

“Your single-mindedness is astonishing.”

Spock found himself unable to resist Jim as his lover pulled him up and to the side of the bed. Couldn’t move away when Jim settled on a pillow on the floor. Couldn’t withdraw from his touch when Jim interlaced their hands. Could only gasp for breath when Jim’s mouth closed around him, warm and wet and strangely wonderful.

His controls slipped. Need took over, pounding in his blood, driving his body into a mindless rhythm, into Jim’s fingers and mouth pulling at him, into pushing against Jim with his hands and his penis. Spock gave himself up to the see-saw of sensations, which usurped his sanity. Until his heartbeat stuttered in a frantic climax that made his stomach constrict. Until his orgasm sent his mind and seed spilling into his lover in helpless completion.

♦

Stardate 2260.253, 1300 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Office

Lunch with Sulu had been Jim’s idea, of course. Spock had to admit, though, that it was a logical attempt to undertake. Not a complex social situation, but a short meeting, which would allow them to catch up on ship’s business. Doctor McCoy was going to be present, too. A solid, sensible step forward into what would be their new normalcy as Bonded couple in their position as command team.

McCoy arrived first, with updated diet forms for both of them, but mostly to remind Jim sternly that they were on medical leave and that their lunch with Sulu was neither a meeting nor a briefing. “Okay, Jim, so remember you’ll get just a short update. Bare bones. Some facts. That’s it. If you try to grill Sulu, I’m gonna throw him out. And then I’ll make sure no one talks to either of you until I declare you fit for duty again. Oh, and just to make myself perfectly clear? In that scenario ‘no one’ includes the computer. Gaila will make sure of that, too.”
Predictably – the statistical likelihood of that specific reaction was so close to 100% that Spock didn’t trouble himself with decimal points – Jim rolled his eyes and protested. “Bones. I don’t get why you’re mother-henning like that. We’re big boys here. We know we’re on medical leave. We’re taking it easy. No parties. No more shore leave. As soon as one of us feels woozy, we’ll go have a nap.”

He glanced at Spock, grinned, and licked his lips. “Naps are good.”

Spock wouldn’t have needed the Bond to realize where Jim’s thoughts were headed. But through their connection a shockingly graphic depiction smashed into him in a physically painful emotional transference. He froze, helpless, uncertain how to react.

To his intense discomfort, McCoy scrutinized him intently. Then the doctor grabbed Jim’s shoulder and turned him around with a jerk to face Spock. “That’s why,” McCoy told him.

The effect on Jim was immediate. He cringed, sending a sharp spike through the Bond. Spock never knew how he came to stand between Jim and Doctor McCoy, only that the doctor was suddenly in front of him and taking a very slow, cautious step backward.

Shame flooded Spock and tore at his already tenuous controls. In an effort to center himself, he pressed together his finger tips and slowed his breathing, inhaling deeply, into the k’rawhl. “I am sorry, Doctor,” he said softly. “Perhaps I should leave.”

McCoy watched him carefully for a minute or two. Then he shook his head. “Nope,” he said. “You didn’t do anything wrong.” Then he very deliberately pushed past Spock and slapped Jim on the upper arm. “You, neither, idiot.”

Spock did not miss how McCoy kept his eyes on him the whole time. “I assure you, Doctor, I have myself under control again.”

“Thought so.” McCoy smiled. “You’re doing well, Spock. But Jim? That right there is why you’re on medical leave for four weeks. You get upset, he gets upset. He gets upset, we don’t know what happens next. Got that? Seclusion after Bonding is normal for ordinary Vulcan couples, which you are most certainly not. Right now we’re at a stage of our mission where we can give you the time you need with no harm done. So you’ll damn well take it, all right?”

“Yes,” Jim said. “I ... sorry.” Suddenly he was on his feet and leaning against Spock. He grasped his wrists, then slid his fingers upward until he could press cool palms against Spock’s hands. Love and contrition flowed into Spock. “I still like our naps, though,” he murmured, batting his eyelashes at Spock.

In response to the stimulus of Jim’s comment and the connected memories, Spock’s sympathetic nervous system responded with vasodilation, flooding the skin of his face with hot blood. “So do I,” he replied honestly.

Uncharacteristically, McCoy made no further remarks but instead busied himself with the replicator, consulting his PADD, punching in requirements and cursing under his breath.

♦

Sulu arrived on time, PADD in hand. Before he had a chance to get out an appropriate greeting, Doctor McCoy growled at him, “Lunch first. Talk about the weather.”

Once again human behavior left Spock at a loss. Instinctively, he turned to Jim, who shrugged. “Bones is a Southern gentleman,” Jim quipped. “No politics, no religion, no sex at the table.” But
the peacefulness he projected clumsily at Spock was at odds with his impudent grin.

They sat down. “The storms on Arrakis are indeed interesting,” Spock remarked obediently after staring at his salad for a long moment, taking in that Doctor McCoy obviously considered his caloric intake insufficient, as this version of *vranto* salad contained cheese and nuts beyond his preferred mixture of lettuces and herbs. “A simplistic hypothesis proposes the storms are only an accumulation of multiple vortices, which can be explained with the turning of the wind vectors by planetary rotation. However, I believe that beyond Coriolis forces several other factors are involved in the formation of the storms. For example the almost constant temperature difference of 27° C as an annual mean between the equator and the poles, as well as the B-class planetary rotation, which breaks up the circulation of the climate into cyclones and anticyclones. Additionally, the excess of ozone needs to be taken into account. It creates a heat barrier, which intensifies the severity of storms ...”

Sulu’s carefully neutral face and his artificial preoccupation with his soup alerted Spock to the fact that he had once again erred in the correct approach to casual inter-species communication. Doctor McCoy was even more transparent with his wide-eyed stare and twitching lips.

Jim laughed. “One day, Bones will learn how to communicate with Vulcans ...”

Jim turned from his bowl of what Spock identified as chili con carne and pressed a quick kiss below Spock’s right earlobe, leaving behind a sting of spices and a peculiar mixture of discomfort and ... Spock did not manage to control an immediate physical response to the stimulus; he shivered. A reaction most unbecoming a Vulcan. But when he cast a quick look at Doctor McCoy, the man just smiled. Another glance told him Jim’s overtures did not seem to have perturbed Lieutenant Sulu. Of course there was no logical reason for him to assume that would be the case. Most likely his uneasiness was just an effect of the new Bond.

“Actually,” Jim said thoughtfully, “with those giant vortices of over seven thousand kilometers in diameter, layered on top of each other and absorbing all energy within their zone of influence, down to the electric impulses of pre-spice mass, you end up with one hell of an energy overhead. All that power has to go somewhere. In a real bad storm, wouldn’t it simply zap the heat barrier as such? Like, effectively overturn the atmosphere in places?”

Doctor McCoy shuddered, completely ignoring the keen meteorological insights Jim had so casually offered. “Those storms flatten you with seven hundred kilometers an hour, and they are loaded with dust and sand like damn grinding machines. First they eat the flesh off your bones. And then they clean them right up and wear them down into kindling. This planet is a killer,” he declared, “and when it’s done with you, the sandworms will dance on your corpses.”

“Bones, I don’t think sandworms know about tango,” Jim said. “But thank you for playing, anyway.” He pushed away his bowl. Spock noticed with concern that he had not consumed half the contents. This was unprecedented and worrisome. Aware of his own nutritional needs after the past days, Spock welcomed the big bowl of hearty vegetable stew the doctor placed in front of him as a main course and traded an alarmed glance with McCoy when Jim faced his steak with reluctance. Only when he stabbed a few chips with relish, Spock relaxed.

“Now, Hikaru,” Jim ordered and stole a piece of vegetable from Spock’s bowl, an action Spock found illogically pleasing. He perceived and promptly ignored the urge to dip his spoon into the bowl and feed Jim. “Tell us what’s up with the ship,” Jim requested. With a wry look at Doctor McCoy and a crooked grin, he added, “As much as you’re allowed to tell us, that is.”

Sulu smiled slightly as he finished the dish of grilled meat and vegetables of his main course. “I think I am permitted to tell you that the ship has so far neither exploded nor imploded.”
Jim laughed. “I’d never have guessed.” Then he stared in disbelief at McCoy as the doctor placed a bowl with replicated chocolate pudding in front of him. “Since when do I rate a dessert?”

“Since you lost even more weight.” McCoy scowled at Jim.

Spock experienced an unreasonable surge of anger at the doctor taking such an intimate interest in Jim’s diet. He quenched the impulse. The reaction was irrational, illogical ... out of character. He analyzed the emotion and was not surprised to find a connection with the primal needs and instincts associated with the Bond. Turning his attention back to the present, he found himself the object of subtle scrutiny by Doctor McCoy. Obviously, the doctor was more familiar with the intricacies of Vulcan mating behavior than he’d let on – and he was testing Spock’s limits.

Spock raised an eyebrow at McCoy. Forking up a piece of gespar pudding with soltar fruit, he offered Jim a taste. The way Jim ducked his head and smiled at him while accepting the food soothed Spock and filled him with strange warmth. The sensation was reinforced by a sense of amused acceptance in his mind. Clearly, Jim had realized what was going on as well.

Only when McCoy had cleared away the dessert plates and they had cups of coffee and tea in front of them, Sulu finally switched on his PADD.

“We’ve finalized trade agreements with the Fremen and the smugglers three days ago,” Sulu announced with satisfaction. “It went pretty much the way Commander Paul predicted. Pergium and a trading license covering all Federation starbases for the Arrakis Trade Union in return for their facilitating Spice trade with the Fremen and transporting Spice deliveries to the nearest starbase. The Fremen get our assistance with an application to the Federation Council for terraforming procedures on Arrakis. We’ll be staying another month for a preliminary surveillance.” Sulu looked up from the PADD. “Since both Vulcan High Council and United Earth Government have already agreed to render all relevant support provided climate, flora, and fauna of Arrakis are not irrevocably damaged, the petition to the Federation Council is just a formality. The condition imposed on the terraforming plans will prove a challenge for generations of scientists, and no doubt lead to some disappointment for the Fremen. But thankfully that’s not our problem.” Sulu scrolled down the PADD, then flipped to another screen. “We expect to get the formal confirmation from Starfleet Command in ten days.”

“Well done,” Jim said, nodding. “I had a good feeling about it all from the beginning. Halleck’s a real character, but not a bad guy. And the Fremen are quality people. What else are you allowed to tell us?”

Sulu glanced at McCoy as if to confirm a prior agreement. McCoy’s reaction was his customary scowl, which naturally elicited a frown from Jim. “Sybok finally made progress with Thorby.”

At that Jim surged up in his chair and leaned forward. “Did he get the data?”

Sulu inhaled and tensed. Spock was unable to tamp down a similar reaction. Thorbehراك’s plight and his open resistance to traditional Vulcan ways left him conflicted. Spock found his emotional response to the situation both unsatisfactory and disturbing. It would be beneficial to devote a meditation to the issue, perhaps even to talk to Sybok about it – unpleasant though the notion was. He started at a soft touch. Jim’s hand on his arm, fingertips only, bright hazel eyes promising questions later, frustration etched around his mouth.

“Could he extract the information from Thorby’s mind, Mister Sulu?” Jim asked, tense, emphasizing the formal address. But he didn’t remove his hand from Spock. And Spock found he did not want him to.
“Yes,” Sulu said. “Details will have to wait, Captain.” He met Jim’s annoyed gaze steadily. Spock approved, even though like the captain, he would have preferred a thorough explanation at once. Sulu went on, “I can assure you that details really can wait. As it turns out a part of the problem was the sheer amount of data stored away in the kid’s mind. Baslim was desperate. He had Thorby memorize years’ worth of data. A human mind would have been fried, and apparently even Vulcan minds have limits. Commander Paul asked me to inform you it will take weeks to analyze the data, and that there’s nothing else we can do at this point. Sybok will continue working with Thorby while we’re here. Commander Paul hopes that Sybok will enable Thorby to access all of his memories again. He would be an invaluable eye witness.” Sulu looked pale, his thoughts obviously straying to just what the child must have experienced.

“That may prove impossible,” Spock said, although he appreciated his brother’s willingness to attempt healing the broken mind of the boy. “If a trauma is intense enough, the Vulcan brain can excise any related memories to ensure its continued functioning. What has been removed cannot be restored.”

McCoy stared at him in shock. “That sounds as if you’re saying you can lobotomize yourself!”

Spock inclined his head. “Crudely put, yes.”

Jim drew back. The moment he removed his hand, Spock could feel him trembling. At the same time, Spock sensed a change in their connection: Jim was scared. A most uncomfortable experience, close to the threshold of physical pain. Spock was at a loss of how to react. He wanted to reach out – wanted to restore the connection – fear – helplessness – how to control himself—

Somehow his face or posture must have betrayed him.

“Shit,” Jim murmured. He got to his feet and moved behind Spock. Before Spock could protest conduct that was unbecoming of two senior Starfleet officers in public, Jim put his hands on Spock’s shoulders. With an awkward burst of pure emotion, Jim pushed the Bond between them wide open. Fear and horror, old and new, touched his mind, but also enough warmth that the pervasive awareness of ambient temperatures always a few degrees too cold for comfort that Spock was so used to faded.

“Are you always that cold?” At his back Spock sensed the motion of Jim shaking his head. “Sorry, Sulu. We’re kind of still getting the hang of things here.” Jim inhaled deeply, issuing a sound that Spock classified as a sigh, but Jim didn’t move away. Instead, he calmly addressed Sulu, continuing their conversation. “Well, that’s good news, Sulu. What else? How are you enjoying your time in the center chair? Any problems with the crew?”

“As a matter of fact,” Sulu said, diplomatically choosing not to reply to the second question, “there has been an incident that has warranted a minor reprimand for a few crew members.”

Jim groaned and returned to his seat, only to reach out again and rest a hand on Spock’s thigh. Strangely, his touch was ... pleasant. Instead of challenging Spock’s emotional control, it seemed to steady his mind. Once more, Spock was forced to acknowledge how rudimentary his understanding of all facets of the Bond still was, and how beneficial the doctor’s decision was to force an extended medical leave on them, with limited social and official interactions.

“What happened?” Jim asked. “Another pub brawl?”

“Four crew members got drunk on shore leave and subsequently had to be physically retrieved from the pool.” Lieutenant Sulu’s face betrayed amusement rather than annoyance over conduct unbecoming.
Next to him, Jim snorted. “Who was it? Let me guess. Scotty and some of his buddies got wasted and decided to use Keenser as a water ball?”

Sulu snorted, and for some reason Doctor McCoy flushed. “Not this time. It seems Lieutenant Gaila, Lieutenant Amell, Lieutenant Paul and Ensign Canningham had a girls’ night out. Apparently, they were pretty tipsy when they got back and decided that skinny-dipping in the pool would be the perfect end for their shared shore leave.”

“Hot damn!” Jim exclaimed. “That’s tons better than a pub brawl. Who were the lucky guys to break up the pool party?”

Doctor McCoy fidgeted in his seat. Once again Spock failed to understand human humor and discomfiture. He said as much. “I fail to perceive what is so amusing at four officers endangering their lives and acting in a way that is unbecoming Starfleet personnel. Or why the crew members who had to intervene should be considered ‘lucky’.”

Jim leaned back in his chair and laughed. “Oh my god, Spock,” he gasped, “you’re killing me over here – idiom, Spock. Just a phrase.” Catching his breath, he chuckled again. “It’s amusing because I doubt the girls were in any serious danger or seriously embarrassing Starfleet. And whoever got to pull them out of the pool is a lucky guy because ...”

“Jim,” McCoy interrupted him sharply. His ears and neck had acquired an astonishingly deep ruddy complexion. Spock could not recall witnessing a similar physical reaction in the doctor before.

But Jim only burst out laughing again. “What?! Bones, you were one of the lucky guys? Hot damn, man. Way to go. So which damsel in distress did you get to save, Prince Charming?”

When McCoy glowered at Jim instead of answering his question, Sulu turned to Spock. “Jim is right Spock,” he explained patiently. “It was not a dangerous situation or threatening crew morale or the standing of Starfleet or anything like that. And well, for many men it’s not a hardship to drag a pretty, naked woman out of a pool ...”

“Oh, I don’t know, Sulu,” Jim sniggered. “I can totally imagine how that might turn into a hardship ...”

“JIM!” McCoy snarled.

Jim rolled his eyes. “Bones, I’m married. I haven’t joined a monastery.” Before Spock could correct him, Jim added, “Spock, it’s just colloquial expressions. Also, you know Bones knows better.” He glanced at Sulu with a smile. “And since Bones briefed Sulu before lunch, Sulu has all the facts, too.”

“Doctor McCoy thinks it’s time to wrap up this lunch now,” McCoy announced with a scowl. “And since he happens to be CMO on this ship, his will shall be done.”

Jim sighed but offered no argument. Spock for his part would have preferred to review the ship’s log in detail to discuss the details of Lieutenant Sulu’s first longer period as acting captain but also kept silent as such an activity could not rationally be reconciled with the sensible restrictions of medical leave imposed on them.

They rose to their feet. “Thank you, Hikaru,” Jim said and held out his hand to Sulu. “Thank you for taking care of the Enterprise. I’m sorry we got you stuck with the conn.” He smiled wryly. “And thank you for putting up with us for lunch.”

“I won’t lie, I’d much rather have the two of you in charge, Captain. But Leslie and I are getting
there.” He nodded respectfully to Spock, before turning back to Jim. “Also, in terms of emergencies, I don’t think they get much more pleasant than this one.” Sulu smiled. “Congratulations, Captain, Mr. Spock. On behalf of all bridge teams.”

♦

**Stardate 2260.253, 1600 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin**

Jim sat cross-legged on the couch, cradling a cup of peppermint tea and enjoying the buzz of yet another hypo that was supposed to help with his sore muscles. On the other side of the coffee table, Spock sat on his meditation stone, perfectly centered, his expression peaceful. A hint of harmony flowed through their connection, and Jim wondered if he might actually make progress with his own attempts at meditation now.

Jim inhaled the refreshing scent of mind and considered the day so far.

He couldn’t help grinning. They’d had their morning after talk and some pretty awesome morning after sex. Of course there was also that bit about Vulcan emotions, and they’d need to discuss that some more with Sybok and M’Benga and Bones. There were all the things Spock didn’t know, not just because he’d never done that before but because there was always the possibility that his human heritage changed things for him.

Lunch. Okay, so Bones was right. They really needed to be on medical leave for now. Sure, it had been mostly little things. The effects and limitations of the Bond. Like, Jim was pretty sure he couldn’t eat meat anymore. At least that was a theory easily tested. But he also found he wanted to give in to the small urges that apparently came with the territory. Sharing food and touches in ways that went beyond standard human behavior for newly-weds in a professional situation. M’Benga and Sybok seemed sure that every little bit would help with *pon farr* later on. Spock hadn’t disagreed, although the whole thing made him crazy uncomfortable. So, yeah, he could see the benefits of staying off duty for a while longer.

Spock blinked, his face coming alive as the serenity of meditation faded into a mellow expression. “Jim.”

“Hey.” Jim knelt in front of him. “Want some tea? I could do with a second cup.” How strange it was just to spend time together. He hadn’t expected how not doing anything much, even if they did it together, could be so ... nice.

“Tea would be pleasant,” Spock agreed. “Perhaps we might also talk about whom to inform concerning the changed status of our relationship beyond the administrative requirements imposed on us by Starfleet.”

“Oh yeah.” Jim smiled. “So you think we can tell older you? We have to tell Sarek.”

Spock inclined his head, his complexion tinged a little greener than before. Jim attempted to focus on the presence in his mind. “Jim ...”

“No, Spock, let me try. I get why you think we should wait with more serious experiments. But I need to practice. So let me _feel_ you. Come on. Open up.”

With a sigh, Spock offered up his hands. “This will help.”

“Or distract me into sex,” Jim muttered but took Spock’s hands anyway.
Spock raised an eyebrow and relaxed into his touch. “If you desire practice, I shall oblige.”

Jim laughed and closed his eyes to concentrate on what Spock allowed to transfer. “You ... like that I like older-you. But ... you’re not sure you like yourself. Why ever not? You’re both kind of awesome. And ...” He opened his eyes again. “Hey ...” Concerned, he leaned forward to kiss Spock. “I’m right here. We don’t even know if they had what we have.”

Spock just looked at him. Jim held on to him tightly, hands and mind. “If there’s such a thing as universal constants, this would be the one I’d choose, too,” Jim whispered. “And yeah, we could probably find out right away if you dug around in that part of my mind. But ...”

“... we should respect his privacy and wait until we can ask him in person,” Spock finished the sentence. “I agree.”

“But we can send him a message about us, at least.” Jim frowned. “Also, you’re still not warm enough. Look, that’s stupid. I can wear shorts and a t-shirt in here no problem. Computer, raise temperature another ten. My feel-good temp may be lower than yours, Spock, but I hate being cold about as much as you do.” He wondered if Spock would agree to try out the sauna in the spa area with him. Since they were not allowed to return to Dune, that would be a good alternative to warm the Vulcan up. Or perhaps a desert scenario in the holo-deck ... One day he’d like to do some sightseeing on Vulcan-that-was, but they were not ready for that yet. Right. Vulcan. “A message to Sarek, too. Anyone else?”

Spock nodded. “My mother’s sister, Doris Grayson, and my cousins. Jemima or ‘Jimmy’ – she still prefers the humorous diminutive to her proper name for what she tells me are illogical human reasons that I simply have to accept if I expect her to answer when I address her – and Lester.”

“So that wasn’t just a metaphor, about Earth being the only home you have left? You have real family back there?” It was illogical to feel that pleased about such a sentiment – pleased, too, about Jim’s ready pleasure at his discovery— “Not illogical at all, Spock, and whoa, I got that almost as clearly as if you said it out loud. Cool. Sure you haven’t uh... flicked that switch in my mind there?”

“No, I haven’t attempted that yet. Nor will I until I am certain we can cope with the connection such as it is,” Spock replied firmly. “But yes, I have human relatives in Seattle with whom I enjoy cordial relations. My mother’s sister, Doris, works with a publishing company. Lester is three years older than I am. He and his partner Mark are lawyers. Jimmy is a year younger than you are. Now that the Spice trade is secured, I believe she will move to New Vulcan to aid the colony.”

“Wow.” Jim pondered the ramifications of Spice, the Vulcan Genome Registry, and Human surrogate mothers. “How’s that even going to work? All those emotional human women, and then all those new babies?”

“I do not know,” Spock said. “It has never been tried before. I believe every effort will be made to form stable familial structures, which will by necessity be polygynous in most cases. How the conflict between a strategic rebuilding of the Vulcan gene pool and the tenets of infinite diversity will be resolved, I cannot tell at this stage. My counterpart is involved in the program, as he is aware of what some individuals achieved in his universe, who will never be born now if nature is left to run its course. Naturally, there is not much information at this stage. I do know that there is an agreement between my father and my cousin.”

“Huh.” Jim blinked. “That must be odd, and difficult.”

Painful, too. He stood and drew Spock up to his feet as well. “C’mon. Tea and cuddling. The
doctors said so.”

They ended up on the couch, touching as much of each other’s body as possible while still drinking tea and eating lirs cookies. “So how about you?” Jim asked after a while. “When we’re done with this mission, do you want us to go to New Vulcan and do the family thing? I’m sure they must be after you about that, since you’re a hero and all.”

The shock that crashed through their connection tasted of pain and humiliation, and faintly, very faintly, of hope. “Jim, no. I am a symbol, not a hero,” Spock said softly. “I may be the personification of IDIC. I am the product of my parents' mutual affection, certainly. But no more. My DNA has never been filed with the Vulcan Genome Registry. Instead, you will find it in the databases of the Vulcan Science Academy. There is even the Vulcan equivalent of a trademark, if you want to look it up. And for the foreseeable future, the VSA will not have any interest in perpetuating hybrid genetic material. It is only logical.” He raised a hand to touch Jim’s meld points in a gentle caress. “Do not be angry or hurt on my behalf.”

Jim shook his head and captured Spock’s hand in a firm grip. “That’s part of my job description. So don’t even start. And yeah, I do get how creating viable hybrids can’t be a priority now. Also, I am not keen on sharing you with another adult ...” Except your older self, he thought. Only I don’t think you’d like that much. Either of you.

“Nor I, you,” Spock said. “Illogical though that may be, I do not wish to share you even with myself. Although it moves me how generous you are in your love.”

“... but maybe adoption would be a solution ...”

Spock stared at him, wide-eyed. “I am at a loss what to say,” he confessed. “... a family of my own is nothing I have ever considered before. And I assumed that you – your—”

“That my first and best destiny is to be a starship captain?” Jim smiled. “Yeah, your older version told me that, too. But remember what you said, when we first discussed all of that parallel universe and alternate timeline shit during the Nero thing? I think it went something like this: ‘Whatever lives we might have lived have now been permanently altered. Our destinies, whatever they were, have changed.’”

“You possess eidetic memory.”

“I know. So do you. But? Point is, even if we ignore the differences that extend far beyond Nero’s influence and the fact how people can change, even if that is my first and best destiny, who’s to say I don’t have a really awesome second or even third destiny? Bones tells me my life expectation isn’t what it used to be. With a bit of luck I’ll be around a lot longer than my counterpart. So I don’t see why we shouldn’t take a couple of years after this mission and give that family thing a go. If we want to, that is.” Jim wondered when he’d started wanting that for himself because he sure as hell hadn’t anything to build on in terms of family relations. Though maybe that would change. “Have I told you my brother’s moving to New Vulcan?”

Spock shook his head. “I was not aware that you are in contact with your brother.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t. He sent a message while I was in hospital. Apparently having your baby brother come back from the dead makes you rethink some stuff.” Jim shrugged and didn’t attempt to stop his bitterness from reaching out to Spock. “Anyway, he’s a research biologist. His wife, Aurelan, too. Currently they are on Deneva. But it’s not living up to the job description. As in, it’s just not interesting enough for them. They’ve got a kid, Peter. He’s ... eight or nine I think.” Jim frowned. “Aurelan’s always wanted siblings for him, but I guess there are issues. I wouldn’t be surprised if
she joins the surrogate scheme.” Suddenly Jim laughed. “I’m trying to imagine that. All our families on New Vulcan, twenty years from now.”

“Human imagination is remarkably fanciful,” Spock said dryly. “Fascinating.”

“Yup,” Jim agreed easily. “That’s me. Fanciful and fascinating. So how about we compose the message to old you first? Then we can write to your human relatives and to my brother. And when we’re in the groove, we’ll do Sarek. Errr... I mean, we will let him know that his youngest kid has gotten hitched with a Human. You know, all polite and formal and Vulcan.”

♦

**Stardate 2260.294, 2000 hours, New Vulcan**

Spock stayed with his father in a moderately sized house at the outskirts of New ShiKahr. It was a practical, logical arrangement for two old men with busy lives and few needs. Additionally, Sarek was absent for months at a time He was still the Vulcan ambassador to Earth and stayed there for the better part of the Terran year. New Vulcan was more than a little out of the way, an arid planet close to the Gorn Hegemony. Even with one of the new warp nine capable vessels, the trip took more than a month. In consequence, Spock was alone more often than not. It mattered little; it was better that way; he could not, should not belong. And if the idea of isolation as penitence was illogical, the idea of work as act of contrition was only logical. What was left of his life belonged to what remained of his people.

Yet his existence was not without joy. Knowing the generosity of spirit that seemed essential to Jim Kirk in any universe, perhaps it should not have come as such a surprise when this precious, young version of his t’hy’la wanted to be his friend. That his younger self made cautious overtures of friendship as well was a shock, he had not been prepared for.

Out of isolation, grief and guilt, his new life took form and acquired rhythm in long days of patient labor punctuated by a cadence of comm unit chimes. At first, thanks to the widespread subspace relays in Federation space, he heard from them once or twice a week. Lately, their messages had become more infrequent as the Enterprise moved farther and farther from Federation space. He knew that soon the messages would most likely cease as distance of space and mind inevitably grew too great to bridge.

He could see that, hear that, read that in every message, in those oblique references to incidents they could not discuss. Whatever had happened to the Enterprise since she left Federation space, it affected them both. They were growing older before his eyes, from one irregular video message to the next.

Jim’s death had erased the smiling softness of youth from his face. To see growing experience and innate resilience marking Jim’s face now instead of the terrible blankness of trauma was comfort Spock did not deserve. To soothe the haunted expression in Jim’s eyes now that he was far away was solace Spock was not entitled or able to provide. Yet he ached for Jim.

To watch the rawness in his younger self’s features fade as a measure of peace and warmth returned to his gaze was hope Spock was not worthy of. To ease the fears and turmoils of his youth he dared not, could not. Yet he could not suppress the self-serving desire to succor the longing he saw in his own eyes.

He never gave in to those impulses. Yet he always waited for the next message. The last missive had arrived nine days ago. They entered an orbit around Arrakis and would finally meet with Sybok. Based on the previous rhythm of subspace transmissions from the Enterprise it was not
illogical to expect another message at this point. It was, however, illogical to long for it.

Spock went through the motions of his routine; working in whatever capacity his assistance was most beneficial on any given day, meditating many hours, sleeping little. Sybok was never evil, merely misguided. Perhaps he was even right. Here, now, nothing is as it was. The time frame, the location, the situation – and even in his universe, the outcome of that encounter had been fortunate in the end. And yet ...

Tonight he returned home after a long session discussing the details of the repopulation program. Most of the men and women who had contributed to the achievements of Vulcan in his own universe were gone, and with them uncountable works of art and music and science. If and how the genetic material preserved in the Vulcan Genome Registry should be used in the effort to stabilize the Vulcan population was the most contentious topic on the agenda of the Vulcan feretaya these days. Spock was inordinately grateful his true identity was known only to so few. He could barely live with the part he had played in the end of Romulus and the destruction of Vulcan. To endure any responsibility for who would be born on New Vulcan in the future was unthinkable.

Wearily Spock sat down on the chaiselongue in front of the comm unit. Still no message.

Only with the strictest mental discipline, he was able to subdue the terrible terror that lurked in his mind. Just like in those endless months after his t’hy’la’s disappearance, his mind was helplessly adrift. Forty-six days ago, a strange dream had disturbed his sleep. Thanks to his half-human heritage, Spock could dream but rarely did. Normally, Vulcan meditation and mind control techniques eliminated his physical and psychological need for dreams. But forty-six days ago he had dreamed – for the first time since his Jim had vanished, in another universe, in another life, never to return to him alive. Spock had dreamed of the worldship they had discovered during their first mission ... and of the distant glow of an energy ribbon in the very heart of darkness ... From afar, he heard once more the last words that Scarlet – the worldship’s steward and a being capable of controlling the universe – offered him: “You are the fixed point of the stories. The stories could not move, without you.” But Spock was lost; had been lost for ninety-six years now; loss was the only fixture in the universe, and the stories that had moved with him had only led to more loss. How much better, if not beneficial, it would be to finally fade into nothing more than a painful footnote of history.

But tomorrow he was expected back at the new Vulcan Science Academy, at the hearing of the feretaya. And today he could sit for a while yet and wait for another message. He was too weary even for meditation ...

The clang of the comm unit roused him. With a shaking hand, he pushed the button to accept the call. A subspace video message – from the Enterprise! A second later, Spock found himself staring at the faces of a young Jim Kirk and a young Spock, sitting on the sofa in Spock’s cabin, under the tapestry his mother had woven long ago, in this and another universe. Jim’s hazel eyes were even more brilliant than he recalled, and his smile radiant. His younger self’s expression was ... Spock’s aged heart stuttered. Could he ever have looked that vulnerable, that happy? As if on cue, the two young men raised joined hands to the camera. Together they recited a poem that did not even exist in this universe:

“We are star-met
We are joined
We are blessed
We who have found each other
We are the dream of the ages
We are the hope, the desire
“We are love.”

“Old friend,” Jim said, still smiling, “I know, it’s been a while since one of us contacted you last. But much has happened. As you can see, we are Bonded now, my Spock and I. Sybok has overseen the process. He says the Bond is very strong. We’re still getting used to the details of it. Bones has put us on sick leave for a whole month just in case.” He rolled his eyes. “When you get this message, we will be back on the bridge and warping to the Black Cluster. Sybok and his healers should be well on their way to New Vulcan by then. He can tell you and Sarek all about our Bonding when he gets to you.” Jim inhaled and gazed tenderly at his partner before he went on, “I remember how you read that poem to me when I didn’t want to believe there is such a thing as Vulcan love poetry. I hope you don’t mind that we have appropriated it for our official messages to family and friends. But we both feel it is the perfect expression for what we are to one another. Nemaiyo, Spock.” He leaned back a little.

Now his younger incarnation focused intensely on the camera, an almost-smile softening his mouth, his eyes warm with love. “It is as Jim says – zhitlar t’du, kudaya t’etek. Your words are our blessing. And today I find that I do not mind offering you an entirely self-serving goodbye: Dif-tor heh smusma, Spokh.” He raised his hand in the ta’al.

Smiling, Jim echoed the gesture. “Live long and prosper, old friend.”

The transmission ended. Spock sat motionless, stunned, overwhelmed with emotions too intense for him to process, much less express ... and with a mystery he couldn’t even begin to comprehend. While it was true that he had written that love poem, he had never shared it with Jim, in any universe – and had always regretted his lack of emotional courage.

♦

“We are star-met  
We are joined  
We are blessed  
We who have found each other  
We are the dream of the ages  
We are the hope, the desire  
We are love.”

– Leonard Nimoy, A Lifetime of Love, Poems on the Passages of Life

Chapter End Notes

• The passages about the storms on Arrakis follow the canon of "Dune" by Frank Herbert.

• The Vulcan Genome Registry is canon. If Spock’s DNA was ever registered I do not know.

• Jimmy and Lester are semi-canon from the tie-in novel "Planet of Judgment" by Joe Haldeman. I took the liberty of turning Jimmy into Jemima for my own nefarious purposes.

• “You are the fixed point of the stories. The stories could not move, without you.” is a quote from “Enterprise: The First Adventure” by Vonda N. McIntyre
♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
I Carry Your Heart

Chapter Summary

Poetry can be sex. And sex can be poetry. ♦ What Colonel Baslim died for. ♦ More aftereffects of Jim’s and Spock’s joint Spice trip of special magnificence and epic embarrassment. ♦ Also, Vulcans feel feelings. And Jim feels like an idiot. ♦ A family visit that reminds Jim of problems they have to face in the near future. ♦ Meanwhile (not precisely in another universe and also not really in another time, but definitely far, far away) grief is all that is left of a life ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I Carry Your Heart

Stardate 2260.254, 0300 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Cabin

Jim couldn’t get that poem out of his mind. Star-met, he thought, as he gazed up into Spock’s mesmerizing black eyes. Joined. He gasped as he turned onto his stomach, craving Spock inside his body, inside his mind. Words had never got under his skin that way before. Blessed? Goddamn lucky at the very least. He wanted to launch himself at his lover, bury himself in his body, wanted to growl at Spock. "Need you, want you, let me fuck you.” But it was early days yet; the Bond was too new, the threat of pon farr often on their mind. So he stretched himself out, pliant and passive, and begged, “Please. Please. No thinking. Not now. Slick yourself up and get on with it.”

Thankfully, Spock chose that exact moment to find his ass with a slick, lubed finger. Found each other. Hell, yes. The Bond transferred just how sensitive a touch-telepath’s fingers were – and also told Spock how Jim experienced the careful pressure on his prostate.

“More,” Jim managed, a moan, not a word. Spock obliged, and Jim panted at the pressure, but he still wanted more. He wanted everything. He’d always enjoyed sex, but this? This was crazy. He was shuddering, out of control with need this morning, and he was tearing Spock along, right into the abyss. Oh, damn. Sybok had been right where the after-effects of Spice were concerned – how symptoms of addiction might linger and express themselves within the Bond. Not cool. “C’mon, please. Please.”

At first Spock’s dick in his ass was nearly too much – yet at the same time exactly what he needed. Almost pain, more than a burn, beyond fullness. To come undone, to be spread open. Between gasps, he begged, “Meld, meld, please. Please. Need you. Need—”

For a moment he sensed his lover’s hot fingertips on his face. Desire surged through him like lightning before the meld exploded into a delirious dream of shared ecstasy.

♦

Need had woken them in the middle of the night. Desire burned in their minds and their bodies. Spock wondered if pon farr would be like that. If this was how it would begin. Or worse, if this
was how it began ... Sybok had spoken of the possibility. But when Spock forced himself to monitor his body and his brain while Jim clutched at him and begged for intercourse, he discovered only what he should find – the requirements of their new Bond, not the hormonal imbalance of impending *pon farr*. Albeit, as Sybok had suspected, their cravings were much stronger than what Spock had been taught to expect. Spice had joined them much more completely than the differences in their genetic make-up should allow. In consequence, all effects of their Bonding were greatly intensified.

In spite of the painful throbbing of his body that demanded physical release, in spite of the ache in his mind that pulled him to his Bondmate, Spock hesitated over Jim’s body spread out helplessly before him. Six days ago he had been overwhelmed by their first meld, by the violent intimacy of their Bonding and the effects of the drug. Now he retained a measure of control but found that less than helpful. As the emotionally and physically inexperienced partner, his lust still felt strange, alien to his mind and body. To hold his penis in a state of arousal for the sixth time in his life left Spock struggling, torn between control and passion.

“Please. Please. No thinking. Not now,” Jim mumbled, “slick yourself up and get on with it.”

Spock picked up the relevant tube and obediently covered himself with the spicy lube. The ingredients as well as the touch stimulated him even more, to the point that he didn’t hesitate to lean over Jim’s body and to trail his hand down Jim’s back and between the cheeks of his ass. Cautiously, he slipped a slick finger into the tight ring of muscle. To engage in such an irrational, unhygienic act should be unappealing, but all he could feel was lust.

“More,” Jim demanded when Spock added another finger. Spock shuddered painfully as the hot, intimate tightness surrounding his hyper-sensitive fingers tore at his control, as the Bond transferred to him how perfectly the pressure and angle of his fingers stimulated Jim’s prostate. “C’mon, please. Please.”

Jim’s pleas helped Spock to overcome his hesitation, and he positioned himself against Jim. Their bodies fit together harmoniously. They were about the same size, with Spock an inch taller. Both of them were physically strong. Spock’s figure was thinner and more angular; due to his Vulcan heritage, his skeletal structure was heavier, his muscles denser. Jim’s human body was a little fuller, softer, and lighter. There was a subtle gentleness to his appearance that was pleasing to Spock’s eyes and hands. Indeed, the contrast between them at this intimate moment was compelling: Jim’s pale body was flushing in ruddy hues, while Spock’s erection was almost green with the increased blood flow of arousal. Slowly, he pushed himself into Jim’s body, his eyes intent on the sight of his penis embedded in the stretched orifice, lube glistening on their skin. The tight clench of Jim’s anal muscles, the echo of almost unbearable fullness in his mind challenged what vestiges of control he had left.

“Meld, meld, please,” Jim gasped. “Please. Need you. Need—” Jim’s need pulsed around him and inside him. Spock flung himself forward, the new angle of penetration wrenching a groan of pleasure from his throat. He allowed his hand to cover Jim’s feverish face. His fingers latched on to the meld points. Untainted by drugs, the effect was instantaneous and even stronger than their previous meld. With a cry, Spock thrust into Jim’s body. He drew back and slid his hands to Jim’s neck without breaking their telepathic connection, to his shoulders, down his back, to his sides, until he held Jim in place with a bruising grip and surged forward again, until he pressed himself ever deeper into his lover’s body.

Jim for his part was merciless, pushing back against Spock with his body and his mind, dissolving Spock’s last controls until he lost himself in the depth of their union. Time turned into rhythm, into a pounding, physical pulse in their joined bodies. Spock slid his right hand under Jim’s stomach
and grasped his lover’s erection, fingers moving up and down his length in time with his thrusts. Soon the sensations became too much for him to hold, the tension of impending orgasm excruciating. He knew Jim was on the brink, too. For a moment, Spock tried to hold them there, motionless, on the cusp between agony and orgasm. Until, from one frantic heartbeat to the next, the effort was too much. He shoved himself deeply into Jim, tightened his grip around him, and let their climax take them. Pressure exploded into release. He could feel his semen rush into his lover’s body in a helpless flow. At the same time, Jim shuddered, spilling his come into Spock’s hand.

Afterwards, although the post-orgasmic hypersensitivity of their bodies was exquisitely painful, Spock did not extricate himself from Jim’s body but instead clung to him for moments longer. Their physical and mental connection was too deep to relinquish just like that, as if it reached beyond time, beyond space. He could barely force himself to move at all. So he merely lowered his face to Jim’s back and inhaled the musky fever-scent of sweat and sex.

“We are the dream of the ages,” Spock quoted and whispered human kisses over his Bondmate’s spine. “We are the hope, the desire.” With a silent groan he finally dragged himself out of Jim’s anus, leaving thick trails of sperm and translucent smears of lube behind. Sinking down next to Jim, he raised his hand, still sticky with his lover’s seed to his lips. Unable to contain his curiosity, he had to smell, had to taste, before he traced tender fingertips along Jim’s crack. Gently mingling their ejaculate, he rubbed index and middle finger across the flushed, hot opening. “We are love.”

Stardate 2260.259, 1600 hours, Deck 7, Sickbay, CMO’s Office

Carolyn sat at Leonard’s computer in the CMO’s office, working slowly through the information Colonel Baslim had amassed in his ten years on New Sydney.

Sickbay’s computer system was the safest on the ship, thanks to the sensitive content of medical files. Additionally, the CMO had to sync the medical files of the crew with Starfleet Medical on a regular basis, so large transmissions from sickbay were not unusual. Hidden away in Spock’s extensive, Vulcan-encrypted medical files, even the massive amount of data Baslim had collected should remain undetected. Her involvement in Thorby’s and Jo’s care was no secret. No one would think it unusual if she spent some extra hours in McCoy’s office. In other words, she was hiding in plain sight – just in case. If Ambassador Gav’s insidious network penetrated Starfleet even more thoroughly than they feared.

Carolyn leaned back with a sigh and rotated tense shoulders. When strong hands settled left and right of her neck and started kneading, she nearly jumped out of her skin. The hands stilled and held her in place.


“Sorry,” she muttered, “didn’t expect that, is all. Also ...” She made a vague gesture at the screen. “This is getting to me.” With a wary glance, she made sure that the door to the CMO’s office was closed and no one was outside. “What we’ve got here,” she explained, “is ...” She trailed off, shaking her head. “Leonard, I don’t know where to start.” All of a sudden she had tears in her eyes and blinked desperately. This was so huge, even though it was evidence for just one planet out of dozens. But it was real data, hard data that could be confirmed from the outside, with external sources.
“Breathe out,” he repeated. When she obeyed, he pressed down on her shoulders along with her exhalation, releasing the pressure only when she inhaled instinctively. “Are you even allowed to talk to me about that?”

“Yes,” she said. “My father changed your clearance. I’m sorry. But that couldn’t be avoided thanks to Thorby’s issues.”

“So that will come back and bite me in the ass,” Leonard griped.

“That’s par for the course with such matters.” She shrugged uncomfortably but didn’t apologize again. “Okay, so … here …” She switched to a hierarchical view of folders on the screen and flicked through a preview of the contents. “What we’ve got. For one thing, we have the shadow ledger of the United Pergium Mining Consortiums. It’s like ‘Creative Accounting For Criminals 101’. That’s already pretty heavy because for trading licenses, for legit deals with Federation ships, they need to file their Federation business accounts with the Federation Tax Authorities. Those files will not match.”

Carolyn tapped the keyboard panel. “And then there’s this, the spaceport registry, and not the public version. It tells us where the ships that show up in the bookkeeping files came from and where they went next. Sadly, those bastards are not stupid enough to come here directly from wherever they are based. But New Sydney’s an important hub in the slave trade. There won’t be many stops between wherever they come from and the Sappora system. With a bit of luck, we’ll be able to trace them back. We need to find the connection, Leonard. Where do they keep the slaves between capturing them and selling them? I … I don’t know because I didn’t go the normal route, because I was a special case. They had to get rid of me quickly, so they took me straight to … well …” Involuntarily she hunched her shoulders again. Leonard tsked at her and dug in his thumbs until she made an undignified **nrgh** sound and sat up straighter.

She inhaled tightly, even though she felt him shake his head behind her. “But the real kicker is this,” she said, opening another file. “That’s what Colonel Baslim died for, Leonard.” She swallowed hard, staring at the graphs, the tables, the numbers. “The transportation logs of New Sydney authorities. The scanner logs for everything, and even more important, for everyone, beamed from and to the surface of New Sydney in the last three years. What the captain did with Thorby? That’s standard procedure here. That’s how they transport slaves to and from New Sydney. That’s why those pergium containers are so big. Not because pergium is so special or because New Sydney miners live to impress, but because the live, organic matter that shows up in the log files needs that kind of space. And that’s how we’ll be able to prove which ships are involved in the slave trade. And not just with the files, but because direct exposure to pergium leaves very specific traces in humanoid organisms. Traces—”

“—that show up in scans for decades,” Leonard interrupted her. “No known decontamination procedures can get rid of pergium residue. It’s not life-threatening as such – unlike strontium-90 or cesium-137 – but pergium really sticks to your bones. If you inhaled it while stuck in a small container, I bet it would also leave very specific marks in your lungs.” He hummed under his breath. “You know, I should do a complete work-up on Thorby’s exposure to radiation. And I think Scotty still has those pergium containers stashed away somewhere …”

“God, yes.” She turned around and rose to her feet to face Leonard, her hands balled into fists. “We’ll get those bastards. We will get them.” She shivered. “And there’ll be a trial, and they’ll rot in hell. Or at least on an extremely unpleasant prison planet.”

Leonard raised his eyebrows. “And then everything will be all right?”

“Hardly.” Carolyn snorted bitterly. “I guess it’s my way of … of owning what happened to me.
They wanted to get me out of the way, but I wasn’t even important enough to be killed. So they did their best to show me how helpless I am. And they succeeded, Leonard, don’t ever doubt that.” She inhaled a ragged breath. “But I’m here now, I’m alive, and I’m not helpless anymore. So, as long as I can, I’ll fight back. As hard as I can. And if we manage to make that a case, if we manage to win that case, the universe will be a better place. That’s more than enough for me.”

And then, to her utter shock and surprise, Leonard McCoy pulled her into his arms and simply held her, for a very long time.

♦

**Stardate 2260.264, 1700 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Quarters**

More than two weeks had passed since their Bonding. The aftereffects of their joint Spice trip of special magnificence and epic embarrassment were gradually decreasing in intensity and frequency as the Bond settled.

This afternoon, Spock had immersed himself in preliminary terraforming reports. With perfect posture and unwavering concentration, he was sitting at the desk in the captain’s quarters, while Jim sprawled on the sofa, eyes closed, enjoying the warm connection between their minds. Jim had already gone over what reports Sulu and Uhura had compiled for him over breakfast. The reports must have been vetted by Bones because they were painfully bland, mostly yet another iteration of “much to everyone’s surprise, the ship still hasn’t exploded or imploded yet”. In other news, the final confirmation from Starfleet Command for the treaties with the ATU (the Arrakis Trade Union) and the Fremen had caught up with the Enterprise the previous day. That meant full steam ahead for the science department of the Enterprise until they would leave orbit around Arrakis after stardate 2260.290 to make way to Khosla, in the vague hope of catching up with the elusive V’tosh ka’tur on the Ferengi outpost at long last.

Jim allowed himself to drift in the ebb and flow of the Bond, or whatever transferred from Spock’s mind while he was reading those reports. Jim liked Spock’s mind. Spock zoned out in science was almost as good as Spock meditating. And Spock meditating was pure zen. Weird how much Jim liked sharing that experience. He’d never expected that, even though he’d been giving that meditation thing a stab with Spock’s help for a while now. Sometimes he worried over using Spock’s meditations as a short-cut for himself. Not that he was above cheating for a good cause – he just knew damn well that sometimes things weren’t supposed to be easy ...

Whatever, Jim couldn’t deny that it was good for him. The whole thing – Spock, and the Bond. He hadn’t had any nightmares since the Bonding and not a single claustrophobic episode. He couldn’t stomach meat anymore, but he didn’t miss that much because for the first time since Tarsus he was able to relax around food, even enjoy it (well, as much as that was possible with replicated stuff). His improved sleeping and eating habits translated directly into medical results such as blood pressure, stress hormones and stuff like that. It was almost scary: Bones was starting to smile at him during their daily check-ups. Nothing like good blood test results to win a doctor over.

Obviously, Bones hadn’t been the biggest fan of their Spice-y Bonding (small wonder, because the initial effects of it – awkward; and Carolyn Paul deserved a commendation for thinking of the security camera in the transporter room, because, again, awkward). And yeah, not talking it over with Bones beforehand hadn’t been Jim’s smartest move ever. But especially in retrospect, with all the sexual awkwardness involved, he’d do it again. Because no matter how pissed-off Bones had been, Jim wanted, needed Bones in this primarily as his friend, not as his doctor. Even though Bones was inevitably involved as CMO now, too, Jim thought that Bones-his-friend had gotten the message. And Jim was determined to enjoy that for as long as it lasted; which would be precisely
until Bones found out how the Bond was not just about living together but about dying together.

Jim cracked an eye open and glanced at Spock. *Yup.* Still deep into his PADD. Jim hoped his mental and emotional state was not too distracting. By now he knew that he could have that effect on Spock. But there was nothing to be done about that, since Sybok had strictly forbidden them to experiment with shielding or Jim’s revamped psionic centers for a month. For an emo hippie Vulcan mind healer, Sybok was awfully strict concerning his instructions for what Jim and Spock were allowed to do and what they mustn’t do. Somewhat to his own surprise, Jim was pretty good at following those rules.

Of course it helped just how much Jim enjoyed the new intimacy he shared with Spock. Finally sex. Damn awesome sex, too. (In spite of staying mostly passive to make *pon farr* safer at some point in the future.) But the Bond was ... he couldn’t come up with any word or phrase to do it justice, so he settled for “better”. *Even better.* The unmatured Bond was a constant, vague presence at the back of his mind, physically a pressure just above his neck, at the base of his skull. He’d attempted to describe it to Bones in a socially and psychologically acceptable way. A kind of inner warmth, of constant connection. How much he needed that feeling of “not-alone-never-alone-always-with-you” was probably best kept out of his psych evals. Co-dependency in a command team was kind of frowned upon.

Jim kept his eyes closed and tried not to tug at the Bond, tried not to want Spock that much. He really didn’t want to bother Spock with a constant deluge of feelings and demands. Even if Spock would never admit that in as many words, Jim was aware how taxing emotional and sexual intimacy could be for the half-Vulcan at times. Spock was always so perfect and patient about satisfying Jim’s needs. He deserved nothing less in return. But “Jim Kirk”, “perfect” and “patient” couldn’t possibly be combined in one and the same sentence. And it was stupid to want perfect anyway, and ... and all of that wanting and needing and thinking made Jim ... irritable ... *itchy.*

“Shhhh,” Spock whispered and drew Jim against his body. Jim blinked open his eyes. He hadn’t noticed when Spock had abandoned his PADD and come over to the couch. “I am sorry. I should have detected that you need me,” Spock murmured. “You must know that you, your feelings, your needs will never ‘bother’ me. It is impossible. In fact, the echo of the ebb and flow of your emotions is already proving to be beneficial for both my balance and my control. My mind is growing more ... flexible.”

Spock laid a gentle hand upon Jim’s face, initiating a light meld. Jim sighed his relief at Spock’s physical and mental proximity. For a while they leaned against each other in comfortable silence. “I guess I do see now why they put us on sick leave for a whole month,” Jim muttered. “It’s one thing to freak out here, alone with you, for no particular reason. Quite another to do so on the bridge.”

“It’s still stupid to be jealous of a PADD,” Jim grumbled. “Or to get obsessed with perfection for no good reason all of a sudden.”

“Perfection,” Spock retorted somewhat prissily, “is a worthy goal to strive for according to both human and Vulcan tradition. Though I must admit that I find your perception of perfection rather irrational. I can assure you that the Vulcan scientific community has never considered me an example of perfection.”

“They’re an ignorant bunch of jerks. I know what I know.” Jim captured Spock’s left hand and proceeded to caress his palm. “But I notice you’re not even trying to tell me it’s illogical to regard reports as rivals for your affections.”

“I—” Spock gasped, when Jim took his little finger between thumb and index finger and gently
stroked him palm to fingertip. “Ahhh.”


He brought Spock’s fingers to his mouth, holding Spock’s wrist and palm in place with both hands. One kiss for each tip of the touch-telepath’s hyper-sensitive fingers. Love was so strange. He’d assumed with Spock in his mind, there’d be no reason to get unnecessarily sentimental. Spock would know. That would be enough. Manliness and Vulcaness satisfied all around. But it didn’t work like that. Jim found he wanted to say the words, wanted to hear himself say those words. And to feel Spock’s reaction to hearing them.

“Love you so much,” Jim said and—

Shock – the ground dropping away from under his feet – shame – a hot shockwave of shame – humiliation at an emotional response to such simple stimuli – agony at being unable to reciprocate in kind – to communicate the depth, the intensity of what he did feel in return—

Jim gasped. A supernova had nothing on Spock’s emotions, once unleashed.

Thirty minutes later they knew that Jim could make Spock climax by sucking on his fingers, and that Vulcan tongues were longer, warmer, more versatile, but unfortunately also much rougher than human tongues. After an undignified yelp from Jim that turned into helpless laughter at Spock’s flustered embarrassment, they ended up in bed after all, because even Spock had to admit that was the logical thing to do at that point. Because yeah, clearly they still needed practice to get it perfect, and Spock was in no position to deny that he’d endorsed striving for perfection a mere thirty-seven minutes and twenty seconds ago.

Afterwards, Jim seriously considered if captaining the Enterprise from the confines of their new big bed was a viable option. Spock’s amusement transferred clear as chuckles, and Jim grinned unrepentantly. “What can I say? You really are perfect. To me, anyway.”

Nevertheless, he rolled out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. They expected Sybok and his family for dinner – another test for their Bond. Let’s see if we are fit for social life again ...

Relaxing in the blast of a sonic shower, Jim considered Spock’s emotions. Oh yeah, Spock did have feelings. The whole gamut from “A for amusement” to ... whatever. Not that Jim had ever doubted that. After all, their very first meeting at the Academy had clued him in that Spock was at least capable of being extremely pissed-off. But now ... Sharing Spock’s hesitant explorations of his emotional range was really special. To be allowed to feel with him like that. His shocked passion. His gentle amusement.

Honest, Vulcans. The blah-blah front about not feeling anything was as much bullshit as that trashy chick-lit slogan of how Vulcan passions ran deeper than mere human feelings. Jim still felt like three times an idiot because he had never realized that Vulcan emotional make-up and Vulcan emotional processes were inherently different from the human equivalent. Alien. He had honestly no clue why there was no nice, shiny, big yellow box at the top of every page of the textbook for “Vulcan Culture 101” saying so. Perhaps because even though it was all kinds of obvious if you took just a moment to think things through, it was the kind of obvious that wasn’t easy to actually understand. Like a blind spot. And shit, if people kept getting wrong the absolute basics about one of the founding members of the Federation, Jim didn’t want to contemplate how oblivious they were concerning the weirder life-forms out there.

But, Spock. He was not entirely Vulcan, and to Jim’s surprise Spock had no idea how human he was. Spock could (probably) write down his complete hybrid genome. He was aware of most
practical aspects of his Vulcan make-up, though mostly in terms of his shortcomings (fucking Vulcan bullies). He was utterly clueless how his human heritage affected him (beyond its “disadvantages” – fucking Vulcan Science Academy freaks). Jim didn’t need a degree in xenobiology to know that this was just the kind of thing that would come back to bite you in the ass when you least expected it.

_Need to bug M'Benga for some background reading, he thought. And bring up the topic with Sybok as well. And yeah, obviously talk to Spock. Which will go over so well ..._

“Jim? You have been in the shower for ten minutes and fifty seconds. You have exceeded the period recommended for a maximum effect of sonics by three minutes and fifty seconds now. To stay in the shower longer than that is an inefficient and irresponsible use of the ship’s energy,” Spock complained. “Also, I still need to use the facilities myself. Need I remind you that Sybok and his wife and daughter will arrive in twenty-five minutes?”

Jim switched off the shower. “What? Sybok doesn’t rate seconds?”

“My brother is rarely on time.”

Jim laughed. When he passed Spock on his way to his cabin, he took the time to lean in for a moment. Not quite an embrace, just a moment of closeness, skin on skin. Spock inhaled sharply, and Jim hummed under his breath, familiar now with his Bondmate’s reaction when Spock inadvertently picked up thoughts through touching. Spock was big on mental privacy. Well, as much as that was possible within their Bond and especially with a needy human Bondmate like Jim.


Spock regarded him seriously. “Jim. You are allowed to need me. Furthermore, you are correct. Our Bonding has proved that. I do not know myself the way I should. What happened—”

“Not going there now,” Jim ordered, more familiar by now with his lover’s well-hidden fears and self-doubts. “And not because Sybok’s on his way. Your brother can wait five minutes if we need them.” He linked his hands with Spock’s so his emotions and thoughts would transfer more clearly.

“What happened, no matter how awkward, I wouldn’t have it any other way. Most important, I wouldn’t have you any other way than just the way you are. You’re a challenge. You know how I am with challenges.” He projected a vision of himself hacking his way through enticing layers of Spockness, body and mind and all. That bizarre image got him at least a minute twitch of Spock’s lips. They separated. “Hey,” Jim added, a gentle joke and a reassurance, “I’m willing to rebuild my caffeine tolerance from scratch for you. Does that tell you something, or what?”

Spock stared at him, and Jim could feel him struggling – at a loss for words, for adequate phrases to give form and reason to emotions that still threatened to overwhelm him. Jim also sensed Spock’s need to move beyond the cruel conditioning of his childhood. He held on to Spock’s hands and waited, as patiently as he could.

“Indeed,” Spock said at last, each word soft and carefully enunciated. “Although it is nothing I have not perceived long before, nothing I do not already carry within my mind, within my soul.”

... your heart ...

With that, Spock disappeared into the shower. Jim stared at the closed bathroom door, breathless, light-headed, surprised by the unexpected romance of a moment between shower and family
And I yours, he thought. Your heart in my mind. In my soul.

Jim shook his head, amused at himself and his unabashed sentimentality. Then he turned to his wardrobe and eyed the contents with a frown. Like it or not, he still had a family dinner to dress up for. I really need to get some more civvies. Bones had made noises about clearing them to roam the ship tomorrow. While confined to quarters, he’d stayed in PJs all day more often than not. But that was hardly appropriate outside (though a shipwide PJ day was a good idea, come to think of it), and he wouldn’t wear a uniform while on sick leave. Finally, he pulled out a pair of faded jeans and a black flannel shirt.

Stardate 2260.264, 1900 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Quarters

First order of business was, of course, a quick exam of their Bond via mind meld in Spock’s cabin, while T’Saralonde and T’Maire waited for them in Jim’s quarters.

Jim hated that kind of meld. The first times, he’d been unconscious, so it hadn’t been a big deal. Now that he was awake, he compared the experience to a particularly nasty dental exam, just inside his skull. Although intellectually he knew it was all in his mind, he had trouble not lashing out physically. It took an effort not to shove Sybok away.

Jim gasped for breath when it was over, his head throbbing with pain. Spock laid his palm over his neck. Although the touch was Vulcan-hot, his mind was flooded with a sensation of cool, liquid tranquility. He exhaled his relief. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“It is an instinctive reaction,” Sybok said, “to defend your mind and your Bond against any intruder. You are very strong-minded, too.”

“Thanks. Though it’s not as if I’m doing anything on purpose here.”

“When you are ready, Spock will instruct you,” Sybok said and turned to his brother. “Spock, you need to accept that your control is atrocious at the moment. It is of no concern. Cease your attempts. The time will come when control is impossible. Get used to the idea. Balance is more important now. Allow Jim to help you as is his right. Meld even more than you have so far. If you are able to maintain a meld while Jim is asleep, it would be beneficial.”

Jim sensed how Spock cringed internally at his brother’s words. He leaned against Spock, taking his left hand and holding it tightly with both hands. He didn’t say anything, merely held his conviction that they could deal with Spock losing control in the center of his mind, his love for Spock in the depth of his heart. When Spock exhaled in a barely audible way – his Vulcan version of a relieved sigh, Jim said quietly, “I like the idea of staying melded all night.” With a deep breath, he turned his attention back to Sybok. “So, can we go have dinner now?”

They headed over to Jim’s cabin. The table was already set for five, and the replicator was programmed for a vegetarian Terran-Vulcan fusion menu. Jim and Spock had spent hours composing the menu and tweaking the replicator. There had been moments of despair when Jim wanted to tell Spock to forget about it and just order in from that restaurant in Arrakeen that Gurney had recommended to them. But apparently it was a matter of Vulcan pride to feed guests with honest-to-goodness Enterprise food, and that meant replicator pap. (Why? Why would anyone want to serve replicated food if there was a perfectly wonderful planet within beaming distance? Why? Jim had always suspected that Vulcans were not half as logical as they claimed to be, and his
growing intimate knowledge of their species and culture only confirmed that notion.)

T’Maire was out of the armchair and launching herself into Jim’s arms the moment they entered the cabin. As if she hadn’t seen him for years and years instead of approximately ten minutes. “Uncle Jim!”

“Hey, *kan-bu.*” Jim planted a noisy smack on her hot, chubby cheek. T’Maire didn’t protest being called “baby girl” in Vulcan. Instead she squealed and snuggled closer. Tugging at her dark curls, he put her down on the floor again. “Go and say hi to Uncle Spock again, or he’ll be sad.”

She promptly turned to Spock and raised her hand in a very proper *ta’al*. Her little face solemn, she greeted him in a formal Vulcan greeting, “*T’nar pak sorat y’rani, toz’ot.*”

“*T’nar jaral, ko-fu t’sa-kai,*” Spock replied, equally polite as he returned the formal greeting. Then he glanced at Jim. A kind of helpless, panicked look. The science officer could cope with the creepiest alien critters without batting an eyelash. But he was hopelessly out of his depth with kids. Jim suppressed a sigh. Small wonder, with the childhood Spock had endured. Jim at least wasn’t an only child. And well, Tarsus? The kids he’d taken care of, that had been the one bright spot in that particular nightmare. Almost like having a family. He still missed them sometimes, and he wasn’t sure if that wasn’t kind of sick, to miss that kind of hell in any way. However, he was still heaps better with kids than Spock. Okay, maybe not “better”, because Spock wasn’t *bad* with kids. Just kind of ... scared of them, perhaps?

“How about helping Spock with the replicator, pumpkin?” Jim suggested helpfully. If they had something to do, if Spock could go into lecture mode, that might make things easier for him.

Thankfully, T’Maire loved the Enterprise and her shiny miracles, from tricorders to transporters. Giving Spock her best chocolate-brown puppy dog eyes, she asked eagerly, “Can I help with dinner?”

Jim watched, amused, as T’Maire led Spock to the replicator to get the first course delivered. She was so cute, how she switched from almost human exuberance to very proper Vulcan control from one second to the next. And so different from Thorby, who seemed to have only three modes of behavior: intensely in control, intensely out of control, and the way he was like with Jo. Jim managed not to sigh, but his heart was heavy because he knew he had to discuss Thorby with Spock and Sybok soon – though not tonight, because that certainly was no topic for a family dinner.

♦

Stardate ...

... what did that even matter? There was only *before* – before Khan, before Spock’s death – and *after*. And oh, how he wished he’d been spared this long, long after. Admiral James T. Kirk sat on a wooden bench outside his log cabin in Idaho and stared at the landscape spread out before him. It could have been paradise, a perfect mountain idyll. The ideal place to enjoy his retirement. But it wasn’t. Nothing would ever be perfect again, no matter how hard he tried. No matter how hard *Antonia* tried. Somehow that made it even worse. That she was so damn understanding, so patient, so giving when he had nothing left to give.

Once again he had fled from the farm, from the town, from his therapist, and from her. Had sought refuge in his log cabin, far away from his life. Not that anything was better here. The sky was too blue, the air too clear, the mountains too magnificent ... everything just too beautiful to be true. It didn’t even seem real. Nothing in his life felt real. Not the farm, not this cabin, not Butler – the
faithful Great Dane at his feet – not even Antonia. Jim knew that was just a symptom: derealization, or in a more fancy medical jargon “an occipital–temporal dysfunction caused by a traumatic event”. His therapist, Guinan, had explained it to him more than once. Derealization constituted merely one of many symptoms of his broken Bond, of the open wound that festered in his mind. A wound which would never heal. A failure he would never overcome. Spock was dead, and he was alive. As Spock’s Bondmate he should have died, too, should have been able to die, damn it. Had wanted to die, more than anything. But he was too human, too weak. Twice over, because he was also too weak to get over losing Spock, no matter how hard he tried. Of course it didn’t help that he did not want to recover.

Thus Jim remained imprisoned in a reality that felt fake. Only in sleep this existence was endurable, because in his dreams he could die. When he slept and dreamed, derealization was not a symptom of a mental disorder but an alien phenomenon. In his dreams, his life was a prison he could escape from – to make a difference one more time before he joined his Bondmate in death, buried in the rubble of a collapsed bridge on an alien planet. Sometimes he dreamed that he was young again. Though he never found the joy a man his age should take in an imaginary second youth. Of course for him that phantasm had to turn into torment, too, instead of blissful illusion. A giant, tentacled starship obscured a familiar, red planet in this nightly vision. Agony and rage contorted Spock’s face as he choked Jim on the bridge of an Enterprise he did not recognize. Instead of the long, slow friendship of peaceful explorations, they shared the terrible intimacy of war. The saving grace of this particular nightmare was that Jim could die in it, too. An even sweeter death, this untimely end, because in this dream Spock lived. If they could not live together, if they could not die together, Jim much preferred Spock to live.

Tonight’s dreamscape was different, though. No bridge collapsed under his feet, no glass door separated him from his Bondmate. Instead, Jim floated in space, drifting away from an energy ribbon that glowed in a starless darkness. In front of him, a seed of light blossomed into a vision of the worldship that he and Spock had discovered during their first mission. A silver strand spun out from its center and whispered words heard long ago: “I will be gone, you will be gone ... memories and dreams shall comfort you not, when the flow of your sweetness is gone and forgot ... time is too short, the universe is too large ...” Onward he traveled, sliding along that gossamer thread, until he beheld a cocoon of brilliant blue light at its center. Inside, he saw himself and Spock, naked, much younger than he remembered, joined in flesh, Bonded in spirit. Gently, their younger selves moved together, flowed into each other with exquisite sweetness. Their completion left a bitter taste in his mouth as his heart turned into acrid dregs of ashes on his tongue. He turned away, ready to reawaken in his prison. But the thread which led him through the strange maze of his dreams tonight beckoned him onward. For a long time, Jim tried to follow it, ached to reach whatever awaited him at its end. But space was indeed too big and he was, as always, too weak. When he realized he could not go on, he stubbornly clung to the trail of silver, staring ahead, his heart filled with nameless longing.

When Jim woke to another perfect mountain morning, a remnant of his dream stayed with him. Spock’s warm eyes ... Spock’s beloved face ... serene and gentle and sad in an old age his Bondmate would never see ... The crisp, clean air choked Jim. Oh, how he hated this cruel paradise, this sick half-life he inhabited ever since Spock had died.

◆

deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than the soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart
Chapter End Notes

• The poem quoted back and forth between Jim and Spock is the one they used to let friends and family know about their Bonding in the previous chapter. In reality it’s a poem by Leonard Nimoy from “A Lifetime of Love”.

• “I will be gone, you will be gone” and “Time is too short, the universe is too large “ are quotes from “Enterprise, The First Adventure” by Vonda McIntyre. “Memories and dreams shall comfort you not, when the flow of your sweetness is gone and forgot” is from the lyrics of “Maiden Wine” by Leonard Nimoy, from TOS “Plato’s Stepchildren”.

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Scars Like Medals

Chapter Summary

Star Trekkin’ across the universe. Or: All hail the Enterprise band. ♦ A love letter from Khan. ♦ Bones and Jo eat pizza and watch a movie. And talk about Thorby. ♦ Then Sybok and Jim and Spock and Bones talk about Thorby. There’s stuff about the Bond. Because Vulcan voodoo is complex like that. ♦ Then Jim and Spock talk. Memories are shared, scars are acknowledged. ♦ At night, Jo and Thorby are sad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scars Like Medals

Stardate 2260.269, 1600 hours, Deck 7, Theater

Humming a Vulcan lullaby, Nyota entered her quarters to freshen up for band practice. After a very productive day (thus far, at least) she had a spring in her step and a smile on her face. She had organized a workshop for the languages of Arrakis, covering Chakobsa – the language spoken by all tribes – as well as the three major Fremen dialects. All communications officers not on bridge duty and several teachers had participated; an excellent attendance record. Fremen native speakers and one of the Vulcan priests had volunteered their services for the workshop, and that had really made a difference.

Stepping into the shower – for once she was going to indulge in real water instead of sonics – she contemplated the Fremen language acquisition project. So far, it was hands down the most satisfying project of her career. And pretty much a textbook example for applied xenolinguistics.

When the Enterprise had arrived in orbit around Arrakis, the universal translator had been in a sore state concerning the Fremen languages – to put it mildly. And even though most Fremen had some Standard, thanks to the involvement of the smugglers on the planet, the ability to speak and understand a people’s native tongue still formed the best foundation for good diplomatic relations. As Chief Communications Officer of the Enterprise, Nyota had put together a suitable study program for Fremen languages. Now, close to the end of their stay, Nyota and several other officers were almost fluent in basic Chakobsa, and the universal translator was up to date.

She released a generous dollop of sandalwood shower gel from the dispenser in the wall and started lathering up.

Of course she wouldn’t rate the Fremen languages as particularly difficult – they shared astounding similarities with Terran Arabic, so the sounds and semantics came easily to Humans. Compared to many other alien tongues, at least. In terms of language acquisition the mostly oral tradition of Fremen culture had formed the biggest hurdle. Learning languages without books was a hassle, plain and simple.

Clean, her skin hot and damp and subtly scented, Nyota emerged from the shower and grabbed her towel, still mulling over her project.
The lack of books could have been easily remedied. She would have put together a book on Fremen languages within the first two weeks in orbit, if she’d only been permitted to do so! But no, the rules and regs concerning contact with contaminated cultures didn’t allow that. Worse, thanks to Starfleet bureaucracy, every single step of the learning process had amounted to a diplomatic incident. By now Nyota was determined to stand shoulder to shoulder with the captain when he told the admiralty to go to hell when they argued Prime Directive issues with him next time. (She’d cheer him on, in fact.)

Amused at herself, she pulled some civvies from her closet. A long, flowing skirt and tight, layered tops to go with it. Feminine and comfortable, perfect for band practice. That was perhaps the best part of having civilians on board: it was completely normal to change and even to dress up when off duty. A simple pony tail, and just a hint of make-up, she decided. Eyes, cheeks, lips – a subtle, but effective frame. Five minutes. There, done.

When she quickly checked her PADD to make sure she had all the scores loaded for band practice, John’s transmissions signal – a 20th century classic, Queen’s Bohemian Rhapsody – started playing. She glanced at the clock. Time enough to read his message? Probably not. His letters were long. But she couldn’t resist. She missed him. His passionate, filthy mind, his acerbic wit, his outrageous sense of humor, even his terrible talent for picking up the worst kind of gossip. (She still couldn’t fathom how her boyfriend, light-years away on Earth, sometimes knew more about what was happening on board of the Enterprise than she did.)

Perhaps that was what prompted her to scan his message right away. Somewhere in the middle, a paragraph caught her attention.

“... You once asked me about the security of subspace transmissions. These days I must say I question both the safety of Starfleet encryption methods and the sanity of certain members of the admiralty. That said, please pass on my felicitations to the star-met couple, along with a reminder to use either my own or Spock’s encryptions or to send their messages straight to the tabloids instead ...”

What?!

Her brain stuttered, ground to a stop, rebooted laboriously, even as her heart started pounding. She should have realized. At some point two or three years ago, she had spent days researching Vulcan Bonding and Mating customs. And now ... Kirk and Spock. Vulcan mind healers. And a really long leave. Like a honeymoon ... or a period of seclusion after Bonding ...

Nyota switched off the PADD and stared off into space (or at least at the door to her cabin). She recalled the day Kirk had died. How Scotty had held her as she cried. How she had realized that very moment just why her relationship with Spock had been falling apart. How she had still waited until November – until it was certain that Kirk would make a complete recovery – to break things off with Spock.

Star-met? What an odd phrase, yet strangely fitting for Spock and Kirk. She wondered where John had heard it. Suddenly she couldn’t suppress a smile, remembering how Kirk had ruined her breakfast way back in May after the first kiss he’d shared with Spock. Star-struck, definitely. Maybe it wasn’t such a miracle that they’d Bonded – that Kirk had developed the patience and decency to do this the right way.

More important than news of the captain’s love life, however, was the warning cleverly hidden in John’s gossip. The lack of security where subspace transmissions were concerned was nothing new. Which was exactly why Nyota had reluctantly agreed to pass on any messages John might
have for Kirk. Even if John’s or Spock’s encryptions were more secure than standard Starfleet safety protocols, nothing was one hundred percent safe – and John’s communications were closely monitored. If he were to send encoded transmissions to a starship captain that would be noticed. Sending long letters to his girlfriend was a different matter. So what did John want her to pass on? She scanned his message once more and ticked off the points he’d made: Subspace transmissions are not safe; you cannot trust Starfleet Command; confidential, private information about Kirk and Spock has been leaked. And, by the way, tell them congrats on getting hitched.

The alarm of her PADD startled her out of her musings. Damn! Now she had to run to be in time for band practice. And Barry Milekey absolutely loathed tardiness.

Nyota rushed to the theater and almost stumbled over her own feet in the doorway. Talk of the devil! Kirk was there. He was in the last row, sitting with Hikaru, Doctor McCoy, and Lieutenant Carolyn Paul, his attention focused on a familiar figure up on the stage.

The only reason she didn’t end up flat on her face was that she ran right into Lieutenant Elena Amell.

“Oh, hi, Nyota, sorry,” Len started. “Uh... everything okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something.”

“Oh, never mind,” she managed. “Just haven’t seen him in a while, and he’s never shown up for band practice before. Doctor McCoy is probably blackmailing him.” (That might even be true, come to think of.)

Len followed her gaze and did a very visible double take. “They’re here? Both of them? I thought they—”


Len flushed and looked away. “Nothing.”

Nyota didn’t move. Len grimaced. “Not here, okay? I promised Scotty I wouldn't say anything to anyone. And I haven’t. But since it's you ... Can we talk later? Go to the bar or something?”

“Okay,” Nyota said. In a way, that was just an act of loyalty, right? Finding out who else knew whatever. As nonchalantly as possible, she waved at everyone as she entered the room. “Hey, Jim, Hikaru. And Jo’s fan club, I see.” She wondered where Thorby was today – normally, the little Vulcan and Jo were joined at the hip. McCoy’s scowl made her grin. Tossing back her ponytail, she made her way to the stage.

Spock had already set up his lute. He didn’t seem to notice her at all. Taking her cue from his non-reaction, she stayed as far away from him as the seating arrangement on the stage allowed. A new Bond could affect a Vulcan’s emotional control. Nyota didn’t feel like testing the effect. She turned away and stared at the front of the stage. At the conductor’s note stand, Barry Milekey stood poring over the scores with Cupcake and Thea Oli. Suddenly Nyota realized that they hadn’t much time left before the first official concert. To be nervous over something as trivial as that was silly, of course. But she hadn’t been up on a stage for a serious concert in ages, and now she was supposed to sing a solo – a Vulcan song, no less.

A few minutes later, Milekey clapped his hands. “Okay, let’s get on with the show. First a quick warm-up with the Enterprise song. Then we’ll go over the pieces for the concert. I trust all soloists
are prepared today?” He spared a filthy glare for an especially recalcitrant saxophone.

Nyota suppressed a groan. She hated the Enterprise song with a passion. (The song had nothing to do with the Enterprise; it was just an endless Starfleet drinking song complete with absurd dance routines, interchangeable lyrics, and at least a hundred verses, most of them not suitable for work. Or anything else, really.) Unfortunately, everyone else loved the damn song. The command crew spent an inordinate amount of time every shore leave coming up with new verses to torture her with. So far, Spock had always seemed immune to the phenomenon. But glancing at him right now she wasn’t so sure anymore. The corners of his eyes crinkled. Just a little. But she knew that expression well. He always got that look when something utterly illogical amused him more than Vulcan logic strictly permitted.

“Star Trekkin’ across the universe,
On the Starship Enterprise under Captain Kirk.
Star Trekkin’ across the universe,
Only going forward ‘cause we can’t find reverse ...”

On the plus side, the awful excuse for a song left every band member energized and focused. Nyota had to hand it to Milekey. He knew what he was doing, the way he organized band practice. Barry clapped his hands. “All right, on with the show. Today I want us to focus on technique, especially on rhythm and tempo. We’ll start with the opening piece. Instruments only, please. And one – two – three ...

Off they were. Buoyed by the good mood that silly song had generated, they threw themselves into the music. The saxophones must have practiced together. They were not only in perfect harmony but on time. After the first pass, Barry looked reluctantly impressed. “And now with the chorus,” he ordered. “Make some noise, people!” Many of the singers had a background in classical European choir music – their interpretation was consistently too solemn and too soft.

Next on Barry’s list was the most challenging arrangement of their concert: a medley from “Stories of Stars” or “Var t’Yelar” – the famous cycle of Vulcan-Terran fusion songs widely hailed as the “Carmina Burana” of the 22nd century. Last time their efforts had still sounded rather pathetic (except for Spock’s parts, of course, but there was only so much a Vulcan harp player could do to save the day without resorting to nerve pinches).

When they’d finally managed a more or less acceptable run-through, Barry called for a break. Nyota was drenched in sweat and her stomach muscles were hurting. Clutching her water bottle, she dropped into a chair and listened to Barry bitching out the flutes. No authentic kolchak; they had to make do with Terran woodwind flutes, and maybe that was the problem. At least the bells and the gongs had been on their toes today. There was more melody to the “Var t’Yelar” than to classical Vulcan music, but the rhythm was all Vulcan perfectionism. If the drums, gongs, and bells weren’t precisely on time, it was pretty much game over.

The rest of the session went rather well. The flutes manned up, and the saxophones didn’t space out. When they were done, even Barry had to admit that there was audible progress. Things were coming together now, in shared vibes of rhythm and harmony. A few weeks ago Nyota wouldn’t have believed that possible. The participants had seemed just too diverse in age, musical experience, and talent. There were kids, like Jo and Gus (though Gus Stein was something of a wunderkind), random civilians and crew members who simply enjoyed making music, as well as nearly professional musicians such as Giotto, Milekey, or herself. A motley group in every way. But today, for the first time, she could hear it. Music. They were making music together. Not just producing noise meshed more or less together.

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As a reward for their hard work, Barry asked Spock to finish up their practice session with his solo. The last piece of the concert would be an instrumental piece played by Spock on the ka'athyra, the Vulcan lyre – and of course Spock was already stage-perfect. Nyota smiled. Listening to Spock was the perfect incentive. The members of the band found seats in the front rows of the theater. Only Spock remained on the stage, as calm and expressionless as ever. When everyone had settled, he began to play.

Nyota knew the piece well. It was an instrumental version of a song called “Shadows in the Garden”. The tune portrayed a Vulcan rock garden. Each verse was dedicated to a different shade of red, a specific shape of stone, and a distinct shadow. Each of those symbols represented a unique Bond, the most basic and most complex connections that made up Vulcan society as a whole. The melody was haunting, the harmony harsh for human ears. From the corner of her eye she watched the reactions of the audience. Predictably, McCoy looked as if he was suffering from a bad case of migraine. She couldn’t even blame him – Vulcan music was an acquired taste, much like bagpipes or opera. Kirk, however, looked enraptured. And Spock ... Nyota had never seen him like that before. He was lost in more than his music.

Joanna McCoy, who’d ended up in the chair next to Nyota, leaned a little closer. “It’s supposed to be a secret because they are still on sick leave,” the girl whispered in a mixture of horror and awe, “but they got married. They eloped. And my dad says if I ever even think of doing that he’ll chain me up in the brig until I’m a hundred years old. He did keep them locked up in sickbay for punishment, too.”

Somehow Nyota managed to stay quiet and to shush the girl, torn between amusement and concern. She had no idea that Spock and Kirk had ended up in sickbay, and she wondered what had happened – what had gone wrong. Then the song was over, and everyone jumped to their feet, applauding, clapping, even whistling. Nyota winced in sympathy at Spock’s subtly tortured expression. Such exuberant displays of emotion still tended to overwhelm him. But then Kirk bounded up to him and sat down at the edge of the stage, dangling his legs. Even from the distance, Nyota noticed the intense, intimate connection between the two men, though they did not touch. Whatever had been wrong with Spock and Kirk, they seemed to be all right now. More than all right, even. She sighed, all of a sudden missing John with a fierce ache in her heart.

Next to her, a familiar, grumpy voice exhaled a long suffering sigh. “No, Jo. You can’t go play zero-grav ball tonight. You’ve promised me some family time while Thorby is visiting with Sybok and his family. Put away your clarinet and get your stuff, then we’ll go have dinner. Yes, pizza. And yes, a movie, too.” Nyota watched as Jo ran off. McCoy offered Nyota a wry smile before focusing his attention on the stage, where Spock demonstrated his instrument to Kirk.

“Jo mentioned you had them ‘locked up’ in sickbay,” Nyota said softly. “I hope it was nothing serious, Doctor. Will there be a public announcement of their Bonding soon?”

“Of course you would realize what’s up. Should have known.” McCoy groaned and rolled his eyes. “And yeah, I should think so. They just decided to wait until things have settled a bit. And I’d rather err on the side of caution at this stage, so I didn’t object.” He gave her a shrewd look. “Not eager to offer your congratulations?”

“As you said, I realize what’s up,” she told him. Well, she did now. And she really should have, even without John’s message. “There was a time when I had reasons to research Vulcan mating behavior. A month’s leave might be a honeymoon or traditional seclusion after Bonding. But if you had them staying in sickbay, I guess it’s safe to say that ‘things’ didn’t go without a hitch. So pardon me if I’m not jumping at the chance to discover just what kind of reaction exposure to an ex-partner might trigger in a newly Bonded Vulcan-Human couple.” From the door, Elena Amell
and Carolyn Paul waved at her. “And now excuse me, please. Looks like I’ve got a date for a girls’ night out.”

McCoy followed her gaze and frowned. “Oh, no,” he muttered. “Those two. Uhura, do yourself a favor. Stay away from them. They are trouble. Or at least stay away from the pool.”

“The pool?” Nyota blinked at the doctor and shook her head. “I must be seriously out of the loop. Well, gotta go.” She waved to Kirk and Spock up on the stage; she’d comm Kirk the next day to pass on John’s message. Before making her way to the exit, she turned to McCoy and allowed herself a small smirk. “And, Doctor McCoy? Tell them to get a move on with that public announcement. Rumors are spreading. From Earth, no less.”

♦

Stardate 2260.269, 1800 hours, Deck 7, Theater, and Deck 4, CMO’s Quarters

Jo carefully cleaned her bass clarinet and stowed the parts in the fake black leather case. The instrument was just a standard student’s model, but better than nothing. She loved being in the Enterprise band. For the first time in her life she belonged to a band with adults and real musicians, and that was awesome. Intimidating, too, because she was one of the weakest participants – she’d barely made the cut at auditions. But she kept practicing, and Mr. Milekey hadn’t kicked her out of the band so far.

She closed her clarinet case. Up on the stage her dad clapped Uncle Jim on the shoulder. Then he climbed down and came over to her. He smiled. “Ready for an evening with your old dad?”

“Yessir,” she replied, flicking off a mock salute. She’d been on the Enterprise for around five months now. Sometimes she felt as if she’d spent her whole life on board already. After Uncle Jim had found her in the reading fort, routine had taken over her life within a week. Her dad had moved to larger quarters in the VIP section on deck four with her the very next day. Just three days later Ms. Paul had introduced her at school. That had been all kinds of embarrassing. At least Gus had been majorly impressed, and they’d stayed friends.

“So what do you want to do with just the two of us around tonight?” her dad asked.

Thorby was on Arrakis, visiting Sybok and his family for a week. Jo hated that. She was envious, for one thing. She hadn’t been “dirtside” yet at all, and that was so annoying. Of course her dad had been on the surface several times already ... and had only complained about everything, about the heat and the dust and the food and the people. She sighed. At least there’d be a school trip to Arrakeen before the Enterprise left orbit. Carolyn (outside of school Jo could call her Carolyn instead of Ms. Paul) had promised. Jo also hated that Thorby wouldn’t be home tonight because she didn’t sleep well without him. Of course she knew that Thorby needed to spend time with his own people. And Sybok was nice and T'Maire was a hoot. Jo knew she was being jealous, and that jealousy was not a nice trait. But she just couldn’t shut up that stupid voice in her mind that insisted that Thorby didn’t belong to anyone else, Vulcan or not, that she was Thorby’s people, and that she should be enough.

Jo shrugged. “Dunno.”

She considered her options. Her dad made such a point of spending time with her, with her and Thorby, but also just with her. But it was always kind of forced. As if he was working off a schedule, as if he worried about getting graded, as if he was scared of what she might do next. And that was her fault. She grabbed her clarinet case. It had been worse on Earth, though. Her dad blamed himself that she and her mother had been in San Francisco when the Vengeance had
crashed. Even though that was stupid. If anyone was to blame, it was Admiral Marcus. Or her mother. Because her mother wouldn’t allow her dad to stay at their house in Georgia “because you are not a part of our life here, Leonard”, and her dad didn’t have a proper apartment anymore. That’s why they’d stayed in San Francisco so Jo could visit with her dad after the conference was over that her mother had attended. Jo tried to remember how it had been when her dad had still lived at home, when they’d still been a family. But that was so long ago that she had no clear memories left. Mostly she remembered how much she’d missed him when he was gone.

“Pizza?” she reminded him hopefully. “And a holo?”

“Sure. We had a deal, after all,” her dad said. “Let’s go.”

Her dad didn’t even groan when she picked “Khan III” as the movie. It was a bit dated (like, from 2240), but she loved it. The actor was way prettier than the real Khan, too. And for some reason the replicated pizza was loads better than the last time she’d tried it. Weird. Maybe someone had updated the code?

“We should get those ancient Superman movies to watch with Thorby when he gets home,” she said after the movie, stacking together plates and cutlery to take back to the recycling station, “I bet he’d like the story. I mean, Superman lost his planet, too, and then he found a new family.”

“Jo, you know that ...” her dad started. “You know that we’re not really Thorby’s family, do you?”

“What?” she squeaked and put the plates back on the coffee table. Panic gripped her. Surely he couldn’t mean ... “But we are! He’s been living with us since he came on board. Of course we are.”

“No, Jo thought, no, no, no. Thorby needs me. Not strange Vulcans he doesn’t even really know. “No,” she said, “you can’t do that. You can’t just send my best friend away. I’ve been trying so hard to be good, and you said you wouldn’t punish me for sneaking on board—”

“I’m not punishing you,” her dad said sharply. “What happens with Thorby has nothing to do with you. Jo, we need to do what’s best for Thorby. And no matter how much it hurts you, staying with you – with us – is not what’s best for Thorby.”

She was crying now, and she hated that. Her head hurt, and her throat ached, and her teeth, too, because she was grinding them so hard. Because if she didn’t, she would sob like a baby, and she wanted to scream at her dad and be mad at him. But she couldn’t even do that because she could only think of how she wasn’t enough, was never enough, not for her mother, and not for her dad. She’d always reminded her mother too much of her father. And since San Francisco, she reminded her father too much of her mother and her mother’s death. Because no matter what he said, he hadn’t wanted her here, with him. And now she wasn’t even enough for Thorby.

“I know this is hard, sweetie,” her dad said and awkwardly patted her back, “but we have to be very brave now and do what’s best for Thorby, don’t you think? Because anything else would be selfish and cruel. And I know you’re not like that. You’re strong and brave and generous.”
She shook her head, her vision blurred with tears. She didn’t want to be brave. She wanted to keep Thorby. How was she supposed to even sleep at night without him?

“And when the mission is over,” her dad said, “we can go to New Vulcan and visit Thorby. It will be an adventure. How’s that?”

♦

Stardate 2260.275, 1900 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Quarters

“So, how did things go?” Jim asked.

Sybok had just beamed back on board with Thorby and dropped him off with Carolyn Paul and Jo. Now Spock’s brother sat in the living area of Jim’s quarters, across from Spock and next to Bones. Janice Rand passed around tea and coffee, before she discretely left the cabin again. Jim picked up his peppermint tea and focused on the pale green-golden liquid.

He should be happy that Bones, Sybok, and M’Benga figured that he and Spock were stable enough to talk about serious business again without freaking out at the slightest provocation. They’d better be, too. In just five days they were supposed to resume regular duty. Thankfully, Jim figured they were indeed ready to return to normal life.

Melding for most of the night made all the difference. Neither Jim nor Spock had ever slept that well (or that long). Bones and M’Benga were still head over heels for their blood test results. Thankfully, they focused their attention on Spock now. The differences in Spock’s baseline before and after the Bonding made them theorize how his Vulcan control led him to neglect his human needs, such as more sleep and more physical contact than an average Vulcan required. Spock had never considered that because he’d interpreted any symptoms as a personal failure at basic mental discipline. But apparently “touch-starved” was an actual thing; a fact that made Jim’s heart ache and Spock uncomfortable and Bones look faintly murderous.

Jim took a deep breath and looked up from his minty herbal infusion. Since Spock had rewired his brain after their Spice overdose, Jim couldn’t drink more than a single cup of coffee a day – in the morning, too, or he couldn’t sleep at night. One glass of anything that contained alcohol was the current limit of his alcohol tolerance. His brain reacted to stimulants as if he were a child. Bones thought that was funny as hell. Jim did not. Spock was disgustingly smug about the whole thing. Anyway. They were mostly ready to get back to business. Serious business, too. And he should be happy about that. But damnit! The serious business at hand right now involved the life of a kid. It was easier to send crew members on life-threatening away missions, and he fucking hated those kinds of decisions.

Sybok watched him with his eerie Spice-blue eyes, and Jim wasn’t sure if the Vulcan hadn’t picked up on exactly how his train of thoughts had just played out, waiting patiently with his answer until Jim managed to concentrate on the discussion.

“Thorby and T’Maire got along well,” Sybok reported. Jim could hear the “but” in his voice, and sadly was not disappointed, when Spock’s brother went on, “mostly thanks to T’Maire’s unusual emotional flexibility and high degree of control for her age. Thorby remains extremely unbalanced. To recover his mental equilibrium and regain a robust control over his emotions he needs the Bonds a Vulcan boy his age is supposed to have: familial Bonds to parents and a betrothal Bond to a mentally compatible child of a suitable age.”

Jim nodded slowly. Of course Thorby needed Bonds. *Shit. Should have thought of that.* Suddenly, he felt ashamed. So much so that his throat constricted. Had he really thought of Thorby only in
terms of whatever information had been stored in the boy’s mind? Hell, even based on “Vulcan Culture 101”, he ought to have known better. What kind of self-absorbed asshole had he turned into, that he could neglect the needs of a child in his care? Was that the inevitable consequence of his own childhood? His head felt frozen from the inside. He winced at the icy agony in his mind and gasped for breath. That fucking hurt. “What the hell?”

Next to him Spock seemed to talk, but Jim couldn’t hear a word. When Spock tried to touch him, his reaching hand faltered.

“Spock?” Jim rasped, suddenly scared. He couldn’t breathe. “Spock?!”

“Jim?” Bones knelt at his side and whipped out his tricorder. “What’s wrong? What’s happening to him, Sybok?”

Sybok pushed past Bones and bent over Jim, a hand on his meld points before Jim had a chance to say another word. “Jim, you have closed the connection of the Bond. To be able to regulate the level of connection between your mind and the mind of your Bondmate is a necessary skill. That you are able to do so now means that your Bond has settled fully. This is a normal process. I had planned for you to begin mental exercises to practice that ability tomorrow, in fact. Now. Take Spock’s hands and interlace your fingers. Close your eyes and concentrate on your linked hands, on the connection between you.”

Jim obeyed. He was blind and deaf and choking. At the same time he could see and hear and breathe just fine. He could still sense Spock, but as if ... as if he was on the other side of a glass door. And that was the very last image he needed in his mind. He was starting to shake, to gasp for breath in helpless panic. But before he could move, before he could start hyperventilating, Sybok was in his thoughts, a burning force. The mind healer simply shoved Jim right through the glass toward Spock, ruthlessly ripping open his mind in the process.

»Spockspockspockspock. Oh, god, Spock!«

»... Jim.« A flood of – shock – love – support – shame – burst into his mind. »In no way was your treatment of the child negligent. You have done everything in your power to ensure that Thorby’s needs as a child of any species but especially as Vuhlkansu are met. Have you not asked me to be present the moment he woke on this ship? Have you not insisted that Sybok treat him, the moment this was possible? If anyone has failed Thorby then it was I. I could not help him in his pain, could provide no aid for him in reclaiming his logic—«

No, Spock, Jim thought. Bullshit. A deep breath. Damn it all to hell, he’d believed they were getting the hang of their Bond now! But Vulcan mind voodoo wasn’t something you could learn to manage in five minutes or even a month of sick leave. So. Another deep breath. Jim opened his eyes, putting a firm lid on fifteen years of old issues.

“No, Spock,” he repeated aloud. “That’s bullshit. If I didn’t fail Thorby, you sure as hell didn’t, either. Fact is, neither of us is a child psychiatrist. And you’re no mind healer. But we’ve got a Vulcan mind healer right here, and a qualified psychologist. So we’ll go over the information we have, listen to the experts, and discuss a solution. I’m sorry. I have no idea why I shut down like that.”

“Well, I do,” Bones said gruffly and sat back down. “You already display overprotective tendencies where your crew is concerned. You’re even more sensitive when children are involved. If anyone has made a mistake so far, it was me. Because I know damn well why this conversation is one hell of a trigger for you.”
Jim shifted in his seat. He didn’t want to remember Tarsus IV right now. Or ever. Didn’t want to recall how he begged Kodos, “Please, sir, let them live. I’ll do anything you want, anything you want, anything ...” Of how he had done just that. Jim was aware that he still tended to expect that of himself. That he’d do anything. Anything. But he didn’t have such insane expectations of anyone else, and certainly not of a child. Or did he? He shivered, nausea twisting his stomach.

“I’ve been distracted, and I’m sorry for that.” Bones wearily pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s just ... I’ve tried to talk to Joanna about Thorby again last night, and I’m afraid she didn’t take it any better than a few days ago. She’s trying, Jim. She’s trying real hard to be all adult and understanding about it. But ...” He shrugged awkwardly. “She’s just a little girl, and she’s convinced Thorby is the best friend she’ll ever have.”

*Oh, damn. Poor Jo.* Jim glanced at Spock, who was still too pale and seemed a little dazed.

»*God, I’m so sorry I shut you out like that, Spock,*« he thought at his Bondmate. »*I didn’t mean to – didn’t even know I could—«*

»*It is no matter, Jim. As Sybok said, it is a skill we need to master, and a natural process to occur once the Bond has settled. I regret that I was unable to react adequately. My lack of control—«*

Jim shook his head. »*Stop that right there. I freaked. You freaked. Shit happens. We’ll work it out.*« He did his best to forget the unfortunate image that had nearly turned his mind inside out.

“You do realize, Jim, that you have been able to effectively engage in telepathic communication with me after Sybok’s intervention removed the shield you had spontaneously created?” Spock asked, his voice quiet.

»*I— what?« Jim blinked and gaped, utterly dumbfounded. “What?”*

Sybok nodded. “The moment I forced down your shield, your psionic center activated, without any artificial manipulation of your mesencephalon. I suspect that any stimulus may suffice as a trigger – if it is intense enough.”

“*Huh.*” Jim considered that. “Could be useful. Though if I need a really intense trigger to get there that would mean I’m in deep shit whenever I manage to *uh*... auto-stimulate my telepathy.”

“Maybe hypnosis might help?” Bones suggested. “Perhaps a post-hypnotic command? I don’t like the idea that Jim is not in complete control of his mind.” He scowled at Spock. Bones had never been a fan of Vulcan mind voodoo. The one thing Bones was still pissed off about with the Bonding was Spock’s unconventional experiment with Jim’s brain.

“Yeah, well,” Jim said, “I don’t like it much, either. But it’s not as if any Human is ever in complete control over what goes on in their brain.”

“But ‘any Human’ don’t have your esper-ratings,” Bones retorted, as if his objections could change anything.

Spock ignored their squabbling and nodded thoughtfully. “That idea has merit, Doctor. If a means could be devised to allow Jim to fully control his latent telepathic abilities that would be most beneficial ...”

“You don’t say,” Bones drawled.

Annoyed, Jim shook his head. “Yeah, we do say. But hold that thought. We need to talk about Thorby now. Without dragging other issues into the fray. We can discuss my beautiful mind later.”
Jim picked up his tea again, took a deep swallow and sighed. “Okay. First off, Sybok, thank you for all the work you’ve done with and for Thorby. We are indebted to you. Now, what can we do? How can we make sure that Thorby’s safety is guaranteed and that he can have the Bonds he needs for his mental health? How does that work in Vulcan society for an orphan?”

Spock’s expression betrayed a hint of uncertainty. “To be truthful, my knowledge of such proceedings is theoretical. I believe customarily an Elder would volunteer as Thorby’s guardian to form a familial Bond with him. It would then be the Elder’s responsibility to secure a compatible age mate for a betrothal Bond.”

Sybok nodded. “That is the way of our people. Or has been, on Vulcan-that-was. However, I have discussed the matter with T’Saralonde.” He paused, looking at Bones with a solemn expression, before he added, “And with T’Maire.” Facing Jim again, he continued, “Together, we have decided that we would like to offer Thorby a place in our family unit. If he is willing; if you are amenable with that solution; and if his and T’Maire’s minds are compatible.”

Jim stared at Spock’s brother, struck speechless by Sybok’s offer.

Thorby was a good kid. Brave and tough. But in Vulcan terms he was very much special needs. Jim couldn’t see any conservative Vulcan coping with Thorby’s resounding rejection of Surak’s teachings to start with. As a mind healer who embraced emotions, Sybok would be the best guardian imaginable for Thorby.

At the same time Jim was concerned about the repercussions of such an arrangement for Thorby and for Sybok’s family. Sybok was Ktorr Skann, an outcast. No matter how much New Vulcan needed Spice and Sybok’s expertise as a mind healer, Sybok’s position in Vulcan society might be difficult. Thorby would be an additional burden for Sybok and his family. Just as, vice versa, an association with Sybok and his family was unlikely to do Thorby any favors. Jim wasn’t so naïve as to believe that betrothal Bonds served only biological needs. There was a clear political and social component. However, Jim was not surprised that Sybok didn’t seem to give a damn about that. Jim could only hope that Sarek would be supportive. He’d definitely message old Spock and ask him for help ...

But what about T’Maire? Jim adored the sweet, six-year-old girl who’d adopted him so cheerfully as her human uncle. He just couldn’t help it: He still struggled with the concept of Bonding children. To join the minds of two kids so they would be drawn together as adults in order to mate ... that kind of thing went against so many core beliefs of his culture – against the human rights of personal and sexual freedom, against the ideal of self-actualization. Of course Jim knew that human standards did not apply. Neither Thorby nor T’Maire were human. And Jim himself was aware of what a Bond meant now, that blissful closeness of a compatible mind. So yeah, the idea was a lot less creepy now than it would have been just a few weeks ago. Plus, since the destruction of Vulcan, koon-ut-kal-if-fee no longer entailed a fight to the death. T’Maire would be able to choose another partner when the time came.

Finally, Jim thought of Jo, and the unlikely friendship Bones’s daughter had formed with the Vulcan orphan. His heart just broke for her. He feared that Thorby’s betrothal with T’Maire would mean the end of his friendship with Jo. Not just because both of them were so young and because so much time would pass until Jo could visit Thorby, either on New Vulcan or on Arrakis, but because Thorby’s mental and emotional capacity for relationships was much more limited than that of a human child his age. The space in his mind now occupied by his friendship with Jo would inevitably be filled by his connection with T’Maire upon their Bonding.

At the back of his mind, Jim felt a strange ache ... melancholy ... loneliness ... Spock’s sorrow and
sympathy for a little girl’s loss.

Jim met Bones’s eyes. His best friend frowned darkly, his lips pressed together into a bitter line. Bones hated hurting Jo, even if he was concerned about the dynamics of the kids’ friendship. But it was more than that. Bones was taking what had happened to Thorby really personal. Jim wondered why the boy got to Bones that way. There was a story there, and Jim was pretty sure he wouldn’t like it. Damn it all to hell! How he wished he could say something, do something, to make this easier for everyone involved. But he had to think of what was best for Thorby.

“We need to do what’s best for Thorby,” Bones said firmly, as if he had suddenly become telepathic, too. “Jo will be fine.”

Eventually, Jim thought sadly and knew that Spock agreed with that less than optimistic assessment of the situation. He turned to Spock’s brother. “Sybok, I don’t know what to say, except ... Thank you. That you – and T’Sara and T’Maire – are willing to do that for Thorby ... that means so much.” Jim took a deep breath. “Well. I guess that means we need to discuss the practical aspects of that solution. First of all, we need to talk to Thorby. Then, security. The information that Colonel Baslim put in Thorby’s mind must be removed without a trace before he can leave the Enterprise for good.” He scratched his head. “Also, can you please explain to me how that test of their mental compatibility works?”

♦

Stardate 2260.275, 2300 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Quarters

Spock watched Jim slip on his excuse of a pajama and slide into bed first. He had finally given up on trying to argue about sleeping next to the wall.

Good.

In turn, Spock had stopped attempting to lower the temperature in their quarters. As a result, it was too warm for Jim, and still not quite warm enough for Spock. Jim called that a “good compromise”; Spock failed to see the logic in a solution that ended with both of them less than comfortable. However, by now he also knew when it was futile to reason with Jim. In consequence, he silently put on his thermal sleepwear, long black pants with a long-sleeved top.

Then Spock arranged himself in front of Jim, until he could feel Jim’s body heat from his head to his toes. For the first time that day, he wasn’t cold. Jim was waiting for Spock’s touch, for the intimacy of the meld. But he was still thinking, processing the day. It showed on his face, so Spock didn’t move, just lay there, meeting his lover’s eyes, and waited, too. Waited for Jim to put into words what was weighing so heavy on his mind. Yes, they had grown accustomed to the Bond. But at the same time, they were both still learning the needs and limits of their minds and their bodies. And, Spock was warily willing to admit, their hearts. He was not, in fact, shocked that this process also entailed somewhat superfluous verbalizations of salient details. That was a well-documented human need, after all. Additionally, communication constituted a beneficial, logical means to arrive at a better understanding of events, situations, and beings. Of the universe and all the rest, he contemplated facetiously. What left Spock somewhat bemused was the irrational degree of satisfaction he derived from that tedious procedure.

The tension of the day and Jim’s inner turmoil vibrated within his mind. But Spock decided to hold off for a – a while longer. Jim needed to talk, even if he did not want to. Spock considered the imprecise nature of the term and found himself disturbingly unperturbed by the inherent vagueness of the word. A minute and twenty seconds later his patience was rewarded.

“So I finally get the reasons behind fraternization rules,” Jim muttered. “Well, I kind of did before. Just not really. That stuff today completely blindsided me. And it’s just not on that our issues
interrupt ship’s business.” He sighed, then added with his usual painful honesty. “I guess I have to admit – and this is where you get to say ‘I told you so’ and raise an eyebrow at my naivety – it’s not as easy to remain professional as I thought it would be.”

Spock sensed that Jim wanted to add something but couldn’t bring himself to say the words. Gently he laid his hand against Jim’s face, not melding yet, but closing in, so he was able to pick up Jim’s surface thoughts.

“I need to tell you about Tarsus, I think,” Jim said abruptly. “I should have before.”

Echoes of old trauma filtered through the Bond, as carefully censured as Jim’s limited experience with regulating emotional transference allowed. Hollowness beyond hunger. Loss beyond grief. Broken boundaries of body, mind, and soul.

“That shit went down more than half my lifetime ago now, and it still fucks me up.” Jim shook his head. “He had a thing for smart boys, Kodos. That’s why I’m still here. They had estimates. All kinds of fancy projections. How many of us might make it under which circumstances. The best prediction was to take half the colonists out of the picture. He could have used a randomizer, I guess. But as I said, Kodos had a thing for smart people. So he used IQ tests to determine who got to live and who had to die. My mother didn’t quite make the cut. She didn’t even care, she was so relieved that my results were through the roof. If worst came to worst, at least I’d get to starve. Because that’s so much better than being shot.” He laughed mirthlessly.

Spock had seen the scene of Winona Kirk’s death during the Bonding meld. What a strange kinship of grief he shared with Jim, losing their mothers to the actions of madmen. But he said nothing and only focused on the Bond and its resilient connection, a vibrant source of hope in the dark places of his own mind.

“Anyway. Kodos. He handpicked kids who had been orphaned in the first wave of executions and had them taken to his residence. There were twenty of us in the beginning. He wanted to groom us for his ... personal service.” Jim swallowed so hard he had to clear his throat with a painful cough. “I was the oldest. I had one of the highest IQ scores in the whole damn colony. I tried to take care of them, Spock. I tried so hard. But I failed.”

Through the Bond Spock heard with painful clarity a high, boyish voice, begging, pleading. Simultaneously, an auditory memory of his own was superimposed over that distant echo, and he heard the voice of his captain on the bridge of the Enterprise, uttering the very same words in the same tone of desperate, hopeless futility, as he begged Admiral Marcus: “Please, sir, let them live. I’ll do anything you want.”

“Jim, no matter how high your IQ score was, you were only thirteen. What you faced—” I don’t believe in no-win scenarios. “You did what you could.” Spock chose not to think of what that had entailed. “And—”

“And that explains a lot?” Jim closed his eyes. “Yeah, I guess it does. At least why I spent years fooling around with weird alien drugs until my eyes changed color.”

Spock understood the logic of that particular emotional process, especially taking into account Jim’s domestic situation after Tarsus. His older brother had not accompanied Jim and his mother to the colony because Sam had already been enrolled at Starfleet preparatory. He had never returned to Iowa. Jim’s stepfather had succumbed to depression and alcoholism. Attempts by teachers and local authorities to provide support had been limited and easily thwarted by Jim himself.

Spock was familiar with those facts. He had read Jim’s files. But more than that, in their Bond and
many melds he had joined Jim’s life, from the morning a half-starved boy had knelt naked in front of Kodos to the night a genius-level repeat offender with Spice-blue eyes had faced a Starfleet captain in a seedy bar near the shipyards of Riverside. Now their shared memories triggered an acute emotional response that Spock could not suppress completely. More than sympathy. **Pain.**

“What I meant to say,” Spock explained softly, “is that I understand why Thorby’s fate affects you the way it does.”

Jim drew a shuddering breath. “Same here, with you.”

Spock stilled, slowing down even his heartbeat in a minute’s drawn out introspection. He was entirely cognizant of how developmental problems—such as lack of mental control and inappropriate aggressive behaviour—and social isolation had impacted his identity formation. However ...

“The similarities of our socialization are limited,” Spock protested at last. “My development occurred in a stable environment.” He attempted to rephrase statement in a more colloquial manner. “I could always go home.”

“Yeah, sure. When those project supervisors over at the VSA and your fellow students were fucking done with you. Then you could drag home what was left of you. To that awesome stable environment in which you never told anyone what was going on. Right,” Jim snorted. “Spock, I hate to inform you, but the Bond really works both ways. And I’m pretty sure that my driving the car off that cliff when I was twelve was a hell of a lot healthier than what you did with your kahs-wan.”

Spock did not know how to respond to that statement. Accordingly, he remained silent. Two minutes and twelve seconds later, Jim pressed even closer, until their bodies were touching intimately. He captured Spock’s hand and pressed it against the side of his face. “Meld us,” he requested, his need sharp ache deep within Spock’s mind, “please. Need you. Need ... us. ‘kay?”

Wordlessly, Spock slid his fingers to the by now familiar *qui’lari* of his Bondmate. He no longer needed the traditional mnemonic chants. Their connection formed almost instinctively now. After their Bond matured during pon farr, not even taroon-ifla might be necessary anymore for their minds to join as one.

**Warmth.** More than anything else Spock associated warmth with their sharing of minds. As if only in his union with Jim, he could ever be less than cold. In this warmth, the disjointed elements that made up Spock aligned in harmony. Within Jim, Spock was *real*—his own person instead of an imperfect experiment, the fractured product of skillful genetic hybridization. In their joined consciousness, the scars of their childhood had no power over them. Here, painful secrets shared between them did not form fissures of agony. Instead, light seeped through those cracks and only illuminated the Bond they shared.
or clan or family, he should now be taken to New Vulcan to be made a ward of the High Council, to have an Elder assigned as his *klashausu*. Thorby had told Jo as much. That it was logical. That it was proper.

Jo had thrown her arms around him and cried until the front of his pajama top was damp, until he was queasy with the intensity of their shared emotions, only a few of which he was able to recognize and control. Now they cuddled in the darkness of his bunk in silence.

Yet in spite of her human emotions, Jo hadn’t disputed the logic of what was bound to happen. And because that wish was so shockingly irrational for a Vulcan, Thorby had not mentioned how much he craved the ability to cry with her.

♦

“*Children show scars like medals. Lovers use them as secrets to reveal. A scar is what happens when the word is made flesh.*”
– Leonard Cohen, *The Favorite Game*

Chapter End Notes

• The Enterprise drinking song is “Star Trekkin'”, a musical parody of TOS written by John O'Connor, Grahame Lister, and Rory Kehoe, released 1987 by The Firm.

• “*Var t’Yelar*” as a seminal piece of Vulcan-Terran music is my invention.

• “Shadows in the Garden” is a semi-canon Vulcan poem from the TNG comic of the same title. The concept of a Vulcan rock garden is mine.

• All bits of Vulcan language in this chapter are from the VLD (http://www.starbase-10.de/vld/) with a little help from the Vulcan Language Institute Reclamation Project. I’m not really trying to get the grammar straight, though.

• Last but not least: The opinions of the characters and their understanding of themselves and each other do not necessarily match the author’s. In other words, what characters think, feel, and say is not always correct.

♥ **Comments are love!** ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about *my* story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Words Can Wound, And Wounds Can Heal

Chapter Summary

Jo cuddles tribble Zero a lot. ♦ Sybok administers a Vulcan nerve-pinch. ♦ Everyone needs therapy. ♦ The long awaited (wedding) party. Also, an unexpected library. And a Vulcan rock garden. ♦ And *drumroll* space pirates!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Words Can Wound, And Wounds Can Heal

Stardate 2260.280, 1600 hours, Deck 4, CMO’s Quarters

Jo lay curled up in her bed, using one of Thorby’s sweaters as a blankie, tribble Zero purring in her lap. Her dad had asked her to take care of the tribble for him. She knew that was just an excuse. He was trying to cheer her up, and that the animal was supposed to comfort her. And she’d been trying hard, to act normal, to be cheerful, not to cry. But right now she didn’t manage. The right sleeve of Thorby’s sweater was wet from her sniffling, and Zero was positively vibrating. But not even that helped.

Thorby was on Arrakis again. Her dad had explained to her that Sybok wanted to find out if Thorby would get along well with T’Maire. If they could be friends in their minds, too. Vulcans were telepaths, so that was important. They needed different friendships than Humans did. If Thorby could be friends with T’Maire, he’d stay with Sybok and his family and move to New Vulcan. Maybe he wouldn’t even come back to say goodbye.

The worst thing was that Thorby wasn’t talking to her anymore. She knew why. He was just too sad. When he hurt too much, he couldn’t talk. Before, they’d always shared their dreams when it got that bad, and in their dreams she’d been able to comfort him. You didn’t need words in dreams. But now he’d shut her off, and that hurt. That hurt so much. She had a headache all the time. And she was cold. Also all the time. And the worst thing was, she liked T’Maire and Sybok and T’Sara. They’d been up on the Enterprise a couple of times, visiting with Uncle Jim and Spock, and with Thorby, too.

Hurt so much. So much. It was like when her dad went away, like when her mother died, as if the hurt would never go away again, and there was nothing she could do to make it go away or get better, and she had no idea how she’d make it through even one day. Forlornly, the tribble trilled away in her lap.

The door hissed open, and Carolyn came in. Jo tried to sit up without dislodging Zero. Tried to smile, too. “Hey,” she said and hated how small her voice sounded.

“Hey, yourself,” Carolyn said and smiled tensely. She was probably not happy with Jo being such a drama queen over Thorby.

“Look, I understand how Thorby needs a Vulcan family,” Jo burst out. “And I’m trying to be happy
for him, I really do. It’s just ...” She trailed off and bit down on her lip, trying hard not to start crying again.

“Well, about that ...” Carolyn hesitated. “May I sit down?”

Jo nodded and scooted backwards a little. Carolyn sat down carefully, her expression serious. As if something bad had happened, and she didn’t know how to tell Jo. Suddenly, Jo was scared.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. Her voice was too shrill, but she couldn’t help it. “Is something wrong with dad?”

“Oh god, honey, no. Your dad’s fine. Everything’s fine.” Carolyn took a deep breath.

“Everything’s just fine, okay? Everything.”

“Oh, honey, no. Your dad’s fine. Everything’s fine.” Carolyn took a deep breath.

“All right,” Jo said, somewhat dubious.

Carolyn noticed and smiled wryly. “Honest, I promise. However, you know why Thorby went to visit with Sybok today?”

Jo nodded. “Dad explained it to me. Sybok is going to make sure Thorby can get along with T’Maire. Thorby needs to have a special Vulcan friend because of his telepathy.”

“Yes,” Carolyn agreed. “That’s exactly what Sybok did today. Only, Sybok discovered that Thorby already has a special friend.”

“And that was a bit of a surprise for all of us. Because, Jo ...” Carolyn reached for her hand and squeezed it. “Thorby’s special friend, that’s you.”

“Oh, honey, no. Your dad’s fine. Everything’s fine.” Carolyn took a deep breath.

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Jo said, somewhat dubious.

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“And that was a bit of a surprise for all of us. Because, Jo ...” Carolyn reached for her hand and squeezed it. “Thorby’s special friend, that’s you.”

“Me? Seriously?” Jo’s voice squeaked. “But I’m human! I thought that’s all about Thorby’s telepathy, and I’m not telepathic—I’m not. And Dad said that Thorby has to go live with Sybok because he needs a Vulcan family. Do I have to go and live with them now, too?”

Jo nodded. She felt so mixed up inside, and her head was hurting so much. Carolyn pulled her into her lap. Her teacher was warm and soft and solid. And she was real calm. Her mother hadn’t been big on cuddling, always fidgeting, already thinking of the next thing on her to-do list, and also not very comfortable to cuddle with because she’d been so thin, kind of bony. Jo pressed the tribble against her stomach. It just kept purring, a rumbling vibration that radiated contentment.

“Better?” Carolyn asked. Jo just nodded, her head pressed against Carolyn’s shoulder. “Okay,” Carolyn said. “Normally, the special friendships Vulcans need for their telepathy are with other Vulcans. And normally, as kids, they need help to form these friendships. Which is why we asked Sybok to help Thorby. But you know how there are exceptions for every rule?”

“Ok,” Jo said. “Uncle Jim is Bonded with Mr. Spock. That’s a pretty special friendship, too, isn’t it?”

Carolyn made a noise that was a mixture of a cough and a laugh. “Yes,” she said. “Pretty special. So sometimes a Vulcan can have a special friendship with someone who is not Vulcan. And
sometimes that friendship simply happens. Just like that. Because you get along that well. That’s what happened with you and Thorby.”

“Because we’re meant to be friends,” Jo said. “Like soul mates. Soul mates are the most special friends ever.” She knew she shouldn’t whine or beg, but she couldn’t help herself. “And you can’t separate soul mates, can you?”

“No,” Carolyn said softly, “you can’t. So we’ve been talking, Sybok and your dad, and Uncle Jim and Mr. Spock, about what to do. Because what your dad explained to you – Thorby needs a Vulcan family, too, for his telepathy. But you need to be with your dad, and your dad wants you to be with him. He knows it was wrong to try and send you away when you didn’t want that at all.”

“Thorby doesn’t want to go away, either,” Jo muttered. “He’d never say that, but I know he doesn’t want to.”

Carolyn nodded. “We know that now, sweetie. Sybok persuaded Thorby to tell him. So we’ve been talking about that. And we have decided that the best thing is if Thorby stays on the Enterprise. Now, your dad and Sybok and your Uncle Jim and Mr. Spock would like to talk to you about how that’s going to be. Do you feel up to that?”

Jo straightened and slid away from Carolyn. “Yeah,” she said. “I’m good. I can talk to them. Dad’s not mad at me, is he? I didn’t do anything. I mean, I couldn’t have, I’m not telepathic, right? And is Thorby back yet?” She tried sounding not too hopeful, not too desperate to have Thorby back.

Carolyn sucked in her lower lip for a moment. Jo wasn’t sure if she was trying not to grin or not to look worried. “No,” Carolyn said, “your dad’s not mad at you. He’s a bit worried. Because a special friendship can be difficult sometimes. But he knows that you didn’t do anything. Or Thorby. Sometimes, such things simply happen. And he knows it’s not a bad thing. Don’t worry. Thorby will be back tonight. Right now he’s still on Arrakis, spending the afternoon with T’Sara and T’Maire. Because even though you are his special friend, he likes Sybok’s family, too.”

“So do I,” Jo said. “They are nice. That made it even harder. It would have been easier if I could have hated them.”

“Well,” Carolyn said and rose to her feet, “now you don’t have to hate anyone. Come on, your dad is waiting for us.”

Carolyn held out her hand to Jo, and although Jo thought that was a bit silly, she didn’t mind too much. It’s the kind of thing a mom would do, she thought. She tried to remember if her mother had ever held her hand like that, but she came up with nothing.

Stardate 2260.280, 1600 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Quarters

Jim was willing to forgive Carolyn Paul for anything and everything right now. Next time she wanted to get into a brawl or felt like frolicking drunk in a pool, he’d be standing on the sidelines, applauding. Caught between his best friend freaking out at the top of his lungs (up until now Jim had believed that no amount of cursing could make him uncomfortable anymore; not so; learn something new every day) and his Bondmate freaking out in silent panic, Jim was beyond grateful that there was one sane person left to help him deal with the situation.

Because, no matter how much he tried to calm the fuck down, his mind just kept reeling. No wonder, what with Bones muttering curses under his breath, and Spock looking ready to keel over.
Only Sybok appeared relatively unruffled, perhaps even amused at their hysterics. At least he hadn’t seemed to mind much that Bones had tried to punch him in the face. And knocking Bones out for a few with a Vulcan nerve pinch had at least given them a chance to regroup. Which, oh boy. So necessary. Speaking of necessary ...

“Okay.” Jim pushed to his feet. “I need five minutes with Spock. Sybok, sorry to do that to you, dude, but you’re in charge of Bones. If Carolyn comes back before we do, get us before anyone says one word. And I mean one word.”

With that, he dragged Spock up and to the door. Spock didn’t object. Not a good sign. When they were safely on the other side of the bathroom, Jim pushed Spock to their bed. He toed off his shoes. Then he crawled behind Spock, knelt down, and hugged his lover close. He relaxed as much as he was able, breathing deep into his stomach, and projected all the confidence he could scrounge up through their connection. After a few minutes, the terrible tension in his head lessened. He rested his head on Spock’s left shoulder.

“Bones will get over it, Spock. He knows it’s not your fault, or Sybok’s, or mine, or hell, anybody’s,” he murmured. “And you won’t be a terrible father. Look, we talked about that already. That family might one day be a thing we could consider. Now it’s happened a bit sooner than expected. Hey, it could be worse. Remember that story about male pregnancy induced by alien sex-pollen that circulated at the Academy? Now that would be awkward.” He considered the idea, then added, “Though I guess the VSA would go totally gaga for that.”

Spock stifled a noise. He sounded like a strangled tribble, and Jim grinned at the pained amusement that transferred through the Bond. “There is no evidence to back up your confidence, Jim,” he said at last. “However, I am unable to perceive a logical alternative to the plan you have devised.”

“We’ve got another ten days for Sybok to work with you and Thorby and M’Benga,” Jim told him. “Carolyn will calm Bones down. And you know how happy the kids will be.” Jim’s stomach twisted at the mere thought of how he would feel if he were separated from Spock, with no way to tell when or even if he’d ever see him again. He didn’t want to imagine how awful the last few days must have been for Thorby and Jo. They hadn’t known of their Bond, how special their friendship was, why their impending separation hurt so much. And they were good kids who trusted the adults in charge of their lives, in spite of the shit that had happened to them that no adult had been able to protect them from. And now those supposedly responsible adults had almost torn them apart, regardless of their wishes. Damn.

Spock raised his hand, gently touching Jim’s meld points. “Jim, if no one is at fault for what happened, then that includes you, too. And statistically, at least, you are correct in that assessment of the situation. The likelihood of a spontaneous interspecies Bond forming between children can be calculated at 0.003214%.”

“If you’re quoting decimal points at me, you’re better.” Jim smiled. “Control okay? Serenity mostly restored? Then we can go back to Bones and Sybok. I bet Carolyn will be here any minute now.”

“I do not object to your usage of colloquialisms under appropriate circumstances,” Spock responded primly.

“Wait, what?” Jim bounced off the bed, beaming. “I’m allowed to ask you how you are feeling now?” He fist bumped the air. “Hell, yeah!”
Stardate 2260.280, 1630, Captain’s Quarters

Leonard knew he had to apologize. No matter how much reason he might have had to throw a fit, he’d been out of line. In a way that just might cost him the friendship that mattered most to him in his life so far.

The bathroom door opened again, and Jim and Spock emerged, both of them still pale and tense, but more composed and less upset. Jim sat back down in his armchair, while Spock remained standing next to him.

Leonard scrubbed his palms over his face. “I’m sorry,” he muttered roughly, “I’m so damn sorry. For what I said. It’s not true, none of it, and I didn’t believe it for a second. I’m ...” He shook his head. “I can be such a bastard.”

“Your outburst was an emotional reaction to a perceived threat for your daughter’s well-being, Doctor McCoy,” Spock said calmly. “It was logical, if misdirected.”

Jim didn’t say a word. Leonard saw the pain in his eyes, though. He also noticed how Jim’s fingers twitched as if he wanted to take Spock’s hand or sling his arm around his partner’s back. But Jim didn’t move, just stared at Leonard, face impassive, hazel eyes hard. Leonard felt even worse.

“It’s Bones,” he managed at last. “Or Leonard.” He attempted a laugh, but he sounded more like a walrus choking. “After all, we’re going to be a family. And won’t that be awesome.”

Spock got that deer-in-the-headlights look again that had made Jim drag him out of the room in the first place. Sybok wore the distinctly pained expression of a man who was wondering how in hell he’d gotten caught up in the wrong holo-drama. Jim just groaned.

A moment later, Jim shook his head. He put his arm around Spock and drew him next to him on the armchair and as close as the Vulcan’s stiff posture allowed. “Bones, you’ve saved my life. You’ve been the only family I’ve had for years now. I couldn’t care more for Jojo if she really was my niece. That’s why we’re still sitting here and talking right now, okay? However, and I can’t fucking believe I’m the one saying this: Talk to a therapist. No one is to blame for what happened, and I’ll be damned if I let you take out any of this on Thorby or on Spock. And that? That is not your friend Jim Kirk speaking right now, but your damn CO. Got that?”

Leonard nodded miserably.

“Great.” Jim exhaled in a ragged sigh. “I think we should also ask Guinan if she’s willing to put up with the three of us in one room.” He rubbed his neck with his free hand. “In fact ... maybe we should ask her to drop by when we talk to Thorby later.”

Leonard nodded again. He hated that Jim didn’t trust him to keep his temper around Thorby. He hated even more that he agreed with Jim.

Then the door opened, and Carolyn stood there. Jo was holding her hand, a frown on her pale face. In her free arm she carried the damn tribble.

Jim smiled. “Hey, Jojo. Come in. We’ve saved you a seat on the sofa next to your dad.”

Jo attempted a smile and sidled past Jim and Spock. But she sat down next to him, she held herself as stiffly as Spock, clearly worried. The tribble purred in her lap. Jim evidently recognized the beast and paled. Carolyn joined them on the sofa, settling on Jo’s other side. Casually, she put an arm around Jo, and offered Leonard a reassuring smile that he didn’t deserve.
“Carolyn said that Thorby doesn’t have to go away after all?” There was so much hope and pain and fear in Jo’s high voice that Leonard thought his heart might break at the sound. How had he failed to notice just how much his daughter was hurt over losing her friend? Suddenly Leonard thought that Bond or no Bond it would have been plain wrong to separate the kids. They had both suffered so much loss in their lives already. Leonard risked a glance at Jim. He had removed his arm from around Spock. Somehow they managed to sit at least two inches apart, which should have been impossible on that armchair. If possible, Leonard felt even worse. He knew better than anyone what Jim and Spock had survived to end up together.

Leonard did his level best to muster a reassuring smile. “No, Jo. Thorby’s going to stay here, I promise. Honey, we had no idea. It just, well, it doesn’t happen very often that ...”

“That a Human turns out to be a Vulcan’s soul mate?” Jo asked and wrinkled her nose. “It happened with Uncle Jim and Mr. Spock, though. And with Mr. Spock’s mom and dad. So it can’t be that special.”

“Yet in all the history of Vulcan-that-was and New Vulcan now there have been only seven examples of Bonds between Humans and Vulcans up until now,” Spock said. “And those Bonds were created between adults after careful consideration.”

Jim managed to turn his laugh into a very creditable cough. When he met Leonard’s eyes, he was still grinning, though. “Jojo, you’re simply a very special girl,” he said. “Also, I think we don’t need such big words here. Think of it as a special kind of friendship. You’ve been telling us for weeks how Thorby’s your bestest friend ever. That’s perfect. And nothing has changed about that. We just have a fancy Vulcan word for your friendship now. Okay?”

Jo nodded warily. “So what will happen now?”

Leonard hated the suspicion that was so clearly audible in her voice. But he couldn’t blame her. After all, he had tried to leave her behind and to take away her best friend – soul mate – dammit, Betrothed – fuck— With the best intentions, sure, but what difference did that make for her?

“Well,” Leonard said, frantically trying to gather his thoughts, “remember how we talked about Thorby’s telepathy? Telepathy is ...” He cast about wildly for an adequate comparison. “… a bit like playing the clarinet. It takes practice. And since you’re Thorby’s ... special friend, you need to learn about it, too. So while we’re here, Mr. Sybok will teach the two of you. When we’re back in space, you’ll keep up lessons with Mr. Spock and with Dr. Elbrun.”

“Okay,” Jo said with a surprised, happy sigh. She had obviously expected something different, something dire. “I bet Thorby will be awesome at telepathy.”

Jim smiled at Spock, a singularly sweet and vulnerable expression that made Leonard’s heart ache. Then he ducked his head and flushed. “Well, there’s one more thing,” Jim said. “Because of his telepathy, Thorby also needs a Vulcan family. So Spock and I will adopt Thorby. We uh... hope Thorby won’t mind too much. And that won’t change anything for the two of you. That just means that Thorby can come to Spock if he has a problem. You, too, Jojo. Telepathy’s real nice, but us Humans aren’t made for it. So if anything makes you uncomfortable, anything at all, just talk to us, okay? Your dad, or Carolyn, or Spock, or me, or Guinan, or Dr. Elbrun. Got that? No matter how odd or silly. You have a question, something bothers you, just come to one of us, and we’ll find a solution.”

“What he said,” Leonard confirmed weakly.
Stardate 2260.290, 2200 hours, Keep Arrakeen, Arrakis

Somehow, Jim had ended up in a library on the first floor of Keep Arrakeen, while the festivities in the great hall downstairs were still in full swing. He suppressed a sigh. Tonight’s event should have been the party to end all parties. After all, it was basically his and Spock’s wedding feast and the official farewell celebrations for the Enterprise rolled into one hot mess. Crew members and smugglers and Fremen were getting the party on together, and yeah, it was more of a blowout than a diplomatic function, and Jim was proud of that. They were setting a standard here, and he was determined to aim high because he had to think of crew morale and of impressing foreign dignitaries and things like that.

Of course the shindig also featured certain traditional/formal elements, such as champagne (cold and tart, and pretty much the best thing about the whole damn evening), speeches (only three of them thoroughly embarrassing – thank you, Scotty, Gary, but what the hell, Guinan!?) and gifts (some admittedly more ridiculous than others – no, not the ones for the Halleck or the Fremen leader or Sybok, those were perfectly appropriate because Uhura had picked them out) and a banquet with ten courses and an obscene variety of cutlery to keep track of. But after dinner, there was music and dancing and, of course, more booze.

But Bones had beamed back on board right after the banquet, and his speech had been short and somewhat stilted and too serious. Jim couldn’t drink more than a glass of champagne or two because he was on Alpha shift the next morning and his alcohol tolerance was still pretty much non-existent. Also, he simply had too much on his mind that was no damn fun at all to really enjoy himself. Then Spock and his brother had disappeared into the courtyard for serious and probably Thorby-related conversation as soon as the banquet was over and politeness allowed. The familial Bonds to Thorby that Sybok had formed for them had settled well, but Spock was still less than confident in his abilities as a proper Vulcan parent. So after Jim had concluded his obligatory tour of the crowd with lots of fake smiling and vigorous shaking of hands, he had managed to drift away from the crowds. He had meandered through the public rooms of the keep, marveling at the architecture, and regretting somewhat (though not too much, because it had been worth it, worth everything) that his post-Bonding sick leave had kept him from getting to know Arrakis as well as he’d wanted to. And now he was here, in the keep’s library. The noise of music and voices was muted to a dim buzzing in the background.

Fremen didn’t really do books, mostly passing on their lore in songs and stories (which wasn’t the worst way to do it, Jim thought, not after spending several evenings listening to Fremen songs and stories in Arrakeen taverns and around the hearth fires of Sietch Tabr and Sietch Jacurutu). Yet here was this library, probably installed by the smugglers, a large room with tall bookshelves lining the walls, full of leather-bound tomes and even triangular compartments filled with scrolls. The room smelled of leather and parchment and paper. Or at least Jim supposed that’s what it was, this deep, musky, dusty scent.

For several minutes Jim wandered around, fingers trailing across the backs of books, taking in the look and feel of the room. He thought of the two old-fashioned books in his mother’s house in Iowa. The bible was a family heirloom, one of those weird, outdated customs. He remembered tracing his older brother’s name written on the flyleaf, right under his dad’s name. His mother never got around to adding his name, and he had no idea what had become of the bible. Perhaps it had been buried with Frank. The other book was an old children’s book he’d found in the attic one day when he’d been hiding from Frank. It was a story about a little boy with a weird scarf, a prince of some sort. The cover and half the pages had been missing, and he’d never been able to make heads or tails of the story. He recalled there had been something about a desert in it. And about a friendly fox.
Jim couldn’t remember ever having been in an honest-to-goodness library before. It wasn’t that there were no old style books left on Earth. They were just not common anymore, mostly expensive antiques, nothing an orphaned hick in Iowa got his hands on. And yeah, he’d probably visited a library at some point, because there’d been school trips to museums when he was little, before Tarsus, and museums always had libraries. But museums were different, with that hallowed, faintly uncomfortable do-not-cough atmosphere. This room, these books? It felt alive. Not like Spock had described his hiding place in his father’s house, that monument of untold stories. Here, from haphazard stacks on the desk in front of the windows to the solemn rows on the shelves, books exuded a quiet, benevolent authority. As if they wanted to tell him that the answers he was looking for actually existed and that he had a chance in hell to discover them, too. Suddenly, he wished Spock was with him now, and not in the banquet hall, talking to Sybok.

Opposite the door, in the middle of a long stone table, an astrolabe was mounted, an intricate construction of gold and silver and ivory, beautifully engraved. The various parts were turning leisurely, an accurate rendition of the planet’s rotation and the universe’s momentum. Jim sat down in front of the astrolabe, his back to the door, and watched the moving spheres. He recognized some of the depicted stars. Khosla, the Ferengi outpost that was their next destination was visible. It was hard to believe they were already five months into the mission. It was even harder to believe they were only five months in.

Jim heard footsteps approaching but didn’t turn around. He was fairly certain it was Halleck.

“You shouldn’t sit with your back to a door, Captain,” the old smuggler said. “It’s not healthy.”

“Worried about drafts on a desert planet, are you?”

“Normally, I’d say it’s safe for you to sleep naked here,” Halleck told him. “But as it is …”

Three days ago the smugglers had caught a man trying to plant bombs on their Spice crawlers, an off-worlder who had ended his own life before he could be questioned. Three days ago, Commander Paul had informed Jim that a crew member – a Maintenance technician – had not returned from shore leave.

Halleck had a point there. Because as it was, Jim had the confirmation now that there were more people on the Enterprise with a secret agenda besides the three legit Section 31 agents he knew of. Who else and how many, Jim had no idea. Of course it was more than likely that Gav had an informant on board. There was too much money in the slave trade not to keep an eye on the flagship’s doings. Next was “Humans First”, the fundamentalist branch of “Humanitarians for Earth”. With Marcus as a martyr, the isolationist movement had turned the corner toward extremism and terrorism. Commander Paul had made sure that Jim was aware of just who those radicals saw as the greatest threat to their cause. Namely, himself, Khan, and any and all Vulcans. And of course it was always possible that there was a third party involved he’d never even heard of so far. Whatever. The damage was done, and would have been much worse if the smugglers hadn’t been that vigilant.

“Well, we’re leaving tomorrow, so there should be no further trouble right now.” Jim rose to his feet and turned to face Halleck. “But …”

“Captain, I’ve been in this business longer than you’re alive.” The smuggler’s disfigured face contorted into a wry grin. “I know exactly what you’re up against.” He touched the scar a slaver’s whip had left on his jaw many years ago.

Jim inhaled heavily. Sighed. Made a decision. “Sybok tells me you’ve met Thorby.”
Halleck nodded. “Serious lad. Never sits with his back to a door.”

“We picked him up at New Sydney,” Jim said, watching Halleck closely.

For a heartbeat, the older man closed his eyes. “Ah.”

“Sybok’s taking T’Sara and T’Maire along to New Vulcan,” Jim said carefully, as if he were trying to walk across drumsands without making a noise. “It’s a long journey. Over two hundred and fifty light-years.”

The smuggler stared at him, his gaze inscrutable. “You’ll owe me.”

Jim nodded. “I can live with that.”

“See that you do, son,” Halleck said, eyes dark and surprisingly kind. “And remember not to sit with your back to the door.”

Stardate 2260.290, 2200 hours, Keep Arrakeen, Arrakis

After the banquet, Sybok and Spock had taken the opportunity to escape from the noisy revelry of the party. Now they were sitting in a secluded courtyard of Keep Arrakeen, the residence of Gurney Halleck and seat of the Arrakis Trade Union. Many smugglers were collectors or plain packrats; Gurney Halleck was a connoisseur of cultures. There was a library in the keep, a music room, and in the courtyard, nestled into a hedge-maze of incense bushes, a Vulcan rock garden. Sybok had designed it a few years ago at Gurney’s request.

Although it was late, it was hot, desert hot. The stones of the garden still added to the warmth, radiating the heat of the day. Only in the small hours, the cold of the desert night would seep into the city, bringing some measure of relief before an early, fiery sunrise. Appropriately, Sybok and Spock sat at the center of sa-kailar, the triangle of brothers. In the light of Muad’Dib, the second moon of Arrakis, the dust-reddened shadows of the sa-kailar crossed between them.

Both of them had settled into the loshiraq position, posture perfect and, perhaps for the first time, in harmony with each other. Sybok considered Spock. His younger half-brother as he had known him fifteen years ago, and as he had come to know him during the last forty-six days. He was aware that his brother was engaged in a similar exercise.

Sybok pulled a small scroll from his robe and placed it on the moon-frosted sand between them. In careful calligraphy, he’d painted his promised gift on the parchment: “I was an idiot.” The glyphs looked beautiful in the moonlight. But the warmth in his brother’s eyes was even more stunning.

“What wrought this transformation in you?” Spock asked. “Vulcans do not change the way you have; not in a hundred years, certainly not in fifteen. It is against Vulcan nature, even for the most changeable of Surak’s line.”

Sybok contemplated pointing out Spock’s limited knowledge of Vulcan nature. However, even though Spock’s understanding of his father’s and his mother’s species was limited, Spock had come to understand himself so much better in the last forty-six days that Sybok was unwilling to argue over minor factual fallacies. He had also put too much effort into creating the calligraphy to render it invalid at his brother’s first question. Therefore, he chose to answer the question and to disregard the deflective commentary.
“Love,” Sybok said and shrugged, “and death.” The usual; the constants of the universe; sweet Aleu, who had taught him the meaning of joy and agony in equal measure. In his mind, he found the solid weight of grief and pain in its usual place, at the very core of his being.

“Kaiidth,” Spock replied, more grounded than Sybok had ever seen him before, not only familiar with these parameters of existence, but at peace with them.

The shadows between the stone formations formed an invisible bond between the brothers, dust and red, night and blue. One day Sybok would tell his brother about a young Human with clear grey eyes and a wry smile, about an artist called Aleu Black, and about Sybok’s first pon farr, about the fever and the blood, about love and death and pain.

Not tonight, though. Sybok had done what he could to prepare his brother, to spare him what he had endured. Not much was left to say now, and he was grateful for that.

“When in doubt,” he said, facing his brother, “do not shield. Shielding at the wrong moment may rob you of the one chance you have to survive together. If you cannot trust yourself, trust Jim.”

He could see how Spock inhaled the desert night, a shuddering breath of too much emotion and unspoken words. “Nemaiyo, Sybok.”

Sybok smiled. Once upon a time, Aleu had attempted to explain the finer nuances of human emotions to him, such as “bittersweet” or “tears of joy”. Sybok had come to regret his inability to cry long ago, but the meaning of “bittersweet” had come to him only in recent years: In spite of what it had cost him, Sybok could not regret that he was here tonight, the man he’d become.

“It seems excessively self-indulgent to ask this of you,” Spock said abruptly, “but Jim requested that I ask for this favor.”

Sybok was tempted to roll his eyes. “Brother, please.”

“When you reach New Vulcan, would you ... take it upon yourself to visit Ambassador Selek?”

“What would you have me do?” Sybok asked. He would have gone anyway, would have done anything. But he was curious as to what Spock would say, now, here.

A long silence followed, drenched in moonlight and the shadows of the rock garden. When Sybok was ready to give up, Spock inhaled, a fearful, tense breath that would never turn into a sigh.

“Ease his pain, if he allows it,” Spock said.

♦

Stardate 2260.320, 1600 hours, near Lytasia

At Khosla they almost caught up with the V’tosh ka’tur. The Dionysus, a freighter of the elusive Vulcan space gypsies, had left the Ferengi outpost just hours before their arrival, en route to Lytasia, a system near Lambda Corone Borealis, a mere five light-years from Khosla. They stayed in orbit long enough for a polite (and, in terms of bureaucratic bribery, expensive) thank-you for that cordially provided information. Then they warped thataway.

Jim was stuck in his office, going over some reports with Lieutenant Romaine, who was in charge of all the admin stuff for Sciences. Romaine was good at her job, but her reports were endless, and her relentlessness set his nerves on edge. To make matters worse, Spock was busy in the lab with some delicate experiments that absolutely could not be interrupted, so he didn’t even have sexy
times to look forward to. Only the thought of hanging out with Scotty later on helped Jim stay patient and polite. (Beer and a recording of the last Parrises Squares match, oh god, yes, please.) At least it wasn’t just him; Janice Rand loathed Romaine. Even Spock wasn’t keen on her. So Jim listened with half an ear to Romaine’s latest litany on efficient PADD use, while he kept an eye on the screen for updates from the bridge. If they managed to catch up with the *V’tosh ka’tur* this time, he’d be able to get out of here and away from her ...

The Enterprise dropped out of warp at a good distance from Lytasia. The planet had seven moons, all of them equipped with bases, and they’d been warned there was a fair amount of traffic in the system. They emerged not too far from two of the moons. The Dionysus was right in front of them, close enough to be visible with the bare eye. Apart from the *V’tosh ka’tur* freighter, space seemed empty. *Odd.*

_Hailing Dionysus,* read the text that scrolled across the screen. _No reaction. Shields up, but no movement. Indistinct life-signs on board. Interferences with comms and scanners._

_OKay,* Jim thought, _that’s not just odd. Something’s off there._ He made a decision. “Lieutenant Romaine,” he said and got up. “I’m sorry to cut this short, but I need to go up to the bridge—”

Suddenly, the Enterprise swerved like a yacht in a thunderstorm on the high seas. Jim knew exactly what that was like because he’d actually lived to puke his guts out on Pike’s boat the summer of his second year at the Academy on that memorable occasion. On the screen at his desk, half a dozen objects lit up, zooming towards them from behind the moons. Another shockwave made him tumble. Romaine’s precious PADD skittered to the floor. Before he managed to reach the comm unit, the ship gave the distinct lurch of emergency shielding. The moment he slammed his right palm on the comm panel, the ship went on red alert.

“Bridge,” he ordered. “What the fuck?”

“Six vessels of unknown origin and without identification, pirates or slavers most likely, are attacking a civilian freighter. ID in Vulcan and Standard is Dionysus, looks like an old Starfleet Normandy class model. We got caught in the crossfire. Good news, we’ve found us some *V’tosh ka’tur,*” Lieutenant Benjamin “Ben” Finney replied, voice harsh with adrenaline, “Bad news, the pirates found them first. Damage report coming up.”

“One hit on deck six, sir,” Finney reported. “Impulse power is failing. Glancing blow deck twelve, hull damage. The bridge of the *V’tosh ka’tur* is gone. Their shields are holding, but they are pretty much sitting ducks now. Also, the pirates are locking weapons on us again. Hang on—”

Jim clung to the back of center chair as the ship bucked under the renewed attack. Thankfully, the shields held. However ...

“Don’t tell me. The impulse drive is down for good now,” Jim said and slumped into the chair. The turbolift hissed open, and with three strides Spock was at Gaila’s side, scanning the incoming data on the enemy vessels and the ship of the *V’tosh ka’tur.*

Over at the weapons console, Ben threw up his hands. “Got it in one. And the starboard phasers are out of commission, circuitry fried. Fuck, those bastards were fast.”

“Be faster,” Jim snapped, his eyes on the screen.
“Enterprise to Dionysus,” Uhura called, trying once more to get through to the gypsies. “What is your status? Enterprise to Dionysus—” But of course there was no answer.

“Status of the V’tosh ka’tur?” Jim asked.

“Their shields are at 40%, getting weaker,” Gaila chirped. “So our scanners are picking up clearer signals over there now. Fifteen life-forms left on the ship, twelve of them humanoid. Make that eleven. Still no reaction to comms. Evacuation via transporter impossible. Something’s interfering with beaming. Either their shields or a disruptor of the pirates”

“Ben, phasers, whatever’s left, whenever you’re ready.” Jim hit the comm pick-up. “Shuttle One crew get ready for an emergency rescue. We’re trying to blast the pirates out of the way for you. Get out the moment we’ve fired.” Jim pulled up the duty roster to check who was on the shuttle crew for Beta One shift. Lieutenant Dave Bailey, in charge of nav, tacticals and ops on the Alpha Two team, was the designated pilot. Next to Jim himself, he was the best pilot on board. Good. The two security guys he only knew in passing, one of the male nurses was the medic on the team, and a maintenance tech – Petty Officer Thule. Hopefully one of them spoke Vulcan. He had no idea if those space gypsies knew Standard.

“Zooming in on the V’tosh ka’tur,” Lieutenant Kelso, the navigator and tactical officer on Beta One shift put in, “Got them. Oh, shit.”

The magnified picture of the damaged V’tosh ka’tur vessel showed an ugly, fractured hole where the bridge in a ship that size should be. Around the ragged edges of the breached hull, remnants of neon-red letters in Standard lit up the blackness of space: “Barqu— cat —oard.”

“Barque cat on board!” Kelso and Gaila cried at the same time.

Barque cats were a space-bred race of domestic felines with low-grade telepathic abilities and supernatural talents for detecting radiation and pressure leaks that not even the best scanners were able to detect. The rule was to evacuate Barque cats first, everyone else second, and the ship third. On average, a single Barque cat would save hundreds of crew members and ships in its lifetime.

“Phasers locked on target,” Ben announced. “And they’ve got their weapons locked on us again, too.”

“Fire!” Jim shouted. “Evasive maneuvers?”

“Impulse power still offline,” Helmsman Lieutenant Gary Mitchell reported. “No evasive maneuvers possible. It’s warp or nothing.”

“Captain, I am picking up fluctuations from the warp core of the Dionysus ,” Spock added calmly. “It is turning unstable. Based on the data I am receiving, their systems must be shut down within sixty minutes.”

“Countdown until impact,” Ben cut in, “Ten – nine— FUCK! There’s another one! Where did that bastard— five – four—”

The scene on the screen and the readouts on the consoles coalesced into a moment of dazed clarity. A heartbeat later, Jim realized what would happen.

Shuttle One wouldn’t make it; Ben would get the three pirate ships between the Enterprise and the ship of the V’tosh ka’tur; the resulting debris would narrow down the safety margin for getting there to nil if they didn’t launch a second shuttle immediately; there was not enough time to round up the back-up shuttle crew; and with Bailey dead, Jim was the only pilot left on board who had a
ghost of a chance to pull the tight-ass maneuvers required for this stunt. Jim was in the turbolift and on his way to the hangar before Ben finished his countdown. The impact of the pirates’ renewed attack made him stumble and drop to his knees, but thankfully didn’t stop the lift.

“Engineering,” he gasped into the comm. “I need someone to meet me in the shuttle bay. The warp core in that Vulcan ship is going critical and must be shut down at once.”

“... on it, Captain,” the muffled voice of Lieutenant Amell poured out of the comm.

When he stumbled out of the lift, he almost collided with Amell. He hadn’t expected her to meet him in person. For a heartbeat he stopped and stared at her. But there was no time to wait for a miracle, for Scotty, for Spock, or for anyone else. Jim pushed into the hangar and ran for the lockers at the back. He pulled out two enviro suits and tossed one at Amell.

“It’s going to be a rough ride, Lieutenant,” he said, stepping into his suit. “The shields of the Vulcan ship are still holding, so we can’t use the transporter. They’re not answering comms, but there are still life signs on board. The warp core is unstable, safety margin an hour at most. There’s considerable hull damage, so air leaks will be an issue. Your priority is to get to the engine and shut down core before it blows. I’ll look for survivors.”

“It’s just the two of us?” Len asked.

Jim forced a smile. “Us and whatever is left of Shuttle One and some pirate ships. We’ll be flying through massive debris.”

Amell hesitated. He knew what she was thinking. An unstable warp core, a ship leaking air, and a debris field. A suicide mission. “You okay, Lieutenant?”

She nodded, zipped up the suit, and picked up the helmet. “Ready to go, sir.”

He didn’t permit himself to consider what they were about to attempt. They turned to the shuttle.

The turbolift opened and Scotty spilled out, running toward them. “Len!”

Out of breath, he skidded to a stop right in front of them. “What are you doin’, lass?” Pushing past her, Scotty grabbed Jim’s arm. “I’m going, Captain. Give me a minute to suit up.”

Jim looked away from the raw expression in Scotty’s eyes. There was a good chance that he wouldn’t see his girlfriend again. But she was qualified to do the job, and the Enterprise could not afford to lose Scotty.

“I’m already suited up,” Amell protested. “And I can do this—”

“I have more experience than you, Len,” Scotty interrupted. “It’s too dangerous. I’m goin’.”

“I don’t have time for this shit,” Jim said sharply. “Scotty, shut up. Lieutenant Amell, with me.”

He ran up the ramp into the shuttle. When he was strapping himself in to the pilot’s seat, he heard the doors of the shuttle close and Amell burst into the cockpit. A moment later, she closed the buckles of the co-pilot’s chair.

“Shuttle Two ready for take-off.” He started up the shuttle. “Drop the damn shields for three in ten.”

Next to him Amell slammed her gloved fist against the console. “Damn him!”
Jim didn’t need that kind of outburst to remind him of how he hadn’t even spared a glance for Spock. He clenched his teeth. “Still good to go, Lieutenant?”

“I’m sorry, Captain.” She stiffened and stared out the front window. “I’m ready to go.”

And they were off. He maneuvered the shuttle out of the bay – his timing was spot on – and into open space. Ahead he could see the outline of the Dionysus, small and insignificant in the vast expanse of space as opposed displayed in super-zoom on the screen up on the bridge. The debris field wasn’t yet visible.

“Scotty has a point,” he said, deftly swerving to portside when alarms for the first pieces of debris started pinging. “But someone has to do this shit. I’m the best shuttle pilot we’ve got left, and I hear you’re the best engineer on board besides Scotty and Keenser. At least we’ll be able to say we’ve done our best.”

“Yes, sir,” Amell replied.

A minute later Jim switched off the alarm of the radar. The constant dinging was about to drive him crazy. Alternating between glancing at the screen and out the front window, he wove his way toward the freighter of the V’tosh ka’tur. The Bond ached in his mind, and he was glad that his psionic center was not active. That would be too distracting. For a moment he wondered how Spock calculated their chances of survival right now. On second thought he decided that he preferred not to know. He already knew that they’d need a shitload of luck to make it to the Dionysus before the wreckage of the first pirate vessel closed in on them. Never mind that the fragments of Shuttle One were more than enough to destroy them. And that was discounting the possibility that there was an eighth pirate ship waiting around the corner that hadn’t made an appearance yet.

Suddenly a huge chunk of metal whizzed toward them at a skewed angle – probably a bit of the hull from the ship of the V’tosh ka’tur. But that was not the problem. The real issue were the other two pieces hurtling in their direction.

“FUCK—”

♦

“The view changes from where you are standing.
Words can wound, and wounds can heal.
All of these things are true.”

— Neil Gaiman, Fragile Things: Short Fictions and Wonders

Chapter End Notes

• Gurney’s advice about never sitting with your back to the door is a textual allusion to a famous scene from “Dune” canon. (Though in “Dune” the line belongs to Thufir Hawat and not to Gurney.)

• The “Dionysus” is from Vonda N. McIntyre’s Star Trek tie-in novel “Enterprise: The First Adventure”
♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Without Distance Closeness Cannot Cure

Chapter Summary

Jim seems to have a special affinity for compromised warp cores. Spock suffers for it.
♦ Doctor McCoy does not approve.

Chapter Notes

Announcing "Hope for Tomorrow" by Aranel Took, a tie-in for "The Resilience of Hope"

This is a really, really special, never-done-before project, and I'm incredibly happy and excited about it all: There is now a tie-in for this story! "Hope for Tomorrow" is a unique and original companion story for "The Resilience of Hope". Written from the perspective of Lieutenant Elena Amell, "Hope for Tomorrow" relates the events from the crash of the Vengeance on San Francisco to the launch of the five-year mission. There's adventure and romance, lots of interesting stuff that ties in directly with "Resilience of Hope", cameos of recurring characters, and much more! If you have the time, please take a look at the tie-in, and leave some kudos & comments love: ["Hope for Tomorrow" by Aranel Took](#) right here at AO3!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Without Distance Closeness Cannot Cure

Stardate 2260.318, 1645 hours, Deck 2, Ready Room

[Now]

—FEAR!

»Fear is the mind-killer, ashayam. You must not fear.« But Jim would not hear him, his psionic centers were closed. Jim would only feel the Bond, distant, dim, at the back of his mind. Spock must not distract Jim. Could not do anything—

Thirty-five minutes and twenty seconds left until the warp core of the Dionysus would blow up.

[Twenty-seven minutes and ten seconds ago]

A painful effort to keep his mind wide open. Sybok’s advice, and the need to share precious last seconds if this was the end. Concentration as an abstract concept. Neurons firing debris into his brain. Mental fatigue, the pounding pain in his temples, an effect of a Bond thrust open to its limits.
Shaking hands a symptom of adrenaline rush, a physical manifestation of emotional transference.

“Sit down, you need to sit down – everyone else, leave the ready room.” Nyota’s voice, distant. “Thorby is afraid you’re breaking your mind. He told Jo; Jo told McCoy; McCoy can’t leave sickbay during Red Alert, so he sent me to— Just sit down. Can you do anything to help him?”

So fast, fast, fast. Small pieces barely visible. A pebble could kill. Would kill. Might not even register on the instruments before it was too late; and the alarms were switched off, too distracting to be helpful.

Forty-one minutes and ten seconds remained.

(He must shield Thorby.)

(Could he do both?)

[Thirty-nine minutes and twenty seconds ago]

Spock arrived at the logical conclusion of what Jim would have to do a fraction of a second before Jim did. In spite of the chaos of casualty lists, damage reports, and target updates, for a Vulcan heartbeat or two he experienced a brief, uncomfortably vague instant of stillness within himself, and in that point of no return, a moment of loss, when the turbolift hissed shut and Jim was gone without a word. The impression lingered as an ache in his mind, emphasized by Lieutenant Finney and Lieutenant Mitchell staring at him. Spock recalled that they had filed a petition for cohabitation thirty-nine days ago. The counselor to sign off on their report had been Dr. Lestrade.

A sense of painful regret whispered through his mind. Jim’s, not his, and not for himself, not for Spock, not for them together, but for—

“Shuttle Two ready for take-off.” Jim’s voice, filtered through the comm unit of center chair. “Drop the damn shields for three in ten.”

On the screen, the shuttle swerved in a tight trajectory with the narrowest of safety margins toward the Dionysus. The quickest course. Jim was the best shuttle pilot the Enterprise had left.

“Scott here.” Status report from Engineering. “Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Amell have left on Shuttle Two to reach the Dionysus and shut down the damaged warp core of the ship.” Chief Engineer Scott’s voice indicated that the man was emotionally compromised – he was barely able to maintain a clear pronunciation of Standard. “Phasers on portside fully functional again. Impulse power should be restored in three hours.”

Amell. She was the focus of Jim’s regret, too. Alien, yet familiar, Jim’s emotions and emotional processes, always fascinating to decipher. A fraction of a second of hypothetical grief, an emotion that would never be shared, should they not—

Spock concentrated on the data coming in from the freighter of the V’tosh ka’tur. Strangely, it was an older Starfleet model, a Normandy class vessel. The condition of the warp core was critical but the core failure was following the expected parameters. The time frame was narrow but sufficient to shut down the system and/or rescue any survivors, provided Shuttle Two made it to the Dionysus. Spock estimated that Jim had fifty-two minutes and twenty seconds for this task.

[Thirty minutes and forty-two seconds ago]

The constant dinging of the shuttle’s security system echoed in his ears, in his skull. Spock shook his head. Jim had reached the wreckage of Shuttle One.
Security systems were intended to aid a pilot; if that purpose could not be achieved, it was logical
to shut them off. The debilitating tinnitus abated. The disorientation remained.

“Lieutenant Finney, you have the conn.”

Spock stumbled from the turbolift into the ready room.

Forty-seven minutes and two seconds left.

[Now]

—Fear!

“Is that how you could take my fear when I died, even through the glass?”

Ah.

Spock let terror take him, permitted panic to pass into him, allowed fear to fill him ...

(Not up, not right, left merely a delay of the inevitable, staying on course impossible, DOWN. Up
again.)

Nothing left, where fear had been.

Only Jim, in a hailstorm of debris and wreckage.

Down, down, down.

UP! LEFT!

Disorientation and involuntary muscle spasms made it impossible for Spock to measure the rest of
Jim’s flight in minutes or seconds. Physically, he was aware that he was sitting at the table in the
ready room. He registered the presence of Doctor McCoy – Leonard – and Nyota next to him.
Mentally, he concentrated on his Bond with Jim to the exclusion of everything else. It was not a
meld; a meld at such a distance was impossible; but it was more than normal connection, it was ... a
feedback loop that absorbed stress and provided energy and focus.

Almost. Almost.

There.

[Now]

“Twenty minutes until the warp core of the Dionysus blows. Shuttle Two closing in on the shuttle
bay of the vessel.” Lieutenant Mitchell’s voice from the comm unit.

Spock’s vision blacked out in ragged holes. Panic. Numbers. Spock knew the code. But so did Jim!

Precisely twenty minutes left.

Spock shivered.

♦

Stardate 2260.318, 1645 hours, in space near Lytasia
A blinding flash of terror, of debilitating panic rushed through Jim. Then it was gone. From one second to the next. What remained in its wake was calm concentration, serenity—

Jim couldn’t go up – he’d collide with the twisted length of metal flying at them from the left. He couldn’t turn right – the remains of Shuttle One were thick as pea-soup there. He sure as hell couldn’t stay on course. (That piece of wreckage was big enough to make it a quick death at least, but he wasn’t quite ready to give up.)

So down he dipped, almost straight down – good thing he hadn’t eaten lunch. Next he jerked the shuttle back up, only to twist sharply to the left with a muffled curse. They were close enough to the leftovers of Shuttle One that it was more like stew now instead of soup. (Though even a pea-sized bit of debris was more than enough to make them breathe vacuum, given the velocity of the wreckage.) That set the rhythm. He lost awareness of time and space. The universe condensed into the shuttle controls. He had to fly by instinct or not at all – there was simply too much shit tumbling through space around them – every heartbeat turned into a twist, a turn, a jerk of the shuttle, an almost-death.

Finally they were closing in on the Dionysus. Of the precious forty or so minutes he figured they had initially just twenty remained now. Twenty minutes. The bay was right in front of them, but the shields were still up. However, the ship was an old model of the Starfleet Normandy class. With a bit of luck the emergency override hadn’t been changed. Somehow he managed to suppress the moment of panic when he started punching in the code – he knew the code – knew the code – knew— YES!

Smoothly, the shuttle settled in the narrow bay, door to door with the single, beat-up shuttle of the gypsies. While the engines switched off, Jim glanced at the read-out of the shuttle’s instruments. “We’ve got twenty minutes or so until the warp core gives out. I’m not getting enough data to say for sure if the hull damage was sealed off properly. No idea if the air’s still breathable in there. You need to get down one deck, there should be stairs—”

Amell was already on her feet and pulling out a set of emergency equipment from the storage cabinet in the back of the shuttle. “Yes, sir,” she said. “Normandy class. On my way.”

“I’ll try locating the survivors.” Jim joined her in the back and grabbed a tricorder from a second emergency kit. Next he moved to the weapons locker, punched in the security code and took out two phasers. He handed one of them to Amell. “In case some pirates got onboard. Set it to stun.”

Then he remembered the message on the hull. “Oh, and there’s a Barque cat on the ship. If you see it, grab it, but don’t waste time looking for it. I need my engineer more than some cat.”

“Yes, sir.” She slipped on her helmet and was gone.

He hit the comm button to update the Enterprise. “Shuttle Two here. We’ve reached the vessel of the V’tosh ka’tur without incident. Lieutenant Amell is proceeding to Engineering to shut off the warp core. I’m going to try and find the survivors. Kirk out.”

He cut the connection and put on his own helmet without waiting for a reply. (What was there to say?) He jumped out of the shuttle and took off to the access stairway. Different from Amell, he went up. The bridge was gone and that there was considerable damage to the hull, that much he knew for sure. His best guess was that any survivors had gathered in sickbay. On this particular type of ship, sickbay was inserted at the core of the vessel, on the same level as the shuttle bay, but behind the warp core and impulse engines. Jim had to go up and across the Engineering section
He was right on top of the warp core when something – phaser fire or debris, he couldn’t tell – hit the ship. It was a bad spot for getting tossed around; the panels surrounding the hallway had split apart. Burst pipes jutted from the walls, cables dangled from the ceiling, and razor-sharp, fractured metal frames stuck out all over the place, and right through the corpse of a middle-aged woman. When the ship stopped shaking, Jim picked himself up stiffly. His right arm stung like hell, and the alarm signal of his suit sounded to alert him that emergency sealant was applied to a leak. He glanced at the wrist controls. There was still breathable air in this section of the ship. Not exactly suitable for human breathing, but better than vacuum. He felt blood or sealant trickling down his skin inside the suit. For a moment he wondered how hurt he was. But there was no time to fudge with the tricorder now. If he could still move and think, it was probably not that bad. At least he still had the damn tricorder, because he couldn’t locate the phaser in the debris for the life of him. Brilliant.

A minute or so later he was at the next access stair and leapt down, three steps at a time. Then it was thankfully just another hallway, through a door, and— He’d been right. The tricorder pinged with several lifesigns straight ahead and also confirmed that in here, the air was still breathable. With a sigh of relief, Jim pulled off the helmet of his enviro suit so they could see his face clearly. Addressing them, he tried Vulcan first, before he switched to Standard, saying everything twice and speaking as calmly as possible: “I’m a friend. Don’t be afraid. I won’t harm you. I’m James T. Kirk, USS Enterprise. We’re trying to shut down the warp core and evacuate this ship. I won’t harm you. I want to help you. I’m a friend.”

No one moved. The Vulcans stayed huddled behind a biobed as if paralyzed. He counted. One, two, three, four, two toddlers, seven, eight, a little girl, ten, eleven – and most of them were injured. The girl looked more dead than alive. A healing trance, he thought, let it be Vulcan voodoo and not a child dying right in front of me. And there must have been more people on board than that. Where were the rest? A ship this size, should be at least fifty people, he guessed. Perhaps sixty. What had happened to all of them? The bridge was taken out, sure, but there wouldn’t have been more than a dozen people up there, if that. The hull damage was limited and sealed off, impossible that twenty to thirty lives had been lost to that.

“We’ll shut down the core and secure the ship, but you need to get out of here ASAP no matter what,” he told them. There might still be pirates in the vicinity. “Is everyone here or do I need to go looking for people? How many injured?”

A blond man was the first to react, taking a cautious step toward him. “Yes – no – everyone’s here. When the bridge was hit, the shields went down – they – the slavers, they took—”

Oh hell. The bitch of it. If they were lucky, the Enterprise had managed to take out all pirates ... which meant that all captured V’tosh ka’tur were dead, too. Jim inhaled deeply. His vision was fraying at the edges. Was he really losing that much blood? He didn’t have time for that shit.

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“Okay,” he said. “Okay ...” When he tried to activate the comm integrated in the enviro suit, the fingers of his right hand wouldn’t move. Damn. With a clumsy flail he managed to hit the right key with his palm. “Lieutenant Amell? I found some passengers. What’s your status?”

“I’m almost ready to shut down the core, Captain,” Amell replied promptly. “Auxiliary power is also offline, so we’re going to lose all power, including life support. Looks like there’s about an hour of air left with that leak, but it’s going to get really cold soon, so we need to beam them out of here within twenty.”

“Great.” He struck at his wrist again. The shutdown would take around ten minutes or so, time
enough for their passengers to grab the bare essentials and prepare for transport. Not enough to start looking for the Barque cat, though. The beast could be anywhere on the damaged ship, and he had zero experience with Barques. Damn again. Maybe he could send someone back for it? Cats were tough. The animal might make it. “Kirk to Enterprise. We’re about to shut down the warp core and the shields. Twelve to beam up from sickbay, one from Engineering upon confirmation.”

Unfortunately, all he got was static. Fuck, and fuck.

“You—” Jim pointed at the fair-haired Vulcan.

“Stephen,” the man replied. “I’m the juggler.”

“Can you still try and get me a signal over here?” Jim asked and thumped the console. “I guess it’s just the shields messing with the comm unit in my suit, but I’d prefer to inform the Enterprise sooner rather than later.” Hopefully it was not an external disruptor. And hopefully it was only interfering with communications, not with beaming. Because there was no way they could fly back now. They’d have to wait until the wreckage had dispersed. And that would take considerably longer than twenty minutes. In that case he could only hope whatever enviro suits the gypsies had lying around would be enough to keep them alive until they were able to fly back safely ...

Together they bent over the communications console. Stephen punched in an override code, Jim fiddled with the knobs he recognized. Nothing. He would have to ask Uhura to give him a refresher on emergency comm tech. Jim took a look at the watch in the panel of his suit. “Okay, lights should go out any second now. Nobody panic, alright? Just stay where you are, you’ll all get beamed out of here as soon as—”

Everything went black. After a moment filled with darkness and tight breathing, the emergency lights activated with a faint, flickering glow. Jim’s suit comm buzzed, and Amell’s voice echoed in the eerie silence of the dead ship. “Warp core shut down successful, Captain. Do you have the passengers?”

He barely managed to lift his arm. “Well done, Lieutenant. And yeah, everyone’s right here in sickbay with me. Get ready for beaming.”

Somehow he succeeded in punching the button that should get him a direct connection to the bridge of the Enterprise. “Kirk to Enterprise. The warp core is safe, but there’s no auxiliary power. We’ve got enough air for an hour, but temps are going down way faster than that. Twelve to beam over from sickbay, one from Engineering. Some of the survivors are in pretty bad shape”

For a moment he heard only hissing and a faint whining. Pleasepleaseplease, Jim thought. No disruptor or shit like that.

He glanced at the comm console of the V’tosh ka’tur sickbay. But apparently the emergency power that kept the lights on in here didn’t extend to the comm unit. Damn. He tried again, listening intently to the scattered static for several minutes. Shit.

Abruptly, clear as day, Spock’s voice: “Captain, we have located you. The transporters are ready. The surviving V’tosh ka’tur will be beamed to transporter room one and two. Medical teams are standing by. Mr. Scott and I are expecting you and Lieutenant Amell in transporter room three. Spock out.”

He almost gasped, light-headed with relief, pain, and blood loss. Bones would be so mad. And Spock ... Somehow Jim managed to switch comm channels once more. “We’re beaming out, Amell. You ready?”
“Ready, sir,” she answered at once, voice firm.

Well, at least he understood much better now why Scotty had come to rely on Lieutenant Amell so much. He hadn’t doubted Scotty’s effusive praise for her talents, but it was still nice to know how reliable someone was in a crisis.

The dizzying sensation of displacement swept over him and nearly turned his stomach. Swaying on his feet, he opened his eyes. As promised, he was in transporter room three on the Enterprise. Lieutenant Amell was in front of him, pulling off the helmet of her enviro suit with a sigh of relief.

Spock and Scotty were standing next to the console. Scotty’s expression was an absurd grimace of relief and worry. Spock’s face was perfectly blank, but he was white as a sheet. Jim took a tentative step toward the edge of the platform, even as Scotty rushed to Lieutenant Amell only to freeze in his tracks. Jim turned to Amell to compliment her and gaped. Between her departure from the shuttle and their return to the Enterprise, her appearance had changed markedly. Mostly around the middle. He raised both eyebrows.

“Is there something you and Scotty need to tell me about?” he quipped, well aware that without the interference of aliens that couldn’t possibly be the case. Not that fast, at least.

Amell lowered her gaze to the uneven bulge of the enviro suit around the general area of her stomach. “It’s the Barque cats, sir,” she blurted, blushing furiously. “I needed to keep them warm.”

So she had found the beast! Suddenly he was warm all over, almost tingly with relief. “Good work, Lieutenant Amell,” he said, grinning at her discomfiture.

She glanced up briefly, before she ducked her head again. “Thank you, sir,” she mumbled. “I need to get the cats to sickbay.” With that, she was gone, sprinting down the corridor.

Jim snorted. “And not a word for the proud daddy. I think she’s still pissed at you, my friend.”

Scotty opened his mouth as if he wanted to argue, but Jim shook his head. “Look, I get it, Scotty. I really do.” Cautiously, he chanced a look at Spock, who was still standing silent and devoid of expression next to the console. “It was one hell of a ride, and touch and go on board there for a bit. But she did fine, she stayed calm, and she got the job done. She’s a good officer to have at your side in a crisis. So pull yourself together. Because when push comes to shove, I need both of you at my side. Okay? And now go after her.”

He rolled his eyes and immediately wished he hadn’t done that because for some reason that made the nausea worse. Thankfully, Scotty didn’t seem to notice. “Aye, sir,” he said, as if to show that he appreciated the difference between Jim speaking to him as captain and as friend. Then Scotty hesitated again. “Thank you. It’s just – she’s my lass—”

“Go after her.” Jim pushed him toward the hallway. And thank God, Scotty finally started moving, because Jim wasn’t entirely sure for how much longer he’d be able to stay on his feet. He stumbled from the transporter platform, and yeah, into Spock’s arms.

“Sorry,” he muttered, his vision fading. “Got hurt. But I guess you know that already.”

♦

Stardate 2260.318, 2300 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Quarters

Jim had trouble waking. Exhaustion weighed him down like a bridge had collapsed on him. The
clock on the wall screen at his feet told him that he’d been out of it for five hours or so. But he felt as if he hadn’t slept at all, as if he’d spent the whole time playing tetris with debris. His right arm was on fire with the aftereffects of regeneration therapy. And the mother of all migraines owned his brain. *Ow.* He gasped for breath with a ragged sound and blinked heavy lids open with a valiant effort. “Hey.”

They were in their quarters. The lights were dimmed to ten or twenty. Spock was sitting on the edge of their bed, clad in his long thermal PJs. No, he wasn’t even sitting there, he *perched.* Before, Jim would have interpreted his stiff posture and the silent treatment as disapproval. He’d have backed off and left Spock to his own devices. But thanks to the Bond, Jim sensed Spock’s state of mind as clearly as his own. He was disoriented and shaken, and he also had a monstrous headache.

“C’mere,” Jim ordered hoarsely. “Get in.”

Without a word, Spock obeyed. He moved stiffly, almost disjointed with tension in the aftermath of the rescue mission and Jim’s injury.

“Damn,” Jim muttered under his breath, before he added, gentler, “Love, I’m fine.”

But Spock was incapable of moving beyond his side of the bed, utterly unable to break free from the prison of his mind. Jim was aware of how hard he was trying to get his emotions under control. Like a hamster stuck in a wheel that was running way too fast. Jim pushed himself upright with his left arm and awkwardly crawled over to Spock. “*Fuck.*” He cursed soundly when he jostled his arm in the process, hissing at the sensation. So that’s what a red-hot poker shoved through your flesh felt like. *Not cool.* In that moment he also realized there was no way he could hold onto Spock without hurting even more on his side of the bed. Logistics of comfort shouldn’t be so damn complicated. Somehow he managed to climb over Spock. By the time he had accomplished that maneuver, he was shaking with the effort. “Budge up now,” he said and prodded Spock. *Nothing.* Oh well. A foot of space on the mattress was enough to get started.

“You are not,” Spock said abruptly. “Fine.”

Jim stretched out next to his lover and carefully laid his aching arm across his middle. Spock’s heart was thudding frantically under his forearm, even faster than the staccato that normally passed for his pulse. “Am, too,” he insisted. “Arm’s all fixed.” He nestled his face against the skin of Spock’s neck. “You’re not fine, though.” Spock’s skin was near human-cold in terms of temperature. “Jeez, you’re an icicle.” He pressed closer against his Bondmate’s body. “Gonna get you warm.” He pushed himself up on his left elbow and moved his right leg over Spock’s thigh. The movement jarred his arm, and he panted with pain.

“Jim, stop, you need another hypo—”

“Oh, good. I was beginning to wonder how angry Bones is with me,” Jim murmured. “But not right now. I’m kinda busy here.”

He bent over Spock’s face, gazing at his dark eyes, pupils blown so wide he couldn’t make out the iris anymore in the dim light of the room. Spock was pale, the hue of his skin almost ghostlike. Jim started at the forehead, barely a kiss. Left temple, right temple. “I’m fine.” He rubbed against Spock’s right cheek, then moved to the left. Cheek to cheek. “Everything’s fine.” Using no hands was kind of interesting, caressing Spock with his tongue and lips and nose. He planted a kiss right on the tip of Spock’s nose. That got him finally a real reaction – a muffled, indignant noise.

“Sorry that there was no time to let you open up my mind,” Jim said, pausing to meet Spock’s eyes. “But it was probably better that way. I’m not used to all-out telepathic contact yet. It would have
been too distracting. Flying through that mess was ...” He inhaled. “Just now? I was still dodging debris in my dreams. That kind of intense.”

Spock closed his eyes. “I could feel it. Then, and now. Every turn. Each reaction. Every decision.”

Jim shuddered with the memory. “I guess I could sense you, too. Like a weight in my mind. An anchor. Calm in a storm. Kept me going when I thought ...” He didn’t finish the sentence. Instead, he drew back to look at Spock, concerned. “Could you still function on the bridge?”

“Negative,” Spock said. “I ceded the conn to Lieutenant Finney and focused on an attempt to absorb as much of your mental stress via the Bond as possible.”

“Hmm.” Jim mulled that explanation over. “I think it worked,” he said at last. “Okay. That explains why you’re in such a state. We’ll need to brief the officers likely to get saddled with conn in critical situations. I think the Bond can be an immense tactical advantage, but everyone needs to be ready for how things affect both of us. We can’t afford a messy command situation in a crisis.”

But that was a worry for another day. Now he wanted Spock back in a sane frame of mind, maybe a bit of cuddling, definitely a hypo for the pain, and last but not least, a good night’s sleep. To achieve his goals, Jim decided on simple distraction tactics.

First he only brushed his lips over Spock’s mouth. Then he pressed soft kisses to the corners of his mouth. He sighed against his lover’s lips and teased him with his tongue. At that point Spock finally relaxed enough to let Jim melt against him, allowed him inside his mouth, and submitted to long, languid swipes of Jim’s tongue. When Jim drew back to gasp for breath, his heart was pounding and his cock was half-hard in spite of his exhaustion, but Spock’s color was better, and he was definitely warmer than before. Not warm enough though, and no matter how much he wanted more, Jim wasn’t up to sex that night. “Computer, raise temperature ten degrees,” he ordered. “Seriously, I can’t sleep when you’re that cold, Spock. You make my head ache when you’re freezing. It’s enough that my arm still hurts like a bitch from regen. Also, I lost enough blood that I can really use some extra warmth.”

For once Spock didn’t argue. He had regained enough control to shift toward the wall until Jim had enough space to sprawl comfortably. Not that he was in the mood for that. After he submitted to another hypo for the pain, he struggled back into the semi-comfortable position of snuggling against Spock’s side, limpet-mode.


Warm fingers caressed his face, warmth spread from their touch, and soon they floated, wrapped safely into each other’s minds. Exhaustion and Vulcan control combined kept any dreams at bay that might have haunted them.

♦

Stardate 2260.319, 0650 hours, Deck 5, First Officer’s Quarters

When Jim woke, his arm barely hurt anymore. It ached, yes, and it was damn stiff because apparently he’d spent the whole night draped in an awkward position over Spock, but ... he lifted his arm experimentally, flexing muscles, bending at the elbow, rotating slowly. Alright. Maybe not quite as new, but good enough.

“Sunlight therapy lamps at fifty percent, please.” He blinked at the sudden brightness flooding the room. Then he propped himself up on his left elbow and turned to look at Spock. “Did you sleep at
“Negative.”

“Did you at least manage to meditate some?” Jim thought Spock must have. He felt much better, and Spock looked mostly normal. Possibly still a bit pale.

“Negative,” Spock replied.

“Sheesh.” Jim flexed the fingers of his right hand. “So what did you do all night? Count my heartbeats and my every breath?”

Spock’s mind focused on their connection, on the rhythm of life as an exemplification of the idea of harmony in everything, of hours of peaceful almost-but-not-quite meditation. After a night’s meld their connection was closer than normally.


Spock did not reply, so he glanced at the clock in the wall screen and hummed to himself, calculating the time and ... “Bones coming over at eight hundred to check on me?”

“Affirmative.”

“That means we have seventy minutes left.” Spock didn’t move, just lay there next to him, expectant, calm. Jim sighed his regret, wishing they had more time. “You know, before the Bonding and even during that god-awful conversation in sickbay afterwards, I thought I couldn’t wait until it was safe for me to be a bit more ... hm-m.” Aggressive sounded wrong, as did dominant. “Assertive? Be able to take the initiative? And now ...” He chuckled, torn between laughter and frustration. “Either the mood’s not right, or shit is happening, or we don’t have enough time. Damn, the romance is gone.”

He waited a beat, before he added, wryly, “That was a joke, you know.”

“I am aware of that.” Faint amusement colored Spock’s voice. “And I concur with your assessment of the situation.”

The four, five weeks after their Spice-enhanced Bonding had been intense in every way, but most of all sexually. To the point that they hadn’t minded when the extreme urgency of their desire for each other had waned. Jim slid his hand under Spock’s top. The Vulcan’s skin was smooth, his muscles harder than a Human’s. His heartbeat was thrumming its usual funny hummingbird rhythm this morning.

“That thing with Thorby was a real mood killer, too,” Jim admitted. “Not that I mind. The good definitely outweighs the bad there. Which reminds me. How ... how did that thing yesterday affect him?”

“Dr. Elbrun and Joanna were able to shield him for the most part,” Spock replied. “There was little bleed-through either way. I was able to contain any mental stress beyond that.”

“Oh, good.” Jim sighed with relief. Familial Bonds, especially in such a makeshift, artificial telepathic family unit, were nowhere near as close as the mating Bond Jim and Spock shared. Nevertheless, shielding was a serious issue, since Jim’s fitness for command was at stake and no one wanted to expose Thorby to more stress. “I certainly didn’t notice anything. Admittedly, I was
Sybok had formed the Bonds between Thorby, Spock, and Jim three days after he had discovered the accidental Bond between Thorby and Jo. As expected, the effect had been profound.

For the most part, it was good stuff. The positive influence of a new telepathic family connection on Thorby was immense. He didn’t flinch as often as before, he had less nightmares, and he became much more talkative. The best description Jim could come up with was that Thorby had turned a little *human*. And sometimes he worried about how that might a) be a bad thing, and b) his fault, even though Spock and Sybok and Elbrun assured him that was not the case. Thorby – close telepathic proximity to another Vulcan mind – was good for Spock, too. Instead of being overwhelmed with Thorby’s needs and problems, Spock felt more grounded. Jim for his part experienced the whole thing mostly through Spock, in a kind of connectivity, an instinctive sense of belonging.

The bad stuff was mostly Thorby’s nightmares bleeding through. Jo did one hell of a job shielding Spock and Jim, but some things an eleven-year-old girl could not – and *should* not – contain. Those things were awful for everyone concerned, and triggery as hell for Jim. Nothing he wanted to contemplate now.

Jim turned his attention back to Spock and tickled his fingertips upwards from his stomach, tenderly counting each rib. Thanks to the Bond Spock *could* allow himself to be aroused now and in fact considered that reaction to his Bondmate’s impulses perfectly logical and beneficial. However, the fact remained that without *pon farr*, Spock was not sexually mature in Vulcan terms. And yeah, that bothered Jim, no matter how often he told himself that human standards were not applicable to the situation and that Spock was an adult who knew perfectly well what he wanted. It was rather more complex than he’d anticipated. What did Spock need now?

“Love you,” Jim said, voice firm. It was important to him to say that out loud. To hear himself say the words. “I’m so sorry for yesterday.”

He pulled his hand out from under Spock’s shirt and raised it to his head, to trail his fingertips over Spock’s meld points. Taking in how his lover’s eyes widened, how his lips parted, Jim swallowed hard. “Would you like to have sex?” he asked, straightforward. (That had been a learning process, too, to figure out that Spock needed clear, clinical questions. Not because he didn’t understand slang or idioms, but because those terms and phrases made him uncomfortable, emotionally loaded as they were.) “It might help.”

“Affirmative,” Spock replied softly.

“Okay,” Jim said with a sigh. “Good. Because I really want you now. And I think we just wasted ten minutes with talking and thinking instead of making out.”

He started over. First, a kiss, slow, deliberate. Lips only. The difference in temperature was striking. And they were so soft. He licked into the corners, delving deeper, tangling with Spock’s rough tongue. When he came up for air, his outlook on the universe had already improved around one hundred percent.

“*Hmm...* ” He buried his face against Spock’s shoulder and inhaled deeply. “How about undressing? Just a suggestion, you know. If you’re not too cold.”

Spock grabbed the hem of his top and quickly drew it up over his head, throwing it aside. In the process, his hair ended up slightly mussed.
“You can’t do that,” Jim protested. “You know what it does to me.” It was such a little thing, really. But he knew it was something no one else got to see about Spock normally, and it completely disarmed him.

“Since I agree that undressing is a suitable means to prepare for satisfactory sexual relations, it is, in fact, essential that I do just that,” Spock replied with perfect Vulcan logic.

Jim thought it was a saving grace that even Vulcans needed to wriggle to get out of PJ bottoms. But then he was faced with his lover lying next to him naked and willing, and a mere sixty minutes left until the CMO would come knocking on their door. In other words, his life sucked. On that note he summarily extricated himself from his own pajama. As soon as he was undressed, Spock turned to him. For a long, breathless moment they pressed against each other, soaking in the touch of naked skin to naked skin. Enveloped in Spock’s heat, Jim was caught in the strangest feeling of déjà vu. A sense of delicious forever mixed with the bone-deep ache of never, never again. As if this, this moment was something he’d longed for his whole life, longer even, and worse, as if this could never be real, could never last.

“As if I’ve been waiting for you forever, that’s how you feel,” Jim whispered. “Every time.” He shivered, even as his cock twitched and ached, impossibly aroused. He didn’t want to finish the thought that threatened to choke him. As if it’s the last time ...

But he couldn’t think of that now. He knelt next to his lover’s supine body and bent over to trail his tongue around Spock’s sheath. His lover’s reaction was immediate – his erection so damn beautiful that Jim would never get used to it. “Gorgeous,” he murmured. That he could provoke such a response in Spock was a heady thing. “Not the right time for penetration, I believe. But I do so want to feel you. Just rub each other off? And your fingers in my mouth? Or wherever you want them?” Spock’s fingers were incredibly sensitive. Sometimes too sensitive. Jim didn’t want to use that Vulcan characteristic as a shortcut to Spock’s orgasm.

“An acceptable compromise,” Spock responded.

♦

His voice sounded too soft to his own ears. But Jim had heard him nevertheless. With careful consideration Spock let go of certain controls. At the same time he tightened the shields of the shallow familial Bonds that connected them to Thorby. (Emotional transference from Jim to Thorby was negligible, thankfully. Monitoring that aspect of the familial Bonds during that particular type of situation had been extremely unpleasant for Jim, but necessary for both his and McCoy’s peace of mind.)

Again Jim bent over him. The warm, wet contact of his lover’s tongue with sensitive skin made him arch his hips in spite of his fatigue. Lassitude assailed his limbs, a symptom of an overextended Bond. His mind, his body ached with need, need for his Bondmate. Lust was not such a simple emotion after all. He allowed his body to react to Jim’s touches, permitted his emotions to flow freely. Motionless he lay under Jim’s kisses, Jim’s caresses.

“That’s okay, Spock,” Jim whispered, “that’s okay.” And added, in his mind: »I was scared, too.« So close after their night’s meld, Jim’s thoughts transferred almost like active speech.

Spock started shivering slightly again. This was more than simple sexual desire, he realized. More than his abnormal need for touching and being touched. More even than the taxed Bond’s demands. It was also a very simple, very human shock, delayed by Vulcan control. That was why he hadn’t been able to meditate, why he couldn’t sleep, why he was so cold, so cold.
And Jim knew. He moved away from Spock’s erection, lay down alongside him, and started over with a kiss, just lips, no tongue. First he drew Spock’s hands up to his face, then he rested his palms on either side of Spock’s head. The connection drew their minds together and stabilized the Bond. The next kiss was less chaste. Jim’s tongue dipped into his mouth, to emulate the movements associated with coitus. The rhythm heightened Spock’s arousal until he was fully erect. Predictably Jim chose that moment to slide his fingers from his face and to draw his head away from Spock’s hands. He propped himself up on his left elbow and his left knee, next to Spock’s arm, next to Spock’s thigh. In an open, wet kiss he slid his mouth over Spock’s chest before he rolled himself on top of Spock. Skin to skin, touch to touch, body to body. He bore down, hard, using his whole weight to anchor Spock inside his body. Thus, Jim held Spock safely in the flood of sensations and emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. For the first time, Spock craved penetration. But he realized that, mentally, he may not be ready yet – to consciously give up control over his body and mind in that particular way.

“We’ll get there,” Jim promised. He curled his right hand around Spock’s shoulder, holding him tenderly. “Don’t fret now. Just feel. I’m here. You’re here. That’s enough.”

He began to move, pressing in. The slight slickness from the sheath that coated Spock’s penis was sufficient to ensure that the resulting friction was pleasurable. Jim kept his movements easy, controlled. Within minutes, the slow stimulation of his body began to affect Spock’s mind. The mental strain of the previous day was converted into sexual tension, until his mind and his body were desperately striving for release.

In languid movements, Jim stretched out all over his body, just enough, almost too little contact. Then Jim kissed him again, picking up the rhythm of his body with his tongue again. Each stroke, each push made Spock feel more – more present, more alive, more needful. Eventually Jim came up for air, a deep, ragged breath followed by a swift caress of lips.

“There, that’s it,” Jim murmured, “let’s get you back in your body, put you back together again.”

With a start Spock realized how fitting that phrase was. Telepathic overexertion and psychological shock had led to mild dissociation, and sex was a surprisingly effective method of overcoming that defense mechanism of his mind.

“Overthinking again, Spock, stop it.” Jim silenced any protest with even deeper kisses. He slid his tongue over Spock’s, back and forth, pushing in and out relentlessly. At the same time, he ground harder against him, and Spock let himself be, just be, here, now, with Jim.

“That’s better.” Jim praised him, lips fluttering to his meld points, down his neck, to the hollow at his throat.

Soon the rhythmic pressure and slide of erection against erection did not provide enough satisfaction anymore. Spock was beginning to ache for more, from deep within his testicles to the sensitive barbs brushing against the silky skin of Jim’s penis. But before he could demand more, now, now, Jim was already stroking his right hand across his body, flicking a nipple, teasing his way to the navel and lower, until he wrapped his hand firmly around both of them. He pumped once, twice, drawing them efficiently to the precipice of orgasm. Then he stopped. Spock felt him trembling with the effort of control. Jim’s sweat was cool and delicious on his skin. With a sigh Jim reached out and grasped Spock’s left hand, tangling their fingers. Spock’s control fractured, and he couldn’t stay silent anymore; he felt more than heard the sound he couldn’t suppress. Closer to a sob than a moan.

“Yeah, like that.” Jim smiled at him, flushed with exertion, eyes brilliant with lust. “Now.” He drew their linked hands to his lips. Adjusting his grip, he slipped Spock’s index and middle finger
into his mouth before he relinquished his hold and moved his hand back between their bodies. He closed his fingers around them in a firm grip. Again he still, waiting. Held so tightly, in the warm wetness of Jim’s mouth, in the rough pressure of Jim’s hand, weighed down by Jim’s body, Spock was safe, yet helpless. He started trembling, mind and body out of control, completely at Jim’s mercy. As if on cue, Jim started moving again, thrusting against his body, taking his fingers deep. Again, again. Again. Until Spock couldn’t hold back anymore, until he arched up in a harsh climax, until he couldn’t do anything but shudder against Jim, into Jim, again, and again, until Jim followed suit, spattering his release over his hand and Spock’s stomach.

With a little slurping sound, Jim let go of Spock’s fingers and gently released his softening penis. But he did not roll away, just slid to his side, until he lay with his head pillowed on Spock’s shoulder, his right leg splayed over Spock’s thighs. He was still intent on anchoring them, drawing them together, away from the aftermath of the previous day. Successfully, too. Spock was exhausted, yes, and slightly uncomfortable – covered in semen and sweat – but also balanced once more in mind, body, and soul.

“Nemaiyo, ashayam,” he whispered.

“Nrgh,” Jim groaned. “You’re welcome. You think that counts as physical therapy for my arm? ‘cause it totally should. Ow.”

But when he tilted back his head to meet Spock’s gaze, his eyes were blazing, almost green with happiness.

♦

Stardate 2260.319, 0800 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Quarters

Somehow they managed to be showered, dressed, and in Jim’s quarters at eight hundred sharp. Spock looked and, through the connection of the Bond, was heaps better. Although Jim’s body was one massive ache – his arm throbbed, and his legs felt like rubber – he was seriously happy, basking in the afterglow of sex, of being alive, and yeah, in love. He was man enough to admit that, plus it was such a nice feeling. He’d spent such a long time wanting more with Spock, in ways he could not name or define, that this new, solid reality of their relationship still was the most awesome surprise ever some days. Smiling, he watched Spock set the table for three, retrieving assorted dishes with healthy breakfast foods from the replicator.

When Bones didn’t come in but pressed the chime of the door panel, a good deal of those nice feelings went poof then and there. So it was a check-up from the CMO, not his friend. Jim suppressed a sigh and a first stirring of anger.

“Morning,” Bones growled and entered the room with a scowl fixed on his face.

“And a very good morning to you,” Jim said, concentrating on a bright smile. “Would you like to join us for breakfast?”

He already knew the answer before Bones shook his head and muttered, “My sickbay is full of injured Vulcan gypsies. No time for that today.”

“Tomorrow then, perhaps,” Spock suggested politely but kept his distance.

Bones didn’t even look up, just pulled out his tricorder and ran it across Jim’s arm. “I spent a full hour fixing your damn arm last night. You were supposed to give it a rest for a single night,” Bones muttered. “And now you’ve somehow managed to strain barely healed tendons in your
sleep? How’s that even possible?” Before Jim could reply, Bones shook his head, shooting Spock a look of disgust. “No, don’t answer. I already know. You didn’t do anything. It just happened.”

So that’s how it was supposed to be between them now? Jim didn’t want to believe it. What had happened to “nobody’s to blame”? His voice was way too calm when he retorted, “My arm’s just fine, Leonard. A hypo and a bit of that sports rub, and I’ll be good as new. However, what I’d like to know is why you didn’t insist on Spock seeing M’Benga last night after you were done with me. You damn well know he’s a worse idiot about taking care of himself than I am. But you simply sent him off with me, never mind that he was close to collapsing himself!”

Bones stared at Jim, stricken. The silence lasted too long. Jim wanted to take back his words, to reassure his friend that he knew Bones would never purposely ignore anyone in need of help.

“Well,” Bones said, his voice dangerously soft, “looks like you fucked him right back into shape this morning, haven’t you? Never mind that your arm was still recovering from being turned into shish-kebab yesterday.”

Spock caught Jim’s eyes. His expression was perfectly blank, his presence at the back of Jim’s mind almost imperceptible. He didn’t even have to think the words: No, Jim. Don’t.

Jim forced himself to take a deep breath. He walked to the table and sat down slowly. Only then he looked at the man who’d been his best friend for years now. That moment made all the difference. For the fraction of a second he caught a glimpse of how Bones was really feeling. His face was drawn, his eyes dark. Not with anger, but with agony, with turmoil.

*It’s not that we had sex when it wasn’t medically advisable. And it’s not that he doesn’t care, Jim thought, it’s that he cares too much. And intimacy – especially the Vulcan version, body, mind, and soul – scares the shit out of him.*

Jim made a mental note to check if Bones was actually seeing a counselor as he’d been told to. He sensed Spock step behind him, the slightest touch of fingertips on his shoulder, warmth and comfort flooding his mind through their Bond. Suddenly Jim realized how their friendship with Bones might still be fixed. He sensed Spock’s approval, but also instinctive wariness. Jim agreed. Only a deep meld, only to experience that “damn Vulcan voodoo” for himself might enable Bones to overcome his issues with such mental intimacy. But that was nothing they could offer to him; he would have to ask for it when he was ready.

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn’t sigh; he just felt tired all over again. What a waste of perfectly good morning sex. “Thank you, Doctor McCoy. That will be all. Please send in Yeoman Rand. And don’t forget our appointment with Guinan tonight.”

◆

*Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, that without distance closeness cannot cure.*
– Henri J.M. Nouwen

Chapter End Notes

• “Fear is the mindkiller” is quote from the famous litany against fear in Frank Herbert’s “Dune”
• The Dionysus and Stephen are from Vonda N. McIntyre’s tie-in novel “Enterprise: The First Adventure”.

• Barque cats belong to Anne McCaffrey and now to Anne McCaffrey/Elizabeth Ann Scarborough.

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story. And if you have the time, please go and take a look at "Hope for Tomorrow" by Aranel Took. Thank you!
Stars Paint This Story, Cover Our Eyes With Mercy

Chapter Summary

Jim thinks about the men he has lost and Earth history. ♦ The end of the Dionysus. And Jim learns something about Vulcans. ♦ A message from New Vulcan catches up with the Enterprise and makes Spock unhappy. ♦ The knitting circle of the Enterprise, also known as the “stitch ‘n’ bitch” club meets for eggnog and gossip. Jim crashes the party. ♦ Vulcan linguistics as a plot device. Which actually made the author of this story cry.

Chapter Notes

"Hope for Tomorrow" by Aranel Took, a tie-in for "The Resilience of Hope"

There is now a tie-in for this story! "Hope for Tomorrow" is a unique and original companion story for "The Resilience of Hope". Written from the perspective of Lieutenant Elena Amell, "Hope for Tomorrow" relates the events from the crash of the Vengeance on San Francisco to the launch of the five-year mission. There's adventure and romance, lots of interesting stuff that ties in directly with "Resilience of Hope", cameos of recurring characters, and much more!

If you have the time, please take a look at the tie-in, and leave some kudos & comments love: "Hope for Tomorrow" by Aranel Took

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stars Paint This Story, Cover Our Eyes With Mercy

Stardate 2260.330, 1000 hours, Bridge, USS Enterprise 1701

The Enterprise was speeding towards the second, more distant star of the Lytasian binary. Jim watched the fiery orbs of the two yellow G type stars grow larger outside the observation window of the bridge. He still had a hard time coming to terms with the Lytasia incident.

Of the eleven V'tosh ka’tur they had saved, nine survived. Four men (Stephen, Atek, Prehnik, Rhodon), three women (T’Peri, Iolite, Tourmel), and two children (the toddlers T’Mir and Solok). Prehnik and Tourmel were still in sickbay, but at last on the road to recovery. The little girl – Ripau – she’d been eleven, Jo’s age – had died first, not even an hour after the rescue. An older man – Tipak – her grandfather – had hung on for a few more hours before slipping away.

Eight people had been killed on the bridge of the Dionysus; ten additional casualties could be confirmed on the rest of the ship, including T’Mir’s parents – Kiron and Seleia – and Solok’s mother, T’Sol. After the bridge had been taken out, the shields of the Dionysus had gone down long enough for the pirates to snatch twenty-seven people from the ship, just beaming them away.
It was very likely that all of them had lost their lives when the Enterprise had blown up the pirate vessels – only one pirate had escaped. There was no way to tell if prisoners had been on board of that ship. Perhaps it was better to imagine they all had died.

At least that would have been fast; it had certainly been a quick death for Lieutenant Dave Bailey, Thomas Clarence and Abasi Shenzi from Security, Nurse Sven Thorensen, and Petty Officer Oliver Thule. Jim would have to take over the training for shuttle pilots himself now, although he wasn’t really sure when he was supposed to accomplish that on top of everything else.

Jim stared at the screen, reviewing the records of the critical moments on the bridge once more in his mind. No. No, there had been no way to tell that there was one more pirate ship lurking behind the moon, using the damaged Dionysus as a cover for a stealthy approach. He almost wished he had found a mistake, an error of judgment – that it could have ended differently. The inevitable provided less solace than he’d been led to believe.

After the Nero incident he’d ended up writing the letters to the families, although technically he hadn’t been in command during the battle with the Narada. Twenty-seven letters. He still remembered every single one.

Spock had written the letters after the Marcus conspiracy. All forty-one of them. Jim recalled each of them, too. The quiet dignity of Vulcan philosophy he’d discovered in those condolences, the careful warmth. Spock had composed the letters while he’d been waiting for Jim to wake up. Thanks to the Bond, Jim’s memory of those letters now mingled with Spock’s dark recollections of these days, with a sense of disorientation and volatile emotions barely kept in check.

And now, the subspace transmissions sent to Starfleet Command so they would be passed on to the families of Bailey, Clarence, Shenzi, Thorensen, and Thule. Jim wondered if he’d remember all the letters, always. Then he shook his head; that was not a healthy line of thinking. Kaiidth, as Spock would say. What is, is.

“Sulu? How’s the Dionysus doing?” Jim forced his attention to their current job.

The ancient Normandy class starship could not be salvaged. When the debris of the destroyed pirate ships and Shuttle One had dispersed, Shuttle Two and the shuttle of the V’tosh ka’tur were retrieved as well as the personal possessions of the survivors and everything Scotty had wanted to salvage.

Today the Enterprise would finish towing the wreck with its damaged and dangerously unstable warp core away from the planets and shipping routes of the Lytasian system and towards the second star of its binary. When they had reached a safe distance, they would release the tractor beam and let the ship pass on into the star, fuelled by its own inertia. Once the star’s gravity pulled the Dionysus in, the end would come quickly in an explosion of the antimatter fuel pods.

“Tractor beam stable, impulse power on full and steady,” Sulu responded promptly.

Scotty had held word; impulse power had been back online on the day of the battle. But he and Lieutenant Amell hadn’t been quite satisfied with some readings, so they – and Ilya, the Barque cat – had spent the following days taking the impulse engines apart and putting them together again. And the cat had managed to find a problem no one else had been able to locate. Now everything was running perfectly again.

Or maybe “purrfectly.” Jim smiled, thinking of the huge Barque with tiger stripes that was currently the queen of Engineering. The cat had certainly proven her usefulness, and her three kittens had acquired quite a fan club. Most of all among the children on board, of course. But Jo
had tattled to him about the time she’d found her dad asleep in his office with one of the kittens on his lap, and Jim himself had surprised Spock cuddling the black kitten, Pash-yel. Another thing to add to his list of things he hadn’t known about Vulcans. They loved cats. Or at least Vulcan space gypsies did. And Spock. And Thorby. In other words, most Vulcans Jim had encountered so far.

Jim glanced over to the communications console. Stephen, Spock, and Uhura were busy over there, sending out carefully coded transmissions to the other V’tosh ka’tur ships, warning them about the pirates in this sector and relaying the message from the Vulcan High Council. Even Vulcan’s most wayward children were invited back into the fold in this hour of need. It was only logical. What Jim couldn’t quite wrap his mind around was how the Vulcan outcasts he’d met so far reacted to that dispensation. That they were so willing to give up their alternative lifestyle at a moment’s notice ... for the good of the many, just so Vulcans as a people would have a better chance of survival. One of the latest bulletins from Starfleet had even mentioned a Romulan sect – Romulans clinging to the Vulcan ways of their distant ancestors, sort of like Terran Amish – relocating to New Vulcan.

Jim rubbed his chin. The planet formerly known as Cestus III was going to be one fascinating place. New Vulcan would end up the strangest cultural melting pot, with traditional Vulcans, Sybok’s people, V’tosh ka’tur, the Romulan equivalent of Amish, the human women volunteering as surrogate mothers, as well as the other helpers flocking to New Vulcan from all over the Federation. Jim couldn’t imagine how those diverse elements would come together to create a new Vulcan society. He knew it would be years before they would get around visiting New Vulcan again, but he was already looking forward to it.

“When will we reach our target position?” Jim asked, turning to Sulu again.

“At approximately 1600 hours today.”

Stephen looked up from the communications console at that. Jim caught the pain in the juggler’s dark eyes. The Dionysus had been his home for many years, ever since he’d split from Sybok’s group ten years ago. Jim remembered the moments in the warp core chamber how, besides saving everyone on the Enterprise, the desperate need to save the ship herself had spurred him on. He wondered if the V’tosh ka’tur would want to witness the end of their ship. Perhaps he could offer them an observation lounge to gather in when the time came. He frowned, unsure if that was an appropriate idea – like a funeral – or callous cruelty. He’d ask Spock at lunch.

“Good.” Jim broke eye contact and consulted his PADD. “Chekov, how’s your plotting coming along?”

The year was almost over, and the next part of their mission lay ahead: to scout the edges of the Black Cluster in order to discover a suitable location for a new starbase. Their next destination, however, was Zaran II, the second planet of the Byrdica system, a diplomatic mission on behalf of the Federation Council.

“Traveling at an average speed of warp five based on our current position, we should reach Zaran II in one month and twenty-seven days on a straight course, Keptin,” Chekov reported and promptly brought up the star chart of that sector in a corner of the window screen.

“Great,” Jim said and concentrated on the chart. That was much better than to get all morose about the demise of the Dionysus. “The course looks good, but I don’t think we’ll make that speed, Chekov. We’re going to cross the Marie Celeste sector, so we’ll have to waste a lot of time dropping out of warp to check for pirate activity.” He exhaled thoughtfully. “I’d prefer giving that sector a wide berth, but that’s not an option. We’d lose even more time that way ...”
He knew chances were that they’d never see the pirate ship again that got away, knew that the odds of catching and boarding that particular vessel were even less favorable, and he was perfectly aware of the fact that the likelihood of rescuing any more V’tosh ka’tur was approximately zero, perhaps less than zero. Still, he couldn’t not try. And it wouldn’t hurt to collect some intelligence on pirate activity in the infamous Marie Celeste sector.

“We vill still manage to reach Zaran II in the second half of January, Keptin,” Chekov insisted.

“Good enough,” Jim replied, poring over their projected itinerary for 2261 on his PADD. The distance they would have to cover during the next year was somewhat intimidating. “Thank you, Chekov.”

The chart dissolved, leaving behind the fiery yellow orbs of the Lytasian binary, already much closer than before. Jim leaned back in his chair and pulled up the information on Zaran II.

Official first contact with the Zaranites had been made in 2257, but thanks to Nero and Marcus, the follow-up visit had been delayed until now. The Zaranites were one of those weird mysteries that made the universe a fascinating place according to Spock. They were a matriarchal species of psionic predators, and their culture was based on hunting, with little indigenous agriculture and industry. Their rise to a warp-capable society had only started when a group of Terran Augments had ended up on their planet after the Eugenics Wars. How in hell that had happened was everybody’s guess, given that Earth had only made warp over fifty years later. But somehow those refugees had made it to Zaran II. They had been granted asylum on the planet. In the following decades their influence had sped up the technological development of the Zaranites by centuries. The last of the Zaranite Augments had died just a few years ago, and for some reason he’d been a huge fan of the Federation.

Jim frowned at his PADD, thinking of Khan and his men. Perhaps it was juvenile, but the injustice of Khan’s story still got to him every time. The Augments had been bred as superhuman cannon fodder. Their treatment had been inhuman. They had been used and exploited as lab rats, breeding stock, slaves. When Khan and his friends had managed to escape, they had fled into the Gobi desert and stayed as far away from civilization as they could manage. Yet when the other Augments and their makers had attempted to enslave humankind (and almost succeeded, too), Khan and his men had emerged from their voluntary exile and turned the tide of the Eugenics Wars. After the war they should have been celebrated as heroes. Instead, the aftermath of atrocities committed by Augments and Humans alike led to a climate of such hostility that Khan and his people decided to leave Earth for good. Suspended in stasis in the cryogenic units of three space ships, they had chosen the elusive hope of eventually reaching a habitable planet far from Earth and their painful past. One of the ships had made it to Zaran. One had been found by Admiral Marcus. No one knew what had happened to the third vessel ...

Jim wondered what he would have done in Khan’s place. Pre-warp space travel came really close to his worst nightmare – to end up utterly helpless ... They could have died so easily without ever waking up again. He’d hate that. His own death, in the warp core chamber, at least he’d known what was happening and why, right up until the last moment.

With a grimace, Jim shut down the PADD. “Lieutenant Marcus? Anything interesting?”

Of course she’d have told him at once if she’d caught so much as a blip of activity, suspicious or otherwise. Sometimes he was still surprised at how boring a shift on the bridge could be.

“Nothing, Captain,” she said. “Just the usual traffic on the shipping routes between Lytasia and the surrounding systems.”
And that was the most exciting thing that happened throughout the shift. Jim was pretty bored throughout, but that was okay. Better than a space battle with pirates any day.

Stardate 2260.330, 1600 hours, Deck 10, Observation Lounge

After consulting Spock, Jim had made arrangements, and then they informed the V'tosh ka’tur that the observation lounge on deck ten would be at their disposal to bid their ship farewell. Now, moments before the proximity to the Lytasan secondary would cause the Dionysus to explode, the space gypsies had gathered in the lounge. Even Prehnik and Tournal. The man was in an electric wheelchair, while Tournal lay on a stretcher, with M’Benga at her side. Guinan and Dr. Elbrun were present as well, taking seats in the background to the left of the door, ready to provide support in case they were needed. Spock and Jim chose two armchairs to the right.

With the Enterprise at a safe distance from the Dionysus, the ship of the V'tosh ka’tur was barely visible without zoom, a small dark spot in front of the yellow star behind it. Spock adjusted the view screen, filtering the glare of the Lytasia binary to acceptable levels, zooming enough that the dot turned into the distant outline of a spaceship. They had released the Dionysus to pass on to her fiery grave at 1600 hours. It wouldn’t take long now until the star claimed the starship as her own.

The door opened with a soft hiss, and Bones entered with Thorby and Jo. Wordlessly, the children crossed the room to sit with T’Miri and Solok and T’Peri on the floor in front of the window screen. Someone had spread out a blanket for them. Ilya jumped down from Stephen’s lap and joined the kids on the floor. Soon the soothing purr of the Barque filled the room.

Jim felt uncomfortable. Out of place. His discomfort must have transferred through the Bond, because Spock suddenly leaned over and lightly placed his fingertips on Jim’s meld points. Jim felt his mind open up as Spock manipulated his psionic centers, emulating the effects of Spice and kindling his latent telepathy.

»Why?« Jim thought, surprised. But Spock shook his head and remained silent. Jim could feel him ache, and he knew that Spock wanted him to see something, to understand something. He had no idea what, though.

Only minutes now. The V’tosh ka’tur huddled together, holding hands or hugging, openly expressing their need for comfort, forming a close-knit half-circle. To see how naturally Thorby and Jo belonged with the gypsies in this moment of grief and loss and solace was ... strange. Suddenly Jim could – see/feel/hear – sense in his mind – the connections between every person in the room. He couldn’t quite describe the impression. Beacons, perhaps, lights and their reflections, signals and answers, bright in the minds of the Vulcans. Or maybe silvery strands, thoughts, minds reaching and joining and clinging, forming a web ... a consciousness beyond the individual, removed from time and space: T’Khasi. Oh. Jim’s breath hitched. So that remained of Vulcan, always, even among outcasts and nomads. A connection of the soul, of the katra.

The comm clicked. “Sixteen-thirty. We expect the warp core to detonate momentarily,” Mitchell announced.

With the added dimension of extra-sensory perception, the scene in the room took on a completely new meaning. Thorby truly belonged. Jim could also see – sense – how Thorby pulled Jo into that circle of belonging, just how deep and instinctive the connection between the two children was. If he hadn’t been so fascinated, he’d have been scared. It’s knowing something and seeing it for yourself, he thought. Not the same thing. Not the same thing at all.
Jim turned to look at Spock and froze, shocked. Because Spock did not ... he did not belong. Not like Thorby. Spock regarded him patiently, his expression and his mind carefully blank. Jim caught only the wisp of a memory: “You will always be a child of two worlds.” And an almost-thought in its wake, painful, and instantly controlled: “Or none.”

“Get ready for fireworks. It’s going to happen any second now.”

Jim suddenly wondered about Guinan and Elbrun. Obviously, they wouldn’t be part of the Vulcan connection, but would they appear differently to him now, in this sensitive mental state? He glanced to the left. Oh, yeah. Definitely different. Elbrun’s black eyes were – magnetic – black holes – Jim was drawn into their darkness, sinking into their depths, his mind and his turbulent emotions. With a gasp he broke contact, looking away, at Guinan. The sensation stopped. However, the El-Aurian felt even stranger to his mind, if that was possible. As if she was there and not there at the same time. The effect made his skin crawl so much that he had to suppress a shudder, that he ended up staring at Bones – and Bones ... Bones met his eyes and for a second he allowed Jim to see just how angry, and how torn up he was.

Somehow Jim managed to focus on the view screen again.

“And that’s it.”

Explosions in space were never spectacular. Fireworks need oxygen. Not much of that was left in the damaged Dionysus. A brief, blinding flare, white-bright before the yellow-orange backdrop of the Lytasian binary. For a second, the screen automatically zoomed in on the debris, tiny black spots dancing in front of the star. Then the screen flicked back to the vista of actual space outside. Perfect black emptiness lit up with pinpricks of silver light. For a moment Jim remembered a vision from the Bonding. A hallucination of silver threads tying him to Spock, and connecting them with two distant stars, one golden and one silver.

Jim had no idea what he did, but suddenly he was – back – back in his body, back in his mind. In his normal frame of mind, that was. Spock raised an eyebrow at him, and a sense of surprise filtered through the Bond. Jim shrugged. No idea how I did that, he thought, shutting off my telepathy like that.

More than before, he realized that they had no fucking clue what they were messing with, that it was dangerous, that it was too late to stop, and that he didn’t want to.

Time to be captain. He rose to his feet. That simple act brought its own kind of awareness of identity and community, of belonging and never belonging. Part of the job description. He wondered why he felt it now, that old cliché – the loneliness of command. Shouldn’t that be impossible now that he was Bonded? But Spock had never been a part of that particular equation. Up until very recently, Bones hadn’t been, either. Perhaps that was the explanation. And Spock’s revelation just now.

“The following will be recorded in the captain’s log of the Enterprise: Stardate 2260.330. The damaged V’tosh ka’tur starship Dionysus was towed to the Lytasian secondary and left to drift into the star. At 1625 hours the antimatter fuel pods exploded at a safe distance from the planets and shipping routes of the Lytasian system. The orbit of the resultant debris will decay over the next years until the star consumes the remains.” He paused. In a few years nothing but memories would be left of the small ship and far too many of its passengers. “Tushah nash-veh k’dular,” Jim said softly, “I grieve with you.”

“Cha’i t’naat,” Stephen replied formally, and the other V’tosh ka’tur silently inclined their heads in respectful agreement. “Thank you. But what is to become of us now? We are far from Federation space, and I have been given to understand your itinerary will take you only further
Jim nodded. “That is correct. And I’m afraid unless we meet up with another ship of your people, it will be impossible to arrange safe transport for you. I’m sorry, but you will have to stay on board for the time being. Are you okay with your quarters?”

Iolite, a lithe woman with auburn hair, stepped next to Stephen and offered a grateful smile. “The rooms are more than adequate for our needs. We are honored, Captain. And grateful, that you would offer asylum to a traveling circus in such manner. But ... while we are here ... what are we to do? I understand that your mission will only be concluded in five years.”

Self-consciously, Jim rubbed his neck. “Look, it’s no big deal. It’s not like you can walk to New Vulcan. And we have more than enough space. Also, what you can do ... I guess, just what you always do? We’re not an ordinary Starfleet vessel – we’ve got civilians on board, families, kids. They, and actually, all of us, I think, will appreciate some entertainment. Food for the soul? Can’t replicate that,” he said, feeling somewhat out of his depth. “And if you want to do more than that, report to Commander Paul. He’ll figure out what to do with you. But really, right now, I think you just need to take some time to recover.” He glanced at the toddlers, still sitting on the blanket in front of the window with T’Peri, Jo, and Thorby. “Take care of yourselves and the kids for a while. Don’t worry about anything else.”

[51 days ago]

Stardate 2260.297, 0500 hours, New Vulcan

In a small dwelling on the main continent of New Vulcan, the man known as Ambassador Selek sat in front of his comm unit in deep contemplation. He had not slept or meditated. Instead he allowed his mind to spiral in and out of focus. On the screen in front of him, the picture of his younger counterpart and his Bondmate was frozen in a smile, a soft gaze, and two ta’al.

“We are star-met
We are joined ...”

In another time Spock would not meet James T. Kirk for another five years. In another universe, it had taken him and his captain two years to realize there was more between them than friendship, and seven years to take the next step. Seven wasted years. Not a long time, compared to the lifespan of a Vulcan or a half-Vulcan. Precious time he could have shared with his Bondmate. If he had been able to accept himself ... But Spock had to fail kolinahr, had to face V’Ger before he could even confront questions of the heart long denied – and find the courage to answer them.

“Is this all that I am? Is there nothing more?”

Spock breathed deep into the k’rawhl to center himself. For ninety-six long years those questions had turned into their own answers now: Yes, that is all that you are. No, there is nothing more. To be reminded of the short twenty years of his life when his heart held different answers was bittersweet. No, it is not: With you, I am hope, I am desire. Yes, there is more: Together we are love, the dream of all our ages.

Again Spock focused on the screen, on the vision of a life he never lived. How to reply to their message in an appropriate and beneficial way? How to convey his thoughts and emotions without expressing too much?
Stardate 2260.348, 1800 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Quarters

Jim and Spock were in their quarters, playing a game of chess before dinner, when the comm sounded. Barry Milekey’s deep, beautiful voice poured out of the speaker: “Subspace transmission from New Vulcan for you and Mr. Spock. A vid message marked private, sirs.”

Jim needed a second to calculate subspace lag. When he realized who this message must be from, he smiled and rose to his feet. “Pipe it down to our quarters, Milekey.”

Spock followed him, and together they stepped in front of the screen on Jim’s desk. Because Jim knew that any encounter with his older counterpart tended to unsettle Spock, he reached for his Bondmate’s hand.

A second later, the screen flickered to life and coalesced into a close-up of an ancient Vulcan. Judging from the perspective, he must have been kneeling on the floor in front of the camera. For a long moment old Spock gazed at them in silence. His dark eyes glistened strangely in the dim light of the room. Jim’s breath caught when he realized that the old man had tears in his eyes.

Finally, old Spock swallowed and inhaled, a rasping, painful breath. But when he spoke, his voice was perfectly even, though much softer than usual.

“You are indeed star-met,” old Spock told them. After a pause, he added, with a smile that somehow made Jim’s heart ache, “And you are more than joined: You are t’hai’la.”

Then his Bondmate’s counterpart reached out to switch off the camera with a sigh. No, Jim thought, not a sigh, a whisper – words.

“As I once was.”

The screen went dark. With a harsh inhalation, Spock drew away from Jim. Without a word, he crossed the room. The door opened with a soft hiss, and he was gone.

Stardate 2260.348, 2100 hours, Deck 5, Officers’ Mess & Captain’s Ready Room

Nyota and her friends had claimed a table in the officers’ mess for an informal meeting of the ship’s knitting circle. Informal, because Barry Milekey was on shift today. But apart from him the other members were present and accounted for: Carolyn Paul, Gwaloth Canningham, Carol Marcus, Gaila, and Elena Amell.

The room was already decorated for what Starfleet regulations defined as “politically appropriate, culturally neutral end-of-the-year celebrations” and what everyone else in the Federation called “Christmas”. Fake mistletoe adorned every other doorway, there were fake garlands in ludicrous colors on every table, along with LED candles and plates with replicated sugar cookies, nuts, and tangerines. There was even a Christmas tree in the main mess, dragged there from the botanic gardens by a dozen burly Maintenance workers, and decorated in a joint effort by all of the Enterprise children.

The thing with Christmas: Every species exported porn, alcohol or drugs, and music. However, a few species had contributed something unique to the universe they would forever be associated
with. Vulcans had provided a philosophy that sustained more than the Federation with IDIC. The Ferengi Rules of Acquisition were the galactic equivalent of the Bible. Orion would always remain a synonym for slavery. And there was a reason that Gwaloth Canningham’s most successful naughty shirt came with the slogan “A Vulcan in the streets, a Klingon in the sheets”. Earth’s interstellar legacy even consisted of two things. Christmas, and towels. Of course, “Christmas” among aliens had not much more to do with the classic Terran holiday than a Klingon brawl with an Orion dance. But the essentials had survived – the tree, the gifts, the weird red-and-white Santa hat, and a vague idea that it was about family, friends, and light in the darkness (which was why the Yovians celebrated “Christmas” by lobbing nuclear bombs at their neighboring planets – that kind of light could be seen three solar systems over). The thing with the towels was easier to understand because towels were so useful that literally every species in the known universe had adopted the custom. Fluffy towels embroidered with the mythical number “42” or the slogan “Don’t Panic!” could be purchased in every spaceport from the Romulan Empire to the Cardassian Union and beyond.

As a result, the members of the infamous Enterprise “stitch ‘n’ bitch” club were making merry tonight with traditional Christmas drinks: with eggnog, mulled wine, and even mead. They were slowly moving beyond casual chatter to outright gossip but hadn’t quite reached the stage of bitching yet.

“So it’s been a while since our last meeting,” Nyota announced, grinning. Four weeks had passed since the last meeting. It was good to hang out tonight. “Therefore, the first order of the day is updates, ladies. Relationship status. Bring it on.” It was a cherished ritual. The girls giggled and cheered and raised their glasses.

Nyota grinned at Amell. “The one who whined at us last gets to spill first.”

“All right, all right,” Len muttered, her gaze fixed on her mead. “We’re good. That fight we had about the away mission to the Dionysus was mostly a misunderstanding. We’re working on our communication skills.”

Nyota sniggered. “Does that mean our Chief Engineer has a talented tongue?”

“I bet he knows how to use his tools perfectly,” Gwaloth put in.

Carolyn promptly inhaled her drink and started coughing violently, while Len flushed scarlet and hid her face in her knitting. Her muffled reply sounded a lot like “affirmative”.

“Details, details,” Gaila urged, not that easily distracted. “We need details!”

“You’re horrible, all of you.” Len offered them a red-faced glare. “If you must know, Scotty apologized. It helped that the captain talked to him. Told him that I’d done well on the Dionysus. And ... when I had a nightmare afterwards, Scotty was really sweet, even though I’d been kind of awful to him.”

“Awww.” Carol laughed at her flustered friend. “I think we can let that stand. Even if she won’t share any juicy specifics. Nyota, your turn.”

Nyota heaved a sigh. “I’m actually beginning to wonder if it’s possible to revert into a virginal state if you go long enough without.”

“So it’s that serious with you and Kh— John?” Carol asked.

“There are toys for that!” Gaila put in helpfully.
Carolyn sighed, full of sympathy. “I hear you …”

“Toys may save my sanity, but it’s just not the same,” Nyota replied. Then her brain caught up with the conversation, and she gasped, pressing her hands to her cheeks. It shouldn’t come as such a surprise. But it did. “And yeah, I guess we’re really serious.”

Gaila shook her head. “You realize it’s a pattern now for you, do you? Going for serious relationships with difficult and dangerous men …”

“As if you’re in a position to comment,” Len put in.

Gaila just giggled and leaned into Carol, who blushed fiercely, before she steered the conversation away from that particular topic. “I heard that sigh, Carolyn. How’s Doctor McGrouch today?”

Carolyn groaned. “Same as yesterday. And the day before. And the day before the day before the … Why?”

“The first straight man I’ve ever known who has managed to turn sulking into an art form,” Gaila said, admiration in her voice. “He needs to get laid, Carolyn,” she added with conviction. “It would be community service. A mental health thing. A sexual emergency due to alien interference. There’s a regulation for that!”

Mortified, Carolyn muffled another groan by hiding her face in her crossed arms. “It’s not that I’m unwilling …”

Nyota snorted simultaneously. “That’s the alien sex pollen paragraph, Gaila. I don’t think that’s applicable when the problem is a future alien son-in-law. Or the alien husband of your best friend.”

“I wouldn’t have expected Doctor McCoy to be such a xenophobe,” Gwaloth commented, suddenly serious.

Carolyn raised her head. “He’s not. That’s not it. The problem isn’t Thorby, or Spock. Not really. Leonard … He’s just scared, and yes, he has issues, okay? And also, that is really private, so I’d appreciate it if we could change the topic now.”

Awkward silence spread, with everyone concentrating uncomfortably on their drinks.

“Actually,” Nyota said suddenly, “it’s not private if it affects the community on board. And his prolonged hissy fit is definitely affecting the command team, so—”

“Speak of the devil,” Carol interrupted.

Nyota turned just in time to see the captain hesitating at the door of the officers’ mess. He was pale and looked drained. Whatever had happened now? It was almost cute how he visibly gathered his courage to approach the table. “Good evening, ladies,” he greeted them with a somewhat strained puppy dog smile. “I’m sorry to bother you, but … Nyota … if you have a moment …?” He emphasized her first name – so this was personal. And Spock was nowhere in sight.

“Sure,” Nyota said and got up. “Sorry, girls. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“My ready room?” he suggested.

A few minutes later, they were sitting around the corner of the long table with mugs of spicy rooibos tea. “What’s wrong, Jim? Did you have an argument with Spock?” She would not get involved in a lovers’ spat between Kirk and Spock. Just no. Nope. Not ever.
“No, not an argument,” Jim said, and while he looked upset – haunted, even – he didn’t appear to be angry or pissed off. “But yeah, there’s ... there’s something wrong. Only, I have no idea what. But it’s got to do with a word. A Vulcan word that I’ve never heard before. I was wondering if you could help me figure it out.”

She breathed on her tea, masking a sigh. Vulcan linguistics she could do. Maybe a simple miscommunication? “Shoot.”

“We got a transmission from New Vulcan tonight, a reply from Spock’s counterpart to the message we’d sent about our Bonding,” Jim explained. “He said we are ...” He frowned in concentration. “T’hy’la? T’ai’la? After we watched the vid, Spock disappeared before I could ask him what it meant.”

“Oh.” Abruptly, Nyota put her mug down, shocked and fascinated at the same time. “Oh.”

“So you do know the word?”

She met his bright hazel gaze, and for a moment she couldn’t answer, trying to process the implications. Finally she replied, “Yes, I do. But it’s an ancient term and very rarely used nowadays, so it’s no wonder you’ve never heard of it. It’s both a myth and a linguistic phenomenon.”

Unable to resist the temptation of linguistic nitpicking, she went on, “To start with, the word is spelled ‘t’ai’la’, not ‘t’hy’la’. ‘T’hy’la’ is an old, sloppy transliteration. In Standard, the letter y can be either a vowel or a consonant. But in Vulcan the corresponding character is always a consonant. To express the vowel sound, the diphthongal ‘ai’ must be used, so ‘t’ai’la’ is the linguistically correct form.”

“Oh.” Kirk smiled. “I’ll remember that, Professor Uhura. So what does ‘t’ai’la’ mean?”

Nyota lowered her gaze to her tea, carefully considering what to say next. “The term dates back to the pre-Surakian warrior elite,” she explained at last. “In Vulcan of old, many warriors never Bonded with women, never had families. Instead, men lived and died together. The closest Terran equivalent would be the Sacred Band of Thebes. The most famous of those ancient heroes formed a Bond with each other, the rarest and most revered Bond of Vulcan culture. They were t’ai’la for each other ... everything. Friend, brother, lover.” She couldn’t help it, she got sentimental and misty-eyed at her own explanation.

Kirk just stared at her, speechless.

She quickly went on, scrambling for safer, linguistic territory. “That warrior Bond was not meant to be broken, not even in death. According to Vulcan mythology, katars of t’ai’la were joined for eternity. What’s really fascinating is that the Vulcan language itself reflects that belief. You see, all Vulcan dialects as well as traditional and modern Golic have very specific terms for every possible familial and social connection – and the lack thereof. For example, there is not just a word for ‘betrothed’, but also for ‘the one hoping to be betrothed’, for ‘the one who lost a betrothed to a challenge’ or ‘the one who lost a betrothed by agreement’, and so on and so forth. Especially interesting is the vocabulary referring to widows and widowers. There are usually three kinds of phrases for that situation. A neutral one – ‘the one left behind’ – a hmm... positive one – ‘the one who chose to stay’ – and a negative version – ‘the one who couldn’t follow’. Those sets of terms exist for Bonded and Mated partners of either gender.”

Nyota took a deep breath and met Kirk’s eyes. The next part was ... difficult.
“There is no such term for a surviving t’hai’la,” she said softly. “In this ancient, complex language family, with those extremely specific expressions that reflect the finest nuances of extant and broken social, familial, and telepathic connections, there is simply no word for that at all.”

After he thanked Uhura politely for her time and her detailed explanation, she excused herself and headed back to her friends. Jim remained behind, clutching his cooling tea, trying to make sense of what she had told him and, more importantly, of how Spock had reacted to his counterpart’s message.

What bothered Jim was that whole mythical heroes shit. That’s not me, he thought. His tea was cold now, with flaky spots of essential oils marring the reddish surface of the liquid. He recalled a conversation with Spock about the topic: I’m not a hero; I’m a symbol.

And old Spock with fucking tears in his eyes, goddammit.

“But that’s my issue,” he muttered. “Not Spock’s.”

Okay, he didn’t think Spock was thrilled with that kind of illogical mythological baggage. But that was definitely not why he’d run away like that. So if it was not the word itself, then it must have been what old Spock had said – or failed to delete – at the very end: “As I once was.”

So old Spock and his own counterpart had been Bonded, too, had been ... t’hai’la. But his counterpart was dead, and old Spock was alive.

And that’s it, Jim thought. That’s the problem. That he could be alive when he should be dead. Because death is our deal. Because death defines us in this universe. More than life ever did.

He got up. To be all alone in his mind was hard. Oh Spock.

Stardate 2260.348, 2300 hours, Deck 10, Observation Lounge

The observation lounge was dark, but not empty. Spock was there, sitting stiffly on a couch near the window screen.

“Hey,” Jim whispered as he sank to his knees in front of Spock, blocking his view of brilliant stars, of colorful nebulae, of the universe. “I get it, you know.”

Spock regarded him, pale and silent.

Jim took Spock’s hands and drew them to his face, to his meld points. “I get it,” he repeated. “And it’s okay. It’s fine. No matter what happens.”

For a while they stayed like that, Jim on his knees, Spock on the sofa. Heartbeats passed into the quiet warmth of living bodies, breaths whispered away into the darkness, stars sailed by in the distance. Gradually, the terrible silence in Jim’s mind dissolved.

“Gimme your hand,” Jim demanded at last. Without waiting for a reaction or a reply, he drew Spock’s left hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss into his palm. “I have a gift for you.”

Spock still didn’t speak, but he quirked his left eyebrow and allowed Jim to position his hand between them, palm turned up.
“There’s more to us than that one word,” Jim said firmly. “More than life. More than death.

He placed one of Guinan’s white marbles in Spock’s hands.

“And that? That’s a fact.”

♦

”Just above our terror, the stars painted this story
in perfect silver calligraphy. And our souls, too often
abused by ignorance, covered our eyes with mercy.”

– Aberjhani, I Made My Boy Out of Poetry

Chapter End Notes

• Stephen, his cat Ilya, and the Dionysus are from Vonda N. McIntyre’s Star Trek tie-
in novel “Enterprise: The First Adventure”.

• Barque cats belong to Anne McCaffrey and now to Anne McCaffrey/Elizabeth Ann
Scarborough.

• “Star met ...” and the related references in that passage are quotes from Leonard
Nimoy’s poem “We are star-met”.

• V’Ger’s questions and the relevant answers are from “Star Trek: The Motion
Picture”.

• The towels with the relevant slogans are of course a reference to “The Hitchhiker’s
Guide to the Galaxy”.

• The transliteration of t’hai’la vs. t’hy’la is explained in the Vulcan Language
Institute’s Introduction to Traditional and Modern Golic Vulcan Grammar. The other
explanations concerning Vulcan language are completely AU but highly relevant for
the plot of this story.

• Guinan’s white marble is a reference to the game of questions Jim and Spock play in
chapter 11. (I still haven’t made a prototype, but I really want to.)

• The thing with Christmas: I’ve had awesome discussions on LJ and Tumblr and G+
about what Earth would be universally famous for in the 23rd century. It’s not easy to
come up with what could be typical for humankind as such. Most spontaneous answers
included booze or sex in some way (but really, that’s what every species will export if
they have it). Someone suggested Velcro, and I still adore that answer. I’d love to hear
what you think of my interpretation of the question – and if you have some ideas to
add, please share!

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What’s the most memorable line? Let
me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for
another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you like my story.
Chapter Summary

Unpleasant news on Christmas Eve. They just can’t catch a break. ♦ Except for a break in the sense of things and maybe even friendships breaking. There’s an emergency in Doctor McCoy’s quarters. And whisky. ♦ Christmas Day with a makeshift family. And more whisk(e)y.

Chapter Notes

Special Author's Note: "Hope for Tomorrow" and "Lower Decks" by Aranel Took

There are now two tie-ins for this story! "Hope for Tomorrow" and "Lower Decks" are unique and original companion stories for "The Resilience of Hope". Written from the perspective of Lieutenant Elena Amell, "Hope for Tomorrow" relates the events from the crash of the Vengeance on San Francisco to the launch of the five-year mission. "Lower Decks" matches each chapter of "The Resilience of Hope" with a very different perspective for everything. There's adventure and romance, lots of interesting stuff that ties in directly with "Resilience of Hope", cameos of recurring characters, and much more!

If you have the time, please take a look at the tie-ins, and leave some kudos & comments love: ["Hope for Tomorrow"] and ["Lower Decks"] by Aranel Took.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regret All The Flaws

Stardate 2260.359, 1545 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Office (Christmas Eve)

The comm shrilled, disturbing Spock’s meditation and Jim’s concentration. He should have been working and had at least progressed to scowling at the first of a dozen reports that needed to be read and signed and filed. Without looking up from the report on his PADD, Jim switched on the speakers.

“Captain, something has come up that I need to discuss with you and Mr. Spock at your earliest convenience,” Commander Paul requested. He was still on the bridge, with fifteen minutes to go until the Beta Two team would take over. “In your office at sixteen-hundred?”

“Sure,” Jim replied. If Paul wanted to see them the second he got off shift, whatever he had to tell them was a) important and b) unpleasant. And the tone of his voice ... Jim didn’t like it. Paul wasn’t the kindest or nicest officer on board, but as head of Diplomacy he did have a way with words normally. Now, however, he seemed almost beyond politeness.
Fifteen minutes later, the three of them sat at the small conference table in Jim’s office. Yeoman Rand served Spice coffee – Jim had managed to increase his caffeine threshold to three cups a day again, although admittedly with plenty of milk and sugar – and a plate of tiny sandwiches, before she disappeared again.

“Well, Commander, what’s up?” Jim asked, leaning forward, hands folded around his cup.

“I have received a top-secret transmission from Starfleet Command,” Paul said, “a sabotage warning for all Federation starships.”

Jim went cold. A clichéd reaction, perhaps, but he couldn’t help it – especially with the warning from Khan in mind that Nyota had relayed to him when they were still in orbit around Arrakis.

“What happened?”

“Two incidents. So far. The first happened three weeks ago when the USS Farragut rendezvoused with the ChR Destrix at the border of the Romulan neutral zone near Miridian to transport members of a Romulan cult to New Vulcan,” Commander Paul explained. “An extremely delicate situation. The Romulans have made an effort to improve diplomatic relations with the Federation since the Nero incident. Mostly because they fear retaliation for the destruction of Vulcan. Of course that’s a less than ideal foundation for political interaction, to put it mildly. As a result, the negotiations concerning the relocation of the veothir s’thaai – the Children of Logic – took almost a year.”

“What went wrong?” Jim thought that even without outside “assistance” that thing would have gone wrong. “Delicate” was not the term he’d use for that kind of thing. Disaster spelled all over it? Shit waiting to happen? Yeah, that.

“On the Romulan side, yellow alert for their whole fleet along with orders to proceed to the neutral zone. Falsified inside information was leaked that the deal wasn’t about relocating some weird philosophical cult, but retrieving Federation spies. On our side it was worse. Along with the veothir s’thaai, a bomb showed up in the transporter room of the Farragut. Sensor readings indicated that the bomb was of Romulan origin. Seemingly it had been beamed on board along with them. The only way to save the Farragut was to beam the bomb randomly into space, at a safe distance from the Farragut and the Destrix. Needless to say, the impromptu fireworks didn’t appeal to the Romulans. Thankfully Captain Hendrix kept his head and managed to review the transporter logs before the situation escalated into armed conflict. The logs revealed at least that the bomb couldn’t have been transported with the veothir s’thaai. The captain of the Farragut turned himself over to the Romulans. Thankfully Captain Hendrix kept his head and managed to review the transporter logs before the situation escalated into armed conflict. The logs revealed at least that the bomb couldn’t have been transported with the veothir s’thaai. The captain of the Farragut turned himself over to the Romulans while her science department tried to figure out what the hell happened. Thankfully their navigator – Max Jones – is about as much a computer genius as Mr. Spock here. Sabotage. The bomb was based on Romulan blueprints but fabricated on Earth, and a crew member of the Farragut had tampered with the sensors. But not just any crew member – a crew member who’d died on the old Farragut during the destruction of Vulcan. Somehow the clearance of the deceased had been reactivated and used to manipulate the sensors.”

“Holy shit. That—” Jim broke off, shaking his head as a memory hit him. A minor incident in February, one of the first things he’d had to deal with after he’d been released from the hospital to start getting the Enterprise ready for the five-year mission. “And the second incident?”

“The USS Antares suffered a collapse of the life support systems after the visit from Andorian scientists. A computer virus in the system, and a genetically engineered virus to emulate Andorian shingles in the AC.”

“Let me guess,” Jim said, “the version control puked up that a crew member who died during the Nero thing had fudged with the system. Same as those issues with the warp core simulator that
Scotty reported back in February.” In October 2259 the version control of the simulator software on the Enterprise had revealed illicit modifications – entered by a deceased crew member. At that time Jim hadn’t known yet if he’d make a full recovery or if he’d get back the ship. Scotty had logged the malfunction, filed a report, and Chekov had inserted a trap to catch the perpetrator. As soon as Jim was back in charge in February, the Chief Engineer had approached him about the issue in person. But there had been no evidence that allowed them to take further action, and they had never caught anyone interfering with the simulator again.

“Exactly,” Commander Paul acknowledged curtly.

“I’d like to think that the guy – Maurice ... Morris something or other – Iarty, wasn’t it? – who offed himself on Arrakis trying to blow up the Spice crawlers was our saboteur,” Jim said. “Unfortunately he wasn’t anywhere near the Enterprise in February.”

What a way to hit off the festive season, Jim thought, exchanging a glance with Spock. Instead of enjoying a carefree Christmas, they – and a good number of crew members – would be tied up in systems checks and more systems checks. Could we have caught them if— No. I can’t think like that. He took a deep breath. What’s done is done ... or rather, what wasn’t done wasn’t done. Damn.

“I guess we’d better invite Lieutenant Romaine to join the party. Spock – you or Elbrun?” Jim remembered only too well his incredulity when Scotty of all people had approached him in February. Scotty had presented suspicions but no evidence that Lieutenant Romaine had manipulated the warp drive simulator using the access codes of a dead member of Starfleet as well as accusations of attempted sexual harassment (with Scotty as the victim, which seriously?). So not the kind of problem he’d anticipated having to deal with his very first week back on active duty. As neither Scotty’s investigation of the simulator nor Jim’s conversation with Romaine had yielded anything substantial beyond the fact that she had indeed worked for Admiral Marcus previously, Jim had logged his own report of the incident and then put it out of his mind.

“As this is not an emergency – yet,” Spock said calmly, “I believe the correct course of action would be to request Dr. Elbrun’s aid.”

Commander Paul nodded. “I’d prefer that, too. If my understanding of telepathy versus empathy is correct, Dr. Elbrun’s intervention would be much less intrusive. At this point of the proceedings we must assume that she is innocent of any malfeasance.”

Yeah, fuck. They should get so lucky that Romaine was the perpetrator they were looking for. Jim punched the comm link. “Dr. Elbrun, I need you in my office. Now.”

Elbrun arrived, was brought up to speed, and sat down next to Commander Paul. Spock went to get Lieutenant Romaine himself.

Jim watched her face carefully as she entered, two steps ahead of Spock. She stopped in her tracks, taking in the scene – himself, Commander Paul, Dr. Elbrun. She paled and nervously pressed her lips together into a thin line, before she stood at attention. “Captain, you wanted to see me?”

“Yes, Lieutenant. Do you remember the conversation we had in February, regarding irregularities in the output of the simulator in Engineering that you programmed?” Jim asked. Spock stepped up next to her. The door hissed shut.

Next to Commander Paul, Dr. Elbrun’s eyes blazed like a black supernova as the Betazoid concentrated on picking up on changes in Romaine’s emotional signature.
Romaine shifted on her feet. Jim thought she turned a surprised—or shocked?—gasp into a quick inhalation of breath just in time. “Yes, sir. You asked me if I knew anything about how such a malfunction might have occurred. I described several possible explanations. Then you discussed standards of appropriate behavior between crew members with me.”

Jim nodded. “Indeed. Do you have anything to add to that conversation by now?”

Her reaction to that question was odd. She should have turned more nervous, not less. And now—with a sigh, she straightened her shoulders and focused on Commander Paul. “Sir, my ID is S31D7009, special agent Amira Romanov, department for terrorism analysis and counterterrorism, five year field assignment on the Enterprise in connection with the Admiral Marcus investigation.”

“You’ve got to be FUCKING kidding me!” Jim slammed his palms on the table in front of him.

Dr. Elbrun shook his head unobtrusively. The harsh lines around Commander Paul’s mouth deepened with displeasure as he examined Romaine/Romanov with a stony stare, his pale green eyes cold. “No, sir. The ID is valid, as is the designation of investigation and department.”

Jim inhaled sharply and balled his hands into fists. “Well, Lieutenant Romaine—I assume you prefer to remain incognito?—I guess you’d better sit down.”

Spock opened the wall closet to retrieve an additional chair with calm, precise movements. After he had positioned the chair at the small end of the table, he returned to his seat next to Jim. He must be—not exactly shielding, but dampening the transference of the Bond. Jim did not feel alone in his mind, but he also sensed no particular reaction from Spock. Probably better. He didn’t think his first officer was any more thrilled with this development than he was.

Commander Paul slid his PADD over to Romaine, who scanned the transmissions quickly. “Sir, my placement on the Enterprise was specifically to investigate the prior sabotage in Engineering during the Marcus conspiracy, as well as to keep an eye on new crew members with access to vital systems. In the light of the recent incidents, I believe there is one officer who should be questioned as soon as possible—Assistant Chief Engineer Elena Amell.”

Jim frowned. Amell had proved herself to be reliable in a crisis during the rescue of the V’tosh ka’tur. More than that, he genuinely liked her, and he knew that Scotty loved the woman. But of course that didn’t necessarily mean anything. Oh hell. He nodded, indicating that Romaine should continue.

“Sir, Lieutenant Amell turned down a prestigious lab job at a top Starfleet research facility to take a standard Engineering job on the Enterprise—grunt work, really. However, just one month after her arrival, she was promoted to Assistant Chief. Although she had no prior experience serving on a starship. Apparently, she has managed to inveigle the Chief Engineer into entering a romantic relationship that is completely out of character for the man. The irregularities of the simulator results occurred when testing dangerous modifications of the warp core she had suggested. I am concerned that this was nothing but a particularly clever ruse to hide serious sabotage.” Romaine fell silent and placed Paul’s PADD back on the table.

“Suggestions?” Jim requested curtly.

“Since Mr. Spock and Dr. Elbrun are already present,” Commander Paul said wearily, “I suggest we ask Lieutenant Amell to join us.”

“Sir, neither empathic nor telepathic interventions are foolproof,” Romaine objected. “Captain, we have reasons to assume that the organization backing both Humanitarians for Earth and Humans
First is none other than Terra Prime. If that is true, their ‘soldiers’ will be prepared.”

Jim considered the objection, the practical implications. How would an organization like Humans First prepare one of their goons for the possibility of capture? “Spock?”

“Most likely a mental trigger to drive them insane, taking out the mind of the interrogator along with their own. Additionally, poison, probably a fast acting nerve gas, hidden in a medical implant,” Spock suggested, perfectly composed. “However, I do believe if I meld with Dr. Elbrun first, and then access Lieutenant Amell’s mind, the danger is minimal. A scan will ascertain if any implants are present; they can be removed before questioning.”

Dr. Elbrun nodded. “There’s no guarantee it will work, but I think with that precaution it would be a reasonably safe intervention.”


“No, sir.”

With a heavy heart, Jim alerted Bones and had him summon Amell to sickbay for the scan. “Take all necessary precautions, Doctor McCoy,” he warned. He knew how much Bones would hate the whole procedure. “That’s an order.”

If Amell truly was a terrorist, they wouldn’t get a chance to question her, but at least she wouldn’t be able to kill anyone else on her way out. Commander Paul commed security. Of course. A necessary precaution. Only sensible. Jim realized that he still had no damn clue just how unpleasant his job as captain could get.

Twenty minutes later, the door to his office opened, and Bones appeared with Lieutenant Amell in tow. “No implants of any kind, Captain,” Bones reported, his expression pinched and bitter. “She’s clean.”

Jim almost sighed with relief. The fact that she was standing in front of him now, pale and confused, hopefully meant that she was not the saboteur they were looking for. “Thank you, Doctor McCoy. Would you please inform Mr. Scott that I need to talk to him? Just send him up.”

“Of course, Captain.” Jim hated the way Bones looked at him – as if he were a stranger – and left without a word, although he knew that it was better than Bones’s vociferous objections to mental invasions of privacy.

“Sir?” Amell asked nervously.

“Lieutenant Amell, we need your assistance in order to examine the possible sabotage of the warp drive simulator that you reported in February,” Jim said, attempting to keep his tone as neutral as possible. “Do you agree to allow Mr. Spock to examine your memories of the incident?”

For a second, she stared at him, clearly taken by complete surprise. “Sure,” she blurted, “Of course I agree, Captain. I have nothing to hide.”

Jim allowed himself a tight smile. “Thought so, Lieutenant. Mr. Spock, Dr. Elbrun, are you ready?”

“Yes, Captain.” Elbrun nodded. Spock approached Lieutenant Amell slowly. Jim realized that Spock didn’t believe that the woman posed any threat, and that he did his best not to scare her and to put her at ease. “Lieutenant, I will perform a light mind meld to examine your memories of the incident. Please focus on what you remember. That will help me to avoid seeing any other
reminiscences that you may prefer to keep private.”

“Yes, sir.” Amell swallowed hard and flushed, but didn’t flinch when Spock gently touched the left side of her face.

“My mind to your mind,” Spock said softly, “my thoughts to your thoughts.” Spock didn’t close his eyes, but it was clear that he didn’t see the room anymore, didn’t see Jim, didn’t hear Amell gasping for breath.

Suddenly visions exploded into Jim’s mind, secondhand memories thrust at him through the Bond:

“None of these make sense, Len,” Scotty said. “Your modifications should have resulted in more of these readings to show a change, even if you did ‘fuck up’ … which you didn’t, by the way.” He pointed at the PADD. “And there’s no explanation for the output to the plasma injector to be worse, other than something is wrong with the simulator itself.”

“But it’s brand new,” Len said. “It was tested before they sent it up.”

...  

“There!” Keenser stabbed his finger at the screen to stop it.

“What’s going on?” Len sat next to Chekov.

“I found the routine that seemed to be causing the problem,” Chekov replied. “But it was strange, because it didn’t match the pattern of the other routines. It was definitely written by an outside person. So we’re checking the version control to see when the update was made, and Keenser just found it. The update was submitted on 2259.275 by Lieutenant Travis Holt.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Scotty leaned over to look at the screen. “Holt never modified this program.”

“How do you know?” Len asked.

“He was killed during the attack by Nero,” Scotty said.

...

“Sabotage?” Chekov shook his head. “Why would anyone want to sabotage Lena’s experiment?”

Len looked up at Scotty. “Romaine installed the software,” she said. “I met Lieutenant Boma in the hallway on my way to get the coffee and mentioned the trouble I was having. He said Romaine insisted on installing it herself.”

“But that was weeks before the changes were made ...”

As suddenly as the stream of memories had started, it was cut off, and Jim was back in the present with a gasp and a blinding headache. “Son of a—” He broke off, rubbing his temples.

Spock stepped back from Lieutenant Amell, his face flushed in a delicate sage-green hue. “I beg your pardon, Lieutenant.”

Amell blinked. She was now white as a sheet, trembling all over, and she had tears in her eyes. “No
Jim shook his head. “Thankfully, no.” He stared at Romaine for a moment. “Lieutenant Amell, thank you for your cooperation. Two things. One, Lieutenant Romaine is not under suspicion for sabotage, but we have reason to suspect there is – or are – saboteurs on board. Therefore I need you to be on your guard and triple-check all systems as unobtrusively as possible. Please discuss the issue with Mr. Scott and report back to me tomorrow. Two, if you experience any discomfort whatsoever, please report to Doctor McCoy. Any questions?”

“No, sir,” she stuttered. Flushing again, she turned to Romaine. “I—I’m sorry, Lieutenant, I—”

“Lieutenant Amell, I know that when we first met I made you ... uncomfortable,” Romaine replied. “I want you to know that was just part of the job – to suss out saboteurs. Nothing more. And that you reported me, that was your job, too. I won’t hold it against you if you don’t.”

Amell nodded. “Of course not, Lieutenant.”

“Very good, Lieutenant Amell,” Jim said. “You may go.”

Commander Paul quickly rose to his feet and led Lieutenant Amell to the door, dismissing the waiting security men with a low-voiced command. When the door closed behind the Assistant Chief Engineer, Paul returned to his seat.

“Well,” Jim said with a sigh, “I have to admit that I am relieved – I would have hated being wrong about her after the thing with the pirates. But that puts us right back to square one where possible saboteurs on board are concerned.”

“Lieutenant Amell has definitely no knowledge about how the malfunctions occurred and who perpetrated them beyond what she reported,” Spock stated. “I also picked up on memories and emotions associated with her career on the Enterprise and her relationship with Mr. Scott. I believe the motivation for her choosing a starship over a comfortable position in a lab was – I think the correct phrase is ‘to do her part’ – to make up for the atrocities Marcus is responsible for? She witnessed the destruction of the Vengeance and lost many friends in the catastrophe, as well as her home.”

“Yeah,” Jim agreed. “I got that, too.” When Commander Paul frowned at him, he added, “Spock transferred his impressions to me, what he picked up from her thoughts. She’d never help those fuckers. And I know Scotty. He’s not just loyal to a fault, he’s also too much of a perfectionist. If he promoted Amell to Assistant Chief, he did that because she’s a damn genius and not because she’s great in bed.”

Dr. Elbrun broke the somewhat awkward silence that followed Jim’s statement. “Her emotional state is stable. She was confused and nervous, but not scared. There’s emotional trauma in the background that fits Mr. Spock’s assessment. I definitely sensed no attempt whatsoever to hide anything. Most of all, no hatred or anger, only fading grief, and a strong undercurrent of love and loyalty.”

“Very well,” Commander Paul said. “Then we can rule her out as a suspect on all counts.”

“Since the manipulations of the simulator occurred before the launch of the mission, maybe there is no saboteur on board after all,” Spock suggested. “Or not anymore, after Iarty’s unsuccessful attempt to sabotage the Spice crawlers.”

Jim snorted. “We should be that lucky. No; the Enterprise is the flagship. Everyone knows we’re
charged with critical missions. And Iarty wasn’t the one to fool around with the warp core simulator—”

The piercing alarm of the fire alert shrilled, an instant rush of hot adrenaline and icy panic. “Fire alert on deck four, section six. Fire alert on deck four, sec—”

“That’s Bones!” Jim was up and running before anyone else could react.

♦

Stardate 2260.359, 1700 hours, Deck 4, CMO’s Quarters (Christmas Eve)

“Fire alert on deck four, section six. Fire alert on deck four, section six.”

Carolyn had spent a quiet afternoon with T’Peri and the two Vulcan toddlers. She had contributed ginger biscuits, and T’Peri had replicated Vulcan spice tea. Carolyn hadn’t been sure if Jo would be patient enough with the Vulcans. But she needn’t have worried. T’Peri had delighted the children with an impromptu juggling show. Afterwards Thorby and Jo had played with T’M Pol and T’M Mir, a kind of Vulcan tetris that was supposed to train the logic of infants, while the adults had talked about Vulcan and Terran culture and the vagaries of life in space. In a typical irony of fate, the alarm sounded no more than five minutes after they had decided to drop that topic and Carolyn and the children were getting ready to leave.

“Stay with T’Peri,” Carolyn ordered Thorby and Jo. “Do what she says.”

Then she ran to the cabin. Leonard had the afternoon off, and for once he’d admitted that he was exhausted, he’d been planning to take a nap—

She ran headlong into a wall – no, collided with a tall, muscular figure jumping out of the turbolift in front of Leonard’s quarters. Stumbling backwards, dizzy, she would have fallen if the captain hadn’t caught her arms. He barely waited for her to regain her balance before charging into the cabin. Behind Carolyn, several of the V’tosh ka’tur came running, and half a dozen crew members spilled from the other turbolift, all of them brandishing fire extinguishers

“Leonard,” she gasped and hurried after the captain.

Fire-suppression foam filled the living area of the cabin up to Carolyn’s knees. Smoke made it impossible to see more than vague shapes of furniture, of people. A spicy scent of forest and resin and fried electronics tickled her nose, and the air was filled with – a flurry of – hail – nails – needles?

“It’s the godforsaken replicator!” Leonard cursed somewhere out of sight. “The bloody thing just won’t STOP.”

“DADDY! DADDY!” Jo was screaming in a panic, shrill and hysterical, at the top of her lungs. Of course it had been too much to hope for that she’d stay with T’Peri. “Daddy? Daddy?! Is that snow?”

“Computer, emergency shutdown of the replicator, quarters of McCoy, Leonard,” the captain ordered.

“Replicator disconnected,” the computer acknowledged.

The hailstorm abated. Seconds later, the ventilation system sucked away the last swirls of smoke.
The scene revealed before Carolyn’s eyes was bizarre.

In the middle of the room, Kirk stood up to his thighs in fire-suppression foam, damp spots creeping up his ass. Beyond the replicator, Leonard crouched in the corner of the room, protectively hunched over ... what even? And in the open door, Jo and Thorby were hanging on to each other, both of them hysterical, laughing and crying at the same time.


“Yeah, fuck you. Bloody replicator bastard scum.”

Carolyn blinked. That was strong language even for Leonard. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one who had that reaction. Kirk stopped in his tracks and stared. “No, but thanks for offering. Bones, what the hell were you trying to get out of the replicator that messed it up so badly?!”

Leonard straightened up, visibly clinging to the last shreds of his dignity. He took a step forward, then he gestured with a flourish to a tall, purple something he’d been guarding in the corner. “A Christmas tree,” he said stiffly. “It was supposed to be a surprise. Someone told me once that you can get everything out of the replicator with the correct code.”

“A Christmas tree!” With a squee, Jo plunged into the foam, dragging Thorby along. “Daddy!!!”

“Emphasis on correct,” Kirk muttered. Then he turned, addressing the crowd of security guys and V’tokh ka’tur hovering just outside the door. “Okay, everyone, I think everything’s under control now. Thank you for your prompt reaction. That’s exactly what we need in an emergency.”

The V’tokh ka’tur disappeared without comment. The security men hung around another moment or two, torn between captain’s orders and curiosity. Then they, too, reluctantly withdrew.

By the time Jo and Thorby had reached Leonard, they had calmed down to occasional giggle fits. Bemused, Carolyn watched Thorby’s serious face. He didn’t look amused at all. But now and again, he would turn to face Jo and ... chuckle, low sounds of boyish laughter, a little hoarse and surprising in their sweetness. His eyes sparkled and crinkled at the corners.

Then she heard the gentle rumble of the turbolifts, and fast footsteps approaching. Scotty and Spock burst through the door at the same time. Spock was pale with more than apprehension, Scotty looked livid. Whatever had happened to put both of them in such a mood?

“Wha’ the hell, Jim?” Scotty snarled. “How could ya? Ya had no right tae treat her like a criminal!” Then he rounded on Spock, positively shaking with fury, hands balled into fists, ready to strike out. “And you! Wha’ the bloody hell did ya do tae her?”

Oh shit, Carolyn thought. She turned to Jo and Thorby. “Jo,” she asked, her voice as calm and firm as she could manage, “take Thorby and go to stay with T’Peri. I’ll come and get you later. Now.”

Jo gave her a wide-eyed, scared look, but she obeyed promptly. Good girl. “Come on, Thorby. Let’s go.” The kids ran from the room.

Kirk met Carolyn’s eyes, a look of painful gratitude in his eyes. Thankfully, the children had also distracted Scotty for a moment. Long enough for Spock to back away carefully. He didn’t speak or raise his hands. Only his dark eyes betrayed that he was concerned, both about Thorby and the captain. Just as obviously he wanted to defuse the potential for violence. Kirk for his part stepped directly into Scotty’s line of vision, protectively drawing the man’s attention away from his husband, forcing the Chief Engineer to focus on himself. From the corner of her eye, Carolyn saw that Leonard was already gearing up to his usual belligerence, no doubt already pushed to the limits.
of his temper thanks to the replicator accident. For a moment, Carolyn wondered how the situation could be peaceably resolved – without brawl between three or even four members of the command crew.

Once again, Kirk surprised her. He looked from Scotty to Leonard and back. Then he helplessly shook his head, before he slumped down on the sofa, disappearing up to his chin in slowly melting fire-fighting foam. The effect was so ridiculous – the gesture so disarming – and Kirk looked so pathetic, that both Scotty and Bones stopped basically midstride, deflating, the proverbial wind taken out of their sails.

All right. Only one thing left to do now, Carolyn thought and hurried to Leonard’s desk and his private whisky bar. A moment later she handed a glass of Ardbeg to Scotty and Leonard, before she turned to Kirk. Again she glimpsed that grateful, agonized expression in those extraordinary hazel eyes. When she held out the bottle of whisky, he gave the tiniest shake of his head. Thankfully, she had anticipated that reaction, although she’d been thinking of Spock when she’d grabbed the small bottle of fancy spring water. Unobtrusively, she handed Kirk a tumbler with water and some ice cubes. Next, she cautiously approached Spock, offering him a choice of whisky or water. Another surprise – he chose whisky. Carolyn put the bottles on the coffee table. At last she put her hands on her hips and turned to level a stern stare at Leonard and Scotty, with a quick, worried glance at Kirk and Spock.

“If you think you can behave like actual Starfleet officers now, I’ll go and figure out how to get this mess cleaned up,” she told them. “But if you’re determined to behave like the worst brats in my classes, I’ll gladly stay here and play teacher. Your choice.”

Scotty blinked at her owlishly, too flustered to offer any resistance. “Ah... aye, sir – lass.”

“Great,” she said and pointed at the armchair that was still mostly invisible in the foam. “Sit.”

To her surprise, the Chief Engineer obeyed. Must be the Ardbeg. She turned to Leonard. Please, she thought. I have no idea whatever happened now, but he’s your best friend, and tomorrow is Christmas day ... light in dark places, hope reborn, and all those ancient clichés and superstitions. And Jo was looking forward to this first Christmas on the Enterprise so much, with the frantic fervor of a much younger child, a little girl who couldn’t remember the last Christmas she had spent with her father. Carolyn did her best not to sigh with exasperation at Leonard’s glowering. What would Jocelyn have done in this situation? Because her best bet was to do the exact opposite.

In the end she settled for a quick touch, briefly clasping Leonard’s left arm. “I’ll go and talk to Jo and Thorby. I’m sure they can stay with T’Peri for dinner today.” Grasping at straws to come up with an excuse to get the hell out of the way, she went on, “Then I’ll head down to Maintenance and get a cleaning crew organized. If you need more time than an hour or so, you should relocate.” She smiled at him and escaped from the room with its dank foam, replicated Christmas tree, pigheaded men and all.

♦

Stardate 2260.360, 1700 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Quarters (Christmas Day)

Leonard sat in one of Jim’s armchairs and nursed hot eggnog. The concoction was gruesome; based on synthehol and replicated in one fell slurp.

Across from him on the couch, Spock and Thorby sat cross-legged, facing each other, their right hands lifted to gently rest their fingers on the meld points of the other. Their eyes were open, and they were gazing at each other. Thorby’s pointy little face was very solemn, but peaceful. Spock’s
expression betrayed the most curious mixture of concentration, apprehension, and gentleness. For a moment Leonard wondered what exactly they were doing, how it felt. He shook himself and turned away, focusing his attention on the middle of the room. Jim and Jo had set up the misbegotten Christmas tree and were now busy replicating ornaments and putting them on the crooked, purple monstrosity.

“We should have angel hair,” Jo decided. “Silver angel hair. It will be awesome.”

Jim took a step back and scrutinized the effect of a twinkling golden shooting star at the top of the tree. “Really, Jo? Are you sure? Purple and silver? Sure you don’t want a rainbow mix? And what next, baby unicorns and pegasi?”

Jo stuck her tongue out at Jim. “Nope. Mermaids and kittens.”

Jim shook his head but obediently wandered over to the replicator. The tip of his tongue caught between his lips, he frowned at the panel.

“Angels are supernatural beings found in mythologies of various species throughout the universe. The most common depiction presents humanoid creatures with feathered wings and halos. In the Terran Judeo-Christian tradition angels are religious messengers and executioners based on winged Assyrian protection gods,” Thorby piped up without turning away from Spock. “It is not logical to attempt to replicate something that may not exist.”

“Oh, Thorby, better get used to it,” Jim said. “Humans do lots of illogical things.” The replicator whined and whirred. Then several objects tumbled out of the slot. “Sometimes those illogical things even work.” He turned to Jo and held up a number of translucent silvery and golden shapes. “Here you go. A sun, a moon, one, two, three ... seven stars, a unicorn, a pegasus, a mermaid ... and a kitten.”

Leonard watched how Jo bounced toward Jim to grab her new treasures. Then his daughter squealed and held out a black silhouette for him to admire. “Oh, look, it’s Pash-yel!”

“Indeed it is,” Leonard agreed. He scowled at Jim, who was still poking at the replicator. “Why is it that you get assorted Christmas paraphernalia out of the replicator no problem, and I nearly burn down the ship in the attempt to produce one scrawny excuse of a Christmas tree? By rights trying to replicate a non-existent mythical object should have transported us into some kind of freaky alternate universe or at the very least produced a crazy time-space anomaly.”

“Because I’m a serious hacker and you’re not even a wannabe, that’s why.” Jim narrowed his eyes at the replicator screen, then stabbed at the panel again. “But mostly because your code contained a virus. It put the replicator into an infinite loop after the first execution. So, instead of creating one Christmas tree starting with the trunk and ending with the needles, it started over again, only backwards, and went haywire over the needles. As a result, the primary energizing coil overheated. That’s what got you the fireworks – the last load of needles ignited before the replicator broke down.”

Cradling his drink in both hands, Leonard winced. Maintenance had assured him that they could return to their quarters in three days – when the living area had dried out and the last remnants of smoke and fumes had been purged from the air. Until then, he was stuck in his old quarters along with Scotty’s super-sekritt and extremely stinky still, and the kids resided in style in the captain’s cabin. It was Christmas, and Jim wouldn’t hear of them stuck on camp beds. Jo had decided it was all an awesome adventure, and Thorby had said nothing, as usual. Faced with Jim’s hard stare, Leonard had taken his cue from Thorby and remained silent, too.
The replicator hissed, and a mess of silvery strands spilled into Jim’s hands. Angel hair. And as far as Leonard could tell, its creation hadn’t triggered any kind of cosmic calamity.

“Come on,” Jim said and fluttered the glittering filaments at him. “Help us. Serious stuff can wait for once.” The tension visible around his eyes hinted at how serious that stuff was, and Leonard felt even worse. When had his entire existence turned into such a clusterfuck? Not enough that he felt professionally out of his depth faced with the assorted complications of Vulcan voodoo messing with people who mattered to him, his private life was going to hell in a hand basket. He sucked as a friend; he was a failure as a father; and he had no damn clue what to do with a woman he actually liked.

“Yes, Daddy!” Joanna begged, voice and eyes bright. “Help us! And we still need candles, Uncle Jim.”

The hell of it – he couldn’t even remember the last time he’d spent Christmas with his daughter. “Alright, kiddo.” Leonard put down the cold dregs of the eggnog and got up. “Let’s see what we can do.” He held out his hand to Jim.

When the tree was done, the wonky purple thing looked utterly ridiculous – adorned with silver lights, silver angel hair, fairy tale ornaments (and a black kitten), and green Vulcan gingerbread men.

They’d actually needed Scotty to make the lights work. Spock, of all people, had declared the situation an Emergency. Jim, of course, had agreed. The idea that Scotty and his girlfriend might have had plans didn’t seem to occur to him. Somehow the next step in the Christmas drama had involved Elena drafting Carolyn and her father to help with the lights. Why one of the three most brilliant engineers on board insisted on the presence of people who didn’t have the slightest clue how replicators or LEDs worked, escaped Leonard. But he knew better than to question the logic of women, no matter which department they belonged to. And although Carolyn’s father was out of his depth where replicators were concerned, he could contribute to a discussion of what constituted a good whisky and was happy to do so, too. Currently, Commander Paul was involved in a serious debate of the merits of blended versus single malt with Scotty on the sofa that not even Carolyn dared to disturb. Where the three bottles on the coffee table had come from, Leonard didn’t want to know. However, when he heard Scotty’s grand sweeping statement “that no sane person can drink whiskey”, Leonard was ready to intervene. It was his solemn duty as a Georgian country doctor to defend the reputation of bourbon. At the very least, he wanted to steal a drink for himself.

But at his side, Carolyn laughed softly. She linked her arm with his and drew him a few steps backwards. “Look,” she whispered. “Really look.”

Jo and Thorby sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the Christmas tree. Somehow the black Barque kitten Pash-yel had managed to sneak into the captain’s quarters and was now curled up in Thorby’s lap. The kids weren’t touching, but Thorby was leaning his head at exactly the same angle Jo did to admire the Christmas tree.

Somehow Spock and Jim had managed to fit themselves into one and the same armchair again, defying the laws of physics. The armchair was conveniently pushed back against the wall on the other side of the Christmas tree. Leonard couldn’t see precisely what the two of them were doing with their hands over there, but he strongly suspected they would be arrested for doing it in a public place on New Vulcan.

On the couch, Len raised a mug of hot chocolate so liberally laced with Bailey’s, he wasn’t sure if the mixture shouldn’t be called Bailey’s with hot chocolate. When Scotty produced a fourth bottle seemingly out of thin air, she rolled her eyes, laughed, and clinked her mug against his tumbler in
Christmas cheers. Commander Paul shook his head at their antics but returned the gesture with his own glass. Then he eloquently pointed at the bottle right in front of him. So far, the great whisk(e)y dispute of Christmas 2260 obviously remained unresolved.

Pash-yel chose that moment to stretch the way only happy kittens can, languid and long, a slender, sleek black question mark, spilling over into Jo’s lap. His daughter giggled with delight. How he loved that sound.

He backed away from the scene and leaned against the wall, blinking hard. When a warm hand touched his arm, he wasn’t surprised to find Carolyn standing there. “She was such a happy little kid,” Leonard whispered, “all laughter and sunshine and mischief. After the divorce ... not so much. Not that I was allowed to visit often enough to know for sure. And last year, I don’t think I’ve heard her laugh like that once.” He shook his head. This was the wrong time and the wrong place to get so maudlin. “Small wonder,” he added. “She watched her mother die. Was stuck in a hospital for months. First as a patient and then because I only made it outside Starfleet Medical for the custody hearings. But her stepfather didn’t want her. Can you imagine not wanting her?” Helplessly, he shook his head.

“No, I can’t,” Carolyn replied. “And you’re right.” She smiled, soft and a little bit sad. “Sunshine and mischief. That’s the best way to describe her. Now,” she asked, briskly, in a tone she must have learned from Christine Chapel. “How about some mulled wine? Real one, not replicated.”

“Won’t say no to that,” he admitted. Then he took a deep breath and sat down on the floor next to Jo. She promptly cuddled against him, ignoring Pash-yel’s protests. The kitten promptly turned his back on her, focusing his attentions on Thorby. Leonard put his arm around his daughter. Against the back of his hand, he could feel the body heat of her little Vulcan Bondmate.

This was not what he’d wanted for his daughter if he’d been given the choice. Growing up in such a dangerous environment without a mother. Facing the challenges of a difficult relationship before she was a teenager. But of course life didn’t work that way. Already Jo wiggled out of his embrace again, her focus on Thorby and the kitten once more. Purrs and giggles mingled.

Carolyn pressed a hot mug of spice-laced red wine into his hand. Then she settled down next to him with a contented sigh only to curse under her breath when she spilled hot wine over her hand. Watching her lick the red liquid from her skin made him flush with a heat that had nothing to do with alcohol at any temperature.

What was that Vulcan saying Spock always annoyed Jim with when he was ranting about fate and fairness and the universe and all the rest? Right. Kaidith – what is, is.

It could be worse.

♦

“Christmas it seems to me is a necessary festival; we require a season when we can regret all the flaws in our human relationships: it is the feast of failure, sad but consoling.”
– Graham Greene, Travels With My Aunt

Chapter End Notes

• “veothir s’thaai” is based on grammar and vocabulary at the Imperial Romulan
Language Institute.

• Captain Hendrix and Max Jones are textual allusions to "Starman Jones" by Robert A. Heinlein.

• Ardbeg is an awesome single malt whisky.

• Background information for this chapter can be found in the awesome tie-in stories for “The Resilience of Hope”: “Hope for Tomorrow” and “RoH: Lower Decks” by Aranel Took.

♥ Comments are love! ♥
What made you smile? What made you frown? What's the most memorable line? Let me know! And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another author elsewhere? Comments are the best thank-you fanfic writers can receive, and all of us cherish them. Thank you for reading, and happy holidays!

You can also find me online on my own website as well as on LiveJournal and Tumblr.
The Ecstasy Of Chaos

Chapter Summary

Jim has a hangover. Nyota gets an awesome Christmas gift from her boyfriend. Spock is flustered. ♦ Jim tries to talk to Spock about the birds and the bees and dildos and vibrators. That goes about as well as you’d imagine. ♦ Gingerbread Vulcans are not as much fun as you might think. Especially when your replicator hack isn’t hack but messy malware. ♦ Nevertheless, the Christmas festivities on the Enterprise continue. Both the family-friendly and the adults-only version. Since Jim doesn’t get invited to the secret orgy, Spock will have to stage one of his own.

Chapter Notes

Special Author's Note: "Hope for Tomorrow" and "Lower Decks" by Aranel Took

There are now two tie-ins for this story! "Hope for Tomorrow" and "Lower Decks" are unique and original companion stories for "The Resilience of Hope". Written from the perspective of Lieutenant Elena Amell, "Hope for Tomorrow" relates the events from the crash of the Vengeance on San Francisco to the launch of the five-year mission. "Lower Decks" matches each chapter of "The Resilience of Hope" with a very different perspective for everything. There's adventure and romance, lots of interesting stuff that ties in directly with "Resilience of Hope", cameos of recurring characters, and much more!

If you have the time, please take a look at the tie-ins, and leave some kudos & comments love: ["Hope for Tomorrow"] and ["Lower Decks"] by Aranel Took.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Ecstasy Of Chaos

Stardate 2260.361, 1000 hours, Bridge

“I thought you said the system was clean.” Jim rubbed his throbbing temples as he bent over Spock’s shoulder to stare at the screen of the science console. The bridge was too bright today, the floor and the walls too white. And there were way too many flickering lights around him. He shouldn’t have had that third whisky last night. Spock had warned him, too. But damn, it was Christmas. And Bones had been almost mellow. Even though he knew it was impossible, Jim could have sworn he felt the Enterprise move through space this morning, and not in a way that agreed with his stomach.

“The system was not compromised when I ran diagnostics on it after the incident in Doctor McCoy’s quarters,” Spock said, with the bitchiest expression Jim had seen on his face in months.
Not because Spock interpreted the remark as criticism (even though Jim’s comment could be taken that way, probably). But no, Spock was simply pissed off that a computer system under his expert care might have been successfully exploited for sabotage. A matter of adding insult to injury.

Spock leaned over the console and tapped a few keys to call up the relevant logs. “However, since then five incidents have been logged concerning the input of non-standard code. In four cases the code has caused replicator malfunctions. An emergency quick scan has confirmed the presence of suspicious code in the system, but it has been impossible to determine the source and the exact nature of the code with standard diagnostic tools.”

“Shit.” No wonder Spock had such a fine rage going if malware was using the replicator system as a merry-go-round thanks to Christmas hacks gone wrong. “What kind of malfunctions?”

With a stiff index finger his first officer pointed at each replicator log entry listed on the screen. “Gus Stein, the oldest son of Lieutenant Eric Stein, Maintenance, tried to replicate a Terran party favor called ‘Christmas cracker’. The attempt resulted in a mixture of plastic and papier mâché that clogged the replicator. Lieutenant Stein shut off the replicator before the mass could catch fire from the overheating energizing coil.

“Ensign Marlena Moreau, Sciences, also tried to create a Christmas cracker. She managed to switch off the safety locks beforehand to facilitate the creation of the required explosive components. The replication process completed without problems. However, the resulting product contained an amount of explosives far beyond the customary contents of similar items. Out of a Christmas party of five, three are still in sickbay with serious injuries. Doctor McCoy will send a report after the next regen treatment has been completed satisfactorily.”

Jim tried not to wince and failed. He could see his reaction reflected in Spock’s face – an infinitesimal increase in tension around his dark eyes. Oh damn. What a way for a Christmas party to end. He should visit the injured crew members and talk to Bones in person. Jim suppressed a sigh. Bones would be in such a foul mood, and for a good reason, and ...

“Lieutenant Michael Darnell, also Sciences,” Spock went on, “attempted to replicate an object of unknown purpose and function called a ‘Festivus Pole’.”

“What?” Jim needed a moment to process that information. The leap from near-lethal Christmas crackers to bizarre Terran holiday customs was unexpected to put it mildly. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he explained, “Festivus. That’s a kind of a secular holiday. A humorous version of Christmas. Dates back to 20th century pop culture. Some people prefer the parody to the real holiday. Not something that would register with you, I guess, but at the Academy it was like The Thing. Ah... the IDIC community pushed it because they claim it’s more inclusive – never mind that half the known universe has adopted Christmas-as-is. And it’s really just a pole. A metal stick. Instead of a Christmas tree.”

Spock politely refrained from stating the obvious (“Utterly illogical.”). Instead he continued his report. “Mr. Darnell had to make do with a puddle of liquid aluminum. It melted the front of the replicator, burned an antique rug, and had to be scraped off the cabin floor by hand.”

“By Mr. Darnell, I hope.”


Spock scrolled down the screen. Four entries were clearly highlighted on the screen. But Spock had spoken of five cases ... But before he could ask Spock about that, the XO went on, “Ensign Hayden Singh tried to produce gingerbread with code he found on the same forum that Doctor
McCoy indicated as the source for the customizations he attempted to use.”

“And?” Jim wondered why Spock was stalling. If Christmas crackers put people in sickbay, Festivus poles melted replicators, messed-up gingerbread could mean anything from glass splinters in the dough to actual poison. His stomach cramped.

“Ensign Singh produced enough gingerbread ... men to supply the crew and passengers of the Enterprise with baked goods for a week. I suspect that this was the incident to effectively introduce the virus into the system, since regular emergency shut-down procedures failed in this case. Maintenance had to be alerted to manually interrupt the power supply of the machine. Hence, too, the current over-abundance of gingerbread ... men onboard the ship.” Spock reached for something on his left. Swiveling around on his chair, he held out a flat, greenish object.

Jim took the cookie. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, he had to bite down on his lip, hard. Somehow he managed to keep a somewhat straight face. Okay, so Spock’s reaction was not linked to any health risk connected with the bakery products in question. Jim sniffed and prodded the gingerbread carefully before taking a courageous bite. Chewing slowly, he considered Spock’s report.

“Three things,” he said after a pause. “One, I noticed not just one but two split infinitives in your syntax. Not a good sign, that. Two, that’s a damn good gingerbread Vulcan. Also, if two – or three, really, counting myself and the OP – people independently come up with the same idea, there’s a market for it. We should secure a trademark or something.”

Spock didn’t react to his (admittedly lame) joke. Not with an explanation of how gingerbread Vulcans couldn’t be trademarked or how three individuals couldn’t be taken as an indicator for the commercial success of bakery products, not even with a curt comment of “That is illogical, Captain”. Which only confirmed Jim’s suspicion concerning the third thing he had noticed. “And three, what’s so terrible about the fifth replicator incident?”

Spock visibly tensed. Oh yeah, Jim thought. Whatever it is, it’s bad. Spock was flushing. Whatever emotional reaction the Vulcan was experiencing right now was so strong that his physiological control over facial vasodilation failed. The effect was ... well, probably to be expected with green blood and pale skin. When Spock blushed, he looked as if he was about to puke.

“Okay, just transfer the data to my PADD.” Without a word, Spock punched a few keys to share the relevant log entry. Jim returned to the chair and concentrated on his PADD. Seconds later, the screen lit up with the relevant log entry. Uhura. Alright, that already went a long way to explain Spock’s discomfort. Up to a point, at least ...

Jim glanced at the auto-generated summary of the code. Millions of lines of coordinates for nearly as many vertices. Whatever it was, it was seriously complex. He prodded the PADD to render a preview image and to run a search for a read-me. Almost a minute passed until the PADD pinged with the requested results. Jim pulled up the preview first.

“Holy—” he breathed, almost reverently, when he realized what he was looking at. Just to make sure that he wasn’t hallucinating, he took a look at the read-me. Nope. It was real. Gingerly, he prodded the screen to rotate the 3D preview and whistled softly. Impressive. He swallowed hard and concentrated on not looking at Spock. Or Uhura. Now that he knew what it was for, the data made sense, the structure of it all, the arrangement of coordinates and vertices. It was awesome code, too. Clean, elegant, sophisticated. And it wasn’t just a refined customization for one of the standard sex toys already included in the database. No, this program would replicate a life-size dildo with the authentic look and feel of the original uh... model. Actually, it isn’t a mere dildo, or even a vibrator, Jim decided and swallowed dryly. It’s a work of art. Extremely erotic art. With
extras.

... sent to Nyota Uhura by John Harrison.

Who was – thanks to subspace lag – inconveniently (or perhaps thankfully) light-years beyond any immediate means of communication or retaliation. Up to, but not limited to, questioning his methods of artistry (which was what Jim had in mind – his best guess was a new tricorder prototype) or death by asphyxiation (which just might be what Spock had in mind, never mind his and Uhura’s current relationship status).

Somehow Jim managed to clear his throat. “Sulu, you have the conn. Mr. Spock, walk with me.” Clutching the PADD to his chest, Jim made his way from the bridge down to the ready room.

Stardate 2260.361, 1030 hours, Deck 2, Ready Room

Jim engaged the privacy lock of his ready room, grateful for the small mercies of captain’s prerogatives in daily life. He put the PADD on the table and leaned over it for a moment. Through the Bond he could feel Spock’s struggle for control. Beyond the immediate concerns for the safety of the ship, he sensed embarrassed curiosity, sexual uneasiness, a vague sense of failure, and the ever-lurking horror of almost killing the man whose blood had saved Jim’s life. Not a good combination.

“C’mere,” he told Spock and extended his hands toward his partner, palms raised. Spock hesitated, his discomfort palpable without any telepathy. Jim knew that even for Spock, with all of his Vulcan logic and his background in sciences, it was one thing to analyze alien sex – and quite another to live with it. Especially when that entailed a surprise confrontation with the sexual proclivities of his ex-girlfriend in the form of a rather unique sex toy. “It’s illogical to refuse the comfort of your Bondmate,” Jim added. “Increased emotional transference will make the explanation easier.” And it will calm you down much more effectively than anything I could say, he thought privately, although he knew that he had to say something, too.

When Spock closed the distance between them, pressing hot palms against Jim’s hands, their connection deepened instantly to near-meld intensity. The relief of tension in mind and body was so extreme that Jim couldn’t suppress a gasp. After the impromptu Christmas party last night, they hadn’t melded but simply collapsed into bed – too wired and too tired at the same time. And Jim too drunk, really. After just three whiskies, damn it. Currently Uhura could drink him under the table. Carefully controlled alcohol abuse was an important diplomatic skill for a Starfleet captain. He’d have to send Scotty or Bones or Commander Paul to drink with Klingons at the moment, and he didn’t like that at all.

Jim sighed and swayed on his feet, helplessly drawn to his lover. Spock’s effect on him was an attraction he compared to gravity or magnetism in his mind ... a force of nature, nothing he could control. “Need to meld tonight,” he murmured, resting his forehead against Spock’s shoulder for a moment, before he forced his mind back to the matter at hand. He drew back so he could see Spock’s face. “Now, that code. First of all, it’s perfectly harmless. In terms of viruses, my money is on the gingerbread. Point the second, and I’m kind of going out on a limb here, but I guess that Vulcans don’t use sex toys as a rule?” He rubbed his neck, willing away the heat that suffused his face. Damn it, normally he didn’t get flustered like that. But of course normally he also didn’t have to explain to Spock what was up with his ex-girlfriend’s new sex toy.

“Vulcans have near-perfect control over their bodies.” Only the slightest pause gave away Spock’s
discomfiture. “Such devices are ...”

(Unnecessary. Illogical. Perhaps even disgusting. Though of course such a reaction was illogical, too.) “Right.” Pretty much the conclusion Jim had arrived at already. He took a deep breath and launched right into a way too awkward explanation. “This, well, I know that you know that Humans can’t switch off their sexuality the way you guys do. I guess there are people who don’t mind doing without, but most Humans don’t particularly enjoy celibacy. Men and women both. That’s what this is about. Uhura’s been with John how long? Pretty much since the two of you broke up, right?”

Instead of an answer that detailed months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds, Jim got a blank stare that wasn’t quite expressionless enough. Jim suppressed a sigh. Probably not even the most logical, amicable break-up in the history of the known universe could be completely painless and straightforward. Plus, Jim was well aware that he was the main reason for their break-up. Awkwardly, he cleared his throat. “Anyway, they’ve been a couple round about a year now. But most of that time she’s been light-years away from him. And I guess they are exclusive – no ‘what happens on the ship stays on the ship’ arrangement – that is, not an open relationship, no other partners on the side.” Jim wasn’t surprised that Uhura didn’t do casual or poly. He was also kind of impressed with her taste in men (somewhat intimidated, to be honest). However, the idea of five years in space without any intimate companionship beyond his right hand was... scary. Scary enough that he was wondering if he could make a stopover at Earth happen after the third year of the mission. Because, yeah. He owed Uhura and John big time.

“So this is kind of a really considerate and uh... creative gift,” Jim concluded weakly. “To uh... tide her over?” And I’ll make sure not to look too closely at message packets Uhura sends in John’s direction, he thought. No matter how hot ensuing holos or vids may be.

“I see,” Spock said stiffly.

Jim was pretty sure that he didn’t. “Women,” Jim tried again. He was beginning to feel more than a little out of his xenocultural depths with this version of the birds and the bees talk. Or maybe rather “dildos and vibes” talk? Shouldn’t Uhura have taken care of that particular conversation with Spock? She was the xenolinguistical expert and the first girlfriend, after all. How come he had to explain this? He took another deep breath. “Human women enjoy and need sex just as much as men do. And many Humans have fun with sex toys on their own or with their partners.” He paused, trying to figure out how to put Spock at ease. “I don’t remember if I mentioned that before, but I used one, too – before Arrakis. Just a simple plug to, well, make things easier.”

Okay, that was the wrong thing to say. If anything, Spock was even more spooked than before. But Jim could also feel that Spock was trying to understand his emotional responses to the situation and to put them into words. That was never an easy task for the half-Vulcan, but it was more important than ever now, thanks to his constant exposure to Jim’s emotions. So Jim just waited as patiently as he could. And he didn’t let Spock step back. Another thing he’d learned by now. Emotional transference was very useful to avoid stupid misunderstandings.

“I sensed her sexual requirements,” Spock said at last, his voice carefully devoid of expression. “But I failed to reciprocate on the level she desired. As a scientist, I was aware that her needs were perfectly natural for her species. But although it was an illogical reaction, I... experienced discomfort. Discomfort I was unable and... unwilling to overcome, even though I knew that was detrimental to our relationship.”

If the topic was less serious, Jim would have smiled. He was beginning to really get Spock. Like just now? What Spock did not say was as important – more important even – than what he actually
did say out loud. Sure, Spock was weirded out by John’s gift for Uhura. Understandably so. But that wasn’t what bothered Spock. Jim didn’t try to reply right away, giving Spock a chance to reinforce his mental controls. Of course it helped that – thanks to the Bond – Jim knew beyond any doubt at all that Spock was neither unwilling nor unable where he was concerned. Comfortable was another matter, though, and Jim was aware of that, too. And that? That did worry him.

“Spock ...” He captured Spock’s wrist. For a brief moment Jim didn’t move, just held on, gently. “Sweetheart ...” Jim drew the Vulcan’s hand to his face and pressed his fingers to his meld points in a gesture of trust and sincerity. “I’ve had fourteen years to figure out my sexuality. You’ve had what? 112 days now? Even perfectly ordinary Humans who never have to question their identity and their preferences need a couple of years to get comfortable in their own skin.”

Through the Bond he could feel how Spock’s inner balance shifted. Instinctively, Jim followed the ebb and flow of tension in his Bondmate’s body. They ended up leaning against each other, breathing together, a natural rhythm established by shared meditation and sex. Better. Much better.

“One more thing,” Jim said quietly, “and this is important. I need you to know that there’s nothing wrong with you, with how your sexuality works. Not with the Vulcan side of it – not with pon farr and not with what we’ve done to make it safer for us whenever it happens – and not with the human side – no matter how you want to explore that aspect of yourself. Now that the Bond has settled, if anything makes you uncomfortable, you have to tell me. Or if there’s anything you want to try. What we do together, you don’t need to be perfect with me, not in Vulcan ways, not in human ways. I want you—” He took a deep breath. “I want us to enjoy ourselves. Whatever feels good, feels good. No logic, no shame. IDIC. Okay?”

Spock straightened and stepped back. “That is an unconventional, but not entirely illogical application of that particular philosophy. I shall endeavor to extrapolate and communicate my preferences accordingly.”

Jim suppressed a sigh. The number of syllables per sentence was a pretty good tell with Spock for just how uncomfortable he was in any given situation. Very uncomfortable, in this case. At least he hadn’t managed to sneak a “Captain” into his reply. Which would have raised the level of Spock’s discomfort on a scale from one to ten to approximately fifteen.

“Alright,” Jim said briskly and turned to his PADD. “Back to business. We need to shut down the replicators. Today. The whole system. And we have to be certain that whatever is messing with us gets eradicated before we switch things on again. So far, that code has only produced a gazillion yummy gingerbread men. Tomorrow it may end up replicating rat poison to spice up our soup. We have emergency rations for three months, and we’re two weeks away from Zaran. We’ve got an official confirmation of the schedule already; so if everything goes wrong, I doubt they’ll let us starve.” He pinched the bridge of his nose again, willing away the headache that still throbbed in his temples and his forehead. “We can’t issue a public announcement – people will try to stockpile and burn out the system. But it’s Christmas. This will fuck up crew morale well and good.”

He licked his lips, trying to find a solution for this dilemma. “Could we at least give the service personnel of the main mess an advance warning, have them prep for a nice dinner at least?” he asked. “Maybe give them three hours? We can get the medics to scan everything, to make sure the food is safe.”

Stardate 2260.361, 1600 hours, Deck 3, Main Computer Room
Spock stared at the code displayed on the screen. His control and concentration was still substandard, as had been the case all day. When Jim had asked him if he was okay twelve minutes and twenty seconds ago, he had been tempted to reply with “fine”, which was unacceptable in any possible interpretation of the term.

The air of the Main Computer Room was filled with muffled curses (neither Orions nor Humans believed in working silently, an idiosyncrasy that was not beneficial for his ability to concentrate on the task at hand) and the smell of coffee, stale and cold as well as hot and freshly brewed (another, only slightly less unpleasant distraction).

However, there were some aspects of starship culture that were inalienable and had to be accepted without question. Engineering had a secret still. On the Enterprise, Scotty’s equipment was currently housed in Doctor McCoy’s former quarters. Computing had coffee. At this stage of the mission, the MCR still boasted authentic, non-replicated Earth coffee (even though the captain’s yeoman had had to switch to an Arrakis Spice blend already). And the Biology department was involved in secret projects in connection with substances relevant for the production of alcohol and caffeine that Spock kept careful tabs on. That was his responsibility as science officer and XO, after all. Even if his sense of duty and the need to uphold Starfleet rules and regulations did not constitute his strongest motivation in this particular context. Curiosity and, most of all, concern for Jim (who would inevitably consume the end products of both experiments) were more important factors.

Once more Spock focused his attention on the data in front of him and to acknowledge the irrational desire to issue a very human sigh. The replicators had been shut down at 1300 hours sharp. Since then Jim, Lieutenant Gaila, Yeoman Rand and Spock were working on an analysis of the data with advanced diagnostic tools to isolate and examine the malicious code.

Meanwhile, all other computer systems of the Enterprise were being subjected to thorough examinations as well. Lieutenant Chekov and Lieutenant Sulu were running scans on navigations. Lieutenant Romaine and Lieutenant Paul were checking the administrations networks, while Lieutenant Uhura and Lieutenant Milekey were checking the communications systems. Commander Scott and Lieutenant Amell were examining Engineering and Environmentals for the third time in as many days. Lieutenant Marcus and Lieutenant Leslie were subjecting the weapons systems to a thorough inspection.

So far, they had discovered precisely nothing.

The lack of progress was frustrating. Spock recognized and controlled this natural response to the situation with more effort than basic mental discipline should have required. The concern for the ship’s safety was even less easily contained. Although Spock had suspected for weeks already that the constant exposure to Jim’s emotions and Thorby’s trauma affected him more strongly than he had anticipated, he found it difficult to accept that conclusion. Especially how this morning’s events – particularly his conversation with Jim in the ready room – disturbed his mental and emotional equilibrium was disconcerting.

His futile longing for intimacy and release before the Bonding had been ... unpleasant. Spock was gratified how easily the Bond allowed him to respond to Jim physically now. Since sexual relations strengthened the Bond, and the strength of the Bond would increase their safety during pon farr, a certain enjoyment of sex was logical as a consequence of purely biological imperatives. As a result, he had expected the effects of the new Bond, if not the Spice-induced intensity of the experience. Similarly, Spock had anticipated that his human Bondmate would have a much stronger sex drive than he did. That was only natural. He had been prepared (if somewhat dubious regarding his abilities in that respect) to engage in whatever activities were necessary to sustain a
satisfactory relationship. But physiologically, he was Vulcan. Now that the Bond had settled, he should not experience such sexual desires himself. He should not need Jim so much – and certainly not like that, not before pon farr was upon him. But he did. He craved and feared control and loss of control in equal measure. And outside a meld, he was so ill-equipped to express himself in that regard.

With an effort, Spock put these private concerns aside to be addressed later, at a more appropriate moment, and concentrated on the console once more. The replicator program to produce Vulcanoid gingerbread figures was bloated with irrelevant lines of what Jim called “GNDN” – goes nowhere, does nothing – to the point that the sheer amount of extraneous, random data would break the system. However, while the hack would inevitably destroy the relevant replicator, the gingerbread malware did not contain a virus or any other program with a purpose beyond that. The malicious code that had crashed the life support system of the USS Antares had constituted a very different level of sabotage.

Jim reached the same conclusion three point five seconds later. He leaned back with a groan. “That’s the dirtiest code I’ve ever seen. But it’s not what we’ve been looking for. If there’s a virus or a Trojan, it’s not in the gingerbread. Damn it.” He closed his eyes. Through the Bond, Spock felt Jim poke and prod the problem, turning it over and around, inside out. Lightning and quicksilver. Code like a kitten. Pash-yel asleep under the bed. What an illogical approach. However ...

“Spock, check the Vulcan stuff.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. Of course there was a connection – the particular shape of the gingerbread figures. To examine Vulcan items contained in the database was not completely illogical. “Yes, sir.”

He called up the relevant entries and executed a diagnostic subroutine he had programmed himself, a tool that was more thorough and precise than even the most advanced software released by Starfleet. It would not take long to ascertain the presence of illicit code. Thirty-seven seconds later he sat motionless. The effort it took not to let himself be affected by Jim’s – fury – frustration – fear——

Abruptly, the battering of Jim’s emotions against the Bond ceased. “I’m sorry, Spock,” Jim whispered.

Spock required another two seconds to reassert control over his mind and emotions before he was able to deliver his report. “Captain, every single item of Vulcan origin is infected. A combination of a virus and a Trojan.”

Jim bracketed his forehead between thumb and index finger. Without looking up, he muttered, “Someone look over the Romulan stuff.” He inhaled. Exhaled. Spock recognized the breathing technique from their meditation practice. “Actually, anything that’s not Terran.” Stiffly, Jim got to his feet and went over to the coffee maker. But he didn’t pour himself another cup. Instead he leaned on the counter and stared at the wall, jaws set, shoulders tightened into tense lines.

“I shall extend my analysis to encompass all items of Vulcanoid origin,” Spock announced calmly. “Lieutenant Gaila, please evaluate Orion products, as well as the standard items from the rest of the Federation. Yeoman Rand, please inspect all non-categorized non-standard items.”

To assess the damage didn’t take long. As Jim had guessed, the virus had multiplied until malicious code had been inserted in every single non-Terran product in the replicator system. Spock spent another five minutes and thirty seconds verifying the results. But the diagnosis was solid. The facts were clear. There could be no question concerning the necessary consequences.
Yet for a whole second, Spock experienced an irrational desire for his analysis to be faulty. A desire that had nothing to do with the safety of the ship, and everything with Jim’s state of mind. With a soft inhalation deep into the center of his body, he put all of that aside – his own thoughts and emotions as well as what he recognized as an echo of Jim’s mind, flowing into him through the Bond.

Smoothly, he rose to his feet and walked over to where Jim stood next to the coffee maker, a mug of cooling liquid forgotten in his hands. Spock stopped at an appropriate distance – two feet in front of Jim – adjusted his posture and clasped his hands behind his back. “The analysis is complete, Captain. The system is irrevocably compromised.”

“Thank you, Mr. Spock,” Jim said. For seven seconds he stared blankly into his coffee. “Very well,” he went on. His voice sounded weary, and his exhalation could almost be classified as a sigh. “Mr. Spock, please prepare a report on the system compromise to be sent to Earth with the next subspace message packet. As per Starfleet safety regulations, perform a clean install of the replicator system with no custom entries and modifications. Switch off the option for custom replication. And I want the last clean back-up of all custom items and custom alterations for standard products.”

Jim turned around and slammed his coffee mug down on the counter. He hadn’t taken more than a sip. Hot liquid spilled over. Jim hissed and grabbed a paper napkin to wipe the sticky fluid from his hand. “I’m sorry to add to your already busy schedules,” he said, surprisingly calm and controlled. “But we’ll have to go over all customizations before they can be added to the system again. I figure the best way to do that is to split things up between the three of us, and then have Mr. Spock check our results. Yeoman Rand, I know the timing sucks, but I want us ready to start working on this project tomorrow. Please set everything up accordingly, with secure PADD access for the four of us.”

“Yes, sir.” Rand and Gaila nodded. If they had any objections to the additional amount of work or the demanding schedule, they didn’t show it, Spock noticed with approval.

“Thank you,” Jim said with a tight smile. “We’ll also need to implement new replicating procedures.” He frowned. “I suggest a two-step process. Have people submit any custom programs to an IT team to vet the code. Then pipe it down to Replications to have it entered in the system. Thoughts?”

Spock nodded, concentrating on the technical solution of the problems. His concerns regarding Jim’s workload could be addressed at a later point. “That is an effective resolution. As nearly all departments depend on timely custom replication, I suggest a team of three per shift to ensure a fast deployment of code. Lieutenant Gaila can draft a roster tomorrow. Additionally, documentation for the application and approval of custom replications needs to be developed. Yeoman Rand can prepare a preliminary form tomorrow.”

Jim nodded. “Sounds good. Lieutenant Gaila, Yeoman Rand, can you get that done tomorrow in time for Beta shift?”

“Of course, sir,” Gaila replied.

“Sure thing, Captain,” Rand said. Then she hesitated for a moment before she added, her voice carefully neutral, “I really don’t mean to be presumptuous, sir, but considering ... well, wouldn’t it be better if I split up the custom alterations we need to review among Lieutenant Gaila’s teams?”

Spock appreciated the tacit reference to Jim’s already numerous duties as captain. Even without the pilots’ training Jim had taken over since the battle of Lysatia, his responsibilities left little free
time. Since Thorby’s adoption those few hours were often filled with additional appointments, and frequently stressful situations.

“That would be an efficient way to test the skills of the relevant crew members,” Spock suggested, although he did not anticipate convincing Jim of the logic of his argument. Jim had no problems with delegating work. But he was a firm believer in employing whoever was best at the task in question. Unfortunately, all too often Jim himself was among the ten persons on board best suited for any given mission.

As expected, Jim shook his head. “Good point, Spock, but nope. Not happening. Look, it’s Christmas. There are kids not getting their gifts because of this mess, parties not happening. When we announce the policy changes once the system is up and running again, people will be all kinds of pissed. And we can’t tell them that it was sabotage. If that gets out, we’ll have a witch hunt on our hands. Everyone will be a suspect. You know how such things can end.”

Spock identified the cold sensation that seeped into him from Jim’s mind. Fear. Yet Jim only allowed an appropriate measure of frustration to color his voice. Startled, Spock realized that Jim’s emotional control was far beyond what most Vulcans assumed Humans capable of.

Jim took a deep breath and went on, “But even if we manage to keep the exact circumstances of this mess under wraps, if we can sell it as a reasonable disciplinary measure after too many people fucking up the replicators, the whole thing won’t be a boost for crew morale. That’s why I want the current customizations back in the system as quickly as possible. The four of us are hands down the best computer specialists on board, so we’ll get the job done quicker than anyone else. And the least I can do as captain is show everyone that I’m not above putting in some grunt work in support of all our creature comforts.”

Gaila winced, and even Rand – who, Spock had been advised, was not regarded as emotionally perceptive among the crew – nodded reluctantly. Unobtrusively, Jim reached out and pressed his right palm against Spock’s. Instantly, Spock sensed Jim’s state of mind. Not quite thoughts, but more than mere feelings. This is how ships go down far from home, this is how it begins, the stories without survivors, in which we’re our own worst enemies ... That must not happen. Must. Not. Happen. Think of the children ...

“Captain, in that case I believe we are done here now,” Spock said calmly. “I will contact you when the other departments report in regarding the status of their systems. Yeoman Rand will outline a statement for you to issue when the replicators go back online. I will send the draft directly to your PADD.”

Jim snorted, but he did not seem in the mood to put up much of a fight. “Want me out of your hair, do you?"

“Alpha shift has ended three hours and forty-five minutes ago,” Spock admonished his Bondmate. “Doctor McCoy has been quite insistent that outside of dire emergencies you are supposed to consume your evening meal on time. Since a solution for our current predicament has been devised, I surmise that Doctor McCoy would not be pleased if I failed to ensure—”

Jim lifted his hands in mock surrender. “Understood, Spock. I’ll go and eat and take a nap like a good little captain. Comm me if anything comes up. Rand, Gaila – I’m so sorry this crap spoiled the holiday for you.” He grabbed his PADD. Rolling tense shoulders, he walked to the door and was gone.

Spock remained behind, staring at the door, unable to suppress a frown. When he turned back to the computer screens, he noticed Yeoman Rand’s carefully blank expression and Lieutenant
Gaila’s grin. He recalled Nyota’s advice that sometimes inappropriate comments while on duty were appropriate means to strengthen the sense of community among the crew.

“There is no point in using the word ‘impossible’ to describe something that has clearly happened,” Spock quoted, addressing the closed door, Jim’s stubborn, tired smile fixed in his mind.

For one-point-three-five seconds the two women looked at each other. Then Gaila giggled and Rand snorted.

“He’s that, isn’t he?” Gaila said with a soft smile. “Our Captain.”

“Let’s think the unthinkable, let’s do the undoable. Let us prepare to grapple with the ineffable itself, and see if we may not eff it after all,” Rand declaimed. With an appreciative sigh and a glance at Gaila, she added, “Douglas Adams. I have a thing for classical literature.”

Spock noticed how a measure of emotional and physical tension that had placed a not insignificant amount of strain on his mind drained away. Nyota, it seemed, had been right.

“My mother shared your appreciation, Yeoman Rand,” Spock said. “It is beneficial to know ...” He was uncertain how to continue.

“The stars know our sadness,” Gaila whispered, her voice strangely gentle and solemn, “the moons see our wounds, the sun shines upon our strength, and the stories go on when we are gone. Thus it is written in the Book of Tears.”

♦

Stardate 2260.361, 2200 hours, Deck 5, Captain’s Office

“... The replicators are working again now, and we’ll do our best to add all approved customizations to the system as soon as possible. So in a few days, everything should be back to normal,” Jim said briskly. “Happy holidays. Kirk out.” He clicked off the comm and leaned back against his office chair. For a moment he closed his eyes. That was not how he’d imagined the first Christmas celebrations of their five-year mission. At the back of his mind, he felt Spock’s concern. Torn between amusement and irritation, he blinked his eyes open again and held his hand out to Spock.

Only when he felt the hot touch of Spock’s palm, he broke the silence. “Don’t worry. I’ve eaten – in sickbay, with Bones and Jo and Thorby. Good thing the sickbay replicators are a self-contained system. I’ve taken a nap. And all of my reports are finished.” He indicated the PADDs stacked neatly on his desk. He hadn’t wanted to go out and mingle before the replicator issue was resolved.

Spock straightened, clasping his hands behind his back. “I did not intend to appear unduly solicitous, sir.” His dark eyes were still too wide, too worried. Some days compartmentalizing between private life and ship’s business was not that easy, even for a Vulcan.

“It’s okay, Spock. Rough day, for all of us.” Jim rose to his feet and walked over to the replicator. Time to try if the clean install was working as advertised. He punched in the code for two cups of chai tea. Instant chai kind of sucked, but he needed a break before he could drag himself down to the festivities.

“Thorby loves our Christmas gift.” Jim leaned against Spock for a moment, enjoying his warmth and the faintly spicy scent of his skin. “I do, too, by the way.” They had replicated a multilingual
children’s edition of Surak’s Tales for the kid, with illustrations by Amanda Grayson. The watercolor paintings were exquisite, even replicated. “Jo is currently in two minds where her gift is concerned,” Jim went on, making sure there would be no awkward silence. They had given her “Colony of Catan”, the Starfleet version of an old Terran board game. “She forced us to play after dinner,” Jim explained. “Bones won. He hoarded dilithium like nobody’s business.”

For a moment, they sat in silence, sipping substandard chai. “We should do that for one of our bridge nights, I think.” The “bridge nights” (or “stress management seminars” as they were called with a wink and a nudge) were a semi-regular, informal meet-up for all bridge shift officers. A team building measure, approved by Starfleet brass no less. Basically, a counter event to the knitting circle. But with more beer. And wow, would the knitters be mad when they realized that Nyota’s rooibos customizations had been wiped from the system along with all other modifications. “Though Scotty would probably start a betting pool right away and then I’d lose half my income to you ...”

“A ship-wide chess tournament might also be an appropriate measure to improve crew morale,” Spock suggested.

“I might win against you,” Jim murmured, thoughtfully. “But what good would come of that? Chekov or Keenser would wipe the hull with me ...”

“Commander Paul has contacted me with another suggestion regarding crew morale,” Spock went on, “It seems that circumstances have engendered spontaneous festivities. A family friendly celebration is taking place on deck eight. The V’tosh ka’thur have presented a circus show, and the Enterprise band has put on a spontaneous concert and ‘sing along’. Commander Paul suggests that we put in an appearance in order to ‘cuddle the children and charm the mothers; red suit and beard optional’. Hyperbole, I hope. At this hour, younger children should be asleep in their quarters, and adolescents hardly require cuddling from their captain. Though I do not doubt your ability to dazzle anyone present, male or female, regardless of their age.”

Jim marveled how Spock managed to deliver that message with a straight face. “If Commander Paul thinks it will help, I’m happy to dress up as Santa,” he muttered. Then he tilted his head. “And for the record, I could imagine any number of adolescents who’d love to be cuddled by the first officer. However, I am afraid we’ll have to disappoint them.” Pairing index and middle finger of his right hand, he reached out and gently stroked Spock’s hand. “You’re mine.”

“I’m mine,” Spock put down his cup.

“We’ve been invited to another party, too.” With a low voice, Jim added enticingly, “Adults only. Christmas clubbing on deck 21. Music, booze, and dancing.”

“Doctor McCoy—Leonard contacted me about that matter as well,” Spock said. “Apparently I am not supposed to chain you to the Christmas tree but am obligated to share you with the rest of the ship.”

Again with that awful straight face. This time, Jim couldn’t suppress a chuckle. “To think there was a time when I actually fell for that ‘Southern gentleman’ ruse of his.” He shook his head. “Oh, Bones also informed me that the command team is not welcome at the secret orgy featuring more or less illicit substances that’s taking place at an undisclosed location tonight. Thankfully he also implied someone more or less responsible would be there to keep an eye on things.” Jim made a face. “You know, that’s what I kind of hate about getting the chair so soon. I’m missing out on essential ship’s culture.” Then he plonked his mug on the table decisively.

“Alright, enough with the moping,” Jim said. “We have places to go and things to do.”
After the shit that had gone down with the replicators that day, there was no way the command team could stay away from what was apparently turning into the party of the year on the Enterprise. Jim knew how to read between the lines of Commander Paul’s and Bones’s messages. Glancing at Spock, he realized that Spock did, too. His lover might not always be comfortable with the antics of Humans, but he had a much better grasp of human psychology and culture than he customarily let on.

Spock’s eyes crinkled ever so slightly at the corners. “So I’ve been told. Doctor’s orders.”

Stardate 2260.361, 2230 hours, Deck 8, Christmas Party, the family-friendly version

When they entered the rec area of deck eight, the first thing Jim saw was a Christmas tree built out of huge, colorful LEGO bricks, with LED lights stuck to the outer nobs. On top of the crazy tree-like structure a tiny replica of the Enterprise flashed blue and red lights.

Jim hesitated a moment before he entered the rec area and surveyed the room. The silly Christmas tree, the people ...

There were almost five-hundred people on board of the ship. Jim still didn’t know all the names and all the faces, but he’d made damn sure that he knew all of the kids – names, faces, voices. He’d know them blind. With the addition of Jo, Thorby, T’Mir, and Solok, there were forty-five children on the Enterprise. He’d already felt the responsibility for the lives of his normal crew keenly. But children upped the ante to nightmare levels. Jim had agreed with Pike and Starfleet Command that allowing families on board was a good message to send – to Starfleet, the Federation, and any new species they’d encounter on their five-year mission. Nothing said “we come in peace” more clearly than the presence of kids. He also knew for a fact just how tough kids could be, given the circumstances of his own birth, and his survival of the Tarsus disaster. Still, facing the children of the Enterprise was never easy for him.

A couple of kids were sitting on the floor in front of the Christmas tree, playing board games. Nine-year-old Natsumi Marsden seemed to be winning, while the scowl on little Benjamin Gunn’s dark face didn’t look like a very merry Christmas. The quaint Terran Christmas music had lured some of the teenagers and tweens to the dance floor. The younger kids, including Jo and her friend Gus, were engaged in one of those silly party dances with lots of jumping and hand waving and giggling. The teenagers were more into body contact. Ludwika Jerusalem and Augustyn Satie were so wrapped up into each other they might have been alone on the whole ship. Jim grinned and cast a quick glance at Spock who was just a step behind him. Young love ...

Families and friends were sitting at the tables all around the room. Some of the smaller children were already asleep on a parent’s lap. At a corner table Jim spied Bones next to Carolyn Paul. Commander Paul was there, too, engaged in earnest conversation with Thorby.

Jim wasn’t particularly fond of Christmas. He had few good memories of it, and those recollections mostly felt like disintegrating holos, flickering and fading with age, the ghost of Christmas past, spent with his mother and his brother when he was still a small child. Most holidays he recalled he’d spent alone, often drunk. Sometimes drugged. Last Christmas he’d celebrated in the hospital, with Bones and Jo and both Spocks. Close to complete recovery, but still far from getting his ship back ... He shook his head, trying to dispel the sudden dizziness. To be here, now, on the Enterprise, with Spock at his side—

“Uncle Jim!” Jo bounded up to him and grabbed his hand. “Come on, my friends want to say hi!”
Helplessly, Jim raised his hands in the universal gesture of defeat and glanced at Spock. A slight softening of the Vulcan’s stern features, accompanied by a mellow feeling in Jim’s mind, betrayed Spock – his first officer and husband was smiling.

Jim let himself be towed off. The kids stopped their crazy ring-around-the-LEGO-tree. Greeting him with applause and shouts of “Merry Christmas, Captain, sir!”, they crowded him eagerly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Spock walking over to Bones. Commander Paul was already pulling out a chair for him, and Thorby’s small face lit up at Spock’s approach. Carolyn Paul, who had volunteered as Thorby’s and Jo’s babysitter for the night, waved to Jim, and even Bones looked less grim.

♦

**Stardate 2260.361, 2400 hours, Deck 21, Christmas Party, the adults-only version**

The music battered Jim’s body, and the bass vibrated deep in his bones. Strobe lights flashed to highlight smiling faces in bursts of white and blue. Then the shadows closed in on them once more, and they were sucked into a writhing vortex of rhythm. Without Spock’s presence behind him, it would have been too much, the pressure of people all around him, congealing into an amorphous mass of moving bodies, of intimate glimpses of limbs and lips. Sweat and artificial Christmas scents mingled into a mind-numbing perfume.

Four round tables had been turned into makeshift stages. Empty boxes labelled “Starfleet Emergency Rations” were piled up around them. On top of the tables, Gaila and Gwaloth and the (male) Andorian twins from Maintenance were swaying sinfully, dressed mostly in Santa hats.

“Holy hell,” Jim muttered, when they were pushed closer to the middle of the rec area. Mentally he calculated the current course of the Enterprise, the subspace lag for transmissions to and from Earth, and the speed of PR fallouts in order to determine when he’d need to have a statement ready. Though at present he had no idea what he could possibly say about ... that.

**That:** On a fifth table, in the center of the room, the long lost love child of a Festivus pole and a neo-minimalist Christmas tree made of scrap metal was proudly displayed, liberally decorated with lingerie and sex toys. Clearly, someone – probably Gaila – had taken the idea of Christmas as a feast of love a little too literally. And of course no one had bothered to correct her. Or to tone down the trimmings of the tree to a state not guaranteed to cause a minor scandal. With a wicked, unrepentant grin, Gaila waved and blew them a kiss.

Suddenly, Bones appeared in front of him. Either he had managed to put the kids to bed in record time or he’d left Carolyn in charge of those details. Whatever; he was here now, grinning like a maniac, and balancing three steaming glasses in his hands, obviously hell-bent on getting the party on. To Jim’s surprise, Spock grabbed a glass right away. It took a lot to get a Vulcan inebriated, but apparently Spock was willing to give it a try tonight. Jim blew out the flames dancing on the surface of his drink, cautiously took a sip and promptly coughed. Red Saurian brandy, served hot and laced with Spice. Okay, with that stuff even Spock had a pretty good chance to get drunk as a skunk.

“Holy hell,” Jim gasped.

“This revelry appears to affect your vocabulary.” Spock almost touched Jim’s ear with his lips in an effort to make himself heard without shouting. “Fascinating.”
In spite of the haze of body heat that entrapped them, Jim shuddered. His heart pounding, he stared at the fiery liquor in his glass. To drink even one glass of that stuff was probably not the best idea he’d ever had. He could only hope that he’d remember not to have another shot when he was finished with this one. On the other hand, it was Christmas, and it had been one hell of a day ... Jim raised his glass to Bones in a silent thank-you.

“Merry Christmas,” Bones mouthed. With a smirk, he winked at them and turned away to dance closer to a beautiful blonde – Doctor Chapel, Jim realized with a start, in high heels and a tiny black leather something that looked positively poured over her curves. Delicious. But a starship captain who also happened to be Bonded to his Vulcan first officer shouldn’t drool over pretty doctors. He swallowed hard and forced himself to turn away. However, that strategy proved to be less helpful than anticipated. Instead of Bones getting handsy with Chapel, he was now faced with Scotty making out with Elena Amell. And what was that thing sticking out from her hair? He narrowed his eyes and waited for the next salvo of strobe lights. Mistletoe. The Assistant Chief Engineer had a sprig of mistletoe in her hair.

Christmas-crazy, he thought. They are all Christmas-crazy. And there’s no hypo for that ...
Nothing to do but ride it out ...

Leaning back against Spock with a sigh, Jim allowed himself to sink into the rhythm that thrummed in his veins. Tension melted away as they were swept up by the tidal powers of people swaying and swirling all around them. An ensign in a blue Santa hat danced up to them to relieve them of their empty glasses, pressing new ones into their hands. Spock slid his arm around him, drawing him into a tight embrace. Alcohol and arousal kindled a fire in Jim’s stomach, and through the Bond he sensed ... He twisted around to look at Spock. In dizzying bursts, the flashing lights illuminated eyes black with desire, unsmiling lips tense and tight with unspoken need.

Fuck. Jim could have kicked himself. He should have known better than to drag a touch-telepath into this claustrophobic chaos of overstimulated minds. Spock’s controls must be crumbling under the onslaught of emotions unleashed around them. But before he could formulate a plan of escape, Spock caught his hand. “I knew what to expect, Jim. I ...”

... want this ... need this ...

Loss of control. Feared and craved with shocking intensity. From one moment to the next, Jim was hard. He couldn’t help it – he pressed against Spock, only to find him equally aroused. In public. And obviously not giving a damn, because he only pulled Jim closer. Groaning at the cruel friction, Jim realized he shouldn’t be surprised. Spock didn’t do anything half-way. He buried his face against Spock’s shoulder to muffle a moan. His surroundings blurred into an abstract seascape of lights and shadows. The music faded away. Within seconds, he was only aware of Spock. Of his arms around him, his hands on his ass, of his erection rubbing against him, hot and hard even through the fabric of their uniform pants.

“Fuck,” Jim groaned. “Fuck ...”

In his mind, he sensed that Spock was beyond words, already too close, much too close to climax. The knowledge that Spock used what little was left of his control to hold off his orgasm because he wanted Jim inside his body was almost enough to send him over the edge. Stumbling ahead, he pushed Spock backwards, in the general direction of the turbolifts. Each step was almost too much, more pain than pleasure. He felt sweat form on his forehead that had nothing to do with the exertion of dancing or the ambient temperature.

When they finally tumbled onto their bed, naked, Jim wasn’t entirely sure how they had made it there, and where they had lost their clothes en route. He gripped himself firmly at the base, hoping
that pure willpower could make him last longer at this point. With a shuddering breath, he laid his other hand over Spock, palm flat and cool on Vulcan-hot skin.

“Are you sure you want this?” Jim asked. He barely recognized his own voice, hoarse with lust.

Instead of an answer, Spock spread his legs wide in a physical invitation and arched his hips up, pressing his penis against Jim’s hand. Spock had no words to express his desires, but the Bond left no doubt about just what he wanted, what he needed.

“Okay.” Jim grabbed the bottle of lube from the shelf above the bed. Although he ached for Spock, he took his time and didn’t allow a meld yet. Slow, slow, slow, down, down, down, he chanted in his mind. Gently he slipped a lubed finger into Spock’s body. The transference via the Bond was almost too much. Almost. Perfect Vulcan muscle control allowed him to add a second and a third finger almost too easily. The prostate was more pronounced than in a human body. The slightest touch sent Spock into spasms. The echo of the sensation in his mind nearly had Jim screaming with pleasure.

Jim couldn’t wait another second. He drew up Spock’s knees, spreading him open before him, and sank into his body. For a heartbeat he feared he’d come at the very first slick slide. So hot, so tight. Hotter and tighter than any human body. Gently drawing back and easing inside again was the sweetest agony he’d ever experienced in his life. With one hand he steadied himself, with the other he grasped Spock’s erection. More than uncoordinated, jerky strokes were beyond him, though.

Then hot fingertips found his meld points. Spock’s passion burst into his mind like a supernova, and all finesse failed him. He pounded himself into his lover’s body, while Spock dragged his hand harder over his penis, desperate for more friction. A slight shift in position, and Spock shouted slurried words in Golic Vulcan, helpless, out of control in his lust. The feedback loop of the Bond gave Jim no time to catch his breath before the pressure in his balls built to the limit. In a surge of painful pleasure he spent himself deep inside the heat of Spock’s body and mind.

For long moments they floated in the aftermath, shivering, trembling, with no knowledge of any boundaries between their bodies or their minds. To withdraw from Spock’s body was torture for both of them. Once they had separated, they still clung to each other, arms and legs tangled together, minds deeply melded. When Jim could see clearly again, he focused on Spock’s eyes – dazed, dark and dreamy ... and glistening with tears. Still beyond words, Jim pushed himself up on his elbows. Carefully, Jim kissed the corners of Spock’s eyes and licked away the tears trailing down his temples.

“\n\n“When the immense drugged universe explodes
In a cascade of unendurable colour
And leaves us gasping naked,
This is no more than the ecstasy of chaos:
Hold fast, with both hands, to that royal love
Which alone, as we know certainly, restores
Fragmentation into true being.”
\n
Chapter End Notes
"There is no point in using the word 'impossible' to describe something that has clearly happened" and "Let's think the unthinkable, let's do the undoable. Let us prepare to grapple with the ineffable itself, and see if we may not eff it after all" are quotes from Douglas Adams, “Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency”.

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