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**Endurance**

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**Summary**

Spock, Christine Chapel and a group of young ensigns are stranded on an icy planet… This doesn’t contain a lot of very mature content, but there are details of death, and a sex scene.
Prologue & Chapter 1

Part One:

Taken from logs recovered from emergency beacon of the Shuttlecraft Copernicus NCC-1701/12.

Shuttlecraft Log: Stardate 1673.1
Commander Spock recording.

We departed the Enterprise point three two hours previously, and are proceeding en route to Kalvar 7 as per schedule. All crew are present and correct as rostered. Ensign Lovett is proving himself quite capable as a navigator, but displaying certain emotional inconsistencies that should be addressed by a competent person at some point in future. Aside from some – inappropriate staring, the basis of which I cannot fathom – from certain female ensigns, all is proceeding quite smoothly so far.

Next log will be in approximately two hours.

End.

*****

Shuttlecraft Log: Stardate 1673.4
Commander Spock recording.

En route to Kalvar 7 – approximately eighteen hours from destination assuming we continue current course and speed. Ensign Lovett has identified an ion storm two point three light years from our position. Ensign Fournier has expressed some concerns, but I do not believe it to be a danger at this time.

Next log will be in approximately two hours.

End.

*****

Shuttlecraft Log: Stardate 1673.7
Commander Spock recording.

En route to Kalvar 7 – approximately fifteen hours from destination. I have retired from the cockpit in order to allow the ensigns some extra responsibility. I – cannot imagine that too much trouble can ensue. I am only three metres away from them, and separated by one door.
Personal Log. Spock. Stardate 1673.7

I find myself in Shuttlecraft *Copernicus*, in charge of six eighteen-year-old humans, apparently conducting an experiment in education. There are certain persons touted by their education providers as able, and possibly excellent, candidates for Starfleet training who, whether by dint of their personalities or upbringing, seem unsuitable for the rigorous academic schedule of Starfleet Academy. Admiral Dawson, in charge of such matters at the academy, has proposed a scheme whereby those persons spend a year in active service within Starfleet *before* entering the academy at the age of nineteen, instead of at the conventional age of eighteen.

I am uncertain of the wisdom of this strategy. The idea of taking unstable, albeit brilliant, youths and placing them on active service on a starship seems at best misguided, and at worst dangerous. The idea is that such service will help to iron out any behavioural problems and instil a certain degree of maturity in these individuals. But… Even now, sitting in seclusion in the rear of the shuttle, I can hear certain arguments arising between them, which Miss Chapel is, I would say vainly, attempting to resolve.

Miss Chapel is my partner in this mission, in joint care of these – youths.

Apparently Captain Kirk spent some time attempting to choose the best possible pair of officers for this duty – and Miss Chapel and I were the solution he arrived at. I am talented in many areas, and also an obvious figure of authority. Miss Chapel, he believes, combines useful medical skills – perhaps he fears injuries resulting from their teenaged arguments? – with a certain degree of maternal care, and various areas of practical expertise useful to this mission. I wonder, recalling the smirk on the captain’s face when he told me of this assignment, whether there were any other motives to the pairing? This is probably not the place to voice my suspicions.

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Shuttlecraft Log: Stardate 1674.1

Commander Spock recording.

The ion storm previously reported has increased in magnitude, and is now pursuing us at a speed exceeding our own top speed. I cannot be certain of the precise speed, since the magnetism is interfering with our instrumentation. I only know it is gaining on us, and is of sufficient size that we cannot hope to evade it. In different circumstances, I would be gratified that Ensign Fournier’s assessment of the storm had been correct – but I would rather that she had been wrong.

Our sole option is to seek the closest available refuge – and meanwhile, to – batten down the hatches, as the captain might say. I will record our destination, if it can be identified, when it is
Log: Stardate 1674.2

Unable to outrun storm. Antimatter injectors overloaded. Explosion imminent. Hopeful of chance to eject over –

*Spock, come on.*

*Put on your own parachute – that’s an order. I need to –* 

*Mr Spock…*

*Everybody be sure to take a communicator. Pack any useful item in your backpacks, not exceeding the weight limit.*

*How on earth can we tell -*

*Commander –*

<screaming>

<interference>

<silence>

******

Part Two:

‘And that’s it?’ McCoy asked gloomily. He stood leaning over the back of a chair in a private briefing room. No one quite felt like sitting down. Restlessness seemed to be a disease at the moment.

‘That’s all I can extract, sir,’ Lieutenant Uhura said, fingering the disc in the slot as if by stroking it she could coax more data from it. ‘The ion storm must have been right upon them – it probably burned out the relays.’

‘They were ejecting,’ Kirk said stubbornly.

He was the only one in the room besides Uhura who had mustered the self-control to sit down and give full, undiluted attention to the data streaming on the screen as the logs were played. They had found the emergency beacon floating serenely in the wake of the ion storm, eerily unharmed,
containing log recordings that were perfectly intact until that final one that had been interjected with different voices, and fuzzed with static. It was impossible to tell how far it had been carried by the storm.

‘If they were ejecting, they were in safe space,’ Kirk continued. ‘They must have been entering orbit of a habitable planet – they must have. We didn’t find any wreckage floating in space – nothing but the beacon – and Spock would never have ordered ejection unless there was a hope of survival.’

‘That was Christine Chapel’s voice in that last recording,’ McCoy put in – uselessly, it seemed, but he felt the need to contribute something to the discussion. ‘She was telling Spock to put a parachute on. Is it possible he –?’

‘No – he was telling her to put a parachute on,’ Uhura corrected gently.

‘The implication – ’ McCoy continued.

‘Spock can be gallant, but he’s not stupid about it,’ Kirk cut in. ‘There were ’chutes enough for all of them.’

‘He’d be last to jump – you can guarantee that,’ Scotty added morosely.

‘Maybe,’ Kirk nodded. ‘But he still would have jumped – and if they jumped, they’re on a planet. We just need to find that planet.’

1.

Wherever they were, it was cold.

Spock had had plenty of time to take in the overview of their destination as he had at first free-fallen, and then parachuted, down from the bitter, thin air of the upper atmosphere. They had at least managed to set a course to a habitable planet, had managed enter the atmosphere on a trajectory suitable to avoid burn-up, and had managed to eject from the shuttle over a day-lit land mass rather than open ocean. Beyond that, however, they did not seem to be fortunate in their location.

At first they had tumbled through nothingness – or to be more exact the rarefied air of the ionosphere – their descent barely slowed by the negligible concentration of gases, with icy cold ripping at their protective suits. As per standard procedure they were held together in a ring, gloved hands clutched in gloved hands, the grip on both Spock’s left and right hands almost unbearably tight as ensigns who had barely had more training than one or two high-atmosphere jumps held onto him for dear life. If he had allowed himself to think of it, both the speed at which they were travelling and the responsibility of his task would have been staggering.

They seemed to fall for an interminable length of time towards the opaque cloud layer below, but in reality it was only a matter of minutes before the swirling mist was rushing towards them and they were enveloped in blinding darkness, shrouded with water droplets that froze into a carapace over their clothing and then cracked off in shards at any movement. On breaking through to the dull day beneath Spock experienced brief relief that his split-second assessment of the geography of the planet had been correct, and they were, indeed, heading for solid land. Then his eyes took
in a vast expanse of snow patched tundra, snaked with dull grey rivers, occasional blotches of forest, and lakes that looked like rainwater puddles from this altitude. He did not notice any evidence of conurbations, roads or artificial structures — although that did not necessarily rule out their existence. He could see the occasional spider's web of tracks, however, like the worn paths of migratory animals spreading across the tundra. It seemed there was at least some life in this place.

The six ensigns and Nurse Chapel were still spread out about him in the air, looking like absurd birds that had suddenly discovered they were flightless, ravaged by streaming, icy winds as they plunged downward. They were all hastily but properly dressed in cold-weather gear, with high-altitude oxygen masks sealed over their mouths and noses, their faces rendered anonymous by the thin cold-resistant hoods and goggles that covered the rest of their heads. The survival suits and gloves were doing their jobs, and no one’s hand had yet become numb enough to slip from their neighbour’s grip — although Spock was finding himself growing distractingly chilled in a suit calibrated for human temperature tolerance.

They had all, thankfully, taken heed of his instructions not to exceed the weight limits in what they were carrying.

All except Spock.

Spock had not grabbed hold of what fell within the designated weight limits for his parachute. He had grabbed what had been most logical and beneficial to take with him; that which he reasoned would not overburden him so much as to cause his death on impact. He held as many of their rations as possible, extra power packs for the phasers and flashlights — and one bulky, heavy, but extremely useful subspace transmitter that was now lashed to his chest with rope from the emergency supply locker. For now, his contact with seven other bodies was stabilising his descent. He knew that when he let go, that would change.

The inbuilt earpiece in Spock’s slim head-covering ticked off the altitude in pristine tones, the interval between each thousand foot gap becoming shorter and shorter. At twelve thousand he gave the order through his intercom to release their grips on each other. He had to actively fight to get the ensign to his left to let go. He could only hope that the man would be controlled enough to listen to instructions as they drifted further apart. He had other concerns than trying to talk panicking ensigns through procedures that they should know by heart.

Without the stabilising influence of the others, the odd bulk attached to Spock’s chest was already causing him to spiral uncontrollably, the ground beneath becoming ever more blurred as it rotated beneath him at greater and greater speeds. As the altimeter chimed out eight thousand feet he gave the order to open parachutes, relying on the device rather than his own assessment of his spinning surroundings. As the fabric unfurled he could tell instantly that the weight was adversely affecting his descent, although the design of the parachute thankfully slowed the sickening revolutions. It seemed that the others around him were suddenly arrested by invisible strings, while he continued far faster than the normal rate of descent.

The ground rushed up to meet him with startling speed. Its appearance of undeniable solidity was enhanced by the fact he was making for plants and rock, not one of the sparse patches of snow. He slammed into it still earlier than he had anticipated and found himself flung forwards violently, the parachute billowing briefly overhead and falling beyond him. He had tried to keep himself relatively upright to save the subspace transmitter from damage, but in the event of his landing he could barely be sure which parts of himself were damaged, let alone of the inanimate box strapped to him. Pain shivered through multiple parts of his body, concentrating acutely in the leg that had hit the ground first.

He lay on the ground, content to lie still for now, dimly aware of things that were quite irrelevant
to his physical condition.

The ground beneath him was relatively soft, dark with dampness, and smelt of peat.

The vegetation that he lay on bore a striking resemblance to grass – long, thin blades, tightly narrow and shining to protect themselves against exposure in this frigid environment.

There were many rocks scattered about him. One of them lay partly under his cheek, the cold of the igneous, granite-like formation being gradually warmed by a trickle of his blood.

The oxygen mask he wore had been knocked aside by the impact. It pressed uncomfortably into his face. The damp grass that his nose was pressed against was at a level of cold that surpassed uncomfortable and ranged, for a Vulcan, towards dangerous.

There were voices in this place, and hurried footsteps.

Of course, it had taken the others longer to descend, and then they had had to find him…

‘Here! He’s here. Nurse Chapel!’

He recognised that voice. He moved his head a little, blinking some kind of warm fluid away from his eye. More blood, he supposed…

But that voice. It was Ensign Malton – the young, dark-haired, dark eyed female that seemed to spend so much time gazing at his ears when she thought he was occupied.

And then he heard an altogether more familiar voice as a well-wrapped figure bent close to him and said sharply, ‘Mr Spock! Commander Spock. Do you hear me?’

‘I assure you, Nurse Chapel,’ he began with difficulty. ‘My hearing is quite undamaged.’

He caught a wave of relief. She did project her emotions so…

‘Don’t try to move yet,’ she said in a softer tone as he stirred. ‘Did you lose consciousness at all?’

Spock blinked again, again trying to move, but stopping as a warning pain washed through him.

‘I – am not absolutely certain,’ he admitted. ‘But I don’t believe so.’

‘Give me a moment,’ she said, and Spock closed his eyes, content to lie silently until she was ready.

He knew subliminally that his inertia was a sign that he was growing seriously cold, but the symptoms of the problem precluded the solution. Then a hypo hissed against his neck – the only place she could gain access without removing his clothing – and he felt warmth and motivation gradually blossoming through his veins.

‘No signs of concussion. Give the drug a minute to work, Mr Spock,’ Nurse Chapel said clearly. ‘It’s just a temporary boost. You lost a lot of heat in the descent, and this will bring you back closer to normal. Everyone’s had a dose.’

Spock took in a deep breath, then fumbled with his gloved hand, pushing the useless oxygen mask away from his face. The drug had helped to clear his mind, giving him a much better idea of what and where his injuries were. Apart from an intense pain in his left ankle he mostly seemed to be suffering cuts and bruising, and the pain was easily dealt with by mental suppression.

‘Thank you, Nurse,’ he said carefully, beginning to roll onto his back. ‘The shot was quite
Thank you, Nurse,’ he said carefully, beginning to roll onto his back. ‘The shot was quite efficacious. Now, is everyone – ’

Nurse Chapel put her hand swiftly to his shoulder, surprising him with the strength of her grip.

‘Wait before you move,’ she said quickly, running her scanner up and down the length of his body. ‘Your spine’s undamaged,’ she nodded.

‘Yes, I was aware of that,’ Spock nodded.

He sat up, oblivious to Chapel’s expression at his blunt statement, looking about himself briefly to be sure that all six ensigns were with them, and unhurt. They all seemed rather bewildered, clutching billows of parachute fabric to their chests as if that were a scant piece of familiarity for them to cling to.

Next he focussed on his surroundings, surveying the terrain that they had found themselves in. The ground was carpeted in patches with a low, bushy shrub, somewhat like heather, and there were small drifts of snow caught in shadowed nooks and dips, each patch brittle with an icy crust that spoke of thaw and refreezing. Perhaps if he had fallen on a patch of that shrub instead of on rocks and grass, he would have found himself less damaged.

There was nothing to be done about it now, however. He had fallen onto hard ground, and he had undoubtedly suffered injury. The next thing to ascertain was whether his cargo had also suffered injury. He began to fumble at the rope tying the subspace transmitter to his chest, and after a moment Chapel began to assist him, until the box was freed. It seemed relatively unscathed, apart from one long, deep dent along one side. It was, Spock noticed with dismay, where most of the most sensitive circuits lay. It was unlikely that it would work without repair. He rolled it onto the grass beside him, and turned his attention to the young and obviously shaken ensigns.

‘Let me carry on checking you over,’ Chapel said anxiously, but he shook his head.

‘Once I have given these orders, nurse. Our first priorities are water and shelter,’ he said, raising his voice so as to be heard by the entire group. ‘Ensign Sutherland, try to find a relatively flat space, preferably sheltered, and clear it of obstruction.’

‘Sheltered, sir?’ Ensign Sutherland echoed, looking about herself blankly. She was short, but seemed relatively well-built and had scored well in survival aptitude tests. Her speciality was astrophysics, but that was hardly needed in this situation, and Spock judged that she was the best choice for this manual work.

‘Sheltered,’ Spock repeated. ‘I do not expect you to find stands of trees, Ensign. You may be able to see somewhere in a slight depression, or sheltered from the prevailing wind by rocks. Try to find somewhere relatively dry, and, if possible, sheltered.’

‘Of – course, sir,’ she said.

She still sounded uncertain, but Spock was gratified to see that, after a moment of indecision, she looked down at the shrubs about her to see which way they had been forced to grow by the wind, then made for the nearest large rock, and ascended it in order to see better where might be a good spot.

‘Ensign Lovett,’ Spock continued, turning his attention to the shuttlecraft’s former navigator – a young-looking, dark haired man who seemed generally to be bothered by a surfeit of energy. ‘Help Ensign Sutherland please. The rest of you can begin to prepare the tents for erection.’

There was a snort of amusement from one of the ensigns at the word erection, which Spock chose to ignore. He began to unclip the cumbersome parachute harness from his body, trying to slip it off
without aggravating his injuries further. He looked up to see the remaining ensigns exchanging confused glances, and finally Ensign Del Sarto said hesitantly, ‘I – er – don’t know that anyone brought the tents, sir.’

Spock closed his eyes briefly, and on opening them caught the gaze of Nurse Chapel. If anything, she looked quietly amused.

‘Am I to understand that no one here familiarised themselves with survival procedure before embarking on this mission?’ he asked dryly.

There was a long, painful silence, and finally a female ensign said in something close to a whisper, ‘The parachutes are designed to work as one and two man tents, sir.’

‘Thank you, Ensign Grant,’ Spock nodded. Karen Grant’s greatest fault was a timidity that tended to overwhelm her talents. He could only hope that this crisis would help her confidence, rather than diminish it. ‘Are you familiar with the method for pitching the tents?’

She stepped forward, coming out from behind the other ensigns, and nodded, saying quietly, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Very good,’ Spock nodded. ‘Considering the cold, I’d advise two man tents. Please explain the method to the others, and once Ensign Sutherland has located a suitable pitch, you can begin to erect them.’

Nurse Chapel crouched silently next to him, watching the small group of ensigns as they dispersed. Finally, once they were all occupied with the tents, she touched the dented box next to the Vulcan, then turned her piercing gaze on him, and asked him;

‘What is this, Mr Spock? What was worth risking your life to bring?’

Spock regarded the box himself, and told her truthfully, ‘It is a subspace transmitter. I may have risked my life to bring it, but it may be the means of saving all of our lives – or at least, of restoring us to the Enterprise.’

She acknowledged that with a nod and a slight smile. It seemed best not to invest all of her hopes in this one dented box, and in Spock’s skill at electronics, no matter how much she wanted to trust in his ability.

‘You’re aware that it’s responsible for you breaking your ankle?’ she asked, with more sympathy in her voice than censure.

Spock met her eyes again, and nodded. ‘I did assess the risks before I chose to bring it. I wasn’t certain I had broken the ankle, but I suspected that was the case. Do you have the requisite medical supplies, Nurse Chapel?’

She exhaled, toying with her backpack, over half of which was taken up with emergency medical equipment and medicines.

Spock raised an eyebrow at her seeming uncertainty.

‘I would be surprised if you weren’t intimately acquainted with the contents of your emergency medical pack, Nurse Chapel,’ he told her. ‘Should I decipher your hesitation as a negative?’

She looked up again, shrugging apologetically. ‘I have painkillers, and spray bandage, and antibiotics. I don’t have a bone knitter, Mr Spock. There just isn’t the power supply or the room for something like that in an emergency kit.’
Spock nodded, inhaling deeply, before sitting up a little straighter, setting his expression against the pain that the movement caused.

‘The spray bandage will have to serve for now,’ he said stoically. ‘I do not want to take painkillers. I need to keep my mind clear.’

‘What about the Vulcan healing trance?’ she asked tentatively.

Spock had shown the staggering power of his own mind only a year earlier, when he had recovered from multiple organ damage with almost no medical assistance, simply by putting himself in a trance in order to focus intently on healing himself. A broken ankle, she imagined, would be far less difficult to heal than the bullet wound through his chest had been.

Spock pressed his lips together, glancing again at the small group of ensigns, gathered about the billowing parachute fabric in a slight depression a hundred feet away, as they attempted to erect the tents.

‘I cannot attempt a healing trance,’ he said. ‘I am needed.’

‘We could spare you, I think,’ she told him softly. ‘If it would heal your ankle.’

Spock shook his head sparsely.

‘It’s too cold,’ he said shortly. ‘If I attempted a healing trance I would likely slip into a coma from which it would be impossible to rouse me.’

His reluctance to admit to this weakness was totally illogical. Nurse Chapel must be fully aware of a Vulcan’s susceptibility to cold. Still, he did not like to bring it to her attention.

‘No,’ he said, looking directly at the nurse. ‘You must do what you can with what we have.’

‘I’d rather wait until we’re in shelter than expose your lower leg in this cold,’ she said apologetically. ‘Are you sure you won’t take painkillers? Just a low dose – ’

‘None are needed, Miss Chapel,’ Spock said briskly, looking over at the struggling ensigns even before he had finished his sentence. ‘There is no way you can help me at this time. Since I am incapacitated, you would make yourself more useful by supervising the erection of the tents,’ he said. ‘I assume you’re familiar with the procedure?’

‘I looked it over just before leaving for this mission,’ she said, with a brittle tone to her voice. ‘I’m perfectly familiar with it.’

Spock watched her walk away with an unwavering gaze. As she got closer to the ensigns she became almost indistinguishable from them, in the thick survival gear that smoothed out distinct features. Almost indistinguishable… Her gait, and her posture were undeniably hers, undeniably familiar.

Almost as familiar was that tone of voice she had used. He had lost count of the times that he had engaged the nurse in conversation, and the veneer of rank and station had begun to wear through, until there was almost, almost, a connection that cut through all of those awkwardnesses. And then he remembered logic and control, duty and discipline, and the glass wall raised itself again, and she was left with that brittleness covering over a very human sense of hurt.

He sighed. The pain in his ankle throbbed, reminding him sharply of his fragile mortality. He had seven people under his command, six of them little more than teenagers, and he was incapacitated
by the failure of a few shards of collagen, hydroxyapatite and sundry other chemicals within his left ankle.

He turned his face upwards as he pulled upon his pain-controlling disciplines. A brief break in the cloud showed a sky tinted with fluctuating ribbons of continually morphing light. Green replaced gold, replaced blue, purple, rusty reds, and gold again. The last remnants of the ion storm were passing overhead, the violent strength of it concentrated out in deep space, the fringes of it licking at the planet’s exosphere. The worst effects of the storm here, protected by atmosphere as they were, would be perhaps some changes in weather, and the aurora-like lights flickering about the clouds. Out in space, they had been disastrous.

Looking back to his small group of charges he saw a couple of the ensigns turn to look at him, startled expressions on their faces. Nurse Chapel had obviously explained why he was sitting here, inactive. He caught their emotions as if they had been blown on the wind. Fear, uncertainty, apprehension. As little as he understood those emotions, unchecked as they were, he knew he would have to help them to manage and curtail them. It was his responsibility to overcome this trifling injury, and to command this mission – to keep these people safe, to return them intact to the Enterprise, and ultimately to their anxious families and friends and loved ones.

After only a few more minutes he saw that they had completed the erection of the tents to the letter of the survival manual. There were four of them, each big enough for two people, oriented in a circle about a central area large enough for a cooking fire. Nurse Chapel was coming back toward him with the two male ensigns in tow.

Spock preferred not to dwell on the ignominy of being carried to the tents by Ensign Lovett and Ensign Del Sarto, but at least he was, eventually, in a place sheltered enough to allow the removal of clothing without serious danger. A rucksack served as a pillow, but he was not using it, preferring to prop himself up on his elbows in a semi-sitting position. A thin but insulating sleeping bag was laid over most of his body, with only his lower leg exposed. Thankfully the only ones present for now were he and Nurse Chapel, the ensigns being outside trying to instil a degree of order into the makeshift camp.

‘It’s not a clean break,’ Chapel murmured as she scanned the exposed ankle. The joint was already swollen, and mottled with greenish black bruising. ‘On the ship, I think Dr McCoy would have operated. The best I can do here is try to get everything lined up with external manipulation, and set it with spray bandage. It’s going to hurt, Mr Spock,’ she said seriously, looking up from his swollen and bruised ankle and meeting his eyes. ‘I really would recommend that you take a painkiller before I begin.’

‘Miss Chapel, painkillers interfere with my ability to control my thought processes,’ he said steadily. ‘I appreciate your concern, but it is likely that drugs would cause me more pain due to my inability to control my reaction.’

‘All right,’ she nodded finally, laying a hand lightly on his foot. ‘If there are any Vulcan techniques you have at your disposal, I suggest you use them.’

Spock finally allowed himself to lie back, pushing the unused rucksack aside so that his head was level with the rest of his body. He closed his eyes, and brought his pain mantras to bear.

‘Proceed,’ he murmured.

His voice seemed very far away. That was good – it indicated that he had managed to draw his mind away from his body. It was not a case of lessening the pain he felt – it was a case of not allowing his mind to be aware of it.
A spike of pain jerked through him, and he grunted without meaning to. He fought to keep himself detached as hot pain flooded in through the crack he had allowed, ignoring the distracting sound of Miss Chapel speaking, pulling himself back to that quiet, still place…

And then he could feel the solid, reassuring constriction of spray bandage setting on his skin, and he allowed himself to come back to reality, opening his eyes and focusing on the nurse who was still kneeling near his feet.

‘Are you done, Nurse?’ he asked carefully.

She looked at him, and smiled apologetically. ‘I’ve done all I can. I’m sorry about that. It was harder to manipulate than I expected. But how does it feel now?’

‘It is – painful,’ Spock said tightly, ‘but I can feel the benefit of the cast.’

‘It should start to settle down now it’s supported,’ she assured him. ‘It won’t be pain-free, but it should start to feel a bit easier.’

‘Yes,’ Spock said gravely. He looked up at the nurse. ‘It will be necessary for me to be able to travel,’ he said seriously. ‘I don’t believe that will be possible without some kind of crutch to lean on. Did you notice any trees or shrubs in our locality?’

‘I haven’t seen anything bigger than that heather-like plant,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Is it really necessary to move? I wouldn’t recommend it – at least not for a few days.’

‘I was able to see quite a large section of the planet’s surface during our descent from the shuttle,’ Spock said. ‘The snow became notably less as the planet curved towards the equator – south, according to Starfleet constant, due to the angle of this planet on the galactic plane. The further south we travel, the warmer it will become, and the easier it will be to survive. We will not make swift progress, but all progress is progress. We may also come across intelligent life, if there is such here.’

‘Were there any signs?’ she asked, casting her mind back to the jumbled moments just before they had left the plummeting shuttle. It must have been less than an hour ago that they had been in a catastrophically decaying orbit of the planet, but it felt like days had passed.

Spock shook his head. ‘The instruments were not functioning sufficiently to tell. It was as much as I could do to determine that this planet was habitable. Picking up evidence of intelligent occupation is a much more complex task. If there had been time, I could have chosen a more suitable landing spot…’

He trailed off, and Chapel read in his eyes that momentary uncertainty that lay underneath his decisive mien. He was in charge of a group of seven people, six of them with very little off-ship experience, and every decision that he made swayed them closer to life or to death.

‘It’s solid ground, the temperature’s tolerable, even to Vulcans, there’s available water, and from what I can see of the vegetation there’s the possibility of finding edible plants,’ she told him quietly. ‘It’s not a paradise, but it’s workable.’

‘Yes,’ Spock nodded, looking up with a more confident expression in his eyes. ‘And we will make it work. I think, judging by the light, that nightfall is approaching. Our best tactic for the moment will be to eat, and then to sleep.’

‘Two to a tent, Mr Spock,’ Chapel reminded him. ‘Do you have an idea as to sleeping arrangements?’
Spock lifted an eyebrow. ‘Ordinarily I would suggest that the – more adult – members of the party each share with an ensign, but that would still leave four of the ensigns without chaperones. Psychologically speaking, I imagine morale would be best served by allowing the younger members of the party to stay with their peers.’

‘I think you’re right,’ Chapel nodded, although she couldn’t help but be surprised at his capitulation to teenage psychology. McCoy had told her more than once about Spock’s near disastrous landing on Taurus 2 in the shuttlecraft Galileo, when human psychological needs had factored very little into his strategy for survival. That had been almost three years ago, though, and it was obvious that the Vulcan’s ability to understand human emotional needs had developed in that time.

‘Besides,’ the nurse continued, running a scanner over his foot. ‘I’d like to be close at hand to keep an eye on that ankle. If it swells I might need to remove the cast and apply a new one.’

She kept her eyes firmly averted from his face. She knew, and Spock must know, the attractions to her of the idea of the two of them sleeping together in one tent. Neither would say anything, of course. She would continue to desire him, and he would continue to perform his duty, with no capitulation to emotional needs.

Spock exhaled slowly, raising himself on his elbows again to regard the limb, now safely cocooned in its white cast.

‘I sincerely hope, Miss Chapel, that the necessity doesn’t arise,’ he said with feeling.

She smiled. It was not often that Spock allowed a glimpse into his own private thoughts, but she could see now that he was in pain, and worried, and apprehensive about what was to come. It was not really a situation to smile about, but she could not help the swell of affection she felt for him in those brief moments when he looked into her eyes and actually gave her a small piece of himself.
Chapter 2

Christine awoke with an odd, confused sensation of having gone camping at a completely inappropriate time of year. She was warm inside the sleeping bag, but her face, and one hand that was pillowed underneath it, were numbed with cold. The pallid light of dawn was filtering through the tent walls, and the surrounding world was almost entirely silent.

She absorbed those facts gradually, lying with her eyes still closed and her body still relaxed with sleep. The dawn light she saw as her eyes blinked open – but for an instant she saw one other thing – Spock’s gaze, fixed unswervingly on her face, as he lay still but wide awake in his own sleeping bag. The moment he noticed that she was conscious his gaze dropped, without embarrassment or explanation. She suspected that he did not realise she had seen him looking at her.

‘Good morning, Mr Spock,’ she said lightly.

Spock glanced toward the tent door. ‘I have yet to assess whether it is truly a good morning,’ he said.

She smiled. Perhaps if she had been McCoy she would have berated him for being pedantic, but in this situation she took his point perfectly.

‘Well – it’s not windy, at least,’ she said. ‘And the temperature’s manageable.’

Spock nodded briefly, not troubling himself to debate the manageability of the temperature.

‘Would you open the flaps for a moment?’ he asked, nodding towards the tent door.

‘Oh, of course,’ she said quickly, sitting bolt upright, and then realising that her other arm was trapped within the sleeping bag.

‘There is no hurry, Nurse,’ Spock assured her, looking faintly amused at her predicament.

‘No,’ she murmured, finally wrenching her arm loose, and then pitching herself forward so as to reach the flaps while still keeping as much of her body as possible in the sleeping bag.

‘Hmm,’ Spock said as she opened the flap to reveal a sky that was covered as far as he could see by a dull, featureless sheet of heavy cloud.

‘It doesn’t look promising,’ she said, craning her neck to look directly up at the thick, grey clouds.

‘Nimbostratus,’ he said succinctly. ‘At this temperature, I would predict snow.’

At that moment a flake of snow descended lazily in front of him – followed by another, and another, until all in front of him was a mass of whirling white flakes, obscuring visibility for all but a few metres around them. Chapel quickly closed the zip, and regained her position in the tent, pulling the sleeping bag back up around her neck.

‘Can’t you predict sunshine and seventy degrees?’ Chapel asked, simultaneously impressed and dismayed at the accuracy of his forecast.

Spock’s eyebrow rose. ‘Unless we manage to move a significant distance south, I can predict very little but low temperatures and the possibility of snow.’
The mention of travelling reminded the nurse of Spock’s badly broken ankle, invisible inside the insulating sleeping bag.

‘You’re not moving anywhere unless we can sort you out some kind of crutch to walk with,’ she said firmly. ‘Mr Spock,’ she continued, seeing the glimmerings of a protest in his face. ‘If you walk on that ankle you risk permanent damage – not to mention it’ll hurt like hell.’

Spock’s eyebrow rose in a challenge. ‘What kind of crutch would you suggest, Nurse Chapel? From what should we fashion it?’

‘If needs be, we can take turns at letting you lean on us,’ she conceded. ‘But I’m not letting you walk without some kind of support.’

‘Miss Chapel, I have complete trust in your ability to provide me with support,’ Spock said with gravity.

She looked at him quickly, uncertain as to whether the gravity had been mock, or real. She knew that the Vulcan did have a sense of humour, but knowing exactly when he was making use of it was a different matter.

‘There must be something,’ she muttered.

Spock’s eyebrow rose. ‘Not necessarily. It seems that there are no trees or large shrubs hereabouts, and no artificial structures either. I cannot think what else we could use to make a crutch.’

She glanced towards the tent entrance.

‘Well, even if there is, we’re not going to find it at the moment – not in this blizzard. We should sit tight until it eases up.’

Spock regarded her. ‘That, I believe, would be my decision, Miss Chapel,’ he said pointedly, before adding, ‘However, I do concur.’ He tilted his head, listening intently, before saying, ‘I believe that we are not the only ones awake. The first order of the day will be to consume rations, and discuss our predicament.’

‘The first order of the day is for your nurse to check your injury,’ she corrected him, reaching for her medical scanner. ‘How does it feel?’ At his raised eyebrow she added, ‘Honestly, Mr Spock. You may be able to suppress the pain, but it's important for me to know what symptoms you’re experiencing.’

Spock exhaled softly, and a subtle twinge of pain passed over his face as he allowed his controls to relax to enable himself to be fully aware of the sensations in his shattered ankle.

‘It is stiff and sore, with dispersed rather than focussed pain,’ he said with a degree of awkwardness. ‘The pain is not pleasant, but it is at a manageable level. Your scanner, I assume, displays a more technical version of the same symptoms.’

She nodded, examining the results. ‘You’re doing about as well as I would expect, considering the lack of facilities and your inability to enter a healing trance at this time,’ she said in a professional tone. ‘A certain degree of swelling and stiffness, but nothing beyond the usual. But,’ she added pointedly, ‘I certainly wouldn’t advise walking on it, unless you want it to swell out of that cast I put on and do yourself permanent damage.’

Spock sighed, his face momentarily turned away as if to hide his own reaction at her diagnosis.

‘Then, as I stated before, our best course of action is a group discussion of our predicament,’ he
said in a level tone.

‘Do you propose everyone getting together in this tent?’ she asked him seriously, looking around at the small space. ‘It’s impossible to sit outside right now, and you’re taking up more room than you would otherwise with that leg.’

Spock looked at her almost with annoyance. It was illogical to be annoyed at her rational practicality, but it was annoying that even a team briefing was made impossible by perverse weather and his own injury.

‘I propose calling one person from each tent into this one,’ he said, without a hint that he had been forced to cogitate a new plan. ‘They can relay what is said to their partner.’

Chapel nodded, but he could see the doubt on her face.

‘You disagree, Lieutenant,’ he said, putting the stress on her rank.

She shook her head quickly. ‘Not entirely, sir. I don’t see another option either. But whichever one you pick the one left behind will probably feel left out. They’re teenagers. They’re not as – rational – as fully fledged officers.’

‘Whichever one you pick,’ Spock amended. ‘It will be impossible for me to go from tent to tent picking people. As for their rationality, perhaps this experience will improve that particular facet of their personalities.’

She smiled at Spock’s very Vulcan view of this potential catastrophe as some kind of mental training exercise – but she had to admit he was right. The six ensigns would probably be forced to grow up very quickly in the next few days.

‘Well,’ she said brightly, steeling herself as she looked about for her cold-weather coat. ‘I guess I’d better go out and face the challenge.’

Spock looked at her with a kind of suppressed amusement on his face.

‘I’ve no doubt you will excel, Miss Chapel,’ he said.

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Less than ten minutes later the small two-man tent felt very small indeed, with four humans clustered about huddled in sleeping bags and trying desperately not to encroach on one Vulcan with a very painful injury. Chapel had situated herself closest to Spock’s leg in the hope that she was the least likely to knock the limb by mistake. Spock was sitting up as straight as possible, and only one very used to reading his facial expressions would have realised that he was in pain.

‘Ensigns,’ Spock said as a beginning, looking between the three anxious, very young-seeming faces. ‘I trust you all rested well?’

An assortment of nods replied to his question, but none of them seemed quite ready to speak aloud. Spock suppressed a sigh. He could only hope that they would become more communicative as time went on. He wondered briefly why Miss Chapel had decided to bring the
reticent Ensign Grant through to this briefing, rather than her bolder tent-mate Ensign Malton, but queries about her choice would have to wait until later. Ensigns Lovett and Sutherland were at least watching him attentively, as if they were eager to receive and carry out orders. His problem was that he had very few orders to give.

‘It must be obvious to you all that we are stranded here, with scant means of removing ourselves from this situation,’ he said without preamble. ‘Our best hope lies in the subspace transmitter I took from the shuttle. Although it is currently damaged, it should be possible to effect repairs. This means we have two priorities at present – to fix the subspace transmitter, and to try to find somewhere more hospitable to shelter while we do.’

‘But – your ankle, sir,’ Ensign Sutherland said hesitantly.

‘My ankle – is an inconvenience,’ Spock admitted. ‘But we do need to find warmth and sustenance.’ He looked from face to face, thinking swiftly. ‘Ensign Lovett. I want you and Del Sarto to cogitate a means of making a crutch,’ he said decisively. ‘If I cannot walk I will be of little use to the party, and it is imperative that we try to move to a more clement location. Sutherland. You and Fournier can scan the surroundings for edible plant life. I don’t expect you to leave the tent – long range scans can give you preliminary data. But if you do leave the tent I want you to use all survival precautions, and extreme care. Ensign Grant.’ He regarded the young woman for a few moments, then said, ‘Your speciality is electronics, is it not?’

‘Yes, sir,’ she replied, almost in a whisper.

‘And Ensign Malton’s talent is –?’

‘Engineering, sir,’ she replied, her eyes focussed on the rim of her sleeping bag as she rubbed it between her fingers.

‘Good,’ he nodded, choosing to ignore her lack of confidence. ‘Then I require you to examine the subspace transmitter thoroughly. Do not attempt any repairs without consulting with me first,’ he said firmly. ‘All I want is a report on damage and possible solutions.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she nodded.

‘Very well,’ he said succinctly. ‘That is all for now. You may return to your tents. If any of you leave your tents for the purpose of your tasks, I want you to stay in contact at all time. Stay within shouting distance.’

‘The communicators – ’ Ensign Lovett began.

‘Are useful, but your voice is more reliable in this situation. If you are close enough to shout, you are close enough to be found with relative ease.’

‘Aye, sir,’ the ensign said, but Spock recognised that look of doubt on his face. Lovett was very obviously aware of his talents as a navigator, and was just as obviously itching to do something about their situation. It was a question of experience, though – and experience was what this party was conspicuously lacking.

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To his consternation, Spock found himself slowly emerging from a sleep that he had not been aware he had fallen into. He blinked, focussing on the fabric of the tent above his head and assessing the likely time of day. It was reasonably light, but he could hear the swishing of snow still hitting the outside of the tent, and there was a low moan in the wind that spoke of more storms to come.

‘Miss Chapel,’ he said.

‘Oh!’ She had been sitting with her sleeping bag pulled up under her arms, apparently taking an inventory of what was in her rucksack and medical kit. ‘Mr Spock, you’re awake!’

‘Obviously,’ he nodded. ‘For how long did I sleep?’

‘Oh, only an hour or two,’ she assured him. ‘It’s not uncommon to need periods of sleep after an injury like yours.’

Spock pressed his lips together, resisting the urge to remind her that he was a Vulcan, and should be immune to such frailties. He had no doubt that it was an argument he would not win. He looked towards the tent opening.

‘Still snowing,’ she said, before he asked. ‘But it seems lighter than before.’

‘Have you had contact with the other tents?’ he asked.

‘Limited,’ she nodded. ‘At least, I put my head out earlier and saw Lovett and Del Sarto outside, huddled over something on the ground about – oh – twenty metres away. I’m not sure what they were doing, but they were scrabbling in the ground…’

‘You did not think to enquire?’ Spock asked.

She gave him an acerbic look. ‘They wouldn’t have heard me over the wind, and I didn’t see the logic of suiting up and going out there when I knew they’d report if they found anything of note.’

Spock regarded her with a new sliver of admiration. Sarek had always told him that impatience had been his failing. Perhaps Nurse Chapel had a greater store of patience than he did himself. Perhaps it was that lying here unable to move about was a situation calculated to try his patience to its limits.

‘Perhaps we are about to find out,’ he said, turning his ear towards the door. There was the definite sound of voices through the wind.

The zip at the doorway moved, and there was a brief, awkward jostle as two heavily-clothed bodies tried to squeeze through the gap as quickly as possible before turning to zip the opening closed again. There was an eagerness in the set of their bodies that was impossible to overlook, and one of the muffled figures turned toward him holding a stick in his gloved hand, unwinding coverings from his face with the other.

‘There, Mr Spock,’ he said triumphantly, and Spock recognised Lovett, his face glowing with cold and activity. ‘One crutch, as ordered, sir.’

Spock took the crutch from the outstretched hand, staring at it in confusion. Against all expectations, the shaft was very obviously made of metal – processed, manufactured, refined metal shaped into a sturdy pipe. Probably iron, he reasoned – or at least some rust-resistant alloy of iron, since the pipe apparently had some age but was not corroded.
‘Ensign, where did you get this pipe?’ he asked, his forehead creased in puzzlement.

‘I scanned for metal, sir, and we dug it out of the ground,’ Ensign Lovett shrugged. ‘Then Ensign Del Sarto made the handle and things out of heather roots.’

‘Technically, that plant is not heather,’ Spock pointed out, but he was examining the metal in his hands closely as he spoke. ‘Obviously manufactured,’ he said. ‘You say it was underground?’

‘About two feet down, sir,’ the man nodded. ‘It took some digging, through the permafrost.’

‘Then at some point there has been a civilisation here capable of relatively advanced metallurgy. Was it part of a greater network?’ he asked, looking up again.

‘I – don’t know, sir,’ he said hesitantly. ‘I didn’t look. I’m sorry.’

‘No matter,’ Spock murmured. ‘One can easily revisit the site. Ensign Del Sarto, this handle shows considerable talent.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ the man murmured, dropping his head in diffidence at the praise. ‘I – took some woodworking classes in school. Working with a phaser isn’t too different to using a chisel laser.’

‘Hmm,’ Spock nodded, intent on the carving of the hardened root.

Obviously the longer they spent in these straitened circumstances the more talents would become evident in the group. Del Sarto had done more than just make a handle. He had worked one piece of wood into a smooth and comfortable grip that was thrust through the bar lower down, and a second piece into a T shape at the top of the bar, creating something more akin to a medically supplied crutch than a simple walking stick.

‘This is quite excellent,’ he said, looking up again. ‘I anticipate we should be able to move on very soon, with this to aid my walking.’

He could feel the reaction from Nurse Chapel without even looking at her. The temperature seemed to have dropped by a fraction of a degree. He turned his head slowly and said in a level voice, ‘We must move on, Miss Chapel. The matter is not negotiable.’

She pressed her lips together in a thin line, but finally she nodded.

‘As you will, sir,’ she said.

‘Indeed,’ Spock replied, turning his attention back to the crutch. ‘Try to locate another such piece for a second crutch, Lovett, and while you are scanning I would appreciate your making a detailed report of all findings. Worked metal is a highly significant find.’

‘Aye, sir,’ Lovett said quickly.

The ensign glanced briefly at Del Sarto, and Spock saw a wholly human look pass between the two youngsters. They obviously felt that they had been out in the cold for long enough. He ignored their human reaction. The crutch was important, and two crutches would be invaluable.

‘Dismissed,’ he said, and the two men hurried out of the tent again, leaving him alone with the nurse.

‘You think the metal’s significant, sir?’ she asked after a brief silence.

He nodded. ‘Almost certainly. There may be liveable structures, or even sentient life forms, not far
away.

‘It looks like it’s been down there for a long time.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Spock said, but he did not finish his sentence. He was aware the McCoy might describe his hope as *clutching at straws*.

He fell into silence, his eyes resting on the sealed entryway to the tent. There was an entire world out there, lost in the snow, and it was his duty to find proper shelter and sustenance for his charges. It was his duty to keep them safe. Had he allowed himself the emotionalism, he would have regretted the clumsy landing that resulted in his broken leg – but there was no point in harbouring such thoughts. The important thing was that next time he was plummeting toward the surface of a planet carrying too much weight for his parachute, that he better prepare himself for landing. If he survived this incident, of course...
Chapter 3

Three days cooped up in emergency shelters had done no one any favours. The snow had been falling almost ceaselessly, drifting around the fabric of the tents until it almost covered them. The only benefit of this was that it sheltered them from the cold in a way the thin fabric could not. The warmth was welcome, but Spock was not sure what to do to tackle the obviously low-spirits of the party except set them tasks to keep them occupied. Ensigns Grant and Malton had thoroughly assessed the subspace transmitter by now, and it was obvious that the damage was too severe to repair without constructing replacement parts. Del Sarto and Lovett had made another crutch to match the first, but Chapel forbade Spock from standing unless absolutely necessary, and there was little point in him leaving the tent in any event. Sutherland and Fournier had succeeded in finding some plant life that was just barely edible, but even the handful of fresh berries that they had found one time had not lifted spirits greatly.

On the morning of the forth day Spock stirred and opened his eyes. It was still dark. It was not dawn that had woken him, nor even the howling of the wind that he could hear buffeting the tent. It was the biting cold that was pressing through the sleeping bag and deep into his bones.

He blinked and sat up, looking around uselessly in the darkness. He reached out a hand briefly to the tent wall and felt no weight of snow against it. The wind had blown the drifts away. He exhaled briefly. The cold was unpleasant, but perhaps if there were less snow outside it would be feasible to move on.

After a while he became aware of another consciousness in the darkness.

‘Nurse?’ he asked softly.

‘Yes,’ she said. She was still lying down. ‘Cold?’

‘The temperature has dropped significantly,’ Spock said through the darkness, carefully avoiding a direct answer.

‘The wind woke me up,’ she said, and she heard the rustle of her sleeping bag as she too sat up.

Spock nodded, even though she would not be able to see it. They had agreed on the first night not to use the flashlight unless absolutely necessary. Anything to preserve power.

‘I don’t believe it is snowing,’ he said. ‘The wind may be to our advantage. It has blown the snow away from around the tent.’

‘You’ve been outside?’ she asked him, and he could hear the surprise in her voice.

‘No. I can no longer feel it against the tent.’

‘Oh, of course.’ She subsided into silence again, and then after a while said, ‘Well, I’m going to try to get some more sleep. I might be able to cut the wind out if I wrap something around my ears.’

Spock raised an eyebrow in the dark, visualising that image. Then he lay back on the ground and closed his eyes. There was no point in lying here awake. Better to sleep until dawn came, and something could be made of the day.
He was woken some time later by screaming. He thought at first that it was the wind outside the tents, but barely a second passed before he realised it was a human voice.

‘Mr Spock, we’ve got to go get them! Mr Spock!’

He sat up and switched on his flashlight, angling it on the face of Ensign Grant. The wind was screaming too, buffeting the tent like something alive, and the cold was so intense it was painful. From the sounds of something spattering the fabric outside it was evidently snowing again.

‘Mr Spock, they need help!’

Spock blinked briefly. If only humans could learn to be more concise. Chapel was sitting up now too, pulling on extra clothing and grabbing her medical tricorder.

‘Ensign Grant, please calm down and explain,’ he said in a level voice.

‘The others! They need help! There’s something out there, and the wind’s so strong, it ripped one of the tents away. The others went to help them, but – ’

Spock looked swiftly toward the door of the tent to be sure it was closed. It would be all too easy for a gust of wind to slip inside and turn the tent back into the parachute it was made of. The zip was firmly closed, though.

‘Ensign, I would judge the wind to be blowing at approximately 150 kilometres per hour. I cannot walk, and I will permit neither you nor Nurse Chapel to venture out in this weather. To do so would be to risk losing your own lives.’

‘Mr Spock!’ she began again, desperation rising in her voice.

‘Ensign, you said, there’s something out there,’ Spock reminded her, hoping that his calm tone would calm her.

She took in a breath, and nodded. ‘I started registering something on tricorder. The others must have too. A life form of some kind. I guess – I guess – I mean, Ensign Lovett – might have gone out to see. And their tent was ripped away by the wind, and then – I don’t know. The others went to help, and the wind pushed me against your tent, and – ’

Spock eased himself out of his sleeping bag, picking up the makeshift crutches and using them to lever himself upwards.

‘Mr Spock, you're not thinking of – ’ Chapel began.

Spock gained his balance, and twisted to look back at the two women.

‘You will both stay inside the tent,’ he said. ‘That is an order,’ he added more firmly, seeing the protesting looks on their faces.

He manoeuvred painfully to the tent door and cautiously opened the zip by a few inches, just enough to angle the beam of the flashlight out through the hole and look through himself. Even through that small hole the wind and snow whipped in and caused the tent fabric to billow
alarmingly. He saw nothing outside but whirling snow and scoured, dark ground. He turned the flashlight about, straining to see something, but where the tents should be there was nothing.

‘I don’t believe there is anything we can do,’ he said pragmatically, closing up the zip again.

He turned back to the two women, angling the light on their faces. They looked scared and overcome with the kind of concern that often got humans killed.

‘We cannot go outside,’ he reiterated. ‘I can’t see anything of the tents out there. I can see no evidence of life at all. If we were to venture out in that storm we will be lost too. There is nothing we can do but wait for calmer weather.’

Their looks were mutinous, but they said nothing. Spock stood regarding them for a moment before hobbling back to his sleeping bag.

‘If we fasten these two bags together the resultant larger bag may take the three of us,’ he said.

Wordlessly, Christine Chapel set herself to readjusting the bags. Spock did not relish spending the night in such close proximity to two emotional human women, but there was no other option if they were to survive the cold.

The morning came with clear weather and greatly reduced wind. The gales in the night had obviously blown away the vast majority of the snow. The land was clear, and dark with damp. Spock stood outside the doorway of the one remaining tent, leaning heavily on his crutches, scanning with his tricorder.

He had never felt so helpless.

Inside Ensign Grant seemed to have succumbed to a form of shock, and was being comforted by Nurse Chapel. All of last night’s desire to act had left her, and she was a huddled shape in a sleeping bag, too listless even to eat the morning’s rations. Spock knew that a rescue last night would have been impossible. He could not have gone out himself with his ankle as it was, and Ensign Grant or Nurse Chapel would almost certainly have become lost, succumbed to hypothermia, or perhaps even been predated by the something that the Ensign had detected on her tricorder.

As for Spock’s own instrument, he could read no signs of life, either human or alien, other than himself and the two women. There was nothing at all within a range of five hundred metres.

He limped forward, trying to reach a small rise of land a few metres from the tent. It was hard going through the scrubby plants that were tangled on the ground, even for that scant distance, but he made it, and stood there looking about again, using the slight height advantage to see more than he had before.

There. There was a glimpse of fabric, something torn and caught on a bush, ribboning in the wind. He steeled himself and moved closer to it. His leg was beginning to ache and throb, but he did all he could to ignore it. As he got closer he saw that the fabric was a piece of the tent, ripped from the rest. A little further on he could see something that looked curiously like one of the survival
suits, and he caught his breath.

He moved on, trying to quicken his pace. He saw a hand resting on the heather at the end of a sleeve, but he did not think he could clamber down into the dip and make the necessary investigations with his leg as it was. He raised his voice and called stridently, ‘Nurse Chapel! Here!’

He looked back to see the tent being unzipped. Chapel came out, bending through as small a gap as possible, and saying something to Ensign Grant inside. She reached Spock at a jog, saying, ‘I told her to stay inside. She’s not fit... What is it, Spock?’

Spock gestured at the survival suit.

‘Dead,’ he said simply. ‘I register no life signs in the immediate vicinity.’

Christine climbed down the small incline and knelt and reached out to the suit, but then she recoiled in momentary horror.

‘More than dead, Mr Spock,’ she said in a grim voice. ‘There – isn’t much left.’

Spock stepped forward, looking past the nurse as she investigated the mass on the ground. There was that hand, curiously untouched, but beyond that, beneath the loose covering of the suit, there was no more than something that looked like a spine, thick and slightly curved, with some flesh adhering to it, and a few other fleshy parts that Spock could hardly identify.

He opened his tricorder again, directing it more in high focus at the remains, scanning the DNA.

‘It is Ensign Sutherland,’ he said simply. ‘Or – it was Ensign Sutherland.’

Chapel was silent for a moment, as if digesting that information. Then she said, ‘Karen doesn’t need to see this.’

‘No,’ Spock agreed. The dismembered body of one of her friends was the last thing that Ensign Grant needed to see at the moment. ‘Do you believe there is any useful evidence to be gained from the corpse?’ he asked. ‘I cannot get down this slope without help.’

Chapel shook her head. ‘You don’t need to. I don’t think there’s much evidence. It looks like it was – something big. Something with large teeth or claws. The tricorder picks up some alien fluid, perhaps saliva, as it has a high concentration of digestive enzymes, but – no, I don’t think we can learn anything else.’

‘Very well,’ Spock nodded. ‘It would be as well to dispose of the body thoroughly, in order to avoid attracting other – visitors. I am aware of your human need to surround these things with ceremony. Is there anything you wish to say?’

Christine looked back at him with half a smile, as if she were planning on saying something about Vulcan ceremony. But she said nothing. She straightened up and joined him back on the higher ground.

‘I – Perhaps a few words would be suitable,’ she said. ‘I don’t know if she had any particular religion, though.’ She closed her eyes, seeming to pull on some inner memory or strength, and then said, ‘Ensign Lowri Sutherland, we now commit you to the ground. Rest in peace.’ Spock waited a beat when she finished speaking, and she nodded. ‘All right, Mr Spock.’

Spock took his phaser from his hip, adjusted the setting, and vaporised the last few mortal remains of Ensign Sutherland. All that was left behind was a patch of scorched earth, and –
‘What’s that, Mr Spock?’ Christine asked, starting down towards the glowing patch on the ground.

‘Do not touch it,’ Spock said quickly.

‘I wasn’t about to,’ she replied, holding out her tricorder over the patch. It was a small puddle, slowly changing from bright white, to red, to dull grey. ‘It’s that iron alloy again,’ she said. ‘I’m reading it stretching north north east and south south west from here. Another pipe, I guess.’

‘Yes,’ Spock said pensively. ‘There must have been a civilisation here at some point.’

‘Well, not necessarily right here,’ Chapel pointed out. ‘I mean, humans had oil pipelines stretching right across the Arctic tundra for decades, but the place wasn’t really populated. It was just a means to an end.’

‘True,’ Spock said, rubbing his gloved hand against his lip. ‘But there may be civilised peoples some distance from here. The native wildlife is obviously dangerous. But will intelligent life be just as dangerous? This planet showed no sign of having developed space travel. Any inhabitants will no doubt have never seen an extra-terrestrial being.’

‘You know, I’ve always thought that the last idea a primitive civilisation will jump to is that a visitor is an alien,’ Chapel said. ‘I don’t think it was ever on the mind of humans before we started looking more closely into space.’

‘Perhaps not,’ Spock said. ‘But we know nothing about any civilisation on this planet. If we do make contact, we will have exercise extreme caution.’

‘I think our priority right now is to find the other ensigns,’ Christine said.

‘I am not optimistic,’ Spock replied. ‘We must also remain vigilant in case the creature – whatever it is – returns.’

‘Why don’t you go back to the tent, Mr Spock,’ Chapel said. ‘I don’t want you to tire that ankle. I can scout around to see if there are any signs of the others.’

Spock glanced back at the tent. He would not choose to go and sit with an eighteen year old woman who was apparently suffering some species of mental collapse. But it was true that his ankle was throbbing distractingly and healing must be a priority.

‘Be careful, Nurse Chapel,’ he told her. ‘Have your communicator and phaser ready at all times.’

With that he turned around and made his way painfully back to the tent. To his relief, Ensign Grant appeared to be asleep when he stepped in through the entrance. She was curled on her side with the sleeping bag pulled right up over her head. Spock sat down nearby and began to take stock of what remained to them after last night’s catastrophe.

They had lost all but this tent, and presumably all the rations and other resources that were in the other tents. The damaged subspace transmitter had also been with Ensigns Grant and Grant. That must have also been lost. It was a harsh blow. As it was they were left with ration resources for two that must be split between three, and little else. Ensign Grant had at least brought her phaser and communicator when she had rushed to the tent last night, and had been wearing her cold weather gear. That was a bonus.

He became aware gradually that he was not in the tent with a mind that was quiet in sleep. He had been holding his shields well up with the amount of emotional humans around, but now, as he
began to relax, he realised that he could sense waves of misery coming from the human in the sleeping bag. She was not asleep. She was hiding, possibly crying.

Spock opened his communicator and called, ‘Nurse Chapel?’

She replied almost instantly. ‘I’m fine, sir. Still looking. I’ve recovered a couple of useful things.’ Her tone became more sober. ‘I’ve also found – ’

‘Nurse Chapel,’ Spock cut across instantly, aware that Grant was probably listening. ‘It would be best, perhaps, to leave certain details until we can speak privately.’

‘Oh – of course, sir,’ she replied, catching on quickly. ‘How is Ensign Grant?’

‘I am about to endeavour to find out,’ Spock said. ‘Spock out.’

Having ascertained that the nurse was still all right, he turned his attention back to the ensign.

‘Ensign Grant?’ he said quietly.

She did not reply.

‘Ensign Grant, I am well aware that you are not asleep,’ Spock said in a rather more forceful tone. ‘Please reply.’

After a moment her head emerged from the sleeping bag. Her face was streaked with tears.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ she murmured.

‘Apology for a human weakness is unnecessary,’ Spock said. He regarded the Ensign, realising just how young she was. When he had left for the Academy at the age of eighteen he had thought himself very mature, but he had not been. He knew that now.

‘Ensign, there was almost nothing that could be done about the others,’ he said. ‘You are undoubtedly suffering from survivor’s guilt, but you took the correct course of action in coming to find Nurse Chapel and myself. However, I suspect that even if I were at peak fitness there would be nothing that I could have done. The fact that you are alive is a small victory.’

‘Mr Spock, are they all gone?’ she asked in a wavering voice. ‘Are they all dead?’

‘I do not know,’ Spock said honestly enough. ‘However, we must consider the possibility.’

‘Okay,’ she said, in such a dejected voice that Spock was at a loss as to how to comfort her.

‘We cannot possibly be certain unless we find the evidence of their bodies, but it is likely,’ Spock said plainly. ‘There was indeed a predator outside last night, and the weather was severe.’

‘Mr Spock, are we in danger?’ she asked.

‘Simply being alive invites a certain amount of danger,’ he reminded her. ‘But, yes, we will be in considerable danger until we return to the ship.’

Ensign Grant did not seem to take that well. She returned to the semi-catatonic state in which she had been that morning, clutching her arms about her knees and rocking slightly. At a loss to know how else to comfort her, since a relatively honest assessment of their situation had not helped, Spock turned his attention to other things.
Chapter 4

It was half an hour later when Christine re-entered the tent, her face almost entirely hidden by her hood and face mask to protect her from the cold. She was clasping a number of things to her chest, and carrying two rucksacks on her back.

‘I found a few things,’ she said, dumping her spoils on the floor. ‘These bags, rations, a couple of the sleeping bags caught in the bushes. I also found the subspace transmitter. I’d say it’s done for, Mr Spock, although you might think differently. It’s been bowled over and over by the wind and come to rest against a couple of boulders that have done pretty drastic damage.’

‘I should like to see it, yes,’ Spock said. ‘Are you capable of carrying it?’

‘I think so, but it’s pretty heavy. Why don’t you come with me and take a look, Mr Spock.’

She gave Spock a pointed look, and he met her eyes, and nodded.

‘Of course, nurse,’ he said.

He picked up the crutches and levered himself to his feet. He did not really want to walk on the leg again so soon, but it was obvious that she wanted to speak to him in private.

‘You found more bodies?’ he asked in a low voice once they were a decent distance from the tent.

‘Yes,’ she nodded gravely. ‘Ensigns Fournier and Lovett. About sixty metres in that direction,’ she said, pointing out across the scrubby ground.

‘Did you dispose of the bodies?’ Spock asked.

She nodded again. ‘Ensign Fournier was intact, but she had suffered numerous broken bones and apparently died of internal bleeding, probably from being dashed against rocks by the wind. Ensign Lovett was – well – I think the same thing got to him as to Ensign Sutherland. I used my phaser. But I did recover their phasers and communicators, and there was a small pack of rations in Ensign Fournier’s jacket pocket. I could have salvaged their clothing but – ’

‘There are some limits to the logical recovery of supplies,’ Spock murmured. ‘A Vulcan party may be able to overcome taboo and use such garments, but I doubt that humans would. Had the phasers been fired?’ he asked.

‘I’m not sure how to tell, Mr Spock,’ she admitted. She patted at her pockets and brought out the small jumble of equipment. ‘I found them before I found the rucksacks,’ she said, ‘So I just shoved them in my pockets.’

‘Not the safest way of carrying a phaser,’ Spock said reprovingly.

‘I do, at least, know how to make sure the safety’s on,’ she said crisply.

‘Of course, Miss Chapel,’ Spock said in a rather more tolerant tone. He examined the phasers carefully. ‘Neither have been fired,’ he said.

‘I doubt they’d have had the time or the presence of mind, to be honest,’ Chapel said. ‘They were probably scared witless, poor things, and the wind was so strong they might not have been able to get their phasers. It’s possible of course that they were all killed or knocked unconscious by the storm and the animal was a scavenger.’
'Possible,' Spock nodded. Illogical as it may be, since the sufferings of the dead were past, he preferred that idea to the thought of these eighteen year old children being ripped apart while still alive by an alien beast.

After a moment of thought for the ensigns he recalled himself to the present task.

‘You did find the subspace transmitter?’ he asked. ‘Or was that simply an excuse to get me out of the tent so that you could tell me the fate of the ensigns?’

‘Oh yes, I did find it,’ she said quickly. ‘It’s rather a trek. I only got you outside so that I could tell you about the bodies away from Ensign Grant. I could go and try to bring it a bit closer.’

‘No matter. I will manage,’ Spock said quickly.

He leant heavily on the crutches, and Chapel looked at him critically.

‘I’m not happy with you using that leg so much.’

‘Nevertheless, I will come,’ Spock said, thinking privately that this would be good practice for walking further distances. He was determined that they should start walking south as soon as possible.

He hobbled forward, following the nurse across the pitted and plant covered ground, looking keenly for what might be edible fruits or leaves as much as seeing where was best to put his feet. They had walked for about six hundred metres when she nodded and said, ‘It’s here, sir, in the middle of these rocks.’

Spock glanced back briefly to see that the tent was no more than a small blue peak above the low growth around it, half hidden in its dip. He opened his communicator and said, ‘Spock to Ensign Grant.’ He waited a beat, then tried again. ‘Spock to Ensign Grant.’

Finally she answered, saying, ‘Yes, sir?’ in a rather unsteady voice.

‘I would appreciate it if you answered your communicator with more alacrity,’ Spock said rather sharply. ‘Ensign Grant, Nurse Chapel and I are investigating what has become of the subspace transmitter. Please do not leave the tent while we are gone.’

‘Aye, sir,’ she said. She sounded very young and alone.

‘Spock out,’ Spock said, and shut his communicator.

‘Mr Spock,’ Chapel said when he looked up. Her expression was severe, even if her voice was not.

‘Yes, Miss Chapel?’

‘Try to go easy on her,’ she said softly. ‘She’s eighteen years old, human, fragile. She’s just lost five of her peers. Let her grieve.’

‘Miss Chapel, in a situation like this we may not have time for grief,’ Spock said sharply.

‘Right now, there in that tent with nothing else to occupy her, she does,’ Chapel insisted.

Spock frowned. ‘Perhaps I should find something to occupy her. The subspace transmitter may fulfil that role.’
Nurse Chapel sighed.

‘Mr Spock, you haven’t know those ensigns for long enough to gain a proper connection to them. But imagine if it were the captain, Dr McCoy, Mr Scott, who had just disappeared. How would you feel then?’

‘My feelings are not a subject for discussion,’ Spock said rather shortly, but he mulled on her words. If the captain had disappeared he would of course be attempting to continue as logically and unemotionally as possible, but he would also be fighting a deep internal loss.

He swung himself forward on the crutches until he could see the battered and broken box that had been the subspace transmitter. It was, as Nurse Chapel had said, drastically damaged, having obviously been smashed into this cluster of rocks by the wind after a long tumble across the uneven ground, perhaps meeting other rocks on the way. He lowered himself down to sit on one of the low stones and reached down to sort through what was there. The casing was cracked, circuits were badly damaged, water had got in to the workings, and wires were loose.

‘It still could be possible to do something with this,’ Spock said musingly. ‘At any rate, the transmitter has powerful batteries. Do you feel able to carry it back alone, Miss Chapel? Once in the tent I could use tools to strip it down to useful components, which will make it a good deal lighter.’

‘I think I’ll be able to,’ she said stoutly. ‘It might take a bit of time, but I could get it back there.’

Spock nodded. He opened the tricorder to scan the wreck, seeing if there were any life in the batteries still. Then he altered the frequencies to scan for biological life, just in case there were any creatures nearby of which they should be aware.

His eyebrow shot up.

‘Miss Chapel, I read human life signs, fairly weak, one hundred metres from our position,’ he said, looking up in the direction of the signs. He could see nothing. ‘It must have been just outside the area of our original scan.’

‘Human!’

Christine attention was immediately focussed. She took out her own tricorder and scanned.

‘Thank God you did a scan for lifeforms...’ she sighed.

‘You have your medical kit?’ Spock asked.

She nodded.

‘Then go. I will follow at my own pace.’

He watched her as she set off at a swift jog across the scrubby tundra, restraining himself from calling out to her to be careful. Even a sprained ankle would be disastrous on top of his own injury, but it was doing her a disservice to assume she was unaware of that. He hobbled after her as fast as he could, and after a time he saw her stop abruptly and crouch down.

She turned back towards Spock and called something, but her words were lost on the wind. She did not wait to see his response, but immediately returned her attention to whomever she had found. Spock redoubled his effort, swinging hard on the crutches, ignoring the aching and sore pain in his ankle. He reached the nurse and saw that she was crouching over the huddled form of Ensign Del Sarto, who appeared to be semi conscious.
‘Knocked out,’ Chapel said briskly. ‘I’ve revived him, but he has a head injury and incipient hypothermia.’

‘Will he live?’ Spock asked.

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘He might even be able to walk in a little while.’

Spock sat down, breathing out a long breath. If he had been human he would have said, thank God. He could invoke no such deity. He was merely grateful that random chance had operated in Del Sarto’s favour.

‘Del Sarto,’ he said, locking his eyes on the ensign’s.

The man looked confused, his eyes only half open, but he attempted to focus on the Vulcan.

‘Yes, sir,’ he murmured.

‘Good,’ Spock nodded, gratified that he was capable of speech. He keep his eyes locked on Del Sarto’s brown ones. ‘Nurse Chapel will attend to your injuries,’ he said. ‘Remain calm. Can you tell us of the location of any specific pain?’

‘Only my head, sir,’ he said, trying to lift a hand, and failing. ‘The rest – bruises, I think. Nothing broken...’

‘That’s good,’ Chapel told him, holding the scanner over him. ‘I don’t see any breaks or internal injuries. You do have a concussion but there’s no sign of bleeding in the brain. I’ve given you a shot for hypothermia and a general pain killer. Ordinarily I wouldn’t suggest moving you without a stretcher, but we need to get you back to the tent, and obviously Mr Spock can’t carry you.’

‘Lovett,’ Del Sarto murmured. ‘Can Lovett – ?’

Spock opened his mouth to speak, but Chapel forestalled him.

‘Lovett can’t carry you, Ben,’ Chapel said quietly. ‘But I think you’ll be able to walk once the drugs are working in your system.’

Spock saw Del Sarto’s eyes widen, but he said nothing more about Lovett.

‘Just – I’ll just lie here a little,’ he said. ‘Just a few more minutes.’

‘That’s fine,’ Chapel said reassuringly.

Spock sat and waited, watching as a certain amount of colour came back into Del Sarto’s face. His focus seemed to sharpen, and after a few minutes he began struggling to sit up.

‘Careful now,’ Chapel told him, putting a hand behind his back to support him. ‘Not too fast. There. Is that all right?’

‘Yeah, s’good,’ he muttered. Now he was raised above the shelter of the rocks he shivered.

‘Cold?’ Christine asked.

‘I’m used to the United States of Africa,’ he said.

‘Which are a good deal cooler than Vulcan,’ Spock pointed out, resolutely straight-faced, his gaze holding Del Sarto’s intently.
Del Sarto laughed suddenly, and then winced, pressing a hand to his head.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Yeah, Mr Spock. You must be freezing.’

‘Not entirely accurate, but correct in the colloquial sense,’ Spock said, allowing his eyes to sparkle a little.

That small amount of humour seemed to do Del Sarto a world of good, and after another ten minutes he was standing, leaning heavily on the nurse but managing to put one foot after another.

‘What about – what about the others, Mr Spock?’ he asked, his voice tight with effort and pain.

Spock glanced at Chapel, who nodded subtly.

‘We know that Ensign Sutherland, Ensign Lovett, and Ensign Fournier are dead,’ Spock said plainly. ‘Ensign Grant is unhurt and in the tent. Ensign Malton is missing.’

He watched Del Sarto keenly as he spoke to him, leaning on his crutches. After a moment of what appeared to be an internal processing of shock, the man nodded. Spock was gratified at his apparent ability to process such drastic information without falling into some kind of emotional breakdown.

‘That wind was vicious, Mr Spock,’ he said. ‘And there was some kind of creature out there...’

‘Yes, we surmise the creature is what killed Ensigns Sutherland and Lovett,’ Spock nodded.

‘No one could have done anything,’ Del Sarto said. ‘The tents were ripped away. We couldn’t see to fire the phasers. You couldn’t have done anything, sir,’ he added, with an apparently realisation of the guilt that Spock might be feeling.

‘No, I could not,’ Spock nodded.

‘Do – you think we’ll find Ensign Malton?’

‘I do not know,’ Spock said. He could see the wreck of the subspace transmitter ahead of them in its nest of rocks. Nurse Chapel would not be able to carry it back to the tent at the moment since Del Sarto was leaning so heavily on her. ‘We may be able to utilise the remains of the subspace transmitter to creating a boosting device for the tricorders, which should extend their useful range.’

‘And then we’ll find her?’ Del Sarto asked.

‘If she is still within range, if she is alive,’ Spock said meaningfully. ‘Ensign Del Sarto, I would not – hold out hope.’

‘No, sir,’ he murmured, looking away from Spock and focussing on the ground ahead.

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Spock sat in the cramped space of the tent picking through the remains of the subspace transmitter with a small set of tools. The work was good. It focussed his mind and pulled him away from the
constant throbbing, burning pain in his leg. He was aware that he had grossly overused the limb today, but there was nothing else that he could have done. The transmitter had to be assessed. Del Sarto had to be recovered.

‘I could have done all of that on my own, though,’ Chapel said in a low voice, her scanner hovering over his leg. ‘It’s swollen, and on the edge of needing a new cast to take account of the increase in volume. You should have told me how bad it was.’

‘My presence was necessary,’ Spock said, his voice equally low.

‘I don’t agree.’ Christine sighed. ‘I insist, Mr Spock, that you monitor your own pain and manage it responsibly in future,’ she said in a crisp voice. ‘We’re not going to get anywhere if your leg doesn’t heal.’

‘Of course,’ Spock murmured.

‘I want you to lie down and keep it elevated,’ she told him.

Spock frowned. ‘Miss Chapel, if I don’t do the necessary work on this transmitter – ’

‘We’re not going anywhere at the moment anyway. We can’t move out with Del Sarto in his condition and your leg as it is. Give it to Ensign Grant.’ She glanced across at the pale faced ensign, who was sitting very close to Del Sarto with her head on his shoulder. ‘She needs distraction. Electronics is her special talent. Let her exercise it. You have to look after that leg, and if necessary I can and will sedate you so as to be sure that you do so.’

Spock looked at her sharply. He knew that she was likely to be as proactive as McCoy if pushed – perhaps moreso.

‘Ensign Grant,’ he said, and she jumped to attention.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Since I am under orders to rest, I want you to take over work on the transmitter. I am attempting to use components to create a long range booster which will work with both tricorders and communicators. Do you believe yourself capable?’

She blinked at him, and then said in a voice which did not greatly reassure him, ‘Y-yes, sir.’

‘You might find it easier to work outside, Karen,’ Christine said quietly. ‘If it’s warm enough to work without gloves. It’s cramped in here.’

‘Yes, sir, of course,’ she murmured, flashing a brief rather panicked look at Spock, and then picking up the tools.

Once she was out of the tent Spock lay back on the ground, using a number of the rucksacks to elevate his leg. Del Sarto also took the opportunity to lie back and close his eyes, and Christine silently pressed a hypo to his arm. After a few minutes he was asleep.

‘He would have refused if I’d offered it,’ she said to Spock. ‘But sleep will help.’

‘Can I expect the same treatment?’ Spock asked archly.

‘I’m not sure yet,’ she said meaningfully.

Spock sighed, and rested back on the ground again. He began to mentally assess the situation.
They had all but one of the original phasers and communicators. Miss Chapel had found three of the ration packs, and had told him that she had also found pieces of the tents in places. She had recovered two of the sleeping bags, which meant one for each of the party, thankfully. She had also found two of the rucksacks. All in all that was a satisfactory state of affairs. They had more food and fire power than was needed for each individual, and bedding for all. It was cramped with four in a tent, but it was manageable. If Ensign Grant, or he and Ensign Grant, could manage to cut down the size and weight of the subspace transmitter, then it was possible that it could be fitted into one of the bags, or that a carrying device could be fashioned from some of the tent scraps to carry light rations, and a rucksack used for the transmitter parts. By no means did he see the death of three Ensigns, possibly four, as positive, but he could see the positives in the unalterable situation in which they now found themselves. As soon as Ensign Del Sarto was well enough he would insist on starting to move southwards. They would keep scanning for Ensign Malton, but it was imperative to do all that he could to ensure the survival of the remainder of their party rather than focussing their efforts on one woman who was quite probably past help.
Spock blinked and opened his eyes to see that the fabric of the tent was dark above him. The wind was howling again and snow was splatting against the sides of the tent. His foot was still elevated on the rucksacks and Christine Chapel, Ensign Del Sarto, and Ensign Grant were sitting talking quietly beside him, sharing from one of the ration packs.

‘Miss Chapel, did you sedate me?’ he asked suspiciously.

She looked round in her surprise to see that he was awake. ‘No, Mr Spock, I did not sedate you,’ she told him in no uncertain terms. ‘Evidently your body has enough common sense to know that you needed to rest that leg and work on healing. Your sleep was entirely natural.’

Spock sat up a little and looked around. His leg ached and throbbed sorely, but he had to admit that it was feeling better than it was earlier.

‘For how long was I asleep?’ she asked.

She flicked open her tricorder and glanced at the screen. ‘About five hours all told,’ she said. ‘Would you like some dinner, Mr Spock?’

‘Thank you,’ Spock said, reached out a hand for one of the foil-sealed packs of food. He looked sharply at Ensign Grant. ‘Ensign Grant, how did you fare with the subspace transmitter?’ he asked.

She blushed as he spoke to her, and said rather quietly, ‘I think all right, sir. I’ve stripped it down as much as possible and modified it into a power booster for the tricorders and communicators. If we really need to we might be able to repower a phaser with it, although that would probably drain it completely.’

Spock’s eyebrow shot up.

‘Very well done, Ensign Grant,’ he said, although he resolved to check her work carefully. He had been anticipating spending at least five hours on converting the broken transmitter himself, so it was very impressive that a non-Vulcan could do the work in so short a time. ‘And has since night has fallen, has someone been scanning for lifeforms in case of another attack like last night?’

Christine nodded quickly. ‘We have been making use of Ensign Grant’s modifications to the transmitter to keep a permanent wide-field scan on the surrounding area. Nothing yet, sir.’

She looked at him significantly, and Spock read her gaze to mean, human or alien. So there were no signs of Ensign Malton even on the wide-field scan.

‘The tricorder will give an alarm if anything is picked up, sir,’ Ensign Grant told him, turning the cobbled-together electronics towards him. He could see her timidity waning and enthusiasm growing as she started to talk about her special subject. He looked carefully over her work as she explained all that she had done in a fast voice, growing louder, and was both gratified and impressed to see that she had performed her task admirably, and with a skill beyond many already serving on the Enterprise.

‘I would have cross circuited the phase modulator to the second X panel,’ he murmured, ‘but your solution is elegant and works just as well. And you have packaged the whole into a neat and portable container,’ he said, turning the metal box to look at it more closely.
‘Ben – I mean – Ensign Del Sarto did that while I did the electronics,’ she said, suddenly sounding shy again.

‘I used the phaser to cut and bend the metal of the original box and a couple of stones to hammer it into shape,’ Del Sarto put in.

Spock nodded, inwardly impressed at the eighteen year old’s resourcefulness. ‘You have both performed quite well,’ he said, his eyes focussed on the box. ‘Well done. I assume you are feeling rather better now, Del Sarto?’

‘Yes, sir,’ he nodded quickly. ‘Nurse Chapel says the swelling’s all gone down now.’

‘I’ve been monitoring him for a couple of hours,’ Chapel put in, ‘and he shows no sign of developing further issues. He may have a headache for a while, but he’s in no danger.’

‘That is good,’ Spock nodded. He turned his attention to his own leg, which was still aching and sore but much less so than it had been when he had lain down a few hours ago. ‘I propose an attempt to move on tomorrow morning.’ He caught Christine’s reaction in the corner of his eye, and ignored it. ‘We may not be able to cover much ground, but some is better than none.’

‘Mr Spock,’ the nurse began.

‘I am well aware of your thoughts on my condition,’ Spock said, ‘but it is imperative that we try to move to a more secure situation. The events of last night only serve to reinforce that necessity.’

She breathed in deeply and busied herself looking in her medical bag and shuffling the contents.

‘I trust you are still well-supplied?’ Spock asked.

‘Well enough, I think,’ she nodded. ‘But I propose doing a deep scan of the native plant life using Ensign Grant’s booster so that we can identify plants that could be used in medicine, as well as those that are edible. I think it’s worth looking to the long-term future – just in case.’

‘I agree completely,’ Spock nodded solemnly. ‘You will not regret the research if we are rescued soon, but you may regret not carrying it out if we are not.’

‘Exactly,’ she nodded. ‘Now.’ She looked around the tent, checking that the door was zipped closed. ‘If you absolutely insist on moving on in the morning, I think it would be a good idea to get as much sleep as possible now it’s dark. With Ensign Grant’s alarm we’ll be alerted to any creatures.’

Spock glanced at the door himself, not entirely happy with the idea of allowing everyone to sleep and leaving no one on guard, but he had to admit that Nurse Chapel was right. With only four of them to take turns on watch no one would get a good night’s sleep. Under normal circumstances he himself would be quite capable of staying awake all night, but with the injury to his leg he needed all the sleep he could get in order to heal.

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He was jolted awake by the shrilling of the alarm. More alert more quickly than the humans, he
grabbed at the tricorder and examined the screen. There was a large living creature outside, only ten metres from the tent. The humans were awake too, the two ensigns murmuring in rather panicked voices. The weather was calm, thankfully, but the fabric of the tent seemed ominously thin against the power of what might be the creature which had already killed three of the ensigns.

‘Miss Chapel,’ Spock said crisply. ‘A creature, ten metres away. I would suggest killing it now, before it attacks. Take a flashlight. Nocturnal creatures are often alarmed by light.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said crisply, not arguing for a moment about why she should be the one to go.

A light flashed on, illuminating the scared faces of Ensigns Grant and Del Sarto. Christine Chapel clambered out of her sleeping bag, pulled on her boots, and unzipped the tent door, letting in a new whirl of snow. Then she slipped out, taking the light with her. Spock stayed bolt upright in his sleeping bag, watching the indistinct glow of the flashlight through the fabric of the tent. The light waved back and forth and he could hear Chapel’s boots crunching on the snow. There was a kind of strangled roar from whatever the creature might be, and Spock stiffened, fighting against every instinct to go out there too. In his condition he would only be a hindrance.

The light waved again and he heard Chapel shout, ‘Hey! Yah!’ and then the phaser sliced red through the darkness.

There was a crunching thud, as of something heavy falling onto the snow. Then silence.

Spock waited. He was not aware that he had been holding his breath until Nurse Chapel came back in through the tent door and he exhaled hard.

‘Report,’ he said swiftly.

‘I don’t know, sir,’ she said, bending to take the tricorder from him and examining the readout. ‘The tricorder shows it’s dead. I wasn’t sure when I shot it. I used full beam but it didn’t vaporise. I was afraid it might just be stunned.’

‘Do you get a proper look at it?’ Spock asked her sharply.

She shook her head. ‘No, sir. The light’s not good enough, and I didn’t want to spend too long out there. It looked – big – and – I don’t know – scaly or armoured, perhaps.’ She shook her head again. ‘I couldn’t tell, sir. But we can look in the morning.’

‘Supposing it is not scavenged by another animal,’ Spock nodded.

‘It looked like it would take a lot of scavenging,’ Chapel pointed out.

‘Perhaps,’ Spock murmured. He took the tricorder back and set it to alert them of alien life signs again. ‘I suggest that we all go back to sleep,’ he said. ‘There are approximately seven hours until daybreak.’ He looked up at Nurse Chapel, who had gone outside with her head uncovered and without her survival suit. She was shivering. ‘Good work, Lieutenant,’ he told her briefly. ‘Now, I suggest you get back into your sleeping bag before you succumb to hypothermia.’

‘I am a bit cold,’ she admitted with a smile that brightened her face.

They were close packed with four of them in a tent designed for two, but at least it meant that the heat built up well in the small space. The air was already warming up again after the cold blast that had come in when Chapel opened the door.

Spock edged himself sideways a little to make more room for her again, and watched as she manoeuvred herself back into her sleeping bag alongside his. There was no room for personal
space, and they were sleeping pressed up against one another, but Spock hoped that this time some of his Vulcan warmth might aid her in growing warm again. He could feel her shivering against him. His concern was quite logical, he told himself as he pushed himself closer against her. They could not afford for the only medical professional in the team to succumb to illness.

She turned off her flashlight and Spock closed his eyes and settled his head back into the soft hood of the sleeping bag. The two ensigns were evidently still awake, but obediently trying to go back to sleep. After a while he could sense that they were asleep, but Christine Chapel stayed awake for a long time, gradually warming up, her breath coming a little fast at first, but slowly steadying back to something more normal in the darkness. Only when she had fallen asleep did Spock let himself sleep too.

In the morning the tent was again banked up with snow that made dark shadows against the fabric to a height of three feet. Spock insisted on breakfast being eaten before anyone moved outside to investigate the creature, but as soon as that was done they all dressed in turned in preparation for going outside. In the cramped space it was impossible for more than one of them to push their limbs into the survival suits at a time. Spock had been hoping for the snow-less weather to continue, holding a small hope of finding one of the missing tents, but that seemed impossible now.

The three humans went outside before he did, since it was far more difficult for him to manoeuvre with his stiff leg and crutches. When he joined them he saw them all staring at a mound in the snow that had not been there before.

‘This is the creature you killed, Nurse Chapel?’ Spock asked curiously. ‘Under that mound of snow?’

‘It must be,’ she nodded. ‘I didn’t realise it was that big.’

Spock leant heavily on one of the crutches and brought out his phaser, turning the beam to a very light setting. It only took a few seconds to melt away the snow that covered the body. What he revealed struck them all into momentary silence.

‘It’s a – dragon!’ Del Sarto said in amazement, taking a step forward. ‘Either I was hit harder on the head than I thought, or that’s a dragon.’

Spock narrowed his eyes, looking intently at the dark shape before them. It was hard to focus on due to the brilliant white light reflecting from the snow around. He knew why Del Sarto had called the creature a dragon. It was big, at least ten metres long, and he calculated that it would have stood about three metres high. The thing was a dark, dull grey-brown, and scaled like a lizard, with damp, fragile, bat-like wings slumped across the ground as if they had fallen from a great height. The tail was long and spiked. The head was cumbersome and armoured, the vacant eyes amber, slitted with black pupils, and the lips that had started to curl back in death revealed long, vicious white teeth.

‘It is not a dragon, Ensign Del Sarto,’ Spock said rationally. ‘Such creatures are entirely mythical, at least as far as their origins in human memory are concerned. However, there are certain
evolutionary constants. The concept of dragons was undoubtedly spawned from the fertile imaginations of humans exposed to lizards. Lizards *could* evolve, in the right conditions, with useful wings. It seems that on this planet they have done so. The gravity is very slightly lower than that of earth."

‘It’s a dragon,’ Del Sarto repeated.

Spock sighed. ‘I very much doubt that it breathes fire or hordes treasure, Ensign,’ he said patiently. ‘But if you wish to think of it as a dragon I can do little to change your misconception.’

‘That – That’s what killed the others?’ Ensign Grant asked in a very quiet, trembling voice.

‘Very likely,’ Spock said. He held out his tricorder, scanning the beast before them. ‘I read human DNA,’ he said quietly to Chapel.

She stared mutely at the creature for a minute, seemingly at a loss for words. Then she said, ‘Do you think there are any more of them?’

‘Unless you have killed the last of its race, then it is almost certain that there are more of them,’ Spock said rationally. ‘But I would suspect due to its size and the apparent scarcity of prey in this location that these creatures are solitary and territorial. There may not be any more for quite some distance.’

‘I hope so,’ she said. She lifted her tricorder and studied the readings silently for a moment. ‘It would be safe to eat,’ she said.

‘To eat?’ Spock echoed, quite startled.

‘You are the only vegetarian among us, Mr Spock,’ Chapel pointed out. ‘We’re surviving in extreme cold and the ration packs will only last so long. I have to make the recommendation that we make use of this animal for food. We can eat some fresh meat, and do what we can to dry and preserve some of it. Maybe we can make some kind of jerky. Do you know what jerky – ?’

‘I know what jerky is,’ Spock nodded. ‘Your suggestion is logical, of course. The corpse will, at least, stay relatively fresh in this snow, and as I don’t believe I could walk without extreme difficulty in snow this deep, I suggest we use today to render down as much of the carcass as is practically possible for future rations.’

‘And I’m sure we can manage without you,’ Chapel said with a smile. ‘I wouldn’t ask you to be involved in something that you would find so distasteful, Mr Spock.’

Spock glanced momentarily at the corpse, visualising how it might look in the not too distant future.

‘I appreciate that, Lieutenant,’ he nodded. ‘I will scan and see if I can find any suitable material for burning. It would be better if we kept phaser use to a minimum.’

‘Sir,’ Ensign Grant said timidly.

Spock looked at her enquiringly.

‘Well, sir,’ she said, looking more at his left shoulder than at his face. ‘I know you want to use the phasers as little as possible, but could we – well – it’s possible that with very little power we could melt the trail ahead, if we needed to walk in the snow, I mean. If it would make it easier for you...’

Spock leant on his crutches, very aware of the hot, throbbing pain in his leg and the inconvenience
that it was causing the whole party. If it weren’t for his injury they could be miles further south by
now, perhaps away from the worst of this extreme weather, perhaps even nearer to some kind of
civilisation, if it existed on this planet.

‘It is possible, Ensign,’ he nodded. ‘But as we have at least a full day’s task ahead of us in
rendering down this creature to provide rations, not an issue at the moment.’

He was aware that the ensign looked a little disappointed, but he moved on quickly to other
matters.

‘Del Sarto, you have shown an admirable practicality since we landed here. Do you believe you
could fashion some kind of cooking surface from the remains of the transmitter box?’

‘I’m sure I can, sir,’ he said brightly, looking around at the trampled area just outside the tent. ‘I
could build a little fire – a kind of grill – from small rocks and balance a plate on top.’

‘Get to it, Ensign,’ Spock said without preamble.

He readjusted his crutches under his armpits and lifted his tricorder, doing a brief scan of the
surrounding area. Then he went back inside the tent and connected the tricorder to the booster that
Grant had constructed, using the extra power to facilitate a careful scan of the surrounding area for
the artificial materials out of which their missing possessions were made.

After a little time Chapel came in through the doorway and zipped it up behind her. A scent of
smoke and cooking meat came in on the air.

‘Mr Spock, I’d like you to consider eating some of that creature out there,’ she said seriously. ‘I
know about the Vulcan objection to eating meat, but that animal is already dead. It killed at least
two of our people.’

‘Do you suggest a – revenge eating?’ Spock asked, an eyebrow quirked up in something close to
amusement.

‘No, of course not, sir,’ she said rather impatiently. ‘But the fact is, it is there, it is dead, and it
contains a huge amount of protein, calories, vitamins, minerals. It isn’t – logical – to overlook such
a huge source of nutrition in a situation like this, especially when you’re trying to mend a broken
leg. It’s one of the first things you learn about nutrition. Protein is for growth and repair. You’re
working on an awful lot of repair in that leg, Mr Spock.’

Spock could still smell the scent of meat cooking from outside. It turned his stomach. He was so
unused to eating meat that he was not certain how his digestive system would react.

‘I would consider it if it were the only logical option, Miss Chapel,’ he said quietly. ‘However, it
is not the only logical option.’

‘Mr Spock, those ration packs won’t last forever,’ she continued in a low voice, obviously
reluctant to let the ensigns outside hear them arguing. ‘And it isn’t fair to anyone else to share
them out unequally. Humans generally need a proper mix of proteins and vegetables, and I can’t
condone slanting it so that you get a bigger share of the vegetables that they need.’

Spock closed his eyes briefly, aware that whatever he said he was not going to win this argument
unless he ordered the nurse to cease talking about it, and that would hardly be a win.

‘If it is necessary I shall consume animal protein,’ he said. ‘I will not allow myself to starve and I
will not compromise the health of the other members of the party for the sake of my Vulcan ethics.
However, I shall decide when it becomes necessary,’ he added in a very firm voice.
She stood looking at him for a moment, before nodding and exiting the tent again. Spock sat gazing at the zipped up doorway. He could see the humans’ figures moving as vague shadows through the fabric. Christine Chapel was a formidable woman. He had always been aware of that. In some ways it was one of her most attractive qualities.

He sighed, and tuned the tricorder to seek out not only fabrics of artificial origin, but also organic substances in the surrounding area which might provide a useful source of protein. Otherwise he was certain that soon he would be eating Ensign Del Sarto’s ‘dragon’ along with the rest of them.
Chapter 6

By the next morning the scouring wind had blown a large amount of the snow away again. There was no stripped carcass of yesterday’s beast outside the tent since Spock had ordered the remains to be destroyed by phaser to discourage scavengers. But large amounts of the creature had been carefully smoked and dried in strips in a process using both fire and phaser, and then rolled up in strips of recovered tent material. Spock hoped that he would never have cause to eat these leathery strips of flesh, but he had to admit that he was pleased that they were there to supplement the rations.

The night before had culminated in something of a culinary orgy, to Spock’s mind, with the last remaining hunks of meat roasted on a spit of Del Sarto’s making over an open fire. Spock had contented himself with roast edible roots that he had identified and dug out of the ground, which he had eaten a little distance apart from the nauseating scents of cooked meat. It was pleasant, though, to eat a warm meal, and one not out of the ration packs. He did not begrudge the humans their small feast. It was a small positive in a horrendous situation, and celebrations of fire and meat had been a constant through human history at difficult times.

At times in the night he had feared for the safety of the tent as the wind rose, clawing and howling at the thin fabric, and for a few hours in the deepest dark of night they had lain awake half expecting the tent to be ripped away around them. But then the wind died again, and thankfully no carnivorous beasts came in the dark either. By dawn more sleep had been gained, the snow had mostly disappeared, and the temperatures were plummeting again.

Spock would not listen to Nurse Chapel’s arguments that another day of rest would benefit his leg after his activity yesterday, finding edible plants.

‘No,’ he said firmly. ‘We have delayed this move long enough already. We must try to get further south.’

Christine pursed her lips together, but she went to work with the rest of them dismantling the tent and carefully packing everything away in the rucksacks. There was more than one rucksack each, with some of the recovered ones and also bundles of dried meat to carry, but the burdens were not unmanageable. Spock ignored her suggestion that he should try not to carry too much weight, and took as much as he could. He and Del Sarto were the tallest and strongest members of the group, and he distributed the weight accordingly.

They set out not long after dawn. The clouds were thick but the sun could just be discerned through their grey-white veil, and Spock thought it might be possible that they could get a glimpse of the sky later. As illogical as it seemed, he felt as if a glimpse of the sky above the clouds might give some hope. He felt too cut off from the vastness and possibilities of space with this thick blanket of cloud always between him and the stars.

As they left their campsite behind them he was aware of Ensign Grant periodically looking back. Del Sarto put his arm around her as they walked, and she seemed to be upset. Despite his injury, he was managing to make a better pace than the young female ensign.

He waited for Nurse Chapel to come alongside and asked her in a low voice, ‘Nurse, is there something wrong with Ensign Grant?’

Christine looked over her shoulder briefly, and smiled sadly.

‘I think it’s just the thought of leaving Ensign Malton behind,’ she said confidentially.
‘Ensign Malton is dead,’ Spock said, his brow slightly furrowed.

‘We don’t know that for sure,’ Chapel reminded him.

The lines on Spock’s forehead deepened. ‘Miss Chapel, she has been missing for over forty-eight hours, and during that time we have been exposed to extremes of wind, snow, and cold. She would have had no protection but her survival suit, and it is unlikely she would have any rations. There is no sign of her on the tricorder, even with Ensign Grant’s greatly boosted signal. The likelihood of her being alive is approximately –’

‘I don’t need the exact odds,’ Christine cut across him rather peevishly, and Spock looked at her sharply.

‘I was about to quote the approximate odds. The exact odds would be impossible to calculate without further data,’ he said. ‘Regardless of the odds, even if Ensign Malton were alive, Ensign Grant will achieve nothing by walking so slowly and looking over her shoulder so often. We have been walking for two hours. What does she expect to see?’

Christine sighed. ‘Mr Spock, humans are not logical. Especially not eighteen-year-old humans on their first ever away mission.’

‘Perhaps our efficiency would improve if they endeavoured to be more like Vulcans,’ Spock said.

Chapel stopped abruptly, her hands on her hips. The two ensigns had a good fifty metres to make up before they caught up with their superior officers.

‘Mr Spock, do you remember what it was like when you were eighteen?’ she asked tartly.

Spock rested on his crutches, lifting his leg up a little and feeling the relief of the lack of pressure spreading through the limb. His mind conjured up a flashing series of memories. Half of his eighteenth year had been spent in bitter, restrained arguments with his father, conversations with his mother that were tearful on her part and full of repressed emotion on his, and long walks alone in the desert trying to reconcile himself to the future he had chosen, and to convince himself that he had betrayed no one and no principle in order to pursue that future.

The rest of the year had been a strange time, accustoming himself to living in San Francisco, on a planet with which he was very familiar but never entirely comfortable at that age, in an academy where, amongst thousands of humans, he was the sole Vulcan. He knew that if he found himself in that situation now, he would approach it in a very different manner to the way in which that young and insular Vulcan had approached it.

He pulled himself back from his memories. He regarded Christine steadily, making eye contact with her blue irises in a way that few humans could maintain, wondering what she had been like at eighteen. Something in himself was unaccountably stirred by that thought, and he found himself breaking the contact before she did, stopping a completely illogical flush before it reached the surface of his skin.

He glanced round at two ensigns, who had increased their pace somewhat once they had seen the others waiting, then back at the nurse again.

‘Allow them an hour’s leisure, and a ration of one third of a chocolate bar each,’ he said. ‘After that time, I will expect them to be ready to move on again.’

‘They – might appreciate some words from you, Mr Spock,’ she suggested softly. ‘A pep talk.’
Spock raised an eyebrow, then said uncomfortably, ‘I am not familiar with making ‘pep talks.’’

‘Perhaps not,’ Christine told him, ‘but it’s the role of a leader to keep up the morale in junior officers.’

Spock pursed his lips, regarding the two young humans.

‘Ensigns, it is imperative that we make better pace,’ he said as they finally reached him. ‘However,’ he continued swiftly, ‘I think it is time for a break. I would advise sitting down. Miss Chapel will share out some chocolate.’

At that he saw a certain light come into the two youngsters’ eyes. He waited until they were seated on the soft, springy, heather-like ground covering, and then lowered himself down so that he was sitting too, laying his crutches across a cushion of heather and using them as a kind of raft upon which to elevate his leg.

‘Ensign Grant, the nurse has suggested that you are still concerned for the safety of Ensign Malton,’ he said in a low voice, looking directly at the woman.

She swallowed quickly, and half-smiled. ‘I – I suppose it’s because we never found a body,’ she said quietly. ‘How awful it would be if we left her somewhere...’

‘Ensign, there were no life signs at all on scans,’ Spock assured her. ‘Even with the booster which you so intelligently and efficiently constructed, we could still find no signs of life.’

‘No, I know,’ Ensign Grant murmured.

‘You are very fortunate to be alive, Ensign,’ Spock told her, holding her dark eyes with his own. ‘I suggest you dwell on that.’

The ensign emitted something that sounded like a stifled sob, then got up and stumbled a few metres away. Ensign Del Sarto followed her swiftly, murmuring what sounded like words of comfort.

Nurse Chapel crouched down beside Spock, her expression hard.

‘Mr Spock, if that was meant to be a pep talk, remind me to never send you in to talk to someone who’s really upset,’ she said sharply.

Spock regarded her, feeling baffled.

‘I do not understand what I said to upset her,’ he confessed. ‘I complimented her work. I reminded her that she is lucky to be alive.’

Christine sighed, rubbing her hand tiredly over her eyes.

‘Mr Spock, all you have done is remind her about what she’s lost, and what a dangerous situation we’re in,’ she said.

‘I am not a psychologist,’ Spock said honestly. ‘Particularly when it comes to humans.’

Christine pressed her lips together as if she were restraining herself from speaking. Then she got out her tricorder and medical scanner and started to carefully and closely scan Spock’s lower leg.

‘How does it feel?’ she asked. ‘Honestly.’

‘It is painful but manageable,’ Spock said honestly. ‘The crutches are invaluable.’
‘Hmm,’ she murmured, taking another scan. ‘There’s a lot of inflammation present and I’m not sure how well the bones are setting...’

‘I assume there is little you can do,’ Spock said.

‘There isn’t much I can do,’ she nodded. ‘It’s up to you, Mr Spock. You need to rest it.’

‘Miss Chapel, we have moved approximately five miles in two hours,’ Spock said. ‘I do not have the luxury of being able to rest my leg.’

‘Mr Spock, do you really think we’ll be able to travel far enough to make a practical difference?’ she asked in a low voice, taking care not to be overheard.

Spock exhaled, looking up at the thick fleecy clouds and then back down at the ground. The bushes they were sitting amongst were sporting small berries that scanned as viable to eat, and he wondered if he should set the ensigns to berry picking while they were resting. Snow sat in small patches where the ground was sheltered or shaded, and the clouds above looked heavy and pregnant with further bad weather. They had travelled five miles. Only five miles. If their tent had still been standing at its original location he probably would have been able to see it as a small speck across the flat land.

Perhaps it was true that they could not move far enough to make a difference, but by staying still they would make no difference at all. The extreme weather and a vicious predator had taken the lives of three, probably four, of their team. There was nothing to be gained by staying in that location, and possibly more to lose.

‘It is impossible to tell how far we may travel, Miss Chapel,’ he said quietly. ‘But in moving we stand the possibility of escaping bad weather and predators and of finding new food sources and possibly native inhabitants who may be able to help us. We gain nothing at all by staying.’

‘Except allowing your leg to heal,’ she pointed out.

‘I am well aware of the problem of my injury,’ Spock said, almost snappishly. ‘If it were not for my broken ankle we could have covered twice the ground that we have. But what would you have me do? Lie recumbent in the tent and wait for more of our group to be eradicated by storms and monsters?’

Christine bewildered him by smiling suddenly, and laying a hand on his arm.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Spock,’ she said softly.

He met her eyes, and for a moment he felt as if something had passed between them, something almost as real as the touch of meld. She seemed to be looking deep into that part of him beyond his logic and disciplines, where he harboured a very real fear for the youngsters in his charge and his ability to keep at least these two safe. He had allowed three eighteen year old humans to die on their first ever mission. He had failed to protect them. In all probability the fourth, missing, ensign was also dead. There was nothing that he could say or do that would replace those individual young lives. When he returned he would have to contact their families, to send an individual message to each one, explaining that under his care their children had died. He wondered how humans could bear such things as this, without the disciplines of logic and control to veneer over their reactions.

‘Thank you, Christine,’ he said almost inaudibly.

She smiled again, pressing a little with her gloved hand through the insulated arm of his survival
suit. He wished he could strip the suit off and take himself off to a clean and quiet room and wash himself from top to bottom. The sweat and staleness of days of living in the same clothes felt like a carapace over him. Perhaps it was an illogical fantasy, but he imagined a place further south where there would be more useful vegetation or perhaps loose rocks enough to build some kind of secure shelter, where they could stop and settle and try to survive until they were found. If they were found...

Christine broke the gaze and the invisible thread seemed to drop like spider’s web on the grass. As if she had seen more in his mind than his deep insecurity she began to diligently pick berries from the low plants that they rested on, dropping them into an open square of silken salvaged tent material. After a moment Spock joined her, picking what he could from where he sat. Noticing the example of their superior officers, the two ensigns joined in, ranging further afield than Spock and the nurse and bringing the deep purple berries back in handfuls to drop them onto Chapel’s square of fabric.

Spock put one of the berries between his lips just to taste it. He knew from scans that it was perfectly safe, but safe did not necessarily mean palatable. But the berry was sweet and firm and burst in his mouth. He lifted an eyebrow a little and nodded, then continued to pick.

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All too soon he knew he had to give the order to move on. Days on this planet were a little longer than Earth-normal, and Starfleet-normal, of twenty four hours, but there was a limit to human endurance, and he could not rely on the young ensigns or Nurse Chapel to be able to march further just because the sun was obliging in staying in the sky.

The cloth of berries was almost bursting, and so Spock distributed a fair share of them to each member of the party, and Christine tied a knot in the fabric to keep the rest safe. While the others ate berries and a couple of strips of the ‘dragon jerky,’ as Ensign Del Sarto insisted on calling it, Spock paired his berries with a few pieces of bland and chewy root which he had harvested the day before.

‘If only we could make coffee,’ he heard Christine saying in a joking tone to the two humans.

It was most illogical to feel left out, but there was a certain chill in sitting there listening to the light ripple of laughter shared between the three humans, that in no way included him. He turned himself away from that small moment of human concord to pass another scan over the local vegetation, wondering if there might be something that would mimic the flavours and benefits of coffee or tea. There was little sense in concentrating on that now, though. They had to move on and cover more ground before nightfall. The party would have to make do with continuing to drink melted snow that had been boiled or sanitised with steriliser tablets.

Spock swung himself up and stood leaning on his crutches. He cleared his throat to get the humans’ attention, and said, ‘It is time to move on.’

He felt like a teacher who had just announced the end of recess, but the humans reshouldered their burdens without complaint, and prepared to walk. Spock opened up the tricorder to get a bearing, and pointed.
‘That direction,’ he said. ‘I want to try to pick up the pace and cover more ground. I believe there are low hills in the distance. They may provide better cover and more scope for food.’

Chapel lifted her hand and shaded her eyes.

‘Can you see hills, Mr Spock?’ she asked. ‘They look like clouds.’

Spock nodded. ‘My eyesight is somewhat keener than a human’s,’ he said. ‘If we start now we may find out if they are indeed hills before nightfall.’
Chapter 7

There were indeed hills in the distance. Barely hills at all to one brought up within range of the Llangon Mountains, but they were hills compared to the flat, seemingly unending tundra over which they had just walked. Spock felt some relief in the fact that they were little more than gentle undulations in the plain. They would not be difficult to traverse with his injury, but they did afford some change in the vegetation and might also affect the weather somewhat. There was a definite change in the cloud cover where the air currents were disturbed by this range of hills.

They had, he calculated, walked some fifteen miles that day, and although his leg was distractingly sore he felt some measure of achievement. Checking on the tricorder showed that they had actually come fourteen point three seven miles from their starting point and had travelled almost directly due south. Spock accounted for the discrepancy between his calculation and the tricorder’s fact by the natural small deviations taken by a party on foot on uneven ground.

The party had been reluctant to cross the first of the small hills, but Spock was insistent upon finding somewhere to camp that had more shelter. There were small stands of tree-like plants growing around the edges of the hills, and he was certain that there would be more further into the range. The wind would be ameliorated by both the shelter of the hills and the baffling effect of the tree branches, and he was certain that any large predators such as the dragon creature they had killed would not be able to fit between the trunks and low branches.

The tent was eventually pitched in a small clearing between a number of the low, alien-looking trees, and Spock sent the two ensigns out with tricorders to search for food. Beside the trees and the shelter of the hills, there was also a narrow, trickling river rimed with ice at the edges. Enough snow remained on the ground to show that the scouring winds on the plains were cut out by the geography here.

‘Mr Spock, I absolutely insist that you rest your leg now,’ Chapel told him as soon as the tent was pitched. ‘There is nothing that you need to do that can’t be done by the rest of us, and if you don’t elevate it for a while I’m going to have to cut that cast off and put on a larger one to accommodate the swelling. I don’t need to remind you that I don’t have infinite supplies of spray cast.’

‘I am quite aware of the finite nature of your resources,’ Spock told her.

Although he was working hard to suppress the pain in his leg he suspected that his discomfort showed in his face. Not only was the leg aching and pulsing with the movement of his blood, but his skin beneath the cast was unbearably itchy. To add to that discomfort he was concerned about his foot. Ever since the nurse had put on the cast he had been reduced to using only one boot and carrying the other, and protecting his foot with wrappings of a moss-like plant over which he stretched his sock, but it was far from ideal in this cold climate. Now he was sitting in the tent he leant forward to try to remove the sock, but Chapel shook her head.

‘No, Mr Spock. Let me,’ she told him firmly.

She first made him a cushion of two rucksacks and carefully used them to elevate the leg. Then she knelt down before him to peel away the overstretched sock and unwrap the layers of moss.

‘Cold, huh?’ she asked, intent on Spock’s foot.

‘The moss is insulating, but not as effective as a boot,’ Spock commented.

She held the scanner over his foot.
‘You’re on the verge of frostbite in the extremity of the foot,’ she murmured.

Spock sat up a little more, bending himself rather awkwardly so that he could see the foot himself. It looked odd and rather detached from his body, poking out of the dirty cast, his skin marked and flecked with the pattern of the moss that had been packed around it. His toes were an unpleasant greenish colour, beginning to be swollen, the skin hard and shiny.

‘It’s recommended to immerse in warm water,’ Chapel murmured, holding her hands around the toes in a protective way, ‘but we don’t have any containers big enough for that, and besides, I can’t be sure that you won’t just be exposed to the cold again...’

She trailed off, hovering her scanner over the leg again and looking at the readings critically. Then abruptly she unzipped the front of her survival suit, saying briefly, ‘Aren’t I glad I chose the uniform pants for the trip to Kalvar 7 instead of the dress?’

Spock raised an eyebrow. He had almost forgotten what their original destination had been when they had set out as a party of eight in the shuttlecraft. The weather patterns on Kalvar 7 were unsuitable for the short uniform dress, and all of the females on board the shuttle had opted for the more practical pants option.

‘It was fortuitous,’ he said, ‘if not – ’

He broke off. It would be unVulcan to express a preference for the short, body-fitting dress on female crew members. It was true that the female uniform top was also more fitting than the male one, and the neck scooped lower, but the uniform pants left a lot more to the imagination than the thin regulation pantyhose.

Chapel carefully lifted Spock’s leg and without asking him if he minded, folded it under her top, pressing the sole of his foot against her bare stomach. If it were not for the pain in his leg Spock would have recoiled. As it was his eyes widened slightly, and his eyebrow raised.

‘It’s the only logical thing I can think of, Mr Spock,’ the nurse told him in a voice that was deliberately professional. ‘I don’t quite approach Vulcan body temperature, but it’s a good deal warmer than anything else around here.’

‘I – ’ Spock began, unaccountably flustered. Then he said. ‘I – was merely concerned that it may be – very uncomfortable for you.’

‘Well, I can’t deny it’s cold,’ Chapel said with a smile. ‘But – it’s all right.’

Spock sat still, feeling the slow creep of warmth into his painful, tingling foot. She had dropped her top again and closed her survival suit as well as she could, clasping her hands over the top of his foot. It was an odd feeling. He wanted to jerk his leg away, but he did not. He could feel something hard against the top of his largest toe, and was aware that it must be almost touching her breasts. The length of his foot made the length of her torso seem rather small, and he wondered what the hard thing was that touched his big toe and why women should have something so rigid in their undergarments. He could not ask.

‘Helping?’ she asked him brightly, as if she were trying to cover over her own embarrassment.

‘Yes, I do believe so,’ he nodded. Pain was starting to creep hard into the toes as the flesh revived. He almost bit his lip into his mouth, but instead he closed his eyes briefly and concentrated on mental techniques for pulling himself away from the sensation. As the pain died away in his consciousness his awareness of his skin against hers seemed to grow in proportion.
'Do you feel able to try a healing trance yet?' she asked.

He shook his head. ‘Not in this cold. I would risk hypothermia.’

‘There’s plenty of wood lying about under the trees. We could light a fire.’

‘No,’ he said quietly. ‘The risk is still too great. One needs a secure area with a regulated temperature, not the wildly veering extremes that would result from a fire in sub-zero temperatures. Without that the trance could result in coma or even death.’

She sighed. ‘All right, Mr Spock.’

Silence fell, and Spock’s hyper-awareness of his skin against hers seemed to grow until it filled the space. It was logical. It was the most logical way to warm his toes. He certainly did not want to develop gangrene in his foot because of a misplaced sense of propriety. But he was very aware of his skin against hers. Vulcan feet were not as sensitive as Vulcan hands. They had evolved for different purposes. But it was true that once, a long way back on the evolutionary tree, the nerves in both hands and feet had been very similar, and he found a surprising amount of sensation and connection through the touch.

The nurse had turned herself to her tricorder and was studying the screen intently, one hand still, almost unconsciously, laid gently over his foot. Spock could not be sure whether or not she was actually applying herself to something of deep interest to her, but he was aware of a sensation through that sensitive skin of his toes, a kind of fluttering, fast-heart-beating sense of alert. Her own hyper-awareness, he was sure. As he moved his toes a little to relieve the aching stiffness in them he gained a feeling of heated self-consciousness, and he was not sure if it originated in her or himself, or in both.

‘I – think that is enough now, Miss Chapel,’ he said suddenly, and she looked down at the lump that his foot made underneath her clothes. She slipped her hand underneath to touch his skin and said, ‘I’d be happier if we got you a little warmer first.’

‘I am sure that it is fine,’ Spock said more firmly.

She looked up rather quickly, then nodded and carefully removed the foot from under her clothes. She rezipped her survival suit and clasped her hands firmly around the foot.

‘I want to get it a bit warmer,’ she repeated.

Spock lay back on the ground and closed his eyes. He had grown used to being cold almost at all times except at night, when the four bodies closely packed in sleeping bags and in a tent made for two brought the temperature up well. He tried to ignore the nurse’s presence and extended his awareness to listen for the ensigns, who were still outside the tent seeking food. He could hear their voices in the distance. No doubt he was the only one who could hear them. His sense of hearing was better than a human’s. They sounded calm, though. There was apparently nothing to worry about.

His thoughts turned to the other ensigns, the lost ones. There was no logic in regret, but there was some logic in considering what had happened in order to inform the present and perhaps reduce risks in the future. What could he have done differently? He had scanned for lifeforms and found none in the vicinity. He had instructed the ensigns to stay in the tents unless absolutely necessary. The camp had been pitched in as sheltered a location as possible. What could he have done against winds so strong and a beast which apparently came in from far away and was a vicious predator? How could he protect the three humans left under his command?
He should have made it absolutely clear that the tent doors were not to be zipped open in strong
winds. That was almost certainly what was to fault for the tents blowing away. It seemed blatantly
obvious to him that it was a danger to open the tent in strong wind, due to the risk of the wind
getting inside and blowing the structure away. But evidently it had not been obvious to the
ensigns, or their fear of the creature that they had detected on their tricorders had been greater than
their common sense. It was probably that one foolish action that had killed them. Ensign Grant
had been the only one with sense enough to come immediately to the other tent.

He must have made some kind of audible sigh, because Christine Chapel said, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, Mr
Spock. Did I hurt you?’

His eyes blinked open. He was almost startled to see the daylight shining blue through the fabric
of the tent. His mind had been so firmly meshed in thoughts of that stormy night.

‘No, not at all, Nurse,’ he said.

Her hands were still around his foot, but she seemed to be trying to rub heat into it.

‘I was afraid I’d put undue pressure on your leg,’ she said.

‘No,’ he murmured. ‘No, the leg is quite all right. The elevation is helping.’

Odd how an injured part of the body became something apart from oneself. The leg rather than my
leg. Rather than a useful and functioning integral part of him the leg had become a nuisance, a
bringer of pain and something which hampered his motion.

‘How long will this take to heal?’ he asked abruptly.

‘Oh, the frostbite should settle down in – ’

‘I meant the break,’ Spock said.

Christine laughed a little. ‘Mr Spock, without proper medical technology, relying only on a cast, it
will take as long as six weeks just for the bones to heal, and that’s not to mention any ligament or
tendon damage. I can’t tell just now how bad that might be because the swelling interferes with
the readings. The tricorder isn’t precise enough for that. Supposing we’re not rescued soon, it’s
likely you’ll need a certain amount of physical therapy once the cast is off, and I’m not a trained
physical therapist, although I know a fair bit about it. The amount of walking you’re doing at the
moment is very likely affecting the setting of the bones, though. You’ve had about a week of
healing, but the tricorder doesn’t show as much progress as there should be.’

‘Even Vulcan bones – ’ Spock began with a note of hope in his voice.

‘Even Vulcan bones,’ she nodded. ‘Without a healing trance there’s not much in it, and you –
have human genetic elements through every bit of your body too.’

‘Of course,’ Spock murmured. It was illogical to resist being reminded of those human elements,
but Christine Chapel was always apologetic when she mentioned them, and he always felt a brief
moment of annoyance when she did.

‘You will have to make up your mind to the fact that you’ll be stuck with this injury for a long
while yet,’ she told him. ‘Fighting it every step of the way will only make it worse.’

‘However, we do need to keep moving on,’ Spock reminded her.

‘Do we?’ she asked him honestly, meeting his eyes.
He looked directly into her eyes, holding her gaze again in a way few humans could tolerate. Blue eyes were always a fascination to him. Although his mother’s eyes were blue, hers were almost unique on a planet of almost exclusively dark eyes.

‘We do need to keep moving on,’ he nodded. ‘You will not sway me from that decision. We do not know when we will be found. We do not know if we will be found. Our best chance of survival lies at more temperate latitudes.’

‘And if we find intelligent lifeforms?’ she asked him.

‘Then we tread carefully,’ Spock said. ‘Very carefully indeed. There is the non-interference directive for a start. We will have to observe any culture we come across before making a decision as to whether or not to make contact. But if it is a more primitive culture, as I would suspect, then it is very likely that we shall have to take the decision to avoid them at all costs. It could prove fatal – to either side.’

‘Yes, even just a stray virus,’ Chapel murmured.

‘A stray virus, a reaction of fear, a perception of threat,’ Spock nodded. ‘We could gain much from contact, but we could lose more.’

He could see something passing in her face, a thought perhaps of being stranded on this planet for many, many years, maybe the rest of a natural human lifespan, and never being able to make contact with anyone outside of their group of four. A lifetime wasted, he thought, but he dismissed that thought quickly as unduly emotional.

‘Christine, the captain is looking for us,’ he said softly. ‘Captain Kirk will not give up. It is not in his nature. They will have found the emergency beacon and will be able to follow the trail of the shuttle to a point very near this planet.’

Her lips parted a little, and he wondered if he could see tears in her eyes. Surely she was not about to cry? He was not sure how he would react to that. There was nothing practical that he could do to remedy her situation. He pushed himself up on his elbows, trying to rotate his body a little while still keeping his leg elevated and his foot in her warm grasp. She was massaging his foot abstractedly, as if she had quite forgotten that she was doing it. He leant on one arm and reached out with the other, saying, ‘Christine...’

The tent door zipped open, and Spock dropped his hand as if he had been stung. Ensign Grant was looking in through the door, and a bright flush rose into her cheeks as her eyes fell on the two people inside.

‘Oh, I – er – I just – ’ she stammered, obviously thinking she had walked in on a scene of some intimacy.

Spock straightened his body again. ‘Report, Lieutenant.’

The nurse had let go of his foot and he was strangely conscious of the nakedness of his toes.

‘We – found a lot of edible fungi, some more of those purple berries, and Ben – Ensign Del Sarto – found a few small mammal-like creatures with the tricorder,’ Ensign Grant said. ‘He couldn’t catch them, but they’re there.’

‘You may be better employed in making some kind of trap for aquatic lifeforms, if you must insist on eating flesh,’ Spock commented. ‘I trust you performed very careful scans of the fungi?’
‘Of course, sir,’ she nodded quickly, her face flushing again.

‘You may want to occupy yourself in gathering some wood and seeing if you’re able to light a fire – at a safe distance from the tent,’ Spock said, aware of the psychological benefits that humans found in making fire.

‘Yes, sir,’ she said quickly. ‘I’ll go tell Ben...’

And she ducked out of the tent and zipped the door closed, seeming glad to be allowed to leave.

Spock exhaled and rested back on the ground.

‘They’ll enjoy that,’ Christine said with a smile. ‘I dare say we will too. We could have a meal round the campfire, and then sleep, and perhaps tomorrow – ’

‘Tomorrow we will move south again,’ Spock said firmly.

Her face seemed to fall. ‘Mr Spock, it really is important that you rest,’ she reminded him.

‘Perhaps so, but I can hardly lie here resting for six weeks,’ Spock replied. ‘Tomorrow we move on, unless there is a more compelling reason to stay than my broken ankle.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she murmured, the barriers of rank seeming to rise between them again.

Spock rested back onto the ground and closed his eyes. It was important that rank structure was maintained. He was by far the most experienced and competent person in the party and it was vital that his orders were followed. But it also made for a difficult, lonely path. They could be trapped here for a very long time, and he did not always want to be a man alone.
In the last three days Spock calculated that they had walked sixty miles, and had travelled 53.7 miles directly south from the spot where they had crashed down onto this cold and barren planet. The change in the weather was noticeable. Although the cold was still crushing, snowfalls were becoming a little more infrequent and there had not been so much wind now that they were in rather more undulating country. He noted a five minute increase in daylight hours, too. All in all, his decision to move south seemed vindicated.

It was nearing the end of a long day, and they had pitched the small tent in the lee of a high, bald protrusion of rock which rose up like the forehead of a venerable old man against the thickly clouded sky. The land was pierced all around by these weather-smoothed domes of rock, with small stands of alien trees clustered in their shelter, and hills larger than the first range the party had journeyed through pressing up on the southern side of this flatter terrain.

Spock was in no condition to appreciate the beauty of his surroundings. Three days of walking had pushed his pain tolerance to the limit, and it was all that he could do to lie in the tent with the leg elevated, trying to control the insistent hot aching and throbbing that consumed the whole of the lower limb.

‘I’m going to have to take that cast off,’ Chapel said to him in no nonsense terms, having sent the ensigns away to forage so that she could deal with the Vulcan in private. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Spock, but I will. I warned you against three days without stopping, and it’s been too much. The leg is swollen, and if I don’t do something about it you’ll lose blood supply to the foot.’

Spock blinked his eyes open. The light that shone through the tent fabric seemed to pierce into his eyes, increasing a headache that he had not yet admitted to.

‘Your temperature’s elevated,’ Chapel continued. ‘It’s possible that you have an infection set in somehow.’

‘Possible,’ Spock murmured. ‘Do what you must.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘It worries me when you agree with me, Mr Spock.’ She lightly touched his forehead with the back of her hand. ‘Definitely warm.’

‘Is that necessary when you have access to a medical tricorder?’ Spock asked curiously.

She smiled. ‘It’s necessary to me. Most doctors and nurses like to have physical contact with their patients. It – speaks to you better than numbers on a screen.’

‘Illogical,’ Spock said.

‘Human,’ she replied. ‘Now, I’m going to have to use a laser scalpel to cut through the bulk of the cast,’ she said. ‘I can do the last bit with good old fashioned scissors. But it’s important you don’t move. The blade is set to cut to a specific depth.’

‘Of course,’ Spock said.

‘It’s going to hurt more once the cast is opened,’ she warned him. ‘I won’t take it off. I’ll just split it but leave it as a support. Once the swelling is down and when I judge – when I judge,’ she repeated forcefully, ‘that you’re able to walk again, I’ll put a new cast on.’

Spock closed his eyes again, lying passively as she peeled his sock away from his foot and
examined the exposed flesh.

‘I think it’s started from this toe,’ she murmured critically, touching his smallest toe on that foot. ‘Frostbitten again. It just didn’t get the chance to recover from last time. You’ve got an open sore.’

‘Do what you must,’ Spock said, keeping his eyes closed, concentrating only on the feeling of the nurse touching his foot and the constant thud of his heartbeat through his body.

‘First, an antibiotic, anti-inflammatory, and a painkiller,’ she said, pressing a hypo to his arm. He did not argue. The medicines hissed into his body and he felt the edges blur away from the pain almost immediately. The pulsing headache was pushed back into something more bearable. ‘Now hold still while I cut that cast.’

Spock heard the slight hum as she activated the laser scalpel, and a kind of vibration set up in the cast. To distract himself he said, ‘It was always a point of curiosity to me that you settled for the post of nurse, Miss Chapel. You are an intelligent woman. Why not MD?’

She laughed quietly. ‘I’m sure Dr McCoy would love that. He already thinks I second guess him enough as it is.’

‘You second guess him, as you put it, because your skill level and potential are high,’ Spock replied. ‘Why not the MD?’

‘Nurses are also intelligent people,’ she reminded him reprovingly. ‘Being a nurse and being a doctor are different things. Not everyone who is a nurse is someone who couldn’t be a doctor.’

‘But you,’ Spock insisted. ‘You show every inclination of a woman who would rather be in control than taking orders. You have risen to Head Nurse, and it is quite obvious to me that you have the potential to go further. Yet you do not. You have settled in a position and make no attempt to reach higher. Why not the MD?’

‘Oh, it’s a long story, Mr Spock,’ she said with an odd tone in her voice. ‘You don’t want to hear it.’

‘In fact, I do,’ Spock said. ‘Else I would not have asked.’

‘Well,’ she murmured, intent on the cutting of the cast. ‘I was pursuing my MD-PhD in biomedical research before I joined the Enterprise.’

‘Ambitious,’ Spock commented. He opened his eyes to see her bending over his leg, very carefully tracing the laser scalpel along the cast.

She smiled, her eyes still on his leg. Her hair was dishevelled after a day’s walking and tied loosely behind her head, and there was a smudge of dirt on her cheek. She wore no make-up. It struck Spock that she was naturally more beautiful than the woman he was used to with carefully coiffured hair and a painted face.

‘I was brought up ambitious,’ she said. ‘I didn’t ever stop to consider that I couldn’t do it. Mom and dad were behind me all the way, paid for everything. They saw me lecturing in a big university, I think. And during the course of my training I met Roger...’

‘Roger Korby,’ Spock said.

He vividly recalled that mission to Exo III, ostensibly to rescue Roger Korby from the planet, that had turned into such a personal tragedy for Christine and a greater tragedy for the world of medical archaeology. Instead of finding the woman’s fiancé alive and well they had discovered a
man who had become an android, callous of feeling and brutal in his attempt to commandeer the
Enterprise for his own ends.

‘Yes, Roger Korby,’ she said with a wistful tone to her voice. Her mind seemed to be far distant
from the present moment. ‘He was – he was so engaging. Fascinating in every way. He was older
than me. I looked up to him. He came to the university during his research into medical techniques
on Abalon 7. There was something of a stash of artefacts there. One of the professors was an
expert. I guess at first he awed me, and then he attracted me, and then – before I knew it we were
engaged. It was – ’ She shook her head. ‘It was a strange time. Happy. Sad. Sometimes I can’t
work out how I felt.’

Spock kept his eyes fixed on her face, trying to read her expressions. Human affairs were so
complicated. How could one be happy, sad, and indecisive all at once, and still commit to
something as concrete as an engagement?

‘I did love him,’ Christine said, running her finger down the split in the cast, picking out debris.
‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ she said, as Spock winced unintentionally.

‘It is all right,’ he said quickly.

She smiled, and set to work again, cutting the groove a little deeper.

‘Yes, I did love him,’ she said with more firmness in her voice.

Her eyes seemed very far away. In the light that filtered through the tent fabric they looked violet,
and Spock stared at them, fascinated. She could have been a hundred light years away, talking to
herself.

‘He was wonderful, but then – I always had those little misgivings. He could be – controlling. He
didn’t always agree with my research. He tried to steer me in the directions he thought I ought to
go. He thought I should concentrate harder on the PhD side of the study and not on the MD. I
wonder – well, I wonder sometimes if he was a little jealous.’

Spock did not comment. He did not feel anywhere near qualified.

‘He encouraged you to give up the MD?’ he asked, trying to get the conversation back on track.

‘Not exactly,’ she smiled. ‘No. He went off to do his research. Went to Exo III. We were going to
be married when he came back. But he never came back, and – well, it seemed like no one was
going to do anything about it. The university he worked for shrugged their collected shoulders.
Starfleet wasn’t interested. The Council for Xeno-Medical Archaeology weren’t interested. They
would have let him freeze into a block of ice, and no one would lift a finger. So I made a decision.
I took a final few months of training that would turn the MD studies into a nursing qualification,
and I joined Starfleet. They were desperate for nurses then. They took me on, and I found myself
assigned to the Enterprise. It was where I wanted to be. The Enterprise is one of the furthest
ranging ships in the fleet. I thought that once I was out in space I could do something, work to find
him. I made connections, contacted people, used spare bits of money to pay for investigations into
where he might be. And then in the end the Enterprise was sent to Exo III.’

She put the laser scalpel down and picked up the scissors. Although they looked old fashioned
they were almost certainly made of durinium, so hard that they would never have to be sharpened.
They could not fail like a laser scalpel might, and it was almost certain that the nurse had a few
other cutting instruments of the same material in her kit. But she did not move to cut the final
thickness of the cast. She just sat there holding the scissors, her left hand on Spock’s foot,
apparently staring into space.
‘Nurse,’ Spock said.

She started. ‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ she said quickly. ‘I was – in another time.’

‘I quite understand,’ Spock said, and she looked at him with a startled expression.

Spock could clearly recall the whole of that mission on Exo III, how she had been forced to accept that her fiancé was long dead, but had also had to watch the facsimile of him, containing his consciousness, be destroyed. She had seemed haunted for days following that mission. Later she had appeared to be back to normal, but he had sense a grief and distraction beneath the façade. Humans often believed that Vulcans had no emotions and no empathy, but that was not true.

‘I’ll – start cutting the final layer now,’ she said. ‘It might feel odd. Tell me if I hurt you.’

‘Of course,’ Spock said.

He felt the cold blade of the scissors pressing beneath the cast, the first fresh thing to touch his skin there in over a week. It was an odd feeling; not unpleasant, but odd. She steadily cut down the length of the pre-cut groove, and Spock lay there feeling entirely disassociated from the leg upon which she worked; that is, until she reached the area where his leg had suffered its trauma. He drew in breath sharply, and air whistled between his teeth, as the blade of the scissors made contact with that first patch of skin that must have sat directly above the break.

Christine passed in her cutting. ‘All right?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Spock said tightly. ‘I would rather you did it swiftly.’

‘As swiftly as I can,’ she promised him.

‘Then you gave up on your chance of becoming a doctor in order to find your missing fiancé,’ Spock said, attempting to draw his mind away from the pain again. ‘Quite fascinating.’

‘It’s not only men who can act the white knight,’ she said with a rather wry smile. ‘Now, I’m going to crack this cast open.’

Spock nodded briefly, and braced himself. He watched her putting a hand on each side of the cast, putting considerable force into pulling the two sides apart. Instantly simultaneous sensations of relief and pain pulsed through the leg.

‘Are you all right, Mr Spock?’ she asked.

Spock took a moment, then said in a thin voice, ‘Yes, Miss Chapel. I am fine.’

‘It’s really quite swollen,’ she murmured. ‘Very bruised looking still. Now, if I can find something to tie around it it will carry on acting as a kind of splint, for rudimentary support – meaning you can get up to go to the bathroom, things like that – but no unnecessary moving around.’

‘Miss Chapel, there is no bathroom here,’ Spock said innocently.

She sighed, putting the scissors back in her kit.

‘I’m going to leave it to rest for a few minutes before I do anything else,’ she said. ‘Let the air get to it for a bit.’

She closed up her medical bag and turned around, lying down on top of the sleeping bag next to Spock and gazing up at the top of the tent.
'I didn’t give up on my chance of becoming a doctor,’ she said after a moment’s silence, sounding as much as if she were speaking to herself as to the Vulcan. ‘I still have ambitions. I don’t see myself being Head Nurse on the Enterprise forever.’

Spock turned his head to look at her. ‘That, Miss Chapel, will be the Enterprise’s loss,’ he said gravely.

She smiled, her face lighting up as if the sun had come out. Spock felt gratified to see that change in her.

‘But why, Miss Chapel, did you not leave the Enterprise once Roger Korby was discovered to be beyond help?’ he asked curiously. ‘That was some years ago now, but you are still Head Nurse of the Enterprise.’

She flushed, seeming consternated.

‘The Enterprise is a very challenging workplace,’ she said after a moment. ‘I encounter things there that I never would back home studying for my MD. Earth seems very boring...’

‘There are other places to study than Earth,’ Spock pointed out. ‘The Enterprise is not a teaching ship, but I am sure that there are opportunities. There are hospital ships belonging to Starfleet. You would not even have to leave the service.’

‘Yes, there are,’ she said vaguely, fiddling with the fabric of the sleeping bag with one hand.

‘I am sure that one of your talent and experience would be granted a transfer almost immediately,’ Spock said. ‘I don’t doubt that Dr McCoy would be irritated at losing his best nurse, but he would find another.’

‘It’s never that simple, Mr Spock,’ she said distantly. ‘There are – ties.’

‘Friendships, of course,’ Spock replied. The cocktail of drugs that she had given him were making him feel relaxed and sleepy. ‘Human distractions. Friendships are – ’

‘Don’t say they’re illogical,’ Christine said, turning her head to look at him suddenly. ‘Please don’t say that.’

‘No,’ Spock said slowly. ‘No. No man exists in a vacuum.’

He lay still, thinking of the people that he may never see again. Jim with his very human passion, McCoy’s irascibility. Lieutenant Uhura with her warm smile and her considerable musical talent. Scott and his love of alcohol and traditional entertainment. His parents, somewhere far away on Vulcan, who may not even know yet that he was missing. In all of those people, Jim was the greatest thought in his mind. He knew no other person, neither Vulcan nor human, who accepted him so completely for what he was. Definitely no Vulcan. He had yet to find a Vulcan who did not attempt to unpick his human traits from his Vulcan. Jim accepted them all as a tapestry that did not need dismantling to understand.

‘You miss them,’ Christine said.

‘Yes,’ Spock replied simply. His eyes were closing. He felt very tired. ‘But I have one person left to me. One person...’

He felt her swell of emotion like a wave crashing onto the shore, but he could not separate the different washing feelings. Regret, sadness, happiness, love. How could humans process so many emotions if they all came at the same time? How did they ever manage without rigid mental
disciplines to sort them? It was true that human emotion did not reach the depths of Vulcan, but still, how did they manage?

‘Christine,’ he murmured, but the word died away on his lips as he fell into sleep.

Christine looked sideways at Spock as his eyes fluttered closed, pleased that the sedative had finally done its work. He looked like a child lying there like that, every line melted out of his face. She lay still for a moment, just watching, trying to push down the surges of feeling that Spock would no doubt decide were terribly illogical. She never could understand him. He uttered sentences or words that seemed to have deep meaning, and she never found out what that precise meaning was. It is illogical to protest against our natures... What did he mean? What did he ever mean?

She needed to concentrate on her job. She sat up, turning her attention to the Vulcan’s leg. She spread a sleeping bag out flat and gently lowered the limb down onto it, removing the rucksacks that had served to elevate it. His skin had that odd, pale look of skin that had been covered over for a long time, like something brought up from underwater. The dark hairs on his leg stood out starkly against the white behind.

Under her pressure the cast came open enough for her to slip it off. The leg looked as if he had been in a fight. Deep greenish black bruises blossomed around the site of the break. They should have been healed by now, but the continued pressure the Vulcan was putting on the limb retarded any meaningful progress. His foot and lower leg were both swollen and felt hot to her touch.

She put the cast aside and felt the leg with both hands, manipulating the site of the break in a way she would never have done if Spock were awake. She could still feel a grating there. The bones were not fusing as they should.

She filled a small cup with water, then heated the water with a very light phaser beam. Then she very carefully cleaned the whole area of the leg that had been covered by the cast, the foot as well, and finished off by rubbing in an antiseptic spray. There would be alien bacteria here that none of them had ever been exposed to, and if she were honest about it the infection in his foot scared her. She could not lose him. She was determined not to lose him.

There was noise outside the tent, and Ensign Del Sarto looked in.

‘I’ve found – ’ he began in a normal tone, then lowered his voice as he saw the Vulcan was sleeping. ‘I’ve found some more food,’ he said. ‘Identified a couple of insect-like critters that might be poisonous, too. Karen’s busy outside with a small mammal thing we caught. Dinner for tonight. We found more edible roots and nuts for Mr Spock, too.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ Christine said with a smile. ‘Don’t worry about keeping your voice down. He won’t wake up for a while. I slipped a sedative into him so I could sort out this leg without hurting him. He wouldn’t have agreed.’

‘How is it?’ Del Sarto asked, coming further into the tent and kneeling down so he could look at the leg more closely. By the expression on his face he wasn’t used to looking on injury.

‘Not good,’ she said honestly. ‘If he keeps on as he is he’s going to lose it. I just need to work out how to convince him of that.’

‘Keep him sedated for a week?’ Del Sarto asked with a laugh. ‘I don’t know. Maybe I could
speak to him, man to man...’

Christine looked at the eager, eighteen year old boy and fought the desire to smile. She had been eighteen once, and had not felt nearly as young as Del Sarto looked to her now. She had to remember not to patronise him because of his age.

‘Spock’s fond of reminding us humans that he’s not a man,’ she replied wryly. ‘Man to man, woman to man, woman to Vulcan, I’m not sure if he’ll listen. We need to convince him that he’s much more useful to us alive and whole.’

‘Mutiny?’ Del Sarto asked, with a slight uncertainty in his voice.

‘I’ll pull medical rank if I have to,’ she assured him. ‘No need to risk a charge of mutiny. Look, can you help me, Ben? I want to get this cast back on now I’ve cleaned his leg. I’ll apply a proper one when we start moving again, but he needs this as a splint. Can you hold the thing open while I ease his leg back into it?’

‘Sure,’ he nodded, and picked up the cast, putting careful force into holding it open. Christine was glad of this diligent, resourceful man. If he was a sample of the six ensigns they had left the ship with, she regretted the loss of four of them even more.

‘There,’ she murmured as she carefully lowered Spock’s leg into the cast. ‘That’s fine. Thank you, Ben. Why don’t you go and see how Karen’s doing with the food, and I’ll be out in a minute? I could do with some fresh air.’

Once she was alone she sat back on her heels just looking at the Vulcan. A scan showed that the medicine was already beginning to combat the infection that had taken hold in his leg. The swelling had not gone down as yet, but that was not surprising considering the manipulation she had just put it through. She picked up his hand, gloved as it was, and held it in hers for a moment, remembering the dozens of times she had done the same on the ship when he had been unconscious in sick bay.

‘You know you’re the reason I don’t have my MD,’ she said, almost in a whisper. ‘Perhaps I’m just a sucker for certain men... But what would you do without me there to keep putting you back together each time you go running into trouble?’
Chapter 9

‘Commander Spock! Commander Spock!’

Spock sat up sharply at the cries and the sound of pounding feet, feeling startled and confused. He must have been dozing again. It seemed like since last night, when Nurse Chapel had so nefariously given him that sedative, he had not been able to stay awake. She insisted that the sedative was out of his system now and that it was only the infection making him tired, and he was not aware of her having given him any more injections, but he still had his suspicions as to her conduct.

He drew in breath as he moved and his leg, only partially supported by the cut-open cast, protested at the sudden jolt. Ensign Grant came running in through the tent door, although she did stop for long enough to carefully zip it up again behind her. They had all been conditioned by now to only open the door for as short a time as possible.

‘What is it, Ensign?’ Spock asked sharply, trying to appear alert, even though he felt far from it. ‘Nurse Chapel? Ensign Del Sarto? Where are they?’

He looked around uselessly. He could see nothing from inside the tent, but they had been with him when he had fallen asleep, and he had no idea where they had gone. He reached out for his crutches, and Grant shook her head quickly.

‘No, sir, it’s all right, sir,’ she said, still panting. ‘They’re all right. I mean – I don’t know that. I don’t know if they’re all right or not. They’re – ’

‘Get to the point, Ensign,’ Spock said, rather more sharply than he had meant to.

‘I’ve found a house, Commander,’ she said, astonishment in her voice.

‘A house?’ Spock echoed. ‘What about the inhabitants? Did they see you? Are they – ’

‘No, sir,’ she cut across him. She pressed a hand to her ribs, trying to catch her breath. ‘No inhabitants. It’s not lived in as far as I can tell. Abandoned. It’s abandoned. But it might – it might – ’

‘Ensign, since there is no real urgency, please stop for a minute,’ Spock said, holding up his hand. He felt far more awake now with this news to cogitate.

She nodded and stopped, picking up a flask and drinking some water. As she was drinking Spock heard more footsteps outside and the tent was unzipped to admit Nurse Chapel and Del Sarto.

‘What’s happened?’ Chapel asked instantly, seeing Ensign Grant’s excitement and Spock’s alert expression.

‘The ensign has found an abandoned house,’ Spock said. ‘I have yet to ascertain much more.’

‘A house?’ Chapel asked quickly. ‘Are there people? Is it – ?’

‘No people,’ Ensign Grant said, screwing the top back on the flask and setting it down. ‘It’s old. I don’t think anyone’s been there for a long time. But it might be useful. There are things in it. Artefacts...’

Spock reached for his crutches, but as he did the nurse said icily, ‘Mr Spock, where do you think
you’re going?’

‘To inspect the ruin,’ Spock said, as if that answer were obvious.

Christine put her hand on her medical bag. ‘Mr Spock, if you stand I will sedate you into next week.’

Spock’s eyebrow shot up both at the threat and at the illogic of the end of her sentence.

‘Lieutenant Chapel, I am in command of this expedition,’ he began.

‘And I am the ranking medical officer, and in medical situations my rank supersedes yours,’ she said in a brittle voice. ‘And if – you – stand,’ she enunciated very clearly, ‘I will give you such a dose of anexatine that you won’t wake up for five hours. Do I make myself clear?’

Spock slowly removed his hand from the vicinity of the crutches, and regarded the nurse. Her face was perfectly serious. He could not argue with her medical seniority.

‘Yes, Nurse Chapel,’ he said in a level voice. ‘You make yourself perfectly clear.’

He settled himself back on the sleeping bag, trying to process and push away the raging frustration at the limitations imposed upon him by this ridiculous injury.

‘Mr Spock, we could take one of the tricorders to the house and take a video of what we find,’ Del Sarto suggested rather nervously. A kind of uncomfortable aura had grown in the tent after Nurse Chapel’s threat.

‘That is a paramount idea,’ Spock said. ‘But first, Ensign Grant, can you tell me more about the house? Is it alone or are there other structures? Is it intact? Can you deduce where the culture may be on the scale of civilisation?’

‘I only saw one building, sir,’ she said quickly, ‘but I didn’t look around much for more. I mean, I came back pretty much as soon as I’d looked into that one. It’s in good shape, sir. The roof is intact and there’s a fireplace. Windows made of some kind of transparent membrane. The floor looked like poured concrete, or something like it. And there’s some furniture, some bits and pieces. But it’s been empty for a long time. I’m sure it has. It just – had that feeling...’

‘I am not familiar with that feeling,’ Spock said, ‘but I am sure that you subconsciously picked up on clues to which you are reacting. Make very sure when you approach the building again that there are no intelligent beings in the vicinity. An encounter could prove fatal.’

‘May we – may we all go, sir?’ Del Sarto asked, sounding very much like a child asking permission to go on a trip.

Spock sighed quietly. ‘You may all go,’ he said. ‘Take care and stay alert. Keep your communicators ready and come back as soon as you have completed your scans.’

Spock lay and waited in the empty tent. It would be a good idea to use this time for meditation, but logically, if he could be alert, he should be alert. So far this planet had not yielded many small but dangerous creatures – versions of insects or spiders or reptiles that could cause harm – but that was not to say that there were none, and staying on the ground like this meant that a certain level of surveillance had to be kept up.

Even so, he found himself drifting again. His leg ached, and although the nurse had assured him
that the swelling had gone down a little, he still felt rather fevered and lethargic. He thought with impatience of this dwelling that the three humans had gone to document. A view on a tricorder screen would not compare to actually seeing it. Then his mind moved to the ensigns left behind, the incontrovertibly dead, and Ensign Malton. Ensign Malton, who would perhaps simply be listed as ‘missing’ for the appropriate length of time, before being recorded as dead. Of course it was possible that was all their fates still. There was no guarantee that they would be found.

He fought hard against the guilt. Guilt had assailed him his whole life. Guilt and love were the most difficult to do away with. He had been brought up to feel guilty, to feel ashamed of the red corpuscles in his blood, of every human mannerism, of every small breach of emotion. Other Vulcan children, fully Vulcan children, suffered the same moments of emotionalism. He could not honestly say that the boys who had tormented him as a child had done it out of pure logic. Bullying was not logical. They had been as prey to their savage emotions as he, but they had expressed them differently. They had expressed them as ones who had the moral high ground. Sarek had done the same.

Thinking, now, he could see the emotion in his father. It had been there all the time. The way his lips pressed together when he was frustrated. The subtle smiles he favoured his wife with when he thought they were alone. Sarek was far more visibly emotional than Spock ever allowed himself to be, because he was secure in his genetic heritage. He had no guilt.

This was the hardest away mission he had been on since the disastrous landing on Taurus II, in which he had lost two of his men. But they had been fully competent officers, not these eighteen year old children ill-advisedly sent into space. Had they really understood the risks when they left their home planet? Perhaps it had been too much too soon. Giving them the rank of Ensign, elevating them to a status above candidates who had spent their full time at the academy. It had been an experiment, true. Experiments were vital in a progressive society. But they had not expected to pay for that experiment with their lives.

Of course it was possible that even crewmembers with a full course of study at the academy under their belts would have succumbed to the same fate. Who could argue with a dragon? Who could argue with winds strong enough to toss a human body like straw? Perhaps it was mere luck that he and Nurse Chapel alone had been left unravaged by the wind. Or, no, not luck. Logic. Miss Chapel had insisted that as a Vulcan, and as an injured patient, he take the most sheltered tent, to be exposed to the least cold. As a nurse it had been her duty to stay alongside him.

No matter the logic and the emotions that wound through his mind. No matter the reasons and rememberings. The fact was that four young people were dead or missing, and he still felt guilt. He would feel guilt for a long time.

He sat up, aware he was at risk of falling asleep again. He risked incurring the nurse’s wrath by shuffling himself around until he could reach the tent door. When he pulled the zip up and looked out he saw that snow was falling from the sky again. It was inevitable, perhaps. They had encountered far less snow here, but the temperatures still dipped below freezing and the clouds were pregnant with snow.

He sighed and closed the zip again, manoeuvring himself back to his position on the sleeping bag. This was, he had to admit, boring. There really was little place for ‘boredom’ in the Vulcan way. If there was nothing else to do, he could meditate. But Spock had never been a normal Vulcan, no matter how hard he tried. Perhaps that was why he had taken the monumental decision to leave the planet and join Starfleet. He needed new things to wrap his mind around.

He laid his head back, and against all his intentions, slipped back into sleep.

...
‘...no I think it’s good,’ he heard Nurse Chapel say. ‘He needs the rest. The more he sleeps the faster he’ll heal.’

‘Will he be all right?’ That was Ensign Grant, sounding very concerned. ‘I never knew a Vulcan could – ’

‘He will be fine as long as he rests up and lets himself heal, Karen,’ Chapel said very firmly. ‘It’s up to all of us to make sure that he does.’

‘Well, I’ve already offered to sit on him,’ Del Sarto said with a deep laugh.

Spock could smell smoke and the scent of cooking meat. But there was something missing. Where was the noise of the tent, that flapping, rippling noise it made every time it was touched by the wind? Why was it so warm?

His head ached. He was almost certain from the feeling of his body that the nurse had given him yet another sedative. Momentary annoyance flashed in him. She was just like McCoy. She used medical privilege and drugs to get exactly what she wanted, and this time –

He frowned. What was he lying on? This was not the tent.

He opened his eyes. The light was dim. Above his head was something solid, a dirty brown, like a ceiling made of plaster...

‘Miss Chapel,’ he said.

The humans jumped. He looked sideways to see them clustered about a recess in the wall that held a burning fire. Del Sarto stood up, banged his head, and cursed.

‘I’m glad you’re back with us, Mr Spock,’ the nurse said brightly. ‘And just in time for dinner. Here, let me help you,’ she said, coming over quickly as Spock started to sit up. She put a rucksack behind him for him to lean on. He looked around suspiciously, taking in his surroundings.

He was in a house, undoubtedly the house that Ensign Grant had found. The room was relatively small, but far bigger than the tent. The ceiling was rather lower than a dwelling built for human or Vulcan occupants, but it curved up from the top of the walls and was higher in the centre. The fire opposite was smoothly moulded into the wall, the chimney disappearing behind the plaster with no mantel. Around two sides of the room a kind of smooth ramp ascended, no doubt serving as this planet’s version of stairs. There must be another room upstairs. But what was he lying on? He was above the level of the floor. He could not tell what was beneath him.

‘I see you took another medical decision, Miss Chapel,’ Spock said rather disapprovingly.

Her smile faltered. ‘It – seemed like the most logical decision there was,’ she said. ‘The temperature had dropped. It was snowing again. And there was this house here, abandoned, just waiting to be used.’

‘So you sedated me and dragged me here while I was unconscious?’ Spock asked.

‘We thought it would be a nice surprise, Mr Spock,’ Ensign Grant put in, looking rather frightened.

‘We didn’t exactly drag you here, sir,’ Chapel told him crisply. ‘You were fast asleep when we came back from checking this place out, and I was worried about how cold you were. Yes, I did
give you a sedative to make the journey less painful. I knew you’d insist on walking otherwise. But Ensign Del Sarto carried you. The snow’s a foot deep outside now and no sign of it stopping. The longer we waited the deeper it would have got, and I saw no sense in sleeping outside in a tent when there was a perfectly good dwelling here.’

Spock regarded her steadily, seeing the defensiveness in her face. He had to admit that her decision had been logical. He would have insisted on walking rather than submitting to be carried. But the fact still remained that the nurse had usurped his authority and taken a decision that was not hers to take. He made up his mind to talk to her later. He did not want to give her a dressing down in front of the ensigns and have the command structure further damaged. It was vital that both he and the nurse remained as figures of authority for the two youths.

‘How long has this house been abandoned?’ he asked.

‘The tricorder suggests it’s been empty for as long as seventy years,’ the nurse said.

He rubbed his finger over his lip, looking around. There were two windows in the wall on either side of the fireplace, glazed with some kind of material that did not look quite like glass, the panes set without frames straight into the smooth plastered edges of the holes in the walls. They were obviously not made to be opened. There was a door that he could not quite make out in the dim light, but might have been made of wood.

‘How many rooms does this place have?’ he asked.

‘Three downstairs, this one, one that must have served as a kitchen, and one that I think was a latrine, and two upstairs that I guess were bedrooms.’

‘Those are human preconceptions,’ Spock murmured. ‘But of course we cannot tell.’

‘There are beds upstairs,’ Miss Chapel said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Spock’s eyebrow rose. ‘Indeed. Intact, functional beds?’

‘Pretty much,’ she nodded. ‘One in each room, quite wide, but a little shorter than we’re used to. They’re – I don’t know – some kind of clay, perhaps. Plinths moulded to the floor, with fibre mattresses on top. There are various artefacts through the house. I think when you’re up and about you’ll be quite fascinated, Mr Spock.’

‘And this, that I am lying on?’ Spock asked, twisting to look down at what was beneath him.

‘I’d say it’s a kind of sofa,’ she replied. ‘Same principle as the beds, formed out of some kind of clay. I guess they weren’t much into moving things around...’

‘Perhaps the wood here proves too friable or otherwise unsuitable for furniture,’ Spock murmured. ‘I assume that you have formed an idea of what the form the natives are likely to take?’

‘Something of an idea, I think,’ she nodded. ‘I’d say bipedal, a little shorter than our average. There are cooking facilities and some crockery with some rather beautiful designs. I mean, sophisticated pieces, not just coil-built pots purely for function. There are motifs which I think represent native plants and animals. So they obviously have a sense of aesthetics and no taboo against representing living things. In all the remnants about the place I haven’t seen either clothes or mirrors.’

‘Which is not to say they do not make use of those things,’ Spock interjected.

‘No, it doesn’t prove they don’t, but I’d say it’s likely,’ she replied. ‘I found what I think is a comb
on one of the shelves upstairs. There are a few hairs still caught in the teeth, about three inches long and a kind of iridescent blue colour.’

‘Fascinating,’ Spock murmured. ‘Did you find any suggestion as to why they would abandon a house apparently in good condition?’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘There’s some kind of pump in the kitchen, and no water comes out. You could speculate that their water supply ran out – but it could just be that after so long it no longer works. Almost anything would be pure speculation.’

‘Hmm,’ Spock nodded. ‘Changes in climate, an increase in predators, failure of crops. There could be any number of reasons.’

He glanced across at the fire. On some of the cooler sticks of wood near the edge the humans had propped up some kind of metal pan, presumably one of the artefacts they had found.

‘You said, just in time for dinner,’ he mentioned, cocking an eyebrow at the nurse.

She turned to look at the food cooking there and shrugged. ‘Well, it’ll probably be ten or fifteen minutes yet...’

‘In that case, I suggest that the ensigns go upstairs and try to make the two bedrooms suitable for sleeping,’ Spock said. ‘It may, of course, be more prudent to put the mattresses together in one room, if they are movable, and sleep in one room.’ He looked piercingly at Del Sarto and Grant. ‘Make your decision based on how warm and secure the two rooms are, Ensigns. I will be interested to see what you decide.’

‘Yes, sir,’ they both said smartly.

Inwardly, Spock was pleased. They seemed to thrive on being given useful tasks to perform.

As soon as they had disappeared up the shallow ramp, he turned to the nurse.

‘Lieutenant Chapel, a word,’ he said in a suddenly severe tone.

‘Yes, sir,’ she said, instantly professional.

‘Miss Chapel, I do not appreciate being drugged so that you may make decisions which are properly mine,’ he said in a low voice, anxious that the sound should not carry to the upper level of the house. ‘No doubt I would have come to the same conclusion as you on the viability of this place as a shelter, but I would appreciate in future being left conscious so that I can come to those conclusions. Do I make myself clear?’

Her lips pressed together as if she were biting back a less than professional response, but she nodded and said, ‘Yes, perfectly clear, sir.’

Something softened in him. A hierarchy of four was a very small one to perpetuate, and he had no doubt that she had acted from the best of motives. He allowed his dark eyes to rest on her blue ones, and gave her a very slight smile.

‘It is important that the Ensigns do not see any disintegration in the chain of command,’ he said quietly. ‘You do understand that, Christine?’

‘Yes,’ she replied just as quietly. ‘Yes, I do, Mr Spock. But I am also very concerned about your health and your apparent inability to respect the limitations of your body. If you kill yourself or permanently cripple yourself then we will all suffer. You do understand that, sir?’
His regarded her steadily, wondering at the depths behind those eyes.

‘I do intend to do everything that I can to stay alive,’ he assured her. ‘Perhaps I have – learned my lesson after three days of walking. The pain alone is instructive.’

‘I hope so, sir,’ she said. ‘Because my first oath, before any to Starfleet, was a medical one. I am bound to put that first.’

The corner of Spock’s mouth twitched. ‘The longer I spend in close proximity to you, the more you remind me of Dr McCoy,’ he said. ‘I would rather not have that association uppermost in my mind.’

‘Well, I can’t help that, Mr Spock,’ she said with a smile. ‘I am a medical professional, just like Dr McCoy.’

‘Not just like Dr McCoy,’ Spock said, his gaze resting on her tied back hair and the contours of her face and body. ‘Not entirely like Dr McCoy, I am very glad to say.’
Chapter 10

The snow was so deep outside that it almost reached as high as the window panes, whatever strange material those panes were constructed from. Spock had scanned them and was yet to deduce exactly what they were made of, apart from the fact that they had a high mineral component. He was not sure if they had been quarried and polished to transparency, or perhaps harvested from some plant or animal. When he touched them with a finger almost none of the cold from outside came through the pane, which was an impressive feat considering their thinness. They did not present a perfectly undistorted view of the outside world, but it was at least as good as the glass that had been made on Earth and Vulcan before factory methods.

These secure and easily heated quarters had one benefit paramount above the others. Within the safety of these walls Spock had agreed to stay for long enough for his leg to heal more, and he thought that if he were assured that the place could be heated steadily for some hours, he was willing to attempt a healing trance. The ensigns seemed pleased to be settled for a short time, and Christine Chapel was satisfied that finally her patient was willing to look after himself. The only doubt in his mind was how hard it would be to persuade the humans to leave this place willingly once they were settled. The advantages of four secure walls and a warm fire were hard ones to leave behind, especially if only for a hope of something better further south based on little more than assumptions. Spock could offer them no certainties.

Truth be told, he himself was wavering in his resolve. This place was safe. It was secure. However, he had no way of knowing what season they were currently experiencing, if this planet even had seasons. They could be in store for an idyllic spring and summer in this picturesque and spreading valley. On the other hand, they could be facing weather that would only grow more severe, and when they discovered that it may be too late. A careful survey of day length and mean temperatures could help to build up a picture, but to make it a meaningful one they would have to stay longer than Spock cared to. Besides, there must be some reason why the original inhabitants left...

Standing at the window, leaning on the shallow sill, Spock saw some kind of winged beings rising up above the trees, standing out as dark silhouettes against the pallid sky. He could hear their calls, thin in the wind, like Arctic fowl of earth. It crossed his mind that it was a lonely sound, but he quickly dismissed the thought. It was very human to infer emotional states into mere noises. He could not risk sentimentality.

He stood still and watched attentively, alert for danger. The humans were outside, searching for food and fuel in the snow, and as so were at risk from any predators out there. He could not tell how big the creatures were with nothing to gauge them against, and the tricorder was on the other side of the room, an easy trip for most but a painful walk for Spock. He was not even supposed to be standing up, according to the nurse’s orders. He had been left with a place to rest close to the fire and his only permitted activity, on strict medical orders, was to feed that fire and keep warm. But lying inactive on the floor was almost unbearable to Spock, and so he was here, at the window, looking out.

Where had these birds – if birds they were – come from? Spock had seen almost no avian life in this place. Were they cousins to the ‘dragon’ which had preyed upon the other members of the group? Perhaps they were a herald of warmer weather. Perhaps they were a herald of – something else...

He made the decision to get the tricorder. He swung himself painfully across the room on his crutches and picked it up from the bed, then hobbled back again. His cast was currently tied to his
leg with strips of bark, since Nurse Chapel insisted the swelling had not yet diminished enough to warrant a new cast. She also wanted to keep an eye on the healing infection, and, Spock suspected, keep him from moving about too much.

Once back at the window he leant on the sill and flipped the top open on the tricorder. The ‘birds’ were still there, circling high in the sky. The tricorder registered them as warm blooded, and possibly more akin to mammals than birds in the conventional sense. But they were small creatures relatively low down, not large ones at high altitude.

He watched them as they circled again then dipped down suddenly, dropping as one and disappearing behind an outcrop of rock. Their shrieks rose, wavered in the wind, died away, rose again, and then he saw them flying up in a cluster, fighting viciously over something that they grasped at with what looked like prehensile limbs. It seemed to be a small creature, dead and being torn apart. So, these creatures, too, were carnivores, like their larger cousin.

He opened up his communicator and called, ‘Spock to Nurse Chapel.’

Almost instantly her voice filtered through the speaker. ‘Here, Mr Spock. Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ Spock replied. ‘Are you? Do you see the birds?’

‘I see them, but they’re not near us, and we’re all together, about point five of a mile out from the house. Curious critters, aren’t they? More like mammals. But how can you see them, Mr Spock, if you’re lying down by the fire?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘I was alerted by their cries,’ Spock said somewhat evasively. No need to say he had already been at the window. ‘Proceed with caution, Lieutenant. Spock out.’

It crossed his mind after he cut the connection that he should have asked about their progress. He made to open the communicator again but he was distracted by the sudden banging of the door. Cold billowed into the room, and Ensign Grant came across the floor to him, unaccountably sobbing. Her face was covered over with her hood and balaclava, her arms were out, and she staggered towards him emitting a kind of wail that spoke of acute distress. When she reached him she flung her arms about him, holding onto him as if he were a life ring in a stormy sea.

‘Ensign!’ Spock said loudly and clearly, trying not to stumble backwards. She had caught him off balance and his leg seared with pain. ‘Ensign, control yourself! Ensign Grant, report!’

He could not understand. Only a moment ago he had spoken to Nurse Chapel. She had said they were all together. The implicit message had been that they were all safe. What could have happened in so short a time? How could the ensign have returned here so swiftly from half a mile away?

The woman’s hysteria showed no signs of abating. She was sobbing into his shoulder, clinging to him, her cries coming out viscerally, like vomit.

‘Ensign Grant! Report!’ he snapped again.

It gradually came to him. This was not Ensign Grant.

‘Ensign Malton?’ he asked in wonder. Her sobs did not break.

He leant hard against the window, took hold of her shoulders with both hands, pushed her gently back from him and touched the balaclava obscuring her face. He lifted it up and pushed away her hood to reveal matted, shoulder-length dark red-brown hair, wide brown eyes, a freckled face disfigured with a long bruise.
‘Ensign Malton!’ he repeated, joy leaping inside him. He clenched at the emotion and pushed it down before it could reach his face. Dr McCoy would no doubt call this a miracle. Spock was sure that there was scientific logic behind it, but all the same, he was as amazed as anyone seeing the blind healed or the lame made to walk.

‘Ensign, let – me – ’ he tried to say as she attempted to attached herself to him again. ‘Let me sit down,’ he said more firmly. His crutches had toppled to the floor and he found himself having to fight against something that seemed more octopus than human to get hold of them and then get himself across the room to the low shelf that served either as sofa or bed. When he sat she sat with him, immediately putting her arms around him again and pressing her head against his chest, sobbing words against him that he could not understand.

He fought against the clinging human to extract his communicator and snap out a brief message to the nurse, telling her and the rest of the party to return immediately. He ignored Miss Chapel’s bewildered questions about the noises she could hear in the background, since he could hardly hear what she was saying.

‘Ensign Malton,’ he said, putting his hands on her shoulders again and trying to peel her away from him. ‘Please, try to calm yourself.’

Her emotions battered into him in waves. Relief. Fear. Pain. Relief. The relief was so great that it seemed to be filling the whole room. It was that which was causing her to cry so long and so hard.

There was nothing else he could do. She was working herself into hysterics. He touched his hand gently to her face, not so much initiating a meld as just a very light connection, some way to impart his own calm and control carefully into her mind. Slowly her sobs became breathy gasps, and then eventually she quieted.

‘Ensign, do you feel able to tell me what happened?’ he asked, dropping his hand from her face.

She was thin and she looked exhausted, but the bruise on her face, which was mainly in greens and yellows, bore all the signs of being old, as old as that fateful night when her peers had been killed. She stared at him as if she were dazed, her face tracked with tears that had run through dirt and dried blood.

‘I – I – ’ she began.

Spock regarded her for a moment. Perhaps it would be better to wait until the nurse returned and assessed her condition. He got up painfully on the crutches and moved over to the fire, where there was a pot of warm water with a rather pleasant tasting bark steeped in it, and some of the rations. He poured her a cup of the drink and brought it back across the room, along with a strip of the ‘dragon’ jerky.

‘I assume you are cold and hungry,’ he said, holding out the cup. She took it in shaking hands. When she lifted the metal receptacle to her mouth it clashed against her teeth, but she drank half of it before lowering it again.

‘This is meat,’ Spock said, handing her the jerky. ‘Try to eat a little.’

He sat down again, watching her as she put the jerky to her mouth and chewed off a portion. She did seem hungry, but so emotionally overwrought that she was finding it hard to swallow.

‘It is all right now, Ensign,’ Spock murmured in what he hoped was a comforting voice. ‘You are quite safe here.’
‘The – the others?’ she asked, her eyes wide.

Spock looked briefly toward the window. No matter how much logic there was in the truth, it was an unpleasant truth. He decided to couch it in positive terms. ‘Ensign Grant, Ensign Del Sarto, and Nurse Chapel all survived that night,’ he said quietly. ‘The others did not.’

She stared at him, mute for a moment, then asked, ‘You – you – know they – ?’

‘We found the bodies,’ Spock said gravely. ‘You were the only one that we could not find.’

She began to cry again, and Spock took the cup of bark juice from her limp hand and set it down on the ledge beside him. She seemed magnetised to him, for she turned and threw herself against him again, pressing her head against his chest and weeping quietly. Resigned to the fact that he could not prise her away, and indeed that prising her away would probably be quite harmful to her mental state, Spock resigned himself to having to act the comforter until the other humans arrived. He put his hand gently on her back and began to stroke.

He judged it to be twelve point three minutes between calling the nurse and the small party arriving at the door, panting, stamping snow from their boots. Their amazement was evident from the moment they stepped into the room

‘Leslie!’ Ensign Grant cried.

Del Sarto just stared, while Chapel immediately snapped into professional mode and picked up her bag, coming across the room and holding out her medical scanner to the young woman.

‘It’s all right, Ensign,’ she said. ‘It’s all right.’

She tried to prise her away from Spock, something which Spock was anxious to achieve, but it seemed impossible. The woman’s gloved hands were clawed into his top.

‘It’s all right,’ Chapel said again. ‘Try to breathe slowly and deeply.’ She caught Spock’s eye and asked quietly, ‘Can you bear with it for now, sir?’

Spock looked down at the head of red-brown hair pressed against his chest, and sighed. He was suffering a considerable battering of emotional projection against his mental shields, but what were Vulcan disciplines for if not to help one tolerate such assaults?

‘I would suggest a thorough medical assessment before moving her,’ he said, then added, ‘Yes, I can bear with it, Miss Chapel.’

He let the woman lie against him, still tentatively stroking at her back. Chapel watched the movement for a moment then looked up and caught Spock’s eye, a kind of tenderness in her gaze. Spock’s instinct was to stop stroking and revert to proper Vulcan conduct, but this young human’s needs came first.

‘She’s suffered concussion in the last week,’ Chapel murmured, holding her scanner up near the woman’s head and consulting the results filtered through to the tricorder. ‘Extensive bruising down the right side of her body. No broken bones, thank god. She’s lost weight but she’s not dehydrated. Somehow avoided frostbite... But considerable mental trauma, I’d say.’

‘That much is quite obvious,’ Spock commented.

The nurse brought out a hypo and carefully pressed it to the Ensign’s neck. The survival suit, made for high altitude descents, was too thick to allow the hypo to work through it.
‘Painkiller and a sedative,’ she murmured to Spock. ‘It’s not going to knock her out but it should calm her down a bit.’

‘That would be very useful,’ Spock replied.

He sat and waited for the medication to take effect. He glanced across the room at the other ensigns, who were standing near the fire stripping off their outer clothing and knocking the snow off their boots. They looked as astonished at this miracle as Spock had been, and he was inwardly glad that they had returned to such a gift. It would have an extremely positive effect on their morale, he was sure.

After a while he looked up at Christine, who was still standing near the ensign, monitoring her vital sounds. Silently she nodded, and he nodded in return.

‘Ensign, do you feel able to tell us what happened now?’ Spock asked carefully.

Her breathing had slowed down and her sobs had stopped. Slowly she nodded, and then sat up a little more, apparently suddenly aware of her position against the Vulcan’s chest.

‘I – I’m sorry, sir,’ she said quickly. She wiped her eyes with her hand and winced as she rubbed over her bruised orbit. ‘I – I don’t really know...’ she said slowly. ‘That night, the wind was so strong, and then we heard – we heard that thing outside. I had the tricorder out, saw it was some kind of animal, and it sounded – it was growling or something. The tricorder – suggested it was a predator. I got my phaser and I opened the tent and the wind got in and it just – it went. It went up like a kite – ’

She shuddered, trying to hold down a sob, and Chapel put her hand on her shoulder and said, ‘It’s all right. Take your time.’

‘Well – it just – picked me up,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what happened. The wind picked me up, I was caught up in the tent, and I couldn’t see, it was dark, and I – I suppose I was carried along. The tent was wrapped all round me. It was caught round my arm, and it pulled me. The wind screaming, up in the air, in the dark. And then – I dropped.’

She stopped speaking. Spock waited a while and then prompted her, ‘You dropped?’

‘I – I suppose I hit my head,’ she said, touching her hand tentatively to the bruise on her face. ‘I don’t remember hitting even. Just falling. And then I woke up, so cold. I still had the tricorder because it was round my neck but the phaser was gone. I thought – at first I thought everything was broken. My head hurt so much. I looked at the tricorder and I’d been – I’d been out for about seventeen hours. I didn’t know where I was. I couldn’t see the tent, I couldn’t find any life signs on the tricorder. I – thought at first maybe you were all dead, then I looked around and I realised things looked – different. I don’t know how far the wind had blown me. I didn’t have our original position in the tricorder. I – didn’t know what to do...’

By now Del Sarto and Grant were both near her too. Ensign Grant had sat down on the end of the sofa plinth while Del Sarto was crouching down in front of Ensign Malton, his hand on her knee. She looked at them as if she were bewildered to see their living faces, then carried on;

‘I – just walked. I knew you’d said we should move south, Mr Spock, so I thought the only thing I could do was do the same, try to get to somewhere warmer, somewhere easier to live. But I didn’t have a tent, the tent was ruined. No sleeping bag. Just the survival suit and the tricorder.’

‘You did well to survive in such temperatures,’ Spock murmured.

She smiled a strange twisted smile, as if her face were still remembering grief.
I just had the tricorder. I used it to scan for flint. So – I found flint and I found bits of stuff to use for tinder, so I managed to light fires. I’d – I’d walk as long as I could then gather anything I could find to make a fire, and light a fire to keep me warm through the night. I had to wake up every few hours to keep it going. And I used the tricorder to find edible plants. I just kept heading south, and I got through the hills, and then it snowed so heavily I didn’t know what I was going to do. I couldn’t make a fire, so I had to make kind of – well, kind of snow caves, and huddle up inside. It was hard to find food, and I could only drink snow, and I got so cold. And then I got into this valley here, and I saw the smoke. I saw the smoke...’

‘The smoke from this dwelling,’ Spock said quietly.

‘You must have been so relieved,’ Chapel said, shaking her head.

‘In fact, hysterically so,’ Spock murmured.

Ensign Malton flushed deeply, as if she had only just recalled her conduct.

‘I’m – sorry, sir,’ she murmured.

‘It is quite all right, Ensign,’ Spock assured her.

‘First of all I was relieved,’ she said. ‘Then I was frightened. What if it was aliens? What they were hostile. And I came up to the house, crept up to the house, and I saw human bootprints all around it. I mean, Starfleet bootprints,’ she corrected herself quickly. ‘And then I knew – ’

‘Ensign, you have proved yourself to be extraordinarily resourceful in an extremely hazardous situation,’ Spock said.

The ensign seemed to glow.

‘Well, Mr Spock, my first prescription for Ensign Malton is a good meal and a hot drink,’ Chapel said in a brisk voice, breaking the momentary silence.

‘I have already given the ensign a hot drink,’ Spock supplied, ‘although I am sure that more, and hot food, would be welcome.’

Christine nodded, and looked up at the other ensigns. ‘We dropped most of the fuel we found when we got your call, but we brought the food back,’ she said. ‘Ensign Del Sarto and I can go back and get the fuel. Ensign Grant, can you fix up some food for Leslie? Mr Spock, I want you to monitor her and call me if you have the slightest concern.’

‘Of course,’ Spock nodded, and Ensign Grant said smartly, ‘Yes, sir.’

Spock moved sideways a little, increasing the gap between himself and Ensign Malton as Chapel and Del Sarto went out through the door. She seemed far calmer now and it was a relief to be able to distance himself from her emotions. He sat and watched as Ensign Grant busied herself at the fire, and Ensign Malton leant back against the wall, looking extremely tired.

‘Once you have eaten, Ensign, I would advise that you go upstairs and sleep for a while,’ he told her.

‘Yes, sir,’ she said, looking at him and blushing suddenly. Spock was suddenly reminded of how long the ensign had spent regarding his ears when they were on board the shuttle, and he wondered how well-advised it had been to allow her to cling to him for so long. But she was young and she was vulnerable, and surely it was well within his ability to deal with her odd
preoccupation now she was back with the group.
Chapter 11

By the evening Spock was assured that the house would be consistently warm enough to attempt a healing trance. There was enough fuel stacked up near the fire to enable the humans to keep feeding it, and as the system had been so expertly built, with various flues to channel the heat evenly through the walls and about the house, he was content to use the sofa built into the opposite wall as a place to lie. He was rather reluctant, however, to put himself out of commission with Ensign Malton so recently returned to the group.

‘Don’t be silly, Mr Spock,’ Chapel assured him briskly. ‘I’ve assessed her and she’s all right. She’s not in peak condition. She’s suffering from exhaustion and hunger – but she’s all right. She’s not in danger any more from the concussion she suffered. I know we’re mere humans, but we’ll manage just fine while you’re out.’

Spock raised an eyebrow. ‘I did not intend to imply a slight towards your genetic heritage,’ he said in a level voice.

‘Good,’ she replied, ‘because it’s your genetic heritage too, in case you’ve forgotten.’

Spock regarded her steadily. ‘Miss Chapel, you remind me more of the good doctor every day.’

She smiled, and then abruptly seemed to be overcome with some emotion which widened her eyes and made her lips press together momentarily.

‘We are doing everything that we can to survive until we are found,’ Spock said quietly, keeping his voice low so the ensigns did not hear. ‘And I am sure that Dr McCoy is berating the captain daily, if not hourly, over his progress in the search. If the captain does not find us, Dr McCoy’s indignation will be sure to seek us out.’

She smiled at that, a happier smile. ‘I was always told Vulcans had no sense of humour,’ she remarked.

Spock cocked an eyebrow, but did not respond.

‘You know how to monitor the healing trance and what to do when I am ready to be aroused,’ Spock said.

‘Yes, Mr Spock,’ she assured him. ‘I remember that last one – very well,’ she said, with a slight edge of humour in her voice.

‘Good,’ Spock nodded.

He lay down on the sofa plinth, where a sleeping bag had been laid out. He was aware of the ensigns watching him nervously, no doubt intrigued by what they saw as an arcane Vulcan ritual. He ignored them, laid his hands down at his sides, and began to focus his mind. Very soon the awareness of the immediacy of his surroundings drifted away. He could hear the murmurs of their voices but the words did not matter. He could hear slight knocks and clashes of pots, of wood in the fire, the tread of feet, but none of it mattered. Time started to attenuate. He lost his sense of the passing seconds that was usually ever-present in his mind. The fire crackled, but it was no danger, and he pushed it away.

He had become still. He had become part of the All. There was no difference between the atoms of his body and the atoms of the stars. Distance was nothing. He was the planet beneath him, the air around him, the vacuum of space and the hard sparks of matter flung through it. He was the
Enterprise, the captain, the doctor, the plants in the hydroponics bay, the skin of the ship, the currents in the circuits. He was the snow that fell and the air that moved and all the creatures and plants that they depended on. He was the ensigns who clustered by the fire, he was the nurse who sat at his shoulder and the tricorder she held in her hand.

Focus.

He accepted his connection to everything in the universe. The atoms of his body were part of the whole. His heart beat pulsed. His blood moved with slow deliberation through veins, arteries, capillaries. It inched down his torso, through the femoral artery, down into his lower leg. It spread out, a hundred tiny journeys through the flesh of his leg. There were the bones, the tibia and fibula, both shattered, both splintered by their impact with rock after a descent of miles through freezing air. He grew aware of the cells of his body, the desperate and determined reaction towards healing. That became his only focus, to increase and assist that healing attempt. His heart pumped, air filled his lungs, haemocyanin flooded the site.

Everything faded down into a ceaseless working to fix the wound. Bones were hard, obdurate, nothing like soft and pliable tissues. But it could be done. It could be done.

...

He had no sense of how long he had been in trance, but he knew that it was time. He had been peripherally aware of voices, movement. A hand had touched his forehead, testing his temperature in that human way, medical instruments had made their soft sounds. And now the voices of the humans had faded away, there was a sense of quiet that spoke of night. The fire still cracked. Sometimes there were the sounds of movement, another stick of wood being thrown onto the flames. The temperature waxed and waned but not to extremes.

Air jerked into his lungs. He needed to surface. It was time...

‘Nurse!’

...a flutter of movement.

‘Nurse!’

He gasped, his chest rigid, struggling for air. He had to shock his system back.

‘Hit – ’

The crack of her hand against his cheek was like a cannon shot in the silence. He gasped, and she hit him again, again.

‘Hard – ’ he gasped.

The hand came down again. The sting reverberated through his body. Breath rasped in his trachea. Again the sting of the palm on his cheek. He rose up, eyes snapping open, dazzled by firelight, dazzled by darkness. Everything was quiet. He still tried to suck air in and felt as if he were in vacuum. She hit him again, and – there. He grasped at her hand, and sat there, panting, his eyes resting on the patch of floor beneath his feet.

Slowly he looked up. Firelight wavered on the walls. It caught snowflakes that were falling close outside the window. All was quiet...

‘Thank you, Miss Chapel,’ he said.
'My pleasure,' she said dryly.

He was still holding her wrist, his fingers clamped around it. He loosened his grasp but did not let go. He could feel her pulse fluttering under his fingers as if something live had been caught inside her skin.

‘Mr Spock – ’ she said.

In some way he was still part of the All. His cells were her cells, his pulse was her pulse.

‘The ensigns,’ he said.

‘They’re upstairs, asleep,’ she replied.

He still had hold of her wrist, so rather than ask him to release her she moved from her slightly awkward position, half bent over, to crouch before him. She was very close to him. There was no difference between her and him. Cells were cells. Bodies were bodies. Breath was breath. Her eyes were looking deep into his as if they alone could perform all the functions of the medical scanner. The All beat through his body, hormones surging after his monumental effort to produce a euphoric state, something like the aftermath of intercourse.

He still had hold of her wrist, and her face was close to his, her breath intermingling with his own. He did not know how it happened or why it happened. He leant forward, wanting to continue to be One with the All, wanting to not fall back into solitude. Not to be alone.

Their lips touched. He had her other hand in his. They were joined, hand to hand, mouth to mouth, and the joy of every atom in the universe became theirs. Her lips parted, he tasted her tongue, her teeth, their breath joined...

‘Oh!’ she said softly.

They had drawn apart, the sense of Oneness slowly settling, fading away. His mind had reached out, he realised. His mind had sparked and risen like a flame from the fire, licking upwards, and had touched hers. That had been her Oh, as the touch met her mind and ignited her thoughts.

‘What – ’ she faltered, and then regained some steadiness in her voice. ‘What – happened?’

He did not feel ready to speak. His eyes were connected with hers, his left hand’s fingers were entwined with hers, his right hand was still curled around her wrist. What had happened? He had been filled with the sense of the All, unwilling to let go and fall into separateness again, unwilling to become a single and isolated being on this planet where they were so alone. And he still did not want to be alone. He did not want to uncurl his fingers. He did not want to drop his gaze.

‘Your – leg is – ’ she said.

His eyes continued to connect with hers. ‘It does not matter,’ he said.

Her professionalism faltered. She glanced toward the tricorder on the floor, but she made no move to free her hands.

‘Mr Spock, you are not yourself,’ she said.

‘On the contrary,’ Spock replied, his voice deep and low. ‘The healing trance permits a deep consciousness of one’s body and mind. I am more myself than I usually allow.’

At last she freed her hand, only to close it hard around his again, as if she needed to reassert some
‘You are *not* yourself, Mr Spock,’ she said in a concerned tone. ‘And one of the first rules of the nurse-patient relationship is not to take advantage.’

Spock steadily kept her gaze. ‘What you see every day, Christine, is a perfect façade,’ he said, his voice so quiet that the crackling of the fire overrode it like static. ‘No Vulcan is the face we present to the world. We could not be – any more than you are the face that you present to the world. Are you not different? When you have finished your shift and you return to your quarters and remove your boots and your make-up, are you not a different person to she who presents always a professional façade to the world?’

‘I – am not Vulcan,’ she replied in a faltering voice.

‘My rules are more exacting, my boundaries more defined,’ he said. The world seemed to have shrunk down to a very small space, to the small breadth of air between their eyes. ‘But they are boundaries. Lines. Borders and barriers. If there is a wall there is necessarily something on the other side.’

The euphoria of the healing trance was dying away. His body was assimilating the hormones and chemicals and the mind rules were closing in. But still he kept her gaze, unwilling to let go of that one small thread that connected him to the human world, the Vulcan pre-Reformation world, to the being of great feeling that was always there no matter how many layers of discipline one built up as a carapace.

‘Mr Spock...’ she said, and he could tell that she had not thought of words to follow that statement of his name. She did not know what to say.

‘No,’ he murmured, leaning forward, touching his lips to hers again, releasing the wrist that he still held to touch his hand to the back of her head.

‘Oh, my hair is – ’ she began.

‘No,’ he said again, softly, moving his fingers through the strands. Yes, her hair was unbrushed, unwashed, but it did not matter. Something rose in his chest, an overwhelming thought of the past days in their semi-isolation on this planet, the thought that perhaps that isolation would continue for the rest of their lives. His circle of friends had always been small, but they had been *there*. He had been able to sit with Jim and play chess, even to share time with McCoy in his small office while the doctor drank bourbon and they talked. He had spent evenings in the recreation rooms with his lyre, while Uhura sang and the crew listened. He had never been an entirely solitary being.

He found himself wondering if he could fashion a chess board; if there were a way of constructing – not a lyre, perhaps, but some kind of instrument. He realised that he was seeing himself staying here, in this house, for a long time. Complacency was a dangerous thing. It would be all too easy to simply settle and wait for a rescue that may never come.

‘What is the time?’ he asked, although that was a largely meaningless question here, since they had not yet adjusted their clocks to the length of days here.

‘About five hours before dawn,’ she said in a rather shaky voice.

‘I see,’ Spock nodded. ‘You must be very tired.’

The air still seemed very warm, very still. There was no sound from upstairs, and he felt only quiescent mental emissions from the ensigns, who were evidently deep in sleep.
‘The sleeping arrangements?’ Spock asked. Last night he had slept downstairs and he had not yet attempted to ascend the ramp, since he had no need.

‘They’re all in the same room. They zipped their two bags together and are sharing them. I asked if they wanted to segregate according to gender but they wanted to be together. I think they’ve formed some pretty strong bonds since we crashed here.’

‘Then the other room is – ’

‘Officers’ quarters, I guess,’ she said with a flashing smile.

‘Technically, ensigns are also officers,’ Spock reminded her. ‘I am quite willing to share the free room with you, Miss Chapel. Do you agree?’

She looked at him rather dubiously. The spell that had formed seemed to be breaking.

‘Well, if you’re able to walk, and if you’re comfortable with that,’ she said. ‘It is warmer with the bags zipped together. But if you need to stay down here.’

Spock looked down at his leg, putting it to the ground gingerly at first, and then rather more firmly. His foot was bare, and the floor felt cool under his skin. There was a certain degree of pain in the leg, but it was greatly reduced. The swelling had gone down and the bruising was far fainter.

Christine turned her attention to the cast, which had not been tied on during the healing trance but just left as a light support. She carefully prised the sides apart and worked it off his leg. Spock suppressed reaction as pain shivered through the limb, but he was aware that the pain was far less than before. He had been unconscious the last time she had removed it, but the increase of pain at the site of the break had told him just how traumatic the removal and reapplication had been.

The nurse touched his leg carefully, feeling across the site of the break. He held in reaction as her fingers probed. It was definitely less painful, and her hands felt unusually warm against his skin. Despite the fire his temperature had dropped considerably during the trance.

‘Perhaps your scanner,’ he said.

‘Oh, of course.’

She got the scanner out quickly and passed it over his leg.

‘Well, it’s a great improvement,’ she said as the results scrolled onto the tricorder screen. ‘I wouldn’t say it’s entirely fixed, but you’ve done a good few weeks worth of healing in about eight hours. To humans that’s a miracle. It’s – Well, it’s not set entirely straight,’ she warned him, looking more closely at the limb itself and then comparing the evidence of her eyes with what the scanner saw. ‘I couldn’t get the bones aligned properly to start with, and the way it’s healed it’s not perfect. Without proper medical attention – re-breaking it and setting it again – I’m afraid you will always have a limp and some pain.’

Spock nodded, taking that in without a flicker of emotion.

‘It is the best that could be done,’ he said. ‘Do you still recommend a cast?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ she said, ‘until the healing has progressed a bit further. And I still recommend crutches. But you can put more weight on it now. In fact, that should help, as you start to build muscle again. Your calf has atrophied.’
‘You wish to apply the cast now?’

‘As soon as possible,’ she nodded.

Spock also nodded, looking down at the leg himself with a degree of fascination. It was very white, apart from the places where bruising still faintly shadowed the skin. The nurse was correct that the muscle had atrophied somewhat, due to over a week of disuse coupled with the intense focus of energy expended during the healing trance. Some of the proteins in that area had gone to fuelling the repair. He could also see the slight distortion where the break had been. He recalled seeing archaeological remains with similar injuries, legs which had been badly broken and then healed without the benefit of surgery, where the bone took on a roughened and irregular form.

‘Do you need me to lie down?’ he asked, and she nodded.

‘Yes, that would be best.’

Spock lifted his legs onto the sofa again, taking care with the injured one which still felt fragile, ready to break again at any moment, no matter how illogical that thought might be. He made sure to hitch up his trouser leg, which had been cut to accommodate the first cast, then rested his head back, lying as if on an examination table. The nurse’s hands touched his leg again, lifting it a little with determined strength, and then he heard the hiss and felt the cool spray as she applied the spray bandage, which hardened almost instantly around the limb.

‘There,’ she said. ‘Ready to walk, Mr Spock. I’d suggest going to bed and sleeping as long as possible. I’ll just sort the fire out...’

Spock swung his legs back to the floor, testing the broken limb again. With the new cast on there was very little pain at all, and he thought the pain there was probably due to the poor alignment of the bones. As the nurse attended to the fire, pushing back any stray sticks from the outer edge, he took his crutches and stood up carefully.

‘It is much more manageable,’ he said, and she looked around and smiled.

‘Let me get the sleeping bag,’ she said, coming across to gather up the bag. ‘And you go up in front of me, just in case you’re unsteady.’

Spock did not argue. He leant on the crutches and carefully ascended the ramp, fascinated to see what would be at the top. There was an entire half of the house that he had not seen up there.

He was uncertain as to whether he would have preferred steps to the ramp. He thought perhaps steps, because at least then his foot would have been flat on the ground and he would not have felt pitched backwards by the slope. But he managed the ascent and then stood at the top in a circular area of smoothly plastered walls, waiting for the nurse.

‘The one on the left,’ she said to him, nodding towards the door, which was constructed of a material he could not identify, curving toward the top rather than rectangular. He pushed it open, and ducked through the doorway, which was rather lower than either human or Vulcans preferred.

Chapel flashed the light past his shoulder, and he stood looking, fascinated. The light did not do a good job of showing the whole room, but he caught glimpses. Walls that seemed to have some kind of coloured patterns on them. Items of furniture that loomed out of the darkness. A flash as if the light had reflected from glass or a mirror. The place had a smell of damp, but their recent heating of the place should help to lift that.

‘The bed’s here, near the inner wall,’ Chapel said, her voice very professional again. She came
past him with the sleeping bag bundled in her arms, and started to zip it together with the other one. It was chilly in the room despite the fire that had been burning for hours downstairs, and Spock watched with concealed impatience. His only thought was getting into the warmth and succumbing to the rest that his body craved after putting so much effort into healing.

‘There,’ Christine said. ‘Are you – ready, Mr Spock?’

He caught the hesitancy in her voice, but did not allow himself to react to it. He still had the memory of that kiss downstairs. He could feel it on his lips. If he allowed himself to react empathically to her nervousness then he was not sure he would be able to sleep. The sleeping bags would have them in close quarters, the most logical solution against the cold, but it would be rather odd.

While he had been standing there the nurse had slipped her boots and socks off and got fully clothed into the sleeping bag. She lay like a doll in a box, still and on her back, staring at the ceiling in the light of the flashlight that she still held. Spock pushed down any reservations and followed her lead, taking off his single sock and boot and getting in himself, before zipping the side up to seal the bag as much as possible. He lay still as she turned off the light, allowing himself to get used to the sensation of sleeping so close after a night alone on the sofa. He felt sure he had heard of vaguely similar situations in human dramas – the male half of a couple who ended up sleeping on a sofa because of a perceived insult, and his return to the marital bed.

This was not a marital bed. Yes, he had shared that kiss. He had revealed more of his deepest feelings than perhaps he would have at another time. He could feel her body alongside his, her heat beginning to warm the bag, warming his own chilled body. But she was stiff and silent.

‘Christine,’ he said quietly.

‘Yes,’ she said after a moment, her voice small in the darkness.

‘Please relax,’ he said. ‘I do not intend any inappropriate action.’

She laughed suddenly, quietly, and then turned her body a little, bringing one hand up to touch his shoulder.

‘I trust you completely, Mr Spock,’ she said.

When she finally fell asleep her hand was still there, touching his shoulder, and Spock brought his left hand up to rest on top of it, feeling her fingers under his, cooler now that he himself was warmer. A little light filtered through the window, and he could see the outline of her head and hair, her lips a little parted in sleep. He closed his eyes, and fell asleep too, his hand on top of hers.
Chapter 12

[A.N. Okay, this is a slightly longer one. But – we’re coming up to Nanowrimo and in a few days I’m going to have to get my head back into 1930s England for the second volume of last year’s Nanowrimo. So, things will either be on hiatus or slow going from now on. I hope to get at least another chapter out before then, but I have to beg patience after that. 1667 words a day, and not Star Trek...]

He woke in half-light, the room lit by the growing day through a rather small window in the opposite wall. The sun was evidently not quite up. The light was diffuse, rather grey, showing angles and protrusions in the room but not colours or detail. He felt very tired and his leg ached in its new cast.

He turned his head sideways. Christine’s face was very close to his, her body close alongside him in the sleeping bag. He lay still, just looking at her. The light through the window caught the edge of her hair, giving it the look of a halo. She had been right last night. Her hair was tangled, dirty; but that did not lessen her attraction. In some ways it increased it. With no make-up and un-styled hair she looked so much closer to the natural woman that she was. Make-up had always seemed like a lie to Spock, something to obscure the person beneath. Now, while she lay sleeping, he had the opportunity to regard her face steadily, without causing embarrassment. Her nose was very straight. Her eyelashes were long and dark and edged eyelids of pink translucence that hid, he knew, eyes of pure blue. She was breathing slowly and steadily and the scent of the air from her lungs filled the space between them. When he breathed he breathed in her air. Her lips were parted by just a few millimetres, soft, inviting...

He lay there, thinking back to the night before. The healing trance had the effect of opening, bringing down boundaries, allowing a greater freedom of thought. It was something like the effect of certain drugs. Of course the hormones, the endorphins and other chemicals, that were released into the body during trance had just as strong an effect as could drugs introduced to the system from outside. In moments like that Spock had always found himself vulnerable to emotion, and the emotion of need was particularly strong in him at this moment. He had lost everything that he knew, and she was the one raft in his wilderness.

He breathed out slowly, taking care not to sigh audibly, fearful of waking her. On the ship there was such a drive to be controlled, to be ever-Vulcan. There was his job, his rank, his appearance in front of four hundred and thirty other humans, all but one of whom were under his command. There was a kind of unspoken myth that Vulcans were asexual, that they could not be swayed by beauty or personality, but that belied the millions of Vulcans in relationships that were based, all logic aside, on a deep love and communion between two people. Vulcans did not live in emotional vacuums, no matter what outworlder myths there were. They simply processed and controlled more efficiently than almost any other race of people.

But could he afford the sentimentality he was allowing himself now? Could he afford that in a place like this?

He sighed again, lifting a hand to stroke a finger down her cheek. She stirred a little, murmuring something, and then settled back into sleep. Just that touch... Just being able to touch another being in this lonely place was such a reassurance. It was hard being in his position, being responsible for these lives. He had already lost three of his people.

He carefully and quietly unzipped the sleeping bag and slipped out, then closed the zip quickly,
afraid of exposing her to cold. She stirred again, but again did not wake. Spock took his crutches from their place against the wall and stood, looking about the room. The light was starting to fill the space now. He could see details that were invisible or obscured last night. There were patches of abstract but highly coloured painting on the walls, the colour applied straight to the plaster in bright little shapes of triangles, lines and dots. He tried to discern something recognisable from the patterns but could not, although they seemed to represent something. They were less abstract than he had first thought.

Then his gaze caught the glint of light on another wall, and he walked over the clay-like floor to see what looked like a framed picture, held in behind a pane of highly polished transparent material identical to the windows. The image behind was so dirty or degraded that he could not see what it was, but as he turned to move away the corner of his eye caught something else, the reflection of his own face in the pane, and he turned back.

He regarded himself. He had grown thinner, haggard perhaps some would call it. His hair, like Christine’s, was unbrushed, unwashed, and while it was shorter and so less disarrayed than hers, it did not have the smoothness he was used to. It was undeniable that this short time on an alien planet had changed him. It had changed them all.

He returned to the bed and sat down. His leg was aching, but it lacked the intensity of pain that it had given him before. He was able to put a little weight on it without unbearable pain, which considerably reduced the pressure on his hands and underarms from leaning on the crutches. He had developed calluses on both palms from all the walking he had done. He stretched the leg out and regarded the smooth white plaster that covered it, wondering how much longer he would be forced to wear the cast. Christine had told him that he might continue to be troubled with the injury until he could have it rebroken and reset, but surely just being rid of the cast would be a great improvement, even if the pain continued.

He sat and watched the room around him, picking out detail after detail as the sun grew in strength. The floor was dirty. There were places where the plaster was falling. Damp had got in. There were small piles of unidentified, mouldering remains at the base of the walls and in the corners. Something that looked like a rug on the floor had been eaten or decomposed to mere shreds. This very definitely was a house that had been abandoned for a long time. At points, downstairs, he had had his doubts, because it had seemed so wholly usable and in such good condition.

He stood again and moved over to the window. Outside, the flat-bottomed valley was an alien landscape filled with snow. The dome-like rises of rock that punctuated the valley floor were capped with snow. The strange, small trees were covered with snow. Far away in front of the house and off to the left hills rose up, white and pristine as if they had been covered in frosting. And the sun was rising over those furthest hills, just showing through a break in the clouds at the horizon. The light was distorted by the atmosphere, just as it was on Earth, tinting the clouds and the snow both in transparent shades of pink and gold. In the sky quite close to the house those strange bird-like things were flying, and he could see the tracks of animals on the ground. Somewhere a small distance away was a red-brown stain on the white carpet. Obviously the birds had found some prey. As he watched, they circled and then dropped again on the carcass, fighting and snatching over the remains.

He thought of Ensign Malton sleeping in the next room. It was a miracle that she had made it back to them alive. Without the steady stream of smoke from the chimney it was likely she never would have located them. The tricorder was not powerful enough to sense other people unless they were relatively close. She could have become prey to any of the carnivorous creatures on this planet. She could have frozen to death. Instead she had proved herself resourceful and capable enough to navigate back to the group despite injury and overwhelmingly poor circumstances.
Spock turned away from the sunrise and went to the door of the bedroom. He could hear and sense no waking activity from the ensigns. Outside the bedroom door was a small landing with two other doors leading from it. He pushed one open, and saw a room rather similar to the one he had been sleeping in. It was perhaps a little larger, with two small windows instead of one, but like his it contained a bed, currently occupied by the three ensigns who were sound asleep in their zipped together sleeping bags. There were more paintings on the walls and more corroded and faceless pictures behind glass, and some small items of furniture that perhaps held possessions or acted as seats.

Quietly he closed that door and turned to the other. Cold billowed out, and he almost recoiled, but he looked in and saw what was almost unmistakably a toilet. Primitively fashioned, it consisted of a plaster shelf with a hole in the centre; a hole which apparently dropped down into some kind of pit below. Some light filtered up, which explained the cold. The thing was open to the air. In the wall of the small room was a small alcove which looked as if it was meant to contain water. A basin, he surmised, although it was too dark in the small room to tell if it had any kind of plumbing attached.

Rather than let too much cold into the house he left the small room quickly and closed the door, which was, he noted, thicker and rather more insulated than the other doors. It was more like the thick outer door downstairs. The nurse had not mentioned this upstairs bathroom, perhaps afraid that if Spock knew of it he would insist on climbing the ramp to use it. No matter. He knew about it now.

Spock returned to the bedroom, since inside the sleeping bag was the warmest place to be. There was no point in wasting fuel in lighting a fire until the rest of the party were awake and ready to go downstairs. But first he gathered together a tricorder and the booster that Ensign Grant had constructed, and once he was back in the bed he sat there with the tricorder carefully scanning, trying to see if he could pick up any signs of civilisation indicated by radio waves, radiation, or other advanced activity. Perhaps he might even pick up a sign of craft outside the planet’s atmosphere, if there were any. It was entirely possible that the Enterprise was up there now, searching for them.

He found nothing. Slightly discouraged, he shut the screen with a snap. There was no point in wasting energy.

‘Oh!’

Christine sat up abruptly, obviously wakened by the sudden slight noise.

‘I am sorry,’ Spock said.

‘I am sorry,’ Spock said.

She looked around, seeming disorientated for a moment, then said, ‘Oh – no, Mr Spock. It’s light. Time to wake up I suppose.’

‘There are no set times for activity here,’ Spock pointed out.

She looked at him, seeming to be reading something in his face.

‘You don’t like staying still, do you, Mr Spock?’ she asked.

He frowned slightly. ‘This house is very convenient,’ he said carefully. ‘But I do find it – disquieting. We may be being lulled into a false sense of security. If the weather should get worse, if the food should run out – ’

‘You want to move on,’ she said.
He could hear the sigh in her voice.

‘I do not intend to spend more than four more days here,’ Spock said decisively, although he had not put such a concrete time to it until he spoke aloud. ‘It is entirely possible that we could starve to death within these walls.’

‘Mr Spock, we only have one tent and four sleeping bags, and there are now five of us,’ Christine pointed out.

‘I know,’ Spock said pensively. ‘But we will not survive here if the weather worsens enough that we cannot find food. The snow has been considerably worse since we settled here.’

‘What if it doesn’t get better even if we move south?’ Christine asked quietly.

‘What if it is commensurately worse here?’

Something seemed to deflate in her. Spock kept his eyes on her face, but she looked away as if she could not bear to hold his gaze. He could feel the emotion of despair swelling like a cloud in the room.

‘It is hard,’ Spock nodded, speaking very softly. ‘But there are certain truths that must be faced. I stood at that window just now and watched the birds circling. They had killed a creature. This kind of activity seems to be increasing as the snows increase, perhaps as other food sources disappear. We cannot afford to become stranded in a place where there are carnivores which drop from the sky. These walls and this roof will protect us, but they cannot provide us with food. For that we must go outside.’

‘But what about while we’re travelling?’ she asked.

‘If it is a choice between that and starving, I would rather the former.’

She did not reply, but kept her face turned away from him, the dark cloud of emotion still hanging in the air. Spock touched his hand to her chin, turning her face back to him. There was a tear running down her cheek.

‘Oh, I’m being stupid. Human. Ignore me. Just ignore me,’ she muttered, lifting her hand to rub furiously at her face.

Spock grasped her hand in his, stopping the angry movement. He could feel the wetness of her tears on her fingers, and he gently wiped them away.

‘I’m just tired – ’ she said.

‘Christine,’ Spock said softly.

At his tone of voice she turned to look at him, her eyes wide, the blue enhanced to a translucent lapis lazuli by the moisture over her irides.

‘You were serious last night,’ she said after a moment, in a wondering voice.

‘I usually am serious, Christine,’ Spock assured her. ‘Frivolity is not in my nature.’

She almost laughed through her tears. ‘But there was something in your eyes just then,’ she said. ‘When you spoke just then. In anyone else that would be a smile or a laugh.’

Spock tilted his head. ‘Perhaps,’ he conceded. ‘We are alone here, Christine, barring the ensigns,
who are little more than children. We are in command of three youths who have almost no experience in situations like this. The responsibility on both our shoulders is immense. But – at the moment, the children are quite asleep,’ he said, this time deliberately allowing the light of humour into his eyes.

He touched her chin again with his finger, turning her face back to him, leaning closer until their lips were almost brushing together.

‘This is eminently more pleasing than tears, don’t you think?’ he asked his voice very low.

‘Oh – yes,’ she murmured, her lips so close to his that he could feel the words that she spoke against his skin.

He touched his hand to the back of her head, slipping his fingers through her hair at the back of her neck, feeling the shape of her skull beneath. He assured her again, ‘No, I am not bothered by your hair, your lack of make-up, or by the fact that neither of us have seen proper bathing facilities in quite some time. Are you troubled by my nascent beard or lack of grooming?’

‘No,’ she said, her lips still touching his, reaching forward as if she were hungry. ‘No, no...’

He leant forward that extra millimetre, pressing his lips to hers and feeling the cool silk of her skin again against his. She reacted as if she were starving, opening up her mouth, reaching in with her tongue to find the curious alien tastes of his teeth and tongue. A small sound of pleasure escaped her, sending corresponding ripples of gratification through the Vulcan as he reciprocated her movement, tasting the humanness of her.

‘There,’ he murmured, putting his hand back into the sleeping bag, finding the hem of her uniform top and slipping his fingers beneath. ‘There...’

He hesitated long enough to allow her to protest or push his hand away, but she did not.. She just lay back on the bed, arching a little into his touch.

To his frustration there was that second layer, the form-fitting black t-shirt beneath the tunic, tucked in. She did not demur as he freed it from the waistband of her trousers and slipped his fingers over her sleep-warm skin, feeling the softness of her stomach flat under his palm. He found the dimple of her navel, the soft-hard ridges of her ribs. She had removed that troublingly solid brassiere, perhaps to make her sleep more comfortable, and rather than hard wire his fingers encountered the soft swellings of her breasts.

She gasped, a low, drawn out sound, and he stopped, suddenly fearing that he had gone too far. He looked at her face and saw that her head was tilted back on the mattress, her eyes closed and her lips parted. She did not look unhappy.

He continued the slow investigation, finding the curiously dimpled skin of the areola, and then the hardness of her nipples all under the blind cover of her clothes. She gasped again, and he experimented, brushing his fingers deftly back and forth over that engorged skin. Something inside himself seemed to be set aflame. This was, he knew, a curious reaction in the males of many species, most definitely seen in the humans with whom he shared half of his heritage. This desperate urge to mate at times of stress and danger. That what what was on fire within him. He needed this as much as she.

Clothes were an irritating encumbrance. Still harder was working those clothes off inside the insulating warmth of the sleeping bag, working his trousers off over the irritating and cumbersome cast. But this was a pleasurable, cunning madness, this madness of the urge to link body to body, to defy the fragile nature of their situation and affirm life. The clothes came off, and hers did too.
She murmured no uncertain protests in the face of his determination. He knew that it was for him that she was worried. She had been imagining this moment for years.

Together they lay naked in the soft security of the sleeping bag. She felt like warmed silk. His fingers traced up and down her torso, feeling what he was denied the sight of by the covers they were beneath. Her heart beat hard beneath her ribs, her pulse fluttering beneath his fingertips, her breath coming in short, quick gasps. Tentatively she reached out too, touching his flat chest, the light hair that furred his skin, the tiny buds of his nipples. She reached around him to stroke a palm down his back, and he could sense the lightning arousal as she allowed her hand to stray a little lower, where back gave way to firm buttock which then curved under to meet the back of his thigh.

Sense the lightning arousal? No, it was in him too. It was not just her. Their minds sparked with desire and the flames seemed to meet and join even without initiating a formal meld. He could feel himself hardening in a way he hardly ever permitted. There was no need to suppress it now. He lay against her and she must be able to feel the heat of the swollen hard rod there, speaking more eloquently of his desire than he could in words.

Her hand came down to touch him, tentative at first, and then with more confidence. Her fingers encircled his erection, slipped down it and up again, then released as she began a fingertip investigation, tracing the potent veins that stood out in his skin, moving down to the exquisitely sensitive skin of his scrotum, which seemed to contract and expand again under her touch. This time it was he who moaned, unable to keep the sound in. As soon as her hand moved away all that he could think of was the pleasure of being touched again. He would not beg, but he wanted to beg. Her fingers were there again, almost, almost touching.

She was teasing him. His eyes flashed, locking with hers, seeing the laughing pleasure in her eyes. ‘After all this time,’ she murmured in a contented voice.

‘Yes,’ Spock said, his voice suddenly rough, low, commanding. ‘After all this time. Do not make me wait.’

‘Well, sir...’ she said teasingly, her hand still a scant millimetre from his skin.

Spock growled, intent suddenly on turning the tables, slipping his hand across the bone of her hip and down to that valley where his fingers sought through moist folds and found her centre. Manuals on human anatomy came to him and he impatiently pushed them away. He did not need that. He knew what he sought. That one place where his finger moved that forced her to stifle a gasp, her hand suddenly clenching hard on his skin. He moved his finger again, stimulating her, hearing her breathing become ragged – and then stopped.

She moaned, putting her hand to his wrist, trying to make him continue.

‘There,’ he murmured in an amused tone. ‘You are not the only one who can tease.’

Abruptly she was holding him again, her hand enclosing the circumference of his erection, moving, stroking, pumping, and he realised that he had no power at all because all he wanted was to feel the tight warmth of her body pressing around that hungry part of him. With an abrupt movement he was above her, straddling her, guiding the hard rod of flesh into her body. His broken leg was an annoying accessory, and he attempted to ignore the protests of the cumbersome limb. As he completed his entry for a moment he felt dizzied. It had been so long. So long, and this was such a perfect place to be.

He lowered himself down over her, fitting perfectly, pelvis to pelvis, leg to leg, chest to chest. He
bowed his head and touched his lips to hers, his gaze burning into hers as he began to move, thrusting his narrow hips as instinct overtook reason. She tried to reach her arms to his neck and roughly he pushed them down above her head in a gesture of forced surrender, laying his hands over hers, palm to palm. A mental connection sparked into being, wordless and without structure, just layers upon layers of pleasure joining and building as his fervour increased and he thrust harder and faster into her soft receiving body. He could feel her pleasure like flames in her mind, building and growing each time he withdrew and then came home again in slick, swift, powerful movements.

And then it built into something beyond his body. He could not see, could not think. There was just the feeling of her around him and the urgency and the pleasure building to a climax that exploded in his mind as he jetted his seed into her body. He was suddenly exhausted, exhilarated, trembling, and he lay over her, his cheek laid against hers, feeling as if nothing could ever be wrong in the world.

…

Later, much later perhaps, perhaps half an hour or half a year, he stirred. The erection had waned, slipped out of her body. She was still underneath him, quiet and content. He could feel her happiness through every inch of her skin that was pressed against his. His hands still lay on her hands and her fingers moved a little, as if she were so tired that was the only thing left to her.

‘I suppose we should move,’ she said eventually.

Spock felt as if he had been lying in a fairy tale, in a timeless place behind high walls that no one could breach. He shook his head a little at her words. Speaking destroyed the fragile illusion.

‘I think the ensigns are awake, at any rate,’ she continued.

‘Hang the ensigns,’ Spock murmured, and he felt her amused shock at his unaccustomed words.

‘Here I thought we were doing everything we could to keep them alive,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ Spock murmured. ‘Yes, that is true. But we were both by necessity kept awake very late, and I woke very early. While you were emulating Sleeping Beauty I was investigating the top floor of the house.’

She snorted. ‘It couldn’t have taken you very long. There’s not that much of it.’

Spock sighed and finally peeled himself away from her, coming back to lie beside her on the bed, his head pillowed by the softness of her breast. This was such a perfect place to be. The sunlight slanted golden-yellow through a miraculous break in the cloud. He was warm and content. He did not want to admit the realities of command, of danger and hardship, of people relying on his resourcefulness and judgement.

Logic was like a cold and clear shower of water that moved down through his mind.

‘You are right,’ he said eventually. ‘We must move. We must move, and soon.’
The beard on Spock’s face was almost an inch long. Christine had pronounced it distinguished, although Spock could not see that it distinguished him particularly since Ensign Del Santo was also graced with a beard of a similar length. The main benefit of being unable to shave was that the beard sat between balaclava and face and helped to keep him warm, and continued to provide a layer of protection when his face was otherwise uncovered.

The comfortable and convenient house was far behind them, by almost a hundred miles according to the tricorder, although they had walked considerably further than that in actuality. Between the flat valley of the house and the place where they were now they had encountered a land of lakes and high hills, and although the lakes had been frozen over Spock would not trust to the safety of the ice enough to allow the party to walk across them. Walking around lakes and around the sides of hills too treacherous to climb made the journey considerably longer and more difficult than it had been over level tundra.

It was definitely growing milder as they moved south, although warmer would be an exaggeration. It was of some private relief to Spock to see the snow growing less and the opportunities for gathering food growing greater. It meant that his decision to leave the warm safety of the house, a decision which he had heard the ensigns quietly questioning among themselves, had been the correct one. He feared encountering a lake or sea that would be too big to walk around, but that had not happened yet, and while they still found land that was traversable, he was determined that they would traverse it.

‘How much further are we walking today, sir?’ Ensign Del Sarto asked, raising his voice after a quiet conversation with the other ensigns of which Spock had only caught snippets.

Spock paused, leaning on his crutches, and looked up at the sky and gauging the remaining daylight by judgement alone.

‘Another hour, Ensign,’ he said succinctly, then turned back to face the land ahead.

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Christine murmured in a rather sing-song voice, and Spock looked at her, startled that she was chiming in with complaints about the journey. ‘Oh, I don’t mean it, Mr Spock,’ she said quickly, seeing his raised eyebrow. ‘Did you ever do that on long shuttle journeys as a kid? Drive your parents mad with are we nearly there yet?every five minutes from leaving the house.’

Spock’s eyebrow rose still further. ‘Christine, when I embarked on a journey with my parents I was well aware of the route and projected duration of the journey before I left the house. To continually ask are we nearly there yet would have been both redundant and irritating to my parents.’

She looked sideways at him, smiling indulgently at his very Vulcan response.

‘Well, at any rate, I’d suggest settling somewhere in the next half hour,’ she said. ‘You’re favouring that leg a lot. You need to rest.’

Spock pressed his lips together in brief annoyance. The cast had been removed a week ago and the leg was still gaining strength, but Christine had been right in her assessment of the injury. He had indeed been left with a limp and considerable pain. He was able to walk about on even
ground for short periods without too much trouble and only one crutch, but for the forced marches
they were taking every day he needed both crutches, and their pace was still slowed by his
inability to walk efficiently. At least, though, he could now wear his boot, and although he could
not fix the ruined lower part of his trouser leg it was covered by the more commodious survival
suit.

‘Very well,’ he said after a moment.

He looked at the land ahead. They were moving down into a valley bottom, away from the snowy
higher land and into an area that was rich with green and reddish plants.

‘As soon as we come across a water source, we will pitch camp for some days,’ he said
decisively, raising his voice so that the ensigns could hear too. ‘We will have to stay in this area
long enough to replenish our food supplies.’

Christine leant in close to him and abruptly favoured him with a light kiss on his balaclava-
covered cheek. As she did Spock felt an emotional surge from behind him, and was aware of
Ensign Malton’s intense stare even though he did not look round. Regardless of the ensign’s
reaction, he found Christine’s open expression of affection difficult to process.

‘I would practice caution,’ he said in a very low voice.

‘Leslie?’ Christine asked in an equally quiet tone.

‘Ensign Malton, yes,’ he nodded. ‘She seems to have a misplaced preoccupation with – well – ’

‘With you,’ Christine finished for him. ‘She has a crush on you, Mr Spock. Believe me, I can read
the signs easily enough, and I know how she feels.’

Spock felt heat flush into the tips of his ears, and was grateful that his head was covered with
balaclava and hood. It was most difficult to be the focus of such an obsession as the ensign
appeared to have.

‘It must be most inconvenient for you humans to be subject to ‘crushes’,’ Spock said
disapprovingly.

‘Oh, incredibly,’ Christine said cheerfully, ‘but we can’t exactly help them – especially not at that
age. I feel for her. It must be very hard.’

‘At any rate, Vulcans are not accustomed to outward displays of affection,’ he said in rather a
strained voice.

‘All right,’ she replied with a smile. ‘If one kiss on the cheek in about seven weeks of intimacy is
too much of a display – ’

‘Christine,’ Spock said, and she was suddenly reminded forcefully of the interactions between his
parents when his human mother had shown similar affection during their short stay aboard the
Enterprise.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said more softly. ‘I was joking. I will be strictly professional, Mr Spock, until we
happen to be alone.’

Spock gave her a grateful look. Being alone was not something that had happened very often at all
in the weeks since leaving the house, since the accommodation for the five of them was a tent
made for two. But he had made use of those moments that they had been allowed to strengthen his
relationship with the nurse with quiet talk and occasional romantic contact. In this situation that
would have to be enough. It was, perhaps, a little too much for Ensign Malton.

The tent was pitched not far from a small stream on the edge of a completely snow-free section of the valley. Once pitched Spock allowed the ensigns to rest, but struck out himself to explore the surrounding area, ignoring the pain in his leg and simply grateful for the fact that he could now walk about more easily, properly shod, without constant admonitions from Christine to stop exacerbating his injury.

He stood some distance from the tent making a sweep with the tricorder, searching for animals. Although he had not yet been forced to eat meat, the ration packs had finally given out some weeks ago and the humans were increasingly relying on small prey. He was beginning to consider constructing some kind of weapon that would take the pressure off the phasers – a bow and arrows or slingshot, perhaps. But with every new addition to their resources they would be forced to carry more. The food they gathered already took up much more space in the packs than the ration packs had. So to consider constructing more cumbersome weapons, a better tent, and more sleeping provisions meant also considering other methods to carry their possessions – perhaps some kind of litter that could be dragged across the ground.

He raised an eyebrow in a moment of ironic humour. Survival had never been presented as easy in all of the courses he had attended. Now he was finding out just how difficult it could be.

‘Can I kiss you here?’

He started. Engrossed as he had been in his thoughts he had not heard Christine approach. His lack of attention was inexcusable. Any number of predatory animals could have crept up on him.

He covered his annoyance and turned to her with what he hoped was a receptive expression.

‘You may kiss me here,’ he said graciously.

In the slightly warmer climate of the valley bottom he had removed his balaclava, and she was not even wearing her hood or gloves. She leant towards him to kiss his lips and he responded with a passion that took her by surprise. That first time in the house all those weeks ago had unlocked barricades that had been so long held that he had almost forgotten they were there. The last time had been Zarabeth. He remembered that, also in a freezing climate, and pressed to a pre-reformation way of thinking by circumstance. It was amazing how much and how often he had been able to express that passion given that McCoy was almost always in the next cave-room. It had been hard to re-erect those barriers after that time, but he had done so, and the very male urge for procreation had been quelled in him. But now it was here, back, pushing at the primitive parts of his mind. It was a distraction that he should not have allowed himself. But he had, and that was that. Christine was here, and when she was not here she was still there in the back of his mind. More than anything he wanted time alone with her in a bed, behind a locked door, but he would have to control those urges.

‘Oh, you know the beard makes it,’ she said as he broke back from the kiss, a smile brightening her eyes.

‘I fail to see – ’ he began.

‘You don’t have to see,’ she replied, touching a finger to his lips. ‘Just know that it does.’

‘Would you have me retain this when we return to the ship?’ Spock asked, brushing his gloved hand over the length of growth. His hair was also growing longer, and he had considered asking
her to cut at least his fringe with her medical scissors.

She sobered, and Spock recalled that she always became thus subdued when he mentioned their chance of rescue. It was easier for her, perhaps, to adhere to the thought that this was their new life than to entertain dreams of a miraculous moment of being beamed up from this wilderness.

Spock turned back to his tricorder, angling the screen towards her so that she could see too.

‘I register a sufficient number of small creatures in the vicinity to make hunting a possibility,’ he said. ‘As yet none of the larger predators that we have encountered.’

The first few weeks after their departure from the house had been difficult ones, fraught with fear in the humans and logical concern in Spock at the number of airborne predators. They had not yet encountered another ‘dragon,’ thankfully, but there had been plenty of the smaller carnivorous creatures which at times had to be warned off with a phaser shot as they swooped down upon the alien travellers. The ensigns in particular seemed fearful of another attack as they slept, and due to this were all experiencing poor sleep.

‘Maybe we’re out of their territory,’ Christine suggested.

‘I would not rely on that fact,’ Spock told her. ‘Or that other threats may not emerge in other territories.’

‘No, I know,’ she sighed. ‘It’s hard work being on a totally alien planet...’

‘Yes,’ Spock murmured. ‘In foreign areas of one’s own planet there are still constants one can rely on, similarities in genetics for example. Here there is no such thing.’

‘Apart from that big dragons have little dragons as their cousins...’

‘Yes,’ Spock said, not bothering to correct the nomenclature she had adopted. Dragons was as good a word as any.

‘How’s that leg?’ she asked, changing the subject abruptly.

Spock looked down at the limb in question. ‘Acceptable,’ he said.

‘Which means you’re in pain.

‘I am always in pain,’ Spock said. ‘But I am in far less pain than I have been these last two months. Your assessment was quite correct. The limb is essentially healed, but I will continue to suffer pain and difficulty from the imperfect level of healing.’

‘I don’t like you moving around too much when you don’t need to.’

‘I know,’ he nodded. ‘And I do not. Almost everything I do on this planet is entirely necessary.’

‘Yes. Yes, I know,’ she said with a regretful sigh.

Spock looked at her quickly. ‘You a troubled by that?’

She laughed. ‘Well, let’s just say I wouldn’t say no to a vacation on a warm sandy beach, or even a quiet walk in a mild climate, away from other eyes. Anything that didn’t involve trying to stay warm, trying to stay fed, trying to purify drinking water, trying to find somewhere better to survive.’

‘It is not my ideal either,’ Spock admitted. ‘But it is what it is. We can do nothing to change it.’
She slipped her hand subtly into his, looking around to be sure that none of the ensigns were near.

‘Can we pretend it’s a warm sunny day in a beautiful valley somewhere?’

Spock looked about at their surroundings. ‘This could perhaps be characterised as a beautiful valley,’ he acknowledged, ‘but I have trouble in pretending that it is warm.’

But he did not let go of her hand. Instead he caught hold of the other one and drew her closer to him, kissing her again, closing his eyes and letting the world sweep away. Fire burnt in his loins, and for a reckless moment he wanted to carry her away into a secluded stand of trees and satiate his passion.

A screech overhead tore them apart, and Spock instantly readied his phaser, pointing it toward the sky. Wings beat with such violence that the air seemed to shudder, and the creature came into view; a massive body that glittered with iridescence, held aloft on enormous, almost translucent, wings. As it came down towards them, mouth open and teeth bared, Spock fired on the highest setting. The beam struck and fluoresced through the animal’s tissues. Stunned, it dropped from the sky, still moving towards them with the momentum of its flight. Spock leapt aside, but he saw as if in slow motion the weight of the creature striking Christine, its gaping mouth tearing past her shoulder, and she toppled back onto the grass, apparently unconscious.

His attention was torn between the injured human and the slowly stirring dragon-like creature. The thing was quite beautiful, its body covered with iridescent blue down that was half-fur, half-feather, its wings naked and sapphire blue. But the full-beam phaser had failed to kill it and had barely rendered it unconscious. Spock reached for the knife that he carried in his small survival kit and opened the blade. It was unpleasant but necessary. He found the creature’s throat, pushing its heavy lolling head back with a huge effort, and pressed the knife blade into the flesh. Reddish brown blood surged out of the gash he made. The blade was too short, and his gloves and sleeves became covered in blood before he was certain he had cut deeply enough to ensure the animal’s death.

He turned himself to Christine, who was still unconscious, a nasty gash on her shoulder spilling out iron-red blood to mix with the dragon’s rust colour fluid. Spock opened his communicator to call, ‘Del Sarto, I need your assistance urgently,’ before throwing his crutches aside and gathering the woman up in his arms.

He half-ran back towards the tent, ignoring the pain in his leg. Del Sarto and the other two ensigns met him half way, and the human tried to take Christine from him. After a moment of hesitation he allowed the transfer. ‘Grant, Malton, I have killed a dragon just back there,’ he said, pointing with his blood covered hand. ‘Go and be certain it is dead. Do not touch its teeth. I suspect the creature may be venomous. Scan for such substances, and analyse. It may be very important.’

They wordlessly acknowledged, and ran on. Spock followed Ensign Del Sarto back to the tent, trying hard to push away the limp and the pain and pick up his pace enough to catch up with the young man. When he arrived at the tent Christine was already stretched out inside on top of a sleeping bag, and the ensign had her medical kit open, but he seemed bewildered by the contents.

‘I have first aid training,’ Spock said sharply, pushing the man aside and kneeling down.

He pulled his gloves off and threw them aside, grateful that his hands were clean underneath. The medical scanner and tricorder were neatly put away in the kit, and he snatched them out and turned them on. His training went beyond first aid, but he was neither a nurse nor a doctor, and he was not sure what he would do if this situation were beyond him.
‘Is she all right?’ Del Sarto asked, hovering close in his anxiety.

Spock resisted the urge to tell him to shut up. He did not reply, intent on the readings on the tricorder screen. Her forehead was grazed and she was suffering concussion which had rendered her unconscious. He thought that he did detect some foreign substance in her bloodstream which had presumably entered at the gash made by the animal’s teeth. She had no broken bones or other injuries. But her temperature was already elevated...

He cleaned the shoulder wound and dressed it carefully, and then very gently manoeuvred the nurse into one of the other sleeping bags to keep her warm. As he was zipping the bag closed the other two ensigns came into the tent, out of breath. Ensign Malton carried his crutches.

‘There was venom on the teeth, sir,’ Ensign Grant panted, crouching down beside him. ‘Can’t tell if it’s meant to kill prey or just render them unconscious, but – ’

‘She’s unconscious, isn’t she?’ Ensign Malton cut in.

Spock turned round to look at her, and she blushed.

‘She is indeed unconscious, but I don’t believe it’s because of the venom. Ensign, you interrupted Ensign Grant.’

‘I wasn’t going to say much more,’ Ensign Grant murmured. She passed her tricorder over to Spock, and he studied the readings.

‘A simple alkaloid toxin, relatively mild,’ he murmured, ‘but I cannot predict how she will react... It may be a paralytic. It will be important to monitor her breathing.’

Time seemed to slow and expand around him. He sat in the tent and watched Christine, while the ensigns moved inside and outside. He did not pay attention to what they were doing. At one point he smelt smoke and assumed that they were cooking, but he did not turn his head to check. And then he felt a tentative touch on his arm and Ensign Malton was crouching beside him saying, ‘Sir, we made you some dinner too.’

Spock nodded and motioned for her to put the food down, but he did not turn his head from Christine’s face.

‘Sir, you should eat,’ the ensign insisted. ‘It won’t help anyone if – ’

‘You are right,’ Spock cut her off impatiently, looking around briefly. If eating would mean she would cease to bother him, then he would eat. She handed him food wrapped in what appeared to be a large leaf, and he took it without comment. He turned his eyes back to the nurse as he unwrapped the leaf and started to pick out bits of what seemed to be roots and fruit with his fingertips. Abstractedly he heard the ensign leave. He put a piece of food into his mouth, and then another, but his eyes moved between the nurse and the read-out on the tricorder screen. It had been three hours and she had not yet stirred.

He sighed and adjusted his position to a rather more comfortable one. Her brain patterns were quiescent but stable. Her temperature was level at thirty-nine point three Celsius. Her breathing was slow but steady.

He turned a little more attention to his food, becoming aware that he had treated Ensign Malton impolitely. The mixture of roasted roots and fruits was good. He looked briefly out of the tent to where the three ensigns were sitting eating by the fire. Ensign Malton had been sitting where she
could see in through the door, and in the first moment when he looked round he was certain that he had caught her staring at his ears again. It was disquieting to be the subject of such intense attention.

He cleared his throat and said, ‘I neglected to thank you for the food, Ensign Malton. It is good.’

She jumped as if he had broken her reverie, smiling broadly at the praise. ‘I’m glad you like it, sir,’ she said. ‘We saved some for Christine if – ’

‘I doubt that Nurse Chapel will be eating tonight,’ he said, slightly disturbed at the familiarity of the ensign using the nurse’s first name.

He turned his attention back to the nurse, touching the back of his hand to her forehead. Suddenly he was reminded of another moment in this tent when she had touched her hand to his head. What had she said? *It speaks to you better than numbers on a screen.* She was right. Her exact temperature was displayed on the tricorder, but by touching her he gained a better understanding of her physical condition. She was still warmer than she should be, still motionless. He gently touched his forefinger and thumb to her face and closed his eyes, trying to seek out the surface of her mind, but there was nothing. She was truly unconscious. Alive, intact, but unconscious.
‘Spock? Spock?’

He was awake instantly. Cramped as they were into the small tent he was pressed close against Christine, and he could feel her heat and the sweat that came off her. It was quite dark and the ensigns were still asleep. But she said again in a feebly voice, ‘Spock?’

He turned on the flashlight and groped for the tricorder in the same movement.

‘It is all right, Christine,’ he said quietly. ‘I am here.’

‘Spock, I can’t – It’s strange – ’

He struggled to sit up, silently frustrated by the cramped conditions. He turned the flashlight on her face to see her eyes wide and scared. Her face looked flushed, as if she had woken from a nightmare. It was, however, deeply relieving to see her awake.

‘Try to remain calm,’ he said quietly. He did not want to wake the Ensigns. The tent immediately seemed five times smaller when everyone was awake.

‘What happened?’ she asked.

‘When I shot the creature it fell on you and knocked you unconscious. Its teeth also caught your shoulder. There was venom on them.’

‘Venom?’ she echoed weakly.

‘An alkaloid toxin,’ he clarified. ‘I do not believe the effects will be permanent, but obviously you are feeling some discomfort.’

‘Discomfort...’ she murmured. ‘I – can hardly move.’

‘A paralytic to immobilise prey,’ Spock told her. ‘Fortunately you are relatively large and the dose was relatively small. It was a glancing blow, not a bite. I was – concerned,’ he admitted reluctantly, ‘but I do believe that the effects will wear off relatively soon.’

‘Oh,’ she murmured. Her voice sounded a little slurred. ‘Well, thank you, Dr Spock.’

‘None of my doctorates are in medicine,’ Spock said in perfect seriousness.

She laughed weakly. ‘Well, I don’t care. You’ve done a good job. I mean, I can’t feel my toes and I’m burning up and I can’t move, but I’m sure you’ve been very efficient.’

‘I have done my best,’ Spock said. ‘I would suggest you try to get as much sleep as possible.’

‘Hmm,’ she said. ‘It’s like sardines in here...’

‘Sardines?’ Spock asked. ‘An earth fish, of the herring family, I believe.’

‘Commonly preserved in oil in large numbers in very small tins,’ Christine clarified. ‘Like having five people in a two person tent.’

‘I see,’ Spock said. He ran the medical scanner over her briefly and examined the results. ‘The swelling in your frontal lobe has gone down. There is no intracranial bleeding. Your temperature
is still slightly elevated and there is still toxin in your system. However, the levels are decreasing.’

‘Well, that’s good,’ she said. ‘You know, I think I am sleepy. Would you stroke me, Spock?’

‘Stroke – you?’ Spock echoed.

‘Stroke me to sleep. Would you?’

Spock sighed, then touched his fingers to her cheek and began to stroke. She sighed contentedly and closed her eyes. All those times in sick bay were brought to mind when he had lain in bed and she had thought him unconscious and stroked his arm or his forehead, or held his hand. She had performed long and lonely vigils over him. Now it was his turn to do the same.

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He was not sure how much he had slept by morning, but he knew that his sleep had been fitful, broken by Christine’s increasing restlessness as the night wore on and the paralytic wore off. Whenever he woke he carefully scanned her and checked her temperature, which was not going down. Even to a Vulcan she felt warm, and she was most uncomfortable to sleep beside as she turned and muttered and sweated to try to lose heat. By the morning Spock was becoming concerned that she was growing dehydrated.

‘You must drink something,’ he said to her, holding her up with one arm and pressing a flask to her lips with the other.

‘Must I?’ she murmured, and in talking spilt water across her face and down her neck.

‘Yes, you must,’ Spock insisted, holding the flask steady as she tried to recoil from the shock of the cold water. ‘You have lost a lot of fluid through the night.’

Her teeth were starting to chatter. ‘T-try – ’ she began. ‘T-try – anexophiline. 5ccs. Should h-help with the t-temperature.’

Spock turned instantly to her medical bag and looked for the required capsule. He set the dose and pressured it into her arm. Almost instantly she sighed and relaxed.

‘It could not work so quickly,’ Spock said, frowning a little.

‘I know, b-but the placebo effect is w-wonderful,’ she replied with a smile. ‘W-where are the ensigns?’ she asked, opening her eyes a little more and looking about the tent.

‘Outside looking for resources,’ Spock said. ‘I did not want to leave you.’

She looked up at him and he favoured her with half a smile, aware that he had seen exactly the same expression on his father’s face when he sometimes looked at his mother.

‘I like to see that,’ she said sleepily. The shivering was subsiding now that the drug was beginning to level out her temperature.

Spock lifted an eyebrow. ‘To see what?’

‘You, smiling,’ she said. ‘It’s a rare gift.’

‘I have found generally that rare gifts are the most appreciated,’ Spock said.

‘I appreciate this one,’ she said. ‘Thank you, Spock.’
Spock felt confused and did not know what to say. How could a smile be a gift? He turned his attention to the tricorder instead, watching her symptoms slowly even out. He should make a deliberate effort to learn the exact uses for every drug in that kit while they were here on this planet. If Christine were to become incapacitated again it could be vital.

‘Do you feel able to sit up?’ he asked.

‘Don’t take it too fast, soldier,’ she said with grim humour. ‘I do feel better, but I’m not perfect.’

‘Are you able to move?’ Spock asked seriously. ‘The tricorder indicates that the paralytic is wearing off.’

‘Yes, I think it is,’ she said, trying to push herself up a little. ‘Effective, isn’t it? I’d be halfway through the digestive system by now.’

‘Indeed,’ Spock agreed.

He was taken by surprise as Christine hooked her arm about his neck and pulled his head down towards hers.

‘This is what we were doing before we were interrupted, wasn’t it?’ she murmured.

‘It was,’ Spock replied. He brushed his lips over hers but would not commit to a proper kiss. ‘But if you remember that ended rather disastrously. Christine, if you feel able I should go and check on the ensigns.’

‘Communicators not working?’ she asked, widening her eyes innocently.

‘They are working perfectly,’ Spock replied. ‘However, I prefer the evidence of my eyes.’

He extricated himself from her arm and went outside, trying to dispel the odd feeling that he was too warm. It was unusual to feel too warm in this climate when he was not deep inside a sleeping bag. The thought of casting caution to the wind and lying down with Christine in the sleeping bag and kissing her and doing more was quite intoxicating, and he needed to distract himself with the cold and reality of outside.

He took his crutches and set out through the patchy snow towards where the tricorder indicated the ensigns to be. He took great care to keep checking the tricorder for any indications of large creatures in the vicinity, but at the moment there were none. He did not want to rely on the assumption that there would be none, however.

When he came upon the ensigns they were clustered about something on the ground and so intent upon it that none of them noticed his arrival. He cleared his throat loudly, and they jumped.

‘I could have been a predator,’ he pointed out quietly.

‘Yes, sir. Sorry, sir,’ Del Sarto said in an abashed tone.

‘But look,’ Ensign Malton cut in. ‘Look what we found!’

‘What is it, Ensign?’ Spock asked, his interest piqued. She sounded rather like an infant who had done something to make her parent proud.

They moved aside to show him a wide scrape in the snow and the ground beneath. They had made a short muddy scar through the grass, and beneath were two parallel rusted lines, about three feet apart.
‘I thought – rails, perhaps?’ Ensign Grant suggested.

Spock crouched, awkwardly favouring his bad leg, and held out the tricorder to scan the metal. It was a similar alloy to that used in his crutches and there were signs of some kind of foundation beneath into which the rails were bedded down. ‘Perhaps,’ he murmured. ‘They appear to run quite parallel for some distance in that direction.’

‘Both directions,’ Del Sarto said excitedly. ‘And they seem to be flattened like rails might be. They show signs of being exposed to prolonged friction – but a long time ago, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Spock murmured. ‘How long ago, Ensign?’

The man sucked in breath through his teeth. ‘The tricorder suggests about two hundred years, but I thought maybe a bit longer based on the amount of soil over the top and the corrosion.’

‘You may be right,’ Spock said. He was rather pleased that Del Sarto did not slavishly believe the tricorder, but rather relied on his own deductions and paired them with the tricorder’s information. ‘And do you see any benefit in this find?’

‘Well, apart from the possible usefulness of the metal itself,’ Del Sarto began. ‘Ensign Grant thought – ’

‘Ensign Grant?’ Spock asked.

‘Well, I thought perhaps if they were rails they might point us towards civilisation, if there was any,’ she said quietly. ‘I mean, even if they don’t use them any more. Plenty of cities still exist on Earth that grew up around railroads.’

Spock nodded. ‘I take your point,’ he said. ‘It is a possibility. The rails run roughly north-south, so we would lose nothing from following them unless they begin to deviate too far from our chosen course.’

‘And rails usually – Earth ones at least – are laid down on level ground,’ Grant continued, her voice becoming louder as she warmed to the subject. ‘If they’ve levelled the ground it will be easier walking.’

‘Again, I take your point,’ Spock nodded. ‘Have you discovered any signs of industry or domestic buildings?’

She shook her head. ‘Nothing so far, sir. Nothing within scanning range. I’d guess this is just a transit route from A to B.’

‘Perhaps,’ Spock said.

He straightened up, giving a glance to his tricorder to check for the presence of life. There was still nothing large in the vicinity.

‘Did you find food?’ he asked.

Ensign Malton lifted her rucksack, smiling. ‘Some of those roots you like, Mr Spock, and quite a few edible leaves, and some nut-like fruit. We got a couple of small animals too, but I put those in a different bag.’

She smiled up at him, evidently hoping for approval for her consideration. Spock nodded his head, discomfited by her obvious attraction to him.
‘Very good,’ he said. ‘I will get back to the tent. I don’t like to leave Miss Chapel unattended.’

Ensign Malton’s face fell, but Spock was already turning away and limping back across the snow and patches of ragged, bare ground to the tent. What could he do about Ensign Malton’s attraction toward him? The answer was very little. He had been made aware of various crewmembers’ fixations with him in the past, both male and female. ‘Crushes,’ Jim called them. McCoy poked fun at Spock for it, but was always decorous and gentlemanly in front of the smitten individuals. Of course the biggest of those crushes had been Christine’s, and Spock had been uncomfortable in her company at times. But with Christine his discomfort had been ameliorated by the fact that he did actually like her, respect her, enjoy conversations with her. She was a fine scientist and a pleasant woman and he had been working alongside her for years. He did not know Ensign Malton at all, compared to that. All she was to him was a very young human with a partially formed personality who spent far too much time staring at his ears and flushing when he noticed her attention.

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He was pleased later that day when Christine showed a definite improvement in her condition. He didn’t like to stay still in a place where they had been attacked by one of the large dragon creatures, and wanted to move on as soon as possible, although he did not voice this desire to the others, aware that they were growing increasingly weary by travelling so often. He was very aware that he held command only by keeping their continued respect. He had been shown during the fated Galileo landing on Taurus 2 how very quickly a command could start to fall apart. Although at that time he had believed to be acting along the most logical and efficient lines he had learnt that humans sometimes required a little less efficiency and logic in order to gain the best performance, as illogical as that seemed to his Vulcan mind.

The next day was spent largely confined to the tent as winds howled outside, scouring more snow from the ground, and Christine gradually gained more strength. The wound on her shoulder was healing well and she was quite able to stand, even though there was nowhere for her to go. By the next morning he believed that everyone was fit and rested enough to continue on their journey, so he ordered the tent and sleeping bags packed up and they carried on walking, attempting to follow the buried and damaged rails the ensigns had found. Ensign Grant’s assumptions seemed to be correct. When they stood on the place where the tricorder sensed the rails and looked southwards there was a definite flatness to the ground, a kind of muted scar that had obviously been long grown over and covered with soil. Nevertheless, it was there, making for a dip in the hills, and walking across that ground was definitely easier than the rather softer and more undulating land around.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked Christine as they walked, probably more frequently than was necessary, and each time she nodded, muffled in the taped-together survival suit and balaclava, and said, ‘Yes, I’m fine.’

Spock kept a close watch on her, scanning her with her own medical tricorder at regular intervals, but the tricorder agreed with her own assessment. She was all right. There was no trace of the poison in her system now, her temperature was within normal parameters, the shoulder wound was healing, and she kept up a decent pace. What had happened served as a constant reminder, though, that this planet was unknown and dangerous.

He looked around to the ensigns, who were a few paces behind, and asked them solicitously, ‘Ensigns, are you faring acceptably?’

Del Sarto laughed at the question, his smile hidden behind his balaclava, and the three of them nodded and reassured him that they were fine. Spock nodded and turned back to the path ahead, satisfied. There was not much he could do to accommodate them if they did find the pace difficult,
but this was another thing he had learnt from commanding humans. It made a favourable impression if one expressed concern about the other team members, and generally kept morale up and loyalty high. No doubt the humans would be illogically irritated if they knew how calculated his treatment of them was, but they were unlikely to ever be privy to the innermost thoughts of his command decisions.

When he checked the tricorder he saw that they had already covered five point three miles that day, and that had been largely in a straight line, following the bed of the abandoned railroad. The rails seemed to lead towards a gap in the hills, and although there was beginning to be a very slight curve in their path Spock judged it to be acceptable, since it would be far easier to walk between the hills than straight over. Once they had passed this range it would be possible to get a better idea of what lay ahead; whether they faced yet another range of hills or perhaps a landscape that changed to something different. It was encouraging that the snow was becoming less and the temperature a little warmer with every degree south that they moved. It was wrong, illogical, ill- ADVISED even, but what Spock longed for most of all was another abandoned house in which they could set up home for a few days, a place where he and Christine could have some privacy, and where he himself could have privacy to meditate perhaps. He felt the lack of meditation keenly, but there was no solitude or peace to be had in a two man tent that sheltered five.
Chapter 15

Perhaps disappointingly, the rails had not lead to anything of use, although while they had lasted they had at least provided a rather easier path to follow. But then ranges of hills had started to rise up again, as if the land were a crinkled rug carelessly dropped on the ground and rucked up by passing feet. It had been a hard walk up to the top of the fifth range of hills they had crossed in a fortnight, and Spock’s leg was searing with pain after tackling the steep incline, but he showed none of that on his face. If he mentioned it, Christine would make him rest, and he did not believe that he needed to rest an injury that was not going to get better regardless of what he did. The leg was set poorly, and that was that.

He stood near the edge of a ridge of rock, surveying the snow-covered slope before them, which led down to what looked like the beginnings of a wood of the small alien trees they had come across here.

‘I think we could do with skis,’ Del Sarto muttered from behind him.

Spock turned and raised an eyebrow. ‘A paramount idea, Ensign, but from what should we fabricate these items?’

‘Uh – it was a joke, sir,’ Del Sarto said, exchanging a look with the other ensigns. It was obvious that they were smiling behind their balaclavas. They often found Spock’s bent toward the literal amusing.

‘I see,’ Spock murmured, turning his attention back to the plain beyond. It did not look as if there were any more ranges of hills for some distance, and the land at lower altitudes was largely brown and green and an odd dull red, not white with snow. A river snaked across the plain some distance off to the right, becoming wider as it did, and then – was that water? Sea, or perhaps a lake?

If he had been human his emotions would have been bitter and depressed. As it was he regarded the dark substance on the horizon with a muted feeling of irritation and not a little consternation. They could not cross water if they could not see the opposite bank. Even if they could construct a boat he could not even begin to suggest striking out across an almost-freezing body of water which could be hundreds of miles wide. That would be an almost certain way to kill everyone, very quickly and efficiently. All they could do, if this was indeed a sea or a great lake, was to try to walk around it, and their progress towards southern latitudes would be slowed vastly.

‘What’s that?’ Christine asked, pointing.

‘I believe it is a body of water,’ Spock said, not bothering to follow her outstretched finger.

‘No, not that, over there, to the right, on one of the bends of the river,’ she said with slight impatience. ‘It looks like – Could it be houses?’

Spock narrowed his eyes, using the flat of his hand to shade the bright light reflected from the clouds, and looked. He had missed what the nurse had seen the first time he had looked.

‘Yes, I do believe it is,’ he said in a wondering tone. ‘Fascinating. This could be the first concrete sign of communal living that we have found on this planet.’

‘A town?’ Del Sarto asked excitedly, coming forward to stand beside Christine.

Ensigns Malton and Grant pushed forward too, Malton using the opportunity to push close against Spock, so that her head was against his shoulder. Spock tried to step away a little and slipped on
Spock, so that her head was against his shoulder. Spock tried to step away a little and slipped on the snow, losing his balance quickly on his damaged leg and trying to catch it again with the crutches.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, sir. Sorry,’ Malton said quickly, grabbing hold of his arm.

Spock stiffened. He could only be grateful that there were so many layers separating her hand from his arm, because he did not think he could stand the emotions that would fly through naked skin.

‘When you have finished trying to precipitate me down this slope without the benefit of Ensign Del Sarto’s skis, I would appreciate your opinions,’ he said crisply as he regained his footing.

‘It looks like a town to me,’ Ensign Grant said quietly, raising her hand above her eyes and squinting. ‘Small, regular shapes like buildings, lines between that look like roads.’

‘Perhaps roads or simply ground worn by foot traffic,’ Spock murmured.

‘A road by another other name,’ Malton said brightly. Spock did not look around. She did not really deserve the gaze that he would have levelled on her.

‘Then we should make for there!’ Del Sarto said quickly, looking as if he were ready to strike out immediately.

Spock quickly shook his head. ‘Negative, Ensign,’ he replied.

‘But, sir, they might have electricity, communications devices, anything!’

‘They might indeed have something that could help us,’ Spock nodded. ‘But we have to proceed with caution. If the place is abandoned it may provide us with useful resources but if it is inhabited we must do all we can to avoid contact. This planet has shown no evidence of interstellar capability, and we must remember the Prime Directive.’

‘But to save our lives...’ Ensign Malton began.

‘Even to save our lives,’ Spock said firmly. ‘Our lives are insignificant when judged against the development of an entire culture.’

‘But – ’ Del Sarto began.

‘He’s right,’ Christine cut across. ‘Ben, Leslie, you know that he’s right. It's one of the first things you would have been taught in training before you were assigned to the Enterprise. We don’t break the Prime Directive. Ever.’

‘When I studied Captain Kirk’s past actions – ’ Ensign Malton started.

‘What the Captain might do or has done in the past is irrelevant,’ Spock said. He would not admit to the small moment of pain at hearing his captain’s name. He had made up his mind that he was very unlikely to see the captain or doctor again, and if that were true he preferred not to think of them. ‘If the Captain has ever – ’ He considered his choice of words for a moment, ‘ – bent the terms of the Prime Directive he has done it for greater reasons than the survival of a handful of people.’

He could feel the emotional rebellion emanating from the humans, but there was nothing he could do. He could not and would not break the directive for so few people.

‘Obviously the ideal is survival, and getting off this planet,’ he said patiently. ‘If we were to die
and our remains were found we would still present problems, since those remains would match nothing in the archaeological or fossil records. Therefore our main focus is on surviving without being seen until such a point as we can make contact with either the Enterprise or some other vessel or peoples off-planet. However, I will not expose the natives, if there are any, to our presence if there is any way to avoid it. You must be aware of the catastrophic result of such contacts in your own human history – the diseases introduced to the New World, for example, which decimated native populations.’

He continued to gaze at the vista before him, trying to make out if there were any signs of actual present habitation – smoke, perhaps, from homes or industries, or some kind of movement of people or vehicles. He could see nothing, however. He found that rather regrettable. Much as he was aware of the necessity of staying away from any native population, there he always felt a certain amount of scientific disappointment over a culture that had become extinct. There were so many possibilities, there was so much to learn, from alien civilisations, even just by observation rather than direct contact.

‘In case that there is a native intelligent population down there, we should move off this ridge as soon as possible,’ he said decisively. ‘We are easily visible here against the snow.’

‘If their vision is as acute as ours,’ Ensign Grant said quietly.

Spock turned to look at her, and had the distinct feeling that she had flushed under her balaclava. ‘You are right that it may indeed be very different from our own, if indeed they possess vision as we understand, but we must not take that chance.’

‘No, of course, sir,’ Ensign Grant murmured, and Spock favoured her with a small nod.

‘The comment was valid, Ensign. The possibilities of such differences are very often forgotten by landing party members.’

‘Thank you, sir!’ the ensign said brightly and Spock saw Ensign Malton eyes narrow a little as if in jealousy.

‘Let’s move out,’ he said briskly. ‘We will not stop for food until we have reached the tree line.’

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It was a strange forest that started halfway down the mountainside, with trees that rose up bare and smooth-trunked and then splayed into umbrella like canopies thick with fleshy leaves of a dull pink hue rather than green. Beneath there was no snow at all, and the air was somewhat warmer because of the shelter of the leaves and branches. After a while most of the party had their hoods pushed back and their balaclavas shoved into pockets. The dried husks of leaves crunched underfoot, but there seemed to be very little animal life to take notice of the sound.

‘Weren’t we going to stop to eat, sir?’ Ensign Malton asked after a while, and Spock looked around.

‘I did suggest we would stop at the tree line, but we reached it rather early,’ he said, ‘Now we are in the forest I would prefer to find a less enclosed location, somewhere we can see any predators.’

‘There’s nothing on the scanner,’ Christine murmured, looking down at the tricorder screen.

‘Even so,’ Spock said. He peered forward through the trees. There was little light under the canopy. ‘I believe there is a clearing up ahead,’ he said. ‘If it is large enough and there is still no sign of predators then we may stop there for lunch.’
He stepped ahead a little, leaning his weight on the crutches. The increased warmth here under the trees was pleasant. His leg did not ache nearly as much as it had at higher altitudes, when his boots had been sinking ankle deep in snow. He peered forward towards the clearing, trying to make it out. The ground seemed more level there than it was in the forest they had so far penetrated.

‘I do believe it is artificial,’ he said after a moment.

They moved closer with great caution. Spock could see one or two very low stumps through the mesh of tree trunks that stood between them and the clearing. The trees had obviously been cut, rather than simply fallen down.

He stopped still for a moment, considering. Perhaps the cut stumps were very old. He had no way of telling without getting closer. But organic remains like this did tend to suggest a more recent occupation than other evidence had shown.

‘Proceed with caution,’ he said in a low voice. ‘No talking.’

‘Sir,’ Ensign Malton said, and Spock turned and levelled a look at her that caused her to fall silent instantly, and flush to the roots of her hair.

Spock turned back to the way ahead, moving slowly and cautiously, trying to make as little noise as possible with the crutches. In the end he lifted them up from the ground and simply limped, since it was quieter. Although there were still no signs of large animals on the tricorder he did not want to take any chances. There was always the possibility of life which the tricorder was not calibrated to detect.

The clearing became more visible, and he stopped for a moment and stared. It was very obvious not that it was not natural. Trees had definitely been felled to widen the space if not to create it entirely, since the edge of the clearing closest to them was littered with old stumps that were worn and almost entirely white, as if they were calcified.

There was something beyond. He could not quite make it out. He moved a little closer, and stopped again. Christine was very close beside him and he could feel her astonishment, although she made no noise. Beyond the low cut off stumps in the circular clearing was a range of stones, obviously deliberately placed. They reminded Spock of a smaller version of the ritual areas on Vulcan, and of similar structures he had seen on Earth and many other planets. The urge to place stones on end in various arrangements was universal, it seemed.

He looked sideways at Christine. It was obvious that she wanted to speak, but she remained silent in deference to his orders. Her mouth was a little open and her eyes were wide and intent on the sight before them.

Spock turned so he could see the ensigns too. He touched his finger to his lips, then lifted a palm, trying to indicate to them, Stay here.

They nodded, and he had to assume that they understood. He handed his crutches to Christine, and she took them wordlessly, frowning a little but still not breaking the ordered silence.

Alone he walked forward, tricorder held out before him, until the last of the tree trunks was just in front of him. He stood staring at the stones. There was a very little snow in the most shadowed areas, but the ground was largely clear. It was also clear of dead leaves and soil, suspiciously so considering the amount of debris on the forest floor behind him. The entire surface of the clearing was covered in small, almost white, quartz-like pebbles, sharp edged and carefully arranged as if raked with grooves in concentric circles centring on the standing stones that stood further in. The clearing was twenty yards across, and the entire surface glittered with the pebbles. Spock was sure
that they had been imported. He had seen nothing like quartz in the locality.

*Ritual activity*, he thought silently. *Perhaps a place of worship.*

It seemed even more important in this context to stay quiet and take care. He was not certain that it was a good idea to walk on the quartz, since it would almost certainly make even more noise than the dry leaves in the forest, but he was intrigued, and his fascination drove him on. The centre of the clearing held a wide ring of upright obsidian-like stones about four feet high, roughly hewn and so angular in places that they looked as if they could cut. They had been erected close together with almost no gaps, but in the few places where there were gaps he could see something in the centre of the ring.

Cautiously he walked forward, accepting that to find out what was there he must walk on the gravel. They made less noise than he had expected, although he was dismayed to see that his weight disturbed the carefully arranged ridges and furrows of the rings, and after a few paces he could see over the stones of the circle. In the centre was a large obsidian-like stone which he estimated to be six feet long and four wide, lying flat on the ground, scooped out on top like a trough, and in the trough lay what he was certain was a body.

He stood motionless for a while, tricorder held out before him, aware of the eager emotions of the humans behind him and hoping they would not break orders and follow him out here. This was certainly no place to stop and eat. The interior of the stone circle was scattered with bones, thousands of bones, bleached and picked clean of any flesh. There were so many that he could not see whether the ground beneath was also covered in the quartz gravel, and their design was alien, looking as if they were related in some distant way to the bones of the predators they had killed during their journey.

He could see a break in the circle at one side, facing, he judged, the position of the midday sun. That was the only way in to the ring. Very carefully he stepped around the edge of the circle until he reached the break. Here there was a channel in the thick scattering of bones, obviously deliberately cleared and revealing the layer of bones to be about four inches deep. The ground there was scattered in dark chips of stone in stark contrast to the bones, and the channel led up to the long side of the supine stone. Spock walked slowly toward the stone, the tricorder momentarily forgotten, his mind and body alight with fascination for this death ritual that they had stumbled across. He had no doubt that this was some kind of ancestral resting place, a graveyard spanning hundreds of years perhaps.

The body on the slab was an old thing, so wizened and shrunken that it was hard to tell what it had looked like in life. He could see, though, that it had been covered in some kind of fur or feathery down, and some parts of the bedraggled, dark stuff still showed itself to be an iridescent blue-green. The rest was almost black, the light having died out of it with decay. He could make out what must be a head, but could make little sense of the orifices in the flesh that was shrunken and adhering to the skull beneath. He thought the thing might have had arms or perhaps wings, but again, it was very hard to tell because it was so caved in on itself and ruined by decay. Legs were evident, curled up a little toward the body, and the feet seemed to terminate in curved claws.

He stood, just staring, his mind working at an incredible rate as it assessed what was before his eyes. Then he caught himself and raised the tricorder, suddenly remembering that he had an incomparable opportunity to discover how recently deceased this body was. He knew that mummified forms could last for hundreds or thousands of years in the right conditions, but he judged that the conditions were not nearly cold and dry enough for such preservation.

He was right. This body had been decaying for no more than fifty days. It had been placed here, he had to assume, only in the last few months. He turned the tricorder on the bones that carpeted the floor, and tried to gain a reading on their ages. A hundred and seventeen years. Five hundred
and thirty two years. Two hundred and ninety three years. Five years. Two years and five months...

Spock caught his breath. This place was used. The body on the slab was evidence of that, but it was not a fluke. It was not a freak occurrence. It could, if the bones had all been old, have been an incredible coincidence, some kind of creature that had simply wandered in here to die and had done so in a place associated with funerary rites. But the fact that the bones around here showed such a variety of ages implied a continuity of use which lasted right up to no longer than fifty days ago.

Unless the native population had suffered some kind of catastrophic event in between then and now, it was almost certain that there were still intelligent, or at least moderately intelligent, beings living in the area. It was almost certain that not far away from here was a civilisation that had almost undoubtedly not reached interstellar capability but were a considerable way up the evolutionary ladder. It was almost certain that they had entered a situation where the Prime Directive became paramount, and it was absolutely certain that they must not be seen.
Spock crouched in front of the long black stone, staring at the body that lay there, trying to make some kind of sense of what he saw. If they successfully avoided any of the lifeforms who used this place then this might be his only chance to discover what their appearance might be. His tricorder was set to record, not scanning for nearby life any more but taking detailed readings of what was before him. Bone density, tissue make up, blood composition, brain size, the chemical components of that odd feather-like, hair-like fur. This was all utterly fascinating, so fascinating that he was barely aware of anything more than a foot away from where he crouched.

He pulled a glove off and reached a finger out toward the fur-like stuff, intending to see what it felt like. Even decayed as the hair was, touch could sometimes tell one much more than sight alone.

There was a shout, high-pitched, almost like the reflex-driven cry of a bird. Spock’s head jerked up, trying to work out it if had been one of the women in his party breaking the orders to remain silent, or if it were another predator coming in for the kill. There was no sound of flapping wings, no sound at all but that high shriek. Spock’s thoughts were moving fast, and the sound had lasted for no more than half a second when something struck the side of his neck with a sharp sting. He put his ungloved hand to his neck and removed what was undoubtedly some kind of dart, small, obsidian-pointed, and with a tuft of bright blue feathery stuff at the other end. He only had time to turn it around once between his fingertips, staring at it in astonishment, before he was overcome by the strange feeling of being drenched in something cold. He could not feel his feet. The dart dropped from between his fingers. He heard more shouting, and this time he was certain it was one of the ensigns, but the sound felt very far away. He tried to speak but nothing happened. Then nausea overcame him, a feeling that was so intense that it inhabited every cell of his body, but was swiftly pushed away by a complete absence of sensation.

Spock’s eyes rolled back into his head and he fell sideways onto the carpet of bleached bones, which crunched and snapped as his weight settled onto them.

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He woke, confused and cold. It was dark, utterly dark, and intense nausea pinned him to the ground. He tried to move his head and the tiniest movement sent vertigo sweeping through him so strongly that he tried to clutch onto the floor to prevent himself from falling. That attempted movement of his hands showed him that he was apparently near paralysed, but at the moment he was certain he was quite incapable of moving anyway since the vertigo was so intense.

He lay very still and used his senses instead. He could hear nothing clear at first. There were sounds that were perhaps wind in trees, perhaps footsteps, perhaps some kind of low, whispered communication. He could not work it out. His hearing seemed dulled too. His head felt muzzy. He tried to gain an idea of colour or form in the darkness, but that was also to no avail. There was, perhaps, a little grey light coming in from somewhere, but he could see no source and it lit up nothing that told him anything. His sense of smell detected damp and earth and stone, and he was certain that he was not alone in the room. He thought he was with one of the humans of his party, rather than with something more alarming. He could sense a quiescent mind very nearby.

He lay breathing in and out, trying to regain control of his body. There was perhaps little he could do to make the poison, if that was what it had been, wear off, but he could try to muster himself to make the most of the returning sensation. He gently tried to clench and unclench his fists, but he could not make his fingers press against his palms. He could feel through that movement, though, that he was no longer wearing his gloves, and he thought his clothes felt dishevelled, as if perhaps
they had been torn or partially removed.

The breathing of the person near him became louder for a moment, and Spock grew certain that it was male, that it was the sound of Ensign Del Sarto.

For a short moment panic flared up in him, red and senseless. Where was Christine? Where were the other two women? Were they hurt? Was Christine alive?

He quelled that emotion. Time. Only time would aid him. He breathed in and out, slowly, trying to increase the oxygen travelling about his body in the hope that he would metabolise the poison more quickly. This was a most consternating and fascinating situation. They had gone from being on a planet upon which all intelligent life seemed to be extinct, to being captured via the relatively sophisticated device of some kind of blow pipe. If only he had caught a glimpse of the propeller of that missile. No doubt in time he would see the lifeform that had him at its mercy, but he would have rather had an idea already of what he was about to face. The evidence suggested it was a living version of that body on the stone which he had been examining, but that carcass had been so shrunken and decayed that it had been hard to tell anything from it.

He listened hard again. He could hear something that sounded more like voices and animal movement than the noise of wind. It was like a low down whispering going on some distance outside the room. He was sure that if he were human he would be able to hear nothing.

He tried to clench his hands again. It was important to be able to move, but he just could not. There was perhaps a little more feeling and flexibility in his fingers, but that was a long way away from moving. When he tried again to move his head the vertigo became so bad that he was afraid of vomiting, and he stopped still, aware of the danger of that while he was held paralysed on his back.

There was a noise closer to him. It sounded like footsteps. Then there was a scuffling, and then a creak nearby. A door was opening. He turned his head a very little, turning his eyes more than his head, trying to see. Light pierced the darkness, and he tried not to blink. It seemed sensible to feign unconsciousness still. He could see something standing there in the doorway, something silhouetted by the daylight behind. Cold air was rushing in, swooping across the floor, and he worked at suppressing a shiver. There was a kind of chittering noise made by the creature in the doorway, and an answering chitter from behind. Something was put on the floor, and from the sloshing noise Spock assumed it was some kind of receptacle with water in it. Then the door closed again.

He lay still and listened hard again, but he could hear nothing useful from outside. He tried instead to sense Christine or the other women. Perhaps they were still unconscious. He thought that if Christine were nearby and conscious he might be able to catch hold of her thoughts and communicate with her.

He closed his eyes as a rush of tiredness came over him. Everything felt very heavy and he could feel himself sinking down. And then he knew that time had passed and he was waking again, able now to lift his head from the ground, and gradually to push himself up and lean against what felt like a rough plastered wall behind him.

‘Ensign Del Sarto,’ he said in a quiet voice.

There was a slight moan and a murmur from near him in the dark room.

‘Keep your voice down, Ensign,’ Spock warned him. He would not vocalise his relief at hearing the man’s incoherent reply. It was pleasant to have company in this situation. ‘Can you move at all?’ he asked.
‘I – I think so, sir,’ Del Sarto murmured. ‘I feel – feel very sick.’

‘As do I,’ Spock nodded quickly. He regretted the nod because it made his head swim. ‘Ensign, do you remember anything about what happened?’

‘We – were in the forest,’ he murmured. ‘Saw you – hit by something. Never saw a sign of anyone. Then we were attacked too. Some – some kind of poison dart...’

‘That corresponds with my experience,’ Spock said. ‘Were the women also taken?’

‘I – think so,’ he said. ‘I – I saw Karen go over... Aren’t they – Aren’t they here?’

‘Negative,’ Spock said. ‘Our clothes have evidently been disturbed, so our gender differences may have been noted and they may be being kept in another place.’

‘You – don’t think they killed – ’ Del Sarto began.

‘No,’ Spock said quickly. Although he had no clear idea what had happened to them he thought he would sense if Christine were no longer alive.

‘Do you think we should t-try to make contact with the aliens?’ Del Sarto asked.

‘No,’ Spock said again. ‘It is imperative to try to free ourselves at the earliest possible opportunity. We must try to minimise all contact. If possible we must recover our goods as well.’

‘We won’t survive without them,’ Del Sarto pointed out.

‘Indeed,’ Spock said grimly. ‘Del Sarto, can you walk?’

‘I – don’t think so. Not yet,’ Del Sarto said immediately.

‘Concentrate on regaining your strength,’ Spock told him.

‘How long d’you think we were out for?’

Spock was pleased that the man was sounding stronger with every minute. ‘I do not know,’ he admitted. ‘The unconsciousness was deep enough that I lost my time sense. I believe it is dark outside, though.’

‘A few hours, a day, two days,’ Del Sarto murmured.

‘It could be any of those,’ Spock nodded. ‘It is quite possible that the poison on the darts is related to the poison that afflicted Nurse Chapel, perhaps extracted from the same creatures – or, indeed, produced by the creatures who captured us.’

He closed his eyes for a moment, steeling himself, then began carefully to try to stand up. He staggered. His legs felt numb, but at least that had the effect of quelling the pain of the improperly healed break.

‘Sir?’ Del Sarto asked.

‘Shh,’ Spock warned him. ‘I am all right.’

He stood leaning against the wall. The roof was so low that he had to keep his head bowed. It was very possible that none of the humans would be able to stand yet and there was little point in attempting escape if that was the case.
‘Stay still,’ Spock murmured as he heard Del Sarto stirring. ‘I will investigate.’

He stood still for a while, letting the spinning in his head settle and his eyes adjust more to the light. He could make out edges of objects dimly in the dark. All around the door was a crack of light, as if moonlight were shining through. He could see the water bowl on the floor and had the urge to drink, but he restrained himself. It was entirely possible that the water was laced with poison to keep the captives subdued.

‘There is water, and possibly some food left for us,’ he said, seeing misshapen objects on the floor by the bowl. ‘Do not eat or drink, though. We cannot trust the food. Without our tricorders we cannot even be certain if food left in good faith would harm us or not.’

Spock moved around the room slowly, running his hands over the wall and then the door. The door felt relatively weak and could perhaps be forced. There was little to find in the room, which seemed more like an emptied out storeroom than a deliberately made jail cell.

There! There was something. With his hand on the wall he could feel it, some kind of spark, a consciousness. He closed his eyes, spreading his hand out on the rough plaster.

Christine?

There was a flicker of recognition, wordless but electric.

Christine, are you all right?

He caught a sense of her feeling of distress and sickness. She was evidently suffering from the same vertigo and nausea. But she was not prostrate. He could tell that she was alert and upright, and that in fact her distress was not quite as acute as his own.

Perhaps am immunity, Spock thought. The previous case of poisoning has given you immunity.

She was pleased at that. It was obvious in her thoughts, a kind of bright bubbling feeling.

Are the other women with you? Spock asked. Del Sarto is here.

A definite affirmative. They were ill, perhaps unconscious still. Their frames were smaller than the men and perhaps the poison had affected them more strongly. But they were there, and alive.

You are close, Spock thought. Perhaps on the other side of this wall.

He caught a sense of what she saw. A small room, quite dark, but not as dark as his. There was a light somewhere, possible electric. There was a partition, and on the other side of it were their possessions and equipment.

Can you get them? Spock asked quickly.

There was a negative, an almost certain negative, but then the sense that perhaps she could try, that perhaps the gaps in the partition were wide enough for her arm to reach through. But what could she bring back through such a small gap?

A phaser, Spock thought instantly.

There was a feeling of dry humour. I don’t have telekinesis.

Try, Spock urged her.

A mental shrug, a feeling of optimism.
'Sir! Sir!'  

Spock came out of it as if he had been slapped. Del Sarto was standing, shaking his arm. For a moment he stared at him, utterly bewildered, then he heard him say, ‘At the door!’  

He turned his head so quickly that the vertigo overcame him and he almost fell. The door was opening again and a light was flooding in through the widening crack. He pressed his hands against the wall, intent on not falling.  

‘Be silent,’ he told Del Sarto urgently.  

The door opened further and Spock heard that chittering sound again. The light that flashed in seemed to him to be electric powered and being held at about two feet above the ground. It was definitely not raw flame, and it was bright enough to dazzle him. He tried to get a better view of the being that held it, but he could make out nothing beyond a vague silhouette that reminded him of something frail and bird-like. The light flashed on the bowl of water on the floor and then over the lumps of what Spock had thought were food, and were revealed in the light to be something of a vaguely pinkish colour, shaped rather like bread rolls. The creature chittered again, then the light flashed up to pass over Spock’s face, and then Del Sarto’s.  

Spock stayed very still, wary of being seen as a threat. He did not know if the creature had a weapon. The creature took a few steps forwards, chittering. When Del Sarto moved minutely the thing started and retreated swiftly from the room, closing the door with a bang.  

Del Sarto whistled out breath between his lips.  

‘That was them,’ he murmured.  

‘Indeed,’ Spock replied. ‘A logical statement, but largely without substance. Did you form any impressions of our captors?’  

‘They’re small,’ Del Sarto said after a moment of silence. ‘If that flashlight was held at hand level, they’re small. It was about – two feet off the ground, I’d say, and the head didn’t come up above four or five feet.’  

‘Four point five, I would say,’ Spock murmured.  

‘I – well, it’s not very logical, but I thought they seemed avian, reptilian perhaps. As if they’re related to those dragon creatures. Seemed to be covered in fur or down.’  

Spock nodded. ‘I thought the same.’  

‘Those noises – I guess it was trying to communicate. But it’s scared of us. It’s small, though. Could be easy to take down.’  

‘We cannot assume that. It could be immensely strong, or possess dangerous appendages – claws or sharp teeth. It could be venomous. Imagine faced a panicked Earth dog, even a small one.’  

‘I guess you’re right,’ Del Sarto said in a rather disappointed tone.  

‘The primary point to my mind was that the flashlight appeared to be powered by electricity,’ Spock said. ‘That implies a relatively technologically advanced society. Such society might possess radio equipment, or at least equipment that could be combined with our transmitter to enable us to contact outside help.’
‘They did,’ Del Sarto said. ‘You’re right, Mr Spock, they did! But – we don’t even know if we have the transmitter any more...’

‘I have communicated with Miss Chapel,’ Spock told him. ‘She believes that all our equipment is in a room adjacent to the one in which she is being held. Ensign Grant and Ensign Malton are also with her,’ he added, in deference to Del Sarto’s human concerns for the others’ welfare.

‘Wow,’ Del Sarto murmured, as if in awe of Spock’s abilities.

‘If you will be silent I will attempt to communicate further,’ he said.

‘Oh – Oh, of course,’ he said quickly.

Spock nodded and sank himself into calm and quiet again, reaching out to Christine’s mind. She was there, but she was evidently occupied in doing something. She responded only vaguely and brusquely to his attempts to contact her. Instead of trying to speak mentally he simply allowed himself to watch her and feel her experiences. She was lying on the ground and her arm was pushed hard through a narrow gap, her survival suit off and her uniform sleeve pushed up almost to her armpit so that her arm was bare and as slim as possible. The healing gash across her collarbone ached and stung. She was moving her fingers back and forth across damp and dusty ground, trying to extend her reach, pushing harder and harder. There was a cluster of the phasers in her sights, lying on top of one of the rucksacks. There was no way she could reach the phasers but if she could jog the rucksack and make them slide to the ground...

Her fingertips touched... She pushed at the rucksack. It was tight with the objects inside and it rocked at her touch. Through her eyes Spock watched the phasers rock and wobble and then fall to the floor with a clatter that made her jump. But one of them was within reach of her fingers. She pressed her fingertips over it, edged it closer, and then, triumphantly, grasped it tightly in her fist.
Christine lay on the floor, holding her breath, praying that the clatter of the phasers falling had not been heard. Her arm was wedged through the gap between two planks of wood and she wasn’t sure yet that she could pull it out, especially at speed. Her hand was gripped tightly around the phaser, but because of her grip the muscles in her arm were just a little thicker than in their relaxed state. She felt like the monkeys she had heard of somewhere once, caught by putting their hands through the hole in a coconut to grasp at a pile of rice. With their fists clenched, they could not withdraw their hand. With her fist clenched, her arm was stuck.

She could not hear any sound from outside. For a moment she relaxed her fingers and her whole arm slackened, relieving the pressure from the wood on either side. Then with her fingertips touching the phaser but not gripping on it she tried to gently tease it back. It moved a little, scraping on the floor with a noise that made her heart beat faster. But she could pull the thickest part of her arm out a little. A few more attempts like that and she was able to grip the phaser again and withdraw it delicately between the bars of the stall or storage area or whatever that other section of their makeshift cell was supposed to be.

She sat up and stayed still for a moment, just holding the phaser. But there were other things there too. She could see her medical kit and tricorder there, tantalisingly close. Even if she could reach them she wouldn’t be able to draw the medical bag through the bars, but anyway, they were too far away for the length of her arm.

She could feel Spock somewhere in the back of her mind, thinking of solutions, suggestions, admonitions. She wished there were some way of shutting him out. It was a warm, comforting feeling having him there, but she needed to think and it didn’t help having a second voice in the back of her mind. She couldn’t help but wonder if this were something like schizophrenia might be for the sufferer. It would be fascinating if it were.

There was a sensation from Spock’s mind that, if verbalised, she thought would have come out as a humph. Despite all of his Vulcan logic he was offended by his presence being compared to a voice produced by severe mental illness.

She pressed her lips together, reassuring him rather automatically as she turned the rest of her mind to the problem at hand. She looked at the phaser and fiddled with the settings on the dial, trying to ignore that ever-present Vulcan voice of caution. She could set it to a very tight, very high beam. Spock was there projecting negative thoughts, thoughts of dire consequences, but she turned the beam on the lowest piece of wood and carefully drew it down through the wood, once, and then once again about two feet along. The wood slumped a little, free from the support of the rest of the bar, but did not topple. There was still no sound from outside. The noise of the phaser had apparently been overlooked. But now she could push aside the cut bar of wood and stretch through the larger gap for as much as she could reach – a rucksack, her tricorder, and the medical kit. With that she could establish why Ensigns Grant and Malton were still unconscious, and perhaps revive them.

It’s all right, she thought almost reflexively at Spock’s concern. It’s all right. No one heard.

We do not know that, came his thoughts into her mind.

How she wished she could shut him out. Every thought was there to be scrutinised by him. She remembered reading 1984. Thought police...

Again there was that feeling of offence. She tried to reassure him wordlessly. It wasn’t that she
thought he was policing her thoughts. She was so unused to this. Her thoughts were private and her own and his presence was deeply distracting. He could sense more of her thoughts than she could of him.

There was a feeling of reassurance from his side now, and softly the presence in her mind retreated. Still she felt that odd sliver of paranoia. Was he gone, or was he merely hidden from her, watching her through a one way mirror? But Spock was, above all, honourable. She could not imagine that he would spy on her.

All of this internal analysis was taking precious time. She needed to get what she could. She flattened the cut bar of wood and reached through, trying to drag the equipment across the floor as quietly as possible. She flipped open the tricorder and got out her medical scanner and passed it over the two unconscious women, wishing fervently that there were a mute button on it. It would be something to mention to the powers that be. In the kind of situations that came up for Starfleet officers, being able to scan someone silently could be immensely important.

She looked at the results scrolling onto the tricorder screen. A match flashed up. The tricorder had detected a similar chemical compound in her own system when she had been poisoned by the dragon creature that Spock had shot from the sky. A paralytic alkaloid toxin. Nothing life threatening but in the format here it was enough to knock out a human for a good while and also cause a mild paralysis throughout the body. She quickly calculated the dose of what should prove to be something of an antidote, and carefully injected each of the women.

Ensign Malton stirred first. She had always been the more robust of the pair. Then Grant turned her head and started to murmur, and then abruptly she vomited. Christine quickly turned her onto her side and concentrated on making sure her airway was clear as the woman regained more movement.

‘Shush,’ she said quickly. ‘Shush, we don’t want to be heard.’

Ensign Malton was looking about the room with wide eyes but Ensign Grant stayed huddled on her side, trying not to cough, her eyes watering.

‘Spock and Del Sarto are next door,’ Christine whispered softly. The acid scent of vomit was sharp in the air and she helped Karen to shuffle backwards, away from the pool on the floor. ‘I’ve got some of our gear. We’re shut in but I think we’ll be able to get out. It’s important to stay quiet, though, so they don’t come in and find out I’ve got our things.’

She could feel Spock there again, probing gently at the edge of her thoughts, and she let him be aware that it was all right, he could come back. He could tell through her mind that the women were awake and recovering, that Christine had got some of the possessions and should be able to recover them all.

Speed is of the essence, she felt in her mind. Although there was no real sound she heard the words in the rich baritone of his voice and it comforted her and made her shiver a little with pleasure.

Illogical, he thought.

Not at all, she reflected. She did not always seem to be able to speak to him as directly as he did to her, but she knew that he felt and understood her thoughts. He could see the plans in her mind – to cut more of that barrier, to get the rest of their things, to get the two women on their feet and then to break out of the rooms in which they were being held. But Spock’s thoughts felt something like a great and unfathomable storage area, a place that went back and back, deeper and deeper. There was so much there, so much going on in his mind simultaneously, that it bewildered her to try to
touch anything other than what he deliberately gave her. There were words she did not understand. A large amount of his thoughts were in Vulcans, and many did not even get as far as words. She was standing at the edge of a huge library and only a handful of books were accessible to her.

Flattering.

Not at all, she thought. You’re utterly incomprehensible.

But he found it flattering. Praise should not move Vulcans. It should be enough to do what was necessary to the best of one’s ability. But there was in Spock a desire for praise. He covered it from those not privy to his thoughts, but it was there, the four year old boy waiting for his mother’s smile, waiting for his father to acknowledge how hard he had tried.

Spock’s thoughts seemed to dim and blur, as if he were trying to hide them from her. She smiled and drew herself back to the room and the present situation. Ensign Malton was sitting up and brushing Grant’s hair back from her face, reaching out to the bowl of water on the floor near the door.

‘No!’ Christine hissed quickly, then explained more gently, ‘Spock’s afraid the food and water may be poisoned, or it simply may not be compatible with our systems. He doesn’t want us to touch it.’

Ensign Malton looked bewildered. ‘But – I thought Mr Spock was next door?’ she asked in a whisper, looking around.

Christine nodded at the wall. ‘Yes, he’s through there I think.’

‘Can you hear him?’

‘No, I – ’ Christine began, and then shook her head. It was too hard to explain. It felt wrong to explain that she was engaged in an intimate mind contact with the Vulcan. But Ensign Malton seemed to understand without explanation. She probably knew, or had made it her business to find out, about the Vulcan mental abilities. It struck Christine that she had probably spent hours in her quarters researching all she could about Vulcans once she had fallen under Spock’s peculiar spell. The ensign looked as if she had been slapped, and her face reddened. Christine felt sympathy for her. After all, she understood how it was to suffer an unrequited crush on the Vulcan. But in another place she was fiercely protective of the fact that Spock was hers, no one else’s.

In response to her emotion Spock’s own feelings suddenly fired until they felt like heat expanding in her mind. There was something beautifully primal about those instincts inside Spock’s mind and body, instincts which were buried and control but no less there, and detectable with the right stimulus.

She snapped down her mind against him. It was a learning process, this. When he had first come into her mind it had been hard to understand and hard to control anything about it. Now, after only a handful of minutes, she was able to gently but forcefully push him back. No doubt if he wanted to force her to feel his thoughts she would not be able to resist, but such force would be anathema to Vulcans.

‘Are you all right, Karen?’ she asked Ensign Grant, and she nodded.

‘Yes, I think so,’ she whispered. ‘I feel – dizzy, odd – but it’s getting better.’

‘Good,’ Christine murmured. She opened the pack that she had pulled through the hole and drew out a flask. ‘There’s still some water in here,’ she said. ‘Drink that and you might feel a bit better.'
Both of you have a drink,’ she said. ‘Do you feel able to eat?’

Ensign Grant shook her head vehemently, and then seemed to regret it as she pressed a hand to her temple, but Malton said, ‘I think I could have a bit. I feel like I haven’t eaten in days.’

‘Something like that,’ Christine replied, looking down at the tricorder. ‘This shows we’ve been out for over a day and a half.’

She pulled out a little of the ‘dragon jerky’ and handed it over to Malton, then took a strip herself. She didn’t feel much like eating, but she knew enough to take her own advice. It was sensible to take in calories and nutrition while she could.

Still chewing the dried meat she lifted the phaser again and cut another plank from the wooden divide between the two rooms. The gap she made was big enough to crawl through, and she shuffled through on her knees, intent on exploring the room a little. There was a door on the other side and she went to it quickly. It was very like the doors in the house they had used so long ago, with an arched top rather than a flat one, and constructed of some dense wood-like fibre. There was a handle a little lower than hip height, and she put her hand on it, moving it gently.

She felt a sudden spike of adrenaline, and stopped, confused, until she realised abruptly that it was Spock. Spock was still aware of her thoughts, and knew that she was trying the door. She would not characterise his emotion as panicked, but he was suddenly alert and not entirely approving.

She tried to ignore that strange double echo of feelings and continued to move the handle. She turned it just enough to find that the door felt loose, the bar of the handle mechanism being the only thing that seemed to hold it closed. She exhaled slowly, relief spreading through her body, and silently pulled the door properly shut again.

‘We can get out that way,’ she whispered to the two women when she came back to them. ‘Do you feel able to walk?’

Ensign Malton nodded quickly, and Grant said, ‘I – think so. I’m pretty sure.’

Christine looked at her critically. Her colour was still very pale, but pink was slowly returning to her cheeks. She looked tired and unwell, but she was probably right. If necessary she would be able to travel.

‘Okay,’ she murmured. She looked in her medical kit again, setting a dose of medicine calculated for Del Sarto, since he was probably also feeling the effects of the toxin. Spock seemed relatively well, at least as far as she could glean from his thoughts.

I am well, Spock voice sounded in her mind.

Impatiently she tried to push it away. She knew he would not approve of her next action and she didn’t want to give away enough to have him forbid her to do it.

What are you going to do? Spock asked her.

Stand back from the wall, she thought, touching the controls of the phaser. This time she wanted to destroy matter, not just cut a thin line. She couldn’t risk the sound of falling rubble.

She did not give him a lot of time to argue. As soon as she pressed the trigger she was aware of Spock moving away and making Del Sarto do the same. She vaporised an area of the wall big enough for a person to climb through and smiled as Spock clambered through the hole. He was looking stern, but she did not let that dampen her buoyed spirits.
‘It was very quiet. I don’t think they heard a thing,’ she said in a whisper as soon as he straightened up. Del Sarto was climbing through behind him and she injected him with the hype as soon as he was through.

‘I would have forbidden such an action had I known,’ Spock said. ‘The Prime Directive for one thing – ’

If you’d been human I wouldn’t have been able to consult at all, she thought, trying to make that thought strong enough for him to pick it up. She caught his flare of awareness, a kind of surprise at how quickly she was learning how to manipulate this contactless meld.

The aliens will know that we have substantially advanced technology, he thought. He understood, at least, her intention that if they were going to argue it was best to do it like this, non-verbally, in front of the ensigns.

They already know that, she thought. They know we’re like nothing they’ve seen before and they’d looked in our packs, I’m certain.

There was a sudden bloom of thought in Spock’s mind, an amorphous moment as he thought of Captain Kirk and Christine, and compared their characters and attitudes with a mixture of affection and irritation.

Well, I’m flattered if you think I’m like him, she thought irreverently. There was not real annoyance in his mind, just concern and a sense of deep, deep responsibility to both the humans under his command and the aliens of this world. He felt that he was at fault for letting them be captured, perhaps jeopardising their lives and perhaps an entire world’s future. It seemed like a terribly heavy and lonely burden to bear.

Her sadness was repelled by his mind like water droplets running from a duck’s back. He would not acknowledge it. It was the path he had chosen in life and he could not allow himself to experience negative emotion over it. She had the sense, though, that she was seeing a carapace that covered a whole lot more than he would admit to.

‘Look, we need to get out of here,’ she said aloud, still keeping her voice very low. She estimated that their long exchange, something that would have taken minutes if they had been discussing it entirely with words, had taken only a few seconds. The ensigns barely seemed aware that anything had gone on. ‘We can get into the other area and the door’s not locked,’ she said. ‘It’s still dark out there. We might be able to get a long way away.’

‘Yes,’ Spock said, looking pensively towards the door.

‘What is it?’ she asked quickly.

‘These aliens are possessed of electric lighting,’ he said, moving silently towards the barrier between this room and the next. ‘Not extremely sophisticated, but nonetheless they do seem to be relatively technologically advanced. Perhaps an era comparable to your Earth’s twentieth century, although it’s hard to tell exactly how advanced.’

‘You think they might have something we can use?’ she asked him.

‘Possible,’ Spock nodded. ‘It is very possible.’ He seemed to snap out of his reflective mood. ‘But you are quite correct, Miss Chapel. It is imperative that we get away as soon as possible.’ He turned to the ensigns. ‘Are you all able to travel, and carry the packs?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Del Sarto said instantly.
'Oh, yes,' Grant and Malton chimed in.

Spock’s brow furrowed a little as he looked at Ensign Grant, who was still very pale. ‘Del Sarto, perhaps we can spread a little of Ensign Grant’s pack contents into our own rucksacks.’

‘Oh, no!’ Ensign Grant protested instantly. ‘No, I can manage, honestly.’

Spock regarded her again, and then nodded. ‘Very well. We don’t have a lot of time. Move through into the other area and be ready to move out on my word. I’ll attempt to pick out the most logical route of escape when we’re through the door. I’ll expect you to follow quickly and in silence.’

There was a murmur of acknowledgement. Spock was already crouching and shuffling through the low gap in the plank partition. Christine almost protested as she saw him shouldering the pack with the heaviest load in it, but she knew there was little point. Del Sarto’s rucksack was also one of the heaviest. The lightest was left for Ensign Grant. Spock was far more capable of carrying a heavy burden than any of the others. But she had realised that his crutches were not here with the rest of their possessions. When Spock had passed them to her before going to investigate that body she had leant them against a tree, and they must have been left behind on the hillside when they had been captured. He was going to have to walk without help, and that was going to be painful and possibly damaging for his leg.
Spock stood by the door in the little storeroom, his pack heavy on his back, his survival suit properly fastened again, and the ensigns and Christine waiting behind him for his word. It was very dark outside. The clouds seemed to have covered the moon and he could not see a lot through the crack between the door and the frame, but undoubtedly he could see more than the humans would be able to. He concentrated hard on what he could see out there. Apparently there was a bare earth yard, possibly littered with a few items he could not make out, and then after about twenty yards the trees started. The house, if there were one, must be behind these sheds. He was sure there must be a dwelling place here. He could smell what could be the remnants of cooking and occasionally hear small sounds. He would expect the occupants to be sleeping if they were not nocturnal, but presumably some were awake to act as guard and keeper to the prisoners.

‘There appears to be little between us and the woods,’ Spock murmured, turning back to the others behind him. ‘A flat space of ground approximately twenty yards across. There may be some obstacles. You will follow my lead in all possible silence, and on my mark.’

He stood still for a little longer, his eye to the crack in the door, one hand held up, ready to drop. There was no sound from outside but the occasional gust of wind.

He dropped his hand, and said briskly, ‘Go.’

Together, with Spock in the lead, they ran across the open space. It felt cold after their confinement and a sprinkling of snow fell with each gust of wind. Every footfall and rustle and jolt of the packs seemed magnified, and just as they were gaining the tree line the clouds slipped from before the moon. The disc was larger than Earth’s moon and white light shone harshly across the ground.

Spock’s injured leg was stiff and painful as he tried to run, but he did his best to ignore the binding pain. Noticing his difficulty, Ensign Malton offered him her arm to lean on, but he shook his head curtly. Christine was close behind him and he preferred to accept her assistance, or perhaps that of Del Sarto, who was stronger and had no dubious interest in him. As they entered the tree line Christine moved forward to give him her arm, and Spock saw as if in slow motion Ensign Malton move in to block her, causing her to stumble and almost fall. Christine cried out reflexively, and as she went down and put out her hand to save herself a dead branch snapped like a rifle shot. Spock heard a noise of alarm rising from the buildings behind, an odd, high-pitched keening sound. Christine was righting herself and muttering apologies. Spock grabbed reflexively at Malton’s arm to pull her onward as she hesitated, perhaps a little more roughly than he should have. Behind him he heard the breathy whistle of darts flying through the air and a cry of alarm, but he pulled the woman onward.

After some time he stopped, pulling freezing air into his lungs. They were no longer being followed, but he was acutely aware that their group was no longer together. Del Sarto, Grant, and Christine had all fallen behind, and he had to assume that they had been hit by darts while he and Malton, who had been slightly in front, had been shielded by their bodies.

His fingers were still gripping around Ensign Malton’s arm, hard enough to bruise. She was gasping for breath herself, but he said in a harsh whisper, ‘Be still!’

He needed to be able to listen. He could not sense Christine’s mind. He could hear neither the other humans nor the natives. There was no sound of feet following through the trees. He took in a few steadying breaths, recognising the furious urge in himself to rant at Ensign Malton for her stupidity and carelessness and knowing that he must not. Now, more than ever, he must be
controlled.

After a moment he said in a low, level voice, ‘With your actions you may have caused the extermination of the rest of our party. You have almost certainly caused them to be recaptured. They may have been killed.’

*Killed*. That word made a hollowness expand inside him. He barely noticed Ensign Malton breaking down in tears. What if Christine were dead? They had gone far enough, he thought, that the tricorders wouldn’t be able to pick up their lifesigns, but surely as a Vulcan he would know? But they did not have a bond, not a full bond. His mind was tentatively connected to hers, but they had not taken the decision to cement a bond.

‘Be quiet,’ he said, losing control momentarily. His tone struck Malton into silence, although every now and then she made a muffled hiccupping sound.

He felt at his waist and retrieved his communicator. He would have to risk the noise. He opened it, and it chirruped. ‘Spock to Chapel,’ he said, then waited for a reply. After a moment he tried, ‘Spock to Grant. Spock to Del Sarto.’

There was no answer from any of the humans. Spock exhaled, carefully controlling himself.

‘I am so sorry,’ Malton whispered. Spock could not see her face clearly in the dim light in the forest, but her voice was shaking. ‘I didn’t mean – ’

‘Humans so rarely do *mean* those things which cause the most trouble,’ Spock said flatly.

‘Can you – can you – please – ’ she began, and he did not understand what she was aiming for until she moved closer and flung herself against him and hung on with her hands pressed against his back, murmuring, ‘I know you don’t mind. I know you don’t. I know you’re just as human as any of us under there. Please, Mr Spock. Please.’

Spock felt frozen, his arms motionless, slightly out from his sides as if he did not know whether to embrace her or push her away. Her emotions were battering at his shields. She looked up, and in the slight slant of moonlight that now fell through the trees he could see her eyes large and glistening, and wetness on her cheeks. She lifted her face very close to his and he realised belatedly that she was trying to kiss him.

Spock stepped back just as her lips touched his, stunned that she should think such a manoeuvre was appropriate in any way, especially after what had just occurred. He had watched her push Christine aside, deliberately if not consciously, so that she could render aid to him first, and that one clumsy motion had precipitated this whole disastrous outcome. At that moment of touch a tableau of her thoughts pushed its way into his mind. He saw Christine as Malton saw her; crisp, mannish even, too harsh, practical, and brusque to be a salve to Spock’s own practical and unemotional demeanour. Ensign Malton was sure, she *knew*, that she was the only perfect match for him. Her emotions and lust in relation to him seemed to surge and burn in his mind. Was this the chaotic inside of every eighteen year old human’s mind? He stumbled away, raising a hand uselessly against that which needed mental barriers to repel, then caught himself and shuttered down his thoughts against her.

‘Be still,’ he said to her as she made to move after him.

At the tone of his voice she froze, and he stepped backwards until his backpack pushed up against a tree. He stopped there, his mind attempting to process all that had happened. *Humans*. And she had possessed the temerity to assure him of his own humanity. How could she possibly think it correct to foist her unwanted affections on him in this situation? He could still feel that...
light, cold touch of her lips on his. He wanted to wipe it off and erase it from his memory. Somewhere in his mind he could imagine Christine advising him to be kind and understanding, but he had no desire for understanding. Ensign Malton might have caused Christine’s death. She might have caused theirs, his and Ensign Malton’s, too, since Christine still had the medical kit and the tent was in Del Sarto’s bag. Spock had the remains of the subspace transmitter, some rations and water, and not a lot else. Ensign Malton might perhaps be capable of surviving outside of shelter for some time, but as a Vulcan bred to desert heat Spock’s situation was far more precarious.

‘Ensign, we have very little choice if we are to emerge from this situation alive,’ Spock said finally, still keeping his voice low although he could hear no sounds of pursuit. ‘We must return for the others. The breach of the Prime Directive in our methods of rescue will be minimal compared to the consequences of leaving humans, living or dead, with all of their equipment, to be studied by this civilisation. To leave them may condemn them to becoming zoo specimens or victims of vivisection.’

‘Oh,’ she said in a small voice, making as if to step a little closer. Spock held up his hand. He did not want her pushing herself past his boundaries again. ‘Oh my God, I never imagined…’

‘Imagine what humans have done during their encounters with other species,’ Spock said rather tersely. ‘That may help you understand of what these beings, undoubtedly emotionally driven as they are, may be capable.’

‘Did you – did you see what they looked like at all, sir?’ she asked, her voice small and faint in the darkness.

Spock shook his head. ‘No,’ he said simply, and did not expand on that. He had been concentrating on running from them, not looking over his shoulder. He had formed a series of impressions from the rooms they had been locked in, the creatures’ sounds, their methods of attack, but he was still yet to look one of them in the eye, if they even had eyes in the conventional sense.

‘We must lose no time in returning to help the others,’ he said. ‘Fall in behind me, Ensign. Move quietly. Do not talk. And please restrain yourself from offering me assistance.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said. Spock could not perfectly interpret her tone of voice. He could not work out if she was simply subdued, or sulking.

He turned stiffly and began to walk back towards the place where they had been held captive, relying on his memory and sense of direction to know that he was going back towards the buildings. After a moment he heard Ensign Malton move after him, but he did not look around.

He sorely regretted the loss of his crutches. Every step sent searing pain through his ankle and up the length of his shin. He could suppress it, but he was very aware that pain was a necessary indicator and that he was probably damaging the leg further.

After a while he took his tricorder out and made a sweep of the area ahead, studying the readings intently. To his relief the device picked up three faint human life signs no more than two hundred yards ahead, and a number of alien ones too. It was difficult for the tricorder to successfully separate alien readings indicative of the intelligent inhabitants from other life readings around since not enough was known about the fauna of this planet yet, but he judged that there were no more than four of the aliens in the compound. It was, of course, almost impossible to tell if they were all intelligent beings or whether they might have other domestic animals with them of a similar size.

‘They are alive,’ he murmured, and he heard Malton exhale in relief. He pressed his lips together,
trying to think through and understand human reactions. The ensign had been fully aware of Spock’s relationship with Nurse Chapel – her jealousy had been evidence enough of that. She had been aware that Vulcans disliked personal contact and did not form and break romantic entanglements easily. She must have known that the chances of her being able to persuade Spock to abandon the nurse for the ensign’s dubious attractions were infinitesimally low, and yet she had still made an attempt to seduce him in the most unlikely of circumstances. Perhaps it was something to do with being human, perhaps with being female, perhaps with being of a young age. He did not care to think too deeply on it. Whatever her rationale, or lack of same, all her actions had done was to cause him to be deeply uncomfortable in her presence. Perhaps if he were human he would feel sorry for her, but he had no time for that. His pity would not help her in any way.

He turned to regard the ensign, making a decision on what to do. He did not entirely trust her to perform as he would want her to, but he was not sure how far his judgement of her had been altered by her attempt to kiss him. Before that, and before the incident of pushing Christine away, he would perhaps have trusted her to accompany him.

After a moment of consideration he said, ‘Silence is imperative now. I intend to find the inhabitants of this dwelling and stun them. Then we can recover our party. I also intend, while we are there, to make a search and discover if there is any technology on hand which will help us to contact outside help. Make sure your phaser is set to stun. I will take the lead. Do not – I repeat, do not – fire unless I order it.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she murmured.

Spock held her eyes until she suddenly flushed and looked away. He seemed to see sincerity there. He could only hope that she would not fail him. He did not think that her infatuation with him would extend to deliberately endangering the rescue effort.

‘Move out,’ he said, and she began to follow him again through the trees.

Spock’s gaze flicked between the tricorder and the ground ahead. The place was alternately lit up and thrown into darkness again as clouds flitted before the moon, and the shadows of the trees and their canopies turned even the moonlit ground into an uncertain shimmer of light and dark. In some places small patches of snow still lay in the lee of tree trunks, and he was wary of ice and of sticks that might crack and give them away.

After a few minutes the trees began to thin out and he saw the assembly of buildings ahead. For the first time he had a proper opportunity to look at them. The place looked something like a small farm, consisting of a large building similar to the house they had used some weeks ago and a handful of other, smaller, buildings, one of which was the one in which they had been held captive. The smaller buildings were all in darkness, but the larger one showed a patch of light shimmering through the imperfect glass-substance of a window. He held the tricorder out and took a scan. The human lifesigns were clustered in one place, apparently back in the sheds where they had been incarcerated before. The alien lifesigns were together in the house, apart from one very near the humans.

Spock looked at Malton, showing her the tricorder screen. He touched a finger to his lips, then beckoned her on. As they got out of the tree line he could see a shape moving up and down outside the shed where the humans were imprisoned. Apparently the alien was pacing, perhaps for warmth.

He held his phaser at the ready, and moved forward slowly, catlike and silent despite his injured leg. He wanted to see what this alien looked like, conscious and animated, but he had to stun it as soon as possible. He could not let scientific curiosity jeopardise their situation for a second time.
He raised his phaser, aimed, and fired. Instantly and soundlessly the alien crumpled. Spock looked about swiftly then ran across to the building. He knelt by the creature. It was an odd, bird-like thing, wearing no clothes and covered in a light feather-like fur that shimmered under the flashes of moonlight. He was aware that it could be dangerous for it to lie outside unconscious in this cold, so he turned his attention to the door in front of him. It was barred with a kind of bolt, and he slid it open, and then opened the door. The room behind was the one where Christine and the other women had been incarcerated, but now it was empty but for the humans’ backpacks, and something large and heavy that had been manoeuvred over the hole that Christine had cut in the wall with her phaser.

Spock removed the backpacks and then lifted the alien and carried it inside. It was very light, and the arm-like limbs seemed to be attached residually to the body by a thin membrane, much atrophied but still a lot like the wings of the dragon-like creatures which had attacked them. He laid it down and scanned it. The results were not conclusive, but indicated the creature would remain unconscious for some time yet. He went out and bolted the door, then turned his attention to the other door, which led into the room where he and Del Sarto had been. Indications were that this was where the humans lay.

When he opened the door he saw they were there, unconscious again, again under the influence of the paralytic drug. He retrieved Christine’s medical kit, then knelt down and carefully administered the same antidote that Christine had used earlier. He gave it to Christine first, and by the time he had injected the other two she was stirring.

She opened her eyes and looked into his, and smiled weakly.

‘Again,’ she murmured.

‘Again,’ Spock nodded. He made no verbal or physical sign of his relief, but his eyes twinkled into hers. ‘Please remain quiet. I intend to stun the other inhabitants, but as yet they are still conscious. How do you feel?’

‘Groggy,’ she said, and Spock did not question the odd phrase. The meaning was obvious.

‘Stay still,’ he said, but she was turning to look at the other two. Del Sarto was stirring, but Ensign Grant was motionless.

‘I’m worried about her,’ she murmured.

Spock turned the tricorder on her. Her bio-readings were very low.

‘She didn’t react well the first time,’ Christine said.

Spock put the tricorder in her hands and put the medical bag beside her. ‘Monitor her,’ he said succinctly. ‘I must go and see to the aliens.’

He went outside without sparing too much time to thinking of Christine. Ensign Malton was waiting out there and he said in a low voice, ‘Ensign, go and stay with the others. They are recovering from being drugged and may need assistance. Obey Miss Chapel’s orders,’ he added firmly.

‘Yes, sir,’ she said, barely looking at him, and slipped inside the room.

Spock got himself another tricorder from one of the captured rucksacks, and turned it on. He would need it to locate the remaining aliens. He knew that if he were to follow the Prime Directive to the strictest letter they should simply make good their escape now, but he had already stunned
one of them, and this might be their only opportunity of contacting outside help.
The farm, if that was what this place was, was still quiet. The tricorder still registered aliens in the house, but none of them seem to have noticed or reacted to what had gone on outside. Spock could see their lifesigns clearly on the screen, showing what appeared to be three of the creatures on the ground floor, close to each other. Now he was closer to the house he could tell that in one of the rooms upstairs there were other signals of smaller creatures. He pressed his lips together at that, the readings giving him pause. Apart from their size the readings were very similar to the other creatures. Might these be children? He did not want to risk hurting young with a phaser stun, nor did he want to terrify them by exposing them to alien creatures, or incapacitate their parents and leave them vulnerable.

He walked slowly towards the main building. It looked like a domestic building, much like the one they had taken over weeks ago, but bigger. It was a reassuring sight. He did not believe that he was going to be encountering well armed and well trained individuals. On the other hand, amateurs could be so much more unpredictable.

He moved cautiously to one of the lit windows. The tricorder showed the larger life forms concentrated in that area. He saw them through the imperfect material of the window, appearing to be clustered about a table. They were strange, bird-like things, reminding him of large versions of those creatures they had encountered on Pyris VII, who had appeared first in the humanoid shapes of Korob and Sylvia. He could hear their chittering talk through the window. They sounded agitated, but they used no gestures as humans might while talking animatedly.

He turned his attention to the tricorder again, changing the scan criteria to look for electric impulses and radiation. There was a significant amount of activity in another room, away from the clustered aliens. Perhaps it would be possible to do this without stunning any of them...

He moved away from the window and opened his communicator, hoping that Christine would be able to respond.

‘Spock to Chapel,’ he murmured.

She replied instantly. ‘Chapel here.’

Spock was gratified that her voice sounded stronger. ‘Are you able to travel yet?’ he asked.

There was a brief moment of hesitation. ‘I don’t know about Ensign Grant,’ she said. ‘She’s still very weak. Del Sarto is fine, and Ensign Malton, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Spock said, covering over the negative thoughts that the ensign’s name conjured in his mind. ‘Christine, if you are able to travel I want you all to leave this compound and move a reasonable distance away. Put up the tent if necessary to shelter Ensign Grant, if you can find a secluded location.’

‘But what about you?’ she asked quickly.

‘I am going to attempt to access what may be a communications device,’ Spock told her. ‘I dare not stun the inhabitants. I believe there are infants in the house. I will rendezvous with you when I have completed my task.’

The silence stretched out again. Spock could tell that Christine did not approve of this plan, but he did not need her approval. He needed her compliance.
‘Miss Chapel,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she responded quickly. ‘Yes, I think Ensign Grant can travel with help. We can carry her if need be. We’ll move toward the north, back toward a less populated area.’

‘Very well,’ Spock said, relieved that she was not arguing. ‘I will contact you when I am done here. Spock out.’

He closed the communicator, allowing himself to feel a fleeting sense of relief. Then he moved around the house again, taking care to be as silent as possible. There was a door making a dark shape in the wall. He checked the area for life signs then tried the handle. The thing was locked. It took a quick focused shot with the phaser to release the lock, and then he moved inside.

The place was dark and smelt of damp. It was some kind of hall area, it seemed, and appeared rather neglected. Spock used the tricorder screen as a makeshift flashlight and saw that the floor was scattered with objects as if they had been dumped when the family came in. It reminded him somewhat of a human home.

The radiation readings were off to the right, apparently radio waves. Spock trailed his fingers along the wall until he found the recess of another door, and went through. He flashed the tricorder light around the room, and exhaled in relief. There was what looked entirely like a communications set up. Evidently it ran on electricity and was able to broadcast. There was a low chair in front of the equipment but Spock moved it aside. It was too low to sit on comfortably. Instead he bent over the equipment and began to work swiftly and skilfully on deciphering the settings and judging the best way to connect it to his own communications equipment.

One ear was always poised in case of interruption, but he heard nothing. He worked for some minutes in the meek light of the tricorder, carefully pulling cables from the alien equipment and meshing it with the superior Starfleet technology. His equipment had much greater range, but this alien communicator had the power and extra components that were needed.

Finally satisfied, he opened his communicator and murmured, ‘Spock to Enterprise. Spock to Enterprise.’

There was a crackle of static, and he waited, poised to rip his equipment from the alien device and run if he were disturbed. And then, finally, the faint reply came, ‘This is the USS Constitution. Is that Commander Spock of the Enterprise?’

‘Yes, Constitution,’ Spock said immediately. ‘That is correct.’

‘Commander, you are listed on the record as missing, presumed dead.’

‘Obviously I am alive,’ Spock replied dryly. ‘To whom am I speaking?’

‘This is Lieutenant Jeffrey Özdemir, Communications Officer.’

‘Request to speak to your captain,’ Spock said briskly. ‘This is urgent.’

It would have been so much easier if he had been able to contact the Enterprise, but at least this was a Starfleet ship, and the fact that he had been able to contact any ship was so fortuitous that he was not going to quibble which one it was.

After a moment another male voice said, ‘This is the captain. Commander Spock, you’re alive!’

‘Quite obviously,’ Spock said, trying not to give way to irritation at the human ability for stating and repeated the blindingly blatant. He recognised the man’s voice. He had met him a year ago at
a conference of captains and department heads and had spoken to him for some time. ‘Captain Shin, my party and I are stranded on an unknown planet. It is impossible to be sure of our exact location.’

‘Instruments show your signal is coming from Salnar V,’ the voice said immediately, and Spock’s eyebrow shot up. He had heard of the planet in passing as one of the many as yet unsurveyed planets on the Fleet’s books. Now at last he had a proper idea of where he was.

‘Captain, this planet is inhabited,’ Spock said swiftly. ‘I repeat, this planet is inhabited. I am using alien technology to contact you. Four others of my party survive and we are in immediate danger. The risk to the Prime Directive is severe. We have already been sighted and captured by the aliens and have effected an escape. I cannot stay at this location.’

‘Commander we are approximately two hours away at Warp 7,’ the captain said. ‘Do you have communications ability away from the alien technology?’

‘Our handheld communicators are functioning,’ Spock said.

‘Then we will rendezvous in two hours, seventeen minutes. Be prepared for our signal. Shin out.’

Spock closed his communicator and unwired the subspace transmitter in a few swift movements. It was paramount now that he get out of the house unobserved. He packed the equipment back in his rucksack and thrust his arms through the straps, then stood by the door, listening. He could hear activity in the house, footsteps that were light and clicking on the ground. The chittering noise of their talk was getting closer.

Spock stood just behind the door of the room he was in, phaser ready, bracing himself for conflict. But none came. The footsteps came past, and moved on. The door to outside banged open and banged closed again. Spock breathed very slowly, and listened. Had he been human he would have held his breath, but there was no logic in starving himself of oxygen for a negligible reduction in sound. He could hear the creatures outside now, their scratching and high pitched voices becoming louder as if in consternation. Perhaps they had discovered their stunned colleague and the prisoners gone again.

Spock had to decide whether to leave now or wait in the house until the creatures were calm again. There was the danger that on their return they would notice the damaged door lock, which they evidently had not seen on the way out. Conversely, if he left now, there was a danger he would be seen by those outside.

He decided that he had to risk it. He would have a far greater chance in the open than trapped in here. It seemed that windows were not made to open in this place so he could only leave through the door through which he entered.

He moved to the doorway and pushed it open. The hallway was lit with light that was emanating from a panel on the ceiling, and he blinked at the unexpected brightness. The tricorder bleeped softly, and he looked down at the reading on the screen, then up in a swift movement, raising his phaser to bear on the creature standing there at the end of the hall.

His finger was on the trigger, but he did not fire. This alien was only two feet tall and despite the vast differences between its physiology and his own it was still obvious that this was a child. It was somehow softer, more delicate, less assured than those other creatures that he had seen.

Spock held his hand steady, staring for a moment at what he thought were the creature’s eyes. Then he moved backwards very slowly, and opened the door behind him. As he slipped out into the night air the creature inside suddenly set up a keening wail, and Spock’s breath caught in his
lungs. He slipped around the corner of the house as the adult aliens came loping back. As soon as they had entered the house, Spock ran.

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His leg was tight and aching and his lungs seared from sucking in cold air, but he did not stop moving through the forest, getting further and further away from the farm behind him and, he trusted, closer to the rest of his group. Every now and then he spared a glance at the tricorder, but there was no sign of pursuit. Perhaps after the second break-out the aliens had decided that this was a situation beyond them. He was uncertain, however, if they might call in help, and he was not sure at what technological level backup might be. He could not rule out some kind of aerial search with infrared capabilities. Everything depended on the Constitution arriving on time.

He came across the other humans finally, cramped into a low place among the trees, the tent up with its fabric brushing against the lower branches. He could see the outline of one of them against the fabric, and hear their low voices. So as not to startle them he opened his communicator before he approached and called, ‘Spock to Miss Chapel.’

‘Del Sarto, sir,’ came the instant response in a tense tone. Spock could hear his voice on the communicator as a split-second echo to the actual voice from the tent. ‘Nurse Chapel is occupied.’

‘I am directly outside the tent,’ Spock said quickly. ‘Coming in now.’

He snapped the communicator shut and limped swiftly to the tent, his leg really hurting now but the pain instantly suppressed. Once he opened the zip he saw why Christine was so occupied. She was kneeling over Ensign Grant, who was apparently unconscious, swaddled in a sleeping bag, her face so pale it looked as if it were reflecting the colour of snow.

‘Miss Chapel,’ he said in a low voice.

She looked up very briefly.

‘She’s got an unusual susceptibility to the toxin,’ she said crisply, flicking her eyes back to the tricorder she held. ‘She made it walking for a few yards but she fell unconscious again and we had to carry her the rest of the way.’

‘I was able to contact the USS Constitution,’ Spock said in a level voice. ‘They will be here in two hours.’

The effect on those in the tent was electric. Although Christine did not turn her attention from Ensign Grant and the lines of her body were lost in her survival suit, Spock could feel her joy. Del Sarto actually whooped, and Ensign Malton let out a kind of choking gasp that Spock assumed must be indicative of a deeply emotional form of pleasure. He hoped that she would not begin to cry.

‘Does she have two hours?’ Spock asked, kneeling down beside the nurse. He was unable to suppress a small grimace and gasp as pain shot through his leg, and she cast him a concerned look.

‘I hope so,’ she said. Her mouth was set in a tight line. ‘Pulse and respiration are both very low, and I don’t have the equipment for life support.’

‘We have mouth to mouth resuscitation if necessary,’ Spock reminded her.

She nodded tersely, her eyes back on the ensign. ‘You’re in pain,’ she said.

‘Irrelevant at this time,’ Spock said briefly. ‘The ensign’s condition is paramount.’
‘No arguments from me there, mister,’ she replied grimly. She looked through her medical kit and selected a drug, which she hissed into Grant’s shoulder. There was no response from the ensign. She was very definitely unconscious, not asleep.

‘If I can be of any assistance,’ Spock began.

Christine shook her head. ‘Not at the moment,’ she said. ‘If it comes to a case of having to give mouth to mouth we might all need to take shifts, but she doesn’t need anything at the moment but my care.’

‘Then she is in expert hands,’ Spock said.

She looked at him and smiled, and he favoured her with a very slight upturn of his lips. From behind he could sense Ensign Malton’s distress, a distress at the sickness of her friend but one which was mixed with a certain amount of jealousy. It made Spock even more uneasy since her clumsy attempt to kiss him. He wondered how he would broach the subject of that moment with Christine, or if he should even attempt to. Would it perhaps only create more trouble? But they already shared a nascent mind link and it was hard to keep secrets under such conditions.

This was why a romantic relationship had always seemed like an incredibly bad idea to him. He was sitting on a planet where they had been attacked by animals and taken captive by the inhabitants, one of their party was seriously ill, and they were awaiting rescue from a Starfleet ship. Relationship concerns should be the last thing on his mind. When at last they were safe and he had the opportunity to meditate, he would have to reorder his thinking processes so as to properly separate this relationship from his duty. Christine would no doubt find this unromantic and perhaps disappointing, but it would have to be done.

He pushed those thoughts ruthlessly aside and opened his tricorder to scan the surroundings. Just because help was en route that did not mean that the creatures and weather of this planet would stop assailing them. The indications were that another heavy fall of snow was expected, but at least there were no large creatures in the immediate vicinity.

Spock pulled the subspace transmitter out of his pack and began to rewire the device. He had altered it considerably in order to make it mesh with the alien communications device, and now it must be readjusted to work with the tricorder. He focussed himself wholly on his task, using it as a kind of meditation to block out the varying human emotions around him in the small space. The tent was so cramped that everyone was touching everyone else, and if conditions had been amenable he would have gone outside.

Once the device was rewired and attached to the tricorder he did a deeper scan of the area, and saw what made his lips press together hard. There were creatures out there. By the readings they were probably the sentient aliens, and they were moving through the forest in their direction. He doubted they had any technology such as the tricorder to detect their quarry, but there were plenty of other methods of finding people.

‘What is it?’ Christine asked quietly, picking up on his stillness.

He looked at her, wondering if she had been connected to his thoughts in a superficial way.

‘There are beings moving one point three nine miles from our position,’ he said in a low voice. ‘I read six in all.’

‘Coming this way?’ she asked him apprehensively.

Spock studied the readings again. ‘They show slow and rather varied movement, but they are
gradually moving closer to our position.’

‘I can’t move Ensign Grant,’ she told him very firmly, even though he had not voiced his thoughts about moving on. ‘She’s extremely weak. Any extra pressure could kill her.’

Spock kept his eyes on the tricorder, watching the readings as they moved so slowly on the screen. His thoughts moved back to the shuttle journey so many weeks ago. He had never been entirely sanguine about the idea of taking six barely trained recruits on a shuttle. He had never been sanguine with the idea of admitting them to Starfleet at all. It seemed a peculiar form of madness to take humans who were so young and had already proved themselves to be volatile or otherwise unsuitable for Starfleet and to allow them to bypass every slow and measured training method and push them straight into the service. It would not have happened on Vulcan. They would have been instructed in how to temper their passions and heal their insecurities, and they would have then entered the same stream of education as everyone else.

He sighed internally at that, remembering how he had eschewed the Vulcan way of education and chosen Starfleet Academy. That had probably seemed as recklessly insane to his father and his tutors as the Starfleet Advanced Programme did to him. But still, he had entered a proper, structured course of education, even if it had not been on Vulcan. These children had been taken straight to the heart of Starfleet operations, to a working starship, and let loose.

It had not been their fault. It had not been their decision to bypass normal procedure, and besides, it had not been their fault that the shuttle had been pushed off course and damaged by an ion storm. Even with a crew seasoned by years of experience he could not see anything unfolding in a different way from what had occurred. It had been his responsibility as commander to keep his charges safe, and that had not happened.

He was startled by a touch on his gloved hand. He looked up to see Christine looking at him and smiling.

_You did everything you could_, he heard her inside his thoughts.

He let those words sink deep into his mind. There was no logic in self-reictimination. When he was back on the _Enterprise_ he could review the entire mission and consider how he might acquit himself better in future, but guilt was of no use at the present moment.

‘How close are the aliens?’ she asked him out loud.

Spock looked down at the tricorder again. ‘Still over a mile away,’ he said. The readings were varied – they had obviously separated in their search.

‘What will we do if they get to us before the _Constitution_?’ she asked.

Spock met her eyes, struck by how blue they looked in the light reflected from the tent walls.

‘Whatever we can to protect our safety and preserve this culture’s innocence,’ he said gravely. ‘At this point, avoiding capture is the most important tactic. Our bodies and technology in their hands would have a significant effect on their culture.’

‘And if we need to kill them to achieve that?’

Spock closed his eyes momentarily. He disliked that idea intensely. He would almost go as far as to say he hated it.

‘If we must kill them in order to prevent our alien equipment from falling in to their hands, then we shall do so,’ he said flatly. ‘I would hope, however, to be able to use no more than phaser
stun.’
Chapter 20

The waiting game was almost unbearable for the humans in the tent. Spock could see the tension on their faces. That momentary burst of joy at the idea of rescue had faded away now, and they were afraid that everything would fall apart at the last moment. In contrast to their doubts, Spock had very little expectation that they would not be rescued. With their tricorders and phasers he was sure that their technology was far superior to that of the planet’s inhabitants. His own worst case scenario involved killing a small number of the aliens, a prospect that was almost as unpleasant to him as the idea of their own deaths was to the humans.

The main body of his concern was reserved for Ensign Grant. Illogical as it may be to place import on the time frame of her survival, he did not want to lose yet another member of this young team when they were so close to rescue. Three of the young ensigns were quite enough to lose.

‘How is she, Nurse?’ he asked quietly.

‘Stable,’ Christine murmured, her eyes flicking between the tricorder and the ensign’s face. Her fingers lightly circled the ensign’s wrist. There was no real need to take her pulse manually, but she was doing just that, and Spock found the action curiously endearing. In McCoy, he was sure he would have found it mildly irritating.

‘Do you expect her to survive?’ Spock asked, and felt the ensigns stiffen in anticipation of the nurse’s response.

‘How much longer will it be?’

Spock blinked, performing a split second calculation of the time that had passed since he had contacted the Constitution, left the farm, trekked back through the forest, found the tent, and then sat here with the others.

‘Approximately forty-five minutes,’ he said. ‘I cannot be more accurate, since Captain Shin was not completely precise, and I have found that human endeavours can usually only be estimated to the nearest five minutes.’

‘Just human endeavours?’ she murmured.

Spock chose not to answer.

‘How’s that leg?’ she asked him, although she did not move the tricorder from its constant monitoring of Ensign Grant’s life signs.

‘Acceptable,’ Spock said, although now he was sitting still the muscles in his calf were tightening up and the pain was quite severe.

She looked up and met his eyes. Spock had seen that look many times before in sick bay, before they shared the closeness that they did now. She did not believe him.

‘It is acceptable,’ he said again. ‘It will be acceptable until we reach proper medical facilities.’

At that she laughed, perplexing him completely.

‘Mr Spock, are you saying my medical treatment is not up to scratch?’ she asked with humour dancing in her eyes.
Spock was startled. ‘Not at all – ’ he began to protest.

‘I’m joking,’ she assured him. ‘Besides, a field medic with a standard kit is never going to approach the facilities of a full starship sick bay.’

Finally she turned the tricorder on his leg and began to scan.

‘Your muscles are very tight. Is it cramping?’

‘A little,’ Spock nodded. If he were totally honest he would say that the leg was so painful he was not sure how easily he would be able to walk, but it was a situation that he accepted and would use discipline to overcome.

She shuffled a little so that she was more facing him, then set the tricorder up again to monitor Ensign Grant.

‘Let me rub it and ease some of the tension out,’ she told him. ‘I can give you a shot for the pain and a muscle relaxant, but massage is usually indicated too.’

Spock looked at the unconscious ensign, but did not spare a glance for the others.

‘Very well,’ he said after a moment’s thought. It was logical for the leg to be usable, should he be required to move quickly. He managed in the small space to manoeuvre his leg so that it was lying across her lap, and she carefully removed his boot, trying not to pain him in the process. She gave him a hypo shot and then began to rub at the tight muscles of his calf.

Ensign Malton stood up and moved towards the tent door. Her hood was down and her survival suit half unzipped, but she didn’t seem to be thinking of the cold.

‘Ensign, where are you going?’ Spock asked her instantly.

‘Outside,’ she said after a moment’s hesitation, not looking at him. ‘It’s too crowded in here.’

‘Sit down, Ensign,’ Spock said gently. ‘It is not safe outside of the tent.’

She opened the zip and ducked outside. A blast of cold air whipped into the tent, and she closed the zip behind her.

Spock stiffened, ready to stand, but Christine clenched her hands on his leg unobtrusively to stop him.

‘Ensign Del Sarto,’ she said quickly, ‘Will you go get her back?’

Spock’s eyebrow shot up. ‘Miss Chapel, I am – ’

Her hands clenched on his leg again and he felt the strong imperative, No, let him go. He resisted for a moment, and then nodded.

‘Take a phaser and communicator; do not follow her too far from the tent,’ he said sharply.

Del Sarto exchanged a worried glance with the nurse, and then left.

‘She needs a human,’ Christine said quietly. ‘A human and a peer.’

‘It is dangerous out there,’ Spock countered in a low, very controlled voice.

‘Yes, I know,’ she said. ‘And right now you can barely walk.’
She continued to knead the muscle of his calf and Spock focussed on relaxing that part of his leg. The pain and tightness stretched right up into his thigh and hip and down into his foot.

‘So, what gives?’ she asked after a long moment of silence.

‘What gives?’ Spock asked in perplexity.

‘With Ensign Malton,’ Chistine clarified. ‘Why did she storm out as soon as I started rubbing your leg?’

Spock sighed. ‘In human terms, you would say she has a crush on me, I believe,’ he admitted.

‘Yes, that’s been obvious for days,’ Christine said slightly impatiently, ‘since the mission started in fact. I think they all did, all the ones of that orientation at least, off and on. But what’s made it come to a head?’

Spock did not look at her. Instead he watched her hands as they moved on the pale skin of his leg. ‘She attempted to kiss me,’ he said. ‘Needless to say, I did not welcome the advance.’

He was expecting consternation, but if anything as he finally looked up to meet her eyes he saw that Christine looked amused. ‘Well, I have to admire her gumption,’ she said. ‘When did this happen?’

‘After we had escaped from the farm the first time, after she managed to trip you up and she and I escaped without you.’

‘Well, Spock. She’s very young,’ Christine said after a moment’s reflection. ‘And after all, I don’t blame her. You are quite kissable.’

Spock looked at her sharply, but not entirely censoriously. ‘Christine, she is in danger,’ he said after a moment. ‘There are aliens out there, both sentient and non-sentient, and the weather is increasingly bad. I do not want to lose another member of this party.’

_Not so close to rescue, he wanted to say. Not so close._ He had lost half of these young humans. He could not lose another one so close to rescue, and over such a ridiculous issue.

Christine glanced at him, then opened her communicator. ‘Chapel to Del Sarto,’ she said.

After a moment the reply came, half muffled by wind and with a curious sound in the background. ‘Del Sarto. I’ve found her. She’s okay.’

‘Get her back to the tent as soon as possible,’ Chapel told him. ‘It’s highly dangerous out there.’

‘Aye, sir,’ Del Sarto replied.

Chapel cut the communication.

‘What was that noise?’ Spock asked curiously.

‘She was crying,’ Christine told him with a weak smile. ‘Sobbing, I’d say. This whole thing – it’s been a huge experience for all of these ensigns. I think she’s reached breaking point. Don’t flatter yourself, Spock,’ she said rather sardonically. ‘I think you were the straw that broke the camel’s back, that’s all.’

‘I would not feel flattered to provoke such a reaction,’ Spock said honestly.
He looked down at his tricorder again. He had been neglecting to scan for the aliens for the last two point seven three minutes. They had moved closer – considerably closer.

He flipped open his communicator.

‘Del Sarto, how close are you?’

‘About two hundred yards, sir,’ came the reply.

‘Make haste,’ Spock said briefly. ‘We may have unwelcome company soon.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Del Sarto said. The alarm was clear in his voice.

Spock snapped the communicator shut.

‘Are they that close?’ Christine asked anxiously.

Spock nodded. ‘They are close enough for concern,’ he said.

‘How long until the Constitution gets here?’ she asked.

He did a quick inward calculation. ‘Approximately half an hour.’

‘Will it be soon enough?’

‘I do not know,’ Spock replied.

His eyes were intent on the tricorder screen. Christine was still rubbing his leg, but she was monitoring her own tricorder, and the lifesigns of Ensign Grant.

‘She’ll need help soon,’ she said quietly.

She gave his leg a stroke, then said, ‘I hope that’s a bit better. You should put your boot on.’

Spock glanced briefly at the rather distorted line of his leg. It was quite obvious that it had not healed in line. Then he nodded and pulled on his sock and boot. He needed to be ready to run if necessary. He moved the foot experimentally and found it did feel easier.

‘We should be ready to move,’ he said.

Christine glanced down at Ensign Grant.

‘I can carry her,’ Spock said. ‘Will she survive a fireman’s lift?’

‘Better than she’ll survive another dose of that toxin,’ Chapel said grimly. ‘Do we need to strike the tent?’

Spock considered briefly. ‘Our first priority must be escape,’ he said. ‘But it would be wise, in the event that the Constitution does not – ’

He did not finish his sentence. The look in Christine’s eyes told him that she understood.

‘I can carry the ensign in the sleeping bag,’ Spock said. ‘Keep monitoring her and also the readings on my tricorder. I shall strike the tent.’

He went outside and began to loosen the guy lines and deflate the struts that held it upright. Inside Christine was still crouching by Ensign Grant, to keep her in shelter for as long possible. As the
tent came down Del Sarto and Malton emerged from the darkness, he with his arm about her shoulders. Spock glanced at them briefly. He wanted to say something terse to Ensign Malton but some intuition, perhaps a sense of what Christine would tell him to do, made him keep silent on that front.

‘We are moving out,’ he said as he stuffed the tent into one of the bags. ‘Take your packs and be prepared to run if necessary.’

The wind was whipping snow against his face. Somewhere beyond the canopy of the trees he thought the sun must be nearing the horizon. It was becoming lighter and the trees made dark silhouettes against the sky.

‘What about Karen, sir?’ Del Sarto asked anxiously.

‘I shall carry her,’ Spock said flatly. ‘No, Ensign,’ he said as Del Sarto opened his mouth to protest. ‘I am considerably stronger than you.’

‘Are they close?’ he asked.

Ensign Malton barely seemed to be listening, lost in some kind of mood. Spock could not interpret whether it was sullenness or honest grief.

‘They are close enough,’ Spock said.

He looked around at Christine, who was still holding both tricorders and monitoring Ensign Grant intently, ignoring the cold and the wind and the flecks of snow. He bent and gently removed his tricorder from her hands, and uncoupled it from the subspace transmitter.

‘Don’t you need – ’ she began.

He shook his head. ‘They are close enough now that we don’t need the extra power,’ he said.

She did not reply. After a moment she said, ‘Well, if we’re all packed then she’s ready to be lifted.’

Spock nodded. He packed the subspace transmitter then lifted the ensign in her sleeping bag. Her weight felt very slight to him. They had all lost weight over the last weeks, but even at full weight she would have been nothing to lift for a Vulcan.

‘We will move north,’ he said, and began to walk through the trees.

He could feel the disappointment and fear of the humans like a veil around him. Disappointing to be going north after so long making their way south, terrifying to think that somewhere in the half light behind them were more of the aliens intent on their capture. But the Constitution was coming. He had to have faith in that. There were still approximately twenty minutes before the ship would arrive, but she should arrive. They just needed to evade capture for that long.

Spock shifted the ensign’s weight a little across his shoulder. It was a dead weight. He could feel the slight shudder of her heartbeat but she made no voluntary movements and he sensed no conscious brain activity. He was grasping the tricorder in his free hand and kept angling the screen upwards to look at the readings. The aliens were closer still, closer to each other and closer to them. He had to believe that they were using some kind of sensor device to be able to aim for them so well. He was not certain that they would be able to evade them for long enough for the Constitution to arrive.

‘Keep up,’ he said, turning back for a moment to the humans.
They picked up their pace as he did. He did not want this to become a panicked run, but it might be that they would have to run.

‘Phasers ready and on stun,’ he said, glancing at the screen again. The aliens certainly were moving swiftly. They, perhaps, were not as hampered by this freezing weather. He did not look back again but he could hear the slight sounds of phasers being checked or adjusted.

‘How close?’ Christine said, coming alongside him and trying to see the tricorder screen.

‘Very,’ Spock said succinctly. The actual numbers would make no difference.

‘How long?’ she asked. Her breath was catching as she tried to talk.

‘Seventeen minutes,’ he said. ‘Ensign Grant?’

He did not look, but he heard the sounds of Christine’s medical tricorder. ‘Not good. Very weak.’

Spock glanced down at his own screen again, although there was almost no need. He could hear them now, hear the chittering sound of their voices and the occasional crack of wood underfoot. He did not want to be forced to fire on the aliens, but it was growing ever more likely. He let the other humans move past him and let go of the tricorder in order to alter his phaser onto a wide beam.

He aimed at the forest behind them and fired a brief shot that fanned out through the trees with an eerie light. There was a thud as of a small creature falling from a tree, but he heard no reaction from the sentient aliens. He fired again, then turned and jogged to catch up with the humans.

‘Be ready to fire,’ he said.

Ensign Grant’s weight was starting to make itself felt now as he grew colder and as he moved faster than his injured leg would normally allow. He could still hear the aliens. His second shot had not reached them through the trees. It was entirely possible that a dart would reach him or the humans more accurately than they could fire a phaser shot in return. The aliens might have naturally better night vision, or some kind of aids to that end. Perhaps it would be better to stand and confront them – but to stand and confront them may simply lay his party open to attack.

‘Keep mov-’ he began, but something interfered with the words. There was an unwonted warmth vibrating from the centre of his body. The ground ceased to feel hard beneath his feet. For a moment there seemed to be no air as he drew in breath, and then his vision faltered.

Light, heat, air returned. The snow was gone, and he was standing in the grey enclosure of a standard Fleet transporter room, the air in his lungs warm and dry, the lights dazzling to his eyes. Without pause he stepped down from the transporter and snapped, ‘This woman needs medical attention.’

The people in the room were largely unfamiliar to him, but it seemed obvious that the concerned looking woman in a regulation blue dress with two continuous lines of braid on her sleeves was the CMO. Christine stepped down from the transporter holding out her medical tricorder and rattling off various medical terms, while a gurney was wheeled over from the side of the room and Spock put Ensign Grant carefully on it.

A slightly balding man in gold stepped forward, and Spock nodded briefly at him.

‘Captain Shin,’ he said.
‘Mr Spock,’ the man replied, his face splitting in a broad smile. ‘Let me guess? We were just in time, eh?’

‘That is an accurate summation, sir,’ Spock nodded. ‘You were early.’

‘I thought it might be a good idea,’ Shin told him. He turned briefly to Christine and the two conscious ensigns. ‘Captain Shin Ye-jun,’ he said. ‘Welcome aboard the Constitution.’ He smiled at them for a moment, then said, ‘Now – sick bay.’

‘Yes, the ensign is in – ’ Spock began, but the CMO cut across him.

‘All of you, Commander Spock,’ she said in an iron voice which reminded him curiously of McCoy. She looked critically all the way down from his head to his feet, and he felt sure that she had noticed his limp. ‘You all need medical checks and possible decontamination,’ she continued. Then she smiled and said, ‘I am Dr Richardson. Very good to meet you. Now – get your butt down to sickbay.’

Spock raised an eyebrow, but he knew better than to argue with a chief medical officer. He ushered the two ensigns ahead of him and followed the gurney, flanked by Christine and the doctor, out of the transporter room.
Chapter 21

The sick bay of the Constitution was almost identical to that of the Enterprise, except for minor differences in decoration and arrangement. The CMO was entirely occupied with Ensign Grant, and was snapping questions at Nurse Chapel, which the nurse was answering even as she stripped off the survival suit which was far too warm in these surroundings. Spock watched her from across the ward, feeling something suspiciously close to pride. Of course she was a competent officer – most of the complement of the Enterprise were – but it really showed now in her ability to step straight back into her sick bay role after being beamed up from weeks in a desperate survival situation.

He was not a medical officer but much of what Dr Richardson and Christine were saying was transparent enough that he could understand it. Ensign Grant had suffered a severe reaction to the toxin and they were doing all they could to bring her life signs back up to something above the almost baseline that they were now.

‘Commander Spock.’

He looked around sharply. He had not noticed anyone else approaching, but there was another doctor at his elbow, a short, dark woman who was smiling at him kindly.

‘Commander, I’m Dr Ndungu,’ she told him quietly. ‘Now, I can see you’re having trouble with that leg. I’d like to examine it.’

Spock felt rather startled, even though he had known he had come down to sick bay for just such an examination. He had been so absorbed in watching Christine and Ensign Grant that he had almost forgotten the doctor would wish to see him.

‘No, Doctor, attend to the ensigns first,’ he said quickly.

She glanced around at them. She held a warbling medical scanner in her left hand. ‘They’re not showing anything like the level of injury that you’ve sustained, Mr Spock,’ she said.

‘That may be so, but – ’ His gaze strayed to Ensign Grant again, then he said, ‘Perhaps we would all be best in your office, Doctor.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ she said, glancing between Grant and ensigns Del Sarto and Malton, who were watching their friend intently. ‘Come on, all three of you,’ she said, ushering them across to the second doctor’s office.

Once the door had closed behind them the two ensigns relaxed slightly, as if being out of sight of their friend helped to allay their concern.

‘Do you want to take that gear off first?’ the doctor asked.

The ensigns instinctively looked toward Spock for permission, and he nodded. He shouldered his own rucksack down onto the floor and began to shed the survival suit while the ensigns did the same. Now he was on a Starfleet ship he felt quite ragged with his over-long hair, the short beard, and his torn and dirty clothing, especially the trousers which had had one leg cut up the front since he had injured his leg.

‘All right,’ Dr Ndungu told them with a broad smile, sitting down on the edge of her desk. ‘Take a seat, all of you. Yes, you too, Mr Spock. Get the weight off that leg. Now,’ she said, once they were all seated. ‘Why do you think I should see these two young things before you, Mr Spock?’
Spock picked up his tricorder, played for a moment with the controls, and then ejected a disc. ‘This contains all pertinent medical details for the party. I kept backups from the nurse’s tricorder. Ensign Del Sarto sustained a head injury some weeks ago, as did Ensign Malton. Ensign Malton also survived a prolonged period of exposure. More recently they have both received doses of the same toxin which has affected Ensign Grant. However, I am more concerned about their mental condition.’

Both Del Sarto and Malton shot him startled looks which might have provoked muted humour, had he allowed it. It was ridiculous how humans placed such stigma on these things.

‘I do not intend to imply that they have been extraordinarily affected,’ Spock said quietly, although he was not certain that was true in Ensign Malton’s case, ‘but that they have been through an extreme amount of stress, including severe danger and bereavement, and I believe a psychological assessment would benefit both of them.’

‘Well,’ Dr Ndungu said calmly, looking between the two young people who were sitting rather uneasily in their chairs. She held out her medical scanner and studied the results. ‘All my preliminary scans show complete healing from their head injuries and no serious degree of exposure at the present time. Their systems have metabolised the toxin very well, and they’re relatively fit and healthy. What they could both do with is a good square meal and a long night’s sleep in good beds. That is my first prescription for the two of you,’ she said, addressing the ensigns directly now. ‘And I will have both of you back in this sick bay at oh ten hundred tomorrow morning for a deeper assessment, including – ’ she said, looking pointedly at Spock, ‘ – a psychological assessment.’

She touched the intercom on her desk and said, ‘Mr Albin, would you come in here?’ After a moment a young orderly in blue overalls came in, and she said to him, ‘Mr Albin, take these two down to the mess and see they get a good meal, and while they’re eating it get the quartermaster onto sorting them out some temporary quarters, a change of clothes, and other necessaries. Thank you.’

Spock experienced a palpable sense of relief as the ensigns left the room. This had been the first time since he had left the Enterprise that he had not been entirely responsible for their safety.

‘Well, that leaves you and me, Mr Spock,’ Dr Ndungu said with a smile, moving from where she leant against her desk and coming to sit opposite him. She wore a uniform tunic and trousers rather than the standard dress, and that allowed her to sit with her legs apart and her arms resting on her knees as she leant forward towards him. Spock wondered briefly why more of the female crew did not choose this option.

‘Do you wish to examine my leg?’ Spock asked.

‘In good time,’ she nodded. ‘I’ve been speaking to my colleague on the Enterprise about you, Mr Spock. I thought I’d give them a call while we were en route to pick you up.’

‘You spoke to Dr McCoy?’ Spock asked.

She shook her head briefly. ‘Dr M’Benga,’ she said. ‘Seeing that he’s your ship’s resident Vulcan expert I thought it was a good idea. When I explained that you’d lost almost half of your party he told me you might be experiencing a good deal of guilt.’

Spock shook his head. He felt very slightly betrayed, but perhaps not as much as he would had McCoy given that statement.
‘He was incorrect,’ he said flatly. ‘Guilt is a most illogical emotion.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Dr Ndungu said, and let that word hang there for a moment.

Spock regarded her steadily. If she was waiting for him to collapse into some kind of confession of mental instability, she would be waiting for a long time.

‘No, Doctor,’ he said, when it became obvious that she was not going to carry on speaking. ‘I assure you that I am quite all right in that regard.’

She carried on looking at him for a few more seconds, her dark eyes looking unwaveringly into his. He did not break her gaze.

‘All right, Mr Spock,’ she said finally. ‘I’ll leave that part of it up to you. I’m sure you have mental resources. But I’d advise – and this was on M’Benga’s recommendation – I’d advise meditation as soon as you get the chance.’

Spock inclined his head once. Meditation was not something he chose to discuss with Dr Ndungu, or with any doctor.

‘Well, then. I’d like you to pop up on the table so I can have a look at your leg,’ she said, nodding towards the examination couch at the side of the room. ‘I don’t think I need you to take your pants off since that leg’s already cut apart, but your boots and socks would be a good idea.’

Spock nodded, bending to take off his boots and socks and then walking across to the medical table. His feet were quite filthy, and he felt a moment of sympathy for the doctor.

‘Never mind the grime,’ she said as if she had read his thoughts. ‘I didn’t expect you to be smelling like a fresh cut lily, you know. Now – well, you have done a bit of damage, haven’t you?’ she asked as she pulled the cut trouser fabric away from his leg.

‘It was a severe fracture, according to Nurse Chapel,’ Spock commented.

‘Oh, lie down,’ she said distractedly. Spock was propped up on his elbows, trying to see what the doctor was doing. ‘I want you to relax while I examine you, please.’

Spock obediently lay down and relaxed his muscles as the scanner warbled and the doctor’s fingers probed the site of the break. There was still a good deal of tenderness.

‘Well, this is going to need a lot of work,’ she murmured. ‘Nothing I’m going to start on here, I’m afraid, Mr Spock. This will require an operation to straighten the limb and remove the scarring, and I’ve never performed surgery on a Vulcan before. I really would rather leave it until we’ve rendezvoused with your ship. Your CMO there has plenty of experience with you, I’m sure, and you have Dr M’Benga on staff too.’

‘That is true,’ Spock nodded. ‘My blood type is somewhat rare, also.’

‘T-negative with human elements,’ she murmured, scanning again. ‘I’ll say it is. We’ve got a couple of units of Vulcan standard on hand just in case, but no T-negative in the banks. That settles it. I’ll give you a couple of vitamin shots and you can get a pair of crutches to help you walk for now, and we’ll leave this mess for your CMO to sort out, eh?’

‘I am sure that Dr McCoy will be delighted,’ Spock said.

Dr Ndungu gave him a quick look, as if she were not sure if he was being sarcastic.
Spock sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. ‘I take it I am free to go?’ he asked.

‘Free as a bird,’ she smiled. ‘Get out of here, have a shower and a shave and a good meal, Mr Spock. You look like you could use one.’

Spock touched a hand to his jaw, feeling the short beard that had grown there. Christine had expressed approval of it. He wondered what she would think if he shaved it off. Nevertheless, he did intend to shave it off, just as Christine would, he was certain, re-tint the roots of her hair that were starting to grow in dark.

He stepped out into the ward and looked around. Ensign Grant must have been taken to another room, for there was no sign either of her or of Christine and the doctor. He saw a nurse folding down the blankets on one of the beds, and limped across to him.

‘Nurse. I need a pair of crutches,’ he said. ‘The doctor ordered it. And can you tell me the condition of Ensign Grant?’

‘Oh, I’ll get them right away, sir,’ the man said quickly. ‘Ensign Grant’s been taken through into the intensive care room,’ he added.

‘Is her condition dangerous?’

‘I think she’s turned the corner,’ the nurse said in a reassuring tone. ‘I was in there a few moments ago and the doctor said she was doing better.’

‘Is Miss Chapel still with her?’

‘Oh, no, she was sent out to get some rest,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘She’s probably down at the quartermaster’s getting a cabin assigned.’

Spock nodded silently, his gaze moving briefly over toward the door of the intensive care room.

‘I’ll get you those crutches, sir,’ the nurse said, and he left the ward.

Spock took the opportunity to go to the intercom and call up the quartermaster and ask for a cabin.

‘Oh, yes, sir, that’s been sorted out,’ the officer told him quickly through the intercom. ‘Cabin 22B on Deck 7. You’re having a change of clothes sent down there. They’ll probably be there before you are, sir, and you can call the mess to send down any meal you want.’

‘Thank you,’ Spock said. Suddenly the idea of solitude and privacy and a good meal seemed very appealing. He had pushed aside all need for rest and food while he had been uncertain of Ensign Grant’s condition, but with the nurse’s reassuring words his own bodily needs had come flooding back.

******

Perhaps the Constitution was short on cabin space, Spock mused as he walked down to his assigned quarters. He knew by the cabin placement that it was one of the ship’s few large rooms, equipped with a double bed if it resembled the Enterprise exactly, and usually reserved for special guests such as visiting ambassadors and their spouses.

He approached the door and it slipped open before him. He stepped through and let his shoulders relax infinitesimally, breathing out between his lips.

‘I wondered how long it would take you to get down here.’
Spock almost jumped, but he caught himself just before his muscles moved. He turned toward the sleeping area of the cabin to see Christine stretched out on the wide bed wearing no more than underwear.

‘I’d have put something slinky on,’ she said with a quick shrug and a smile, ‘but I didn’t quite want to ask the quartermaster if he could fit me out with lingerie.’

‘No, of course,’ Spock said. He was not quite sure exactly what Christine had said to the quartermaster of the Constitution, but obviously it had been enough to suggest that Spock would be quite content to share a room. He wondered briefly about the breach of confidence implied, but on looking back at Christine where she lay on the bed, he thought perhaps it did not matter.

‘I haven’t even had a chance to shower yet – just a brief wash – but it’s just nice to be out of those clothes I’ve been wearing for over a month,’ she said.

‘Yes, of course,’ Spock said, his eyes lingering on her bare midriff, the rises of her breasts in the regulation bra, the lines of the slim panties. Although he had made love to her in a snatched moment in that house on the planet he had seen almost none of her, since they had both been enveloped in a sleeping bag. Here the temperature was quite suitable for nudity. Indeed, it almost felt too hot after so long in such a cold place.

‘Christine,’ Spock said, rather hesitantly, taking a step towards the bed.

‘Oh, god, Spock, you don’t need to be nervous,’ she urged him, patting the mattress beside her. ‘How long have we been waiting for this – some time alone in a locked room?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

He leant his crutches against the wall and stepped forward to her, removing his clothes as he moved. He sat on the bed in his underwear, just looking at her for a moment. There was quite a scar on her shoulder where that dragon creature had gored her. It could be removed, but it was there now, and it made a sharp feeling in his chest as he thought of the danger that she had been in. They had all been in such terrible danger for so very long, and finally they were safe.

‘Are you getting emotional on me, Mister?’ Christine asked seriously. There was worry in her blue eyes.

Spock blinked. ‘Not at all,’ he said, making sure that his voice was level. He finally slipped his underpants off, and sat there entirely naked in the warm room. The next best feeling to this, he was sure, would be being able to wash the grime from his body.

‘May I?’ he asked, touching his hand to the waistband of her panties.

She laughed. ‘Spock, there is no need, no need at all, to be gentlemanly. Connect with your primitive Vulcan ancestors and channel their passion.’

Consciously and deliberately he relaxed his inhibitions. Thought flooded away and he growled as he pulled the last remnants of clothing from her body and bent down over her, laying kiss after kiss on her breasts and her stomach and face. Then he moved further down and kissed the soft fur between her legs, and then gently thrust her thighs apart with his arm and buried his face there, tasting her, massaging her with his tongue, feeling a spike of pleasure as he heard her gasp and moan.

He was stiffening against her where he straddled her leg. Need was building up like water pressure behind a dam. As he lifted his face and brought himself back up to the level of her head
her hand reached out and touched him. He gasped aloud as her fingers closed about the length of his erection and moved up and down. He could not bear to be outside her, to not be together with her. Almost roughly he took hold of her wrists with his hands and pushed them back onto the pillow on either side of her head. Then he entered her, feeling as if he were sinking down into the only place he ever wanted to be. She was cool and soft around him, and he butted his slim hips forward, back, forward again. The universe outside was non-existent, irrelevant. He lowered his mouth down to kiss her, to curl his tongue about the stiff point of a nipple. She gasped, and he felt delight light like a flame inside him.

Softly, ever so gently, he touched his fingertips to her head, first feeling the softness of her skin and then the hard bone behind. And then he was there in her mind, feeling her pleasure, feeling every thrill that ran through her body. He added his own to it, feeling it multiply and flush into something greater than either of them could achieve apart. All the world was fire and joy. He took her sensations and carefully sculpted them until she was feeling the most exquisite sensation imaginable. And then even his consciousness of her thoughts ballooned away as he came to a crashing orgasm, feeling the dam burst and seed jetting into her body.

He lay over her for a while, panting, feeling the thud of her heartbeat against his chest, hearing her breathing near his ear. He let himself melt into the feeling of her body there against him, skin to skin, and knew that this was perfection.

After some time they both moved wordlessly into the shower, where they stood together under the hot pummelling jets of water. The sight of her there, naked and flushed, her head tilted back and water streaming down her body, sent him into a fury of desire again. The water cascaded down her, catching on the pert nipples, twining down onto her stomach and between her legs. He kissed her, and then he gently nudged her back against the wall and pushed himself against her, the hardness of his erection rearing between them. He took her like that, water streaming over both of them and steam clouding the air.

Finally, satiated, clean, relaxed with a pervasive feeling of bliss, they came back into the bedroom, where they lay on the bed and ate food ordered from the mess. Later Spock fell asleep with his head against Christine’s chest, and no thought in his mind but the thought of her.
Chapter 22

The transporter beam held his body suspended. For the briefest of moments he felt no pain, no comfort, no sensation at all. For a split second even thought was an utter blank. If Spock allowed himself to think about that split second sometimes he found it disconcerting. Sometimes he found it a comfort to have had relief for even the tiniest of moments from the constant activity in his mind. This was different to meditation. Even during meditation there was something there; his heartbeat making his skin shudder just a little, the feeling of air in his lungs. In the transporter there was nothing at all, and he wondered sometimes if this were how death might feel.

And then there it was. The scent of the Enterprise came first. Then the sight of it resolved before his eyes, and the soft, almost subliminal sound of the engines vibrating through the decks. Much as Spock did not subscribe to emotions such as nostalgia and homesickness, nevertheless it was reassuring to be back on his ship.

‘Mr Spock!’

Jim was stepping forward with a broad smile on his face. It was there for a moment as Spock stepped down from the transporter and the captain slapped his hands on the top of the Vulcan’s arms, but it faded very quickly as his eyes moved to the three ensigns and Nurse Chapel behind him.

‘Welcome back, Nurse, Ensigns,’ he said more soberly. ‘Dr McCoy wants to see all of you in sick bay. I know, I know you’ve been thoroughly checked by the doctor on the Constitution,’ he said quickly at the brief look of dismay on the ensigns’ faces, ‘But the doctor wants to look you over himself. You too, Spock – but I want a word with you first. Miss Chapel, would you escort the ensigns?’

‘Of course, sir,’ Christine said quickly. She gave Spock a fleeting smile, and then ushered the ensigns out of the room.

‘I think my cabin would be best, Spock,’ Kirk said quietly. He glanced at the Vulcan’s crutches. ‘How’s the leg?’

‘Manageable,’ Spock said. ‘Dr McCoy will no doubt be pleased to know that Dr Ndungu thought it best to leave it to his expertise.’

‘Bones has been rubbing his hands together in glee for the past three days,’ Kirk told him with a quick grin.

Spock’s eyebrow rose. ‘Sometimes I wonder if the good doctor has a power complex.’

Jim grew unusually silent on the walk down to his cabin, and Spock did not try to entice him to speak. He knew that their forthcoming discussion was not the kind that his captain enjoyed.

‘Sit down, Spock,’ Jim said when they were in his quarters.

Spock took a chair by the desk and steepled his hands in front of him. Jim went to the side of the room and came back with a bottle of pale green liquid and two glasses.

‘If there’s ever a time for Andorian saki, it’s now,’ he said.

Spock almost demurred, but chose not to. He let Jim pour him a glass, and took it. He sat tracing his finger around the sheer glass of the rim, while Jim sat down. The captain sat silently for a
moment, just staring at the liquid in his own glass. Then he looked up at Spock.

‘I’ve been in contact with the families of the deceased ensigns,’ he said quietly. ‘Broke the news, conveyed condolences. The usual. I think they’d appreciate a word from you, though.’

‘Yes, of course, Captain,’ Spock nodded. ‘I had been intending to do so.’

‘I studied the tapes you transmitted from the Constitution,’ Jim continued. ‘Analysed all the reports thoroughly, went through the shuttle tapes with Scotty and the medical ones with Bones. There was nothing you could have done.’

‘I am aware of that,’ Spock said, but he felt gratitude suffuse his body. He had spent long hours in meditation on the Constitution ruminating on the subject of the lost ensigns, but his captain’s reassurance meant more than he could express.

‘It’s not gone down well with the powers that be, of course,’ Jim continued soberly. ‘You know that this was a kind of test case for a new admissions policy.’

‘Yes, I am quite aware,’ Spock said pensively, rubbing his finger across his lips.

‘Don’t worry about it, Spock,’ Jim told him firmly. ‘The logs back you up. You did all you could and you came out of a first contact situation with minimal damage to the culture involved. Fleet need to be reminded that it’s a blessing any of you got out of that alive. If anyone’s to blame, it’s them for authorising a bunch of greenhorn teenagers to be let loose in a situation like that.’

‘Yes,’ Spock said. He took a sip of his drink, and rested back into his chair, stretching out his injured leg.

‘Bones is eager to get that fixed asap,’ Kirk said, nodding towards the limb. ‘It’s definitely not quite straight, isn’t it?’

‘Noticeably so,’ Spock nodded.

‘Well,’ Jim said. He relaxed, taking a mouthful of his own drink, and then tapping his finger on the desk once or twice.

‘You seem perturbed, Captain,’ Spock pointed out.

‘Not perturbed,’ his captain said quickly, shaking his head. He took another sip of the saki then said with an air of rather forced nonchalance, ‘You know, there’s quite the rumour mill on the Constitution.’

‘Indeed,’ Spock said. ‘Gossip is an area of human communication that tends not to be of interest to me.’

‘Even when it concerns you, Spock?’ Jim asked, raising his eyebrows. ‘You and a certain nurse on your mission?’

If Spock had been human, and not in control of his reactions, he might have coloured. Instead he set his glass down and looked steadily at his captain.

‘I hardly think that my personal business would be of any interest to the crew of the Constitution,’ he said. ‘I hardly know them.’

Kirk laughed. ‘Spock, I’m sure you know that human gossip doesn’t work like that. Shall I cut to the chase? I hear that you shared a cabin on the way to meet the Enterprise. That you shared a
diplomatic suite with Miss Christine Chapel, no less.’

Spock did not alter his gaze. ‘I did,’ he said.

Kirk seemed rather nonplussed by the simplicity of his First Officer’s reply.

‘You – did?’ he asked blankly.

‘Yes, Jim,’ Spock nodded.

‘Well,’ Jim said. A slow smile spread over his face. ‘Spock, did you – are you – I mean – ?’

‘Captain, I really think that my sleeping arrangements are my own business,’ Spock said firmly. He had to admit to a certain level of enjoyment at Jim’s reaction.

‘Ah, well,’ Jim said. He smiled again, and then laughed, sounding rather nervous. ‘You’re right, of course, Mr Spock. I’m sorry to intrude.’

‘It is no intrusion, Jim,’ Spock said, softening his voice a little. He drank a little more saki, and then said, ‘Captain, I gained a definite sense when you chose the personnel for this mission that you had – may I say – ulterior motives?’

‘Me, Spock?’ Kirk asked, pressing a hand to his chest, widening his eyes in feigned innocence. ‘Spock, are you suggesting I’d choose people for a mission based on anything other than qualifications?’

‘I fully acknowledge that the qualifications were quite adequate,’ Spock nodded. ‘But still. I am quite certain that you had ulterior motives.’

‘Well,’ Kirk said slowly.

‘They worked,’ Spock said simply.

Jim leant forward a little in his chair. ‘They did, Spock?’

‘There is perhaps something shared in a survival situation that takes one away from a more mundane way of viewing things,’ Spock said.

‘Well, you know I never intended any of that to happen,’ Jim said quickly. ‘The storm, the crash.’

‘Of course,’ Spock nodded. ‘Nevertheless, it did.’

‘Well,’ Jim said again. He seemed nonplussed. ‘Well, Spock, I’m very happy for you. But – you know Bones is going to roast you,’ he added with a wicked smile. ‘Green blooded son of a bitch distracting my head nurse, and so on.’

Spock’s eyebrow rose. ‘Since the doctor will be performing surgery on me very soon, perhaps I should endeavour to keep this secret until after his work is done.’

Jim chuckled quietly. ‘I think you should, Spock – unless he’s been listening to the same rumour mill that I have.’

******

The day was a long and busy one, with reports to file and job details to catch up on, and the obligatory time with McCoy in sick bay looking at his leg. Spock lay with an unaccustomed degree of nervousness in the examination room as the doctor carefully took scans and probed the
surface of Spock’s leg with his fingers.

‘Really, Doctor, the physicians on the Constitution have performed all of these tests – including the prodding,’ Spock complained. ‘Surely you can simply access their data?’

‘Nothing compares to first person experience,’ McCoy muttered, digging his finger in particularly hard.

Spock almost winced, but he managed to stop himself from flinching away. There seemed to be a particularly deliberate force in McCoy’s touch.

‘Have I annoyed you, Doctor?’ he asked cautiously.

‘Disappearing into the godforsaken vacuum of space, crashing onto a planet, breaking this leg by completely ignoring protocol on how much weight to take,’ McCoy began to mutter, and Spock felt as if he had unleashed an unwelcome genie with his question. ‘Not to mention what you’ve done to Christine.’

‘Done to her, Doctor?’ Spock asked rather apprehensively. It seemed that McCoy had been listening to the same subspace channels as the captain.

‘Done to her,’ McCoy repeated. ‘As if it wasn’t bad enough when she first started mooning over you, thinking about you when she should have been working, questioning my orders when you were a patient. And now, if I’m to believe the space rumours – ’

He looked up and pinned Spock with his piercing blue gaze.

‘Yes, Doctor?’ Spock asked. He was not going to give away any information for free.

‘Spock, just give it to me straight,’ the doctor said impatiently. ‘Are you, or are you not, sleeping with my head nurse?’

Spock found himself biting back a quick flash of indignation at the doctor’s wording.

‘That is entirely my concern, and Miss Chapel’s,’ he replied after a moment of silence.

McCoy turned back to the leg. ‘Huh. I thought as much,’ he muttered. He was quiet again for a moment, and began moving his fingers rather more considerately over Spock’s leg.

‘Well, I’m pleased for you both,’ he said finally.

Spock lay still on the examination table, considering his reply. ‘Thank you for your blessing, Bones,’ he said quietly.

*****

Later Spock sat in the privacy of his cabin and made calls to the parents of Ensign Lovett and Ensign Fournier. Ensign Sutherland had no living parents, and he spoke instead to an elder sister who was her next of kin. It was a difficult task, and he did not envy Kirk his position as the first to break the news. Ensign Fournier’s parents showed a good deal of anger. Ensign Lovett’s seemed resigned, whereas Sutherland’s sister spent most of the call holding a handkerchief to her face and trying not to cry.

That done, Spock stretched out on his bed and lay there for some minutes, experiencing the peace and content that came with being back in these familiar surroundings. It was late, and he had shed his clothes in preparation for sleep. He had not seen Christine since the morning, and he reflected
that this was probably the longest that they had been separated since they stepped onto the shuttle with six healthy ensigns.

He recalled their brief stay in that house on the planet which he now knew to be Salnar V. For a brief moment there he had almost felt the same content that he felt now in his quarters. There had always been the undercurrent of unease due to their survival situation, but lying with Christine in that bed he had been truly content.

The buzzer sounded, and he sat up. Would it be Christine? He did not think he could sense her closeness. He sighed and reached out for a regulation Fleet robe, which he donned and tied firmly about his waist. Perhaps Jim wanted to talk more about what had happened.

He seated himself behind his desk, and called, ‘Come.’

The door slid open to reveal Ensign Malton. Spock concealed his emotions at the sight of her.

‘Ensign, it is late,’ he said in a level voice.

‘I know, sir. I’m sorry,’ she said, standing hesitantly on the threshold.

‘Please, come in,’ Spock said. He did not like his door being left open and his quarters on view to anyone who passed.

She stepped forward, and the door slid closed. She seemed highly embarrassed. Her cheeks were fiery.

‘I – just wanted to apologise, sir,’ she said, without moving further into the room.

Since Spock was clad in nothing more than the regulation robe, he was quite content for her to stay where she was. He raised an eyebrow at her words, inviting her to continue.

‘My conduct on the planet – ’ she stammered. ‘I mean – I should never have – I didn’t – ’

Spock exhaled minutely. ‘Ensign, humans are human,’ he said, ‘and you are a very young human.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she muttered.

‘It might behove you to try to control your hormonal reactions,’ Spock continued.

She flushed an even deeper red, and Spock continued to regard her steadily. He was suddenly struck with the thought that Christine might tell him he was being cruel. He recalled himself at eighteen. There had been a Vulcan woman called T’El in his class, and although he had always been entirely Vulcan in his dealings with her, he had felt very human underneath.

‘Thank you for coming to see me, Ensign,’ he said more gently. ‘The gesture is appreciated. I think – that time will give you a perspective that you do not yet have.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ she said. She sounded almost as if she were about to sob, and Spock hoped that would not happen while she was still in the room.

‘Dismissed,’ he said softly.

She left. The door slid closed, and Spock allowed himself to sigh fully. He sat motionless at his desk for a few moments, thinking about what had just occurred. Christine had suggested to him that the Ensign’s problem was a common one, that somehow he simply caused women to infatuate
themselves with him. It was a very odd situation. He certainly did not court such attention.

He opened the intercom and called, ‘Spock to Miss Chapel.’

Her reply was almost instant, and he felt a muted amusement. Had she, perhaps, been waiting for his call?

‘Christine, it has been too long since I saw you,’ he said simply. ‘Do you think, perhaps, you could accustom yourself to sharing a bed that is rather smaller than the one in our previous suite?’

‘Oh, I could accustom myself to almost anything as long as it was with you,’ she replied with a smile in her voice. ‘I’ll be there right away.’

******

They lay together in necessary closeness, she with her head on his chest, he with his arm about her shoulder and his face nestling against her hair. The cabin was warm, a rich warmth that Spock had almost forgotten in his time on that freezing planet. The thick red drapes that covered the walls accentuated the heat. It was like being in a womb.

‘It’s good to be home,’ Christine murmured. She sounded very sleepy.

‘Yes,’ Spock said simply.

‘Leonard’s going to fix your leg tomorrow, isn’t he?’ she asked.

‘Yes, he is,’ Spock replied.

‘Do you think you could persuade supplies to give you a bigger bed? Just a little bigger. We could push it up against the wall.’

‘Perhaps,’ Spock said.

She laughed quietly. ‘You’re my one-word-Vulcan tonight.’

‘An exaggeration,’ Spock said.

She moved her head against his chest, and Spock stroked his hand over her hair. He felt utterly content. There was no need for any more words.

The End

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