

Sea Change

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by [jouissant](#)

Summary

As the five-year mission gets underway, Kirk and Spock are on course to develop a friendship--or something--that will define them both. Then, a poorly-timed away mission changes everything. Before they can begin to deal with the fallout, Jim disappears. With his captain presumed dead, Spock has no choice but to accept a promotion and try to move on. But when he starts experiencing disturbing visions, he gradually begins to suspect that Jim may be alive after all. (A canon-divergent AU assuming they began the 5-year mission following STXI.)

Notes

Written for Kirk/Spock Big Bang 2013.

Huge thanks to [museattack](#) for the beta! I couldn't have done it without you. This story is so much better for your involvement. You are a star!

Aku_rin and Cannedebonbon created some amazing art for this story, [here](#) and [here](#). I feel totally spoiled to have had two super-talented artists claim my story and work their asses off with just over a month between claims and posting, so thank you both so much. I'm incredibly flattered you wanted to illustrate this fic. Seriously, go feast your eyes on their art, because it's just so good! Pterodactyl screeching forever, basically.

So I started this story way back in 2010, came back to it this spring after a 2.5-year fandom hiatus, and finished it just as STID was coming out, so I feel like it spans two very different iterations of Reboot Trek fandom. I kind of look at it as an homage to some of my favorite K/S tropes and a character study of Spock as I saw him before STID infiltrated my headcanon. Okay, enough boring navel-gazing. Enjoy the fic!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)



[Art by Cannedebonbon](#)

[Art by Aku-rin](#)

The first full day out of space dock, after Spock essentially appointed himself First Officer of the *Enterprise* in a fit of boldness that he still cannot quite believe or explain, Jim Kirk sits next to him in the mess. More accurately, he flops down next to Spock and promptly spills coffee all over himself.

“Dammit, that replicator sure knows how to get it hot enough. There should be a warning or something.”

“Are you aware that there is a temperature setting?” Spock says.

“Oh.” Kirk looks sheepish. “Well, next time I won’t scald myself, then.”

He turns to his plate of scrambled eggs, and silence hangs heavy between them. Kirk taps his foot compulsively under the table, causing the entire surface to vibrate. Little ripples break the surface of Spock’s cup of tea. “So,” says Kirk.

Spock thinks he will never understand the human predilection for filling silences. He looks up, watching Kirk with a suitably blank expression.

Kirk shifts in his seat, as if something about Spock's regard makes him uncomfortable. “Um,” he continues. “Are you doing anything after shift tonight? Are you and Uhura...”

“Lieutenant Uhura is attempting to organize a musical group amongst interested crew members. I believe tonight is their first meeting,” Spock supplies.

Kirk nods. “Oh. That's a good idea, actually. Are you going? Do you play something?”

“I played the Vulcan lyre as a child. I am out of practice. I believe you would say I am ‘rusty’. I require considerable practice in private prior to playing with Nyota’s group,” Spock says.

“Come on, Spock, I’m sure you’re not that bad,” Kirk says.

“I have recently been compared to a wounded sehlat,” Spock counters. It is true; the lyre is not easily mastered again after so much time. Nyota likens playing to riding a bicycle. Spock has never actually seen a bicycle in operation, much less ridden one himself, but somehow he doubts the aptness of the comparison.

“Ah. Well, okay then. So you’re not even going for moral support?”

“Nyota is quite capable of running a meeting herself. Indeed...I believe my presence might cause her difficulty.” He is not sure why he offers this last statement.

Kirk appears to be considering a response, but thinks better of it. “Are you up for a game of chess, then? I hear you’re a pretty formidable opponent, and beating the pants off Bones stopped being fun my first semester at the Academy.”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “I warn you, I attained the rank of Grand Master at the age of thirteen.”

Kirk smirks back. “Yeah, well, I learned Tri-D chess on the mean streets of Iowa. I play dirty. You up for that, Grand Master?”

Later, Spock watches somewhat helplessly as he’s checkmated for the third time. Kirk gulps his glass of brandy and slams it down on the table before raising his hands to the ceiling and making a sound not unlike the aforementioned sehlat.

“And the crowd goes wild!” he crows. “Well, Spock, as battles royale go, logic versus illogic has been pretty epic so far.”

“Captain, you may be victorious in this initial battle...”

“Third battle.”

“Third battle. However, I believe we have a war before us.”

Kirk leans back in his chair, crossing his hands behind his head. “Mr. Spock,” he drawls, “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

It is not a logical process, befriending someone. Particularly not when that person is a Human, and least of all when that human is Jim Kirk.

Spock has not had many friends. He has been apprised that in certain circles it is considered strange to claim one’s mother as a friend, but the fact remains that Amanda was Spock’s constant in childhood. It seemed she could see things in her son that few others on his homeworld could, perhaps because she saw his human side as integral rather than other, part of rather than in spite of. She saw it even when Spock could not. Ironically, he has only been fully aware of her importance in the wake of her death. But back to the topic at hand: becoming friends with Jim Kirk is not a logical process.

First of all, Spock does not typically seek out interpersonal relationships with beings with whom he has previously come to blows. That he sometimes, in his weaker moments, fantasizes about the hulking bullies of his childhood approaching him contritely is neither here nor there, particularly as the majority of those bullies have received the comeuppance his younger self so often wished upon them. It was far less satisfying than he imagined it would be, considering his planet died along with them.

Second, Spock likes to be certain of things. He appreciates Nyota for her directness, the way she offers him a choice, a simple yes or no. He understands that not all humans are like this, that they have a propensity for turning emotional exchanges into games. Emotional interactions are difficult enough for Spock without strange sets of rules he cannot possibly master. Humans require reciprocity, and Spock does not always wish to reciprocate, particularly when he considers its very necessity illogical.

They have never spoken of Spock's counterpart. Spock is not sure whether Jim even knows that he is aware of his alternate's existence in their timeline. He cannot help but wonder, the second time Jim shows up at his door, chess set in hand, if he is thinking of his own alternate self, of another Kirk and Spock.

He knows only that Jim keeps coming. At first, he asks. Then he just appears, and it occurs to Spock that Jim must have learned his schedule, which nights he retires early to meditate, which nights he spends in Nyota's quarters. In this quiet way, Jim infiltrates Spock's life, and Spock lets him. He does not like to reciprocate, and Jim does not require it of him. He is simply there, and Spock finds he does not mind.

Spock knows Jim's question long before he actually asks it. They are in Jim's quarters tonight, and the captain has virtually given away the game with his last move. It is a sure sign that he is either feinting or focusing his attention elsewhere. He worries his lower lip between his teeth and drums his fingers against the tabletop absentmindedly. He opens his mouth, shuts it, opens it again.

Spock has a headache. He pinches the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, focusing on his shields.

"Jim. Please speak your mind. The purpose of recreational activity is relaxation, is it not?"

Jim nods.

"Then I find your agitation at cross-purposes."

Jim exhales. "So, you and Uhura. How's that whole thing going?"

Spock schools his features into blankness. The captain grins back, disarmingly. Spock has seen this grin before, most commonly at diplomatic functions. To his vague horror, he feels his controls drop ever so slightly. He understands suddenly why Jim's efforts at diplomacy go so shockingly well.

“You feign nonchalance,” he says finally. “It is unnecessary.”

“Ugh, thank God,” says Jim. “You’ve been prowling around the ship all week. I’ve had three separate complaints from the lab techs about you, and everyone on the bridge is worried. Everyone except Uhura.”

“I believe Nyota to be concerned, in her way.”

“What does that mean?”

Spock steeples his fingers. He stares studiously down at where the tips press together. Focus, he thinks. “We terminated our personal relationship 3.7 solar days ago.”

“Wait, seriously? Why?”

“It is not your concern,” Spock snaps. Jim looks affronted; he straightens in his chair, posture no longer casual or relaxed.

I do not wish to speak of these matters, thinks Spock furiously, drawing his shields about him protectively. It is insulting, he thinks, that Jim should require him to lay himself bare to pander to the human need to “share.” I am Vulcan, he thinks. I do not wallow in pain as your species is wont to do.

Outwardly, he supposes he must still look quite calm. Good. He allows himself a small sigh. He will not bristle at Jim, will not speak his mind. Reciprocity, he reminds himself. He will play these human games after all.

“I...I apologize, Captain. I did not mean to speak so harshly. This matter is difficult for me to speak of at all. I am quite dissatisfied with the manner in which these events have unfolded.”

“Well, tell me. Maybe I can help. God knows I’ve been in your shoes often enough.”

“Do not take offense, captain, but I doubt you have or ever will find yourself in my current position. You are, after all, human. This is my essential problem.”

“She broke up with you because you’re not human? Did she somehow miss the pointy ears and the green--” Spock raises a hand to still him; he can feel a tirade beginning. Jim is difficult to halt when, as he puts it, on a roll.

“Jim, please. Firstly, our parting was mutual, and I do not wish to waste time on the illogical practice of assigning blame. Secondly, Nyota is an extremely sensitive individual, particularly regarding xenocultural concerns. She has had the utmost respect for my heritage and its implications for my personal relationships. That does not mean, however, that she was...happy with them.”

Happy. The word feels strange on his tongue.

“Were you? Happy, I mean?”

Spock straightens. “I do not feel happiness. You know this.”

Jim leans forward. "I know. I just...it's so hard for me to wrap my brain around it. I mean, you're lying there in bed with someone you...someone you're in a 'personal relationship' with. Post-coital bliss, Spock. You're telling me you don't feel..."

Spock ignores the heat creeping into his face. "I *feel* satisfaction that my physical needs have been met. I derive similar satisfaction from physical proximity to another."

"But you could say that about...about a bowl of plomeek soup from the replicator. Or, shit, 'physical proximity to another'? You could say that about us, when we spar at the gym. A Vulcan woman--"

"There are degrees. I cannot explain. There are... I am *other*, Jim. A Vulcan woman would understand..."

He tries again.

"When I speak of emotions, I am speaking of theoretical concepts."

Jim looks unconvinced. "No, see, I think you're just telling yourself that you are. I'm pretty sure you could get some praxis going if you wanted to."

Spock looks down at his hands again. He can feel Jim's gaze on him. He looks back up at him to see comprehension dawning on his face.

"You...you don't want to," Jim says incredulously. His tone and his expressions are distressingly close to Nyota's.

"I am Vulcan," Spock says, by way of an answer. "I grant that my inclinations make little sense to you. You are a species ruled by emotion--" Jim moves as if to refute him, but Spock raises a hand to still him.

"Please, Jim, I make no judgment; I only state facts. I am not of your world. You...you may wish me to be. Indeed, others, my mother... but I *cannot* be." He runs a hand over his face, rubbing his eyes, giving himself a moment to regain control. He will meditate for an additional fifteen minutes to compensate for this lapse. His mother would call it self-flagellation, but he is no longer a child, and his mother is no longer alive.

He looks up again to see Jim watching him carefully. "You weren't really talking to me just then, were you?"

"I am sorry. I must retire early tonight. I am...I find myself an unworthy opponent."

"Spock, come on. Stay. I don't care about the chess game."

He inclines his head politely at Jim as he stands and leaves. In the corridor, he leans against the bulkhead, heart pounding.

“Is your communicator working yet?” Jim paces around the small clearing. Shifting painfully, Spock looks up at him. The sky behind the captain pulses violet in the gloaming, lending his skin a strange cast.

“You last asked me that question five minutes, thirteen seconds ago. You have remained in your present position for the entirety of that time, well within earshot of my communicator.”

“Yeah, I know, I know.” He sits down heavily beside Spock, sighing. “How are you feeling?”

Spock looks down at his side, feeling as if he is looking at someone else’s body. There is a patch of green spreading across the blue of his uniform, although the flow seems to have halted for the present. “I have been able to shield from the worst of the pain thus far.” He is growing tired, though, and with his mounting exhaustion comes the weakening of his controls. He can sense the pain looming, a lurking thing prowling outside crumbling fortifications. His hand scrabbles involuntarily at the soft chartreuse of the earth beneath him; Caley’s various mineral deposits result in the planet’s vivid colors. The soil, the flora... everything is suffused with a strange glow. Spock has spent much of this mission feeling oddly hallucinatory. He has no other excuse for falling off a cliff, so he supposes this will have to do.

Jim glances worriedly at Spock’s hand. “I didn’t know you could shield from physical sensations too,” he offers. It’s meant as distraction, and Spock accepts the implied question eagerly.

“Meditation is an effective pain management technique. Vulcan women use it to great effect in childbirth,” he says.

“Huh. Makes sense,” says Jim. “So, you think you’ll have kids?”

Spock is suddenly too tired to point out the relative non sequitur. He is also too tired to dodge the overly personal query. “I do not know,” he says. “There is some speculation that my hybrid status renders me incapable of fathering children. I have not pursued genetic testing in that area, although the results may prove to be of consequence...” He trails off.

“What do you mean, ‘of consequence’?” Jim asks.

Spock shakes his head faintly. “It is unimportant,” he says. “And you? Do you believe you will reproduce?”

“That means I have to settle down first, Spock. You know how I feel about that.”

“If you are referring to your frequent and diverse sexual encounters, you are correct in your assertion that they diverge from the traditional human family unit. However, as I understand it, monogamy is not the only means of deriving satisfaction from relationships.” A flare of pain bleeds through his shields, and he sucks in a breath sharply.

A cloud passes over Jim’s face. Spock recognizes it as worry, but Jim seems to push it aside and goes on as if they were conversing over a chessboard. “Yeah, you’re right, you’re right,” he says. “But I’ve been...I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately, and...”

Spock supposes that Jim is still talking. It is a logical conclusion, because his mouth is still moving. However, Spock cannot hear him, and it suddenly occurs to him that he is very cold. A wet, sticky sensation spreads over his side and lower back, and something tells Spock that it should feel warm, although he feels nothing but a growing chill. And then he can hear Jim again as if from under water.

“Fuck, Spock, that's--that's a lot of blood.” Jim looks ill, Spock thinks. He should report to sickbay for a physical when they return to the ship. Spock decides that he will recommend this when he next feels capable of speech.

He feels himself being lifted, and Jim must see something he does not like because his face goes blank and he is screaming into his communicator now, *fuck the fucking ion storm, Scotty, beam us up right the fuck now, come on come on come on* and then Spock knows no more.

He comes back to himself slowly. In the healing trance, he feels by turns minute and vast, and it is discomfiting to return to the confines of his body. When he does, he is vaguely aware of a hand in his. As soon as he is able to identify the sensation, the hand disappears, and the blurry, pixelated mass hovering above him gradually reconciles into Jim's face. Spock feels an instinctual urge to withdraw, but when he draws back he feels the biobed rigid behind him.

“Hey,” Jim says quietly. There is a swipe of green across his right cheek; his eyes are wet.

“Hello,” replies Spock. His voice rasps as if he has been shouting. “Captain, I believe you are experiencing an allergic reaction to an airborne particulate. Your eyes are inflamed.”

Jim swipes at the moisture on his face with the back of his hand, laughing. “Yeah, yeah.”

Dr. McCoy has relinquished his iron grasp on Spock's person and deemed him sufficiently recovered to return to his quarters. He is most grateful for the respite from the bustle of the medical bay. McCoy and Nurse Chapel themselves escort him to Deck 5, carrying an array of supplies they will no doubt blackmail him into judicious use of, threats of a return to medical custody ringing in his ears. McCoy stands in the middle of the room, glowering, hands on his hips, while Chapel sets about transforming Spock's bureau into an impromptu pharmacy.

“Now, pay attention,” McCoy says, reading from Spock's chart. “This one's an anti-inflammatory; you need to take it with food and preferably before bed 'cause it'll make you drowsy. Not before shift, you got me? This one you take without food but with a full glass of water. This one's topical, a disinfectant. Apply it three times a day after you change your bandage...dammit, Christine, we should just take him back down to sickbay and manage all this ourselves...”

“Bones. Leave the poor guy alone. He's tired enough as it is without you harassing him,” says Jim from the doorway. Spock is indeed beginning to feel harassed. He has been tired for days.

“Well, unfortunately for him, harassing is my job. If I’d harassed him enough last time maybe he wouldn’t have collapsed on the bridge with a raging infection.”

“That was an interaction with the copper in his blood. It was unprecedented; you said so yourself.”

“Dr. McCoy,” says Spock, by way of intervention. “It would be impolitic not to say that I appreciate your concern. However, the Captain is correct. I am quite fatigued, and would appreciate solitude. I assure you, doctor, I am quite capable of following your regimen. Nurse Chapel has provided me with copious notes on each drug and any potential for interactions with my individual chemistry.”

“I wrote my dissertation on xenopharmacology, sir,” says Chapel at Jim’s look of surprise. “Dr. McCoy has a tendency to forget that.” McCoy looks appropriately abashed.

“See, Bones, he’s in good hands.” Jim moves as if to clap Spock on the back, but stops himself just in time. “Uh, sorry. Well, I guess we’ll leave you to it, then.” He ushers McCoy and Chapel out of the room, hanging back until they are out in the corridor.

“I am really quite tired, Jim,” says Spock. The captain shifts back and forth on the balls of his feet.

“No, sure, I understand. I just...wanted to make sure you were okay,” Jim says.

“Dr. McCoy tells me you remained in sickbay until I regained consciousness. He no doubt apprised you of my status at regular intervals. And as I stand before you under my own power, you may logically conclude that I am, in fact, ‘okay’.”

Jim runs his hand through his hair absently. “I know that, geez. It was just scary as hell to see you like that, Spock. One second you were fine, talking to me, and the next...” he shakes his head. “I hope I never have to see that again.”

Spock straightens as much as he can before his healing abdomen protests. “I suppose it would be insensitive to remind you of the percent likelihood of death in the line of duty, assuming 58.7 away missions per year on average and---”

Jim raises a hand, laughing. “All right, already. Now I know you’re okay. So, according to the good doctor, you’re cleared for light duty tomorrow.”

Spock nods. “I have a considerable backlog of paperwork requiring attention.”

“Light duty. That means you take breaks, got it?”

Spock nods. Were he human and thus given to making jokes, there would be one here about reversal of roles, or perhaps mother hens.

Jim nods back at him once, decisively. “Good. Think you’ll be up for a game tomorrow night?”

“I believe so, if my recovery continues apace. 2000 hours?”

“Here? Okay, then.” Jim smiles at him. “It’s a date.”

It is not, Spock thinks, a ‘date’. He does not fully understand why it is suddenly necessary to remind himself of the precise connotations of the word, and why those connotations do not apply to his planned rendezvous with Jim.

“What do you think about Dr. Noel?” Jim asks, taking a sip of replicated beer.

Spock looks up from the board. “Pardon?”

“Helen Noel. She’s that psych specialist who came on about six months ago? We met her at the Christmas party, remember? Chekov had that ridiculous tree-topper shaped like the Kremlin in Old Moscow? Anyway, Bones says she has some really interesting theories about the long-term effects of warp travel. You know, it’s something that’s never really been studied before, but the more I think about it, the more important I think it is to the Prime Directive and the way we think about pre-warp cultures.”

“Indeed. There are doubtlessly a great many psychological pitfalls inherent in warp travel; I believe that the movement for a review of the Prime Directive has merit, and is not as misguided as the Starfleet establishment might think. But then, there will always be a core faction opposed to such change,” Spock muses in turn.

“Do you think she’s pretty? I think she’s kind of pretty.”

Spock will not, *will not* roll his eyes. Instead, he blinks. Forcefully.

Jim gives him a long look. “Do you have something in your eye? I hear the airborne particulates are killer this time of year.”

Spock ignores him. “You said you had been thinking. Does this interest in Dr. Noel reflect that?”

“Thinking? What do you mean? About what?” Jim asks.

“On the planet, before I...while we were still conversing. You spoke of your reluctance to maintain a monogamous relationship, but then indicated that you had been ‘thinking’ about it. Just now, your attention to Dr. Noel’s work persisted 20.76 percent longer than is typical before devolving into a prurient discussion of her physical attributes.”

Jim laughs. “Come on, you’re bullshitting me. There’s no way you have actual data to support that. Which, if you do, that’s... that’s just weird.”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “I have an eidetic memory. Believe me, it is not nearly as desirable as it might seem. And do not avoid the question, Jim. I am asking if this indicates a move towards seeking more from your partners than mere sexual compatibility.”

A blush blooms on Jim's cheeks. “And here I was hoping you’d forgotten that little convo.”

"At the time, I was preoccupied. However, I now find myself with considerable time on my hands," Spock says.

Jim looks incredulous. "Oh, and you've decided to spend it musing on the state of my love life? What did you shake loose in there when you took that swan dive off the cliff?" He indicates Spock's head.

Despite himself, Spock feels blood heat his own face at the baldness of Jim's remark. He takes an overlarge gulp of tea and makes a show of swallowing it before he answers.

"I do not muse," he says. "I merely observe and report."

"You can take the Vulcan out of the lab..." Jim shakes his head. "I don't know. It's just...it gets a bit lonely. I don't ever see anyone twice. They're all one-night stands. Which has always been by mutual arrangement, by the way," he adds. "I haven't been leaving a wake of broken hearts across the cosmos, in case you've heard anything."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're referring to," Spock says diplomatically. He considers a moment. This is unprecedented territory between them; indeed, he has rarely spoken so frankly with another being. "You do not see fit to undertake a romantic commitment elsewhere," he says carefully. "Have you not considered an arrangement with someone on board the ship in the meantime? I understand that this is not uncommon on long-term deep-space missions." Nyota takes great pleasure in detailing her knowledge of such relationships among the crew. He has heard her mention a flow chart.

Jim wrinkles his nose. "I don't know, Spock. It just never seemed right. Fishing off the company pier and all that."

He must look blank, because Jim explains, "Sleeping with people you work with. It just doesn't seem like a good idea. Especially in my case, with the chain of command and all. I mean, not to say that it can't work; you and Uhura were different, for example."

"You believe our relationship to have been outside the realm of what you might term a casual encounter?" Spock asks.

"Of course," Jim says. "You were in it for the long haul, for a while there. Weren't you?"

Spock suddenly feels very exposed. Posed so directly, the question gives him pause. He wonders what possessed him to open this line of discussion. "I do not know. "

Jim nods thoughtfully, staring at the chessboard with unfocused eyes. Spock finds himself relieved that Jim is not looking at him. "But Vulcans are serious about this stuff, right?" Jim asks.

Spock nods. "As a society, we tend toward monogamy, and we mate for life when possible. You are aware of the role telepathy plays in our personal relationships?"

"I know Vulcans are touch-telepaths. I can imagine that must make for pretty intense sex," Jim says, waggling his eyebrows at Spock obnoxiously.

Spock favors him with a raised eyebrow of his own in reply. "Indeed," he says primly.

Jim shifts a little in his seat. "I can imagine. So, what does that have to do with you and Uhura?"

"Melds outside bonded partners are not customary among Vulcans," Spock explains.

"Bonded? But you two were committed, right?"

"Correct," Spock says. "However, we were not bonded in the traditional sense."

"Ah. So bonded is like married?" Jim says.

"The two concepts are not exactly interchangeable, but essentially yes. It was a difficult situation. Nyota did not desire that level of commitment at the time." There is, of course, another factor, but he will not disclose it. Perhaps it will prove a non-issue, in any case. Jim watches him quietly for a long moment, eyes narrowed, as if aware Spock is not being entirely forthcoming. Then he relaxes, and smiles.

"Maybe we should make a pact," Jim says, a look on his face that Spock is unfortunately coming to know rather well at this point in their association.

"A pact?" Spock's gut churns. Perhaps it is the tea.

"Yeah," Jim says slowly. "Maybe I should give a long-term thing a shot. And maybe you should...I don't know, what do you want to do? Find someone you can Vulcan-bond with?"

Spock plucks at the lower hem of his tunic uncomfortably. "I do not wish to pursue that avenue at this time," he says, more sharply than he means to.

"Okay, fine," Jim says, acquiescing. "But you can still have fun, right?"

"Choosing not to seek a bondmate does not preclude sexual encounters, if that is what you are alluding to." That, Spock is not averse to, if he is being honest. He could choose to subsume the sexual impulse entirely, of course, but then he is not yet a disciple of kolinahr. *Self-flagellation*, says his mother's voice again.

No, he need not yet take that measure.

Across the table, Jim is nodding enthusiastically.

"Great. So you go...have sexual encounters, yay! And I'll give this dating thing a shot for a change. We've got shore leave coming up, and I might just invite Helen Noel out to dinner."

Reciprocity again, Spock thinks. Why it is necessary for the two of them to undertake some sort of agreement, he does not know. He decides that the vagaries of human behavior account for the heavy feeling in the vicinity of his heart.

The excitement in the transporter room is palpable. Not even Spock is immune. They'll beam down to the planet in shifts, with the Alpha bridge crew first by virtue of rank. Lieutenant Commander Scott has agreed to remain behind and take the conn, although his protective hand on the transporter controls indicates that this is not necessarily a hardship.

"I'll take good care of her, sir," he says to the captain, patting the console.

For his part, Jim is dressed in a suit and tie. In a nod to his preferred shore leave attire, the tie is bright blue and printed with yellow pineapples. ("I don't care if there are no suitable accommodations on the coast, Spock, the Hawaiian shirt is symbolic.")

At his side, Dr. Noel picks up the end of the tie with thumb and forefinger and rolls her eyes. "Nice," she says. She is wearing a black dress and very high heels.

"You know, I found these awesome, gigantic, rhinestone-encrusted pineapple earrings, but I thought 'too soon,'" Jim replies.

"You thought wrong," says Dr. Noel. "That is definitely what you should have bought me on our first date. Because I think the matchy-matchy thing is totally hot."

"Dammit," Jim says, laughing.

Spock turns away.

To his right, Sulu is needling Chekov about the legal drinking age on Cestra V, which Spock is fairly sure varies by species. Nyota is deep in conversation with Yeoman Rand and Nurse Chapel regarding the merits of several different drinking establishments. She scrolls feverishly through the guidebook on her PADD.

"Christine, what is wrong with you?" Nyota says, shaking her head. "This club has thirties night! The 2230s are only the best musical decade ever. I mean, unless you hate dancing your ass off, which you and Riley clearly do. Janice here is with me." She looks up at him. "Spock, be our tiebreaker. What do you think?"

"As I was but a child during the period in question, I cannot provide an accurate assessment of the decade's popular music. Although I feel secure in stating that, unless Vulcan in origin, it is likely subpar," he says.

Chapel punches the air with a fist. "Yes! Thank you, Mr. Spock! Tellarite hard house it is." She blushes then, and looks hurriedly back at Nyota, who regards him with mock sourness.

"You're no fun," she says. "So now that you've totally ruined my plans for shore leave, what will you be doing on Cesta?"

In the end, Spock goes with them. The club Chapel favored is dark and throbbing like something alive, punctuated by pulsing lights. Her apparent distaste for the music forgotten, Nyota grabs her friends by the hands and gestures for Spock and Lieutenant Riley to follow them into the melee. The bar is packed, with patrons of at least ten different species

competing for the attention of the wait staff. Nyota mutters something about ‘throwing elbows’ and fights her way into the nearest bartender’s line of sight.

Five minutes later, she presses a glass of Altair water into his hand and clinks it with her own flute. Her drink is orange in the strange light and she leans her head back into the strobes, laughing, before she takes a sip.

“It’s good to get off the ship,” she says, half-yelling over the beat. “I haven’t gone dancing in forever.”

It has been eight months, three weeks, and four days since Nyota last went dancing, but she will not likely be able to hear his reply. He spares his voice and nods instead.

“You going to be okay over here? Christine’s already out there with two Andorians and I can’t let her have all the fun,” she says apologetically.

He nods again, leaning in. “Go. Enjoy yourself.” She reaches up and squeezes his arm, then ducks back into the crowd and disappears.

Spock leans back against the bar. He takes a small sip of his drink. He will not buy another, he decides. The prices on the pleasure planets are exorbitant, capitalizing on their status as havens for homesick travelers in need of food, drink, or company in any combination different from shipboard life. He dislikes the way the humans act here, although he knows he should not judge. They confuse him, drunk and desperate for both difference and familiarity at the same time. He wonders how Jim is faring, wherever he and Dr. Noel have gone.

“Are you here alone?” says a clipped voice very close to his ear. Spock starts at the other being’s proximity, stiffening and turning to see a Vulcan male next to him, hands raised in a gesture of deference. “I apologize for startling you. This room is interminably loud.”

Again, Spock must lean in to make himself heard. It is tiresome, having to raise his voice like this.

“I estimate that we may remain here for seventy-five minutes maximum before suffering irreversible damage to the tympanic membrane,” Spock says by way of reply.

The Vulcan gives him an appraising look.

“May I buy you a drink?” he asks.

They do not stay in the club for long. They leave their drinks unfinished in favor of a walk in the planet’s verdant parkland. Massive trees strung with lanterns line the path, and glowing moths the size of songbirds drift lazily in the warm air.

The Vulcan’s name is Sorvik and he is a geologist aboard a Science Academy mining vessel. He is on Cesta V awaiting passage back to the new Vulcan colony.

“The Time,” he explains quietly. “It draws near.”

Spock nods. "Do you have long to wait?"

Sorvik shakes his head. "Three months, four perhaps," he says. "Were it sooner, I would not have engaged you tonight. I can feel it beginning, though. A stirring in the blood."

"I am young yet," says Spock. "I have not felt it." He does not speak of his lineage, the hope that he might yet be spared. "Will you bond?" he asks instead.

"My betrothed was off-planet when Vulcan was attacked. We both were. We are most fortunate."

There is a slight warmth in his voice that takes Spock aback. He supposes that some Vulcans must feel affection toward their intended. That he and T'Pol did not share an affinity must surely be the exception rather than the rule. Despite this, if he concentrates, he can feel the ragged edge of their bond. He finds himself wishing fervently there had been time to make the arrangements they had all known to be inevitable.

Sorvik extends his hand and brushes his fingers tentatively against Spock's.

"My lodgings here on Cesta V are spacious," he says. "You may share them tonight, if you wish."

The man is tall, lean, and dark, and Spock finds, to his surprise, that he does wish. He had not intended to take Jim up on his challenge. But to borrow a human idiom, he does not see the logic in cutting off his nose to spite his face.

It is reassuring to be in the company of a fellow Vulcan. Spock realizes, when they have returned to Sorvik's room and are sitting on the bed cross-legged in the dim light, that he has never had sexual intercourse with another of his father's race. There were adolescent fumbblings, of course, hot nights in the desert passing a bottle of port and playing at drunkenness. But nothing like this. He is struck with the strange feeling that he has somehow found a clone of himself, although he and Sorvik look nothing alike.

Their fingers tangle, sending sparks of sensation shooting up Spock's arm. Without thinking, Spock presses his body against Sorvik's and kisses him the human way. The other man draws back, and Spock can feel a frisson of surprise through his skin. "I apologize," Spock says quickly. Sorvik shakes his head. "Unnecessary," he says, and kisses Spock back, a little clumsily.

"Strange," Sorvik murmurs. "But not unpleasant." He trails kisses experimentally along Spock's jawline, down his neck. Spock leans back, allowing him access, letting him run hands down under Spock's tunic and over his chest. Spock sits up slightly, shrugs out of the shirt and slips his pants down his hips. Sorvik does the same with predatory grace.

He moves down the bed, down Spock's body, and breathes against him. His hesitation is a question. Yes, Spock answers with his whole body, lying supine on the bed. *Yes*.

Sorvik kneels beside Spock, breath hot at his groin, and Spock tries very hard not to whimper. Sorvik looks up at him and watches Spock's face for a torturous moment before

turning his attention to Spock's half-hard cock. He laps once at the head, then takes Spock down his throat in one smooth, practiced motion. Spock stifles a gasp and clutches a handful of the bedsheet. He curls the other hand around the nape of Sorvik's neck, scratching lightly at the knob of the vertebra prominens. Spock feels a hand drift low to cup his testicles, then lower, spreading the mess of saliva down from his cock to his hole. He gasps and jerks a little at the intrusion, as Sorvik's finger rubs a lazy circle and presses inside. The faint burn coupled with the wet heat round his cock is maddening, and Spock feels as if he's trapped, held captive between warring sensations. Sorvik moans around Spock's cock in his mouth, and Spock shudders as he imagines what he must feel like, his ass hot and clasp around Sorvik's sensitive fingers.

Sorvik pulls off of Spock with an obscene pop. "There is lubricant in the drawer there, if you desire further penetration," he says, somewhat breathlessly. Spock thinks he detects a note of hopefulness in Sorvik's voice.

"That would be satisfactory," Spock says, his voice low. He leans over to retrieve the bottle from Sorvik's nightstand and passes it down the bed, his fingers brushing Sorvik's as he takes it. The contact seems to trigger something in Sorvik. He gives a low growl and returns to his ministrations, pausing only to squeeze the bottle's contents into his palm before taking Spock down to the hilt again. This time, Spock can't stop himself from thrusting up into Sorvik's mouth, and when he does so Sorvik hums in encouragement, pressing inside Spock again, stretching him, sliding in his middle finger too now. Spock has not been touched this way in a long time, though he cannot be bothered to calculate exactly how long at this juncture. All he knows presently is that it burns, just on the knife edge between pleasure and pain, and Sorvik lavishes additional attention on the sensitive head of Spock's cock as if he knows what Spock is thinking.

"One does not require telepathy to see how your muscles tense, to feel how you tighten around me," Sorvik murmurs, fisting Spock deftly to make up for the loss of his mouth. He runs his free hand down Spock's side, and Spock is momentarily overcome by the desire to hide his face. "Ah, but you open so well for me," Sorvik says. "Even as you lie here I can reach deeper and deeper. In fact..." He crooks his fingers inside Spock and suddenly a bolt of pure pleasure shoots through him, and Spock can't contain a strangled cry. He imagines he hears Sorvik give a dark little laugh, which is of course impossible. Regardless, he seems to take pleasure from Spock's vocalization, because he increases his pace, stretching Spock with his fingers and bending to suck Spock down again. Spock lets his mind wander, and finds himself thinking of Jim. He wonders if Jim is kneeling between Dr. Noel's parted thighs, or if perhaps she has taken him into her mouth. And once he has fixed these images in his mind's eye, is it really so surprising that his brain should substitute Jim for Sorvik, Spock for Helen Noel? And so Sorvik mutters something Spock can't hear. He fists Spock's spit-slick cock once, twice, and brushes Spock's prostate with long, searching fingers, and Spock comes hard, thinking helplessly of Jim.

When Spock wakes, Sorvik is gone. He finds his clothing neatly folded on a chair next to the bed, his communicator blinking atop the pile.

Spock: the message reads, I rose early to exercise. Please join me for the morning meal if you wish. Otherwise, I wish you safe passage. Live long and prosper. Sorvik.

Spock thinks for a moment, then dresses. He has two hours until he is due to report. He flips open the communicator and hits reply. *Peace and long life*. He then hails the ship and reports one to beam up.

He had expected some sort of debrief from the captain upon his return to the ship, but as it turns out, he does not see Jim again until the start of the next Alpha shift. He swaggers onto the bridge and shoots Spock a broad smile, which Spock supposes is a more subdued version of his typical response to a mutually satisfactory sexual encounter. As he is not Jim's usual confidant in such matters, Spock can only hazard a conjecture that his typical response involves finger guns and liberal use of the word "awesome."

The smile also seems intended to communicate the fact that Jim Kirk, in this instance anyway, is disinclined to kiss and tell. Spock catches him staring in the mess out of the corner of his eye, gaze fixed on Spock's neck. Spock wonders who saw him with Sorvik down on the pleasure planet, because someone almost certainly did. But he never learns what, if anything, Jim has heard, and the captain remains circumspect on the matter of Helen Noel.

Spock is left to draw his own conclusions when their standing chess games drop to once a week. He can find no logical reason for his vague sense of dissatisfaction because, on the surface, everything about his interaction with Jim is the same. Jim still makes small talk over the chessboard, still plays with a mix of strategy and braggadocio, still makes good-natured attempts to goad Spock into an emotional response. But there is something different about him, Spock decides. Something about him has unwound where it was coiled too tight before. Spock feels tense as if in counterpoint, as though whatever it was that has melted out of the captain has taken up residence in him.

If he did not know what it was then, he does now. A stirring in the blood, Sorvik said. Spock feels a strange prick when he thinks of that night on Cesta V, perhaps because it was the last time he remembers feeling himself.

I returned to the ship, he thinks, and everything changed. His hands are shaking.

How long? thinks Spock. He has been remiss; he should have consulted Sarek or another of the elders long ago. But he long hoped to be spared the ravages of the Time. It is the sole instance in his life that he has wished for his human blood to win out.

It now appears that it has only succeeded in accelerating the onset of his first *pon farr*.

He can hear his heart beat. His metabolic rate will only increase now, his endocrine glands working overtime, pumping his system with hormones like puppet-strings over which he has no control. Gradually, they will take over, until he must succumb to the *plak tow*. But surely, Spock thinks, forcing himself to breathe deeply, surely he has time yet. Months, maybe even closer to a year.

He will speak to his father at the earliest opportunity, and with a member of the medical staff, provided he can do so discreetly and without Dr. McCoy's knowledge. Sufficiently buoyed, he returns to his work.

Dr. M'benga's face is grim as he consults the results of Spock's bloodwork. They are in Spock's quarters; M'benga's studies on Vulcan mean he understands why Spock must be spared the indignity of sickbay.

"I'm sorry," he says, "but you have a month. Maybe a little longer, if you're very lucky. You need to get to the colony as soon as possible." He casts his eyes down at the floor. "Unless there's someone here," he says quietly.

Spock shakes his head, careful to keep his expression neutral. It is increasingly difficult. Already, he feels dull rage at a slow boil inside him, and with it the irrational urge to strike the doctor. He curls his hands into fists at his sides. When he speaks the words feel strange in his mouth.

"I will consult the captain. We should reach the colony in sufficient time, provided we alter our present course within the next 1.5 days," Spock says.

M'benga looks stern. "I understand the sensitive nature of your condition," he says. "But you can't afford to wait, Commander. Waiting would be illogical. You know this."

Be silent, thinks Spock furiously. *You overestimate yourself, to speak with such authority to a true child of Surak.* But this molten anger within him has nothing at all to do with Surak's logic.

M'benga has continued speaking, and Spock nods again as if he has been following, suddenly desperate for M'benga to finish with him and leave him alone.

When at last the doctor turns and leaves, Spock lights the traditional incense and prepares for meditation. This ritual too has proven increasingly challenging. He can hear his heart beating now. Soon, it says. Soon, soon, soon. Soon he will have nothing, not ritual, not logic. Nothing in the way of the blood fever. He closes his eyes and attempts to center himself while he still has the luxury of trying.

Jim is characteristically accommodating, though Spock can see that avoiding the temptation to question him about his request is almost physically painful. The *Enterprise* alters course to New Vulcan without question. If Nyota looks askance at him, it is not his concern. He is first officer, her superior, and he need care only for his captain's approval. Everything is in its right place.

Spock did not count on the cave-in.

The mission is, as Jim is so fond of putting it, a milk run. Spock is correct in his calculation of the time it will take them to reach the colony; as he will arrive with ample time to spare, he sees no reason to stress the gravity of the situation. So when Jim receives Starfleet

Command's request to investigate an outlying signal from a little-known moon, Spock has no reason to voice opposition.

Had he the gift of foresight, he might have done so. As the dust clears, and it becomes apparent that the mouth of the tunnel is blocked, he instinctively gropes for Jim in the dark.

"Captain?" Spock calls. "Are you all right?"

Somewhere in the tunnel, he can hear Jim coughing.

"Spock? I'm fine; I'm over here. Are you okay?"

"Relatively speaking." A warm rivulet of blood snakes through the fine dust caking his face. The air smells of sulfur.

The signal was inconsequential, of course, originating from an abandoned mechanism hundreds of years old. They'd discovered the rusting hulk 11.4 scant minutes before the tunnel collapsed. A milk run, indeed.

"I guess it's not worth asking if your communicator is working."

Spock hopes his silence is answer enough. He feels strange today, strange even for this new normal. He realizes he can smell Jim in the dark. "Are you bleeding?" he asks. He can smell the tang of iron.

"What? No, I don't think so. Maybe a cut."

Spock hears rocks moving and then a small circle of light pools around Jim's feet. He steps closer. "Hey, are you all right? You sound weird."

"I am not myself." He kneels, suddenly dizzy. Now, his heart says. Now, now. No, he thinks, and it is not until he feels Jim's hand on his shoulder that he realizes he has spoken aloud.

"Spock? What the hell is going on?"

"You should...stay away," he says. It is difficult to speak over the roar in his ears; he is surprised that Jim cannot hear it. It's so loud, an ocean in his head. One being can't possibly contain all this sound.

"What? Why? Spock, you need to tell me what the hell is wrong with you."

Spock doesn't answer. Jim sighs angrily.

"Look, I wasn't going to say anything, but I know you saw M'benga last week." Jim pauses, then continues on in a rush of words before Spock can reply. "You just...you seemed off. I was worried, so I looked at the sickbay logs." *Hacked the sickbay logs*, Spock supplies, somewhere in the shred of a rational mind he has left.

Jim continues. "I was expecting to see the flu, a booster shot, something dumb. I didn't mean to...to pry."

Spock has the disconcerting urge to snarl at the captain. He swallows against it like a bone in his throat.

"And what did the logs say?" he says, trying to keep his voice level.

Jim laughs nervously. "Nothing. They said nothing. Just that M'benga met with you in your quarters. It was the day before you came and found me and asked for the detour to the colony."

They stare at each other. Jim has a flare out; it suffuses the small space with a green glow. He looks pale and sweaty in the odd, low light.

"If that visit was nothing--if you have the flu or you're under the weather--or if this detour to the colony is nothing, then fine. I'm a pain in the ass who can't stay out of his crew's business. But you've declined leave every time it's been offered. Which makes it even weirder to me that you're requesting it now."

"This is not a matter for outworlders," Spock says. The voice doesn't sound like his own; it sounds like it is welling up from some dark place inside him. He presses his palms into the cool rock of the cave.

"So this *is* a Vulcan thing? Can you just tell me--"

"We do not speak of it."

"Well, Spock, we're trapped in a damn cave and our communicators are shot. And since all I've got in the way of first aid is a hip flask of Saurian brandy and some band-aids, you'd better give it a try."

Spock swallows again. The roaring in his ears is louder now; he can barely hear himself speak over it. He tries to keep his voice even.

"It has to do with...biology," he says carefully.

"What?" says Jim. "You're muttering."

"Biology."

"Biology? What kind of biology?"

"Vulcan biology."

Jim blinks. "Just so I'm totally clear--you mean the biology of Vulcans?"

The rational part of Spock's brain, rapidly dwindling though it is, knows that Jim is not being willfully obtuse. Whatever conversation Jim expected to have with Spock on the matter of his

visit to sickbay, he is reasonably certain that a discourse on the Vulcan reproductive system is not it. But the rage that boils in his blood has no capacity for patient explanation.

These are our ways, it cries. They are not to be taught to prying aliens. Spock looks across at Jim, his eyes wide in the dim light, and suppresses the impulse to run, to claw at the rockfall that bars his escape until his hands bleed. He has begun to sweat.

“That is correct. I ask that you be patient with me, Jim. As I said, I... am not myself. I am referring to certain reproductive processes.” He casts about for examples, for ways to make Jim understand. “Consider the Terran salmon. Near the end of its lifespan, it feels a bone-deep compulsion to revisit the very stream where it was born in order to mate, spawn, and then die.”

He feels himself flush. He is being deliberately vague and it will not work; Jim is too astute for that.

“So this is some kind of birds and bees thing? You don’t need to be embarrassed about it, Spock. It happens to everyone.” Jim rakes a hand through his hair, laughing nervously. “Well, shit. Didn’t think I’d have to have the ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves’ talk with my first officer. Did I miss that in the job description?”

“It is a cyclical process,” Spock says flatly. “It occurs every seven years from the time of sexual maturity. I had hoped to be spared this, but it appears my genetic circumstances have only accelerated the onset of the condition.”

He looks down at his hands. The stone floor of the cave was cool; now it is slick with his perspiration, heated by the pulse of his blood. It feels like wet skin. He gasps.

“What... what’s it doing to you?” Jim reaches out as if to steady him, but Spock flinches away. To feel Jim’s hands on him...he doesn’t know what would happen. *I want*, says the dark voice inside. Spock grimaces. No, he thinks. *No*.

“It sends my endocrine system into overdrive. It is currently flooding my system with hormones, and eventually, I will be overcome. I will be inconsolable, uncontrollable, devoid of logic. It is called the *plak tow*. In Standard, the blood fever.”

He looks up at Jim, at the lines of his face in the low light. He can feel Jim’s eyes on him and cannot repress a shudder of embarrassment at how he must look now, hunched and sweaty on the floor of the cave.

Jim gulps, licking his lips compulsively. “And what happens then?”

Spock looks away. “Following the onset of the *plak tow*, I must take a mate. I described the Vulcan bond to you, but there is something I did not disclose: I had a bondmate, once. There would have been a ceremony. But Vulcan is gone, and she with it. On the colony, there are methods of dealing with such eventualities. But as you are eminently aware, I am not on the colony.”

“So if you go into this fever and you can’t...mate. Then...” Comprehension seems to dawn on his face. “Spock, what the hell kind of biological impulse is this? ‘Mate or die’?”

Spock leans heavily against the cave wall, a rock digging into the small of his back. He presses against it, to the point of pain. It feels sharp and clean. He closes his eyes.

“Spock, look at me.” Spock doesn’t move.

“For God’s sake, look at me.” Jim has moved in front of him now. Spock can smell his blood again, hear his heart pounding. His heart rate is elevated a full thirty beats per minute above normal, indicating either intense physical activity or stress. Average resting heart rate for an adult human male is—

"Spock."

Jim reaches out and touches his cheek.

It’s the barest ghost of a touch, but Jim’s fingertips are cool and he’s touching Spock and the cave floor feels like skin. And though he hates himself for it, Spock can’t help but lean into Jim's hand.

“You aren’t going to die,” Jim says in a hoarse whisper.

The roar in Spock’s head has reconciled itself into a pleased hum. It sounds like satisfaction. It disturbs him profoundly.

“I am alone.” He doesn’t quite know what he means.

“No, you’re not. And I’m not going to let you die.” Jim drops his hand, leaning in further to rest his forehead against Spock’s. He can feel Jim’s breath hot against his mouth, then Jim closes even that small space and presses a kiss to his lips. It’s tentative at first, but then it’s as if the contact has loosened something in Jim, and he begins to ply Spock with his tongue. Spock gasps.

Keeping his eyes closed, he senses rather than sees Jim withdraw. “What do we do?” he whispers.

“We wait,” says Spock, finally daring to look.

Jim stares at him for a long moment, as if he wants to say something else, but then he nods resolutely. Resigning himself, thinks Spock. "Jim," says Spock roughly, "You must understand. I will not be careful," he says. "I will not--"

Jim laughs mirthlessly. There's a strange look to him; Spock imagines it mirrors his own. "Think I can't take it?" He shakes his head as if in disbelief. Spock wishes he wouldn't laugh that way.

“All right,” Jim says finally, sighing. “So, we wait. Are you okay to help me try and shift some of this rock fall in the meantime? If we can work our way a little closer to the cave mouth they might be able to lock on with the transporter.”

When it happens, it happens quickly. Deep in the cave, Spock cannot tell if it is day or night, but his last coherent thought before the fever takes him is that it is ship's night and they have been here a full day.

Earlier, they grew tired of moving rocks and sat together on the cave floor, slumped against each other. "How does it feel?" Jim asked quietly.

"Like a sea inside," Spock answered.

Now, the sea breaks over him and drags him under. His vision tunnels, and everything is tinted red. He cannot speak.

He reaches for Jim and cares nothing for the hint of hesitation he feels before Jim leans into Spock's kiss. The gesture holds none of Jim's earlier tenderness. It's all tongue and teeth, Spock probing into the wet heat of Jim's mouth, and yes yes yes this is what Spock wants. He rends their clothing without pretense and laves Jim's exposed flesh inch by inch. He bites and licks his way down to Jim's cock and swallows it with a rasp of teeth. Above him, Jim cries out, but Spock either does not hear it or does not care. Spock sucks him until Jim is hard and pulsing under his tongue; he gasps and thrusts up into Spock's throat and the dark thing within Spock hums with pleasure again.

He reaches up and grips Jim at the root, and Jim whimpers. Sitting up, Spock flips him in one motion, kneeling over the smooth swell of Jim's ass, pale green in the light of the flares. He rests his palm on it for a second, feeling a frisson of uncertainty through Jim's skin. Then he bends lower, raking teeth across Jim's sensitive flesh. Then lower still, and he's spreading Jim wide to taste. Jim twitches at the first slippery slide of Spock's mouth on him, like he was expecting something else. Spock is suddenly frantic to consume, to claim, and he can smell sweat and blood and Jim, and he laps at Jim's hole and feels Jim buck back against his face as Spock works his tongue inside. He works his fingers in alongside it, spreading the mess of spit around, withdrawing his tongue and resting his cheek on Jim's ass as he works his fingers in deeper. They glisten obscenely in the low light when he withdraws them, only to thrust back inside. Jim shudders, clamping down on Spock's fingers. Spock feels a laugh rise in his throat and lets it loose. He wants to feel Jim from the inside, wants to feel Jim's ass clench like that around his cock. He sits up, gripping Jim at the hipbones. He wants, and as he presses into Jim and feels more slick wet heat surround him, he takes.

Sheathed balls-deep inside Jim, Spock finds that the blood roaring in his ears abates slightly. He stills, enjoying the sensation, then rolls his hips lazily before grasping Jim's hipbones and setting a punishing pace. Beneath him, Jim gasps, chanting a litany of little cries under his breath. He tries to work a hand between his body and the floor but Spock swats it away; Jim is his to control.

Spock stretches them out along the floor, still grinding into Jim hard enough to bruise. He brings a hand up to cup his face and Jim's tongue darts out at his fingers as he moves them to the psi points. And then everything is gone. The cave, their bodies—Spock dives under the surface into the red and black.

Jim's shock is staggering. At first, Spock feels Jim recoil at the abandon he senses in Spock's mind. The contrast between *his* Spock and this rampant emotion takes him aback.

Now you see, Spock thinks.

Now I see, Jim echoes.

Coupled as their minds are, the bubbling anger Spock has repressed ever since the first stirrings of the fever manifested dissipates as if it was never there. This is what the Time is about, Spock realizes.

A marriage of true minds, he thinks, or Jim does. He does not know, and it does not matter.

He delves into Jim's mind, pleased at how quickly he submits as Spock darts across the months and years, here and there, a small, bright fish. He starts when he sees himself there, amid old frustrations and fears. He sees them fight on the bridge, feels his throat tighten looking into eyes black with rage and sadness. He sees Jim considering him, a difficult knot to tease apart. He sees himself bleeding out on Caley, unconscious, feels the echoes of worry and fear and...something else.

Jim shows it to him as if unwrapping something precious. Deep in the center of his mind, it rests like a carefully tended seed.

I didn't know, Spock thinks.

I'm good at hiding.

Jim...

It's all right.

And abruptly, Spock can feel his body again. He can feel both their bodies, thrumming with pleasure. He grips Jim in hand and works his cock in the way he somehow knows Jim likes best, and is rewarded with a moan. He matches the cant of his hips to the pump of his fist and feels himself begin to come undone. He buries his face at the juncture of Jim's neck and shoulder and sinks his teeth in as he comes.

When Spock wakes he can immediately feel that the fever has ebbed. He's curled in on himself in a corner of the cave, back pressed against the rock wall. He can smell sweat and soap and another scent that's uniquely...Jim. His eyes fly open. Jim. No. He scrabbles into a sitting position. Jim is sitting up few feet away, cross-legged, looking at him contemplatively. He's dirty, his hair mussed, and he has a silver insulation blanket draped over his shoulders. He's still wearing the tatters of his uniform shirt, and Spock feels a hot rush of shame.

He notices Spock watching him. "Hey," he says. "How are you feeling?"

Spock opens his mouth and then closes it again. When he finally speaks, his voice is harsh as if from shouting and his throat is sore.

"My actions over the past..." he shakes his head, realizing he has no idea how long they've been here.

"It's been three days," Jim says quietly.

"My actions have been unforgivable. I wish to...I must apologize."

"Spock, it's--"

"It's not," Spock says. He feels as if he's been eating sand. He looks down at his hands, expecting them to shake as they had been at the outset of the blood fever, but they are steadfast. It feels wrong somehow. "The ship," he says, looking back up at Jim abruptly.

Jim blushes. "They--they got through the rock fall last night," he says. "I told the first guy in to fuck off and send M'benga."

Spock nods. "Thank you," he says.

"You were out like a light," Jim says, smiling sadly at him. "But I got him to take a look at you and he didn't seem to be too worried. He brought some first aid stuff and rations, if you're hungry."

Spock is not hungry. In fact, his stomach is roiling. "Are you all right?" he asks Jim.

"Might be sitting a little funny for the next couple days," he says. "And if I was going to have a three-day sex marathon, I might have chosen a less...bruise-y setting." He gestures at the cave. "But I'll live."

Spock shakes his head. "I should never have beamed down to the planet's surface," he says. "I should have remained in my quarters."

Jim crosses the space between them, sitting down again next to Spock and placing a hand gingerly on his knee. "That's ridiculous, and you know it," he says. "If you hadn't come down here..." Jim shakes his head as if trying to dispel whatever image he has of the alternative. "Doesn't matter," Jim says resolutely. "You came, and we...we got through it, right? I mean, if we're talking should've-dones, here, you *should* have just told me what the hell was going on with you, and I'd never have agreed to this mission in the first place. We might not have made it to the colony in time, but it would have beaten a cave floor, am I right?" He looks up at Spock, eyes liquid. He looks like there's something else he wants to say, but he appears to think better of it.

"Anyway, we can beam back up whenever you're ready," he says, standing up. "You need to report to sickbay as soon as you get back to the ship, okay? Full physical and STI preventatives, just in case, unless there were some ceremonial Vulcan condoms I don't know about."

"There were not," Spock says, face hot. He must get control of himself. He looks at his hands again. There are dull red crescents crusted under his fingernails. He does not wish to think about how they might correspond to Jim's person.

"I'm going too. To sickbay, I mean. We can beam up separately if you want," Jim adds, as if this should make Spock feel better. It is not Spock's own privacy he cares for at this moment;

he feels he should say so to Jim, but the words will not come. He shakes his head instead. "Unnecessary," he says.

Jim looks briefly relieved, but then worry falls back over his face like a curtain, and Spock's stomach lurches again. "M'benga brought some extra clothes," Jim says, tossing a bundle at Spock. "Guess we should get decent before we go back up there." Spock nods his thanks.

Spock sits in silence for a long time, Jim busying himself dressing and collecting the detritus of three days bivouacking in the cave. He should get up, will get up in a moment and help Jim, but for now Spock listens. He wonders, illogically, if his heart beats time with Jim's, but he can no longer hear it.

Back on the ship, Spock has barely materialized on the transporter pad before he leaves the room and the querulous expressions of Mr. Scott and the transporter crew behind. He feels Jim's eyes on him, but he does not wait. He stalks through the corridors, suddenly aware of how much better he feels than the last time he walked these halls. He is sore and stiff, both from the cave floor and from their exertions, but beneath these superficial hurts is a humming current of rightness. He feels a pang of shame, and rather than tamping it down immediately he allows himself to luxuriate in it. It is no more than he deserves, he thinks, for what transpired in the cave. He should report to the brig, bring himself up on charges. He imagines explaining himself to the security officers, to Starfleet, and the shame wells up in him like a hot tide. He wonders what his mother would say if she could see him now. Most likely, something both infuriatingly illogical and eminently right. She was good at that, he thinks, and he imagines his father's face after so many of their arguments: the amusement dancing at the corners of his eyes, how he schooled it away when Spock looked too closely.

In sickbay, he nods at M'benga and ducks past McCoy, who glowers like a gargoyle from a corner of the room. McCoy looks like he wants to follow M'benga into the exam room, but he just hovers in the doorway a moment, jabbing a finger inchoately in Spock's direction before muttering something to himself and disappearing into his office.

"Well, you check out fine," M'benga says after his exam. He removes his gloves and tosses them into the disposal. "I can have Chapel draw your labs; we'd have the results by the end of the day, but I'm going to go out on a limb and assume they'd be normal too, so I won't hold you to it." He gives Spock a long look, as if trying to reconcile something.

"Speak freely, Doctor," Spock says, finally.

"Do you want to talk about it?" says M'benga.

"I am quite unsure what you are referring to," Spock says, prevaricating.

M'benga nods, glancing down at the floor. "Of course." He hesitates for a moment, then: "Commander, I want you to know that I understand the sensitive nature of this matter," he says. "The notes I've made in your chart are as oblique as I can make them within the parameters of my position. But as you well know, my CMO isn't stupid, and if he has reason to go looking for the truth, he will uncover it."

"Understood," Spock said. "I appreciate your circumspection." If McCoy sees fit to discover what exactly transpired on the planet, Spock knows he cannot stop him. Indeed, the fact that Jim has also pledged to seek medical attention greatly increases the likelihood that this will occur. McCoy is rarely able to resist becoming involved in Jim's personal life, and despite whatever issues this may create for Spock in the future, he finds he cannot begrudge McCoy his concern for the captain.

M'benga looks at him, something like trepidation in his eyes. "Commander, if I may...from what I understand of Vulcan culture, this is a major life event. If you find you need to--to process that, I would advise doing so sooner rather than later."

Spock stands up, straightening his tunic. "Noted, Doctor," he says coolly. "Now, if I am cleared for duty, I believe I will return to my quarters and ready myself for my shift tomorrow."

As he leaves, Spock can hear the hum of voices from the adjacent exam room. Jim murmurs in low tones Spock cannot quite make out, and McCoy's voice is alternately strident and cajoling. If the door to the exam room slides open as Spock steps into the corridor, if he hears McCoy call after him, Spock does not acknowledge it.

Spock half-expects either Jim or McCoy or both to visit him that evening, but he is not interrupted. He indulges in a water shower, scrubbing at his fingernails for longer than is strictly necessary to clean them. He successfully completes the modest backlog of paperwork accrued over the past three days, and responds to 147 emails. He ignores the automatic notification from Medical indicating an update to his records. He also ignores an email from Nyota, received four days prior, with the subject line "?". Before retiring for the night, he spends an hour in deeper meditation than he can recall achieving in months. He should feel refreshed, he muses as he strips off his uniform and turns back the blankets on his bed. He should feel at ease, his mind settled, but instead he stares at the ceiling and tosses restlessly. He imagines he can hear pacing in the corridor, stopping in front of his door and then moving away again. But the footsteps are only in his head, and he lets himself follow them back and forth until he falls asleep.

At the start of alpha shift, Spock arrives at his station a full half hour early, nodding absently to the ensign he relieves. He turns his attention to his console, logging in to his account only to be met with a quarterly software update keyed to his login. Spock had hoped to be thoroughly engaged in his work by the time the rest of the alpha bridge crew arrives, but the update runs at a creeping pace. So when the turbolift doors slide open and a mass of red and gold pours out, Spock has no choice but to acknowledge their arrival. The captain gives him a tight smile before taking a seat in the center chair and accepting a sizable stack of PADDs from his yeoman. Spock finds himself surprised at the normalcy of Jim's actions. He is alternately grateful for it and abashed, particularly as he sees Jim stiffen and then shift in his seat, eyes never leaving the screen in front of him. Nyota, for her part, makes a beeline for the science station. Spock wills himself to stand a little taller as he watches her come. He straightens the hem of his tunic. It's a reflex that he is frequently all too aware of, but seems to be powerless to stop.

Nyota looks like she wants to throw her arms around him, but instead she crosses them across her chest as if she's worried they'll act of their own volition. She leans into him, peering into his face like she's looking for something specific. Then she straightens with a sigh. He can't tell if she's found what she was looking for.

"Are you okay?" she asks, eyes narrowed. Spock slumps a little. She always was good at cutting to the core of him. There is little logic in attempting to lie; Spock is a terrible liar on his best day, and he dislikes the thought of lying to Nyota. Still, he cannot be frank with her, least of all here and now.

"I am well," he says. It's the truth, physically at least.

She lets out a breath. She does hug him then, a brief press of her body to his. She stands back, smiling wanly. "I'm sorry," she says. "It's just...god, three days without contact, and we couldn't beam you out. For awhile there it looked like those rocks weren't moving, and when the team finally got in we had no idea what we were going to..."

She stops, looking away. She swallows. When she turns back, she's smiling. It reminds him of that watery smile Jim wore in the cave, and he finds it disconcerting.

"I don't know why I'm this upset," Nyota says. "It's not like you two haven't had it way worse than a cave-in." She glances briefly at Jim. "It was just...the not knowing was hard."

Spock nods. Oddly, he thinks, the rock barrier was a blessing. If the blood fever had to strike him on the planet, he can think of far worse locations. A wide-open prairie, in the midst of the full complement of the landing party, for example. For a moment, he wonders if Nyota knows, if he looks as irrevocably changed as he feels. But no, her expression beneath the sad smile is unclouded. If she was in full possession of the truth about their ill-fated mission, surely she would not look so unreservedly pleased to see him.

"Anyway," she says. "No more gloom and doom for a little while, okay? Promise?"

It's illogical to make a promise one has no hope of keeping, but Spock does it anyway.

The rest of the shift is mercifully quiet. Halfway through, a headache begins to beat at Spock's temples. He focuses on his viewscreen and imagines wrapping the pain in a thick, soft cloth, muffling it and putting it aside. It's harder than it should be. Spock feels distracted. He can feel Jim's eyes on the back of his neck as surely as if he were to turn and look. He turns inward again and counts the minutes until shift change. With four minutes and forty seconds to go, he hears the captain's chair squeak as it turns. There must be a more efficient swiveling mechanism, Spock thinks idly. He should present the problem to engineering. Behind Spock, Jim clears his throat.

"Commander, can I see you in my ready room?"

Spock does not look up from his station. He is composing a memorandum to his Beta shift counterpart. "One moment, Captain," he replies. Something about the formality of their exchange clutches at his throat. He signs the memo and logs out, then turns to Jim. It occurs

to him that it's the first time he's looked at Jim--really looked--since the previous morning before they beamed up to sickbay.

"You wished to speak with me?" he asks.

"I...there are some debriefing protocols we need to go over," Jim says weakly.

"Of course," Spock says crisply. He stands and turns, making for the turbolift door, but Jim reaches it at the same time and then there's an interminable moment that seems outside the realm of Spock's finely-honed sense of time. They're together at the door to the turbolift, a hairsbreadth from touching, and Spock suddenly feels as if everyone on the bridge can read the tension between them like lines on a page. Then Jim shrinks back, gesturing for Spock to go ahead. The moment is over, but the tension remains. Spock's head begins to hurt again.

They are silent in the turbolift, silent as Spock follows Jim into his ready room. He stands nearly at attention, staring at the wall, hands clasped behind his back. Jim half-sits, half-leans against the table. He looks at the floor for a long moment before looking up at Spock. He looks tired, Spock thinks. His eyes seem sunken deep in his head. His face has a grey cast; the room itself seems dimmer somehow. "So, there's no debriefing, obviously," Jim says.

"Are you all right?" Spock asks quietly. His arm twitches as if to reach out to Jim of its own volition. Spock crosses his arms against his chest.

Jim smiles at him, that same tight smile from the bridge. "I'm fine," he says. "Checked out right as rain. What about you?"

Spock nods. "My systems appear to have returned to homeostasis," he says.

"That's--that's good," Jim says. "Look, Spock, I don't know if you remember anything from the planet," Jim says cautiously. "I just--I want you to know...anything you might have seen? In my mind? I don't want you to feel...shit, I don't know how to say this." He looks past Spock, at the opposite wall. "I don't want you to feel obligated," he says finally.

Spock feels cold.

"I know they were, uh, special circumstances, you know?" Jim continues. "You wouldn't have even seen anything, if it hadn't been for the whole Vulcan biology thing."

Spock presses his lips together, dragging the lower one over his teeth hard enough to taste copper. "If I did remember," he pauses, and something seems to flash across Jim's face, a momentary brightness. "If I did, I assure you, it would be kept in the strictest confidence, captain."

"Oh," Jim says quietly, his face falling. "Well, thanks. I...I appreciate it, Spock."

Spock glances at the door, then back at the captain. "Jim," he says. "I owe you a great debt."

Jim smiles at that, looks back down at the floor and shakes his head, as if Spock has said something unbelievable.

“If there’s nothing else, I believe I will retire to my quarters.”

“Of course. I mean, no, there’s nothing else.” He sighs, shoulders drooping. “See you,” he says, running a hand through his hair. Spock nods. He expects Jim to follow him out, but the door to the ready room slides closed behind Spock with a dry puff of air.

Nothing has changed, Spock tells himself. The bustle and hum of quotidian life on the ship continues apace. Spock rises at 0600 without the aid of the alarms that blare in other cabins. He showers in the sonics, dresses, and steps out of his quarters into the stream of crew beginning the ship’s day. He reports to the bridge, or to the science labs, or to the recreation decks. He completes his assigned duties, he eats, he exercises, he meditates, he sleeps again. He feels at times as if he has somehow miraculously excised his human half, as if he is a being of pure logic. These are, Spock feels, his better moments. Of course, they do not last.

In the captain’s ready room, Spock watches Nyota trace an invisible pattern on the tabletop with a fingertip as they wait for said captain to arrive. He suspects that Sulu and Chekov are playing some variety of game on Lieutenant Sulu’s PADD. He looks at them pointedly and clears his throat. Chekov makes a quick little fillip on the screen with his finger and elbows Sulu, who snorts irritably before looking up at Spock with an over-bright smile. The door slides open and Jim walks in, carrying a stack of PADDs and followed closely by Dr. McCoy. The doctor wears a thunderous expression.

“Who pissed in his cheerios?” mutters Sulu.

“I heard that,” McCoy says. “And trust me, Lieutenant, if *you’d* spent the past twelve hours elbow-deep in pus, you wouldn’t need anyone to piss in anything.”

“Um, sorry, sir.”

“No, sorry is what’s going to happen if people on this ship don’t start learning basic preventive measures like, oh, I don’t know, washing their hands after handling goddamn moon rocks, or not pocketing every cute little slimeball that catches their fancy while they’re gallivanting across some uncharted planet. It’s all fun and games until somebody’s fingers are rotting off, and then it’s all ‘Help me, Dr. McCoy, you’re my only hope!’”

Sulu looks appropriately chagrined. The meeting is now six minutes and twenty-five seconds behind schedule.

Jim pats McCoy on the shoulder. “Okay, so I’m counting that as your weekly report, Bones,” he says, pushing Dr. McCoy toward a chair. “Because I heard the whole rundown on our way over here, and trust me, you guys are good with just that.”

An earlier iteration of Spock might have cited Starfleet Regulation 547, pertaining to mandatory departmental reporting of all shipboard activities, but now he finds himself disinclined to hear any more of Dr. McCoy’s exploits. He looks up at the precise moment Jim

turns and meets his eyes, grinning as if he knows Spock's thoughts. Spock raises an eyebrow at him, and Jim's smile widens.

"So," Jim says. He smiles at Spock again before turning back to face the room, and Spock feels a sudden twinge. He is reminded of that moment on the bridge, some twenty-two days ago now.

"So," Jim says again. "We've got orders." He brandishes a PADD. "Vespae is a mining colony. Not a big one, just kind of small and scrappy, since the initial survey only found trace amounts of minerals. But they're expensive minerals, so the Federation figured it was worth it to find out if there was more where that came from. Looks like they've been incommunicado recently, and since we're in the neighborhood, we're stopping by to check up on them." Jim sighs. "Could just be technical difficulties," he says. "The atmosphere's pretty volatile, so we'll need to be spot on with comms and engineering on this one. I don't want anyone down there without a line on them and the best possible transporter capability. Uhura, Scotty, that's on you two, obviously."

"Aye, sir," Scott says. Nyota's brow furrows, and she scribbles something on her PADD.

"Chekov, let's get some coordinates mapped and get an ETA. I'm going to need a full security detail; let's go with optimism until further notice, but we're kind of heading to the back end of beyond here, and...people tend to get a little squirrely, in my experience." He looks down briefly, as if composing himself. Spock has a sudden flash of cloudless blue sky, the smell of baked earth. But as quickly as he is able to identify these things, they are gone. Spock blinks. He has experienced telepathic bleed-through previously, but he is not in direct contact with anyone. Perhaps it is an anomaly.

"Okay," Jim says. "Thanks, everyone. Mr. Spock, if you'd hang out and go over some details?"

Spock nods, rising.

"See you all on the bridge, then. Dismissed."

Spock waits while the room clears, hands at the small of his back.

When they are alone, Jim crosses the room and stands next to Spock, leaning against the conference table. He's quiet for a long moment, as if he's thinking of making a personal query, and Spock stiffens reflexively in anticipation. But then Jim appears to think better of it, and when he does speak he refers only to the upcoming mission.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he says. Once, Spock might have dismissed such a statement as an illogical flight of fancy, but now he is forced to acknowledge that he owes his life to Jim Kirk many times over, and that perhaps these "feelings" of the captain's merit closer attention.

"Do you attribute your foreboding to anything in particular?" Spock asks.

"I...maybe. I'm not sure I want to go into it right now, but...yeah. What I said before, about people getting squirrely--sorry, acting weird--way out in space? I might have first-hand experience."

"Understood," Spock says. "You are wise to assign a full security detail," he says. "Have you considered the remainder of the away team?"

"I have," Jim says. "I think I want Sulu with me, too. We're going to have to pilot a shuttle down there, I'm guessing, with their comms and transport so jacked up. Uhura's great in a shuttle, but I need her here on comms. And...I want you up here too."

"Captain--"

"Listen, okay? If everything goes to hell, it needs to be you, Spock. They'll need it to be you."

"Are you not endeavoring to be optimistic?"

Jim smiles, then. Later, Spock will replay that particular smile over and over, though he will not be sure why that expression is the one that sticks.

"Right," Jim says. He sighs. "I'm going to go up to the bridge, see if Chekov has anything yet. You coming?"

Spock goes.

In the shuttle bay, Spock finds that Jim's bad feeling seems to have spread to the rest of the crew. Dr. McCoy fairly hovers around Jim, pulling him away from Sulu, Ensign Jeffries, and the security team. Spock suddenly recalls his mother just before his meeting with the High Council, how she leaned in to pluck unseen lint from his robes, how he ducked away from her. Jim has also requested that McCoy remain on the ship, and he is not taking it well.

"I had your medkit updated and restocked," McCoy says. "Christine's been working on some new watertight bandages; I put a couple of those in there, and there's a life raft on the shuttle--"

"There's no water on this planet," Jim says.

"Better to be overprepared," says McCoy firmly. "I should be coming with you, Jim." He shakes his head. "You said so yourself, we're at the ass-end of space. You have no idea what's happened down there, and if this goes belly-up you'll be down there with nothing but a shitty medkit."

"I thought my medkit was state-of-the-art, Bones. Which is it?" Jim says easily.

"Goddammit, Jim, this is not lighthearted banter!" McCoy wheels on Spock. "What about you? You're telling me you're just going to let him fly off into the wild blue? Into who knows what?"

“Lower your voice, doctor,” Spock says. Ensign Jeffries is listening to them, and her face has blanched. “As the captain is my commanding officer, I am not in a position to ‘let’ him do anything,” he continues crisply.

“You cold-blooded son of a bitch,” McCoy snaps. “You’re more to him than that, you--”

“Bones, that’s enough!” Jim says, in a tone that brooks no argument. “Spock’s right, this is my decision, and I’m assigning myself to lead the away team. End of discussion.”

In truth, Spock finds himself relating to McCoy’s position with disconcerting ease. It’s only logical, he tells himself. He has become accustomed to accompanying Jim in the field. Jim shoots him an unreadable look, and Spock busies himself with one of the tricorders he is sending with the security team. McCoy makes a disgusted noise and turns away, shaking his head and muttering something undoubtedly insubordinate.

“Captain,” Nyota says quietly, biting her lip. “Maybe Dr. McCoy’s right. Maybe--”

“End of discussion,” Jim says, gently this time. He grins again, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. Spock wonders if the others notice. He hopes they do not. “Look, it’s going to be fine,” he says. “I’m not going to say it’s going to be a milk run, because the last time I said that--well, never mind. But we’ll get it done, we’ll find out what happened, and then we’ll go map some stars somewhere for awhile, okay?”

Nyota does not look placated, but she nods. “I’ll be on the bridge the whole time,” she says. “I swapped shifts with Ellis on gamma comms.”

Jim turns to Spock. “Don’t let her wear herself out,” he says. “That goes for everyone, Spock, especially you.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“Good,” Jim says. He turns, gesturing to the rest of the away team. “You all about ready to roll?”

“Aye, sir,” says Sulu, who appears genuinely excited to be behind the controls of a shuttle. He pats Jeffries on the back. “C’mon,” he says. “You can have shotgun, best seat in the house.” The ensign appears unconvinced but allows Sulu to lead her into the shuttle.

Jim moves to follow them but stops and turns back to Spock. He presses his lips together in a bloodless line.

“Captain,” Spock says. “Are you certain--”

“No,” Jim says, in a voice too low for anyone but Spock to hear. “But I just...we need to find out what’s happened. And I feel like it needs to be me,” he says. “I know you don’t understand.”

“I do not,” says Spock. “But...I trust your judgement on the matter.”

Jim raises his hand. He hesitates for a beat, then brings it to rest on Spock's shoulder. Spock stifles a gasp, though Jim has touched him in this way countless times in their acquaintance. It had become so easy as to be unremarkable, once. But now Spock realizes that they have not touched in weeks. "Take care, okay?" Jim says.

Spock swallows. "Aye, Captain."

Jim slides his hand down Spock's shoulder, briefly gripping his upper arm. Then he drops his hand, turns, and steps into the shuttle.

"Clear shuttle bay for launch," calls an engineering tech over the comm system.

"I guess that's our cue," McCoy says from behind him. He sighs. "Look, Spock, I was way out of line before," he says. "I'm sorry."

"There is no offense where none is taken, doctor," Spock says. He turns, sidestepping McCoy as he makes for the turbolift. He hears McCoy mutter something as he moves to follow Spock out of the shuttle bay.

"I know you're worried about him, too."

Spock doesn't answer.

Back on the bridge, he sits uneasily in the center chair. As Jim predicted, communications with Vespae are severely impaired, and as the shuttlecraft enters the atmosphere their signal flickers and is lost. Nyota's mood darkens noticeably following loss of contact with the shuttle. He contemplates dismissing her from the bridge, knowing that she dislikes feeling useless. But he finds himself buoyed by her presence, loathe as he might be to admit it to himself. These, Spock supposes, are atypical circumstances. If he requires additional meditation before he retires this evening, so be it.

Nyota leaves her station eventually, pacing the bridge, periodically pausing next to his chair. "I'm augmenting our system as much as I possibly can," she says, shaking her head. She has repeated a variation on this statement three times previously, but Spock does not comment on it. "Sometimes I don't understand the Federation," she says on a low voice. "There have to be better places to go looking for resources, right?" Spock doesn't reply. He wonders if the miners thought differently, if they peered at the planet from their own transport shuttle with trepidation or wonder.

"I'm receiving a transponder signal from the shuttle, sir," says Chekov. "It is intermittent, but it is there. I believe they have landed successfully," he says.

"Thank you, Mr. Chekov," Spock says. "Please continue to keep me apprised."

"Ah, it's gone again," Chekov says, whacking the edge of his console in frustration. Spock sees him cast a glance at Sulu's chair, currently occupied by Zlet, the gamma shift helmsman. Chekov's brow furrows, then relaxes. Zlet catches him looking and meets Chekov's eye, smiling. He says something to him that Spock does not quite catch.

Spock knows that this is why the captain deliberates so prior to away missions. He is adept at taking the pulse of the ship, noting who steals glances at which empty chairs. He knows the way each absence is keenly felt by someone on board, weighs and measures it, feels it nearly as keenly himself. These are far from Jim's only considerations when assigning crew, but they are no less important to him for being rooted in emotion. Spock is certain this would be a failing of his, were he to captain a predominantly human crew.

There is no further communication from the away team, and presently Spock dismisses the alpha shift crew on a voluntary basis. They protest, but most of them retire to the mess to eat. They cluster in small groups, talking in low voices, glancing up at him periodically. Spock ignores them, eating in silence at a table with Nyota and Chekov, half listening to their conversation. They are planning a celebration for Lieutenant Sulu's upcoming birthday, and Nyota is attempting to program the replicator to make something called a red velvet cake. Apparently, its correct preparation is a matter of some debate, and Chekov is insistent that Nyota understand the recipe.

"I have heard this so many times, Uhura," Chekov says, exasperated. "He is obsessed with it. The cake is not just *red*, he says. It is also chocolate flavored. I tell him, Hikaru, of course I know how to make red velvet cake--it's a traditional Russian dessert. I tell him, why do you think it's red?"

Uhura snorts. "So, cocoa powder in the batter," she says. "Got it."

She begins to say something else, but she's drowned out by the comm system.

"Commander Spock to the bridge," says the clipped voice of Lieutenant Ellis, the gamma shift comms officer. "Repeat, Spock to the bridge, priority one."

They rise as one, and Spock cannot help but feel a brief flash of something like gratitude. They do not speak in the corridor. In the turbolift, Nyota stands close to him.

"Report," says Spock as he steps out of the turbolift.

Chekov and Uhura go to their stations, Nyota leaning over Ellis and Chekov gesturing for Ensign Veszl to move aside. Chekov leans over his viewscreen, keying in a sequence that projects its imagery onto the larger screen in front of them. "It's the shuttle, sir!" he says. "Leaving Vespae's atmosphere."

Abruptly, the ship is buffeted by what can only be a shockwave. There is a near-collective cry from the bridge crew, and Spock hauls himself to his feet by the back of the captain's chair.

"Lieutenant Uhura, red alert," he snaps. Her answer is her voice booming over the comm. He turns back to the viewscreen, watching as the tiny mass of pixels representing the shuttle skips off course, then corrects.

"Can we open a channel?" Spock asks.

"Already trying, sir."

“Chekov, shuttle status.”

“Five hundred clicks and closing, sir.”

“Science station, your hypotheses as to the origin of that shock wave?” Lieutenant Matthews hunches over her station, fingers flying over the touchscreen. “Working on it, Commander,” she says tersely. “No other spacecraft in the vicinity, sir,” she says. “It was almost like a nuclear explosion,” she says. “Do we know what kind of weaponry they had on the mining colony?”

“We do not,” Spock says. “There may be a nuclear component to a drilling device, perhaps,” Spock says, feeling his stomach lurch as he does so. *Deja vu all over again*, says a distinctly Jim-like voice in his head.

“Chekov,” he says, trying to focus on something else.

“Three hundred clicks, sir,” Chekov says excitedly.

The turbolift chimes and Spock half-turns to see Dr. McCoy step out, eyes wild. “What the hell’s going on here, Spock? I’m down in sickbay trying to finish off the paperwork from Jim’s last ill-advised scrape and suddenly this tin can’s lurching around like we’re going over Niagara Falls.”

“I am attempting to ascertain that for myself, doctor,” Spock says, ignoring the more colloquial portion of McCoy’s question.

“Commander, we’ve got another shock wave incoming,” shouts Matthews.

“Brace for impact,” Spock says, clutching the back of the chair. Next to him, McCoy does the same.

“All hands, brace for impact,” says Nyota over the comm.

Matthews takes a breath, then: “Impact in three, two---”

Spock hears a muffled *crump* as the wave hits them. The ship shudders, and the lights flicker momentarily.

“We need to get some distance from this planet, sir,” says Matthews. She is eminently calm, Spock thinks. He will speak with the captain about a commendation when this is over.

“Ensign Zlet,” Spock says to the helmsman, “Reverse thrusters.”

“Sir, the shuttle,” cries Chekov. The little blue dot continues dauntlessly across the viewscreen, coordinates ticking away as they draw closer.

“It would be most unfortunate, Mr. Chekov, if there were no *Enterprise* to which the shuttle could return,” Spock says. Chekov nods quickly, biting his lower lip. Spock sees his knuckles whiten on the arms of his chair.

“Reverse thrusters, sir,” Zlet says.

“Hope you know what you’re doing,” McCoy mutters.

“As do I,” Spock says.

There’s suddenly a blare of static from Nyota’s station, and she whirls in her seat. “Open line with the shuttle!” she calls. She presses a hand to her headset. “Galileo, this is Enterprise, do you read?”

“--terprise, this is Galileo, Sulu here.”

“Mr. Sulu, status?” Spock asks loudly.

“--of us, repeat, three--you’re really breaking up here, *Enterprise*, I can’t--” Sulu’s voice dissolves into static, and next to Spock, McCoy curses.

“What’d he say about three? Three of them? Spock, that’d mean--”

Spock raises a hand to still him. “Can you open the channel again, Lieutenant Uhura?”

“Trying, sir, this ion field’s like soup. Okay, let me try this...”

Abruptly, Sulu’s voice comes back over the comm channel. “--thing’s happening to the planet, some kind of seismic activity. We’re hauling ass back to you, but these shock waves are giving us a hell of a time--”

“Ask him about the captain,” McCoy says desperately. “Spock, ask him about--”

“Another wave,” says Matthews. “They’re getting closer together, sir; sensors are already detecting another one following that.”

“Galileo, you have another shock wave on your tail,” Nyota says, not waiting for Spock to ask her to transmit the message.

“Thanks, *Enterprise*,” says Sulu. His voice is tinny. At the helm, Chekov looks ill.

“Mr. Zlet, reverse thrusters again,” Spock says.

“Aye,” says Zlet. The ship starts backwards again.

“*Enterprise*, sure would help if you’d stop scooting back on us,” Sulu says. Before Spock can reply, the line drops, and seconds later the ship lurches again as the wave hits the *Enterprise* in turn. The lights drop for a full thirty seconds this time, and Spock holds his breath until they come back on.

“Bridge to engineering,” Spock says, leaning into the comm unit on the center console.

“Scott here.”

“Mr. Scott, status report,” Spock says. He can hear noise in the background over the comm.

“She’s taking a bit of a beating, sir,” Scott says. “We can’t take these shock waves much longer. If I can ask, what exactly are we dealing with here?”

“Unclear,” Spock replies. “Perhaps some sort of nuclear detonation, though with the repeated waves it appears more likely to be extreme seismic activity of some kind.”

“Extreme is right,” Scott says.

“I will keep you informed,” Spock says. “Spock out.”

“Shuttle at one hundred clicks,” says Chekov.

“Dammit, Sulu,” says McCoy. His arms are tightly crossed across his chest. Spock thinks about his earlier question. There are several logical explanations for why Jim wasn’t the crew member communicating with the ship. Spock does not particularly like any of them.

“Next shock wave incoming, Commander!” yells Matthews. The ship jolts to one side. Spock is not holding on tightly enough to the back of the chair, and he is thrown abruptly into the adjacent console. He rights himself, hissing with the pain that lances across his ribcage.

“You okay?” McCoy asks, concerned. Spock nods, wincing once before drawing his controls around the pain like a shield. He thinks of the last time he employed his shields this way, bleeding out on Caley with Jim. He tamps the thought down again. He cannot afford the luxury of reflection now.

“We need to leave the area,” Spock says, gritting his teeth. “Lieutenant Uhura, get me Mr. Sulu.”

“Trying, Commander.”

“Try harder,” Spock says, more sharply than he intends to.

“*Enterprise to Galileo*, come in. Repeat, *Enterprise to Galileo*, come in please.”

“--*lileo to Enterprise*. Getting a little shaky out here, *Enterprise*. Any chance we can get a pickup from the mothership? We’re losing thrusters; two down already.”

Nyota spins around, looking at Spock imploringly. Spock can see her eyes shining.

“Matthews, what is the expected outcome for the shuttle should we hold our present position?” Spock knows the answer, but he asks anyway.

“They’ll--they’ll break up, sir,” Matthews says. “The shuttle craft aren’t designed to take that kind of repeated impact.”

“Understood,” Spock says. “Mr. Zlet, forward thrusters, please.”

“F--forward thrusters, sir? But the ship--”

“Sir, the atmosphere is extremely volatile,” interjects Matthews. “If this is some kind of seismic event, it appears to be building. I would characterize approaching the planet as extremely inadvisable.”

“Forward thrusters, Ensign Zlet,” Spock repeats. He steps over to Nyota’s station, leaning over the console. “*Galileo*, Spock here. We are attempting to move closer to you. When you are within range, please alert us so that we may open the shuttle bay doors,” he says.

“Roger that, Enterprise,” says Sulu.

Another shock wave slams the ship, Spock grabbing the back of Nyota’s chair and mostly remaining upright. From the science station, Matthews gives a panicked cry, probably more shocked by her failure to warn of the incoming impact than anything else, although Spock can sense the tang of fear on the bridge like the sear of hot metal.

“Maintain forward thrusters,” Spock says.

“We’re closing on the shuttle, Commander,” says Chekov. On the viewscreen, the little dot pulses ever closer. Spock can feel every millimeter of progress in his gut. “Twenty clicks, sir.”

“Engineering to bridge, Scott here.” Scott breaks in over the comm, voice high and reedy. “Sir, we’re risking a breach on deck 5,” he says desperately. “Oh, and internal pressure’s rising on all decks.” Spock thinks he can hear Keenser chittering in the background, as if badgering Mr. Scott not to leave anything out.

The bridge is a cacophony, beacons and alerts and alarms blinking and screaming in sharp contrast to the quiet determination of the crew, Chekov’s measured reports of the shuttle’s progress, Zlet’s hands on the controls, Nyota’s steely calm. In addition to the churning in his belly, Spock feels something like pride. But again, the time to dwell on this is later.

“Stand by, Mr. Scott,” Spock says. “Mr. Sulu, be advised that you may have only one opportunity to dock with the shuttle bay. The ship is unstable, and our ability to withstand future impacts is questionable, over.”

“Got it, sir. Get ready to open the barn doors,” Sulu says tersely. Spock can hear him hail the shuttle bay, knows the doors are sliding open...

“They’re at 10 kilometers and closing, sir!” says Chekov. He is standing now, jabbing at the dot on the viewscreen with an index finger.

“Sir, impact incoming!”

“She can’t take much more of these, Mr. Spock...”

“Goddammit, Spock--”

Spock closes his eyes for a fraction of a second, allowing himself to draw his controls tighter. He sees the flurry of stimuli slow to a halt around him, as if he is watching each separate water droplet in a raincloud. He breathes once, twice. Somewhere on the edges of his

consciousness he perceives a shock wave hitting the ship, but it seems as if he is listening from underwater. Then he opens his eyes, and the activity on the bridge returns to normal speed once more.

“Helmsman,” he says to Zlet, “Prepare to jump to warp as soon as Engineering confirms the shuttle has returned.”

“Coordinates, sir?” asks Chekov.

“I find that I do not care,” Spock says sardonically. “Somewhere away from here.” He nods to McCoy. “I will go and meet the shuttle,” he says, “if you wish to accompany me.”

“Damn right,” McCoy says. “I’ll comm Chapel,” he says. “Jim’s probably allergic to whatever space dust they’re mining for on that godforsaken planet.” Despite his words, the doctor’s tone is hopeful, and Spock finds the incongruity perplexing.

There are three of them in the shuttle bay.

“Lieutenant Sulu,” Spock says, endeavoring to keep his voice even. “Report.”

Sulu is shaking. His face is covered in dust, giving his skin a grey cast but for the places where sweat has run down in little rivulets, pushing the dirt and debris before it.

There are three of them: Sulu, Ensign Jeffries, and Lieutenant Riviello from security. When they step out of the shuttle, Sulu looks at Spock, McCoy, and Chapel and gives a barely perceptible shake of his head.

Riviello’s shirt is torn, and Spock cannot help but watch the place where the scarlet fabric meets the man’s skin. Chapel hovers around the group with her tricorder, and Spock is reminded of McCoy a scant few hours before. He wonders whether the doctor would be standing here, had he succeeded in persuading Jim to allow him to join the away team. Spock straightens, ignoring the pain in his ribs.

“Report,” he says again.

“It was the planet,” Sulu starts. He shakes his head. “There was something...we knew there was something wrong almost as soon as we landed. The colony was abandoned,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “There was a mine, but it didn’t look like they ever really used it, just dug down and...stopped. We looked around, the...the captain wanted to make sure there wasn’t anyone there. We found a bunch of their records, though; they were pretty dusty but mostly intact. Jeffries has them, if you want.”

He pauses, running his tongue over his split lip. “We were inside when it started. We thought it was an earthquake, and I guess it was, but then they just kept coming. And not aftershocks, either. They were getting stronger, they...well, you got hit too, you know.” Sulu swallows, looking at Spock. “It was like nothing I’ve ever seen before,” he says. “The planet...it was like the planet was breaking apart.

“It was too unstable, there was no way we could stay there, obviously. So we tried to get back to the shuttle, but it was just...the whole place was coming down around our ears.” He looks at the floor. When he looks up again, his face is flushed and Spock thinks he can see new tracks making their way through the dust on his cheeks.

“Kirk was there,” Sulu says. “Kirk and West and Zhang. They were right behind me, sir, until...until they weren’t. We made it back to the shuttle and I thought they were right behind me, and we couldn’t...if we’d stayed, we’d all have been dead.” He raises his hands as if in supplication. To Spock’s right, McCoy makes a choked sound. Jeffries sobs, stumbling, and Chapel steps closer to her.

Sulu looks right at Spock now. “Sir, I’m sorry,” he says. He looks as if he can barely stand.

Spock opens his mouth to answer, but finds he cannot think of anything to say. He feels as if someone has scraped him hollow.

He sits in front of his computer, watching the cursor blink. The document has been open in front of him for a full sixty-three minutes. INCIDENT REPORT, it reads. Spock is suddenly captain, and as such it falls to him to condense the end of Jim’s life into a Department of Personnel Resources template. It does not bear thinking about. He has completed incident reports for Zhang and West already; this should be no different. But when he lifts his hand to the trackpad, he finds it shaking, and he can’t so much as type Jim’s name on the first line.

His door chimes. Spock jolts upright. It is late in ship’s night now. Some part of his hindbrain supplies Jim’s name when he wonders who might be outside, and the full force of the pain that reflexive thought sends coursing through him takes Spock’s breath away in spite of his controls.

“Enter,” he gasps, and the door slides wide. He looks up at Nyota slouched in the doorway. Her hair is down, spilling damp across her shoulders. She is wearing loose pants and an oversized shirt that he recognizes as his own. She looks very young.

“Can I...” She gestures at the interior of Spock’s room.

“Yes,” Spock says, his voice hoarse. Besides calling Nyota inside, hasn’t spoken aloud since he asked Sulu for his report in the shuttle bay. Afterwards, he returned to his quarters and prepared one brief for immediate transmission to Starfleet Command, and another for shipwide distribution, although he hardly imagines the latter to be necessary. There will be a ceremony, in the rec room, perhaps. He should ask Nyota to play.

She approaches the desk, pulling the extra chair close, and sits. She reaches out to touch his arm, her fingers ghosting over the fabric of his sleeve. “I couldn’t sleep,” she says. “What are you working on?”

Spock looks crossly at the screen. “I’m attempting to complete the captain’s incident report,” he says. “I cannot do it.”

Nyota sighs, taking his other hand from where it lies cramping on the trackpad. She places it in his lap, then folds her own hands in hers. She looks at him apologetically, knowing the intimacy of the gesture. Spock does not notice, and would not especially care if he did. He watches the cursor on the screen blink, blink, blink.

“Spock.”

Blink.

“Will you look at me?”

He does. She is biting the inside of her cheek the way she does when she’s trying not to cry. He knows it’s for his benefit, that she’s trying to spare him, and he feels suddenly disgusted with himself.

“Are you shielding?” she asks quietly.

“Yes,” Spock says, voice barely louder than a whisper.

Nyota nods. She curls into herself, bringing her feet up onto the seat of the chair and resting her chin on her knees. A tear spills over and down her cheek, and she wipes it away. She sniffs. Spock does not know where to look.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Spock, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you,” Spock says. It seems the only thing to say.

After that, they sit in silence for a full thirty-seven minutes. Spock counts the seconds, imagining them as small white hash marks against the black field of his mind’s eye. Nyota’s breathing slows, and when Spock looks up at her again she is asleep where she sits. He tries and fails to initiate a meditative state, and finally rises to retrieve a blanket from his bed and drape it over Nyota’s shoulders. Her arms are stippled with gooseflesh despite the warmth of the room.

She stirs at the sudden weight, raises her head and rubs at her eyes. “Oh,” she says muzzily. “I feel asleep.”

“I will attempt the same,” Spock says. “If you wish to stay, you may have the bed.”

She smiles up at him

In the doorway, she turns. “Please talk to me,” she says finally. “Or someone. Okay?”

He nods. “Goodnight, Nyota,” he says, and opens the door. Outside, McCoy is slumped against the bulkhead, fast asleep with a bottle in one hand and a tumbler in the other. The amber liquid and melted ice have stratified in the glass. Nyota makes a small, pained noise and kneels beside him.

“Oh, Len,” she whispers, taking the tumbler out of his hand. Spock leans down and lifts McCoy up under the armpits, insinuating an arm under his and taking McCoy’s weight on his shoulder. Nyota retrieves the bottle and follows Spock down the corridor to McCoy’s door.

Spock stops, contemplating the computer terminal next to the door. He smells the cloying odor of bourbon. "Captain's override code," he says.

Spock is standing on a green plain. He turns around slowly, tracing the line where the horizon meets the cloudless sky. In the distance, a house like a squat black tooth; next to it, a tree. At his feet, a human child--a girl--sits in the grass, legs crossed in front of her. Her dress rides up over a skinned knee. Her lap is full of flowers, her head is bowed. Someone calls out from the direction of the house, and the girl looks up at Spock, opening her mouth to speak--

Spock wakes up abruptly in the warm dark of his quarters. The sheet is a tangle at his feet, and he's sweating. He comes back to himself slowly, feeling his heart rate and respiration ebb back to normal. He has three hours and fifty-seven minutes before the start of alpha shift, and he will not sleep again.

He has thirty-five communications in his inbox; apparently news travels fast. He imagines Jim standing over his shoulder as he reads them. Admiral Pike requests a conference at Spock's earliest convenience. Spock realizes he will have to inform Winona Kirk of her son's death, and somehow this feels more momentous and somber than it logically should, given that this will not be the first time it has fallen to him to write to the family of a deceased crew member.

"Computer," he says. "Provide location of Chief Engineer Kirk, Winona."

The room is silent but for the whirl of the climate controls as the computer searches. The cheerful blue timepiece it displays as it does so seems garish to Spock. When Winona Kirk's face resolves on the view screen, she is rubbing her eyes. Spock supposes he must have roused her from sleep, that wherever her engineering vessel is out the the void, it must be ship's night there too. It strikes him that he has never seen Jim's mother in person before, knows little of her other than what is available in her personnel file and the scraps of information Jim has meted out over time. He thinks they kept in contact. He finds himself hoping they did.

She knows as soon as she recognizes him. Her pupils dilate and her hands fly to her mouth. Spock isn't sure what he expects. Tears, perhaps, or rage. He as borne the fruitless anger of too many parents, sitting across from him at a view screen light years away, too far even to shoot the messenger properly. He does not begrudge them their fury, though he does not fully understand it. But Winona Kirk simply looks down for a moment. When she looks up again her eyes are wide and shining.

"Tell me what happened," she says. Spock complies, and when he is finished, Winona nods once and presses her lips together in a whitish line. "So you're Spock," she says finally.

"Is this the point at which you tell me you have 'heard a lot about me?'" Spock asks. She smiles then, and he can see the tears glisten on her cheeks.

"Yes," she says. "And then you say, 'only good things, I hope.' And I say, 'of course. Except for the whole attempted strangulation thing.'"

They converse for several additional minutes, long past the point at which Spock would have terminated any other communication. They arrange transfer of Jim's personal effects. "We should send his books to Peter on Deneva," Winona muses. Spock does not inquire as to her use of "we".

He has scarcely ended the comm with Winona Kirk when Nyota's voice breaks in, indicating a transmission from Starfleet Command. Spock is briefly surprised to hear her rather than the gamma shift comms officer, and then he is not surprised at all. He allows himself a minute sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

"Please patch it through, Lieutenant," he says, and then Christopher Pike is before him on the screen, looking as grey as Spock feels.

"What the fuck happened?" Pike says, before Spock can acknowledge him. There's a momentary wave of...something that passes between them, and perhaps Spock is not as quick to tamp it down as he should be because Pike looks chastened. When he speaks again, his tone is softer. "Spock?" he asks, and there are so many questions behind this use of his name that Spock has no answers for.

"I regret that I know no specifics beyond what I included in the report," he says. "Sir, I am requesting permission to return to Vespae and attempt to...to recover Captain Kirk's body." Spock's gorge rises involuntarily. Jim's still form, floating unbound in the black...he shakes his head slightly to dispel the image and Pike leans closer as if to decipher something in the motion. Pike always read him the way Jim did, Spock thinks. He never minded with either of them. He has not made that observation until this moment.

Pike shakes his head. "I thought you were going to say that," he says. "I've been going back and forth with the admiralty since they forwarded me the transmission." He looks at his hands, spread before him on the flat of the desk. "And frankly, it pisses me right the hell off that they're making me tell you this, so I guess I should get it over with." He sighs. "Commander Spock," he says, "My orders are to expressly forbid you from returning to Vespae."

Spock's hands twitch in his lap. "Sir--"

"Spock," Pike says, "I think you know me well enough by now to know how I...how I felt about Jim. I would like nothing more than to find him, to bring him home. But if that planet's as volatile as your helmsman says it is, you know as well as I do you have no business taking the ship back there. It's illogical and you know it."

"Do not insult me by invoking logic, Admiral," Spock snaps. He looks away. In his peripheral vision he sees Pike slump a little.

"I'm going to forget I heard that, Commander," Pike says wearily.

"Your consideration is appreciated," Spock says by way of apology. He cannot quite bring himself to be contrite.

“At any rate,” Pike says, “It’s Starfleet’s intention to promote you, if you’re amenable. You’d finish out the five-year mission as captain of the *Enterprise* and then we’d go from there.”

Spock’s mouth feels dry. He wonders if there could ever have been a time or a context in which everything about this scenario would not feel so strikingly wrong. “And First Officer?” he asks roughly.

“It’s up for discussion,” Pike says. “I think they’ve got a few candidates in mind, but if you’d like to promote from within the current crew--”

“Yes,” Spock says automatically.

“You’ll need to submit a formal recommendation,” Pike says. He gives Spock a long look. “Look, I know you and Jim had become close,” he says. “You were--you were making quite the reputation for yourselves as a command team, and that’s not just because of Jim’s... unorthodox methods.” Pike pauses. “I’m asking you this as a friend, Spock, and it can be off the record if you need it to be. If you need some time...”

“With all due respect, sir,” Spock says, “I resumed active duty weeks after the annihilation of ninety-seven percent of my species and our home planet.”

“So what’s one guy, right?” Pike says, scoffing. “Cut the crap, Spock. You know what I’m asking.”

Spock reflexively draws his shields tighter as he answers. “I am not compromised, sir,” he says.

There’s a long silence. It’s physically impossible, but Spock is certain he can feel Pike’s eyes boring into him through the screen. “I’m not sure whether to be reassured or worried by that,” Pike says finally. “Okay. I’m going to sign off on the paperwork as soon as we’re done, then. You can forward your recommendation for XO.” He smiles tightly. “I wish it didn’t have to happen like this, but I’d like to say I think you’re the right choice here.”

Take care of her, Spock.

Spock remains motionless until it’s time to report for shift, staring into the black of the view screen.

Spock briefs the crew via shipwide comm. First, however, he tells the senior staff, sitting in the ready room where Jim detailed the last away mission days before. Spock stands in the front of the room, hands at his back. He does not believe in ghosts. Jim’s *katra*, if humans have one, is trapped in his body and adrift in space. (Spock prefers to believe humans do not have *katra*.) Nevertheless, he finds himself repeatedly glancing just to his left. It seems the air itself is swirling and coalescing around some nebulous figure. Spock blinks. McCoy looks up from the second row, brow furrowing, and Spock meets his eyes for a moment before looking away. Perhaps Spock has underestimated his body’s need for sleep. This is, after all, the only reasonable explanation.

Following the meeting, Spock asks Lieutenant Sulu to consider the position of First Officer. Sulu immediately reaches out to grip the back of a chair as if he fears he will collapse.

“I thought you were going to have me court-martialed,” he says.

“On what charges?” Spock says softly.

Sulu shakes his head. “We should be going back for him,” he says.

Spock does not look at Sulu when he replies. “Yes,” is all he says. Then, “Dismissed.”

They receive new orders by the end of Alpha shift. Ferrying a Federation official to the nearest starbase, fittingly inappropriate when Spock suspects the majority of the crew would prefer to spend a long period of time shooting things. He does not include himself among their number, of course. If he spends longer than usual with the punching bags on the recreation deck, it's only because his best-matched sparring partner is no longer available. Spock goes to the gym directly after each shift. He jabs and cuts the hapless weighted sack until his mind is free of all thought. He is reminded of the period immediately following his *pon farr*, a clarity so sharp it was nearly pleasurable. He wonders if disciples of Gol feel this way, their scorched-earth brains seared clean. He is beginning to think the process recommends itself.

His gloved hands beat a tattoo against the black synthetic leather of the bag. Droplets of sweat run down his face and he pauses to remove a glove and wipe his brow with a towel. He turns to toss the towel into the fresher and Jim is standing before him, stripped to the waist and leaning against the wall. The look he gives Spock is one of pure appraisal, and he nods as if to assure Spock that he has not been found wanting. Jim licks his lips and takes a step closer. Spock drops his glove.

Jim is standing in front of him now. Spock can smell him as he could in the cave, the hot sweet blood beating so close at his wrists, his groin, his throat. Jim reaches out and presses his palm to Spock's side, and Spock cannot stop his traitorous body from leaning in to Jim's touch and shuddering--

Spock sucks in a lungful of thick air. His eyes open, and he's alone. He puts his hand on his side, over his heart. It's beating faster than normal, but that's not especially unusual given his physical exertion. He can still smell Jim, but as he looks around him and rubs his eyes hard enough to see stars the smell fades until he is unsure whether it was ever there at all.

“Jim is dead,” he says aloud. He has not said the words yet, not so plainly. He feels as if they should somehow call a new sense of reality into being, settle in his chest like a weight next to the heavy, blunted grief his mother left him. But Spock is just as he was before, too light as he abandons the punching bag for the white noise hum of the sonic showers. After he's cleaned and dressed, he finds himself in sickbay, at the door to McCoy's office. He knocks.

There's something like a growl from inside, and the door slides ajar. Spock nudges it the rest of the way with his shoulder and it eases past the sticky place. “You should submit a work

order,” he says to McCoy, nodding at the door.

McCoy shrugs. “It’s been that way since a month out of spacedock,” he says. “I’m used to it.” He indicates the chair opposite him, and Spock sits.

“You been seeing him too?” McCoy asks.

Spock starts. “Pardon?”

McCoy smiles sadly. “You know,” he says. “Around the ship. I see a blond guy in the mess, and for a split second back there in my lizard brain it’s Jim, and I’m halfway to giving him shit for whatever junk food he’s fixing to spackle his arteries with when I realize it’s...not.”

“No,” Spock says quietly. “It’s not.”

“I don’t know why the hell he was so damned set on getting on that shuttle,” McCoy says, shaking his head. “Or actually, I do. Because of goddamn Tarsus, that’s why.” McCoy looks pointedly at Spock, who is apparently not reacting as anticipated. McCoy’s eyes widen, and he leans across the desk.

“Shit,” he says. “You didn’t know, did you? That Jim was on Tarsus.”

Spock bristles. “I do not make a habit of reading personnel files unless immediately relevant,” he says.

McCoy rolls his eyes. “You couldn’t even if you wanted to,” he says. “Jim hacked in and encrypted that part of his file as soon as he realized he *had* a file.”

Spock looks up at McCoy. “He alluded to it,” he says, remembering. “Prior to leaving for Vespae. He declined to elaborate at the time. I believe he thought it might be preferable for him to initiate contact with the mining colony personally, should the worst have happened.”

McCoy rubs a hand over his face. “Ah, Jim.” His eyes are shot through with red. Spock wonders if his sclera are similarly green-tinged. “You know he buried kids on Tarsus? Buried them with his own hands.” His Adam’s apple bobs. “Anyway,” McCoy says. “Not my story to tell, not that I guess it matters now.” He opens his desk drawer and produces a half-empty bottle, sloshing an inch into the glass on his desk. He lifts the bottle as if to indicate Spock, who declines. McCoy raises the glass to his lips and takes a sip, closing his eyes and lifting his face as if toward an unseen sun. Spock feels a sudden chill.

“So,” McCoy says when he’s swallowed, “ever think you’d be captain of this ship again?”

“I did not,” Spock says.

“I think Sulu’s a good choice for XO,” says McCoy. “Pretty sure he’s a little bit terrified right now, though.”

“As well he should be,” Spock says, raising an eyebrow.

“Not sure whether to be relieved or concerned that you’re joking again,” McCoy says.

Spock isn't sure exactly what to make of the fact that this is the second time he's heard a variation on this statement today. "Allow me to end your paralyzing indecision by reminding you that Vulcans do not joke," he says.

McCoy laughs outright at that. "Relieved," he says. "Definitely relieved."

--The air is fetid. It smells sweetish, and Spock feels a vague curl of nausea. He tries to open his eyes, but there's something warm and sticky on his eyelids. He lifts his arms, intending to wipe it away, but they're pinned and he cannot move them. Something wraps itself around him and squeezes, a warning or a promise. Spock isn't sure. There's a prick of pain on the inside of his forearm. Fear shoots through him, chased by a haze of pleasure. Spock is vaguely aware of the incongruity of these two sensations, but then there's a tingling warmth over his whole body, like sitting with the sun on his back. Spock can almost see the farmhouse in the distance, feel grass tickling the soles of his bare feet. Something thick and soft drifts across his mouth, and then Spock can't breathe, there's something pinching his nose and closing off the airway. He opens his mouth to gasp, a slave to reflex, and then the searching, probing thing is inside, pressing down his throat and Spock is gagging and flailing but he's gripped tighter and then he can see a ragged little cloud skipping across the sky over the farmhouse and the trees are dappled with sun and his mother is outside and she's waving--

Spock's head is resting on his desk, cheek pillowed on his PADD. He sits up, wiping the drool from his cheek with the back of his hand glancing around him as if someone might be watching. But he is, of course, alone in his quarters, with no one there to see that he's apparently passed out at his desk doing...something. He cannot recall exactly what he was doing before he fell asleep. This fact disturbs Spock more than anything else. He swipes a finger across the touchscreen of his PADD, awakening it from sleep mode. Supply manifests, he sees. Spock supposes he should delegate the supply allotments to Sulu; they were always his responsibility as First Officer. But Spock finds that he has been illogically loathe to do away with certain aspects of his routine, despite the fact that he understands a distaste for paperwork and "number-crunching" to be a common complaint among Command track personnel. Ironical, Spock thinks, since the quotidian functioning of a starship is utterly dependent on such tasks. It runs counter to his Vulcan nature to express a preference for one aspect of his job over another. Which, Spock has to admit, makes it all the more illogical that he has not yet relinquished the supply manifests. His neck aches, muscles protesting as he straightens it, twisting left and then right. How long has he lain like this? *Four hours, twenty-three minutes*, he supplies automatically. He stretches long arms out in front of him, watching as his pale fingers seem to fade into the gleaming tooth-white of the bulkhead.

He relaxes his arms and touches his mouth, swallowing as if to ensure there's nothing down his throat and feeling a misplaced jolt of relief at the confirmation. His dreams have been strange since Jim died, he thinks. Spock does not dream often--which follows, given that Vulcans spend less time in REM sleep than do humans--but he imagines that when he does so the content of his dreams is typical. Now, however, there is an odd sense of familiarity to many of them. They feel almost nostalgic, although Spock does not recall any aspect of them having occurred in waking life. And there was his encounter with the specter of Jim while exercising, but Spock is willing to attribute this to a trick of the brain--the "lizard brain," as

Dr. McCoy put it. He wonders idly if there will come a time when the cells of his body have all regenerated in turn, when the physical reality of Spock will not have corresponded with that of Jim Kirk. He recalls that neurons, at least, do not divide, and he takes a small and shameful measure of comfort in this fact. He shakes his head. His dreams are strange, and now his waking thoughts are strange, too.

Chekov and Uhura have decided to hold Sulu's birthday party as planned. Uhura doesn't smile as she asks for permission to reserve the mess hall after hours. Spock tells her he believes the party to be a good idea for the sake of crew morale, and that he hopes Sulu's theory on the inclusion of cocoa powder in red velvet cake is incorrect, but that he supposes he will have to live dangerously in order to find out. She grins. "Thank you," she says, and there's a spring to her step as she leaves that he hasn't seen in a long time.

That evening, at the party, Dr. Noel sits across from him in the mess. He is sitting at the same table he occupied all those months ago, when Jim spilled warm as coffee into Spock's life. There's a half-eaten slice of cake in front of him, and Spock can feel the barest tingle of intoxication beginning at the corners of his consciousness. Helen Noel walks up to Spock's table and pulls the chair out halfway, and Spock looks up at her.

"May I?" she says.

Spock nods.

Her hair is short and dark, and as she pushes it reflexively behind her ears, her earrings swing sideways like little pendulums.

"Ananas comosus," Spock says absently.

"What? Oh, these!" She grabs the earrings as if to stop them swinging, flushing for a moment. Then she presses a palm to her mouth and smiles a little sadly into her fingers. She looks back up at Spock. "How are you doing?" she asks, in the tone he has come to associate with well-meaning humans, particularly those somehow associated with Starfleet Medical.

"May I help you, Dr. Noel?" he asks, ignoring her question.

"Maybe," she says. "At least, I hope you can. I don't know if you know anything about my work--"

"*Toward a Clinical Understanding of Post-Warp Psychology*," Spock says. "Your doctoral dissertation, if I'm not mistaken. Your posting on the *Enterprise* constitutes a postgraduate fellowship, does it not?"

"It does," she says. "And it's been...well, it's been amazing, Comm--oh, sorry, Captain. That's...that's still taking some getting used to," she says, looking at him apologetically.

"Quite understandable," he says. He wonders what Jim was to her. He'd never elaborated. Spock suspects this speaks well of both Jim and Dr. Noel.

“They almost didn’t let me come, you know,” she continues. “After Nero...” She bites her lip, eyes drifting a little out of focus. He can almost see her thoughts, running over her list of names, worrying them like beads. She looks back at Spock. “I think it’s safe to say Starfleet’s mission statement changed a little. I mean, I know what a Constitution-class starship used to look like, and I also know what kind of arsenal they retrofitted the *Enterprise* with.” She sighs. “Everything’s more complicated now. But I think...I think it only makes the kind of work we’re doing in Psych more important, to be honest.”

Spock nods slowly. “I am inclined to agree with you,” he says.

She seems almost surprised. “Good,” she says. “I’m glad to hear it. Since I’ve joined the crew, I’ve been spending most of my time developing survey instruments and building the framework of our database, but I think now I’m ready to start data collection. I wanted to get your okay before we started.”

Spock nods. “What does your survey entail?” he asks.

“Well, ideally we’d be able to study a culture pre-and post-warp, but that long-term a study is pretty much infeasible for a number of reasons. So I decided the next best thing would be to look at brain anatomy and physiology of species who’d individually been exposed to warp for a sustained period. Then we’d have a solid basis for comparison with pre-warp or newly warp-capable civilizations, which I figured we stood a decent chance of coming across on a five-year exploratory mission.” She smiles wryly.

“Your methodology is sound,” Spock says. “Are you requesting permission to initiate physiological testing on the crew?”

She nods. “Brain scans, basically. Totally noninvasive, of course. And everything will obviously be on a voluntary basis. I’ve put together a presentation on the project; I thought I could go over everything at the next shipwide staff meeting and start soliciting volunteers then.” She sits back, looking at him hopefully.

“So, Captain, can I ask for your support of my work?”

“Indeed,” Spock says. “I shall endeavor to help in any way I can. I agree that, in light of Nero, this avenue of study is potentially quite valuable.” He pauses, pressing his lips together. “Additionally,” he says, “I believe the Captain--I believe Captain Kirk would have wanted you to know that he too believed your work to be of great importance.”

Dr. Noel swallows, and her eyes fill with tears. Spock takes up his fork and prods at the remains of his cake for a moment. Humans claim to embrace their emotions, he thinks, yet it is often customary to pretend moments such as these are not happening. Dr. Noel coughs, and Spock looks up. She’s smiling at him tightly, as if to reassure him that it is all right to look again. He is now expected to change the subject in order to maintain the fiction that Dr. Noel is not upset at the mention of Jim.

“Tell me,” he says, “How did you initially become interested in the effects of warp travel on the brain?”

Dr. Noel smiles again. She leans over the table and begins speaking. She gesticulates and cocks her head to the side in enthusiasm as she talks, and Spock watches her earrings swing.

After Dr. Noel leaves, Spock finishes his cake. It is delicious, and he tells Sulu as much with perhaps more effusion than is strictly proper. He then obtains another slice, which he eats leaning against the wall in the corridor outside the mess, where the alpha bridge crew have congregated to drink replicated beer and linger. There is a tangible sense of clinging to the dregs of something. It is obvious even to Spock, as he stands there mixing his metaphors and collecting crumbs of red velvet cake on the pad of his index finger.

“We planned this party right before we got the red alert,” Chekov says dismally.

“No offense, Pavel, but can we give that a rest?” Sulu says wearily. “My birthday’s going to be depressing enough for the rest of my life.” He rubs his eyes. “Not that that really matters,” he says quickly, glancing at Spock. “But...you know.”

They all look tired, Spock thinks. There was mandatory debriefing with medical, but he wonders how much of that McCoy handwaved. He himself chose to schedule his debrief with McCoy rather than M’benga. They spent it packing Jim’s things to transfer to his mother aboard the *Wright*, McCoy drinking heavily and periodically absconding with various items he deemed inappropriate for Winona to see. “You should keep this one, Spock,” he said, hooting with laughter. He opened an old-fashioned paper magazine, holding it lengthwise and tilting his head to inspect the illustration within. “Pretty sure they’re supposed to be Vulcans.”

Spock had snatched it from him, regarding the orgiastic scene with a critical eye. “These are obviously plastic ears, and the hairpieces are deplorable quality,” he said, tucking the magazine under his arm protectively nonetheless.

Now, in the corridor, McCoy eyeballs the liquid level in his bottle of beer and tilts it back, draining the last of it and shaking it to emphasize its emptiness. “Anyone else dry?” he asks. “I’ll make a replicator run.”

“Doctor,” Spock says, “that is your seventh alcoholic beverage in ninety-three minutes.”

“Can it, Captain,” McCoy says, not unkindly. “Want another piece of cake?”

Spock says nothing. McCoy brings him a plate anyway. “Knew life would be better once we got you on the sauce,” he says as he hands it to Spock. “If only Jim were here to see it.”

Spock isn’t sure whether or not it’s a good thing that the humans have taken to joking about Jim. He supposes it’s good, that it’s healing somehow. The raw places inside him feel ever so slightly less at moments like these, and Spock allows himself, however tentatively, to feel. He does so gingerly, as if testing a healing limb. “I believe Vulcans’ alleged sensitivity to cacao to be greatly exaggerated,” he says, as he nearly loses his balance and slides awkwardly down the wall to come to a rest on the floor in between McCoy and Nyota. Across the narrow hallway, Chekov snorts with laughter.

“Seriously, though,” Nyota says, taking a drink. “If it weren’t for Jim and his genius with a replicator, we’d all be stuck with synthehol and moonshine from engineering.”

“Hey!” Scotty interjects, and next to him Keenser gives an incomprehensible squawk.

“Oh, please,” Nyota says. “None of you even *like* that stuff, you just drink it as some kind of circle-jerky red badge of courage thing.”

“Puts hair on your chest, among other places,” Sulu says, voice warped and strange.

“Was that supposed to be a *Scottish accent*?” Scotty asks incredulously. “I’m deeply offended.” He turns to Spock. “Captain, I’d like to report First Officer Sulu for impersonating an--”

The cave walls are wet with condensation, and the air smells musty and metallic. His heart is pounding and he’s scared, scared and sad and angry. And he wants, too, oh how he wants. But the figure huddled on the floor is shaking, curled in on itself like a bundle, and as he approaches and reaches out a hand it jerks away. Jim feels a pang at that, but he steadies his hand and tries again, skating fingertips across coarse blue fabric. Spock shudders under his touch, and Jim’s traitorous heart skips at the response, but he swallows the little jolt of pleasure and leans down to find Spock’s eyes, like maybe if he can just fucking look at him Jim can get Spock to stop panicking. Jim runs a finger along the line of Spock’s jaw, trying to get him to turn his head. He does, and his lips brush Jim’s fingers and nip at them, oh god...

“Spock,” he says. “Spock, look at me.”

“I’m alone,” Spock says. Something in his tone chills Jim. He seems resigned somehow, cold despite the fever-brightness of his eyes.

“No,” Jim says, insistent. “You’re not. And you’re not going to die.” He leans in and kisses Spock on the mouth, testing, and when Spock opens his mouth and lets Jim in he knows they’ll be all right. They’ll make their way down here in the dark.

“Len? It looks like he’s coming around.”

“That idiot. Did you hear him earlier, running his mouth about Vulcans and chocolate being some big myth?” McCoy comes into focus above Spock, shaking his head slowly and blurrily.

“I will compose a literature review, if that will sufficiently prove my point,” Spock says.

His head aches, and he wishes they’d leave him alone.

“Can you make out what he’s saying?” asks the second voice, which Spock can now identify as Nyota. “His voice is all slurred. Here, Spock, I’ll get you some water.” She returns a moment later with a cup, holding it to his mouth so he can drink. “Thank you,” Spock says, and Nyota’s gratified expression tells him he is intelligible again.

He sits up, wincing at the pain in his head before mentally adjusting his shields. He's in sickbay, and the lights are blessedly dim. Nyota sits cross-legged on a bed opposite him, and McCoy glowers at Spock as is his custom. Spock is coming to find it oddly reassuring.

"What happened?" Spock asks.

"What *happened*," says McCoy, "is you got drunk on chocolate and keeled over in the middle of the hallway."

Spock shakes his head. "I was not inebriated." McCoy looks skeptical. Spock holds up his hands. "Perhaps I will concede some exceedingly minor impairment. I estimate lessening of my mental faculties to be less than point five percent, which would coincide with a blood cacao level of--"

"Fine, fine," McCoy says dismissively. "So you're telling me you just fell asleep?"

"I do not know," Spock says. "I was conscious, listening to Mr. Scott. And then I was...elsewhere."

McCoy furrows his brow. "That's disturbingly imprecise coming from you," he says.

"I concur," says Spock. He can't remember the dream. Something tugs at the edges of his awareness, something familiar, but it dances maddeningly out of reach.

McCoy makes a note on his PADD. "Any headache?"

"Mild," Spock says. "Possibly attributable to the cake," he adds, slightly abashed.

"Hmph," snorts McCoy. "I heard what you were mumbling earlier, by the way," he says. "I'll take that lit review at your earliest convenience."

Spock is in the shower, of all places, when he remembers. He feels altogether dirtier than he knows to be logical; regardless, he allows himself the luxury of water for the first time since his *pon farr*. Perhaps it's something in the muscle memory of scrubbing himself with real soap, perhaps it's the slick feel of the shower wall as he slips and reaches out to catch his balance. Whatever it is that jogs his memory, it's enough to send Spock reeling, and he crouches down and stares at the swirl of water down the drain and waits to catch his breath. The cave, he thinks. The dream was about the cave. And it was not a dream at all, but a memory. Jim's memory.

"Impossible," he says aloud. He and Jim have had mental contact more than once, the most notable occasion being their meld in the cave. Jim's experience of the event must have somehow transferred to Spock's consciousness during the meld, allowing him to view the memory as if it were his own. A simple, cruel trick of the mind, Spock thinks. He should be grateful for the simplicity of this explanation. To feel disappointment would be...misplaced. He stands and shuts off the water.

Two months later

“Assuming standard orbit of Eterea, Captain,” Sulu says.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Commander,” Spock replies. “Lieutenant Uhura, Ensign Chekov, meet me in the transporter room at 1200 hours. Lieutenant, you have the schedule?” Nyota swipes a finger over her touchscreen and nods.

“The Etereans have arranged accommodations for us for the duration of the conference,” she says. “Check-in’s at 1300, then it looks like we’re free until the cocktail reception at 1800.” She pauses and looks up, then bites her lip and returns to her PADD. Jim’s inevitable quip about the merits of free alcohol hangs in the air, unspoken, and for a moment everyone is silent. There have been hundreds of such moments, Spock thinks. They haunt the ship like thousands of little ghosts, congregating in the mess, in sickbay, in the corners of Spock’s quarters.

“So, 1800,” Nyota says again. “And then panels start tomorrow at 0800, looks like Federation xenogeology trying to convince Eterea they should join up and yield their mineral rights.” She makes a face. “I’m sure that will go well.” She turns to Chekov. “You’re there to watch and learn,” she says. “So follow the Captain’s or my lead, and for god’s sake, be diplomatic.” There is also a joke to be made here at Jim’s expense, but Nyota snaps the cover over her PADD and turns back to Spock.

“With your permission, I’ll go pack,” she says.

Spock nods. “I will do the same,” he says. He gestures at the turbolift, uncertain how to react when Chekov lingers on the bridge and the doors close on the two of them. Nyota immediately takes a step closer, peering into his face inscrutably.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“I believe you have said those words to me more often than any others over the course of our acquaintance,” he replies. “And, as always, ‘okay’ has variable definitions.”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course,” she says. Her eyes don’t leave his face. Spock shifts almost involuntarily and she raises an eyebrow. “Glad to see I can still make you squirm,” she says, warmth in her tone.

“Vulcans do not squirm,” Spock says. He exhales. “I am...well.”

“Well,” she repeats. “Well, I, for one, am not okay. And I wasn’t the one closer to the captain than anyone in the universe.” He opens his mouth to protest, but she raises a hand. “Just saying. And please don’t tell McCoy I said that.”

“What do you hope to achieve by repeatedly asking after my mental state?” Spock asks evenly.

She sighs. “I don’t know,” she says. “I guess it’s the same old same old, you know?” She smiles at his raised eyebrow. “Even after all this time, I can’t tell whether the stoic Vulcan thing is what you want or...or something else.”

“It’s more complicated than a simple choice,” he says. “I know you understand this.” He looks away from her. The turbolift chimes as they reach deck 5, and Spock reaches over and holds down the button. “I told the Captain once that I was endeavoring to dwell in the gray,” he says. “That is still true, although lately I find the attempt decidedly less pleasant.”

Nyota smiles sadly at him. “I can imagine,” she says. The turbolift buzzes in protest, and Spock releases the button.

The conference is held in what serves as a hotel in the Eterean capital. The Etereans seem to favor light and space, and the structure they’ve built to house visitors to the planet is all wide planes of glass and soaring ceilings. The glass adjusts to the planet’s distance from the sun, darkening or lightening in response to the shifting heat and light that penetrate from the exterior as the Eterean day lengthens and wanes. Spock finds himself pressing his palm to the glass and marveling at the unexpected coolness.

“Here are our badges,” Nyota says, handing them around. Spock’s blinks with the same picture that’s on his Starfleet ID card, alternating with his name and rank. The picture is a rather unfortunate likeness, and Spock has a sudden recollection of the first time he had to wear a name tag in Jim’s presence (“What is this, man, your mug shot after getting picked up for drunk and disorderly?”).

Nyota looks at her chrono. “I’ve been in touch with some of the xenoling people on the *Kinshasa* and the *Dauntless*; we’ve set up a meeting with some of the scholars here,” she says. “You’re both welcome to come with.”

Chekov accepts Nyota’s invitation, leaving Spock alone in the atrium with the promise to return at 1730 for the cocktail reception. He takes a seat on a pale lavender banquette opulently upholstered in a velvety material. The Etereans are a prosperous people, dwelling as they do on a planet rich with life and resources. Thus far they have chosen to remain outside the Federation, exchanging a relative lack of security for freedom from trade restrictions. He finds he cannot fault them for it. Spock finds himself tired. The conference will proceed as so many have before it. The Etereans will elect to join the Federation now, or they will not. If they do not, perhaps the *Enterprise* will return here someday, weapons blazing, to try and save the verdant little planet from someone who has decided they prefer not to trade. And even if they do join the Federation’s ranks, Spock estimates a 77.3% probability the same outcome will occur. He allows his shoulders to slump minutely, Jim’s absence a persistent throb.

“Commander Spock?”

Spock looks up to see Sorvik standing beside the banquette, watching him with an interested expression. He feels a jolt of embarrassment, as if he’s a child caught out at something, although Sorvik is nowhere near enough to perceive his thoughts. He stands, raising his hand in the *ta’al*. “Greetings, Sorvik,” he says. “I was unaware that the Science Academy sent a delegation to Eterea.”

“We have,” Sorvik says. “There are a number of interesting mineral variations we have not previously encountered, and the Etereans have given us the opportunity to meet with their miners and examine samples.” His gaze darts to Spock’s sleeve, clearly noting his rank

insignia. "I see I erred in addressing you," he says. "My apologies, Captain Spock, and my congratulations on your promotion."

"There is no offense where none is taken," Spock says automatically. "And your congratulations are misplaced, given that I was promoted as a result of circumstance rather than on my own merits." He says this plainly, without any trace of bitterness. "Captain Kirk was killed in action sixty-two days ago. I was promoted to Captain following that incident."

"I see," Sorvik says. "I grieve with thee."

Sorvik assumes he grieves, Spock thinks. Is it so obvious?

"And you? Are you well?" Spock asks, eager to discuss another topic.

"I am," Sorvik says. "I am quite interested in the native flora," he says abruptly. "Would you care to walk in the hotel garden with me? I am not due to rendezvous with our landing party until 1700."

"That would be satisfactory," Spock says. He is also interested in observing the planet's wildlife, theoretically at least. Certainly it would be illogical to remain indoors (moping, a Jim-like voice supplies) when he could be collecting data on Etereia in the company of a fellow scientist.

The hotel's "garden" is designed to be representative of the planet's biomes. As such, it's a series of greenhouses under the necessary climate controls interspersed with outdoor greenspace. In reality "green" is something of a misnomer, Spock thinks, as much of the flora and fauna has an indigo cast that mirrors the Etereans' skin. Sorvik appears quite taken with the specimens on display, and Spock produces his tricorder to take readings from the plants and soil.

"I have a personal interest in botany," Sorvik explains. "My parents maintained a garden on Vulcan. They used nearly the entirety of their water allocation on it. Their acquaintances believed they had taken leave of their senses." There's a softening around Sorvik's eyes that Spock would have missed had he not been looking for it, and it strikes him that Sorvik is likely well-acquainted with the appearance of grief.

They walk among the plantings in silence after that, separating periodically to explore areas of individual interest. Spock leans close to a particularly striking fern, and when he straightens again to inspect his tricorder readings he--

He's standing in the ready room, and the edge of the table is digging into the small of his back. It hurts, but he doesn't care. Spock is standing in front of him, looking shifty as fuck but also like he's trying not to be. It would be funny, how he thinks he's being subtle, except for how it's the worst.

"So, there's no actual debriefing, obviously," Jim says. Just wanted to get you alone, since you've been avoiding me like I've got a raging case of Andorian shingles ever since we got back on the ship. Spock has the good grace to look slightly ashamed, as if he somehow knows Jim's thoughts.

“Are you all right?” Spock asks, softly. There’s a gentleness there that makes Jim’s gut twist, and he crosses his arms in front of him to stop himself from bridging the little gulf between them and grabbing Spock by the shoulders and kissing the goddamn trepidation off of his stony Vulcan face--

“Spock?”

Spock comes back to himself, the indigo haze of the garden blurry at first and coming slowly back into focus. He’s on his knees. Sorvik is next to him, reaching out as if to touch his shoulder. Spock starts, visibly this time, and Sorvik withdraws his hand quickly, perhaps perceiving the movement as a negative reaction to his proximity.

“Are you well?” Sorvik asks, and the memory rushes back at Spock full force. Another of Jim’s memories, Spock knows with certainty now. He gasps, drawing in a deep breath. His eyes are watering. “Spock?” Sorvik says again.

Spock gets to his feet. “I don’t know,” he says. He stands quietly for seventy-five seconds, breathing slowly and deliberately in order to slow his heart rate and quell the burgeoning sense of panic. Some distant part of him knows that he should be ashamed that this display is taking place in front of Sorvik, but he finds he cannot bring himself to care. For his part, Sorvik stands next to him, studying Spock with a slightly furrowed brow. He looks as if he’s trying to work something out.

“May I ask a personal question?” Sorvik asks. Spock feels disarmed, and can only nod.

“Your captain,” Sorvik says. “You...cared for him?”

Spock whirls to face Sorvik, knowing his reaction is a dead giveaway. “How...”

“We did not meld the night we met, but we were quite close regardless,” Sorvik says. “I did not intend to sense your thoughts, though I must admit I found them intriguing.” He colors slightly. “You thought of him then,” Sorvik continues. “Were you thinking of him just now?”

Spock swallows, bile rising in his throat. “Yes,” he says. “Though it was unintentional.” He bends down and retrieves his tricorder from where it lies in the dirt. “I must go,” he says. “I apologize.”

“No apology is necessary,” Sorvik says. “I will see you at the panels tomorrow.”

Spock shakes his head. “I must return to my ship,” he says, feeling dazed. He’s not sure exactly why he’s telling Sorvik this. He turns and walks quickly back toward the atrium, footsteps crunching on the gravel path.

“Spock?” calls Sorvik.

Spock turns.

“I am sorry,” Sorvik says.

“Perhaps you need not be,” Spock says. Sorvik gives him a strange look, and turns back to his plants.

Spock’s nerves jangle like alarm bells with every step. It feels frighteningly like hope. When he reaches the atrium, he texts Nyota, then he opens his communicator and hails the ship.

Spock materializes on the transporter pad and strides from the room without a word to the puzzled-looking transporter crew. Dr. Noel’s office is located on Deck 7 with the rest of the science labs. He has passed it 742 times, by his estimation, 326 of which were accompanied by increased heart and respiratory rate. Spock recalls that he once considered an additional physical as a result of these peculiar symptoms, but now he has a hypothesis that these incidences post-date shore leave on Cesta V.

Spock presses the door chime, and Dr. Noel opens it looking slightly sleepy, wearing eyeglasses and an oversized sweater. “It’s freezing in here,” she says, holding up her arms to let the material flop over her hands. Then she pushes it back up reflexively and puts her hands on her hips, regarding Spock brightly. She’s not wearing earrings.

“What can I do for you, Captain?” she asks.

“I trust I am not disturbing you,” Spock says. He feels oddly calm now, and when he looks back on it later he decides that he knew, then, even before going to see her.

“Not at all,” she says. “Just catching up on some paperwork.”

“I wondered if I might contribute to your brain scan database,” he says. “Personally.”

Dr. Noel looks perplexed for a moment. Then she smiles at him. “Of course,” she says. “I’d be...I’d be honored to have you contribute. Give me a few minutes; I need to boot up the system, and then we can take a look. Spock nods his thanks, standing as rigidly as he can while she sets about making her preparations.

“Okay,” Dr. Noel says. “I think we’ve about got it. I’m going to bring you out now.” Spock can hear voices, and suddenly the white field an inch from his nose is replaced by Dr. Noel’s eager face.

“The scan looks great, Spock,” says Dr. Noel as Spock sits up. “I can’t wait to really get a look at it and show you exactly what we’re looking for.”

Spock slides off of the biobed. Dr. Noel is leaning over one of the sickbay computer consoles, keying something in and peering at a swirling mass that Spock supposes is an image of his brain. He is passingly knowledgeable about anatomy and physiology; all Vulcan children receive a thorough grounding on the subject. Spock remembers a particularly explosive argument with his parents regarding the relative logic of devoting time to “a subject that does not pertain to me.” He cannot recall the meat of his argument, only that, after a long debate,

his father simply sighed and told him to use his time as he saw fit. Then he took Spock's mother by the hand and closed their bedroom door. Spock remembers watching the light under the door flicker and then go out. He did not feel victorious at all.

Here, in sickbay, Dr. Noel has opened Spock's brain scan on a large viewscreen. He feels exposed, as if his every thought is being streamed for a live audience. He reminds himself that this is not the case, and looks at the image. It's a large oval, filled with a glowing congregation of colored shapes.

"So, this is your brain, obviously," says Dr. Noel. "This scanning technology can map neuronal connections, so we know what's doing what, more or less. Now, I'm not an expert on the physiology of the Vulcan brain, but you can see here--" She raises her hand, tracing one of the glowing areas on the screen with her forefinger. "Here's your parietal lobe. That governs your sense of time, and yours is larger than a human's...you probably have a greater proportion of basal ganglia in your brain, too. Those are also important for sensing time. We're interested in what adaptations might occur in those areas as a result of warp travel. And here's...oh, I didn't notice this before!" She indicates a faint blueish glow around the edges of the scan.

Spock quells the urge to put his hands to his head, as if he can feel the strange glow with his fingers. "Is that not a normal feature of the Vulcan brain?" he asks, keeping his tone neutral.

Dr. Noel blushes, and Spock feels something in his stomach flip disconcertingly.

"As I said, I'm not an expert on Vulcans," she says. "But I did have a colleague who specialized in Vulcan neurology, and he taught me a little of the theory. I've never seen a bond on a scan before, so I'm kind of flying blind here. But wow, this is cool--"

Spock holds up a hand, and she pauses, looking at him expectantly. "Dr. Noel, would you please repeat yourself?" Spock's mouth feels dry. He had begun to suspect, but...

"It's a pair bond," she says slowly. Perhaps she thinks he is testing her. "The scan's interpreting it as this kind of glow because of the color-mapping program, but what we're really looking at is neural plasticity. It's your brain's way of adapting to your...partner? Is that the right word?"

"Bondmate," Spock says, nearly whispering.

"Bondmate, right," she repeats. "Your brain is adapting to your bondmate's consciousness, forging new neural pathways. It's amazing, from a neurological perspective, no matter how commonplace it is among your species. And it's pretty new, right? if I'm interpreting the scan correctly, that is. See how it's just on the periphery there?"

Spock doesn't answer. His face feels hot. Dr. Noel gives him a strange look, then presses her lips together and drops her gaze. "Anyway," she says breezily. "That's all I need. Thank you for the scan, Captain. We'll add you to the database, and hopefully one day reasonably soon I'll be able to get some hard numbers back to you."

Spock nods. "Would you mind--"

“I’ll be happy to forward you a copy of the scan,” she says quickly.

“Thank you, Dr. Noel,” Spock says. He does not believe in the human concept of the ‘miracle’, but if he did, he feels sure that making it to the door without stumbling would qualify.

McCoy is sitting at his desk when Spock enters his quarters; he has opened the door without requesting identification. Now he glances up, then back down at the PADD in front of him, then back up again when he realizes who it is. He drops his stylus onto the surface of the desk, and it rolls off onto the floor.

“Dammit,” he says. “I keep losing those things.” He turns to Spock. “I’m off duty, you know. And aren’t you supposed to be down on the planet? Since I didn’t get a comm I’m assuming no one’s grievously injured. Oh lord, tell me Chekov didn’t drink some mystery beverage at the cocktail hour like he did on--”

“Jim is alive,” Spock says.

McCoy gives him a long look. “I’m listening,” he says in a tone that tells Spock that if anyone else were talking they’d have been physically removed from the premises already.

“I have been experiencing unusual dreams since Jim disappeared,” Spock begins. “They have since escalated, and I now have reason to believe they are not dreams at all, but Jim’s thoughts and memories.”

“And you were planning on telling me this when, exactly? When you had some kind of--of *vision* of Jim on the bridge in front of the whole crew? Or better yet, in the middle of that conference you’re supposed to be at right now?”

“I don’t think the episodes are physically harmful,” Spock counters.

“Oh, and your medical degree is backing you up on that, is it? Jesus, Spock, I know the past couple months have been rough, and I’m not trying to be a hard-ass--”

“I find that difficult to believe,” Spock cannot resist interjecting. “Doctor, if you would--”

“I’m trying to look out for you, you idiot,” McCoy says “Now listen, I want you to tell me exactly what’s been happening. No ‘prevaricating’, or whatever it is you claim is against your religion.”

“That is precisely what I’ve been attempting to do,” Spock says. “The episodes began shortly after the mission to Vespae. As I said, initially I believed them to be dreams, and attributed their bizarre nature to my...agitated mental state following Jim’s death. However, I began experiencing them while conscious, and recognized them as...memories, from Jim’s point of view.” He takes a breath. However illogically, he feels daunted by what comes next. But his friend lives, he knows it in his bones, and whatever temporary embarrassment he might suffer before McCoy is impossibly trivial now.

“Jim and I have...shared minds,” he says carefully. “At first, I believed the memories were simply an aftereffect of a particular meld, psychic or emotional transference that occurred under great duress. Today, on Eterea, I had another episode. This time, the incident the memory involved occurred after our last meld. I have no explanation for this, unless it results from a link formed between our minds.”

“Shared minds, oh my God,” McCoy says, running a hand over his face. “I’m going to pretend, for my own well-being, that that was in a professional capacity. But okay, how do you know that this link wasn’t there before, and broke, when Jim...you know.”

Spock sighs. “I was not certain,” he said. “I am not an expert on Vulcan telepathy; that is the realm of the adepts. Fortuitously, I was able to procure proof that should satisfy your high scientific standards,” he says, calling up the image on his PADD and handing the device to McCoy.

He bends over the scan, reading the metadata that identifies the image, the date and time it was recorded. Spock feels a certain proprietary sense of warmth well up in him upon seeing the physical evidence of the bond again. *Bondmate*. He turns the word over in his mind like a touchstone.

McCoy looks up at Spock. “Am I looking at what I think I’m looking at?”

Spock clasps and unclasps his hands, feeling the blood rise in his cheeks. “That is a Vulcan pair bond, doctor,” he says.

“And it wouldn’t look like that if--”

“It is unbroken,” Spock says.

“Holy shit,” says McCoy, shaking his head slowly. “Holy shit.” When he looks at Spock again, his eyes are filled with tears. “Let’s go get him,” he says.

“Captain on the bridge,” Sulu announces as Spock steps out of the turbolift.

“Acting captain,” Spock says. “Listen closely,” he says. “Captain Kirk is alive.” The bridge is silent for a beat, then erupts. Spock raises his hands for quiet.

“I intend to return to Vespae and retrieve him, and I do not intend to await Starfleet’s blessing in order to do so. These actions will likely be construed as insubordinate, and while I will do my utmost to assume all responsibility--”

“Laying in a course for Vespae,” Chekov interrupts. Beside him, Sulu’s fingers hover over the controls. “Maximum warp sound good?”

Spock most definitely does not smile.

When they drop out of warp, Spock's plans are somewhat foiled by the distinct lack of a planet. Instead, there's a massive debris field. Spock's stomach drops, and he does his best to ignore it. The bond, he thinks. Surely his assumptions were correct, that he'd have felt something, *anything*, if...

"Mr. Chekov, you're certain these are the correct coordinates?" he asks.

"Yes, sir," Chekov says.

"Mr. Sulu, take us through the debris," he says. Something is tugging on his consciousness again, at the periphery of his mind. This time he stills, and tries to listen.

"You brought back the records from the mining colony, correct?"

"That's right, sir," Sulu says. "Should be uploaded into the system; we handed them off to ops."

Spock calls up the information on his PADD, scanning through it as quickly as he can. Sulu was right; it appears the miners made little progress prior to abandoning their efforts. They established an infrastructure on the planet, set up a drilling apparatus, and began to mine for dilithium, but then they abruptly discontinued their activities and all documentation of their time on the planet. Shortly thereafter, Spock supposes, the Federation took notice of their silence (or, more likely, the lack of dilithium) and sent word to Starfleet.

"And the rest, as they say, is history," Spock mutters. Nyota looks up from her station and catches his eye.

It appears that all mining operations ceased once the drills reached a certain level of the planet's mantle. Spock extrapolates based on the start of drilling and calls up a series of staff logs from a three-day period. The first two days are uneventful. The third is decidedly different.

A human female identifying herself as the head of operations is shouting at someone offscreen, and Spock can hear the sound of explosions. "It's in the core," the woman says, turning back to the screen. "It's in the core. We didn't know; how could we have known? Tell them--if someone can just tell them, that we didn't mean..."

Spock narrows his eyes at the PADD. He calls up the readings from the drills and examines them. "Fascinating," he says.

"Got something?" McCoy paces next to the center chair. Spock hands him the PADD.

"Look at these readings," he says. "This is the material the miners extracted from the planet's mantle. What is unusual about it?"

McCoy is silent for twenty seconds, then: "This came out of a planet? This is biological material."

"I'm beginning to think this did not come out of a planet at all," Spock says.

“What, the planet was some kind of giant creature that just exploded? Or a giant egg that--*oh*.” McCoy slaps a hand over his mouth. “Fuck me,” he says.

“Indeed,” Spock says.

“Okay,” McCoy says. “Okay. So if it was a gigantic egg, what the hell came out of it? And where did it go?”

“Um, Captain?” Sulu says. “Couldn’t help but overhear, and uh...this wouldn’t happen to be what you’re looking for, would it?”

Spock and McCoy turn to the view screen as one. The creature--Spock supposes he should think of it as a creature--is mammoth, a smooth pinkish-grey hulk crusted over in places with blue-black. Parts of it look like a planet, but parts of it look wet and new and alive. Something instinctive in Spock feels a protective jolt, although the thing is so large that it could destroy the ship without ever knowing she was there.

“Jim’s *on* that?” McCoy says. “Where?”

“On,” says Spock. “Or in.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

They end up on a shuttle, of course. Sulu, in an illogical fit of sentimentality that Spock cannot fault or refuse, insists on piloting Spock and McCoy through the debris field they now believe to be the nascent creature’s discarded shell.

“I wonder how long it’s in there for,” McCoy says. “And if that’s the baby, where the hell are the parents?”

“I suspect that may answer what became of the miners,” Spock says. “Although I am content for that theory to remain a theory.”

Sulu puts them down on a piece of the creature’s carapace that Spock sincerely hopes is stable. “I could order you to stay with the shuttle and leave us in the event the landing site becomes compromised,” he says as they unbuckle their harnesses.

“You could,” Sulu says, reaching up to free his biosuit from the wall straps.

They move awkwardly across the surface. Part of Spock is intensely curious about this creature, if that’s what it is. But a much larger part is drawn forward as if to a beacon. He wonders what this is, if it’s instinct, or folly, or a manifestation of the bond. It doesn’t feel the way he’d imagined a bond to feel, but perhaps that was by virtue of its accidental nature. He imagines each clumsy step in the unwieldy biosuit bringing him closer to Jim.

At last, they come to a hulking structure. In the lee of the outcrop is an opening, a pore into the living earth. Spock steps close to it, peering inside. Here, here, here beats his heart. He turns to McCoy and Sulu, indicating the pore. McCoy’s voice crackles in Spock’s earpiece.

“Again,” he says, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” But he doesn’t hesitate when Spock steps into the darkness, a shadowy maw that coalesces into a tunnel just high enough for Spock to stand without crouching...which only lasts for about the first hundred feet, when the tunnel narrows and begins to slope gently down. Spock has been calm since the brain scan. But now he’s seized with a sudden urgency, and he picks up his pace, half jogging, half sliding down the slick surface of the tunnel. Behind him he can hear McCoy and Sulu cursing as they follow, Spock’s superior proprioception allowing him to move more quickly than they can. Around them, the air hangs close and heavy, and Spock is grateful for the respirator on his suit.

There’s a cry from behind him, and he barely has time to look back before McCoy slams into him, knocked down by Sulu’s falling form. The substrate around them is coated with a layer of slimy secretion that offers no purchase; rather, the smooth biosuits seem designed specifically to propel the three of them faster and faster down the tunnel. Down they slide, a knot of bodies, down down down and then out, as the tunnel opens into a cavernous space that’s red and pink and pulsing. Their headlamps flash wildly against the walls, and then they hit the bottom and come to rest, Spock at the bottom of the pile with the air knocked from his lungs. McCoy and Sulu roll off of him and the three men stand up shakily, feet slipping beneath them.

Sulu holds his arms out in front of him, inspecting the viscous, pale yellow substance that coats his suit. “Well, this is horrifying,” he says.

“Everyone okay?” McCoy says. “Spock?”

Spock is not listening. He’s recovered himself enough to turn away from McCoy and Sulu, unclipping the flashlight from his utility belt and running it over the walls. They seem to beat in time to what he assumes is the creature’s pulse. And there, there where his flashlight beam meets the dark and dies away, the remnants of light play over a still humanoid form and Spock’s heart stutters and stops.

He’s at a dead sprint before he even realizes that his body is moving, across the cavern and sliding to a stop, slipping onto his knees and staggering up again. Jim is on the wall--no, he’s in the wall. The living tissue has grown around his body. Suddenly the dream-that-wasn’t comes flooding back to him, and he automatically looks up at where Jim’s face should be, where a thick, fleshy tendril runs from the wall into Jim’s mouth.

Jim’s chest is rising and falling, and that’s all Spock needs to see before he flings himself at the wall, tearing off his gloves and clawing at it with his bare hands and calling desperately for McCoy. He finds himself talking to Jim as he does so, a litany of encouragements and promises he is barely aware of. McCoy and Sulu skid to a stop beside him, McCoy stepping close to Spock and putting a hand on his shoulder. Spock shrugs it off. McCoy tightens his grip, trying to pull Spock away from the wall, away from Jim, away...

“*Spock!* Spock. You need to listen to me. You need to let me do this. If we take him out of there too quickly, we have no idea what could happen. It could kill him, you hear me?” McCoy tries to spin Spock around, to look him in the face, but Spock wrenches himself free. The force causes him to stumble backwards. He’s vaguely aware of Sulu reaching out a hand to steady him, but he hits the floor milliseconds later, rolling onto his hands and knees and

retching at the thick squelch of McCoy's surgical tools removing Jim from the wall. A small, rational part of Spock's mind boggles at his body's visceral response. It's as if a relentless wave of nausea has welled up in him from nowhere. It's tinged with pleasure, the unlikely mix heady in Spock's nervous system, the two sensations warring as McCoy and Sulu pull Jim free and deposit his body with a wet flop on the floor beside Spock.

"Just stay back, dammit," McCoy says preemptively. "Let me get his vitals," he says, getting out his tricorder. Spock fixes his gaze on Jim's throat, at the pulse he can see fluttering there.

"This is amazing," McCoy mutters as if to himself. "He's dehydrated, a little shocky. We're not going to want to hang around here too long, and not just because we're the Jonah to this freaky alien's whale, but...he's pretty stable." He shakes his head, and his hands quiver around the tricorder. "Spock--"

Spock does not wait to hear what McCoy planned to say, whether it's caution or permission or something else entirely. He lunges, closing the space between himself and Jim and gathering Jim's body up in his arms. Jim stirs at the contact, eyelids fluttering open. He opens his mouth and tries to speak, accomplishing nothing but a dry crackle, and Spock finds he cannot help himself. He lays Jim out gently, kneeling over him and cradling his face in his hands. "I have been a fool," Spock murmurs thickly. Then, heedless of their onlookers, of the gore streaking Jim's face, he leans down and kisses him.

I saw you, says Jim, voice clear as stars in Spock's mind. *I saw you every day*.

Jim sits on his bed, bouncing lightly on the mattress in a manner that can only be described as fidgety. He looks around the room as if seeing it for the first time, and Spock wonders exactly how much of the past two months he remembers. How much of the time before, of--

"So," Jim says.

"Dr. McCoy has discharged you from sickbay," Spock says carefully.

"Yep," Jim says. "I'm right as rain, apparently. Nothing a week's worth of IV fluids couldn't fix. Which doesn't really compute with being presumed dead for two months, but I'll take it, I guess." He laughs, and the hollowness there pains Spock. He has learned that Jim is a master of understatement where his own well-being is concerned. The Jim sitting across from Spock is too pale, too thin. Spock crosses his arms tightly against his chest to physically restrain himself from crossing the room and taking Jim into his arms as he did on Vespae, and whether this is an effect of the bond or something else he does not know.

Jim studies Spock's face. "Bones told me...he told me you found me. That you knew I was alive. But he was kind of cagey about the specifics. And then you...you've made yourself pretty scarce, man." Jim looks down, but not before Spock can see the look in his eyes, feel the soreness ripple across the air between them. He is correct, of course. Spock largely stayed away from sickbay. He supposes his absence confused the rest of the crew, but then he stayed away from them too so he does not know.

Jim swallows. "I feel really weird right now," he says. "Dizzy." He rubs his eyes.

"I must speak with you," Spock says haltingly. "At length. Is that tolerable at present?"

Jim gives him a wan smile. "I think I can handle it," he says. He sighs, shoulders slumping. "I missed you, you know? I wasn't really...thinking, on the planet. Just kind of drifting. But somehow...somehow I knew you, and I knew I missed...us."

"Do you recall the incident in the cave?" Spock asks softly.

"Um. Yes," Jim says. "And look, I know we never really talked about it, not really, and--"

"Jim," Spock says. "I wish to apologize. I was--my behavior following our return to the ship was...deplorable."

"Spock--"

Spock holds up a hand. "Please," he says. "I have had...I have had considerable time to imagine this moment, to determine what I would say if--" He looks away, a sudden clutching sensation in his chest, his throat. A physiological response to sorrow, he thinks. Unexpected that he should feel this now, when Jim sits whole before him. He sighs.

"As I said once before, I owe you a great debt," he continues. "You acted admirably, in circumstances of which you had only the barest understanding." He takes a step closer, and Jim pats the mattress next to him. Spock crosses the room and sits, leaving a carefully measured sliver of space between them.

"When we joined our minds, I felt fear," Spock says. He looks at his hands.

Jim laughs, a little bitterly. "Should I be offended by that?"

"You misunderstand me," Spock says. "I could not recall feeling such fear on any prior occasion, not even when I stood on the surface of my dying planet."

Jim looks past Spock, shaking his head slowly. "It was me, though," he says. "It was *me*, Spock."

"Yes," Spock says. "It was you." He presses his lips together, as if he could hold the words in, keep this admission inside to batter about the cage of his mind. But he cannot; this he knows. The buzzing blue light wrapping each of his cells with sharp, sweet electricity chides him for even considering it.

"When we melded during the *plak-tow*, I...it seems a link was formed," he says hurriedly. He feels as if all eloquence has deserted him, and Jim is sitting silently, brow slightly furrowed in focus as if Spock is a particularly difficult equation.

Spock looks down again, plucking at a loose stitch in the blanket and worrying it between his thumb and forefinger. Jim reaches out, hesitating for a second, and then stilling Spock's hand with his own. "Stop fidgeting," he says gently. "And tell me about this link."

“It would be more accurate to refer to it as a bond,” Spock says. He closes his eyes. Jim’s hand tenses.

“Say that again,” Jim whispers.

“A bond,” Spock repeats.

Jim slumps against Spock then, exhaling. “Shit,” he says, laughing. Spock thinks he can detect a slightly hysterical cant to it; he comes dangerously close to matching it himself. “Like, a *bond* bond?” Jim asks. “Like we were talking about that time?”

Spock nods. “Yes,” he says.

“But Spock, that’s...”

“Less than a marriage, but more than a betrothal,” Spock says, like an incantation. “Though in this case, I suspect marriage might be the nearer approximation.”

Jim giggles again, and now the hysteria is shrill and unmistakable. “You married me,” he says. “You Vulcan-married me. Holy shit, Spock.”

Spock straightens, so that Jim’s body slumps unceremoniously towards the bed. He catches himself, sitting up and giving Spock a look he can’t quite parse. “It is not...it is not irreversible,” Spock says. “We may travel to New Vulcan at our earliest convenience and seek an adept to sever the bond,” he says tersely.

Jim leans forward, peering at Spock’s face. “Why do you sound so pissed off?” he asks. “You’re the one who was terrified by the horror show that is my brain. Aren’t you counting the seconds until we can break this thing?”

Spock doesn’t respond. They sit in silence. He rarely feels challenged by language, but now he cannot find the words he wants; they slip like minnows through grasping fingers. “I care for you,” he says at last, staring across the room to the opposite wall. He can see Jim’s body in his peripheral vision and Spock cannot help but watch the taut set of his shoulders as the words leave his mouth.

“You kissed me,” Jim says abruptly. “On Vespae, when Bones pulled me out of the wall.” He blinks like he’s coming awake.

“I did,” Spock says.

Jim shifts closer to Spock. He licks his lips. “Kiss me again,” he says.

Spock does.

Jim brings a hand up to wrap around the back of Spock’s head. “Mmm,” he hums into Spock’s mouth, then withdraws just slightly to nip at Spock’s lower lip. “Been wanting to do this for so long,” he murmurs, and Spock pulls back.

“Jim, I truly regret that--”

“Shh,” Jim says. “Later, okay? Now, I just...we’re here, and...” He kisses Spock again, straying from his lips to his jawline and down Spock’s neck. He pauses at Spock’s throat, sucking and biting enough to bruise. Spock finds himself gasping, stretching his neck back to give Jim access, and Jim laughs again, darkly this time. “You like that,” he says wonderingly. “You like my mouth on you? Tell me, Spock,” he says, and Spock is powerless to resist him.

“Yes,” he says.

Jim laughs again. “Jesus,” he says. He runs his fingers under Spock’s collar. “Let’s--”

They part, and Spock strips off his black undershirt in one motion, Jim doing the same across from him. Jim lifts his lower body up off of the bed, leaning awkwardly on one arm while he jerks his pants down with his free hand. He’s dressed for sleep in soft loose-fitting sweats, and Spock’s mouth goes dry when he sees that Jim has foregone briefs, his cock hanging heavy and half-hard between his legs. Jim meets Spock’s eyes, gesturing at his own uniform trousers, and for a moment Spock thinks he’s forgotten how his fingers work. Jim reaches over and undoes Spock’s fly, tsking low in his throat in mock reproach.

“Off,” Jim says, and Spock leans down to remove his boots, then shucks off his pants and briefs. He leans back on the bed. Something about the tenor of the room stills him, makes him want to wait for orders like he’s on the bridge.

Jim’s eyes are all over Spock, and he wears that enthusiastic look Spock recognizes from away missions, the one that says Jim doesn’t know what he wants to do first. “Lie back,” Jim says finally. Spock complies. Jim arranges himself so that they’re pressed close, belly to belly, and the slide of their cocks against each other makes Spock gasp and bury his face in Jim’s neck. Jim slides his index finger under Spock’s chin, pushing gently so Spock will look up at him. His face feels hot. Jim is so close, and surely Spock’s emotions are writ large here for him to see. He wants badly to turn away again. “It’s okay, Spock,” Jim whispers, as if he knows Spock’s thoughts, and Spock realizes abruptly how close they are. He can feel Jim, feel the buzz and hum of him through his skin.

“Can you feel it?” he asks. His voice is shaking.

Jim swallows, eyes fluttering closed as if he’s casting about for something. They fly open again, and Jim gasps. “Yeah,” he says. He runs his hands down the sides of Spock’s neck and back up again, and Spock feels a shudder run through him. “Oh,” Jim says. “I can feel you; you’re--you’re right there,” he says. He gestures to his head. “Right here.”

He leans in and kisses Spock on the mouth, just once, softly and experimentally. “I can feel that,” he says. “I mean, I can feel that like I’m--I’m you.”

“Sensory mirroring,” Spock says. “It is a common...side affect of the bond.”

“You mean it’s always going to be like that?”

“With practice, I believe it can be moderated,” Spock says. He’s unsure of how to read Jim’s question. His brain has stumbled over the word “always”.

“Practice, oh my god,” Jim says, and then he grins in earnest and Spock is well and truly lost. Jim returns to the bruised spot on Spock’s neck, sucking at it until Spock moans. *“This is going to be fucking awesome,”* he says against Spock’s skin.

And as Jim works his way lower, his mouth on Spock’s shoulder, his chest, his belly, Spock cannot help but agree. He closes his eyes and surrenders, feeling as if he is everywhere at once. He wonders at the fact that he is only just feeling this now. It is fortuitous, of course, that he has not been experiencing the mirroring effect of the bond the entire time. Surely if he had, he would have believed himself insane. But the bond is new, and perhaps therein lies the answer.

Then Spock feels it, a soft but determined press in his mind. *Thinking too much,* Jim says.

It would figure, thinks Spock, that Jim has a higher than average psi rating. He is altogether too comfortable in Spock’s mind. There’s a mental ripple of laughter at this, and Spock sees it without seeing, a red-gold shimmer. And then Jim’s mouth is on him again, low on his belly. Jim noses his way down to bite at Spock’s inner thigh, breath hot against Spock’s balls and then drifting lower still.

“I wanna taste you,” Jim mutters, reaching up with both hands to coax Spock’s thighs apart. He looks up, finding Spock’s face and smiling almost shyly before licking his lips again. *“Is that okay?”*

Yes, Spock thinks. He’s lying back against the pillows. Jim’s hands are there at his thighs again, pushing up suggestively. Spock bends his knees and then Jim is right there, nipping Spock’s leg once before licking a wet stripe up the cleft of Spock’s ass over his hole and right to the underside of his balls. Spock makes a strangled sound, unable to help himself as he parts his legs involuntarily. He hears Jim laughing again, and Spock wonders at such ready access to mirth. But all coherent thought is abruptly halted when Jim’s tongue laps at Spock’s hole. Jim presses even closer to Spock; Spock wonders that he can even breathe. Jim’s whole mouth is on him, sucking and licking, and Spock can’t help but think of Jim’s lips, his wet pink tongue and all the moments he’s driven Spock to distraction courtesy of this subconscious tic.

Subconscious, huh? That’s interesting.

Spock will not be held responsible for his actions while emotionally compromised.

If I’m doing my job right, you’re not going to be able to take a whole lot of action for the next little while.

Jim’s fingers slide up next to his mouth, circling Spock and gently pulling him open so Jim’s tongue can slip inside of him, fucking into Spock’s body in a torturous rhythm.

Has--has anyone ever done this to you before?

Spock shudders. *No.*

Jim moans aloud. The sound vibrates against Spock's body; it seems to travel up inside of him, bringing with it the promise of *more*, of how good it would feel to be filled.

Is--is that what you want?

Spock responds by spreading his thighs wider, backing onto Jim's tongue as much as he can. He's so hard now, his cock flushed green and leaking. The thought of taking Jim into his body, of opening for him entirely...*I would...open for you, body and mind*, he thinks, a little shyly. Then he's crying out as Jim's tongue slides out of him, Spock's sensitive flesh suddenly meeting the cool air of the room. Jim clambers up Spock's body, taking Spock's face in his hands and kissing him desperately. Spock can taste himself on Jim's mouth, his embarrassment washed away by the intensity of Jim's reassurance that *no no no it's hot, Spock, it's so hot, here, feel what you're doing to me*. He grinds his cock against Spock's hip.

Spock's bangs cling to his forehead. Jim brushes them back, searching Spock's face like he's reading a map. He is so eager, Spock thinks. His confidence has a sweetness to it that keeps it from being brash. But then it falls away like a mask, replaced with a flicker of disquiet. Jim swallows, eyes darting away from Spock's. "I want you...god, I want you so much," he says hurriedly. "But Spock, if there's any part of you that's just--"

"Jim," Spock says. "Our minds are one. I cannot lie to you. It is possible to shield from you, yes, but...I am not shielding now."

"But on the planet--"

"On the planet, I allowed fear to rule my actions. That is...it is the very nadir of illogic." He pauses. He looks at Jim imploringly, thinks it with a fervency that shocks him: *Jim, I am sorry*.

Jim glances down, lashes dark against his cheeks. When he looks back at Spock, there's still a hint of trepidation there, but then Jim smiles. It is warm and open and reaches his eyes. He seems to have decided something. "You can make it up to me," he says mildly.

"I will endeavour to do so," Spock says earnestly, and kisses him again.

Jim quirks an eyebrow at him, grinning wide and devilish now. "Well then," he says, voice suddenly low and almost dangerous. It does something to Spock, that voice, and he feels his mouth drop open. "How about you turn over, Mr. Spock, and then we can see about...about what you were thinking before." Jim flushes a bit at that, which Spock finds somewhat reassuring.

He flips onto his belly, Jim making a pleased noise deep in his throat and settling at the small of Spock's back. He runs his hand lightly down Spock's spine, dipping down into his lumbar curve and back up over his ass. Spock feels acutely aware of that general area courtesy of Jim's earlier ministrations, and he can't resist arching up into Jim's hand just slightly, gasping as his sensitive cock drags across the bed beneath him. His hole feels suddenly too empty, and Jim must have felt that through the bond because he hums appreciatively and trails his fingers down the cleft between Spock's cheeks.

“Hold on,” Jim says quietly, as if to himself. Spock feels the mattress shift as Jim gets up, then again as he resettles a moment later. Spock hears a faint pop and a liquid squeeze, and then Jim’s hands are back on him. “Whoever cleaned out my quarters did a pretty shoddy job with the drawers,” he says. He spreads something slick and cool over Spock, who shudders a little from temperature and anticipation both. “Wanted to eat you some more,” Jim mutters. “But I want to touch you too, get you ready for me.” He runs his finger over Spock’s hole, sliding the first joint inside. “Um, I like to talk,” Jim says, tone suddenly conversational. “Is...is that okay?”

You always like to talk, Spock thinks bluntly. Jim is slowly working his finger deeper, in and out, and Spock finds he has lost his capacity for more eloquent language.

“Point taken,” Jim murmurs. “God, this is...you’re...” Spock imagines he can see Jim smiling into his skin at the exchange, warm and familiar despite the alien novelty of the bond. *Like home*, Spock thinks suddenly.

Yeah.

It’s as if the revelation has tripped something in Jim, because he sets about preparing Spock in earnest. He drizzles more lube over his fingers, working a second finger in next to the first, and Spock exhales into the mattress. He jerks his hips involuntarily. “You like that,” Jim says quietly, almost to himself, punctuating the statement with a nip. He rotates his fingers slightly, curving them up into Spock like he knows what he’s looking for and missing deliberately. Spock shifts a little, as if he can somehow redirect Jim, but it’s in vain. Jim thrusts into him again, still just a fraction shy of where Spock wants him, and Spock in turn thrusts into the mattress once more.

“Yeah,” Jim says again. “I could...I could get used to this.” There’s a strange undertone to the words, to Jim’s thoughts, but Spock can’t process it and finds that he does not care to at this particular moment. Jim’s fingers will drive him mad, he decides. He clenches around them, and in a flash of sensory transference he feels a grasping, pulsing heat in his own hands. Spock scrabbles at the mattress, muscles firing of their own volition, and can’t contain a shameful little moan.

He wants, he thinks. He wants, and he feels the barest hint of the dark, sticky desire that took him during the *plak-tow*. The memory sends his gorge rising unpleasantly, and a tiny vestige of the scientist part of Spock’s brain files *that* association away for further analysis. This is different, he tells himself. And it is. Jim kneels behind him--over him--on the bed. His touch is soft; he is gentle without being precious, but there’s an undercurrent of flinty resolve to him that seems to go straight to Spock’s core and pins him to the bed surer than any binding.

Jim’s fingers stop just short one more time, and it’s not enough, and Spock knows, just *knows* that Jim has that smile on his face again. “Look at you,” Jim says, and there’s so much in his voice then. It hangs in the air synesthetically, a stratified spectrum of emotion for Spock’s mind to catalogue.

“Spock,” Jim says. “I want--”

Spock pushes up onto all fours, anticipatory. Jim laughs again, warmly, running a hand over Spock's right hip, his quadriceps. "Other way," Jim says. "I want to see you."

Spock flips deftly, rising up on his elbows to watch Jim at the foot of the bed. He's flushed pink, *pink and gold*, Spock thinks abstractly. He blinks, and Jim's form blurs for a moment. There's a charge that seems to pass between them, and Jim crawls up the bed to kneel near Spock's head. He leans over Spock to reach small square packet that seems to have materialized on the nightstand and then sits back on his heels. Jim leans down, Spock up to meet him. They kiss, messy and unchaste, and Jim moans into Spock's mouth. When they part, Jim bites his lip and looks at Spock expectantly. "You good?" he asks quietly.

Spock nods. Good has variable definitions, he thinks. He believes most of them apply at this moment. Jim smiles wide at that. "God, Spock, I..." but he shakes his head, not completing the thought. When Spock pursues it through their mind link Jim seems to hold it apart, just out of Spock's reach. He sits back again, ripping into the condom packet with his teeth.

"Wait," Spock says, sitting up. Jim looks alarmed for a moment, like he's been caught out at something. Spock gestures at the condom. "Let me," he says. Jim is mostly hard already, and Spock jerks him the rest of the way slowly and lazily, gasping into Jim's mouth as he does it. He finds the bottle of lube in the blankets, flicks it open and squeezes it into his open hand, palms Jim's cock once and unrolls the condom onto it.

"Fuck," Jim mutters. "Love seeing your hands on me like that." Spock agrees, and then there's that jolt of ownership again, a tug at Spock's midsection that makes him want to pull Jim close, take him in. He runs his hands up Jim's back, lying back, pulling Jim down on top of him. "Come," he says quietly. "Come down here, with me."

Yeah. Yeah, I will.

Jim kisses him lightly on the mouth, the cheeks, the eyelids. Spock feels Jim's hands back on him again, feeling that Spock is still ready for him, still open and clasping. He guides himself inside, weight on one arm. Spock writhes, casting his head from right to left on the pillow. Jim's hand is trembling as he runs it over Spock's side like Spock is an animal he can soothe somehow. "Shh," he says. "Okay?"

Spock burns, and Jim stills. The room is so quiet, Spock realizes. All he can hear is their breathing. Jim settles over him, hands in Spock's hair and eyes searching his. Spock suddenly feels the...the too-muchness of the bond. He wants to close his eyes, to look away and not feel so *seen*, but when he does it Jim is there too, he's everywhere and Spock feels, he feels too much and it's private, it's--

Spock, Jim says in his head, and something about the way Jim says--thinks--Spock's name checks him.

"Look at me."

Spock takes a breath, and opens his eyes. Jim kisses him. He reaches down to take Spock's hand and bring it up to his mouth. He kisses the pads of Spock's fingers, the mound of flesh over his thumb; he traces his tongue over the creases in Spock's palm. Each touch of Jim's

lips to his skin burns Spock like a brand, countering the burn of Jim's cock in his ass in a sweet counterpoint. Spock twitches. He is beginning to think it might be preferable for Jim to--

"Oh," Spock gasps as Jim moves. Jim makes a satisfied noise in response, thrusting again experimentally. He moves his hips in languorous ellipses. Spock feels it in his body and down through the thrum of the bond: Jim is close already, just from eating Spock's ass and fingering him open, and oh holy shit Spock you feel so good I just don't think I can-- and Jim stops, bracing over Spock and breathing like a sprinter. Spock can't help himself; he makes a frustrated sound that is embarrassingly close to a whine.

"Sorry," Jim mutters. "Sorry sorry sorry, I just--I don't want it to be over yet."

For months now, Spock has not allowed himself much more than a life lived in present tense. If he is honest with himself, it predates losing Jim; perhaps it even stretches back as far as his mother. It's as if he believed that living this way, the fathoms within him could never be plumbed, that he could skip stones from moment to moment until the end. It's only now, Jim trembling in him, that Spock allows himself to think ahead. Now, as Jim's fingers card through his hair and tug just so at the roots, Spock exhales and thinks *always*.

Jim's breath hitches, a question, and then Spock knows he understands because he's laughing again, laughter spilling from his mouth and through Spock's mind. He starts to move. It's faster now, jerkier and less practiced and what they need. Jim pushes himself up on his arms, looking at Spock's body like he misses it. But it's easier to find a rhythm this way, to slide out of Spock torturously and then slam back in with a force that pushes Spock up the bed inch by inch until his cranium reaches the bulkhead beyond the pillows. Spock can feel the pressure building around them now, a warm deep ache in his belly, and he thinks he could let go this way, come just like this with Jim touching what feels like all of him. If he reaches down and touches himself he knows he'll be gone. When he listens for Jim he's confronted with a litany of praise and questions and why did it take *this*, Spock, why did it take me basically dying, you're an idiot you know that we could've been doing this the whole fucking time ah God you're so you're so I love you I love mmmph--

Because Spock has concluded that he is not the only one who thinks too much, and jammed his fingers into Jim's mouth. Jim attacks them with aplomb, with tongue and just the right scrape of teeth that translates immediately to Spock's cock. And then abruptly there it is, Jim snaps his hips into Spock and moves his tongue in a little fillip that recalls the whorls of Spock's fingerprints shut up Spock, who thinks about the word whorl when they're fucking Vulcan poetry oh, oh my God I'm going to come right fucking now...

Impulsively, Spock yanks his fingers out of Jim's mouth and splays them messily over the meld points, a little off center but good enough. So when Jim goes over the edge he takes Spock with him, and he clenches down around Jim and shuts his eyes against it as he comes so hard he sees colors in the black.

They return to themselves slowly, Jim collapsing on top of him and gasping into Spock's shoulder. Eventually, Jim slides out, reaching down to discard the condom. "It'd be hot if my come was in you," he mutters wistfully, gently sliding two fingers into Spock's used, sensitive hole. Spock can't forestall a shudder at the words. Jim sprawls next to him on the

bed, shoulder to sticky shoulder, and Spock reaches over and takes his hand. They're quiet for awhile, heart rates slowing. Spock imagines he can hear Jim's pulse, the blood beating in his ears.

"So," Jim says. "That was kind of amazing."

Yes, Spock thinks.

"But I'm guessing the whole psychic bond thing is about more than just great sex, huh?"

Spock raises an eyebrow at the ceiling. "That is correct," he says.

"Figures," Jim says. "Vulcans aren't exactly all about doing things just for the fun of it." He elbows Spock gently. *I'm teasing. You know that, right?* and Spock finds himself remembering Sorvik and their night on Cesta V. Completely coincidentally, of course.

"Wait, what? That guy? *That guy?* I *saw* that guy! I knew something happened on that planet!" Jim smacks the mattress for emphasis. "Dammit, Spock," he says. "As part of your bid to make things up to me, you're going to need to describe that in great detail sometime." He sighs. "Man, that pact, though. What were we even thinking?"

"I do not know," Spock says.

"You know Helen and I ended it? After...after what happened in the cave," Jim says quietly. "I guess I thought...well, I don't know what I thought. That I shouldn't be dragging an innocent bystander into whatever was going on with us, maybe."

"It was Dr. Noel's study--her scanning technology--that allowed me to prove you were still alive," Spock says quietly. He sighs. "Jim, I was serious when I offered the option of traveling to New Vulcan and severing the bond," Spock says. "I realize that...I realize that these events have been somewhat...sudden. If this is no longer what you--"

Jim appears not to be listening. "So, Iowa's kinda pretty in the spring," he says, somewhat distantly. "Maybe we can get a special dispensation for the time off or something. But that's no good, the crew's gotta be there; you want Uhura to be your person and Bones obviously has dibs on me--"

"*Pardon?*"

"C'mon, Spock, it's all well and good to get Vulcan married, but I think my mom will probably kill me for real this time if we don't do it the old-fashioned human way too." Jim cocks an eyebrow at him. His eyes are twinkling, but there's a hint of something there that Spock somehow knows is...completely serious.

"As a heart attack," Jim says.

Spock chokes. "Are--are you certain you would not prefer a...some sort of trial period?"

Jim rolls his eyes theatrically. He takes Spock's hand, lifts it to his mouth and kisses his fingers. "Look," he says. "I was left for dead and encased in alien goo for two months. And

then the--the love of my life rescued me because he realized we had a fucking *telepathic marriage bond*. Also, because he loved me back.” He looks pointedly at Spock. “So I say...I say fuck the trial period.”

Spock has nothing resembling a cogent argument with which to refute Jim. More to the point, however, he finds he does not wish to. “Iowa then,” he says thoughtfully. “Though, I prefer the fall.”

End Notes

I originally came across the idea of a giant alien-as-planet in Brian K. Vaughn and Fiona Staples' epic space opera comic *Saga*, which I highly, highly recommend, btw. I adapted and expanded on it for my purposes here.

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