

A Higher Power When You Look

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A Higher Power When You Look

by [daraoakwise](#)

Summary

In the Kelvin timeline, from 2258 through 2269, the senior crew of the Starship Enterprise served together on Enterprise and Enterprise A. These are some of their days. Routine, adventure, tragedy, service, suffering, bravery, boredom, sacrifice. With particular emphasis on a gentle friendship between Scotty and Uhura, and the unbreakable love between Uhura and Spock, but everyone is here.

Chapter Summary

The beginning

Chapter Notes

This is a lengthy story with adult themes. Please mind the content warnings at the start of each chapter. That said, this is a story about hope, about love, about courage in an extraordinary universe. I won't leave you, or them, in sorrow.

Content warning in this chapter for sexual content.

Acting Captain's Log, Stardate 2258 point, uh, something. The Enterprise is heading home, slowly, without warp capability since it was necessary to detonate the warp core to escape the singularity. The ship is badly damaged. As for the crew.... We were cadets last week. Most of us have no idea what the hell we are doing. We have exactly three officers onboard who have ever served on a Starship. One is unconscious and may never walk again; one is emotionally compromised; and one is technically AWOL from his post. I honestly have no idea what any of us will face when we get home,

Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, Starfleet Communications Officer, xenolinguist, and apparently a senior officer on this ship of children, spotted the vagrant or engineer or whatever the hell he was sitting in a corner of the mess hall. Kirk had dragged him in, mysteriously, impossibly and, bizarrely, soaking wet. And he had immediately saved all their lives, and yes, okay, worked like hell since then to get the ship limping home, but she didn't like him. She stomped over to him; time for some answers.

"Scott?" she asked.

"Aye," he said, unfolding his arms and opening his eyes. "Montgomery Scott. Scotty, tae my friends."

"Well ... Mr. Scott," she said deliberately, and he grinned at her, not minding the dig. "Are you actually a Starfleet officer, or did you just put on a red shirt with Lieutenant Commander stripes and take over our engine room? Since that's how promotions apparently work on this ship."

"No, just a passerby who can beam onto ships at warp and blow up warp cores," he said sarcastically. "Of course I'm a Starfleet officer. I have been for 15 years. I really am a lieutenant commander, which best as I can tell, makes me acting second officer at the moment. I've served on four ships, been chief or assistant chief on two, led an experimental tech design team at Starfleet Engineering, and taught at the Academy. I have four doctorates, six classified patents, three commendations for valor, and two court martial acquittals for conduct unbecoming an officer, both of which I'm actually guilty of. And I'm fairly certain I saved everyone on this ship yesterday. Good enough for yeh, Lieutenant?" he asked, an edge to his voice.

"Arrogant bastard too," she said, and he shrugged. "Is that what got you assigned to an iceball in the middle of nowhere?" she challenged, and he smiled at her again, a little sharply.

"Aye, that and a wee incident with a dog."

"A ... dog?" she asked distastefully, and he laughed and pointed an accusing finger at her.

"And a *transporter*. God, you went there, nae me. Is your mind always that dirty?"

"You're pretty chipper for a guy about to get court martialed for being AWOL," she said sternly.

"Oh, nae just AWOL," he said dismissively. "Stowing away on a Federation Starship. Insubordination. Destruction of Federation property. I'm probably going tae prison." He smiled up at the ship. "Worth it. Also, I've got this equation in my head— apparently invented by an alternate future version of myself, which is very interesting—and it solves transwarp beaming but it also solves *everything else*. Our warp equations are wrong. We've always known that they are wrong. Tae make the maths work with observed reality we had tae write errors into them. People have argued with me about it, but writing an error intae an equation means you've got it straight wrong. And I've figured it out. It's *space* that's moving. It fixes *everything*. We are going to have tae completely reconfigure our thinking about the entire physics of faster than light travel. So aye, you'll forgive me if I'm a wee bit excited."

Uhura smiled at him despite herself; the guy was practically bouncing off the walls. "Do you always talk this fast, Mr. Scott?"

He smiled ruefully, and there was something in it she couldn't quite parse. "Not as a rule, but it's been an odd week," he said. "And I'll confess tae being *maybe* a wee bit mad." He leaned back and folded his arms. "Not tae be rude, lass," he said tiredly. "I was actually trying tae sleep here. I'm fairly bad at it even on good days, and I havenae slept in 48 hours. I'm not assigned to this ship, and dinnae have any quarters."

She stared at him. "Which means you don't have meal card access either. You haven't eaten in two days?"

"I havenae eaten in three days; different issue, we ran out of everything but protein nibs at the outpost a few days ago. We were supposed tae

get a shipment, but the ship that was supposed to bring it got destroyed above Vulcan, I think.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say anything?” she asked, shocked.

“Not a priority,” he shrugged. “Not for nothin’, but I think Kirk may have the same problem.”

“I’ll get it sorted,” she sighed.

“Not your job, lass,” he answered, settling back and closing his eyes.

“Scotty to your friends?” she asked, and he opened his eyes again and smiled at her.

“Aye.”

“I’m going to get you a sandwich, a beer, a blanket, and then I’ll get it sorted out. I’m Nyota Uhura. Good to meet you, Scotty.”

“Nyota,” he said warmly. “Assuming they don’t throw my arse in the brig until I die, this might just be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2258.40. Boldly go.

Uhura wasn’t sure who in the admiralty had decided that giving Kirk, of all people, a diplomatic assignment right out of the gate was a good idea, but here they were. And, as expected, it was a disaster, although to be fair, it wasn’t Kirk’s fault.

The first contact team had made a mistake, and a bad one, confusing the broadly spoken daily language for the language of formal matters. And the two languages were not remotely the same. They were fortunate that the species considered it amusingly and merely *mildly* insulting, rather than deeply insulting.

Uhura had left manning the communications station on the bridge to her deputy, and was ensconced in the small communications office with the rest of the communications staff and about half of the programmers from Engineering, pouring over the words in real time and trying to feed data into the universal translator matrix in Kirk’s ear as quickly as possible while also trying to re-translate almost a thousand pages of treaty documents. It was the work of six months, with a 24 hour deadline.

She heard the door slide open behind her, and a stack of vegan snack boxes from the mess hall materialized at her elbow.

“God, thanks Mr. Scott,” she said gratefully, taking one and passing the rest down to her frazzled staff.

“Drink orders?” the second officer called.

“Bourbon?” someone called, to general laughter.

“A hell of a lot of coffee,” Uhura corrected. “Although I heard a rumor that you had a kettle and some real tea?”

“I’ll be back,” he said with a wink.

She laughed when he reappeared a few minutes later and handed her a teacup, complete with saucer. “I wasn’t sure where you were on the great coffee/tea divide,” he said. “I figure a Kenyan could go either way. I have a big box of the real stuff and, aye, a kettle. None of the starship synthesized shite.”

“My grandmother makes the most amazing tea,” she said wistfully. “It has to be done properly or it isn’t worth the time. Too many years in San Francisco means entirely too much coffee.” She took a sip and sighed happily. “Oh, yes. Trust a Scot to get tea right. My bibi would approve.”

She turned back to the mountain of work, and he passed out coffee and the weird, syrupy soda that the synthesizer couldn’t get quite right, but was drinkable (according to North Americans) with enough ice.

“Isn’t food service a little below your pay grade?” Uhura asked, catching his sleeve as he turned to go.

“Sitting still above a planet in a brand-new Starship,” he said with a shrug. “Nothing for me to do but spell Mr. Spock on the bridge and deliver caffeine to the people doing the real work today. Let me know if you need the rest of the programmers and I’ll set them up in auxiliary control.”

“I think we’re fine, but thank you, sir,” she said. “For the food, and the tea, and remembering us down here.”

He smiled at her. “That’s what I’m here for. Give me a yell, if I can help.”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2258.98. The Enterprise has arrived at New Vulcan to assist in setting basic infrastructure. Beyond that report, I don’t know that any of us have the words for this.

Spock had asked for permission to beam down to New Vulcan first and alone, which the Captain had immediately agreed to. At least he’d had something to say, even if it was simply “yes, of course Spock.”

Nyota was a linguist, fluent in dozens of languages. She was his girlfriend. She shared his life; his bed. And she could not find the words. She was pacing the transporter room, for he had asked her to beam down a few minutes after he did. “I believe,” Spock had said, “your presence may be grounding.” And if that wasn’t Vulcan for ‘*help me*,’ she didn’t know what was.

Scott was at the transporter controls. He didn’t have to be; it wasn’t a complicated beam-in. He probably should have been in the cargo bay,

continuing to organize the massive project he was about to be overseeing. Instead, he was watching her pace.

“Don’t you have something else to do?” she growled at him.

“Quite a lot,” he said, rightly shrugging off her irritation as misplaced tension.

“I don’t know what to say,” she admitted. “Not to Spock. Not to his father. Not to the High Council. Not to ...” she paused; it was massively classified and she wasn’t really supposed to know about it.

“The future alternate reality version of our first officer?” Scott supplied.

“Right,” she said, slumping against the wall. “I forgot you knew about that. I don’t know what to say to any of them. ‘So sorry about your planet’ just doesn’t quite capture the depth and tragedy of the thing.”

“I dinnae imagine you’re meant to say anything,” Scott said.

“So I just stand there and look pretty?” she snapped. He gave her a look, and she sighed. “Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“Look, lass, there are a hundred thousand of tons of equipment in the cargo bay to get down to the surface that I should probably be staging. But I dinnae want Mr. Spock to be beamed down to what is supposed tae be his new homeworld by whatever transporter officer happened tae be on rotation. If I could put him down on the planet just a wee bit more gently, that’s worth it. Maybe not that he’d notice; maybe not that it even matters. It’s all I’ve got. There’s nothing tae say to fix this. We just give what we can.”

“And the reason you’re still here, instead of calling in a tech to beam me down ...?”

He smiled at her. “We give what we can,” he repeated, and glanced down at the panel when it beeped. “And you’re givin’ quite a lot, just by standing next tae him. Mr. Spock is ready for yeh.” She took her place on the pad, and he gestured at the shoulder of his uniform tunic and the small control switches worked into the material. “Dinnae forget tae turn on your environmental control; it’s 41 degrees down there. Gravity a touch higher too. I’ll put you down easy but watch your first step.”

“Thanks, Scotty,” she said gratefully. “See you down there.”

“Aye,” he said. “Energize.”

It had gone well, of course, the Vulcans unfailingly polite and grateful for her presence, if somewhat puzzled about why Spock had asked her down ahead of the construction group. Still, she’d been glad when Scott had arrived with half of the *Enterprise*’s operations crew and his tons of equipment, including a high-powered communication relay that he’d left to her to assemble. It was something concrete to do, even if she was now sweating profusely through her climate controlled tunic.

She was grumbling in Swahili at a finicky connection when an aged but still-familiar voice greeted her.

“In my universe, you appreciated a lightly fermented Vulcan tea, which, in a human way that used to puzzle me, you then sweetened and poured over ice. I have taken the liberty of bringing you some prepared as she preferred.”

“Ambassador Spock!” she said, scrambling to her feet, and yes, he was *smiling* at her. She took the tea, a little shell shocked and—

“This is wonderful,” she said, immediately refreshed and delighted by her drink. “I apparently have excellent taste; I’ll have to remember this.”

“She always enjoyed it,” the Ambassador said, a little wistfully. His hands were clasped behind his back; a Starfleet parade rest so well-worn that it might as well have been the line of his brow or the color of his eyes.

“It must have been some time since you saw her last,” Uhura said, and *god* this was an eerie conversation to be having.

“Yes,” the elder Spock acknowledged, sitting on a chair she’d pulled in to work on the relay. “Though you may be assured that her life was long and extraordinary.”

“This must be strange for you, she said, sipping her drink. “It must have been so long since you saw any of us.”

“Some longer than others. Some left us before their time, while others broke longevity records purely, I think, out of spite.”

“Kirk, and McCoy, in that order,” she said softly, a bit shocked at how well she could read his voice. A complete stranger, and so, *so* profoundly not. He smiled at her again, if sadly, and she wondered how long it had taken before emotion was easy on his face.

The ancient Vulcan sat forward, and began working on the communications relay with impressively practiced hands. “It is good to see you all,” he said. “Not yet with the wisdom of your years, or the full development of your extraordinary friendships, but so full of your youth. Most of you have been gone half of my lifetime, now. Although there is one member of the crew remaining, who helped build the ship I arrived in. His sudden presence in the late 24th century was unexpected but ultimately unsurprisingly to those of us who knew him. He is gone again, but would be nearly as angry that the ship we built was destroyed as he would be at my failure to return.”

And *that* was more than enough to tell her who it was.

The man himself, or a version of him, came walking through the door of the communications tower, sweat-soaked and plastered with red dust. “Lass, we’re ready with power if you are ...” Scott called out, tossing down a tool bag and pulling off his construction helmet and ear protection, then drew up short. “Ambassador, my apologies. I didnae know you were here.”

“He was helping me with the relay, and brought me a drink I didn’t know I loved,” Uhura answered, turning back to the communications relay

to finish the connections. "Give me a second, Mr. Scott."

"He does bring interesting gifts from the future," Scott said cheerfully, swiping at his face with his sleeve in a futile attempt to wipe the dirt away. "If he has any others, of the mathematics variety, I'd love to hear them."

"I suspect, Mr. Scott, that like your counterpart, transwarp beaming will provide you the necessary key to future breakthroughs." Spock said. At Scott's look of hesitation, Spock continued, "or perhaps current ones."

"Two weeks ago we got to a planet to help with a plague *impossibly* fast," Uhura volunteered. "He did something that had Kirk gleeful and Spock ... you, whatever ... worried."

The elder Spock inclined his head gravely. "In my time, you came to the answers much later in life, when you were more tempered and less trusting. I would advise caution, Mr. Scott. Less, perhaps, in the use of your ideas than the reporting of them."

"You dinnae trust Starfleet," Scott said quietly. "*I* didnae." Spock merely raised an eyebrow. Scott nodded and looked away. "Right," he said, clapping his dusty hands together to change the subject. "I have the solar power system up and ready to bring power in. Although, Ambassador, I'll mention again that we could get you a stronger power source. I know the high council is nae interested in a fusion reactor because of the emissions, but I have a small matter/antimatter reactor here with us."

Spock shook his head. "The solar power system is sufficient for our needs. And I fear that we no longer have engineers capable of looking after a matter/antimatter reactor."

Scott blew out a breath at the reminder of how decimated the Vulcan population was. "I spent four months on Vulcan, a fellowship studying matter/antimatter engineering. Nae the easiest four months of my life, but some of the most educational. None left ..." he mourned.

Uhura had finished on the relay. "Ready, Scotty."

He tossed her an acoustic marker and settled his helmet back on his head. "Mark the floor where I need tae bring the power conduit up, then mind your feet, I'll cut through with a plasma torch."

"I will take my leave," Spock said. "I confess that after a lifetime in space, the heat is draining. Will we expect to see you at the dinner tonight? Your presence would honor us."

"I will be there," Uhura promised.

"I hadnae planned on it," Scott confessed.

"He'll be there too," Uhura continued smoothly.

"It seems I have my orders," Scott said, amused.

"I always found it best to be guided by her wise counsel, whether as a lieutenant, a commander, a captain, an admiral, or my friend," the ancient Vulcan agreed, and exited with a nod.

"That's a hell of an endorsement, and a hell of a future," Scott said with a smile.

"You should hear about yours," she answered. "Let's get this done."

"It's damn near 48 degrees in the crawl space. So you can imagine how much I'm looking forward to turning on a plasma torch," he grimaced. He slid through an access hatch, and she tracked him as he worked from the bangs and curses beneath the floor. She stepped back from the superheated stream of plasma as it punched a hole in the floor. "I'm going tae hand this up to you, lassie," he called through the opening, contorting a shoulder to pass her a wide bunch of cabling.

"Got it," she called down to him.

"Pull, hard as you can, I'll feed up a couple meters of slack. Tell me when it reaches the relay."

They both struggled for a few moments; the cables were heavy and stiff. "We're there," she finally shouted to him, and started the final connections while he squirmed out of the crawl space.

"Good lord, that's hot," he said, and pulled a liter of water from his pack, drinking it in less than a minute.

"You're a mess," she told him, amused, and he grinned at her. "I've got this connected, if you're ready." He nodded and vanished outside again, to the main power box. A moment later the relay came to life. She tapped several test commands, then sent a signal to Earth. *New Vulcan Communications Relay One online. Confirm receipt.* A moment later, after a round trip of dozens of light years, a response pinged back. *Confirmed.*

"We're up and running, Mr. Scott."

"Good work, Lieutenant," he said, collecting his gear.

"What's next?" she asked as they walked back toward the main settlement.

"Depends on when we're supposed tae be presentable for dinner."

"1900 hours," she answered.

“Then you can take your pick. Most of the Vulcans have been living in tents. I have crews puttin’ together housing. It’s careful work; they have aesthetic specifications that are important to them, as you know. Chekov’s working on a water purification and recycling plant. Sulu on a greenhouse and farm unit. McCoy on the medical building. The ecologists and planetary terraforming specialists are setting up sensor units. My lads and lasses from engineering are running power conduits and pipes tae everything.”

“We’ll be here a month,” Uhura said.

“Pretty easily, unless Starfleet pulls us first.” He hesitated. “We’re runnin’ around here like ants. Full o’ direction and purpose, bangin’ around on things. And I almost feel like a construction crew trying tae build in the middle of a mausoleum, surrounded by mourners too polite to tell us to bugga off. The Federation wants this done, for its oldest and most important member. But I’m worried about them. About the Vulcans. They feel ... I dinnae ken. Fragile. Transparent.”

“How psi sensitive are you?” Uhura asked, shooting him a look.

He shrugged. “A touch higher than most on pre-cog, but otherwise just the usual baseline human empathic levels.”

“Well, you’re not wrong,” she answered with a sigh. “Their agony is so thick that even nearly psi-deaf people like you and me can pick it up. This really could not have happened to a worse species. If we’d lost Earth, humanity would have been traumatized and angry and reeling, but there are 500 million of us out in the stars. We would have spit in the faces of our enemies, had a hell of a lot of revenge sex, and spread through the universe until we were on every backwater planet in every corner of the galaxy. Earth is our cradle but not our heart. Vulcan was the anchor of their species. Spock is an exception; they didn’t leave it often, which is why there are so few left. The planet was the heart of the living and the vessel for the souls of their dead. I’m not sure if they’ll survive without it. Any of them,” she said softly, her mind clearly going to her particular Vulcan.

“It is pretty here, though,” Scott said, pausing to look at the towering, twisting red-rock spires just beyond the town. “Stark, and hot as hell, but pretty. It’s been less than a year. It’s asking a lot of them tae be healed and whole. Maybe we just give ‘em some time, and they’ll be okay. All of ‘em,” he said, bumping her shoulder companionably. “I’m off tae pull cables through the blazing hot sun.”

“I’m going to work on helping with the home construction, I think,” she said.

“Good choice,” he said, heading off. “See yeh.”

The dinner had been lovely after a very hard day of work, marked with the honor, she knew, of some of the last food and drink from the fallen world. Scotty had taken his leave as early as was polite, looking more exhausted than she’d ever seen him, tossing her a weary smile before he went.

Ambassador Spock stood near the Captain and McCoy when he could, speaking softly to them. They listened politely, attentively, a little awkwardly. She watched, and her jaw dropped when the Ambassador intentionally baited McCoy, who responded as he usually would, until he remembered exactly who he was speaking to.

Spock, *her* Spock, slipped in behind her and took her hand. “There is a question that humans sometimes ask each other,” she told him. “A thought exercise, for fun. ‘If you could spend one hour in the company of anyone, living or dead, who would it be?’ I get the feeling that the Ambassador is precisely where he would choose to be.”

“I know you are right,” he said. “For I am as well. Come away with me?” he asked her quietly, and tugged her into the rapidly cooling night. “My father’s house,” he said, “if you have no objection?”

“If your father has none?” she asked.

“My father knows what it is to love a human woman,” Spock answered.

She followed him into the darkened guest room, but once there, he paused, seeming to reconsider the wisdom of his plans. She took the lead instead. He blinked at her while she unbuttoned his dress uniform and tugged off his trousers, followed by her own clothing. She guided him to sit on the edge of the bed, where he looked up at her, his eyes dark with sorrow and arousal. She traced the angles of the face, down his chest, then dropped to her knees between his legs.

“We have never been together, with Vulcans near,” he said softly. “You need to know. They will not see what I see. But they will ... know what I feel.”

She kissed the inside of his thigh, her breath hot against his skin. “Are there any others doing this tonight?” she asked as he carded his fingers through her hair.

He closed his eyes. “On the planet? No. Their hearts are still too broken. On the *Enterprise*? The Vulcans can feel the human empathic field above us, in orbit. Individually, human psi abilities are too weak to discern, but collectively there is a very real human empathic connection. On the ship, tonight, and every night? Yes. Human passion.”

Nyota reached up and took his hands between her own, her chin on his knee while she looked up into his eyes.

“Will this help them, or hurt them?” she asked gently.

“Both, Nyota,” he said softly.

“Will this help you, or hurt you?”

“Both,” he admitted shakily. “And with their grief so near the doors of my mind, I do not know that I will be able to give anything back to you.”

You do not have to do this,” he said.

She smiled up at him. “Of course I don’t. But will you let me give this to you?”

He cupped her face, thumbs stoking her temples, then leaned back on his hands, opening himself to her. “Please,” he breathed, and she did.

She took him to his edge with hands and lips and tongue, then slipped onto him at the end, wrapping her legs around his waist. He pulled her to his chest and there were tears on his face.

She eased him onto the bed, and he spooned her into the curve of his hip. She hooked a heel back over his knee, letting her legs drop open, intending to finish herself with the feel of his arousal cooling against her back. But his hand joined hers, and she was closer than she’d thought, unraveling completely with his breath on her neck.

Vaguely, at the edge of sleep, like a shadow in the deep night, she also felt the remains of a species holding her gently. “*Thank you*,” someone whispered, “*thank you*,” and she wasn’t sure if it was Spock, or them.

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2258.290. Day 18 of a six month hop into an uncharted section of space. Our first mission on the Enterprise that isn’t just patrolling Federation space, dropping supplies to colonies, or serving as a ferry service for ambassadors. Real exploration, and a chance for this crew to prove what it’s really made of. It’s times like this when we begin to realize just how vast space is. The Federation, and our allies, and our enemies are located within a few hundred light-years in a corner of the galaxy. That we can point a ship in one direction, travel just twelve weeks, and encounter things we’ve never seen before is humbling. And demonstrates clearly the need for a five-year mission.

“I’m sorry, you’re going tae *what*?” Scott asked, looking dumbfoundedly at his still-new Captain. He shot a look at Uhura, who just shrugged in her own clear frustration. “The Captain, the First Officer, and the Chief Medical Officer are beaming down. Together. Tae an unknown planet. At the same time?”

“Right,” Kirk said easily. “You’re in command until we get back, Lieutenant Commander. You are the second officer, after all.”

Scott looked cautiously sideways at Spock. “Isnae this the part of the conversation where you’re supposed to cite some regulations, sir?” he asked.

“I have already done so,” Spock said serenely, but did not elaborate on exactly *why* he seemed fine with three of the four most senior officers on the ship all being away from it. Leaving *him* in command without a single other officer onboard above the rank of lieutenant, and without a chief science officer, a chief medical officer, or frankly, a chief engineer since his arse was stuck on the bridge.

“Okay then,” Scott said, although he still couldn’t quite believe it. “Would you like me tae get on the controls and beam you down too, Captain?”

The Captain chose to ignore the sarcasm “Sounds good,” Kirk said. “Don’t worry, we’ll be back before you notice we’re gone!”

They were not.

“This is my life now,” Scott said wearily to Uhura fourteen hours later, rubbing his eyes. “Isnae it? They beam off the ship, get intae immediate trouble, we fall under attack or some such nonsense, and I get tae sort it out using a kettle, some string, and zero information about what the hell is going on.”

“Sorry, Scotty,” she commiserated, standing as her relief on the communications board came in.

“You going down to sickbay to check on them?”

“I was going to, yes,” she said.

“Please kick their arses while you’re there,” Scott grumped.

“Is that an order, Commander?” Uhura asked.

“Aye.”

“You are aware that they all outrank me?” she asked.

“Never stopped you before, lass,” Scott replied.

She could be amused, now. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy were going to be fine after a night under observation in sickbay. Three hours ago, in the midst of dodging missiles getting lobbed at them from the surface and a desperate scramble to find their missing and imprisoned crew, it hadn’t been amusing at all. Scott had proved himself as impressive and creative a commander as he was an engineer; her lingering doubt about his appointment as the second officer, unspoken to anyone but Spock, had entirely vanished. The Alpha bridge crew had remained at their posts through the crisis, but now Gamma Shift was filtering in, replacing everyone but the man in the center chair.

“Need some food, Mr. Scott?” Uhura asked him sympathetically.

“No,” he complained. “Why the hell would I need food? Or sleep? Or senior officers?” Uhura rolled her eyes at him, and sent a yeoman to the mess hall to collect a sandwich and some tea.

“I could relieve you, sir?” Sulu said hesitantly.

Scott stood to stretch and pace. “You’ve been on duty as long as I have, and dancin’ with the helm the whole time tae keep us out of trouble. Besides, we’re already far afield of regulations without compounding it in the log by having no senior commander awake for the shift. Get some rest.”

“I’ll take four hours,” Sulu said firmly. “Then I’ll be up to relieve you, regulations be damned.”

“I’ll be back at the start of Alpha, and then I’ll relieve you so you can get a full shift off, Sulu,” Uhura volunteered. “And I’ll re-juggle the roster to get some rest for everyone who has been on duty for more than two shifts.”

“Kirk has been a terrible influence on all of yeh,” Scott said fondly, sitting again and gratefully taking the food the yeoman delivered. “Makin’ up your own rules as yeh see fit. Oh, assuming Chekov isnae already asleep in his rack, will one of you tell him he did a good job hopping between science and engineering?” He gestured over his shoulder. “Out, go.”

Uhura paused beside his chair, and he smiled up at her. “Stop standin’ here bothering me,” he said softly. “Get down tae sickbay so you can look at him with your own two eyes and confirm his continued presence in the universe.”

“Thanks, Scotty,” she said quietly, her hand on his arm, which he reached over and patted. “Thank you for bringing him home.”

Chapter Summary

Before and after the Khan incident.

Captain's Log, Stardate 2259.001. We've stopped for shore leave on a pretty little world. The new year for us, which means nothing to them, but they have been welcoming and kind. Humans have never been here, but this planet is a citizen of the universe and a hub world for many species we are just meeting. The crew is looking forward to getting to know them better.

Scotty returned with another round of drinks and put them down on the table in front of his crewmates. The flavors weren't anything they could pin down, but they were all vibrantly alcoholic. A bar was a bar, it seemed, even so many light years from home.

"You were saying?" Chekov prompted Scotty.

"...so we roll intae this moonbase," Scott said, waving his drink, continuing a story where he'd left off. "Shithole of a place, in unclaimed territory. And we are in desperate need of four plasma relays, so Captain April sends me off with a thousand credits and a 48 hour pass to see what I can find. Trouble is, a Klingon Bird of Prey had come in, also looking for relays. And there is one person on the whole station selling 'em, a little Ferengi. He's seeing profit and tries tae have us bid against each other. Korg—that's the Klingon engineer—and I figure out his game, so we team up and scare the shite out of the Ferengi, who just wants tae escape with his life by the end. Korg and I have a laugh over the look on his face, and decide that we like each other." Scotty took a long pull on his drink, fully into the swing of his story. Chekov was hanging on his words; Sulu and Uhura were both enjoying the way Scott was winding up the young man.

"Just six hours in," he continued, "and we both have our plasma relays, extra money in our pockets, and two days left on our passes. We *could* go back tae our ships, but we didnae do that. So we hit every bar on the base. I introduce him tae scotch, which he declares a 'warrior's drink.' I dinnae know what we ate, but it was a kind of wriggling haggis, and we get intae a bar fight with some Orions. We're bleeding on each other in the hall, singing drinking songs in Klingon and Gàidhlig, when he decides it would be hilarious tae smuggle me aboard his ship tae look at his engine room. Then we beam over to *our* engine room. And we are both well intae treason by this point, but figure what the hell..."

"I swear to god, Scotty," Nyota said, draining down her drink. "If this story ends with you having sex with a Klingon ..."

"Funny thing about that," Scotty shrugged. "There is a lot more quoting poetry involved in Klingon sex than you'd think." Nyota and Hikaru groaned, and Scott grinned wickedly at them. "Fortunately, my wee granny always made sure I was up on my Burns. Nae what she had in mind when I was memorizing *A Red, Red Rose*, but it did the trick. Let's just say that Korg had a strong, ah, *oral tradition*. And a hell o' a tight ..."

"Oh, my god," Sulu interrupted, shooting a look at the gaping navigator beside him. "Pavel. He is bullshitting us. Lieutenant Commander Scott is a drunk engineer on shore leave, and every word out of his mouth is pure bullshit. He's having you on, especially since it's your first leave. Do not, ever, *ever* attempt to have sex with a Klingon. Am I right, *sir*?"

"Right," Scott said, catching on abruptly. "No sex with Klingons, Ensign. Bad idea. Especially since you prefer tits to dicks. Takes a hell of a high pain threshold to risk sex with a Klingon woman, although it can be worth it, they do this amazing ..."

"Scotty," Uhura snapped.

"Aye, lass?" he said blearily.

"Shut up."

"Aye ma'am. Just remember, we ever run intae Korg son of Vrenn, and he's trying to kill us, tell him that he has a *qaStaHvIS wa'maH ghom* and we may get an invitation tae dinner instead." Scotty glanced over at the table beside them, and a pretty blue couple who had been unabashedly eavesdropping and laughing at his story. He winked at them.

"We believe you," one of them called.

"They believe me!" Scotty crowed.

"They believe you're drunk and easy," Nyota corrected.

"I am," he agreed, then stood and walked over to them. One of them pulled him down for an open-mouthed kiss; a universal language, it seemed, then whispered in his ear. He offered her a hand, then the other to her friend, and let them lead him out of the bar.

"Bye," he called over his shoulder to his shipmates.

Chekov's jaw practically hit the floor. "That was impressive," he said in awe. "How did he *do* that?"

"A lot of practice," Sulu said sagely. "You probably didn't see it, but he bought them drinks when we first came in, more every time he bought a new round, and has been flirting with them all evening. And they both had their hands all over him every time he walked by."

Uhura put her face in her hands. "Pavel, don't get me wrong, I love Scotty, but he's objectively *awful*," she groaned.

"I'm going to try it!" Chekov said excitedly, and headed for a nearby table and another gorgeous blue woman.

"Hopefully they're biologically compatible," Sulu deadpanned, finishing his drink.

Uhura sighed in long suffering. "Hopefully they don't cause an interstellar incident. Want to shop for shoes and swords, Hikaru? I spotted a great little market on our way here."

"Absolutely," Sulu said. She stood and offered him her arm, and they left their shipmates to their own pleasures.

Captain's log, Stardate 2259.75. Five months out on our jaunt into uncharted space. We are now well back into charted space, however. The crew is starting to look forward to being home. We're a few days out from a small world we've been asked to survey, with care because of indigenous population is approximately stone age. Should be simple, but a break from days of cruising home at warp four.

"Some days I am just tired of sitting on my ass," Chekov said at the end of an utterly uneventful shift, stretching tiredly as they rode the turbolift down from the bridge.

"God, yes," Sulu groaned. "I'm not sure whether I've taken the shape of the seat, or the seat has taken the shape of me."

"Treadmill, weights?" Uhura asked as they stepped into the hall and headed for the gym. "Or yoga? Maybe hand-to-hand sparring? I think Kirk and Spock were planning to beat the shit out of each other in the training ring tonight."

"I need to sweat. Run for hours," Chekov said. "Preferably along a quiet, very long path through some mountains or along a beach where I can get baked by the sun, followed by a cold shower and a big plate of fresh fruit."

"Mmm," Uhura agreed wistfully. "Failing that, treadmill, sun lamps, loud music, sonic shower, and something synthesized?"

"God, that sounds awful," Scott said, falling into step behind them with two of his engineers, Masters and Singh.

"You three look like you've already had a workout today," Nyota said, noticing their sweat-stiff uniforms.

"Aye. Twelve hours of zero G in the port nacelle. Which means a couple hours of mandatory high G exercise to compensate."

"Hardly seems fair," Charlene Masters grumped, and Singh grunted in agreement.

"You're young and invincible now, Ensign," Scott sighed. "By the time you're old as me and in charge of your own engine room, the bone loss from too many weightless hours would start to catch up with you."

"Damn straight," McCoy agreed from where he was waiting for the engineers in the hall outside the gym. Zero gravity work was serious enough to require medical monitoring, and he gave them a quick scan. "An hour on the treadmill," he told them. "At one and a half Gs, so don't forget the knee and lower back support. Low aerobic heart rate; don't bother going faster, you'd just be sore and go into calorie debt. Don't forget to drink water and suck down a couple of gels, then eat what the computer wants you to eat for dinner."

"Then do it all again tomorrow, because we still have the starboard nacelle to do," Charlene said in a weary aside to Uhura, who patted her arm sympathetically. "I could have picked science. Sat on my ass all day. But noooo, I just had to be an engineer."

"Ass-sitting isn't all it's cracked up to be. At least you'll sleep!"

"Unless the Chief wants a 0600 start. Which he always does because he's a heartless machine."

"I could make it 0500," the chief engineer warned, only half-teasing.

The music was already pounding loudly in the gym, humid with sweat from a crew that was starting to need to work themselves into exhaustion just to sleep at night. They stepped into the locker room, filled with mostly-naked species in every color of the rainbow and the full spectrum of genders. The initial shy prudishness that had marked the beginning of the mission had more than faded after five months of living on top of each other in 500 meters of livable space.

"If we're this stir crazy after a couple months, I'm not sure about a five-year mission," Uhura admitted, taking off her uniform to change into her workout gear.

"I've heard there is a hump, right about where we are. We'd push past it," Sulu said confidently.

"Aye, until the next one, which is at about a year. And the one after that at 18 months. Beyond that, no one really knows," Scott said, pulling a shirt back on over the high-g back brace and heart monitor. "We're off to suffer," he told the Bridge crew cheerfully, and prodded the grumpy junior engineers toward the treadmills.

"That really is brutal," Chekov said. "Weightlessness is fun for just playing around, but exhausting for trying to get any real work done." In solidarity with the engineers, Uhura, Chekov, and Sulu went for the treadmills, put their heads down, and knocked out ten kilometers.

"We need a swimming pool," Chekov complained afterward, all of them headed for the much-less-than-satisfying sonic showers. "It isn't like we don't have water; 2.5 megaliters down in engineering for cooling and power generation."

"We can only sustain four real water showers on this whole ship, and you want a pool?" Scotty scoffed. "That would be fun in a gravity loss. I'll just install an extra fusion reactor, shall I, to power the gravity plating, and a filtration system, and heaters to keep it from freezing where it touches the hull?"

"A pool wouldn't be impossible, is all I'm saying," Chekov continued later as they sat down together in the mess hall, everyone but Scotty

only half-dressed in a combination of gym-wear and duty underclothes. The second officer, like the first officer and the Captain, was always in uniform.

“You give me unlimited power, nothing is impossible,” Scott agreed.

“I’d settle for edible food,” Uhura said, poking at the gelatinous slabs that passed for rations. “Just five months and our fresh food stores are nearly gone. You’ve got to invent a way for the food synthesizers to make something closer to the real thing, Scotty, or it’s going to be a long five years.”

“I think we could set up sustainable hydroponics for vegetables,” Sulu mused. “The trick is definitely going to be everything else.”

“Everyone is treatin’ the five year mission as a forgone conclusion, but it isnae,” Scotty shook his head. “Someone is going tae get it, but dinnae get your hopes up.”

“Why not?” Chekov challenged. “We’re the fastest ship in the fleet. The best nawigational system, the best science equipment, the best crew.”

“Aye,” Scott said, plowing through his food as if he didn’t care it was awful. “We are also the largest, the best shielded, the most heavily armed. And, nae for nothing, this crew has the most combat experience in the fleet. They may want us patrolling borders closer tae home in a show of force.”

The junior officers blinked at him, disquieted by his words. He glanced up at them, and stopped mid-chew.

“What? You think that isnae a major consideration?” he asked them incredulously. “Vulcan was destroyed less than two years ago. Earth attacked. There are plenty of people at home, including admirals, who think that the exploration part o’ Starfleet ought tae be shelved in favor of militarization.”

“That wouldn’t happen,” Chekov said firmly.

“Wouldnae it?” Scott sighed, standing to catch a few hours of sleep before his day started again. “I hope you’re right, Pavel.”

Captain’s log, Stardate 2259.80. Our survey of Nibiru has revealed a dangerous volcano that could destroy the delicate, developing indigenous species. As difficult as it is, we cannot, of course, interfere. And even if we wanted to, there is no way of stopping a geological force like a volcano. Let us hope that the planet is more stable than it appears to be. Otherwise, our survey has been uneventful.

“And when the volcano erupts?” Kirk asked urgently, studying his first officer’s face with concern.

“The entire species will be destroyed,” Spock reported. “Possibly the entire planet.” Although he might have sounded calm to a stranger, everyone on the bridge knew the first officer was deeply agitated.

“I’ve stood above enough planets and watched them fall to pieces,” Kirk said firmly, turning to the beautiful world on the screen. “I’m not inclined to let that happen again.”

“Nor am I, Captain,” Spock admitted.

“It would be interfering with planetary development,” Kirk said quietly.

“The Prime Directive only prohibits societal interference,” Spock said slowly. “So long as they are not *aware* of our interference, there is no violation.”

“Okay,” Kirk said. “You stop a supervolcano by cooling the magma chamber into solid rock. How do you cool a magma chamber?” They shared a long look with each other, and the Captain hit a button on his chair. “Scotty, can you come up to the bridge please?”

Scotty boggled at them when they described the project. “A *magma chamber*? Right off the top o’ my head I can tell yeh there will be an energy problem. Setting aside the energy requirements for cooling something that massive, cooling itself releases energy ...” he started scribbling equations on a pad. “Depending on the size, it might nae be possible. The latent heat release might be more than we can overcome.” He frowned at the mathematics. “Although maybe we could use that energy to create a feedback loop and power an ongoing reaction ... Okay. Yes. Maybe. But assuming we can create some kind o’ ... I dinnae ken, self-sustaining molecular dampening cascade, it would have tae be limited tae the magma chamber. Otherwise you’d run the risk of solidifying the planet’s molten core in a runaway reaction.”

“Destroying the magnetic field, allowing the solar winds to strip away the atmosphere and water,” Kirk said. “Got it. Don’t do that.”

“Dinnae invent a terrifying planet killer?” Scott said sarcastically. “Aye aye, sir.”

“You have 48 hours, Mr. Scott, Mr. Spock,” Kirk said.

“Oh, well, dinnae make it *hard*,” Scott complained. “Also, how in the hell are we planning to deliver this entirely theoretical device that doesnae exist yet? Yeh cannae beam something intae the middle of a volcano.”

“Shuttlecraft?” Sulu volunteered reluctantly. “Maybe we lower someone down in a modified encounter suit?”

“Oh, my good lord,” Scotty groaned.

“Scotty,” Kirk snapped. “We’re talking about the extinction of an *entire species*. The destruction of a *planet*. I think we’ve had quite enough of that, don’t you?”

Scott glanced somberly at Spock. “Aye, sir,” he sighed. “Mr. Spock, I could use your help.”

Personally, Spock and Scott always circled each other carefully, stabilized and polarized in equal measure by their love for Nyota and their vague confusion about exactly what it was she saw in the other man. Professionally, however, they worked extraordinarily well together, driven upward by Spock's swiftly methodical precision and Scott's intuitive genius for fusing untested theory with engineering reality.

They solved it, of course, and their doubts were swept up in the fierce joy of invention. "Six successes in the modeling, Mr. Spock. We've got it," Scott said jubilantly.

Spock looked over the engineer's shoulder. "What is this failure in the seventh test?" Spock asked, pulling up the data.

Scott grimaced, reaching to shut off the screen, then stopping himself. "Nothing, sir, just an experiment..."

Spock gave the engineer an appraising, uneasy look that would color every interaction they would have for the rest of their lives. "You altered the mathematics to test the runaway reaction. Alterations which result in a doomsday weapon."

Scott swallowed hard. "Just testing the maths, sir. If our controlled reaction was accurate, that precise change would create the full cascade. Just means our equations are correct. I wouldnae ..."

"Of course, Mr. Scott," Spock said smoothly. "Please proceed with fabrication. I will discuss delivery options with the Captain."

It damn near ended with Spock dead, not because of a device that accomplished the impossible, but because of the heat limitations of a *cable*. And, in the aftermath, if Scotty only vaguely noticed that Nyota was giving Spock a cold shoulder, he *definitely* noticed it when she grabbed the front of his uniform and shoved him into the wall outside his quarters.

"Right, you're angry," he said.

"Well deduced, Mr. Genius," she growled at him.

Scotty rubbed his face. "Um ... I'm sorry?" he said, and she rolled her eyes at him.

"You have no idea why I'm mad."

He shrugged bewilderedly.

She let go of his shirt and paced away. "Spock has this specific, endangered-species inspired survivor's guilt. And he's a reckless enough danger to himself without you handing him another way to nobly *kill himself*!"

"I'm sorry, Nyota, but I'm not sorry for saving those people," Scott said earnestly.

"That was not remotely my objection," she hissed at him, and stalked away. He watched her go in puzzled frustration.

Things went swiftly downhill from there: disgrace and death, resignation and Klingons, torpedoes and terrorists; murderous admirals and dying starships. They wouldn't speak again until they stood outside the warp core, both of them as bruised and battered as their suffering ship, and wept helplessly on each other's shoulders while their Captain died and Spock screamed at the sky.

Captain's Log, Stardate 2259.110, supplemental. Note for log: Chief Engineer Lt. Cmdr. Scott and First Assistant Ensign Keenser have requested personal leave. Although irregular just prior to our deployment, permission has been granted.

"Let's come back on the record," Admiral Komack said. "If everyone is ready?" the assorted collection of Admirals and Commodores nodded. In the mezzanine, Chekov, Sulu, Uhura, and McCoy sat back down. They had not been subpoenaed, and had been permitted to attend the inquest. In rooms somewhere below, Kirk and Spock waited to testify, sequestered from the proceedings, the crew, and one another.

"It hasn't been bad so far," McCoy murmured, tugging on the collar of his dress uniform. "A lot of focus on Khan, Marcus, and the *Vengeance*."

"It's about to get bad," Uhura sighed. "Scotty's not going to throw anyone to the wolves if he can help it, but the questions are about to get really uncomfortable."

"I remind everyone that this inquest is classified," Komack continued. "Lieutenant Commander Scott, continuing with your testimony. You are still under oath. Admiral April?"

The venerable and deeply-respected former commander of the USS *Constitution* leaned forward. "Stardate 2259.110. The Captain's log notes that you requested personal leave. Is that entry accurate?" April asked.

"No, sir," Scott answered steadily. "I resigned."

April frowned. "Not noted as such in the log, or reported immediately to command, as required by regulations. Presumably because a report that the *chief engineer and second officer* of the Federation's *flagship* had resigned an hour before deployment would have brought immediate and intense scrutiny of the Captain, the orders, and the mission."

"I cannae speak tae that, sir."

"Why did you resign?" April asked.

"A number of experimental torpedoes had been brought aboard," Scott answered. "I couldnae detect their fuel sources and was advised that the specs were classified above my clearance."

“Just to clarify—how many torpedoes?”

“Seventy-two, sir.”

“And what is your security clearance?” the Admiral asked.

“Top secret, sir,” Scott answered.

“And the specifications for these torpedoes were above that?”

“So I was told, sir.”

“Continue, please.” April gestured. “How did this lead to your resignation?”

Scotty leaned on the podium. “Without specifications, there was no way to tell whether the torpedoes would interfere with the magnetic balances required to keep the warp core stable,” Scotty said. “Under those circumstances, regulations and my own judgment required me to decline to sign for the torpedoes. Captain Kirk disagreed with my assessment and asked me to sign for them despite my objection.”

“Did he ask you to sign for the torpedoes, or did he order it?” April pressed.

“Ordered, sir.”

“How did you respond to that order?”

“I told him that I would resign rather than follow that order, sir.” Scott answered.

April nodded. “I’m sure you did. And that resignation was accepted?” he asked.

“Aye, sir.”

“Kirk then appointed a junior ensign, outside of the engineering department, as chief engineer,” April said, his voice pitched in sarcastic disbelief. At the end of their row, Chekov shifted uncomfortably.

“That’s my understanding,” Scott said.

“Were any of your engineering lieutenants, the deputy chiefs, aboard at the time?”

“All of them.”

“Mr. Chekov. Bright kid. Nineteen years old,” April said agreeably. “How many doctorates do you have, Mr. Scott?”

“Four, sir.”

“What fields?”

“Theoretical physics. Warp physics. Starship engineering. Mathematics,” Scotty answered.

“How many does Mr. Chekov have, if you know?”

“I believe he’s working on his first, sir.”

“Is there a chief engineer in the fleet with any fewer than two?” April asked.

“I dinnae believe so, sir.”

“What are the minimum number of continuing educational hours required of a chief engineer every year?”

“A hundred, sir,” Scott said.

“How many of those must be classified as safety and regulatory?”

“At least fifty.”

April pursed his lips, and glanced at his colleagues on the inquiry board. “So Ensign Chekov, the navigator without formal training as an Engineer, without the basic qualifications of a chief, and without requisite training in the safety regulations required of all chiefs, is appointed as chief engineer, and immediately signed for the torpedoes, as requested by the Captain.”

“Is that a question, sir?”

April leaned back in his chair. “I supposed the implied ‘was Mr. Chekov appointed only for his naiveté’ is more appropriately directed at Captain Kirk,” April agreed.

In the observation seats, Chekov grimaced. “It’s not true,” Sulu said softly to him. “And you know it.”

“Ensign Chekov is a fine officer,” Scott defended.

“No question is pending, Lieutenant Commander,” April said. “But here’s one: in your opinion, was the Captain’s order to you to sign for the torpedoes illegal?”

“Shit,” McCoy breathed.

“I told you,” Uhura said sorrowfully. “Hang on.”

“I’m nae a lawyer, sir,” Scott said, staring hard at the podium.

“You’re a Starfleet Officer,” Komack interrupted. “Who was willing to resign rather than follow the order. And, Lieutenant Commander, I remind you that the terms of your own disciplinary action are contingent upon your full and honest testimony here,” Komack said.

Scott flushed red in anger, his jaw working.

McCoy leaned over to Uhura. “What the hell?” he asked softly. “What disciplinary action?”

Uhura’s gaze flashed, deep and angry. “They arrested him in the engine room of the *Enterprise*, in front of his people, and were going to bring him up on court martial charges. Bad ones. Infiltrating a secured facility. Stowing away on a Federation Starship. Sabotage. There were even threats of a murder charge.”

“Murder?” McCoy hissed quietly, startled.

“He vented a security officer into space when he opened the hatch for Kirk,” Uhura sighed. “I know you’ve been focused on the Captain’s health, and rightly so, Leonard, but Scotty’s pretty messed up just now.”

“Jesus,” McCoy murmured, rubbing his eyes. “He saved our lives. Those kinds of charges would send him to prison for the rest of his life.”

“That’s what his lawyer said too,” Uhura whispered. “Especially since, technically, he’s guilty on all counts. They couldn’t subpoena him if he was up on his own charges, so they told him they would drop the charges completely if he testified here against Kirk. He told them they could go fuck themselves. Those words, literally, to their admiral-y faces. Then Kirk woke up, got wind of it, and made him take the deal.” They turned their attention back to the hearing.

“I’ll ask you again,” the Admiral continued. “In your opinion, as a Starfleet Officer and Chief Engineer of the *Enterprise*, was Captain Kirk’s order to you to sign for the torpedoes illegal?”

Scott was struggling. “It was dangerous and unwise,” he answered. “And against numerous regulations.”

“Not the question, Lieutenant Commander,” Komack warned again. “Last chance. Legal or illegal?”

“Nae legal, sir,” Scott sighed.

“What was your understanding of the *Enterprise’s* orders?” April asked, taking over the questioning again.

“I hadnae been fully briefed,” Scott answered. “But my understanding was that we were tae hunt an alleged criminal and launch torpedoes at him on a world that is not one of our allies.”

“Which world?”

Scott hesitated. “Do you want me tae answer on the record, sir?”

“This inquest is classified. Answer the question.”

“The Klingon homeworld, sir.”

“In your opinion as a Starfleet officer and second officer of the *Enterprise*, were those orders legal or illegal?” April leveled a serious look at Scott. “Before you prevaricate again, Lieutenant Commander, I remind you of your duty of candor here.”

“In the absence of a declaration of war or self defense, nae legal, sir,” Scott sighed. “An opinion that I believe Captain Kirk came tae.”

“No question is pending,” April said icily. “As the second officer, do you agree or disagree that those illegal orders should have been declined outright, on threat of resignation, by a starship Captain and the First Officer.”

In the observation seats, McCoy sighed, disbelieving. “They’re going after Spock too.”

“Oh, they definitely are,” Uhura murmured unhappily.

“Do I agree or disagree?” Scott asked, clearly stalling for time.

“That is the question,” April said.

“As I said, I had not been fully briefed.”

“You are fully apprised of the facts now, Lieutenant Commander,” Komack interrupted again. “As the second officer of the *Enterprise*, under these facts, if the Captain had failed to refuse these illegal orders and the First Officer had then failed to relieve the Captain, would it or would it not have been the Second Officer’s duty to relieve them both and take command of the ship?”

“I wasnae aboard, sir,” Scotty answered, knuckles white on the podium.

“We’re not doing this with you, Lieutenant Commander,” Komack said dismissively. “Get the military police in here.”

“Just ... let him answer, James,” April said placatingly. “Goddamnit, Scotty,” April breathed wearily, and it was an abrupt reminder that Scott had served under the Admiral—and Pike—aboard the *Constitution* in deep space. “You were willing to resign over the possibility of magnetic fluctuations. Why are you fighting to protect men who wouldn’t do the same to prevent the possibility of war?”

Scotty looked down and swallowed hard. “Admiral Pike loved them, sir,” Scott said softly to April, and April looked away, his jaw clenched in sorrow. Pike had been his first officer, and Pike’s fate was an agony for everyone who’d ever served with the man.

“The question still stands, and the MP’s are here,” Komack warned. “I will gladly have you arrested and reinstate all charges against you if you fail to answer again. Knowing what you know of the facts, and had you been aboard, would it have been your duty to relieve Captain Kirk and Commander Spock for continuing to execute Admiral Marcus’s orders?”

Scotty looked up into the seats in the mezzanine, at his shipmates.

“He has to say yes,” Uhura murmured.

“Had I been aboard, and had they given the order to fire torpedoes at the Klingon homeworld,” Scotty said, dropping his gaze, “my answer is yes.”

“Should the *Enterprise* have embarked at all, on a mission with those orders as the intended result?” April continued.

Scott rubbed his face. “No,” he said wearily.

“The Captain’s order to cross into Klingon space: legal or illegal?”

Scott sighed. “Illegal, sir.”

“A violation, in fact, of treaties which could have led to war,” April said, pointed and sharp.

“Yes.”

Commodore Paris, the *Enterprise*’s immediate senior commander in Starship Group One, interrupted smoothly. “We are, perhaps, treading afield from Mr. Scott’s factual testimony and into hypotheticals. After all, Mr. Kirk did not use the torpedoes or fire on Kronos.” And then, blessedly, she threw the struggling engineer a line. “I have a question, however. Despite your many hesitations, Lieutenant Commander, you ended up on the *USS Vengeance* less than 24 hours later. You have already testified concerning your actions on the *Vengeance*. My question, Mr. Scott, is this: what prompted you to look for the *Vengeance* in the first place?”

Scotty took a breath. “I received a subspace communication from Captain Kirk, asking me to look into whether there was something strange at some coordinates near Jupiter.”

“Where were you at the time? And what was the time you received that message?”

“San Francisco, ma’am,” Scott said. “Nearing 0100.”

“And you went immediately?”

“Aye, nearly. I’m afraid I had been drinking very heavily, ma’am. I was significantly intoxicated. I had to sober up and obtain a shuttle, but I left by 0400.”

“This board is well acquainted with your passion for the *Enterprise*. Captain Kirk had just dismissed you from that ship. He had disregarded your wise advice. And yet, with one vague call from Kirk in the middle of the night, you were willing to put your career and, in fact, life on the line. Why?”

Scott blew out a breath and gripped the podium. “If you’ll indulge me in a long answer, ma’am. There are three versions of Captain Kirk. There’s ‘Jim,’ a young, kind, humble man who is a friend of mine. I don’t see him very often. Then there’s ‘Kirk,’ a hothead who can be overruled by his fierce passions, and who doesn’t listen to reason. He and I never get along, and our conversations usually end in shouting. It was ‘Kirk’ who was standing on the deck of the ship, asking me to sign for a load of torpedoes. And then, ma’am, there is ‘Captain James T. Kirk.’ He is one of the most extraordinary people I know. Brave, loyal, selfless, fearless, wise. It was Captain James T. Kirk on that line, asking me to look into something that his gut was telling him was wrong.” Scott looked up fiercely. “And ma’am, if James T. Kirk wanted me to follow him straight to hell, I’d go, and die there if he asked it of me.”

“A ringing endorsement,” Paris said serenely, “from a man without cause to give one.” It wasn’t a question for Scott, but a closing statement for the board of inquiry.

April leaned back in his chair and nodded ruefully, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “And a difficult one to get from this officer, who suffers no fools. I believe, gentlebeings, we have taken enough of the Lieutenant Commander’s time,” April said. “He has much work to do on the repair of *Enterprise*.” He paused; no one disagreed.

“You are dismissed, Mr. Scott,” Komack said, and the board decided to break for lunch before taking up the testimony of Commander Spock.

Uhura and McCoy had to run to try to catch Scott, who was exiting the building at maximum warp. “Scotty!” Uhura called sharply down at him from the second floor. He hesitated just enough that she knew he’d heard her, then continued toward the exit on the main floor without looking back.

Chapter Summary

The five year mission begins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Inquest Report Re: [Classified incident.] Stardate 2260.12. Summary of Findings. Official reprimand: Captain James T. Kirk. Finding is that Capt. Kirk should have recognized and challenged the illegal nature of the orders from Admiral Marcus. This failure was a contributing, although not proximate, cause of deaths aboard USS Enterprise, USS Vengeance, and on Earth. Official reprimand: Commander Spock. Finding is that Cmdr. Spock should have recognized and challenged the illegal nature of the orders from Capt. Kirk. This failure was a contributing, although not proximate, cause of deaths aboard USS Enterprise? USS Vengeance, and on Earth. Official reprimand: Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott. Finding is that Lt. Cmdr. Scott intentionally damaged USS Vengeance, which proximately caused the death of a civilian contractor. Reprimands will be recorded in the classified sections of each officer's personnel file. Further findings. Official Commendation: Captain James T. Kirk, valor. Official Commendation: Commander Spock, valor. Official Commendation: Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott, valor.

“Out,” Nyota ordered, booting the pretty blonde who had been sitting in Scotty’s lap, kissing their way down the engineer’s neck.

“Aww,” blondie pouted. “You didn’t tell me you had a girlfriend, love.”

“Wait,” Scotty called out to the fleeing figure, startled. “Kyle. Karl. Katie ... whatever your name is. Shit. Bloody hell, Nyota,” he complained, straightening his clothes and re-buttoning his shirt.

“You,” Nyota said in fond irritation, sliding into a seat across from Scotty, “are hard to find.” She’d finally tracked him down in Sydney, pleasantly sunny in January, at an open-air harborside bar just nice enough to have good liquor but more than rough enough not to care about the joint that was smoldering between his fingers—old-school smoke, sweet and pungent.

He laughed, his annoyance vanishing. “I should be *impossible* tae find. You are impressive as ever, lass.”

“Did you see the inquest report?” she said. “Slap on the wrist for the three of you. We’re getting the five year mission.”

“Your pain tolerance is higher than mine, if that was a slap on the wrist.” He downed one of the glasses of liquor on the table with a grimace, and chased it with a lung-filling drag of smoke. “I’m happy for yeh; congratulations on the mission.”

She frowned unhappily at him at his phrasing and kicked at his feet stretched out under her chair. He picked them up and put them on the table.

“What the hell are you doing, Scotty?” she asked in exasperation. “From what I see you’ve been spending your days drunk, stoned, and having shitty sex with every pretty man, woman, or otherwise who will take you to bed.”

He shrugged. “It’s no’ shitty sex. It’s pretty okay sex. As tae the rest ... I’m on leave. Two weeks, while they wait for a berth tae open up on the Starbase, and then we’ll transport the *Enterprise* up from Riverside Shipyard back tae space where she belongs, and finish the repairs from there. I havenae had leave on Earth since 2256, Nyota, leave me alone,” he grumbled, leaning back in his chair. He took another drag from his joint, then offered it to her. She rolled her eyes at him and took it.

“Oh, lord, that’s nice,” she sighed, breathing out a mouthful of smoke. “I’ll risk McCoy’s lecture; I’m smoking the rest of your weed.”

He cracked an eyelid at her. “Go buy your own! There is a shop around the corner. Nothing stopping yeh.”

“Just a disapprovingly Vulcan,” she laughed.

“You’re a goddamned pain in my arse,” he grumbled

“You wish,” she said lazily. “There would be screaming, I assure you, but not from pain. Spock seems to enjoy it. I have ‘impeccable technique.’”

Scotty sat up, the front legs of his chair hitting the floor. “Thank yeh very much for that horrific image. This is how yeh get after one joint?” He waved down a waiter. “She’s having ... whatever the hell she wants.”

“Looks like you’ve already drunk all their scotch. Just a beer. Whatever’s local, smooth, and on tap,” she told the waiter. They sat in companionable silence, getting methodically intoxicated in a way they’d never do aboard ship.

“Five year mission,” she continued at last. “Needs a chief engineer. So why the hell haven’t you applied?”

“Kirk sent you,” Scott said heavily.

“No,” she said brightly. “Kirk’s been fretting to Spock and McCoy, who suggested that I find you and ‘inquire as to your plans’ and ‘kick your ass,’ respectively. You can decide who said what.”

He shrugged miserably.

“Drunk and stoned,” she said, looking sharply at him. “How about high? Snorting illegal and dangerous things up your nose?”

“Wow,” he said incredulously, slamming another drink.

“Your sister called me too. She’s worried. And if you think I’ve never talked to Clara about that gap for rehab and treatment when you were seventeen, after your first doctorate and discovering the Aberdeen Solution, then you are sorely mistaken.”

He shook his head, downed another drink, put his feet back on the table, and leaned back in the chair, arms folded and eyes closed.

“Is that a yes or no?” she challenged.

“It’s a ‘I’m nae taking about it,’” he answered.

“So yes?” she pressed, stomach dropping in abrupt concern.

He sighed in aggravation, dug into his pocket, and dumped a small packet on the table.

“*Please* tell me you haven’t taken any of this, Scotty,” Nyota said shakily. “Because that drug test would get you bumped from the five year mission.”

He sat up. “What on earth do you take me for? I’ve been working on the *Enterprise*. If my hands are steady and my mind is clear, I could make a mistake that would cost someone their life. I dinnae touch any of this shite,” he waved at the table, “legal or otherwise when I’m being an engineer. And ... I havenae touched the hard stuff at all. Yet.”

“Then why buy it?” she said angrily, stuffing the bag in her purse to flush down the toilet at the first opportunity.

He toyed with the rim of the nearest empty glass. “The last two times I was on the *Enterprise* with the Captain were the two worst moments of my life. I stood in main engineering, and disobeyed a direct order. Legal or illegal be damned, I told him *no*. And then, 24 hours later, I stood in main engineering again and ...” He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I was afraid, Nyota,” he admitted softly. “I stood there in front of *my* warp core, knowing what had tae be done. And instead of walking straight inside, which it was my duty tae do, I let him knock me on my arse and die in my place.”

“Why do you think Kirk hit you, Scotty?” Nyota said gently. “Because he knew that you were about to do it.”

“I dinnae ken if that’s true or nae. But the end of it is that it’s better tae get bumped from the mission for my oldest and worst demon than have James T. Kirk tell me I’m not welcome on his ship.”

“Yeah,” Uhura sighed in irritation. “And half a world away, Jim is worrying that the mission is going to lose the best engineer in Starfleet because you refuse to work with him. I’m calling him,” she said, flipping open her communicator.

“No! wait ...” Scott protested.

“I won’t tell him about the drugs,” she said softly. “Jim!” she called out cheerfully when the comm connected. “I am sitting here in lovely Sydney with our perpetually grumpy friend Mr. Scott. Who is drunk and stoned and thinks you don’t want him on the mission.”

“Thank you,” Scott groaned. “That was artfully handled. Are you sure you’re no’ in the diplomatic corps?”

There was a pause “... *why the hell wouldn’t I want you on the mission?*” Kirk asked. “*No. You know what? We’re not doing this over the communicators. Give me a second. I’m going to completely misuse one of the Transporters here at headquarters. Keep your communicator on, Nyota, we’ll lock on and be there in a minute.*”

A moment later, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy materialized across the nearby plaza, very much out of place in the dress uniforms required at Starfleet headquarters. “It’s the whole trio,” Scott said to Uhura, holding up three fingers. He leaned back in his chair again to smoke while they piled into the small table, to odd looks from the bar’s other patrons, unused to Starfleet officers, much less those in full dress.

“I forgot it’s summer here. And tomorrow. And daytime,” Kirk complained, and took off his uniform jacket. “Oooh, nice,” he said, spotting the marijuana, and helped himself.

McCoy pulled off his jacket. “Smoke?!” he said, aggrieved. “Seriously? You could at least vape it. Or eat it. You all enjoy lung disease, I take it.” He surveyed the wreckage of many, many drinks. “And liver cirrhosis. What time is it here? It’s only 1300, at best. Just when did you start drinkin’ today?” Spock, his uniform impeccably in place, lifted an eyebrow at Nyota, who just shrugged unrepentantly.

“I’m on leave!” Scotty complained, throwing up his hands. The bemused waiter stopped by to clear the table and take another drink order. An awkward silence settled over the group.

“Take a stroll with me, Leonard?” Nyota asked. “The harborwalk looks lovely.”

“I think I will.” McCoy stood and offered her his arm, which she took with a fond shake of her head, leaving the Captain, his first, and his second to talk. They were barely out of earshot before Kirk was leaning forward earnestly, trying to get Scotty to look up at him.

“Let me guess,” McCoy said. “Scotty thinks Jim won’t have him back because of torpedoes, the *Vengeance*, the inquest, and the warp core. Because those are the *exact* issues that have Jim convinced that Scotty hates his guts.”

“Got it in one,” Uhura sighed. “Think they’ll work it out?”

McCoy shrugged. "Jim's worried Scotty may leave Starfleet entirely," McCoy confided. "There's been angry talk at headquarters that Starfleet betrayed a good officer with that arrest and inquest stunt, and that he's going to walk."

"He hasn't said anything," Uhura said. "Then again, he hasn't *said anything*. If he feels betrayed, he also feels *guilty*. And if he's leaving, it's going to be in the most self-immolating way possible ... Can you get rid of this, Leonard?" she said, pulling the drugs out of her purse.

"Shit," McCoy said fervently, shoving it into his pocket. "Has he taken any?"

"He said no."

"Look, there's a depressingly bad history there..." McCoy started wearily.

"I know," Uhura said quickly. "He said no, and I believe him. He was considering being self destructive, but hadn't got there yet. Or at least, not quite that far," she amended. She sighed. "It's funny. If I was asked to guess which one of my friends had been arrested three times on court martial charges, which one would be most likely disappear to the other side of the planet to have dangerous sex with strangers in back alleys, which one had a frightening history of serious drug addiction, it wouldn't be the cheerful, bighearted, nerdy engineer."

"He doesn't get in trouble as often as some people we know, but when he does he goes big," McCoy agreed, and glanced back toward Kirk, Spock, and Scott. "Look," he said softly. "They've worked it out."

"Oh, thank god," Nyota sighed. "We're all coming home."

Personal Log, Stardate 2260.93. We haven't been together in one place for a year. And what a hell of a year. But what a wonderful reason to get together today.

"Hikaru, she is beautiful," Nyota said, looking down into newborn Demora's eyes.

"We think so," Sulu said proudly. "We may be a little biased though."

"You do not get to hog the baby, Nyota," McCoy complained. "Hand her over. Gained, what, a quarter kilo already? Good for you babygirl, just keep growin' and growin'."

It was an exquisite southern California day, the sun warm on the beach and an unending blue sky overhead. A perfect day for the naming ceremony of a much-loved little girl. Ben and Hikaru's nieces and nephews were chasing each other, the cousins splashing in the surf while their parents watched. The kids had all immediately glommed on to Pavel Chekov, who was playing at being a monster in the waves while Ben and Hikaru's parents sat under a shaded canopy, enjoying their drinks and shouting encouragement.

The *Enterprise* was in the final days of preparation for deployment, but Nyota had pried Scotty off the ship and plied him with sunscreen, sandwiches, and beer. He'd fallen asleep in a beach chair after lunch, and there was an unspoken agreement to let him be for a few hours, although a bucketful of water to the face was definitely in his future.

Spock had cradled Demora for nearly an hour, communing with the child who had looked up at him curiously for five minutes before falling asleep in his arms. He had finally handed her off to her father, then stood ankle deep in the waves, staring across the sea, before coming back to Nyota and taking her hand.

Jim Kirk wasn't sure if this is what steely-eyed explorers were supposed to look like, bravely preparing to hurl themselves into the unknown. But a family? Well. It certainly looked like that.

"Walk with me a minute, Hikaru," Kirk said, grabbing Sulu by the shoulder. "Five year mission?" He asked softly once they were out of earshot. "Are you sure?"

Sulu looked over at his little family, his husband and tiny baby, with longing and pain. "I'm sure, sir," he said.

Kirk shook his head. "It's Jim asking, Hikaru. Not Captain Kirk."

"I'm sure, Jim," he amended. "Believe me. We've looked at other assignments. I've interviewed in the private sector, talked with admirals about teaching at the academy. And there are positions here on Earth, if I wanted them. We've talked and cried, and cried and talked. But I'm not letting the *Enterprise* warp away without me, even if I'm leaving my heart behind."

"There's a narrow window to change your mind," Kirk said quietly. "There are a hundred thousand tons of equipment and supplies staged at the San Francisco Shipyard, and the shuttles start running tomorrow. I stood next to Scotty three weeks ago when he brought the repaired core online again, and the *Enterprise* is tugging at the reigns to go. The engineers are already aboard, and the rest of the crew is coming off their last training rotations. I'll leave you on Earth until the very last minute, but it's just weeks until deployment, Hikaru. Weeks."

Sulu wiped his eyes. "I know," he breathed.

Jim patted his back. "Okay," he said.

There were plenty of ancient and somber traditions they could have drawn on, but Ben and Hikaru had crafted their own. As the last of the sunlight and the first of the starlight fell on the beach they stood by a fire and held their daughter in their hands, dressed all in white. They announced her name and spoke their love and prayers for her. She was passed to her grandparents, who presented her with a scroll, her name written in delicate calligraphy. They had planned to pass her to each of the assembled guests, but she was fussy after a long day, and they each simply spoke their prayers over her while she watched from her fathers' arms.

The sun went down and the families went home, sunbaked children yawning. "Go home, Hikaru" Nyota had said, shooing him away with his

precious daughter in his arms. The rest of the *Enterprise* crew lingered languidly around the fire, sitting in the sand drinking the last of the beer. Before he went, Sulu paused next to them.

“My prayer for the mission is to fly straight and fast and true,” he said, and his crewmates smiled up at him.

“That we discover things no one has discovered, and see things no one has seen,” Chekov said, rolling his bottle of beer in his hands as he stared into the fire.

Uhura stirred from where she was leaning against Spock’s chest. “That we find friends along the way,” she said.

“That when the Captain asks the impossible, the laws of physics will bend, just a little,” Scotty said, his grin slightly maniacal.

“I just want everybody to make it home,” McCoy sighed.

Spock paused in thought. “That our actions will reflect the best of the Federation, our peoples, and ourselves.”

They turned toward their Captain, who looked up to the sky, his face lit by firelight, and quoted softly: “Let me but live my life from year to year, with forward face and unreluctant soul; not hurrying to, nor turning from the goal; not mourning for the things that disappear in the dim past, nor holding back in fear from what the future veils; but with a whole and happy heart, that pays its toll to youth and age, and travels on with cheer. So let the way wind up the hill or down, o’er rough or smooth, the journey will be joy: Still seeking what I sought when but a boy, new friendship, high adventure, and a crown, my heart will keep the courage of the quest, and hope the road’s last turn will be the best.”

“He thinks he’s a damn poet,” McCoy complained after a thoughtful moment, and Kirk winked at him.

“Boldly go, friends,” Kirk said, a toast they were happy to drink to as they clinked their glass bottles together over the waning fire. “Boldly go.”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2260.203. We’re not even that far from home yet, and into mysteries already. We’re in orbit around what appears to be a ghost planet—full of massive modern cities, and not one sign of the people who built them.

The planet would have been beautiful. It *was* beautiful. But it was by far the eeriest place they had ever been. Vast, towering cities, all completely abandoned, molding over apocalyptically as nature took the entire world back.

“What do you think, Lieutenant Zhu?” the Captain asked the ship’s anthropologist.

Zhu shook his head, puzzled. “This was an advanced civilization, obviously. Massive buildings, public transportation, parks, shops. Probably churches and schools. The architecture suggests a bipedal species of approximately human height. It’s a little hard to judge without a study of the ecology, but I’d guess that this world has been abandoned for at least a century. No sign of a planetary cataclysm, war, or plague. No bodies, and you would expect to still see some, unless they were particularly delicate.”

“They definitely had written language,” Uhura said. “It hasn’t been difficult to translate. What you would expect in an urban city. The signs say things like ‘government building,’ ‘this way to the park,’ ‘our food is the best and cheapest,’ ‘no littering.’ No indication of what happened here, though. It wouldn’t surprise me if a civilization like this did most of its communication electronically. Broadcast, radio, digital. Assuming that they saved any of that at all, we would have to get aged and damaged equipment operating to get even a hint of that data.”

Ensign Keenser was scanning with his tricorder. “Pre-warp,” he said softly. “Internal combustion engines. Carbon-based power sources, although I’d say those natural resources were seriously strained and in swift decline. No radiation signals that would suggest nuclear capacity. There is a very large project outside of the city that I can’t identify that actually seems to be emitting energy. No indication of a migration off-planet—no large scale spaceship construction, no launch platforms.”

“A ghost planet,” Kirk mused. “The archeologists could probably spend lifetimes here, trying to solve the mystery. Well, we’ll make our report, and leave it to them.” The Captain flipped his communicator open. “Four to beam up,” he said, and they dematerialized.

“Dinnae move,” Scott said urgently as the away team reappeared on the transporter pad. “I have the quarantine shield dropped.” The away team was grimacing and rubbing at their chests, aching deeply from the roughest rematerialization they’d ever had. They could see the faint shimmer of the shield between them and the transporter console, and Scott just beyond, pouring over his screens.

“What’s going on, Mr. Scott?” the Captain asked, glancing at the team to make sure everyone was present and body parts in order.

“Biofilter picked up something strange, but your patterns were also going a ... wee bit dodgy, so I didnae dare wait.” Scott glanced up at them, face set grimly and pale from whatever miracle he’d just pulled off. The transporter tech sitting next to him was trembling, so whatever it had been, it had been very bad. “Just hang out for a bit,” Scott continued. “I need to get McCoy in here tae take a look at this.”

“Excuse me for a minute, sir,” the tech said tightly, scooting quickly past the Chief into the hall. The doors hadn’t quite closed before the sound of his retching reached them.

“Scotty,” Kirk said, his voice pitched to a warning. “Why is Ensign O’Neil throwing up in the hall?”

McCoy came barging in at that moment, and sagged in relief when he saw the puzzled but fine-appearing away team. “O’Neil is out there puking. Jesus, I was afraid we had a transporter splice. What the hell is going on?”

O’Neil stepped back in. “Sorry sir,” he said shakily to Scott, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “It’s just that I’ve never been that close to losing anyone before.”

The door opened again; Spock, looking concerned. “What has happened?” he asked gravely.

“Will everyone *please* just shut up for a minute,” Scott snapped, hands still moving on the controls. Silence descended, other than the sound of McCoy’s medical tricorder. McCoy frowned at his readings, then came over to the transporter console and looked over Scott’s shoulder.

“What the hell is that?” McCoy asked, and Scott stepped aside so McCoy and Spock could get a better look. Scotty reached out and grabbed Ensign O’Neil gently by the arm.

“Hey,” he said softly. “It didnae happen, laddie. Mop up the mess out there, aye? and take the rest of the day off. We’ll talk tomorrow. Yeh did good.” O’Neil nodded, embarrassed and shaken and miserable, but at least slightly comforted, and let his boss push him out the door.

Kirk pinched the bridge of his nose. “Gentlemen ...” he said.

Scott pulled off the eyepiece that gave him heads-up access to the delicate transporter data. He rubbed his face with both hands. “I lost you, for thirty seconds,” he admitted. “Then I got your patterns back, but they were commingled. I barely got yeh all untangled at the damn atomic level before your patterns completely degraded. I couldnae wait any longer, but the biofilter doesnae like something about yeh.” He looked down at his hands, trembling mutinously, and shook them out.

“That close, huh?” Kirk asked, with false bravado. He motioned to the away team to sit; it was looking like it would be a while.

“Just the adrenaline dropping off,” Scott insisted.

“Sure,” Kirk said, and blew out a breath. “Montgomery Scott’s trembling hands means we were dead, and you pulled off a miracle.”

“Remains to be seen,” McCoy said. “This is weird. How do you all feel?”

“Achy,” Uhura said. “All over, like too much of a workout and the flu at the same time.” The others nodded.

“Could be transporter shock,” Scott suggested.

“Except the biofilters were right,” McCoy said. “There is definitely something wrong here, but I can’t identify it. Not a parasite; not a pathogen. It’s like their mass has been reduced, which is impossible. Weird as hell.” He swiped the data from the transporter console onto a padd, and held it up just outside the shield screen for the Captain to see.

Behind him, Uhura gasped tightly, then slumped to the ground with a groan. The Captain jumped to her side while Spock pressed himself to the force shield.

“Drop the shield!” Spock ordered Scott sharply.

Scott’s gaze flickered miserably; they’d had this kind of conversation before outside the warp core. “I cannae, not until McCoy clears it.”

“Jim, how is she?” McCoy asked urgently.

“I’m okay,” she said shakily, and reached up to take Kirk’s hand, outstretched to help her sit up—and their hands passed straight through each other like ghosts. They both jerked back with a yelp.

McCoy and Scott were staring, slack jawed and incredulous at what they’d just seen.

“Captain,” Spock said urgently. “Are you both incorporeal?”

“Just how the hell would you like me to test that, Mr. Spock?” Kirk asked a little hysterically, staring at his hands.

The away team reached out for each other. Hands passed through hands or faces, but, strangely, not through the bulk of each other’s bodies.

“Clothing,” Spock said simply. Kirk pulled off his shirt, and as Spock had predicted, the others could then reach through his chest up to the cuffs of their sleeves.

“Oh, that isn’t disturbing at all,” McCoy moaned.

“You’re standing on the deck. What about communicators, tricorders, the wall?” Scott asked. They found they could all interact with items and the ship as usual.

“I wonder,” Nyota said, and pulled a ration bar out of her field pack. Once she removed it from the wrapper, it slipped through her fingers. She picked it up inside the wrapper, and tried to take a bite, but it was impossible. “That’s a little disappointing,” she confessed ruefully. “I’m really hungry.”

“Organic material,” Spock summarized. “You cannot interact with organic material. Is this a transporter accident, Mr. Scott?”

Scott sputtered, offended on the transporter’s behalf. “A transporter accident? In a perfectly functioning transporter? Causing *selective* molecular dissolution? No, sir. If this was a transporter error we’d have four puddles of goo on the pad instead of four crewmen. This wasnae the transporter; I’d stake my life on it.” Spock lifted an eyebrow. “I’ll ... run a diagnostic,” Scott sighed, punching a series of buttons on the console.

“I tend to agree with Mr. Scott,” the Captain said. “We don’t know that this arose in transport. The transporter didn’t like something about us, but I don’t know how long we’ve been ... noncorporeal. I didn’t touch anything but my equipment down there. Do any of you remember touching anything organic on the surface of the planet? Pick a flower, touch a vine growing through the ruins?” The away team shook their heads. “I can’t feel anything,” the Captain continued quietly. “Except the pain in my own body. I can’t feel the weight of my clothing, the communicator in my hand, my feet in the deck. Not numb just ...not there. We have an away team turning into ghosts after walking around on

a ghost planet. My guess is that those things are related.”

“Except there weren’t ghosts down there,” McCoy said. “There was *no one at all*.”

“It might be a progressive condition,” Kirk said. “And we aren’t going to get answers standing around on a transporter pad. Beam us back down to the planet, Mr. Scott.”

Scott’s eyes popped at the order. “There is *no way in hell*, sir. It’s been fifteen years since I lost someone in transport, but I damn near lost the four of you today. Besides, for all we know the transporter did this.”

“You just said it didn’t. You said you’d bet your life it wasn’t the transporter,” Kirk said.

“Aye, well, in that case I’ve changed my mind, sir.” The transporter diagnostic chose that moment to beep all clear.

“Sure, Scotty,” Kirk said sarcastically. “Look, keep the rest of the team here, and just beam me down.”

The away team immediately disagreed. “There might be written information somewhere,” Uhura said.

“I might be able to get computers running that tell us something,” Keenser continued.

“I’m in this with you,” Zhu insisted.

“Now just a damn minute...” McCoy started.

“I am *nae beaming anyone down*,” Scott growled, cutting them all off. “It could kill you all.”

“It’s an order, Mr. Scott,” the Captain said. Scott folded his arms mutinously, and the men glared at each other through the shield. “I guess we’ll deal with this later, engineer,” the Kirk said tightly. “Mr. Spock, please relieve Mr. Scott.”

“Jim...” McCoy begged.

Scott closed his eyes, his jaw clenched, and held up a hand, forestalling Spock. He looped the heads-up display back over his ear and across his face. “I’ll do it sir. God help me. You’ve no chance otherwise. Planet of mysteries sir. Where do yeh want tae go? We’ve got one shot, at best.”

Kirk thought for a moment. “Ensign Keenser identified a large project, but didn’t know what it was. I doubt we’ll find the answer at the department of motor vehicles or the library. Send us there.”

“Let’s see it, wee man,” Scott sighed, and Keenser held his tricorder up to the quarantine shield. Scott nodded, and the away team took their places on the pad again. “Be very still; your beating hearts alone might be too complex a movement in bodies that dinnae fully exist just now. Ready?”

“Energize,” the Captain said firmly, and Scott reluctantly pulled the dematerialization lever.

“Goddamnit,” Scott whispered as the transporter immediately began protesting alarmingly.

“They’ve commingled. Compensate, Mr. Scott!” Spock ordered sharply.

Scott did not respond, his eyes fixed unblinkingly on the data, his hands moving swiftly, waiting as long as he dared before punching the rematerialization sequence. He slammed the communication button on his console with his fist. “Captain, are yeh whole and in the right places?” he asked desperately.

“*We’re okay Scotty*,” the Captain answered weakly. “*But holy hell that hurt. Remind me that I need to listen to your advice next time.*”

“As repeatedly established *over and over again*,” Scott spat, pulling off his headset and throwing it furiously at the console. Then he spun on Spock. “As for you, Mr. Spock. Dinnae ever, *ever* fuckin’ distract me in the middle of a beamdown!” Scott stormed out of the room.

“*That sounded a little tense*,” Kirk said over the comm.

“I’m sure he’ll be back in ten minutes to apologize,” McCoy sighed.

“I will speak with him, but his characteristic emotionalism was ... not unwarranted.” Spock admitted mildly.

“I suppose not,” Kirk said, exchanging a knowing glance with both Uhura and Keenser. “We’ll organize a plan down here. Bones, please analyze the medical data and see if it tells you anything. Spock, get our brightest minds thinking deep thoughts, including Mr. Scott once he’s calmed down. Keep us updated. Kirk out.”

“Everybody okay?” Kirk asked the away team. They were pale, and everyone was in pain, but they nodded. Kirk turned to study the massive structure in front of him. They were on the far outskirts of the city, and the building was larger than anything they’d seen. Clearly industrial but, as Keenser had noted, completely mysterious. The away team headed for a door that once would have been imposing, but now was hanging off its hinges. It was dark inside; very dark, and the team pulled flashlights out of their packs. “Comm check,” the Captain said, and to his relief the communicators seemed to work within the building. On the *Enterprise*, the communication officer confirmed receipt as well. “Let’s split up here; get a feel for where we are,” the Captain said, and his team nodded.

Keenser headed up a staircase, Uhura toward what appeared to be an office space. Kirk exchanged a glance with Zhu, and they headed in different directions on the main floor.

Massive conduits passed overhead and below the grating underfoot. A large turbine was just visible, hanging over the center of what seemed to be a vast center room. Kirk was making his way around the perimeter, careful of his footing in the dark, when there was an alarming grinding sound, and massive shades lifted, lighting the room with sunlight. "Ensign Keenser, was that you?" Kirk asked.

"Aye sir. Should have warned you. I didn't expect that to work. A weighted pulley system."

"Good job, that will make this much easier."

"There is a computer system," Uhura reported. "If we could just get power ..."

"There is something strange here in the center of the building," Zhu said. *Almost a membrane...*" Zhu's report abruptly broke off into horrific screams, and the Captain came running, phaser in hand, Uhura and Keenser hot on his heels. When they reached him, Zhu was bowed over in agony, holding his hands up, which were fading, disappearing completely. Hands, wrists, elbows.

"I touched it, sir," Zhu panted, his body vanishing more by the moment. "The membrane. I touched it. I'm sorry, sir. I'm ... oh, God," he choked, and threw his head back, screaming silently with no body left to push air through his throat. And then he was gone.

Kirk jerked out his communicator, eyes locked in horror on the place where his crewman had stood. "Enterprise did you beam Lieutenant Zhu out?!"

"No, sir," Spock replied tensely.

"Well, he just vanished or disassembled or disintegrated in front of our eyes," Kirk said mournfully.

"Your condition is deteriorating?" Spock asked sharply.

"Maybe," Kirk replied. "He said he touched something."

"Captain, we also have a serious problem up here. Mr. Scott just reported that one of his engineers attempted to drink a cup of coffee, and it poured straight through his body into his boots."

"It's spreading to the Enterprise?" Kirk whispered.

"It appears so, sir," Spock said. "Captain, I would like your permission to beam down to the planet."

"No way, Spock," the Captain responded instantly, and Uhura stepped forward and met Kirk's eyes, her hand lifted in protest.

"It would appear that I am no safer aboard the ship than I would be with you. My technical and scientific expertise may be a significant benefit," Spock answered reasonably. "In addition, I am certain that Dr. McCoy can devise a number of monitoring devices for me to wear that may be invaluable helping us determine what is occurring."

"Unfortunately, I agree, Mr. Spock," Kirk said reluctantly, and Uhura's shoulders slumped in resignation. "Get down here as quickly as you can. Ensign Keenser and Lieutenant Uhura will provide you a list of additional equipment that we may need. See you in a few minutes." Kirk closed the line, then glanced up ruefully at what remained of his team. "Scotty and McCoy are going to be apocalyptic."

Aboard the ship, the second officer stared levelly across at the first, then stepped closer to the command chair. "What in the hell are you thinking Mr. Spock?" he said, voice pitched so it wouldn't carry across the bridge. "The Captain is down there, seriously affected by what may well be a ..." he paused, and dropped his voice further. "A fatal condition. And now you want tae beam down too? I object, sir, in the strongest terms."

"The condition is spreading to the ship, Engineer Scott. We must solve this as quickly as possible if any of us are to survive."

"I dinnae disagree with that," the Engineer hissed, trying to clamp down on agitation that was starting to draw the attention of the bridge officers. "Which can be done perfectly well from the ship! What I fail tae understand is why..." he pinched the bridge of his nose, struggling to keep his voice under control, with limited success. "Why in the goddamned hell the two of you always have the suicidal need to stand side by side in the same spewing shithole, every bloody time."

In front of them, Sulu and Chekov were studiously examining their consoles. Spock didn't even raise an eyebrow. "Jim and Nyota are down there," Spock said simply. The answer immediately threw Scott, who scrubbed both hands down his face.

"Aye, and my friend Ensign Keenser. That isnae a reason," Scott said wearily.

"It is," Spock answered.

"A logical reason?" Scott shot back, and eyes widened all over the bridge.

"I could present the argument, if you wish."

Scott made an inarticulate noise of frustration. "I get the *one* Vulcan in all the damn universe who goes with his gut. Maybe McCoy can talk some sense intae yeh," he said, and stomped off the bridge.

McCoy didn't bother to keep his voice down. "Are you out of your Vulcan mind!?" he yelled, pacing the medbay.

"Quite the contrary," Spock said levelly. "Doctor, I would be happy to wear any device which might assist you in gathering data about the condition, in the assumption that I might become incorporeal more quickly on the surface. While it is only correlative, at present, that proximity to the planet leads to the condition, it is likely related, as the away team was affected first. We cannot prove causation, but it is

sufficient data to develop a hypothesis. Mr. Scott, as soon as I am on the surface, break orbit and take the ship out past the first moon. It may provide a measure of safety.”

“Aye, sir,” Scott said resignedly, and McCoy whirled on him.

“You’re just going to let him do this?!” McCoy hissed.

“This isnae my day for talkin’ sense intae superior officers,” Scott sighed.

McCoy took a breath, clearly unhappy, then started to grab equipment. He stuck a piece of a bandage to the back to Spock’s hand. “This is organic tape. Some species don’t respond well to the dermal regenerator or to non-organic bandages. When this falls through your hand, we will know for sure that you’ve been affected.” The Doctor hesitated, then stuck the piece to his own hand, and to Scotty’s. McCoy then fixed several monitors to Spock, one to his neck, one to his chest under his shirt. “Maybe it will tell us something.”

“Meet me in the transporter room in five minutes,” Spock said to the unhappy officers, going to collect supplies.

Spock materialized in the surface outside the building. He flipped his communicator open. “That seemed to be uneventful, Mr. Scott.”

“It was,” Scott responded. *“That confirms that the issue isnae with the transporter itself, but something on the planet.”*

“Agreed,” Spock said. “I will find the Captain. As discussed, break orbit.” Spock walked into the massive building and glanced around it. “Captain?” he called.

“Here, Spock.” Spock followed Kirk’s voice to the center of the building, and found his Captain looking down at a strange circle. It was about ten meters in diameter, centered in the room. It shimmered and was slightly convex, like a portion of a massive soap bubble, and it looked vanishingly delicate. “Zhu touched this, and died. I have a feeling that this is the source of our puzzle,” Kirk said.

Spock pulled out his tricorder and scanned. “No mass at all. Energy, however. Massive energy, in fact, but not of any kind I recognize. A puzzle indeed.”

“I think I may have some more pieces of that puzzle,” Uhura said, coming up behind them. “Keenser managed to modify his phaser to power the computer, and I’m getting a picture of what happened here.”

She exchanged a glance with Spock, annoyed and grateful for his presence in equal measure. He reached out hesitantly and put a hand on her arm. “I can’t feel you, Spock,” she said quietly, an admission that felt shattering, and he gave a small, pained nod. Kirk glanced between them, his gaze flickering unhappily.

Uhura breathed and pulled herself upright, collecting herself, and led them to the computer console in what seemed to be an office space.

Keenser glanced up, his hands in the guts of the mechanism. “It’s fragile,” he said simply.

“I’ve only been working with the language for an hour, but I have the broad strokes,” Uhura explained, pulling up a screen full of glyphs.

“They have a name for the membrane,” she said, pointing at a symbol on the screen. “I can’t quite translate it. Something like ‘the gift’ or ‘the powerful one.’ Maybe even ‘the god.’ It appeared at some point. I’m not sure the timeframe; possibly months, years. I don’t think it’s anything quite as long as centuries or millennia.”

“This building appears to be industrial,” Spock observed. “If the membrane were ancient, it would more likely be surrounded by a temple or other sacred space.”

“Unless they were like humans,” Kirk murmured, “wholly capable of desecration.” Spock tilted his head, conceding the point.

“The building is definitely entirely industrial,” Uhura continued. “Best as I can tell, as Keenser guessed, they were having a severe energy crisis, and were trying to tap the membrane for power. Successfully too, at first. There are congratulatory messages. ‘You’ve done it, you’ve saved us, the future is limitless.’ Along those lines. Then something happens, reference to an accident. Someone touches it, or falls in, and the tone changes. ‘The vanishing,’ ‘it’s spreading,’ ‘we can’t stop it,’ ‘my god what have we done.’ And that’s the end.”

“This is it, then,” Kirk said. “This is why this planet is a ghost planet, and why we are vanishing.”

“And quickly too,” Spock said tightly, holding up his hands. The organic bandage that McCoy had placed on his arm fluttered to the ground. “I appear to be noncorporeal.” Nyota gave him a pained, resigned look, and Spock’s communicator beeped.

“Doctor,” Spock said, opening it.

“I take it you’re about to confirm that you’ve just turned into a ghost,” McCoy sighed. *“Because the monitors just went crazy and are telling me that you barely exist.”*

“Any other data, Doctor?”

“Just that, contrary to the laws of physics, most of the matter in your body simply ceased to exist. No energy conversion, nothing. Scotty is losing his goddamn mind up here.”

Scotty broke in, as agitated as he’d been all day. *“With quantum exceptions I’m nae willing tae entertain just yet, matter and energy cannae be destroyed. Simplest explanation? Alternate universe punchin’ a hole ...”*

“I agree, Mr. Scott,” Spock said. “Captain, I hypothesize that the membrane is a break in the spacetime continuum. The very thinnest of walls

between this universe, and another. And rather than drawing energy from that universe as they had intended, the indigenous species caused it to draw energy from ours. Starting with the organic mass of our bodies.”

“How do we stop it and reverse it?” Kirk asked heavily. But there would not be time to answer the question tonight; the sun was going down and the light quickly fading. Kirk broke open a chemical light, which glowed pale green.

“*Sir, the sun is going down over you, and readings are that it gets damn cold,*” Scott reported.

“*Very damn cold. Negative forty.*” McCoy said with a low whistle.

“*It doesnae make sense,*” Scott continued. “*Not for your latitude and elevation. It’s all wrong. Regardless, I dinnae know if you’d feel it, or be hurt by it, but nae worth the risk. I’m going to beam down a heater, warm clothing, and sleeping bags. I wish I could send you some food, but it willnae help you. Night looks like ... about eight hours long.*”

“Eight point three one six hours at this latitude,” Spock corrected, and McCoy’s eye roll was almost audible.

“*Bunk down,*” McCoy said. “*We’ll keep working on it up here.*”

“I hope we’re still here in the morning,” Kirk said softly. As promised, a few minutes later Scott beamed in a pile of supplies. They couldn’t feel anything; not heat or cold, not each other’s shoulders as they lay side by side, not the ground beneath their backs. It was profoundly unsettling. What they could feel was the deep ache of bodies being stretched across two universes, and gnawing thirst and hunger that could not be satisfied.

Nyota curled into Spock all the same, careful to touch him only where clothing or blankets outlined what was left of his body. “I can hear your heart,” she said softly.

“What do you think, Spock?” Kirk said into the darkness. “Is anyone alive in that other universe? The people of this planet? Lieutenant Zhu?”

“We know that other universes exist. The multiverse theory was proved abundantly by Ambassador Spock. Whether any one universe is habitable, however, is an unknown.”

“I’m going to believe they are alive,” Uhura said.

“Me too,” Kirk said.

“Humans ... emotional,” Keenser grumped.

“Indeed,” Spock agreed.

The lapsed into silence and uneasy sleep, none of them sure they would see the dawn. But dawn came, pale gray. Cold, probably, their breath heavy in the air though they could not feel the air moving through their lungs. Hungry, although no one mentioned it.

Kirk pulled out his communicator. “*Enterprise*, we’re still here. Are you?”

“*Aye sir, mostly.*” It was Sulu. “*About ten percent of the crew are ghosts.*”

“Dammit,” Kirk muttered. “Is the *Enterprise* still out at 400,000 kilometers?”

“*Yes, sir,*” Sulu confirmed. “*Barely in orbit, but we’re still getting hit hard. Mr. Scott and Mr. Chekov have been working all night; they have some ideas.*”

Kirk turned to Spock. “Why is it affecting the *Enterprise*?”

“Zhu touched the membrane,” Uhura said. “A similar event seems to have kicked off the imbalance in the first place. Maybe it’s stronger now?”

“I agree,” Spock said, scanning with his tricorder. “It is considerably more energetic than yesterday, and it also seems to be drawing more energy into itself. Mr. Scott expressed surprise at the cold. The membrane is absorbing energy, including the solar energy.” Spock furrowed his brow. “It is growing. Slowly. But in a million years it will overtake our universe entirely. Ages, on a biological scale, but little time at all on a cosmic one. Whether or not we can be saved may be immaterial in light of this threat; we must stop it by whatever means necessary.”

“Antimatter explosion?” Kirk spitballed, then corrected himself. “No, if it gets stronger the more energy it absorbs, that would just exponentially accelerate it. How do you seal a rift in spacetime?”

Ensign Keenser, characteristically quiet, blinked as though something were occurring to him that he didn’t like.

“*Bend it over on itself; bring the edges together like mending a hole in fabric,*” Scott said, coming on the open line. Keenser frowned as though it was just as bad as he feared. “*Getting the Enterprise within a few meters of the rift, and punching warp eight should do it.*”

Kirk blinked and exchanged a glance with the little engineer. “That will be ... interesting. Go to warp eight, in a planetary gravity well, in the middle of atmospheric mass, and with planetary mass just *meters* away? That’s a hell of a warp field. It will make a nice instant mountain range on the planet. Won’t it also crush us?”

“*We’ll need to be very, very precise,*” Scott hedged. “*Mr. Spock, Mr. Keenser, we are going tae need readings on the membrane or rift or whatever the hell it is, as detailed as you can get.*”

“What does it mean for the *Enterprise*’s ghosts?” Kirk asked softly.

Scott didn’t answer.

“Unknown,” Spock stated. “But there is no choice. We will get you your readings, Mr. Scott.”

“I’ll send a shuttle for yeh, sir. Before yeh protest about putting crew at risk, Sulu is already a ghost. He probably didnae mention it. I’ll send him.”

Kirk frowned unhappily at that news, remembering Sulu’s hands cradling his new baby and the kisses he scattered so lovingly on her cheeks. He wondered if Sulu would ever touch his daughter again, although that point might be moot. If sealing the rift didn’t kill them outright, the ghosts would all die of thirst in a few days.

They were back on the ship within an hour. Spock, Chekov, and Scott hovered over Spock’s station for another hour, murmuring over the mathematics. Apparently satisfied, Scott headed for engineering, clearly tense, while Spock and Chekov conferred with Sulu and the backup pilot DePaul to model the precise steps of the maneuver.

“We are ready, sir,” Spock said at last.

“Yellow alert,” the Captain said. “Buckle up, everyone. Mr. Sulu, take us down.”

The *Enterprise* dropped slowly into the atmosphere, Sulu very carefully controlling the rate of descent to minimize heating on the hull. The superstructure creaked as atmospheric pressure increased. Ordinarily they would have increased internal pressure to compensate, but warping from the atmosphere back into space wouldn’t give them time to lower the internal pressure again, and would cause the ship to explode. Scotty had declared the atmospheric pressure within tolerances. Barely.

The lights flickered as the ship protested, threatening to implode. “Two kilometers,” Sulu said tensely.

“We’re still okay,” Scott reported from Engineering. At one kilometer they slowed to a crawl, Chekov, Sulu, and DePaul all working the thrusters. At 500 kilometers, engineering moved both nacelles inward six centimeters each, a rare maneuver to narrow and focus the warp field. The matter-antimatter reactor went to full capacity, the tempo and volume of its roaring throb increasing dangerously. At 200 meters the nacelles came online, charging to full in a combat posture. Chekov and DePaul shifted from thrusters to the impulse nozzles to hold the ship at a precise heading and declination; there was a two centimeter margin for error.

“Holding,” Chekov reported. “Holding. Holding.”

“At your discretion Mr. Sulu,” Kirk murmured.

At thirty meters exactly, with no margin for error at all, Sulu engaged the warp drive.

Warp was never to be engaged in a gravity well, in atmosphere, or in proximity to a planet—for many, many important reasons, chief among them being that a planet was not meant to be folded, and a Starship was not meant to fold anything more dense than the vacuum of space. Ship and planet howled in protest. Of equal concern, however, was the agonized screaming from the ship’s ghostly crew, who sounded as if they were being torn limb from limb.

Chekov and DePaul both leapt for the helm over Sulu’s slumped body and jerked the *Enterprise* out of warp. The ship whined in protest, nacelles grinding faintly under the uneven thump of the reactor. They stared at each other, panting in exertion.

“Status?” the Captain asked weakly, stirring in his chair.

“Alive?” Chekov volunteered.

“If you say so,” Kirk sighed. A touch on his shoulder startled him straight upright.

“Corporeal,” Spock said, allowing his hand to linger.

“Bridge, are you all whole?” McCoy asked urgently, calling up from sickbay. *“Because our ghosts all seem to be back down here.”*

“I think so, Bones,” Kirk said. Sulu sighed in unabashed relief as Chekov helped him upright, and Kirk smiled faintly when Spock pressed a gentle kiss to Uhura’s knuckles.

“Get a room,” Kirk teased lightly. “I take it that it worked, Spock?”

“Affirmative, Captain. The rift is closed. And …” Spock trailed off. “I am reading a massive surge of biomass from the planet.”

“Sir!” Uhura interrupted urgently. “I’m getting a Starfleet signal from the surface.”

“Umm. This is Lieutenant Zhu. Enterprise, are you there?”

“Zhu!” Kirk shouted joyfully. “We thought you were dead!”

“Not dead, sir. And not alone either. I think I found the indigenous population. They are a little confused, but there also seems to be a lot of hugging? Now they are hugging me. I’m rather obviously alien, and I think they think I saved them. You might want to get down here soon, sir, to explain it to them. Whatever it is that you did.”

Kirk sat back in wonder. “Scotty, are you on fire down there?” he called down to engineering.

“Aye,” the Chief replied, grumpily terse. “*As usual.*”

“Well, put it out and cheer up. We saved ourselves, a planet and the universe today,” Kirk said, more than a little smugly.

“As usual,” Uhura whispered to Spock.

Kirk heard her and spun around in his chair, beaming broadly. “And we’re just getting started!”

Chapter End Notes

The poem that Kirk quotes is “Life” by Henry Van Dyke

Chapter Summary

A temporary crew member catches Scotty's eye, and gets in terrible trouble.

Captain's Log, Stardate 2261.13. We are finally moving in the direction of truly uncharted space. We've stopped at Starbase 12 to pick up a number of specialists to finish outfitting the Enterprise. Weapons, enhanced shielding, more powerful sensors, and an archival vault. They will be with us about six weeks until we reach the very last Federation outpost, then make their way to other assignments as we travel on into the unknown.

Lieutenant Mira Romaine had always considered herself more of a librarian than anything. She liked neatly shelved artifacts, preserved parchment, and plenty of time for detailed research. But she had to admit that being aboard a starship was a thrill. The *Enterprise*, no less! The first days aboard this temporary assignment had been a blur, away from most of the regular crew while Mira and those she'd come aboard with got a crash course in starship life. Uniforms, quarters, action station assignments, evacuation procedures, water conservation, gravity loss and decompression protocols, emergency medical self-care, vaccine boosters, a subdermal monitor for mandatory daily caloric and exercise requirements, radiation badges, and on.

It was quite a lot for a librarian to take in. Fortunately she'd already found some friends in the junior officers. Unexpectedly, she'd also found one in the department head she'd be working with most closely to set up the communications relay between the *Yorktown* Central Archive and the *Enterprise's* vault. Lieutenant Uhura was well-liked and incredibly busy, but gracious enough to welcome Mira as a friend over meals or in the rec room.

"Is that the chief engineer?" Mira asked her curiously one evening. Uhura glanced over her shoulder at a lieutenant commander who was at a table across the room, absently inhaling a pile of what looked like both breakfast and dinner while working on three different padds.

"That's Scotty," Uhura said fondly.

"It occurred to me the other day that there are about a million ways space is trying to kill us, and that there is one person aboard this ship who is responsible for making sure that doesn't happen. And that's him."

"You're not wrong, but it's a little frightening when you put it that way," Uhura said with an amused smile, then dropped the cheerful teasing for a moment of somber reflection. "He feels it. Every second. Don't for a moment think he doesn't."

"In good hands?" Romaine asked, because space was both exhilarating and terrifying.

"Always," Uhura said fervently, then shot the engineer an exasperated look. "Even if he looks like he doesn't know what time it is or what shift he's on."

"I hear he has four doctorates."

"He does," Uhura said. "Like them brainy, do you?" she asked slyly.

Mira blushed. "I won't deny it. He is pretty cute too."

Nyota laughed, moving to stand. "I'll introduce you."

"No! No no no," Mira said. "I don't want to bother him."

"A little bothering is good for him. Besides, he asked me, two days ago, who you were. I told him to forget it, because you are way out of his league. But if you're interested ... Just a sec."

"Oh, god," Mira murmured to herself, burying her face in her hands. When she looked up, Scott was grinning down at her.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked. "I'm Scotty."

"I'm Mira," she said faintly, gesturing for him to sit. "And I'm also possibly slightly mortified."

"I'm not," he said. "I'm delighted. First time in space, lass ...?"

She'd been half-afraid that their conversation would be nothing but warp engines and antimatter, but Scotty was surprisingly easy to talk to. Good at asking perceptive questions about her life, and happy to fill any awkward silence with a funny story. Also happy, it seemed, to abandon his mountain of paperwork in favor of a long talk.

"You haven't been to the observation deck?" he asked her in disbelief. "Well, we can fix that right now," he said, and led her off somewhere to what must have been the outer hull of the ship.

"That's stunning," she said in awe as the stars streamed by. She put her hand on the window, and even through the highly shielded transparent plating, she could feel the chill of space.

“Warp four,” he said, the first time he’d mentioned anything even remotely technical. He tapped his ear. “You can hear it, in the pitch of the engines, and feel it in the vibration of the hull.” He put his hand over hers against the window.

“Maybe *you* can feel it,” she laughed at him, then took his hand and tugged him over to one of the couches. She put her head on his shoulder and watched the stars. “Are you going to kiss me?” she asked, smiling up at him.

He squinted down at her and pretended to consider it. “I was thinkin’ about it.”

“Good. Because I’m definitely going to kiss you.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down, smiling against his lips. “Anyone going to walk in on us?” she asked when they came up for air.

“I abused my command codes and locked the door when we came in,” he admitted.

“Mmm. Smart man,” she said, and let her lips and hands wander.

His hand was up her skirt, and hers down his trousers, when he pulled away and sat up with a shaky groan. “I am a terrible person and an old spacedog,” he said, leaning his head back. “You tell me. Too fast?”

She shifted her position, straddling his lap so he could not mistake her. “Seems about right to me. If it’s about right to you?” she asked, tilting her hips to make him gasp. He pulled her near to kiss her again, hands moving to support her hips as their urgency increased.

“Okay, wait wait wait,” he said breathlessly between kisses. She pouted at him. “There are technically two people who could walk in on us, of the Vulcan and CO variety. My quarters are just that way,” he gestured over his shoulder. “And also, I have one of the four real hot water showers on this ship.”

“Oh, nice!” she said appreciatively, running her hands down his chest. “After sonics for the last weeks, way to sweeten that pot. Big enough for two?”

“If they were standing close,” he teased.

“That is the plan.” She smiled at him, re-buttoned the front of his trousers, then stood and smoothed her tunic, leaving him sprawled and aroused on the couch. He looked up at her, eyes flicking to the hem of the skirt riding up her legs.

“God, you are beautiful,” he said reverently.

“You should see the rest of me,” she said wickedly, and sashayed out of the room. Then she poked her head back in, less sultry but more endearing as far as he was concerned. “Your quarters are ...?” she asked.

“Aft,” he said.

“Mmm. That’s very interesting, Mr. Chief Engineer. Which is which way, exactly, from here ...?”

He laughed at her and stood, then offered her his arm. “Left, Ms. Romaine. Let me show you.”

Three days later, the Captain asked her to present the plans for the archival vault to the senior staff. “It’s an impressive project, Lieutenant,” the Captain said at the end of her presentation. “Stable archival storage, full scanning, and direct uploads with *Yorktown* station?”

“Yes sir,” she said proudly.

“Good. It’s a big part of why we’re headed out there,” Kirk said. “You should know that you’re empowered to enlist anyone you need to assist, up to and including the Chief Engineer. I don’t know if you’ve met Lieutenant Commander Scott? Scotty can be a grump but I assure you he’s harmless.”

“I’d be happy tae help the lieutenant out with whatever she needs,” Scott smiled faintly at her, almost mischievously. “Wherever. Whenever. Happy tae be of service.”

She looked down, her lips twitching. “Thank you, commander. I’m sure it will be a pleasure for us both.”

Kirk’s gaze flicked between the two of them. “Fantastic,” he said.

“We really are excited about this,” said she earnestly, with the air of someone pulling themselves back on track. “The ability to safely transport and accurately catalog the things you will discover in the deep space portion of your mission is invaluable. Scientists everywhere are already queuing up experiments they’d like you to perform, objects they’d like you to collect, to say nothing of the things you’ll find that we can’t even imagine. It’s a very exciting time to be a scientist, sir, and I’m tremendously honored to be a small part of it.”

“We appreciate that, Lieutenant,” Kirk said. “It’s an exciting time to be an explorer too. Thank you for your report, we’ll look forward to the finished project. You’re dismissed. You too, Scotty.” Kirk gestured at the floor, toward the secondary hull. “There’s something off about the harmonics today and it’s making me crazy, please fix it.”

“Aye,” Scott grumped, mischief gone. “There’s some cavitation in the coolant system. Givin’ me a headache too. I’ll get it sorted.”

The door slid shut behind him, and Kirk whirled on the rest of his staff. “Okay, was someone going to tell me they’re sleeping together?” Kirk asked.

“Who?” Sulu asked.

“Romaine and Scotty?” Chekov questioned, puzzled.

“Obviously. Right?” Kirk asked. “Seriously, no one else sees that?”

Spock raised an eyebrow; McCoy shrugged. Uhura sat very, very deliberately still.

“Yeah,” Kirk said, waving a finger in her face. “Spill.”

Uhura shrugged nonchalantly. “I may have set them up. Introduced them. A couple days ago. What they’ve done since then I have no idea.”

Kirk rolled his eyes. “Best gossip in weeks and you’re all no help,” he grumbled, and waved them all away good naturedly. “Get back to work.”

Nyota bolted down the hall as soon as she was clear of the door, and caught Scotty before he got to the lift, snagging his arm. He made an undignified squeak of surprise as she pulled him into an empty briefing room.

“Scotty ...” she chastised, disappointed. “You already had sex with her?”

“Uh,” he said, blushing.

“She wasn’t supposed to be a shore leave fuck!”

“No!” he answered, appalled. “No, no, no. I wouldnae ... I was being a perfect gentleman when ...” he ran his hands down his face. “Shit. I’m shit, arenae I? She’s kind, and smart, and, god, so gorgeous. And other things I think I’ll keep tae myself, for now.”

“Just ... don’t be a horndog, okay?” Nyota sighed.

He shrugged sheepishly. “I really like her. I wouldnae hurt her, I swear.” She shot him a look, studying him hard. “I’ve got ...” he stammered. “Trouble with the coolant system. So if I could just ...”

“Oh, Scotty,” Uhura sighed, and let him pass.

She caught Mira over lunch. “You already slept with him?!”

Mira winced. “God, is it all over the ship already? I didn’t think he’d say anything.”

“It isn’t. He didn’t. He wouldn’t,” Uhura assured her. “I just know him really well.”

Mira smiled. “I really like him. And not for nothing, he’s got really, really good hands. Like. God, amazing. And,” she gestured vaguely, blushing happily. “Yeah. Fantastic.”

Uhura blinked. “Right. I’ll take your word for it.” She sighed. “Look, Mira, Scotty’s practically the nicest guy you’ll ever meet, but he’s got this self-destructive addictive streak. Which you should know usually manifests in the form of whiskey, rewriting the laws of physics, drugs, warp cores, anonymous sex, dangerous transporter experiments, and starships. But it also means that when he falls in love, he falls *hard*. Just don’t hurt him, okay?”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2261.47. The Enterprise has been contacted by a station calling itself, roughly translated, the Memory Alpha Library Archive. They have been having mysterious equipment failures. We’re pushing into the outer fringes of Federation influence. The station is non-Federation and very much non-human, but the systems are familiar to us, as is the alliance that operates the station. Fortunately we have an information technology expert aboard in Lt. Romaine. I’m sending her and Lt. Cmdr. Scott down to see what they can do. Hopefully the two of them will be able to keep their hands off of each other long enough to get something done.

Romaine wasn’t quite sure what was wrong with the library computer. She suspected it was a couple of issues all coming to a head at once; it seemed that researchers weren’t always terribly good at regular maintenance, no matter the species. Scotty was off looking at the power system, some form of fusion reactor, in case there was a surge somewhere. She was up to her elbows in the computer bank that lined the backside of a wall in one of the research alcoves, chasing an over-temperature reading, when a pair of arms wrapped around her waist.

“Mmm,” she said happily. “That had better be you, Scotty, and not Dr. Haazaath.”

Scotty kissed the back of her neck, his breath tickling. “Ever had sex in a library?” he whispered in her ear.

She turned and looped her arms around his neck. “Yes,” she said mischievously, then backed him into the computer bank for a deep kiss and a positively pornographic grope.

“I am beginning to suspect that yeh arenae nearly the good girl yeh pretend tae be,” he said breathlessly, nipping at her throat. “Sex in a library?! Anyone could walk in.”

“True,” she said. “You have to be quick.”

“Oh, god,” he groaned, his hands under her skirt. “You arenae wearing any knickers.” Voices in the hall interrupted them before they could get any further.

“Next time,” she whispered, fingers trailing teasingly. The door slid open as she stepped away with a wicked smile and turned back to her repair project. “Redirect your power flow please, Mr. Scott. There really is something odd here,” Mira said, impressing him with her ability to move smoothly back to the engineering while he was still struggling to get blood back to his brain “How was the reactor?”

“Dodgy,” he said, refocusing with effort. “I need some parts and some tools. I’m going tae head back tae the ship; I’ll be back in a half hour.” She snagged him for another kiss, which he finally broke away from reluctantly. “I am in so much trouble,” he breathed, then called the ship for beam out.

He got distracted by a question from one of the techs in environmental control, so was still in Engineering an hour later when red alert sounded.

“*Who is in command of the Engineering deck?*” the Captain barked from the bridge.

“Scott, sir! I’m aboard. What ...?”

“*We’ve got to extend the shields, Scotty. There is some kind of energy surge coming at us at warp speed, and it appears that Memory Alpha isn’t shielded!*”

“*Warp speed?* Sir that isnae anything natural,” he said, scrambling hard. “Done, sir, but we’re stretched thin!”

“*All hands, Station Memory Alpha, brace for impact!*” the Captain called over the comms. The ship rocked violently, her superstructure groaning dangerously with the added torque of the station. Scott grimaced at the control board; the shields were seriously depleted and the antimatter reactor overheating.

“*It’s coming around again. Scotty, divert all power to the shields !*”

And he really, really didn’t want to say it, but he had to. “We cannae take this, sir. Three more hits and our shields will be gone. Just *two* more and we’re looking at a breach; I cannae hold the antimatter containment with this kind of strain.”

“*Mr. Scott is correct, sir,*” Spock said from the bridge.

“*We, what, turn our back on the station? Ms. Romaine is aboard, to say nothing of fifty scientists.*”

“*Maybe we can fire on it, draw it away?*” Sulu suggested.

“*Scotty?*” the Captain asked.

“All I know is that if I lose antimatter containment we’re all dead. Ship, station, all,” he answered heavily.

“*Good point. Pull our shields back, Engineer Scott. Mr. Chekov, prepare to fire, Mr. Sulu, evasive maneuvers!*”

Scotty closed his eyes, feet rooting him to the deck with practiced skill against the lurching maneuvers. In these moments, balanced between infinite possibilities while the bridge decided their fate, there was nothing for him to do but let the chatter from the bridge wash over him over the open line, the voices overlapping: “*evasive maneuvers! phaser having minimal effect! it’s turning away from us, sir, ignoring us. Try photon torpedoes! No effect, sir. It is still heading toward the station... Memory Alpha, brace for impact!*”

A pause, then Spock. “*Impact on the station. The energy seems to have been ... absorbed into it. No further readings at all; it is as if it has vanished.*”

Then Uhura’s voice: “*Memory Alpha, Memory Alpha, report please. Please respond, what is your status? Lieutenant Romaine, Enterprise, please come in. Communication equipment appears to be operative but no response Captain.*”

Scott opened his eyes, knowing perfectly well that communication silence usually meant there was no one left alive to say anything.

“*Doctor McCoy, Mr. Scott, report to the transporter room,*” Kirk ordered. “*We’re going to beam over to the station.*”

McCoy and Kirk glanced up at the engineer when he arrived, both of them worried. Kirk grabbed his arm. “No communication from the station or Ms. Romaine. This could be very bad, Scotty. If you’d rather stay ...”

Scott headed for the pad. “I can stand here worrying, or face it head on. I’ll face it, sir.”

They materialized aboard the station, and it was strewn with bodies. Scott swallowed hard, and glanced at the Captain, who simply nodded. Scott ran for where he’d last seen Mira.

McCoy and Kirk paused next to a scientist struggling for breath, a terrible sound coming coming from her throat. She was bleeding from her eyes, her nose, her ears, and her skin seemed lit from the inside, flashing in unnatural colors before she died.

“I found her!” Scott called from down the hall, cradling Romaine. “She’s alive!” Beyond miracles, she was breathing, although deeply unconscious. “Mira? She willnae wake, Doctor.” McCoy knelt next to her, scanning her briefly.

Her eyes and mouth opened, but she was not present, and the same terrible sounds poured from her throat. She closed her eyes again, but was still clinging to life.

“Bones?” Kirk asked.

“I have no idea. Let’s get her back onto the ship,” McCoy said urgently. Scott scooped her up in his arms. They paused beside each other as they transported, then sprinted down the halls of the *Enterprise* toward sickbay. Scott eased her onto a bed, and her eyes fluttered open.

“Scotty?” she murmured, present and conscious, and he grabbed her hand.

“Right here. Hey, no, no, dinnae try to sit up. Just rest and let the Doctor look at yeh.”

“What happened?” she asked weakly.

“You were attacked by something, Lieutenant,” the Captain explained. “Aboard the station. We’re not quite certain what happened. You reacted differently from everyone else.”

“No one else passed out?” she asked ruefully.

The Captain exchanged a look with the engineer and the doctor. McCoy nodded. “No one else survived,” Kirk answered gently.

The men grabbed her as she tried to sit up again. “Don’t move,” McCoy ordered crossly.

“There were fifty researchers aboard that station!” she cried. “Why am I alive?”

“We’re glad you are,” Scott said gently, wiping her tears away with his thumb.

McCoy finished his scan. “Beyond the initial unconsciousness, and the strange sounds when we first found her, I’m not seeing anything.”

“Sounds?” Mira asked.

“It sounded like you were trying to tell us something, but it wasnae any human language,” Scott said. She frowned at him, puzzled and disquieted.

“You can go ahead and sit up, slowly,” McCoy said. “But if you feel dizzy, nauseated, anything, lie back down.” She nodded, a little pale, but made it upright, Scotty hovering at her side. “Take it easy for ten minutes. If you’re okay then, I’ll release you to your quarters.”

Kirk and McCoy left Scott to comfort her and stepped into McCoy’s office.

“Why is she alive, Bones?” Kirk asked sharply.

“I don’t know, Jim. It could just be chance. Enough energy to kill fifty people but not the fifty-first?”

“A force that was going to blow our shields apart in a few hits? Unlikely. Maybe there is something else. Anything notable in her medical file or psych profile?”

McCoy pulled up her information on his computer. “Fully medically transitioned trans female. Healthy and in shape. Highly intelligent, highly motivated. Creative, curious, mentally pliant, skilled at creating order in complex systems. Highly empathetic, very slightly pre-cognitive. Nothing that would seem even remotely relevant.”

“Thoroughly human.” Kirk said, stating the obvious.

“The only human aboard the station. That may well be the answer, although I have no idea why.”

Kirk sighed heavily. “Do what you can to make sense of it, Bones. We’ve got some time for investigation, but before too long we are going to need to contact the alliance and let them know what happened. I don’t love the fact that *we* are the mysterious strangers where fifty people died except, conveniently, our crewperson. Suspicious-looking at best.”

“Why do we always get in this kind of trouble?” McCoy grumbled, and headed back into the main medbay. “Your vitals are all normal, Lieutenant,” he told Romaine. “Scotty, take her back to her quarters. Or yours, I don’t care which. Just take it easy for the next 24 hours. Shower, food, sleep, then check back here.” He handed across medpatch for the back of her hand. “Sedative so you can sleep a solid eight hours. Put it on just before you go to bed.”

She stood, steady on her feet, but gratefully let Scotty wrap an arm around her and lead her to his quarters.

She headed straight for his shower, longing for the comfort of the hot water. She sat in the floor and let it pour over her, hoping it would wash away the cottony thickness that had settled into her brain. She didn’t feel capable of anything; her limbs felt distant and disconnected. She held up her hands, and wondered, vaguely, why she felt surprised to see them. It was because, of course, it had been so long since they had possessed hands.

What?! She shook herself.

Scotty, concerned, finally came in to get her. He shut off the water and pulled her upright. “You’re shaking, lass,” he said, toweling her dry and wrapping her in his bathrobe.

“I can see them all, dead, on the floor,” she wailed.

“You were unconscious on the station,” he said gently. “You didnae see it. But it isnae hard to imagine, I know. Try not tae; it doesnae do them or you any good.”

“I’m not imagining it, Scotty,” she said angrily. “I can see them!”

“Okay,” he said tenderly.

“And I keep thinking ... thinking I see you on the floor too, Scotty. That you’re dead, and that I’ve killed you. And everyone else. I feel like I’m panicking; I can’t breathe. I feel like I’m floating outside myself, that my body isn’t my own. Not much of a brave Starfleet Officer, am I?”

“None of that, now,” he protested. He took her hands and gently traced the lines of her palms. “This happened tae yeh *two hours ago*, lass. Give yourself some grace. Plenty of time tae work through it all. As far as being brave ... it’s just space.”

She frowned at him, and he shook his head, searching for the words. He pointed out the small porthole that his rank afforded him. “The light from those stars traveled a billion years tae reach our eyes. And later today, the *Enterprise* will go tae warp with a flash of light that someone will see a billion years from now. Out that window is everything that is, and was, and will be.” He paused and looked at her. “And sometimes that feels like home, and sometimes it feels like madness. Walkin’ in the stars is nothing *but* brave.”

He tucked her into his bed and smoothed the sedative patch onto the back on her hand. “I’ve got to check on the shield generators. Rest, aye?” he said, and kissed her. “I should be back before yeh wake, but if you need anything call down tae Engineering.”

Mira closed her eyes, and when she opened them again she was walking down the hall of the *Enterprise*. She trailed her fingers along its gleaming walls, and stepped over the bodies strewn everywhere. They’d have to take care of those; they were repulsive. This was a good host. After so long, they were whole again.

She stopped next to Kirk, staring into his lifeless blue eyes. “Thank you for your ship, Captain,” she mocked him.

“Let Mira go!” a voice growled behind her, and it was the Engineer, Scott, bleeding heavily. How annoying.

“She’s dead,” Mira told him cruelly. “Or as good as. Formless, helpless.” Killing the engineer was not difficult. Enjoyable, almost. But when it was done, there was a sound, and it was not right, not right at all, and some memory stirred in the back of her mind: the warp engines, overloading.

“What did you do?!” she screamed at the lifeless lump on the floor, and kicked him, but it was too late. She—they—launched themselves out of the girl’s body, only just in time to escape the subspace-shattering blast.

Mira opened her eyes into the dark, terrified, her heart pounding wildly. Where?!? *Scotty’s quarters. A dream.* But she knew it wasn’t. That was no dream. That was the future, and there was *something inside of her*. She knew it with perfect, unshakable clarity. She hit the communication panel by Scotty’s bed.

“*Engineering,*” came a voice. Not Scotty.

She cleared her throat. “Is Lieutenant Commander Scott available?” she asked, with as much calm as she could muster.

“*The Chief is buried in the shield generators. Is this an emergency? Who is this?*”

“Lieutenant Romaine,” she said.

“*Ah, well,*” and there was just the slightest hint of disdain and annoyance in the voice that the *boss’s girlfriend* was calling down. “*I’ll make a note that you called, Lieutenant, and have him call when he’s done.*”

Her face burned, anger and fear and frustration and *kill the engineers first*, and—good god. Mira pressed her hands to her face, and made another call.

Nyota Uhura walked in a few minutes later, and Mira was not surprised that Scotty’s quarters were keyed to let her in. Nyota sat in the bed beside her, and took her hands.

“What’s happening, Mira?”

Mira swiftly explained her visions. “Scotty says it’s just space getting to me,” Mira sighed. “But I know myself. I know when my body isn’t right, when things aren’t fitting. I know this *isn’t* me.”

Uhura tilted her head. “You’ve only known Scotty a few weeks. You haven’t seen him when ... look, Scotty’s experiences inside his own head make him distrust his own reality. He doesn’t understand that kind of certainty, but I do,” she said. “If it’s not coming from you, it’s coming from somewhere else. And we don’t know what happened to that energy cloud.”

Uhura helped Mira get dressed and walked her down to sickbay, and swiftly overrode McCoy’s infuriatingly paternal “well, darlin’ sometimes after something traumatic...” with a demand for a brain scan.

“What the *hell?!?*” McCoy said, staring at the results five minutes later. “This is impossible. Her hyperencephalogram has changed. Dramatically. It’s as if her thoughts are not traveling on the established neural pathways of her brain.”

“There is something inside of me,” Mira insisted, amazed at how calm she sounded, because she certainly didn’t feel it. “It’s been there since I left the station.” McCoy nodded in agreement and urgently called up to the bridge for the Captain and Spock.

“Doctor,” Spock said when they arrived, raising an eyebrow. “Why are you looking at the energy signature for the cloud that attacked the station?”

“The ... what? I’m not, these are Lieutenant Romaine’s brain waves,” McCoy sputtered.

“Fascinating. And concerning. Because ...” Spock brought another file up on the computer. “Her brainwaves and the energy signal of the cloud are a perfect match.”

The door opened, and Scott walked in, wiping coolant off his face. “Doctor, have you seen Mir ... whoa,” he said, caught off-guard by the group. “What the hell...?”

Mira felt herself stand, and a nasty smile crossed her face. Then her mouth opened, and words that didn’t belong to her spilled out:

“*Then we shall explain, before we kill you. We are the last hundred of Zetar. Of the pure Zetar. They dared to take our bodies and banished us.*”

We have searched for a millennium for one through whom we could see and speak and hear and feel. Others have always fought us, and so died because they could not abide our glory. This one was open. Foolishly so, but sufficient for our needs. We will hollow her, and take this body, and this ship. And return to Zetar to seize what is rightfully ours."

Kirk glared across at the Zetar, spinning color in his officer's eyes. "She isn't yours to take. And neither is this ship. She has a life of her own, and she isn't giving it to you. Fight them, Lieutenant," he urged.

"I'm trying, sir," she said, sliding to the ground with a groan. "Scotty don't touch me! They will kill you!" she cried sharply when he jerked forward, and Kirk grabbed him.

"You won't let them," Scott said fiercely, but she shook her head desperately.

McCoy was scanning. "She could kill us all in this state," he warned.

Mira stood again. "They are making me go to the bridge, Captain," she managed. "What should I do?"

"Let them begin to function through you," Kirk said, circling her cautiously. "Let them use your body. They haven't had one in so long that it might allow you to hold onto your mind, and we can control that moment."

She nodded tightly, and they all followed her down the hall, onto the lift and up to the bridge.

"Stay with us," Scotty murmured to her. "Hold on."

"I am Mira Romaine," she said tightly, pained. "I will be who I choose to be. Who I choose to be!"

"We will not give this body up," the Zetarians said, clearly speaking to her. *"We will destroy you, if you try to remove us."*

"Sir," she said shakily when they arrived on the bridge, shoving her torment back. "What do I do?"

Spock had gone to his station and focused internal sensors onto her. "They have not synced with her completely; she keeps displacing them. Lieutenant, when you are yourself, what are you doing?"

"Thinking of everything I want to live for," she gasped. "Every strong emotion I've ever felt, good and bad. They can't seem to deal with it. Love, and lust. Anger, embarrassment. Grief. Fear. Excitement, happiness. Joy."

"Captain, humans are capable of sharing emotional states, particularly in proximity and in groups," Spock said urgently. "It is real and measurable. Consider worshippers speaking in tongues at a religious revival. A rioting mob. Concert-goers spontaneously singing together. It is a collective state that amplifies the underlying emotions."

Mira cried out in pain, falling to her knees, and Scott stepped toward her.

"Scotty," Kirk warned sharply.

"She willnae hurt me," he said, kneeling beside her. He paused, then took her hand. He breathed sharply, painfully, and Mira suddenly snapped upright, seizing both of his hands tightly and looking urgently into his eyes.

"She's fighting them, Scott said hoarsely, and reached to cup her face with shaking fingers, clearly struggling hard against something. Blood started dripping down his face, and Mira's. Ears, eyes, nose, and they were dying. "She's borrowing my mind, to shove them out. Maybe not the right choice; not going tae be enough," he groaned.

Nyota stepped forward without hesitation and put her hand on Scotty's shoulder. Mira and Scott gasped.

"No!" the Zetarians shouted through Mira's mouth, her eyes flashing in a kaleidoscope of color as they dug in.

Mira shoved them back. "Yes," she said fiercely. Spock reached for Nyota's shoulder, then Kirk for Spock, and McCoy for Kirk. Everyone on the bridge rushed forward, hands on shoulders, elbows, backs, surrounding Mira.

"Get more people up here!" Kirk said urgently. Uhura toggled a switch on the communication's panel with her free hand, and a few moments later the lift opened, carrying more people. Everyone stepped inward, making room. The lift opened again; more crew.

"You aren't the only collective here," Kirk said fiercely. "We are the crew of the USS *Enterprise*. Let her go!"

"NO!" they howled.

Mira stood, and Scotty with her, keeping a firm grip on her hands. "If you'd come to us for help there would have been those who would have volunteered," she said sadly. "Who would have jumped at the opportunity to learn what you can teach. But instead you take. You kill. We see your minds; you are without remorse or kindness," she was weeping, but resolved and firm. "We cannot allow you to continue. We will not allow you to do to others what you did to the crew of the station, what you are trying to do to me. A hundred of us; a hundred of you. We will end you."

Mira looked around the packed bridge, at Scotty, and Uhura, at her Captain, and saw their agreement. She had never noticed it before, but the Zetar had done something to her, and she felt it now: the fierce wave of *feeling*, crew standing together. The Zetar had her mind and body, but not her heart. The crew felt everything—fear and love and rage and joy, courage and sorrow, hope and despair. Everything that it meant to stand together, wild and alive, against an indifferent universe.

She threw their faithful hearts against the Zetar, displacing them entirely, formless, into the cold void. There was no time for them to become

the energy cloud they'd been, and they dispersed into nothing without even a last scream.

The crew gasped, then looked at each other, blinking. Mira slumped, and Scotty and those nearest grabbed her. There was little room on the bridge, stuffed shoulder to shoulder with the officers who had responded without question to the call for help.

"Okay, those nearest the lift, start making your way out!" Kirk called.

"Aye, sir," they said from the perimeter, and the bridge began to empty. Scotty gentled Mira to the floor, and McCoy began scanning her.

"Fascinating," Spock said. "When the Zetar broke into her mind, they enabled her to hold us in a momentary emotional collective. Impressive, especially in an untrained human mind."

Mira smiled faintly.

"I think that was a compliment, but I cannae be sure," Scott said to her, kissing her knuckles, teary and amused and vastly relieved.

"Well done, Lieutenant," Kirk said. "Just be still, and we'll get you down to medbay."

"Thank you, sir," she whispered, and passed out.

After everything, being summoned to the Captain's office still managed to be terrifying, Mira considered ruefully two weeks later, and touched the bell.

"Come in," Kirk called, and looked up with a warm smile. "Ms. Romaine. Could I offer you some coffee? I also have tea, entirely because of Mr. Spock and Mr. Scott, not because I can stomach the stuff."

"Coffee would be wonderful, sir," she said, and wrapped her hands around the warm mug.

"I saw your report that the *Enterprise* Archive is done, and took a walk though it this morning. It's just as impressive as you promised."

"Thank you sir," she said proudly.

"I got a call yesterday from *Yorktown* station," he continued. "You put in for the Archive position there."

"Yes sir," she said, sitting upright. "It's my dream posting."

"Not the *Enterprise*?" he asked in mock hurt, and chuckled at her when she blushed. "Apparently my recommendation has a little sway, but not nearly as much as your qualifications. My understanding is that the position is yours, if you want it. But before you take it, you should know that Commander Spock, Doctor McCoy, and Engineer Scott all agree that you'd make a valuable addition to our permanent crew here. It may well be the first time the three of them have ever agreed on anything. You don't have to say yes, Lieutenant. It's a five year mission, and that's not for everyone. But it's yours, if you want it."

Romaine carefully put her coffee down. "I thought there was a chance this might be coming, sir," she said. "I've thought about it. Talked about it. Not with Scotty because this decision needs to be mine, but with Lieutenant Uhura and other friends here, my family. I'm flattered, sir, but no. I can't say no to *Yorktown*. And, not for nothing, Scotty and I might be able to make a go of it...but not on the *Enterprise*. He's wonderful and kind, but his heart and head is too tied up here for anything more than a fling. I'd rather wait for him to come home."

She paused, then continued quietly. "This thing, with the Zetarians. It's a defining moment in my life. I can feel it. I'll have to come to terms with it, and decide what it means for my story. And to you, all of you ... I can see it is different for you, sir. Another one of a long string of strange occurrences. Logged, processed, set aside, and onto the next thing. Explorers are their own strange breed. I'm a librarian, sir. So thank you. But no."

Kirk smiled at her, then stood and offered her a warm handshake. "It all sounds logical to me. We'll be sorry to see you go, but you've proven yourself to be wise and strong, in both mind and heart. You can trust your decisions, and I trust them too. Three days until we put you off. I don't imagine I'll see you again, Lieutenant. Best of luck to you."

"Thank you, Captain," she said fervently, and there was a pang in her heart to turn away from the wilder road, but she was certain in her choice. "It's been an honor."

Captain's Log, Stardate 2261.63. Second star to the right, and straight on until morning.

"I've got this one, O'Neil," Scotty said, walking into the transporter room.

"Aye sir," O'Neil said knowingly, and stepped out.

Scotty smiled at Mira. "Got everything?" he asked, nodding at her three duffle bags piled on the pad, ready for beam down to the station.

"I think so," she said with forced cheer. "If not, I guess I'll do without." She looked down. "I wasn't sure if you'd be here to say goodbye."

"Why wouldnae I be here?" he asked gently.

She looked up at him. "I meant to tell you. I got the *Yorktown* Archive position. I'll catch a ride back into Federation space on the *Hood* in a few days, and should be there in a few weeks."

He smiled at her. “I knew you’d get it. There’s no one better. Congratulations, Mira. You’ll be brilliant. I’ve nae been to *Yorktown*, but I’ve seen the specs. Impressive. It wouldnae surprise me if the *Enterprise* rolls in sometime mid-mission to resupply.”

“Call me, when you do?” she asked shyly.

“I was hoping I could call yeh before that.”

“I’d like that,” she said, and stepped into his arms one more time. “Thank you, Scotty,” she said, and kissed him. “For this. For everything.”

He traced his fingers over her face. “Thank you, Mira,” he said tenderly, then stepped away to the controls. “Be safe, be well. Send me a message when you get to *Yorktown*, aye?”

“I will,” she said tearily, positioning herself on the pad. “Safe journeys, Scotty.”

He nodded. “Energize,” he said, because he didn’t trust his voice to say anything else, and she dematerialized. He confirmed safe transport, and watched his instruments as she cleared the pad aboard station. Then she was gone, onto new adventures. Alone in the transporter room, he rubbed his face. “Okay,” he said aloud to himself, then sighed a deep breath and toggled a switch. “Bridge, transporter room. Transport complete. We can disembark.”

“*Transport confirmed, transporter room. Confirm disembark.*” It was Uhura at the conn this evening, and he was grateful for her voice. “*Warp four, Scotty?*” she asked.

“We’re leaving the last of Federation space,” Scott said. “I can give yeh an hour or two of warp six, and maybe a wee bit more. Where are we headed?”

She laughed. “*The Captain ordered second star to the right. How Chekov interpreted that, I really can’t say. Warp six, aye.*”

Below his feet, Scott felt one-quarter impulse, pushing back from the station, then the low, powerful rumble of the nacelles initializing. The tug, behind his chest, of spacetime folding, breaking Einsteinian physics to carry them forward at 216 times the speed of light itself. The engineer closed his eyes and listened, content enough, as his fair beauty sang into the mysterious void.

Chapter Summary

2262 proves difficult for the Enterprise crew

Chapter Notes

The first section of this chapter reflects the effects of the attack on Uhura and Scott by the Nomad probe which occurred in TOS episode The Changeling. My full retelling of that incident in the AOS universe is contained in my story “Not Until We are Lost.” Reading that story isn’t necessary. Briefly recapping: a murderous probe wiped Uhura’s mind, and when Scotty tried to stop it, the probe killed him. And, unlike the episode of the Original Series, it took considerably longer than an afternoon for the two of them to recover. Content warning for injury and sexual content.

The third section of this chapter is the reason this story is tagged rape/non-con. Episodes of the original series got close with the subject, but backed away or downplayed the consequences. Here in the AOS, I’m addressing it. The third section is tagged for rape/noncon, sadism, and torture. This is an important event, the consequences of which ripple forward through the rest of that story. None of it is described with any graphic detail; what is happening is entirely implied. That said, if it is triggering, the relevant section is marked with “*****” at the beginning and end, with a brief tl;dr in the note that ends this chapter.

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

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2262.101. Four weeks ago two of my senior officers were cut down on my bridge by the deadly Nomad probe. Since then it has been difficult to watch Lt. Cmdr. Scott and Lt. Uhura struggle. Scott was dead and utterly beyond help for twelve minutes. By some miracle the probe repaired his destroyed nervous system, but the autonomic signals from his brain to his body have been prone to wandering away ever since. Watching a man periodically forget how to breathe is terrifying. As for Uhura ... we truly feared that she had suffered a fate worse than death. All that we are exists only in the delicate pattern of neural connections in that small, dark space inside our heads. It appeared that her mind had been wiped away; the blank nothingness behind her eyes was the worst thing I’ve ever seen. But today our chief engineer was back on duty, and Dr. McCoy thinks our head of communications will follow soon. In short, we got lucky.

If Uhura never heard a planetary distress call again in her life, it would be too soon. The sudden silence in her ear had been the instant death of *four billion* people. People who, only a few days before, had welcomed the *Enterprise* as honored guests.

A tiny probe—Nomad—had brutally ended them all, and nearly the *Enterprise*, pounding the ship to its utter limit with only two mighty blasts. The third had been building, but for some reason, the Captain’s desperate hail had stopped what would have been the final killing blow. In exchange for their lives, the murderous probe had insisted on coming aboard and demanded the location of Earth. They’d intentionally broken the nav computer to prevent it, which put Sulu on manual control on the damaged helm. With the Captain and Spock below, trying desperately to reason with their “guest,” and Scotty making repairs, that put Uhura on the conn with the lives of the crew under her careful watch.

She nodded a thank you to the crewman who handed her the midshift report, then skimmed it, singing softly to herself. She was not even remotely relaxed, but knew that the crew felt like if she was singing, the crisis must be past. She forced herself to focus on the report; mostly nominal except for a number of yellow-flagged engineering issues leftover from Nomad’s attack.

“Mr. Sulu, how’s the helm?” she asked the pilot.

“Sluggish,” he answered, and she toggled a switch on the arm of the chair.

“*Engineering*,” came the chief’s voice.

“Mr. Scott, helm is still reporting sluggish.”

“*I just saw that in the report*,” he answered. “*It’s probably something in the power relay behind the deflector dish, but before I spend the next six hours sweating in a meter-high tube with three techs, I’m going tae check helm control.*”

“Acknowledged,” she said, and forced herself to hum again before she closed the line to engineering.

She glanced up at the chief engineer when he stepped onto the bridge. Uhura smiled tightly at him before he ducked under the console, then went back to the report, half listening as Scotty called up maneuvering instructions to Sulu to test the helm.

The turbolift doors hissed open again, and the music she’d been humming died on her lips. “Trouble,” Uhura called urgently as the Nomad probe floated toward her, a mechanical arm extended. She shared a half-panicked glance with Sulu and Scotty, both of whom were on their feet.

Scotty circled behind her to the communications panel and hit a button. “Bridge to Captain,” the second officer murmured. “The bloody thing is *up here*.”

“*On my way, Scotty,*” Kirk said.

Uhura sat straight in the center chair, eyes locked on the intruder. She could feel Scotty step up behind her in support, moving carefully, and was grateful to feel him at her back. “What are you doing here?” she asked it firmly.

“What is the meaning of the communication?” it asked.

Uhura glanced at Sulu, both of them equally confused. “I don’t understand your inquiry,” she told the probe.

“The soundwaves at mathematical intervals,” the probe responded. “What is the meaning?”

“Music,” Scotty said softly. “It must’ve heard yeh singing over the comms.”

Uhura nodded and gripped the arms of the chair. “It is a form of symbolic communication,” she answered calmly. “It most often conveys emotion and feeling. Done for the purpose of enjoyment and unity.”

“Error. It is not logical. Unity cannot be achieved through individual distinctiveness,” the machine said, and pointed one of its arms at her head.

There was. There was. There was something *wrong*. Distantly, she heard someone yelling: “*let her go, yeh wee bastard!*” Then deadly blue light. Commotion. “*He’s dead, Jim,*” despairing and incredulous. She was fading, someone was shouting in fury. “*Why did you kill him? ... What did you do to her?*”

Then nothing.

Then something. She had no language, no words. She did not know what those things were. But if she did, she would have noticed that there were hands, and a voice, and a gentle touch in her cheek. “Open your mouth, Nyota. You must eat.” Later, warm softness moving across her body, the sound of water sloshing in a bowl. “Cleaner now. I will help you with your nightgown, you have said many times it is your favorite.” And when the thing happened, the unpleasant thing, hands, again, wiping it away. “Done. Now we will put a clean diaper back on.”

There was something. A word. *Love*. She wondered what that meant. “Sleep, Nyota.” *Spock*. It was the same thing as love, she just knew it.

In the night there was a rush past her door, voices raised down the hall. She followed them, squinting against the light. A sharp shout: “Come on, Scotty. Goddamnit, stop doing this to us. Breathe. Come on, figure it out!” They were reaching for a man who was thrashing on a bed.

“O2 dropping, Doctor, he won’t be conscious much longer.”

“Give him a few seconds more. Circumventing his nervous system with life support doesn’t do him any favors. His body has got to remember how to breathe on its own or he’ll never get out of medbay. Come on, Scotty!”

She did not know what any of it meant, but there was a long, desperate silence, then choked, jagged gasps for air cut with hoarse whimpers of pain and fear. It was frightening, and she wept. The man rolled over—soaked in sweat, chest heaving, curling in on himself—and looked directly at her as he turned.

“Nyota,” he gasped.

“Shit. Nurse, get her out of here.”

The kind woman took her arm. “Back to bed, Nyota,” she said with false cheer. The kind woman wrapped a warm, soft thing around her, and wiped the tears off her face. “Don’t cry, Nyota. Scotty’s okay now. Go to sleep.”

She closed her eyes, and there was nothing for a time, and then she opened her eyes. *Spock. Love*. His mouth was on her cheek. She liked how it felt. She wondered how it would feel on other places, and the thought made her shiver..

“Good morning.” The sounds from the people meant something, she was sure of it. There was a reason. A pattern. She was angry she couldn’t understand it.

“She’s agitated again. I could sedate her.”

“Let me hold her, Leonard, it seems to calm her. She cannot hurt me.”

Someone sang to her, and she drifted, humming along.

Spock. Spock. “Spock,” she said, and he gripped her hand.

“Nyota?” his voice trembled with emotion. No, that couldn’t be right. Not emotion. It must be the wrong word.

“Spock,” she said again, and her voice was rusty. “What happened?”

“You were injured. Your brain was damaged.”

Ah. That made sense. She wondered what a brain was, and closed her eyes. There was something, as she slept. *Dreams*. She did not like them, and woke.

Someone was sitting in a chair beside her bed, wearing soft white clothes like her, not the bright red and yellow and blue that she liked better. He was asleep. She wondered if he dreamed. “Do you dream?” she asked him.

He stirred, and spoke. “What was that you were saying, lass?” He seemed unwell. Pained, breathless. It worried her.

“Do you dream?” she asked again.

He frowned at her. “Sometimes. Did you have a dream, Nyota?” he asked gently.

“There was a thing. It hurt me.”

“Sounds like a bad dream,” he said softly, and took her hand. She wondered who he was. She liked his voice, and the kind look in his eyes.

“Read me the book?” she asked. “Starship Communication System Operations, Part 2. Spock was on Chapter 6.”

He smiled at her, bemused. “Aye, lass. Whatever you want.” He picked up a padd, and began to read. “Chapter 6. Subspace beacon skipping. At long ranges, degradation of the subspace signal can be overcome by directing the signal first through beacons already in place ...”

“You can use gravity wells too,” she interrupted.

“Aye. That’s in Chapter 8 or 9.”

“And boost it from the source. Redirect power from the reactor to the high-gain relay, really punch the signal hard. Don’t tell Scotty, it makes him crazy.”

“That’s where the power drain has been coming from? Goddamnit, Nyota,” he laughed.

“Don’t tell him!” she repeated urgently.

“I willnae,” he agreed. He sounded sad. She wondered why. Maybe it was because he was sick. He fell asleep reading to her, and she tugged and padd from his fingers and considered the mysterious squiggles on the page.

She drifted.

There was. There was. There was something *wrong*. “Spock!” she screamed terror. “Oh, Spock!”

“I am here,” he said, cradling her in his arms.

“There is something wrong with my mind. What happened? What is ...” she couldn’t remember the word, and howled in frustration. “What is wrong with me?”

“You were attacked and suffered a brain injury,” he explained, for the hundredth time.

Oh. That was right. Then, abruptly, there was meaning to his words, and she was terrified again. *A brain injury?!*

“How bad, Spock,” she asked him desperately. “How bad? How long? Oh Spock, Spock!” she wailed, and she was up and running away from him. A grip on her shoulder stopped her, and there was darkness.

She slowly became aware of time, although she could not begin to guess how much had passed. She no longer drifted. Her thoughts became intentional, directional, purposeful. In the mornings, before Spock came, she liked to sit under the sun lamp in sickbay and remember her childhood. The feel of her language in her lips, and the sun in the sky. Her father’s smile, her bibi’s laughter. Racing her cousins down roads, running easily, forever.

Dr. McCoy had explained, several times, that the murderous *Nomad* probe had disrupted the neural memory inside her brain—the delicate order in which neurons fired from one to another to create the complex and mysterious patterns of consciousness. It had done a similar thing to Scotty, except rather than damaging his brain it had disrupted the nerves which carried the autonomic impulses from his brainstem to the systems in his body. *Nearly* destroyed, but not entirely. Faint paths had remained for them both, and as they pushed through over and over again, their struggles reset the halls of mind and body.

One day, as she strengthened and her understanding deepened, McCoy had slipped in his explanation. “We’re damn lucky that there was anything left of your neuronal pathways at all. Another second or two and you would have been gone forever,” McCoy had said. “It’s a damn good thing that Scotty...” McCoy cut himself off, a strange look on his face, and wouldn’t say anything more.

That Scotty what? she wondered to herself, but no one would answer, least of all the man himself. “Nothin’, lass,” he’d say with a shrug if she pressed him, and if he was feeling well enough he would read to her; if he wasn’t they’d listen to music. She let it slide—for now.

She was slowly working through the communications department duty roster when Spock walked into the medbay with their dinner. “Have rations always been this awful,” she asked him, “or am I just remembering incorrectly?”

“Synthesized food is nutritionally balanced and healthy,” Spock answered. “But there are aspects of it that are ... not entirely fulfilling.”

“Right. It’s awful,” she laughed. They spoke of his day, spent investigating a quasar. She told him of hers, which included a visit from Chekov and Sulu, a rousing if off-tune song from the janitorial bowling team, and two hours of ridiculous stories from Scotty which had left her giggling helplessly.

“I’m not quite sure how much to believe him,” she said, chuckling again as she recounted one of the tales.

“He is well known for embellishing facts if he believes it improves the story,” Spock said dryly. “I believe you find it endearing.”

“I do,” she laughed. “He’s doing a lot better, finally. McCoy says he’s about ready to clear him for duty.”

“He has been much missed,” Spock said gravely. “As have you. Deeply missed.”

She smiled at him. “Spock,” she said hesitantly, and caught his hand as he cleaned up their supper. “Make love to me?”

He froze.

She reached out and traced his face. “I have wanted you since before I could remember anything else. I asked McCoy; he said it was safe. I want this; I want you. Be with me, Spock.”

He considered her for a moment, and she could see him deciding. Logic and hope and caution and love. At last Spock turned his head to kiss her palm, then stood to close the door to Nyota’s private medbay room. McCoy glanced up from his charting as he did so, catching his eye with a steady, knowing look, then turned up the music playing in his office.

Spock guided her to the bed. He touched her face with the tips of his fingers, and kissed her. Lips and cheeks, eyelids and ears. The hollow of her throat. He untied the sash of her robe and opened it worshipfully. Hands, down her neck, her breasts, her belly. He took his time, reverently kissing her skin inch by inch until she was nude. “You are trembling,” Spock said in concern.

“I had forgotten what this felt like,” she gasped.

“If it is too much, I will stop,” Spock said.

“Don’t stop,” she begged him.

He gently parted her knees with the backs of his hands, trailing his fingers down her inner thighs, following with his lips. She threw her head back, making small noises of pleasure, then gasped sharply. He paused, looking up at her to study her face, then dropped his head again and grasped her hips, tilting their angle, tongue and lips, gentle teeth, knowingly, purposefully precise in all the ways she’d forgotten about herself.

“Oh, Spock,” she managed, tugging on his hair. “I remember. I remember.”

“You like this as well,” he murmured against her, one finger, then another, curling, moving, his rhythm drawing her closer to something she knew she wanted. Heat, growing, and she caught his hand, wanting him deeper but also ... He understood, and touched her with his other hand, stroking *there, oh god, just there*. “You like other things as well; there are many ways in which we give and take pleasure from one another. I will show you those another night.” Then his mouth was back, and her hips moved desperately against him, her body leading the way where her mind could not recall.

“Let go, Nyota,” he whispered, and she did with a cry, sensation igniting across her body then arcing through her broken brain with brilliant, overwhelming force. This, too, was her.

“Spock!” she cried, clinging to him as he slid up her body to hold her through it. He looked down into her eyes, and she looked up into his. “There you are, my Spock.”

“There you are, my Nyota,” he said reverently.

She put her hands on either side of his face, then down his body, still fully clothed but rather obviously aroused. “I want to remember how your skin feels beside mine. The weight of you in my hand. The taste of you on my lips. How you feel when you break inside of me. Help me remember?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered softly, and he did.

Morning brought duty, as ever. But first they shared a languid shower and a tender breakfast, both of them aching sweetly after too long apart. She needed sleep, and he tucked her in for a morning nap with a gentle kiss.

“Did you stay the night, Spock?” McCoy asked, wandering by with a dermal regenerator for a clumsy crewman’s hand.

“I did,” Spock said simply.

“Good,” the Doctor answered firmly. On other days he might have teased his friend, but not in his medbay, and not with the woman with the most frightening brain injury he’d ever seen on the other side of the door.

Spock checked in with the Captain on the bridge, then made his morning rounds through the departments. In the last weeks, when he had not been with Nyota, Spock had spent many shifts in Engineering, assisting the badly overwhelmed deputy chiefs. Through those weeks, the Chief Engineer’s office had remained dark, more than illustrative of the mood aboard a ship shaken by the attack on two of its most beloved officers. If Nyota Uhura was the ship’s voice and Jim Kirk the other half of the *Enterprise’s* wild soul, Montgomery Scott was her beating heart.

This morning, at last, the light was on and the door was open.

“May I enter?” Spock asked. Scott glanced up from his desk, and gestured at his guest chair.

“I’ll be with yeh in a minute, Mr. Spock. Let me finish this report first.”

The chief engineer signed off on the report, then leaned back with a sigh. “My lieutenants are fine engineers,” Scott said, sipping at tea that he’d let go cold, “but they havenae a clue what it takes tae keep a starship running. Four weeks and I’m overrun by paperwork. Starfleet Engineering is getting salty about the number of reports we’ve missed. Maintenance logs are weeks behind, tae say nothing of actual *maintenance*.” He swiped wearily through the files on his padd. “Quarterly personnel assessments, usage and emissions reports, bimonthly safety briefings, radiation charting, hull stability, duty rosters, crew rotations, requests for departmental transfers, minor maintenance requests. Apparently environmental control and the torpedo techs are in a feud about somethin’, although I’ll be damned if I can figure out what. I’m

starting to wonder if I shoulda just stayed dead,” he said dryly, and shook his head. “What can I do for yeh, Mr. Spock?”

“I wish to speak to you on a matter of a personal nature,” Spock said.

Scott blinked, taken aback. “I’m listening, Mr. Spock?”

Spock steepled his fingers. “Nyota has asked to see the security footage from the bridge on the day you both were attacked.”

Scott blew out a breath, then took another with some difficulty, lungs catching on his still-healing nervous system. “That willnae be pleasant tae watch,” Scott said.

“No,” Spock agreed. “She has a reasonably clear grasp on what happened to her, although it will be difficult for her to see. As yet, however, although she knows you were injured, she is unaware of the precise ... scope.”

The chief engineer stood restlessly, and drifted to one of the walls of his office, a virtual blackboard on which he had dozens of complex warp equations scrawled, not all of which Spock recognized, and several of which appeared to be radical breakthroughs.

“You died for her,” Spock continued. “And had you not intervened when you did, her mind would have been lost forever. But the price was your life.”

“Aye. Well, that wasnae the plan. I had to get the murderous beastie tae let her go. Tae the extent I thought of it at all...” Scott shrugged. “I was just reacting, Mr. Spock. I think, though, from the Captain on down, it’s well established that any one of us would die for each other.”

“Yes,” Spock agreed. “I am aware, however, Mr. Scott, that you love her.”

“Mr. Spock ...” Scott protested wearily.

“Vulcans do not consider love an emotion,” Spock interrupted. “Nor do we speak of it as contained within the body—the heart—as humans do. Rather, we have sixteen different words for the influence it has on the soul. Each way equally profound, but turning the soul in different directions. What humans would call ‘eros’ is but one manifestation.”

Scott sat tiredly, and Spock was reminded that the engineer was only recently on his feet, not even truly cleared yet for the lightest of duty. “In that case, aye, I love her,” Scott admitted.

“Your relationship has always puzzled me,” Spock admitted. “Yet she loves you as well. She will be exceeding upset to learn of your death.”

“Aye, well, I got better,” Scott grumbled.

“An entirely fortuitous turn of events, as you were utterly beyond our help.”

Scott scrubbed his face with both hands. “What are you here asking of me, Mr. Spock?” Scott asked.

“Would you like to be there, when she watches the footage?”

The engineer grimaced. “Not particularly, Mr. Spock. If she needs tae have a shout at me she can do it later. I havenae seen it myself,” he admitted quietly. “The footage, I havenae watched it. I cannae. Forgive me, Mr. Spock. I cannae.”

Spock inclined his head in understanding and stood. “None of that is what I came here to say. I meant to thank you, but that does not encompass the depth of it. Rather, I am grateful,” Spock paused, searching for the words. “Grateful for the love you share with her.”

“So am I, Mr. Spock,” Scott said earnestly. Spock nodded once, firmly, and left, the door sliding shut behind him.

Scotty tilted his head, resting it on the back of his chair with a groan. “Fantastic talk, Mr. Spock,” he said to the ceiling. “But next time you want tae have a heart tae heart, please give me some warning. I cannae do this sort of thing stone sober.” He sighed, then sat forward and looked at his paperwork. “Right. Nae,” he said to himself, and went to go stare into the warp core instead.

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2262.169. Someone onboard this ship has programmed the synthesizer to make chocolate ice cream. Real, honest-to-god chocolate ice cream. Dr. McCoy is on a rampage because it is all anyone has been eating for days, and we are all up two kilos each. The truth is, we’ve all been struggling this year, deep into the mission. We’re homesick and tired, and far from done. It may only be temporary, but ice cream has lifted spirits considerably. So I am grateful to our ‘mysterious’ benefactor. (This being the Enterprise, however, I know exactly who the culprit is, and to keep McCoy off his back, I’ll be blackmailing him into writing root beer. And chicken pot pie.)

“Try this,” Scotty said in irritation, sitting down across from her at the table and handing her a spoon. “And tell me what’s wrong with it.”

Nyota blinked at him in surprise, then at the bowl he’d put in front of her.

“That’s ... chocolate ice cream,” she said in awe.

“Nae. It is *almost* chocolate ice cream. When I get a moment, I’ve been workin’ on the synthesizer formula. And I’m close, but not quite there.”

“Montgomery Scott, working on programming chocolate ice cream, and not scotch or bourbon? I’m a little surprised. Proud of you, but surprised.”

“I think I’d rather die than be the man who invented synthetic scotch,” Scotty groaned. “Chocolate ice cream in an acceptable legacy.”

Nyota took a cautious bite, then sighed in pleasure and took another, much larger one. “Oh, that is good. How did you know I needed ice cream?” He settled back, apparently content to watch her enjoy the dessert. It was nice to sit with him; it had been a while. Every department and section head was working wild shifts to cover an increasing number of sick call-ins from the weary crew. Which, unfortunately, was having the effect of grinding the senior officers into dust.

“Does Spock seem weird to you?” she asked him after a few moments of companionable silence.

“More so than usual or ...?”

“There is just something off,” she sighed. “I don’t know if it’s me, or him. Or if it’s just in my head, because that’s been happening too, since *Nomad*. McCoy has me on an antidepressant, and I’m having to relearn how I feel things.”

He gave a half shrug. “New meds always take a while tae settle. But trust yourself. It seems tae me like Spock may be holding a little harder tae the logic, which is his way of showing irritation, although he’s always like that with me. From where I’m sittin’ it’s the Captain who really seems off,” Scotty sighed. “And the goddamned Chief Engineer, if I’m being completely honest. I dinnae ken, Nyota, we’ve been out here a long time.”

She nodded slowly and took another bite. “Do you know what this reminds me of?” Nyota said, gesturing at the ice cream. “It reminds me of ... when I was a little girl, we’d go visit my bibi. She lived in a village, she didn’t like Nairobi. And every afternoon she’d hand us some actual coins and my cousins and I would run down the road to this ancient shop. Soda in a glass bottle, hard candy, and ice cream at the bottom of a freezer. You could never quite tell what flavor the ice cream was. Wonderful but a little mysterious? Like my bibi, come to think of it,” she said taking another bite, and suddenly she was in tears. “God, Scotty. That just came back. That memory, just now.”

The look he gave her was a little fractured, but he managed to smile at her.

“Your grandmother raised you, didn’t she?” Nyota asked him hesitantly. The details of her own life were firming, but she was still struggling with those of her friends.

“Aye,” he said. “You’re remembering that right. The kindest thing my mother ever did was drop my sister and me at my grandmother’s and never come back.” Scott grabbed a spoon and took a bite from Nyota’s bowl. He seemed to consider something, unsure whether to speak more, then forged on. “I didnae understand my mother until I was fifteen years old. Just a lad at the University of Edinburgh, working on my first doctorate. And that poor damned kid.” Scott tapped the side of his head. “The maths just wouldnae shut up. Ever. He couldnae eat, he couldnae sleep. His head was ...”

He glanced up at Uhura, his gaze complicated. She suspected he needed to say something, but was hesitant.

“Tell me,” she said simply.

He took a breath. “That lad was so sick, and he knew it, and he knew *why*, but he was so scared. So damn scared. He tried everything. Sober, drunk, stoned,” Scott rubbed his face. “It didnae matter. Until a professor, who shoulda known better, and who wasnae being kind, gave that boy his first line of hypercaine, and he found a way tae quiet the raging in his head for a few hours.”

Scott shook his head, and Nyota watched him quietly. She was still struggling to remember things, but she knew from the look in his eyes that this was something he’d never told her before.

Scotty continued. “I understood my mother then. Understood why she couldnae bear tae live in her own mind. I hid it from my granny for a year. But one weekend it was my birthday, and I’d forgotten.” He took a breath. “She came tae surprise me, and walked intae my flat and looked at my eyes, pupils blown wide open. And she’d seen it before in her only daughter. Seen every bit of it, in the utter wreck of her failed child.”

He sketched three lines on the table. “My granny was standing there, on my seventeenth birthday, and there was no hiding the drugs, laid out in front of me, or the phaser that wasnae set tae stun. Two minutes later and she woulda been too late. At that moment I understood why my mother stayed away; I didnae know someone else’s tears could hurt so much.”

Scott toyed with his spoon. “Granny marched me out the door and took me for ice cream, of all the damned things. She told me that my mother had been dead for four years; ‘indeterminate cause of death’ on some shitty station. And I never really knew my mother, Nyota, except damn, I *do*.”

He smiled crookedly up at her. “And my wee granny told me I’d be okay. And we finished our ice cream—it was chocolate—and she took me tae hospital. And I was there for six months. I was so angry at her for doin’ that tae me ... and *god*, so, so relieved. It was too late for my mother. But my grandmother’s tears saved me.”

“And the maths?” Nyota asked quietly. “Did they ever quiet down?”

“Aye, well, you can ask yourself why the Chief Engineer of the *USS Enterprise* is up in the middle of the night, programming chocolate ice cream intae a synthesizer, and there’s your answer. It’s too sweet,” he said, as if changing the subject. “The ice cream. Too sweet, aye?”

“I don’t know, Scotty, it tastes pretty good to me,” Nyota said, not just because he was being completely fragile, but because it really was delicious.

“Nae, it’s missing somethin’. That little bit of bitter underneath the chocolate. Humans evolved bitter taste receptors to detect poison, y’know. And then humans, being human, immediately went ‘aye, but *how* poisonous are we talking? Because we’d still like to eat that.’” He was starting to ramble, which was concerning, especially in combination with outlandish midnight programming experiments.

“Maybe that’s the problem,” Scotty continued. “The computer doesnae believe me that I’m programmin’ in something edible. It thinks humans

are insane, and illogical, and dangerous, and it's right."

"Is that *ice cream*?" Chekov interrupted, practically drooling on the table.

"Almost," Scotty grumped.

"Completely," Nyota disagreed. "Scotty just got done programming it. Get a spoon."

"*Synthesized* ice cream that tastes real?" Chekov squeaked, and took a slow, reverent bite. "This is the best day of my life."

Scotty smiled faintly. "I have a question for you, Pavel. Do the maths ever quiet down for you?"

Chekov licked his spoon. "The maths?" he asked, puzzled, then pointed at his head and moved his fingers in a circle to indicate a never-ending cycle. "The *tick tick tick*, all the time, the maths?"

"Aye," Scott said.

"Nyet. Why would I want them to?"

Scotty gave a half laugh. "Why indeed? And the ice cream is good tae you. Not missing anything?"

"Perfect," Chekov said happily. "I am getting my own bowl or twelve."

"And there you have it, summarized," Scott said wearily. "There's just something wrong with some of us, always trying tae toss something bitter intae something sweet."

"Scotty..." Nyota started, but the words were getting caught in her head, coagulating against the scars *Nomad* had ripped into her.

He watched her face, then stood up. "It'll keep workin' on it. Got tae get chocolate ice cream right. For our grannies. Good night, lass."

"I'm ... no, Scotty," she called out to him, but he was already gone.

"Is he all right?" Chekov said, a bowl of ice cream in each hand, and there was a surge of excited chatter though the mess hall as the discovery swept through. "He's made the whole crew happy today. Except McCoy, who will probably kill him."

"Scotty scares me sometimes," she admitted.

"Scotty scares me all the time," Chekov agreed. "Any particular reason today?"

"Yes," she said simply. "But I can't quite remember why."

Acting Captain's Log, Stardate 2262.175. Jesus fuck. Acting Captain's log, supplemental. It has been suggested tae me that the last log entry wasnae professional. How about this: some days we are bored out of our skulls. Some days we are surrounded by incandescent beauty. And other days we run straight intae monstrous fuckin' demons. Guess which today was? Supplemental again. I'm apparently not supposed tae fucking swear in the fucking official log. Who fucking knew? You know what? I cannae do this fucking shit today.

Acting Captain's Log, Stardate 2262.176, Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu in command. Per the last log entry, we are not doing well. The Captain and First Officer, along with Lt. Uhura, are in medbay with injuries. The Second Officer has been relieved, also on medical grounds. I don't have the heart to say anything more today.

The engineering staff had a procedure, if you needed to get the attention of someone wearing ear protection. Firm hand on the shoulder or anatomical equivalent so the person didn't startle. Wait until they secured their equipment, then communicate the issue using sign language. Everyone knew, however, that the Chief jumped, every time, so Keenser grabbed his hand first and turned off the plasma torch. Scott flipped up his UV visor and signed: *what?*

Emergency. Bridge. Keenser signed back.

Scotty untangled himself from the narrow space, which was roaring with sound even through the ear plugs, and pushed through the labyrinthine innards of the ship. Once back on the main engineering deck he pulled off his ear protection, visor, and gloves, and tossed his tools onto a workbench.

"What's going on?" he asked, wiping the sweat off his face.

Keenser shrugged. "They said they need you on the Bridge immediately."

Scott sighed, and headed off to the lift at a jog.

The lift door opened into a Bridge in complete panicked chaos. Scott glanced around, taken aback. The Captain would never allow this. But the Captain was not there. And neither was Spock.

"What the hell? Report!" he snapped.

"Mr. Scott, thank god," Sulu said. "We were afraid that you had been taken too."

"Taken? *Too*? Where's the Captain!? Pretend I've been up tae my neck all day in the guts of the solid waste recycler, because I have been, and start at the beginning."

Sulu took a deep breath. “We received a distress call this morning, about half a light year away. We arrived, settled into standard orbit. Class M planet. The Captain asked Lt. Uhura to open a hailing frequency, and the moment she did, the Captain and Mr. Spock disappeared from the bridge.”

The second officer sat down slowly in the center seat, glaring at the planet on the screen as if it would yield answers. “Transporter?” he asked.

“Nyet, sir,” Chekov supplied. “It did not appear to be. No dematerialization sequence. Just here and then gone.”

“Are our shields up?” Scott asked.

“They are now. They weren’t at the time,” Chekov said.

“Mr. Sulu, I need a count of the ship’s full complement, and I need it now,” Scott ordered. “Take the ship tae action stations, that will be the quickest way.”

Sulu had barely acknowledged when Scott turned to the communications station. “Lieutenant Uhura, I need the bridge fully manned, and then I need tae know more about this distress call. I assume neither one of them happened tae have a communicator in his pocket?”

“No, sir,” she said, fighting hard through her own panic. He gave her a lingering look, and she simply nodded at him, straightening in her chair.

Scott spun forward again. “Mr. Chekov! You are now the acting science officer. We need a report about anywhere they might be.” Chekov jumped up and headed for Spock’s station.

“I have the count, sir,” Sulu reported. “No one else is missing.”

The chaos was gone, replaced by tension as the officers worked. Scotty clenched his jaw, suddenly the only one without a task, other than trying very, very hard not to snap at his people for answers. “Where are you, Captain?” he whispered.

“Where are we, Spock?” Kirk asked, walking around the perimeter of what was clearly a cell, a prison, although there seemed to be no door or window.

“I can only surmise that we are on the surface of the planet somewhere. That we have been taken from the *Enterprise*.”

“Just us, or the rest of the crew too, I wonder?”

“Unknown, sir.”

“Yeah,” Kirk said, but before they could begin testing their cell for a way out, they found themselves transported again into a vast hall.

“It appears to be Late Classical Greek,” Spock observed. “From ancient Earth.”

“Well spotted!” said a booming voice. “I wondered when humankind would reach for the stars! How delightful! And how very, very unfortunate for you.”

A man stepped out, wrapped in robes and a crown, a two-pronged staff in his hands. “I am Hades. God of the underworld. And I’m very much afraid that you’ve arrived in Hell.”

“It’s been hours! Where the hell are they?!” McCoy yelled, storming into the bridge.

“If I knew that, Doctor, I’d have them aboard,” Scott snapped sharply. “D’yeh have something tae add, or are yeh just here tae have a shout? Because I could stick yeh into a spacesuit and yeh could scream intae space. It would have the same effect, but spare me the headache.”

McCoy deflated. “Sorry, Scotty. I’m just ... just ...”

“Aye,” Scott answered knowingly.

Across the Bridge, Uhura sat upright. “We’re being hailed!”

“The Captain? Mr. Spock?”

“No,” Uhura answered, disappointed. “It seems to be whatever put out the distress call.”

“Put them through, Ms. Uhura,” Scott ordered.

“*I take it that this is the Enterprise?*” a voice said, and it raised everyone’s hackles. “*A ship of exploration and science and peace? Despite your battle shielding and energy weapons and missiles, of course.*”

Scott exchanged a glance with McCoy. “This is the *Enterprise*. Lieutenant Commander Scott in command. To whom am I speaking?”

“*I am Hades. God of the underworld, your master of old.*”

“O...kay,” McCoy murmured quietly, and the bridge crew all gave each other incredulous looks.

Scott frowned. “Well, Mr. ... Hades. We arrived here in good faith in response tae a distress call, but now two of our crewmen are missing.

Any assistance you could give us in locating them would be appreciated.”

“I’m afraid the distress call was my fault. And a trap, I’m embarrassed to say. I do think I may have your people. Let’s check, shall we?”

The viewscreen abruptly snapped on. “That wasn’t me, Mr. Scott,” Uhura said. “He’s overriding us.”

“There, see, that’s better. Now we can talk face to face.” A being stepped in front of the screen, nearly human looking in every respect, but just slightly off in a way that was hard to identify.

“Are these your missing crew?” he asked, and snapped his fingers. Kirk and Spock stepped stiffly in front of the screen, dressed in togas and laurel crowns. Kirk made eye contact with Scott, blinking heavily.

“They are most amusing,” Hades continued with over-cheerful delight. “Look, they can dance!” The man, if that’s what he was, waved his hands, and Kirk and Spock began spinning, bodies clearly not under their control. “Run into things!” The bridge crew winced as the Captain and first officer smashed full force into a wall. “Ah, and this one. I like this one very much.” Another gesture, and Spock reached for Kirk’s throat. Spock was fighting it as hard as he could, but was completely helpless to stop himself. His fingers wrapped around his Captain’s windpipe and slowly squeezed. Kirk, for his part, could only gasp.

“Stop it,” Scott cried in fury, on his feet, along with the bridge crew. “What do you want?”

“Your agony,” the creature said, smiling toothily. “Your fear. And for you to drop your shields so that I may have all of you.”

“Ah, well,” Scott said grimly, his eyes flicking to Kirk and Spock. “You didnae even make that hard. No. Never.”

On the screen, Spock abruptly released Kirk. They looked incredulously at each other and sprinted for the door, kicking at it in frustration when they found it locked. On the bridge, Scott suddenly jerked upright with a strangled breath and lurched to his feet, lunging involuntarily toward the navigation station.

“Stop me, stop me,” he managed through clenched teeth, and the bridge crew jumped into action. Chekov wrapped his arms around Scott, struggling against him, and Sulu jumped up to help, forcing an arm not under Scotty’s command down and away from shield control. McCoy slammed two buttons on the science station and whipped out his medical tricorder. Uhura ran to the helm and pushed the ship to maximum orbit, then pulled out a phaser and pointed it at the acting Captain.

“I’ll stun you if I have to,” she said quietly, and Scott nodded tightly, fighting against Sulu, Chekov, and his own body. He abruptly went to his knees, himself again.

“I’m okay,” he said breathlessly, raising his hands. He reached for his head and grimaced, then shook it and glared up at the face smirking at him from the screen, Sulu and Chekov half-holding and half-restraining him. Across the room and on the screen, Spock had involuntarily grabbed Kirk again, the expressions of the two men resigned.

“A small demonstration of my powers. Did you get away, Lieutenant Commander Scott, or did I just let you go?” the creature oiled malevolently. It closed its eyes in ecstasy. “You hate me. You fear me. I can taste it, in the very chemistry of your mind. An appetizer for the main meal.” It opened its eyes, and chortled. “Oh ho! How *interesting*, Lieutenant Commander Scott. This is not something I saw in your ancestors, who had no choice but to go mad. *Your* neurotransmitters are partially artificial. And I have just *completely* destabilized them, haven’t I? How delicious!” It laughed nastily. “I can make your friends do far worse things than kill each other. Is that really what you want? Lower your shields.”

“No,” Scott growled.

“The orgies of Dionysus were extraordinary,” Hades mused menacingly. “So much feeling! The participants even enjoyed it. Usually. Although if not, well, that is a flavor I always savored.”

“Oh, God,” McCoy murmured at Scotty’s side. “Beam them out!”

“I cannae drop our bloody shielding,” Scott snapped, paling as it became clear what was going to happen next, Spock forced to his knees in front of the Captain. The two of them looked at each other, clearly fearful, but not of each other.

“Drop your shields,” Hades said, and forced Spock to pull the tunic up over Kirk’s bare hips.

Kirk managed to speak. “Don’t you dare drop those shields, Scotty, no matter what happens.”

“Ah, I see, you want this then, Captain?” the creature mocked. “How shall I have him touch you first? I am willing to entertain your suggestion. No? Shall he touch you like this?”

On the bridge, every fist curled in rage.

“Like this?” Hades said. “Perhaps your crew likes to watch, and that is why they refuse to help you. Or do they all take turns between your legs, Captain?”

“Stop!” Uhura cried suddenly. “We won’t drop our shields but I’ll come down in a shuttle. A good-faith tribute while we organize ourselves to come down to the planet. Just, stop. Don’t make them do this.”

“An acceptable proposal,” Hades smirked, and Kirk and Spock drew apart. Neither was relieved, but each fighting their own despair at Uhura’s words. “You have thirty minutes to send her down. Or they brutalize each other, in the worst ways possible, on your screens right before your very eyes.” The screen went blank.

Scott stumbled to the central chair, the bridge pindrop silent as they struggled to process what they'd just seen. In one corner, a young Ensign was hyperventilating. Scott breathed shakily, reaching for his head again, then snapped back to professionalism. "Mr. Chekov, lock down shield control. Authorization of two officers required tae lower shields." Scott smashed a button on his chair. "Security, put a two-man armed guard on the shield generators. If someone tries to disable them, even if it's me, shoot them."

McCoy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, swallowing down his horror. "Jim was blinking in code," he said urgently. "Giving us orders. What was he saying?"

"He was ordering us tae leave," Scott said heavily. "Tae abandon them. Orders I'm suddenly considering following," he said, lifting his head to glare at Uhura. "I am nae sending you down there."

"Yes, you are. Or I will relieve you of command myself," Uhura said, lifting her chin.

Scott stood up, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Excuse me, Lieutenant?"

Uhura stepped into the temporary commanding officer and put a finger in his chest, and he looked down at her, flabbergasted. "Doctor McCoy, scan Mr. Scott. You know as well as I do that he's been losing a fight with his mental health since *Nomad*."

"Bloody hell, Nyota!" Scott hissed incredulously.

She looked at him with flicker of guilt. "The meds you've been on for twenty years haven't been working like they should, you've been cycling between mania and depression, trying to hide it," Uhura revealed, getting in his face, knowing perfectly well it was a betrayal. "And our 'friend' down there just blew you up completely, didn't it?" she pressed.

"*Shit*," McCoy boggled angrily, looking at his tricorder. "Yeah. That goddamned bastard just completely stripped every medication out of you in two seconds flat."

"I'm going down there, Scotty," Uhura said firmly. "I'm not going to let you stop me. You can be part of this or I'll stand on regulations for a commanding officer in a medical crisis and put your ass in sickbay."

"Well, then, Lieutenant. *Do it*," he growled. She grimaced and looked away, her bluff called, and he continued, more gently, soft and urgent, for her ears. "That son of a bitch is a sadist. You and I and everyone on this bridge knows *damn well* what he's not going tae stop. He'll figure out your relationship with Spock in two seconds, and ..." He broke off and sat heavily in the center chair. "Yeh cannae ask this of me."

"I'm not asking. I'm ... volunteering for a rescue mission," she told him, her heart hammering in her chest.

He rubbed his forehead, frowning, not happy about it. "I'm nae sending you down without any defenses. We have thirty minutes; what do we know that we didn't know before?" He looked up urgently at the bridge crew.

Uhura took a breath. "I saw that it let go of Spock and Kirk when it took you," Uhura said. "Maybe the range overextended it? And it may have a maximum distance. It let go of you when we got out to maximum orbit. It claimed it had released you, but that may be a bluff."

"It was talking about fear and anger as a meal," Sulu said. "Maybe it consumes or is powered by emotions, at the biochemical level?"

"I think Sulu's right," McCoy said. "I got a good scan when it grabbed you, on the ship's sensors and the tricorder, and just now. It's ravaged your neurotransmitters. Also," McCoy said, scanning the others in the room, then himself. "That's all of us, to a lesser degree. It was taking the most from the person it was controlling, but was also taking something from us as we were experiencing what it was doing. *Feeding* from us."

"I'm seeing something in the data," Chekov said. "It looked like telekinesis, but it wasn't. It wasn't manipulating your body. It was influencing brainwaves. Not a puppet master pulling the strings, but remote control."

"A signal..." Scott started, comprehension immediately dawning.

"...which we might be able to disrupt," Chekov continued. "It may be technological; it may be biological; it may be a hybrid. Doctor, if you could ...?"

"Yeah," McCoy said, and bent over the data with Chekov at the science station.

"Look, Scotty," Uhura said, softly apologetic. "I ..."

"Shut up, Lieutenant," he said levelly, barely sparing her a glance. "What do we have, gentlemen?"

"There is a technological component," Chekov said, certain. "I think there is a biological component, some form of disruption wave and feeding mechanism, but it is undoubtedly being enhanced by technology. If we could damage that technology ..."

"Where is it coming from?" Scott asked.

Chekov shrugged. "Nearby, but I could not say what."

"He claimed to be Hades," McCoy said. "That's an Earth name. Greek god of the underworld. Coincidence?"

"Anything from the myth that might help us?" Scott said. "I'm nae saying he's literally Hades, by the way, lest any of yeh think I'm *losing touch with reality*."

"I mean, he could be, Scotty," McCoy shrugged. "Those myths came from somewhere. A powerful visiting alien species isn't entirely out of the question."

“Hades,” Chekov said, skimming the library entry. “God of the dead, king of the underworld. Son of the Titan Cronus. Kidnapper and rapist of Persephone. Owns a three headed dog.” Chekov snapped his fingers. “Wields a bident. Two pronged spear thing. Maybe our answer?”

“Fantastic,” Scott groaned. “Lieutenant Uhura, when yeh go down there and yeh aren’t being ...” he cut himself off, but the unspoken word hung in the air, along with the vision of the Captain and Spock that was clinging darkly. “Please, wander around and try tae find a pitchfork. I’m sure it will be both easy tae find and tae break,” he continued bitterly. “Is there any way of blocking the signal? Come on people!” At their helpless shrugs Scott slammed his fist into the arm of the chair, just barely in control, and it had McCoy and Sulu looking at him in concern. “Pitchfork theory rescue mission it is then. Ms. Uhura, go put on a shuttle suit and then meet me in the shuttle bay. I have one or two things that would blow a hole straight through tae hell. We’ll have tae hope that will do the trick.”

Uhura nodded and headed for the lift.

“Sulu, you have the bridge. I’ll be back in ten minutes. Doctor, walk with me please.” The door slid shut and Scott leaned back against the wall of the turbolift, breathing shakily. “I cannae trust myself. Have I done anything insane?”

“No more than usual,” McCoy said, then swiftly amended when Scott shot him an agonized look. “I’m sorry. No. You clearly feel terrible, but no. Uhura was way out of line, but from where I’m standing, you’re making appropriate decisions. Including, Mr. Scott, sending a very small rescue party to try to get them back.”

“Do yeh have anything that would help with the feeling that the entire *Enterprise* has been pounded intae my head through my eye sockets?” Scott asked softly.

McCoy shook his head. “Those medications have to be carefully titrated. Your brain chemistry is shot to hell, but I can’t just throw some meds at you and expect it to help. I’m sorry, it’s going to be a long time before you’re okay.”

Scott nodded. “Leonard ... What about Captain. Spock. And now, god help me, Nyota?”

“Let’s get them back first,” McCoy said shakily as they stepped off the lift into main engineering; he’d been trying hard not to think about it. “Then we can concentrate on repairing mind, body, and soul. Jesus *fucking* wept, Scotty. What kind of devil have we run into?”

“The original, I suspect,” Scott sighed, rifling through a drawer in his office. “We’ve got tae come up with a way tae disrupt that signal. Biological or technological. Go back tae the bridge. You and Chekov have got tae figure this out. And I have tae go do the very last thing I want tae do,” he said, and headed for the shuttle bay.

Nyota was afraid. She knew she would be, and she was breathing through it, but she was afraid. She had no illusions about what she was facing. *Brilliant idea, Nyota*, she thought to herself.

Scotty stepped into the bay, a box in his hands. “Keep everything yeh can on your body,” he said without preamble. “I have a feeling the moment you get outside the *Enterprise’s* shield he’s going tae take you. Phaser, communicator, tricorder,” he said, holding them out. “And a straight-up plasma grenade. Probably will get confiscated but worth a try.”

He held up two wires. “These are each one half of an explosive. Inert on their own. Twist them together and yeh have ninety seconds to get as far as yeh can. It will take down a building.” He threaded one wire through the necklace she always wore, a gift from Spock, and the other into her hair.

“Your hands are shaking,” she said softly.

“Yeh think?” he sighed. He pulled out a disk and two more strands of explosives, a makeshift bracelet and anklet. “The disk is an EMP bomb. It will short out any electrical system within 50 meters. Including your communicator and the shuttle, by the way.” Then he very, very carefully pulled out a ring, embedded with a small, clear sphere. She slipped it onto finger and lifted a questioning eyebrow.

“Three atoms of antimatter, held suspended in a vacuum by a magnetic field,” he explained.

She sucked in a breath. “That’s terrifying. When exactly did you make this?” she asked him.

“After the ice cream. I told yeh, I cannae sleep for the noise in my head.”

“Dessert to bombs. That’s a swing,” she murmured, aiming for levity but missing.

“Aye, well. You werenae entirely wrong about my health recently.” He glanced up at her. “Even if that isnae exactly talk for the bridge. Twist the band, half clockwise, half anticlockwise. Ten seconds and anything within twenty meters is gone. That’s all I’ve got.” He folded his arms and looked urgently into her eyes. “I’m nae dropping the shields, and I’m nae sending another soul down there. We’ll do what we can, but you’re on your own. If I have tae turn my back on this world, I’ll raze it intae oblivion before I go. Tae end your suffering and get my revenge.”

She gave him a crooked smile. “How long do I have?” she asked.

“As long as I can bear,” he said. Then he bowed his head and squeezed his eyes shut. “Nyota ...” he whispered.

“I know what I’m facing,” she murmured. “Whatever happens next, I accept it, if it gives us a chance to get the Captain and Spock back. I won’t be alone. And that’s agonizing, but it’s also comforting.”

“Aye,” he murmured, and stepped away. “Good luck, Lieutenant.”

She nodded tightly and headed for the shuttle. As Scotty had predicted, Hades plucked her from it the moment she was clear of the *Enterprise’s* shields, a nauseating teleportation nothing like a transporter that left her inner ear spinning. No time to get her bearings; Hades, or

whomever he was, was there.

“You remind me of Persephone,” Hades said, taking her hand and kissing it. “Who also came with no choice.”

“Yeah, well,” she said tightly. “My name is Nyota Uhura. And I’d like to see my crew.”

“Would you?” he said, mocking. “Eager, are we?” He gestured, and a naked Kirk and Spock were forced into the room from another chamber. Her heart skipped a beat, for in the other room she’d caught a glimpse of a two-pronged staff, exactly as Chekov had predicted.

“Nyota,” Spock said in despair, as his hands were made tear off her uniform, while the Captain gripped her firmly then forced her into a low couch.

Hades turned back to the screen; to the *Enterprise*. “I appreciate your lovely tribute, Lieutenant Commander. Now, let us continue our conversation. Drop your shields so that you all may come to worship me.”

Uhura spared the screen a glance. Scotty had cleared the bridge, and was sitting, alone, his head bowed in his hands. No further games from this terrible creature, she sensed. This was about to be brutal.

“What do we know?” Kirk murmured, his eyes firmly averted as he was forced to kiss her. She was trembling, but his voice was steel, steady as if he was standing on the bridge. And she was not afraid.

She couldn’t speak; the thing had her entirely. But then it took a hold of Spock and turned him on Kirk, but she managed a few words. “He’s feeding off of our brains ... eating us alive. Not telekinesis,” she whispered, firmly dissociating herself from all that was happening to their bodies. It was not Kirk and Spock, and so it was not her.

Then it had her again, and it was harder to ignore the way she was being forced to hurt *them*, and they were both trembling in shock by the time the monster was done with her hands.

“There is a signal,” she managed, her voice hers again, for a moment. “That spear in the other room.”

For a time, none of them could speak, or be anything other than playthings for a monster. He was tearing them apart from the inside out, body and soul. *Not them, not me.*

“How do we destroy it?” Spock murmured from above her, looking down into her eyes. Despite the shaky, dangerous hurt pulsing inside of her, the feel of him was almost comforting in its familiarity, but for all that it was his body, it was not him. Spock was fighting, trying not to move, trying not to hurt her more severely, but all that Kirk was being made to do shuttered through Spock and into her.

She could hear Scotty’s raw voice, raging, entirely past control, threatening Hades, and the creature goading him on in evil delight, violating his mind as much as it was doing to their bodies.

Hades used her Captain to force her facedown into the bed, and she couldn’t breathe, and couldn’t stop herself from screaming in raw agony, her body at the end of what it could bear. Her Captain and her lover were keening in the same pain, and Scott had gone silent, although she could hear his shaky breathing.

She managed to turn her head, careful to not catch Scotty’s gaze on the screen. *Not them, not me*, she reminded herself urgently. *Not them, not me!*

Then Hades did something to their *souls*, mercilessly pinning their consciousnesses to the razor-sharp floor of a blood-soaked mindscape—even Scott, who cried out on the comm.

Hades laughed. “This has been entirely enjoyable. And now, here, in mind, you will all find the exquisite meaning of torture. Unless, Lieutenant Commander, you will drop the shields?”

“*Never*,” Scotty spat.

“Then perhaps you first,” Hades said to him, closing his fist, and the sound Hades tore out of Scotty was something shattering inside of him. “The next commander of the *Enterprise* may prove more reasonable.”

There was no more time; they had to end this. Uhura fought for her voice, and found it. “My ring,” she breathed urgently to the Captain. “Antimatter bomb. Destroy the spear. Twist the band; ten seconds to run.”

Captain Kirk moved his hand against Hades’s force; one centimeter, two, with all the focus and strength he had. Then he slid the ring off her finger, palming it. He called out, trembling violently.

“Hades. I didn’t think you would be so boring,” he complained petulantly. “I know Spock and Nyota shall we say, *very* well, and they need more. I saw just the thing, in the other room. Big, thick, pointed. Two prongs, which is intriguing. Powerful. Let me go collect it?”

Hades laughed, and let Kirk go, though the Captain could barely walk, blood dripping down his legs.

Spock managed to shift them, placing his own body between the door and Nyota, and it was Spock who was holding her, and she holding him, not Hades.

And twenty seconds later, the world exploded.

Captain's Log, Stardate 2262.275 . I was reminded today that it has been one hundred days since our encounter with the creature that called itself Hades. McCoy asked me this morning how we are doing, mind, body, and soul. Body? Healed. Mind? Steady, I think, with the exception of Lt. Cmdr. Scott, who is still fighting the ill effects of stolen neurochemicals. Soul? Well, soul. Mine is restless. Scotty doesn't believe in them. And Spock and Uhura, whose souls have been intertwined in all the time I've known them both, seem to have become unraveled.

It was nearly 0100 when Uhura leaned on the bell outside Scotty's quarters. The chief engineer was bleary and shirtless when he opened the door; he'd been asleep. He took one look at her tear-stained face and stepped back and gestured her inside. The moment the door closed she leaned into him and wept.

She'd woken, a hundred days before, ears ringing in the aftermath of an antimatter blast, to the members of the crew wrapping blankets around their ravaged bodies. McCoy, Chekov, Sulu, bundling them into their arms, and Scotty beaming them home with precision, straight into sickbay.

The bident had been the source of power—and possibly the life source—of the demon Hades, who seemed to have been banished back to hell, if not destroyed outright. Later, they would discuss whether he was the source of the myth, whether he had taken the myth as inspiration and styled himself a god, or whether he was some other creature that had simply pulled it from their minds when they arrived. Not that it particularly mattered, the damage was the same.

The physical healing hadn't taken long. The wounds they'd each suffered had been serious, but easily addressed, although when she had woken from a brief surgery there were lines on McCoy's face that hadn't been there before. The rest was harder; for the second time that year, Nyota had to gather the tattered pieces of her soul.

She'd sat with Spock and Kirk in therapy and talked. They'd forgiven each other, which was easy to do, since none of them had done anything in need of forgiveness. They'd been gentle with each other, tender, and rebuilt themselves side-by-side. It wasn't perfect; there were night terrors, and panic attacks and days when she struggled to get out of bed, but—less, now. A little better every day.

When they were ready, Christine Chapel had also worked with Spock and Nyota in relationship and sexual therapy, and guided them to what Nyota had thought was an even greater intimacy—until tonight, that is.

Recovery had been harder with Scotty, whose trauma was different, and who had denied it entirely for a while. Where the three of them still struggled in heart, something had happened inside his head—his brain had been ravaged, more susceptible in the worst way to the monster's hunger.

Spock finally had to intervene, and without a human word for it, had used a Vulcan word to describe what had happened that Uhura could barely translate. *Frozen* was as close as she could get, which made no sense from a desert world. Scotty had nodded in weary understanding, and managed to climb out of something by the end.

And then a brutal rebound locked him into a brittle, still-ongoing, paranoia-tinged fury that had Engineering reeling—and junior engineers muttering—in search of 0.001% speed improvements and non-existent power drains.

She knew better than to call the stable version of Scotty the 'real' one. He was himself, all of himself, regardless of the state of his health, no less than complete in any iteration. But she hadn't been able to face him. He was *too much*, like that, her psyche too fragile to face the anger in him. So she very much hoped that the steady version of Scotty, who had been reappearing more in recent days, was here tonight.

He wrapped his arms around her, and it seems he was.

"Ah, lass," he murmured. "Tell me."

"I'm sorry, Scotty," she said tearily. "But I need a drink and a friend."

"Gimme a minute," he said, and she sat down on his couch while he disappeared into the bedroom. His quarters were a mirror of Spock's, with a small sitting room and desk in the front, bedroom and bathroom in the back. She was struck, as always, at how spartan his space was. A few bottles of alcohol, carefully stowed. Tea and a kettle. A battered Starfleet Academy fleece on the back of a chair. A family photo—Scotty, his grandmother, his sister, and his nephew, grinning at the camera somewhere on Earth. She knew there was a jacket and a few civilian shirts in his closet, and a handmade quilt on his bed. He'd been in space longer than any of them, and could pack everything he owed in a single duffel in five minutes. "*Never keep anything important on a Starship*," he'd told her once.

He pulled on a shirt and sat down beside her; she put her head in his lap to hide her tears.

He looked down at her, and stroked her hair. "Ah, Nyota," he whispered. "I've got whiskey, some of McCoy's bourbon, and some spirits of dubious safety that I've collected out here." He paused. "Or, lass, I have tea."

"As much as I'd like to drink all your whiskey, I'm on duty at 0800. Tea?"

He nodded and stood up to start the kettle, then settled back beside her, her head on his shoulder while the tea steeped. "Tell me, Nyota. Whatever it is that has you cryin' on my shoulder in the middle of the night."

"Spock," she said. "He thinks he is about to enter a rare fertility cycle, and has talked the Captain into heading back to Federation space so he can mate with a stranger on New Vulcan," Nyota said.

Scotty blew out a breath and rubbed his face with both hands. "I knew," he said softly, and stood to collect their tea. He handed her a cup with her right amounts of milk and sugar, then made one for himself and sat down again. "Did he actually put it that way?"

“More or less,” she said. “At first I thought he was just afraid.”

“Of?” Scott asked.

“Hurting me. It’s biologically coercive sex with the threat of madness and violence.” Scotty swallowed hard and took her hand. “I know what you’re thinking,” she continued. “Not an unwarranted fear. But we had found our way back to each other in the last few months. I’d light some candles and get him through it. Interspecies partners navigate these sorts of things. But he still insists, and I’ve realized what it is. The thing I keep coming back to isn’t that he wants children, or thinks he should want them. But that he doesn’t want them to be *mine*.”

Scotty blinked at her. “You didnae want kids, I thought?”

“I didn’t. I don’t! I thought.”

“Ah,” Scott said.

“I know I’m sounding entirely ridiculous and *emotional*,” she said, spitting out the last word.

“I didnae say that, lass,” he said gently, knowing full well that her anger wasn’t directed at him. “You are allowed tae consider the possibility of a life other than this one, yeh know. A life without ships and Starfleet. Tae plan a life where maybe these days in space are a footnote you look back on, from the long years spent doing something else. You are allowed tae have hoped that *that* life might’ve been with him.”

“Yeah,” she said, in tears again. “I feel so guilty for being angry. I have no right to be angry about this. There are so few Vulcans left, and they cycle into fertility so infrequently. And a three-quarters Vulcan is better for the species than a one-quarter Vulcan. Or no child at all. Because ... I don’t, Scotty. I don’t want children, and he feels obligated to have them, and there are only a few chances for that in his entire life. I have no right to be angry.”

Scotty put his tea down carefully. “What the hell d’yeh mean yeh dinnae have a *right* tae be angry? Yeh have every right tae feel how yeh feel.” She didn’t believe him, he could tell. He rubbed the back of his neck. “What are you going tae do?” he asked gently

“I think the question is what *Spock* is going to do,” Nyota said. She pulled up her feet and curled into his side, and he pulled her under his arm. “I know myself Scotty. I’m hurt and angry, I’m being petulant and unfair. But I can jump to the end of this. I love him, and I don’t want to lose him, and I also understand. I’d give him a pass, to help save his species, and then ask him to come back to me.”

“It sounds logical tae me,” Scott admitted.

Nyota reached up and touched her necklace. “Spock can’t do it. I know him too, and he can’t tear his heart in half like that. Too much emotion, too much guilt. He’s going to break up with me, Scotty.” Nyota took a cleansing breath. “That’s what he was trying to do tonight. And between his ‘I hope you understand the depth of my affection and respect for you’ and his ‘our years together have been deeply enriching,’ he couldn’t quite get it out. But he’ll take another run at it tomorrow, and we’ll be done.”

Scott pulled her closer, and put his chin on her head. “Yeh dinnae know that. You love him fiercely, in that human way that looks at the odds, and then tells the odds tae fuck off.” She laughed brokenly.

“And he loves yeh passionately. Aye, I said passionately,” Scotty continued, before she could disagree. “I dinnae pretend to know his mind or his heart, but I do know that, for all his logic, he *feels* to the depths of his soul. And maybe the path isnae clear, and maybe yeh have tae walk apart for a while, but I wouldnae ever bet against the two of yeh.”

“Never bet against *Enterprise* crew,” Nyota murmured, suddenly exhausted.

“Damn straight,” he said, standing. “I know that you’ve moved all your stuff tae his quarters. You can sleep here. I’m headed down tae Engineering anyway.”

“I’m not tossing you out of your own bed,” she protested, catching his hand. “I know you’ve barely been sleeping, and I’m not going to take that from you.”

“I cannae sleep anymore tonight,” he admitted, and she blinked sadly at him. He looked at his feet. “I know you keep hoping I am back tae myself. I know this version of me is an exhausting bastard. But I’m nae there. I’m starting tae wonder if I’ll ever get back. McCoy thinks I might not.”

And that was enough to put her into tears again. “Forgive me,” she whispered. “Do you? Can you?”

He raised his eyebrows in confusion. “Nyota ...”

“That day on the bridge,” she said softly. “I was out of line.”

“What day was that, now?” he asked gently, because they needed to get past this.

“You know the one,” she said, and glanced miserably up at him. “I overstepped my position. And betrayed our friendship.”

“Aye,” he said simply. “You did.”

“I should have trusted you. Things could have gone differently.”

He sat down again. “They could have. Better, or worse.” He paused. “I think Mr. Spock and the Captain would agree that we all carry plenty of guilt from that day, and none of the actual blame. No need tae heft burdens that arenae yours.”

She nodded. “Scotty,” she said hesitantly. “You wouldn’t come to therapy with us. The things he made you see ... you can’t just pretend ...”

He leaned forward, knowing exactly what she was trying to say. “Nyota Uhura,” he said, rueful but entirely firm. “Are yeh listening tae me at all? You’re nae actually my big sister, or my doctor. I’ve got a therapist back home I’ve been seein’ for years, and I’ve been meeting with her once a week on a subspace call for these last three months. It’s no’ your job tae worry about me, lass, and it never has been.”

He knelt down in front of her. “And, in case you think you’ve done something that needs forgiving from me: it’s forgiven. If you’ll offer me the same for not stopping you.” He stood up, heading for engineering. “Try tae sleep. Dream well, if yeh can.”

Chapter End Notes

The tl;dr for the trigger warning section: using mind control, Hades forces Kirk, Spock, and Uhura to sexually assault one another. They are hurt, but not afraid, and continue fighting through it toward escape. Scotty, who has cleared the bridge, is forced to watch it play out. Pushing through the mind control, and using the antimatter ring that Scotty sent to the planet with Uhura, Kirk destroys Hades.

Chapter Summary

The Enterprise is lost, and the crew deals with the effects of many traumas.

Chapter Notes

Be mindful of several tags in this chapter. Canonical death of minor characters, sexual content, discussion of suicidal thoughts, and a very short dream recollection of the rape/noncon scene from the previous chapter

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

Captain's Log, Stardate 2262.365 ... three two one. Stardate 2263.1. New year. Happy? Hard to say. I hope it is a happy one for the Enterprise, although I won't be here to see it.

"Ah, there he is!" McCoy said, putting a glass of gin in the Captain's hand. "You're late, Jim. You missed the countdown."

Other than a skeleton crew of Gamma shifters, the rest of the crew was packed in the rec room. Since they were only a few days out from *Yorktown* no one was hoarding their liquor; plenty to buy on the station, so they could drink it all tonight, and they were. The senior staff was tucked into a corner of the room, and had saved a seat for Kirk.

"Sorry, I was finishing the log," the Captain said. "I didn't know that it mattered that much exactly when old Earth made it around the sun again."

"Boooo," Chekov heckled, to laughter.

"All right, all right," Kirk said with a smile. "I'm the stick in the mud."

"Scotty, pass over more of that scotch," McCoy said. The engineer reached lazily behind him, comfortably drunk, and handed it over.

"Oi, Leonard, thanks fer keepin' us alive las' year," Scott said. "It wasnae an easy task."

"You're not the only miracle worker," McCoy answered, and Scotty tipped his drink to that. "Sulu, did I hear that Demora and Ben are going to be at *Yorktown* when we arrive?"

Sulu grinned. "They are. In fact they are already there. It's taking everything I have not to secretly push us to warp eight so we can get there sooner. Two days is feeling like an eternity."

"Anyone else have plans for the station?" Uhura asked.

"There is a small colony of Vulcans there," Spock answered from the other side of the table, where he was drinking his fermented tea. "I am hoping to spend some time meditating in their presence."

"Sounds thrilling," McCoy said, rolling his eyes.

"Restful and rejuvenating, I hope. What are your plans, Nyota?" Spock asked solicitously.

The two of them, who in other years would have been cuddled side by side, were carefully distant from one another and unfailingly polite. And so very, very clearly pining, so obviously aching. If the situation didn't feel so tremulous, any one of the rest of the group would have shoved them into a room with a plea to *just fuck it out, already*. But not after the year they'd had. Nyota answered Spock, her tone carefully light. "Some sightseeing. A massage. Getting my hair done. Also lunch and shopping with Mira Romaine, when she isn't busy having sex with with Scotty."

"I forgot Mira was stationed on *Yorktown*," Chekov said. "That's Scotty's vacation sorted."

Scotty shrugged, not disagreeing. "What are you going tae do, wee man?"

"I am still making plans."

"It isn't a competition to see how many people you can sleep with, Pavel," Uhura sighed.

"You say that, and yet there is an actual pool. Winner gets a bottle of scotch, a box of condoms, and some porn."

"So you're saying I get to spend my vacation running STD tests. Great," McCoy grumped.

"What are you going to do Bones?" Kirk asked.

"I dunno, Jim. Usually I just follow you around scraping you out of trouble."

Kirk shook his head. “While we’re in communication range with Earth I have a bunch of meetings with Starfleet.”

“The STD tests sound more fun.”

The group lapsed into comfortable silence, nursing their drinks, buzzed, drunk, and half asleep while the crew partied around them. Nyota stood at last, nudging Scotty to his feet, and collected a few of their crewmates. The crowd quieted because they knew it meant a song. She pulled the guitar out from behind the piano and plucked the first notes. “You know the one,” she told them. Her little group of singers smiled and immediately joined in:

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and auld lang syne?*

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.*

“Do you know the other verses, Scotty?” Uhura asked, still strumming the chorus.

“Och, now yer going tae put an old, drunk Scotsman tae shame. I havenae been home in a long time. Aye. It’s a song about old friends, long since gone their ways, back together fer one night tae share a drink for times long past,” he explained, and sang when she came back around to the verse:

*And surely ye'll be your pint-stoup
and surely I'll be mine
And we'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.*

*We twa hae run about the braes,
and pou'd the gowans fine;
But we've wander'd mony a weary fit,
sin' days o' auld lang syne.*

*We twa hae paidl'd in the burn,
frae morning sun till dine;
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
sin' days o' auld lang syne.*

“And th’ last verse,” he said, while she improvised a bridge. He finished the drink he’d been holding. “It’s an important one, so I’ll sing it closer tae standard than Burns wrote it.”

*And there's a hand my trusty friend!
And give me hand o' thine!
And we'll take a right good-will draught, for auld lang syne.*

Nyota finished on the chorus, her silver voice ringing in the stars:

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.*

The music faded off, to murmurs of approval from the crew. This was the end of the evening, they could feel, with Alpha shift starting in six hours and a diplomatic mission still to perform over the next two days. Eyes turned to the Captain, who stood and raised his drink. “You are all incomparable. I hope you know that,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I hope you know what an honor it has been to serve with you. Happy New Year, crewmates.”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2263.2 If the universe is truly endless, then are we not striving for something forever out of reach? The Enterprise is scheduled for a reprovisioning stop at Yorktown, the Federation's newest and most advanced starbase. Perhaps a break from routine will offer up some respite from the mysteries of the unknown.

Lieutenant Mira Romaine always thought that she had the best office on *Yorktown* station, overlooking the central transit core from space, but never more so than now.

“Wow,” her assistant gasped. “We’ve had plenty of ships in. Even starships. But *that* is impressive. A Constitution-class heavy cruiser, up close! I wish we could see the serial number on the nacelles from here. I wonder which one it is?”

“That, Ensign Kim, is the *Enterprise*,” Mira said admiringly.

“Oh, come on,” Kim pouted. “How would you know?”

“I served aboard her Jin-Ae! Didn’t I ever tell you that story? I have some friends aboard, and some insider information. They’ve been out in deep space. *Way* out. We’re their first glimmer of the Federation in almost two years.”

"Friends aboard?" Kim asked. "Or a *friend*."

"Well" Mira hedged. "Friends for certain. But there *is* someone special. He's obviously been away for a long time. It's mostly casual, but we're going to dinner tonight."

"Sailor rolling into port. Bit more than dinner I'd think," her friend teased. "Some handsome lieutenant?" Mira shrugged. "Not a lieutenant. A commander? Or ... lord Mira, not Kirk?"

"God, no," Mira said, wrinkling her nose. "The chief engineer," she admitted.

"Good with his hands, then."

Mira choked. "God, Jin-Ae."

"You didn't say no," she cackled.

"Not having this conversation!" Mira said, and turned eagerly for the door. "I'm leaving now." It wasn't hard to find the Enterprise crew, in their vibrant Starship colors, in contrast to the usual Starbase grey. She spied Scotty almost immediately across the terminal, talking to Captain Kirk. Even at that distance, Kirk seemed a little subdued. Scotty apparently agreed, and patted the Captain on the shoulder before turning away.

"Scotty!" Mira called to him, and he beamed at her, quickening his pace.

He hesitated for a moment when she got within reach, brain glitching on the *kiss-hug-handshake*? conundrum that she knew would hit him after years apart. Fortunately, she'd already worked it out, and reached up to pull him into a kiss, to his obvious delighted pleasure.

"Welcome to *Yorktown*," she said with a smile.

"She is beautiful, but not so beautiful as you," Scotty said.

She laughed and punched him in the shoulder before taking his arm. "Are bad pickup lines all you've got? Compare me to the *Enterprise*, then, and I'll know you mean it."

"Give me a break, I'm outta practice," Scotty complained.

"I'm very glad to hear that," Mira said, and gave him an expectant look.

"You're as beautiful as the *Enterprise*, and that's as far as I can ever go," he teased.

"I will take that," she said, and they walked arm in arm for a few minutes. "Are you hungry?" she asked. "I have the perfect restaurant picked out. The vegan offerings are all entirely fresh, grown here. Meat and dairy are pre-frozen, but real."

"I'm starving," he said fervently. "We've been scraping the bottom of the barrel. All synthesized food for two damn years. I've made progress on programming chocolate ice cream and chicken soup, but the rest of it may as well be gelatine blocks."

She winced in sympathy. "Let's feed you before you fade away," she said.

Two hours later they were both stuffed, but still lingering over drinks. Scotty had insisted on seeing the chef, three times, to tell her she was brilliant.

"... so the Captain calls back two minutes later. Two minutes," Scotty was saying. "And he's shouting 'Scotty get me outta here!' but the surface is crawling with something. So I get him back aboard. And he's fighting off these people. They're wee, literally half a meter at best. And he's torn his shirt ..."

"Oh my god. Again," Mira giggled.

"And he's lost his boot. And I cannae help myself. I turn to him and ask 'How'd it go?'" They looked at each other and lost it to laughter. Mira took a sip of her wine, caught his eye again, and they both went undignified with another round of giggles.

"I damn near invited him tae dinner tonight," Scott admitted when he got himself under control. He caught the eye of their server, who brought the check.

"Oh, lord, Scotty," Mira complained.

"I know, I know. It's just ..." he sighed. "We got the shite kicked out of us last year. I know I wasnae good at calling, but believe me, a hell of a lot of it wasnae worth hearing. Brave starship Captain, but I think he's feeling lost."

"Think he's okay?" Mira asked, worried, as they stood to go.

"I honestly dinnae think he is," Scotty admitted.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"Me? Sure, I'm fine."

She gave him an appraising look. "Take a walk with me, Scotty?" she asked.

“Anywhere. Lead the way.” He wrapped an arm around her, and she could feel him uncoiling in relief. He had in fact been *very* bad at calling and writing, but Nyota Uhura less so, and Mira knew more than he thought she did. She knew he’d been dead for twelve minutes, and she knew that he’d spent many weeks at both the start and end of the year in sickbay. Not that she expected him to tell her about any of it. She leaned into him, and above them, *Yorktown’s* sky was phasing to night, the blue fading away into an astonishing vista of stars.

“That’s very pretty,” he said. “Hell of a bit of engineering too.”

“I’ve stood under these stars more than once, and wondered where you were,” she told him, feeling grateful to have him beside her. “How are Spock and Nyota?” she asked as they strolled.

“Ah, that one’s hard,” he sighed. “Taking a break. Not that either of them want tae.”

“Oh no,” she commiserated.

“It’s ...” he sighed. “We ran intae this alien, and he was a demon. Just straight evil. And the two of them got taken, along with the Captain. The experience was brutal in ways that I dinnae have the words or heart tae say. They are terrified of hurting each other more. Which, of course, means they’re hurting each other more.”

“Think they’ll work it out?”

“I hope so,” he said. They’d stopped in front of a high rise and he looked at her quizzically. “Where’s this, then?” he asked.

“My apartment,” she answered. “Come in. Have another drink,” she said, and traced his lips with her fingers before leaning in for a kiss. “Stay the night.”

He smiled down at her. “I can do that. If you’re sure?”

“So sure,” she breathed, and pulled him with her through the door.

It had barely swished closed behind them before she had his tunic and undershirt over his head, kissing him full the moment it was off. He caught the fastener of her dress with his fingertips, and slid it down her body. She stepped out of it and went to work on his belt.

He groaned when she got her hand around him, then backed her into the flat, kissing her until they hit a surface—her bed, and they tumbled into it together. He bracketed her with his arms, lips on her neck, and she pressed up against him through the clothing they hadn’t quite got off yet.

There was a half-awkward fumble for everything else—stockings and bra and socks, trousers tossed haphazardly, a condom from her bedside drawer, some toys and lube placed playfully in reach. And then—fingers and tongues and lips, drawing each other with low, urgent, heat, letting effervescent static replace thought.

They paused for a breath, and she traced his face with the tips of her fingers, then leaned down to press her lips against his. “Oh, god, Scotty,” she whispered brokenly, and he knew she could feel it in him. There was something shattered within him that he couldn’t fix, parts of himself that he couldn’t reach anymore.

He knew that Mira understood exactly what that felt like.

She sat up, on her knees with him beneath her, and trailed her hand down him; chest, belly, lower. He reached for her hip, then brushed her with his thumb, and she caught her breath. He glanced between their bodies, and then looked back into her eyes, the invitation in his gaze. She shook her head and kissed him tenderly, then rolled them so he was above her.

“What?” he asked, puzzled

“You need to control this moment,” she whispered to him. “Trust me.” Her fingers tightened on the back of his neck, then her body around him, and she was *right*. She scraped her fingernails up and down his back, holding him *everywhere*, and he tried not to weep.

“Come on, Scotty,” she breathed into his ear, then surged up to kiss him urgently. “Stop thinking.” She pressed her forehead to his, then lifted her hips and hooked a knee over his shoulder. He gasped, hands moving to support her, and she rocked up into him, setting an urgent, rolling rhythm. “Come with me,” she begged, and he followed, letting her take them both somewhere the pain couldn’t find them, at least for a while.

Ungodly beeping at 0600 woke them. “Did you set an alarm?” she grumbled at him from under the blankets.

“Nae,” he answered blearily. “That’s a communicator.”

“I don’t have one. They just page me if they need me, or leave a padd message,” Mira said.

“Damn,” he groaned, “that means it’s me,” and went searching for his trousers, which she’d thrown somewhere. He dug the communicator out of the pocket and glanced at the message face. “Immediate recall tae the ship,” he sighed.

Mira buried her head under the pillow. “I thought you were here for at least four days?”

“We are,” he said, and collapsed back into bed beside her. “Deuterium and anti-deuterium stores are critically low, and that transfer will take at least four days. Which means we’ll be back, whether the Captain likes it or no’, or we willnae be warping anywhere a few weeks from now.”

She snuggled into his side and kissed his chest. “Just stay, it probably isn’t important.”

He closed his eyes and tilted his head back while she trailed her lips up his neck. “Emergency recall of the Federation’s flagship after one day

in port? Aye. Probably nothin' important," he agreed with a groan, tracing small circles on her lower back.

"Is the *Enterprise* going to leave without her chief engineer?" Mira asked, levering up on an elbow to look down at him.

"I dinnae imagine so."

"In light of the emergency, you can multitask," she said, padding naked to the bathroom. "You can shower *and* give me an orgasm."

He lifted his head. "You are a very bad influence," he called.

"Hurry, big emergency," she shouted to him, and started the water.

"The ship, or the sex?" he asked, amused, stepping in behind her.

"There is only one of those I care about right now, Scotty!"

After, he toweled off and got dressed while she reclined nude in the bed, enjoying the view of him. "We could do this every day, you know," she told him, making sure he had a good view of her. "The *Yorktown* shipyard would take you in a heartbeat."

"Aye, well," he said noncommittally, and leaned down to kiss her. "Dinnae bother tae see us off. Go back tae sleep. I'm sure we'll be back in a few days," he said, and walked out the door for what he didn't know was the final voyage of the USS *Enterprise*.

Inquest Report re: Destruction of USS Enterprise. Reconstructed Transmission, Stardate 2263.3. USS Enterprise, final communication, as follows: Yorktown, ..terprise ... if you can hear... attack. Nacelles and secondary hull... boarded ... crew losses ... rutural integrity [unintelligible] percent and falling. ...ayday mayday mayday. Abando... repeat, aban...

At the last second, the stolen swarm ship piloted by McCoy and Spock swooped in and saved Kirk from a certain and horrible death in the vacuum of space. Scotty slumped in relief and put his head down on the control console on *Yorktown's* bridge, feeling abruptly weak as two days of adrenaline leached away, its metallic taste heavy and nauseating in his mouth.

"Are you alright, Montgomery Scotty?" Jaylah asked him.

There was a sudden commotion as Commodore Paris arrived in the command center. "What in the name of god just happened?" she snapped. "What was that attacking the station, why is the long lost USS *Franklin*, of all things, parked in the lake, and what happened in the air circulation system?! Commander Finnegan, report!"

The operations commander of the station opened his mouth, then closed it, struggling to process, much less find the words. "I'm honestly not sure ma'am," he admitted at last.

Scotty climbed wearily to his feet. "Taking your questions in order ma'am," he said. "The station was attacked by a swarm that we were able tae disrupt before it tore the station apart; the *Franklin* is a very long and strange story; and we just barely kept an ancient doomsday weapon from getting intae the air system and destroying every living thing on *Yorktown*."

Paris squinted at him, frowning. "I know you," she said slowly, taking in the vintage Starfleet jacket over the top of a dusty red modern starship duty tunic. Her eyes flicked to his face in recognition. "You're Scott. The chief engineer and second officer of the *Enterprise*."

"Aye, ma'am," he said softly.

"Mr. Scott," she said, and there was dread in her voice. "Why are you here, and *where is the Enterprise?*"

He'd already said the words, on the planet. He already acknowledged it, although he hadn't accepted it. But *this*, right here and right now, was the first report to Starfleet, and fate was making it his responsibility to say it.

"The *Enterprise* has been destroyed, ma'am," he said, and his voice sounded far away. He felt the awful grief of it lurking, threatening to overwhelm him, and shoved it back. "Torn tae pieces yesterday morning by the same swarm fleet that came for *Yorktown*. The distress call was a trap."

Paris went very, very still. "Mr. Scott, where are the crew?"

"Aboard the *Franklin*. What's left of them."

"How many?" the Commodore asked urgently.

Scott knew *exactly* how many. He'd beamed them aboard the *Franklin*, twenty at a time. He'd counted every one of them. But until this very moment, he hadn't let himself think of it; could not think of it, not if they wanted to save millions on *Yorktown* and beyond. "Less than half, ma'am," he managed, and the strength went out of him. He reached for the back of the chair, suddenly shaking, breathing hard, and someone grabbed him under the arm. "Oh, god."

The operations center went silent, the officers frozen in sympathetic horror. Somehow—he wasn't sure how—he was sitting in the chair again, and the Commodore was crouched in front of him. "Breathe, commander," she said gently. Her face had aged ten years in three seconds, lined with grief. It was, after all, her order that had sent them to their deaths. "Where is Captain Kirk?"

"I'm here, ma'am," Kirk said from the door, flanked by McCoy and Spock. He was bloody and pummeled, but standing. He walked forward and put his hand on his engineer's shoulder. "Half, Scotty?" Kirk asked. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Scott twisted to face him. "There wasnae time, sir."

The Commodore spoke, still kneeling beside Scott, struggling herself under the pain of it. "I have a number of questions, gentlemen. But I will ask only one: is this station in danger?"

"Not anymore, ma'am," Kirk said tiredly.

Paris stood smartly, fully in command of the situation. "You are all to report to *Yorktown* Hospital immediately," she said, then turned away. "Commander Finnegan, send a medical team to the *Franklin* to collect the remaining survivors, and assign a disaster response team. We need to start with a list of who is alive, who is dead, and who is missing. Communications Officer, I need a gold channel to Starfleet Command ..."

Around them, *Yorktown's* bridge bustled to life, while the dispossessed *Enterprise* officers stared at each other, suddenly useless.

"Come on, Montgomery Scotty," Jaylah said, hauling him to his feet. "You too James T. You heard the command of your Ma'am."

The crew was already gathering in the plaza, bloody, dazed, being pulled out of the *Franklin* one at a time by the efficient *Yorktown* officers. The word was passing swiftly around the station: the *Enterprise* was dead. A medical team beelined straight through to start triage, while six other officers stopped each person to ask name and rank, starting the work of framing a terrible loss.

On a wall of the plaza, where civilian news streamed from Earth, a ticker was starting to run, news readers pausing, their faces grave: *We are just receiving reports of an attack on Yorktown station, which is home to over two million people. It is also believed that the Starfleet flagship Enterprise has been destroyed. Our viewers may recall that the Enterprise was the sole surviving ship after the battle of Vulcan almost five years ago and single-handedly prevented the destruction of Earth shortly after. No word at this hour on casualties...we are now getting video footage from Yorktown...*

McCoy grabbed Scotty by the shoulder and squeezed it before they plunged into the chaos. "Don't forget to get yourself to medical. I haven't worked this hard on your brain just to have you skip two days and end up back where we started," he said, and then snagged Kirk and Spock. "I'm taking these two yahoos to triage because you just know they both are bleeding internally."

"Aye. Take Jaylah too, she got beat up pretty bad," Scotty said and started moving through the crew, his words flowing as they reached out for him, relieved to see one of their commanders: *hold onto that arm son it's broken, yeh okay Matthews? nae, I havenae seen Josie, I dinnae ken if there will anything left to recover from the ship, nae they definitely willnae be putting the ship back together, Miguel get tae a doctor right now lad! Paulie can you get everyone lining up to talk tae the recovery people? I'm sure you'll be able to call yer mam in a few hours, I havenae seen her lad, I'm sorry I havenae seen him, aye I transported out everyone who was there, the hull burned up in the atmosphere laddie that wasnae survivable, I think they are organizing some food, I dinnae ken, Shawna's dead son, aye they'll probably send us back tae Earth ...*

"Scotty," Uhura said, grabbing him in the swirling chaos. "Have you seen Spock?"

"Aye. McCoy took him to triage. You okay lassie?"

She shrugged helplessly. "Maybe. You?"

"I havenae a clue."

"Name?" a *Yorktown* lieutenant asked him, padd balanced in his hand.

"What?" Scott asked, distracted by the sight of Sulu holding his daughter and weeping on his husband's shoulder.

"Your name, rank, and department," the lieutenant said, louder and more slowly, and Scott focused with difficulty.

"Scott, Montgomery. Lieutenant Commander. Chief Engineer." The lieutenant nodded and ticked a box, then put a green band around his wrist. "That report is live, sir, to a searchable database. Your loved ones will know you're safe.

"Too many of those are never going tae be marked safe," he said sorrowfully, looking at the officer's pad.

"I'm very sorry, sir," the lieutenant said crisply, and moved on.

Scotty paused in the middle of the plaza. The shape of the *Franklin* loomed overhead, with the damaged curve of the *Yorktown's* translucent hull beyond, orbited by still-burning debris. He felt the reality of it, which he'd been holding outside himself, finally settle in. The sounds around him felt distant, brittle. Even the beat of his own heart seemed false, and he abruptly wished it had ended on the *Enterprise*. *That's nae what you want*, a corner of his brain supplied rationally. *That's two days without meds talking. No food, no sleep. Trauma. Shock.*

Someone was singing softly, and it brought him back. *Nyota*. Some ancient Earth hymn, sad and mournful. The voices that only days ago would have joined her couldn't now. He didn't have the heart, and the rest were dead.

He knew how death felt. To say that he remembered it wasn't quite right. Not remembered, not exactly. But the final moment of passing was a part of him. *Nomad* had hit him, hard. And then... no sight, no sound, no feeling, no consciousness, just the last distant whisper of self, curled deep in the final electrical flickers of mind. No fear, and then he'd simply stopped existing.

Half the crew.

"...Scotty!" Someone was touching his face, looking urgently into his eyes.

"Mira," he managed, and she wrapped her arms around him.

"You weren't here for a second. Are you hurt?"

“I dinnae think so.”

“Is that a ‘no’ or a ‘I have no idea?’” she pressed him. On his shrug she propelled him toward the medical tent. “Everyone is supposed to get checked anyway. Scotty ... is the *Enterprise* really gone?”

He nodded his head, and she held him tighter.

“Doctor McCoy,” Mira said when they arrived at triage, and wrapped him in a hug too.

“Mira Romaine, you are a sight for sore eyes,” McCoy said kindly.

“You are no’ supposed tae be working, Leonard,” Scott chastised him.

“My patients are lined up out the door. Do you honestly think I can sit my ass on a biobed?” he scanned the engineer and frowned. “Can you give us a minute, Mira?” McCoy asked.

“I see Nyota, I’ll be right back,” she said, giving Scotty’s hand a squeeze.

“How are the Captain and Mr. Spock?” Scott asked, rubbing both hands through his hair and then down his face.

“Jim is under observation for a head injury. Spock is in surgery.” McCoy made an adjustment to a hypo before pressing it to Scott’s neck. “This will make you feel a little less dissociative and suicidal.” He glanced at Scott. “Right. No protest means you’re thinking of it.”

“Doesnae everyone kind of want tae die right now?” he sighed.

Jaylah, who had been sitting four beds away and resisting the hapless nurse who was trying to scan her to ensure that the atmosphere was appropriate for her unknown species, also apparently had excellent hearing. She had Scotty by the front of the shirt in about half a second.

“Montgomery Scotty you cannot,” she hissed at him. “I too have considered death. It is not the answer. We have survived. We are alive. You cannot!”

He smiled faintly at her. “I willnae,” he said. “My brain sometimes whispers lies tae me. Medicine helps, but I havenae had any for longer than usual. I know the sound of the lies, and can wait it out until the medicine makes me feel better. Now, lassie, will yeh please sit still and let the nurse make sure our air isnae going tae poison yeh?”

She let go of his shirt. “If you promise to stay I will let them.”

“I promise, lassie,” he said, and then spoke quietly to McCoy. “A passing thought, that it would have hurt less tae die with my ship.”

“Okay,” McCoy said, accepting the answer, and glanced up as Mira came back to stand beside them. “How the hell did you strain your shoulder, by the way?”

“Fell off a cliff,” Scotty answered.

McCoy sighed, and left the answer alone. “Rest, food, sleep.” He handed across a vial and a hypo. “The usual meds, plus a painkiller and a sedative.

McCoy turned to the next patient, and Scott slid off the biobed. Before he could move to go, he found himself face to face with another earnest young *Yorktown* officer.

“Are you being admitted to the hospital sir?”

“Nae,” Scott answered.

The officer handed him a packet. “Key card to a room in officer’s quarters, quartermaster ticket for clothing and toiletries, meal pass for the mess hall. You’re the second officer, sir?”

“I ... was.”

“Communicator then sir, as well, in case they need you. Report to Commodore Paris in her office tomorrow at 1100 to begin debrief.”

Mira took the supplies from Scotty’s unresisting fingers. “We’re not doing any of that tonight. Come on,” she whispered, and led him to her quiet apartment.

She made him eat a sandwich, and drink a cup of tea and a liter of water. Then, as he’d once done for her, she took him into the bathroom and stripped his uniform off him. It smelled of sweat and fear, smoke and dirt, dying starship and old starship. He wouldn’t be wearing starship red again for a very long time, Mira considered sadly, and put him in the shower.

He sighed and turned on the water. “Can yeh give me twenty minutes?” he asked

“I’ll be right here,” she whispered, kissing him gently. And then she sat on the other side of the door with tears running down her face while she listened to him sob.

Stardate 2263.67. My son has arrived on New Vulcan with the woman he loves. She will not be the mother of his child. And yet, she is the reason the child will be born. It is most curious. And most human.

It was a dream, a nightmare, and she knew it was, but that didn’t stop it from coming. She stepped into a dark room, and it was unmistakably a

dungeon. Not a prison, not a camp. A dungeon, smeared with blood and excrement. “They’re all dead,” Sulu said dully, looking up at her.

“What?” Uhura asked, her brain moving slowly. Words; what were words? They must mean something, but her mind couldn’t parse it. *Think Nyota!*

“Dead,” Sulu said, and when she turned around she was on the *Enterprise*, staring across at Kirk as the saucer separated, but he was dying, pounding helplessly on the glass as his body was consumed by the ravenous darkness.

Scotty was suddenly standing next to her. “The ship is dead,” he said in despair, his face lit by approaching flames. “Me too.”

“No, Scotty, you’ve got to get off,” she told him urgently, but he was gone and she was back in the dungeon.

“Dead,” Sulu repeated, except he was a desiccated corpse, laid out alongside Chekov, and McCoy, and the rest of the crew, dead in the halls, hung from the ceiling, devoured by darkness.

“Nyota,” Spock said, looking at her with pained confusion, and they were back on Hades’ world, hurting each other.

“No, Spock, please,” she sobbed while Kirk’s reanimated corpse stood over them. Blood dripped off their ravaged bodies and pooled between them. Someone was screaming, and it was Scotty, forced to watch, fighting against ropes that tied him to the command chair while the ship was torn apart and flames took him.

“Spock, oh, Spock!” she cried but suddenly he was Krall.

“Where’s Spock!?” she wailed.

“I’m Spock,” Krall said, releasing the weapon and watching curiously as it consumed her, “and I always have been.”

She screamed and screamed; it was all that was left of her, and she’d never stop.

“*Forgive me, Ms. Uhura,*” a gentle voice said in her mind. “*You are most distressed. Wake!*”

She opened her eyes and, terrifyingly, her brain couldn’t parse it. *Where?* The question echoed. And then the answer: New Vulcan. Spock? No. *Sarek.*

“I think, sir, you ought to call me Nyota,” she gasped shakily, looking up at the gracefully curved ceiling of Sarek’s guest room.

“Perhaps,” he answered, holding up a robe for her, his eyes politely averted. “Forgive me for waking you at this early hour. Your dreams were terrible, and I believed that you would not wish to continue in them.”

She nodded gratefully and walked into the New Vulcan predawn, struggling to shake off the nightmare. She could make out the mammoth red rock spires in the distance, dark shapes against a just-lighting sky. It was dry and cool, almost cold, but the air spoke of the heat that the day would bring. The last time she had been here, on an early voyage of the *Enterprise*, it had been little more than a dusty refugee camp. It had changed since then, grown more graceful. It was not Vulcan. But it was *New Vulcan*, and was coming to encompass the hopeful promise of that word.

“I’m sorry I disturbed you,” she told Sarek.

He inclined his head. “You are not the first person I have pulled from their nightmares this night. Spock cannot be disturbed, not in his state, but each of you of the late *Enterprise* had night terrors. We know such fear, on New Vulcan. We have seen horrors ourselves. But human grief, like human love, is raw in the profundity of its loneliness.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure I understand what you mean, sir.”

He folded his hands behind his back. “Allow me to explain. There are many things about humans that puzzle me. Among them is this: humans speak of sex often. They watch it for entertainment, they boast of it, they consume it in its many varieties. And yet, the moment it becomes holy, a manifestation of love —” Sarek paused. “There. You see. You looked away. To even speak of it is to intrude. It is puzzling to Vulcans. For us the act is deeply communal.”

“You’re a telepathic species; we’re not,” Nyota shrugged. “For humans, an act of love belongs only to the person given it. Private unity.”

Sarek looked into the distance, to the rising suns. “And yet, from the Vulcan perspective, there is no such unity at all. My beloved Amanda always left her mind open to me, enfolding me, although she did not realize it. But I could not reciprocate, and it grieved me. To comfort me, she insisted that in those moments she felt a closeness and a belonging that she felt in no other time.”

“She was right,” Nyota said.

“Ah, but do you not see? Even as she claimed that connection, her mind remained deeply, profoundly alone. If those are the times when you feel bonded, how alone must you be in the other moments of your lives?”

Nyota frowned. “I don’t know that I agree. We don’t feel bereft,” she answered him. “Humans can’t know with certainty what others feel. Perhaps that’s why we are so emotional. We have only words and action to guide us. We show our love with tender pleasures, with sacrifice, with naked vulnerability, with trust. When that is reciprocated, Ambassador, we *know* we are not alone. And that knowledge is enough.”

“An act of faith,” Sarek said.

“Yes,” Nyota agreed slowly, thinking on it. “For humans, love is always an act of faith. Sex is one thing, but that kind of faith isn’t something

for just anyone to consume. And to intrude uninvited would be a violation.”

Sarek paused, gathering his thoughts. “This experience will not be that way. It will be shared in a manner that you have not experienced. And I am concerned, in light of your dream this morning, and those of your friends. How much of that dream truly happened?”

“All of it, in one way or another.”

“The sexual violence?” he asked gently

“Yes,” she said. “My dream also had elements of a brain injury I experienced earlier, and a layer of death from the later loss of the *Enterprise*, but otherwise that is how it happened.”

“Then I am much concerned. There are ways in which this may be reminiscent of that. Not in intent, or force, but the borrowing of body and soul. I fear for you, for Spock, for your companions. The pon farr does not have to be accomplished in this way.”

“This is the only way for a child,” Nyota said.

“Yes,” Sarek answered.

“Then this is the only way. To speak honestly, sir, I have hopes that this will be healing.”

“Speak to your friends one more time,” Sarek asked. “For it to be so, they must also be sure. Speak soon; the time draws near.”

Nyota had looked on many stars, but a twin sunrise from the surface of a planet was a rare pleasure, although deeply alien. And, she considered, as she walked, perhaps a fitting metaphor for their purpose here on Vulcan. Two bodies; one light.

Kirk and Scotty were where she had left them the night before, in a guest house adjacent to Sarek’s home. They looked tired, and it was obvious that Sarek had also pulled them from their nightmares.

Her question set Kirk pacing. “You want to know if we’re completely sure about this. Okay. Let me just make sure I understand the logistics,” he said, counting it off on his fingers. “First, and key to this foray into Vulcan sex and reproduction, is Saavik. A Vulcan woman who is bonded to her husband, and has no desire to break that link. But her husband was irreversibly injured in the fall of Vulcan. He is a mind trapped in a broken body, with no possibility of children. Then there is Spock, fertile at any moment now. But he is bonded to you, and inconveniently for the endangered species, you’re human.”

“And uninterested in being pregnant,” she supplied.

Kirk nodded. “But the mental bond is critical to the reproductive aspect. So to work around that, the four of you will share your consciousnesses. Two bodies—Spock and Saavik—making the baby, but four minds participating. As far as Saavik is concerned, her husband is inhabiting Spock, and as far as Spock is concerned, you are inhabiting Saavik.”

“Essentially we are,” Nyota said.

“I’m an openminded pansexual, and so is Scotty, but you’ve got to admit it’s a little strange,” Kirk sighed.

“A limited human view, apparently,” Nyota said. “According to our host.”

Kirk rubbed his eyes. “Please don’t ever tell McCoy that Ambassador Sarek of New Vulcan considers me sexually puritanical, I’d never live it down,” he groaned, then continued. “Adding to the complexity, the four of you each need someone on the outside, grounding you, or you run the risk that you won’t return to yourselves. Saavik and her husband each have their friends. Me for Spock. Scotty for you. We aren’t participants, exactly. Anchors.”

“Yes. Your participation should be limited to emotional transference.”

“You say that as if it is any *less* intimate.” Kirk ran a hand through his hair. “It is just me, or does this seem a tad overcomplicated?”

“It’s been done before. Not often, and not with humans, but it has been done.”

Scotty was looking out the window, arms crossed as he gazed across infrastructure he’d built years before with his own hands. “What I need to know, Nyota, is whether you are really okay with this.”

Nyota stepped over and leaned into him, her head on his shoulder. In the distance she picked out the high communication tower where they had once stood, working side by side, before they had truly known each other. Ambassador Spock had spoken of extraordinary friendships to come, and she understood now what he had meant.

“I’ve been examining this since Spock proposed it four days after we lost the *Enterprise*. And I’m at peace. But the two of you got pulled into this last week. You have to be sure too.”

“If Spock is sure, I’m sure,” Kirk said firmly.

“Aye,” Scotty answered, looking over at her. “If you’re sure I’m sure.”

“An act of faith?” Nyota asked.

“Seems like that’s all I’ve ever got,” Kirk answered.

“Very human,” she said with a smile, and Kirk looked curiously at her.

There was a gentle knock on the door, and it was Sarek. "It is time," he said.

The two human men exchanged a glance. And if they were nervous and a little fearful, they were also willing. She hoped it was enough, and inclined her head. Six Vulcans immediately came through the door, and Nyota had to agree with Kirk's assessment. *Over complicated* she thought ruefully as they were washed and dressed in white ceremonial robes, then led into an inner chamber.

Spock was there.

He sat to one side of the room, and Saavik on the other, beside her husband. She was young, much younger than Nyota had thought she would be, and so was her husband, despite his ruined body. Nyota went to Spock, and reached for his hand, stroking two fingers down his. He lifted his head, and he was trembling, his eyes strange with fire and need. She kissed him, careful not to push too far. She sat beside him, and the complex work of making the necessary mental connections began, assisted by a group of strong Vulcan telepaths.

Her bond with Spock had been made long ago, but they checked and strengthened all the same. An insult, she knew, from the way Spock stirred, but she didn't mind. Despite the distress of his condition, Spock was as he ever was. Deep waters; a placid surface with churning depths. His mind was aligned and precise, but for the first time she realized that it was by training and not inclination. The true Spock was infinitely curious, unfailingly good, and deeply passionate. She loved him more than she ever had.

Then their anchors. They gestured Kirk forward, and he took Spock's left hand while Spock reached out with his right, into the mind meld. She hadn't expected to feel Kirk, but she became aware of him through Spock. The boy she'd first met in a bar in Iowa—for a boy he had been—was long gone. His spark of mischief and of danger remained, but he was a rock. More than that. A mountain, towering from his heights to the depths of the bedrock buried deep in his heart. Unmovable, unforgettable, extraordinary. Captain James T. Kirk, straight through, and she realized with a sense of wonder that he was the foundation of Spock's soul. A quirked eyebrow from the telepaths; she wondered if it was good or bad.

Then Scotty, and he smiled at her and took both her hands, neither of them capable of a mental connection without help. Two telepaths touched their faces, making the link. Scotty's mind was entirely different from Kirk's or Spock's. It swirled and *moved*, lit by mathematics that illuminated every corner of the universe in a piercing light. But there was a vast, black chasm here as well, gashed into him. Some of it looked old, its edges smooth, but there were also newer, ragged, clearly irreparable fissures, and she mourned to see how profoundly it had shattered his bright and cheerful mind. Even so, while Scotty was not and could not be the rock that Kirk was, his feet were unerring on a path that he seemed to summon effortlessly into existence. More eyebrows from the Vulcans, including Spock.

Unexpectedly she felt herself being reflected back in each of them. *Go ahead and look*, she felt from Spock. It was not how they saw her, or how she saw herself; it was how she *was*. To her surprise, her mind was the most ordered of all. If Kirk was heights, and Spock was depths, if Scott was light and dark, her mind was *breadth*. She was connection, and communication, and understanding, reaching out endlessly. Curious, quick, clever, kind. Unafraid to go as far as she needed to understand the world and, more, the people in it.

"It is unorthodox but stable," someone said, and they were talking about the four of them.

And then the Vulcans built a bridge across, so that Saavik's husband could share his bond with Spock. Whatever that felt like, it was kept from Nyota. And then another, so that Nyota could share her bond with Saavik. She felt the first stir of human emotion in that, and yes, it was jealousy, but also fear that her faith was in vain and the bond wasn't real. That Saavik would laugh sympathetically at her for presuming Spock's love.

It is real, said many voices, and she had to close her eyes because her brain needed to borrow her frontal cortex to navigate this. Spock took Saavik's hand, and Nyota felt it as though it were her hand. He kissed lips, and Nyota couldn't tell whose lips were kissed. She reached out to touch him, and wasn't her hand. Then a body moved, and it may have been hers, but not under her command.

The terror of it sliced straight through her, through Spock, and deep into Kirk and Scott. None of them had their eyes open, but the observing Vulcans did, and all four of their heads snapped back as one as though struck, each of them crying out in fear.

"What is this?" someone asked with deep concern.

"Nightmares," Sarek said sorrowfully. "They must try to cross this together."

The four of them faced each other across Hades' torture chamber. There was blood on the floor, red and green. His mocking, malevolent laughter echoed through the vast hall, but worse was the distant, primal screaming that they knew was their own raw voices.

You are not here, four Vulcan voices said inside their minds: Saavik, and her husband, and their anchors. Also, outside, with their waking ears, Sarek and the telepaths spoke as well. *You escaped this place. What was done then was done in pain and evil and hate. What we do now is done with free will and tenderness and love. You are not here.*

"I'm afraid," Nyota and Spock told each other simultaneously.

"Don't make me do this," Kirk and Scott begged.

You are not here.

"We aren't here," Nyota said shakily, and reached for Spock. "You are touched because I wish to touch you," she said, with her hands on his chest.

"We are not here," Spock agreed, and kissed her tenderly. "You are kissed because I wish to kiss you." Spock reached for Kirk. "Jim. We are not here. You are not hurting me. You are strengthening me. I stand beside you, as I always stand beside you, because I wish it. I am now and shall always be your friend."

“We aren’t here, Scotty,” Nyota murmured, and caught his face between her hands so he would look at her. “The things before your eyes are not tortures, but acts of love.”

You are not here.

“It’s the truth,” Spock said, certain.

“How can you know?” said Nyota, and Jim, and Scotty.

You may know by the words and actions of those you love. Have faith that you are not alone, and you shall not be.

“We are not here,” they agreed together, and Hades’ realm dissolved. The nightmare would never leave her, not entirely, but Nyota knew, with distant, shaky relief, that she would always be able to escape it.

On New Vulcan, although her body remained on the other side of the room, Nyota reached for Spock through another’s hands. She understood that in that moment that Saavik also reached for her husband, his body unbroken for these moments in the form of Spock.

Satisfied that what had been a precipitous situation was now stable, the telepaths and Sarek withdrew to another room. The four anchors remained. Whether the Vulcans watched, the humans did not know, for their eyes were closed—a very human reaction to an immense act of faith.

Nyota accepted the strangeness of it. Of soul outside of body, of a body not hers moving against Spock in every familiar, intensely erotic way that she’d always known. Of an awareness of another, weeping with the joy of being enfolded again by her own beloved. Of pleasure pooling urgently, even as she was both untouched and most tenderly touched.

Let go, Nyota, let go, Spock, the Vulcans said kindly in her mind, and Nyota could see that the two of them were still holding themselves separate, still aware of the difference between self and other. Her attention was turned, gently, to Jim and Scotty, present in that soulscape. Perhaps it should have felt intrusive, but there was nothing in them aroused or voyeuristic, nothing embarrassed or dismayed. They were still points, and with them waiting to protect them and bring them home, she could let go. Spock could let go.

And so they did.

When it ended, the bonds slowly dissipated into a gentle afterglow. The friends of Saavik and her husband lifted them wordlessly and carried them away to another room, to sleep and wake beside each other. Nyota curled beside Spock on a bed he had—and had not—shared with another. They too would sleep and wake entwined.

Kirk and Scotty looked at each other, and stood. And if there were tears running down their faces, neither man mentioned it. They stepped outside, into starlight. “It’s *night*,” Scotty said, astonished. “How the hell is it night? Wasnae it morning?!”

“That apparently took longer than we thought,” Kirk said.

“Yes,” Sarek said simply, coming to stand beside them. “I will have food and drink brought to your lodgings, and you must rest. You may stay as long as you desire, but Spock and Nyota will remain alone together for many days yet.”

“Is there anything you still need of us, sir?” Kirk asked Sarek.

“No,” Sarek said. “You have our deepest gratitude. The child was conceived; we sensed it. The first on New Vulcan.”

“That is extraordinary, Ambassador. Thank you for letting us be a part of this.” Kirk hesitated. “I think we may sleep easier after today.”

“I believe you shall. Captain Kirk, Commander Scott,” Sarek raised his hand. “Live long, and proper,” he said, and withdrew.

Kirk put a hand on Scotty’s shoulder, leaning on him, searching unsuccessfully for the words to say, and Scotty looked over at Kirk.

“Am I allowed tae say ‘holy shit,’ now sir?” Scotty asked with a shaky laugh.

“Holy shit, Scotty,” Kirk agreed fervently, and waved a finger between them. “You and I are going to change out of this Vulcan pajamawear, and then go get very drunk.”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty said gratefully.

“And then sleep for two days and find a shuttle back to Earth, I guess.”

“I’m no’ going back tae Earth,” Scott confessed.

Kirk squinted at him. “Excuse me? Just where the hell are you going, then?”

“*Yorktown*,” Scott answered simply.

“The *Enterprise*,” Kirk guessed reverently, and Scotty nodded. “In that case, Mr. Scott, you and I are going to get very very *very* drunk. Where do you think they keep their liquor?”

Scott shrugged. “I have a bottle of scotch in my room. Also, McCoy bought a case of bourbon two weeks ago and I make it a point tae steal a bottle of it from him every time he does, because it makes him crazy.”

“You are a smart man, Scotty. The Vulcans agree. Did you see the look on their faces when they figured out that you are a once-in-a-generation mathematical genius? Which, by the way, I didn’t know either.”

“You people really walk around yer whole lives without all that goin’ on in yer heads?” he grumbled. “No wonder I’m flat mad and cannae sleep. You, sir, by the way, are some sort of fixed monolith of the multiverse upon which history turns, so you cannae get away from incredulous Vulcan eyebrows either.”

“It’s Nyota who was really impressive in all this,” Kirk said softly.

“Aye,” Scott agreed. “She is always the most impressive person in the room.”

“Strange new worlds,” Kirk said with a laugh. “I just didn’t think we’d find them in Earth’s oldest friends, or with ours. Right. Drinks, Scotty. All of them. Now.”

Chapter End Notes

There is a brief scene in the second section based on a deleted scene in *Beyond*, and it’s the reason Mira Romaine is in this story. You can find it a couple of places, including here: <https://screencrush.com/star-trek-beyond-deleted-scene/>

Chapter Summary

The crew spends a year apart, and prepares for the launch of Enterprise A

/jtkirk/letters/condolencesrecovery. Last accessed 2264.270. Dear [insert appropriate honorific], I am writing to inform you that the body of your [insert relationship], [insert name/rank] has been recovered from the wreckage of the Enterprise. After all this time, I hope it brings comfort to you. [insert personal reminiscences or ask senior staff]. [His/her/their] body is being cared for on Yorktown Station, and will be returned to you in the coming days by an escort, who will be in contact with you each step of the way. You have my thanks for the exemplary life of your [insert] and my very deepest condolences. Sincerely, James T. Kirk, Captain, late of the USS Enterprise.

... the endearing thing about him was how much he loved to be in command of a starship. He was constantly volunteering for Gamma shift rotations so he could take the conn through the whole night, even if it meant pulling a double shift in the morning. Other than the first and second officers and myself, I believe he had the most time in the command chair of anyone aboard. I sometimes had to remind him that he needed to let other people have a turn! He was made for it, and I am convinced he would have had his own Captain's chair before long. I will always remember how much he loved it, and keep that feeling with me ...

...she was an exemplary scientist. She combined her endless curiosity with precise scientific rigor. It was an honor to edit her ten published papers, all of which were astrophysical breakthroughs. She had a passion for taking things that were unknown and shining the clear light of science on them. Her loss is incalculable...

... you already know this, but he was a born engineer. He loved night shifts the most, because he could get into the machinery without interruption. He was a godsend to me. On more than one occasion I'd walk down to Engineering late in the evening to talk with him about a strange noise or a hitch in the engines. And every time I did, he always told me the same thing: that he already knew, that he'd sorted out what was wrong, and that it would be fixed before morning. And sure enough, in the middle of the night the rough sound would suddenly smooth out. He'd done it again, and I could sleep easier for it ...

...she was an exceptional nurse. She had worked particularly hard on training in psychology and counseling. The crew knew they could trust her, and they did. She had the perfect combination of empathy and professionalism. I know she was the difference between survival and despair for more than one member of the crew. You should be so very proud of her. I always was...

...while she survived the initial attack, one of the final acts of her life was to save mine. It was an act of supreme bravery. The unity and love that the crew had for one another was unmatched and she died, as she had lived, for others...

...particularly on deep space missions with species we'd never met, language was a constant challenge. Although the translator helped, we often had to make decisions about nuance and shading—so critical in a first contact—with very little information. Our advice could make or break the mission, and either protect the away team or put them in danger. She had an instinctive knack for it, especially if she could get face to face with the people. She had been on more first contact missions than any communications officer in Starfleet, a fact about which she was very proud, and rightly so...

...he was my friend. What more can I say? We teased each other about Russia and Ireland, and the merits of their women and alcohol, but were going to give each other tours of our hometowns when we got back. I miss him ...

Commodore's log, Starship Group One, Stardate 2264.356, from Yorktown Base. Routine reports received from Intrepid, Reliant, Hawking, Bernoulli, and Chandrasekhar. It still hurts not to receive reports from Enterprise, even after all this time, but the launch of Enterprise-A is imminent. Project Engineer Cmdr. Scott reports success in bringing the warp core online. He has declared the ship to be a 'reincarnated soul.' If ships have souls, I believe he may be correct.

After a mildly uncomfortable two-week journey, Lieutenant Commander Hikaru Sulu, Lieutenant Commander Nyota Uhura, and Lieutenant Pavel Chekov stepped off the mid-range transport into the always-impressive terminal of Yorktown Starbase. More impressive, though, as far as they were concerned, was the Starship visible through Yorktown's clear walls, sitting majestically in one of the massive berths. Crowds of passengers from disembarking ships always paused there in wonder, and the three crewmates were no exception.

"She's gorgeous," Chekov breathed.

"The Enterprise," a passerby said, stopping beside them to gesture up at her. "Almost done, I hear. We'll miss seeing her when she's gone! She vanished about a week ago, and disappointed us all because we thought there would be a big show when they launched her. But then she was back a day later. They don't say anything, obviously. It's classified. But good bets are that they took her out to start her warp core. It's too dangerous to do that in the middle of two million people!"

"You live here?" Uhura asked politely.

"Three years!" the man responded cheerfully. "Best place in the Federation to live if you ask me, even with that attack two years ago." He gestured at the Starship. "Her crew saved us. Part of the reason they got her done so fast. The shipyard was very motivated to make a gift of her to James T. Kirk." The man nodded firmly and proudly. "Are you just visiting?"

"Briefly," Sulu answered.

“Starfleet,” the man said knowingly. “You’re not in uniform, but you live here long enough and you can start to tell.” Then he looked harder at them. “You’re *Enterprise* crew, aren’t you? You are. I can see it in your eyes. The last *Enterprise*.” He reached out and took their hands. “Thank you for saving my life,” he said reverently.

“Our honor,” Uhura said softly.

“They always say that,” the man said, his eyes sad, and walked away with a bow.

“That kind of thing happens around here, sometimes,” a familiar voice said behind them.

“Scotty,” Nyota breathed fondly, and turned to give him an enveloping hug, which he readily returned, then draped an arm over Chekov and Sulu’s shoulders. He wasn’t in the Starship red they were used to seeing, but Starbase grey, with *Yorktown*’s patch on his shoulder.

“What d’ye think?” he said, smiling up at the ship.

“I don’t think there are words,” Nyota said softly.

“I certainly never have them,” Scott agreed, giving the ship another lingering look. “Let’s get you settled.”

For all of their easy camaraderie, none of them had seen Scotty in a year and a half. In the first weeks following the disaster on Altamid, the surviving junior officers and crew of the late Starship *Enterprise* had scattered to the stars. New assignments, new postings, although many would return to the new ship when it was time. The seven members of the command crew, however, had returned to Earth, directly into endless debriefings, intense and difficult mandatory counseling, a short inquest which had resulted only in commendations, and a soul-crushing round of funerals as bodies were slowly recovered from the wreckage on Altamid—or memorials when there was nothing to bring home.

Scott’s engineering department had taken the brunt of those losses. The secondary hull, sliced to pieces, had vented scores of personnel straight into space. The chief knew well that many of the rest of his missing people had been cut off from all routes to evacuation. Structural integrity gone, the secondary hull had largely burned up in the atmosphere, along with anyone who hadn’t found their way out. At a quiet dinner hosted by the Sulus one evening, mostly drunk and still in his dress uniform from another service, Scotty had admitted that he had nearly met the same fate. Oldest of the command core by nearly a decade or considerably more, they’d watched his hair go noticeably silver during those months on Earth. While the rest of them found some comfort in being together in San Francisco, it had surprised no one when Scotty didn’t come back from what was supposed to have been a week on New Vulcan, but bolted at the opportunity to get back to the emerging new *Enterprise*.

Starfleet had filled in the second stripe on this sleeve, a promotion good enough for Project Engineer, with the dangling temptation of the third stripe and Shipyard Commander at *Yorktown*. A promotion he’d never take, not with the *Enterprise* waiting, for all that Starfleet would have liked to keep their best theoretical physicist and design engineer far away from deep space. Kirk had been locked in a near-constant battle with Starfleet Engineering to keep him for the *Enterprise* until Spock had pulled out regulations to remind the Admiralty that assignments to active duty on a starship had priority over other orders.

“They wanted tae stick you in officers quarters,” Scotty said as they followed him through *Yorktown*’s gleaming streets. “But there are plenty of nicer places on *Yorktown*, so I got you a B&B.”

“Very nice,” Uhura said approvingly when they arrived.

“Cheers, Seamus,” Scott greeted the proprietor. “My mates, Hikaru, Pavel, and Nyota.”

“Ah, the mystery guests!” the man said, cheerfully Irish. “And not the only ones! There are Starfleet officers streaming in from everywhere. You’re launching her soon, aren’t you?”

“Classified, Seamus!” Scott said.

“Classified my arse, parked in plain view of a million people. The damn *Klingons* know you’re launching by now.”

“I take it you know each other?” Uhura said, amused.

“Aye, ma’am,” Seamus said. “Scotty and I share an appreciation of old liquor, and a powerful urge to drink each other under the table. Which largely ends in a draw.”

“Largely ends in us drunk,” Scott snorted.

“That too. Your luggage is already upstairs,” he said, turning his attention to his guests. “If you’d prefer to trade rooms, feel free, and the common area is entirely yours.” He hesitated, then forged on. “You’re ... *Enterprise*, aren’t you? Not just our fair lady out front. The other one. Thank you for your service,” he said. “Please, go take a look at your rooms. The view is incredible.”

Rooms inspected and declared perfect, they congregated for a few minutes more on the large balcony overlooking a twisting gravity drop.

“Where have you been living this whole time, Scotty?” Chekov asked.

“Mira’s,” he said simply. “*Yorktown* Archive is her permanent posting, and she bought an apartment. It’s ...” he stared at his hands. “She wants me tae take a permanent assignment here at the shipyard. I’m not going tae do that. Not now; not with the *Enterprise* sitting there. I moved out tae the ship yesterday. I’m leaving for five years.” Scott shrugged ruefully. “That’s hard as hell, and I’m a shite boyfriend, much less a long-distance one.”

“Bring her to dinner tonight,” Nyota said softly.

Scott shook his head. “She’s on Beta shift this month. She has tomorrow off, so we have plans.” He sighed. “Letting each other go.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Sulu said gently.

“Mira is as kind and patient and good as your Ben is,” Scott agreed with a sad smile. “But I’m no’ half the man you are, Hikaru.”

“You’re wrong,” Sulu said fervently.

Scott shrugged, disagreeing. “Get settled and rest a bit, that shuttle in from Earth is brutal. I have a shift tae finish, then I’ll come by and grab you for dinner at 1900.”

Scotty was perfectly capable of living on protein nibs, reheated burritos, and two-day old sandwiches, but he preferred not to, and the restaurant he brought them to was excellent. Quieter than shore-leave fare—which was always about getting drunk and laid in more or less that order—this was the kind of hidden gem that the locals knew.

“How was your thesis defense, *Doctor* Chekov?” Scotty asked, after drinks had arrived and they were waiting for their meal.

“It went fine, thank you again for the sponsorship,” he said, then sighed. “It was a leetle strange if I am being honest. There was the Nero thing, and then the Khan thing, and that was all bad enough. And when we finally came up for air after Altamid and the battle of *Yorktown*, it was like ... I don’t even know the word. We were?” he gestured helplessly at Uhura.

“Badass motherfuckers,” she supplied, to choked laughter from Sulu. Scotty smiled faintly at her.

“That works,” Chekov shrugged. “My thesis defense was closer to a book signing than a scientific inquiry.”

“You should have seen my first lecture at the Academy,” Uhura said, leaning forward and gesturing with her wine. “It was supposed to be a xenolinguistics seminar with twenty seniors. There were two hundred cadets *and* professors stuffed in there.”

Sulu shook his head. “About the thousandth time I told the story about flying the *Franklin* off the cliff, I cashed out every hour of leave I had, and have been spending the days on the beach with Ben and Demora, where no one knows us,” Sulu said. “Life on Earth is stupid.”

“There is a wee bit of that here,” Scott admitted. “More along the lines of what you saw today, though. They take it seriously on *Yorktown*. But then, they processed the bodies from the recovery here.” He frowned and rolled his drink between his hands. “The recovery team actually found a piece of the secondary hull two weeks ago that hadnae burned up in the atmosphere. Main Engineering.”

“I’d heard that,” Uhura said gently.

“Six bodies,” he continued, and angrily finished his scotch. “Six o’ *my* people, or what was left of ‘em. And I’m standing there beside Commodore Paris in dress grey, sending them home in boxes. Here on *Yorktown*, they say they can recognize *Enterprise* crew by the look in their eyes. Maybe so; I try nae tae look in the mirror that often.” He sighed. “I need another drink,” he said, standing and heading to the bar.

“I was worried about him being here alone,” Sulu sighed. “For good reason.”

“We are not the same as we were,” Chekov argued. “None of us is. We cannot be.”

“There’s ‘changed’ and then there is ‘still traumatized,’” Sulu countered.

“Give him a break, Hikaru,” Uhura said. “A week ago he sent six of his kids home for closed-casket funerals. It was *main engineering* they found. And he’s breaking up with his girlfriend tomorrow out of misplaced chivalry. He’s allowed to be maudlin.”

“Who’s maudlin? Scott asked, sitting down again. “McCoy?”

“The usual ‘five year mission, god I hate space.’” Uhura laughed. “I think he’s genuinely confused how he got talked into this again.”

“As if he could say no tae the Captain,” Scotty said. Their food arrived and they murmured their thanks. “They grow most of it here,” Scott explained, “although they have tae keep the Terran section sealed off. Earth pollen is apparently vicious on both environmental systems and non-Earth plants. The meat is imported, although they have a couple of animals in a little hobby farm for the school kids tae look at. So McCoy’s grumpy,” he continued, picking up the earlier thread. “How are the other two-thirds of our favorite trio?”

“Spock’s been teaching, when he isn’t hunkered down with Kirk planning the mission,” Uhura said. “You think *my* lectures are ridiculous, they have to schedule him the largest lecture hall, and he gets applauded at the end of every class.”

“Most illogical,” Chekov supplied, and Scotty smiled at him.

“Spock’s son was born early this year, on New Vulcan,” Nyota continued. “Soren. He’s beautiful. We’ve spent a couple months here and there with the baby and his mother. It’s ... good, Scotty. Really good. It’s right. It works.”

“I’m glad for yeh, and him,” Scott said earnestly. “And Kirk?” Scotty raised his eyebrows when his friends all glanced hesitantly at each other.

“It depends which of the ‘three Kirks’ you’re talking about, as you’ve put it in the past.” Uhura said at last. “There’s James T., world famous Starship Captain who can’t go anywhere without being recognized. There’s Kirk, the asshole.” Scott snorted at the apt description. “And then Jim, our friend. It’s mostly James T. these days, with occasional appearances by Kirk, although generally only when the Admiralty is being unreasonable. Jim appears only behind very closed doors.”

“Does he know about our little surprise?” Scott asked.

“I don’t think so,” Sulu answered. “Leonard is the weak link, but I think he’s afraid of what Spock would do to him if he spoiled it.”

“Spock’s onboard with it?” Scotty pressed.

“The Captain is engaged in the details of preparation. It would be illogical to disturb him with information that may or may not come to pass,” Uhura quoted. “So yes. He’s practically giddy.”

Scotty gave them the first genuine grin they’d seen since arriving. “I cannae wait tae see the look on his face.”

Commodore’s Log, Starship Group One, Stardate 2264.363, from Yorktown Base. Note change in designation. Yorktown Shipyard Project 0006 re-designated to Starship Enterprise 1701-A. Godspeed, Enterprise.

Captain James T. Kirk stepped out into the garden for a breath of night air. Inside, there was music, and drink, and food. Although the *Enterprise* was still weeks away from completion, much less shakedown, the tasteful garden restaurant had been reserved for the evening for the first meeting of the crew. Just the senior officers—the department and sub-department heads, the assistant heads, and the command staff—about thirty people, starting to buzz with the anticipation of the mission.

He’d been circulating through, saying hello. This was the first time meeting many of the officers, and he was in full ‘Captain’ mode, especially because, other than McCoy and Spock, the senior staff seemed to be missing. It was harder than he’d imagined. He’d caught himself looking around for familiar faces before remembering that they were dead. He knew he wasn’t the only one. There were ghosts walking here, and the old *Enterprise* crew felt it. Felt the loss, still. Probably always would.

As he’d feared, there was a division starting. He didn’t begrudge the way that the officers of the late *Enterprise* congregated. The things they had lived through together had bonded them deeply. But there was a creeping feeling of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that he’d need to address. He’d hoped the party would help—drink together tonight and work together tomorrow—but it wasn’t so far.

He lifted his face to the sky. The light pollution in a city like San Francisco was inevitable, but he could still pick out a few stars, plus Starbase One, always gleaming in geosynchronous orbit above the city.

McCoy strolled up behind him. “Happy birthday, Jim,” he drawled.

“I’m feeling a little stood up,” Kirk grumped. “None of this tonight is mandatory, and I knew Scotty wouldn’t be here. But I expected Nyota, Hikaru, and Pavel!”

McCoy shrugged, and glanced over at Spock who had also joined them outside. “I know they’ve all been off world for a few weeks on short term assignments, but they promised they’d be here. Ah! Look, here they come.”

And it was true, a laughing group was walking up the path, and Kirk smiled at them. Then he took a harder look and—

“Scotty, what the hell?” Kirk called out, a little concerned, grabbing the engineer’s elbow and shaking his hand. “I thought you were on *Yorktown* with our girl?”

“Aye,” Scotty said. “I was. Got called back tae Earth a wee bit early. Seeing as how I was on Earth, and seeing as how it’s your birthday, I thought I’d bring you two presents. First is this old and obscenely expensive bottle of scotch,” he said, handing it over.

“Thanks, Scotty,” Jim said appreciatively, lifting the bottle for everyone to see. “We’ll open this tonight,” he promised. Kirk turned back to Scott, a teasing eyebrow raised. “You said two presents?”

“Aye, I did,” Scott said, and broke into an enormous grin. He handed Kirk a pair of long-range binoculars, and looked significantly up at the night sky. “Dock One.”

It took a moment before understanding dawned. “*Oh my god*,” Jim whispered, and lifted the binoculars to focus them on the Starbase. “Oh, my god, Scotty. She’s in orbit!!”

“Captain James T. Kirk,” Scott said, and gestured at the command crew. “We have brought you the Federation Starship *Enterprise*.”

“You all knew!” Kirk laughed, in disbelieving wonder.

“That’s where we’ve been the last four weeks,” Uhura said, taking Spock’s hand. “They shipped the three of us out to *Yorktown* to bring her home under Scotty. I knew Spock could keep it a secret. Wasn’t so sure about Leonard,” she teased.

Jim handed the binoculars to Spock, and slapped a hand on Scott’s back. “Four weeks early?” he asked in wonder. A shout had gone up inside the restaurant, and the rest of the assembled officers started to pour out as the word spread.

“I’m opening this,” McCoy announced loudly over the commotion, holding up the bottle of scotch.

“Hell yes,” Scotty exclaimed. “That’s why I brought it. The *Yorktown* crew is damn good,” he continued, answering Kirk’s question. “And after ... everything,” he waved a vague hand, “they wanted tae get her done early for you, sir. But it’s more than that. She just wanted tae be born. Every time I expected tae have an issue, thought I’d have tae chase a glitch for three weeks, she just came together, smooth as you like. She’s ready tae go.”

The gathering shifted abruptly from a professional meet-and-greet to a *party*, as the officers of the *Enterprise*, old and new, bonded together in the giddy realization that their ship was in the sky. They slapped their Captain on the back: *congratulations, sir! happy birthday, sir!* and broke into increasingly drunken out-of-tune renditions of the Happy Birthday song as sung on at least six planets. Kirk knew that he would be buying the restaurant’s entire stock of liquor tonight. Sometime approaching dawn, with the last glass of Scotty’s scotch in his hand, Jim Kirk stood

up on a table.

“The *Enterprise!*” he called, gesturing to the sky, and those who knew him best knew that he was speaking of both of them.

“The *Enterprise!*” his crew roared back. With the word, Kirk felt the ghosts of his old crew leave him, going their ways to rest in peace. New ship, new crew, new mission.

Forward.

Chapter Summary

The second mission begins

Chapter Notes

Content warning: panic attack/anxiety, sexual content, gore, blood, permanent injury

Captains's log, Stardate 2265.66. We have been unconsciously—or, if I'm being honest, perhaps even intentionally—avoiding it, but Commanders Spock and Scott rightly insist that we have put it off for too long, and that it needs to be done before we enter deep space. Sometime in the next 48 hours, we will have an all-hands evacuation drill. I confess, I'm not looking forward to hearing those sirens. And I dare say that the other 128 veterans of the former Starship Enterprise onboard this ship will agree with me.

Nyota Uhura awoke in the very early morning to the feel of Spock's lips on her neck. Unexpected, although not remotely unwelcome. He brushed her mind for consent and, finding it, pulled her atop of him, hands skimming her sleepwear down her legs, fingers dipping, impatient to bring her sleepy arousal to meet his. He clutched her hips and pulled her forward onto his chest, the better to reach her with his clever lips and tongue.

"Spock," she laughed shakily, shattering as he touched her with his usual deft precision.

"You are precious to me. Always. Always," he murmured against her. It was the last time they would speak all day. In retrospect, she should have known what was coming.

It was 1700, just after the transition between Alpha and Beta shift. Spock seemed to have disappeared, which happened several days a week when he needed to work through Beta, although he usually let her know he'd be late. Nyota was debating between grabbing take-away from the mess hall or finding someone to sit with. She'd just decided on take-away and a quiet evening working on the communications duty roster when the sharp three-tone chime of an all-hands drill sounded, followed by the soul-dropping siren of the abandon ship. The alert started to cycle: drill tone, abandon ship, drill tone, abandon ship.

She stepped immediately into the hall outside their quarters. Sulu, their neighbor, grimly caught her eye. And then the power faded, followed immediately by the gravity, which rolled unevenly through the ship.

"*Shit*," Sulu muttered.

Uhura heartily agreed, stumbling over a sudden gravity shift in the middle of the hall. Not just a drill. A *scenario*. Officers were pouring out of their quarters. Alpha-shifters, half out of uniform. Gamma-shifters, who had mostly been asleep, pulling on trousers and boots.

"Let's go!" she barked through the hall, lit now only by emergency lighting, her strong voice carrying authoritatively. "Escape pods, station one! This is a drill! Do *not* eject, or Commander Scott will have your hide. Go! Go!"

Sulu was shouting encouragement from the other end of the hall, and it was going well until someone started screaming. Nyota battled upstream toward the sound and found one of her communications staff curled up on the ground. She thought, for a moment, that he was part of the drill, a simulated casualty, until she looked into his eyes.

Panic. Pure panic. And he wasn't the only one. Some were holding themselves together a little better, but couldn't let go of the wall.

"Pete, get up!" she shouted at him. Two of his friends were kneeling next to him, and they looked up at her in confusion.

"Evacuate!" she yelled at them. "Leave him!" Her feet came off the floor; there went the gravity.

Abandon ship. All personnel evacuate the computer continued pleasantly.

"Use the handholds!" she shouted at flailing crewmen. Someone was vomiting. The drill was breaking down; she could feel it. There were going to be a *lot* of simulated deaths, including her own, and most of those deaths were going to be people who'd survived Altamid. Maybe, she considered distantly, you only ever had one evacuation in you.

The radiological alarm sounded. Anyone in the secondary hull was now 'dead'; there were seconds left until the core breach. Nyota looked helplessly down the corridor. Her friends, her neighbors, her crew. *If this was real, we'd be dead.*

The alarms stopped. Lighting switched on abruptly, blinding them briefly. The gravity alarm sounded, warning to watch position and overhead objects as the gravity slowly came back online.

"Stand down the drill," the Captain's voice came over the comm. "Secure pods and return to stations. Thank you." Perhaps only Uhura heard the thread of tension in his voice.

By 2200 hours, the officer's mess was full of Alpha shifters who should have been thinking about sleep, Gamma shifters who sure as hell couldn't have gone back to sleep and were waiting for their shift to start, and Beta shifters whose shift commanders had taken one look at their eyes and dismissed them for 24 hours. They were, nearly to the person, veterans of the last ship called *Enterprise*.

The drill had been a failure with a dismal fifty-nine percent evac rate. They'd spend the next two weeks training in the basics and then, as Kirk had said, more than a little frustrated, '*obviously doing this again.*'

Uhura, Sulu, and Chekov were slumped wearily at one table, sipping at black coffee they shouldn't be drinking at this time of night, but it was better than the alcohol they knew they *really* shouldn't be drinking.

The Captain and First Officer wouldn't be here tonight, they knew instinctively. *Enterprise's* officers needed permission to fall apart, and Kirk and Spock knew perfectly well that their people would *never* do so in front of the ship's top commanders. So tonight, they would stay away.

Ordinarily, McCoy would have been here, grumpy and prickly and somehow comforting. But the drill had gone very poorly. There had been three inadvertent pod launches, which won the sheepish officers a solid tongue lashing from Scotty once they were brought back aboard, to say nothing of bumps and bruises. The evacuation scramble had also yielded a couple of sprained ankles and wrists, some cracked ribs and two mild concussions. Worst, though, there were at least twelve people with anxiety reactions so severe that they were likely facing medical discharge. '*If they can't get through an evac drill, they can't serve in space,*' McCoy had reported grimly to the Captain. There were many others struggling from milder post-drill anxiety reactions. McCoy more than had his hands full.

It was not surprising, though, when Scotty rested a hand on Sulu and Chekov's shoulders, then dropped into the chair beside Uhura. He offered her an upturned hand, which she took gratefully. "That went badly," Uhura breathed.

"Talk tae me," the ship's second officer said simply.

"I executed the abandon-ship, last time," Sulu sighed. "I was sitting there in the chair. I could happily go the rest of my life without ever hearing that alarm again."

"Da. And without standing in another escape pod," Chekov said glumly. "The sight of the *Enterprise* crashing into the planet through that window was the worst thing I have ewer seen."

Nyota leaned into Scotty, and he pulled her under his arm. "We didn't really realize our losses until we got to the planet," she said softly, the words flowing from her. "Trying to do a count by division and shift, and we didn't even have most of the shift lieutenants to do the count. Not a single commander had made it out. You were dead, Scotty. Keenser could barely bring himself to say it, but he was completely sure, because you'd shoved him into the last pod in the section. McCoy..." She breathed shakily, the next word terrible. "...Spock. And hundreds of other officers and crew. Missing faces everywhere."

"I was the senior officer," Sulu murmured, and there were unshed tears glistening in his eyes. "And we lost three other people after we got to the surface, murdered by Krall."

"Martine, Tomlinson, and Syl," Uhura whispered.

"Yeah," Sulu said, staring at the table.

Scotty hadn't said a word, letting them talk until they were done. When it became apparent that they were, he spoke softly. "None o' you made it off the ship today," he said quietly. "All three of you were classified as deaths. Mind telling me why?"

"There were people having panic attacks in the corridors, Scotty," Sulu said quietly. "Our people, from before. From Altamid. Not many, but a few couldn't even move."

"Aye," Scotty said. "And?"

"We couldn't leave them," Chekov said softly.

Scott looked levelly at all three of them. "Are you going tae make me say it?" he asked gently.

"No, Commander," Sulu sighed. "It's our duty to get off the ship."

"And you well know why, better than most," Scott said. He touched each of their hands, calling their attention to his eyes, then gestured to the room. "If we lose the ship, *they'll need you.*" Scotty looked fondly at all them, the shade of his own trauma from this and the *other* day in his face, then stood, squared his shoulders, and headed to the next table of despondently huddled officers.

Sulu looked at his friends, then stood resolutely and headed to another table. Chekov nodded firmly and followed. Uhura took a deep breath, pushed to her feet, and slid into a table next to some of Spock's science officers.

"Talk to me," she said gently.

Captains log, Stardate 2265.90. Back in deep space, on the other side of the Yorktown nebula, picking up where we left off two years ago. We're stretching our legs on some old-fashioned stellar cartography, and have already picked up something usual—a star on the verge of supernova. We are enroute for a closer look.

The sleek new *Enterprise* slipped in next to the gigantic star. The ship was the tiniest speck beside the vast fusion behemoth that was entering its last days—maybe its last hours.

"This is as close as we dare come, Mr. Spock," Sulu reported. "It would give us time to react to any large flares. Or the sun just going up in a

nova.”

“If it does you shall be the first to know,” Spock said dryly.

“Good idea,” Sulu said, amused.

“Are we sure this is actually safe?” McCoy asked, lurking at the Captain’s shoulder for no reason in particular.

“We’d have whole tens of seconds to go to warp,” Kirk said easily, which didn’t assuage McCoy in the least. Kirk gestured at the screen. “Have at it, Mr. Spock. Readings to your heart’s content.”

The bridge crew quietly examined the massive star on the view screen, dimmed so they could observe it. It was a red supergiant. Billions of Earth’s sun would fit inside it, but it was much cooler and much younger than Sol, for all that it was at the end of its life. A million years old, at best.

“This star is definitely nearing a supernova stage. More helium than hydrogen at the surface. Throughout the star I’m reading oxygen. Carbon. Nitrogen. Silicone.”

“Iron?” Kirk asked.

“Not yet,” Spock said. “When it does, it will have only moments remaining. It is quite extraordinary.” What went unsaid was that the readings were particularly valuable in light of the Romulan supernova, which they knew would occur in less than two centuries, although the Romulans were still claiming it was a hoax. It was something that Spock would have to contend with on some future day in his long life.

“Captain,” Uhura said, puzzled. “I’m picking up something from the star. Not a transmission, but sound waves. And not just those that would be naturally occurring. These are regular. Repeating. Organic. Almost like speaking, or a song.”

“Put it on speaker,” Kirk said, and a haunting, lyrical sound filled the room, deep and mournful. “That sounds like something living,” the Captain said.

“It is,” Spock said, straightening from his station, and if it was possible for him to sound awe-struck, that’s what he sounded like. “I am reading the presence of massive organic beings from *within* the star.

“That’s impossible,” Kirk whispered.

Spock’s hands moved steadily at his station for a moment, and then he glanced up at the bridge’s viewscreen and brought up an image.

“Star whales,” Uhura said reverently, and everyone on the bridge was on their feet, transfixed by the sight. It was as good a description as any, something truly wonderful and strange; something no one had ever considered, much less seen. But there was also a very obvious serious problem facing the vast, graceful creatures swimming through the surface of a sun.

“Living beings in a star about to go supernova,” Kirk sighed sadly. “The most amazing thing I’ve ever seen, and they are going to die. Any guesses, Mr. Spock and Ms. Uhura, about whether these are animals, or whether they are advanced thinking beings? Can we talk with them? Do they know the danger? Can we help them?”

“Unknown, sir,” Spock answered.

“I’ll see if I can tell whether this is a language,” Uhura said, and pressed her earpiece to her ear and closed her eyes in concentration.”

“Can we stop a supernova, Spock?” Kirk asked, staring hard at the screen. “Your counterpart from the other universe seemed to think it was possible. Is it possible?”

“With red matter, perhaps,” Spock answered slowly. “But as far as I am aware, there is no one in our universe who has started working on that substance.” Spock paused. “Although. Perhaps I am incorrect in that assumption. I once saw some extremely unusual mathematics written on the board in Mr. Scott’s office.”

Scott was summoned, and boggled at the beauty of the star whales, like the rest of them. The moment, however, his commanding officers said the words “red matter” and “supernova,” he turned wordlessly on his heel and walked back onto the turbolift.

“Huh,” Kirk said, nonplussed, exchanging a look with Spock and McCoy before heading for the lift himself. Scotty hadn’t gone anywhere, but was leaning face first into the wall. “Can you join us on the bridge, Commander?” the Captain asked, but it wasn’t a request.

“I appreciate that you think this kind of miracle is something I can pull off,” Scotty sighed, following his Captain. “But this is beyond us.”

“It wasn’t beyond the other universe,” Kirk challenged.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Scott argued. “Ambassador Spock didnae actually succeed in preventing the supernova. And, tae be frank, I fail tae see how creating a black hole is any less a disaster for a solar system than a supernova. Unless red matter wasnae actually supposed to create a black hole but a . . .,” Scott said, cutting himself off abruptly, as if something had just occurred to him that he didn’t like.

“A what?” Kirk pressed.

Scotty sighed. “An energy portal intae another dimension, like that damned thing we ran intae on that ghost planet a few years ago, except in reverse. Pulling energy intae our universe. Put that at the heart of a star and you might be able to give it enough ongoing energy to combat the energy loss from iron fusion and the collapse of the core.”

"Have you been working on it?" Kirk pressed.

"Working on what?" Scott asked, intentionally obtuse. On Kirk's look, he flushed, whether in anger or fear it was hard to say. "Have I reverse-engineered the superweapon that destroyed Vulcan? No, sir," he answered. "We dinnae know enough about the interaction between our universe and the other. It's entirely possible that the weapon *came from our universe*; that would explain why it drilled back here when it was deployed. So no. I'm nae going tae touch that particular destiny loop, lest I be any part of the reason billions of Vulcans died."

"He's got a point, Jim," McCoy said.

Spock interjected. "There is nothing beyond Mr. Scott's speculation, and mine, as to what red matter is. No formula. No testing to determine if it would be safe for the universe. No way to fabricate it. No way to store it. No way to deploy it. And no time; it would be the work of decades, if not more."

"Okay," Kirk said. "So how do we save them? Can we move them?"

"They are vast," Spock answered. "Each individual is the size of a moon."

"Transporter?" Chekov suggested reluctantly.

"Something the size of a moon? Tae another system? Nae, wee man," Scott said.

"You're telling me this is impossible?!" Kirk asked, and he was angry. Scott, Chekov, and Spock looked helplessly at one another. "That is unacceptable; figure something out, gentlemen!"

"Jim..." McCoy started, jumping in to soothe the irate Captain and defend his crewmates.

"I don't think you are going to have to," Uhura interrupted abruptly. "It's a language, and they are singing a *migration* song."

"How certain are you?" Kirk asked her urgently.

"Very," she said. "Look!" On the screen, the vast creatures were exiting the star. It looked slow, but they had to be moving at thousands of kilometers a second as they moved outside the surface of the star. Uhura put their song on the speakers, and translated softly:

— *we go. Like our fathers. From
Light to dark. For the sake
of our children. We breathe
the last warmest
breath and then
into the cold. We go—*

They poured out of the star, thousands of them, then millions, shining brightly, still lit by the incredible energy of starlight. Each unfurled a mammoth membrane from their bodies. A sail, to catch the solar winds. Spock's hands tapped on his station, making calculations. "With the push from the supernova and sails to catch the solar wind, they will approach approximately one-half the speed of light," he murmured. "And the nearest star is only 4.8 light years away."

"From inside a star to across the vacuum of space," McCoy said in wonder. "That is one hell of an evolutionary development."

"May I try to send them a message, Captain?" Uhura asked.

He nodded. "What should we say?"

Uhura paused, thinking. "How about 'we are small creatures who live in the black. We see you and are amazed. Blessed journey.'"

"Send it," Kirk said, and his communications officer went to work, manipulating the *Enterprise's* systems to send a sound wave through the very thin shell of material surrounding the star; just enough to carry sound.

"Sending," she said.

A few moments later, the star whales seemed to pause. They had no eyes or faces, but it seemed that they were startled and looking around.

"The song has changed," Uhura said. They are asking:

—*what? Where? Creatures
in the black? How?—*

Kirk sat bolt upright; this was communication and first contact. "Send this: 'we are small creatures. We came to see the end of the star. We did not know you were here. We are amazed by you.'"

Uhura sent it, and one of the star whales moved toward them.

"Careful Sulu," the Captain murmured. "Don't let it get too close; I don't think it can see us, and would easily crush us."

"Aye sir. They are actually moving very fast, beyond us. Should I follow?"

"Yes, at a safe distance."

The star whales sang at them:

—life??! In the black? Oh!
we would stay
We would speak with you
For a time. But we cannot
linger. We cannot. We must go!—

“Send this.” Kirk said. “we know. We will not keep you. But we will watch where you go, and find you again.”

— run! Quickly, the
time comes—

“We are very fast; do not worry for us. Safe journey to your new home.”

—find us again
Please—

“We shall.”

The star whales turned, moving very quickly already under their sail power. “They are traveling at full impulse speed,” Sulu said in wonder, “and accelerating.”

“Sir,” Spock interrupted urgently. “Iron fusion in the star has commenced. It has seconds.”

“Sulu,” Kirk said tensely.

“I’m on it, sir.”

“The star whales? Are they far enough?” Kirk asked.

“I believe so. The shockwave ahead of the nova should accelerate them,” Spock said.

“Spock, are you getting your readings on the star?” Kirk asked.

“Of course. The core has collapsed. And rebounded!”

— we go!!— The star whales sang with fierce joy.
— we go!!—

“Mr. Sulu!” Spock said urgently.

“Warping now!”

On the screen, now at maximum magnification behind the warping ship, the leading edge of the nova hit the star whales. Their sails caught its ferocious currents and, as Spock had predicted, accelerated them to half light speed. Physics took over; they were ahead of it and would remain so. They were safe, and headed on their long voyage.

“What is their heading?” Kirk asked softly.

“The nearest star,” Spock answered. “Less than ten years to their new home.”

Kirk looked around his bridge, and the awe-struck faces of his people. “And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why we are here,” the Captain said, unabashedly wiping the tears off his face. He would have been embarrassed, once, to weep on his bridge, but had long ago embraced what discovery did for his soul.

“That was beautiful,” Uhura murmured.

“Good job, Ms. Uhura,” Kirk said. “That was an extraordinary first contact.”

“Nice tae stand here useless, for once, and watch ‘em save themselves,” Scotty said. “Glad I was up here tae see it, sir. Mr. Spock, perhaps another day, when you’ve had a chance tae look at the data, we can talk about how tae stop the next supernova.”

“Red matter,” Kirk said ruefully. “You’re working on it, aren’t you?”

“Of course not, sir,” Scotty lied smoothly, heading for the lift. “If I was, I’d have tae report it tae Starfleet.”

“Right,” Kirk said with a sigh.

“Star whales!” McCoy enthused. “Their biology must be incredible. Do you think we’ll see them again? I’d love to study them closer.”

“Next five year mission, Bones,” Kirk teased him, and laughed at the look on McCoy’s face. “Mr. Spock, do you have all the readings you need on the supernova and the star whales?”

“Yes, sir,” Spock said.

“Very well. Mr. Chekov, Mr. Sulu, continue on our original heading, warp four. Let’s see what’s next!”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2265.357. The Enterprise is cruising through a largely empty section of space. We have gone days with little on

our sensors, and it seems we may go many weeks more. We have taken advantage of the opportunity for routine maintenance, for drills and for training. There is a fine balance, though, and also some advantage to letting the crew find their own ways to fill the moments between their duties. I keep cautioning people, however, not to tempt the universe with the word 'bored.'

Scott jerked awake face down on the deck, with no memory at all of how he got there, ears ringing, and someone shouting at him over the comms. He moved to push himself upright, but collapsed back to the floor.

"Ah, hell," he breathed, looking down at himself, and rolled shakily to his back.

Keenser was beside him, also flat on his back, looking woozily at him. After two more tries Scotty managed to push himself to sitting. His head swam nauseatingly, and a darkly overwhelming pain clawed up his left arm, threatening to put him under again.

"You have got to get that tied off now or you are going to bleed to death," Keenser whispered.

"Aye," Scott agreed weakly, hauling himself across the floor to where an emergency medkit was stowed. He fumbled with the kit, struggling to open it one-handed. He pulled out a tourniquet, but couldn't get beyond that.

"You are not going to get that on your own. Come here," Keenser said. His voice, barely audible to human ears in the best times, was breathless now. Scott crawled to his first assistant, medkit under his good arm. Once there, Scotty paused to examine Keenser's body, punched straight through with shrapnel down his right side, his guts oozing thickly blue under his cracked exoskeleton.

"You can't help me," Keenser said, ever steady even in agony, reaching up to his injured friend with his rocky hands. "But I can help you. Give that to me before all your damn slippery red blood runs out on the ground."

Scott made a choked, agonized sound as Keenser mercilessly cinched the tourniquet tight, below his elbow and above the shredded space where his left hand had been. The bleeding slowed and Scotty turned abruptly away from his friend to vomit. He wiped his mouth against his shoulder, breathing hard, trying to pull himself together, then turned back to Keenser.

"It's freezin' in here," Scott complained, and he couldn't stop shaking.

"We need the medbay," Keenser groaned, hands pressed deeply into his own exoskeleton.

They really did. Scattered over several meters were four other injured engineers, also caught in what had clearly been a violent explosion. From the splattered viscera that Scott knew didn't belong to him, it was disturbingly clear to the chief that, despite the severity of his injury, they were *all* hurt far worse than he.

He leaned against a console and closed his eyes to gather his strength, his heart pounding hard and uneven, and the darkness took him.

"Tell me this is what you really want," Mira Romaine was challenging him, eyes flashing as they walked through her favorite Yorktown garden. "Look me in the face and say it. That it's what you want, not that you're doing this because you think you know what I want."

He shook his head; he couldn't say it. "God, Scotty," she sighed, exasperated. "You think I don't understand? That I don't know you are about to put a starship on your back, and five hundred lives on your shoulders? You think I don't know that you'll work five shifts in six, and that you'll forget to eat and sleep, much less send a message to your girlfriend? You think I don't understand a five year mission? I know sometimes your voice will be a thousand light years and two weeks away on the other end of a choppy subspace message, but I'll take that. Your voice, telling me about the things the Enterprise has discovered. Complaining about Kirk, and idiot lieutenants, and synthetic tea." She leaned in and kissed him with aching tenderness. "Your voice, telling me how you'd touch me if you were here, and mine back, telling you the same. God. Please, Scotty."

He pulled her closer, shuddering under her touch. "Okay," he said. "Okay, okay. I'm nae strong enough tae tell you no."

"We already did this," she told him, pressing a lingering kiss to his lips before pulling away to walk beside him. "I talked you into giving us a chance. Then we went home, one more time, to our bed. And in the morning you got up, and put on a red shirt, and flew away on the Enterprise."

"I know," he said. "It's just that it doesnae hurt here, with you."

She leaned into him and threaded her fingers through his, and looked down at their hands. Her right, his left. "You have to wake up now, Scotty. The atmosphere is venting. The warp core is down, and your people are dying. You are too. You have to figure this out. Wake up, Scotty."

"...wake up Scotty!" Keenser growled at him.

Scott opened his eyes back into the ravaging pain, grabbed the edge of the console with his right hand, and hauled himself to his feet, wrecked left arm tucked hard against his body. He staggered and almost lost his feet, fighting to stay awake. "Report in," he called hoarsely to his people.

Only two answers came back, weak and pained. "Here, sir."

"Dinnae move," he ordered, and checked the board. Warp was offline from an emergency intermix shutdown and the main warp plasma conduit was blown to hell all over his engine room and through his people's bodies. Impulse was fine; he tightened his right fist to get to it stop shaking, tapped two commands to transfer the ship's power to the fusion backup, and then turned his attention back to their nearer plight. The bulkhead doors had dropped, trapping the six of them in the section nearest the warp core control where they had been working. Which meant hull breach.

Scotty finally turned to the comm, which had been shouting at them in the Captain's voice the whole time.

"Scott here," he groaned, sitting down heavily in the chair. He curled forward through another wave of agony and pressed his forehead to the control panel, breathing hard.

"Scotty. Thank god. What the hell happened?"

"I dinnae ken sir. I've been unconscious." Scott said, eyes closed. "We've had an explosion down here."

"Are you okay, Scotty?" the Captain asked sharply.

"No, sir," Scott managed. "I've got five critically injured people, and I seem tae have misplaced my left hand."

"...Acknowledged," Kirk said tightly. *"Hang in there."* In the background, Scott could hear Uhura urgently deploying a medteam.

"Bulkhead doors are down, sir," Scott sighed, and sat upright again to check the instruments. "So we have a hull breach in the section. Must be a small one or none o' us would be breathing down here. I assume no one has been shooting at us?"

"No, we just were torn out of warp without warning," Kirk said.

Spock's voice joined in. *"Internal scanners are showing two breaches in your section, Mr. Scott. Small; less than five centimeters each, and directionally aligned. I postulate that we have flown through something that the deflector did not catch."*

There wasn't much that the deflector wouldn't catch. Unless of course it was something that Scott had theorized might happen, had written an *entire bloody paper* to Starfleet Engineering about ... Scott shook his head against the darkness edging rapidly into his vision, then examined the data. The breaches were also aligned with the badly-damaged branch of the warp plasma conduit coming straight from the reactor.

He paused a moment to make sure his voice was steady. "I have a theory. I think we warped through a microscopic singularity ..." His breath hitched on an involuntary, punched-out groan that he knew they could hear on the Bridge. Then the shaking was back, rattling through him, and there was no controlling his breathing now. "Mini black hole," he continued when he was able to. "It went straight through Plasma Conduit A, which blew ..." he ran out of breath. "... blew up in our faces."

"As unlikely as such an encounter would be, your theory fits the preliminary facts, Mr. Scott," Spock said. *"Including faint spacetime distortions at what would have been the event horizon."*

"That's just unlucky," Kirk complained.

"I disagree, sir," Scott said, agony raw in his voice despite his best efforts. He put his head down again, the thought of the alternate possibilities draining away his remaining strength. "A meter fore an' it woulda gone through ..." He couldn't make it through the end of the sentence. "... th' *reaction chamber*." Another breath. "... and none o' us would be here tae talk about it."

Not unexpectedly, the life support alarm chose that moment to sound, the vacuum of space starting to win over the system's ability to compensate.

"Scotty," Kirk said urgently. *"You have got to get those breaches sealed."*

Scott did not answer.

"Scotty!" Kirk yelled, then spun toward Uhura. "He was losing it on the comm. If 'misplaced hand' means what I think it means, he might not be conscious anymore. Scramble an EVA team to get those breaches sealed from the outside."

"EVA says fourteen minutes," Uhura said, her voice tight.

"I have six men and women in Section E1 who don't have fourteen minutes!" Kirk snapped. "And we can't beam them out, correct?" Kirk asked.

"No, sir," Chekov said, though he was flipping through his padd anyway, trying to think of a solution. "There is a shield that drops around a sealed section with the bulkhead to shore up structural integrity."

"But doesn't seal a hull breach?"

"It does, for a while," Chekov said. "But it cannot stand up to a vacuum for long. One of Mr. Scott's frequent complaints and something on which he is working."

"Jim," McCoy's voice came over the comm. *"The goddamn bulkheads are down. I can't get to our people, and the environmental alarm is screaming at us down here. Atmosphere in their section is venting fast."*

"Stand by, Bones," Kirk said.

The minutes ticked by into the pindrop-silent bridge until Spock spoke. "Sir," he said, his voice gently regretful. "Sensors are reading a full vacuum in Section E1."

"Acknowledged," Kirk murmured, closing his eyes. The silence on the bridge turned grim.

"EVA reports the hull is sealed," Uhura finally said six deadly minutes later, her tone very carefully controlled.

"The techs are bringing up the atmosphere in there as quickly as they can," McCoy reported, his voice clinical. He knew perfectly well what

he was going to be walking into. *“Okay. Bulkheads disengaging. Stand by.”*

Kirk rubbed his eyes and face, waiting for the terrible confirmation they all knew was coming.

McCoy abruptly called up. *“I need Chekov and Spock and whomever else knows anything about transporters down here now! Your goddamn chief engineer has done something, but I don’t have a goddamned clue what. I think they’re alive but I don’t dare touch this thing.”*

“Sulu, you have the conn!” Kirk shouted, bolting for the lift with Spock and Chekov.

Section E1 was a mess, scorched by superheated electroplasma, pocketed by shrapnel, and smeared with what was unmistakably pulverized body parts. Several colors of blood pooled on the deck where six bodies had been. A human-colored streak crossed the space several times; clearly Scotty moving around the room.

No bodies now, though; just a portable cargo transporter laboring heavily in the middle of the room, tied hurriedly into the power system under the main warp control console.

Chekov swallowed past his rising gorge, then turned to the transporter with shaking hands. He wiped Scott’s blood off the controls with his sleeve. “Okay okay okay,” he said to himself. “Rematerialization subroutine disabled. He’s locked the pattern buffers into a diagnostic mode ... rerouted the matter array through the pattern buffer ... he’s using the phase inducer to keep the patterns intact ... you are *crazy* Scotty!” Chekov yelled angrily at the machine where the crew’s bodies looped impossibly as pure energy and data. He looked up at the Captain. “I am going to try to pull out Meester Scott first. That way if there is a problem with the others he can help. But if I get this wrong, this will kill him. I will kill him. Right now.”

“They were dead without this, Lieutenant,” Kirk said gently. “He weighed the risk, and took it.”

“Okay,” Chekov breathed, and punched the rematerialization sequence.

Scotty grimaced hard as his body reformed roughly. “Good job, laddie. How long?” he gasped.

“Twenty-nine minutes,” Chekov said shortly. “New record.”

“Let’s get them tae beat me,” he said, staggering toward the controls.

“Scotty, sit the hell down,” McCoy snapped, starting forward to grab him. “You’re going to bleed to death.”

“I’m about tae be the least of your worries,” Scott said, looking grimly at the Doctor, and then turned his attention to Chekov, who was sweating hard. “Gently, lad. One at a time. Matter stream, pattern, reintegrate ...okay, good. Slow, slow, slow”

“Traumatic amputation is the *light* injury?” McCoy muttered balefully, hesitating as he looked hard at Scotty. “I hate space.”

“Doctor,” Spock said, stepping forward, clamping both hands down on the trembling engineer’s arm with Vulcan strength. “I have him. Is pressure alone sufficient?”

“For now. Don’t cut yourself on the edges of those bones; you should see two, but watch for shards, they’ll be razor sharp. You should see two large arteries; thumbs on them as hard as you can, don’t let up, no matter how much it hurts him,” McCoy directed, then moved back to scramble a full emergency medical response, snagging the Captain to assist. Scott clenched his jaw and his remaining fist, forcing a breath through his nose, but otherwise kept his focus on the transporter.

It took four tense minutes, Scott calmly murmuring instructions to Chekov as though his breathing wasn’t entirely ragged with shock. Each crewman gasped back to existence on the deck, tended to immediately as the medical staff struggled to stabilize them and rush them to the medbay. Scotty was right; they were all critical. Keenser, the last, had no sooner materialized when Scotty collapsed.

Chekov grabbed him, and Spock and Chekov lowered him to the ground. “You goddamned son of a bitch,” Chekov said weepily, taking a fistful of Scott’s shirt. “You goddamned *fucking* son of a bitch. I’ve never been so scared.”

“I knew you could pull us out,” Scott said weakly.

“Good job, Chekov,” Kirk murmured, then pulled the Lieutenant up and passed him back, knowing that someone would tend to the shaken young man. When he turned back, Spock was kneeling with merciless precision on Scott’s arm.

“How you doing, Scotty?” McCoy called, hands full of a rapidly crashing Keenser.

“Going tae close my eyes for a minute,” Scott gasped, shaking hard.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” McCoy said.

“Too late, Bones,” Kirk said, and grabbed a medical tricorder from McCoy’s medbag. “How many liters of blood should he have?”

“Five and a half.”

“He’s a little low,” Kirk hedged.

“Ya think?” McCoy growled, still working to stabilize Keenser. “Keep doing what you are doing, Spock. You don’t happen to see his hand lying around there somewhere, do you Jim?”

“Some pieces, I think,” the Captain said, eying the grisly fragments around the room.

“Looks like he gets to join the dubious ranks of Starfleet’s chief-engineers-with-prosthetic-limbs-club,” McCoy sighed. “There are at least three of ‘em. Four now. I’m going to make him fill out the occupational safety paperwork on this one, it’s a goddamned pain in the ass.”

The fiercely skilled Nurse Chapel pushed through the crowd of engineers who were hovering worriedly just outside the damaged section. “Don’t you have work to do?” she chided, and knelt down beside the unconscious chief, scanning him and immediately injecting a hypo. “I think he would say ‘stop staring, the lot of you, and get back to it.’”

McCoy was following Keenser out straight to surgery, but paused very briefly beside Chapel, eyes flicking to her open tricorder.

“Hypovolemic shock,” she said. “I already got 15 cc’s of tri-ox in him.”

“Good. Get the tourniquet off and a stasis cuff on his arm. Nerve block in his shoulder; four units of whole blood to start and more as necessary. Bring him up when his blood pressure stabilizes, unless you can’t get the tachycardia under control in the next two minutes, and then bring him immediately.”

“Yes, Doctor,” she said, already working, the Captain and Spock beside her. “He’s last on the triage list,” Chapel explained softly. “Organs and brains take priority, especially when we only have two surgeons. But make no mistake, this is exactly as bad as it looks. He’s lost a lot of blood. I think I can get him stable but he’s in very real danger until I do. Captain, grab the stasis cuff. Don’t get your fingers inside it or they’ll be worthless for an hour. We need to do three things almost simultaneously. Captain, you’ll cut this tourniquet; Spock, release pressure on his lower arm, and move up here, under his armpit, where there is an artery. And I’ll get the cuff on, which should stop the bleeding as soon as it seals, although they are always fiddly to fit. Questions? Ready? On three; one, two, three.”

Their hands moved, steady and quick, blood soaking through their sleeves as Scott paled further, nearly grey.

“Okay, Spock, let go, but be ready for compression again if he starts to bleed ... stasis field is holding.” Chapel quickly ran a line into Scott’s other arm, and instructed the Captain to hold the bag of transfusion blood in the air. Then she pressed three hypos into Scott’s shoulder in quick succession, deep into the nerves, and even unconscious, he visibly relaxed as the pain faded. “I’m taking him upstairs now,” she said at last as his color improved, and pushed the antigrav gurney under him.

Chekov had reappeared, still looking shaken, and was moving through the mess in Engineering. “Clean up first, I think?” he said with a sigh. “Then we see about repairing the conduit. Maybe by then Meester Scott can talk us through restarting the reactor. He’s the only person on the ship qualified to do it.”

“Mr. Chekov,” Kirk said gently, stripping off his ruined outer tunic and rinsing the blood from his hands in the emergency eyewash station. Spock was doing the same. “Spock and I will take care of this. It’s going to be bad. There are going to be ... identifiable pieces of our friends. You get showered and changed.”

“Nyet, sirs. I will do this,” Chekov said firmly, bending to pick up Scott’s blood-splattered watch. “Still works,” he said faintly, not looking too closely at the fragments he shook out of the band. “I will give it back to him later.”

It was deep in Gamma shift when Scotty woke up again with a soft groan. “Gently, gently,” Nyota murmured to him from beside his biobed. She’d arrived in the medbay many hours earlier, on an urgent call for everyone rated EMT1, a medical certification Uhura had picked up after Altamid. Christine Chapel, who was badly needed to assist with the ongoing surgeries, had swiftly put her in charge of four unconscious engineers still waiting their turn, held together with stasis bandages. All apparently not quite as urgent as the others, although it was difficult to imagine why. “Just monitor them,” Chapel had instructed. “The sensors will alarm if anyone’s condition deteriorates.”

Uhura and the three other EMTs had cut off blood-soaked uniforms and cleaned up the engineers as best they could without interfering with the medical equipment. They also took care of several burned crewmen, who had arrived quietly and reluctantly in sickbay. Three other plasma conduits had burst downstream from the main explosion, the result of the strain on the entire EP system.

And as the hours ticked by and the gravely injured engineers slowly came out of surgery, the temporary med staff also monitored the machines keeping them breathing. All of the medbay was grim and hushed, other than beeping monitors and the occasional pained cry.

“Gently,” Uhura said again to Scotty who was thrashing restlessly. “Don’t try to move. She pressed a button beside him, delivering a heavy dose of pain medication, and he relaxed marginally. “The medical staff is still working on the others.”

” ... thirsty,” he rasped.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I can’t give you anything, not until after surgery.”

He nodded faintly. “The hand is definitely gone, isnae it?” he asked thickly, not wanting to look for himself.

“Yes,” Nyota said gently, and held up her own arm to illustrate, circling mid-forearm with her fingers. “I’m so sorry, Scotty. Left hand and wrist. They couldn’t find any pieces big enough to try reconstruction. And the reason you still hurt so badly is that they haven’t had a chance to look at you at all. The others are still in surgery.”

His breath caught on pain that even the strongest neonarcotic wasn’t keeping up with. She had to stop him from reaching across his body to try to grab at the fire in his arm.

“I’ll tie you down if you do that again,” she said apologetically. “You knock off that stasis cuff and you won’t make it.”

He opened his eyes. “Aye. Sorry,” he gasped. “Did we lose anybody?”

“No. Charlene Masters is still very touch and go, though.”

“Most of her brain was on the floor,” he said quietly. “And Paulie’s. And Keensers guts. DeSalle and j’Ahuja, I couldn’t tell, just too much blood.” He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, and Nyota thought he was gone again until he said: “I cannae hear the warp core. Cold shutdown?”

“That’s what Spock and Chekov say,” she answered. “They knew you’d ask. The Captain called your grandmother and Mira. There’s a subspace lag through bad interference. We couldn’t get a live signal through to Earth. We did get *Yorktown*, although a real conversation is impossible, but Mira had already had a premonition you were hurt.”

“She gets that sometimes, since her mission with us.” Scott said weakly.

Nyota nodded, and gentled a hand across his brow. “She told us to tell you that she loves you. Go back to sleep with that thought in your mind.”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2265.361. Some days, you warp through a singularity and end up with a broken engine room, a bizarre new theory of transporter stasis, two crewmen with traumatic brain injuries, three with holes punched clean through their bodies, and a chief engineer who blows off an entire damn hand. Other days, you find yourself floating through an actual cloud of alcohol. Space is strange.

“It’s a cloud of alcohol, Bones!” Kirk said cheerfully, waving his morning coffee as they walked through the *Enterprise*’s bright corridors toward the bridge. “Alcohol, in space. Distilled by the universe!”

“Methanol!” McCoy argued. “Which will poison you. And not the *fun* kind of poisoning. The ‘go blind and die’ kind.”

“And yet, it is still tempting,” Kirk said with a wink.

“Bad enough with the still down in Engineering, pumping out swill just half step up from industrial strength solvent,” McCoy grumbled.

“There is *not* a still in Engineering,” Kirk said, shaking his head. “Scotty would never have that. Flammable liquid under heat and pressure, tubing to explode through his people and the antimatter holding tanks? No way in hell ... It’s in hydroponics.”

“I am going to pretend I don’t know that,” McCoy sighed.

“That’s what I do,” Kirk said easily. “So does Scotty. Part of a long and noble tradition of ignoring the harmless antics of the junior engineering lieutenants, as long as they bring spirits to holiday parties.”

“Harmless my ass,” McCoy grumbled as they stepped onto the turbolift.

“Speaking of engineers ...” Kirk started, his voice serious, and McCoy sighed.

“Still down six of them, including the chief, obviously, with two in sickbay. Masters still hasn’t woken up, and I don’t know if she ever will.”

“She’s only twenty-four,” the Captain said sorrowfully.

“A fact that ages Scotty about a million years every time he sits with her,” McCoy said. “Keenser needs to stay completely immobilized for two more weeks. Takes a hell of a lot to puncture his exoskeleton, and a hell of a long time for it to fuse. The others are more or less healing, although between you and me, I can’t get Scotty’s pain under control. Phantom limb pain is a son of a bitch to treat until you can redirect the brain with a biomechanical prosthesis. He’ll barely miss the original once I tie the new hand into his nervous system, but we’re still three weeks and two more surgeries out from even getting started, and right now everything is just hard.”

“I got to be on a conference call with Admiral Paris and about half of Starfleet Engineering and Medical yesterday. Lots of fun with a subspace lag, I’ll tell you that.” Kirk rolled his eyes. “They were pissed as hell about everything, but mostly about Scotty.”

“Damn chiefs keep blowing their limbs off,” McCoy grumbled. “Scotty is number four.”

“Number five,” Kirk corrected ruefully. “Happened on the *Chandrasekhar* about six months ago, and the *Hawking* two weeks ago. So you can imagine how well our incident report went over when it rolled in.”

“Goddamned engineers,” McCoy grumbled.

“That seems to be Medical’s position too,” the Captain agreed. “And how are you doing, Bones?”

“Twenty nine straight hours of surgery, followed by six patients in critical care. Draggin’ a bit,” he admitted. “Takes a while to bounce back from days like that.”

The doors slid open, and the men stepped onto the gleaming bridge. The atmosphere was light with the friendly camaraderie among the senior officers.

“Good morning, Captain,” Spock murmured. “Doctor.”

“Morning, Spock, all,” the Captain said cheerfully. “Scotty,” he called out warmly to the engineer, who was leaning against Chekov’s station.

“I hear we are flying through a cloud of *alcohol*, sir,” Scotty said, gesturing to the screen with his remaining hand. He was still far too pale, his arm immobilized tightly across his chest in a sling, but jovial.

“No,” McCoy said, crossing the bridge to thump him in the shoulder, somewhat more gently than he might have otherwise. “No, no, no. You are not on duty except for we-are-all-going-to-die warp core related emergencies. Which this isn’t.”

“I’m no’ working,” Scott complained. “I’m standing on the bridge talking with my mates about stellar spirits. If you think that has anything tae do with my job, we need tae have a talk about just what it is you think I do.”

“You’re wearing a uniform,” McCoy argued.

“It’s all I have to wear.”

“I know perfectly well that you have a number of other *completely stupid* shirts. Also, you have coolant on your sleeve,” McCoy challenged.

“The shirts are pretty bad,” Chekov agreed, as Sulu and Uhura snickered.

“Oi!” Scott swatted Chekov on the back of the head and glared at them all in mock offense. “‘Stupid shirts’? I spend my blood, sweat, tears, and flesh keeping you all alive, and the thanks I get is insults about my clothes?”

McCoy lifted an eyebrow worthy of Spock. “And the coolant?”

“Aye, well, I may have nipped down tae and Engineering this morning to help the lads in Gamma shift with one or two things,” Scott said hurriedly. “He’s grouchy today,” he continued over his shoulder to Kirk, leaning back to avoid McCoy’s sputtering.

“*Grouchy?!*” McCoy started.

“He’s mad about the alcohol cloud,” Kirk confided.

“I hear,” Chekov said slowly, “it would taste like rum. Ethyl formate would give it the flavor.”

“That’s very interesting, laddie. She’s a pirate then, the universe is. Makes sense.”

“And a woman?” Uhura said, amused.

“Gods, universes, and starships are always women,” Scott answered reverently. “It’s the way things are; I dinnae make the rules.” He grimaced faintly and shifted his arm uncomfortably. “And speaking of swashbuckling women, Brinkhoff and Castillo down in chemistry say that if we scoop up a wee bit of the cloud, they can convert it from methanol to ethanol. Something less likely tae kill us immediately, and more likely tae just kill us slowly as we die of liver cirrhosis over the next fifty years.”

“For the love of ...!” McCoy exploded. “First, Scotty, you aren’t *touching* alcohol while you are still on triptacederine. Second, Brinkhoff and Castillo are only about half as reckless as you, which is still a good four times too much for my liking. And third, you pull a stunt like that, so help me I will bolt your new hand on backwards in surgery.”

Scotty patted McCoy placatingly on the shoulder and shot Kirk a look. “All I’m saying is that, if anyone were *inclined* tae see what the universe has brewed up for us, the good lasses in chemistry are amenable.”

“Probably better pass, Scotty,” Kirk said regretfully.

“Lost opportunities,” Scott sighed, then rubbed the back of his neck, the already-faint color in his face suddenly draining from an ill-concealed surge of pain. He headed wordlessly for the turbolift.

Kirk caught him by the door and looked seriously into his face. “Don’t make me order you to stay away from Engineering, Mr. Scott,” he said quietly.

“Aye, sir,” Scott said, resignedly chastised, and left.

“Is it just me, or is he more mad-scientist than usual recently?” McCoy asked. “I mean, that thing with the transporter?”

“Yes,” Chekov said darkly. “I still can’t decide if I want to hug him or punch him for that. Did you know that he thinks that, if you can maintain power and the phase inducer doesn’t fail, you could hold a person in transport indefinitely?”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m talking about,” McCoy shuddered.

“He’s always been that way, Bones,” Kirk shrugged. “First time I met him, he jumped onto a transporter pad to try out transwarp beaming on the word of a time-traveling Vulcan and some pretty math. And a couple hours later he detonated a warp core into a black hole.”

Chekov spoke up. “Once, Scotty and I were very very drunk at a bar on that shore leave world. That one shore leave, you remember the one ... anyhow, there were these two very pretty women. Maybe women. I don’t know. They had quite a lot of hands, and they were very pretty, whatever they were. So Scotty and I are very drunk, and one of our new friends is in his lap, and I’m not *quite* sure where all their hands are, but Scotty is enjoying it all very much, and at the same time, on the back of a napkin he is writing the maths for a way to destroy a star system, ‘in case we ever need it.’ And then he goes off with *both* of the very pretty people for,” Chekov waved a hand. “Diplomatic relations, and I am left alone at the table needing to dissolve the napkin in my drink because you *cannot* be leaving the plans to a functioning doomsday device in a bar.”

“The gravity disruptor,” Kirk said knowingly.

“Nyet, melt the ice caps,” Chekov said, puzzled for a moment before he looked up in horrified realization.

“Ah hell,” Kirk said. “He’s got two plans.”

Sulu raised a hesitant finger. “And the planetary magnetic field destabilizer.”

Kirk rubbed his face. “Remind me to never let him off the ship, *ever* again, for any reason. Point is, Bones ... he’s always been this way.”

“Which usually saves lives,” Uhura reminded them.

“Yeah,” McCoy said, and paused, weighing his next words. “Look ... he’ll be fine, but right now he is somewhat less okay than he seems to be. The good cheer is an act.”

“We know that, Bones,” Kirk said softly.

McCoy sighed. “Just—we all need to keep an eye on him.”

Chapter Summary

Friends live and struggle and argue, and set some boundaries

Captain's Log, Stardate 2266.86. We don't have many parents on this ship. Fifty, perhaps, in the whole five hundred. Starship duty doesn't draw many people with children, much less a five year mission. But we do have them. McCoy. Sulu. Spock and Uhura. Others throughout the crew, and I am mindful of their sacrifices. The missed school plays, the bedtime stories, the birthday parties. Today is Demora Sulu's birthday. Mr. Sulu doesn't think I remember, but I do.

"Fist, tight as you can," McCoy said to the Chief Engineer. "Good. Each finger to the thumb ... now tap on the table, one two three four five. Wrist, side to side, up and down, now rotate it front to back. Can you feel this?" McCoy brushed the palm of the prosthesis with a stylus, then harder for the pain reaction.

Scott nodded.

"It's looking really good, Scotty. How does it feel?"

"Pretty seamless, although I occasionally lose track of where I'm at space, and have tae look at what I'm doing."

"Proprioception is complex. Your brain should eventually be able to re-map that, but it will take time. Any pain?" the Doctor asked.

"Sometimes," Scott shrugged. "Not an issue with any of the hardware, but sometimes it feels like the hand I dinnae have anymore is hurting at me from another dimension."

"That's a good way to put it," McCoy said, scanning one more time at the subdermal socket, the junction built into his arm that was anchored into the bone and bridged Scott's own biological systems and those of the prosthetic. It was well-seated and invisible. "That may be ongoing. A strange layer to phantom limb pain. The prosthesis takes care of most of it, but sometimes your brain may try to reach for something that isn't there. If it becomes an ongoing problem let me know. There are some drugs and therapies that help. I am also going to schedule you with Martinez for a massage. You've pretty clearly been guarding your arm, and you're a knotted-up mess." McCoy put his equipment down, then manually manipulated the hand and Scott's forearm, checking for flexibility and smooth movement up into the muscles of his arm. He gave a firm nod, liking what he was seeing. "You're free to use the hand fully now, and I'm clearing you for duty without restrictions. Any issues or questions?"

Scott shook his head. "It's a hell of a piece of biotech."

"I'm glad you approve. I'll have you know I lost 20 credits to Chapel about you. I thought you'd be in here during fabrication, trying to talk me into upgrades."

Scotty smiled faintly. "I know better than tae overstep on someone else's expertise. Besides, I have plenty of tools. Just need a hand to hold them with."

In retrospect, McCoy considered, Chapel had been absolutely right. Fear and pain, frustration and more than a touch of despair were the driving emotions here. Even in the 23rd century, the injury was a permanent one, although the prosthesis was excellent. About sixty percent mechanical, with the remaining forty from biological components grown from stem cells, it was powered by the circulatory system and directly connected to the nervous system. But an injury like that was still a difficult blow.

"It comes off, obviously, but I'd rather that *not* happen outside of sickbay," McCoy said. "It would hurt like hell and bleed worse. To say nothing of putting the biological components of the prosthesis at risk of dying if cut off too long from blood flow."

"Aye," Scott agreed, and pulled his shirt back on.

"How is your mental health?" McCoy inquired, putting his tools away.

"Down," Scott admitted. "Since the explosion. Not terribly surprising."

"Swings are normal in everybody, Scotty, especially when shitty things happen. How far down do you feel like you are?"

"I've been a hell of a lot worse," Scotty said, and paused. "Did Kirk ever tell you about New Vulcan? A year or so ago, with Nyota and Spock?"

"Some," McCoy answered.

"It helped," Scotty said, tapping his head. "In a way that's hard tae explain."

McCoy nodded. "I'm glad. But I'm going to adjust your dosage. No use suffering."

"I ..." Scott hesitated, then shrugged. "I'm sure you're right. He glanced at the chronometer on the wall. "We've got tae go, we're going tae be late."

“Damn, Sulu and Chekov will take all the good pastries,” McCoy said, following Scott out of the medbay. “Which, by the way, god bless and curse you for convincing the synthesizers to make real bread. The crew is starting to call your programming ‘replicated’ food, you know, to differentiate it from synthesized swill.”

Scotty smiled and gave a half-shrug. It was time consuming, fiddly, and not remotely as important as anything else he did, but it made people happy. And he’d had some time in his hands ... well, hand, while on light duty.

“I made Chekov save you the last cheese danish, Bones,” Kirk said, handing it over when they arrived at the staff meeting. McCoy took it happily and sat down beside the Captain. “Pastry, Scotty?” The Engineer shook his head and poured a cup of tea instead, then leaned against the wall, not wanting to sit.

Kirk wasn’t big on meetings, but the weekly departmental briefing was important and valuable, for face time with the staff, if nothing else. “Quickly around the room, any issues?” Kirk asked. There were a few minor repair requests, which Scott jotted down, and a few personnel issues, which Spock noted in his orderly brain. A report from stellar cartography, a briefing from communications on an upcoming diplomatic mission, a consumption and emissions summary from engineering.

“Thank you, all,” the Captain said. “I think, Lieutenant Chekov and Commanders Uhura and Sulu, you’ve booked the rest of the day off?” They nodded. “Good,” he said. “And just generally for everyone, we’re getting deep into the mission. Be sure you’re rotating your people through days off. I know everyone is a workaholic but don’t let them work through, and that includes yourselves. We’re right at the point where burnout starts to set in. Watch out for each other, please. No one is getting a month off, short of cutting off their hand ...”

“Caught me, sir,” Scotty murmured, to laughter.

“...but regular time off makes a difference,” the Captain continued. “We’ve got our eyes open for some shore leave as well, if we can find an appropriate place. Dismissed, thanks,” he said, and the department heads scattered to their tasks for the day.

Near the end of the shift, the Chief backed out of a Jefferies tube, and turned around to find himself face-to-face with Uhura, Sulu, and Chekov. He yelped in surprise, and growled something unkind at them under his breath. “Yeh scared the shit outta me,” he complained. “What the hell are the three of you doing lurking outside a tube on yer day off?”

“Waiting for you,” Chekov supplied helpfully.

“Aye, I gathered that.”

“We need to drop out of warp,” Uhura said. Scott glanced sharply at them, then up at the ceiling, listening for something wrong in the sound of the engines.

“It’s Demora’s birthday,” Sulu hastened to add. “My daughter.”

“I know who Demora is,” Scotty complained in exasperation, rightly interpreting the added explanation as an assumption that he wouldn’t remember who Demora was. “Little girl. About yea high. Sends me drawings of the *Enterprise*.”

“Demora sends you drawings of the *Enterprise*?” Sulu asked, abruptly derailed. “She doesn’t send *me* drawings of the *Enterprise*. How come you get them?”

“Because I told her that I was sure we could pull some strings and get her intae Starfleet Academy when she turns sixteen.”

“No,” Sulu protested. “No, no, no, that is definitely not happening.”

“And that attitude right there, laddie, is why you dinnae get any drawings,” Scotty said primly.

“We need to drop out of warp,” Uhura interrupted in some irritation.

“You need tae drop out of warp,” Scott repeated slowly.

“Right,” Chekov said.

“Because it’s Demora Sulu’s birthday.”

“Yes,” the three of them answered.

Scotty rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’ve been buried in machinery all day, and it’s just possible I’ve forgotten how language works. I’ve always assumed that when you say something, the next thing you say is supposed tae be related tae the first thing. Although it’s entirely possible I’ve just had that wrong my whole life.”

“She’s having a birthday party,” Sulu said.

“If one or the other of you dinnae explain just what the hell it is yeh want, I’m going tae leave,” Scott finally shouted in exasperation.

“If we drop out of warp, I can redirect the power from the reactor in order to increase the strength of a subspace signal,” Uhura said. “We also have three supermassive gravity wells currently aligned between us and the general direction of Earth. I can slingshot the signal around them to increase the signal speed even more, and also take advantage of temporal regression for a real-time signal home. Hiraku can call and be part of the party.”

“*Temporal regression*?” Scotty asked.

“Don’t get distracted!” Nyota snapped at him.

“Dinnae get distracted by you casually telling me that you can send subspace communications *back in time*?! Which is impossible by the way.”

“Of course it isn’t! Hyperwarp speeds and high gravity do strange things to time! I’ve seen it, Scotty.”

“Huh,” he said, the science already clicking behind his eyes.

“Shouldn’t have mentioned that part,” Sulu whispered.

Nyota rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Scotty. Focus. We need to drop out of warp.”

“Okay. I understand why yeh need to drop out of warp. I still dinnae ken why you are talking tae *me* about it. Find yourself, I dinnae ken, a *helmsman*, and take us out of warp! It isnae hard. I’m no expert but I think it’s two buttons,” he said, miming the maneuver.

“We cannot just casually walk onto the bridge and take the ship out of warp!” Chekov cried in agitation. “There has to be a *reason*. We were thinking ... problem with the reactor.”

“They’re isnae a damn thing wrong with the reactor,” Scotty said, defending his bairns.

“Not a *real* problem,” Chekov explained. “A pretend one.”

Scotty blinked, finally understanding. “You would like me tae call up tae the bridge and tell the Captain that there is ‘something wrong’ with the reactor and that we need tae drop out of warp?”

“Right!” Chekov said in relief. “For a genius it took you a surprisingly long time to get there. Sir.”

Scott gave him a withering look. “What exactly would you like tae be *wrong* with the reactor? Because the Captain’s ears are as good as mine. He can hear as well as I can that it’s in perfect working order.”

“Maybe something wrong in the coolant system?” Chekov suggested, and did a surprisingly accurate mime of a wrench smashing against a pipe.

“Now yeh would like me tae *sabotage* the reactor?”

Chekov shrugged sheepishly.

“Right. Or I have a better idea.” Scotty reached over and hit a communication panel on the wall. “Bridge, Scott.”

“*Mr. Scott*,” the Captain said jovially, sounding mildly bored. “*What can I do for you?*”

“Can yeh drop the ship out of warp, sir?”

“*I can. Any particular reason why?*”

“I’m honestly not sure I’m following it myself. Something about sending subspace messages back in time tae a child’s birthday party.”

There was a pause from the bridge. “...okie dokie then, Mr. Scott. *Whatever you say. How long will this take?*”

Scotty looked at his shipmates, who were hiding their faces in their hands. “Hour or two?”

“*You got it. Let me know when we’re good to go.*”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty said, and closed the line as the engines ramped down. “There. You see. Much easier, quite a lot less sabotage and treason.” He collected his tools from outside the tube, and paused. “Yeh coulda just asked him, y’know,” he said softly. “Jim Kirk isnae going tae tell the three of you no.”

“We can’t abuse that, Scotty,” Nyota answered. “There are plenty of people on this ship who have missed birthdays. Who haven’t talked in real time to their children or partners in a year.”

Scott smiled sadly. “You really think you can get a live subspace message through?” he asked. “It’s mostly been messages at least two days stale; four, by the time yeh get anything back. Not very much longer and we’ll be lookin’ at weeks.”

“I think I can, Scotty,” Nyota said confidently. “With the full power of the reactor and those three gravity wells in our current position, I really think so.”

“Let’s do that, then,” Scott said. “We’re in no hurry. If you can get it tae work, let’s stay here twenty four hours. Forty eight. Let’s all call home tae the people we love. I’ll go talk tae the Captain and Mr. Spock, and set up a schedule. It’s maybe only five or ten minutes each, but worth doing, and better than rest. But first, go enjoy the party, Hiraku, and tell your lass Happy Birthday.”

“Thanks Scotty,” Sulu said gratefully. “Come by, when you’re done taking with the Captain. We have cake.”

“Is it time travel cake?” he asked, amused.

“Synthesized. So, someone’s memory of cake,” Sulu said, and grabbed Chekov to help him blow up some balloons and hang a banner in his quarters.

“Are you really going tae send messages back through time, Nyota?” Scotty said, watching them go.

“I really am,” she answered. “The extreme warp of a subspace message plus a high gravity equals time travel. Want me to send you some equations?”

“Obviously,” he said. She kissed his cheek and headed off after Pavel and Hiraku. He waited until Nyota was out of earshot, and put a hand on the wall of his ship. “Time travel,” he mused to the *Enterprise*. “I wonder if yeh could do it with a starship?”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2266.95. Lord, that was close. We’re down for several days of repairs, including structural repairs to the bridge. Commander Spock and Lieutenant Uhura are still under medical observation, and half of engineering is coughing their lungs out from coolant inhalation, but we’ll be okay.

The ship rocked hard from the impact of another torpedo, throwing anyone not strapped down off their feet.

“We’re adrift, sir,” Keenser called urgently to Scott, whose ears were well attuned to his friend’s nearly infrasound voice, even over the red alert and groaning engine room.

“Why?” Scott snapped, eyes scanning the board. They were damaged but not incapacitated.

“Helm. The bridge. We’ve lost them.”

“We’ve lost *communication* tae the bridge, or we’ve lost *the bridge*?” Scott asked urgently.

“Unknown, sir.”

“Son of a *bitch*. Auxiliary control!” the chief shouted into the comm. “Who’s on auxiliary helm?”

“*DePaul, sir. I think we’ve lost the bridge!*” the frantic report came back. An auxiliary bridge was always manned at action stations, but rare, indeed, for the backup controllers to be called on, even in the middle of a battle.

“We have!” Scott yelled. “Set a course. Drop us intae the ionosphere of that big gas giant from yesterday, whoever the hell is shooting at us shoudnae be able to track us there. I hope. I can give yeh warp seven,” Scott glanced at Keenser, who nodded tightly. “Now! Engage, Mr. DePaul!”

“*Aye, sir!*”

The engines groaned, warp seven pushing them past their damaged limits. Engineering rapidly filled with smoke and searing aerosolized coolant.

“Masks!” the Chief shouted to his people, coughing hard through what he knew was already a dangerous lungful of chemicals. “Lock that coolant leak down or we’ll have a core breach! Come on, come on,” Scott prayed to his engines. “Please dinnae fly us through the planet, Mr. DePaul.”

“*No, sir,*” the backup helmsman answered, voice just slightly perturbed at the suggestion. “*Three, two, one.*” The engines disengaged, moaning in a way that suggested they wouldn’t be at warp again any time soon. “*Near orbit around the gas giant, sir. Holding steady.*”

Another voice chimed in from auxiliary control, whoever was on backup sensor control at action stations. “*I don’t think we’ve been followed, sir.*”

Scott was barely listening, his eyes locked on the temperature gauge on the warp core. “Shut it off! Shut the core off!” he shouted to Keenser, who smashed down the intermix reaction. The temperature gauge climbed for ten more tense seconds, and then the engineers sighed in relief as it headed down.

“That was close,” Keenser murmured shakily.

“Aye.” Scotty coughed. “Comms, does anyone have communication with the bridge?” he asked hoarsely.

There was a pause while the auxiliary communications officer checked the board. “*No, sir.*”

“Hold orbit, let me know if anything changes. Unless we hear from the bridge, keep ship functions at auxiliary control, and you have the conn, Mr. DePaul. Maintain orbit,” Scott ordered. He looked around his smoldering engine room in frustration. As usual in an unexpected red alert, he had no idea what was happening or who had been shooting at them. And now he was commanding the ship blind.

“Systems down broadly shipwide,” Keenser reported, his eyes watering thickly green through the toxic smoke. “We have life support, comms, partial shields, and thrusters. No transporters or lifts, before you ask.”

“Fantastic,” Scotty grumbled, and hit the comm again. “Damage control team, report to section E1, ready to make the climb to the bridge. Medbay?”

“*I heard,*” McCoy answered. “*Do you have any communication at all with the bridge?*”

“No,” Scotty said shortly, the worry he’d been suppressing starting to claw its way through his gut.

“*Grab me on your way up,*” McCoy said.

Scott looked at Keenser, who nodded in understanding; he’d start organizing repairs. Keenser coughed violently, then wiped the back of his

hand across his mouth. Scott took a too-deep breath, which set him off too. “I’m cycling the atmosphere,” the little Roylan wheezed. “But we all have a medbay visit visit in our future.”

Scott grabbed a communicator and strapped a damage control pack to his back. “Ready, lads?” he asked the damage control team. Four nods and they headed for the access shaft and ladder that paralleled the turbolift shaft. They went into a quick climbing rhythm, all sweating in short order.

They stepped out halfway up, at the deck of the medbay, to catch their breaths and collect McCoy.

“You been huffing coolant again, Scotty?” McCoy grumped, noting the chief’s wheezing.

“Dinnae start with me, Leonard,” Scott said, both of them desperately worried about the silence from the bridge. The damage control specialists strapped McCoy into a harness that he’d need at the top.

Scotty took off a panel to the main turboshaft control and tapped several commands. The shaft itself was kept at half pressure and atmosphere; that would have to change to access the bridge. The main shaft would be habitable, if cold, by the time they got to the top. He turned around, and McCoy whacked a hypo into him.

“The hell, Doctor!?” he growled in irritated surprise.

“You want to breathe or not?” McCoy asked crossly.

“Let’s go,” Scott sighed, more immediate concerns pressing.

McCoy paused at the threshold to the access shaft and looked up and down. “Why is everything about this ship a death trap?” he sighed.

At the top of the shaft Scott opened a hatch which led straight into the yawning depths of the main turbolift shaft. He exchanged a look with McCoy, just below him in the access shaft; in a moment they would know. He stepped out, holding on to a handhold, and McCoy moaned. “Pass me the antigrav hook,” Scott said, reaching over his shoulder while looking at the sealed bridge door on the other side of the shaft. A tech handed it over—and Scott dropped it; it fell 80 meters before hitting the top of the lift with a distant clang

“Ah, fuck me,” Scott swore viciously.

“Did you drop it, sir?” one of the team asked.

“Aye,” he said tightly.

“Left hand?” McCoy asked in concern.

“Aye,” Scott growled in irritation.

“Does that happen very often?”

“Nae; just the worst possible moments, it seems,” Scott sighed.

“I’ll downclimb, sir,” one of his men said, headed down already.

“Aye, because we’re going tae need it, but we dinnae necessarily have time. I’m worried about the atmosphere on the bridge.” And with that, Scott leapt across the lift shaft and caught the handholds by the opposite door.

McCoy screamed. “*Goddamn it, Scotty. You can’t hang onto a gravity hook, but you’re sure you can grab the fucking handhold midair?!*”

Scott ignored him and jammed his toes into a narrow foothold, then pulled out a tricorder, pausing to take a breath.

“God, please,” Scott whispered, and scanned behind the sealed door to the bridge. “Atmosphere and pressure,” he called out in relief, and McCoy released a breath he’d been holding. Scott banged hard on the door. “Captain!?” he shouted.

There was no answer.

“Oxygen is low in there, and the door is jammed,” Scott said to the team. “The entire superstructure must be off by a bit. I’m going tae have to cut the door off.”

One of the damage control team members quickly pulled out a plasma torch. Scott shivered; the turboshaft was just at freezing. “What’s the oxygen in the turboshaft?” he asked, and another tech gave a quick scan. “Enough to ignite the torch, not enough to blow us up,” the tech reported. “I’m going to have to throw this to you, sir; can you catch it?”

Scott rolled his eyes. He grabbed the handhold tightly with his artificial left hand, which set McCoy off again grumbling curses under his breath, and reached back with his right.

“One, two, three.” Scott caught the torch on an excellent toss from the tech and stowed it in his belt. “Sir, we have the antigrav hook again. You’re going to need it for the door. Ready?” Another precise throw. Scott mounted the hook to catch the heavy door, then got to work cutting through the pins that held in its recessed door jam. It came away with a lurch, and he flicked it across the shaft on the antigrav field for the techs to collect.

Scott stepped onto the darkened and smoky bridge, then turned back toward the techs. “Get McCoy over here,” he said urgently. “And someone climb down three levels; there’s a turboshaft control. Bring up the oxygen in the tube, it’s going tae have tae support the bridge for a

while. Fast as yeh can!”

He grabbed McCoy as the Doctor flailed half-panicked at the door, swung awkwardly across the gap by the techs. “Got yeh,” he said. “Easy.”

McCoy pulled out his tricorder and quickly scanned the bodies of the bridge crew slumped around the room.

“Alive but hypoxic,” he said.

“My head’s swimmin’ in here,” Scott said. “Is it the atmosphere or my bollocked lungs?”

McCoy scanned again. “Atmosphere, but it’s coming up already. Do you have an O2 mask in your kit? I’d like to get them all some solid breaths. Watch yourself though, Scotty, even with that hypo your lung capacity is definitely down from whatever crap you’ve been breathing in engineering.”

Scott nodded and handed his oxygen kit to McCoy. “Toss me your O2 gear,” he called across to the damage control team, and set up an emergency light from his pack.

Five masks and fourteen people down on the bridge meant everyone only got a few breaths, but it immediately improved their color, and the atmosphere on the bridge was stabilizing. The bridge’s environmental systems had gone down with the power, but would have been breathable for a while; they had probably only been unconscious a few minutes.

“It’s not just the air,” McCoy said, scanning the crew further while Scotty and the team held masks to faces. “We’ve got some injuries. Spock’s got a serious head injury. Chekov a broken leg. Uhura’s broken her ribs and is bleeding internally. Any possibility of getting the lifts or transporters up, Scotty?”

Scott was kneeling next to Chekov, watching the navigator breathe. He shook his head. “Six, eight hours at best. We’ll have tae strap them intae antigrav gurneys and lower them down the access shaft.”

The Captain coughed, and blinked awake. “Bones,” he said weakly through the oxygen mask

“Easy, Jim,” McCoy said. “Just take it easy and breathe.”

The Captain looked around the room. “Hey, Scotty,” he said blearily. “What happened?”

“I dinnae ken, sir. Someone was shooting at us. We warped away; we’re in near orbit around that big gas giant. Lots of damage, and it looks like the bridge took a direct hit. I also had tae smash the core. Nae estimate yet on repair time. Auxiliary control has the ship, DePaul at the conn. You scared the hell outta us, sir.”

Kirk pushed himself to sitting and waved off McCoy. “I’m alright, Bones,” he said.

Scott glanced at McCoy. “He’s mostly telling the truth,” the Doctor answered, scanning the Captain. “He should be able to make the climb.”

“Climb?” Kirk asked, scooting over to sit by Spock, whose head was oozing green. McCoy had moved his attention to the first officer and was frowning down at his tricorder.

“Lifts are down, and I had tae cut off the door tae get tae yeh, sir,” Scott said. “The lads will get you across the turboshaft to the service shaft, if you’re feeling well enough tae climb down tae auxiliary control?”

The Captain nodded. Others were stirring; Sulu and Chekov, and the assorted other controllers. Chekov shifted painfully, his broken leg at a terrible angle. McCoy injected a painkiller into the lieutenant’s hip, and another into Uhura’s neck.

“Gently, Nyota,” Scott said softly when she moaned, her hands drifting to her shattered ribs. “Dinnae move, lass. You’re hurt pretty bad.”

“How’s Spock?” she asked quietly, gasping in pain and reaching blindly for Scotty’s hand, which he grabbed. “He was hurt, and we were running out of air.”

“He’s being tended tae,” Scotty said gently, glancing toward the still-unconscious Vulcan. “See, right there? McCoy is strapping him intae a gurney and we’re going tae carry him down tae sickbay.”

“We’re going to have to do them one at a time, Scotty,” McCoy said, coming to kneel by Uhura. “Or we’ll end up with a bad traffic jam in the access tube.”

“Aye,” Scotty agreed, and coughed into his shoulder. The uninjured or mildly injured bridge crew were headed down, but they’d have to carry Spock, Uhura, and Chekov, and it was going to be a tricky job, even with antigrav assistance.

McCoy stood, hands on his hips. “I’m going to take the damage control team to carry Spock down, then they’ll come back for Uhura and Chekov. Can you stay with them? I’ll leave you a med kit but they should be stable until we can get them to medbay.”

“Aye,” Scott agreed, the bridge quieting as the three officers were left alone. Scotty handed Chekov a liter of water, which he took gratefully. “How are yeh feeling, lad?”

“McCoy has good drugs,” Chekov said. “Can’t feel a thing below my waist. How is Nyota?”

“Cold,” she said, shivering. “Shouldn’t have worn the skirt today, it’s breezy and there’s no personal environmental control in the dumb things.”

"It's the air from the turboshaft. Damn cold in there," Scotty said. He switched on the environmental control in his own red duty overtunic, then pulled it off and tucked it around her. "Stinks tae high heaven, I know," he said apologetically, scooting closer to her. "Me too."

"You're warm; I'll take it," she chattered, trembling harder, and closed her eyes. Scott looked down at her in concern.

"Are you cold, Pavel?" Scotty asked.

The injured young man shrugged. "A little cool but fine. Need my tunic too, Mr. Scott?" Chekov asked quietly.

Scotty considered it, then shook his head. "I dinnae need you in shock too, lad," Scotty said. "I'm going tae lie down next tae yeh, Nyota, it will be warmer. Dinnae kick my arse when I put my arms around yeh."

She cracked her eyelids and smiled faintly at him, and turned her face into his chest as he settled in beside her, careful of her broken ribs. "...better," she slurred, barely conscious. Chekov gingerly butt-scooted over to sit at her other side.

Ten minutes later Nurse Chapel called across the turboshaft. "Mr. Scott?" Scotty eased out from under his injured friend and helped Chapel across the gap. "The team is right behind me, and Dr. M'Benga," she said. "We've got them from here."

Scotty put his hand on Chekov's shoulder, then knelt beside Uhura to take her hand. "Hang in there, lassie," he said, then stood, coughing again.

Chapel grabbed his arm as he turned to go. "McCoy wants you to come by later today so he can take care of that cough."

"Me, and half o' Engineering," he sighed. "How is Mr. Spock?"

Chapel frowned. "Bad concussion. He woke up, but has been asking repeatedly what time it is, and telling McCoy over and over that the 'occipital part of his skull appears to have impacted a console.' He'll be fine, but it's a definite traumatic brain injury, and it's going to be more than a few weeks before he's on the other side."

Scotty nodded, and turned his attention from his injured crewmates to his damaged ship. It was three days before he came up for air again, buried in repairs. It was the weary Captain, who had taken over the command duties of both his injured first officer and his overworked second officer, who finally ordered Scott to sickbay.

"Christ on a bike," McCoy complained, waving his medical probe at the coughing chief engineer. "Why didn't you come by three days ago, like the rest of your damn department?"

Scotty gestured up, then down, encompassing the entire ship.

"Well, now you have bronchitis," McCoy said crossly. The Doctor shoved the engineer into a biobed, jammed a hypo into his neck none-too-gently, and handed him an oxygen mask. "Sit here for two hours, don't talk, and breathe this."

Scotty rolled his eyes, but sat back obediently and put the mask over his nose and mouth. McCoy stomped back to office, muttering obscenities about all species of engineers. Scott cocked his head, noticing the open door to a private room, a sleeping Spock just visible with Nyota curled into the narrow space at his side. Scotty pulled his mask off and headed for the door, intending to shut it.

"Scotty," Uhura said quietly.

"Sorry, lass, I didnae want tae disturb."

She shook her head. "I was actually about to get up. I'm too sore for Spock's bony elbows. Can you help me up? I don't want to wake him."

He gave her a hand, then a shoulder to lean on when she grimaced. "Ribs still really hurt," she admitted.

"Where are we headed?"

"Just the next room over," she answered, and he helped her across the hall and tucked her into the biobed. She sighed in relief and dropped her head back onto the pillow.

"Scotty what the hell?" McCoy complained, coming in. "You should have called for me, Nyota."

"I was about to," she said, "but I didn't want to wake Spock."

The Doctor scanned her, making displeased noises. "Time for more pain meds," he said, gently pressing a hypo to her neck. "Get out of here, Scotty."

"He can stay," Nyota answered. "If he wants to?"

"Sit down," McCoy grumbled. "I'll bring the breathing treatment in here. The idiot has been inhaling coolant. Again," McCoy explained.

"Not intentionally," Scott defended himself, and settled into the chair beside her, then took the mask from McCoy.

"Coolant leaks are pretty dangerous," Uhura chided him.

"Oh, aye." Scott held his fingers two centimeters apart. "We were that close tae a core breach."

Nyota lifted an eyebrow. "I meant for breathing, but that too."

Scott leaned back in the chair. “How are yeh feeling, seriously?”

“Six splintered ribs. Really sore, really stiff. It would be nice if I could take a full breath. Sometime next week, McCoy says. Chekov has been limping around here on that broken leg; I think he’s back on duty tomorrow.”

“How’s Spock?”

“He had pretty much 36 hours of dazed batshittery. He’s better now but he’s foggy, tired, achy, and can’t focus. The usual brain injury garbage that just takes a while.”

“Aye,” Scott grunted.

“Probably two weeks, minimum, until McCoy clears him for light duty.”

“You really think he’ll willingly stay down that long?” Scotty asked skeptically through his mask.

“Probably not,” Nyota admitted. “Fortunately Leonard isn’t above dirty tricks.”

Scott chuckled, then paused and lifted the mask. He stared down at it suspiciously. “That son of a bitch,” he groaned.

“Oh, yes,” McCoy said gleefully from the door, folding his arms and leaning against the wall. “You are *definitely* on my shit list. I know you haven’t slept for three days. There’s a sedative in there that will kick in in about a minute, and put you down for eight hours.”

“Fuck you,” Scotty complained, but put the mask back on his face.

“If you want him gone, Nyota, we have about 30 seconds,” McCoy said. “Otherwise he’s sleeping in the chair.”

“He’s fine,” Nyota said, settling back in her bed with a yawn. “Night, Scotty. If it makes you feel better, I think he got me too with the hypo.”

McCoy gave a satisfied smile, then tossed a blanket over Scott, turned off the light, and went to check in Spock.

“You’re terrible,” Nurse Chapel told him.

“I’m brilliant!” he disagreed. “We’ll have to figure out a way to get Jim next.”

Captain’s Log, Stardate 2266.220. While on shore leave on Argelius II, the Chief Engineer and Second Officer of this ship has been arrested on suspicion of murder. It seems impossible, and yet the evidence is damning. As required by Federation law and Starfleet regulations, we will submit to the jurisdiction of the local courts, whatever the outcome.

They didn’t have a jail here. Just a nondescript government building with a single barred cell in the back that looked more like it was used for hosting the town drunk on weekends. McCoy was escorted back, and took a deep breath as the guard swung the door open. Scott was sitting on the edge of a hard, gray bed and looked up at him when he walked in, and then back down at the floor.

It was ... was it shame in his downward gaze? Fear? Defiance? McCoy knelt in front of the man and looked up into his eyes. His affect was entirely flat, as if Scott didn’t know or care where he was. McCoy clenched his teeth, a disturbing theory already forming.

“I can stay, for your protection?” the officer offered in concern, because being locked in with a murderer was very dangerous.

“No, thank you,” McCoy said, standing, and the officer nodded.

“Just knock when you are ready,” the guard said, and reluctantly closed the door behind him.

“Are you hurt at all?” McCoy asked. Scotty shook his head, eyes still fixed on the ground. “Cops didn’t rough you up? Victim didn’t bite you, anything like that?”

Scotty looked up at that. “*No*,” he growled, showing some actual emotion, even if it was anger. “The hell kind of question is that?”

“I’m going to scan you now.” McCoy pulled out his tricorder and aimed it at the engineer, and pursed his lips. “How do you feel?” he pressed.

Scotty pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Bad,” he admitted. “I just feel really, really off.”

“Like you haven’t taken any meds in a month?” McCoy said, his voice intentionally light.

“Aye, I suppose something like that,” Scotty sighed.

“Maybe that’s because you haven’t taken your meds in a *month*,” McCoy exploded, trying to shove back his own surge of sudden rage.

Scotty blinked in confusion, and then gaped up at the doctor. “What the hell are you talking about? I took them this morning. I take them *every* morning.”

McCoy slammed the scanner down and paced around the cell. “I’m looking right at my readings, Scotty. After all these years, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t lie to my face.” McCoy shook his head, fighting to get himself under control. “Jesus Christ. What the hell were you thinking? Or *not* thinking, I suppose. No meds for a *month*?! Murder is a capital offense on this planet. God. I wonder if they have an insanity defense?”

Scotty was abruptly on his feet. “I didnae kill that girl,” he insisted, and then sat again, like his legs couldn’t hold him. “How could you think I could do that?”

“Asks the man who has invented no fewer than *three* doomsday weapons,” McCoy sighed. “State of your brain right now, you could very well be seriously dissociative. I don’t know what you’re capable of just now.”

“Doctor McCoy, I’ve nae skipped a single dose in years,” Scott insisted.

McCoy rubbed his eyes. “Are you sure you’d know?” he asked, almost gently. The question made Scott flinch. “Have you ever gone off the medication long-term before without a doctor’s approval?”

Scotty paused, and his gaze flickered. “Aye, once, but Leonard…”

McCoy had had enough. He stood and banged on the door, ready to leave, then rounded on the man. “The murder weapon was in your hands, her blood all over you, did you know that? Do you remember them taking the knife from you? Do you remember them taking your uniform off of your body and putting it into evidence?”

Scotty looked down at himself, at the prison jumpsuit he was wearing, and paled. He shook his head, suddenly trembling. “I … I cannae remember anything.”

McCoy heaved a pained sigh. “God, I hope they have an insanity defense.”

They didn’t have an insanity defense. The Argelian culture was deeply peaceful; the murder of a woman on her way home on a foggy night had badly rocked the capital city. They barely understood violence, much less what the Federation visitors were trying to explain.

Prefect Jaris looked over at his city administrator with a frown. “Explain it to me again, Hengist.”

Hengist looked apologetically at Captain Kirk, and spoke. His voice was high and a little squeaky, almost breathy. “It’s not completely unusual in the universe. I’ve traveled enough of it to know. But Argelians genuinely don’t have mental illness here, Captain Kirk, which is why they are struggling so much to understand. The instability in your human species is an offshoot of evolution for a people who occasionally find themselves both hunted as prey or operating as predators; heightened anxiety and everything that flows from it. But there’s never been predation here, ever. They just don’t understand.”

“You are not Argelian?” Kirk asked.

“I’m not,” Hengist said. “Just been here a while, living among the gentlest people you can imagine.”

“Help me to understand,” Jaris said slowly. “A person might, because of illness, be incapable of controlling behavior? May not even be aware of what they do?”

“It can happen,” Kirk said sadly.

Jaris rubbed his brow. “And you permit such people to walk among you?”

Kirk tilted his head. “You’d deny them their lives?”

“Yes,” Jaris said with a frown. “For the protection of everyone else.”

“We don’t see it that way,” Kirk replied. “Normally, Mr. Scott is fine, or fine enough to function, with the details between him and his physician. I’m not completely sure what’s happened here, but what he’s accused of is uncharacteristic, even in a state of illness.”

“Is he incapable of killing?” Jaris asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Kirk sighed.

“The problem, of course, comes in punishment,” Hengist explained to Jaris. “It’s something these affected cultures have had to grapple with. It’s philosophically interesting, if practically a bit agonizing. Is it right or just to execute someone for a murder if they were not in control of themselves when they committed it?”

“I would say it is not,” Jaris agreed.

“We are getting significantly ahead of ourselves,” Spock said, speaking up for the first time. “We do not know that he committed this crime at all.”

“No, we can’t know for certain at this point. But the evidence is certainly fairly overwhelming,” Hengist said.

“But circumstantial,” Spock pointed out.

“True, but our laws do not differentiate. Examining this further, Prefect, is another layer of complexity. What do we do with a person who intentionally quit taking the substance that would have prevent them from committing violence? That is an active choice, which may justify punishment. It’s slightly more attenuated, but a crime still flows from knowing choice.”

“I do see that,” Jaris answered with a frown.

“We do not know that Scott did that either,” Spock interrupted. “He claims he did not.”

“Your own doctor thinks otherwise,” Hengist said, his voice regretful. “He, in fact, seems downright angry about it, as if he believes it was an unwise, deliberate, and destructive choice.”

“Doctor McCoy is not always correct,” Spock replied evenly. “Regardless, discussions of punishment are premature, in the absence of proof that any crime has been committed. How is culpability determined? Is there a trial? Evidence? Witnesses?”

“Crime is incredibly rare here,” Hengist said. “A person is presumed guilty, but can be exonerated by testing by a priestess.”

Captain Kirk tapped his fingers on the table. “Guilty until proven innocent. Okay. Testing by a priestess?” he asked. “What is that?”

“Consent to examination of the mind,” Jaris explained, gesturing at his head.

“Telepathic examination?” Spock asked.

“In a way,” Hengist said. “An initial psychic contact, and then a joinder of a tribunal into that mindscape to examine the accused and the events in question. You can’t hide there. There’s no controlling the narrative. You’re just stripped bare to the truth.”

“Will your officer consent to the testing?” Jaris asked, leaning forward.

Kirk blew out a breath. “I don’t know if he will. What if he doesn’t?” Kirk asked.

“That is an admission of guilt, and punishment is carried out within hours. It would be cruel to the family of the victim, and the criminal himself, to delay.

“Execution,” Kirk said heavily.

“I’m afraid so.”

Kirk sighed. “I’ll have McCoy talk to him.”

“Captain, may I speak with him instead?” Spock asked.

Kirk frowned. “If you think that’s the better choice?”

“Under the present circumstances, I do,” Spock answered.

Kirk grimaced unhappily. “I just genuinely can’t believe any of this. May we get you his reply in the morning?” Kirk asked.

“That is sufficient,” Prefect Jaris answered. “The guards will be told to give you all the time you need.”

He hated staring at walls. But he hated it more when he couldn’t bring himself to do anything else. Closing his eyes didn’t help; he felt the same amount of nothing. But even in the nothing, something was beating itself on the inside of his skull, sharp and dangerous, and he could barely hear anything over the pounding of its heart. *His heart?*

Spock was talking. And waiting for an answer in a pause he’d apparently let go too long.

“So, my choices are tae submit myself tae psychic mumbo jumbo, or they kill me at dawn?” Scott asked from flat on his back in bed, turning his head to look through the bars. He laughed unhappily. “Well, that’s no real choice, is it?”

“You will submit?” Spock asked urgently.

“Aye, fine,” Scott sighed, and closed his eyes, because he couldn’t do this.

“Mr. Scott ...” Spock started, disquieted.

“Do I ever scare you, Mr. Spock? Scott interrupted. “I have tae watch people’s eyes, sometimes, tae gauge if I’m being a madman.”

“Fear is not an emotion I seek to cultivate,” Spock said simply.

Well, that was a non-answer. He held his hands above his face, and stared at them. The left was an identical flip of the right, down to the fingerprints. It hadn’t always been, and it was still uncanny. Things felt strange, like he was holding onto something from another dimension, and the feeling of a knife in his palm wasn’t quite real.

The fact that he could still *feel* it, though, was concerning.

Scott turned his head, and looked at Spock’s eyes. “I dinnae ken if I killed that girl,” he said softly. “I cannae remember a damn thing. Maybe I did it. What happens if they walk around in my mind, and it turns out I murdered her?”

There was an awful lot of blood in his memory, and it was *so cold* when it drained out of you. It threw your heart off, to lose it that fast. Someone had gasped, shaking in the cold gray while blood poured out on the ground. His. *Hers?*

“I do not believe you to be capable of this crime,” Spock said simply.

“That makes one of us,” Scott groaned, and he pressed his forearm across his eyes. He sat up. “There’s just one thing that gives me hope,” he said softly. “It’s the damn meds, Mr. Spock. I didnae stop taking them. I know that, beyond all doubt. I got up, started my tea, had a shower, injected a hypo. This morning and *every* morning. I wouldnae miss once, much less a month, not if I had a choice. If scans are saying otherwise, there’s somethin’ else afoot.”

“Why are you so certain?” Spock asked.

Scott grimaced. Fair question. He didn't want to tell the story. No choice. He gathered his thoughts, which obeyed him sluggishly. Mr. Spock was going to have to be patient, because this wasn't going in a straight line, but—

"The science is in my head, but the machinery has always been in my heart and hands," he started. "From the time I was a wee five year old who took apart my granny's kitchen stove, twice. I always wondered: could I make a thing better? And the first time I woke up on the floor with my eyebrows smoldering, I also wondered: could I make it *safer*?" Scott stared into the palms of his hands, one of which hadn't belonged to that little boy, but might have had a knife in it, once. Or had it been a phaser?

He continued. "And then there was this very sick kid, sitting in a very carefully engineered hospital room, but he could still see two different ways a person could kill himself in there. That boy stared at those walls for four days, not feeling any particular sort of way about anything at all. It coulda gone either way. Live, die, he really couldnae be arsed. But on the fifth day, I got up and started tearing things down. And this mass of nurses came flying through the door and pinned me to the floor. But I'd already fixed it, and they went through the hospital the next day and fixed everyone else's room too."

Scott stood and wrapped both hands around the bars between them. It just felt *wrong*. Like something wet, dripping to his elbow.

"And twenty years later, transwarp beaming was torturing me. And it's so damn seductive, Mr. Spock. The idea that brilliance and madness are the same. So I went off the meds for the first time since that kid fixed something and saved some lives, starting with his own."

He let go of the bars and paced away. "And one night, after I hadnae slept in days, the answer just came tae me. I'd solved it, I was sure of it." He'd die, someday—or tomorrow—with the giddy, overwhelming, entirely false *certainly* of it still stuck in his chest.

"I had this cadet workin' with me. So I woke him up, and he didnae ken what I was talking about, but he *believed* in me. I had him on the transporter pad. And then Admiral Archer's beagle came trotting down the hall, and for no reason in particular, I took the lad off the pad and put the dog on."

Scott sighed, getting closer to his point. "Mr. Spock, the look in that cadet's eyes, when he realized I was *wrong* ... when we both realized how damn close I'd been tae killing him ... I requested that assignment tae an ice ball in the middle of nowhere ... I *fix things*, Mr. Spock," he said desperately, willing the Vulcan to understand why he would never choose that path again.

Spock steepled his fingers. "Doctor McCoy's scan says that you stopped your medications at least 30 days ago."

Scott closed his eyes. "I know. I have no explanation."

"The simplest explanation is often the truth," Spock said, and it was gentle, but it slid right through his ribs. Then Spock continued: "And yet, in this particular case, I am inclined to believe you. The explanation has not yet presented itself, but logically there must be one. Try to sleep, Mr. Scott, and perhaps we will find answers in the morning."

That idea was laughable, but his next one wasn't, and he called out to Spock. "Sir, if it turns out I killed that lass ... will you please make sure Nyota doesnae come down for the execution?"

"This looks like a seance," Kirk murmured unhappily to Spock and McCoy the next morning as the priestess set up for the inquiry. A long oval table was in the center of the room, draped in curtains and lit by candlelight. The room felt hot, stuffy, and already overcrowded.

"It doesn't seem right, that Scotty's neck depends on this," McCoy said, glancing up when the door opened. "Here he comes. God, look at him. He's so sick right now, Jim."

Scott shuffled into the room, wearing a gray prison jumpsuit and heavy restraints. The guards helped him sit down at the table, then took off the handcuffs before placing his wrists in open shackles bolted to the top of the table, his palms facing up. Hengist clicked the shackles down and locked them with the key around his neck.

There was sweat on Scott's brow, and he wouldn't look up at anyone in the room. McCoy stepped up with his tricorder for a quick scan.

"If this was the Federation, he'd be declared incompetent for trial right now," McCoy complained.

"There is no such concept here," Hengist said apologetically.

"Can you at least loosen the restraints? They're hurting him."

"He is accused of a horrific murder, and is guilty unless we find otherwise," Hengist said. "The family of the victim is here, and they insist on it."

"Please sit," Prefect Jaris announced to the room at large, extending his hands. "This is the Priestess Sybo, my wife. She will now conduct the inquiry. If guilt is found or consent withdrawn, the sentence will be carried out immediately with the same weapon and in the same manner used in the murder," he said, and nodded toward the knife on the table. Scott's eyes flicked toward it, and then away, his expression agonized. "If innocence is found, the accused will be set free. The inquiry begins."

Sybo tapped a bell on the table, then steepled her fingers and breathed deeply. Her eyes fluttered closed, and when she opened them again, they were glowing faintly silver. "There is only truth here," she intoned, her voice deep. "All in this room will be joined. Any may choose to withdraw now, but once joined, none can hide."

Sybo reached forward and placed her palms in Scott's. Then she abruptly leaned back. "I was told he consented," she said.

“He does,” Kirk said swiftly.

“His heart rate is way up,” McCoy warned, glancing down at his tricorder

Scott clenched his jaw. “I do,” he insisted.

“You do not,” the priestess corrected gently. “I cannot enter your mind without consent.”

“Look, lady. Just do what yeh have tae. I cannae stop you.”

She gave an appalled, disbelieving laugh. “I will not violate you. I have sworn an oath.” She reached forward again, and then immediately drew back. “You are saying one thing, but thinking another. You have closed the door to your mind. I cannot pass.”

“And that concludes the inquiry,” Hengist said ruefully, then stood and picked up the knife on the table. “I’ll do it, Prefect. The heavy burden of punishment falls to me. I’ll be kinder than he was with his victim. Get him up,” Hengist said to guards.

“Now, wait just a damn minute ...!” McCoy shouted, and the Captain half-stood in protest. Scott’s eyes flicked up, and his expression was enough to make Hengist step backward, the knife still in his hand. Hengist smiled faintly.

“Wait,” Sybo said, raising a hand. She grasped Scott’s left wrist and rotated it in the shackle, turning his artificial palm down, then hovered both her hands over his upturned right hand, not quite touching him. “He is afraid.”

“He doesn’t want to die,” Kirk murmured.

“He is largely indifferent on that point,” she revealed.

“Goddammit,” McCoy sighed.

She continued. “He is afraid that he may have done this. He needs to know; he is afraid to know.” Her eyes were closed again, neck arching, hands flexing where they hovered above his, reaching. “Who is Hades?” she asked in concern.

“No,” Kirk said, standing abruptly, shaking his head. “No no no. We aren’t doing this. We need a break.”

“And Redjac?” she continued.

Scott hesitated, and looked at Captain Kirk in confusion. “I ... what? Redjac? Ma’am, I have no idea.”

“Your hand is trembling,” she said, and it was, shaking hard enough even against the restraint to brush up against her hovering palms. “Do you consent?”

“Aye,” he said, his breathing ragged.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re doing to him, but he’s about two seconds from a heart attack,” McCoy said urgently, jumping to his feet with a hypo in his hand.

“Dinnae fucking touch me, McCoy,” Scott snapped.

“I can give you no answers if you do not let me in,” Sybo begged Scott urgently. “You must open the door to your mind.”

He shook his head. “How do I do that?” he looked across the table at Spock. “Help me, Mr. Spock...” he begged.

Spock immediately leaned forward into a mind meld. His fingers tightened almost imperceptibly against the engineer’s skin.

“You would break into his mind?” Sybo reproved him sharply.

“The door to his mind is locked,” Spock replied urgently. “He is incapable of that; someone else has locked it. They have locked him out of his own memories, and us from the truth.”

Spock opened his eyes, looking straight through Scott. “Tell me yes,” he said.

“Just do it, Mr. Spock,” Scott gritted out.

The priestess flinched violently, at the same time as Scott, and she swiftly dropped her hands into his right palm, clutching it hard enough for her nails to draw blood.

“Caught you,” she said shakily, as if he may have been danger of falling into an endless abyss.

“The door is open,” Spock said evenly.

“Prefect, this is becoming very irregular,” Hengist interrupted urgently. “Someone is going to get hurt.” But Sybo had already swept them up, and they were standing in the fog, and they were all Montgomery Scott.

“Where are we?” Sybo’s voice asked him.

“I dinnae ken,” Scott said in despair. “I cannae remember.”

“Let us step backward in time. Where are we?”

“*The Enterprise*,” Scott said, leaning on a biobed and arguing with McCoy. “I’m tired of you wandering by, waving a medical probe at me. I’d thank yeh tae stay out of my head. And I dinnae want shore leave. No one else is getting sent down. Will you please just listen tae me? I’m *fine*.”

“You terrified your lieutenants with a very loud, very ... colorful ... dressing down two days ago,” McCoy said.

Scott frowned. “Aye, because some incompetent sod installed a junction backward, what the hell does that have tae do with ...?”

“You’re not sleeping,” McCoy interrupted. “Barely eating. Pacing the deck four shifts in five ... Keenser told on you.”

“Keenser thinks he’s my gran,” Scott said, rolling his eyes.

McCoy folded his arms. “Would you like me to read you some of the symptoms of depression? Irritability, apathy, restlessness, sleeplessness ... shall I go on? There are fragments of your bones embedded into the walls of main Engineering,” McCoy said.

Scotty blinked, caught off guard. “Aye, but nae just mine. Maybe Keenser needs shore leave too, his guts still ache. Or Charlene Masters, who’s asleep in a status tube until we get back tae Earth, and will be lucky if she’s anything other than vegetative for the rest of her life,” he growled, angry now.

“And you’ve just made my point. I’m not worried so much about this,” McCoy gestured at his prosthetic hand. “But this,” McCoy continued, and tapped Scott’s head.

Scotty rubbed his face in frustration. “I’m fine.”

“If you’d let me scan you, we could confirm that,” McCoy said pointedly.

“I’m tired of getting poked.”

“It’s completely non-invasive, and you damn well know it,” McCoy said, hands on his hips. “Look. Go down to the planet. Get a little drunk. Watch some pretty girls take all their clothes off. You want to have sex, I won’t tell Mira. You’ll feel better.”

“I feel fine *now*.”

McCoy thumped him in the chest. “I don’t believe you. Get out of here, Scotty. Shoreleave, now.”

Sybo pulled them forward in time, back into the fog. “*Where are we?*” she asked.

“*I’m just walking. Didnae go tae a club. Had one drink at a pub, a sandwich. Just walkin’ now, wondering how quick I can get back up tae the ship without McCoy noticing.*”

“*Who is she?*” Sybo asked, of a woman waiting beside the road.

“*Dinnae ken ...* Good evening,” he called, and she startled. “Sorry, didnae mean tae frighten yeh. Thick fog tonight. Is it usually like this?”

“It’s not,” she said, shivering. “A little frightening actually.”

“Do yeh need help?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “I’m waiting for my fiancé.”

“Hopefully he can find yeh in this pea soup. Have a nice evening, lass,” Scotty said, jamming his hands in his pockets and continuing his aimless wandering.

Her scream a few seconds later turned him around, but he couldn’t see anything, the fog suddenly thicker, *tangible*, down his throat. “Lass, where are yeh?” he coughed, and something within him twisted, the raw despair of it radiating out into the inquiry party.

“*What is happening?*” Sybo asked him urgently

“*There’s something wrong. There’s something in my head. It’s hungry. Its got me. I’ve felt this before.*”

“*When?*” Sybo asked.

“*Now!*” he cried, as though unable to separate his memories, reeling between something past and something nearer. “*Its got my hands; I cannae stop it. It’s wrapped up in my mind, making me watch. This bastard’s so hungry, takin’ me too fast. Angry. It’s angry at me, because its already taken everything and I cannae feel anything. It wants me tae feel. It wants me afraid. I’m no’ afraid. I’m empty.*”

“*There is evil here!*” Sybo cried in alarm.

The voice speaking changed, no longer Scott, but high and breathy, and from the waking world. “Yes there is. The woman is afraid. She can feel me, Red Jack, breathing on her neck.” Hengist stepped out of the fog, and turned to Scott.

“I’m going to put this knife in your hand, and you’re going to kill her. And I’ll eat her terror, and your despair, and that’s a good meal. I’ve been stuck here with these pacifists, starving, and you’re going to give me a ride off this planet. But first we’ll go around the room with that knife. Start with the priestess while her husband watches. The Captain. Spock. McCoy, you’re angry at him anyway. And they’re so afraid!

“They’re really not,” Scotty said, the fog twisting around his body “You staged this in my mind, and I feel like shite. I’d rather fight you with the power of joy, but I’ve got nothin’. Maybe you’ll choke tae death on my current inability tae feel any damn thing at all.”

The shared dreamscape abruptly shattered outward, and Hengist—Jack—was laughing maniacally. Scott was out of his restraints, on his feet with Sybo clutched in his arms. The knife was in his hand, its tip bloody from where it had drawn a shallow cut against her breast. He dropped it like it was burning him. “Are you alright, ma’am?” he asked, steadying her on her feet even as he staggered, and she turned her hands to catch his.

Hengist suddenly collapsed, and McCoy dashed to his side. “He’s dead,” the doctor said, utterly baffled, but the horrible echoing laughter filled the room again. “*Red Jack!! Red Jack!!*” the voice cackled from Hengist’s slightly open mouth.

Spock spun on his heel. “What is in that hypo?” Spock asked McCoy sharply, gesturing at the drugs the doctor had wanted to give Scotty.

“Vallium,” McCoy said.

“Inject everyone in the room, now, Doctor,” Spock ordered.

McCoy’s eyes widened in understanding, and he had everyone slipping toward deeply mellow within seconds.

“I said *no*,” the Engineer snapped when McCoy moved to inject him.

“Okay, then,” McCoy drawled, his own dose hitting him. “You’re mad at me. You want some of this Spock? It’s niiiice.”

“I am fine,” Spock said dryly.

Sybo was still holding Scotty’s hands. “You are innocent,” she said gently as McCoy injected her. “Release him.”

The body of Hengist suddenly leapt from the floor, snatched up the knife, and held it to her throat.

“I’ll kill her!” he screamed wildly, fading, his energy entirely spent. The priestess burst out laughing, the Valium making her completely unconcerned, and Hengist went transparent, his energy entirely spent in the attack. “Dead, dead ... why aren’t you afraid? You must be afraid. Fear me!”

“We do not fear you,” Spock said. He gestured at the room. “They are amused. I am repulsed. And Scott is numb. There is nothing here for you to feed on.”

“No! No!” Redjac screamed, stretching out into thinning fog. “*Nooooo!!!*” and he was gone.

“This is a nice planet,” McCoy sighed happily.

“Very nice,” Kirk agreed, entirely high.

Scotty looked at Spock. “I think we ought tae get them home, sir,” he said shakily, and then sat down hard.

The priestess knelt beside him. “I do not understand,” she murmured.

“Nasty monster, trying tae survive on fear,” Scott said, and mustered a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “He picked a bad planet for it.”

“No,” she insisted urgently, and reached for his face, cupping it in both of her hands, tracing it with her thumbs. “*I don’t understand.*”

“Good,” he said heavily. “You’re not meant tae.”

Spock abruptly leaned forward and placed his hand over the priestess’s, where it rested against Scott’s cheek. The priestess and the Vulcan both closed their eyes for a moment before lifting their hands, and Scott’s countenance lifted slightly.

“Huh,” he said in surprise, rubbing at his temple.

Sybo stepped away to reach for her husband’s hands, and the Prefect tucked her protectively into his side, pressing a cloth against the shallowly bleeding cuts on her breast and throat.

“I think, perhaps, you should all go,” the Prefect said, a little icily.

“Gladly,” Spock said, and opened his communicator.

Uhura was immediately on the line, her voice tense and concerned. “*Is there a verdict, Mr. Spock?*” she asked urgently.

“Acquittal,” Spock answered evenly, and she sighed in relief. “Four to beam up, please.”

McCoy sat down across from Scott in the mess hall. The engineer paused mid-chew and lifted his brows in question. McCoy didn’t speak, but stole a chip off his plate, and the men sat in silence until McCoy burst out—

“Red Jack the *Ripper*, according to Spock. I don’t know why we keep running into ancient psychopaths.”

“Aye. I’d rather they stay out of my head,” Scott answered calmly.

McCoy hesitated. “Look ... M’Benga wants to consult with me about you. I mean ... I’ve got eyes, Scotty. I don’t have to look at your file to know you’re struggling to bounce back. He’d like to brainstorm a bit, since I was your primary physician all those years, but I told him only with your consent.” Scotty blinked at him, and McCoy pressed on. “For what it’s worth, and that may be nothing at all, I apologize. For what is quite a few things, at this point ... look, if I ramble at you, will you listen to me for a minute?”

Scott slid his lunch across the table, inviting McCoy to finish his chips with a tilt of his hand, and leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed.

McCoy munched a chip and collected his thoughts. “Back after Jim was put in command of the *Enterprise*, I was helping him sort out the roster of officers he was requesting for the ship. He wanted you as chief, and I don’t think the request had been in longer than five minutes before Pike called, with Admiral April on the line too. I hadn’t realized until then that you served with them.”

”The *Constitution*,” Scotty said fondly, a little ruefully. “Captain April and Commander Pike. They knocked a fuckup of an engineering lieutenant into a halfway okay officer.”

”They didn’t want us to have you. They said you were brilliant and troubled, and that serving on a starship was beneath you. They said they’d left you alone for a while to sort out your head, but that you belonged at Starfleet Engineering, thinking deep thoughts. But Jim’s stubborn, and so are you, and it’s a good thing we got you because you’ve saved our asses once or twice. But the responsibility for your health weighed on me. It’s hard to keep you alive, sometimes, much less happy and well.”

Scotty traced a groove in the table with a thumbnail, thinking. “I never asked that of you, Leonard,” he said at last.

“I know,” McCoy interrupted.

“Your turn tae listen,” Scott said, holding up an hand, and McCoy quit talking. “With genuine, full gratitude for your help and for everything you’ve ever done for me—I’m nae a child, Leonard. Past, present, and future, there is just one person responsible for my life, and that’s me.”

McCoy blew out a breath and leaned back in his chair, and nodded. “I think I’ll leave M’Benga to it. Maybe some fresh eyes.” Then he changed the subject. “You didn’t even make it to a club down there?” McCoy said with false heartiness. It was an entirely awkward shift, but they were both at their limit for fraught conversations. “Those dancers are famous in this sector!”

”Maybe I should have. Might have gotten in less trouble.” Scotty said ruefully, and stood up to toss the rest of his lunch in the recycler.

”Scotty,” McCoy said hesitantly, following him out of the mess. “It’s not ‘Dr. McCoy’ asking here but ... how are you doing?”

Scott paused, and the look on his face may have been weariness, or frustration, or something altogether more complicated. He finally just shrugged. “I have an old bottle of scotch that needs drinking. Come over one of these nights, and we’ll drain it down. And maybe I’ll be able tae answer yeh then.”

The Twentieth Century

Chapter Summary

The crew has an encounter with the Guardian, and are changed forever.

Captain's Log, Stardate 2266.350. We've been summoned. From light years away, and with a mechanism we can't identify, something called the 'Guardian' has summoned us, with the message that our universe is at stake. And when we arrive we have been instructed to beam down with myself, Spock, Scott, McCoy, and Uhura. It knew our names. I'm suspicious and reluctant. That said, we are crossing through a phenomenon we've never encountered—temporal waves, suggesting time travel. The last time this universe encountered time travel, we lost the planet Vulcan. So we go.

Kirk went to the quartermaster himself for supplies ahead of the beam down, suspicious of what they were facing. Tricorders, type one and two phasers, communicators, and full away packs with 72 hours of emergency supplies. He considered some of Scotty's nastier inventions, designed mostly for making things explode with extreme prejudice, but decided against them.

He handed out the supplies and joined his crewmates on the pad. "Stay alert," Kirk said tensely, and nodded at the transporter officer. The *Enterprise* shimmered out of existence, replaced by the swirling mists of the planetoid.

"The temporal waves are increasing in intensity," Spock reported, scanning with his tricorder. "They are coming from this planet; more specifically, they appear to be coming from a small focal point."

"Something like that?" Uhura asked, gesturing toward a stone arch with an undulating, twisting substance hovering within.

"That precisely," Spock said.

"That looks almost familiar," Kirk mused. "Do you remember that membrane on the ghost planet? It looked something like that."

"Agreed, sir," Spock said. "Have care."

The away team stopped in front of it. "Readings, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"It does not exist," Spock said. "It is causing massive time distortion, but all readings say there is nothing there."

"What are you?" Kirk asked it softly.

"A question!" a booming voice said. **"Since before your sun burned hot in space and before your race was born, I have awaited a question. I am the Guardian of Forever."**

"Are you machine, or being?" Spock asked.

"I am both. And neither. I am my own beginning. My own ending."

"I see so reason why your answer should be couched in riddles," Spock said.

"I speak only as your understanding makes possible," the Guardian said, to a raised eyebrow from Spock.

"A time portal, Captain. A gateway to other times and universes," Spock said quietly. "It must be."

"Did you ask us here?" Kirk questioned.

"Yes," said the voice. **"Your universe is gone. I held you until you arrived. But all you know is ended. Your ship. Your Federation. Your Earth. Time has been altered. It must be corrected."**

Kirk's eyes widened, and he flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*," he said urgently. "Sulu. *Enterprise*, come in!"

Nothing.

"It's gone, Jim," McCoy said shakily, scanning the sky with his tricorder. "Just gone."

"What did you do with my ship!" Kirk cried in rage.

"It has been undone," the Guardian said. **"Your vessel. Your beginning. All that you knew is gone. Time has been altered. Look!"** The portal came to life, flashing scenes too quickly to see.

"It is history!" Spock said, suddenly understanding. "All of history!" He lifted his tricorder and began recording.

"History has been changed before," Kirk said quietly. "Ambassador Spock and Nero. You let it happen then. What is different this time?"

"No." The Guardian corrected. **"What occurred then always occurred. Had always, would always, in this universe. What has been done**

now is an alteration. A desecration. An attack. One point, one life, one change and history turns. The universe splits where it should not. It must be undone.”

“Why us?” Kirk asked. “Did we cause it?”

“No,” said the Guardian. **“And yes. Walk through the portal, Kirk. Pass into what was. You shall go to whom you have always gone.”**

“How do we get back?” Kirk asked, hesitant.

“If you are successful in mending the timeline, you will all be returned, as if none of you had gone,” the Guardian said.

“Are we really going tae jump intae a time machine, with no idea what has changed, and hope we run intae the answer?” Scott asked incredulously.

“We appear to have no choice, engineer,” Spock said. “The past as we know it is gone. We are totally alone.”

“If nothing else, we could survive somewhere in the past,” Kirk said.

“Aye,” Scott agreed softly.

Kirk squared his shoulders. “When do we go through?” Kirk asked the Guardian.

“At the correct moment, as you have always done,” it said.

“Fantastic,” Kirk sighed. “Okay, people. Side by side,” he said, and the remaining officers of Starfleet in the universe stepped together into the past.

It was Earth. Clearly Earth. A city, English speaking from the signs and the people flowing around them. Automobiles on the streets meant the twentieth or twenty-first century. “Spread out a little. Let’s see if we can figure out when and where we are,” Kirk said.

“June 5, 1989,” Spock reported. “Unless the paper in this box is inaccurate.”

“Late twentieth century. New York Times newspaper. Are we in New York?”

“We’re getting odd looks, sir,” Uhura said softly.

“Yeah, well, we’re dressed identically in a strange uniform they’ve never seen. And we have an alien with us. Come on, let’s find somewhere private.”

“What do we do?” McCoy asked as they walked aimlessly. “How do we start?”

“On the tricorder I recorded all of history as the Guardian showed it to us, Doctor,” Spock answered. “The answer is there somewhere. One change, the Guardian said, one life.”

“I don’t think we have time to watch all of history,” Kirk said.

“No,” Spock agreed. “We need a computer.”

“Which isn’t impossible in 1989, but it’s going to be an incredibly stupid machine not capable of crunching trillions of terabytes of data, to say nothing of interfacing with a tricorder,” Kirk answered.

“We’re going tae have tae build something,” Scott said.

It swiftly became apparent that this was real, that it was happening, and that they were going to have to deal with living in the twentieth century for the foreseeable future. While they were grateful they’d brought away packs and equipment with them, their resources were minimal. They needed clothing, food, and a quiet place to sleep and work on the problem of their altered history. Which in the twentieth century meant they needed money and jobs. They started with pawning Scotty’s watch—too advanced for the time but there was nothing for it. Nyota sang in bars. And Kirk managed to beg more money in the street than all of them combined. In three days they had acquired a small, crowded two bedroom apartment—Spock and Nyota in one room, Jim and Leonard in the other, Scotty on the couch. They had all agreed that it was better for Spock to try to crack the tricorder data and stay away from humanity as much as possible, lest he attract unwanted attention. Everyone else had jobs, and Spock and Scott were beginning to cobble together computer parts.

However, another problem quickly became apparent.

“How did we not think of this?” Nyota said angrily. “He’s been gone two days! They haven’t seen him at the auto store. Repair shop. Whatever it is. He was sick; they sent him home, and he never got here! How did we not think of this!?”

“Scotty did,” McCoy said guiltily. “He’s been slowly panicking all week. I just didn’t realize we’d be here quite this quickly.”

The Captain frowned. “I’ve seen flashes of it, obviously. We all have. Just how sick is Scotty when he’s unmedicated?” he asked.

“Very,” McCoy said reluctantly. “Between genetic predisposition and alien interference, he is severely bipolar. It takes the best of 23rd century medicine to keep him well. And not for nothing, Jim. Nyota’s supposed to be on a low dose antidepressant. I’m supposed to be on antianxiety meds,” McCoy said. “We’ve all been in forced withdrawal and feeling like shit, and it’s all going to be tons of fun living without modern medicine. But Scotty’s condition is the most dangerous.”

“Can they treat him, in this timeframe?” Spock asked, looking deeply concerned.

“With goddamned *lithium*, McCoy sighed. “But better than nothing.”

“We have to find him first,” Nyota reminded them.

“What do you do, in the twentieth century, when someone goes missing?” McCoy asked, and they all looked helplessly at each other.

“Search parties, I guess,” Kirk said, and was pulling on a coat when a knock on the door startled them. Kirk answered it, cracking it open to reveal the kind face of a lovely woman. “I’m sorry, I’ve got a gentleman here who says he thinks he lives here?” she said.

“Scotty,” Kirk said in relief, and grabbed the engineer, who was leaning heavily on his rescuer. His face was bloody and bruised; he’d obviously been beaten up. “You’ve been gone two days, mister.”

“Sorry, Captain,” Scott said thickly. “I lost track of time.”

“What the hell happened!?”

The woman sighed, assuming Kirk was asking her, and came inside. “I don’t know what things are like in England, but around here it’s still dangerous for a man to kiss another man in the street,” she said wearily.

“Did she jus’ call me English?” Scotty asked, woozily insulted.

McCoy was wiping up Scott’s battered face. “Scotty, you can’t just go picking up guys in bars. It’s the middle of the damn twentieth century. And what about Mira?”

“Mira isnae alive” he slurred. “So it isnae cheating.”

“That’s not how that works,” Nyota hissed at him. “You’re drunk.”

“I feel like *shite*,” he complained, as though it were a surprising discovery.

“How long has he been off his medications?” the woman asked kindly. At their surprised looks she added, “I work at the shelter. I see it pretty regularly. From the way he’s talking he’s in bad shape. Something about spaceships and time travel. I was glad and surprised he had somewhere to go, but he really needs the hospital. He got beat up pretty badly too. And look ... I’m sure you already know it, but some people don’t. Be careful cleaning up his blood. It isn’t just sex that passes AIDS.”

McCoy frowned at the mention of the very old disease. “He doesn’t have it.”

“I hope you’re right. If his boyfriend ... Mira? died of it though...” The woman shook her head. “We are going to lose an entire generation of gay men to this thing. They get sick, the people they love die, and they can’t even be together, locked out of hospital rooms by cruel laws and heartless people. The whole thing is a tragedy.”

“Someone should change things,” McCoy said pointedly.

“I intend to,” she said, her eyes flashing. “I have a nose for people down on their luck, and you people here have that look. And I’m worried about him. In a couple of days will you let me know how he’s doing? Here’s my card, down at the shelter,” she said, and handed it to Kirk.

“Edith Keeler,” he said, reading her name. “We will. Thank you for helping our friend.”

As promised, two days later Kirk was waiting for her outside the shelter, and brightened when he saw her. “Ms. Keeler,” he said. “I don’t know you if you remember me ...”

“The friend of the pummeled Scotsman,” she said warmly. “It occurred to me later I didn’t get your name.”

“Jim,” he said with a smile. “Jim Kirk. I wanted to thank you again for your help. He’s doing a lot better.”

“I’m so glad,” she said, and they smiled awkwardly at each other for a moment, at the end of their conversation, but neither wanting to be.

“Would it be incredibly forward of me to invite you to dinner?” Jim asked. “Although when I say ‘invite to dinner.’ My friends and I are saving our money right now. So, not a restaurant. But I can boil noodles. In my apartment, with four other people. And it just occurred to me how incredibly pathetic that all sounds ...”

“I would love to come to a dinner of boiled noodles,” she said with a smile. “I’m off now, and don’t have plans ...?”

“Well then, Ms. Keeler,” he said, extending his arm. “Care to take a walk with me?”

“It’s Edith,” he said, and hooked her arm in his. He kept the conversation on her while they walked. Where was she from? Here, in Queens. Family? Not any more. Hobbies? Helping people.

“I think you sound extraordinary, Edith,” he said, and they walked into the apartment. “Introductions, this time. Leonard, over there. Georgia boy. He’s grumpy this week, but don’t hold it against him. Nyota. From Kenya. The only one of us here that’s remotely competent. Spock. He’s from nowhere and everywhere. The ears are a birth defect, before you ask. He works on computers and doesn’t talk much. And you remember Scotty. Everyone, Edith.”

“You’re quite the collection of people,” she said warmly. “You’re looking better,” she told Scotty, although his face was still black and blue.

“Feeling a little better,” he said. “Slowly feeling less likely tae wander a strange city making poor life choices. Thanks for the help the other night, lass.”

“I promised Edith a fabulous boiled noodle dinner,” Kirk said.

Scott gave a half laugh. “Did you now? Considering that you’ve now burned water *twice* this week, you arenae going near the kitchen.”

“Scotty will come up with something,” Nyota told Edith warmly. “It’s much safer that way. Jim, get her a beer.”

Dinner managed to be delicious, and the company good, although Edith could tell they were all playing it vague with their life stories. “I have a few questions,” she told Jim as he walked her home.

“Do you?” he teased. “Just a few?”

“There is something strange here,” she mused. “Not bad. Not dangerous. But I don’t understand it. I don’t understand you. For example, why do they call you ‘Captain?’”

“Did they really call me that?” he asked ruefully.

“It was ‘Jim,’ most of the time. But I definitely heard ‘Captain.’ And even ‘sir.’”

“Scotty started that. I was a brash kid. He called me ‘Captain.’ It stuck and spread.”

“That’s not it,” she insisted. “You’re clearly their leader. They look to you, they defer to you, and they wait for you to decide. And you obviously feel responsible for them.”

“We’re just kind of ... found family,” Kirk said.

“Families don’t have Captains,” she said.

“Oh, they can,” he said softly. “Thank god.”

She looked up into his eyes and traced his face with her fingertips. “Who are you, Jim Kirk?” she asked.

“Just a guy from Iowa,” he answered.

“For some reason I don’t believe that at all,” she said, and pulled him down into a kiss.

“Hey!” she called, opening the door. “Anybody home? Hi, Spock.”

“Miss Keeler,” Spock greeted her.

“It’s Edith,” she teased him, for about the thousandth time. “How is the computer coming?”

“Frustratingly slow,” he answered. “The available parts are simply not sufficient.”

“What is everyone doing today?” she asked, digging through the refrigerator for the leftovers from Scotty’s amazing veggie curry from the night before.

“Strangely, they all seemed to have the day off. It appears to be a holiday of some kind.”

“Fourth of July,” she laughed at him. At his querying eyebrow she sighed. “Seriously?”

Scotty came banging through the front door with an armload of what looked like electronics garbage, and he smelled like he’d been foraging through dumpsters all night.

“There was someone following’ me last night,” he complained twitchily, then shook his head, and refocused, a bit. “Mr. Spock, I once ran intae a species on a planet that used focused electrical phasing tae approximate artificial intelligence ... oh, good morning, lassie,” he said, cutting himself off when he noticed Edith. He dumped the junk on the table; Spock immediately began combing through it.

“Hi, Scotty,” Edith said fondly. “How are you this morning?”

He grabbed a mostly-clean cup from the sink, filled it with water, and swallowed a pill. He grimaced at the taste of the water or the pill, or both. “Trapped,” he said, answering her question. “In the twentieth century.”

She smiled at him. “The fate of billions. Give it twelve more years and we’ll escape.”

“It’s a stupid century,” he said firmly. “Although, I suppose, in comparison tae the twenty-first ...”

Nyota walked in, looking stunning even straight from bed, and kissed Spock sweetly. Edith didn’t quite understand the two of them, but it seemed to work. “Oh, you stink,” Nyota scolded Scotty, cutting off his rambling. “Shower, food. *Sleep*, if you haven’t had any.”

He rolled his eyes. “Aye aye, ma’am,” Scott said sarcastically.

“Jim said he wanted pancakes, so he and Leonard ran out to the shop for ingredients,” Nyota told Edith.

The door opened again. “It is *crazy* out there, I really think this might be a big holiday,” Kirk said, arms loaded with pancake mix and fruit.

“Edith! He said happily, and came over to kiss her, his hands lingering shyly. She shivered at his touch, still so new. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“I’ve come to invite you to a barbecue, at the shelter,” she said. “No fireworks; we have too many vets who don’t care much for things exploding around them. Burgers, hotdogs, music, the works.”

“Sure,” he said, a little puzzled. “For the ...?”

“Fourth of July,” Spock interjected.

“Right!” Kirk said, and he was clearly bullshitting. “Fourth day. Of July! Right, Bones? Good old day.”

“Absolutely,” McCoy enthused. “My favorite.”

“Okay. Wait,” Edith boggled, holding up a hand. “I could believe it if Nyota, or Scotty, or Spock weren’t following, because they aren’t from the United States. But two boys from Iowa and Georgia? Fourth of July? Independence Day?”

“The United States,” Kirk said slowly. “In America. Are America? *Of*. Of America,” Kirk said. “Right. You know, if Earth was just a big united planet, that kind of thing wouldn’t come up. Wouldn’t that be great?” he clapped his hands, trying to distract from the sideways look Edith was giving him. “We’d love to come!”

“You are all so strange,” she breathed. “Four o’clock, just bring yourselves. We’ll have a vegetarian option too, Spock, so I’ll expect to see you!”

The party was in full swing when they arrived, the families and individuals who were staying at the shelter mingling happily with the family and friends of the staff. “I know you said not to bring anything,” Kirk said apologetically, handing her several bags of groceries. “But Spock was worried about the vegetarian dish. And McCoy wasn’t sure you’d have sweet tea. And we ended up at the market buying junk food...”

Edith laughed at him, and went to arrange the food on the table. She moved easily in the crowd. She knew everyone, knew their story. She was clearly beloved here, and Jim loved to watch her. She was the lightest, most joyous, most giving person he’d ever met. His heart wondered, not for the first time, how he was supposed to leave her behind when they went back to the future. *If*, he thought in frustration. Spock and Scott still weren’t any closer to a computer that would do what they needed.

Jim didn’t have anything to compare it to, but enjoyed the Fourth of July party enormously. Spock, Nyota, and Scotty had wandered over to the musical equipment up front, and had been entertaining a very appreciative crowd with songs that wouldn’t be written for hundreds of years. The evening was winding down, Nyota leaning into Spock, and they’d be going home soon, Kirk could tell. He’d caught Scotty enthusiastically kissing a pretty blonde in the kitchen, so that was Scotty’s evening sorted. And McCoy was down on the floor playing games with the kids. Whether he slept with any single moms tonight, or just tucked children into bed and came home with tears in his eyes, missing his daughter, remained to be seen

“Your friends are amazing musicians,” Edith said, coming up behind him to take his hand. “I had no idea.”

“They’ve spent more than a few hours entertaining people very far from home,” Kirk said nostalgically.

“There are some fireworks, down at the park, if you’d care to watch them? I was going to see them. I’ve always loved fireworks.”

He’d happily agreed, and enjoyed the feel of her cuddled into his side far more than the show. They were walking home, his arm around her, when a shout caught his attention.

“Jim! Watch out!”

It startled him, and he glanced around sharply and saw a car careening toward them from behind. “Whoa!” he cried, pirouetting them out of the way just in time as the car hopped the curb where they’d been standing.

She clung to him for a moment. “Well,” she said ruefully. “That was close. How on earth did you see that!?”

His heart was still pounding from the close call. “I thought I heard someone shouting my name, but there’s no one. Someone must have been shouting at another Jim. Weirdest coincidence.” He pressed his lips to hers, just to feel her alive under him, and she kissed back with equal fervor that rapidly became something else.

“How is it that I love you Edith Keeler?” he asked her in wonder. “So soon, so quickly, so completely. And so *inconveniently*, I might add!”

She laughed at him. “The same way I love you, Jim,” she said. “The same way I love you.”

Nyota Uhura was both the most intimidating and kindest woman that Edith had ever met. Edith had the impression that she could effortlessly speak dozens of languages, and had helped out at the shelter a few times when they got someone in and couldn’t figure out what language they needed. Each time Nyota had listened for a moment, then immediately started speaking, much to the relief of the other person.

She seemed perfectly unflappable, entirely collected, and always exquisitely put together. And yet. Edith was quite sure she’d heard her screaming in the night. Not from Spock’s apparently careful ministrations—which, to be fair, the walls were thin—these were screams of a different sort, that put Jim and Leonard straight in their feet and drove Scotty outside in despair. And no one ever spoke of it the next day. Something horrible had happened. Maybe more than one something, but there wasn’t a trace of it on her in the light of day.

She was never afraid to speak her mind, or confront any of the boys if they were pulling crap. And yet, she’d also seen Nyota defer, if one of them made a choice that would affect the group, each of them sliding into some kind of role that Edith couldn’t quite place.

Nyota would sing around the apartment, her voice more than good enough for the stage, and Spock's bass and Scotty's tenor usually would slip into harmony with her on songs Edith had never heard. It was the one thing that seemed to make everyone happy. She had a deep friendship with Jim and a comfortable fondness for Leonard. But although Spock was clearly her exclusive lover, she was more likely to be tactile with Scotty than anyone—a head in his lap, or his in hers, a beer casually shared.

She got harassed on the street once by a drunken fool who put his hands on her ass. All four of the boys had been there, and roared to her aid, ready to kill him. But there had been no need; Nyota had him on his back, a foot on his throat before the drunk could blink.

Nyota Uhura was, frankly, terrifyingly competent. Which made it very, very strange when she pulled Edith aside one day, a box of tampons in her hand and an odd look on her face. "I haven't had to deal with this since I was fourteen," she said wearily. "Do these work how I think they work?"

"I ... yes?" Edith said, gobsmacked. "I mean, presumably?" Edith pulled one out of the box and, using one hand as a stand in for parts that Nyota was surely familiar with, did a quick pantomime of the procedure.

"So ridiculous," Nyota said with a sigh. "Thanks, Edith."

Edith could hear Scotty and Leonard going at it before they even walked in the door. And it had been brewing inevitably for a while, with five people stuffed together in a two bedroom apartment for months. She knew that she didn't help, a regular sixth. She had the impression that they were used to living in close quarters, but not quite this tight.

Jim looked ruefully over at her. "I'd walk away and let them have at it, but they really might kill each other," he said, and pushed the door open.

Scotty was up and pacing, Leonard parked grumpily on the couch. Spock appeared to be ignoring them, and Nyota was glaring at them both from the kitchen.

"...pacing all night long, coming in at all hours!" Leonard was shouting. "When the rest of us just want to *sleep*."

"Yes, because I love being awake 72 hours straight and absolutely have control over it!" Scotty shouted back sarcastically. "Maybe you could put your one, oh-so-impressive doctorate tae work and get tae synthesizing something other than damn poison tae pour intae my brain, and I'll do a little better!"

Leonard stood up, going toe to toe with Scotty.

"Well, in that case maybe you could put your *four* doctorates to work and figure out how to get us the hell out of here, instead of getting drunk every night and having sex in back alleys with every pretty face that smiles at you! Which, by the way, how the *hell* you can justify doing that to Mira..."

"You can leave her the fuck out of this," Scotty growled, and he had Leonard by the front of the shirt.

"That's *enough*," Jim snapped, and the two men stiffened, almost as though coming to attention. Edith could practically hear them both swallowing down an instinctive 'aye, sir,' and yet again, she wondered just what exactly this little group was.

"Look, I know this isn't easy," Jim said, a hand on both of their shoulders, both of their gazes on the floor. "We're living on top of each other, tripping over one another every time we turn around. I know your anxiety is eating you up, Bones. And Scotty, I know you're exhausted from fighting every day to stay steady. But taking swipes at each other isn't going to help."

They both nodded.

"Besides which, if we're airing grievances I want to talk about the pile of laundry on the floor, and whoever leaves a wet washcloth in the shower," he teased gently, breaking the tension. "You should both get some rest."

"I think I will, Jim," McCoy said tiredly, and headed toward the shower.

Scotty shook his head. "I need some air, sir," he said.

"It's raining out there, Scotty."

"There's air between the raindrops," he shrugged, picking up his coat. "Good night, Captain."

Nyota frowned. "I'll go with him, sir," she said, grabbing an umbrella and following him out.

Kirk sighed. "You were just going to let them go at it, Spock?"

"Their irritation has been growing for some time, Captain. I thought it best that they 'have it out.' I would not have permitted it to come to blows."

"Okay," Jim said wearily, and sat beside Spock, as though the burden of the argument was his.

Edith knew that Jim wouldn't answer the question, if she asked it. But he'd just been called "Captain" and "sir" by three different people, and he'd stopped a fight with one clipped word. There was a chain of command, here, and Jim was the commander. Also, Leonard had a doctorate, and Scotty had four. What they were doing working at a market and a car repair shop was beyond her.

Edith took Jim's hand, and wondered when he'd trust her enough to tell her the truth.

It was late, or early; three o'clock in the morning, and Edith wrapped a blanket around herself and tiptoed out of Jim's room to use the bathroom. Jim had tossed poor Leonard out of their shared bedroom again, and Leonard had stolen Scotty's couch. Scotty wasn't anywhere, and she felt guilty about that, because when she was over it tended to drive Scotty straight into a stranger's bed. She assumed that is exactly what had happened tonight until she noticed a light coming from the rarely-opened door on the other side of the apartment—Spock and Nyota's room.

Inside, Scotty was face down across the foot of their bed, fully clothed and trembling. Edith was unsurprised to see Nyota kneeling on the floor in front him, holding his hand, whispering to him. They had a close, tactile, unusual relationship that she would have assumed was romantic, other than the fact that it so clearly was *not*. What *did* surprise her was that Spock was sitting on the bed, and his hands were on Scotty's head; one touching his face, the other on the back of his neck, joined there by Nyota's other hand. There was something achingly gentle in it, and profoundly intimate.

Edith couldn't figure out what to make of Spock. He was so coldly and brittlely emotionless that she had initially assumed he was barely connected to the people he lived with. Except he was in a long-standing and deeply sexual relationship with Nyota, a woman of intense passion. Except he clearly loved Jim with a fierce and unwavering loyalty. Except Spock and Leonard teased each other like brothers who would die for each other. Except he was sitting beside Scotty in the middle of the night, with Scotty in some kind of crisis, and there was something happening that she didn't understand at all.

"Hey," a voice said, and it made her jump guiltily. Jim, only a towel around his waist. "Come back to bed?"

"Yes," she said. "Um. I was just using the restroom. I ... she shook her head. She wanted to say both *I wasn't spying on your friends* and *are they okay?* but couldn't find the words.

He glanced across the apartment. "Yeah," he said gently, his tone forgiving her, if there was anything to forgive, but also asking her to turn away.

"I'll just ..." she said, and gestured for the restroom. When she came out, Spock and Nyota's bedroom was closed, although she could still see the light under the door. She went back to Jim and dropped the blanket before kneeling on the bed beside him, both of them completely nude in the dark. She looked down at him, and he looked up at her, melancholy in his eyes. She leaned down to kiss him, and he reached for her, his hands pulling her atop him. Edith straddled his hips and settled onto him with a sigh of pleasure while Jim's eyes fluttered closed, hands on her as she moved against him. She arched back, a deep angle that put him exactly where she needed him. He got a hand between them, a finger set against her for exquisite pressure on every stroke. Which meant he knew he wasn't going to last long, but she didn't need him to, and she rode out the warm rush of him, their eyes locked together.

She dropped on top of his chest, still holding him comfortably soft as she drifted back to sleep, stirring only when he shifted her to the bed beside him, arms wrapped around her. "They need to go home," he murmured against her skin. "But how am I supposed to let you go?"

"Full house," Nyota said, fanning her cards out in triumph.

"Ah, hell," Scott groaned. "Again?"

"She's cheatin'," McCoy said. "Got to be."

"Nyota would never cheat," Spock defended, looking up from his computer programming.

She laughed and kissed him. "Of course I would. No need, though. I'm just that good."

"Here's your sixty-two cents of winnings, Nyota, don't spend it all in the same place," McCoy said, and headed to the refrigerator for a beer.

The door opened, letting in the October chill, and Edith and Jim came tumbling in. "It is trying to *snow* out there!" she cried.

"Your hands are freezing," Jim said. "Here, let me." He pulled her hands under his shirt, against his bare chest, and pretended to gasp while she giggled. She gave him a wicked look then stepped closer to him, and put her cold hands down his trousers. Which *did* make him gasp.

"Fantastic," Leonard grumbled to Scotty. "I'm getting the sock on the door handle tonight. Looks like we get to share the couch. Again."

"Nae," Scotty said, and stood up to put on his coat and cap. "I'll go find someone else tae sleep with, thank yeh very much."

"Condom!" Edith shouted at him, and he reached into his pocket and held one over his head as proof while he walked out the door. "I really wish he would stop picking up a new guy every night," she sighed. "It's so dangerous."

"If he never commits to one person, he feels like he isn't actually cheating on Mira," Nyota sighed. "Which is all completely insane, but there it is."

"You can't cheat on someone who is dead," Edith said gently.

"Not alive," Nyota corrected vaguely. "You kind of can. Spock, come to bed with me," she said, caressing his hand. Spock glanced up from his work, looking like he was going to protest, then thought better of it and straightened his tools before following her into their room.

"Wanna fool around?" Kirk asked Edith with a goofy grin.

"Mmm hmm," she said, and hooked a finger over the front of his jeans to tug him to the other bedroom.

McCoy blinked and glanced around the suddenly-empty kitchen, beer in hand.

“How come everyone gets to have sex but me?” he shouted.

“Poor planning on your part, Bones,” Kirk called back, and shut the bedroom door.

“Poor planning, my ass,” he grumbled. “Fine. I can pick up a nice girl at a bar like the best of them. I’m off to get drunk and laid!” he shouted.

“Have fun!” Kirk shouted back, voice muffled through the wall.

The bar was one of his favorites, and the prospects were good. McCoy was pleasantly buzzed and chatting up a beautiful woman when the thought of waking up in the morning, sticky with someone whose name he couldn’t remember, hit his gut like lead. He excused himself, to her hurt puzzlement, and trudged home.

He was nearly there when he caught sight of a familiar silhouette. “Jim?” he called, and then felt like a moron because Jim was back home banging his girlfriend. But the man paused and looked back at him, and it was like looking at Jim in broad strokes. Blonde hair, square jaw, piercing eyes. The man smiled toothily at him, and it raised McCoy’s hackles.

“Yes?” the man asked.

“Sorry,” McCoy said. “For a minute I thought you were my friend Jim.”

“Small world,” the man laughed. “My name is Jim too. And you look familiar, almost like my friend Leonard.” The man looked hard at him, and it left him feeling stripped bare—or sliced open.

“What?” Leonard boggled.

“Don’t tell me your name is Leonard too?!” the man gasped, and his surprise was entirely false, his gaze sharp and calculating. Leonard had stared at a devil once, the sadistic god of the underworld who had raped his friends, mind and body. This ‘Jim’s’ eyes were the same.

“No!” McCoy cried, his voice too high. “Nooo, no no. Ha. Not Leonard. That would be strange, wouldn’t it?” McCoy fled home, and triple checked that he’d locked the door behind him. By morning he had almost convinced himself that he’d just been very drunk.

“Mr. Spock,” Scott sighed one dreary Saturday just before Christmas as they bent over the frustrating computer project. “Do yeh know what we need tae make this work? Duotronic circuitry.”

“I agree. However, Mr. Scott, the technology to guide starships will not exist until the twenty-third century, and we have no way of fabricating it or procuring it in the twentieth. I have already stripped out every available part from our equipment, none of which, unfortunately, is duotronic.”

Scott rubbed the back of his neck. “That isnae entirely true,” he said, and held up his left hand.

Spock glanced up, a puzzled look flashing across his face. Then: “Mr. Scott. You have an artificial left hand. I had forgotten. Those components are precisely what we need.”

“I know,” he said, grimacing. “Leonard isnae going tae be happy.”

As predicted, it made for unpleasant dinner conversation. “No.” McCoy said flatly. “I am not taking your hand off on this table so you can cannibalize it for parts.”

“Not just the hand,” Spock said. “The components in the socket are needed as well.”

“Then not just no, but *hell* no,” McCoy said, crossing his arms. “That is a complex surgery. I’m not doing it with a butter knife and no goddamned anesthesia. Scotty, it will damage the nerves and muscles you have left. You’re at about a three percent disability rating right now, which is plenty low enough for an active duty waiver. We do this and you’re looking at fifteen percent disability, maybe twenty. You’ll never serve in space again.”

“It would solve it?” Kirk asked softly. “This would do it; we’d be able to analyze the data on the tricorder and pin down the history change?”

“Yes,” Spock said, certain.

“Aye,” Scott said, reluctantly.

Kirk glanced up at Scotty and held his gaze for a long moment, then over at McCoy. “We’ve got a universe to save, gentlemen. We have no choice. Make a list of what you need, Bones—that we can actually get,” Kirk said, anticipating McCoy grumpily demanding a 23rd Century medbay.

“Kitchen utensils and Spock’s computer tools will have to do, then,” McCoy said resignedly. “We can do it now. This is going to be *awful*, Scotty,” McCoy said earnestly. “And it will be worse when it’s done; those nerves were hypersensitized to communicate with the prosthetic, and they are going to be pissed as hell.”

No one could eat anything after that. Scotty sat down on the couch and closed his eyes, arms folded, while his crewmates bleached the kitchen and the table. McCoy and Spock went through Spock’s tools and sanitized them, including the soldering iron. “Bandages and gauze,” Uhura said softly, setting it on the table.

“Okay, Scotty,” McCoy said, and handed him a healthy double of scotch, which the engineer tossed down unhappily before taking off his shirt

and lying down on the kitchen table.

"Spock, I'll need you to assist. Jim, Nyota, hold him down," McCoy instructed. He found the edge of the socket under the skin of Scott's forearm, and the switches that disengaged the hand.

"Ready?" McCoy asked. "One, two..." he hit the switches and had the hand off before three, leaving Scott gasping. "It hurts less if it is a surprise," McCoy explained, his fingers clamped hard on the bleeding artery that powered the prosthesis.

"As discussed in the past, *horse shit*, Leonard," Spock said evenly, to suppressed laughter around the room.

"Aye," Scott agreed shakily, cold sweat on his forehead.

"Moment of no return Scotty. The biological portion of the hand will die in six minutes. I could put it back on and we can figure out something else."

"Nothin' else tae figure," Scott said tightly.

"Okay," McCoy sighed, and set it aside. "Half your parts, Spock. The other half of this is going to be much, much worse. He went to work on the artery first, clamping it off. "This is going to smell bad; no one puke," he said, and cauterized it shut with the soldering iron.

"The socket end is complex. Nerves, muscles, blood vessels, tendons threaded all through it. And it's bolted straight to bone. You're probably going to pass out, Scotty," he said. And then more quietly, "I hope. Hold him," McCoy said urgently, and Scott nearly came off the table as McCoy dug into his arm.

"Spock," Uhura cried.

Spock reached for the junction between Scott's neck and shoulder to render him unconscious. "He's likely to break through that," Spock murmured.

He didn't until he woke with a cry when McCoy pulled the socket off. "Your timing is bad," McCoy sighed. "I've still got to cauterize this whole mess. Try not to scream."

"Wait," Scotty begged hoarsely. "Let me catch m'breath."

"You're bleeding too heavily. Jim, I need you on top of him. One knee on his breastbone, one on his shoulder, all your weight. Nyota, across his hips. Spock, don't let him move his arm. Scotty. Don't. Move."

He tried, but it was too much, and he fought against them. Spock reached out and touched his face. "You cannot feel it," Spock whispered. "The pain. It is in your body but not your mind. Be still!" And he was, other than the tremors quaking through him. "Done," McCoy said, and started bandaging the newly-raw end of his arm. "Can you get a blanket, Jim? he's shocky." Thirty minutes later his trembling eased and McCoy helped him sit up. "I'm sure these two capsules of acetaminophen won't help at all, but swallow them anyway. I'm sticking him in your bed, Jim."

"We need tae take apart the stuff..." Scott started weakly.

"No," McCoy cut him off. "Spock will get it apart. You're going to rest."

The front door opened; certainly Edith.

"Jim. We have pieces of twenty-third century bionic arm scattered all over the kitchen," McCoy said urgently.

Kirk nodded and intercepted her before she could come any further. "Hey," he said cheerfully. "The gang handed me some money they've been saving, and are insisting that I take you out for real dinner and a night in a hotel." He wrapped an arm around her and headed for the door. "What do you say?"

"What in god's name is that smell?" she asked, of the terrible smell of charred human flesh.

"I burned a, uh, lamb roast," Kirk said hurriedly, pulling her out of the door.

"What's wrong, Jim?" she asked him. "What's happened?"

"I promise I'll tell you later," he said. "Please, can we have tonight, for me to hold in my heart?"

"That's entirely sappy, Jim," she said fondly. "And I'd laugh at you if you weren't so earnest and sad. Tonight then, Jim, and then I need some answers from you."

If Spock and Scott were right, if savaging Scott's arm for parts got the computer working, Jim knew these could be his last hours with Edith. Solve the problem of the universe, and go home. It made him ache, and so he resolved to make the weekend special. Dinner, dancing, and a hotel room to themselves without their friends on the other side of a thin wall. He wanted to make her cry his name as many times as he could, so he could memorize the sound of it. He never wanted to forget the taste of her, the feel of her around him, the way she made him feel entirely complete.

The sun was setting on them Sunday night, and he was taking her home, cuddled together in the back of a cab they splurged on. "Jim," she said softly. "The most unsettling thing happened yesterday. And I didn't want to tell you about it, but for some reason I feel like I should."

"Tell me," he said.

“Have you ever had a moment where you catch a glimpse of yourself in a mirror, and you’re convinced that the person looking back isn’t you? It was like that, except it involved you. This man walked into the shelter, and he may as well have been your brother, he looked that much like you. He was watching me, and it was completely unsettling. Like the most horrible, dangerous person I’d ever met had walked into the room. Evil, Jim. And he walked up to me and said ‘hello Edith, my name is James T. Kirk. And I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.’ And the way he said it, Jim. The way he was pretending to be you, and *was* you, except turned inside out. It scared me. It terrified me.”

He’d sat up slowly as she told the story, holding her tighter. “Edith, I need to go home and talk to Spock, but it terrifies me too. I want you to stay home, and swear you won’t open the door for anyone but me. The *real* me, and I’ll give you the passcode ‘Enterprise.’ Promise me, Edith!” he said urgently.

“I promise, Jim. But what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” he said grimly, “but I’m going to find out.”

Kirk checked her small apartment, then pulled something out of his pocket he’d carried since they arrived, a tiny type-1 phaser. “This is a weapon. A very dangerous one. Point and shoot, do you see? Shoot anyone who tries to come in without the passcode. ‘Enterprise,’ remember. I’ll be back tonight, I swear, and will tell you everything.”

Kirk ran home, his heart pounding, and banged through the door of the apartment. Spock and Scotty were hovering together over the computer. Scotty was upright, his arm in a sling, but looked terrible.

“We’ve finally got this workin’, sir,” he said distractedly. “History of the universe, now searchable.”

“Focus on Edith,” Kirk said urgently. “I think it is something about her.”

“How do you know, sir?” Spock asked. Kirk quickly retold Edith’s story of the other Kirk.

“An imposter, perhaps? An alternate universe counterpart?” Spock mused.

“He’s here to kill her. I can feel it,” Kirk said, pacing around the room. “Once we figure this out I’m bringing her here to protect her.”

Spock, who had used the computer to focus in Edith’s life, lifted his head slowly. “No, Jim. She dies on December 20, 1989. Murdered.

“I knew it! Two days,” Kirk breathed. “Okay, we can do this.”

“Jim,” Spock said gently. “You don’t understand. There are *three* versions of her life history here. In one, she is killed July 4, 1989, by a motor vehicle.”

“I remember that!” Kirk breathed. “Someone shouted my name, and I got her out of the way just in time.”

Spock continued. “In the second, she dies on December 20, 1989. In the third, she survives and lives to old age. In 2000, she will be elected to a high-level government position. Vice President. She later spearheads a groundbreaking and successful One Earth peace accord. She is an extraordinarily uniting figure, much beloved throughout the world. Because of her leadership, most of the turmoil of the twenty-first century is avoided. The period of terrorist activity and Middle East wars. The plagues. The final world war. When the Vulcans make first contact with Earth, it is with a peaceful, orderly, united planet. And when the Romulan wars come, Jim, a United Terra’s victory is swift, decisive—and utterly without mercy. Rather than emerging with the belief that it’s survival hinges upon cultivating allies—a Federation—Earth emerges with a manifest destiny, and establishes an Empire.”

Kirk sat slowly while Spock spoke, the color draining from his face.

“Spock!” McCoy said sharply. “You can’t mean ...?”

“He does,” Kirk said heavily. “To save our universe, Edith Keeler must die.”

“No,” said Nyota firmly. “We’ll figure out something else.”

“Bring her with us tae the future,” Scotty suggested.

“How?” Kirk whispered. “The Guardian said we wouldn’t return until history is repaired.

“We tell her, then. The truth,” Scotty said. “She has tae live a quiet life.”

“Even if she believed us, do you truly think, Jim, that the Edith Keeler we know would be able to watch the suffering of the world and do nothing?” Spock asked.

“How do we know the Empire is worse?” Kirk asked sharply. “It isn’t our universe; we would never be able to go home. But it was founded on unity. Maybe it’s better than the Federation. Lord knows our Federation isn’t perfect.”

“Miss Keeler’s own testimony is damning,” Spock said. “I am convinced that both the person who shouted your name on July 4 and the other James Kirk she met were both you, Jim, from that alternate. Trying somehow to give rise to that universe. How did she describe him?”

“Frightening,” Kirk said. “Dangerous. Malevolent. Sadistic. Evil.”

“Oh, god,” McCoy murmured. “I think I met him. He scared the hell out of me.”

“I am aware of James T. Kirk as he exists in two universes,” Spock said. “The one whom Ambassador Spock carried in his soul. And you, Jim.

Both, by all accounts, are brave, good, and extraordinary. I cannot imagine what it would take to turn you, my friend, but it must be something truly terrible.”

“How does she die?” Kirk asked brokenly.

“From the reports, it is unclear, and baffles the authorities. An injury of some kind, almost as though she were burned straight through her heart. The culprit is never caught.”

“She’s shot by a phaser,” McCoy whispered. “And not by the other you, because her survival is what creates the Empire. He even stopped her first death. He *wants* her to live.”

“It’s me. It must be *me*.” Kirk curled in on himself, head in his hands. “I can’t do that. *We* can’t do that. Not to save ourselves. Not even to save the universe. If our universe depends on the cold-blooded murder of an innocent person, then perhaps it doesn’t deserve to exist.” He stood, taking a cleansing breath, facing the consequences of this terrible decision, not just for himself but for what was left of his crew.

“This choice, the last order I’m ever going to give you, traps us here,” Kirk said. He glanced at Scotty. “It consigns some of us to suffering I can’t take away, and I’m sorry. You’ll never see your children again, your parents, the people you love. My friends, please forgive me. But know this, as well, in case any of you are inclined to try to take on this burden yourselves.” He looked around hard at all of them, his gaze lingering longest on Spock. “I will defend her life with lethal force. I won’t permit her to be murdered on December 20, 1989, or ever.”

The silence sat heavily in the room as they absorbed the implications.

“An evil, even if done in the name of right, remains evil,” Spock said at last. “I accept your logic.”

Nyota stood, and kissed Kirk’s cheek. “I wish you a lifetime of joy, sir, if nothing else.”

Scotty closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then pulled his aching arm closer to his chest, irreparable in this century, like his mind. “Aye aye, sir,” he said softly.

“Bones?” Kirk asked.

McCoy stood. “My granddad had an antique book. ‘Great Sports Victories of the 20th Century.’ I should have looked at it more closely, we could have been rich.” McCoy clasped Kirk on the shoulder. “Go get her and bring her home. And once we’re sure she’s safe, Christmas Eve or Christmas Day would be the perfect time to propose to her.”

October 26, 2000. Stardate 2000.299. Can you call it a Captain’s Log, when you aren’t the Captain of anything? I haven’t done one of these for a long time. The whole story is here. In this book, in case a future historian is ever interested. I hope you don’t condemn us too much for our choice. It seems clear that Edith is going to win the election, finally committing us to this path. So this is the final entry, and the report on the fates of the last Starfleet officers in the universe.

Lt. Cmdr. Nyota Uhura and Cmdr. Spock stayed in New York, even after Edith, Leonard and I moved to Washington DC to pursue Edith’s skyrocketing political career. Their mentoring and education programs are considered extraordinary and groundbreaking. Spock and Nyota also travel regularly to Africa to assist with poverty issues there; a comfort, I think, for her. Spock is content to know that Vulcan still spins in the sky, and perhaps it always will. They are happy because they are together.

Cmdr. Dr. Leonard McCoy stays near us, part of Edith’s inner circle since the beginning. He likes to rant about idiots and medicine and evil corporations, and has helped tremendously to change the world for the better, at least for now. He can’t believe he is involved with politics, and the people of Georgia want him to run for Senate. Is he happy? I think so. I hope so.

And Scotty. Cmdr. Montgomery Scott. He taught at NYU, his credentials faked but not remotely false, where he was known for blistering physics lectures and equally blistering queer rights advocacy. But he was more unwell than he let on to anyone, unless Spock knew. We all fought hard for him, no one more so than Nyota and Spock. But his terrible pain was more than he would say, and neither their love nor twentieth century medicine could save him in the end. When he couldn’t bear it any longer he quietly took his own life. He left me a letter, assuring me that I hadn’t traded his life for Edith’s. He trusted my choice, he said, and asked me to trust his. But I was his Captain, and he died because of my orders. His death is and will always be my responsibility. We took him home to Scotland, 224 years before he was born, and buried him in his uniform. He lived just 53 years.

And what of James T. and Edith Kirk? Eleven years of joy. I love her more deeply each day, and I couldn’t be more proud. We’re off, for a few days, just the two of us before the election. And then on, on to the future

“—terprise here,” Sulu’s voice said.

“What?” Kirk asked, blankly stunned, as he stared down at the open communicator in his hand, completely baffled about how it came to be there, since he hadn’t held one in better than a decade.

“Enterprise here, sir. You just called up?” Sulu repeated, puzzled.

They were standing on the Guardian’s planet, dressed in their uniforms, still holding their equipment and their neatly-packed bags. Kirk, McCoy, Uhura, Spock, and—*god almighty*—Scott. All of them whole, alive, and looking ten years younger, existing exactly the way they had the moment before they stepped into the past. All of them here, in an instant, from wherever they’d just been in Earth’s past.

Scotty looked down at himself, clenching the perfectly intact prosthesis of his left hand into a fist, then looked up at his crewmates, a strange look in his eyes. Nyota stepped into him with a gasp, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

“Time has resumed its shape. All is as it was before,” the Guardian boomed. **“In this universe. In another, a mirror now glints darkly.”**

Everyone looked over at Kirk. “I don’t understand?” he begged. “I don’t understand! I was just with Edith.” He was weeping. “We were driving, just the two of us, Bones, the time off that we needed so badly. I was holding her hand, and then ... oh god. There was a car in our lane.”

“Jim, she must have died,” McCoy said softly, and Kirk stared at him, dazed. “Jim!”

Spock took the communicator from his Captain’s limp fingers. “Beam us up, Mr. Sulu. Immediately.” And suddenly beyond all expectation and possibility, with a decade and *death* standing between them and home, the five of them were on the *Enterprise*.

Kirk somehow found his way to his quarters before he collapsed. An hour ago he’d been the supportive husband of Edith Kirk, the presumptive front runner for the Vice Presidency of the United States. And now, he was Captain James T. Kirk, sitting on a starship he had left fifteen minutes and eleven years earlier. The chime rang, and it took him a moment to place the sound. He blinked and looked up. “Come,” he said, unsurprised when McCoy and Spock walked in.

“How’s Scotty?” Kirk asked, and the strangeness of asking about the health of a dead man he’d mourned for two years was breathtaking.

“As he said, it’s not the first time he’s been dead,” McCoy said. “It’s something we’ll have to navigate. He feels perfectly fine; he’s not the man who ended his life 268 years ago. And yet ... he is. It’s the last thing he remembers. There’s not a protocol for this. Nyota is sitting with him.”

Kirk looked up at his two great friends, struggling to find the next words, so Spock spoke them for him. “Edith Keeler Kirk died October 27, 2000, in a car accident. It appears the other driver fell asleep and crossed the centerline. A single second difference would have changed history. As it was, however, it threw the election into utter disarray. Many of the advancements she had made were rolled back over the following months, and history occurred as we would remember it.” Spock paused. “She was buried beside her beloved husband James, who also died in the accident.”

“My body is buried on Earth somewhere?” Kirk asked. “And Scotty’s too, presumably? It all happened, and it didn’t?”

“It appears so,” Spock said softly.

“I was driving the car, Spock,” Kirk choked out. “If I’d been faster, or slower, a little to the left or to the right, she would have lived...” he breathed, fiercely swallowing his terrible need to wail in grief. She was dead. The universe was saved.

McCoy reached out for him. “Jim. Your wife died an hour ago. Take some time.”

“No,” Kirk said bleakly, pulling his arm away. “My wife died 266 years ago. Spock, can you please set a heading, to anywhere? I don’t care where. Just please. Please,” he begged. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Chapter Summary

The crew struggles to get back on track after a decade in the twentieth century.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: references to suicide, mental illness, grief, vaguely-implied polyamory

Acting Captains log, Stardate 2267.34, Lt. Cmdr. Hikaru Sulu in command. Six weeks ago I beamed the senior commanders of the Enterprise down to the Guardian planet. And fifteen minutes later, I got back five officers who were highly traumatized and hadn't served aboard a Starship in over a decade. When Starfleet got word, they immediately relieved every one of them until they could pass competency and psychological exams. Four of the five are returning to duty today, although the Captain by the skin of his teeth. His grief for the life and love that he lost is intense. I wouldn't call him well, but perhaps the command chair will give him the purpose he needs. I'll be glad to give it back to him. We may never get our Chief Engineer back, however; regulations are firm on questions of self-harm, even if it happened in another timeline. There is an old Earth saying, however, about idle hands and the devil's playground that keeps popping ominously into my mind.

Nyota turned on the shower for a few minutes at the end of a long day, a quick and indulgent burst of heat and steam, before switching over to the sonics. Returning to duty, at last, had been a relief. Starfleet had been over-cautious and maddeningly slow.

She dried off and thought with longing about her deep tub in their New York apartment. When she and Spock had gone shopping for homes, that tub had been the biggest draw, as far as she had been concerned, and Spock had indulged her. No such luxury on a Starship. That she had a water shower at all was only because Spock had one, and early on in the mission Scotty had knocked a door between her quarters and Spock's. Their combined quarters aboard ship was just about the same size as the tiny apartment they'd all shared for those first months in the twentieth century.

Kirk's decision that they would not correct the timeline—that they couldn't murder Edith, even to save the universe—had meant that they had had to embrace the twentieth century. Scotty and Spock had faked everyone a solid set of credentials and hacked the meager information technology of the day to seed life histories for them solid enough that they'd gone unquestioned. Jim had been the first to move out of the apartment, and within days they'd all gone their ways. They hadn't exactly scattered to the wind, but that era had ended.

Returning to the tight quarters of the *Enterprise*, to artificial lights, to two minute showers, to living with 500 people in 800 meters and nowhere to go had proved surprisingly difficult. More heartbreaking, though, had been combing old historical records, hoping for a glimpse of the kids she'd been mentoring in both the States and Kenya. With wars and plagues and centuries between then and now, however, there had been little sign of them. Her searches had led to a wonderful picture of Edith and Jim, however. The Captain had taken it wordlessly and carefully positioned it on his desk.

Nyota wrapped herself in a robe. "Tea?" she called to Spock, who was working in their small office.

"Please," he said. She was settling in on the couch with her own tea and a padd for an evening of reports when the door chime rang.

"Come," she called, and Scotty walked through the door with a look that lurched her straight back to New York. He didn't look like a Starfleet officer, dressed in a black undershirt and with a non-regulation beard on his face. He looked like a physics professor, and had a familiar ache in his eyes. He'd so seldom been well during those years on Earth, and she had watched in grief as his innate good cheer had faded into silence and pain, and finally despair that she had refused to see.

She was not pleased at all that Starfleet was refusing to clear him for duty, and the look on his face just confirmed her worries ... and also suggested that perhaps Starfleet was right.

"I've done a thing," Scott said, his fist clenched around something. "And I need yeh tae forgive me."

And *god*, he'd put that in a letter, once.

"Scotty," Nyota said urgently, on her feet, and her heart rate skyrocketed when she saw that he had a vial of something blood red in his hand. But she quickly saw it was one of his cunning and delicate designs, a glass vial around a magnetic bottle. Which wasn't *good*, particularly, but he probably wasn't in immediate danger.

Spock had come out of the office, and Scott wordlessly handed him the vial. "Red matter," Spock breathed, and looked down at the substance that had destroyed his planet.

"Aye," Scott said reluctantly.

"You were years from this, you said. A decade ..." Spock trailed off.

Scott shrugged. “A wee bit less. You didnae think I spent all those years on Earth just teachin’ basic physics, did you? I worked on this.” He sat restlessly, vibrating with a bizarre mix of pride and dread. “I didnae really think I’d solve it, but one day the answer just came. It’s all the same thing. Warp. Transwarp. Time travel. Black holes. Gravity. That thing in the ghost planet. The Guardian. Just folds in the multiverse, which is actually just one thing. This stuff takes a handful of multispacetime and,” he mimed a closing fist. “Crushes it. I wasnae going tae try tae synthesize it but ... I’ve had some time on my hands.”

“Is it stable?” Spock asked urgently. “Is it safe?”

“It is the most dangerous thing in the universe, of course it isnae safe!” Scott cried, standing to pace in agitation. “But it’s contained. It willnae hurt us, bottled up. The vial has the equations and instructions for synthesis, on a chip in the base coded tae your passcode. It’s the only place in the universe they exist, outside my mind.”

“What am I to do with this, Mr. Scott?” Spock asked quietly.

“I dinnae ken, Mr. Spock,” Scott shrugged helplessly. He scrubbed his hands down his face and looked over at Nyota, then back at Spock. “The final pieces came tae me on Earth when I was nearly at the end of my endurance. When I solved it, I knew I couldnae let the answer exist in that reality, even in my mind. I burned every note I had and was relieved tae let it die with me. I wasnae going tae leave it for the Empire *or* the Federation tae find. And then the universe, bitch that she is, brought me back. I willnae put it in *Starfleet’s* hands, so I’ll put it in yours. God forgive me, Mr. Spock. I have the terrible feeling I’ve just closed a destiny loop and destroyed your people.”

Spock folded his hands around the vial. “There is no reason to think that your work here has anything to do with the creation of this substance in Ambassador Spock’s universe. The burden of Vulcan is not yours.”

“Oh, Mr. Spock,” he said in despair. “You dinnae ken what this shite really is.”

Spock carefully tucked the vial into the box that Ambassador Spock had left him. “I will use this, one day, to save billions of lives on Romulus, with the hope that it will bring peace across our universe. You have my word, Mr. Scott.”

The engineer nodded and stood reluctantly, headed back to stare at the claustrophobic walls of his quarters where it seemed he was going to be spending the rest of the mission. Nyota grabbed his hand before he could go, and he closed his eyes.

“Hey,” she said, a hand on either side of his face, and chastely kissed his lips to get his attention. “Stay.”

He sighed, like it was the one thing he wanted and the one thing he couldn’t have. “People will talk,” he said softly.

“I don’t care. Spock doesn’t care.”

“You are always welcome in our home, Mr. Scott, wherever that is,” Spock said. “That has not changed. It is logical for you to stay, if it will bring you comfort and allow you to rest.”

“Maybe just for tonight,” he said softly, and Nyota wrapped her arms around him, relishing the beat of his heart against hers, then took Spock’s hand and headed for the bedroom. “Maybe just one more time,” Scotty said, and followed them.

Captain’s log, Stardate 2267.41. I am grateful to be Captain of the Enterprise again. If I can’t be the husband of Edith Kirk, I’ll take that. I dreamed about her last night. About taking her to the observation deck, and showing her the stars. About locking the door, and making love to her with the universe around us. About finding a planet with a beach to walk on. And then I woke up. No beach to walk on.

The outpost was full of dead people. Dead *Klingons*, more precisely, which was concerning for a number of reasons, the first of which was that the Federation had been unaware that the Klingons even had an outpost this far from the Empire. The other concerning fact was the *dead* Klingons part, although live ones would have been problematic too. They appeared to have died in three ways — at each other’s hands, outside in the poisonous atmosphere without suits, or apparently from just sitting down and dying. And none of those were characteristic ways for Klingons to die.

A Klingon outpost was, of course, a goldmine of intelligence. Here in uncharted space salvage was not an act of war, and so they stripped it bare of any useful part and every bit of information, which would be scanned, encoded, and sent back to Starfleet for analysis.

“What do we do with the bodies, Ms. Uhura?” Kirk asked.

“Best we’ve ever been able to determine, there is a ritual. Open their eyes and bellow at the sky. Then the body can just be discarded as a worthless empty shell,” she answered.

“Bellow at the sky?” Kirk asked, looking at the row of bodies. “Fine.” The eyes were opened and then Kirk cleared his throat.

“Nice big bellow,” Uhura encouraged, and Kirk managed something that he hoped wasn’t completely insulting to the dead.

They beamed home, and burned the outpost and bodies to the ground with one photon torpedo. Kirk wiped his palms on his trousers, surprised at how much he was sweating, but then, the entire incident had been unsettling. He suddenly felt tears prick behind his eyes, as the thought of Edith passed through his mind. He hadn’t even been able to bury her. Someday, he would go home and find her grave, even if he was, apparently, also somehow already buried beside her.

He pulled himself together. “Ms. Uhura, please encode a subspace message, priority one about our findings here. When that is sent, Mr. Sulu set a course for that neutron star Mr. Spock wanted to look at. Mr. Spock, you have the conn,” the Captain said, and then, to everyone’s surprise, left the bridge.

He didn’t return, even when they dropped into a careful, distant orbit around the neutron star. It was the corpse of what had once been a much

larger star, likely around twenty times as massive as Sol; the collapsed core remnant of a supernova not quite large enough to become a black hole. It was tiny now, with a radius of only ten kilometers and incredibly hot, magnetic, and dense. The *Enterprise* would need to keep a very careful distance from this deadly stellar object.

Spock frowned at the sensor readings. “Unusual,” he announced to the bridge at large. “I’m reading a warp signature only a few days old. Someone else has been here.

Normally the Captain would have interjected something to that observation, but the junior officers had to scramble to fill the silence.

“Must be another explorer out here,” Chekov said, a bit lamely.

“So it seems ...” Spock trailed off. “They were much closer to the star than my comfort level would permit. Mr. Chekov, Mr. Sulu, please remain alert and carefully monitor our orbit, and impress that need on your relief in an hour.”

The shift ended without incident and the Alpha crew stood and stretched. Spock reached for Nyota as they rode the lift down to the level of officer’s quarters, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips.

“What was that for?” she asked him, a little bemused.

“I was simply considering that you are beautiful and extraordinary,” he said.

“Well, thank you, Mr. Spock,” she teased him. “Dinner?”

“I will join you shortly. I wish to check on the Captain. It was unusual for him to leave the bridge and not return.”

“I think the dead Klingon outpost got to him a little,” she admitted. “He honestly seemed shaken. I’m hungry, do you mind if I start without you?”

“Not at all,” Spock said, and leaned in to kiss her neck.

“Spock!” she said, pleased and a little scandalized. He usually kept his displays of affection firmly in their quarters. The lift opened, and she headed for the mess hall. She paused outside Scotty’s quarters and considered digging him out. She hadn’t seen the man in days, sidelined by Starfleet’s frustrating orders relieving him on psychological grounds, and without regular duty shifts he’d gone a bit reclusive. But his sleep schedule was largely the same, and she knew he tended to sleep through early Beta shift. She left him alone for now, with the promise to herself that she would roust him tomorrow if she didn’t see him today.

She collected her dinner—a really excellent veggie curry that Scott had recently programmed in his abundant spare time—and sat down to chat with Christine Chapel. And in retrospect, what happened next wasn’t the first sign that there was something wrong, but it was the first she’d noticed.

“Get off my back!” Pavel Chekov screamed at an utterly bemused Sulu, shoving him backward.

“I just asked if I could get you a drink from the synthesizer ...” Sulu said.

“I am not a child, and I am not *your* child,” Chekov yelled, becoming more agitated, and took a wild swing at Sulu that didn’t connect with anything. Nyota was about to stand up when a couple of burley engineers did instead. “Cool down, Pavel!” they said, grabbing him. “What the hell, mate?”

Chekov threw off their hands and stalked out of the room.

“What was that about?” asked a shaken Sulu.

Ten minutes later, three security officers started screaming at each other, and went down in a biting, punching pile. And then the engineers who’d stooped Chekov. And then two of her communications officers started sobbing, and Christine Chapel sat on the floor and refused to move.

Nyota stood, intending to go find Spock, because there was definitely a serious problem, but Spock stepped into the room and headed straight for her.

“Spock,” she started. “There is something seriously wrong ...”

“There is,” he said mournfully. “How can I live when I know that someday, you’ll be gone? Human life, so brief. All of you, gone, and I’ll be alone!”

Nyota looked at him in shock, and then marched him to their quarters just before he burst into tears. “Stay here,” she ordered him. “I’ll be right back.”

She ran for the medbay. The halls were full of crewmen, some fighting each other, some weeping, some laughing maniacally and running, some sitting despondently in the hall.

“I’ll protect you fair maiden!” shouted a shirtless Sulu, waving a practice sword from the gym and grabbing her around the waist.

“Neither, Sulu,” she said, shoving him off.

The Captain walked by, utterly heedless of the chaos. “No beach to walk on,” he told her sadly. “No beach.”

“Yeah,” McCoy said when she arrived, breathless from pushing through the madness. “We have a big problem.”

“The Klingon outpost,” she said in horror. “They were all dead. Some of them killed each other. Some of them stripped naked and went outside. Some of them just sat down and died. But they *all died*, Leonard, and we’ve got it too.”

“And whatever this is, it’s spreading very fast. Too fast to be by contact; it’s got to be airborne. How are you feeling?” McCoy asked her.

“Bewildered and concerned but fine,” she said.

“Have you still been taking your antidepressant every day?” McCoy asked her.

“I ... yes?” she said, confused.

“Me too. And I also feel fine. And Peters over there, who just brought in two engineers, is fine. He takes anti-anxiety medications. Johnson came in with some science officers. Attention deficit stabilizers. Everyone who is okay is on brain-stabilizing medications of some kind. I’m developing a theory.”

The ship lurched. “We’re in orbit around a neutron star!” Uhura gasped, and headed for the bridge. “Work fast!”

The bridge was in the same condition, although it appeared that the fighters and the runners had already cleared out, leaving only the criers. She hauled the sobbing duty officer out of the central chair and was headed for helm control when the ship suddenly went silent, other than the cries and shouts of the crew, and it took Uhura a moment to place what was wrong. *The warp core!* The reactor was *off*.

She hit the comm. “Engineering! Report! Get that core back online, or we won’t be able to maintain orbit! Engineering!”

There was no response.

To her eternal relief, Scotty came charging onto the bridge a moment later, boggling open-mouthed at the chaos around him. Two gamma shift bridge officers were with him, their eyes clear, if wide with fear, and they headed for the helm and science stations.

“What the *hell...*?” Scott snapped.

“You haven’t heard the screaming, but could hear the core shut down?” Uhura rolled her eyes at him. “Typical. We’ve got some sort of pathogen affecting emotions. Manifesting either as rage, grief, or mania.”

“Helm is not responding,” said one of the officers. “No power at all.”

The other looked up from the science station. “The neutron star has got us,” she said in dread.

“A bloody *neutron...*?” Scott started. “Where are the Captain and Mr. Spock?” he asked.

“Weeping somewhere, last I knew. And Sulu was chasing people through the hall with a sword. You’re in command, Mr. Scott,” Uhura said.

“No, I’m not,” he said sharply. “I’ve been relieved; I cannae take command of the ship.”

“This is not the time to parce that! We’re in orbit around a neutron star and the *core just went down*. The crew will follow you, what’s left of them.”

“Aye, and that’s a mutinous coup. No, Lieutenant Commander. You are in command, ma’am, Scott said, and gestured firmly toward the chair.

She stared at him in aggravation. “Fine,” she snapped. “In that case Mr. Scott, could you head down to engineering and perhaps *make some suggestions* before the star tears us apart?!”

“That I can do, lass,” he said, and headed for the lift at a run. Engineering wasn’t empty, but most of the people who should have been there weren’t, and everyone left was lying on the floor staring vaguely into the middle distance.

The Captain was sitting despondently at the reactor controls, tapping a phaser on the console. Scott edged up to him.

“Hello, Captain,” Scott said gently. “What are yeh doin’, sir?”

“Oh, hi Scotty,” the Captain said absently. “The warp core was really loud, so I turned it off.”

“Really loud ...” Scott gave a half laugh. “It can be a wee bit. But sir, we need it tae power the ship.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Kirk said. “Sorry about that.” He didn’t move, however, and continued to tap the phaser, then pointed it vaguely at Scott, who grimaced and shifted uncomfortably. It was set to kill.

“Sir, the phaser.”

“Oh, right,” Kirk said, and turned it around to point at himself, staring curiously down the barrel. Scott took an aborted step forward; that wasn’t actually any better.

“Sir, can yeh just hand that tae me, please?” he said tightly.

“Between the two of us, we’ve been dead three times,” Kirk mused. “Isn’t that something? I remember being afraid last time. But I’m not afraid now. Were you afraid, Scotty? Or just relieved to be free of the pain? Because it fucking *hurts* Scotty.”

“Sir, you’re very ill. Your mind is telling yeh lies.”

Kirk looked up, a flash of anger in his eyes. “You’re not really the one to be lecturing me about that, Scotty,” he snapped.

“Oh, Jim, I’m exactly the right person tae give yeh that warning; I fought for my life for more than four decades,” Scott said apologetically, reaching out placatingly. “In the end I just couldnae do it anymore. And I didnae believe there was anything next, but on the chance I was wrong, I hoped it would be better. And what was next was the *Enterprise*,” he said, and tilted his head to look up at the ship. “She was here waitin’ for me the entire time. She never let me go, and we’ll never let her go, right Jim?”

“The *Enterprise*,” Kirk said weakly, and the word seemed to break through his fog.

“Aye, sir. And she’s in trouble. Let me help our girl?”

Kirk looked up fiercely, the dull look lifting out of his eyes. “Scotty, we’re in orbit around a neutron star, and the core is *off*,” he said urgently.

“Aye, sir, you’re grasping the problem.”

“Never let you go,” Kirk said fiercely to the ship, and stumbled aside to let Scott by. He was still holding the phaser, but it wasn’t the priority.

The engineer looked at the board, and his heart dropped. “Bridge, Engineering,” he said, hitting the comm. “Commander Uhura, the core is in cold shutdown.”

“You’re talking like that’s bad. Explain, swiftly,” Uhura said.

He looked across at the Captain, who was looking back at him in panic. “Aye, ma’am. You cannae mix matter and antimatter cold; yeh have tae bring them up to temperature. I’ve got tae have 30 minutes.”

“Mr. Scott,” Uhura said tightly. *“We’re falling to the neutron star. In less than five minutes.”*

“I understand the issue!” Scott cried. “At 500,000 kilometers the bloody thing will atomize us! But I cannae change the laws of physics. A reactor breach will kill us equally dead. If I just ... start the reactor cold the odds of surviving the star and surviving the ignition are about equal. Which is tae say, nonexistent.”

“If you have an idea, now would be the time, Scotty!” she barked.

“Oh, I have one,” he moaned. “I hate it, but I have one. I need the red matter that Mr. Spock has in his box.”

“What the hell are you planning to do with red matter?!” Uhura asked urgently.

“Inject an atom of it into the warp core and then cold start it,” he said.

Uhura sputtered. *“You’re going to open a singularity inside the warp core?! That will help how exactly?”*

“The singularity will absorb the energy from the cold-start implosion. Then, accretion from the matter and antimatter falling intae the singularity will release an enormous amount of energy. Heat and x-rays, with massive efficiency. Enough to fold spacetime even this close to the neutron star; warp eight, or higher. The singularity should collapse in a millisecond, before it tears us apart. I hope.”

“A little less theory and little more doing, Mr. Scott,” she sighed. *“You have two minutes!”*

The engineer was already running, with Kirk on his heels. He burst into Spock and Uhura’s quarters, fortunately already keyed for his entry because he really didn’t have time to break in. Spock looked up, tears of pain running down his face.

“Ah, Mr. Spock,” Scott sighed sadly, but headed straight for the box of Vulcan artifacts and upended it.

“Mr. Scott,” Spock said bleakly, following him. “I knew.”

“I know yeh did,” Scott answered, digging through the box.

“I knew, and I let you die. I let you die *alone*,” Spock continued in despair. “I once stood in a volcano, prepared to die alone, and I was *rescued*.”

Scott did look up at that. “There was no saving me, and I wouldnae have had you there tae see it. And now *isnae the time*, Mr. Spock,” he said.

“Jim,” Spock whispered. “You would not let me die alone. But everyone must. My mother was alone. I could never tell her I loved her. An Earth woman, living on a planet where love, emotion, is bad taste. How am I to live knowing that all I love will always leave me?”

“I’ve always known I’d die alone,” Kirk said weepily, fogged over again. “Can I hug you?”

“God almighty,” Scott groaned. “Red matter, Mr. Spock! Red matter, red matter, where the hell is ... gotcha,” he said in triumph, snatching it up, and was running again.

“Why do you have red matter...?” Kirk asked Spock, switching back to himself for a moment. “You know what? Doesn’t matter. Engineering, Spock, now!”

Spock blinked, and then followed his Captain.

“Nyota!” Scott said, calling up to the bridge, no time for propriety. “Set a course. The moment I touch this off, we’re headed in whatever way

we're pointed."

"Ready," she called.

Scott set the board. "Captain. Mr. Spock. In fifteen seconds, cold start the reactor for one second and then turn it off again. This button, here, do yeh see? Yes? You can do that? Nod like you're listening tae me."

"Mr. Scott," Spock lectured reprovingly. "You cannot cold start the reactor."

"I am aware!" Scott shouted. "Hence the red matter. No time tae explain. Just do it, please!"

"I see," said Spock slowly. "Mr. Scott, this is a very bad idea."

"D'yeh have another one?!"

"A controlled implosion, perhaps, but the equations ... there is insufficient time. I would prefer some modeling before we create a singularity in the middle of an uncontrolled warp reaction, however."

"Me too! Cold start, on my mark," Scott said.

"Understood, Mr. Scott," the Captain said firmly

Scott grabbed a communicator and scrambled into the narrow tube that paralleled the deuterium injector and slammed the door behind him. He had built the red matter vial to extract atomic amounts, and drew down a single atom. "Captain, Spock! Ready? On zero; three, two, one, zero ..." He injected the red matter just ahead of the deuterium stream at the moment before the core cold started.

The resulting explosion was entirely shock-and-awe, shaking the ship violently. Gravity and dampeners strained as the ship went end over end, and the core screamed in protest. Then the power flicked off, and it was over. Someone in engineering switched over to impulse and the power came back.

"Are we dead, Commander Uhura?" Scott asked breathlessly. He eyed his right forearm and the radiation chip implanted there, now glowing ominously red at him. Unsurprising, really, given how close he'd been to the emissions of a singularity, even one that existed only for a millisecond.

"*Not dead,*" Uhura answered. "*We've traveled half a light year in a second which is ... a speed record, to put it mildly. Also, we went to hyperwarp in the vicinity of a massive gravity well, Mr. Scott. Which, as you'll recall, leads to ...*"

"Time travel," he groaned. "Oh, god."

"*Twelve days backward,*" she revealed. "*Which explains the odd readings Mr. Spock made when we arrived. He was reading us. Is there any damage?*"

"Probably," Scott admitted. "Also, I hate tae mention it, but I'm stuck in a tube half inside the reactor until someone can set up a radiation field and get me out. I'm glowin' in the dark here."

"*God, Scotty! You probably should have led with that. I'm sending a medical team now.*"

Scott shook his head, trying to shake off the woolen feeling settling into his brain. "The Captain and Spock are down here. They are in and out of rational thought. Dinnae turn command over until McCoy or someone can sort this." Scott said, and closed his eyes for a moment, just to rest, for a second ...

"Radiation is a son of a bitch to wake up from," Kirk said conversationally from somewhere distant, apropos of nothing. "Believe me, I know. Take your time. Yep, there you are. Really awake this time, I think."

Scott was flat on his back somewhere, and it was the medbay, which honestly made no sense, because he'd been relieved from duty and moping in his quarters for weeks. Kirk held up the vial of red matter into his swimming vision and ... *oh, right.*

"How are yeh feeling, sir?" Scott asked weakly. He considered sitting up, and then thought better of it.

"I was a bit off the rails, wasn't I?" Kirk said ruefully. "McCoy found a cure before any of us embarrassed ourselves further. Not exactly the way I wanted you and I to have that conversation about your life and death, by the way. You're making a habit of resurrection, though. Three, now, to my one. It *really* isn't a competition, Scotty."

"He was barely dead this time," McCoy said, wandering by. "Minute; minute and a half."

"You saved the ship. Thank you. Now, however, I'm going to chew your ass." The Captain held up the red matter again. "Care to tell me why this was in Spock's sock drawer?"

Scott lifted his head. "Starfleet cannae know about that," he begged. "Please tell me you didnae put that in a report."

"I didn't. We played it vague. And actually we haven't sent it yet, because we're still a few days in the past, and we're not telling Starfleet about that either. That said, in the future if you synthesize and store a *superweapon* on my ship, I'd like to know."

"Sorry, sir," Scott said, and closed his eyes again.

"We have another problem, Scotty. DeSalle has resigned as acting Chief." Scott opened his eyes again in confusion. "And Keenser. And all the

other engineering lieutenants. And all the ensigns. And the techs and specialists. All hundred and two of them, standing there in red shirts, holding me hostage with the same demand to reinstate you as Chief. It's mutiny, but I don't have a choice really. So effective whenever McCoy clears you from this little adventure in radiation poisoning, you are back as Chief Engineer and second officer."

He did sit up at that. "Starfleet isn'tae going tae like it, sir," Scott said quietly. "And they aren't entirely wrong in their thinking that you may nae want tae put a 2000-teradyne matter/antimatter reactor intae the hands of someone who didn'tae want tae live."

Kirk shook his head. "That isn't the situation. I know how long and hard you fought, Scotty. And when the twentieth century couldn't help you anymore you made a decision about what you wanted from your life. As much as that decision hurt, I honored it then, and now."

Scott rubbed his head, inner ear still spinning a bit. "Captain, my reasons were more, and less, complicated than that," he said quietly.

"Yeah," Kirk answered, jaw working in emotion. "Edith thought so too. She always understood things better than I did ... The job is yours. If you'll take it."

"Aye, sir," Scott answered. "There's nothin' in this or any other universe I'd rather do."

"I know," Kirk said, and rubbed his chin. "You'll have to shave the fuzz off your face though."

"Mustache?" Scott asked hopefully.

"Don't push it, mister," Kirk growled.

"Jim," Scotty started gently. "I was looking intae your eyes when you were holding that phaser ... and wanting tae go, it's..." he trailed off with a sigh, without the words.

Kirk patted the engineer on the shoulder, and he was all Captain Kirk again. "I'm fine, Mr. Scott. And not going anywhere, although after today I understand better. Don't worry about me. Get some rest," he said, and headed out.

Scott watched him go, then called, "Leonard, are you there?"

"Yeah," McCoy said, popping back in. "Are you hurting?"

"Nae. But Jim Kirk is," Scott said sadly. "Starfleet was worried about me, going straight from dyin' back tae the *Enterprise*. But I may as well have arrived in heaven. Jim, though? He went from holding her hand, tae losing her forever. And he didn't even get tae say goodbye. There were so many people that loved her, and he didn't get a chance to be held while he wept. Tae hear them talk about how much she meant. Tae grieve."

"I know," McCoy sighed. "He skated past the psych exam with Starfleet Medical because of the two week subspace lag. Because he could listen to their questions and then brace himself to answer."

"How do we help him?"

"Time, Scotty," McCoy said, shaking his head. "We give him time."

Captain's log, Stardate 2267.175. Nothing notable. Or, wait. Something Spock was interested in. An unusual moon around a gas giant? Something. We're sending a shuttle out tomorrow to take a look.

"Well, Mr. Spock," Scott said ruefully, studying the smoldering shuttlecraft. "We're dead in the water for sure."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Yes. We do appear to be."

Uhura stepped out of the shuttle shaking her head. "Communication is completely down. And even if we had any, I don't think we could punch through the electromagnetic interference from the gas giant. It will be three days before the *Enterprise* even starts to look for us, when we miss the rendezvous."

"We'll be okay for a bit," McCoy said. "We got lucky with this moon. The atmosphere is tolerable, and is doing a good job screening radiation. A little oxygen-thin, but should be okay as long as we aren't doing wind sprints. Emergency supplies, food, and water are in good shape, if we're careful. Encounter clothing to deal with cold. We have basic medic supplies. But with the synthesizer down what we don't have, Scotty, is ..."

"Aye," Scott said with a sigh. "You'd think I woulda learned by now. Why the hell do I ever leave the ship without two weeks of medication?"

Sulu and Chekov came back, dusting fine red sand off their hands and trousers from a scramble over the nearby rocks.

"Some woody plants. It would be worth collecting some; they should burn, and the smoke wouldn't be toxic," Sulu said. "No surface water that we could find."

"There is animal life. Perhaps even primitive intelligence," Chekov continued. "And it is very large. We may need to risk drawing down our battery power for a small force-fence, especially at night."

"Get started on that, Mr. Chekov," Spock ordered. "And Ms. Uhura, please take a look at the condition of our weapons. Dr. McCoy, Mr. Sulu, please collect vegetation for a fire and set up the shelter. Mr. Scott, you and I need to think creatively about the power situation. If we cannot get off the moon, the *Enterprise* may never find us, not with the interference from the planet."

They all ‘aye, sir-ed’ and got to work.

The sun went down three hours later. It was a red giant, and had likely been a yellow dwarf very much like Earth’s sun, but at around 5 billion years older had left the main sequence and was fusing helium. Any inner planets had been incinerated, which was Earth’s fate, but the expanding star had given life to outer moons. It was their day in the sun, literally, and they had evolved life. It was an intriguing look into the possible lifecycle of the Sol system.

The life on the moon apparently didn’t realize it was scientifically interesting, and as darkness settled, began closing in on the aliens to their world. Their screeching, Chekov’s sharp shout, and the sound of phaser fire brought everyone running.

“Got you!” Sulu cried, putting his arm under Chekov’s shoulder and hauling him to his feet.

“Force shield!” Chekov gasped, then shouted. “Sound off! Inside the shield generators?! Spock?”

“Yes!”

“Scott?”

“Aye!”

“Uhura?”

“Yes!”

“McCoy?!”

“Shit shit shit! no ... now yes!”

Chekov hit the shield generator, and the force screen sprang up between them and the pacing, snapping, toothy creatures, who tested the field and then fled when Spock lit a fire.

“Pretty beasties,” Scotty said conversationally. “Quite a lot o’ teeth, though.”

“Why,” McCoy moaned, “do we always end up trapped on planets with dinosaurs? Are you alright, Chekov?”

“One of them bit me in the leg,” he said tightly, and the Doctor grabbed his medkit and rushed over.

Scotty was looking nervously out at the shield generators, and glanced over at Uhura. “Grab a phaser and a light, Ms. Uhura, I want tae check the generators.”

“Aye, sir,” she said, and followed him.

He was crouched down, examining the last one, when he looked up into the golden eyes of a predator half a meter away. He jerked back with a curse, but the creature was on the other side of the shield, watching them and the generator carefully. “That’s intelligence in those eyes, d’yeh think?” he said softly. “Any possibility that the sounds they were making was language?”

Uhura frowned. “It sounded animal, but I’ll see if I can get a recording and listen more carefully tomorrow,” she said. The creatures were clicking and screeching just beyond the shield; getting a recording wasn’t going to be a problem.

“Come on,” Scott said. “Let’s get back tae the fire. I’d rather nae give them any more data on us than necessary.”

Spock and Sulu were handing out water and ration bars when they got back. “Ah, my favorite,” Scott grumped sarcastically. “Fishy mashed potatoes.”

“It is considerably better than nothing,” Spock chided.

“Oh, aye, I didnae say I wasnae going tae eat it. How are you feeling, wee man?” he asked Chekov

“Like I’ve been bitten,” Chekov sighed. “And not the fun kind. You ewer made love to a l’t’Knil, Scotty? *Those* bites are worth it. Wery nice tentacles too, once you explain where a prostate is ...”

“And the venom makes yeh nicely high, aye.” Scott said. Nyota rolled her eyes and kicked at him. “Maybe nae fireside conversation though, Pavel.”

“I’m worried about infection,” McCoy admitted. “There were some nasty pathogens in that dinosaur saliva.” Chekov frowned unhappily, toying with the unappetizing food.

The group lapsed into silence, munching on the rations in the flickering firelight. Overhead the ringed gas giant spun on the horizon, and the stars of the galaxy twinkled in the deep darkness. This moon was on a similar plane relative to the galactic center as Earth, and the band of the Milky Way across the sky looked almost like home.

The night cooled, and Spock brought out coats and blankets as they drew closer to each other and the fire. Spock sat behind Nyota, settling her into his chest, and Nyota reached for Scotty and pulled his head into her lap. Scott looked up at her, a strange and sad look in his eyes. “You okay?” she asked softly.

“Aye,” Scotty said gently. “Are you?” She nodded, and he continued. “Nice stars here. Reminds me of ... d’yeh remember that time Jim dragged us all tae Yosemite? He wanted tae go camping and rock climbing. Must have been 1997?”

“1998. Edith was unimpressed,” Nyota laughed. “With the camping part, that is. Yosemite is always impressive.”

Scotty chuckled, and launched into a story for Sulu and Chekov’s benefit. “So Jim is convinced that he can climb El Capitan. And we are staring up at this vast bloody rock face, and of course Jim is telling these young rock hooligans about the route up, which he’d done on antigrav protection 260 years later. And he cannae tie a damn rope, and is describing features that dinnae exist because they havenae been eroded yet. And they are looking at him like he’s a crazy person, and they’re looking sideways at me, wondering if I was going tae be nuts enough tae follow him up.”

“Did you?” Chekov asked.

“Nae, wee man. I was missing a hand, and was pretty sick besides. He hauled Leonard and Spock up a couple hundred meters, though.”

“It was horrible,” McCoy shuddered. “Edith thought it was hilarious, but she always did like to watch me suffer.”

“The Keptin doesn’t talk about her. Edith.” Chekov said.

“She was extraordinary,” McCoy said. “The kind of person who went to change the world, and did. We would sit around, dreaming of ways to make things better for people. And she wasn’t just a dreamer; she knew how to get right in and help *now*. ”

“She woulda fit right in on a starship, I’ll tell you that,” Scotty said wistfully. “And she could go toe-tae-toe with Jim Kirk, no mistake. She could and did kick all our arses. Well, everyone but Nyota, but no need there. They really loved each other, our Captain and his Edith.”

“The Keptin seems so sad,” Chekov said.

“He is,” Spock answered simply.

“Did Edith know the truth about you?” Chekov asked curiously.

“She did,” Uhura answered. “It took about a day for her to believe it after we told her. But green Vulcan blood, Scotty’s deconstructed hand, a tricorder, five Starfleet uniforms, and a phaser convinced her.” She paused, then mused softly. “I think that Yosemite trip was the last time we were all together. You were so unwell, Scotty. You’d started saying no to everything by then, and we barely convinced you to come. Edith worried about you the whole time, and you were gone six weeks later.”

“You’re right,” he said sadly. “That was the last time I saw her.”

“When Starfleet heard what happened, they nearly turned us around for home,” Sulu said. “I got a recorded call from twelve admirals in the middle of the night. They were terrified about Scotty and the Captain, and ‘profoundly concerned’ about everyone else. I managed to convince them not to do it, but I wondered if I’d done the right thing as it slowly sunk in that none of you had served in space for a *decade*. There kept being these small moments. The Captain fumbling for names. Mr. Spock hesitating on the sensor array. Scotty turned around on the deck. Dr. McCoy grabbing a bone-knitter instead of a dermal regenerator. Nyota opening a long range frequency instead of ship-to-ship. These tiny hesitations, these small mistakes.”

“I know the crew pretended not to notice, but they did,” McCoy said. “And believe me, we noticed them noticing.”

“Everyone is still worried about the Captain,” Sulu said as he stood to feed more logs into the fire. “Not for themselves. The Captain is the Captain, James T. Kirk straight through, and he’d die before he failed any of us. But his joy seems gone.”

“He’s still grieving. So very, very much,” Uhura sighed. “But I have faith he’ll find his way back.”

The fire crackled and they all stared into it, half-mesmerized, drifting tiredly. Spock finally stood, to a distressed noise from Nyota, and wrapped his blanket around his shoulders. “Night appears to be ten hours long. Five watches, two hours apiece. On your feet, phaser in hand. Feed the fire and monitor the perimeter. I will take the first watch. Then Mr. Scott. Ms. Uhura. Mr. Sulu. Dr. McCoy, you are last. Mr. Chekov, before you protest, you are injured and require rest.”

The next days were spent essentially the same. Tasteless rations, broken sleep, trying to stay warm, no progress with the broken shuttle, and fighting off increasingly bold dinosaurs who had started methodically attacking the shield.

On the third night, Scotty got up in the middle of Spock’s shift, his hand braced on the side of the Shuttlecraft while he threw up.

“Bad rations or medical withdrawal, Commander?” Spock asked gravely.

“The latter, sir,” he croaked.

“Beyond the obvious, how are you feeling?”

Scott hesitated. “Feeling like this, again ... I’m here. Arenae I? These arenae the last flickers of a dyin’ mind, are they?”

Spock stood, in some concern. “You are here. You are alive.”

Scotty smiled crookedly. “The trouble is, that’s exactly what the Mr. Spock in my head would say.” He held up a hand, which was shaking slightly, and he frowned at it. “No; I know where I am. Fitting back intae my body was hard, and it’s just throwing’ me backward a bit tae feel like this.” Another wave of nausea hit him, and he turned aside to vomit again. Scott blew out a breath and rinsed the sick out his mouth. “And besides, that taste of ration bar coming back up is *very specific*. I’ll be okay for a while. It’s about time for my shift, get some rest, sir, or at least keep Nyota warm.”

Spock nodded and Scott did a quick check of the shield generators, watched the entire time by the glittering eyes of the indigenous species on

the other side. The dinosaurs seemed to want to eat them all very badly. “We’re nae tasty, lads,” Scott told them, and frowned at the generators. “As you’ll soon find out, because we’ve only got batteries for another nineteen hours.”

Scott went back to his sleeping crewmates and stoked the fire. Chekov stirred with a moan. “Gently, laddie,” Scott told him. He peeled back the shredded leg of Chekov’s trousers and grimaced at the hot, tight, infected flesh. He injected another hypo of antibiotics and pain medicine that McCoy had laid out for this shift, and got the sick navigator a bottle of water, but what they really needed was the medbay so McCoy could synthesize a targeted antibiotic. Scott stood quickly to throw up again, in definite withdrawal from the strong medicine he normally took every day.

“We’re having all sorts of fun, aren’t we,” Chekov said ruefully.

“Go back tae sleep, wee man,” Scott said. “The hypo should be kicking in soon.”

“I’ll keep you company until it does. How are the shield generators?”

“Holding,” Scott said.

“For now,” Chekov continued knowingly.

“Aye,” Scott admitted, and settled down beside him. “One way or another, we have just one more cold night on this moon, but nae two, because after that we’ll be devoured.”

“There’s all our problems sorted,” Chekov said flippantly, and then looked seriously at his friend and mentor. “Scotty. Did you die on Earth, in the past? Because there are rumors.”

“Aye,” he said simply.

“How?” Chekov asked mournfully.

Scotty reached out and patted the younger man on the shoulder. “Purposefully, son,” Scott said quietly.

Chekov clenched his jaw. “Why?” he whispered.

Scotty stood up, half shrugging, and turned away. He spoke quietly. “A hand I didnae have anymore hurt more than any pain I’d ever felt, until the next day, when it hurt worse. And my mind ...” he shook his head, without the words. “There was a special torture in lookin’ up at the stars knowing I’d never walk in them again. And I could try tae tell yeh about cocaine, and havin’ AIDS, and people telling yeh who yeh can and cannae love.” He swallowed, shoving back nausea, then sat again, rubbing absently at his artificial hand. “And those are and arenae reasons. There was no hope for that universe, Pavel. Nothin’ that any of us could ever do that would make one damn bit of difference, not there. Hard tae fight for your life, when there is no point tae it at all.”

Chekov nodded slowly. “I understand.”

Scott sighed. “That’s good. I dinnae.”

The fire crackled between them. “How long? Were you ... gone?” Chekov ventured.

Scott scooted closer to the fire, shivering, and perhaps it was with the cold. “Two years, for them, they tell me. For me? I cannae say, Pavel. You know when you fall asleep, and then wake up and cannae tell if it’s been two minutes or twelve hours? That’s what it felt like.”

“Did dying hurt?” Pavel asked, shivering himself. “Were you afraid?”

Scott reached over and fussed with Chekov’s blanket, pulling it closer around the injured and feverish navigator. “It was fast. It’s livin’ again that’s been scaring me. Go tae sleep, laddie, we may have tae try tae outrun some dinosaurs tomorrow.”

Dawn came, pale and cold. Breakfast was quiet and distasteful, but Spock made them all eat their rations, except Scott who couldn’t keep anything down, although McCoy and Uhura were also struggling to a lesser extent. Scott opened the shuttle’s hatch, but it was too dark and he didn’t want to draw down the batteries with lights; he’d have to wait until the sun was higher to work. He sighed in aggravation, then grabbed a phaser and went to check the shield generators again. He was back ten minutes later, pacing twitchily.

Nyota shook her head and finally followed him, grabbing him firmly to hold him still near the front of the shuttle, half-blocked from view. She stood on her toes and skimmed her fingers down the back of his neck, pulling him forward to rest his forehead against hers. Spock came up behind her and wrapped a hand around her waist, then reached out with the other to brush the pressure points on Scott’s head—temple, cheek, pulse. They all breathed together for a moment, then stepped apart.

“Leonard,” Sulu asked quietly, stirring something that was supposed to be oatmeal. “Are the three of them sleeping together?”

“That’s a question I asked them back on Earth, when that,” McCoy gestured with his chin, “started to happen. And the answer is yes, but not how you’re thinking. It’s something Vulcan. Something telepathic and mental that made things easier. Its roots are in a ceremony on New Vulcan that I don’t entirely understand. Jim was part of it too, and when Scotty was in really bad shape I know Jim stepped in with them a few times. Maybe even Edith, through Jim. There is absolutely a physical element to it, of touch and sweat and skin, but I don’t know how far it goes. Whether it is or isn’t sex, it *is* profoundly intimate.”

“They couldn’t save him, in the end,” Sulu said quietly.

“No,” McCoy sighed. “It tore us up, you know. We were still in Scotland, drunk and whiplashing between getting angry and getting weepy.”

And guilty as all hell. But Edith reminded us that even if they'd been hard fought, he'd had enough good days and hours to keep him with us for eight years. And that he gave most of those good hours to us. And that's damned intimate too."

Sulu nodded, and watched Scott duck into the shuttle. "How do you come back from that?"

"I have no idea," McCoy said heavily and stood. "I genuinely have no idea."

A few hours later Scott pushed himself out of the guts of the shuttle's machinery, and looked up at Spock from flat on his back. "Mr. Spock, I have an idea on the power situation, but you are no' going tae like it," Scott said. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then stood to find some water. The rest of the small crew looked up at them as they stepped outside. "It's dangerous but it might work," Scott continued. "I can adjust the main reactor to function with a substitute fuel supply."

"That's all very well," Spock said, "but we do not have a substitute supply."

"Aye, we do; our phasers. I can adapt them and use their energy. It will take time but it's doable."

"They also happen to be our only defense if the shield fails," McCoy interjected.

"*When* it fails," Scotty corrected, sitting down beside Chekov. He patted the feverish navigator, who looked up with a wan smile. "How yeh feeling lad?"

"I would like to go home," Chekov said. "I am not feeling so good."

"Draining the phasers puts us at risk just as our defenses fail," Spock said. "And yet the phasers seem to be our only hope."

"Aye."

Scott stood and headed for the shuttle again. Spock followed him. "How long will it take?" he asked the Engineer urgently. "The batteries on the shield are failing even now; do we have time?"

"Five hours of batteries. Three hours of work. We have time." Scott hesitated, then started pulling off panels. "But Mr. Spock, the best this will do is get us off the planet and intae a shaky orbit for a few hours. After that, we'll be right back where we started, but with no resources left. And sir ... we cannae take all of us. We'll be overweight some 200 kilos. We can strip out parts, but there isnae much extra in a shuttle tae begin with."

"Two of us will have to remain on the planet," Spock surmised.

"Aye. And you have a hell of a choice tae make, Commander."

"It will be a logical one," Spock said heavily.

"Of course it will. Your phaser, sir?"

Spock nodded and handed Scott his weapon. "Go to work, Mr. Scott," he said. "When you have my phaser drained we'll go onto the next one.

"Aye, sir," Scotty said. "Everyone needs tae stay out of the shuttle. It will be tricky work, and if a phaser overloads ... well. There willnae be time tae get out. For what it's worth, Commander, I volunteer to stay behind."

"I shall not be taking volunteers. Work quickly, Engineer."

The next time Scott stepped out, the job was done and the shuttle was ready. Spock was standing alone at the edge of the camp, staring up at the gas giant, his hands folded behind his back. The others were having a vehement argument about who should stay behind. This particular group being what it was, each was convinced that he or she should be left.

"That's enough," Scotty snapped, his voice cutting through. He rarely pulled rank, but when he did could be as fierce as the Captain or Spock. "Commander Spock will make the choice, and we'll abide it."

"My choice is made," Spock said, coming to stand by his crew. "Our odds are poor, whether on the planet or on the shuttle. However, they are slightly better aboard the shuttle. My decision has therefore been based on who is most needed aboard the *Enterprise*, and whose role can be most easily replaced by another member of the crew. Mr. Chekov. Ms. Uhura. You shall remain on the planet."

The two of them nodded tightly, absorbing and accepting it like the Starfleet officers they were. McCoy looked like he was ready to explode, but Scott grabbed him and shook his head, despite the grief in his eyes. "Shield will hold another hour. Shuttle is ready. There isnae time tae stand around. The Engineer fiercely hugged his two friends, then turned away to prep the shuttle. He didn't bother to wipe away the tears streaming down his face. McCoy and Sulu followed suit.

"Mr. Chekov..." Spock started.

"An honor, Commander," Chekov said. "Now, please, take Nyota's hand and spend these last seconds with her."

Spock inclined his head. "Nyota," Spock said softly.

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "Your choice is the right one. I love you, Spock," she said, and kissed him with all she had. He held her tightly, and sobbed, just once, before turning away.

"Live long!" she cried at his back. "Prosper, Spock, and find joy." She helped Chekov to his feet to move them out of the backdraft of the

shuttle, and they watched it rise into the air above them. The dinosaurs scattered in fear, but they wouldn't be gone long. The shield flickered.

The damaged shuttle struggled for orbit, but managed a minimal altitude under Sulu's expert hands. "We've got about forty-five minutes," Scott said softly. "This interference is terrible. The *Enterprise* will have to be looking right at us to see us."

Spock frowned hard at the instruments. "Gentlemen," he asked slowly. "Do you trust me?"

"I hate questions like that," McCoy grumbled. "Of course we do, Spock."

With that, Spock reached forward and dumped their remaining fuel, igniting it in a trail that streaked behind the ship.

Sulu yelled and jerked back from controls. "That's *all our fuel*! Every drop. There's no landing back on the surface now!"

The men stared, aghast, at their commander, and then Scott laughed. "A distress signal?" he asked, and grinned fiercely. "Like sending up a flare. Maybe the *Enterprise* will see it. A good gamble, Mr. Spock, even if it doesn't pay off."

"I suppose I'd rather die now on a last roll of the dice," Sulu said. "That said, we are now a rock on a trajectory, and at the mercy of physics. Six minutes until atmosphere, sir."

"At least I'll die with the pleasure of having watched you make an entirely human decision," McCoy said, reaching forward to slap Spock on the shoulder.

"Totally illogical," Spock sighed. "There was no chance."

"Exactly what I mean," McCoy said.

There was nothing more to say. Six minutes later the shuttle began to heat and shake as the atmosphere started tearing it apart. They all knew they had seconds left, but faced it with the same grace as their friends on the planet. And then, beyond hope, the familiar feeling of the transporter grabbed them.

"*Transporter room!*" the Captain was shouting as they materialized. "*Why do you only have four of them!?*"

"Stand aside, laddie!" Scott barked at the transporter tech, jumping off the pad with Spock hot on his heels. "The other two are still on the surface ..." he scanned quickly, hands flying over the controls. "Shield is down," he said grimly to Spock, and jerked hard on the dematerialization lever.

Chekov and Uhura sparkled into existence, their eyes wide and hands raised, arms bloody from deep defensive wounds.

"You have amazing timing, Scotty," Nyota said shakily.

"Six aboard, sir," Spock reported to the Captain.

"*What in the hell ... you know what, just get up here right now,*" the Captain said.

"A moment, sir," Spock said serenely. He pulled off his duty tunic and wrapped it around Nyota's bleeding hands, then leaned forward, his head against hers, vastly relieved.

Scott kissed her cheek on the way by, the injured Chekov under his arm, and waved a finger at Spock. "He went all in with no cards, and bluffed the universe. It was magnificent."

"I made the only logical choices under the circumstances," Spock said reprovingly.

Scotty just laughed on his way out the door.

"Like hell!" McCoy sputtered. "I know what I saw! Logical, my ass ..."

Captain's log, Stardate 2267.350. A year without you. A year in deep space. And I feel certain that something must have happened this year. Yes, certainly, I remember now. The wonders of the universe. What are the wonders of the universe, my Edith, without you in it? I started this mission with hope. And now I wonder: why am I here?

Kirk arrived at morning report, balancing a coffee and absently flipping through his padd. "Morning Scotty," he murmured to the other occupant of the room, also distracted by a padd. The engineer grunted something that may have been 'Captain.'

Kirk was *weary*. Ten years, mostly, in space—in this century. Eleven years of life on Earth in another century. Twenty one years lived since he'd stepped on a ship called *Enterprise* and faked his way into a Captain's chair. And since then, he had just *lost*. Lost Pike. Lost his own life in a warp core. Lost crew. Lost the *Enterprise*. Lost the century he'd been born in. Lost Scott to his own pain. Lost the century he'd found love in. Lost *her*. And although he'd regained a few things along the way, he was coming to discover that perhaps he'd lost himself too.

The rest of the department heads filtered in, yawning and subdued as they helped themselves to beverages and breakfast.

Spock started a dry report on the nebula they were surveying. A tricky scientific and navigational task, but nothing particularly new. Kirk squinted at his first officer and forced himself to focus. The meeting was breaking up when the comm sounded from the bridge.

"*Keptin,*" Chekov said, on the conn. "*We are receiving a distress call. Approximately one light year away. We are still working on getting it translated, but it appears to be a meteor strike on ship.*"

“Any response?” Kirk asked.

“It isn’t a subspace signal. Regular space, a compressed radio wave so right at the speed of light. We are picking it up on long range scanners, not the communications system; it appears to have just left the ship in distress and seems to be directed at a planet about ten light years away. It will be years before it is received. It may be a spacefaring but pre-warp civilization. Space travel technology at near lightspeed, making a multi-decade trip possible, but no hope of rescue. At warp seven we could be there tomorrow. If Mr. Scott could give us warp eight...”

Kirk was on his feet. “Scotty?”

“Aye,” the Engineer said, headed out of the room at a jog. “Let’s see what I can give yeh sir.”

The staff quickly broke to their stations. Chekov stood, relinquishing the center seat to the Captain. “Ms. Uhura, see what you can make of the language. Mr. Spock?” Kirk asked.

“I have it on long-range scanners. My estimation from its size and structure is that it is a colony ship. There could be thousands or tens of thousands of souls aboard. One point zero two light years away. I’ll know more about it’s condition as we get closer.”

Kirk hit the button for the comm. “Mr. Scott?”

“I can give yeh warp eight, sir.”

“Mr. Sulu,” Kirk said. “Warp eight.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Pre-warp civilization may mean this is a first contact with any intelligent life other than their own planet,” Kirk mused. “Ms. Uhura, start working on an appropriate message.” He hit the comm on his chair. “All hands this is the Captain. In the next few hours we may be engaged in a large-scale space rescue. Department heads and shift lieutenants please review the protocols, and all hands, review your specific role. We may have the opportunity to save many lives, if we work quickly and together.”

He turned to the Doctor, standing at his shoulder. “I’m on it,” McCoy said, turning to go. “Emergency medbay in the cargo hold. I’ll activate all our emergency medical personnel from the ship’s other departments

Kirk called down to Engineering again. “Mr. Scott we don’t know what we’re looking at yet, but as we get scans from Mr. Spock we’ll be able to refine. The engineering department is our rescue crew; be ready for anything.”

“Aye, sir, we always are.”

“Ms. Uhura, any feel for when we may be able to hail them?”

She shook her head. “If they can’t send a subspace signal they probably can’t pick one up, so we’re looking at radio. Twelve million kilometers would give them a 45 second delay, but at warp eight we’ll be there in 39 seconds. Realistically, they aren’t going to be able to communicate with us until we are right on top of them.”

“So we’ll scare the hell out of them.”

“Likely, sir,” Spock answered. “We should be sure our shields are up, in case they have weapons.”

“I’m getting a better feel for the message,” Uhura said. “Definitely meteor strike on an unshielded ship. Bulkheads dropped, energy systems damaged, propulsion offline, significant injuries. The signal was less a distress call and more a final report; while they are attempting repairs they don’t expect to survive to their destination. Colony ship, ten thousand souls.”

“Sixteen hours to the ship, sir,” Spock said.

Kirk nodded. “Spock, you have the conn, I’m going to walk through the departments to help with preparations. In eight hours I am going to want everyone but a skeleton crew to rest so we can all be fresh for rescue operations.”

Sixteen hours later the Captain of the *Enterprise* was back on the bridge.

“Three two one, dropping out of warp,” Sulu reported crisply.

It was a very big ship, almost four kilometers long, with rotating hubs that suggested they didn’t possess artificial gravity. The ship was spinning oddly, the awkward roll and pitch of a strike that hadn’t been corrected. It was surrounded by a halo of broken pieces and was venting gasses into space.

“Life signs Captain, and in significant numbers,” Spock reported. “Nine thousand six hundred and twelve. It appears to be fission powered, but systems are down. It is likely on emergency backup.

“Ms. Uhura,” Kirk said.

“I have a radio frequency ready and a translator algorithm online. Unknown though, sir, whether they are monitoring. They probably don’t expect to hear anything for decades, if ever.”

“Let’s give it a shot,” he said, and waited for her nod. “Unknown ship this is the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. We are a vessel of exploration and peace. We picked up your distress signal; can we be of assistance?”

“Nothing so far; I’ll repeat your message ... still nothing.”

“We’ll just have to beam aboard ...” Kirk started, but then there was a voice.

“... *gracious gods. Who are you?*”

Kirk sat up. “Friends. Here to help, if you need it?”

“*Where are you from? Home?*”

“We are not from your home planet. We are a ship of exploration, currently almost 3000 light years from our home.”

There was no response, until:

“... *gods. Gods mighty. Life, from other worlds? Intelligent life. We hoped we were not alone in the universe, but did not dream ... can you assist us?*”

Kirk smiled. “We can. We will come aboard your ship. Is there a particular location that would be best?”

“*Our airlocks are damaged,*” the voice said regretfully.

“That isn’t prohibitive. We have teleportation technology. We’re reading a large space on the other side of the airlocks. Would that be acceptable?”

“*Yes. That section is relatively undamaged.*”

“We will be aboard shortly,” Kirk said, and Uhura closed the communication. “What does the atmosphere look like?”

“Near enough to Earth standard not to be a problem,” Spock reported.

“Ms. Uhura, you’re with me. Spock have a discrete security team meet us in Transporter Room One.”

Uhura rigged them all with translation devices; a broadcast button on their collars so that their hosts could understand them, and an earpiece so they could understand their hosts. Phasers and communicators in pockets, and the transporter officer put them in the middle of a wide cargo bay.

There was a clear welcoming party, but also a crowd, all of whom stepped back in fear as the *Enterprise* officers materialized. Then the welcoming party steeled themselves and came toward them.

The species was a little smaller and denser than a human, bipedal, lightly haired or furred in blacks and browns. Uhura took in their eyes, set on the sides of their heads, and the vestigial remains of hooves on their hands. “Likely herbivores, sir. They often have flight reactions to binocular vision, as it is usually associated with predators. Watch out for prolonged eye contact and showing teeth,” she reminded him.

One of them spoke. “I am Governor Grelso Tresin. This is Captain Dared Andoln. Welcome to the *Cataico*. Please forgive the many onlookers. We are a colony ship and have all been together for many years. We keep no secrets. Not that we could; your ship is visible outside our observation windows and has caused a stir, to put it mildly.”

“We are honored to be here, Governor. I’m Captain James T. Kirk. This is Lieutenant Commander Nyota Uhura; Lieutenants James and Wocer.”

“Captain Kirk,” the Governor said. “I would like nothing better than to sit with you for days and learn everything I can of your people and your travels ...”

“...but you have injured people and a badly damaged ship. Let’s take care of them first, and we can sort out the diplomacy later,” Kirk agreed. “With your permission, I’m about to beam over about 140 people. Engineers and medical personnel, mostly, and we can get started.”

The first priority was stabilizing the ship to ensure no further damage. The *Enterprise* grabbed it with tractor beams to stabilize rotation and then carefully extended her shields around it, in case there were further meteors. The second priority was rescue. And the third was repair, if repair was possible.

The Governor looked on, a little fearfully, as the rather fearsome-seeming *Enterprise* crew teleported aboard. It occurred to him, rather too late, that this was a scientifically and technically advanced predator species that was fully capable of killing them all, and that he was risking much with his trust. But the alternative seemed to be to die slowly in space.

Scott came over in the first wave and spotted Captain Kirk. He beelined over, in his usual state of focused intensity when there was a problem to solve, and the colonists shifted nervously. Uhura gestured to him; *tone it down*. He took a breath and dropped his gaze.

“I’m trying tae sort out the priority, sir,” he told the Captain. “Power or rescue? And it depends on the state of the reactor and the level of danger it poses. What is your power source, sir?” Scott asked the Governor.

“I’m not a nuclear engineer,” the Governor said apologetically, “and our engineer is missing. Captain Andoln?”

The commander of the colony ship continued. “At its basic level? Uranium suspended in water, creating heat and steam that spins turbines.”

Scott nodded, hands in his hips; it was old technology, but familiar. “Any chance that we are looking at a meltdown or the possibility of one? Exposure of the uranium? Loss of coolant?”

The captain made a gesture that seemed to be ‘no,’ then caught herself. The communication was good but the nuance wasn’t there yet. “No,” she said. “There’s a failsafe that doesn’t depend on power. It is mechanical; if the temperatures reach a certain level the core will melt through a plate and slide into outer space where it is sufficiently cooled.”

“Smart,” Scott said approvingly. “In that case I’m inclined to leave the core alone until we can examine the entire power system and the core itself for damage. And that can wait until after hull stabilization and rescue. For the time being we could use the *Enterprise’s* spacedock umbilicals. Rig a connection and reverse the power flow.”

Kirk agreed. “Do it, Scotty. If we can get to basic stability, I then want our focus on rescue.”

“Aye, sir,” Scott agreed, and plowed his way back to his assembled people, talking loudly and quickly as he deployed them to their jobs.

Uhura grimaced. “He’s the best there is, Governor, but he can be a little intense.”

“He reminds me of a ...” the Governor said a word that didn’t translate. The translator in their ears paused and then guessed: *large dog*.

“Our translator struggled with that word, sir, but took a good guess, and I agree,” she said, trying not to smile too toothily.

The colonists were wide-eyed with astonishment that they weren’t going to die, and that their saviors were aliens. Kirk and Uhura spent two very busy hours interfacing between the *Enterprise* crew and the colonists, working out the logistics and the communications kinks. Abruptly, however, everything was sorted, everyone was clear on their role, and everyone was hard at work—except them.

“Scotty said there is still a pile of search and rescue packs in transporter room one, sir. I’ll go grab two,” Uhura said. She dematerialized, to the shock of some passing colonists, and was back a moment later with two bags.

They both wordlessly upended them and got their kits in order. Kevlar gloves, two mid-weight antigrav lifts, flashlight, handheld medical scanner, plasma torch, basic medical pack, voiceless emergency beam out beacon, and an environmental collar that would give them a ten second bubble of air in the event of decompression. Uhura helped Kirk seal the collar around his neck, and lifted her chin so he could help her.

“*Enterprise*, Kirk,” the Captain said. “Commander Uhura and I are moving forward to help in rescue efforts.”

The part of the ship they’d been in had been relatively unscathed, but as they moved forward the damage quickly became worse. The ship had been at nearly lightspeed at the time of the strike. It was a testament to the strength of the ship that it had survived at all. But the first fifty meters of the ship had been sheared off, and the forces at work had buckled about 300 meters behind the strike, twisting metal and bringing down floors. Unfortunately, the damaged section of the ship appeared to be largely family quarters of the colonists.

The *Enterprise* crew was here, along with many of the colonists, carefully picking their way forward, scanning for life signs and bodies. McCoy was a bit behind the main work with a dozen medics, running treatment and triage.

The work was tricky. The transporter was of limited help; it was dangerous to beam into or out of unstable spaces. You certainly didn’t want to beam out someone who might be impaled with a piece of metal, as the shock of leaving the metal behind could kill them. On the other hand, beaming them out with the metal still in them could bring down the unstable deck around the rescuers and survivors. And so rescue efforts were largely by hand; plasma torches and antigravs and brute force.

Kirk and Uhura pushed forward through the narrow spaces, cutting victims out inch by inch and hour by hour. They were filthy from soot and grease, their uniforms snagged and torn, bleeding here and there from a jagged edge, but they pushed on with determination. They were deep into the wreckage, and mostly pulling out bodies, when Kirk got an encouraging blip on his scanner.

“I’m getting a lifesign behind this panel,” the Captain said, slithering forward in his belly. “If I could just shift it ...” he grunted and pulled.

He was greeted by the wide, startled, tear-tracked eyes of what he guessed was a child. “You’re an alien!” the person gasped, and yes, that was a child’s voice.

“Hello,” he said gently, and her eyes darted around trying to understand the translated voice overlaying with the English he was speaking. “My name is Jim. And I *am* an alien. But you live on a spaceship; you really should expect to meet a few.”

“That’s what I keep telling Mrs.” an untranslated word in his earpiece, probably a proper name. “I’ve been telling her that surely there are aliens!” the child continued precociously.

“Well, you were right. I’m here to help you; your spaceship crashed. What’s your name?” he asked her.

“Eadeth,” she answered, and he blinked in surprise.

“That is a lovely name,” he said, swallowing back the lump in his throat. “Someone I love has a name that sounds a lot like yours. Are you hurt, Eadeth?”

“No. But ...” she tried to move. “I’m stuck!” she complained in frustration.

Kirk scanned her; she really was pinned as badly, trapped against rubble and the outer hull of the ship. He glanced back at Uhura. “We’re going to need some help with this one.”

“Aye, sir,” she said, and backed out.

Eadeth chattered a million questions at him while they waited: did he have a ship? What was the name of the ship? Was it fast? Was it big? What color was it? Where did he come from? She couldn’t move her arms but he was able to reach forward and pour some water into her mouth, and a bit of food.

Uhura was back ten minutes later with Scott, who wiggled into the tight space with the Captain.

“Hello,” Eadeth said cheerfully, much comforted by the food, water, and company.

“Hello, lassie,” Scotty said.

“This is Eadeth. She’s stuck but not hurt,” Kirk explained.

Scott scanned. “Aye, stuck good,” he said with a frown.

“Can we transport her out?” Kirk asked.

Scotty grimaced. “She’s completely surrounded by metal. I’m worried about that kind of precision, especially since there is some magnetic interference. The ship might intermingle with her pattern.”

“Cut her out, then?”

“She’s deep in here. Days, sir.”

Kirk frowned, and tapped above them. “This is the outer hull, isn’t it? Can we seal off behind us and take her through the outside?”

Scotty considered it. “Aye, that’s doable. Give me an hour or so to get things set,” he said, and backed out.

Nyota was back and forth several times with more food and water. One time she came back with word that she had found Eadeth’s despairing parents. Eadeth’s father came up with Uhura the next time, and stroked his child’s face.

Uhura returned a final time with an environmental collar. “Scotty said they’re ready. Can you get this around her neck? He’ll get her beamed out as soon as she is clear of the wreckage, but this will protect her from vacuum.”

“Beam *us* out,” the Captain corrected. “I’m not leaving her.”

“Scotty figured,” Uhura answered ruefully. “The EVA team is going to take off this entire panel above you both. I’m headed out, and we’ll seal you in. Good luck, sir.”

Kirk got the collar around Eadeth’s head with some difficulty. He felt the pressure change in his ears as the crew sealed them in so the decompression wouldn’t affect any other part of the ship. Kirk double checked her environmental collar, and his own, then reached out and touched her chin.

“Deep breath Eadeth, and be brave. This may be a little scary.” He hit his comm. “Okay, we’re ready. One shot, Scotty, let’s get this right.”

“Aye, *sir*,” Scott said, and then called the EVA team. “*Go, Peters, quick as yeh can!*”

The panel above them both abruptly pulled away, sucking them both into space. The environmental collars snapped on, giving them a breath and protecting them from the vacuum of space, although the deadly cold immediately closed around them. Kirk kicked forward, hard, off the hull and wrapped his arms around her, just as the familiar comfort of the transporters picked them up.

The materialized in a bit of a pile on the floor, and Scott looked relieved. Eadeth looked up at Kirk in awe. “Welcome to the *Enterprise*, Eadeth,” he said, trying very hard not to smile too hard and frighten her. She just wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. “I’m sure it is a very nice ship Jim,” she said seriously. “But I probably ought to go home so my parents don’t worry.”

“I’m quite sure you’re right,” Kirk said, and nodded at Scotty, who put them gently back down on the colony ship near Uhura and McCoy, and her joyful parents

The colony ship wouldn’t quite be the same, and the forward section had been sealed off, but the *Enterprise* EVA team and Engineers patched her together. Scotty brought the power system back online without difficulty, and the near-lightspeed propulsion system. Medical healed the injured colonists, some of whom had required surgery, and there was a somber ceremony for the dead.

As promised, the Captain answered every question the awe-struck Governor had for him. “A universe of life,” the Governor said in wonder.

“It’s beautiful beyond words,” Kirk agreed, and then it was time to part ways. The colonists were a half light year from their new home, and the Governor declined the *Enterprise’s* offer for a warp boost.

“No, Captain,” he said. “I think it’s important for us to finish as we started. Only a few more months!”

The *Enterprise* cruised along beside the giant ship for a few hours to make sure she got safely up to speed. Spock put the colony ship’s hull up in the viewscreen, and they could see many faces pressed against the windows, watching the *Enterprise* in awe. Then, with a cheerful goodbye, they moved to a safe distance and went to warp in a flash of light Kirk hoped the colonists would always remember.

The *Enterprise* quickly traveled the short half-light year to the world their friends had picked. It was a gorgeous little planet, and they were all pleased. Before they left, they beamed down a box of equipment and supplies to greet the colonists when they arrived, emblazoned in the side with the Starfleet emblem so they couldn’t mistake who had left the gift.

The next day, Kirk walked into the morning report feeling lighter than he had in a year.

“Mornin’, sir,” Scotty said cheerfully, pouring some tea. “I dinnae ken what got me remembering, but I was thinking about your wedding. And Leonard being so damn nervous about the toast. He was so drunk that he ...”

“...started talking about Starfleet Academy, caught himself, and then had to invent an incredibly weird metaphor about space on the fly to cover,” Kirk laughed. “I remember. That was a good day.”

“Aye, it was, sir. Your bride was beautiful, and you even cleaned up okay yourself.”

Kirk looked seriously at the Chief. “We had a few of those, didn’t we? Good days. Back then.”

“Oh, aye sir,” Scotty said easily. “Plenty. I dinnae ken that I’d ever had quite so much fun as I did winding up twentieth century physicists with the suggestion that faster than light travel was possible. And time travel. Stephen Hawking figured us out, did yeh know that? Confronted me with all the evidence after a conference and I had tae tell him the truth. Showed him the warp equations. He called me ‘that fucking time traveler,’ and everyone thought he was joking.”

“I didn’t know that story, it’s a good one,” Kirk chuckled. “God, Scotty. I feel so much better today than I have in ages, and I have no idea why. Maybe ...” he hesitated. “Maybe I’m getting over her.”

Scott shook his head. “I figure yeh cannae get over someone like Edith Kirk. No, sir. But I know what it is. You saved ten thousand people yesterday. I think she would call that a halfway good start on a day’s work.”

Kirk smiled wistfully. “Yeah, she would. I miss her.”

“Of course yeh do. But when yeh take what’s here,” Scott pointed at the center of the Captain’s chest, then gestured out, “and put it out here. Well. She’s nearly standing next to yeh then, isnae she?” Scott glanced up as Uhura, McCoy, and Spock walked into the room. “Ah, Dr. McCoy. We were just takin’ about yer catastrophic toast at the Captain’s wedding.”

“Oh, god,” McCoy moaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“As I recall, it included the line ‘Starfleet is like a fleet of stars in the sky,’” Spock deadpanned, and Scott nearly spilled his tea; he and Nyota were leaning on each other, laughing hard and quoting other memorable lines to each other.

“It wasn’t that bad,” McCoy complained, crossing his arms.

Kirk patted him on the shoulder. “It really was, Bones.” He looked around at his smiling friends, his crew, and was grateful to be serving them, and the universe, aboard the good ship *Enterprise*.

Chapter Summary

The crew faces technical difficulties and a planet of horrors.

Chapter Notes

Content warning in this chapter for sexual content and body horror

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

Captain's log, Stardate 2268.68. More than three years in space without reprieve is starting to push the Enterprise and our Engineers. We were very, very close to disaster today, and are parked until Cmdr. Scott can get us sorted.

"I'm sorry, but *what?*" asked the Chief Engineer of the USS *Enterprise*, hands on his hips.

Sulu leaned back in the pilot's chair and gestured at the helm. "It just feels wrong," he said with a sigh. "A ... I don't know. A hesitation, a vibration under my fingers."

"I feel it too," Chekov agreed.

"Is that possible?" Kirk said, following the conversation between his chief helmsman, navigator, and engineer with concern.

"Actual tactile feedback in the console? In theory, no. The helm isnae physically yoked to anything; the connections are entirely electronic." Scott said slowly.

"I know it sounds crazy, Scotty," Sulu sighed. "Maybe it isn't the console itself. Maybe it's the ship, and that's just where I'm feeling it. A kind of jerk. A hiccup. Maybe even a very low sound. I don't know. Or maybe I'm just tired."

"She speaks tae us all in different ways," Scott said, gesturing to the ship. "If I ignored that I'd deserve what she'd do tae me." He rubbed his forehead. "Both going intae and out of warp?"

"And impulse. And thrusters. And navigational changes at any speed.

"*Every* helm maneuver?" Scott asked, frowning harder, clearly puzzled. Sulu and Chekov nodded. "Every time or just some of the time?"

"Every time."

"Is this recent or ongoing?"

"Recent. Last 24 to 48 hours," Sulu said.

Scott pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes, murmuring softly to himself as he mentally reviewed systems and schematics in his head. He stiffened, and when he opened his eyes again his expression was deliberately still.

"Mr. Spock," he said carefully. "Are we in a section of space safe for an all stop?"

"I believe so," Spock said. "We appear to be in a section of empty space."

"What do you need, Scotty?" the Captain said urgently, sensing a brewing emergency, even if he didn't understand it yet.

"I need us out of warp and at all stop, with the absolute minimum of commands tae get us there," Scott said, and it was apparent to everyone on the bridge that his pulse had accelerated. "And then no one, *no one* touch helm control until I check something. I dinnae care if we are about tae crash into a planet. *Nothing.*"

"Sulu?" Kirk said.

"Understood, sir." The helmsman glanced at Scott, then tapped two commands, bringing the *Enterprise* to a halt. The engineer flinched at each move.

"Lift your hands, lads. Dinnae touch the console. Dinnae let anyone lean on it. Dinnae *sneeze* on it."

"Scotty?" Kirk asked tensely, but the man just shook his head as they jogged off the lift into main Engineering.

"I dinnae ken, sir, not yet." They stopped by an equipment locker and Scott shoved a dozen tools in a bag, then whistled sharply down to two specialists working a level below. "Lad, lass. Need you now." Keenser, noticing both the commotion and the all stop, followed.

They all followed the increasingly tense chief deep into the control systems of the ship, the spaces narrowing. Scott popped off a small access hatch, then stepped back from the blast of heat.

Scott gestured with his thumbs, left and right. "Lock down the EPS conduits, both ends," he told the crewmen. He grabbed thermal gloves and his tools, then hauled himself into the tight space.

"It's hot in there, isn't it?" Kirk asked Keenser, a little nervously. Keenser rolled his eyes in obvious annoyance. "Scotty, please don't cook yourself," Kirk called in.

Some muffled swearing came back, followed by a much louder: "*Holy shit.*" Scott scooted out and wiped the sweat off his face, cheeks flushed deep red from the heat. He looked down at Keenser and said simply "*USS Chien-Shiung Wu.*"

Keenser stepped back in shock.

"Need tae bleed the rest of the plasma out of the system," Scott told Keenser. "Which will be fun." The engineers stared morosely into the system for a minute. "Dammit," Scotty sighed, in response to something Keenser said that Kirk couldn't hear.

"Gentlemen?" Kirk asked.

"Start working the maths," Scott told Keenser. "I'll be there in a minute. Open the conduits back up," he told the techs. "Then get back tae what you were doing, thanks." Scott slammed the hatch shut. "Let's nae do this here, sir," Scott said, and they pushed their way back into the main deck. Scott stowed the tools and chugged a bottle of water, then walked into his office. He pulled up the *Enterprise* schematics on the panel which covered a full wall.

"The *Chien-Shiung Wu* blew up eighty years ago," Kirk said slowly. "Something in ... god. Helm control."

"Aye," Scott said darkly, zooming in on the section where they'd just been, then pulling out the three-dimensional holo-render with a quick gesture. "The helm isnae on the bridge. Not really. It's here. The third largest electroplasma conduit on the ship is at this junction, Conduit E, and it's a ugly one. Both warp and impulse plasma, shunted to power the maneuvering systems through a complex valve system. And it's all *mechanical*. It has tae be."

Scott zoomed in further, showing the schematics for the conduit. "Sulu hits a button on the bridge, and the valves move to redirect the power flow. Which in turn move the nacelles fractionally tae distort the warp field; or the impulse nozzles to redirect the plasma exhaust for yaw and pitch; or thrusters for roll. It all starts here.

"In 2180 the *Chien-Shiung Wu* suffered a massive failure in one of the flow valves in EPC E. Splintered the entire conduit and sent microscopic fragments intae the maneuvering systems. Which all, immediately and unsurprising, blew up. EPC E is the only valved system on the ship. It has tae be. And we cannae monitor the valves. The temperatures and pressures are too high. So we built 'em strong. We build 'em with safeguards. But if they go, they go. It's undetectable until then, unless you do something stupidly dangerous like manually inspect them, which I just did."

"Sulu and Chekov detected it," Kirk said in awe.

"Aye," Scott said. "Completely impossible, of course. I'll be buying them both incredibly expensive bottles of liquor the next time we are in a spaceport."

"Is this related at all to the damage to Conduit A when we flew through the micro-singularity a while back?" the Captain asked.

Scott drummed the fingers of his artificial left hand, the one he'd lost when the ship's largest conduit had blown up all over Engineering. "Possibly, sir. It was a stress on the system."

"Can you fix it?" Kirk asked urgently.

Keenser came trundling in, tapping at a padd, and then wordlessly extended it to his boss, who flipped through the equations and breathed heavily.

"Aye, but you're no' going tae like it," Scott continued. "This is a Starbase-caliber repair, with no Starbase. I cannae pull the conduit if there is plasma in the system. Ordinarily we'd seal it off on both ends and bleed the remaining plasma out into a canister, but the navigational system is massive. I have tae cold-stop the warp and impulse reactors, vent the entire electroplasma system ship-wide, rebuild the conduit, reinstall it, re-prime the EP system, then restart both reactors."

"Well, damn," Kirk muttered. "That puts us a little short on power."

"To understate it, aye," Scott said. "And I'll need every scrap of power we've got in the batteries tae get the job done."

"Okay," Kirk said, glancing between Scott and Keenser. "Question of the day. How do we keep the crew alive with no power?"

"We don't," Keenser muttered. "We can't."

"We've got tae get the crew off the ship. And I mean the *entire crew*," Scott said. "We need to be in high orbit around something very stable, and then rely on physics. Because I'm going tae need tae turn off everything. Life support. Gravity. *Everything*. Anyone aboard for the repairs gets tae live in spacesuits. Maybe we keep one shuttle aboard tae eat and sleep in, since it's self-sustaining."

Kirk leaned heavily on Scott's desk. "How many engineers aboard for the repairs?" Kirk asked.

Scott gestured at Keenser. "Keenser, who is my best machinist and fabricator, and me."

Kirk whistled. “How long?”

“Two, three weeks,” Keenser answered.

Scott started thinking through it. “A day or two tae prep the ship for deep freeze. A day tae shut down the reactors and bleed the system. Pull the conduit. Remachine the valves.”

“Three days at least for fabrication,” Keenser interrupted. “Probably five.”

“Install and test the valves. Two days,” Scott continued, counting on his fingers. “Reinstall the conduit. Test the system. Prime the reactors. Bring them online. Retest the system ... aye. Two or three weeks,” Scott agreed.

Kirk ran a hand over his face. “Wow,” he sighed. “Okay. We have that block of emergency supplies in the cargo bay for shipwide evac to a planet. And two days ago we surveyed a little ocean world. Class M atmosphere but very early development. Nothing bigger than plants and early microscopic organisms. Boring but safe. The question is—can we get back? How soon is that conduit going to blow?”

“It could be the next helm maneuver, sir,” Scott said heavily. “But I dinnae ken that we have a choice. Ask Sulu and Chekov to set a course with the bare minimum of maneuvers.”

“We are okay for maximum warp?”

“Aye. I could give yeh warp seven. It’s not the propulsion system that’s the issue at all.”

“Alright, Mr. Scott. Sit on the helm, please. Sing to it, if you think it would help,” Kirk said. “Get us there, get us fixed. Spock and I will take care of everything else.” Kirk nodded at them, and headed to the bridge.

“Oh good. Keenser grumped. “Stuck alone with you on a freezing cold ship. Sounds familiar.”

“Sorry, wee man,” Scott said, smiling faintly down at his friend. “No beach holiday for you and me.”

Keenser shrugged. “It’s okay. Sand in my exoskeletal folds is horrible. And your pale-ass skin doesn’t hold up well to nearby stars, if I recall.”

“Aye, I sunburn fiercely. Come on, let’s go stare at the helm and think good thoughts at it, since that’s all we can do until we get it apart.”

Getting the entire crew down to the planet with necessary supplies and equipment for a possible three week stay had been a fairly monumental task, and the entire senior staff, minus Scott, had scrambled hard to make it happen. The crew, however, had been completely delighted by the idea of an extended beach vacation. And although it would have been nice to have a cabana, a pool, and a bar, this was going to work, Uhura thought in satisfaction as she surveyed what they were calling Camp Enterprise.

Since launch, the ship had carried a tightly packed block of supplies for just such an eventuality. Sulu had brought it down to the surface slung under a shuttle. Five of the ship’s six shuttles were here, providing some shelter, power, and food synthesizing capability. The sixth shuttle was still aboard the *Enterprise*, providing the same services for Scott and Keenser in a considerably less pleasant environment.

The supplies included barrack tents, cots, bedding, toilet and washing facilities, a mess hall, a medical tent, clothing, rations, and water. The crew had each been permitted a duffle bag, and as such there were plenty of swimming suits, games, and every bottle of booze aboard the ship save Scotty’s supply. Chekov had already set up a community bar. Sulu had come up with beach volleyball. Most of the crew was already sprawled out on towels or splashing in the mildly salty water.

The planet was gorgeous. It was almost entirely covered by a shallow ocean, no more than 50 meters deep, and only one to two meters in most places. At the equator the temperature didn’t appear to drift far from 30C, even at night. There were a few islands, like the one they had picked, with gorgeous white sand beaches and a slightly higher interior covered in soft vegetation and short trees. There was no insect or animal life on the land; life was in early days and existed entirely at the microscopic level in the ocean. The biggest dangers were going to be sunburn, drunken stupidity, and, frankly, boredom.

“Three days, and I’m going to be patching up dumb injuries because people are bored,” McCoy predicted, echoing Uhura’s thoughts. He wandered up, already changed into shorts and a floral-printed shirt. “Cocktail?” he offered with a smile, and handed her a mint julep.

She took it and toasted him with it, trying not to feel guilty about Scotty and Keenser, stuck in orbit aboard what was about to be a dark icebox. “Would it be jinxing things to call this paradise?” She smiled happily, closing her eyes and enjoying the warm sun and gentle breeze.

“We do have one big problem,” McCoy sighed. “A major oversight, and it’s all Scotty’s fault. He never programmed any seafood dishes into the synthesizers, beyond pub-style fish and chips. No crab, no lobster, no sushi or ceviche. I’m not sure how to survive a beach vacation without seafood! That, and his damn stubborn refusal to program booze. At the rate the crew is drinkin’, we’ll be out in about four days.”

Nyota laughed at him. “I guess we’ll have to suffer.”

McCoy looked around contentedly. “My kind of suffering,” he admitted happily, and wandered off again.

There really wasn't anything left to do, she considered, sipping her drink. The last days had been exhausting, but the camp was up, the crew was happy, and beyond a few rotations on one of the shuttles to monitor Scotty and the *Enterprise*, she had fourteen or more unexpected days off. She needed to change out of her uniform and take a nap, she decided, and headed for the private tent Spock had set up for them two hundred meters down the beach. No need to be crowded together with the crew when there was an entire planet at their disposal.

Spock had already changed and was wearing a lightweight white linen robe, traditional garb of Vulcan. Though his clothing was more subdued in color, it wasn't much different than the flowing and bright kintenge dresses she'd brought for herself. He was sitting meditatively on their small cot, looking out at the gently swelling sea just beyond the opened flap of their tent. She pulled off her uniform and closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of the cool breeze on her skin and the heat of Spock's appreciative gaze on her naked body.

She was pleased when Spock touched her, his fingers tracing down her spine from the nape of her neck. She leaned back into him when fingers passed the swell of her hip, an invitation he eagerly took, opening his robe and swaying forward to press his chest against her back as he drifted one hand to cup a breast and the other across her body and between her parted legs. He stroked her gently, then pressed deeper, encouraging her into him. She sighed appreciatively as he trailed kisses down her neck, then moaned when he slipped into her from behind. Standing at this angle he was barely inside her, but his shallow movements were an exquisite counterpoint to what his fingers were doing. When he clearly needed more she tugged him toward their cot and went to her elbows and knees. He paused, kneeling behind her, hands lingering, considering his options.

"Whatever you'd like," she murmured to him. "There's lube in my bag."

"We have time for whatever *you* would like," he answered huskily. "But logic suggests that we finish first what we have started." She smiled and tilted her hips for the best angle for them both, and he flowed deeply into her, gasping her name, losing his control as swiftly as she was losing hers. No need to be quick, considerate, or quiet, so they spent the rest of the day inside each other, body and mind, in every way they loved best.

Later, napping as the sun went down, aching sweetly from considerable overindulgence and curled together in the lazy sixty-nine where they had ended for the moment, she couldn't help but think—a little wickedly—that this innocent little planet had never seen anything quite like sex.

Scott stepped from the cold and airless *Enterprise* into the airlock door of the Shuttlecraft, stumbling slightly over the artificial gravity field that the small ship was generating. Once the atmosphere cycled he pulled off his helmet and started to work the space suit off his arms and legs, clumsy in the gravity, beginning to feel the weakening effects of a six days of weightlessness. Twenty hours straight in the suit—he was sweaty, shaky, exhausted, and probably hungry.

Keenser glanced up from his padd as Scott stepped in; he'd come in about a half hour earlier to use the sonic shower in the back of the shuttle, and had already polished off half a bag of protein nibs. He handed the rest to his boss, who scowled down at them. Their power situation was precarious enough that they weren't going to waste any on synthesized food. As usual, though, Scott complained mightily about rations and tended not to eat them.

"Eat the rest of the bag," Keenser growled at him. "Or I'll turn McCoy on you."

"Fine," Scott sighed. He downed a liter of water in short order, dehydrated, and mechanically started through the food.

"Have you called down tae the planet yet?" Scott asked.

"No, I was about to." Keenser held up his padd. "But then I noticed that I had a new subspace message from my wives and husband back home."

"How are the spouses and the bairnes?" Scott asked.

"I don't know," Keenser admitted with a shrug. "I fast-forwarded to the naughty bits at the end. But now I *really* need a wank. I'll go back and listen to their messages later."

Scott smiled faintly at his friend. "G'night, Keenser, have nice subspace sex. I'll call down tae the planet."

"Night, Scotty," Keenser said, collecting his padd of homemade porn. "Eat your food, and in the name of the goddess, take a shower." Keenser pulled the curtain shut on the sleeping space he'd set up for himself, their attempt at a bit of privacy.

Scott looked down at the rest of the rations he was supposed to eat, but couldn't stomach it, and tossed it aside before heading up to the control systems in the front of the ship. He opened a comm link to the surface. "Camp Enterprise, Shuttle *Galileo*," he said tiredly.

"Galileo, *Camp Enterprise*. *There you are, old friend. We were getting worried.*" It was Nyota, sitting in the front of a shuttle on the surface.

"Sorry, long day," he answered. "We removed the conduit today and will begin machining replacement valves tomorrow."

"*You look good from down here. Orbit is stable. Nothing unexpected in the solar system.*"

"Good tae hear," Scott said with a yawn. "How is the island paradise?"

“Sunshine and rain, perfect white sand, sky and sea forever,” she said. “It’s beautiful. We’re bored out of our wits,” she said, and he laughed at her. “I had to pull rank and boot a bunch of lieutenants who were fighting about who got to man the shuttle tonight ...” She paused. “Oh. Hey. McCoy is on his way to yell at you, stand by.”

“Why am I getting yelled at, exactly?” Scott asked crossly.

“Many many reasons,” the Doctor said, coming on the line. “First, you’ve lost seven kilos. In a week. Which is slightly terrifying. Are you actually eating anything?”

Scott rubbed at the monitor patch under his shirt that McCoy was making him wear. “You hassle me and I will take this damn thing off, Leonard, I swear tae god. I’m working twenty hours straight and sweating hard, I’m not surprised I’ve lost weight.”

“And not eating.”

“I am eating!” Scott insisted.

“Three thousand calories a day, like I told you? Because eight hours of zero G will put you straight into calorie debt, to say nothing of twenty damn hours.”

“You cannae eat three thousand calories a day in protein nibs, it’s too horrible,” Scotty complained.

“Yeah. Eat more. Keenser is managing it. Also, that’s way too much zero G. You both have to get in some exercise when you’re in gravity in the shuttle, or you won’t have any bones or muscles left when you turn the gravity back on sometime next month.”

“Aye,” Scott admitted. “I’m feelin’ it already. We’ll do better.”

“How are you feeling otherwise?”

“Tired. Cold. We’re okay though,” Scott said.

“If that changes, Doctor M’Benga needs to know. No messing around with that. If you’re losing weight and muscle the meds will hit differently.”

“Aye, I understand,” Scott said.

“How’s Keenser?”

“He’ll be in a good mood for a couple days. He got a new subspace message from the spouses and is off rubbing one out,” Scott answered, amused.

“Good for him. Might want to consider it yourself.”

Scott lifted his eyebrows. “Is that an order, Doctor?”

“I’m just saying some natural endorphins wouldn’t kill you, is all. Speaking of things that wouldn’t kill you ... Honest to god, Scotty, couldn’t you have programmed liquor into the synthesizer? We’re getting seriously low down here.”

“Death first,” the engineer answered easily, with a chuckle.

“Yeah yeah yeah. Damn snob,” McCoy complained.

“Good night, Leonard.”

“Night Scotty. Eat a lot more food, please.”

Nyota came back on. *“Goodnight, my friend. Be safe. We’ll be monitoring you down here.”*

“Enjoy your sun and sand. *Galileo* out.”

He toggled off the comm and leaned back in the pilot’s chair, the inertia of sitting just a little much to overcome, and closed his eyes.

And it didn’t happen often, anymore, but drifting near the edge of sleep felt like drifting at the edge of death. There was, sometimes, a twist of longing for it, for the settled finality of the end. To put everything down, and never pick it up again. To just ... go.

And then his body, not on the same page, went straight to panic, dumping adrenaline and kicking off his heart. He sat up and leaned forward, gulping for air.

He had inhabited an agonized body and a disintegrating mind for so long that living again in a form bent on survival was, sometimes, intensely dysphoric. As far as he knew, there had never been anyone who had re-inhabited life after being away from it for two years. There weren’t words for it. What was he supposed to say? *‘You know, that feeling when your heart was stopped for two years, and the slam of it against your ribs now feels like violence? Feels like violation?’*

“Aye, lad, let’s calm down,” he sternly told that pounding heart.

He stood up, feeling shaky, and told himself it was too long in zero-G. McCoy was right about the exercise. There wasn’t much room on the shuttle, so he pushed through a hundred or so sit-ups, push-ups, squats, and pull ups on the door frame. He ignored Keenser’s orgasmic grunting through the thin privacy wall, something they both had plenty of practice doing, and drank more water. He eyed the

terrible food, but couldn't do it, not with his stomach still in a knot.

The exercise had re-centered him inside himself, but he wasn't going to be able to sleep. He sighed and grabbed a padd, put his feet up, and pulled up Mira's last message from a week ago.

He'd been in a long, ongoing conversation with Mira since the years he'd spent in the past—a conversation complicated by an unavoidable two-week subspace lag. He'd told her immediately about what he considered to be many affairs during that time on Earth, and had apologized and expected her to end their relationship. She'd told him that she wasn't sure it was cheating when your partner didn't exist, but that she would need time to decide how she felt. He'd agreed, and backed down considerably. For months he'd kept his messages to her light, nothing more than funny stories from the *Enterprise* and from Earth of the past.

One evening, though, torn up from losing one of his people after that crewman's long struggle with despair, and a note that said simply '*sorry, Chief, but I know you understand,*' he'd sent Mira a message. Scotty told her that he *did* understand, down to his soul, but he couldn't *explain*.

He tried all the same.

He tried to tell her how the shadows anchored into the middle of his chest, a fierce weight that dug deeper every time the fiery inferno twisting through his mind forced him up against it. He tried to explain the tormenting despair as he realized that his own thoughts burdened a hopeless and fragile future. He tried to describe *pain*—agony radiating out from something that didn't exist, entirely *false* and utterly *consuming* as it burned away everything left of him but itself. He tried to tell her about watching the burden of him weigh ever more heavily on the people who loved him, his own worthless life reflected back at him by the guilt and distress in their eyes. About how the last emotion he was able to feel was rage, until even that left him. That the gun was warm because he had been carrying it in his pocket for weeks, and that he could remember hearing it fire because a bullet from a handgun was somewhat slower than the speed of sound.

He told her what it felt like to *stop*, about the gap in his mind that somehow lasted seconds and years and eternity. Of the eerie strangeness of living again, of *wanting* to live again. Of stepping from a body so weak with illness and despair that it couldn't bear to continue, directly into one that not only *remembered* hope, but *felt* it.

He admitted that purposefully ending a life, even if it was only his own, would never leave him. That living again made him afraid, but dying wasn't something he would choose again.

He told her he still loved her but that she didn't need to message him back again if she didn't want to.

She hadn't, and he'd assumed they were over until she sent him a gentle message six weeks later. She had apologized for the delay, but had needed to consider the right words to say. She told him that she understood what it was like to fight with your own body, that she knew the disoriented feel of stepping into new one, even if it felt better. She told him that she loved him, was honored by his trust in her, and was grateful for the wild strangeness of a universe that brought him back again. They had slowly re-established their intimacy—plenty of funny stories still in their messages across the universe, but truth and heart too.

She'd been the one to restart the sexual side of their relationship, an unexpected and extremely erotic fifteen minutes at the end of a message, recorded from the bed that they'd shared for two years on *Yorktown*. Then she'd given him some equally explicit instructions about what she'd like back in return. Instructions he'd been more than happy to follow, once for her, and several times later for himself. Their messages continued in that way, human words and love and sex back and forth across the galaxy.

Here, tired and cold and lonely on the shuttle, he was tempted to just lie down in his bunk, still sweaty and stinking from the day, and drift to the sound of her lovely voice telling him about her week. Or he could take the padd into the shower and make love with someone thousands of light years away and weeks in the past. He'd seen her most recent message once before, a good one, rocking herself to a sweet orgasm with his name on her lips.

He jumped to the end of her message and tilted his head back, listening to her sultry narration with his eyes closed, and his suddenly-redirected blood flow decided it. He peeled off his foul-smelling clothes and dumped them in the recycler, then headed for the shower.

Once there he discovered, to his amusement, that Keenser had left an unopened bottle and a note balanced on the sink—brief, as usual. *Lube. Human compatible. Have sex with Mira. Then eat more food.* Scott picked it up with a snort.

"I dinnae need yeh watching out for me!" he yelled to his friend across the shuttle.

"*Yes you do!*" Keenser yelled back through the thin walls.

"Aye, well," he muttered to himself, then queued up Mira's message and stepped into the shower.

Captain Kirk was manning the shuttle on the surface on day twenty when the call they'd been waiting for came through. He knew the minute the line connected, the sound deeper and richer than the tinny shuttle communications. "*Camp Enterprise,*" Scotty said. "*This is the Enterprise.*" Beneath the engineer's voice, Kirk could hear the deep pulse of the reactor.

"*Enterprise,*" Kirk said gratefully. "Welcome back. I take it we're back online?"

"*Aye, sir, up and running and better than ever. I could use at least a skeleton crew up here, when yeh can.*"

“Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll get some people together. And we’ll start striking camp, although that will probably take better than a day, since we need to have extra care to leave no trace, even at the microscopic level. Once we’ve got a crew up there, I want you and Keenser to beam down until we’re ready to disembark, give you both at least a day in the sun.”

“No, we’re okay, sir.”

“That wasn’t a suggestion, Mr. Scott. Standby for my signal.”

A cheer went up when Kirk gave the news; his ship full of explorers preferred space, it seemed. He pulled together thirty people to man the ship, and put Uhura and Sulu in charge of breaking camp, with McCoy assisting to make sure that they didn’t leave behind anything which might interfere with the natural development of life on the planet. Kirk beamed up, and then booted the reluctant Keenser and Scott down.

Uhura stumbled across the engineers an hour or so later, both shirtless in the heat and tucked into a quiet corner of the camp. Keenser was wadded up on a towel, baking in the sun, looking for all the world like a slowly-blinking boulder. Scotty had found a bunk in the shade and was stretched out on his belly, out cold.

“Ah, dammit Scotty,” Nyota murmured. He had the pale, gray, strung-out look of too much hard labor in zero-G without enough food. He’d curled in her bed, looking like that, the last night he’d spent with them. He’d looked worse two weeks later when he’d trembled on the other side of his kitchen and spat barbed words at her which she’d only recognized later had been designed to cut away his last anchor to his life.

She should have known. Somehow, she didn’t.

She sat down beside him on the cot and smoothed a palm down his back. And, yes, he’d lost a lot of weight and muscle, but his heart was beating under her hand. He stirred, and his movements were off, gravity hitting him hard. “Hi, Nyota,” he said blearily, turning his head to face her. “Nice planet you’ve got here.”

She smiled down at him. “For the first week or two. Get into the third one and you start feeling marooned. We missed you down here.”

He hummed noncommittally, half-drifting off again from the massage she was giving him.

“You missed all the excitement,” she laughed. “Probably twenty newly-consummated relationships, and eighteen breakups. Chekov is in trouble with at least six women.”

“Damn horny boy,” Scott sighed.

“The volleyball tournament resulted in two broken hands,” she continued, still rubbing his back. “Smitty tried to drown in a quarter meter of water. We named absolutely every stick and twig on this island after famous scientists. And we’re completely out of booze, so you’d better keep yours hidden.”

“The junior engineers will get their still up again, I’m sure,” he chuckled. “They just have tae hide it better from Mr. Spock this time. How about you, lass, did yeh have a nice holiday?”

“Some long naps, some beach sex, some ocean sex, sang for a couple of concerts, drank an entire bottle of tequila ... just really quite, quite a lot of sex to be honest ... it was nice. I won’t ask you how it went up there because you look like shit, Scotty,” she told him ruefully.

“Thank yeh very much,” he grumbled. “I feel like shit. McCoy is going tae kill me.”

“Go back to sleep, we’ll try not to leave you behind,” she said. He smirked and turned his head the other way again, and was snoring again a minute later. She sat with him a few minutes more, enjoying the sunshine and the breeze, then blinked back tears she’d never let him see, patted him on the back, and beamed up to the ship.

Captain’s log, Stardate 2268.103. We have reached the zenith of this mission, as far from Federation space as we will go. We turn, now, our faces toward home for the first time since we launched. It won’t be a direct path, of course. No need to retread where we have been, when a slightly hyperbolic course will take us to places we’ve never been. But our aim feels different. No time to wander, any more. Little time to stop, unless something is wrong. Space is lovely, dark and deep, but we have promises to keep, and miles to go before we sleep.

Kirk pushed himself upright from the floor of his bridge, his head ringing and inner ear rolling. The bridge crew around him was starting to stand shakily too. Kirk glanced at the chronometer on the wall; they’d all be unconscious for hours. The fact that McCoy and Scott hadn’t already charged up to the bridge suggested that everyone on the ship had been out.

They were in orbit around a planet; they hadn’t been, before. “Where are we, Spock?” Kirk asked, shaking his head. Spock didn’t answer, and Kirk turned to him ... and froze in horror.

“Oh, god,” Chekov cried, and he was staring at Uhura.

Kirk felt like the ground had dropped out from under him, his joints liquid in shock and dread, bile in his throat. He smashed the comm. “Medical emergency, Doctor McCoy, get up here *now*,” he screamed.

Scott barreled through the door of sickbay, a look of despair on his face. McCoy looked up, his own face gray and drawn. “Lord almighty, Leonard, *please*,” Scott begged, taking in the bodies on full life support, their heads wrapped in stasis bandages. Spock and Nyota,

deathly still, side-by-side.

"It's true, Scotty," McCoy managed. "Their brains are just *gone*."

"How?" the engineer choked.

McCoy gestured vaguely to his own head. "Straight out the top, skulls sawed in half above their ears. The most horrific thing I've ever seen."

Scott slumped against the wall, a hand over his eyes. "Why, and *who*?" he asked, and there was a dangerous, cold note in his voice, under the grief.

The door opened; Kirk, and the look in his eyes matched the tone in Scotty's voice. He leaned heavily on the bed holding Spock's body. "It's got to be the planet below us. There are massive life sign readings. Nothing on the surface; a completely subterranean civilization. They're not responding to us at all, but it has to have been them."

"Tell me what you need, sir. Tae *convince* them," Scott said darkly, his voice raw and bitter, coming around between the beds to look his Captain in the eye. "Tell me what you need for our friends. For Spock and Nyota. Tell me you need that planet dead, its people destroyed. Give me the word, sir."

McCoy glanced between the Captain and the engineer, agape. Kirk looked up at Scott, his own expression agonized with grief.

"When Pike died," he said softly. "An admiral handed me six dozen torpedoes and gave me permission to pursue my own vengeance. I paid for that choice with my life, and worse, the lives of many of my crew. I thought I'd learned from that. And I've always been grateful, Scotty. Grateful to have you on the ship, and on our side. But not today. Damn you," Kirk said shakily. "Damn you to hell for offering me that, on a day when I'll tell you yes."

"Jim..." McCoy started, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Just ask me," Scotty interrupted urgently, wildly, out of control. "Ask me for the keys tae death and hell, sir, I'll hand them tae yeh. Tell me what you need."

"What do I need?" Kirk cried furiously, and reached across Spock's prone body to grab the front of the engineer's shirt. "I need you to look me in the eyes, Scotty. *Lie* to me, and tell me it's impossible. Tell me that even if I wanted to wipe a planet from the universe, you and I aren't gods, and it's impossible."

The two men stared at each other, chests heaving, jaws clenched, near to blows. Scott blinked first.

"Oh, Captain," he whispered. "It *is* possible. You and I could travel the universe, the very gods of vengeance and death. We could rain justice on planets and people, the judge and jury and executioner of billions." He reached into his pocket for the vial of red matter he'd once entrusted to Spock and held it up between them in his left hand—the one that wasn't human any more. He laughed nastily. "And there's no one in the universe could stop us." Kirk let go of Scott's shirt, staring slack jawed at the man. Scott turned away and dropped to his knees beside Uhura's bed and tucked the vial into her palm. "But it's impossible, James T. Kirk," he finally murmured, shattered, looking into Nyota's face. "It's impossible because you and I. Will. Nae. Do. It."

Kirk sat shakily on the bed beside Spock, and glanced over at McCoy. "You scare the hell out of me, sometimes, Scotty."

"Aye, sir," Scott agreed, still on his knees, head bowed, the fight and strength gone out of him. "If you'll recall I removed myself once from the universe. For a number of reasons, and that was one of them. Ambassador Spock, from the other future, gave me something I shouldnae have had yet. It wasnae just transwarp beaming, but the ability to define the true shape of reality. The answer tae everything." He looked up into the air, and turned his palm upward, as though holding something only he could see. "And I doubt it's because he didnae know what it really was. He knew *exactly* what it was, and he gave it tae me anyway because he trusted a man he knew from another place and time named Montgomery Scott. I dinnae ken that man. I dinnae ken the things he suffered, or if he coulda borne this either. But I willnae fail the trust of my friends," he tenderly stroked Nyota's cheek. "Or yours, sir."

"Stand up, Scotty," Kirk said mercilessly. "You want to do the impossible? Then let's find them, and put them back where they belong."

"How?" Scott asked dully. "I can take life. That's easy. Give it back? That's hard."

"More my field," McCoy said firmly, hauling the engineer to his feet. "Let's start by finding them."

The men rode the lift to the bridge in silence. Two orderlies from sickbay were there, on their knees, using molecular sanitizers to pull the red and green bloodstains off the floor.

"Any word from the planet?" Kirk asked Sulu.

"No, sir," Sulu said.

"This is strange," Chekov said slowly, bowed over Spock's science station. "It appears that we arrived here in response to a distress call."

"I don't remember a distress call," Kirk said, puzzled.

"I don't either. But the logs do. Distress call, changed course, usual procedures, standard orbit, hailing frequency. Some kind of beam directed at us. Then nothing, even on the security footage. We seem to have all lost three hours of time. Some of it unconscious but some not, it appears."

“Whatever they used on us to knock us out also gave us amnesia,” McCoy theorized.

“And knocked out ship functions too,” Scott said. “If the security footage was down, that means we were down tae bare life support only.”

“Any sign about what happened? Beyond the obvious,” Kirk asked.

Chekov leaned back over the science station. “The surface of the planet is not habitable. A runaway greenhouse effect, wery hot. There are extensive underground dwellings, wery advanced. But no sign of industrialization beyond that, no spaceports. That said, there is an ionization trail from the *Enterprise* to the planet. Not a shuttle. Some kind of transporter. To what seems to be a control center a kilometer below the surface. Here, sir,” he said, pulling it up in the viewscreen.

“Can we beam down a kilometer?” Kirk asked.

“Yes, sir. It is not solid rock.”

“Wouldnae matter if it was,” Scott said.

“We disagree on that point,” Chekov responded, a little hotly.

“Not today, gentlemen,” Kirk said sharply. “That’s where we are headed, then.” He paused, as though considering something, glancing between the chief engineer and helmsman.

Scott folded his arms. “You put me in command of this ship and they do anything tae hurt another member of this crew, I will destroy the planet,” he said matter of factly.

“You promised you wouldn’t,” Kirk said.

“That was before I saw their blood on the floor. I’m back tae considering it again.”

“Yeah,” Kirk answered, the question decided. “Mr. Sulu, you have the ship. Mr. Scott, Doctor McCoy, with me.”

They beamed down to the control room, deep underground. It was empty when they arrived. The room was strange; not designed at all for the comfort of an operator. Although there was air, heat and light, there was nothing that seemed to be a chair, or a screen, or an input device. “Take a look around,” Kirk said. The men circled the room, then drifted back together, puzzled.

“Bones?” Kirk asked.

“This seems to be entirely technical. More Scotty’s field than mine.”

“Scotty?”

The Engineer was rubbing his face and eyes. “There’s something off, sir, but it isnae the machines. Look, you know, don’t you, that in the past when the meds were nae workin’ at all, sometimes Spock and Nyota sort of ... stepped intae my mind tae hold me together?”

“I am aware. The pathways from that time on New Vulcan. You had some really bad nights when I was there too.”

“We’re yeh, sir? I didnae remember that. The point is, toward the end it was a pretty regular thing. And I’m no telepath. I cannae connect, or block, project, or anything. But I did get tae where I could feel a telepathic presence. And I’m feelin’ it now. A massive one. And strange.”

“Where?” Kirk asked.

“That’s beyond me. But it’s got tae be near.”

“Let’s see what is beyond this room, then,” Kirk said. “Phasers out, please.”

They split up and began checking doors. “Jim!” McCoy shouted after a few minutes, and Kirk and Scott ran toward him. They stepped into a cold, vast, dark room, and there were bodies. Thousands, tens of thousands, more, laid out side by side in shallow tubs. McCoy was scanning. “Alive,” he said. “But deeply unconscious.” They worked their way cautiously over to the first row of bodies. Naked, hands folded, eyes closed, covered completely in a greenish gel.

“All women,” Kirk said.

“They seem to be. The men could be somewhere else,” McCoy mused.

Scott was rubbing his head again. “This is the telepathic presence. All of them, would be my guess. Spock would know better. Hell, Nyota would know better.”

“All of them telepathically joined,” McCoy said slowly.

Kirk frowned. “This is strange, gentlemen. But what I want to know is what this has to do with Spock and Nyota’s brains. And, if everyone is asleep, who the hell took them?”

“Not everyone is asleep,” said a voice behind them. The three men whirled around, but not in time to avoid a blinding pulse of agony that put them on the ground, and then put them out cold.

Kirk woke first. Rather surprisingly, not in a dungeon—which was frankly where they usually woke up in these kinds of situations—but laid out on a low couch in a pleasantly comfortable room, darkened for sleep. McCoy and Scott were near, on other beds.

He sat up with a groan and a cough, aching deeply.

“Gently, Captain Kirk,” said a nearby woman’s voice, and he whirled toward it, then wished he hadn’t at the pull of pain. “The pulsar is a damaging weapon. You are injured. Not severely; you will recover. But we should do what we can to avoid a second blast, which would be dangerous.”

“We could have avoided the first, with a little more talking before the shooting,” Kirk complained, steadying himself in a shaky sitting position.

“You were down among the people,” the woman said sharply. “One touch to the equipment or stasis gel would have killed that person instantly.”

McCoy sat up with a groan, rubbing his chest. “Holy hell that hurts.”

“Careful, Bones, we’re apparently injured.”

“Ya think?” he reached over and poked Scott, who blinked awake. “Don’t sit up, it hurts worse.”

“It can hurt worse?” Scott asked, and sat up anyway. “Oh, aye, it can.”

“I warned you,” McCoy said.

“Our hostess was just beginning to explain,” Kirk said. “We’re not looking to hurt anyone,”

“Maybe,” Scott muttered, and Kirk shot him a warning look.

“We’re just looking for two of our friends,” the Captain continued.

“Of course you are,” she said smoothly. She brought the lights up in the room, leaving the humans blinking a little painfully. “Your technology is impressive. The ships do not ordinarily have transportation technology. They shake their fists at us, lob a few useless missiles, and ultimately leave. But here you are, far below the surface, with questions and anger.”

“From the way you are talking, you know exactly what you’ve done, and you’ve done it before.” Kirk’s voice was furious, but only to people who knew him. “You’ve taken something you have no right to take. If they are alive, we want them back. If they are dead ...” he hesitated and glanced at Scott. “You may find our capacity for destruction to be ... impressive as well.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, standing with a sigh. “My choices may have been different, had I known. Walk with me, Captain Kirk, Doctor McCoy, Mr. Scott, and I shall answer your questions.”

The men stood stiffly, wincing in pain. “Sir, how does she know our names?” Scott whispered.

“I don’t know,” Kirk answered, and gestured them forward, after the mysterious woman. “Come on.”

She led them back to the control room where they had first arrived, and pointed to two spheres, surrounded by a starburst of cables and conduits. “Spock,” she said, pointing to one. “Nyota,” she said, pointing to the other.

“They’re alive?” McCoy whispered.

“Of course. They exist now as this planet.” She walked around the spheres, and the *Enterprise* officers. “We knew immediately that we would choose Spock. But there must be a second. That decision was harder. We considered many minds. Yours,” she said, standing in front of the Captain. “Quick. Clever. It would have worked well with Spock. Nearly yours.”

“Yours,” she said to McCoy. “A gifted caretaker. You also would have worked well with Spock.”

“I really wouldn’t have,” McCoy complained.

“Yours,” she said, and touched Scott’s head. He jerked back with a curse. “Brilliant, and your mind has been with Spock’s many times. But no. Damaged, dangerous, unstable.”

“You havenae seen *anything* unstable yet,” he growled.

“Back off, Scotty,” Kirk said sharply.

“I dinnae want tae.”

“Yes. Which is why that’s an order.”

“Nyota was chosen,” the woman continued. “Orderly, bright, imaginative, communicative. Bound with Spock. It was the right choice,” she said in satisfaction.

“It really wasn’t,” Kirk said, his voice dangerous and low. “Put them back.”

“Impossible, Captain,” she said dismissively. “Functionally, and practically. We need them.”

"Lady, if you don't cooperate *real quick*, you're not going tae like what happens next," Scott growled.

"Oh, Scotty," she said, almost fondly, and he frowned unhappily at her familiar use of his nickname. "You wouldn't hurt them. And so you cannot hurt us. Captain Kirk, this is the planet Ozurida, or it was. A beautiful planet, once, filled with a high and glorious civilization. But our planet has died, its atmosphere poison. We had a choice. We could huddle miserably in caves until we died. Or we could retreat into ourselves, into mind and memory, and exist there in comfort and unity. The counsel of high priestesses decided upon the latter, on behalf of our people. The chambers of rest were constructed, and the people's bodies put into the state you saw. Their minds, though, exist and live vibrant lives, and for them they live on Ozurida as it was, spared the knowledge of our true fate."

"Wait," McCoy said urgently. "They don't know that they're asleep?"

"Not asleep," she corrected. "Just existing entirely in a plane of mind that we now call Ozurida."

"Why aren't you there too?" Kirk asked pointedly, folding his arms.

"I am a priestess, and this is my tenyear. During this time I unthaw drones, what you might call males, although they are mindless, good only for mating." She twitched aside her robe to reveal a creature wrapped around her upper leg, with probes clearly reaching higher into her body.

"Huh," McCoy said. "Sexual symbiosis. Like anglerfish on Earth. I've never seen it in higher species."

"Their ejaculations are irritating but necessary," she said, tucking her robe back around her. "Once I am impregnated it will die. I will give birth to five or six daughters, who I immediately put into Ozurida, to replace the few deaths from age which occur. I will also produce several drones, frozen until a future day. I watch over my sisters, and this facility. When my tenyear is done I will wake another and return home to Ozurida."

"That's all fascinating and ... creepy," Kirk said. "I'm not certain how that leads to brain snatching."

"They serve two critical purposes," the priestess explained reasonably, gesturing to the room at large. "Without a need to sustain the burden of bodies, they are able to automatically control the life support facilities of this installation. Where once they would have pumped blood, they circulate the gel fluids around the bodies. Where once they breathed, they oxygenate these halls. In addition, with nothing external, we found in time that our people began to wake. We have placed Spock and Nyota in Ozurida to bring diversity, and fascination, and wonder."

"They are in there? That telepathic link?" Scott asked. "Like, what? Zoo animals? Where do they think they are?"

"They are present in the link. That is how I know all of you. They believe they are on the planet. That they have been left behind. They are comfortable, they are well, and will be so until their deaths."

Kirk paced around the room, circling the spheres housing their friends. "You lurked us here, with a false distress call, so you could enslave our friends for your *amusement*?"

"The distress call was not false," she said dismissively. "The prior controllers had died, and we were therefore in great distress. We found long ago that when we asked for what we needed, it was refused. So we stopped asking, and simply take what we need."

"Full non-consent seems to be the way around here," McCoy said furiously. "Even with your own people!"

"I'm going to give you one chance," Kirk said dangerously. "Put them back. Or you will find yourself in quite a lot more *distress* than you ever dreamed of."

"Yes. I knew that is what you would say," she said tiredly, then pulled her weapon out and shot them again.

When they woke up, this time they were definitely in a dungeon, and getting shot twice was apparently a bad idea, because Kirk felt like his organs had been scooped out and left in the sun to dry. He went so far as to feel at his chest; intact. Probably.

"Gently," a voice said.

"Oh, terrific," Kirk groaned. "Another priestess."

"Not even close," she answered, and he blinked up at her. "Revolutionary, maybe. Rabble-rouser. Prisoner, certainly. My name is Coria. You're hurt, don't move," she said urgently, restraining him when he tried to sit up.

"Jim Kirk," he started weakly, and let his head roll back. "I had two friends with me."

"Here, Captain," Scott answered hoarsely. "McCoy's next tae me, still unconscious."

"You okay?" Kirk asked, closing his eyes against a wave of agony.

"Nae really, sir, no." He could hear Scotty shift, his breathing tight with pain. "Hurt pretty bad, I think."

"The weapons are vicious, especially if you get hit more than once," the woman said, touching Kirk's chest. "Your internal injuries are serious, all three of you."

From somewhere in the murky dark, McCoy started coughing. "Wow, shit," he wheezed.

"Easy," said another voice, and Kirk turned his head. Someone had lifted McCoy slightly and was giving him water before gentling him

back to a blanket on the ground.

"How many of you are there?" Kirk asked, blinking up at her.

"Fifty two," Coria answered. "Sisters, and sons."

"Sons?" Kirk asked.

"Ah, the priestess gave you the lie about 'drones'," Coria said angrily. "The castrated remains of men that the priestesses pleasure themselves with for their ten years. The rest of the bodies of the men get processed into gel."

"I really, really like this planet," Scott snarled sarcastically.

"Sounds like they are very good at removing organs and discarding everything else," Kirk said, repulsed.

"Did they lure you here and take the brains of your friends?" she asked him.

"Yes," the Captain answered. "Who are you?"

She stood in agitation. "Did she tell you about their fantasy dream realm? We knew the planet was dying. There were many ideas. Repair it. Leave it. And then there was the insane plan to force us to drift forever in a shared mindscape. They executed their plan before we could stop them. There are some of us who fight through it, who wake up. And when we do, weak, naked, alone, we end up here. Some of us were born here; all of the men, since the priestesses have decided to execute the rest. From time to time, although rarely, we get people like you, searching for stolen brains."

"Did you wake, or were you born here?" Kirk asked.

"I woke," she said softly, kneeling back beside him. "I knew from the first instant where I was, and fought to wake. I intend to save my people, some day."

"If you can help us, we may be able to help you," Kirk said. "I've got a ship up there."

"Your name is Jim?" she asked gently.

"Yes," he answered.

"Jim, the moment you defied the priestess, she decided the fate of your ship. She will have deployed a neural suppression field, the same one that keeps my people asleep, the same one she used on you when she took the brains of your friends. Your people will be held unconscious until their brains are needed. Which is regularly; the brains don't always live long, particularly if they fight the fantasy."

"I am ending this. I am ending *all* of this, before I leave here," Kirk said fiercely, struggling and failing to sit up. "I swear it, Coria," he said breathlessly.

"I believe that you believe that," she said, and ran a hand through his hair. "Sleep, for now." He didn't have the strength to do otherwise, and closed his eyes.

Distantly, later, maybe *much* later, he heard someone calling him. *Jim. Jim!* And it was Spock. And then another voice. "Jim. Jim! Come on, dammit."

"Hey, Bones," he said woozily to his old friend, kneeling beside him.

"Finally," McCoy said in irritation. "Sleeping Beauty."

Kirk sat up, feeling much better, although desperately thirsty. Scott crouched down beside him and handed him a glass of flat, acrid water that tasted like heaven. "How long was I asleep?"

"Not much longer than Scotty and me," McCoy admitted. "I don't honestly know. We're all a hell of a lot better. Don't look at your chest, though. Nasty, deep bruising that's faded to greens. That kind of unaided healing takes a while. Five to ten days, maybe longer."

"I don't know your time frames," Coria said, and she had a plate of some kind of food that made Kirk's stomach growl. He took it gratefully and tried not to eat like an animal. It tasted horrible, but was warm food in his calorie-starved body. "Quite some time," she continued. "In addition to your injuries, I believe you were being affected by the neural suppression field. You were all awake from time to time, but likely don't remember it."

"You okay?" Kirk asked McCoy and Scott.

Scott tilted a hand noncommittally; five to ten days without medication meant he ... wasn't great.

"Sure," groaned McCoy. "If by 'okay' you mean 'stomped on by a moose.'"

"This may sound nuts," Kirk said, "but I could have sworn I heard ..."

"Spock," McCoy said with a gleam in his eye. "Me too. And Scotty."

"Aye," Scott said. "There is no way in hell Spock and Nyota would believe a world where we just *abandoned* them. They're fighting the dream."

“Is there any way of talking to them? Scotty?”

Scott shook his head. “If you’re asking about telepathy, I’ve got nothing. Spock drove that, and it required touch. From a technical perspective ... if I could get back intae that control room, maybe.”

“I assume no sign of the *Enterprise*?” Kirk asked.

“Coria has got to be right,” McCoy said. “They must be unconscious, or Sulu would have been down here with the cavalry.”

“We have got to get out of this dungeon, gentlemen,” Kirk said. “If you can get on your feet, give it a look. Collect our resources.” The dungeon was less a dungeon and more a vast limestone cave, lit by a few lights and some kind of bioluminescence. Their resources were, unfortunately, sparse, and by the end of the day they had little to show for their efforts beyond exhaustion.

Scott sat wearily down on the ground next to his crewmates, rubbing his aching chest. “It’s a vacuum lock, I’m sure of it. On the door. It cannae be forced.” He gratefully took some of the food offered by a young and silent boy. “Thanks, laddie,” he said, and the boy scampered away. “Why execute boys?” he asked softly.

McCoy shrugged. “If you can continue the species without them, rig up the reproductive organs to survive in a weird symbiotic state, then there’s half of your resources saved.” Kirk looked sideways at him. “I’m not saying I approve,” McCoy protested. “It’s repulsive. I’m just talking from a biological perspective.”

“It’s horrific,” Coria agreed, and sat at Kirk’s welcoming gesture. “Everything they do is horrific. And yet they justify every bit of it as necessary to keep our people alive. And, under their plan, they are right. It is all necessary.”

“What is your plan?” Kirk asked her, chewing some food.

“To wake my people up, and come up with something else. Together.”

“Are yer people telepathic?” Scott asked curiously. “Or is what they’ve got rigged there tae connect everyone artificial?”

“Our males are. Or were, at the cellular level; to touch one alone was to open your mind,” she said sadly, with longing. “That’s part of why they were killed, I think. They would have recognized the telepathic construct. That, and they needed to be liquified in order to submerge the women in enough telepathic cells to achieve their collective hallucination.”

“Where did these lads down here come from?” Scott asked softly.

“Some of us were pregnant when we went into the hallucination. They grounded us to reality and gave us something to fight for.” She stood, and extended a hand. “Jim, will you walk with me?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, and let her help him up. They walked the cave, past some vast formations that likely would have been dazzling in the light. “You manage to take care of these people well, with few resources,” he complimented her. “Water collected from drippings on the rocks. Geothermal heat for cooking. Bioluminescence for light. The food ... what, small organisms and algae?”

“And the clothing,” she said. “Spun and woven by hand. Jim. You should know you and your men have a home here with us. We’ll care for you.”

“I appreciate that,” he said, and tilted his head up. “But I have a home up there, and intend to return to it. Have you ever seen the stars?”

“I have,” she said. “Long ago.” She smoothed a hand down his chest, then leaned forward and kissed him. He hesitated a moment, then kissed her back. “Jim. Make love to me?” she asked, stroking the back of his neck. “We are compatible. I cleaned your body, while you slept and ... I believe we would be compatible.”

“Even if not, there’s always a way to have fun.” He smiled sadly at her. “But look, Coria, I ...”

“I find you handsome,” she interrupted. “Do you find me beautiful?”

“I do,” he admitted.

She turned away, looking into the darkness. “When we were a people, a real people, you could go to restaurants,” she reminisced. “We fermented drinks to alter our minds. You could go, and drink, and if there was someone who caught your eye you could share a pleasant night. Or a life; I met my husband that way.” She looked over at him sadly. “He died long ago,” she said.

“So did my wife,” Kirk answered.

“If I was drinking, and happy, and I saw you, I would want to have you,” she said. “Have you ever done such a thing?”

“Picked up someone lovely in a bar? Once or twice,” he admitted wryly. He looked at her. “Okay,” he breathed, giving in, and leaned forward to kiss her again. “I’m a little drunk, and I see you across the bar. I come up to you, and I hit you with my best pickup line.” He pulled away a bit, and glanced around their dungeon. ““What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” And you laugh at me because it is a really bad pickup line, but take mercy on me.”

“We get another drink,” she said, picking up the story, and wrapping her arms around him. “We dance under the stars. And I know what I want. And I think I know what you want. So I whisper in your ear.” She turned her head and put her face beside his. “I say, ‘Jim, make love to me?’ And you say ...” she trailed off.

“I will,” he whispered, and let her lead him to her bed. She was tender with him, gentle, mindful of his still-injured body. And it was

different; it always was, with someone not human, and he knew he was missing a telepathic element she craved. He hadn't slept with anyone since Edith, and she since her husband was murdered. If they wept on each other, they didn't mention it, and found their way. And after, in the dark but not alone, they slept.

Jim, a voice said. *Jim, where are you? Where am I?*

Spock! Kirk thought back. *I'm trapped. So are you. There's a door, and a cave, and a lock. Get us out, and we'll get you out. Spock!*

He woke, and jerked back, startled to find himself surrounded by a dozen adolescent boys, standing around the bed.

"I'm sorry," Coria said, tugging a blanket up around them. "I should have warned you they might be here. They were born here. They've never learned boundaries. No need, really."

"It's fine," Kirk said urgently. "I think they may have helped with something. Can you reach Spock?" he asked them. "Show him the door? I think he can unlock it."

They nodded wordlessly, and wandered off.

"We were compatible," Coria said happily, stretching, and Kirk took a moment to admire her in the twilight dark.

"Yeah," he said slowly, his mind whirring. He leaned over and kissed her, then jumped up, buzzing with anticipation, looking for his clothes. "I have this feeling that today might be the day you've been waiting for." He headed for the dungeon door, nudging a sleeping Scotty awake with his foot on his way by. The engineer grumbled at him.

"Wake up. Where's McCoy?" Kirk asked urgently.

Scott sat up stiffly and rubbed his head. "Sex. With a pretty lass. I cannae remember her name."

"Jim!" McCoy yelled, running out of an alcove, pulling on his trousers. "It's creepy as hell, but the boys were standing around us in the morning and ..."

"Spock," Kirk said, and looked at the boys again. He tapped the lock in the door. "Show him this. Have him open it."

A tense moment passed, and then the door clicked, the vacuum seal releasing. Kirk grinned fiercely at Scott and McCoy. "They're alive."

"What's our play, sir? Other than avoiding the devil woman and her nasty gun," Scott asked.

"The neutral stasis field," Coria said. "It is what is keeping my people asleep, and yours. There is a machine, in the control room, near the brain compartments. Large, white, square."

"Aye," Scott said slowly, working his memory through the room.

"It has two power sources," she continued. "External, and an internal generator. "

"You take the stasis field down, Mr. Scott," Kirk ordered. "We'll look for our weapons, communicators. And the high priestess."

The *Enterprise* officers went through the door, along with the free people of Ozurida. Weaponless, but greater in number, they checked the rooms as they went. One of the first was the control room, and Scott nodded and went inside.

He paused in front of the brain cases. "We're coming for you," he promised them, then found the stasis field generator. Taking out the external power was easy enough; a solid kick to the cording. Internal power would be harder, and he had the first panel off when he felt the unmistakable press of the muzzle of a weapon between his shoulder blades. He considered for a moment just ripping the guts out of the machinery and letting the chips fall where they may, but he didn't know if it would be enough to knock it out, and raised his hands in surrender.

"Good choice," the priestess said. "At this range a third shot would kill you." He turned to face her. "How did you get out?" He just smiled grimly at her. "How?!" she demanded, and pressed the weapon against his chest. Then she reconsidered, and pointed it at the brain housings.

"No, wait," he cried, and started forward, and she had the gun trained on him again.

"How?" she said evenly.

"Unlocked the door," he said simply, eyeing the weapon.

"That's impossible," she scoffed.

"Apparently not," he answered.

"You're all very troublesome. And it's unfortunate, because you really were brilliant. Your mind would have been an acceptable substitute, in time. I'm going to kill you now," she said conversationally.

A weapon fired, and Scott gasped sharply, but the priestess crumpled to the ground. "You have very good timing, sir," Scott told Kirk shakily, lowering his hands in relief. Kirk kept his phaser trained in the woman until he could kick her vicious weapon toward McCoy, who picked it up.

"Can you tie her up or something?" Kirk asked Coria.

“With pleasure,” she said.

Scott was back on his knees in front of the stasis machine, and a few moments later it powered down. Kirk flipped his communicator open urgently. “Kirk to *Enterprise*,” he said. “*Enterprise*, come in.”

There was a pause, and then Sulu’s voice, weak and confused. “*Enterprise here, sir. I think we’ve been unconscious.*”

“You have been. For quite some time. Check the crew and standby,” Kirk ordered.

Coria came back into the room, tears of joy in her eyes. “My people are waking,” she said. “Thank you, Jim.”

“Are you going to be able to care for them?” Kirk asked.

She nodded. “There are stores of food here. Clothing, water, shelter. This place is what we were preparing to save ourselves when it was hijacked by the priestesses. We’ll be fine here, for a time, until we can come up with a better plan. And we will, Jim.”

A moment later, to everyone’s surprise, a voice came. Mechanical, unnatural, echoing in the control room, but a voice.

“*Jim?*”

“Spock!?” Kirk cried.

“*Yes, sir,*” the voice answered.

“*And me, sir.*” The same mechanical voice, but somehow a different inflection. Nyota Uhura.

“I’m not quite sure how to explain what has happened to you,” Kirk started sorrowfully.

“*I believe we have a grasp of that. We were able to interact with freedom fighters within the simulation who were able to outline the situation.*”

Kirk turned to Coria. “How do we undo this?” he asked quietly. “How do we put them back?”

“Oh, Jim,” she said sorrowfully. “It can’t be done.”

“*Unfortunately,*” Spock said, “*I agree.*”

“*We agree.*” Nyota again.

Kirk looked at McCoy, his face gray. “I don’t know how to do this,” McCoy admitted softly. “We can’t even repair basic spinal damage, and this is essentially decapitation. To reattach a brain to the body, neuron by neuron ... I was hoping something might become apparent. That the technology that did this could be reversed.” He shrugged hopelessly. “I’ve got nothing.”

“I’m about tae suggest something,” Scott said softly. “It’s a felony. Punishable by twenty years tae life in a penal colony for each occurrence. It’s a *capital crime* in the Klingon Empire. There is no civilized society that permits it, and it’s too far for most uncivilized ones.”

“You were suggesting genocide a few days ago, Scotty. So ...” Kirk sighed.

“The transporter,” Scott said simply.

McCoy shook his head. “You can’t just beam their brains back into their skulls.”

“That’s nae what I’m suggesting. Look, at its basic level a transporter takes matter, converts it tae energy, and then converts it back tae matter in a specific pattern. Usually the one that existed a few seconds before.”

“*If you’re proposing a repair at the pattern level, it’s been theorized, but it is too complex,*” Spock volunteered.

“Right,” McCoy sighed. “In theory you could take a guy who, say, lost his hand. Scrape together all the pieces so you have enough matter, beam the pieces and the rest of his body into a transporter, repair the pattern, and rematerialize the person intact. Medical science has discussed it many times, and in theory it could be done, but it would take too long. Hours, days to program the simplest repair, assuming you could even get it right, and the pattern would degrade too badly in the meantime.”

“I dinnae know that I agree completely with the time constraints,” Scott said. “But the complexity, aye. And there are some ethical angles there too, especially if you are using replacement matter for missing pieces. But more, pattern manipulation is a terrifyingly slippery slope.”

McCoy shuddered. “Agreed.”

“But that’s no’ what I’m suggesting either. I’m suggesting something technically much easier, but ethically much, much worse. All yeh need is an intact pattern. It doesnae matter when that pattern is from.”

“Hold on,” Kirk said. “Let’s set aside the ethics of rematerializing a prior version of a person, which, holy hell Scotty. We don’t save patterns from the past. Each time we use the transporter it resets the pattern buffer.”

“Aye. The pattern buffer. But nae the biofilter.”

"I don't see how that helps either," Kirk argued. "The last time either of them went through the transporter was probably weeks ago, and the biofilter would have cycled by now. Unless you're saving patterns, Scotty ... shit ... You're saving patterns. Talk about ethics. Why the hell ...?"

"I'm nae planning on going around makin' copies of people," Scotty complained. "It just gives the computer time tae look for issues, tae scan the pattern at the atomic level. It learns, it gets better, it can catalog microorganisms, radiation damage, DNA mutations, and is better able to catch problems in future transports." Scott ran his hands down his face. "Your two patterns are in the biofilter right now," he told Spock and Nyota. "I checked, before we beamed down, and made sure to segregate them from any further transporter action. I was afraid it might come tae this. The patterns are pristine, havenae degraded at all, from when yeh beamed up from the ocean planet after the repairs to the *Enterprise*. And we have everything that makes up yer bodies. We can integrate those."

"Wiping out the last however many weeks of your lives," Kirk said slowly.

"No," Scott answered heavily. "Killing the people who exist now and replacing them with copies from the past."

Kirk stared at him. "That's one interpretation, I guess," he said slowly.

"It is the only interpretation," Spock said.

"Aye," Scott insisted, pacing now. "Even setting that aside, there are other ethical issues. If we're wiping out pieces of people's past for medical reasons, where is the line? Is it worth losing a week for replacing a hand? How about six months? What if someone is raped or tortured, do we wipe that out of their history? Are we obligated tae? And all that is assuming consent. What if someone commits a crime, do we execute them and push them back tae the past? Is it torture, tae roll someone back over and over again against their will? What about the troublesome revolutionary, the too-knowledgeable whistleblower?"

"I just want my people back. It's only a slippery slope if you take another step," Kirk insisted.

"Have yeh met me?" Scott said with a bitter smile.

"Scotty, you are a source of good in this universe. We trust you," Nyota said, as gently as she could with a robotic voice.

"I'm a source of chaos, and I dinnae trust myself," Scott answered her levelly, and turned to Kirk. "Keys tae death and hell, sir. I've offered them tae yeh before. Ask me for them, and they're yours."

"Bones?" Kirk asked softly.

McCoy shook his head. "I can't help them. I hate transporters. But Scotty is overstating. We've all been unconscious for the last week anyway, here and on the *Enterprise*. It's no worse than amnesia from a head injury, or unconsciousness after surgery. A few weeks of memory loss versus the end of life in their bodies. Bodies which won't last much longer without your brains, by the way," he said, addressing his disembodied friends. "And frankly, we don't know how long your brains will last without your bodies; this brain snatching business seems to be a regular thing around here, suggesting the brains don't last long."

"I think there is only one logical choice here," and at first that sounded like Spock, but it was Uhura. *"Bring us home. We can leave messages to ourselves about our experiences here, our decisions. My life is beautiful, and I'll sacrifice this one so she can live it."*

"I concur," Spock said.

Kirk nodded firmly. "We're doing this."

Spock and Uhura recorded their messages to themselves while McCoy and Scott returned to the ship to prepare the bodies and the transporter. Spock directed Kirk to carrying containers, and with Coria's help he carefully removed his friend's brains.

"Thank you," he whispered to her, tracing her face and lips. "For everything."

"No, Jim," she said, and kissed him deeply. "Thank you. Thank you," she told him as he beamed away.

The brains sat, quiet and cut off in their cases, in darkness but not, they hoped, in fear. McCoy used antigravs to place their bodies beside the brains on the transporter pad. "If we're ready I'll remove the life support equipment," McCoy said quietly.

Kirk examined the setup, then turned to his chief engineer, who nodded tightly. "Twenty years minimum in a penal colony?" he asked Scott, trying for jocularly but missing considerably.

"Twenty years minimum per occurrence," Scott corrected. "So at least forty years for killing our friends. Not anywhere near enough."

"It's my order," the Captain said softly.

"An illegal order; I'm the one following it."

"I'll do it," Kirk said firmly, moving toward the controls.

"No yeh willnae; not if yeh want them alive," Scott snapped, blocking him.

Kirk turned back to the pad, hands on his hips, head bowed. "I have a feeling Starfleet will overlook this one," Kirk said.

"They shouldnae," Scott answered, staring hard at his hands.

“Ready, Bones,” the Captain said softly. The Doctor pulled the medical equipment out of the bodies, which went still, hearts and lungs and organs stopped, and stepped back. “Energize,” Kirk said.

Scott hesitated, then pulled the dematerialization lever. The bodies and brains vanished; Kirk and McCoy quickly removed the now-empty brain cases from the pad. Scott input a series of commands that Kirk had never seen before, and the transporter alarmed violently. Scott clenched his hands into fists, then reached across his body—lefthanded where he should have been using his right, using the hand that wasn’t his. Another alarm from the transporter—almost plaintive, shocked, betrayed; another left-handed move. “I’ve just deleted their patterns,” Scott said dully. “They’re dead. Importing the patterns from the biofilter.” The transporter beeped again. “Integrating.” Scott watched the controls grimly, then nodded and reversed the lever for rematerialization.

Spock and Uhura sparkled into existence standing side by side, whole and upright, and immediately hesitated in confusion. They glanced at each other, bewildered; they hadn’t beamed up together from the beach planet, and they hadn’t expected a grim-faced welcoming party. Uhura, in fact, had just left a slightly thinner Scott sleeping on the planet, not standing at the transporter controls looking simultaneously relieved and guilty. Scott immediately turned away and walked out of the room.

“What has happened?” Spock asked gravely.

McCoy scanned them both. “I need you to come with me to the medbay so I can check you out. There are some messages for you that will explain. If you still have questions, the Captain and I will answer them.”

Spock reached out and took Nyota’s hand, both of them somber, and followed McCoy and the Captain out the door. On the other end of the hall, sitting on the floor, his head in his hands, Scott looked up at them, then bowed his head again and closed his eyes. “Scotty?” Nyota asked gently. The engineer shook his head violently.

“Give him some time,” Kirk said, pulling them away. “He needs to come to terms with the fact that he did the right thing.”

McCoy wanted to keep them off duty for a while, but couldn’t manage it for long. They were, after all, perfectly fine, and just coming off a three week vacation. While Nyota didn’t love the lost memories—or the echo of the brain wipe from years ago—her own personal logs were good. She pieced together the missing time. Not much of note, honestly, up until the moment her brain got jerked from her head. And her disembodied self had done a good job explaining that experience—an interesting one, scientifically speaking, without pain—as well as the choices they had faced in coming home.

The choice had been, well, logical. A few lost days of memory was little sacrifice for the beauty of her own life, as her brain had told her. What she *hadn’t* anticipated, it seemed, was losing Scotty. She hadn’t seen the engineer at all for weeks. He sent a deputy chief to every meeting. If he was eating and sleeping, it wasn’t in the mess, his office, or his quarters. His engineers claimed he was there somewhere, but as far as anyone else was concerned the man had vanished, and neither Kirk nor McCoy were pushing the issue. Spock was; as the first officer he was entitled to demand meetings with the Chief Engineer, and he was, but had admitted concern about the uncharacteristic coldly professional tone of those meetings.

She finally took a day off to search for him. And, with the help of the exasperated Keenser, she found him in the null gravity section of the starboard nacelle. He had her back to her, working on something, and she launched herself at him and grabbed him. She’d been regularly lifting weights for years. He, on the other hand, hadn’t recovered from the muscle loss from the three weeks of null gravity repairs or from his injuries on the planet. She caught him by surprise and, floating in the nacelle without leverage, he didn’t have the strength to shake her off.

“Nyota, get off me,” he said in irritation, the two of them spinning slowly, upside down relative to the usual orientation of the ship.

“Nope,” she said, arms locked around him. “Not until you talk to me.

“Fine,” he grumped, refusing to look at her. “What would you like tae talk about?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How about you vanishing and utterly avoiding Spock and me?”

“I see Spock all the time.”

“And me?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Sure,” she scoffed. “Scotty. You saved our lives.”

“I really didnae,” he sighed. “I killed yeh both.”

“I don’t feel dead,” Nyota said.

“Neither do I,” he shot back. “That doesnae mean it didnae happen.”

And that still hurt. It always would. She shifted her grip on him, and put her head on his shoulder. He stopped fighting against her, and closed his eyes and let her hold him, both of them floating together in the true antigravity of spaceflight.

She spoke softly. “I used to wonder what I would have said to you, if you had walked through my door on the last day of your life. I spent long nights, trying to find the words that would have saved you.” He turned his head to watch her face, his gaze soft and sad, and she blinked back her tears. “Sometimes I yelled at you. Sometimes I begged. Sometimes I made lists of beautiful things. And I just couldn’t find the words that would have saved you.”

He breathed deeply, and she hurriedly continued before he could speak. “I couldn’t find the words because there weren’t any. I came to that realization after a year. But I still didn’t know what I would have said.”

She closed her eyes, and continued. “But now I do. If I was sent back to you on that day, I wouldn’t say anything. I would listen, if you had anything to say. And if you didn’t, I would hold you until you were ready. And then I would let you go. Just like you did, for a gravely injured woman who made a choice about her life.”

He wrapped his arms around her and sighed “Did I ever thank you?” he asked. “For letting me go; for taking me back?”

She kissed his cheek. “Not in so many words.”

“Aye. Well, thank you.”

She pushed off him, heading gracefully for a wall, sending him less gracefully toward the opposite one. She caught a handhold and worked her way back to the gravity plating, moving carefully until it grabbed her. He oriented himself intentionally upside down in the null gravity just barely beyond the plating, grinning at her. She tilted her head at him. “Come to dinner with us tonight?”

“Okay,” he said, and the word wasn’t easy, but it was *yes*.

“Bring booze; we’re out,” she said lightly, then sombered, studying him. She reached out and put her hands on either side of his upside-down face, then rested a palm in the center of his chest, above his heart. He put his right hand over hers and reached for the wall beside him to turn himself the right way around.

“I’m grateful you’re alive, Montgomery Scott,” she said.

He took her hand and turned it to kiss her palm. “I’m grateful you’re alive, Nyota Uhura,” he answered fervently.

She smiled tremulously at him, then smirked a little wickedly. He caught his breath just as he realized what she was going to do, but couldn’t stop her from shoving him back into the weightless center of the room.

“Are you really going tae leave me here?” he called, floating helplessly as she walked away. “Just for that I’m bringing the bad booze to dinner!”

“Oh, like you own any bad booze. You’ll hit a wall eventually,” she said, laughing. He would, too, in about ten minutes. “Take a nap until then. Don’t be late, Scotty!”

He muttered curses at her that he didn’t mean, watching her go. He’d never come to terms with the moment he’d deleted her pattern, and what he’d had to do. But he’d find a way to live with it.

Chapter End Notes

In his log entry, Kirk paraphrases Robert Frost.

Chapter Summary

The final year of the mission finds the Enterprise facing a malevolent inter-dimensional threat.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for body horror and torture

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

Captain's log, Stardate 2269.89. We've searched hopelessly for days. There is nothing more we can do, but move on, and try to come to terms with the depth of our loss. Record personnel changes: Lt. Cmdr. Hikaru Sulu appointed as second officer; Lt. Vincent DeSalle appointed as chief engineer.

"Ah, *shit*," Scott cried, struggling to get off the transporter pad he had half apart. The transporter had been acting completely insane, cycling for no reason when there wasn't a soul around. And now it was *activating*, with him standing on the bloody thing. He tripped, tangled in its guts, and he felt himself dematerializing. Those were the most terrifying seconds of his life, because there was nowhere to transport *to*. He was about to be atomized and scattered into oblivion. It was a profound relief to instead find himself standing on a transporter pad, and for a moment he thought he'd simply rematerialized right where he'd started from, because it was a starship. But not *his* starship, he realized immediately. He was in a transporter room with an insignia emblazoned intimidatingly on the wall, a sword through the center of the Earth. And he looked across at the transporter officer, a man with his face, or near to it, who smirked menacingly and leveled a phaser at him.

"Gotcha," the other man said, and pulled the trigger, putting Scotty straight on the ground. Scotty stared up at the ceiling, losing a fight to stay conscious. The other version of himself looked down at him. "Welcome to the ISS *Enterprise*, Mr. Scott," he said, and the world went dark.

"Easy," said a familiar voice some time later, and Scotty blinked awake in the medbay. He would have thought he was home, except when he glanced over at Kirk, it was *not* Kirk. The menacing sword emblem was on the wall again, and on Kirk's chest. But what truly gave it away was that, for all that the man was attempting an ingratiating smile, it didn't reach his cold eyes.

"My apologies for that welcome," Kirk said, and reached to help Scotty sit up. "When a duplicate of my chief engineer showed up unexpectedly on the transporter pad, we were understandably concerned that we were being attacked. But I'm thinking something a little stranger, and possibly more wonderful, is happening here."

Scotty looked around. "Where the hell am I?" he asked.

"This is the Terran Empire Warship *Enterprise*, and I'm her Captain, J. Tiberius Kirk."

"The Terran Empire," Scott said flatly, and he abruptly knew exactly what this was. The universe that the Guardian had sent them into the past to prevent, apparently not with complete success. A dark mirror which would have overtaken his own universe, had Edith lived, and which Scott had taken drastic steps to ensure never obtained the dangerous mathematics he carried in his mind.

"Of course," Kirk said with a laugh. "Why, where are you from?"

"A different universe," Scotty said heavily.

"Yes," Kirk said. "That's what we are thinking. And I'll confess, this may be our fault. We've been following some readings, probing an anomaly for scientific purposes, and I think we may have poked a hole between our universe and yours with our transporter."

"That's where it could happen," Scotty agreed. "If the walls between the universe are thin the disruption of a subspace signal could absolutely punch a hole."

"That's what I'm told," Kirk said.

"Ah," said someone who looked like McCoy, coming into the room, the door swishing behind him. "Our universe traveler is awake. Welcome. I'm Leonard McCoy, unless you already know that."

"I do already know that," Scotty said. "You look like a friend of mine."

"I'm glad to hear that," McCoy said. A scream came from the other room. "I'm sorry, that's unpleasant," McCoy said apologetically. "We have a crewman with Rigellian fever, and it's just so painful. How are you feeling?"

"A little sore from getting shot," Scotty said pointedly.

"I really do apologize," the false Captain said ruefully. "If you're up to it, I'd be happy to show you around. There are people who are very curious to meet you."

"If you don't mind, I'd really rather go home," Scotty said, standing.

"Something I assure you that we're working on," Kirk said placatingly. "We're just not quite sure what happened yet."

"I'm pretty good with transporters. I could take a look?"

"We're honestly still working out the ethical angles here," Kirk said apologetically. "Is there a cross-universe Prime Directive we need to consider? What if we have technology that you don't, or you have technology that we don't? Interference with each other's timelines and development could be catastrophic."

"Fair enough," Scotty said with a shrug, aiming for a nonchalance he didn't feel. "As it happens, my universe has some experience with those kinds of consequences."

"It's interesting that you'd say that," Kirk said, taking Scotty's elbow and leading him down the hall. "We've been wondering if your universe might have had multiple cross-universe incursions. There seems to be some instability in your timeline. So I'm told, you understand. This isn't exactly my speciality. This is more Engineer Scott and Science Officer Spock's fields." Kirk looked sharply at him. "Do you have any expertise in multidimensional theory, or are you more of a mechanic in your universe?"

"Oh, just a mechanic," Scott lied easily. "I try not tae dabble too much in the theories. Hard enough keeping a Starship operational."

"Starship. What a charming way to put it," Kirk said, smiling toothily and gesturing for him to take a seat in an empty conference room. "And I'm sure you're just being modest. Tea? I'm more a coffee man, but our Scott seems to enjoy it."

"No, I'm fine," Scotty said. "I am curious about your history here. World War Three. The Romulan Wars?"

"It seems you have a bit of a violent history," Kirk said with an incredulous laugh. "No World War Three. My god! And Romulus is a part of the Empire."

"Oh," Scott said, as if he were on familiar ground, remembering Spock's description of a brutal empire. "A peaceful surrender?"

"Just so," Kirk said, and there was the smile again, the one that made Scotty's blood run cold. "You know, I think I am going to get my Scott in here. I can't let you dig into our transporter, but if the two of you can talk through the math, maybe we can get you home."

"As you say, Captain," Scotty said. "I'll do what I can." He most certainly would *not*. Everything about this felt off, staged, his head and heart screaming alarms at him. The way the transporter had activated, the greeting he'd received, the damn *physics* told him this was no accidental incursion; they'd grabbed him deliberately. But he'd play along until he knew more. Kirk left the room, and Scott stood and looked around under the pretense of getting tea. There was what was unmistakably a monitoring device in the corner; no chance to run, then, and nowhere to go anyway. Beyond the logo on the wall again, the room was otherwise empty and bland.

Kirk returned, and Scotty looked up at a man wearing his own face. "This is weird," Kirk said ruefully. "But productive, I hope. I imagine you'll get along well."

"That's only assuming that your man's capacity for self-loathing and self-destruction isnae as well developed as mine," Scotty said, putting his feet on the table and folding his arms.

Kirk laughed. It was supposed to have sounded jovial, but missed the mark. "I'll leave you to it."

The other Scott blew out a breath and slid him a padd. "Look, this isnae exactly fun for me either. Let's figure this out and get yeh home."

Scotty picked up the padd, and understood immediately what this was about. "I dinnae ken how it was for you," Scotty said softly, "but when I was sixteen, just a kid at the University of Edinburgh, the maths drove me mad. And they drove me mad when I was nineteen, at MIT. And at Starfleet Academy. On Starships in the black of space, and on frozen planets. I'd put equations on the board in the middle of the night, and stare at them. I'd go back tae Cochrane and Einstein, tae fucking Newton and Leibniz, trying tae find the missing piece." He stood up and stretched a hand between them, as though holding something imaginary in his fingers. "And finally, one day, when a traveler from another universe walked in and *handed* it tae me, I realized that I'd already put all the rest of it together. I'd been focusing too long on the missing piece tae realize I already had its shape and form, surrounded by everything else."

Scotty picked up the padd at waved it at his other self. "You're nae there. Yeh havenae put in the time. And I know the worst of me, so I know why. You silence the shite in yer godfucked head with drink, and drugs, and shitty sex. I know, lad," he laughed humorlessly. "Oh, believe me, I know. I cannae give you what yeh want. It's the answer tae questions yeh havenae thought tae ask yet. And until you're ready tae ask them, yeh run the risk of killing yerself, and everything else."

Across from him, his counterpart clenched his jaw. Then his eyes flicked to the camera in the corner. He reached out and grabbed Scotty by the front of the shirt, and turned them so his own back was to the watching eyes. "It's nae just the booze, and the drugs, and the sex. It's lookin' over my shoulder every bloody day, watching for the knife coming for my back," he said, and there was despair in his voice. Then his gaze hardened. "I dinnae have the *luxury* of time, nor yer sanctimonious shit. Do yourself a favor. Go with this. We thought we'd try it this way, just this once. Play nice. Play scientist. The alternative, for you, is agonizing and horrific."

"Go fuck yourself," Scotty spat.

His other self got in his face. "That can be arranged," he hissed. The other Scott shoved him back and hit the comm on the wall. "Come get him, as yeh can see the bastard isnae going tae play."

Several over-muscled goons came barreling through the door; they'd evidently been just outside, expecting the call. They grabbed him, none too gently, and marched him down the hall toward the brig and shoved him into a cell. None of this was good, Scotty thought with some panic.

He was alone in an apparently hostile universe that wanted to dig dangerous secrets out of his head. His own friends likely thought him dead or vanished, if they'd even noticed yet that he was missing.

He moved around the room, not expecting to find anything helpful, but it was worth a look. There was one slightly loose wall panel, but all that was under it was a few dozen tick marks, the count of some poor bastard before him, and a partial carved-in word: *'transpor.'* Transporter? Didn't make sense.

He glanced up as the door to the brig slid open. Three demons wearing the familiar faces of McCoy, Spock, Kirk stepped into the room. They wordlessly dropped the shield to his cell, and Spock grabbed him firmly, twisting an arm behind his back at a painful angle to immobilize him.

McCoy pulled out a hypo, and Scotty tried to jerk away, but Spock held him more cruelly. McCoy dumped the drug, whatever it was, into his neck, and Scotty felt his mind fog over and his body go limp. Then Spock was kneeling over him, hands on Scott's head

"Someone," Spock said quietly, "has put telepathic anchors in your mind. Carefully done; gently done. Why?" Spock asked.

Scotty felt compelled to answer, the drugs hitting him. "My mind comes apart, sometimes. They sit with me, holding me together until I can find my way back." Scott grimaced; he was going to need to fight harder to keep his mouth shut.

"Yes," Spock answered slowly. "Unusual. Not logical."

"Not everything is, Mr. Spock," Scott said sorrowfully. "Is what you are about to do to me logical?"

"We require the information you possess," Spock said, and dug hard into his mind, brutally breaking through on paths another Spock had carefully set.

Scott gasped. Then he closed his eyes and set his mind to reciting prime numbers, psychic noise distorting the information Spock was trying to steal. He was five hundred numbers in when McCoy tore off his prosthetic hand, and the agony of it lit up his entire left side, joined by vicious kicks to his ribs. He could feel the blood draining swiftly from his body, the artery to his missing hand pumping unchecked for a minute until McCoy finally came at him with a cauterizer. Kirk pulled him to his feet, and his head swam from the pain and the blood loss and the drugs.

"You may want to think about cooperating tomorrow morning," Kirk hissed, and dropped him back to the floor into the pool of his own blood. The force shield snapped shut again, and he lay shaking on the floor.

He woke in the early morning. It had been some time since he'd been *surprised* to be alive. Longer since he'd been *disappointed*, like the promise of peace, the end to suffering, had been snatched away from him.

He opened his eyes to Nyota Uhura, or a terrible version of her, barely dressed in lingerie and a silk robe. And *god*, he'd hoped not to see her face. "They've really messed you up, haven't they?" she said softly, sitting beside him, and he closed his eyes, because *of course* they were going to try to play it this way.

"These are brutal, heartless people," she said. "Tomorrow will be worse, you can take my word for that. Tell them what they need to know, and they'll send you home." She brushed his face with her fingertips, and her hands were trembling. "Listen to me. You don't know what it's like here. To be forced to do terrible things just to save your life. I do it every day. The other version of you does too. He'd be kind, if he could. He *is* kind, behind closed doors, with me. In our bed together, us versus this terrible world. This was his idea, his last chance; they are going to kill him if he can't figure it out. Don't do that to him; please, please, Scotty, don't do that to *me*."

"You love him?" Scotty asked softly.

"I do," she answered, and leaned down and kissed him gently, brushing her lips against his, and he pushed back, deepening the kiss just slightly. She responded ardently, taking over, tongue in his mouth, one hand on his face, the other unclipping the front of her already ill-concealing bra and pulling it off. When he immediately stopped kissing her she pulled back, puzzled.

He smiled sadly at her, and with the one hand he had left pulled her clothing back around her and sat up stiffly. "You're a very good actress, lassie. Very convincing. But you haven't got the first idea of how a person would act if they truly loved someone. And for that, Nyota, I'm very very sorry.

He glared disdainfully at him. "You think you're better than us," she hissed.

"Me? No," he said. "I'm just as bad, or worse, than the bastard whose bed you may or may not share. But her? Yes. Oh, yes, she is better than you."

She slapped him and left, archly ignoring the leers of both Kirk and the other Scott as they swept into the room. Spock was right behind them, and her gaze lingered on him, but he entirely ignored her.

"This has been a disappointing experiment," Kirk said conversationally, and pulled out a knife, spinning it in his fingers. "I need three things from you, right now. The new warp equations. The multiverse equations. And red matter."

"No," Scotty said evenly.

Kirk punched him hard, breaking his nose.

"No," Scotty said through his blood, and despite everything he'd been through, it was still unexpected when Kirk viciously stabbed the knife into his gut.

Scotty grunted, fighting to stay on his feet, his hand wrapped around Kirk's wrist. He wasn't going to survive this, he knew with distant fear. "I'll die to keep this information from the Empire," Scotty managed through the agony. "I killed myself once to ensure it; what's one more time?"

At his words, Kirk twisted the blade up into Scotty's heart, and Scott gasped in shock. "Yes," Kirk spat into his face. "So you say. Every. Single. Time."

And suddenly, in these final moments, Scotty understood. It was blinding, and horrible. The marks under the panel. The writing: *tranpor*. Messages, but not from other prisoners. From *himself*, in those times he'd solved it earlier in the cycle. He realized in despair what was going to happen. What *had already happened*, over and over again. He was going to die in agony for the tenth or the hundredth or the thousandth time. And then they were going to use the *transporter* to bring him back, his pattern saved from the first moment of his arrival. Continually resetting him back to the beginning to start again. "Oh, god, no," he breathed.

"We're going to have to try something different," Kirk mused, tilting up Scotty's bloody face. "This moment of understanding is powerful. It breaks him every time, but too late, and then we lose it. We need a witness. Who on his ship does he love the most, Spock? Who does he think of each time he dies? Whose agony can he not bear?"

"Nyota Uhura," Spock said simply, and Scotty may have told them everything they wanted to know, had he heard them speak her name. But he was already dead. Kirk jerked the blade out of his body and let it thud to the floor.

"I'm going to have breakfast. Get him ready again," Kirk told his Chief Engineer. "He lost a lot of blood this time; you'll probably have to come up with some extra matter to make up for it. Just shove something in there. Masturbate into a sock or something, that ought to do it.

"You're pushing it, Kirk," the mirror Scott said viciously, looking down at a broken version of his own body. "Killing *him* like this over and over is startin' tae make the crew whisper about *me*."

"Would you rather I just cut something off of you?" Kirk said, pointing the bloody knife at the version of Scott who was still alive. "Because that would work too. No? I didn't think so. Stop bitching and get the body ready, then fetch the girl from the other universe."

....

The *Enterprise* transporter room disappeared, and Scotty knew he was about to be atomized and scattered into oblivion. It was a profound relief to instead find himself standing on a transporter pad, and for a moment he thought he'd simply rematerialized right where he'd started from, because it was a starship. But not *his* starship, he realized immediately. He was in a transporter room with an insignia emblazoned intimidatingly on the wall, a sword through the center of the Earth. And he looked across at the transporter officer, a man with his face, or near to it, and a man who was Jim Kirk, but with a devil's eyes, holding a phaser to Nyota Uhura's back.

"Scotty, this isn't our universe," she told him urgently. "Run!"

He did, but toward her. It surprised the devil crew enough that she was able to jerk away and kick Kirk solidly in the groin, sending him to his knees. She scooped up the phaser and turned, but the mirror Scott had her Scotty from behind, a knife at his throat.

"Put it down, lassie," the mirror Scott said, and she didn't have a choice. Her phaser clattered to the ground, and Kirk grabbed her tightly, bruisingly, around her arm.

"Don't try anything like that ever again," Kirk wheezed painfully. "I'm not inclined to hurt you, but that could change."

"What the hell is this?" Uhura demanded belligerently.

Kirk smirked. "Show her, Scott," he said. The Mirror Scott nodded, and with a single violent movement expertly cut Scotty's throat and dropped his body onto the transporter pad.

"No!!" Nyota screamed, fighting, cursing and raging against Kirk. "Scotty! No, no!" Kirk grabbed her more firmly and cruelly gripped her chin, holding her still while Scotty's last breath gurgled through his blood.

"Watch, girl," he growled, shaking her. "Watch him die. You'll wish next time for something so easy and so quick, so *watch!*"

....

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"Just kick the shit out of him and dump him in the hole with the girl," the devilish Kirk said. "I'm going to eat some food and have a woman or two, and we'll begin again tomorrow. Pleasant dreams, Scott," he said nastily, and walked out of the room.

"What the *hell?*" Scotty managed, completely confused, and then four burly guards, plus a scarred and maniacally grinning Sulu, closed in on him and gave him the beating of his life. It was as if they knew every weakness in his body, every old hurt, every scar. When they were done, when he was just on the edge of consciousness, they roughly hauled him to his feet and dragged him through the hall, then tossed him into a dark cell.

"Scotty?" someone called, kneeling next to him on the floor.

"Nyota?" he gasped, bewildered. Although there were duplicated demons everywhere aboard this ship, she was *his* Nyota Uhura, he could see it in her eyes. "Where in the hell are we? How did we get here?"

At his question she rocked forward into his chest and sobbed. "They've killed you again," she cried brokenly, clutching at his shirt. "Oh, god,

Scotty.”

“Hush now lass, he said, stroking her hair despite his fractured fingers. “I dinnae understand what yeh mean.”

“You think you’ve just arrived, but you’ve been here *weeks*, Scotty,” she said softly. “Here in this alternate universe of the Terran Empire.” He breathed sharply at that; this was the world created when Edith Kirk lived. The world that the Guardian had sent them into the past to prevent.

“We discovered you were missing,” Nyota continued. “You’ve always had this habit of disappearing. Working Gamma shift for a few days, or buried somewhere deep in the ship for a lengthy repair. It took us two days to even figure out you were gone, to realize that *no one* had seen you. We traced you to the transporter room, which was in pieces; we thought you were dead in a horrific accident.” She rubbed her eyes in grief. “Spock and Chekov did everything they could with the transporter, and we beamed away teams to every nearby system, but you were just gone. And then, three days ago, you showed up at my door. But it wasn’t you, Scotty. Oh, god, it wasn’t you!”

“The version of me I saw at the transporter controls, standing alongside some twisted version of Kirk,” Scotty said softly. “He kidnapped you and brought you here. Why? And ... three days ago? I dinnae understand, you havenae been missing.”

“I didn’t understand at first either,” she said brokenly. “I was just so grateful you were alive. And then they murdered you and dumped you on the transporter pad. And the next time, they *tortured you to death*, and took what was left of your body and threw it on the transporter pad. And the next time. And the next.”

Scott felt himself go weak with shock as she spoke. “They dematerialize my body and reintegrate it with my pattern from the first moment I arrived. It’s ... it’s how I brought you and Spock back, after your brains were taken.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But I chose that to save my life. This is the fifth time they’ve *killed* you in three days, and god knows how many times they’ve done it to you in the last weeks. Scotty,” she begged, her voice raw. “Please, please, just tell them what they want! When they ask you about transwarp and red matter and multispacetime, when they want your equations, just give it to them! I can’t watch you die, over and over and over! I can’t keep having this conversation with you, you not remembering, while I know what they are going to do to you the next time they come in the door! They must have most of the equations by now anyway, the scraps they’ve been able to drag from you. Oh, god. Just tell them!”

She was quaking in his arms, which he’d wrapped around her. “Have they hurt yeh at all?” he asked softly.

“They’ve not laid a hand on me. As far as I know. Unless we’ve been here years, Scotty, and they take turns killing us and resetting us to the beginning. How would we know?”

He dragged a shaky hand down his bloodied face. “It cannae be as bad as that. We’ll figure something out,” he promised. But for now, he was hurt too badly to move, and he let himself sleep, held by a trembling Nyota Uhura.

He dreamed of death.

In the morning they took Nyota first. She fought against them wildly, clawing and kicking. “Tell them, Scotty!” she screamed at him as they pulled her out of the room. And then they came for him and forced him roughly down the hallway. Nyota was handcuffed to a chair, still raging. The horrible faces of Kirk and McCoy and Spock were waiting for him, looking anticipative; the other version of himself was standing on the other side of the room, arms crossed, looking mulish.

His heart rate picked up in terror when he saw the things they had laid out on the table. Spock came for him first, asking questions, breaking brutally into his brain on paths another Spock had gently set, pulling out pieces of his mind. And then, when he was lying on the floor, trembling at the psychic shock, Kirk and McCoy came at him with their horrors. It was worse, so very much worse than he’d feared, and he knew what his screams were doing to Nyota, but there was nothing he could do to stop them.

There was no need for them to hold back with their brutalities. If he died with their information still in his head—again—they’d just start over. There was no peace in his inevitable death, no hope that it would bring relief or end. They’d just be better at killing him tomorrow. This time they hung him from the ceiling, like meat, held helpless while they cut him into smaller pieces. A bin was on the floor under his feet to catch the bits and blood for the next time around. He looked over at Nyota, in nearly as much agony as he, forced to watch, forced to relive what she’d already seen.

“You begin to understand,” Kirk the Terrible said, almost kindly, stopping for a moment to catch his breath from the hard work of butchering a man alive. “We don’t kill her. Never, never. We don’t even touch her. But watching *this*,” he waved his knife, “buries itself deeper into her soul, every time. You forget; she remembers forever. Will you really subject her to this again? There is time yet; we can do it again today. Maybe twice. How long until this breaks her mind and her heart? You can end this, Scotty. Tell us what we need. We’ll swiftly and mercifully kill you both, reset you, and rematerialize you at home. Your friends, who think you both are dead, will be so relieved. A miracle! And neither of you will remember a thing. You can end your suffering, and hers. Give us the equations we need, and this is over. Why should you even care? This isn’t your universe.”

And that decided it. Because they didn’t understand. The maths proved it. The multiverse *wasn’t* separate parallels. It was all one thing; universes as intertwined as atoms and systems and galaxies were connected in any single reality.

“I can do this the rest of my existence,” Scott managed, and looked Kirk dead in the eye. “Can you?” The Terran’s hand tightened on his knife. “Forgive me,” Scott said hoarsely to Nyota, blood dripping from his lips, and waited to die. Again.

And then something happened that he didn’t imagine had happened before: Jim Kirk and Spock and a host of *Enterprise* redshirts came flying through the door, the Starfleet arrow over their hearts, firing phasers. His Captain, and Nyota’s love, to the rescue. These Empire fiends had pushed it too far in taking Nyota, he suddenly understood. One mysterious disappearance was a tragedy. *Two* was an attack. The Captain had solved it, and come to bring them home.

It was just too bad, Scotty thought sadly, fighting for one more breath as the cold darkness closed in on him, that he wouldn't live to see it.

....

The *Enterprise* transporter room disappeared, and Scotty knew he was about to be atomized and scattered into oblivion. It was a profound relief to instead find himself standing on a transporter pad, and astonishingly, he was right back where he'd started. Except the transporter was in one piece, neatly put back together rather than tangling around his feet, and Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock were staring grimly at him, someone's blood on their hands and tunics—and from the looks in their eyes, it was his.

"Scotty," Nyota cried brokenly, and wrapped her arms around him. He reflexively hugged her back, but alarms were clanging loudly in the back of his mind.

"What did yeh do?" he whispered to Kirk in dread, and the pieces clicked into place. "I warned yeh!" he cried furiously. "Yeh cannae use a transporter like this! It's a slippery slope intae horrors."

"I know," Kirk said, and there was something shattered in his voice. "Scotty, I'm sorry. We didn't get your consent. You were already gone by the time we got you down. We just thought ... one more time to bring you home."

Scott stared at them, and had a terrible feeling there was quite a lot about this that he was missing.

"Nyota," Spock said gently. "There is a version of you in the biofilter from a few days ago, when we were beaming to nearby planets in an attempt to find Mr. Scott. If you need to forget."

"Yeh *cannae use a transporter like that!*" Scott protested desperately.

"It's not your decision, Scotty," Kirk said tightly. "You don't know what you're asking of her. Nyota?"

She looked up at Scotty's face, stricken, and shook her head. "I'll find a way to live with it," she said softly.

Scotty always left the door to his office open; it encouraged his people to stop by with any issue, and allowed him to keep an ear open for problems, which tended to manifest as sound before anything else. But since his inadvertent three-week absence, and what his people thought had been his tragic death (and which, in fact, had been his horrific death, over and over, although he remembered none of it), they'd been making him crazy. Everyone apparently felt guilty that they hadn't realized he was missing for over two days. He tried not to notice that they'd all mourned deeply for him. The result, though, was that they all kept loitering outside his office, keeping an eye on him, following him around if he went anywhere. Keenser was positively clingy. When it got ridiculous he'd give them all a shout, and they'd scatter, but an hour later there someone would be again, lurking conspicuously. He'd nearly closed his door in exasperation.

He was glad he hadn't when Nyota knocked on the frame. "Hey," she said a little tremulously.

"Hey," Scotty said gently, putting his padd down and sitting up. He'd finally found the courage to ask Spock, a few days before, about the state of the body—his body—that they had cut down from the ceiling of the Empire Warship *Enterprise*. Spock had reluctantly shared just enough to confirm Scott's fears, and had admitted that he'd also seen much more because of the return of Nyota's vicious nightmares. Nightmares that had the psi-sensitive species on the ship looking at the engineer queasily when they passed him in the halls.

Nyota hadn't been avoiding him, not exactly, but she was clearly having a hard time, and Scotty wasn't going to push her beyond what she could bear. He'd let her be, but was grateful to see her at his door.

"Do you have any real tea left?" she asked him.

"A little," he answered, and stood to pull out his guest chair for her. "Enough for a cup or two, still." He fetched some water and got his kettle started. She watched him silently as he moved through the ritual of it, and smiled up at him when he handed the finished product to her, cup and saucer. She closed her eyes to appreciate the heat and steam, smell and taste.

"That cures most things, right enough," he said, standing across from her with a cup of his own. They let the silence stretch out, neither needing to speak. Neither with words to say.

"There's a poem that keeps going through my head," she said at last. "'*Sasa kama Simba-Mtu shauri nimekata; Ya nyuma sana nisijali, ya mbele sana niyakabili; Kwa ujasiri na uangalifu nitazunguka; Nikifuata kamba kama ng'ombe aliyefungwa; Kila mpigo wa moyo wangu; Huu mpigo muziki wa maisha.*'" He lifted his eyebrows at her, and she translated: "Now, like a Lion, I have made a decision; I shall ignore the past, I shall face the future; I shall move with courage and caution; I follow the rope like a bound ox; With every beat of my heart; This beat, the music of life."

He looked ruefully at her. "I'm just an engineer, lass," he said.

She finished her tea, then stood and took his hand. He let her take it and looked down at her, troubled and concerned.

"Thanks for the tea, Scotty," she managed.

"Nyota ..." he started, although he had no idea what to say. She turned his hand and put her cheek in his palm. Her tears ran across his knuckles, and he stroked her face with his thumb, then pulled her toward him and held her against his chest while she cried great, heaving sobs. Keenser walked by and silently shut Scott's office door with a shattered look at his boss. Scott nodded his thanks, making a mental note that he needed to have a similar sit-down with his shaken assistant, and wordlessly let Nyota cry herself out. His uniform was soaked with her tears, and he grabbed a clean grease rag from a pile and tenderly wiped her face. "'*I shall face the future,*'" he quoted back at her. "'*I shall move with courage, with every beat of my heart.*'" It's what we do, lass."

"Thank you, Scotty," she said, stronger, and it wasn't just the tea she was thanking him for.

"Any time, lass," he said, and squeezed her hand. "Any time."

Captain's log, Stardate 2269.211. There are no words. What do I say? What do we do? Where do we go, now?

Lieutenant Commander Nyota Uhura sat back slowly in her chair, then queued up the message she'd just received and listened again. And yes, it had said what she'd thought it said.

"Captain," she said softly. "We just received a priority one gold channel message from Starfleet. It's ... it's a planetary distress call from Earth."

The Captain and the entire bridge staff snapped toward her. "Put it on the screen," Kirk ordered.

The drawn face of Admiral Komack appeared, the message choppy and wavering. "It's the best I can do, sir," Uhura said, her hands moving as she attempted to compensate.

"... the Planet Earth. Repeat, this is a planetary distress call from the Planet Earth to all Federation and non-Federation ships and planets. We are under attack from what appears ... doomsday device. Most of our fleet is destroyed. ... planetary defenses are destroyed ... unstoppable ..."

"It ends there, sir," Uhura said apologetically.

"Are you picking up anything else? Chatter from other ships or planets? Anything?" Kirk asked urgently.

Uhura shook her head. "We are still so far away, sir. The only messages we pick up are those that might be local, or long-range subspace messages directed at our beacon. And sir ... this message is at least a week old."

Kirk spun his chair toward Spock. "At maximum warp ..." he started.

"... six months away, at best," Spock supplied regretfully, knowing exactly what Kirk was asking.

The Captain smashed the comm. "Scotty, with every impossible, dangerous, pull-out-the-stops invention that you've been keeping from Starfleet, and me, how quickly can you get us home?"

"Maximum warp?" Scotty asked, bewildered by the request. "*Six months.*"

"I'm not asking about maximum warp!" Kirk shouted. "I'm asking for what you've got beyond that."

Scott paused. "*I've got a few tricks up my sleeve for a few light years. But for the distances involved? Nothing. We'd blow apart. What ...?*"

"Let's say it's worth the risk!! How long, Commander Scott?" Kirk snapped.

"*Thirty or so days. But I'm tellin' yeh sir, we'll die before we got there. The ship couldnae take it.*"

"Thirty days isn't acceptable. Just get the hell up here right now," Kirk said, and smashed the comm closed before standing to pace.

"Jim," Spock said softly. "We cannot get there in time. And even if we did, the Admiral said the fleet had been destroyed. We would surely be killed just as quickly. We do not even know what we would be facing." The pronouncement sat heavily on the bridge until Scotty came bursting through the door.

"What in the name of *hell* ...?" the Engineer started, but cut himself off, struck silent by the looks on his friends' faces.

Kirk looked across at him. "We have every reason to believe the Earth has been destroyed," he explained softly, collapsing back into the center seat, head in his hands. The Chief stared at him, and glanced at Uhura, who nodded minutely.

"Let me see what I can do about speed," Scott said, turning toward the door.

"No," Kirk said heavily. "You're right. We'd never make it. Spock's right too; we'd be destroyed if we did. Just ... maintain heading and speed, Mr. Sulu." Kirk glanced up at his grim-faced bridge staff. "And this stays here, until we know more. Don't spread this to the crew, not yet."

Twenty-four hours later they got a second recorded message. "Put it on," Kirk said urgently, and Uhura wasted no time.

It was Admiral Paris, from Yorktown station. "Enterprise," she said gently, her face gray and drawn. "*I don't know what, if anything, you have heard. It is my grave duty to tell you that the Earth had been destroyed. New Vulcan has been destroyed. The planets of the Federation are falling, one by one, and swiftly. The entire fleet has been destroyed. Most stations. We anticipate that Yorktown will fall within the week.*"

The bridge was silent.

"*I am sending you a data packet with everything we know.*" Spock sat up, the data pouring into his computer. "*Briefly stated, we are facing this.*" The admiral's face was replaced by a long, conical probe, gleaming black in space, save a terrible, glowing maw at the widest end. The weapon plowed through what appeared to be a planet or a moon, destroying it in an instant. "*We know little about it, beyond that it appears to be interdimensional. Likely not of our universe. We don't know how it operates. We don't know why it is here. And we don't know how to stop it.*" The admiral took a deep breath.

"Enterprise, *I am ordering you to stay away. I am ordering you to run as far as you can. To save yourselves. By the time you receive this, you*

will be the last of your respective species in the universe. Find somewhere safe, and do what you can to build a life. That is my hope for you, Jim,” she said. And then she smiled, very, very faintly. “But on the assumption that you will disobey that order and charge across the universe anyway, I am declassifying your subspace beacon codes. I will be broadcasting those codes, along with what I will call General Order 712. That Order is for every Federation ship, base, planet, or colony that encounters the Doomsday Weapon to send all data to the Enterprise for as long as they can hold out. With enough time, perhaps you, our bravest and best, can save the rest of our universe. I fear, however, that you can’t save us. Captain Kirk, I am field promoting you to the rank of Commodore, a rank which should make you the senior officer of any surviving Federation ship you may happen to encounter. Brave hearts. Farewell, Enterprise.”

“The message ends, Commodore Kirk,” Uhura reported softly.

“Get me shipwide,” Kirk said. “And after I’ve told the crew, I want the senior staff in the briefing room, please.”

Kirk arrived last after giving the horrific news to his crew, having stopped first in his quarters to vomit. His promotion had apparently already been logged by Spock; when he went to put on a new shirt it had the four gold bands of a Commodore, which he reluctantly pulled over his head.

Rather predictably, when Kirk arrived in the briefing room McCoy and Scott were already having a go at each other, both men with opposite opinions: McCoy, for finding somewhere safe for the crew; Scott, for tearing across the galaxy with guns blazing. Kirk listened to them for a few minutes, both of them making rational arguments he’d already thought of.

“Maybe we vote,” McCoy argued. “Let the crew decide.”

“No,” Kirk said wearily, coming fully into the room. “I’ll decide. No divisions, no voting. The ship’s commander will make the terrible choice. Because the choice is terrible. But I want to hear your thoughts. Mr. Spock?”

Spock was standing on the opposite side of the room, his hands pressed together. The second time losing his world—the world where his son had lived—didn’t make it easier. “We must destroy it, Commodore. Even from the preliminary data, in time there will be no safe place left to go; the Weapon will eventually consume every place we might hide. But we cannot act rashly or quickly. We must know what we are facing, and how to combat it. Even if it takes years.”

Kirk nodded. “Mr. Scott?”

“Yeh heard my opinion, sir. Kill it,” he said fervently, and then sighed. “With this warning, Cap...Commodore. We maynae have years. The *Enterprise* is pushing her limits as it is. We were supposed tae be coming back tae Federation influence in the next year. Tae be able tae buy parts and supplies, which we already desperately need. She cannae run forever on electrical tape and hope, much less head intae battle.”

“Bones?” Kirk asked softly.

“Jim, every person on this ship has just lost everything and everyone. Spouses. Children. Lovers. Parents, siblings, friends. But not just that. Also the futures they had planned; what was *next*. Maybe some of us could live out our days on a Starship,” McCoy shot a glance at Scotty and thumped the table. “But I can tell you that we are pushing *people* to their limits too. You can’t ask them to do this another two years, or five, or ten.”

“Mr. Sulu?”

The helmsman looked up, the agony of losing Ben and Demora carved into his face. “I say kill it now or die trying. But I may not be the man to ask. Not today.”

“Ms. Uhura?”

She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead, pushing off her own tears. “I agree with Doctor McCoy, to a degree. We can’t do this much longer. But I also agree with Spock. We’re kidding ourselves if we think we can hide forever. Maybe there is a middle ground. Rest, and watch, and prepare—but from a planet, not the *Enterprise*. And then, when we’re ready, then we strike.”

Kirk nodded. “Mr. Chekov?”

Chekov was looking down at the table, and didn’t look up as he spoke. “We kill it. That is our focus. Our goal. Our one purpose, and what we live for. Or die for.”

The reluctant Commodore ran his hands down his face, then stared into the middle distance, his lips pursed.

“Here’s what we do,” Kirk said at last. “Scotty, I need you to identify everything this ship needs for long term sustainability. I’m talking *indefinitely*. What supplies do we need? What parts? Assuming we are going to have to fabricate those, what raw materials? How do we collect or manufacture fuel? Dilitium? Then we identify the places where we can obtain those. And when we do, we stay. We stay as long as we need, and as long as it is safe. A month here. A year there. As we move, as we travel, or stay, we study the Weapon. And some day, we kill it. Are there questions?”

“Many,” Spock said into the somber silence, “although they have likely not occurred to us yet.”

The crew had two missions, now. Survive, and kill the Weapon. The science, which had been the hopeful goal of their fair ship, was set aside and all science officers reassigned. Some were tasked with studying the Weapon; others seconded to Engineering and the questions of survival.

Early on, in the first days, someone had arrived on the bridge wearing black. Not the familiar red or yellow or blue, but the duty tunic turned somber in mourning, its only color on the silver rank stripes and the Starfleet arrow. By the next shift, half the crew was wearing it. By the

next morning, it was the uniform of the Starship *Enterprise*.

The ship wandered, now. No direction, just wherever they could find things they needed while keeping a wary eye over their shoulder for the monstrous Weapon consuming the galaxy. They tried to stay away from populated worlds. The word of the Weapon was already spreading—tales of trillions dead, of an unstoppable horror. The terror was ripping through worlds even this far distant. And, predictably and depressingly, this fear was leading to hostilities and closed doors, even on worlds where they had been welcomed before during their travels. The *Enterprise* didn't have the strength for needless firefights across systems nor the will for diplomacy with terrified people. And so, as best they could, they stayed away from inhabited worlds.

There were a few worlds where they found some welcome. With Coria and the remains of her newly-awoken people. With the colonists from the ship they had rescued. They found and spoke with the Starwhales, although the Starwhales had a difficult time understanding the danger. None of these friends had been able to offer the *Enterprise* anything but solace. They even traveled back to the Guardian world, wondering about the possibility of time travel to set the universe right, but found the portal had been destroyed by some force, and was dark and silent.

They finally returned to the beach world where they had stopped for repairs a year earlier. It had the advantage of being unclaimed, uninhabited, and secluded. Their initial survey had also suggested it was rich in metals and, perhaps, dilithium. And so, with reluctance for what they were doing to a perfect, untouched world, they dropped several mining shafts deep into the ground. They also set up refineries to convert the hydrogen in the water to deuterium and then, with extreme care, antideuterium—the matter and antimatter desperately needed to power the reactor, both of which had been approaching critical levels.

On a gorgeous evening two years after the Earth had died, Uhura was bent over the communications hub in the operations center they'd constructed in the middle of their tent city. Spock was in command of the *Enterprise* this week, aboard in orbit above with an ever-rotating skeleton crew, and he'd just sent down a new packet of Order 712 messages in need of translation.

Scotty walked into the control room, filthy and sweat-soaked from whatever industrial thing he'd been doing all day, and wordlessly handed her a drink. A bottle of *beer*, of all unlikely things, keeping another for himself.

"We're out of beer," she said in disbelief, taking a slow, appreciative sip. It was *fantastic*, and that wasn't just a few dry years talking. "We are out of *everything* except for that nearly undrinkable wood varnish that the engineering lieutenants manage to distill."

"Aye," he admitted. "We were."

"Presumably you didn't just find a pool of lager in the mine ...?"

"No," he said, opening his drink. He swallowed a mouthful and blew out a breath, glad for the alcohol too. "It comes from where we get all our food and drink."

"Someone programmed it into the synthesizer," she deduced.

"Aye," he answered softly. "Someone did."

She reached out and patted his hand. "It's really, *really* good, Scotty. I needed a drink."

"So did I," he admitted, and changed the subject. "That looks like Klingon," he said, gesturing at the monitor.

"It is," she said with a sigh. "Another round of Order 712 messages. The Weapon is eating its way through the Klingon Empire now."

"Are they having any luck against it?" Scotty asked hopefully.

Nyota shook her head. "No. Not even a little. I'm not sure that Admiral Paris knew quite what she was doing to us when she sent out Order 712. It hurts, Scotty, to watch this thing killing its billions. Order 712 wasn't meant for anyone other than Federation worlds and ships, but it has spread to everyone. And the purpose of the Order sometimes gets lost in translation. They call us hoping for rescue. They invoke our name like we are gods. 'Help us *Enterprise*, save us *Enterprise*, we are dying.' It just *hurts*."

Scotty squeezed her shoulder. "Anyway," she continued, pulling herself together, taking another swallow of her drink. "*God*, that is nice," she said appreciatively, slightly derailed again as half a bottle of beer started to hit pleasantly, and he smiled crookedly at her. "I'm going to translate this and then get the data up to Spock. Speaking of which, when you get cleaned up Spock asked if you could beam up to the ship. He wants to talk maths at you."

"Aye," Scott said absently, frowning over her shoulder at the new data on the Weapon.

Leonard McCoy came barreling in a moment later, a glass in his hand. "I see you've discovered it too. Someone has finally programmed booze into the synthesizer," he announced. "And I'm going to kill them."

"It couldnae be that bad" Scotty asked ruefully, finishing off his drink.

"No," McCoy answered angrily. "This is the best goddamned glass of bourbon I've had in my entire life. Which means someday when we find a bottle of bourbon spinning somewhere in space, some of the most precious liquid left in the universe, and we reverently pop it open to share, I'll have to say 'hmm, well, it's *okay*, but not nearly as good as what I can get out of the *goddamn synthesizer*.'"

"Why do yeh think I never programmed it until now?" Scott sighed.

"It was you," McCoy cried, pointing an accusing finger at him. "I knew it. Damn you to hell, Scotty, you could have made it taste at least a little shitty. And you were never going to do this. You swore that you would never do this!"

Scotty wearily scrubbed a hand through the beard he'd let grow again, military disciple gone lax. "That's when we were going home, Leonard."

That's when there were still breweries and distilleries in vineyards in the galaxy that had been making their spirits for a thousand years."

"Yeah," McCoy said heavily, and drained his glass. "And on that note, I'm going to get another drink. Wanna get drunk, Scotty?"

Scott shook his head. "Not tonight, I need tae go up tae the ship."

"Unlimited alcohol," Nyota mused as they watched McCoy go. "Possibly not your best idea."

"There is a limit," Scotty admitted. "Two drinks, per person, per day. We have too much tae do tae let everyone slide intae an alcoholic haze. Least of all m'self, as much as I'd like tae."

"You might not want to be on the planet when Leonard hits that limit," Nyota said in amusement.

"Too late," Scotty said when McCoy's shouting started up from the mess tent. "I'm going tae get cleaned up, will yeh let Mr. Spock know I'll be up in fifteen minutes?" True to his word, Scott was back fifteen minutes later, clean-shaven, hair still damp from the shower and in a black uniform. Nyota, on her second beer, called up to the ship, and they beamed Scotty home.

The ship was largely silent and dark. They kept her powered down and airless in all but a few sections. Engineering. The bridge. One deck of crew quarters, rec room, and mess hall where the skeleton crew assigned for the week stayed. Her warp core was off, a tremendous drain on personnel and resources when she was on, and unnecessary in a simple orbit. The crew did three things, these days: maintained the ship in a basic readiness posture; monitored the Weapon at a distance to ensure that it wasn't turning toward them; and collected the Order 712 communications.

Scotty hadn't been aboard since he'd been in command a few weeks ago, and so headed first for engineering to check on things there. All nominal, and so he rode the lift up to the Bridge, manned this evening only by Spock himself.

"Good evening, Mr. Spock," he said.

"Mr. Scott," Spock said, inclining his head. "Thank you for coming aboard. Have you had a chance at all to analyze the data we have been receiving on the Weapon?"

"I havenae, sir," Scott admitted. "It's been takin' everything I've got tae keep the *Enterprise* in the sky and our people alive."

"I suspected that might be the case," Spock answered. "I have been devoting any available time to attempting to ascertain how it operates. And increasingly, there are elements that seem familiar. Do you recall the 'ghost planet,' and the portal between our universe and another that made several of us noncorporeal?"

"Aye. Aboard the first *Enterprise*, early in the mission," Scott said slowly. "We went intae warp in the atmosphere tae seal it off. A stunt Starfleet Engineering chewed my arse about, by the way. Why?"

"There are many similar characteristics shared by the Weapon and that portal. In fact, I have a suspicion that the portal on the ghost planet may have been an experimental iteration of the Weapon." Spock pulled up data, swiping mathematics from his padd up to the viewscreen.

"Disappearing energy," Scott said in awe. "It's chewing up our universe, matter tae energy, and directing it intae another universe?"

"That is my current hypothesis," Spock said. "There are also distinctive similarities to the Vulcan and Narada singularities created by red matter. In addition, Mr. Scott, here is the mathematical modeling of how it is being accomplished," Spock said, and put a long string equations on the viewscreen.

Scott stared at it, his brow furrowing. "Mr. Spock," Scott said slowly. "That is *my* mathematics."

"More precisely, that is your mathematics, but inartfully applied," Spock agreed. "Heavy handed, rushed, without your usual finesse."

Scott sat slowly in Sulu's empty seat, paling at the implications.

Spock continued. "When Commodore Kirk and I traced you and Nyota to the mirror universe, we were able to map its location in multispacetime in relation to our own reality. I am convinced that the Weapon comes from that universe, and is directing the stolen energy there."

Scotty closed his eyes in despair. "I dinnae ken what I told them," he whispered.

"Nyota said you told them nothing. But from her descriptions, the mirror version of myself repeatedly violated your mind," Spock said apologetically. "They may have come close enough to the answers that our counterparts could have been able to reconstruct any missing elements. As I said, it is artless and inefficient. The work of thieves, not people with true understanding."

"Aye," Scotty said, and he was shaking. "They dinnae understand that the multiverse is intertwined. That if yeh destroy one universe, you'll collapse others around it. They devour our universe, and they'll pull down their own too. Probably other immediate parallels—the one Ambassador Spock was from, maybe others. And those go, others go with it, a house of cards comin' down."

"The end of everything," Spock said slowly.

"Eventually," Scotty answered, and put his head down on the conn.

"This is not your doing," Spock said softly.

Scott lifted his head again and looked at the equations. "It is," he disagreed. "That said ... I think I know how tae kill it. Drop a load of red

matter down it's gullet tae make a hole in spacetime, then go to warp inside the damn thing tae fold spacetime over the top."

"I had considered that as well," Spock said. "And perhaps that would have worked in the beginning, before it destroyed even a single world. But it gets stronger the more it consumes. Or, perhaps 'stronger' is not the word. Larger, although its physical boundaries in our universe are unchanged. We must destroy it from both 'ends,' and the end anchored in the Mirror universe has become mammoth."

Scott looked up at Spock, and there was a glimmer of what might have been hope in his eyes. "In the beginning?" he said, and walked to Nyota's station. "Hyperwarp plus gravity equals time travel. Nyota, Chekov and I have been pokin' at it for years with subspace messages. And we did it, once, with the *Enterprise*, pullin' away from the neutron star."

"Very imprecisely and with significant damage to the ship," Spock reminded him.

"That's because we had no time tae work the equations," Scott argued, grinning fiercely. "We may be able tae stop the fucking thing before it destroys the Federation and everything else."

"Do we run the risk of creating a time paradox?" Spock asked. "An ever-recurring loop, in which the reason for our time travel never occurs, so we never travel back in time to destroy it, so it consumes the universe until we travel back in time to destroy it ..."

"...and the reason for our time travel never occurs, over and over again, forever?" Scott continued. "No." Scott opened a clean page on Spock's padd and swiped it to the viewscreen, and drew a straight line up the center with the stylus. "This is time, without the Weapon." He drew a branch off of it, heading off 45 degrees. "This is the timeline we are on, with the Weapon eating the universe. Now, if we can turn this universe around ..." He bent the line back, making a circle that attached to the first line he'd drawn. "A bubble universe. We already traveled this path; it cannae be 'untraveled.' It will collapse and so cannae be traveled again, but it existed. Then time continues forward on the original path. In theory."

"I suppose, Mr. Scott, that even if you are wrong, the multiverse has nothing to lose," Spock said thoughtfully.

"Aye," Scotty agreed, and the two scientists got to work.

When they presented the plan to Commodore Kirk six weeks later, the mathematics perfected, Kirk asked the final question. "This is a suicide mission, isn't it?" Kirk said softly, his steepled fingers pressed to his lips.

"Yes," Spock answered.

"Probably," Scott amended.

Kirk looked ruefully at Scott. "You give us a chance?"

"We dinnae ken how spacetime will react when it returns to its original course. There's hope there, no matter how small."

"Obviously, we try," Kirk said firmly. "And if the price is our lives, so be it."

To the man, woman, and being, the crew agreed. The next weeks were laser-focused on the mission and the preparation of the *Enterprise*. In Engineering, Scott manufactured a terrifying status bubble and filled it with a cubic meter of red matter. Everyone aboard the ship came down to stare into it, at least once—their own deaths, but, they hoped, the salvation of everyone else who had ever existed. They didn't speak of their fear. There was no countdown, no final night, no sad last words to each other. Simply a steady report from Scotty Engineering, in the middle of the shift: "*ready, sir.*"

And, dressed in the black uniforms they would die in, the crew of *Enterprise* immediately went to action stations one last time.

The warp reactor was in cold shutdown, but an extremely precise ball of red matter was floating inside of it, contained in a magnetic bottle which was slaved to the matter and antimatter injectors. At the helm, an unusual heading was set, and the massive power of a singularity within the core was primed to send them through a thousand light years of space and years of time in the blink of an eye. Aboard a torpedo, a payload of red matter had also been loaded to create the necessary gravity well for a sling-shot effect.

Commodore James T. Kirk looked around his bridge, at his steady, faithful, stalwart people, their hands hovering over their stations. At Chekov, who hadn't been a boy in a long time. At Sulu, ready to trade his life for his daughter's. At Uhura, who had sent a private message to Engineering and touched Spock's hand as she'd come in, and was now sitting at her station with perfect calm. At McCoy, on the bridge because there was no need for a Doctor, not anymore, as brave as anyone. At Spock, who felt as much as any of them, and always had.

Kirk nodded at Uhura, who gave him shipwide. "It has been my honor serving with you," he said. "For the people we love, and the homes won't see again. All hands, brace. Mr. Chekov, fire," Kirk ordered. The torpedo launched off the ship, detonating into a black hole at one million kilometers. "Mr. Scott!" Kirk barked, and a much smaller singularity burst into life in the warp core. The *Enterprise* leapt forward at extreme speed, barely in control even under Sulu's expert hands, headed straight toward the black hole. "Now, Mr. Sulu!" Kirk cried, and the ship pulled away. The superstructure and the people groaned together under the terrible strain of the most extreme bend of spacetime they'd ever experienced, turning an entire universe back on itself to the moments before its creation.

The *Enterprise* tumbled violently out of timewarp into the very maw of the Weapon, and aboard the ship anyone looking out a window or viewscreen got their final look at the Earth. Uhura had the frequencies wide open, and a barrage of panicked messages streamed in, garbled over each other as the Earth attempted to fend off an attack and the fleet of Starships came streaming in. They would be too late, and no use—but time had already changed.

'*It's the Enterprise!*' cried many shocked voices at once.

The ship had no time to explain their impossible appearance, and no time to say goodbye, as the terrible throat of the Weapon started tearing

them to pieces. “*We’re comin’ apart, sir! Seconds...!*” Scott cried from Engineering.

“Mr. Chekov,” Kirk cried as the ship fell apart around them, and gave his last order: “Fire!”

The *Enterprise* launched its final torpedo into the heart of the Weapon, and the red matter within burst out of its protective casing, punching a hole straight through spacetime. And then, with everything she had left, the *Enterprise* went to warp again, bending reality over the breach into which they’d fallen, folding the universe around the deadly Weapon.

And above the astonished Earth, nothing remained of the Weapon—or the Starship *Enterprise*.

Chapter End Notes

Nyota quotes a poem by Euphrase Kezilahabi

The Multiverse, Part 1

Chapter Summary

The Weapon proves resilient, and an old ally sends the senior officers across the multiverse to combat it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The walls of spacetime closed around the Starship *Enterprise*. She was at the endurance of metal and men, coming apart as she tumbled into the anti-reality between universes with the Weapon. Unlike the *Enterprise*, however, the Weapon was designed for traversing realities. Its automated scanners noted that it had entered the slipstream between universes, and so it simply dropped a load of red matter and exited again above the Earth to continue its deadly course.

On the astonished Earth, almost faster than the desperate defenders could follow, the Weapon had disappeared. But there was no time for relief; the Weapon abruptly reappeared, roaring in triumph, and turned its terrible maw toward the terrified planet.

And the planet exploded.

The badly-damaged *Enterprise* tore itself out of the anti-reality a moment too late, straight into the horrific rubble of the world.

They had failed.

“Oh, god,” Kirk whispered. But self-preservation took over. “Mr. Sulu! Evasive maneuvers!” he barked as the Weapon turned toward them.

“*Sir!*” Scott shouted up from Engineering. “*There’s nothin’ that says this was our only shot. We’re a time-and-space ship!*”

“We’re falling apart, Scotty,” Kirk said grimly. “Don’t try to tell me we’re not. Let’s live to fight another day first. Can you give me warp?”

“*Fifty-fifty,*” Scott reported. “*Warp, or we blow up and take the Weapon with us.*”

“Fair enough,” Kirk said with a grim smile, their combined rage and grief making them all reckless. “I doubt the Weapon cares about systems that are already dead. Set a course for what was Vulcan,” Kirk ordered.

Sulu set his jaw and pushed forward the warp initialization lever. From engineering, the main reactor groaned, but held, and the *Enterprise* left one destroyed world behind them, headed for another.

They dropped out of warp around Delta Vega, the frozen moon where Scotty had once lived out his punishment for a lost dog, and where a time traveling Vulcan had handed him the key to the secrets of the universe. Once a manned Federation outpost, it had been abandoned after the destruction of Vulcan; the Vulcan singularity was slowly destabilizing the entire solar system.

They had never failed before; the no-win scenario was incomprehensible to this ship and crew. And yet, here they were, the hull covered with the rubble of Earthdust, and the Weapon moving on to the next world, and the next, and the next. The senior staff gathered grimly on the Bridge, their failure hitting hard.

“We can try again,” Scott insisted, pacing.

“How did we fail last time?” Kirk asked. His hands were tight on the arms of the command chair to keep them from trembling.

Spock shook his head, his hands locked firmly behind his back and gaze troubled. “It was stronger than we had calculated. Closing the universe over it failed to destroy it.”

“We must try something else,” Chekov said.

“Aye,” Scotty agreed.

“What?” Kirk pressed.

“The explosion of a 2000-teradyne matter/antimatter reactor, straight in its gullet,” Scotty answered firmly.

“Oh, boy,” McCoy muttered. “The suicide option.”

“That’s how we assumed the last one would end,” Uhura reminded him gently.

“It’s harder to face, the second time ‘round,” McCoy sighed.

“Blowing up the ship is our very last shot, Scotty,” Kirk said, his voice sharp and brittle. “We have to be sure that it would do it.”

Scott looked at Spock. “We’ll have tae do the calculations.”

“I do not know that we have enough data,” Spock admitted. “The Weapon was heavily shielded, and our focus was not on a scientific scan. The Weapon’s strength exceeded what we had anticipated, given that it had not yet consumed the energy from a planet. We may need to plan a

reconnaissance encounter.”

Scott rubbed his face. “We’re badly damaged. The core housing is cracked, and is leaking radiation. I’ve got it shored up with a force shield, and I’m rotating my people though to make sure that none of us are in main engineering for long, but our girl doesnae have much left in her.”

“Goddamnit,” McCoy muttered, unhappy about the radiation.

“And Commodore,” Scotty continued. “Maybe blowing ourselves tae bits willnae work, but we have nothing else. It’s the last thing I’ve got. If that willnae do it, nothing will.”

There wasn’t anything to say to that. No one disagreed, and no one had a better idea.

“Do we stay here and try to make repairs? Or do we queue up our final trip across space and time and do it now?” Kirk asked.

“I cannae repair anything,” Scott admitted. “This one cannae be done in anything less than a Starbase.”

“Then that is our answer,” Kirk said wearily, and stood, looking out the viewscreen across what was left of the Vulcan system. “Start the time calculations, Mr. Spock, back to before Earth was destroyed. One last time; let’s finish this.”

Spock inclined his head gravely, but before he could start, the sensors tied to his science station alarmed. “Sir, something incoming,” Spock said sharply. “Very fast; a pulse of energy coming directly for us.”

“Shields!” Kirk cried, but it was too late.

And, of all the unexpected things that could have happened, there was suddenly a middle-aged man on the bridge, wearing a bowler hat and seated beside a wooden door. He was reading a newspaper with the headline “*Planet Earth Destroyed—Who is Next?*”

“Who the hell are you?” Kirk asked.

“Is that really the question you want to ask?” the man answered, flipping through the pages.

Kirk narrowed his eyes at the intruder, and gestured at the door. “Okay. What is that?”

“That isn’t any better. ‘What is that?’ It’s a door, James,” the man said with a snort. “While you’re being ridiculous, would you like to hear a joke? When is a door not a door? When it’s ajar. Another? A door went to a job interview. ‘What position are you looking for?’ the manager asked. ‘Well,’ the door answered, ‘being a door, I’m open to new things.’”

“Are you just here to distract us? Waste our time?” McCoy said angrily.

“I am not the one wasting time. You have so little left, and your chances are narrowing by the moment,” the man responded levelly.

“The sensors say that the door is not here,” Spock said slowly. “And neither is the man. No radiation. No energy signature. But time waves. Commodore, we have seen this before.”

“Yes, you have,” the man agreed, still flicking through his newspaper. “Oh, look, this has a comics section.”

“‘When is a door not a door?’” Kirk murmured, mostly to himself. “The Guardian of Forever,” Kirk said, suddenly certain of it. “You’re the Guardian of Forever.”

The man inclined his head.

“We went back to look for you,” Kirk continued. “We thought you were destroyed. And also, you know, a time portal. What are you doing here?”

“Again, are you sure that is the question you wish to ask?”

“Will you help us?” Kirk asked after a moment of thought.

“**A question,**” the Guardian answered in the booming voice of the portal, and his eyes were glowing when he looked up. “**I will ask you one in return. What is on the other side of this door?**”

“The past,” Kirk said.

“**Pasts,**” the Guardian answered. “**Plural. The pasts, and a chance, if each of you do what you must. Will you walk through?**”

“Yes,” Kirk answered immediately.

“That was quick,” the Guardian said, his voice that of a man again. “Are you certain? A chance may stand before you as well, in the destruction of your ship and your lives. If you turn away from that path, it may not be available again. Remember, the last time you walked through this door, you were willing to sacrifice your reality for a single life.”

“We did what we thought was right,” Kirk said softly.

“The choice was yours, Captain. Your officers followed your orders. And I did not say that your choices were incorrect, or correct,” the Guardian said. “I simply note that the path is rarely clear.”

“We’ll do what has to be done,” Kirk stated firmly.

The Guardian studied the Commodore. “So you say,” the Guardian answered at last, and the wooden door abruptly turned inside-out and reshaped itself into the time vortex. “Four groups,” the Guardian said. “Four tasks which must be accomplished.”

“What tasks?” Spock asked.

“This is a test, Mr. Spock,” the Guardian said. “I cannot give you those answers.”

“What test?” Kirk asked in frustration. “If we fail, it isn’t just our universe at risk; the multiverse itself will collapse. Us, you, everything. Why the riddles? Why do we need to prove ourselves to you?”

“You are not proving anything to me,” the Guardian said kindly. “You must convince yourselves. Three groups, when you are ready. Sulu and Chekov. Scott and Uhura. Kirk and McCoy. Spock must remain on the *Enterprise*.” The senior officers looked at one another, fearful but resolute.

“We’re not ready yet,” McCoy said gruffly. “A few of us go a little wobbly without help. Hang on.” McCoy walked swiftly off the bridge.

“Spock, 72 hour packs, phasers, communicators,” Kirk said, and Spock nodded and followed the Doctor. The others waited in heavy silence, eyeing the embodied time portal who was sitting calmly on the bridge.

“Can you tell us anything?” Kirk asked him at last.

“Earth ends, in time, but it is not supposed to end now,” the Guardian answered. “But neither is the *Enterprise* and her crew. You have things yet to do; history yet to make. The Terran Empire that mirrors you has shattered the timeline and future of your universe, unless you are able to correct it.”

“They have their own universe,” Kirk said bitterly. “Why won’t they leave us alone?”

“They wish to fill the multiverse with themselves,” the Guardian said with a shrug. “And in so doing, will destroy everything, unless they are stopped.”

Spock and McCoy walked back onto the Bridge a few minutes later. McCoy had three hypos; he kept one for himself and handed the others to Scott and Uhura. “A thirty day supply,” the Doctor said. “Hopefully none of us will be away that long.”

Spock had phasers, communicators, away packs, and civilian clothing he had collected from their quarters. “Starfleet uniforms may be out of place,” he explained. They all peeled out of their black duty tunics and pulled on the shirts and jackets Spock had brought. Scotty had a battered cap in his jacket pocket, which he settled on his head. They looked at one another, and there was a glimmer of hope. Maybe they hadn’t lost; maybe they were still in the middle of this, and could pull off the miracle.

The Guardian gestured toward the portal.

“You’ll send us where you need to go, and bring us back?” Kirk asked.

“More or less,” the Guardian answered enigmatically.

“Lieutenant Chekov, Lieutenant Commander Sulu,” the Commodore said, and the two men stepped up to the portal. “Be safe. Do what you have to do.” They steeled themselves and then stepped through without a look back.

Uhura and Scott knew they were next. Nyota leaned into Spock, and he skimmed his fingers across her face; they needed no words, not after all these years.

“Don’t skip your meds,” McCoy told them firmly. They nodded. Nyota reached for Scotty’s hand, which he took, and they walked through.

“With any luck we’ll be back in an instant, but if not, take care of my ship, Spock,” Kirk said.

“I shall. Good luck, Jim,” Spock answered gravely.

“Bones?” Kirk said, settling a hand in his old friend’s shoulder.

“I hate this,” McCoy grumbled. With one last look at Spock and the Guardian, they passed through the portal, leaving Spock behind.

The first officer clenched his jaw, but if there was any distress on his face he quickly schooled it. The replacement officers had arrived on the Bridge and were taking the places of the senior officers.

“We wait, then?” Spock asked the Guardian.

“Not exactly, Spock,” the Guardian said, and the portal left the ship, gliding through the walls and expanding, a massive swirling vortex off the bow of the *Enterprise*.

“I am to take the ship through?” Spock surmised.

The Guardian smiled, and then faded, following the portal and becoming one with it.

Spock looked around the Bridge, at the fierce and trusting eyes of the junior officers. Spock sat in the center chair. “Take her through, Mr. DePaul,” he ordered, and the ship moved forward, into the portal and their unknown destination.

Chekov and Sulu walked off the *Enterprise* into Sulu’s living room in San Francisco. They glanced at one another, astonished. This was not

what they had expected.

“Hikaru!” Ben Sulu breathed, scrambling to his feet with a padd in his hand, shocked to see his husband standing there. After all, Sulu was supposed to be thousands of light years away. And in fact *was* thousands of light years away, in a version of himself from his own relative past.

“Benny,” Hikaru said brokenly, for his family was dead twice over—and once today in fact, before his very eyes. Ben was abruptly in his arms, kissing him urgently until they broke apart a minute later, both shaky and teary.

“Pavel. Hi, sorry,” Ben said, turning toward the other man in the room who wasn’t supposed to be there.

“I completely understand,” Chekov said with a gentle smile.

“What—and I mean this in the most loving way—the hell are you two doing here?! And *how* ...?” Ben boggled.

“What’s the Stardate, Ben?” Hikaru asked urgently.

Ben blinked at him, then immediately caught on. “You have got to be fucking *kidding* me,” he sighed. “This is the strangest life.”

“Oh, Ben,” Sulu cried brokenly, and was clinging to him again. “You’re dead. Demora. The Earth. The Federation. Everything. *Everyone*. For two years, to me.”

“It’s Stardate 2269.174,” Ben said, very troubled.

“A month,” Chekov said heavily, and Ben looked between the Starfleet officers in shock. Chekov continued: “We have a month. To do ... whatever we are supposed to do.”

“Papa?” came a sweet voice from the doorway. Demora, rubbing her eyes, awakened by the commotion, and Sulu scooped her up.

“My baby,” he whispered into her hair, and she put her arms around his neck, completely accepting of her father’s unexpected appearance. “Oh, god, my baby, my baby ...” Sulu rocked his daughter in his arms, then looked up again at his husband. “Ben, I don’t know why we are here, not exactly. We’ve been sent back to try to change things, but we really have no idea what. And very little time.”

“Which means you’re leaving, doesn’t it?” Ben said sadly. “You’re leaving, right now.”

Scott and Uhura stepped out into a nightclub, pulsing with too-loud music. It was a bad one, awash in the smell of booze, piss, puke, and sex, and they grimaced at each other. The good thing was that their arrival went entirely unnoticed.

The bad thing was that there was a symbol painted in the wall, a sword through the center of the Earth.

“Shit,” Scotty muttered, seeing it first. He didn’t remember seeing it before, despite all times he had appeared and died over and over again on the ISS *Enterprise*, but he certainly knew what it was.

“Terran Empire,” Nyota groaned in despair, for she remembered it well.

They were now starting to get odd looks, neither dressed for a nightclub, packs on their shoulders and stone sober besides. Nyota stepped into Scotty, getting intimately close, and the suspicious looks turned into smirks and drifted away. Scott followed along immediately, understanding, and kissed her, both of them good enough actors to fake what they needed. “I dinnae like this bar,” he murmured into her ear under the guise of kissing her neck. “It’s trouble, but it’s also cover. No telling what’s outside.”

She trailed her nails down the back of his neck, turning them both slightly so they could both get a look at opposite sides of the room. “Let’s circulate a minute, see if we can get our bearings. Back together in two minutes?”

They stepped apart and walked around the room, eavesdropping on snatches of conversation, glancing over shoulders at padds and watching the flickering entertainment screens in the walls—screens that would be showing sports on Earth, but were showing bloody gladiator matches here. They came back together in a secluded booth in a corner. Nyota settled into his lap and put her arms around his neck, playing the horny couple again.

“Earth,” she whispered into his lips. “Or, Terra, here.”

“San Francisco is my guess,” he answered. “This feels like a military bar. Nae Starfleet, but whatever the hell they call themselves.”

“The past, but not far,” Nyota agreed. Across the room, a brawl was brewing, knives coming out. “Come on,” she said, grabbing his hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

They slipped out the back into the night. And the air and light pollution was significant, but those were Earth constellations, and what was undeniably the Port of San Francisco. Middle of the night, in the Terran Empire, in the roughest part of town. They both had their hands in their pockets, wrapped around their phasers.

“What do we do?” Uhura asked in despair. “What the hell are we supposed to do here, of all the godforsaken places?”

“I have a hunch,” Scotty said with a frown. “But first we have tae steal a shuttle.”

Kirk and McCoy knew immediately where they were—the residence of Jim and Edith Kirk, in Virginia of the late twentieth century.

Kirk's jaw dropped. "Edith!" he shouted, not particularly caring whether the past version of himself was home or not.

They moved quickly through the house, but there was no one in.

"Why the hell would the Guardian send us here?" McCoy asked. "What the hell are we supposed to do about a 23rd Century inter-dimensional weapon from here? This has nothing to do with anything."

"I don't know, Bones," Kirk said, and looked around the house he'd once lived in. He picked up a framed wedding photo sitting on the entry table, and traced Edith's face. "When are we, exactly, I wonder? It's autumn, and morning, by the way the light is coming in ..."

Kirk unlocked the front door and stepped out; as he'd thought, there was a newspaper on the porch. He grabbed it and shook it open; the headlines were full of election news. "No," Kirk breathed in dread. "Oh god, no. It's October 27, Bones. October 27, 2000. Today is the day Edith dies."

In a different universe entirely, aboard a Starship called *Enterprise*, which her Chief Engineer would someday note contained "*no bloody A, B, C, or D,*" Captain James T. Kirk, clad in a wrap-around green tunic, leaned back in his command chair. This *Enterprise* was nearing the end of its five year mission; a mission spent closer to home than they might have liked, but one with plenty of discovery and adventure.

Their latest task had been ferrying a VIP to Babel, not for the first time. But they had been happy to do so; it had been Commodore Robert April, the *Enterprise's* very first commander on his way to well-deserved retirement honors. Of course, it had gone to hell, the *Enterprise* pulled into a bizarre anti-universe of backward flowing time. They'd managed to sort it out, but between their disturbing switch with evil versions of themselves from a mirror universe a few years prior and now this anti-universe, they would be content to remain firmly in their own reality.

A lightning storm in space was certainly bizarre, although not quite as strange. "What is it, Spock?" Kirk asked, his hazel eyes curious. "Not an actual lightning storm, presumably?"

"After the last five years, why the hell not?" asked Leonard McCoy, loitering on the bridge for no particular reason other than that he liked to.

"No," Spock said slowly. "The readings are ..." And at that moment, a Starship burst out of the storm and spun into existence, careering wildly, clearly in distress.

"Evasive maneuvers!" Kirk cried to Sulu, who was already on it, jerking the *Enterprise* out of the way of the out-of-control vessel. The new ship was still spinning, unpowered, utterly at the mercy of physics. "Mr. Chekov, can we grab it with tractor beams?" Kirk asked.

"Aye, Keptin," Chekov said, and they caught the ship, stabilizing it off their port bow. It was obviously Federation. *Almost* obviously, that is; its class was entirely unknown. And then the top of the saucer turned toward them, and the bridge went silent in shock—for it said USS *Enterprise* 1701-A.

Chapter End Notes

The Prime Universe *Enterprise* has just concluded the adventure in The Counter-Clock Incident, the final episode of the Animated Series

The Multiverse, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Scattered across space and time, the crew does what they can to combat the Weapon. But where is Kirk?

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: dubious consent, implied but non-explicit non-con, the use of lethal force in a close combat scenario, blood/injury, and reference to mental health concerns and a panic attack.

Kelvin Universe, Earth, Stardate 2269.174

There was no place in the universe Sulu would rather have been than where he was—holding his husband and daughter. He'd been mourning their deaths for two years. And then, earlier in this day he'd failed to save them again, and they had died as the Earth had disintegrated before his eyes. Now here, a month earlier, they were in his arms. But he had no idea how to save them.

"You're leaving right now, aren't you?" Ben said sadly.

"Yes," Hikaru said. "Although I don't know where we're going."

"Starfleet, surely?" Chekov said. "To warn them. There wasn't a defense at all when we tried to fight it. We were alone. But if the fleet was there ...?"

Sulu frowned, and held Demora closer. "Do you think they'll believe us?"

"Let's think through it," Ben said. "Tell me what we're facing. You showed up *here* and not headquarters; maybe there's a reason."

Chekov sighed. "We are facing a giant, terrible, unstoppable weapon from another universe."

"Unstoppable?" Ben asked. "What can Starfleet do? Even if the entire fleet was there, could they fight it?" Ben asked.

Chekov and Sulu looked heavily at one another. "Nyet," Chekov answered. "No. By the time it got here it was already too strong."

"Why, Pavel?" Sulu asked urgently, something abruptly occurring to him. "Why was it already so strong? We came back through time to Earth—the first planet it destroyed. Because we wanted to save Earth, obviously, but remember what Spock and Scotty said? Once it destroyed even a single planet, absorbed all that energy, it would be too strong to fight. Pavel, what if it destroyed another planet before Earth?!"

"No," Chekov said, shaking his head. "No, all the information we received is that Earth was the first. Everything else was after that."

Sulu shook his head urgently. "Earth was the first *inhabited* planet destroyed. There are seven others in the Sol system! What if the *Enterprise* got here too late, and in the wrong place and time? What if, by the time it got to Earth, it had already eaten a planet?"

Chekov's eyes widened.

"Okay," Ben prompted slowly. "So if you were sending a superweapon to eat its way toward Earth, what direction would you come from?"

"No, that is not the question," Chekov disagreed, talking fast now as the pieces fell into place. "Big weapon that you are going to shift across universes, before it's fully powered. Are you really going to shift it across realities *and* time *and* space? Nyet. Just the universe shift is hard enough. So you move it from its base to the same location in the other universe. And if there is a nice big snack to charge it up when it arrives, so much the better. The question is *where would you build it?* And there is only one answer."

"Jupiter," Sulu said in awe. "Close to the asteroid belt for raw materials, hidden by Jupiter's ionosphere. Oh, my God. It ate *Jupiter* before it got to Earth. No wonder we couldn't fight it!"

"We need to know *exactly* when and where it first arrives," Chekov summarized. "And when we try again, that's where we hit it, *before* it consumes Jupiter. It will be exponentially weaker than when we encountered it!" They looked at one another, giddy with the clear realization of what they had to do, but their frothy high quickly slipped away.

"So we get ourselves to Jupiter," Sulu said, frowning. "We set up ... somewhere, hoping we get lucky enough to pick the right side of the planet. Then we wait around with some kind of equipment capable of detecting the moment something drops into orbit around Jupiter. *Jupiter*, the planet in our system that scrambles even Starship sensors."

"Papa, I'm scared," came Demora's little voice, and in their agitation they'd forgotten she was there.

Sulu kissed her forehead. "Nothing to be scared of, baby. Your daddy, and your papa, and your Uncle Pavel will keep you safe. To say nothing of Auntie Nyota, and Uncle Scotty, and Leonard and Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk." She nodded solemnly, not entirely convinced. "I'll tuck

you back into bed, how would that be?" Sulu asked, and the three men all escorted the little girl back to her room.

"Would you like me to tell you a nice Russian story to help you fall back asleep?" Chekov asked her, glancing at Hikaru and Ben.

"Is there such a thing as a nice Russian story?" Sulu asked ruefully.

"I will tell her some appalling North American knock-knock jokes instead," Chekov agreed. "Hikaru, it has been a long and terrible day. We will work out what we must do in the morning. I remember where the guest room is. Go sleep with your husband."

Sulu kissed his daughter, and then kissed her again, and Chekov finally shooed him out.

"Benny," Sulu whispered in dread when the door closed behind them, trying very hard not to sob. "You were dead. You both were dead."

Ben leaned forward and kissed him, achingly gentle, mindful that his husband was literally *trembling* in his arms. "I'm so sorry, Hikaru. I'm so sorry you've had to live that." He tugged him toward their room. "How about a hot water shower, then we get into bed and listen to each other's hearts beat, and sleep?"

Hikaru cupped Ben's cheek in a hand, tracing his thumb across evening stubble. "Shower with me?" he asked.

Ben hesitated. "Hikaru, are you sure you're up for that? Because from where I'm standing you're coming apart."

"I expected to die today, Ben," Hikaru admitted. "We all did; we assumed we were going to our deaths. But we consoled ourselves with the hope that we were saving the people we loved. And instead we failed; I watched you die again. And yet here you are. I *am* coming apart, Ben. And I'm not sure what I've got tonight. But I need you."

Ben studied him. "Okay," he agreed at last, and redirected them to the bathroom that adjoined their bedroom. He undressed himself, then slowly and reverently undressed Hikaru, letting his hands slide and linger, much more about comfort than arousal, although the latter was coming on for Ben quickly enough.

He chuckled slightly at himself. "Lube's by the screen in the bedroom. All my sex is subspace; didn't expect you home, as it happens. Just a second," Ben said, and stepped out to get it. He enjoyed the pleasant burn of Hikaru's appreciative gaze when he came back.

"You're gorgeous," Hikaru breathed.

"You should talk. God, those muscles on you. Also, you're doing better than you thought you might," Ben said, letting his own gaze linger on the rising evidence that his husband appreciated him very much. Still, Ben sensed that he needed to guide this tonight. The story of his own supposed death a month from now didn't feel real, although it was horrifyingly clear that Hikaru had lived it. Hikaru had been ready to sacrifice his life today (might yet give his life to save the Earth, Ben tried not to think). Perhaps unsurprisingly, although Ben was meant to be the one who was dead, it was Hikaru who felt like a ghost.

"Come on, flyboy," Ben whispered, wrapping his husband in his arms. "I'm alive; so are you. And I'll prove it."

Pavel and Demora were eating their way through a massive pile of pancakes when the Sulus finally managed to get out of bed in the morning.

"Good morning, my sunshine," Hikaru said to her.

"Good morning," Chekov answered, and he and Demora laughed uproariously together at his wit. "I had a thought, last night," Pavel continued, helping himself to more pancakes. "What about the Galilei Observatory on Ganymede? It was designed for closely observing Jupiter and its moons."

Sulu frowned. "It's been unmanned for twenty years."

"Unmanned, but not disassembled. It still streams data to the University of Bologna. The equipment is just what we need."

Sulu nodded. "Do we go there alone, or do we ask Starfleet for help?"

Pavel poked at his breakfast. "I've been thinking about that too. I'm worried about going to Starfleet. We are supposed to be a thousand light years away. And I know that Mr. Scott, Mr. Spock, and the Captain have not been, shall we say, *fully forthcoming* in their logs. Not about time travel, the multiiverse, or red matter. Just showing up with a wild story about those things might not go well. Worst case scenario is they lock us up as imposters, or Mirror alternates."

"We can't risk that," Sulu said fervently.

"I agree. But how do we get to Jupiter without Starfleet?"

"My uncle has that shuttle," Ben interjected.

"That piece of crap?" Sulu moaned, but it was the only idea they had. They spent a week working on the rickety shuttle, and another gathering instrumentation and equipment. Sulu spent every stolen moment he could with his family, but his stomach roiled in knots because each moment was also closer to their deaths.

It didn't occur to him that Ben and Demora intended to come with them until they were almost ready to go.

“No,” Hikaru said flatly. “Absolutely not.”

“I am not spending one second away from you that I don’t have to,” Ben answered belligerently, and Sulu honestly couldn’t fault that reasoning. A piece of him wondered too if he might be able to protect them, to take them with him to the future. And so Sulu gave in.

Demora had only ever been on commercial shuttles, and spent the entire trip out to Jupiter in Hikaru’s lap, her hands on his as he piloted the ship.

“She’s a natural,” Pavel said softly to Ben.

“All she talks about is Starfleet,” Ben sighed. “This just seals it.”

The massive gas giant soon filled their view, roiling with ancient storms, and then the cratered face of Ganymede. Earth had invested heavily in moon habitations early in its space exploration, but after the development of warp had turned to the plentiful, easier worlds to live. There were no permanent settlements on any of the Jovian moons, but the Galilei Observatory was still intact. Sulu docked the shuttle, and they were grateful when the sensors showed that the Observatory’s atmosphere had been replenished by the shuttle’s and was stable. They settled in, squatters in the Observatory, but it was unlikely that anyone on Earth was paying attention.

They didn’t know when the Weapon would arrive, and the adults took turns monitoring their equipment. When they weren’t, they watched Jupiter, or played cards, or sang songs. It was almost a camping trip, but there was a true monster lurking.

The Sulus were napping together in a comfortable pile on the third day when Chekov woke them urgently. “There it is!” Chekov cried, for the Weapon had just blinked into existence, and was visible outside the observation window even to their naked eyes. He scanned it with the Observatory’s precise instruments, pulling the raw data into his linked tricorder. He didn’t blink, his eyes glued to the display, memorizing the coordinates of the Weapon in time and space, just in case the tricorder failed. He locked them in his mind and knew, should he survive this day, he’d been able to quote them again even when he was a hundred and forty years old.

Hikaru spun toward Ben and Demora. He could feel it; they’d done what they came to do, and the Guardian was pulling them back. But his little family wasn’t on Earth, like he’d thought; they were right in the path of the Weapon’s first blood. He kissed Ben urgently, with every bit of love and passion he had. “I’ll save you,” he cried fiercely. Then he knelt in front of his precious daughter and wrapped his arms around her, hoping beyond hope that he could take her with him. “I love you,” he murmured, his tears falling into her hair. “I love you!”

Demora looked up at Ben in confusion, and started to sob, because her papa had just disappeared—Sulu and Chekov were gone. In their place was quickly-dissipating shards of light, like lightning in space, and the heavy smell of ozone. Ben scooped Demora up and held her to his chest so she couldn’t see the terrible Weapon bearing down on them through the observation windows, black and red and terrible. Ben prayed for, and feared, the appearance of the *Enterprise*. If it didn’t appear, they would be dead in a few minutes. If it *did* appear, he knew with certain despair that Hikaru would die. He hadn’t said how the *Enterprise* would destroy the Weapon, but Ben knew perfectly well why Hikaru and Pavel needed the precise coordinates. They intended to put the *Enterprise* inside the evil thing, and then destroy the warp core. So Ben held Demora close so she wouldn’t have to watch her papa die, and wept, as heartbroken as his child.

And then, outside in the black of space, something completely unexpected happened.

“Demora!” Ben whispered in wonder. “Look!”

Mirror Universe, Terra, Stardate 2269.101

Scott and Uhura were in the most dangerous place either of them could imagine—the Mirror universe. Scotty had been tortured to death here, a hundred times, maybe more, although he couldn’t remember any of it. Nyota did, however, and it was a brittle, bloody layer to the nightmares that plagued her. It seemed cruel to send the two of them back here, but there had to be a reason. There was something they had to do, some task to save the Earth, the Federation, and the universe.

“What do we do?” Uhura asked in despair. “What are we supposed to do here, of all the godforsaken places?”

“I have a hunch,” Scotty said with a frown. “But first we have tae steal a shuttle. I have a feeling that there is a massive box orbiting Jupiter, and a half-constructed Weapon inside. We get there, and maybe there is something we can do tae weaken it.”

Uhura nodded thoughtfully. “That makes sense. If this San Francisco is anything like ours, there is a shuttle facility right on the bay. Two or three kilometers?”

Scott nodded. “Aye,” he said, and they moved swiftly through the dangerous night.

The shuttle hanger was just where they thought it would be. It would be bustling in the morning, but was dark and quiet now. They slipped inside, staying in the shadows, and were grateful they had when there was a security desk and a Terran officer guarding the main shuttle staging platform. He was young and bored of this lonely Gamma shift assignment, and was engrossed in his padd.

“We need to take care of the guard, and also get into the computer system. Fake identities and fake orders would make this all much easier,” Uhura whispered.

“Agreed,” Scotty murmured. “One of us is going tae have tae distract him, the other get tae the computer. And I think the distraction has tae be me. You feel comfortable hacking intae the system?”

“I can do it,” she said confidently. “But are you sure you’re the better, um ... distraction?”

“You’re much prettier than me, that’s for certain, but he’s watching porn on his padd. Yeh can just see the reflection in the window behind

him, see? And he's jerking off under the desk. Given his choice of viewing ...” Scotty trailed off.

She watched the reflection for a minute, then nodded. “You do seem to have more the equipment he's interested in. We could just shoot him instead?” she said, gripping her phaser.

Scott shook his head. “We're here tae do something tae the Weapon. If we damage it and they know we did, they'll just fix it. We have tae be soft and careful, work something in that they willnae notice. We go shooting a place up and they'll notice that right quick.”

Nyota agreed. “Be *careful*, Scotty, everyone in the Mirror is a bastard. Don't take it any further than you have to.”

“I've had sex in back alleys with plenty of people whose name I didnae remember for reasons much less noble than saving the universe,” he answered ruefully. “I'll do what I need tae do.” He took a breath, tugged his cap so it shadowed his face, then walked toward the guard. “I hate fuckin' Gamma shift,” Scotty said nonchalantly, wandering in with his hands in his pockets.

The guard stiffened. “Who the hell are you?”

“Aww, dinnae be that way. I'm the new guy. And we've been flirting for a week ... I thought,” Scotty said, as though disappointed.

The guard frowned at him. “Oh, right. Uh, yeah. I didn't recognize you. You're out of uniform.”

“Ah, come on,” Scotty complained, getting close, and he reached out and straightened the guard's collar, letting his hand linger. The guard glanced down at it, and swallowed. “Are you going tae tell on me? I'm nae on duty; I came down here special tae see you. You're breaking my heart.” Then Scotty let his gaze and hands drop, and smirked. “Yeh touching yerself back here?”

“No,” the guard denied guiltily, but gasped at whatever Scotty was doing with his hands.

“Just happy tae see me, then?” Scotty teased, then leaned forward and kissed him, open mouthed and sloppy. The guard gave a squeak of surprise, then tried to dominate the kiss like a good Terran officer, but Scott understood the danger of anything other than perfect control over this encounter, and wouldn't let him. “You be good,” Scott growled at him, nipping at his throat and trailing a thumbnail up his groin through his trousers, enough to make the guard buck against him with a groan. “I'll take my knees in a minute. Be patient, you'll like this.”

Still hidden, Nyota grimaced. This wasn't the first time she'd seen her friend seduce someone, but never anything like this, and it was hell to watch. Then Scotty had the unresisting guard by the front of his trousers, and was pulling them back into a row of darkened shuttles. He glanced briefly at where Nyota was, and she nodded, although she doubted he could see her.

The moment they were out of sight of the console Uhura dashed in. She needed to create three things: two false identities and one forged set of orders. She was an expert in all languages, and that included those of computers. She was as good at this as Scotty or Spock, and was into the system within a minute. Two identities, then the shuttle requisition for the following morning, with a redirected payload of coffee cells for food synthesizers. It took less than ten minutes. Nyota did a quick scan of the facility; there was a quartermaster's replicator and closet on the other side of the building, so they would be able to look the part.

Nyota could hear Scotty and the guard coming back, Scotty intentionally loud and talking dirty, and she slipped into the shadows again. Scott was wiping his mouth; the guard looked blissed and starry-eyed. Scotty kissed him again, and the guard moaned. “A hell of a lot more fun than coming lonely in yer pants, aye? ‘Night, love,” Scotty said smugly, and sauntered off.

Nyota caught him near the hanger doors.

“Are you okay?” she asked urgently.

“Aye,” he said. “Just a dumb kid. He didnae touch me anywhere I didnae let him. Only harm is that he now knows what a proper blowjob is supposed tae feel like.”

“Scotty...”

“Seriously, Nyota. I havenae sucked a complete stranger behind a shuttlecraft in a long time, but I've absolutely done it before. Did yeh get the job done?”

“Yeah,” Nyota said, dropping it reluctantly. “Orders for tomorrow to take a shuttle. I'm ‘Nyota Sorenson.’”

“Spock's son Soren. Okay. Easy enough tae remember.”

“And you're ‘Scott Christopher.’”

“Fair enough,”

“Lieutenants both,” Uhura continued. “And there is a quartermasters closet nearby ... just here,” she said. Scott bypassed the lock, and they replicated uniforms and flight suits. They stuffed their old clothes and supplies into a duffle. Phasers back in pockets, they looked each other over, neither of them happy to see the Empire symbol on one another. “Eight hours until our ‘orders.’ Where do we go until then?” Uhura asked, and then she sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Not the bar, I hope. I'm really, really exhausted, to be honest.”

Scotty nodded. “Aye, well, we woke up this morning, some 36 hours ago, years in the future and in a different universe. And we didnae expect tae live tae sleep again.”

“I suppose that explains it,” she said ruefully.

“Aye. The kid had a credit chip in his pocket, and I lifted it,” Scott continued, and held up a card. “We passed a shitty motel about half a block

away, we could hide and rest there.” They checked in easily enough, the system entirely automated. Scotty headed straight for the bathroom and took a drink of water out of the sink, rising out his mouth and spitting the taste of the guard back into the basin. He scooped a handful of water over the back of his head, then looked up at his reflection with a sigh.

“Planetside and the cheap bastards just have sonics,” Scotty complained. “Mind if I shower first?”

“Of course not,” Nyota answered quietly.

The only good thing about a sonic shower is that it was impossible for it to be dirty. He shut the door behind him, started the shower, and pulled off his clothes. Then he sat on the floor, and despite having it on the hottest setting, he *shook*. His mind felt white with static, unable to think of anything other than that his life and deaths in this reality had been agony.

It was impossible for him to remember any of it, of course. The Federation hadn’t used transporters on living beings until they had been able to prove continuity of consciousness. That is, that neural connections—memory and experience—changed from dematerialization through transport and rematerialization, though that change was incredibly small. There was no such continuity of consciousness from when the Terran Empire had beamed him away to torture him and reset him, again and again. Which made him a literal copy of his original self. Setting aside the existential issues he had decided to firmly ignore, it meant it was impossible for him to remember anything about the Terran Empire. And yet, here he sat, shaking like a leaf.

He wished he could think of Mira. She’d been dead two years, her last message to him still unwatched because she would have sent it to him knowing of her approaching death. It was *goodbye*, and how the hell could you find the strength to watch that? But he’d stood in a universe earlier today where she was alive—was *still* alive, because she was on *Yorktown*, not Earth.

He’d failed the Earth today, and its fourteen billion humans. His Gran was dead. His sister. His nephew. He couldn’t think of them. But Mira—for the first time in two years, his heart gave him permission to think of her. But when your throat still ached from swallowing down a dick you hadn’t wanted there, it felt like a violation to think of your dead-somewhen girlfriend.

The sonic was on a timer—*fucking cheap bastards*—and switched off. And he was clean, and that’s about the best he could say.

He put on his trousers, but couldn’t bear the Terran uniform and pulled his Starfleet undershirt over his head instead.

He walked back into the tiny motel room. “Yours,” he told Uhura, not able to look at her. “It’s on a timer, so ...” and then she had her arms around him. “God almighty, Scotty,” she whispered into his skin, and she was shaking worse than him.

Because, of course, she *remembered* being here.

“Okay,” he said, pulling back a bit, running his hands up and down his arms. “I’m going tae put you in the shower and we try tae sleep. And in the morning we eat some rations, take some meds, get this done and get *home*. Aye?”

“Yeah,” she agreed shakily.

He helped her take off her uniform because her hands were trembling too much to do it herself, then bodily put her in the shower and pulled the screen shut. He moved to leave the bathroom, and she called out: “*please* stay. I’m not sure I can bear to be alone.”

“Aye,” he said, and sat down on the tile floor and closed his eyes. He could hear her too-rapid breathing, on the edge of sobs, and dug deep for a distraction. “Did I ever tell yeh about the time I had tae pretend tae be McCoy’s boyfriend tae keep him from breaking the Prime Directive?”

“... *what?*” she asked, and he took it as permission to continue.

“Before the first five year mission. Before Khan, when we were blooming around at the edge of the Federation. I think you were home, visitin’ your gran. So we were on this planet. Pre-warp, pre- *industrial*, Prime Directive firmly in place, but nosing around for Klingons because we thought they were interfering. And we’re delivering stuff, pretending tae be local merchants. We’ve got this horse. Way more legs than a horse should have. Whatever number that is.”

“Four, Scotty,” Nyota said through the screen, and she sounded steadier.

“It had more than that. I dinnae ken. Eight, maybe. And we’re at the governor’s mansion, and getting Klingon life signs from *inside*. The governor’s daughter is watching us, pretty openly ogling McCoy. Who, full credit tae him, has a nice arse.”

“I never really noticed,” Nyota said, a ripple of amusement in her voice.

“Aye. Well, he does. And he knows it, by the way. And McCoy notices her noticin’, so he pretends tae get trampled by the octo-horse. Throws this god-almighty fuss about how he’s dying, and the daughter insists we come in.”

Scott shifted his position; the floor was hard, and he was *aching* with exhaustion, still shaky in the center of himself. He didn’t let it come through his voice. “So I go off tae pretend tae look for some wet cloths. Got some good scans; Klingons confirmed, enough tae pass off tae the diplomats so they can growl at each other about treaties. Job done, I head back tae McCoy. And the governor’s *very pretty* daughter has him spread-eagle in bed, no clothes left but his pants.”

“And you came barging in and cockblocked him?” Nyota guessed.

“I got an eyeful, anyhow. So I’m backing out; job’s done, what the hell do I care? And it *abruptly* occurs tae me that although we had surgery on our faces tae blend in, his anatomy is going tae be ... seriously alien.”

“Oh, god,” Nyota groaned. “Is this a *bullshit* story?”

He ignored her. “And I have no choice. I have tae throw a fucking fit. ‘How dare he’ and ‘what about our vows’ and just whatever the hell I can think of. And he is staring at me, full-on pissed. And I’m gesturing very firmly at his groin, which is making its shape, ah, known. ‘My love, you promised that was *just for my eyes*.’ And suddenly it occurs tae him what I’m on about. His eyes go round as tea saucers. He grabs his trousers and we run like hell, find the Captain, and never breathe a word of it tae each other ever again. And that’s the story about how Leonard McCoy’s alien dick nearly broke the Prime Directive.”

Nyota was giggling on the other side of the glass. And if it was a little hysterical, it was still better than sobs. The timer on the shower clicked off. Scott sighed and pushed himself stiffly to his feet. “I’m going tae let you get dressed, lass,” he said gently, and left the bathroom.

He turned off the light in the main room, stumbling a bit over his own feet, and collapsed into the single narrow, filthy bed, which dipped a few minutes later when she joined him in it. “I think you made that story up,” she accused him.

“If McCoy denies it, he’s lying,” Scotty insisted.

“This day has gone a little strange,” Nyota said, putting her head on his chest.

“That’s an understatement,” Scotty said, the barest ripple of laughter in his voice. There was little else to say, and unexpectedly, they both slept.

Uhura woke sometime near dawn to Scotty shaking her awake and her heart pounding hard against her ribs. “Yeh cannae scream in your sleep, lass,” he said apologetically. “No’ here. No’ like that.”

“Sorry Scotty,” she groaned. “I hate this universe and its horrible people. Nightmares about what they did to you.”

“Aye,” he said softly. “So I gathered. Come on. Let’s eat some rations and get ready for this day.”

He pulled his hypo out of the bag, but his hands were shaking and he nearly dropped it. Uhura took it from him and drew a dose into the pressure head.

“Jesus, Scotty. That’s a hell of a lot of meds,” she said.

“At the very top of the safe range. Past it, actually,” he admitted, rolling his neck from the heavy dose. “M’Benga doesnae like it either, and has been fretting about what tae do with me, because tae be perfectly honest even this level has been barely getting me through for the last few weeks. Not likely tae matter much though, not if this ends like we’re planning.”

She took her own medication, very glad Leonard had thought about it. They chewed on some tasteless food from the away packs, and Uhura reluctantly told Scott what she knew about the people here. “Your instincts with the guard were spot-on. These people are cruel. Weakness is exploited. No friends; just temporary alliances. We’ll have to be careful how we treat each other. Even if people assume we’re together, those relationships aren’t any better.”

“It’s strange,” he said. “I know I was in this universe for weeks. And I shouldnae remember anything, and I dinnae, but there is this feeling of complete dread just being here.”

“The Vulcans would say that your *katra* knows; your soul remembers,” she answered softly.

“Due respect tae the Vulcans, but all the times I’ve been dead, I’ve never seen any evidence I had a soul,” he said with a shrug.

“All the times you’ve been alive, I have,” she countered, and he smiled and shook his head at her.

“Let’s do this,” he said firmly. They pulled on their Terran uniforms and walked together back into the cruel world. The shuttle terminal was much busier, and fortunately there was an entirely different guard sitting at the desk.

“Christopher, Sorenson,” Scotty said curtly, gesturing to the two of them.

“Right,” the guard said, equally curt. “Orders last night. You’re loaded and ready. Shuttle *Napoleon*.”

Scotty tossed the nightguard’s credit chip on the floor as they walked through the rows. “Hopefully he figures he just ‘dropped’ it and doesnae check too closely on the charges,” he explained. “I’d rather not raise suspicion.”

The shuttle was essentially identical to any Starfleet shuttle, other than the blasted Empire symbol that was painted on everything. Thirty minutes later they were in orbit. “Coordinates 23.17.46.11,” Scotty said, pulling the numbers where the *Vengeance* had been constructed from his memory. “Let’s see if I’m right.” The trip out was quick, and Scott was right; there was a massive spacedock tucked between Jupiter and Io. They looked at one another as it came into view, both relieved and afraid.

“Now what?” Nyota asked.

“Now we figure out how tae get in.”

The comm cracked on: “*Shuttle, identify.*”

Uhura reached out and flipped the comm. “Shuttle *Napoleon*,” she said, affecting boredom. “Carrying equipment and supplies.”

“*You are not on our register. What equipment and supplies?*”

Nyota exchanged a glance with Scotty, then scowled to get into character. “You think we know? What, they are telling shuttle pilots about classified payloads now? They said ‘fly this to these coordinates, hurry up, don’t ask questions.’ What the hell do you think we’re doing out

here? We didn't just stumble across a big box in space. We're here to do a job. But we'll be happy to go back. Just give us your name, I'm sure they'll be eager to know what idiot turned us around ..."

"*That ... won't be necessary,*" the controller said nervously. "*You're cleared to enter, Shuttle Napoleon.*"

Scotty smirked at her, and mouthed 'good job' as the massive hanger doors opened to let them in. The smile immediately slipped off his face, for inside was the half-constructed Weapon, already terrifying and menacing.

They exchanged a heavy glance. There was no question that this is where they were supposed to be. But what, exactly, they were supposed to do was still very unclear.

They landed the shuttle, and weren't paid much attention by the bored and surly dock crew, which gave them the opportunity to slip away. Getting through the security checkpoints necessary to get anywhere close to the Weapon was going to be hard. Wandering around the station was easier, especially after they both snagged a padd and walked with scowls and purpose. This reality seemed particularly susceptible to the power of authority to stifle questions and thought.

Scott settled down at a computer station like he was supposed to be there. "The plans tae the Weapon are here," he said softly to Nyota. "But I cannae access them. Access is locked tae specific consoles ... in restricted sections. Damn. Other than ... one set of quarters." Scotty sighed. "Those of Project Captain Montgomery Scott. The bastard is *here* on the station."

Nyota's heart clenched; she knew just how bad her friend's counterpart really was, but there wasn't a choice. They located the quarters on the station map, then headed off. They got a few sideways glances, but a firm step and withering look of authority was enough to put off any questions.

They paused outside the quarters. There was a thumb pad for entry. "I suppose we'll see how close our DNA really is," Scotty said, and pressed his finger to the pad. The door swished open, revealing a darkened interior. They darted in and swept the quarters quickly, phasers in hand, although it would be dangerous to fire them. It was critical that no one know that they were here, and there were certainly internal sensors that would alert to phaser fire. Uhura grabbed a knife from a sheath by the door. In the bedroom, a naked woman sat up and looked at them, her eyes wide. She was chained to the bed, and her eyes darted to Scott's face, confused and fearful.

"Shit," he muttered unhappily.

Uhura pointed the knife at her. "Would you like to get out of here?" Uhura asked. The woman nodded. "Sit there, shut up, and we'll let you go when we're done," Uhura said.

Scotty sat down at the computer across the room, and with a few keystrokes had the plans for the Weapon. His eyes moved quickly across the schematics, taking them in as swiftly as possible.

"You're not him," the woman said in amazement. "Who are you?" And then she gasped. "The alternate universe. You're the one from the alternate universe."

Scott spun toward her in the chair, and Uhura held the knife more firmly. "What the hell do you know about that?" Uhura asked evenly.

"Sometimes he pretends we're friends," the woman spat bitterly. "Real lovers, instead of a slave chained to a bed for him to rut on when the mood takes him. If he's drunk or high enough, he'll talk about you. He hates you because you understood the math and he doesn't. I thought you were dead, though?"

"Which time?" Scott muttered darkly, and turned back to the computer. "Nyota, it isnae susceptible tae exploding the engines, even straight down its throat," he said in despair. "At least, not like this ... maybe I can make some changes, they havenae built the maw yet."

Before he could do anything, the door to the quarters slid open. Nyota managed to scramble out of sight, back into the bed with the woman who gave her a terrified look, but Scotty was exposed and in the open, his phaser out of reach. The mirror Scott walked into the room, a phaser already in his hand, set to kill.

"I'll be damned," the other Scott said in amusement, and knocked Scotty's phaser off the table and onto the ground. "I got an unauthorized entry alarm, but didnae expect tae see you. You were dead. Means that your precious, 'honorable' Captain used the transporter one last time tae commit a terrible crime against yeh, and yeh dinnae remember a thing about it ... You like it?" he asked, changing the subject, tipping his head at the schematics of the Weapon. "Pretty, isnae it? Your maths. Your ideas."

"You're not just killing my universe," Scotty said evenly. "You'll bring down the multiverse. Including this universe."

"You think I dinnae ken?" the Mirror Scott snorted disdainfully. "*They* dinnae, of course. Kirk. The Emperor. Even Spock. But I do."

"Then why the hell are you doing this?" Scotty said angrily, cautiously circling his counterpart.

The mirror Scott shrugged. "They murdered Nyota Uhura. I expressed the slightest hesitation over this damn thing," he gestured at the plans. "And they murdered her. We'd only slept together a few times; I wasnae her type, and she wasnae really mine. And yet, she was something tae me I dinnae have words for, and they knew it. So they killed her." His voice was shaking in fury. "And so I'll build the cunts their Weapon. I'll be rich; I'll be powerful. I'll tear my vengeance across the multiverse, and when it is too late for them tae stop me, I'll take my revenge on this universe too."

Scotty stared at his alternate counterpart, gutted. "Human language doesnae have the word for what you feel for her," he told the other man softly. "But Vulcan does. Not soulmate. Not that, that's the wrong word. 'Soultraveler,' she told me once, is the closest translation. Listen tae me. I've threatened death and hell on the universe in her name too. I understand. But dinnae do this. Yeh dinnae have tae do this."

“No,” the other Scott said. “I dinnae have tae. But I *want* tae, so I will. I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been having the slightest bit of trouble with the maths. And you’re going tae help me.” He holstered his phaser, but pulled out a knife, spinning it expertly in his fingers. “You dinnae remember how this went the last time. Let me assure you it was even worse than you’ve been told. I advise yeh tae cooperate.”

This was *bad*. Not just because the mirror Scott had a knife and clearly knew how to use it, although Scotty knew enough about what had happened to him the last time not to relish that thought. It was bad because they’d been caught. Even if he could keyboard smash some weakness into the plans for the Weapon, the other Scott would just fix it.

Unless, of course, he was dead.

There was a flicker from the bedroom, and Scotty knew Nyota was moving. Scotty jumped forward and grabbed the blade of the knife directly with his left hand. It bit hard into the artificial flesh, the tip of the knife punching straight through his palm and out the other side, and it hurt like *hell*. But now the knife was caught between his artificial titanium metacarpals, and Scotty had the advantage. He twisted his wrist, disarming his doppelgänger.

Nyota had moved at the same moment. When Scotty grabbed the knife, she pulled the phaser out of the other Scott’s belt, then shoved her own knife through his back. The mirror version of Scott grunted in shock and looked down at his chest where the bloody tip of the blade was just showing. The man laughed faintly, incredulously; a lifetime looking over his shoulder for this very moment, and he’d misjudged it. He tilted his head just enough to catch a glimpse of Nyota Uhura, twisting the knife deeper into his back. “I didnae think yeh had it in yeh,” he wheezed, grudgingly respectful. He dropped to his knees, then fell forward, dead.

Uhura looked across at the living version of her friend, who was staring back at her in pained horror.

“Sorry, Scotty,” she said, looking down at the blood on her hands. “I couldn’t see another way out of this. I know you couldn’t either. And I wasn’t going to let you do it, or let him hurt you any more,” she finished fiercely, trying not to let him see how fast her heart was racing, how she could barely *breathe*, even though she knew the body on the floor didn’t belong to her friend. “Are you okay?” she continued, shoving the panic back. She gestured at the knife though his hand.

Scotty reached out and cradled her cheek in his good hand. “Nyota,” he whispered. “Dinnae yeh have nightmares enough?”

“Let’s do what we’re here to do,” she told him calmly, although her hands were shaking. She grabbed his left wrist and forearm and turned his damaged hand palm up. “Ouch,” she commiserated.

“Aye, it’s stinging a bit,” he understated. “Pull the knife out slowly; the hand will automatically clamp down the blood vessels around the wound.” She slid it out, shivering a little—it was uncanny to see the clean puncture and the mechanical components beneath. He’d wasn’t bleeding much, and any stray drips should just match the other Scott’s blood, which was rapidly spreading across the floor. Still, there was no reason to risk it. She wiped the knife off on his tunic, then cut through the material of his sleeve and bandaged the hole in his hand. Scotty nodded, then stepped around the body on the floor and went back to work at the computer one-handed, altering the plans of the Weapon just slightly. Not enough to raise suspicion, but enough to give them a fighting chance.

In the bedroom beyond, Nyota cut the slave free and replicated her a Terran uniform. The woman pulled Nyota’s knife from her captor’s back and wiped it on the sheets of the bed he’d so often raped her on, then hid it in her tunic. Nyota handed her the other knife as well, and the woman slipped it into her boot.

“They’ll think it was me who killed him,” she said evenly. “Sex slave kills their owner and escapes? Happens every day. They won’t even bother to assume otherwise, much less imagine that people like you were here.”

“Run fast,” Uhura said, giving her the phaser. “There’s a shuttle we brought here. Shuttle *Napoleon*. It won’t be missed for some time.”

The woman gave a smile of satisfaction. “There are plenty of people who hate the Terran Empire as much as you must. A shuttle is quite the prize. It will bring me wealth and renown. And you never know. In time, maybe the Resistance will be able to crush the Empire. Thank you,” she said, and slipped out of the room.

“Almost done,” Scotty said. “Did you know, Nyota, I once nearly destroyed a planet in revenge for those priestesses who stole yer brain? The only reason I didnae is because Kirk stopped me.”

“You’re not him,” she answered fiercely, knowing exactly where his self-loathing was headed. “And I don’t believe a word of what he said to you about his motivations. The two of you talked a lot when they kidnapped you, so he knows you better than you think. He was just trying to mess with your head. You’re *not* him.”

“I wonder,” Scotty sighed, and hit a final key, then reached for her hand. That did it, and the Guardian grabbed them again and pulled them home across space and time. In the room, small sparks of lightning filled the air, then dissipated around the body of the Weapon’s designer, while across the station a fierce former slave and future freedom fighter named Michael Burnham stole a shuttle and moved toward her own fate.

Prime Universe, Space, Stardate 6770.15.

“Sorry, sir,” the backup helmsman apologized, rubbing his elbow where he had banged it, hard, on the helm. “Somehow I didn’t anticipate it would be that rough coming through the portal.”

“The ship is already badly damaged, Mr. DePaul,” Spock said, straightening in the command chair. “I very much doubt any of that was your fault.” Spock keyed the comm for engineering. “Status?” he asked.

“Not good,” came the soft voice of Lieutenant Keenser. “Systems down broadly shipwide.”

“Sir!” DePaul called urgently. “Something’s got us. A ship and a tractor beam, sir!”

“On the screen,” Spock ordered. To their surprise, it was a Starship. And then the saucer turned toward them, and the bridge went silent in shock, for it said USS *Enterprise* 1701.

“We are being hailed, sir,” said Uhura’s deputy, Lieutenant Palmer. “By ... Captain James T. Kirk.”

“Fascinating. On screen, please,” Spock answered, and the ship and starfield vanished and were replaced by a nearly familiar face. It was unquestionably Kirk, although his face was not identical to that of their commanding officer. This was not a mirror universe, but a true parallel, and the variations of DNA and environment made themselves known in subtle ways. Even so, Spock recognized this precise face. It was the face of a man in a photo that Ambassador Spock had carried across time and space as his most prized possession. This face was younger, but the same man.

“Captain Kirk,” Spock greeted him.

On the screen, Kirk glanced behind him, at his own Spock. Another familiar face. The face of Ambassador Spock; a century younger but the same face.

“Fascinating,” said the other Spock.

Kirk blinked. “Captain Spock, I presume?”

“No,” Spock answered smoothly. “Commodore Kirk is not aboard the ship at the moment. I assume you have questions. I will confess that I do as well. Briefly stated: we are from an alternate timeline and have been sent into this universe in an attempt to save our own, although I am uncertain how to accomplish it, or why we have been sent here, to you.”

Kirk frowned on the screen. “We were in an alternate universe ourselves a few days ago. With backward flowing time. It was ... unpleasant.”

The other Spock spoke. “Which may make your presence in our universe entirely accidental. Space-time may be weak in this vicinity. If you were traversing universes, perhaps you are here entirely by chance.”

“It is possible, although I have reason to believe otherwise. Regardless, I confess I am grateful to see you, Captain.”

“We don’t know that we are completely glad to see you,” said a man standing behind the Captain, and it was McCoy; that tone *had to be* McCoy. “We had a nasty encounter with a mirror universe a few years ago. And they were frankly terrible. How do we know you’re not them?”

“Bones,” Kirk chided.

“That is a reasonable question,” Spock answered. “I presume you are referring to the Terran Empire. We have likewise had ... unpleasant encounters with that particular alternate. More than unpleasant. However we are a Federation Starship, not a Terran Warship.”

“Sir, they are spewing radiation everywhere,” said a Scottish brogue off the screen. “They are in trouble.”

Spock knew it was true. “Captain, I am missing my entire senior staff at present. We have been scattered across the multiverse, and the ship is heavily damaged. Any assistance you could render would be appreciated.”

Kirk nodded grimly. “Commander Spock, I propose beaming a small damage control team to your ship. Then you and I can talk face to face.”

Spock was unsurprised that the Captain of the other *Enterprise* was as reckless as his own. “I concur, Captain,” Spock said. “Our transporters are down, however. We will need to rely on yours.”

“We’re reading a transporter pad. We’ll beam in there. Say ten minutes?”

“Agreed, Captain.” Spock gave the conn to DePaul and collected a security team, then waited in the transporter room, his hands folded behind his back. The unmistakable sound of a transporter beam filled the room, and Spock straightened, smoothing his black tunic. The two security officers unobtrusively wrapped their hands around their phasers.

Five figures materialized: Kirk, McCoy, someone who had to be Scott, and a security detail. Kirk had left Spock’s own counterpart on the other ship. Logical, although Spock admitted a small twinge of disappointment. It would have been interesting to see Ambassador Spock in his youth. The Ambassador had never mentioned this, although there was no reason why he would have. Still, Spock wondered whether history had been changed, or whether Ambassador Spock had known this moment was coming. There was no way of knowing.

The other *Enterprise* officers looked around the unfamiliar transporter room, then at Spock. “I hope you forgive the security team,” Kirk said. “It is a little difficult to trust all this, although I trust it more by the minute.”

“No offense is taken,” Spock said. “You will note that I have my own.”

“I had noticed that.” Kirk said, amused.

“From the readings we were getting, I need to see your engine room as quickly as I can,” said the engineer.

“I will take you myself, Mr. Scott,” Spock said. There was the faintest flicker of surprise on the man’s face; he hadn’t been introduced. Spock turned to his security officers. “Please take the remainder of the party to the briefing room.”

This universe’s Scott followed Spock out of the transporter room, taking in the corridors of the ship as they walked.

“*Enterprise* ‘A,’ Mr. Spock...” the man ventured at last as they rode the turbolift down, with the emphasis on the letter.

Spock nodded. “The second ship of her name. The first was ... lost in an incident.”

Scott frowned, unhappily pained. “I was afraid you’d say that.” They arrived in main engineering, and the engineer lifted his chin, taking her in. “And yet ... her voice is almost familiar,” he said softly to himself.

“Gentlebeings,” Spock announced, calling to the engineers. “This man is this universe’s counterpart to our Commander Scott. The Lieutenant Commander is here to help us with repairs in the Chief’s absence; please give him your full assistance.”

“I could use a look at schematics, tae start,” Scott said.

“Chief’s office,” Keenser said, leading him there, and Spock left the engineers to their duties.

It was a sign of how profoundly difficult this day had been that Spock didn’t consider the danger of sending an alternate Scott into the Chief Engineer’s office until he was in the corridor outside main engineering. Spock immediately spun on his heel and headed back. “Lieutenant Commander Scott,” he called, but it was too late; this universe’s Montgomery Scott was staring at the equations scrawled across the board in the office.

Spock breathed in relief; they were incomplete, the final lines hidden. “Well, there yeh are, lad,” Scott said softly to himself, and to the absent man who had written these equations. His hand was hovering over the board; one movement would scroll up the answer, and all the others that flowed from it. He glanced back at Spock. “Transwarp beaming.”

“Your equation,” Spock said simply.

Scott shook his head, and dropped his hand. “His.”

“No,” Spock corrected. “Yours, in time. His work then continues from it. In my universe, these breakthroughs exist nowhere but here, and in his mind—for good reason. I will tell you frankly that the chief engineer of this ship has suffered greatly to protect these discoveries from falling into hands that would misuse them.”

Scott looked at the incomplete lines one more time, his face drawn up somewhere between a frown a scowl, but in pity too.

With a single decisive movement, the engineer toggled the screen off. “As ‘fascinating’ as this all is, this ship has more immediate problems. What’s got you lads in this state, Commander? What has happened to you?”

“Our own trials,” Spock said smoothly, and pulled up the plans to the *Enterprise* before moving to go. “I am sure you have had your share. We appreciate your assistance. Watch your radiation exposure and please let me know if you need anything.”

“Aye,” Scott said, and sat at the Chief’s desk. There was much to do, but he couldn’t quite help himself, and opened the desk drawer. Some tools, some bits and bobs. An old-style black-and-white nude photo of a pretty lass with the words ‘*With love, Mira,*’ on the back, and Scott smiled fondly to see that. There was a vial of a red liquid that made him shiver with dread, and at the back of the drawer a hypo of medicine that made him sigh—the kind that had been in his mother’s bedside table. The dosage was set high; exceedingly, *worryingly* high. “Ah, you poor lad,” Scott commiserated sadly, then closed the drawer, glanced up at the blank screen, and went to work.

Spock walked through the corridors, questioning his own logic. In his life, he had had direct contact with two universes other than his own. In one, he had watched Jim’s hands shake in pain and rage as they cut Scott’s lifeless body down from the ceiling. And the other had included an ancient and emotional version of himself, a mad Romulan, and the murder of billions of Vulcans. Logically, he should not trust here. And yet he found that he did. He recalled Ambassador Spock’s words to him, once: to do what *felt* right. This was Ambassador Spock’s universe. He could feel it. And while these versions of his crewmates and himself were just as imperfect as they were, their intentions felt right, their souls honorable. These people were fundamentally *them*, for good and ill. Spock stopped briefly in his quarters, and then headed to the briefing room.

This universe’s Kirk and McCoy, and the security teams (theirs, and his) looked up at his arrival. “Is this you, Jim?” Spock asked, and handed him the photograph from Ambassador Spock’s effects.

Kirk stared down at the photo. At the strange uniforms, at the older faces, at his own eyes heavy with the weight of troubles and years. At his crew gathered around him. At his future.

“Yes, Mr. Spock,” Kirk said, handing it back. “It does appear to be. Am I allowed to ask how you came to have this?”

“It was carried by a traveler from your universe to mine who trusted you implicitly. His faith informs mine. I feel that I may place the same reliance in you that I place into my Commodore Kirk. Which is to say, my very life, and the life of my crew.”

Kirk’s eyes went soft at the speech, and he glanced over at McCoy. “I’m not going to attempt to guess who that traveler was. Although, frankly, I have a good idea.” Spock inclined his head, just slightly, and somehow they understood each other perfectly. Kirk continued. “It probably isn’t logical, but his trust in you in turn informs mine, Commander Spock.”

“Weirdest damn thing,” McCoy muttered. “You’re definitely Spock. But why don’t you look the same?”

“We had once assumed that my universe was a branch of yours, created by an incursion in time. Increasingly, however, we have become convinced that we are true parallels.”

“I would love to compare life stories, Commander,” Kirk said. “But even without the damage to your ship, I get the feeling that this is a crew on a desperate mission. Where is Commodore Kirk, and your senior staff?”

Spock paused, considering his words. “In your travels, did you ever encounter the Guardian of Forever?” he asked at last.

Kirk’s expression flickered in grief, and McCoy looked over at him, a haunted look on his face. “Yes,” Kirk answered quietly.

“As have we. On two occasions, now,” Spock said. “The Guardian has sent my crew across time and space to accomplish certain tasks necessary to ... stabilize our universe. It also brought the *Enterprise* here. I can only surmise that it is for assistance with repairs.”

Kirk looked across at Spock. And even on a different face, a different voice, he could read unspoken undercurrents. “Well,” Kirk said. “We’re glad to help. With your permission, I’ll go check on Mr. Scott. Then I think I will return to my ship. Do you need me to leave Dr. McCoy? Do you have injuries?”

“That would be appreciated,” Spock said, standing. Kirk glanced at McCoy, who followed Spock out to the medbay, and then Kirk followed the security officers to Engineering.

Scott was up to his armpits in something when Kirk arrived, helped by a little gray rocky fellow.

“I think that’s got it,” said the smaller engineer, very softly. “Let me go run a few tests on the transporter.”

“Lad’s name is Keenser,” Scott said fondly, dusting off his hands. “I knew a Keenser, back when I was a young engineer. We both managed to get ourselves in trouble with some admirals, half marooned on this backwater moon ...” Scott shook his head ruefully at the memory. “I think that’s the same lad. How’d it go, sir?”

“These people are *us*, Scotty,” Kirk said in amazement.

“Aye,” Scott agreed. “They are at that, or nearly so.” The engineer frowned. “For what it’s worth, this doesn’t read ‘future’ to me. The differences between this *Enterprise* and ours are cosmetic. They prefer touch screens to switches; god help ‘em in a power outage. But otherwise this ship would fit fine in our fleet.” Scott moved slowly around the room, trailing his fingers across the plating.

“*Enterprise A*,” he continued. “She feels young to me; less than ten years old. But she’s pushing her technical capacity. Even without the cracked core, this ship needs dry dock. I’m seeing jury rigging everywhere, repairs, *fabrication* of parts.” He gestured toward a computer panel. “There are seven and a half, almost eight years of Engineering logs here. A starship’s not meant to push that far. Five years of operation and she needs to be stripped to her bones and rebuilt. Something has happened to these people, and they’re not being completely honest with us.”

“I can think of two possibilities,” Kirk said, ticking them off on his fingers. “Either they are far from home or they are running and aren’t welcome back.”

“I can think of a third,” Scott said softly. “Home no longer exists.”

Captain Kirk nodded slowly. “Can you help them at all, Scotty?”

“A few things here and there. It’s the oddest damn thing, to have a wild repair idea and discover that someone has already done it, in the exact way I would.”

“You’re brilliant across universes,” Kirk said, amused.

“Or just predictable,” Scotty shrugged. “The other fellow worries me, to be completely honest. It takes a *hell* of a lot to crack a core. He was doing something intentionally that did it. The long and short of it is these people are in trouble, and there isn’t a lot to do for them in open space. I’m reluctant to send them back to wherever they are going in this condition. And the crew ... dressed all in black. Have you ever served on a ship when people expect they are going bravely to their deaths, sir?”

“I have,” Kirk answered softly.

“Me too,” Scott said heavily. “This feels like that.”

Kirk nodded tightly, agreeing. “Spock—this ship’s Spock—is playing his cards close to his vest. But I agree with you, Scotty. These people are on a suicide mission and they don’t want us to know. And they don’t want us to know *why*. And strangely, it isn’t a lack of trust ... I think Spock is afraid we’ll offer to come with them.”

“We will, won’t we?” Scott asked, both fierce and resigned. “Go with them, that is, whether they like it or not.”

“I think, Mr. Scott, that we can’t leave these people to die. Or at least, not die alone.”

“Aye,” Scott agreed.

Kirk flipped open his communicator. “Kirk to *Enterprise*.”

“*Spock here*,” came the reply.

“Beam me and the security team back aboard, Mr. Spock. Doctor McCoy and Mr. Scott will remain aboard for now to assist. I have a lot to tell you, and need your opinion about this very troubling situation.”

“*Of course, sir. Standby.*” A moment later the Captain beamed away, and Scotty turned back to his work.

By midafternoon, the guests had made their way up to the bridge. McCoy was looking over the bumps and bruises of the bridge crew, while Scott and Spock were working together under a damaged console.

A crack of electricity abruptly filled the room, which sparked with twisting light, and Scotty and Nyota stepped into existence. They looked around the room in profound relief, and then at each other. Then they both yanked their tunics over their heads like they were being burned—tunics emblazoned with the symbol of the Terran Empire. Nyota stepped into Spock's arms, and he could feel her trembling violently. He pressed his lips into her hair, and across the room, this universe's Scott and McCoy glanced at each other, startled by the display.

"Are you injured?" Spock asked Uhura and Scott urgently, noting the blood on Nyota's hands and the bandage on Scott's.

Neither answered the question. "Are the others back yet?" Uhura asked, straightening.

"No," Spock started, but the bridge sparked again, and Sulu and Chekov materialized into existence.

"Gentlemen," Spock greeted them.

Sulu looked fractured and shaken, on his knees with his arms extended around someone who wasn't there anymore, but Chekov was bursting with news.

"We went to the wrong place!" he cried. "Too late, and the wrong place! The Weapon didn't come through the multiverse in Earth orbit. It appeared at *Jupiter*, and devoured a whole fucking *gas giant* before heading to Earth! We had *no* chance of beating it at Earth!" Chekov ran to his station and swiftly began inputting numbers. "I have the precise spacetime coordinates of its first appearance."

Scott had hauled Sulu to his feet and was resting his uninjured hand on the helmsman's shoulder. He shook his head in amazement at Chekov's words. "How did we no' think of that, Mr. Spock? It makes complete sense. The Weapon definitely came from the Mirror," Scott said, and gratefully took his black duty tunic from a quick-thinking yeoman who had brought a change of clothes for the travelers. He pulled it on, a little awkwardly over his injured arm, his hand lingering for a moment on the silver Starfleet arrow. "The bloody thing was under construction behind Jupiter."

"The same coordinates as the *Vengeance*," Spock immediately surmised.

"Aye," Scott answered darkly.

"I knew it!" Chekov said, punching at the air.

"Mr. Spock, it wouldnae have been susceptible tae warp engines blowing up, even straight down its throat," Scott continued. "But we were able tae get a hold of the plans, and I made some changes. Its got an Achilles heel now. No' a big one, but we've got a shot."

Across the bridge, the officers of the other *Enterprise* were frowning, not liking the reference to a weapon no one had mentioned yet, much less the suggestion about exploding warp engines.

"Where are the Commodore and McCoy?" Sulu asked.

"They have not yet arrived," Spock said heavily. Everyone paused, as if expecting the men to appear, but there was nothing. "In addition ..." he started, glancing over at the strangers his crew had not yet noticed. Before he could explain the complexity of the situation, this universe's McCoy chimed in.

"He's hurt; anyone else?" McCoy asked, gesturing at Scott. The senior staff spun toward him, their brows furrowing at the two strangers on the bridge dressed in Starship blue and red.

"Doctor McCoy. Lieutenant Commander Scott," Spock supplied by way of explanation. "The *Enterprise* is in an alternate universe, and has met itself."

"Which one, exactly?" Uhura asked urgently, and she and Scott shifted with a kind of disquiet that suggested they may have encountered one or more of their disturbing mirror counterparts.

"The one you are hoping," Spock answered enigmatically. "You may trust these people, as we trusted the Ambassador."

"Wow," Uhura murmured.

"Please let Doctor McCoy examine you," Spock said, folding his hands behind him, and it wasn't a request. The officers nodded and followed the other version of McCoy to Medbay.

"Hikaru," Nyota said softly, touching his back as they walked. "What's wrong?"

"I left Ben and Demora on Ganymede with the Weapon bearing down on them," he said shakily.

"We'll save them, Hikaru," she said firmly.

"Maybe," he said in despair. "Where are Kirk and McCoy? There's something they had to do for us to win. Where are they?"

"Jim Kirk willnae fail us," Scotty said evenly.

"Amen," McCoy said fervently. "Sorry, eavesdropping. But I think James T. Kirk is a universal constant." They arrived in sickbay and McCoy grabbed a medical tricorder. "Your equipment is identical to mine, except you've reversed the damn buttons," McCoy grumped. "Who the hell designs a tricorder like that?"

Everyone in the room, from the nurses to the patients, couldn't help but smile—McCoy was McCoy, across universes.

Christine Chapel had glanced up as they arrived, and frowned at Scott. "Sit down, Scotty I'll get that hand off." McCoy blinked in surprise. "It's a bionic prosthetic," she explained. Chapel injected a swift-acting anesthetic above the artificial socket, then disengaged the hand and immediately clamped off the socket with a cap. She monitored him for a moment to ensure that there was no bleeding, then plugged the hand into a repair unit. "It's banged up but fixable. Hour or two, Scotty," she said, giving the prosthesis a scan.

"Don't go anywhere," McCoy barked at him when he stood to go, and Scotty sat down again with a sigh. "How long were you all gone?"

"A month," Chekov said.

"Really?" Scotty said in surprise. "Less than two days for us."

"Home," Sulu said softly. "A month home with Demora and Ben. I just hope it wasn't the last month of their lives."

"Well ..." McCoy said, waving the tricorder at them. "You're Chekov and Sulu aren't you? You've got to be. The two of you look perfectly fine; you're free to go." The two men nodded and headed back to the bridge.

McCoy turned to Scott and Uhura.

"You were in the Mirror universe?" he asked them, and they nodded. McCoy shuddered. "I've been there. It's a terrifying place. Ms. Uhura, you're showing definite signs of anxiety and shock," he said gently. "I'm not reading injuries, but it may be an effect of cross-universe travel."

"I'm okay," she said.

"Nyota," Scotty chided softly.

Chapel handed across her file, and McCoy's eyes flicked across multiple diagnoses. Familiar enough to him; a five year mission in uncharted space was hard on mental health.

"I think you're in the middle of a panic attack," McCoy said gently. "There is no reason to grit through it. Do you have Valium in this universe? Two milligrams please, nurse."

Nurse Chapel took her arm. "No use fighting him, he's as ornery as Leonard."

"Glad to hear it," McCoy drawled, and waved his tricorder at Scotty. "How did you lose your hand, by the way...? Never mind, not relevant, it just surprised me is all. Shouldn't have really; my Scotty mangled his other hand and has a prosthetic finger he forgets to wear. Goddamned engineers. Any pain in the socket?"

"No pain, nicely numb," Scotty answered, rubbing the skin below his elbow. "Boring story."

"*Terrifying* story," Uhura corrected from the next bed over, her eyes closed. Chapel injected a hypo into her shoulder, then used a disinfectant cloth to wipe the blood of her hands.

"Scotty's blood?" Christine asked, and Nyota laughed without humor.

"In a manner of speaking."

"Hmmp," McCoy hummed unhappily as he scanned Scott, frowning down at the readings.

"Not like the other me?" Scott asked, knowing what the doctor was fretting about.

"Are you usually this heavily medicated?" McCoy asked, not answering the question, rubbing his forehead as Chapel handed over Scott's file, which he skimmed without changing his expression. "If you're feeling functional I'm not going to mess with this," McCoy said with a sigh.

"I feel good enough. Also, I, uh," Scott stammered a bit. "Had tae. Y'know. 'Distract' a guard. Not sure about his STD status."

McCoy looked seriously across at him, any bluster set firmly aside. "Penetrative sex?" he asked simply, as steady and professional as Leonard would have been.

Scott shook his head. "Oral."

"Any barrier protection at all?" McCoy asked, and Scott shook his head again. "Human?" McCoy asked, and at Scott's nod grabbed a hypo. "I'll give you an antiviral and antibacterial, to cover our bases. Scotty ..." he said, and trailed off, concerned about being this familiar with someone who he felt like he knew, but didn't, not really. He forged on anyway. "Seriously. How do you feel?"

"Brain's at warp eight. After that there's a dark pit waiting for me," Scott said, tapping the side of his head. "Meds have it pushed off for now. Dinnae worry, Doctor McCoy, I expect it will all be a moot point."

"You don't expect to survive this," McCoy said, bluntly putting the question to the engineer that his friends from the other ship had been sensing.

"I suppose yeh never know. Can I go? The ship sounds terrible."

"Yeah. We'll comm you when the hand is repaired. Actually, no, wait. I'd rather have that arm in a sling. I don't need you banging the socket around in a Jefferies tube, it isn't designed for that kind of abuse."

Chapel helped Scott pull a sling over his head and strapped his arm down. "It's wild, hearing Leonard's exact words coming out of your mouth," Scott said, amused, and then his expression flickered, concerned about his still-missing crewmates. He leaned over and kissed Nyota's

cheek. “Yeh did good work today, lass,” he said.

“You too. Tell Spock I’ll be back on the bridge within the hour.”

Scotty glanced at McCoy, who nodded. “I will. Now I’m going tae go see what godawful things the other me has been doing tae my ship.”

An hour later the two Scotts were both staring morosely at the warp core. “Dammit,” the Chief Engineer of this version of the *Enterprise* sighed, going over the data again.

“I’m afraid ye really can’t wait,” the other one agreed. “A few more hours and you’ll have no power to go anywhere, much less fight off whatever you’re fightin’ when ye get there.”

“The Cap ... the Commodore willnae fail us,” Scotty said softly. “If he’s nae back yet, there’s a reason. James T. Kirk once knocked me out cold so he could *walk intae the reactor* and kick the bloody housing back intae place so the *Enterprise* wouldnae hit the Pacific Ocean at terminal velocity.”

“That kind of irradiation would usually be fatal,” the other Scotty said wryly.

“Oh, it was. He got over that too. He *willnae* fail us. It’s nae in him.”

“I believe you. But you can do the maths as easily as I can. You don’t have the time.”

Scotty hitched his half-arm closer to his body uncomfortably; the anesthetic was wearing off and the unconnected nerves were bothering him, a familiar ache that would build into consuming agony if he didn’t get to it soon. “Have yeh got any ideas?” he asked the other man softly.

“I’ve tossed everything at it I can think of. The core is *cracked*, lad. That’s a Starbase repair.”

“There are no Starbases left,” Scotty admitted.

“I’ve been gathering as much,” the other Scott sighed. “*Tell me*,” he said urgently. “Just say it, laddie. What’s happened?”

Scotty sat heavily in the chair beside warp control. “Have you been in my office, Mr. Scott?” he asked, his voice starting light but darkening as he spoke. “Did I have the maths up on the screen?”

The other Scott squinted at him, hackles rising at the bitter, accusatory tone in the other engineer’s voice. There were currents, here, opposite charges sparking dangerously. “Ye did,” Scott said evenly. “Transwarp beaming, or half of it.”

The black-clad Scott glanced up at him, his gaze sharp. “You solved it yet?” he asked. “And everything else?”

“No. But I’ll come to it in my time. And I’ll thank ye to tae stand down phasers, laddie. I turned off the board.”

Scotty rubbed his face, hard, with his only hand, and then looked up at his double with a half-laugh. “You are impressive, sir,” he said softly. “I understand why he trusted you. I dinnae ken that he should have trusted me.”

Scott let the question of who ‘he’ was go; he had some suspicions. “You’re shaking, laddie,” he said instead.

“You ever threaten tae destroy a planet?” Scotty asked, squeezing his eyes closed. And yes, he was shaking. *Again*. He’d try to pull himself together, but decided he didn’t care. He was, essentially, sitting here alone.

“Once or twice,” the other man admitted.

“You ever *done* it?”

“No,” Scott answered.

“Me neither, although it’s been nearer than I care tae admit ... I met another one of us today, though. And he has destroyed worlds. *Mine*,” he growled. “He destroyed *my* Earth.” He gestured at his office, and then at his head. “The Terran Empire stole my equations, then built a superweapon and unleashed it on my universe. It destroyed Earth. It destroyed New Vulcan. It destroyed Kronos and Romulus. It’s destroyed a hundred thousand inhabited worlds. Trillions of lives. And when it finally brings down my universe, the rest of the multiverse will begin to collapse down around it. Yours. All of them. We traveled back in time tae try tae stop it. And we *failed*. We’ll try one more time. One last shot, everything we’ve got left. We’re going tae take the *Enterprise* down its throat, and then I’m going to blow her up.”

The other Scott folded his arms. “Aye, that’s about what I thought,” he sighed wearily.

“Yeh see why we have tae wait for Kirk,” Scotty said, almost angry. “We’re on a knife’s edge as is. There’s something he is supposed to do that has tae get done. Tae say nothing of needing him in the captain’s chair.”

“And yet, ye can’t wait,” the other man answered grimly, standing and straightening his red tunic. “You know ye can’t. Also, you can’t imagine that we’ll let you do this on your own? Look, go get your hand back on, because you’re going tae need ’em both. Talk to Spock. And then you’ve got to go. And we’ll be coming with ye.”

The other engineer pulled out his communicator and beamed off the ship. Scotty stared at his warp core again for a moment, then sent a quick unobtrusive text message up to the bridge, asking if Spock could meet him in the First Officer’s office, not quite trusting his voice or wanting to attract the concern of the bridge crew. The acknowledgment back came from Nyota, and he was grateful that she was feeling better. Scott stopped at the medbay, where Chapel swiftly refitted his repaired hand. The other McCoy had beamed back to the ship a few minutes before, she told him; the other Kirk had sounded concerned.

“Is Commodore Kirk back?” she asked him softly.

“Nae yet,” Scotty sighed, flexing his hand through a set of exercises to test the refit, and then headed to Spock’s office to explain the fading power situation.

“Commodore Kirk will succeed,” Spock said firmly. “We must simply give him more time.

“Why is it taking so much time?” Scott burst out in despair. “Sulu and Chekov were gone an entire month, and the Guardian brought them back the same time as Nyota and me. Something must have happened, Mr. Spock. If we dinnae go now, we’ll never go. The ship is dying, sir. And there is nothing that two versions of me can do tae stop it.”

Spock steepled his fingers and pressed them to his lips. “I cannot refute your logic. Why has he not returned?” Spock asked at last, his own certainty cracking.

“I dinnae ken, sir,” Scott said heavily. “James T. Kirk would do anything he had tae do tae save the universe.”

Spock looked up slowly. “No,” he said. “He wouldn’t. ‘A test,’ the Guardian said. Even before Jim stepped through the portal, the Guardian reminded us that there was one life that the Commodore refused to sacrifice, even if it meant the universe.”

“No,” Scotty whispered in horror. “No, no, no. Yeh cannae mean ... Edith?”

Spock stood swiftly and pulled up the historical records of Earth, and scrolled back swiftly to the end of the 20th Century. “Mr. Scott,” he said gravely. “At some point since I last checked it, the historical record has changed.”

Scotty peered anxiously over Spock’s shoulder at the monitor. “Dear god,” he breathed.

“We must get there. Back to our universe in the 20th Century. And I don’t believe the Guardian is going to take us. Do we still have any red matter?”

Scott shook his head. “Not enough for two trips. And I need a functional matter-antimatter reactor to manufacture more. But sir, regardless, the *Enterprise* cannae take it. She has *maybe* one more trip across time and space in her, but nae two.”

The First and Second Officers of the *Enterprise-A* looked grimly at one another, then turned to the small window in Spock’s office, and the view of other *Enterprise* hovering off their bow, perfectly intact.

Spock put his hand on the window, his fingers tracing the name *Enterprise*. “I believe,” he said slowly, “I finally understand why the Guardian has brought us here.”

The Multiverse, Part 3

Chapter Summary

Many Enterprises face the Weapon in the battle for all reality.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Prime Universe, Space, Stardate 6770.15

The *Enterprise* had had run-ins before with the multiverse and doubles. The Mirror universe, of course, but there had also been two versions of a man named Lazuaus—one sane and one not—who had nearly ripped space and time apart. Then there was the time that a transporter accident split Kirk into good and evil halves. Once, Kirk had been forced out of his body into that of a woman bent on taking the ship, and more than one person had tried to fool them into dropping their shields using Kirk’s voice or likeness. Hell, they’d been in a universe of backward-flowing time only a week before. But this, Lieutenant Commander Scott considered, waiting with his hands on the transporter controls, was the first time they had truly come face-to-face with *themselves*.

And so far in this disquieting event, Scotty was the only one who had looked into his own eyes, although that was about to change. The closest he’d ever come before had been watching people flinch away from him in the Mirror Universe, thinking they were seeing the madman who was the Chief Engineer there. It had taken a while to shake those terrified looks from his heart, and talk himself into believing that he could never be that man.

This other lad, though, the Chief Engineer of the *Enterprise-A*, who looked like his sister—well. There were differences, of course. It was like looking at two dilithium crystals; always the same thing, but the surface covered in different facets turned in different directions. There were pieces he didn’t recognize at all. And then there were glints of his own might-have-beens. Missed opportunities, bullets dodged. Bullets taken.

Still, for all that the pattern of their lives was differently woven, somewhere deep inside the core of self they were fundamentally the same person. And, Scotty considered, this encounter might be harder to reconcile than the encounter with the Mirror, because standing there were his own strengths, his own weaknesses, his own failings. Worse, it was wrenching to look into your own eyes and see pain and despair. He could imagine well enough what had put it there.

It was all a question for priests and poets, not engineers.

Scotty set aside his troubled musings when Captain Kirk walked into the transporter room, with Spock at his side. “Energize, Mr. Scott,” Kirk murmured. Scott pulled the lever and the black-clad figures of the other Scott and Spock appeared. The two Spocks coolly studied one another for a moment as though there was nothing soul-altering about this.

“How can we help you, Commander Spock?” Kirk asked simply.

“We need to travel across dimensions into the past to assist Commodore Kirk,” the Vulcan answered, stepping down from the pad. “But our *Enterprise* is too damaged for such a trip.”

“But ours isn’t,” Kirk surmised with a nod, immediately acquiescing. “How do we accomplish this? The *Enterprise* has traveled through time before. However, shifting universes with intention and precision is not in our repertoire.”

The other Scott spoke, and there was something strange and hesitant in his voice. “There is a substance we have been able to manufacture that fractures spacetime. But I need a stable warp core to do so.”

Kirk looked over at his Scott, who blew out a breath and then shrugged reluctantly. “So long as you’re not punching holes in my warp core, laddie,” he warned the other man, who laughed humorlessly.

In a near-repeat of what they done aboard the *Enterprise-A*, Kirk gestured and the other officers followed them through the corridors of the *Enterprise* to Engineering. People stepped aside in the halls to let the group pass, eying the alternate universe men curiously. Both Spocks were impassive, of course. The guest Scott reached out several times to trail his fingers along the bulkheads. He was feeling it too; for all their differences, the voice of the two ships was almost disquietingly similar.

“Show us what you need us to do,” Kirk said, waving them into main engineering. The group followed the Chief Engineer to his office, and the other Scott moved toward the computer.

The man’s hands hovered over the console, hesitating, something holding him back. “Mr. Spock ...” he whispered, in some kind of agony. “We give them this, and we will close this causal loop. What came from here comes from *us*. I’m killing your people, their blood on us, on *me*. And apparently it always has been, as I’ve long feared.”

The Spock clad in black looked levelly at his officer. “The destruction of Vulcan is not the doing of anyone in this room,” he said firmly. The other Spock looked up sharply, his gaze deeply troubled, but the first officer of the *Enterprise-A* continued: “And if we must trade the lives of billions to save trillions ... it is only logical. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

Scott leaned heavily on the console for a moment, not able to lift his head to meet the eyes of anyone in the room. Then he sighed and his hands moved, sketching a formula on the screen. “This is red matter, gentlemen,” Spock said evenly, gesturing at Scott’s formula. “It has the

power to move us through time, space, and the multiverse. With your permission, Captain. We need half a cubic meter of it, held in a magnetic bottle. Mr. Spock, if you will assist me with the time and space calculations necessary to deploy it, the Commanders Scott can work on synthesizing it. We have little time; the *Enterprise-A* grows ever weaker.”

“Do it. If I can help, don’t hesitate,” Kirk said, and walked out of the office for the bridge

The Spock who didn’t yet know he would one day be *Ambassador* Spock and cross universes carrying the very substance they were making today, leaned over the equations with his counterpart. “Earth of the late 20th Century?” he asked. “And you are certain of the date? And certain that your Kirk is there?”

“Quite certain,” Spock answered. “It is a date of historical significance for the fate of my universe. And events of that date have shifted, since last I checked the historical record. The Commodore is there.”

“Come on, lad,” said the Chief of the *Enterprise*, poking his dejected counterpart in the side. “Needs must,” and they headed toward the core.

It was a strange thing, working beside yourself. Efficient, certainly, with instructions quietly murmured and immediately understood. But they couldn’t be mistaken for one another. Not hands, or face. Not accent, which slid through the tones of Scotland differently and spoke of a different road through childhood and beyond. Neither of them said it, but it all felt intensely familiar, like they had met before.

Scotty’s engineers were hovering near, ready to help, but also bursting with curiosity. Wondering, perhaps, if they could glean anything about their chief from his double.

The two men stood, tense and quiet, monitoring as red matter was pulled into existence. “Its got the hair standin’ up on the back of my neck,” the chief of this ship finally admitted.

“It scares me. More than *anything*,” the other one said, then shook his head and looked away, because staring intently at it wasn’t actually necessary to its synthesis. The silence stretched out again, and the visiting chief glanced at his counterpart, who was glaring at the red matter, entirely square jawed. And if one of them might be a tad too taciturn, the other was a tad too garrulous, and his brain was itching besides.

“They say ‘ayuh’ in Scotland, in your universe?” he asked, and Scott blinked, and smiled very, very faintly.

“Did I say that?”

“Other ship.”

“Well, they don’t say it in Scotland, unless my brother from Maine happens to be there. It’s a long story. And I wasn’t going tae ask about the *New Yorkin* your voice.”

“Long story,” he echoed, and shifted the subject to more common ground. “Yeh have a bonnie *Enterprise*.”

Scott tilted his head up at his ship. “A graceful lady, for certain. A jealous heart, though. She’ll take as much as you’ll give her.”

The other engineer nodded. “You pace the deck at night, because sleep is hard. Listening tae her voice,” he said, closing his eyes, head cocked to hear something high. “Heartbeat,” he continued, and dropped his chin, like he was feeling sounds through the soles of his feet. “Yeh sometimes find yourself breathless, because you’re breathing in time with the warp core, and it’s not quite fast enough for a man.”

“Hm,” Scott grunted in agreement. “That’s an uncomfortable level of being known, lad.”

The other Scott thumped himself in the chest, above the Starfleet arrow on his black uniform. “We’re the same, all of us, straight down the middle.”

Scotty frowned, because he could hear the undercurrent of despair in the other man’s voice. One terrible version of them had apparently orchestrated the destruction of everything. And the trouble, of course, is that he *could* imagine it. He knew the places where he was weak. He feared himself, in anger. If he let go of the honor with which he had always lived his life—desperate or enraged or just past caring—aye. They had it in them. But—

“If we had the time, laddie, to compare life stories, I expect we’d be astonished where we overlapped, and baffled where we didn’t,” Scott said softly. “But at the end of it, I’d be proud of you.”

The other man leaned shakily on the console in front of him, then turned his head, and looked Scott square in the eye. It was the first time either one of them had done it. “And it would be my entire honor, sir, tae be you.” He glanced up at the red matter. “Job’s done, Chief. Let’s finish the rest of it.”

At that report, Spock asked Kirk to beam Nyota Uhura aboard. The request seemed a little unusual to the officers of the *Enterprise*, but was, of course, granted.

Kirk sent his own Uhura to greet her in the transporter room. Lieutenant Uhura took one look at her double, and pulled her into her arms for an enveloping hug. Lieutenant Commander Uhura laughed. “Thanks, I needed that,” she said ruefully.

“Oh, I know,” the *Enterprise*’s communication officer said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Good thing I’ve always liked myself,” Nyota said with a smile.

“What’s not to like?” Uhura agreed, and led the other woman to the bridge.

The three guests stood together, a little awkwardly without stations to attend, and Kirk hailed the *Enterprise-A*. The waiting face of Sulu

appeared, sitting in the center chair.

“With your permission, Captain?” Spock asked politely.

“Of course,” Kirk said.

Spock stepped forward and faced the screen, his hands folded behind his back in the familiar Starfleet parade rest. “Lieutenant Commander Sulu, regardless of how long this takes us from our perspective, we will return here within ten minutes,” Spock said. “If we have not returned by minute eleven, you must assume that we have died or become trapped forever. Your orders are then to take the *Enterprise* back to our universe in Jupiter orbit at the time of the appearance of the Weapon, and destroy it by any means necessary.”

“Understood, sir,” Sulu said heavily. “Godspeed, and good luck.” The screen went dark and the *Enterprise-A* moved away to a hundred thousand kilometers.

“Mr. Sulu, Mr. Chekov,” Kirk said, addressing his own helmsman and navigator. “Are you clear on the necessary maneuvers?” The men murmured their acknowledgment. “Execute,” Kirk ordered. Torpedos, and singularities, red matter and black holes: the *Enterprise* leapt forward, crossing universes, space, and centuries. Then the multiverse twisted, and the *Enterprise* spun wildly into existence. “Report!” Kirk barked as the lights flickered and gravity re-stabilized.

“We’re okay,” his Chief Engineer answered in relief, checking his board.

“My instruments are reading the twentieth century,” Spock reported. “We are behind Earth’s moon. Presumably in the correct universe, as I am detecting a subtle variation between the cratering of that body and those which our historical maps say should be there.”

They had expected to be alone behind the Moon, but alarmingly, they were not, and snapped to action as the silver lines of another ship abruptly appeared. “Red Alert!” Captain Kirk called sharply, and the amber lights blinked on as the alarm sounded. “Evasive, Mr. Sulu!”

“That is an *Enterprise*,” the black-clad Scott said, grimly certain from where he stood near the lift, a guest keeping out of the way of the bridge crew. A quick command from Spock’s science station brought the hull of the other ship into focus: ISS *Enterprise*, it said.

“*Shit*,” Uhura breathed, her voice pitched for her Spock and Scotty’s ears only, although the other version of herself shot her slightly chastising look.

Unexpectedly, the Terran Warship didn’t respond to their presence. No maneuvers, no weapons targeted. The ship wasn’t dead but ...

“It is entirely unmanned,” the first officer said, and gestured at his station, inviting his counterpart to look and confirm.

“Indeed,” said the other Spock, raising an eyebrow in surprise. “No lifesigns at all.”

“Stand down to yellow alert,” Kirk ordered, and frowned. “As I think we’ve mentioned to you, we were once dragged into the Terran Universe. A transporter incident caused several of us to switch places with our mirror counterparts.” Kirk pointed at the screen. “And the ship we were sent to was *not* that one. The ship we were pulled to was identical to the one we are standing on ... I’ve never seen a ship that looks like that.”

“We have,” Scott said heavily. “Her twin was our first *Enterprise*, torn apart in an ambush.” The bridge crew frowned unhappily at that revelation.

“I’ve been on that Warship,” Uhura said, her voice cracking with despair, and then more softly to Scotty, who grimaced unhappily. “You too.”

“Is there more than one Mirror Universe?” Kirk asked, leaning back in his chair. “Does half the multiverse belong to the Terran Empire, and half to the Federation? One Mirror for us; a different one for you?”

“That seems possible,” said the black-clad Spock.

“What the *hell* is it doing here?” asked McCoy angrily, gesturing to the silent Warship.

“That’s a good question,” the Captain said, and turned to the guest Spock. “You asked us to come here. Did you expect this?”

“I did not,” Spock admitted, and he looked over at his own crewmates, puzzled and concerned. “A Terran Warship *here*. The ISS *Enterprise*, on this day, of all days. Is there anything in your memory that this stirs, Nyota?”

Uhura shook her head, but frowned. “Not on this particular day. But Jim said that he remembered someone shouting his name that one Fourth of July, do you remember, which changed Edith’s original fate? Leonard saw some dark version of Kirk that scared the hell out of him. And Edith too, right before our first Christmas. We know he was here. But that was a decade ago.”

“I thought I saw him ‘98,” Scott admitted, arms folded across his chest. “Two years before this ‘now.’ A bit before ...” he glanced over at his other self, and didn’t finish the sentence. “If you’ll recall, I wasnae doing particularly well, and I was half convinced I was just seein’ things, but there was this shadow skulking around the university, tailing me. I’ve got some missing days in my memory that I dismissed at the time as just being very unwell, but knowing what I know now, I think there is a possibility that he grabbed me for a while. After that I burned my notes on red matter, and started tae take steps tae ensure that that knowledge wasnae on Earth anymore.”

The Captain looked levelly at his guests. “Commanders, what are we talking about?”

Spock pressed his fingertips together. “Captain Kirk, Doctor McCoy, Ms. Uhura, Mr. Scott, and I spent over a decade trapped in this time. Our own timeline had been disrupted by the Mirror Universe, and on several occasions it appears that J. Tiberius Kirk the Terrible was here personally, making further attempts to manipulate our history. Unfortunately, the death of a specific individual was required to repair our

timeline. On this precise date, that occurred in what we believed had been an accident, and the timeline corrected. The presence of the Warship *Enterprise*, at this time and this place, is both baffling and disquieting.”

“Who had to die?” Kirk asked with a frown.

“The love of our Jim’s life. A very kind woman, barely remembered in history, named Edith Keeler,” Nyota said sadly.

Kirk choked, and was on his feet. “*Edith Keeler?*” he asked urgently, and then collapsed bonelessly back into his chair as suddenly as he’d been on his feet, running his hand down his face to hide his eyes. McCoy reached out and gripped the Captain’s arm.

“It’s the late twentieth century, not the 1930s. It can’t be her,” McCoy murmured.

“The death of an extraordinary woman, required to save the future? Of course it’s her,” Kirk said in grief. He took a deep breath and shoved it away. “My past, *my* Edith, isn’t relevant here. We have the conjunction of a critical date in your history, the Guardian apparently sending your Commodore to this time, and our enemy’s personal presence in the form of an evil James Tiberius Kirk. This feels both momentous and ... orchestrated. What does it mean, ladies and gentlemen?”

“I’ll tell you one thing it means,” said the Chief Engineer of this ship, and he thumped the engineering console emphatically. “There is an empty ship, with no crew, sitting right there. A warp core for the taking,” he said, looking at the alternate version of himself. “To blow to hell down the gullet of a superweapon. Maybe yer crew and yer ship don’t have tae die after all, laddie.”

Scotty smiled slowly, hope kindling in his eyes. “Aye. We can steal her!” he said fiercely.

“She’ll be booby-trapped,” Uhura cautioned from the communications station.

“She’s the *Enterprise*,” Scotty said confidently. “I know that ship. Besides, if someone set traps, you know damn well that Montgomery *Fucking* Scott did it, and there are two of us here who know that man’s mind perfectly. And *you’ve* been aboard her, Nyota—you remember being aboard her.”

This ship’s Spock shook his head. “Her shields are up. Short of seriously damaging the ship—which is not advisable if you intend to take her into battle—we cannot get aboard her.”

Scotty gestured emphatically at the screen. “That ship is why we are here, I’m certain of it.”

Captain Kirk nodded, pursing his lips. “I don’t disagree. At the very least, it is an extraordinary opportunity. We have an empty *Enterprise*, running automated with her shields up. Brought here, presumably, by a Terran Kirk. And if I know James Tiberius Kirk—and I do—he has a way of getting back aboard his ship.” Kirk looked around at the assembled officers, then stood decisively. “We have to find him.”

Kelvin Universe, Earth, Stardate 2000.300

Of all the places the Guardian could have sent them, Commodore Kirk was not prepared to be standing in his 20th Century home in Virginia—the home he had shared with Edith. She wasn’t here, but he felt surrounded by her all the same. Her coats were in the closet, a book she’d been reading on the counter, her favorite coffee in the pantry. He knew that he could go upstairs and fall into their bed. But he wouldn’t; he couldn’t; he mustn’t. Today was the day that Edith had to die, or the Empire would overtake this universe.

Unless.

“Bones,” he said slowly. “What if we are here to save her? Maybe a universe where the Terran Empire exists is a better alternative to the death of trillions. Maybe that’s the test that the Guardian meant. The sacrifice. The universe that we know gone, but existing in a way that won’t bring the multiverse down around it.”

McCoy rubbed his nose and shrugged. “That doesn’t feel right to me, Jim. You say that, and it doesn’t feel settled in my soul. We can’t fixate on her. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that we are here *today*, but maybe it isn’t just her. If it was just about installing the Terran Empire in our reality, would the Guardian have sent the others on missions too?”

Kirk felt his heart sink; McCoy was probably right.

“That said,” McCoy continued, “whatever we are here for is probably in proximity to her. Where is she, and earlier you, today?”

“Right now we’re at a bed and breakfast at Virginia Beach,” Kirk said. “Our favorite one. A two hour drive.”

“Where is everyone else?” McCoy asked, tapping his lips. “The crew? Scotty is ... unavailable at the moment, obviously. I think I’m in Georgia today. Nyota and Spock?”

“Kenya,” Kirk said, shaking his head. “We’re on our own with whatever this is. Edith and I took my car, but hers is still here. Let me find the keys.”

He knew exactly where her keys were—in the drawer beside Edith’s side of the bed. He climbed the stairs, overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all. Then, their room; their bed. He trailed his fingers across the quilt and opened the drawer. He took the keys, then hesitated and pulled a necklace from the drawer. It was her most prized possession, her grandmother’s locket, with their wedding picture inside. He opened it, his fingers trembling, then pocketed it.

“Let’s go, Bones,” he said to McCoy, who was standing in the door looking at Kirk with concern. They walked wordlessly to the garage. Kirk’s hands hesitated in the wheel of the vehicle; it had been some time since he’d operated one, but the muscle memory kicked in. He started the car and backed it onto the street.

The two men barely spoke as 20th Century America passed by outside their windows. Kirk stopped half a block away from the quaint little bed and breakfast; it wouldn't do for Edith to look out the window and see her car.

"Jim, you can't talk to her," McCoy said urgently, grabbing his arm before he opened the door. "Whatever else we are here to do, we have to protect the timeline. *Jim*, are you listening to me?!?"

Kirk wasn't; his gaze was locked on something across the street. "Look, Bones," he said softly. There, directly adjacent to the B&B, another Kirk was sitting in a little sports car.

"Earlier you?" McCoy asked, puzzled.

"No. Earlier me is in there," Kirk gestured at the building, "making love to my wife for the last time. *That* is not me. That is Tiberius Kirk, the Terran Captain."

"What the *hell*?" McCoy whispered.

"I don't know," Kirk said grimly. "But he's why we're here."

The door to the bed and breakfast opened a moment later, and Kirk watched with a look of hungry, grief-struck longing that twisted McCoy's heart in pity. A happy and oblivious Jim and Edith Kirk had just walked out, arm in arm.

Kirk closed his eyes in pain; it was taking everything he had not to run to her. When he opened them again, the Terran Kirk was staring directly at him, eyes narrowed. The earlier Jim and Edith were just pulling away for their last drive. The Terran grinned manically at Kirk, then gestured, a mocking 'follow me' before speeding after the couple.

"Buckle up, Bones!" Kirk cried, and followed.

Ahead of them all, Jim and Edith were in no hurry, driving lazily along a scenic route. The Terran wasn't pushing them, holding back a half mile. Last in the unintentional parade, Kirk's heart was pounding, abruptly furious he sped up and clipped the Terran's bumper. That Kirk resisted the slide, then hit his brakes, the two cars now engaged in a deadly chase. The Terran pulled aside Kirk, the cars grinding into one another.

The Terran rolled down his window. "I'm here to save her, Jim. Are you here to kill her?" he mocked, yelling over the rushing wind, then jerked his wheel.

"Jim!" McCoy cried in panic as they spun out. Kirk white-knuckled the wheel, barely controlling the skid into the shoulder of the road. "We're losing them!"

The Terran abruptly floored his gas, speeding ahead. He was on Jim and Edith's bumper moments later, and jerked around to pass them. The Terran leaned into the horn of his car, and around the next corner, and the car that would have killed Edith Kirk swerved, the startled driver snapping awake just in time to avoid their deaths.

With sinking, horrifying certainty, Kirk knew what had to happen next.

When he'd chosen Edith's life, those years ago, he had known he was choosing pain for Scott. But he hadn't known what that pain would look like, until he watched it intensify, unrelenting, unstoppable. Scotty had absolved Kirk of his *death*; the man would never blame someone else for his decisions. But when Starfleet's greatest engineer had put a scrap of paper in his pocket—a phone number beside the name 'Capt. James T. Kirk'—and then shot himself in the head, his last rebuke had been abundantly clear: *you chose my pain*.

And when Kirk had chosen Edith's life all those years ago, he knew he was choosing agony for trillions. He'd had no conception of what that could look like. He did now; he had literally heard the screams of worlds and systems at the moment of their deaths.

He couldn't choose that again. He would save them from becoming the Empire first, and then try to save them from annihilation, whatever the cost.

The needs of the many, Spock might say.

And so he pushed his car to its limit, whipping around Jim and Edith to smash violently into the back of the Terran. Behind them, unable to avoid their fates, Jim and Edith piled straight into them. All three cars flipped, tons of metal tumbling together before finally grinding to a halt, the wreckage smeared over a quarter mile.

Kirk and McCoy crawled out of their car, both of them bleeding and stunned. Kirk staggered, and then ran toward the other cars. J. Tiberius Kirk the Terrible was lying on the pavement, what was left of him—dead. *Jim* Kirk's body was nowhere; whisked back to the future by the Guardian, as had always occurred. Kirk had believed, until this moment, that he would never have a day more awful than that one. But today—today was far, far worse; he'd murdered the love of his life for the survival of everything else. It was the logical decision, the required sacrifice. He would never forgive himself.

"Edith," he cried brokenly, pulling her from the wreckage, and cradled her body in his lap. McCoy, breathless and limping, knelt on the ground beside them, slack-jawed and helpless.

"Jim," Edith whispered, coughing, blood on her lips. "Oh, Jim. You're hurt."

"Shhhh," he murmured, weeping, and traced her lovely face with the pads of his fingers. "Don't try to speak, my love. Just rest. Rest. I'll hold you, the pain will be gone soon." She looked up at him, fading by the moment.

And then the familiar and unexpected sound of a transporter beam filled the air. McCoy jerked upright, pointing his phaser at the materializing

figures, expecting Terran henchmen here to avenge Kirk.

“Spock?” McCoy asked, puzzled and vastly relieved as his great friend resolved, plus a number of other Starfleet officers he didn’t recognize.

Kirk didn’t look up at Spock. “We can’t do this,” he said brokenly. “Don’t tempt me with this. She has to die. They bury her on Earth. Beside her ... husband, who is actually that damn mirror bastard.”

“No, Jim,” Spock said, coming to stand beside him. “All that is required is that she does not affect the twenty-first century. The timeline has changed. According to the historical records, they bury ‘Jim Kirk,’ but they never find Edith.”

“Spock ...” Kirk whispered, barely able to believe it, and there were tears running down his face as he held Edith’s hand.

“Stop arguing and move out of my way,” McCoy shouted, and he smiled down at his dear Edith. “You are going to be just fine, darlin’,” he soothed.

“Bones?” Kirk asked urgently.

“Seriously, Jim?” McCoy grumped. “I’ve spent this whole damn mission resurrecting people, and you’re fretting about a car crash?” Another doctor came up beside them with a medkit in his hand. McCoy glanced over at him, and then did a double take. “You have *got* to be kidding me,” he sighed.

“Hi there, Leonard,” said the other doctor. “Nice to finally meet you. Let’s get her back up to the *Enterprise*.”

Kirk reluctantly let her hand go, and stepped aside. “Who are our friends, Spock?” he asked, puzzled.

“Jim Kirk,” said someone in what seemed to be a type of Captain’s uniform, extending his hand.

“Yes?” the Commodore said, accepting the handshake, still puzzled.

“No,” the man said, a little mischievously. “*I’m* Jim Kirk.”

The Commodore stared at him. “No,” he whispered in wonder, his eyes pinging between Spock and the captain.

“The Guardian sent the *Enterprise* to Ambassador Spock’s universe,” Spock explained simply.

The Commodore locked his eyes on his counterpart’s face. “Yes,” he said slowly. “I can see that now.”

“Commodore, the Terran Warship *Enterprise* is in orbit around Luna,” Spock continued. “Shielded but empty, which provides a significant opportunity if we can commandeer that vessel. Tiberius Kirk must have had a way to return to his ship. I am going to examine his body.”

Spock withdrew, leaving the Kirks alone to study one another. “Edith Keeler,” said the other Kirk slowly, his eyes deep and sad. “I knew an Edith Keeler once.”

“Edith *Kirk*,” said the Commodore softly, and the Captain sighed.

“Who is *Ambassador* Spock?” the Captain asked at last.

“I think you already know the answer to that,” the Commodore answered, and the Captain nodded slowly, the muscles in his jaw clenching. “How much do you know about our mission?” the Commodore continued.

“The super weapon that is destroying the multiverse and your suicidal plan to destroy it? Quite a lot.”

Commodore Kirk watched as Spock straightened over the top of the Terran’s body, a device in his hand. “Today is a day of miracles,” he breathed. “I’m wondering if we might just have another.”

They beamed away just before the 20th Century authorities arrived at the terrible accident scene to discover the news of Edith Kirk’s apparent death, which would set the fate of the future. Once aboard the *Enterprise*, the Kirks immediately checked with the McCoy; Edith was already out of her brief surgery and doing well, although still unconscious. The Doctor of this ship ran his dermal regenerator over the Commodore and McCoy, muttering unhappily about using vehicles as projectiles.

“You’ll be sore but fine,” he said. “I can’t do anything for your torn shirt, though, Commodore. You’ll have to borrow one of Jim’s.”

“I haven’t worn gold since the Earth was destroyed,” Kirk admitted quietly.

“Well, we are going to save it today,” McCoy answered evenly, holding out the change of clothing. Kirk nodded and pulled the slightly strange Captain’s tunic over his head, then held Edith’s hand until he was paged back to the transporter room. He looked up at his Bones, who looked over at the other McCoy.

McCoy rocked up onto his toes, and smiled kindly. “Gentlemen, you have a mission to complete. I’ll watch over her. She’s in good hands.”

“Nice being able to be in two places at once,” Bones said, and followed the Commodore out of the room. They had to backtrack once, slightly lost, but a kid who simply had to be Chekov directed them the correct way to the transporter room.

“It’s a personal transporter,” Scotty was saying admiringly, poking at the tech they’d pulled off the Terran’s body.

“I hate tae give anyone in that universe credit, but that is clever,” the other Scotty said ruefully.

“Can it get us aboard that Warship?” Commodore Kirk asked urgently.

“I think so,” the Chief of this ship shrugged. The two chief engineers fiddled with the thing for a few minutes, and were able to tie the Terran personal transporter into the *Enterprise*’s main transporter. “That will do it,” said Lieutenant Commander Scott in satisfaction. “It’s modulating perfectly with what must be a preset flicker in the shields. The next cycle though is in 90 seconds, and we’ll be able to slip through.”

Eight of them—two Kirks, Spocks, and Scotts, plus one McCoy and one Uhura—took their places on the pad, and 90 seconds later materialized in a darkened transporter room of the hibernating ship. Even in the dark, the fierce Terran emblem was viable on the wall.

They flicked on their flashlights. “We must be cautious,” warned the Commander Spock in black before anyone could move, lifting his tricorder. “The ship is unmanned, but we must consider the high likelihood that it is riddled with defensive traps. Move carefully and slowly, scanning as you go.”

“I think...” started Captain Kirk, “...Commodore, if you agree ... most of us should work our way toward the bridge. The Misters Scott head to Engineering, to try to get power back on.”

“I do agree,” Commodore Kirk said, and the group gingerly stepped down from the transporter pad. The Scotts headed aft, toward Engineering, and the rest of the group went forward toward the Bridge.

Spock was right; there were traps everywhere. Trip wires to poisonous gas, explosive pressure plates, airlocks rigged to blow sections open to space. The Scottys reported a false floor panel just before main engineering that dropped directly into an open EPS conduit, and an antimatter bomb on the warp core that started a countdown the moment they walked into Engineering but that, fortunately, was disarmed by a simple numeric code—the Scotts’ birthday. They brought the power up just as the other six stepped onto the bridge.

The slide of the door onto the bridge triggered the final trap. A hologram of J. Tiberius Kirk flickered into existence in front of the viewscreen. He was sneering at them. “*Whoever you are, you’re very clever to make it this far. But this is the Warship Enterprise, and you are not welcome here. I’m not going to kill you; I want you alive so I can execute you myself. But believe me, if you still have minds left by the time I get to you, you’ll be begging to die. It’s called a reality bomb. Enjoy your trip to hell!*”

A device dropped from the ceiling and then rotated midair, red matter viable for a moment within its components. There was no time to escape; the reality bomb exploded in their faces, twisting multispacetime. Aboard the ISS *Enterprise*, the souls of the skeleton crew were smeared across all the realms of possibility—not just in two universes, but all of them, fracturing their consciousnesses across infinite might-have-beens of past, present, and future. It was far more than any human or Vulcan mind could bear, and utterly disabled them all. They were adrift, helpless in the waves of potentiality.

....

In one universe, Spock folded his hands in front of his body. “Thank you, ministers. I humbly accept your invitation to the Vulcan Science Academy,” he said, and his father almost looked pleased.

....

In another possible version of reality, Khan grabbed Scotty by the front of his tunic, nearly jerking him off his feet. “We dug you off that backwater iceball because we assumed you had some minimal mental capacity. *Solve this*” he spat at the engineer.

“You can tell Marcus to go fuck himself, ‘*John*,’” Scott growled, glaring balefully at the tyrant from the past.

Khan stepped right into the Engineer’s face, backing him against the wall. “I don’t care about your problems,” he oiled dangerously. “I don’t care about what you snort up your nose, or how drunk you have to be to sleep, or who fucks you over a trash bin in a dark alleyway.” He slammed his palm against the wall, and Scott flinched. “Figure this out, or I will break your neck. Do we understand one another?”

....

The possibilities continued to flick by, ever faster.

“I don’t know, Dad,” Jim Kirk said, sitting on a rock. He drank some water, then hitched his pack onto his back; miles to go get before their next campsite. “I’m not sure Starfleet is the way I should go. It just doesn’t tug at my heart like it does yours.”

George Kirk put his hand in his son’s shoulder. “You’ll find your way, Jim, and I’ll be proud of anything you choose to do.”

....

“He’s a professor,” Nyota said as they walked across campus. “It’s *really* inappropriate.”

“It’s just dinner,” Gaila cajoled. Nyota rolled her eyes at her roommate.

“And sex,” Nyota said.

“Presumably,” Gaila shrugged. “Come on! Commander Spock is gorgeous, in that stoic Vulcan way.”

“No!” Nyota cried. “Not talking about this anymore.”

....

He knew what had happened to him, even through the consuming pain. He could feel the life support system, heavy on—inside—his chest. He

knew that Pike was sitting near him. He knew that he would never recover from what the delta radiation had done to him. He was a mind trapped in a body, forever.

"I'm so sorry, Spock," Pike said brokenly, but Spock could not answer, beyond the desperate double-flashing of a light.

....

The pilot of the cadet shuttle frog-marched him out of the head. "I told you people, I don't need a doctor, damn it. I *am* a doctor!" McCoy cried.

"You need to get back to your seat," the pilot said firmly.

"I had one, in the bathroom with no windows."

"You need to get back to your seat, now."

"I suffer from aviofobia, that means fear of dying in something that flies," McCoy complained. "One tiny crack in the hull and our blood boils in 13 seconds. A solar flare might crop up, cook us in our seats. And while you're sitting pretty with a case of Andorian shingles, see if you're still so relaxed when your eyeballs are bleeding. Space is disease and danger, wrapped in darkness and silence."

The pilot stuffed him into a seat, alone in a row. McCoy looked around at the withering gazes of the other cadets, and abruptly felt more alone than he had since his wife had packed up their daughter and walked out of his life.

....

"Baba, that shuttle you three were supposed to be on *crashed*," Nyota said, walking into the room.

"My god!" her father said in shock. "Thank god for your mother's intuition." He shook his head. "Well. It didn't happen. Miracles, big and small, turn the world. How were your classes at the university?"

"Wonderful," she said with a smile, and put the close call behind her; she couldn't imagine a world without her parents and brother.

"So, that puts the Starfleet talk to rest?" he father probed gently.

"Bibi will be disappointed. But yes," she said, and gave him a hug. "The University of Nairobi is home."

....

Spock was old. So very old; nearly everyone he'd ever cared about was dead. And now, in the wrong universe, in a past that wasn't his, he looked up at the sky and watched as a world—his world—was consumed by the singularity. He thought the Kolinahr would have purged him of this pain. But the minds of billions of Vulcans cried out in death, and in this moment, he wished he could have had a lifetime of rich feeling to combat his despair.

....

"Uhura ... USS *Farragut*." said the officer calling out emergency assignments to the cadets. Nyota's heart sank, but there was nothing for it. For now, she had a job to do. *I'll fight for a posting on the Enterprise later*, she promised herself. She didn't know she'd be dead in an hour, and never get the chance.

....

He was fourteen, and his mother was dead, and he didn't even know the name of this shitty station at the edge of the Empire. His sister had gone weeks ago, sold to a pimp for two days of drugs, snorted in one. He wondered if they'd fed her today.

He stole what was left of his mother's drugs off her already-rotting body. He was shaking with the need for it, but it was probably a bad batch, so he'd have to be careful. Maybe cut it with something else.

Monty was fourteen years old, aching in hunger and withdrawal, and wondered where he'd survive the longest: the brothel or the shipyard.

....

"Mother!" Spock cried, just barely close enough to catch her hand as the cliff tumbled out from beneath her feet. They materialized on the *Enterprise*, side by side, and he fell into her arms.

....

"I'm sorry, Spock, did you say *humpback whales*?"

....

Scotty dug through the smoldering wreckage of his engine room, filled with smoke and groaning cadets.

"Peter!" he cried, pulling his nephew out from the pile of rubble. "Oh, god, laddie," he groaned. His nephew, who had been so proud to be a Starfleet engineer, to serve aboard the *Enterprise*, and who had stood especially tall under Admiral Kirk's inspection. The boy was dead. His sister would never forgive Scotty, but then, Scotty would never forgive himself.

....

Kirk was dying on the wrong side of the radiation shielding

....

Uhura was dying on the wrong side of the radiation shielding.

....

Scotty was dying on the wrong side of the radiation shielding.

....

Spock was dying on the wrong side of the radiation shielding.

“Sir, he’s dead already,” Scotty cried desperately, both McCoy and Scott holding Kirk back from opening the door and flooding the compartment with deadly radiation. Kirk looked into Scott’s face, and then McCoy’s.

“It’s too late, Jim,” McCoy whispered in grief. Kirk’s shoulders slumped in defeat, and he stumbled toward the shield.

“Spock!” he cried brokenly, fumbling for the comm.

Spock forced himself to his feet and straightened his uniform then staggered toward Kirk’s voice. Already blind from the radiation, he bumped into the shield.

“Ship ... out of danger?” Spock croaked hoarsely.

“Yes,” Kirk said.

Spock nodded. “Don’t grieve, Admiral. It is logical. The needs of the many ... outweigh ...” he choked, unable to continue.

“...the needs of the few,” Kirk supplied.

“Or the one,” Spock managed, almost losing his feet. “I never took the Kobayashi Maru test ... until now. What do you think of my solution?”

“Spock!” Kirk begged. Spock collapsed to his knees, and Kirk with him.

“I have been, and always shall be, your friend,” Spock gasped, and pressed his hand to the glass in the Vulcan salute. “Live long, and prosper.”

Kirk pressed his own hand against the glass, longing to touch him. Spock settled painfully to the ground, and then turned his face away so Jim would not see the moment of death in his face.

“No,” was all Jim could say.

....

“Visitor,” the guard said curtly, and dropped the force shield. Uhura sat up in surprise and a little dread, and held out her wrists for the handcuffs required when she was outside her cell. No one had visited since the former senior line officers of the *Enterprise* had been sentenced. Admiral Marcus, Kirk, and Spock would spend their lives here. Uhura, Chekov, and Sulu would be in prison for at least two decades—following an illegal order was nearly as bad as giving it. They were just lucky to be in a Federation facility and not in the Klingon dilithium mine at Rura Penthe.

In truth, the better punishment may have been for them to fight in the terrible war they had started, but others were paying that awful price.

Nyota stepped into the visitor’s lounge, and very nearly stepped straight back out. Sitting on the couch, in a grim black uniform and with Captain’s bars on his shoulders, was Montgomery Scott. He was wearing the awful new Starfleet Emblem on his chest; not the arrow of exploration, but the sword of war.

One officer, just *one*, had defied Kirk. Scott had walked off the ship over magnetic variations in torpedoes and the unreasonable demands of a Captain bent on avenging Admiral George Kirk. Spock would always—and had—followed Kirk to hell. Nyota couldn’t help but wonder if history would have been different if the *Enterprise*’s intractable second officer had been aboard when Kirk had given the fateful order to fire at the Klingon homeworld.

Scotty stood up when she arrived, moving stiffly. When he turned toward her, her heart clenched to see that the right half of his face had recently been replaced from his brow to jaw, still raw and joined to his own flesh with metal implants. His eye was cybernetic and the wrong color, and his arm looked bionic. She wondered if the damage extended down his body. “Hello, lass,” he said gently, then raised his voice to address the guard. “You can take off the cuffs and leave us, lieutenant.”

“But sir ...” the guard protested. “Aye, Captain,” he said nervously at Scott’s fierce scowl. He clicked off the handcuffs and stepped out of the room.

“You alright, Nyota?” Scott asked.

“I should be asking you,” she said, a little angrily, and gestured at his rebuilt body. “I didn’t know you had been hurt.”

“Aye,” he said, scratching at his new face. “We had rather ... a large explosion on the bridge. The new bits are McCoy’s work, just before they pulled him off the *Enterprise* and back to Starfleet Medical.”

“Did you lose anyone?” Uhura asked. “In the explosion?”

“Aye,” he said, jaw clenched. “I’ve lost rather a lot o’ people since becoming Captain of the *Enterprise*. Sometimes I dinnae even know their names yet, but when we go intae battle we lose people every time.” He shook his head at her stricken expression, and sat heavily. “I’m nae here tae try tae upset you, or tae throw blame on any of yeh. They’re slapping repairs on the *Enterprise* and I had a day or two. I just ... wanted tae see yeh.”

She sat beside him and bumped his shoulder companionably. “In that case. Hi, Scotty,” she said. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’m sorry I wasnae at any of the hearings. I just couldnae,” he said softly. “By all rights, I shoulda been standing in the dock beside you.”

“You are the only one of us who did the right thing,” she protested.

“Because Kirk pissed me off. My pride got hurt and I left in a huff. I shoulda been on that ship.” Scotty rubbed his face again, the manufactured parts obviously bothering him. “The irony is ... I’m about to do far worse than you,” he said softly. “All you did was lob some torpedoes at an uninhabited zone. But I’ve been playing with doomsday machines since I was a kid. Just for fun; just for the intellectual exercise, yeh understand?” he said a little desperately, and turned his body away from her, not wanting to see her face. “My orders are tae commit genocide tae save the Federation. How are those orders legal, and Kirk’s were nae legal?”

She reached out and soothed a hand down his back. And yes, she could feel the uneven line of bionics down his spine; the explosion had nearly ripped him apart, it seemed. “The *Enterprise* started the war. I guess it’s right that she should end it,” she said softly.

“Opening a singularity in the core of Q’onoS willnae end anything,” he sighed, and stood. “Do you ever wake up in the morning, and for just a moment you think you were in a universe where none of this happened? Where we are heroes and not villains?”

“Every morning,” she admitted, staring at her hands. “Every single one.” She looked up at him. “I forgive you, Scotty, if you will forgive me?”

“Neither one of us can offer that tae each other,” he said. He shook his head. “If there is a hell, we’re in it, and past absolution. Goodbye, Nyota,” he said, and walked away from her, leaving her to her well-deserved misery.

....

Vulcan rage, human despair, and bad luck in one wild punch had put a piece of bone through the other boy’s brain.

A six year old could not be convicted of a crime, but he could be ostracized forever, and he hid behind his mother, shaking in terror.

“I’m taking him back to Earth,” Amanda said icily. “Don’t follow us, Sarek.”

....

Edith lifted her hands placatingly. “Jim,” she begged shakily. He was holding a phaser, pointed directly at her chest. And although she didn’t know what a phaser was, or that it was set to kill, she certainly knew what a gun was.

“Edith,” he said brokenly. “I’m so, so sorry. You can’t live. The future requires ... requires your death.”

“Jim, I thought you loved me.” She was weeping now, so afraid of his man whom *she* had loved, and who was suddenly completely insane. “Put the gun down. You’re sick, we can get you help.”

“I do love you. So very, very much. I love you. Edith, I love you!” Kirk cried, and pulled the trigger.

....

“Spock,” Kirk said softly, catching his sleeve before the Vulcan could leave the observation dome. “I will do whatever you need.”

Spock’s jaw was clenched, and he was sweating, his blue tunic damp. “Do not mistake this, Captain,” he said, humiliated and defeated. “It is nothing more or less than sex. I will be biologically compelled. It will be repeated. Uncontrolled. Uncontrollable.”

“If you’re trying to talk me out of it, that isn’t the way to do it,” Kirk teased gently, but Spock didn’t respond. Jim ducked to catch Spock’s downturned eyes. “Spock, this is only an offer, gently proposed. If you are not interested in me ...”

“That is ... not a problem,” Spock confessed hoarsely, and groaned, his face in his hands. “I know this is not offered in pity, but in kindness. I understand the logic in having a friend assist me through this time. And yet. *Jim*. I find that I wish you loved me.”

“Spock,” Kirk whispered, then repeated his own words back to him. “*That is not a problem*. This isn’t pity, or kindness, or logic. Let me show you, now, before the pon farr begins. Everything you wish, Spock,” Jim said, and finally took his hand.

“And what *you* wish,” Spock insisted urgently, looking down at their intertwined fingers.

“Yes,” Kirk laughed. “Fine, and what I wish. And then later, when biology has its demands, you may know it is still done for love. Logical, is it not?”

“That sounds very ... logical,” Spock admitted.

“Completely,” Kirk agreed, then raised his voice. “Computer, lock the door. Command override Kirk-six-one-alpha-two. Cancel all other overrides.”

“Confirmed,” the computer acknowledged, and the lock switched shut on the observation dome; even McCoy and Scott couldn’t open it now.

“Spock,” Kirk whispered, and closed his eyes and brought their foreheads together. “Tell me yes. Tell me this is what you want, and I’ll give you the universe. Everything I am. If you will have me.”

“Yes, Jim,” Spock said in wonder. “ *Yes.* ”

....

“No, he fell. Didnae yeh, Montgomery?” his father said to the police officer. “These kids, always running around. He’s all the time trespassing around in the junk yard. Troublemaker. Fell off a shuttle. What can yeh do?”

“You the one stealing converters?” the officer sighed, and gestured at his arm. “Well then, maybe yeh deserve that, aye?”

Monty glared at the ground, letting his broken arm stoke his rage. He imagined telling the truth, but then his father’s heavy hand was on his shoulder, the threat more than implied in that iron grip.

“Aye, sir,” he lied.

....

“Well,” McCoy said, tugging at his collar. “I suppose the only good thing is that we won’t have to wear these damn uniforms ever again.”

Chekov nodded sadly. “You’re thinking the dishonorable discharge.”

“We stole a *starship*, laddie,” Scotty snorted. “We’re going tae *prison.* ”

“We did save the Earth,” Sulu protested.

“*After* the part where we stole a starship,” Scotty replied.

“I wouldn’t do a thing different,” Uhura insisted firmly. “Mr. Spock is out there sitting in the observation seats. Alive. *Spock.* I’d do it again.”

“Aye,” Scotty said.

“In a heartbeat,” McCoy agreed, and the others nodded.

Kirk looked up. “My friends, I thank you,” he said softly. “If I don’t get a chance to say it, let me say it now. Serving with you has been the honor of my life.”

The door opened and a lieutenant walked in. “Admiral, Captain, Commanders. They are ready for you.”

“I guess we face the music,” Kirk said with a nod, and his crew followed him out the door.

....

Scott stiffened when she put the blade to his throat, its razor edge drawing a thin line of blood across his skin.

“Don’t go for your knife or I’ll cut your head off,” Uhura said conversationally from behind him, pressing a hand between his shoulder blades, and he lifted his chin as the blade dug a millimeter deeper into his neck. “I’ve just killed everyone else standing between me and the Captain’s chair.”

“I dinnae want the Captain’s chair,” he insisted immediately.

“And yet, you are the second officer.”

“An arrangement of convenience with Kirk. Who is dead now,” he pleaded.

“Very dead,” she agreed. She could feel his pulse racing beneath her blade and sweat on his back soaking through his shirt. “Tell me why I should let you live, Scott.”

“I’m a damn good engineer,” he answered swiftly

She let him turn around to face her, but didn’t shift the knife pressing just above his carotid artery. “You could be better,” she challenged. “You suppress your genius. You hold back. I can get a perfectly serviceable engineer—one that doesn’t come with problematic whispers from the crew about why I let *Kirk’s* second officer live.”

He laughed unhappily. “I had my back tae yeh. I didnae know that you’d already moved against the others; I hadnae heard yet, and either my allies hadnae heard either, or you’ve already turned ‘em. You had me dead. So you tell me: why am I still alive?” he challenged.

She lowered her knife and studied him. His blood was dripping onto his collar from the superficial cuts on his neck. “Because when you are at your best, you are nothing less than the finest engineer in the fleet,” she admitted at last. “Because I know you really *don’t* want the Captain’s chair. Because ... I don’t know,” she shrugged, and lifted the knife again and pressed it above his heart. “I really should kill you. You are a serious problem for me. They’ll assume I gave you something to convince you to stand aside, that you have some kind of hold on me, or that you bribed me for your life. All of which is weakness.”

“Do what you have tae, Captain Uhura,” he said wearily. He rubbed his eyes, then turned toward the panel he’d been repairing, his back to her, although his hands were trembling.

She drew a feather-light line down the center of his spine with the tip of her knife, from the nape of his neck down. He shuddered violently at its touch. “Do you want to die, Scotty?” she whispered into his ear.

He took a shaky breath. “Sometimes,” he answered. “And other times I desperately want tae live.”

“What do you want now?” she asked him. She reached around him to the front of his throat, his congealing blood on her fingers, and squeezed experimentally. He swallowed hard.

“Doesnae matter,” he said hoarsely.

“You’re alive because I can’t bring myself to kill you,” she breathed into his neck. “I don’t know why.

He turned again to face her again, in her very arms this time, her knife between their bodies, and looked across into her eyes. He touched his bleeding neck, then reached out and smeared a line of his own blood down the center of her lips.

“I’m yours, you know,” he growled. “What you ask of me, I’ll do. Warp nine tae the edge of the universe? Done. Worlds destroyed? Which ones do yeh want crushed beneath your feet, Captain? You want me on my fucking knees when you spread your legs in the Captain’s chair? My pleasure, and yours.” He reached between them and grabbed her knife, the blade cutting into his palm. “You want my heart? I’ll cut it out and hand it tae you.”

“Why?” she challenged him, lifting her chin.

“I dinnae ken,” he spat angrily.

“You *are* mine,” she said, pleased, and ran the flat of her knife down his jaw. “I want all of that, Scotty. Except your heart. That I’ll take myself, in my own time.”

“Aye, Captain,” he said fiercely.

....

There was no way around the Prime Directive. And for all that Commander Spock begged Pike, in his way, the Captain had been immovable in the certainty of his decision, and Commander Kirk died in the volcano to save the species. Somehow, unexpectedly, Jim had sounded so at peace in his final moments. A Kirk, dying to save others, fulfilling his birthright and destiny.

That didn’t make it easier on the people who had loved him. It sunk deeply into Pike, and there were whispers that he’d be taking the promotion he’d long been resisting. Whether Spock would take command of the *Enterprise* when Pike moved on was an open question. Nyota and Spock had taken their grief out on each other, sniping at one another in the halls when they weren’t having despairing and desperate sex that was entirely off-balance without Jim. They hadn’t found anything approaching stability until McCoy had barged in on them one day, half drunk and cursing, and kissed them both.

Not long after, Scotty walked in on the three of them while they were together in an engineering supply closet. “For God’s sake,” he’d muttered, turning away in exasperation.

A week later, Scotty presented Nyota with the clearance codes for the shuttle they’d confiscated from Harry Mudd, and a targeted electroplasma surge key that would drop the hanger shields.

“Come with us?” Nyota asked him hopefully.

“And leave the *Enterprise*?” he scoffed. “No way in hell.” He kissed her forehead. “Be well, Nyota.”

There were rumors that a second Klingon War was on the horizon; if it happened, he’d be in the middle of it, no question. She cupped his face in her hands, and he smiled at her. “Be safe, Scotty,” she told him gratefully, and knew in her heart she’d never see him again.

Two hours later, they stole the shuttle in a mad caper, headed for a new kind of life. She grinned fiercely at Spock and Leonard as they warped away, giddy with the possibilities. They all knew, of course, that after a very token resistance, Pike and the *Enterprise* had simply let them go. And at the first port outside of Federation space they painted the bow of their shuttle and home with its new name: the SS *Jim Kirk*.

....

He knew he wasn’t trying anymore. It was too much; he wasn’t going to be able to hold on much longer. He *wasn’t* holding on, in fact—his friends were holding onto him, and he was trapped here until he could get them to let go.

Which is why Scotty’s answer had been *no*, for almost year. *No*, no drinks with McCoy. No Christmas at the Kirks. No camping at Yosemite. No check-in dinner with Spock and Nyota when they got home from Kenya. *Certainly* no nights at their apartment. He’d closed the door in their faces when they showed up anyway. No *Spock*, not close enough to touch him. Because Spock already suspected, but he didn’t *know*.

(Later that night, when he checked to see if they were gone, he thought he caught a glimpse of some dark version of Kirk skulking in the shadows. He’d checked the deadbolt, and burned every note he had on red matter.)

He was a little surprised they kept inviting him to anything. It made him angry. It also made him shaky with relief. He could be inconsistent if he wanted to be; that’s all he ever was, here in this godforsaken universe.

The latest invitation was to a fundraiser at the Kirks’ home. And Scotty couldn’t stand politicians, but Edith had called him and told him it would mean a lot to Jim if he came, even if just for a few minutes. He said no, and not just to drive them off. This week he really couldn’t get out of bed. Everything felt numb and distant, other than the clenching, maddeningly constant ache of his nonexistent hand, which refused to be

anything but omnipresently agonizing. He was too sick to drag his arse from New York to Virginia, he told her, and it was true.

Then Nyota had called, and Leonard, and finally *Spock*, all of them so gently and solicitously concerned that it would have made him angry, if he was capable of something quite so exhausting as anger. Beyond longing for non-existence, all he could muster was self-loathing, and it wasn't much, but it was just enough to get him up and on a train.

Because if they weren't going to let him go, then he would have to pry them off.

There was a barber shop outside the station, and after ten minutes of indecision Scotty finally talked himself into a haircut and shave before checking into a soulless hotel and asking the front desk to call him a taxi. He was probably supposed to be in a tux, but there was no way he could tie a bow tie one-handed. Black slacks and a leather jacket would have to do; his professor uniform. He tied his arm tight to his side in a sling. The damn thing hurt too much, and drew too many pitying looks, to do otherwise.

He stood in front of the mirror and practiced what he thought were probably the right expressions to go with a party. He remembered enjoying these sorts of things, once. The taste of good scotch, of being able to move around a room and draw people to him with a funny story or a fierce debate. The feeling of friends nearby, in and out of the stories and jokes, grinning at each other. Of the interesting stranger, whose glance lingered a little too long to be accidental, the pleasure of an evening that ended sweetly with sex. He remembered feeling all of that, but couldn't remember what any of it actually felt like.

If he hadn't already asked for a cab, he wouldn't have made it to the party, but the front desk called to tell him it had arrived, and he crawled into the back seat with a sigh.

"Nice place," the driver whistled some time later.

"Aye," Scott said, shaking himself. He hadn't realized they had arrived at Jim and Edith's gorgeous house.

The event was already in full swing when he got there, but his friends noticed his arrival. Nyota and Edith kissed his cheeks, Kirk shook his hand, McCoy slapped his back. Spock simply inclined his head, god bless the Vulcan.

The politicians noticed him too—the Kirks' mad-scientist friend who was infamous for periodically blowing up the agreed-on rules of the universe, and causing fist-fights during physics conferences and scientific shouting matches on CNN. After twenty minutes, trapped by some giggling deputy secretary of transportation who had apparently audited his theoretical physics class and understood none of it, Scotty couldn't take it anymore.

Edith found him in the garden, smoking a joint. "Scotty, that's illegal in this century," she chided gently. "There are a lot of journalists here. People from the Department of Justice. 'Drug Fest at Candidate's Fundraiser' is not a headline I need."

"I'll put it out. It's fine." He looked up at the sky so he wouldn't have to look into her eyes, and sighed. "You can see the stars here a little better, at least. New York City is jus' impossible. Big Dipper, there, yeh see?" He pointed to the sky. "Follow the line north, tae Polaris. Couple stars over from that ... the star of the planet Vulcan. Spock will be born there. The Klingon Empire is there," he said, gesturing. "Romulus over there. Big nebula, just there. If it was darker you'd be able to see it. They'll build a huge station just outside it. McCoy once called it a 'snow globe in space.' We had a spot of trouble in that nebula, lost a lot o' good people. But on the other side there are these massive creatures who live inside of stars, can yeh imagine? Star whales."

She looked up at the faint stars. "I've heard the five of you tell plenty of stories," she said softly. "About your ship, and your shipmates. Drunken escapades in ports of call. And it is easy to hear those stories and think 'Navy vets.' I've known plenty of those. But that's the first time any of you, even Jim, has pointed at the stars, and said 'I've been there.' You were *astronauts*," she said in wonder.

"I'm glad I got tae see the stars," he answered vaguely. He ran his hand over his eyes. "I'm keeping yeh from your guests. I'm sorry."

She patted his back, letting her hand linger. "I'm glad you're here," she said gently, trying to catch his gaze. "Please stay?"

"You know I cannae," he said, looking up at her at last, and she closed her eyes in pain.

"We will miss you," she whispered. "So very, very much." She glanced up at the stars, then once more at him, and turned away.

He watched her go, then put his hand back in his jacket pocket and closed it around the contents. Two joints to ease the pain, enough cocaine to get him through the party, and the means to end his life. Tonight, perhaps.

Vaguely, distantly, it was almost as if he could hear himself, back when he was happy aboard the *Enterprise*. For some reason, the voice was doubled in his ears. They should have found him pathetic and pitiable. Their acceptance and grace was unexpected. *Fight for another hour, laddie. Just one more. And then in another hour, decide again.*

Slightly lifted, he took his hand out of his pocket and headed back to the party, determined to summon a spark of his old cheer for the sake of his desperately worried friends. One last time for them, if not for himself.

....

Nyota looked up from the freezing floor as her captors came into the room. Time for pain again, it seemed, she sighed to herself.

"We know you are Starfleet," the Klingon said without preamble, dragging her to her feet by her hair.

"I'm not," she said with a disbelieving laugh, although she was struggling to keep her balance. "I really, really wish I could tell you otherwise. Maybe you'd stop breaking my ribs."

What she really wanted, of course, was to see Spock, Kirk, and the security officers. They'd come to the Klingon homeworld for the criminal

Harrison, but he'd slipped away when the Klingons had shot down their little non-regulation ship and taken them prisoner. She hadn't seen her compatriots since then, although she suspected that she had heard their screams. And that they had heard hers.

They were abandoned here. Starfleet wouldn't—couldn't—come for them, not without triggering a war. If Scott had been in the command seat on the *Enterprise* when they were taken, she knew he would have brought the ship across the neutral zone, and damn the consequences. But Scotty had resigned and walked away from the ship without even saying goodbye. Sulu had been the one in the command chair, and although his fury could match the Scotsman's, it was colder. Sulu was less impulsive and more measured, and although it would have broken his mighty heart, she knew Hikaru had ordered the *Enterprise* away.

"ghaHvaD ja' chuqchugh je tlhobnISLu," the interrogator said, amused.

"Shakespeare?" Nyota sighed. "Really?"

"You have not seen Shakespeare until you have heard it in the original Klingon," her torturer insisted. "You protest too much," the Klingon repeated. "If you truly were a simple merchant, you would have broken by now. You would have told us what we wanted, in the futile hope of sparing yourself more pain. Only a true Starfleet officer would continue to hold to the fiction that you are not a Starfleet officer. Particularly when the alternative is war."

Uhura spread her hands wide, the movement pulling terribly on her injured body. "I don't know what to tell you," she said. "I'm not a Starfleet officer. Torturing me will never change that answer."

"No," the interrogator said, almost rueful and admiring. "We had not expected such honor from humans, nor such will. But we are changing our tactics." She gestured, and they dragged Spock into the room, his body mangled and broken, but still alive, and he lifted his head slightly to look at her through ruined and swollen eyes. Nyota desperately took back her wish, her stomach nearly emptying itself of bile in horror, because she knew what was about to happen. She *did not* want to see Spock. She absolutely did not.

This isn't happening. It can't be!

The interrogator smiled benevolently. "We will not touch you again, Nyota. You may be assured of it. But How long will *he* scream, I wonder, before you change your answer?"

....

Kirk never did find Chekov, or the alien woman. They must have ejected too early and burned in the atmosphere, or too late and crashed into the ground. He wandered the planet that had killed his ship, carefully dodging the drones and the thugs. He found the saucer of the *Enterprise* without too much difficulty, hoping that there might be scanners still to find someone—anyone—but it was entirely unpowered. A few days later the deadly swarm ships left the planet again and never returned. He barely dared think what that might mean, and made his way over a period of weeks toward the tower they had come from.

The crew had been there. Hundreds of them, all dead; dessicated and sucked dry. He'd retched and screamed, and run away. And then returned. It took him months to bury them all, to write their names on stone plaques. He knew he would never get the smell of their rotting corpses off of him. But then, he didn't deserve to. He returned, sometimes, when he was especially lonely, and would talk most often to the graves of Nyota and Hikaru.

Kirk's uniform fell to pieces, and he scavenged supplies when he could, but also stole them from other marauders when he had to. He and a fierce black-and-white woman had an uneasy truce, and mostly left one another alone.

Two years later he found a portion of the *Enterprise's* secondary hull—main engineering. He knew better than to hope that anyone had survived, and no one had. He found some welcome supplies, but also seven more bodies to bury. Seven of his engineers who had been trapped aboard with no way off the ship. He could and did imagine what their final minutes had been like. Six of the seven he had no way of identifying, lieutenants or ensigns whose bodies were well past recognition, which Kirk buried under the name "Unknown Enterprise Engineer." But the seventh was a lieutenant commander. There had only been two of those aboard the *Enterprise*, and only one an engineer. Kirk hadn't wept in some time, but he did then, and left Scotty's body on the ship, where he would want to be.

He once stumbled across the black-and-white woman's corpse. He wondered what had happened to her, and went ahead and buried her too after taking everything of use off her broken body.

It took him ten years to find Spock and Bones, high in the mountains. It looked like they had survived initially, but then died together. Kirk had considered lying down and dying beside them. In fact, he *did* lie down, with that very intention. For days he'd stared at the sky, slowly starving. And then, in a dream, he'd heard their voices:

Captain, this is not logical.

Dammit, Jim, get the hell off the ground!

He sighed, so very alone, and did as they asked. The next time he slept, he dreamed that none of it had ever happened, and he almost believed that it was possible.

....

Spock was old. So very old, and yet Jim Kirk was still beside him. Beyond hope, he'd survived death and the Nexus, a living miracle again. As usual, as always. And who else but Kirk would have boarded the *Jellyfish* with him to try to save Romulus? They'd done it. Of course they had; failure was not possible when Jim was with him. Not unexpectedly, however, it had cost them their lives—or it would soon now, as the life support in their little ship failed.

They rested together on the floor, strength gone as the oxygen decreased, Kirk's head on Spock's shoulder, and Spock's heart bursting with both sadness and gratitude for this end.

"If we weren't already about to be dead, Scotty would kill us for this," Kirk murmured vaguely.

"Yes," Spock agreed dryly. "He will undoubtedly be upset about losing the ship."

Jim chuckled; that wasn't what he meant, of course, and Spock damn well knew it. "We're not here, you know," he said.

"What?" Spock asked, puzzled, sitting up slightly.

"We're not here," Kirk murmured, drifting, and then frowned, his gaze focusing in confusion. "Why did I say that?"

"We've said that before," Spock said, and his head was spinning. "On New Vulcan, in the dreamscape with Scott and Nyota, fighting our memory of Hades."

"Our ... *what? Where? New Vulcan?* Spock, nothing like that ever happened," Kirk said woozily.

Spock sat up abruptly, and Kirk reached for him plaintively. "It did. Somewhere, somewhen, to a version of us. We are here, Jim, you and I, this is our end in our time." Spock staggered to the controls of the ship and looked at his reflection, wavering and doubled in the glass. "But we are not alone. You are not here!" He cried out to two other versions Jim Kirk and Spock as they existed in another place. Spock collapsed to his knees, and then crawled back to Jim.

Kirk stared at Spock, both of them gasping now, and then something in his expression changed. "Spock!" he said urgently with his last breath, the minds of other Kirks catching the last fading flickers of this one. "*You are not here!* Fight this and escape, for the sake of this reality, and all the others!"

....

Suddenly dizzy, Scotty instinctively put down the kitchen knife he was holding, aware that he'd be chopping his fingers instead of onions if he kept on. He ached in all the places he usually ached, and yet the pain was so unexpected that it took his breath away.

I'm on Earth, he thought in shock, and he was. The light and the heat, the vista out the window ... not San Francisco. Not New York. Not Scotland. Africa. *Kenya. Of course Kenya.* He'd lived here with Spock and Nyota for years; he didn't know why he felt so surprised. He blinked, and Nyota was standing across the counter from him, trying to catch his gaze.

"Did you need something, Scotty?" she asked softly, touching his fingers, and he looked down at her hand, and then back up into her face. She didn't look quite right; not quite like Nyota. He caught a glimpse of his own face, reflected back at him from the chrome fixtures of the kitchen, and his face didn't look right either. Which was completely insane, but then, that wasn't unusual. He suddenly felt like multiple people. And his unstable brain, damaged but capable of self-assessment, was very annoyed. *Great. This is new.*

He'd been an Engineer, once. A damn good one, especially at his height aboard the *Enterprise* after the Klingon War, five years under Pike and another five under Kirk. Midway through his last mission he'd cracked the mathematics that had plagued him since his youth—*space was the thing that was moving!* But shortly after those discoveries the Terran Empire had kidnapped him off of the *Enterprise* and tortured him for *months*, trying to steal the formulas locked in his mind. They hadn't killed him, but they'd come close, and Spock ... the mirror Spock had shredded his mind into confetti. By the time they got him back—his Kirk and Spock and Uhura, bent on rescue with phasers blazing—his physical and psychic injuries had been profound.

McCoy had grimly placed him straight into a stasis coma for the final months of the mission, the procedures Scott needed far too complex for a Starship. He had a distant impression of Nyota singing to him, and had no idea if it was before or after McCoy put him under. He had a red-tinged memory of waking in searing agony between many surgeries on Earth, and then a soft grey one of being on Vulcan, with Nyota and Spock and a half-dozen strong Vulcan telepaths trying to piece his shattered mind back together, with very limited success.

The Vulcans had wanted them to stay indefinitely, appalled and horrified at what had been done by one of their own, even from another universe. It had taken Scotty a long time to find the way to tell them he wanted to go home; Nyota had finally been the one to break through his devastating aphasia. Unlike spoken words, the language of mathematics hadn't left him; he'd written $(x-a)^2 + (y-b)^2 = r^2$, over and over—the formula for finding the center of a circle.

"Home," she had finally interpreted one day, and he'd wept in relief. At home Nyota and Spock could hold him and stop the nightmares. At home he could have tea with his sister and nephew and granny. At home he could sit on the beach with Hikaru and Ben and Demora, or share a drink with Leonard, or listen to Pavel tell him an outrageous story. At home, Admiral Kirk could come by and talk at him for hours about the refit to the *Enterprise*. At home, he could just be *broken*, and although it grieved the people who loved him, they accepted it.

But none of that was right, he thought in confusion. *That's nae what happened*, Scotty insisted to himself. *They tortured and killed me, over and over, but used the transporter tae restore me. I'm fine.* As if that was *less* horrific. Or, no. What the *hell?* *None of that had happened either.*

Fantastic, he grumped at himself, *I'm apparently three people who cannae decide on their life history.*

"Scotty," Nyota said again, achingly gentle, cupping his face in her hands. She was smoothing her thumbs over his temples, and he blinked at her, completely baffled. "Are you with me?"

I'm fine, he wanted to tell Nyota; what came out instead was: "I'm in th' wrong universe." Which was the most fluid thing he'd said in years.

No I'm not, shut up, he thought at himself.

Nyota gaped at him. "I don't know what you're trying to say, my dear," she finally said.

"Exactly what I just said," he insisted, his voice incredibly rusty but apparently intent on proving he was completely mad with the longest sentence he'd spoken in ages. "We're not supposed to be here, Nyota." Although he had no idea where they were supposed to be instead.

She stared at him, as though she almost felt it too.

He abandoned the onion he was supposed to be chopping and went hunting for a padd, the equations spilling off his fingers as he sat at the kitchen counter. *Space is the thing that's moving*, he thought fondly.

"Scotty," Nyota was calling urgently. "Scotty!!" His head was heavy with universes and superweapons and reality bombs. "Scotty!!!" Nyota shouted sharply, and he focused on her with difficulty. "What the hell is going on?"

I need your help for the sake of everything, he tried to say, but the words were gone again, and he looked across at her in despair. He was abruptly, profoundly weary, and starting to tremble. He'd done too much for one day, and his shattered body and mind couldn't take it. *I'm sorry*, he thought, and wasn't sure which one of himself was apologizing.

Nyota stepped into him and wrapped a firm arm around his waist to keep him upright, then put her other hand on the head of a little boy. "Selek, go get your father," Nyota murmured, and the boy dashed from the room. *Nyota and Spock's son*, he deduced—or possibly remembered—unsurprised by the swell of love that accompanied the thought. The boy was back a moment later, and pressed his head against Scotty's leg.

"Nyota!" Spock called, striding into the room, pausing to take in the scene. "What has happened?" His face didn't look quite right either. *Alternate universe*, Scotty told himself vaguely.

"He spoke," Nyota answered softly. "A *complete sentence*. He said he was in the wrong universe, started writing equations, and now he's disoriented and shaking. I don't know, Spock."

Spock took the padd that was still in Scotty's hand. Scotty frowned down at his empty fingers, then spasmodically clenched and unclenched his fist. Young Selek put his fingers over Scott's hand, stilling him. The lad was just a toddler still, but so, *so* like both of his parents.

"This is red matter," Spock said as he looked over the equations, his voice as shocked as it ever got. "The multiverse equations." He gazed at Scotty, and there was something fractured in his expression. "I did not know you still had this in your mind," he said quietly.

Scotty shrugged, the slightest movement of his shoulders. *Of course it's still there*, he wanted to say. The multiverse was at stake. He had no idea how he knew; he just *knew*. "Multiverse," he managed, then pounded the table in frustration. But the movement knocked him out of Nyota's supporting grip, and he would have hit the floor hard if Spock hadn't caught him.

"There is no need to spend your strength on this," Spock said sadly, and brushed against his shattered mind with fingers to his head. "Sleep."

He woke later in his bed, sometime in the evening after sunset, with the feel of Selek against his chest. Since the baby had learned to walk, he often curled up beside Scotty to sleep, a habit no one was inclined to discourage. There were voices coming from the kitchen, and it took Scotty a moment to place them. *Kirk and McCoy*. Scott sat up carefully so as not to disturb the sleeping tot. He grimaced; his body ached terribly.

"We can rule out a stroke or aneurysm," Leonard was saying. "I would normally think speaking was a good sign, but it's nonsensical. I'm afraid it's more likely that he's backsliding into a confusional or minimally conscious state again. We need to get him to Starfleet Medical, but depending on what's happening, I can't promise you he'll ever come home. These things just don't take straight lines. Between what those bastards did to him, the brain injury and the psychic damage layered on top of the issues he's always had, we've been lucky to have any of him at all."

"We knew, from the moment we brought him back from the mirror universe, that we weren't getting Scotty back, not the way he was," Jim sighed. "The brilliant Starship Engineer is gone, but he's seemed stable and at least reasonably content these last years."

"Until today I would have agreed with you," Spock answered. "But unexpectedly, the Starship Engineer is still within him. He wrote a page of complex and groundbreaking equations. Equations that are *not* identical to the last time I saw them; there were considerable refinements and improvements. We have long known that he had a once-a-generation mind. We have a responsibility to science, and to Scott himself, to help him communicate that again."

Leonard was shaking his head sorrowfully, but Nyota spoke first. "Spock, he's coming apart," she said, aghast. "The gifts of his mind never brought him happiness or peace. Let him be."

Scotty stood stiffly and walked into the kitchen, and the conversation stopped, bland expressions and hearty smiles plastered on their faces. Scotty just shook his head at the lot of them and the smiles dropped. He collected a glass of water and drank half of it down, then dipped his finger in the water and started tracing an equation on a paper napkin.

"The multiverse equations," Spock said gravely, and Scott nodded. Spock glanced at Nyota, who shrugged in tearful frustration.

"You are trying to tell us something? Or ask us something?" Spock asked.

He nodded.

"Related to the multiverse?"

He nodded again.

Nyota rubbed her forehead. “Scotty, no offense, but the multiverse can go fuck itself.”

Scotty shook his head; a fucked universe was the problem exactly. He could usually communicate with Nyota, even with his deep disabilities, because he rarely had anything complicated to say: food, sleep, help, pain, fear, love, Selek, Spock. But *charades* wasn’t going to get them anywhere with this.

Scotty’s vision was swimming again. Lord, he was in bad shape. Worse than usual, he realized, with sudden dread. Whatever the hell this was was putting terrible pressure on the shaky infrastructure that the Vulcans had managed to rebuild out of the wreckage of his brain. The whole thing was threatening to come down, he understood with sorrow. His wasn’t much of a life anymore, but he’d fought hard to be able to live it. He knew, with sudden and complete clarity, that he was about to lose everything. He was falling; reality was fading. Spock’s hands were on his head, Nyota’s on his face stroking away his tears, and they were reaching hopelessly for his rapidly receding mind.

The shattered versions of ourselves give us something to hold onto, the overlapping iterations of Enterprise crew intuited. *The dying, the damaged, the despairing. Jagged edges. Traction. Slows us down for long enough to realize that we are not here.*

Spock abruptly straightened, blinking rapidly, and looked around the room as if confused to find himself there.

“We are not here,” he said solemnly, and Kirk and Uhura’s gazes snapped up to his face as he repeated words they had all said to break out of a nightmare they’d once all lived together. “This is real, for a parallel version of ourselves, but *we are not here*,” Spock repeated urgently.

“Reality bomb. *Warp field!*” Scott managed, reaching for Nyota’s hand as the last moments of present consciousness slipped away forever from this version of himself.

“We’re on the ISS *Enterprise*,” Kirk cried grimly. “Fight through this! We’ve got to get out!”

....

Spock turned to the screen, his fingers pressed together as he waited for the computer to put the next test question to him.

“If a collapse of multispacetime has occurred in magnitude sufficient to result in cross-universal incursions, the subspace damage can be resolved through the application of a warp field at a factor of eight, for a period of two point four-six seconds,” Spock answered evenly.

“*No question pending*,” the computer said crossly.

....

“Scotty, I need warp eight!” Kirk shouted into the comm.

“*I cannae give yeh warp eight!*” Scotty cried back desperately.

“The universe depends on it! Just do it!”

....

“So, let’s say you’re going warp eight,” said the very pretty woman, leaning over her drink. Ny ... something. Nyta? Whatever her name was.

“Okay,” Kirk agreed, definitely buzzed. Fine. *Drunk*.

“For ... 2.46 seconds,” she continued.

“A very short trip,” he slurred.

“How far have you gone?”

“A fair bit,” he answered, and she pouted at him. He waved vaguely. “Three hundred and seventy millionish kilometers. Earth to Jupiter-ish.” He grinned at her. “Am I plotting a course?”

“If you’re in orbit around the Earth you’d probably better,” she said with a frown. “Warp eight in a star system is incredibly dangerous. So many things to run into.”

“Wait. What?” Kirk asked, sitting up.

....

“Course laid in sir,” McCoy said.

“You *are* a pilot aren’t you?” the Captain teased his best helmsman.

“Apparently I am today,” he teased back.

“Very funny, Mr. McCoy. Punch it.”

....

Reality narrowed and focused, finally centering on one place and time. On the bridge of the Warship *Enterprise*, two currently co-existing but blessedly separate versions of James T. Kirk pushed themselves off the floor.

“Holy shit,” Commodore Kirk said shakily.

Captain Kirk rubbed his face. “I don’t disagree. Mr. Spock and ... Mr. Spock, are you alright?”

The two Spocks were sharing a long and solemn gaze. “We are physically unhurt,” one of them answered, and they both moved to a duty station on the bridge to check the readings.

“Dr. McCoy and Commander Uhura?” Kirk asked.

“I think I may need to schedule an existential crisis for sometime next week,” McCoy answered, looking down at the helm where, somehow, he was sitting.

Uhura laughed shakily. “That makes two of us.”

The two Kirks both moved toward the center chair, and then both stuttered to a halt. The Captain gestured at it. “You’re the one without a ship just now, Commodore. Please, I insist.”

The Commodore nodded and reached for the comm in the arm of the chair. “Scotty, are you okay?”

“Did anyone else jus’ have a truly disturbing encounter with infinite possibilities, or was that jus’ us?” one of them answered from Engineering, and it was honestly impossible to tell which one it was.

“A trap; a reality bomb,” Spock answered.

“Invented by myself, no doubt. Fucking bastard.”

“How long were we in that, Mr. Spock?” Uhura asked.

“Ninety-six seconds,” one of them answered.

“We lived all that in ninety-six seconds?” Captain Kirk marveled. “And all of that was real? Somewhere, in some universe, all of that that has happened, is happening, will happen?”

“The very smallest encounter with eternity,” Spock answered gravely.

“As suggested, we’ll all have to schedule our mental breakdowns for another day,” the Commodore said, sitting in the center seat. “I take it we went to warp, Scotty?”

“Aye sir, warp eight.”

“Where are we, exactly?” Kirk asked.

“Between Mars and Jupiter,” Spock answered.

“Enterprise is hailing us,” said Uhura from the communications board. “They’re concerned.”

Commodore Kirk glanced at Captain Kirk, who answered the hail. “Sorry about that, Mr. Sulu. Minor glitch.”

“Some glitch sir,” Sulu said. *“Do you need assistance?”*

“I don’t think so, Sulu, but standby,” Kirk answered. “Assuming we don’t hit another ... glitch we’ll get you the calculations soon to work our way back to our universe and the *Enterprise-A*. We have a job to finish.

Prime Universe, Space, Stardate 6770.15

Sulu’s eyes flicked to the chronometer. “Nine minutes,” he said wearily. Sixty seconds more and Spock’s deadline would expire, and he would have to take the *Enterprise-A* back into their universe alone to try to fight the Weapon. “Anything, Mr. Chekov?”

“No sir,” Chekov said sadly. Then: “wait! Getting a massive surge on scanners! *Two ships?!?*”

“Which ships?” Sulu said urgently, spinning the command chair toward the science station that Chekov was manning in Spock’s absence.

“Enterprise and ... ISS Enterprise !” Chekov cried urgently. “The Terran Warship!”

“Shields!” Sulu cried, but a moment later they were being hailed.

“It’s okay, Sulu. This is Commodore Kirk.”

Sulu snapped upright, his face grim. “Due respect, sir: prove it.”

There was a pause. *“The seven of us once had a perfect day on a California beach, just before we deployed. Demora’s naming and blessing day. The joy on your face was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.”*

Sulu sighed in relief. “You okay, sir?”

“We’ve had a bit of a day, I’ll tell you that. But as you can see, we managed to get our hands on an extra ship. We are planning to stuff her down the throat of the Weapon, and blow them both back to hell.”

Sulu grinned fiercely. “Aye, sir!” he said.

It didn’t take long to set the plan and get everyone where they were supposed to be. Red matter set, calculations made, battle strategy formulated. The only hitch was when Commodore Kirk tried to talk Captain Kirk into staying behind; after all, this wasn’t their fight.

“Like hell, Jim,” the Captain answered evenly.

Aboard three ships called *Enterprise*, three different commanders settled into the command chairs. Captain James T. Kirk looked at his resolute crew, all of whom agreed they couldn’t leave this fight to their doubles. Commodore James T. Kirk looked at Spock, the only other person aboard the Warship. Commander Montgomery Scott looked at the other versions of his ship on the screen, both of them presently in better shape than the *Enterprise-A*, then back at Uhura, who opened a channel.

“Sirs, we’re not doing great over here,” Scott said, a hard admission. “Now or never.”

“Fire the red matter torpedo,” the Commodore ordered, and the three ships headed into a battle for the fate of everything.

Kelvin Universe, Jupiter Orbit, Stardate 2269.205

In Jupiter orbit, the three versions of the *Enterprise* abruptly appeared and swooped over the Jovian moon Ganymede to position themselves between the gas giant and the Weapon. Sulu spared a glance toward the Galilei Observatory as they roared over the top of it, and prayed that Ben and Demora would survive this.

The Weapon, which had been locked onto Jupiter, turned lazily toward the approaching ships, bringing around its terrible weaponized maw, capable of crushing planets to rubble. On the *Enterprise*, Captain Kirk gripped the arms of his command chair. “Shields,” he ordered. “Weapons, standby. Standby transporters too, in case we have to pull out as many people as we can off the Warship or the *Enterprise-A*.”

On the USS *Enterprise-A*, Scott hit the comm to the transporter room. “Mr. Chekov, you keep locked onto the Commodore and Mr. Spock,” he said urgently.

“We’ll need to keep close,” Chekov said tensely. “And drop shields at the last moment.”

“Shield control tied into your console, laddie. We’re going down the gullet with the Commodore, Scott confirmed. “Mr. Sulu?”

“Line of sight, sir,” said Sulu tightly, his hands moving swiftly over the controls. “And the moment I get confirmation they are back aboard, I’ll punch us to warp to get us out of there.

“Here it comes, gentlemen,” the Commodore said. “Let’s kill the bastard. Execute!”

The *Enterprise* immediately started attacking the Weapon, dancing around it, swift and deadly. The *Enterprise-A* and the Terran Warship jumped forward in formation, both at full impulse, headed down its throat.

The Weapon powered up, its maw glowing red and deadly as a molecular disruption beam began churning. “We won’t stand against that for long, much less the *Enterprise-A*” Spock said to Commodore Kirk. The Warship jerked violently as the edge of a beam swept across the bow, and behind them the *Enterprise-A* suddenly pitched up to avoid a direct hit that likely would have destroyed the damaged ship.

“You stay behind us, Mr. Scott,” the Commodore warned grimly. “Close as you can; we’ll deflect as much as we can with the Warship’s shields. Captain Kirk, anything you can do to disrupt those weapons would be much appreciated.”

“On it, Commodore,” the other Kirk said. The *Enterprise* swooped in toward the generators, and the Weapon, still running only on auxiliary power rather than the nearly-infinite power that would come from consuming Jupiter, started to have trouble holding the beam. It shot off an unexpected volley of torpedoes toward the *Enterprise*, which had to maintain position to protect the other ships even as deadly fire roared across its shielding.

“Report!” Captain Kirk snapped.

“Shields down 37 percent,” Spock responded.

“Hull breaches on decks four and twelve,” Uhura reported crisply. “Damage control teams enroute.”

“Commodore, let’s get this done!” Kirk called tensely into the comm.

“Warship is crossing the boundary, *Enterprise-A* is right behind us!”

Another volley of torpedoes hit the *Enterprise*, and its weapons fire stuttered for a moment; enough for the Weapon’s disrupter to sweep the *Enterprise-A* solidly broadside. The ship rolled hard with the hit, power clearly gone to major systems.

“Scotty!” the Commodore shouted.

“... still with you. Keep going sir!”

The two ships finally slipped inside the Weapon, leaving the *Enterprise* outside to try to keep it away from Jupiter. Inside the Weapon, a wave of automated drones rolled toward the intruders, not unlike t-cells in an immune response, burrowing through the shielding. They pulled away from the Warship, apparently reading it as friendly, or at least familiar, but doubled up on the *Enterprise-A*.

“Yeh need tae be within a thousand meters of the reactor, sir!” Scott called urgently, and Kirk and Spock pressed the Warship forward.

“Six thousand meters,” Spock reported. “Fifty-five hundred. Five thousand meters. Sixty seconds until optimal positioning.”

Kirk nodded, and turned away from the helm to the Warship’s engineering station. “Scotty, I’m going to start overloading the reactor. It goes without saying that once we kick this off, there is no stopping it. Please be ready to transport Mr. Spock and me off.”

Scott didn’t acknowledge for a moment. “*Sir,*” he said tensely, “*we’re having serious problems with these drones ...*” the comms cut out for a long beat, then hissed back in, heavy with disruption. “*... goddamn ... transporters! Sulu, take the conn!*”

“Scotty?” Kirk called urgently. “*Enterprise ?*” He turned toward his first officer. “I think they just lost transporters,” he said grimly.

Outside the Weapon, Lieutenant Uhura pressed her earpiece close to her face. “Captain, I’m having a difficult time with the comms through the Weapon’s hull, but I the *Enterprise-A* may have just lost transporters,” she reported.

“Scotty?” Captain Kirk asked tensely of his Engineer. “Could we beam the other Kirk and Spock out?”

The Engineer shook his head. “We cannae get a lock through the hull.”

“Can we get in there?” Kirk asked, turning toward Spock.

“Unlikely, Captain. Without an outside attack on the disruption beam, I calculate an 86 percent chance that we would be destroyed. Moreover, without our continuing attacks, the Weapon would consume Jupiter. If that occurs before the Weapon can be disabled, there is no chance of success. It will be too powerful at that point to destroy by any means.”

“They’ll have to do what they must,” Kirk said.

Inside the Weapon, the *Enterprise-A* was buckling as the drones started buzzing through its hull. There was no time for the Chief Engineer of the ship to think about it; he was sprinting full speed down the corridor. He slid sideways into transporter control, where Chekov had the padd half apart.

“It’s the emitters on the hull,” Chekov said, hands flying as he put components back together. “The drones are interfering with them. Thirty seconds until the Warship is in position.” Scott didn’t spare any breath for a response, but spun on his heel and headed for the access shaft down the hall.

Aboard the Warship, Kirk called his Starship with a calm he did not feel. “We are at thirty two seconds until detonation. What is our status?”

“*Standby,*” Sulu said tersely.

“Anytime now,” Kirk said, standing to circle the bridge, his eyes fixed on the reactor looming ever larger on the screen. Fifteen seconds. “Gentlemen, beam us aboard.” Ten. He looked over at Spock, who reached for his arm. Five.

And the transporter grabbed them.

“I’ve got them!!” Chekov screamed, smashing the comm, and with a quarter second to spare, Sulu took the ship to warp.

Kirk and Spock materialized, *their Enterprise* under their feet. They barely had time to take in Chekov’s supremely relieved face before the ship heaved violently, knocking them all flat, groaning from the massive shockwave of an exploding warp core in extreme proximity.

“Come on!” Kirk whispered to his ship, his face pressed to the deck. “Hold together, old girl!”

Somehow, when the shaking ended, she was still in one piece. The engines were laboring heavily and the superstructure creaking dangerously. Scott was in the hallway outside the transporter room, and when he saw them he heaved a sigh of relief, “I’m going tae Engineering,” he said urgently, pushing past them for the lift without pausing for permission or acknowledgement.

Kirk, Spock, and Chekov raced to the bridge. “Is it dead?” the Commodore asked without preamble when they arrived.

Sulu stood, relinquishing the command chair. “I’m honestly not sure, sir. Our scanners are down, along with most everything else.”

Kirk glanced at Uhura, who hailed the *Enterprise*. “Jim, we’re blind. Did we kill it?” Kirk asked urgently.

The other Kirk nodded back at him on the screen, and gestured at his Spock. “Zero power readings,” Spock recited. “Zero heat emissions. Its hull is seriously compromised. It is neutralized, Commodore.”

The Commodore sat shakily in his command chair, reeling in sudden exhaustion from the last day. Two days. Two *years*. “Captain Kirk,” he said gratefully. “You have our deepest thanks.”

“Commodore, it was our honor.”

“I don’t know if it’s really ‘Commodore’ anymore,” Kirk said in wonder. “I don’t get promoted until about two weeks from now, after the Earth was destroyed.”

“Well then, *Captain*. It suits you,” the other Kirk said with a smile.

The Captain of *Enterprise-A* smiled a little tearily. “What is next for you, Captain?”

“Home for us,” Jim Kirk said. “We’re at the end of our mission too. I think we all have a lot to process. To think about. This has all been ... well, bizarre, Jim, and that is saying a lot.”

Still in the wrong uniform shirt, but grateful for the rightness of gold Captain's bands, Jim Kirk nodded. "Live long, friends. Prosper." His eyes flicked to the other Spock. "Until we meet again. I think you have your red matter, and your equations to get you home?" he asked, glancing back at his Spock, who nodded.

The Captain of the *Enterprise* settled back into his chair, and his senior staff stood around him, unknowingly echoing the photo that Ambassador Spock would bring with him back to this universe in his future and their past. "We do. Be well, *Enterprise*," he said, and the screen went dark. In space, the ship from the other universe maneuvered away, and then disappeared into a halo of light.

"Captain," Uhura said, the title coming more easily off her lips than 'Commodore.' "We're being hailed by Starfleet command."

McCoy had made his way up to the Bridge, with Edith Kirk at his side, who was staring around in shock. "Ya think?" McCoy said sarcastically.

The puzzled and drawn face of Admiral Komack appeared. "*Enterprise*," he said slowly. "Two questions. First, what in god's name just happened in Jupiter orbit? And second, how the hell did you get here? You're, ah, very early."

"From our perspective sir, we're very, very late," Kirk sighed. "And it took us a couple of tries to get this right. You've all been dead more times than I care to admit, and we have a bit of a story to tell."

"I'm quite sure you do," the Admiral said, more than a little shocked. "You look to be in bad shape, Jim. I don't dare guess what you've faced. Can you make it home or do we need to send a rescue?"

"We're coming, sir," Kirk said firmly, and glanced at his wife, who was standing near Spock and gazing in wonder at the swirling clouds of Jupiter. Komack nodded, and the screen went dark. Kirk exhaled in shaky relief, then toggled the comm.

"Scotty," he called cheerfully. "Are you on fire?"

"*Of course I'm on fire*," Scott complained. "*When am I not on fire down here?*"

"Well, put it out, it would be embarrassing to have to be towed to Spacedock."

"*Over my dead body, sir.*"

Kirk laughed, then looked around his bridge, at the stalwart, brave faces of his crew. "Mr. Chekov, I believe that Ben and Demora Sulu may need a ride home. If we've got anything left in our transporters, please beam them aboard and then bring them up to the bridge. I need you on the helm, Mr. Sulu," he said apologetically. "Once we get your family aboard, set a course for Earth, at whatever speed Mr. Scott can give us." Kirk looked up at his wife, and offered her his hand.

"Welcome to the *Enterprise*, and the future, my dear," he said.

"Was that really Scotty you were talking to on your," she waved vaguely. "...thing?"

"It was," Kirk said, and watched her face.

"I don't pretend to have a real grasp of any of this," she admitted. "But I distinctly remember going to his funeral."

"And he was actually dead there for a few years. But then again, my love, so were you. And everyone else. But we fixed it. Let's just say ... the universe is wild and strange."

She laughed, a little shakily, and leaned into his shoulder. "Is the future always like this?"

"Hardly ever. What do you think of the view, by the way?"

"My god, Jim," Edith whispered. "That's *Jupiter!*"

He smiled at her, and held her hand a little tighter. "Wait until you see the Earth." He reached into his pocket and handed her the precious locket he'd pulled out of her bedside drawer earlier that day—and hundreds of years ago. She gasped and looped it around her neck. A moment later the Sulus swept into the bridge, Ben's eyes wide while Demora talked at warp speed about the space battle that had just raged over their heads. Hikaru kissed them fiercely, and then he and Chekov turned back to the helm.

"Engineering says half impulse, sir," Sulu said, and settled his daughter into his lap. "Two hours to space dock."

Kirk leaned back in his chair. He pressed a kiss to Edith's palm, then took a cleansing breath before looking into the brave faces of his crew. "Steady as she goes, Mr. Sulu. Half impulse for home."

Chapter End Notes

Why Maine slips into TOS Scotty's voice is sure as hell a long story. See @SLWalker, whose Original Series Scotty is entirely the definitive one, right after Jimmy Doohan himself.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Endings and beginnings.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: canonical character deaths and the natural ends of long human lives.

The final Captain's Log quotes Shakespeare's Sonnet 87.

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

Captain's Final Log, USS Enterprise, 1701-A, upon her decommission. Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing, and like enough thou knowst thy estimate. The Charter of thy worth gives thee releasing; my bonds in thee are all determinate. For how do I hold thee but by thy granting, and for that riches where is my deserving? The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting, and so my patent back again is swerving. Thy self thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing, or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking, so thy great gift, upon misprision growing, comes home again, on better judgement making. Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter: in sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

Earth, San Francisco, Stardate 2295.180

They had to reserve the largest hall they could find in San Francisco for Admiral Nyota Uhura's retirement party. Every shipmate, student, mentee, and friend she'd ever had wanted to be there, and most of them made sure they made it.

Her years aboard ship had slipped into fond memory. Twenty five years, now, in San Francisco with Spock; her as head of Starfleet Intelligence; him as Ambassador of New Vulcan. Throughout those years, their home had continually brimmed with the riches of friends. Anyone who had ever served on a ship called *Enterprise* was always welcome, and any Vulcan. Spock's two adult sons and their mother, Saavik, were frequent and much-welcomed guests, as was McCoy, who had retired shortly after the Khitomer incident, and Edith, particularly when Jim was deployed.

Captains (and later Admirals) Kirk, Sulu, and Chekov cycled on and off of Earth as their ships came in and out of port, and they visited whenever they were home. Scotty was the rarest visitor; he'd barely stepped foot on Earth in decades, constantly on ships and bases and shipyards across the Federation and beyond, but he called every month or so, if he was in range. She'd been out the last time he'd called, and he'd left her a cheerful message. He'd told her some outrageous story, the details of which she couldn't quite remember, and had signed off with his love, as always, which she would never forget.

The party was wonderful, full of tributes from people she'd loved so much over the years. She walked serenely hand-in-hand with Spock all day, feeling nothing but blessed. But there were two faces conspicuously missing, and anyone who had ever served aboard an *Enterprise* had spent the day looking over their shoulders, half expecting their absent friends to walk in with a laugh and an incredible tale to tell. If they were ever going to come home, it would have been today.

They didn't. Which meant they were truly gone.

By the end of the evening, with just the old guard lingering over their drinks back at Spock and Nyota's home, Nyota knew she had to speak now, or the grief would solidify into a tradition and no one would ever be able to say their names again. She poured two drinks, which would go untouched, and put them on the table. Her friends fell somberly silent as they realized what she was doing.

"Shipmates," she said, "raise a glass for Jim and Scotty. Wherever you are, dear ones, may the stars be shining on your faces. We love you and miss you."

"Hear hear," McCoy said fervently, and drained down his drink.

Speaking their names broke the wall of silence and sorrow as the stories and reminiscences and tears started to flow.

"...so they walked into sickbay, straight from the landing party, and they'd fallen into something," McCoy was saying, the evening wrapping up. "Just covered head to toe in slime. And I swear to god, it's some kind of reproductive ejaculate from a massive animal. And Jim says 'face it, Bones, it isn't like this is the worst thing you've ever had to scrape off of us.'" The group laughed heartily, and even Spock looked deeply amused at the memory. McCoy sat back with a shake of his head, his smile slowly fading. "Lord almighty, how is it possible that we lost them both in the same damn year? Jim died saving lives on a ship called *Enterprise*, which was the most goddamned 'James T. Kirk' thing he ever did. And Scotty just vanished into thin air, because of course he did."

"It's final, with Scotty, as of last week," Nyota said tearily. "His sister called me. The search for his ship was indefinitely suspended and his death certificate issued. No memorial, she said. No body to bury, and enough tears already."

The group sighed unhappily. Admiral James T. Kirk's memorial, of course, had come almost immediately, a massive affair full of somber

pomp. Kirk the magnificent. Kirk the extraordinary. Kirk the hero. Jim would have hated it. They hadn't found his body either, but they hadn't expected to. Being vented into space when a mysterious energy ribbon sliced your ship into pieces wasn't survivable. Chekov had been there, and Scotty—only a few weeks before his own death—and they'd stood side-by-side, witnesses to that terrible, gaping void.

Losing Jim felt like losing their center, their anchor. There would always be something adrift about the people who remained; they could feel it. After all, if Jim had been alive, he would never have let Scotty slip unnoticed out of a bar, headed for space again, without one last drink. Without saying goodbye. But Jim was dead, and sometime in the middle of a drunken wake for their Captain, Scotty left them forever too.

"I know Scotty was off on some classified project when he disappeared, but does anyone know what it was?" Chekov asked.

"It was the Romulan supernova project," Spock said simply, to sorrowful nods. "His loss is a significant setback to its success; there were critical plans and equations in his mind that he never wrote down."

"He was afraid of so much of it," Nyota said softly. "Of how it could be used for destruction, rather than discovery."

"Sad experience says he was right," Chekov sighed, standing to top off his drink. "And yet. He was an extraordinary inventor. We'll be set back by decades. Maybe *centuries*. Starfleet Engineering is digging through every note and log he ever made, trying to piece together at least some of the things they know he knew. Equations, plans, improvements. They think he'd recently solved ion power. He'd reworked warp equations that would have scaled up speeds logarithmically, and he was designing the first prototype reactors and ships. And who knows where the multiverse theories would have led? He wasn't ready to go. And we weren't ready to lose him." Chekov's voice cracked and he scrubbed his hands over his eyes in grief. The news that Scotty's ship had vanished had come only a month after losing Kirk, and he'd immediately rerouted the *Reliant* and Sulu the *Excelsior* as they searched futilely for their friend. Starfleet had given them two weeks before reluctantly calling them off.

"Were he and Mira on, or off, when he headed out there?" Sulu asked, nursing the last of his drink.

Uhura smiled sadly. "Mira is a saint, but you know what Scotty is ... what he was like. He couldn't stay still long enough to make it work. Off, mostly, for all that they loved each other."

"How is she?"

"Not great," Nyota said heavily. "I invited her today, but she just couldn't face it."

"It was good to see Edith today," Sulu continued. "She said she was going to take that friendship tour through non-Federation planets that she and Jim had been talking about. They might even pull *Enterprise-A* out of the reserve shipyard for it. Oh, and had you heard that the repairs from the energy ribbon are done on *Enterprise-B*? Demora told me they considered renaming her the *James T. Kirk*, but someone convinced them that it was a better tribute to him to leave her the *Enterprise*."

"Thank god," McCoy drawled, somewhere well past drunk. "We don't need to be haunted by an *insufferable* ghost." He swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Goddammit," he complained weepily. "It wasn't supposed to be this way."

Nyota glanced at Spock, who inclined his head, then took Leonard's elbow to guide him to the guest room.

"Congratulations, Nyota," Hikaru said, and leaned forward to kiss her cheek. Pavel did the same, and she walked them to the door. They stepped out into the night, looking up to the sky, as always. It was a comfort to know that the stars themselves were the final rest of their friends.

"What will you do next?" Pavel asked.

Nyota smiled, and stepped back into the warm light of her home. "Begin again," she answered.

New Vulcan, Stardate 2379.4

Spock stood outside the *Jellyfish*, the New Vulcan Science Academy's newest and best ship. Ion powered, impossibly fast, and carrying the most dangerous payload in history—red matter enough to save a star, or to destroy worlds. Spock fought through a wave of *deja vu*. He'd only seen his alternate universe counterpart's ship the one time more than a century ago, immediately before destroying it. This felt like nearly the same ship, but completed, he hoped, in time.

Spock had said his goodbyes already. To his shipmates—to Jim, to Leonard, to Pavel, to Hikaru, and to his beloved Nyota—in the long decades before, as short human lives came to their ends. To his sons, to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, to Saavik, just that morning. Just one more goodbye now. Spock folded his hands behind his back while he waited, and wondered why this one felt so hard.

Admiral Montgomery Scott, ostensibly on loan from Starfleet, but who in truth answered only to himself after his long and unusual life, came to stand beside the Vulcan, and looked up at the extraordinary little ship they'd built together. "She's ready, Ambassador," Scott said. "Tell me we *arenae* just closing the loop here. That this will work, and not just send you *intae* the past somewhere *tae* start it all over again?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "It is to be hoped, Mr. Scott. I believe we are done nearly a decade earlier than the other universe," Spock answered.

Even with more than a century of preparation, the Federation had been dragging its feet, and Spock and his counterparts on Romulus had despaired of the stagnated project to save Romulus from its dying star. Until, that is, ten years ago when Picard's *Enterprise* had arrived unexpectedly on New Vulcan with the long-vanished engineer aboard.

Nyota had tried to tell Spock, toward the end of her life, that she believed Scotty was still alive, and that Spock might meet him again in the future. Nyota's keen mind had been fading, however, and Spock had humored her gently without believing it. But if anyone could survive for three-quarters of a century frozen in transporter stasis, Spock had considered later in rueful apology, it was Scott. Nyota would not have been

at all surprised.

Scott's abrupt reappearance, and his willingness to return to the supernova project that had been the cause of his long absence, had been most welcome. They'd put their heads down and *worked*. While their relationship had been intense during their years of service together, Spock and Scott had never been *friends*, not quite. The word wasn't enough, and it was too much. They had been like planets orbiting the same star, bound by powerful forces and a shared past, but always on different paths. They were *Ambassador* and *Admiral* to each other, *Mr. Spock* and *Mr. Scott*.

They talked, sometimes, of the old days, and mourned deeply together when Picard came personally to tell them that Jim Kirk had reappeared briefly, only to die alone again. They had spoken once, and only once, of Nyota, a few weeks after Scott's reappearance. "*I cannae, Mr. Spock,*" Scotty had begged, unable to handle more than Spock's assurance that she had died with the same grace she'd lived.

But beyond those rare flashes, they fell back into old patterns. They trusted each other implicitly, but never quite understood each other, unless they were working on a project. And this project was to save billions of lives, if they could solve it in time. Scott, in his early seventies when he arrived and still youthful compared to Spock, had been as fiercely inventive as ever, and the spark the project needed. It had only taken Scott six months to catch up on and then surpass seven decades of technical changes—a fact which had set him off on a rant about idiots who should have figured out new equations by now, and an intense discussion about whether Spock trusted Starfleet.

Spock didn't, and neither did Scott. Which meant that the re-written warp equations Scott had discovered a century earlier were carefully guarded on New Vulcan, as was the formula for red matter. Scott hadn't been happy that they hadn't come up with another solution, and had stomped off into the New Vulcan heat muttering about destiny and the multiverse.

Complex issues remained, however, about how, when, and where to deploy the matter into the heart of a star. It took ten intense years, but they'd done it. With the foreknowledge of his counterpart's errors, and driven by his own failure to save Vulcan, Spock believed that in this universe, he would save Romulus. Whether he lived or died doing so was unimportant.

Scott and Spock walked in companionable silence to the hatch of the *Jellyfish* through the cool of the New Vulcan night. Scott cycled the door, then turned toward Spock.

"D'yeh remember that time you and I invented cold fusion tae save a species, and then you almost died in a volcano?" Scott mused. "Nyota was so angry at both of us for that one. I wonder what she'd say about me sending you intae a dying star?"

"She would be angry," Spock confessed, and Scott laughed.

"Aye. She would be at that. Godspeed, Mr. Spock," he said softly, raising his hand in a Vulcan salute. "Bring my ship back in one piece, and yourself, while you're at it. But if yeh do end up in the past, give them my love, aye? Jim and Leonard. Pavel and Hikaru ... and Nyota."

"I shall," Spock said gravely, returning the gesture. He hesitated, then extended his hand. Scotty stared down at it, a little bemused, then firmly returned the handshake.

"Scotty," Spock said, for the first time in his life. "Live long, and proper."

"Go boldly, Spock." Scotty answered, clasping Spock's shoulder. Then he stepped back and closed the airlock between them. Spock began powering up the ship, and Scott walked away from the last of his shipmates, knowing they would not meet again.

"However this ends, I'm sending him home tae you, lass," he whispered. He did not turn as the ship rose into the night, carrying Spock to his destiny. Instead, the engineer lifted his face to the stars of New Vulcan's sky, reflexively picking out Sol, the star of the home he'd never return to, for it was the cradle and grave of nearly everyone he'd ever known.

He blew out a breath and walked alone into the night. "Begin again," he said.

And the poem that gave this story its title: *The Friend*, by Matt Hart:

The friend lives half in the grass and half in the chocolate cake, walks over to your house in the bashful light of November, or the forceful light of summer. You put your hand on her shoulder, or you put your hand on his shoulder. The friend is indefinite. You are both so tired, no one ever notices the sleeping bags inside you and under your eyes when you're talking together about the glue of this life, the sticky saturation of bodies into darkness.

The friend's crisis of faith about faith is unnerving in its power to influence belief, not in or toward some other higher power, but away from all power in the grass or the lake with your hand on her shoulder, your hand on his shoulder. You tell the friend the best things you can imagine, and every single one of them has already happened, so you recount them of great necessity with nostalgic, atomic ferocity, and one by one by one until many.

The eggbirds whistle the gargantuan trees. The noiserocks fall twisted into each other's dreams, their colorful paratrooping, their skinny dark jeans, little black walnuts to the surface of this earth. You and the friend remain twisted together, thinking your simultaneous and inarticulate thoughts in physical lawlessness, in chemical awkwardness. It is too much to be so many different things at once.

The friend brings black hole candy to your lips, and jumping off the rooftops of your city, the experience. So much confusion — the several

layers of exhaustion, and being a friend with your hands in your pockets, and the friend's hands in your pockets. O bitter black walnuts of this parachuted earth! O gongbirds and appleflocks! The friend puts her hand on your shoulder. The friend puts his hand on your shoulder. You find a higher power when you look.

Chapter End Notes

Originally written and posted from June 2020 through March 2021, sometimes a joy, sometimes a slog, but always something of which I'm tremendously proud.

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