

Peak of Fools

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Peak of Fools

by [Atroubledtribble](#)

Summary

It's Pavel Chekov's first day on the Enterprise. When the inexperienced ensign apparently makes a costly mistake that results in Mr Scott and two of his men going missing, Captain Kirk gives him the chance to redeem himself. However, it is not just the young man who will learn a major life lesson. Kirk's two best friends will also gain some unexpected insights, as they embark on a rescue mission into the unknown.

Notes

When I started writing Peak of Fools many years ago, I didn't anticipate how it would turn out! I set out to write a short story but as it turns out it's actually a short novel! After a 12 year break, where life just got in the way of writing unfortunately, I've picked up where I had left to finish the story. Please feel free to leave a comment, it would mean a lot to me to know that just one person is reading Thank you :-)

Disclaimer: I don't own Star Trek, but I owe a lot to Star Trek.

Chapter 1

Prologue

Since his first star gazing expedition with his father when he was 8 years old, to the Peak of Fools in the Kuznetsk Alatau Mountains, Pavel Andreievich Chekov had anticipated this special occasion. His first day as ensign aboard a Starfleet starship had finally dawned!

Pavel was woken up by a dim light that was slowly illuminating his yet to be decorated quarters and he realised that on the *Enterprise* dawn was actually a rather fake and sterile event. This artificial 'sunrise' was so very different to the real thing. Pavel remembered the expedition he had embarked on with his father as a boy and how they had witnessed a spectacular sunrise after a night of observing the crystal clear stary sky. Cradled in his father's arms and wearing protective goggles, little Pavel had gazed in wonder at the star that slowly turned night on Earth into day.

Pavel remained under the thin but warm blanket for just a moment longer, a soft smile on his face. But never one to dwell on the past for too long, his childhood memories soon had to make way for more pressing concerns of the here and now. It was time to get ready for his first shift!

As he mentally readied himself to get up, the young Russian mused that nothing was left to coincidence on the *Enterprise* which he found strangely reassuring. Indeed, the artificial 24-hour cycle was highly logical given the predominantly human crew aboard the ship. The lighting of most interiors on the *Enterprise*, including the quarters (unless they were otherwise adjusted by the individual crew member) followed Earth's 24-hour solar rhythm of night and day, sunrise and sunset. Consequently the 3 main 8 hour shifts most personnel were assigned to were accordingly structured into the popular day shift Alpha from 0800 hours to 1600 hours, the quite popular day and evening shift Beta from 1600 hours to 2400; and the night and morning shift Gamma from 2400-0800 (only attractive to those crew members with a nocturnal streak).

Pavel slowly rose from his bed and placed his feet on the comfortably warm floor. He had to smile as he remembered how he had heard from Lieutenant Sulu, the man he would share his new workstation with, the ship's navigational console, for the first time. The helmsman had related the shift rota and other helpful information to him in unique fashion – in an old style letter! Pavel was still on his final practical assignment on Toluna 7 when he received the letter via a provisions drop-off.

The navigator was completing his Starfleet training on the class M planet with a geological assignment. The young cadet had enjoyed his 12 weeks on the beautiful world immensely as he liked to be out and about in wide, open spaces. The countryside, however alien it might be, always reminded him of his school holidays which he used to spend in a particularly beautiful part of South Siberia. But despite the joy of working outdoors, he had counted the days until he would leave for Starbase 2 where a medical awaited him before he would finally board the *Enterprise*, who was scheduled to rendezvous with the base in due course. And that day couldn't come soon enough.

Four days ago, Pavel finally bid farewell to Toluna 7 as he was picked up by a Starfleet shuttle craft. He found himself amongst a large group of cadets that had been picked up from all over the planet where they had undergone practical training. He knew most of them from the Academy. The young recruits were also scheduled to undergo their medicals on Starbase 2. Then all the cadets would be deployed on various science or medical vessels on their first tours of duty.

All but one.

Envid by his peers, the best cadet in his year, Chekov would start his career as an ensign on Starfleet's flagship: the USS *Enterprise*. Never too bothered about what others thought of him, he endured the envious looks and mocking remarks of his comrades during the one-day journey with a brave face. Those people just reminded him why he preferred to be a loner.

As the young Russian yawned and stretched his tired limbs, his thoughts travelled back to the events of the previous day. Lieutenant Sulu had greeted him in the transporter room. When Pavel materialised on the transporter platform he saw Sulu for the first time, yet the man didn't appear to be unfamiliar at all, thanks to his detailed letter.

Pavel had known for two months that he would be assigned to the *Enterprise* to fill the vacant role of navigator. When it came to applying for various available Starfleet positions, the *Enterprise* had been his first choice due to Captain Kirk's impressive track record and the vessel's positive reputation regarding its facilities and crew. Pavel openly admired the ship's captain and had read every paper or mission report Kirk had ever published or shared with the Academy. Furthermore, the vessel was the most modern and best equipped in the fleet. Only one year into its 5-year mission under Captain Kirk, the crew was already known all throughout Federation space for its courage, professionalism and loyalty. Pavel had earned many frowns and envious looks from his fellow cadets during practical assignment on Taluna 7, when they asked him where he had applied. They wouldn't have dared to apply to the *Enterprise* themselves but as Pavel was top of the class, they refrained from further commentary and kept quiet.

But the reality had been somewhat more complicated.

Even though Chekov had played it cool in front of his peers and pretended to have already sent off his application to Captain Kirk, he actually didn't dare to do so until the very last opportunity before the deadline. The truth was, he had been tormented with self-doubts. Would he really be good enough for the *Enterprise*? Just out of the Academy, had his two comparably brief practical excursions, one on Toluna 7 and another on a Starfleet science vessel, really provided him with enough experience for duty on the Federation's flagship? Would its brilliant captain accept such a young and inexperienced navigator?

The great reputation of Captain Kirk and his ship aside, there had been one decisive factor that finally gave Pavel the strength to overcome his doubts and submit his application. During his final year at the Academy, to say he had only heard good things about the *Enterprise*'s Science and First Officer was an understatement. The tutors had made it a fashion to rave about him and regularly used his research findings in their lectures. Consequently, Mr Spock had attained a somewhat legendary status among the cadets. The ambitious strove to learn as much about his working patterns, his research and his findings as possible. The cynical dismissed the Vulcan as some kind of Starfleet myth, setting unrealistic benchmarks they could never reach, consciously set up by their tutors to make them work harder and aim higher. Pavel privately shared both

notions and what's more, he didn't believe them to be actually in conflict with one another. He was well aware that he would never be able to come even close to the Vulcan's scientific achievements. But the cadet's stubborn and dedicated nature dictated him to seek out this unique opportunity to learn as much as he could from Mr Spock. Reading and analysing the Vulcan's papers just wouldn't suffice. Pavel dreamed about assisting this 'myth' with groundbreaking and challenging scientific tasks - on the bridge of the Enterprise. An application *had* to be sent off.

Welcome Aboard!

Welcome Aboard!

Chekov put on his yellow uniform for the first time. He scrutinised himself in the mirror. His fingers stroked gently over the insignia that identified him as a crewmember of Ship's Operations- a golden arrow pointing to a golden star. That's where he was now, where he had always wanted to be. Among the stars.

A proud grin appeared on the youngster's face. Even though he had only set foot on the Enterprise yesterday, he already knew why the flagship was supposed to have the most loyal crew in the fleet. It was because on the Enterprise, the crew was not only loyal towards their captain, but towards one another.

As Pavel sat down at the table in his quarters to have a cup of tea before embarking on his first shift, the ensign replayed the previous day, and the events leading up to it, in his mind.

When Chekov's application had been approved by Captain Kirk 8 weeks earlier, a letter from Mr Sulu had accompanied the conformational message by Starfleet. As Kirk had been on very challenging landing party duty on the planet Deneva at the time, Sulu had taken it on himself to write to Chekov. No interstellar memo, no electronic message, an actual *letter* written with real ink, on real paper! Chekov had never seen anything like it outside of history museums on Earth. Written in beautiful, rather old-fashioned, handwriting, the letter communicated Captain Kirk's greetings and compliments and noted that he was very pleased that Starfleet had approved of his choice to assign Chekov. The main reason for the letter however was so that Sulu could personally introduce himself to his new colleague. The helmsman believed it was only sensible to volunteer his assistance should the navigator have any queries regarding his new environment. After all, they would be working side by side from now on and it would help to get to know his new shipmate as soon as possible.

Pleased and excited by such a personal and totally unexpected direct communication from the Enterprise, Chekov had replied straight away. Impressed by Lieutenant Sulu's old-fashioned but stylish way of communication, Pavel had sat down in his quarters on Toluna 7 to write a letter back. In actual fact, it was the first letter he had ever written on paper.

In his first letter, he simply voiced his gratefulness and honour to join the Enterprise crew. He was too shy to ask the many questions he had. In actual fact, he felt a little embarrassed by his own curiosity regarding the ship. Pavel had countless questions about professional as well as recreational procedures on board, but he felt he could not waste Mr Sulu's time with such infantile musings as to what the galley had to offer for breakfast or if the Enterprise had a swimming pool. Not to mention his youthful curiosity regarding the female contingent on board, a curiosity he was reluctant to admit to anyone as he deemed it to be a rather unprofessional concern.

However, Chekov soon realised from Lieutenant Sulu's regularly delivered letters during the 8 weeks gap until his assignment would commence, that he needn't worry. The helmsman was more than happy to answer the ensign's questions, a mission he fulfilled thoroughly during his seemingly abundant recreational time. Chekov was amazed to hear that Sulu found time to entertain various, and very different, hobbies ranging from botanics, to martial arts and collecting historic Terran weapons. Consequently, the young Russian felt encouraged to ask most of his questions and even received a deck plan. With a relieved smile, he noted that his own quarters (lovingly marked by Sulu with a red X like on an ancient treasure hunt map) were next to the helmsman's. How convenient to be housed right next to the all-knowing Lieutenant, Pavel thought to himself.

Mr Sulu's entertaining letters gave the young recruit a personal insight into procedures on board the ship he would call home for the next four years. But most importantly, they also gave him the notion that he already had a *friend*, even before setting foot on the Enterprise.

His first day aboard the ship had been busy, but his new colleague had warned him that it would be. Shaking his head with a bemused smile now, Pavel recapped what had transpired during the last 24 hours or so.

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The previous day

Grinning mischievously, Sulu came up the first step of the transporter platform to greet Chekov with a strong slap on the back as soon as he had materialised. As Pavel wasn't accustomed to the beaming process yet, he felt a little dizzy and Sulu's friendly slap made him stumble down the last step. In that precise moment the doors opened and the ensign found himself involuntarily catapulted into the arms of the man that had just entered.

“Hello to you too, my son!”

Thankfully, the man had caught Chekov just in time, preventing him from crashing straight into the wall of the transporter room. Sulu shrugged his shoulders innocently and exchanged an amused look with the transporter operator, Lieutenant Kyle.

Blushing, the navigator took a step back. He quickly straightened up and held his head up high to report to the older man, obviously a senior officer, who had come to greet him.

“Pavel Andreievich Chekov reporting for duty. Permission to come aboard, Sir.”

“I believe you've already *flown* aboard, ensign”, the man mumbled with an undisguised US-American southern drawl. He sounded rather grumpy. Probably he wasn't too keen on catching new recruits mid-air that weren't able to stay on their feet, Pavel thought gravely.

Sulu looked like he had expected the Lieutenant Commander and he nodded knowingly towards Chekov. But the youngster was momentarily occupied with studying the transporter room floor, probably more out of embarrassment than actual interest.

“See, what did I tell you, Chekov? Dr McCoy wants to run an additional medical on you!”

Ah, so this is Dr McCoy, Chekov thought as he stared at the floor, not knowing where else to look. Sulu had already warned him about the doctor's thorough medicals (his quarterly conducted examinations of the crew significantly exceeded Starfleet standards of one annual check).

And about McCoy's reputation for emotional outbursts.

Chekov hoped one of such wouldn't follow his involuntary display of clumsy Russian ballet on the transporter platform.

But when he finally managed to look up, he was relieved to see an amused glint in the doctor's eyes. McCoy scrutinised him and seemed to bounce slightly as he directed a sideways glance at Sulu:

“I have to! All those space travellers cramped into one place - it's a hub for viruses and bacteria down there! If you're not ill already, you will be after a medical on Starbase 2!”

With that he gestured Chekov to follow him out of the transporter room. The ensign dutifully complied and after a quick nod towards Sulu he followed McCoy into the busy corridor. Before the door closed, Sulu managed to shout after Chekov that he would oversee his belongings were beamed aboard and taken to his new quarters. Chekov was grateful for that, because according to Sulu's warning, he didn't expect to leave sickbay any time soon.

“The Captain is currently engaged in a conference call with Starfleet, Chekov. That's why you had to do with Mr Sulu and my good self as a welcoming committee”, McCoy explained as they walked towards the turbo lift.

“Zank you, Dr McCoy”.

Pavel had to smile at this. The thought that Captain Kirk had wanted to greet him personally on arrival filled him with pride. He was just one of many new recruits that joined the Enterprise on a regular basis. Surely, he couldn't greet all of them personally whenever one of them came aboard?

Distracted for a second by his musings, the ensign noticed that he had fallen behind, as the doctor was a few steps ahead now. He was hardly able to take on all that was going on around him, the labyrinths of corridors, populated by dozens of men and women in blue, yellow and red uniforms that seemed to know exactly where they were going. Chekov quickly caught up with Dr McCoy and asked himself if he'd ever find his way around this gigantic starship. The confusion he felt must have been reflected on his face, because the doctor suddenly laughed and put a hand on Pavel's shoulder as they entered the turbo lift.

“We're going to Deck 4 now. And as long as you know where that is, you'll be just fine!”

The lift rushed upwards, quickly passing Deck 2 and 3.

“Zat's because sickbay is on Deck 4?”, Chekov offered with a quizzing look.

“Because the Cafeteria is on Deck 4!”, McCoy replied with a wide grin. “But yes, you're right, sickbay is located just around the corner”.

The lift doors slid open. “Oh, I see. Zank you for informing me of zis, Doctor.” Chekov said as he followed his superior into the corridor.

Sickbay was just a few doors away. As they stepped into the tidy and quiet area, Pavel noticed immediately that contrary to the abrasive reputation Dr McCoy had, his place of work transmitted an atmosphere of tranquillity and safety.

“Don't thank me too much, Ensign. Before I let you go there or anywhere, you gotta stay here for a bit. I don't trust those medical facilities on starbases. God knows what kinda hybrid bacteria is breeding down there, with all those travellers constantly coming and going.”

Chekov suddenly felt an uneasy rumbling in his belly. If it had to do with Dr McCoy's predictions or if it simply were nerves, he didn't know.

Without further ado, the doctor grabbed his medical scanner and gestured towards a diagnostic bed.

“You don't want to spread any starbase bugs around the ship, do you?”

“No, Sir.” Chekov said and shook his head. There wasn't time for any more exclamations, because McCoy promptly got hold of his arm and placed the ensign onto the bed.

To Chekov's surprise the medical Dr McCoy conducted was actually the most pleasant he had ever endured. Not for the actual examinations and tests themselves, they were as boring as usual, but due to McCoy's friendly chatter. The good doctor didn't seem to be so bad after all. Not only did he want to know about his medical past and general physical and mental condition, but he also seemed to display an honest interest in his upbringing and training at the Academy. Due to the doctor's gruff but warm welcome in the transporter room, and because of his professional yet pleasant conduct during the examination, Chekov immediately felt at home onboard the Enterprise. And he had arrived only an hour ago! The attractive and lovely Nurse Chapel who assisted Dr McCoy was another reason why, after a while, the young recruit leaned back on the diagnostic bed with a relaxed sigh and crossed his arms behind his head. He was already looking forward to his next cold so that he could spend some time in sickbay under Nurse Chapel's supervision.

“So, apart from navigation, do you have any other areas of expertise, Chekov?”, McCoy asked while checking his blood pressure on the diagnostic screen. He gently retrieved the ensign's left hand from behind his head, forcing him to lean forward again. McCoy put his fingers on his wrist to confirm the screen's showings. Pavel had to grin at this old fashioned method no doctor had ever performed on him.

“I'm also trained in General Sciences, Doctor”, Chekov answered with undisguised pride, “I'm to directly assist Mr Spock.”

At this, McCoy took his eyes off the screen. For a moment, he observed the young man's face that beamed with pride, before he turned his

attention back to the screen.

“Oh, happy days!”, the doctor muttered sarcastically.

Chekov frowned and scratched his head. What did the doctor mean?

McCoy seemed to have read the concern on Chekov's face. With a wry smile he patted his shoulder:

“Nothing to worry about, Ensign. You'll just have to get used to working with a computer on two legs.”

McCoy chuckled at Chekov's puzzled look. “You'll be all right, Chekov. Knowing Mr Spock, he will take good care of you!”

The second part of the sentence sounded more like a threat to the Russian and he leaned back, feeling a little exhausted all of a sudden.

McCoy left the room to undergo a few tests with Chekov's blood samples. The navigator noticed that a deep frown had crept upon Nurse Chapel's soft face. Alone now, she seized the opportunity to rectify her superior's harsh comments:

“Don't let Dr McCoy scare you, Ensign. Mr Spock is a wonderful First Officer. I'm sure you'll get along just fine.” She smiled and followed McCoy into the lab.

Pavel was on his own for the first time since boarding the Enterprise. He had just arrived but felt that he already got to know some key personnel aboard the ship - the enthusiastic helmsman Mr Sulu, the very kind head nurse Chapel and the direct and sharp Dr McCoy who didn't seem to be on the best of terms with Mr Spock.

Although he was aware of Mr Spock's shared human and Vulcan heritage, Chekov wondered if the doctor's apparent reservations towards the FO was because the latter race was known for not displaying emotions. Maybe, this could cause conflicts with such an openly emotional individual as Dr McCoy... But as he leaned back on the biobed, Chekov decided that the CMO's issues with Mr Spock wouldn't need to bother him as long as *he* would get on well with his new departmental supervisor. And as long as he wasn't stuck with McCoy and Spock on some deserted island, any personal quarrel they might have with one another would not need to affect him in the slightest.

Complications

Complications

After two hours of thorough examinations, Dr McCoy finally allowed Chekov to leave sickbay and move into his quarters. The test results had confirmed the ensign's perfect health, apart from slightly raised blood pressure, which McCoy blamed on the young man's general excitement about his new life aboard the Enterprise that was about to commence.

A look on the clock on his computer told the doctor that dinner was long overdue and he realised he was already late. While he hurried down the corridor towards the cafeteria, he wondered if Jim had been able to make their usual dinner arrangement on time or if the conference call with Starfleet wouldn't permit him to tonight.

During the last few months, McCoy, Kirk and Spock had made it a habit to have their main meals together whenever their schedules allowed it. In case Jim *was* still around, McCoy would seize the opportunity to inform him about Pavel Chekov's safe arrival on board and confirm his clean bill of health. As the ensign was now the youngest crewmember at just 21, McCoy was particularly eager to find out what kind of initial duties Jim and Spock had in mind for the boy. He hoped the duties they would assign to him wouldn't be too demanding initially. Even though Chekov was a bright and well-trained new recruit, he also seemed a little over-excited, a common phenomenon amongst young crewmembers who were starting their first long-term space assignment. McCoy had experienced on many occasions during his career, that young recruits were prone to making costly mistakes, due to a dangerous mix of a lack of experience and untamed excitement. In his opinion, Chekov, just like any new recruit, would need at least a couple of weeks to settle in and adjust to his new surroundings before he should be burdened with the kind of highly challenging tasks Spock would surly have in store for him.

Entering the cafeteria, McCoy was relieved to see both Kirk and Spock were still there. In fact, they were late as well. The captain and his FO were just sitting down at their usual table in a quiet corner, away from the noisy centre of the large room that was usually occupied by younger and more vociferous crewmembers such as Lieutenants Uhura and Sulu.

McCoy had to smile at the familiar sight of Spock gracefully walking behind the captain and politely waiting for Jim to choose his seat first before sitting down opposite. As the doctor received his food from the replicator, he mused that he was grateful to have the opportunity to talk to Jim and Spock about Chekov. He was also keen to find out about their next assignment.

"Evening Jim, Spock", McCoy greeted them as he sat down, carrying a bowl of chicken soup, a cup of tea and a salad on a tray.

Kirk looked up from his meal, slightly guilty. McCoy frowned at the captain's choice of dinner: Cheeseburger and French Fries. Typical!

Kirk sighed. Suddenly his appetite wasn't as great as it had been a minute ago. As he and Spock had actually been late for their usual dinner arrangement with McCoy, Kirk had assumed that the doctor had already eaten. He had therefore opted for the tasty as opposed to the healthy choice.

"I know what you're going to say, Bones...", Kirk offered helpfully as he put down his fork that had stabbed several French Fries just before McCoy's arrival.

"You better keep it to yourself then! Otherwise your meal will be cold by the time you've finished sayin' it!", McCoy interrupted as he sat down next to Spock.

The words were delivered without taking a breath in the doctor's usual gruff tone but he gave Kirk an encouraging look to continue with eating. The captain happily complied, while McCoy stole a quick glimpse onto Spock's choice. Like himself, the Vulcan had optioned for a soup, the smoky smell clearly identifying it as Plomik soup. Unfortunately, this didn't present the CMO with the opportunity to criticise Spock's choice. The frugal first officer rarely gave the doctor any reason to criticise his dietary habits and McCoy privately wished that such sensibility would eventually rub off on Jim Kirk as well.

McCoy looked from one to the other as they quietly focused on their food.

"Anyone care to enlighten me where we're going next? What did you discuss with Admiral Keller, Jim?"

Spock's raised eyebrow and expectant look towards the captain didn't escape McCoy and he knew intuitively that there had been an argument between Kirk and the commanding officer of Starbase 2.

Kirk sighed. "I'm afraid there won't be any shore leave for the crew in the immediate future, Bones. We were assigned on an emergency rescue mission".

McCoy pressed his lips into a thin line; he had seen it coming. That's just typical - they all needed a break and what they got was an emergency rescue mission! The crew in general was in good health, but overall the men and women aboard the Enterprise were tired, stressed and overworked. Their last shore leave on a supposedly uninhabited planet in the Omicron Delta system had taken place as far back as 9 months ago. However, it had been an exhausting experience rather than a relaxing one, as McCoy had died and returned from the dead on the first day! And their latest attempt at leave unfortunately had to be cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances which had involved his good self again and an overdose of Cordrazine. McCoy shivered just thinking that word in his head.

The doctor privately wondered why the prospect of shore leave always presented him with lethal danger. In any case, McCoy had submitted a sharp and clear report to Starfleet that leave had to be undertaken very soon if any possible mistakes by a crew member due to exhaustion was to be avoided, not to mention possible long-term effects on the crew's general health.

Kirk's gaze wandered across the unusually quiet cafeteria. Like it normally was the case at this time of the evening, it was very busy and crowded. The room would then become quite hot despite the air ventilation system, and the doors were left open which only invited more

people to come in, who might be just passing by in the corridor and decided to join in the socialising. But despite the large crowd, conversations were sparse and quiet. Even Lieutenant Uhura seemed absentminded as she stared into the distance across the rim of her coffee cup. The crew was tired and it showed in their free time when they could afford to display their exhaustion. On duty, no crewmember would allow themselves to give the impression of being tired or stressed. Kirk pressed his lips. Apart from his own argumentation to reward the crew for outstanding performances on this mission so far with some well-deserved free time, Kirk had referred several times to his CMO's report in his conversation with Keller, but to no avail.

Kirk watched as McCoy shook his head in disapproval.

"Bones, I know you don't like it and neither do I, but Keller has just received a mayday call from the Cassiopeia. We're on route to Adalous 4 from where the message was sent."

McCoy frowned.

"Isn't the Cassiopeia one of the Federation's biggest dilithium crystal transporters?"

"Correct, Doctor. After their mayday call the shuttle craft has apparently crash landed on the surface of Adalous 4 and since then Starfleet has not been able to re-establish communications", Spock added as he looked up from his soup.

"As we are the only starship in the proximity, Keller has ordered us to go to Adalous 4, look for survivors plus secure the freight if possible", Kirk explained.

"I see." McCoy didn't like the fact that shore leave was cancelled yet again, but in this case he could actually understand Starfleet's reasoning.

"It's just a shame that we have to carry the can again. The crew really deserves a break."

Kirk's rather loud sigh spoke more than a thousand words and the doctor knew how much it troubled his captain to ask so much of his crew. They would of course follow his orders without even thinking about the fact that they were missing yet another opportunity of shore leave.

"They fear the worst, Bones", Jim explained with a tired face, "40 crew missing and unaccounted for".

McCoy nodded gravely as the bad news sunk in.

"As is Starfleet's quarterly supply of dilithium crystals in the Beta Sector", Spock added matter-of-factly.

"*Damn* those crystals! 40 people need to be rescued, Spock!", McCoy blurted out, "If they're still alive", the doctor added solemnly.

"If those crystals are not retrieved in the next 50.5 hours, Doctor, all Starfleet operations in this sector will be severely disrupted and come to a halt. Including the Enterprise, as we have not been able to stock up our supplies at Starbase 2 as originally planned. It is therefore highly illogical to desire the Cassiopeia's freight to be lost in a Terran mythological place of no return."

McCoy had to catch his breath for a moment - but just for a moment.

"You mean *hell*?"

Spock's eyebrow disappeared in his hairline, a small sigh of impatience escaping his lips, "I believe I have just said that, Doctor."

"All I meant, Spock, was that I'd rather have those crystals go to *hell*, than that crew."

"May I note that your illogical commentary on a challenging situation is, like usual, not very helpful."

Pearls of sweat started to appear on McCoy's forehead, his face slowly turning into a rather healthy colour. He wiped the moisture away with his sleeve. Bones doubted that the overcrowded cafeteria had anything to do with his sudden perspiration. Like always when he was getting irritated, his thick Georgian accent became even stronger.

"It's getting' kinda hot in here, doesn't it, Jim? I'd die for some *ice* tea. Ah, I know, I'll just put my cup next to *you*, Spock! How's that?", McCoy angrily put his cup down next to Spock's arm. His Vulcan shipmate however continued eating his Plomik soup as if nothing had happened.

Kirk put his coffee mug down poignantly. He favoured his two friends with a look of exasperated helplessness that he reserved only for moments as this, when he desperately wanted to stop one of their otherwise endless quarrels.

"Gentlemen, my orders are clear. Crew *and* crystals need to be retrieved if possible. I suggest you prepare yourself for landing party duty. We should arrive at Adalous 4 in about two days".

"Two days, 2 hours and 45 minutes, Captain."

McCoy briefly directed his eyes skyward while Kirk nodded benevolently towards his first officer and got up. This prompted the doctor to quickly finish his cup of tea in one gulp as he had no intention to stay seated with Spock by his own. The Vulcan just raised an eyebrow at McCoy's abrupt departure from their table. The doctor grabbed his tray and followed Kirk to the dish rack.

"By the way, Jim, Ensign Chekov is now on board and I have certified his health to be in perfect condition."

"Thanks, Bones. Also for reminding me. His arrival did get lost somewhere in my mind today. I will welcome him aboard tomorrow at the start of his shift."

Kirk sounded tired as he disposed of his empty plate. McCoy could sense his frustration. It was Jim's custom to greet new crewmembers personally in the transporter room when they beamed on board. Providing, circumstances allowed it.

"Don't worry about it, Jim. You've got enough on your plate as it is." McCoy said as he watched the captain's *empty* plate disappear in the automatic dishwasher. *At least he hasn't lost his appetite yet with all that stress*, Bones was happy to note privately.

"Anyway, Sulu and I were a splendid welcoming committee."

Kirk had to smile at the fact that his helmsman had been reliable as usual, as he had indeed forgotten to tell Sulu to greet Chekov in his place. Kirk's absent-minded smile didn't escape McCoy, and he took the opportunity to say what had been on his mind all along.

"I recommend you don't put too much pressure on the boy straight away, Jim."

"May I enquire to the reason for your request, Doctor?"

Appearing behind them quiet as a cat, Spock gave McCoy a mighty fright.

"Goddammit Spock! In case you haven't noticed, I don't have eyes at the back of my head!"

Spock just frowned, but didn't say anything in response. Kirk looked inquiringly at the CMO. Just like Spock, he also wondered what the reasons were for the doctor's concern.

"Ensign Chekov is highly qualified and capable", the Vulcan stated after he had disposed of his empty bowl and turned towards McCoy with a questioning look.

"But he's still a little *green* behind the ears, Spock", McCoy replied with a wry grin, "you know the feeling."

Before the Vulcan could answer Bones turned to Kirk:

"Chekov is a little too over-excited and high strung at the moment, Jim. Call it intuition or a hunch, but I think it would be best to give him a few weeks to settle in before he's assigned with heavy duty. That's our normal procedure with all recruits, isn't it?", McCoy ended with a poignant look directed at Spock.

"Nevertheless, in this instance, your request is illogical, Doctor", Spock said in his neutral and calm tone that usually didn't make McCoy feel calm himself. He shot a glare towards his opponent but this time the Vulcan beat him to it:

"As you said, it is our practice under *normal* circumstances to allow young and newly assigned crew members some adjustment time during which they are assigned lighter duties. However, the circumstances we find ourselves in are far from normal. The navigator's post is vacant and needs to be filled immediately. We're on a rescue mission that requires urgency and unrestrained ability to act, therefore Ensign Chekov should start his shift tomorrow morning on the bridge as scheduled." Spock looked at Kirk, certain that his point would be confirmed in an instant.

"I'm afraid Spock's right, Bones. Mr Chekov will have to be thrown into the deep end. It can't be avoided." A short pause followed during which Kirk reflected on the brilliant references and grades the young Russian had presented in his application. "But I've got the feeling the kid will surprise us all."

McCoy pressed his lips. He knew he was overruled. Like usual when the CMO had the impression that Spock and Jim ganged up on him, he didn't look at either of them. Instead, he shook his head, his forehead in one big frown. He also knew that they were right. Usually when two out of the triumvirate agreed on an issue, the third one knew that he must be going wrong somewhere. McCoy did accept this fact to be a reassuring constant in their relationship, just as he knew the other two did if they happened to find themselves being the odd one out. But of course, it didn't happen to Kirk or Spock just as often as it seemed to happen to him, Bones was convincing himself. God, how those two could get on his nerves!

McCoy started to turn on his heels, "But don't tell me I didn't warn you when the boy makes a mistake!"

Kirk just gently shook his head at this while Spock raised an eyebrow.

McCoy hurried out of the overcrowded cafeteria, relieved that he had managed to have the last word for once.

The Men from the Boys

The Men from the Boys

Even though he would never admit it voluntarily, Dr McCoy had indeed been right - there were certain risks involved in letting Ensign Chekov take over the navigator position on his first day of duty. After all, they were on a tricky rescue mission and the exact circumstances regarding the Cassiopeia's disappearance were still unknown.

Spock leaned over his viewer at the science station. He was looking for any signs of human life on the surface of Adelous 4 or of any traces of the crashed shuttlecraft, so far without success. Captain Kirk had welcomed Ensign Chekov two hours earlier to his first shift on the bridge and introduced him to the personnel. Spock was last to be introduced. The captain and Chekov had stepped towards the science station where Spock was seated and the young navigator started to beam. He awkwardly expressed his honour to work with Mr Spock. But as he hadn't reacted towards the outstretched Russian hand - shaking hands wasn't a Vulcan custom - the young man had quickly taken his seat next to Mr Sulu at the navigational console. Since then, the ensign had been focused and was giving all the correct replies to his own and Captain Kirk's enquiries or orders. Spock was pleased to note, that apart from Chekov's brief display of excitement when he had arrived on the bridge, he hadn't shown any of the exaggerated human emotions McCoy had predicted. But Spock was well aware of the statistics regarding human errors committed during a starship's mission. 65.56 % of significant errors were committed by a crewmember during their first three months of duty.

Spock reminded himself that it was illogical to ponder the relevance of this statistic, as they had no other choice but to *'throw Chekov in at the deep end'* as Kirk had described the situation. It was a calculated risk they had to take, as the circumstances didn't allow alternatives. However, Spock admired the captain's ability to view apparent disadvantages in a positive light, as Jim believed that Chekov could only benefit from shouldering responsibility straight away. Kirk had left his chair and put his hand on Chekov's shoulder shortly after he had taken his seat at the navigational console, to bring him up to speed about the Cassiopeia's disappearance. With quiet but certain words the CO had then informed Chekov that he had faith in his abilities unreservedly, without referring to the fact that the young man had just graduated from Starfleet Academy. Like usual, Spock had been highly impressed with the captain's excellent man management skills.

Suddenly, the iron indicator on Spock's sensor screen showed an unusual reading. For a few brief moments he investigated the measurements further until he had gathered more information.

"Captain."

"Yes, Mr. Spock", Kirk turned around quickly in his chair as a subtle change in Spock's voice indicated that he must have made a significant discovery.

"I have identified a large, possibly metallic, object on the planet's surface but due to a thick mass of cirrocumulus cloud that is currently obstructing and interfering with our sensors, I'm unable to reach a definite conclusion. However, the computer is able to calculate estimates regarding the object's material and components: 49 % iron, 26.45 % copper, 25.99 % dilithium", at this he briefly looked up to give Kirk a meaningful look before he continued "2.04 %..."

"All right Spock, but no signs of human life?"

Spock shook his head, "Not at the moment, Captain."

Kirk sighed and got out of his chair. He took the steps leading towards the science station in a few strides and joined the first officer's side.

"Could this be the Cassiopeia, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. It is a strong possibility. However, due to the current obstruction and interference of our sensors, only a landing party would be able to confirm this hypothesis at the moment. Furthermore, as Adelous 4 doesn't feature any lifeforms, apart from certain bacteria, it would also be necessary to investigate this object, its origins and possible purpose further if it turns out not to be the Cassiopeia."

"Purpose, Spock?"

"If this object is not the Cassiopeia, hypothetically it could be linked to the shuttle's disappearance."

"Another space craft?"

"A possibility. I strongly recommend to beam down to investigate, while continuing our scans for life on those parts of the planet's surface that aren't currently obstructed by cirrocumulus clouds."

Spock's face was as neutral as ever, but Kirk had to smile at the slight hint of curiosity in his FO's tone. Of course, Spock couldn't resist to investigate such an abnormal finding further, if indeed it didn't turn out to be the Cassiopeia.

Kirk grinned benevolently at the Vulcan.

"I'm happy to give you the opportunity to satisfy your curiosity Mr Spock, and will agree to a landing party."

Spock's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline.

"May I remind you, Captain, that curiosity is a human phenomenon?"

Spock deemed it necessary to remind Kirk that he didn't approve of being accused of possessing any human character traits.

"I merely aim to fulfil my purpose of constantly attaining new information and data, Sir."

"Haven't I just said that?" Kirk replied with a smile, well aware he was using one of Spock's own phrases against him. As the Vulcan looked stubbornly past him and didn't give the impression of offering a reply, Kirk put his hand on his shoulder.

"I'm aware of your purpose, Mr Spock. On Earth we would call a person with such an inclination... *curious*."

Kirk walked over towards Mr Scott at the engineering console.

"However, as this is most likely the Cassiopeia down there and as the dilithium crystals on board need to be secured in a complex technical fashion only Mr Scott is familiar with, I will send our Chief Engineer and two of his assistants down before I agree to any additional landing party personnel."

Kirk could detect a hint of disappointment on Spock's face, but he had made it a policy to only send essential personnel on landing party duty. Too many crew members had already lost their lives on previous planetary missions and as a consequence, Jim aimed to limit the size of any landing party as much as possible.

"But if this is *not* the Cassiopeia and Mr Scott deems the circumstances safe for further investigation, I know who I will send down next."

Spock nodded dutifully, turned around and sat back down at his station to continue his scan for human life on those parts of Adelous 4's surface that weren't obstructed by cloud.

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Mr Scott, and his young right hand men Lieutenants Brown and Monet, assembled in the transporter room. Brown and Monet were carrying specially prepared containers, which they would use in case the Cassiopeia awaited them on the planet. Scott had instructed them, that they would secure the dilithium crystals as soon as they reached the shuttle. The crystals only maintained their energy in an air-locked environment and could under no circumstance be exposed to the planet's atmosphere. Otherwise, they would lose their energy charge and turn into worthless stones in an instant.

With a relaxed smile, Scott turned towards transporter engineer Kyle who was waiting for the coordinates from the bridge. This was going to be an interesting mission, the Scotsman thought. He loved the nitty gritty of retrieving and securing dilithium crystals, a skill he didn't share with many people as it required an extremely still hand and years of experience in handling the precious material. It would be a great opportunity for Delroy Brown and Louie Monet to practice their skills. If only the Cassiopeia crew could be retrieved as well ...

Scott's thoughts were interrupted by a voice from the com unit on the transporter console.

"Spock to Transporter Room."

"Kyle here, Mr Spock. Ready to receive coordinates."

Scotty nodded towards his assistants to follow him onto the transporter platform. He took the first step onto the platform when suddenly a massive force hit the whole ship. The impact was accompanied by a deafening bang that came from the crunching outer shells. Scott knew instantly that the Enterprise was under attack.

The whole bridge crew was catapulted out of their chairs the moment the ship was hit with magnificent force.

"Shields are up, Sair", Chekov shouted towards the captain with his voice raised a little too much for his own liking. Kirk was steady on his feet first, helping Lieutenant Uhura back onto her chair.

"Red Alarm! Report, Mr. Spock!"

"Unknown force has hit the ship frontally, Captain."

Sulu: "Velocity down to impulse power, Sir."

"Increase speed to maintain orbit, Mr Sulu!"

The helmsman nodded, his fingers quickly flying over the colourful buttons in front of him.

"Orbit maintained, Captain."

Sulu exchanged a quick look with Chekov to his right: *Welcome aboard!*

Kirk checked the large viewing screen in front of them that still showed the planet they were orbiting.

"Any information from our viewers, Mr Chekov?"

The navigator quickly switched through all the directions and angles the viewers did cover: a the front of the ship, back of the ship, above, below, to its right, to its left, a closeup of the planet - without any sign of an alien vessel or power source that could have targeted them. Chekov turned around to face his CO with a rather helpless look.

"Negative, Sair, our viewers detect no signs of any space vessels or of any abnormalities on Adelous V that could have been responsible for the disturbance."

"Keep scanning the planet and our spatial vicinity, Ensign!"

“Yes, Sair!”

Kirk looked over to Uhura who just shook her head. With one hand she was adjusting her earpiece and with the other she was pressing buttons on her station.

“No subspace communication and no communication from the planet either, Captain. Medium damages to outer shells, assessment and repairs in progress, 12 crewmen treated for minor injuries. Mr Scott and landing party still present in the transporter room.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Kirk joined the FO at the science station.

“Spock, who or what hit us, and from where?”

Spock lifted his head from his sensor to face the captain.

“All I can confirm at this moment is that we were hit by a powerful wall of energy at the front of the ship, which reduced our speed by 70% down to impulse power. However, it is certain that the ship wasn't damaged by an energy we usually associate with interstellar spaceship weaponry as the outer shell is not burned or melted, rather it is...” Spock rose one eyebrow before continuing... “crushed.”

Kirk gave him a puzzled look: “Crushed?”

“Captain, this yet unidentified power is most fascinating in its direct effect on the ship's exteriors. Any known possible impact on the ship, hostile or from natural causes such as space debris or a meteor shower, would have resulted in the outer shells being burned or affected by radiation to at least some degree. Judging from our damage, we have crashed into a *wall* of sorts, consisting of an unknown form of energy.”

“A *wall*?”

Kirk took a moment to ponder possible implications.

“Could this unknown energy be artificial and this a deliberate attempt to...”, Kirk searched for the right words, “...to *stop* us?”

“It is a possibility, Captain. I shall continue my analysis of the ship's exterior damage to ascertain the nature of the energy that has caused it.”

“What about the landing party, Spock? Will it be safe for them to proceed?”

Within a second or two, Scotty called the bridge.

“Scott here, Captain.”

Mr Scott had followed the events on the bridge during the last 5 minutes or so from the transporter room. The channel was still open since Kyle's communication with Mr Spock had been interrupted by the sudden impact.

“Yes, Scotty!”

“We were following yer conversation with Mr Spock right naw and I can tell ya I dun like it! Our remaining dilithium crystals are already drained as it is and the ship wasn't prepared for combat or whatever this was, but to simply undertake a rescue and retrieval mission! And I know what yer going to say, Captain, but I urge you to send us down to get those crystals immediately as ar shields will not be powerful enough for many more of those funny bangs! Ready to beam down, Sir!”

Despite the puzzling and dangerous situation, Kirk gave Spock an amused look, wondering about Scotty's ability to talk like this without taking a breath. Spock replied with a raised eyebrow.

“May I remind you, Mr Scott, that we have no definite proof yet if this object on the planet surface is indeed the Cassiopeia. And I won't transport anyone during an *attack* on the ship.”

Chekov exchanged a worried look with Sulu who gave him an encouraging smile that seemed to say: don't worry, we've been in such situations before - and we're still here, aren't we?

“Aye. But we have to take ar chances, Captain, because we won't withstand many more of those attacks without the crystals.”

Scotty's voice sounded through the com onto the bridge, its personnel exchanging worried looks at the CEO's grave assessment of the situation.

Kirk didn't like the idea of beaming the landing party while being under some kind of attack from a yet unidentified source. Spock read Kirk's thoughts correctly and knew that although his next statement wouldn't ease the captain's concerns for his crew, it would at least help him to make the right decision. He tilted his head slightly towards the communicator so that Mr Scott could hear as well.

“Even though I have to disagree with you insofar Mr Scott, that *'taking chances'* is an irrational way of action, I agree that your argumentation is logical. As I have computed the probability that the object is the Cassiopeia to be 85.43%, it would be illogical not to attempt retrieving the dilithium, which would guarantee protection for the ship from any further impacts.”

Kirk sighed. Scotty and Spock were right. He couldn't risk the Enterprise remaining vulnerable for much longer. He couldn't just assume there wouldn't be any more of those *'funny bangs'* as Scotty had called them.

In that moment the ship was shook by three consecutive massive jolts, stronger than the previous one. Each jolt was accompanied by a loud,

high-pitched whinging noise as if the engines were being tortured. The bridge personnel stumbled around, trying their best to keep at their stations, the noise of the third and loudest jolt tormenting everyone's ears.

Scotty and his assistants tumbled away from the transporter console. The Scotsman helped Lieutenant Kyle up who had fallen to the floor.

"We're losing orbit, Captain! Speed reduced further to sub-impulse power."

Sulu's professional tone couldn't hide his concern, Chekov wasn't pleased to notice.

"Divert all engines to impulse power, Mr Sulu, maintain orbit!"

Kirk reached Sulu's side as if his physical proximity would help the helmsman to follow his command. Sulu's fingers flew over the buttons on his console.

"Negative Captain, the engines are working correctly but... *something* is in our way."

Lieutenant Uhura was first to realise that the officer who had manned the engineering station next to the doors, had knocked his head on the console during the turbulences and was now unconscious on the floor.

"Bridge to sickbay, medical attention required, one crew unconscious", Uhura instructed before she went over to the injured man.

Kirk directed a swift, grateful look towards his communications officer who knelt down next to her shipmate.

Chekov looked at his hands. To his surprise he noticed that they were sweaty. He quickly wiped them on his trousers and put them back on his console.

"Sulu?" Kirk put his hand on the helmsman's shoulder.

"Our orbit will decay in exactly 44.3 seconds, Captain, if we can't resume impulse-power."

"Shields holding at 36 %, Keptin", Chekov chipped in.

"Give it all you can to maintain orbit, Mr Sulu!", Kirk spun around to Spock, "Prepare emergency thrusters to catapult us out of orbit!"

Spock rushed to the engineering console, seemingly ignoring the injured engineer on the floor who until a few moments ago had manned this station.

McCoy arrived on the bridge just as Sulu turned around to face Kirk.

"No use, Captain, I can't proceed any further without imploding our engines."

McCoy rushed to the engineer on the floor who was bleeding from a nasty cut on his forehead. Unaware that the extent of their predicament necessitated immediate action, the doctor frowned at Spock who stood above the injured crewman, eyes fixed on the engineering computer, apparently ignorant of his shipmate's condition.

"Thrusters ready in 22.79 seconds, Captain. Time to orbit decay 25.67 seconds", Spock reported calmly.

In the transporter room, Scotty shouted into the com unit: "Captain, it's now o'never, giv'us the coordinates before we are out of transporter reach!"

Jim Kirk had to make a crucial decision in a split second: keep the landing party on board and thrust out of orbit to only relative safety. They would no longer have the ability to beam onto the planet to possibly retrieve the crystals as they would be out of transporter range. If they were attacked then, they would have hardly any energy left to maintain the shields.

Or take the chance of beaming down the men while another attack was possible at any moment, for an 85% chance of retrieving the crystals. After the landing party had been beamed down, the ship would still have to thrust out of orbit to escape the energy source that was damaging the Enterprise, but the range would be sufficient to beam back the crystals. With the dilithium on board, the ship would be able to maintain its shields. Once the situation had come under control and the Enterprise was safe, they would be able to retrieve the landing party.

But beaming through the shields and another attack possible at any moment, the process could potentially risk the lives of the landing party. But 427 lives needed saving as well.

"Coordinates, Mr Chekov!"

Kirk had made a decision. With the attacks having stopped momentarily, it was now or never.

Chekov jumped up from his seat and rushed to the science station where Spock had stored the coordinates that would beam the landing party into the direct vicinity of the metallic object on Adelous 4. Without the time to double check the coordinates were still accurate, Chekov transferred them directly to the transporter by the touch of a few buttons.

"I'm sending ze coordinates now to ze transporter, Mr Kyle", Chekov shouted into the com. His unnecessary loud voice made his blood rush into his head and to his dismay Pavel realised he was blushing. Kirk stole a tense look in the ensign's direction. A brief moment later, that felt like an eternity to Chekov, Kyle replied to the bridge:

"Beaming process completed."

Chekov unnecessarily repeated this information to Kirk who had already turned back to Spock:

“Thrusters, now!”

Another powerful jolt made everyone sway. But this time the bridge crew had been prepared for the sudden increase in speed and everybody was holding on to their consoles. Spock turned around to Kirk, an almost inaudible sigh escaping his lips.

“Out of orbit at 44 201 kilometres, Captain. Impulse power...”, Spock checked the engineering computer screen, “...restored.”

Kirk looked at his FO with undisguised relief.

“So is this man”, said an equally relieved looking McCoy at the sight of the engineer on the floor who had just regained consciousness thanks to his emergency treatment. The doctor helped the man back into his seat.

Lieutenant Boateng held his head but otherwise he looked relatively relaxed as he was blissfully unaware of the tension his shipmates had endured during the last few minutes. Uhura informed Kirk of substantial but not critical damages to the ship's exteriors and a handful of minor to medium injuries amongst the crew. Kirk quickly checked on Boateng and the rest of the bridge personnel to confirm their well-being and was relieved to find everyone was unharmed.

Keen to get back to his own station as soon as possible, Spock left the engineering station and passed Boateng and McCoy without a word or any sign of relief regarding the man's fate - or all of their fates for that matter. Combined with the stress of the previous minutes, McCoy was infuriated by the Vulcan's reaction, or rather, the lack of it.

“Oh, it's good to see *you* are unharmed, too, Mr Spock!”

Coming to a halt next to the captain's chair, Spock turned towards the CMO, eyebrows skywards.

“Why, thank you, Doctor.”

With amused smiles all around, with the exception of McCoy, Kirk felt that a good old Spock-Bones quarrel was exactly what the crew needed right now, just to release the tension a little. But then he noticed that Chekov, who was still sitting at the science station, wasn't joining in the laughter. Pale as snow, he looked up from the scanner.

“Keptin, Sair...”, he started, lost for words, feeling like the knot in his throat was about to suffocate him. Kirk came up the steps and approached him. The navigator was frozen and didn't move an inch.

“What is it, Ensign?”, Kirk put the hands on the young Russian's shoulders, imploring him to speak.

“Ze landing party, Sair...is not on ze planet.”

Consequences

Consequences

Chekov sat silently at his station, unable to explain what had happened. McCoy squeezed his left shoulder, but the young man couldn't look up.

Lieutenant Kyle had confirmed that the coordinates Mr Spock had calculated and saved on his computer, had been correct. Furthermore, Kyle was able to confirm that the beaming process hadn't been impacted by the ship's shields. He also ruled out that the process could have been influenced by the unknown energy field, as no impact had occurred during the transportation process. Spock's computed coordinates correlated directly to the object on Adalous 4 and the landing party should have materialised right next to it. However, there was no sign of human life on the planet. Neither of the Cassiopeia crew, nor of the landing party. Nor was there any sign of dead bodies. Uhura's repeated attempts to establish contact to the men proved futile. All they knew was that Scotty, Brown and Monet had dematerialised and if they had indeed re-materialised elsewhere, they had done so anywhere but on Adalous 4.

Kirk and Spock concluded that as things stood, the most likely explanation was that Chekov made a mistake when transferring the coordinates to the transporter. After all, he had been under significant pressure during the recent peril when he communicated the coordinates to the transporter.

"Did you double check that the coordinates Mr Spock had computed before the attack, did still correspond to the object on the planet before you sent them to the transporter computer?"

"No, Sair, I didn't... I believed zere was no time, Keptin."

Chekov lowered his eyes in shame. He just couldn't believe that he had probably cost three men their lives. He didn't even think about the consequences for his career. His career was over before it started. He was a *murderer*, unintentionally, but a murderer nevertheless.

"You had 8.2 seconds to double check the data, Ensign."

Spock stepped down from his station and came to an halt opposite Chekov, Kirk and McCoy. The doctor sent the Vulcan a look that would have shut up a Harry Fenton Mudd on Klingon energy pills. Unfazed, the Vulcan continued in his assessment of the situation.

"Unfortunately, the actual coordinates you transferred to the transporter computer can't be checked at the moment due to a fault in its memory banks, inflicted by the recent impact with the energy field."

"So zere is no way we can find out where Mr Scott and ze others have been transported to...", Chekov stated, looking even more beaten.

"That is correct, Ensign", Spock replied matter-of-factly "at least for the moment."

The FO turned to Kirk who was watching Chekov intensely.

"Captain, I would like to examine the transporter computer and see if I can retrieve any useful information."

Kirk nodded and walked back to his chair where he hit the com button. "Kirk to Lieutenant Kyle. Mr Spock is on his way to assist in the repairing of the transporter memory banks."

"Acknowledged, Sir", came Kyle's muffled reply.

"Kirk out." He ended the communication by smashing his palm on the button. The captain positioned himself in front of Chekov, demanding his attention.

"It is likely that you've made an error under pressure, Mr Chekov."

"I know Keptin...I'm sorry", was all Chekov managed to respond.

"Until the situation has been fully examined and we have determined the actual coordinates you transferred to the transporter computer, you remain on duty. Disciplinary action will become necessary if your fault has been confirmed beyond the reason of a doubt." Kirk continued in his strict command tone.

Chekov stared at the floor, but nodded.

"You know, Chekov, unfortunately we all have committed a serious mistake at some point in our career", McCoy sighed. Spock raised both of his eyebrows at this but remained silent. "It's how we deal with them, that matters."

Chekov felt that even though the doctor was probably right, such insight didn't make him feel much better.

"Yes, Sair. I understand." Chekov pressed his lips and held his head up high. He had to remain strong. There was still a tiny bit of hope that the men would be located alive. And maybe, just maybe, this would mean that he hadn't made a mistake after all.

Suddenly, a warm smile appeared on Kirk's face. Chekov had expected anything, a tirade, shouting, unforgiving blame from the captain but this genuine smile took him by surprise.

"Pavel...", Kirk put his hands on Chekov's shoulders, which startled him just as much as hearing his first name coming from the captain's mouth.

Kirk sat in his captain's chair, eyes fixed on the screen that showed nothing but empty space in front of them and Adalous 4 in the far distance. They had maintained a wide orbit on impulse power, as he wanted to make sure they scanned the space surrounding the planet for the hostile energy force field that had damaged the Enterprise. Even though he was desperate to find out the origins, and possible objectives, of the energy barrier they had encountered, what tormented Kirk the most was not knowing the fate of Scotty, Monet and Brown. The CEO and his two assistants could be dead or alive, safe or in danger, anywhere or nowhere. Furthermore, despite all evidence at the moment pointing towards Chekov having made a mistake while transferring the coordinates to the transporter, they couldn't rule out the faint possibility that the energy field and the men's disappearance were connected somehow. The uncertainty of the situation hung like a dark cloud over the captain's head. Hence, the nasty headache he had developed during the last few hours was becoming worse by the minute. He looked up gratefully as McCoy appeared on the bridge with one of his 'magic' pills as Jim liked to call them.

"Thanks, Bones", Kirk hastily swallowed the yellow pill and smiled at the doctor who scrutinised him with concern..

"Any news from the transporter room, Jim?"

Just as Kirk shook his head, Spock called through the com unit.

"Spock here, Captain."

"What is it, Spock?"

Kirk and McCoy exchanged a serious look.

"Captain, we have successfully reinstated the transporter computer's factory settings, including certain standard functions which can be adjusted and modified according to the requirements of each starship and its mission."

While Spock was talking, Kirk's expression turned increasingly impatient. Full of anticipation, he leaned forward toward the com and grabbed the armrest of his chair.

"Cut to the chase, Spock!"

"I'm not aware of chasing anything, Captain."

The voice coming from the coms monitor sounded slightly baffled.

"Unless of course, you are referring to my pursuit to find a solution for the problem at hand. However, I'm inclined to refer to it as..."

McCoy was about to explode with impatience.

"Are you joking, you green-blooded Vulcan? In God's name, tell us what the hell is going on!"

"Doctor, I believe that..."

Chekov, who could no longer hold himself back, dared to interrupt his FO. The Russian sounded out of breath.

"We have reinstalled *ze repeat function*, Keptin, and can send a communications probe to *ze exact coordinates* I have given to *ze transporter computer* earlier on!"

Spock slowly turned around to face the ensign, his eyebrows sky-high. He didn't approve of being interrupted, however he had become quite accustomed to it during his years in space alongside humans, especially since he had been serving alongside Dr McCoy.

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Captain Kirk poured himself a cup of freshly brewed, and desperately needed, coffee, as he waited for his key personnel to gather in conference room 2 for a crisis meeting. As he had been the first one to arrive, he had the opportunity to reflect on the events of the last couple of hours.

An hour earlier, Kirk had congratulated Spock, Kyle and especially Chekov for their excellent work and the Russian had beamed like a 5 year-old on Christmas Day.

Kirk had praised the ensign's idea of sending a probe to the coordinates he had communicated to the transporter earlier on, to see if it would re-materialise at a location on-planet or in space. The latter scenario would irrefutably confirm that the landing party had perished. But if the first scenario should occur, it would provide them with reasons to be hopeful.

The simple but robust long-range communications probe Hoffmann 7 had been deemed the most suitable candidate by Spock and Lieutenant Kyle. It would be the guinea pig which would hopefully herald a rescue mission. The small metal probe could be used as a communication device to transmit encoded messages. Mr Scott and his assistants were familiar with such codes and if they would encounter the probe they would know how to communicate through it. If the men were able to ascertain their coordinates, they could communicate them through the probe. The landing party could then be retrieved once the transporter was operational again.

The transporter was still so severely damaged that even though they would be able to beam the probe to the last coordinates used, beaming anyone back, once coordinates of the landing party had been received, wouldn't be possible for a few more days until the transporter was fully repaired.

But Kirk was not prepared to waste any time. Within minutes of having agreed to the proposed plan of action, the Hoffmann 7 was beamed to the coordinates the transporter had used last and had been transferred by Chekov at the time.

Jim knew deep down in his heart that the chances were slim for a positive outcome. There were just too many unknowns at this moment in time to be genuinely hopeful. And there was the significant matter of how the outcome would affect young Pavel Chekov's future.

If they only could conclusively identify the nature of the unknown energy field that had prevented the Enterprise from entering the local vicinity around Adelous 4. The energy was still present in the same area of space and Kirk deemed it best to not attempt to get closer to the planet again until its nature and purpose had been identified. So far, their limited readings hadn't provided any clarity. They needed to determine if it was a natural or an artificial object... was it placed there by some alien force? And if so, why? Maybe Chekov had transmitted the correct coordinates after all but this alien force field had altered the beaming process. If that was the case, they would at least know that it hadn't been the ensign's fault should the communications from the probe turn out negative. If the incident could be blamed on the energy field, and possibly an alien power behind it, the youngster's conscience would be freed of its guilt.

The captain's mind was occupied with all those questions as he watched the young navigator arrive in the conference room. Chekov sat down, nervously playing with his hands, eyes fixed on the floor. A moment later the rest of the officers Kirk had summoned arrived: Mr Spock, Dr McCoy, acting CEO Lieutenant Mendelson and Lieutenants Sulu, Uhura and Kyle were now all present at the crisis meeting.

Lieutenant Uhura delivered her report on how long it could take for a response from the probe to be received, either by the Enterprise or any Starfleet outpost in Federation space for that matter. Her proposed time-scale spanned from an immediate reply to dozens of years in the future, depending on the distance the signal would have to travel between the probe's location and the ship, or any possible star base that might be closer and would, therefore, receive the signal before the Enterprise.

After his initial enthusiasm, Uhura's discouraging computations made Chekov feel as disheartened as he had been before his breakthrough idea. He was well aware that depending on the coordinates he had fed it, the transporter was capable to beam an inanimate object of small size so far away that a signal could take dozens of years to reach them, but the disassembled molecules of a human body would not survive such a distance. Hence, the longer it would take the probe to reply, the more unlikely it would be that Mr Scott and his men were still alive.

"50.34 minutes."

Spock reminded everyone of the exact time left they were allowed to hope for a reply. After that time the probe would be too far away for any human to have survived the beaming process.

Chekov looked like he'd like to disappear into thin air. McCoy directed a sharp look towards Spock which was received with a raised eyebrow that reached the FO's hairline. The doctor crossed his arms, but uncharacteristically, he refrained from replying to Spock's mimicry with a critical comment. Bones didn't want to unnerve Chekov any further.

The sombre mood in the conference room was becoming more unbearable with any minute that passed. Even Sulu's light-hearted attempt to entertain the attendees with an anecdote about his recently attained flesh-eating plant from Rigel 6, were met with tired smiles.

Kirk sensed how the pressure was straining Chekov's nerves. The navigator was white as a sheet. McCoy exchanged a worried look with the captain. Kirk got up and put a hand on Chekov's shoulder who was startled by the touch and lifted his head.

"You may wait in your quarters if you prefer to do so, Pavel. There's no need for you to wait here. In fact" - at this the captain turned to the others - "you can all choose a way to pass the short time left that seems most appropriate to you."

No one got up. The thought of being alone right now didn't appeal to anyone.

"May I request to stay with you, Sair, I mean with the other officers?", Chekov blushed at his own clumsiness but Kirk replied with a warm smile.

"Of course."

As the Enterprise was maintaining a safe distance from the energy field and the bridge was in the capable hands of the Gamma shift, there was no need for any of the attending officers to be at their posts. Indeed, all they could do at this moment was wait. And they chose to wait together. A soft smile appeared on the captain's lips.

As Jim thought about the camaraderie of his crew, he felt a knot at the depth of his stomach. Scotty, and his two assistants no doubt, would have also opted to share those tormenting moments with their colleagues, if they had found themselves in the painful situation of those present.

Grateful for some distraction, Jim took a glass of brandy from McCoy's hand. The doctor had left the room a few minutes earlier to '*get some medicine*' and had returned with a large bottle of his best Saurian brandy.

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"Time's up, Captain."

Spock's calmly spoken words were still ringing in his ears. Chekov had exchanged a brief look with Sulu, sensing his friend's agony at his own desperation. Pavel had immediately requested to return to his post, stubbornly maintaining a brave face even though he was screaming inside. But he couldn't fool Captain Kirk. His CO had send him directly to his quarters with the unambiguous order to '*try and get some rest*' until further notice.

Now, Pavel was lying in his bed but contrary to the captain's instruction, he was wide awake and far from resting. Mr Scott and his men were dead and, in all likelihood, it was his fault.

Pavel turned onto his side and pulled the blanket up to his chin. Tears welled up in his eyes. How he wished to talk to his parents right now. Especially to father who was so proud of his achievements. But how could he ever explain his mistake to them, how could he tell them about his carelessness? He started to sob and wasn't even ashamed to do so. There was nothing he could do.

The Quiet of the Night

The Quiet of the Night

McCoy lay awake in his quarters. The events of this long day still fresh in his mind, his thoughts were with Scotty, Brown and Monet, or rather, with their molecules that had been spread all over the galaxy. He shuddered and told himself, what seemed to be the hundredth time, to stop envisaging how the chief engineer and his two assistants had met their fate. Otherwise he would never be able to take his place on the transporter platform ever again. God, how he hated that blasted machine.

Bones turned from one side of his bed to the other, resigning himself to the fact that he wouldn't sleep much tonight. He put his right arm under his head and glared into the darkness of his quarters. Here he was, contemplating his stupid fear of the damn transporter when three of their men had just been declared dead. Bones angrily shook his head. Why in God's name couldn't he grieve for the lost men? Two young, excellent engineering assistants and the most amazing technical miracle worker he had ever had the pleasure to work with. And had the honour to call a friend.

A sad smile crept on the CMO's face as he recalled the countless times he and Scotty had shared a glass of scotch or brandy in the evening (preferably of Terran or, on special occasions, Saurian origin). They would often muse about the fact how much their different jobs had in common - the Scotsman fixed the ship while the Southerner fixed its crew. Bones felt his eyes dampen and he angrily wiped away any tears before they could be shed.

He frowned - why could he not accept that Scotty was gone? Was it the shock of the loss of a dear friend; was it his natural attitude as a physician to never accept a death unless you saw the *dead* body before you, felt the cold skin, closed the expressionless eyes of the empty shell that used to be a sentient being, with no other choice left but to accept the truth; was it his extreme stubbornness which only rivalled the pig-headedness of the two most senior officers on board; or was he not able to grieve because of something else, maybe a hunch, an intuition?

Somehow Bones *felt* that Scotty and his men weren't dead. He groaned as he imagined Spock's reaction to such a hunch - granted, he would just get another lecture on how his mind apparently was working in illogical ways. But McCoy never mistrusted his intuition. It usually was right.

But how could it be right this time?

He turned back onto his left side into a more comfortable position. If night time wouldn't provide him with some rest, at least it was giving him the time to hopefully bring a little peace to his troubled mind. He certainly had a whole lotta more thinking to do before the morning.

The doctor's thoughts now focused on the young Russian. Chekov's promising career was at stake. Apparently, he had made a costly mistake under pressure by transferring the wrong coordinates to the transporter. But was this really the case; was the young man really to blame for the disappearance of the landing party? After all, they still hadn't been able to gather any conclusive information about the strange energy field. Maybe it had somehow interfered with the beaming process? Bones sighed. But what did he know? He was a doctor, not an astro-physicist.

They hadn't had any more opportunities to analyse the unknown energy again which had caused substantial damage to the ship. While they had conducted their emergency meeting, the energy field suddenly disappeared as quickly as it had appeared a few hours before. The source and the exact form of the energy was still unknown because during the attacks, Spock and the science department had been able to gather only very little data from their scans.

Frustrated, Bones shook his head as he realised yet again how much a starship crew was relying on technical data. If even Spock wasn't able to formulate a substantial theory as to what had happened, why should the Enterprise's insomniac CMO be able to do so by basing his suspicions on a *hunch*?

The captain's mind however worked in yet another way all together.

Even with hardly any knowledge about the origins and nature of that unknown energy, Jim had voiced his suspicion to Bones and Spock that it could have been a controlled and coordinated attack by an intelligent enemy and that the transportation process had been interrupted on purpose. While Spock didn't discard such possibilities, he didn't support them either as he didn't want to 'take a guess' on the basis of insufficient data. As no communications had been established with an alien attacker, and there wasn't any other evidence to support Jim's suspicions, Bones felt that they were merely grounded on his friend's relentless desire to protect his ship. It was much easier for Jim to defend the Enterprise against an enemy he could put a name to - but facing an unknown power like that strange energy field was deeply unsettling for the captain.

The ship maintained a wide orbit around Adelous 4 and would remain there at least another day until the engines and transporter were fully repaired. They were still ordered to search for the Cassiopeia and its crew, however Starfleet had acknowledged the Enterprise's momentary predicament that was putting the rescue mission on hold.

Regardless if the energy field would be confirmed to be of alien origin or not, McCoy mused that the more he thought about it, the more he suspected that it had interfered with the beaming process somehow and that Chekov would be freed from any blame. But so far they hadn't been able to gather enough data to confirm this to be the case one way or another. If only they had received a positive signal from the probe... Would they ever be able to establish what happened during those frantic minutes on the bridge? What had become of Scotty and his men?

In any case, there was one thing he was dead certain of. He was convinced that if the young Russian wouldn't have found himself in a highly demanding situation on his first day of duty, in a situation that presented him with pressure he could not cope with due to the lack of experience, things would be better for all of them now. If Kirk and Spock had only listened to his concerns regarding the boy! Bones knew that Jim had had his doubts about throwing Chekov into the deep end. But the captain had been too easily convinced by Spock's ruthless attitude that they couldn't afford to allow the ensign time to get used to his new surroundings. How on earth could that green-blooded hobgoblin expect

a computer-like efficiency from all crewmembers, regardless of their age, rank or experience?

Angry, McCoy pushed his blanket away and sat up in his bed. This was it - one thought about Spock's ignorance and any hope of getting some sleep was out the window! He turned around to his bedside-table where he usually kept his 'medicine' that helped him during nights like this. But his hand only grabbed into thin air.

Bones sighed as he realised that he had left the bottle of Saurian brandy in the conference room - definitely not a sensible place to leave it, as the next group of officers that would hold their meeting there could be tempted to help themselves to a little liquid inspiration. And by God, they could all do with some inspiration right now.

He got up with a long yawn, changed into his blue top and black trousers and headed out into the corridor. It would only take a few minutes to get hold of that bottle and get back to bed for one more attempt to either fall asleep or at least drift into some light slumber before the morning shift.

McCoy jumped and nearly screamed. In one of the corners of the dimly lit conference room something had just moved.

He had aimed for the table with the brandy bottle straight away, without looking around the room. Naturally, he had not expected anyone there at this ungodly hour.

"Doctor, why are you still awake?"

A deep and calm voice emanated from the dark corner.

Spock turned away from the computer screen to face McCoy, his raised eyebrows indicating he was just as surprised as the CMO to encounter anyone else at that time of night.

"I got an excuse for being awake - I left my sleeping medicine!", McCoy grabbed the bottle with a suspicious look directed at the Vulcan, "What's yours?"

Spock's eyebrows rose again.

"I don't need an excuse to withhold sleep, Doctor. Vulcans need 74% less rest than humans."

McCoy glared at Spock. Still angry from his recent musings about the first officer's ruthlessness towards Chekov, he was in no mood for a dose of his wisdom right now.

"Spare me your lectures on Vulcan superiority at this hour, will ya? I just wanted to know what ya doin' in front of the computer at 3 AM in the goddamn morning?"

A small sigh escaped Spock's lips.

"I'm using this quiet time to go over Lieutenant Uhura's calculations regarding the probe's communication radius and the geographical trigonometry scans again."

To answer McCoy's questioning look Spock continued quickly, "I have of course substantial justification to do so."

McCoy froze at this but before he could ask Spock to elaborate the FO continued.

"However, I must admit, I'm puzzled by the apparent powers of your multifunctional 'medicine', Doctor. If memory serves correctly, you used it earlier on to 'bring everyone back to life'. And now you're planning to use it to get yourself to sleep. But then, why should your medical remedies be any less contradictory than your character?"

With this, Spock turned back to the computer screen. The Vulcan obviously had a reason to be in a good mood and that could only mean he had made some discovery regarding what had happened to the landing party.

McCoy was so relieved at this that he even forgot to be insulted. Curiosity had a calming effect and his anger had to take a back seat, at least for now. The CMO pulled the cork from the bottle, which resulted in a loud 'pop' noise, and poured himself a drink. With a glass in hand, taking small gulps, McCoy stepped behind Spock. His eyes fixed on the screen, the doctor nodded towards the computer.

"Mind sharing your late-night discoveries with a contradictory country doctor, Mr Spock?"

The Vulcan turned towards McCoy whose serious face didn't reflect the mocking tone in his voice. Contradictory indeed, but Spock knew the doctor well enough not to disregard his request. The CMO was very concerned about what had happened to the missing men and his interest was genuine.

"Lieutenant Uhura's calculations are exact and complete regarding the probe's possible destinations in this galaxy."

McCoy took a quick breath. He had immediately picked up on the crucial word in Spock's statement.

"*This* galaxy, Spock? You mean it could have been transported to another?"

Spock nodded slowly. His hesitation however indicated McCoy that the Vulcan wasn't entirely convinced yet.

"There is a slight possibility that this could have been the case, Doctor."

Baffled, McCoy stared at him.

"How, Spock?"

The FO folded his hands, his eyes never leaving the computer screen. When he replied after a few moments of hesitation, McCoy had the impression that there was a hint of frustration in his voice, if that was possible for a Vulcan.

"Doctor - the energy that has damaged the ship is of an unknown kind and according to the library computers, has never been detected before. Hence, our great difficulty to analyse the readings as we have no point of reference. I also require additional scans of the energy field to supplement the limited data we were able to gather during the attacks. But as you know, regrettably, the field disappeared while we conducted our emergency meeting earlier. Therefore, my theory to explain recent events is incomplete."

Again, McCoy picked up on the crucial word in Spock's elaboration. He might be just an ol' contradictory country doctor, but when it came to decipher the Vulcan's speech, McCoy was gradually becoming an expert.

"*Incomplete*, Spock? That means you got at least some idea as to what happened!"

When Spock didn't give any indication to reply and simply continued with focusing his gaze at the screen, McCoy crossed his arms angrily. He knew the first officer didn't like to speculate and only drew conclusions when he was 100% sure about something. But Spock couldn't expect him to shut up and stop asking questions after having planted some outrageous ideas in his mind.

"Do I have to get down on my knees and beg you, or are you going to tell me what's going on in that Vulcan head of yours voluntarily?", McCoy growled.

Spock frowned but decided not to test the doctor's patience any longer, as he seemed to get more irritable the later the evening, or the emptier the bottle of Saurian brandy. A small sigh escaped his lips as he turned to face this most irrational of humans.

"As I have just explained, Doctor, I haven't been able to formulate the fundamental construction of this energy yet. However, through my detailed analyses of the three-dimensional trigonometry scan readings that were taken during the attack, I *can* confirm the energy field's exact geographical position at the time of the collisions with the ship."

McCoy nodded eagerly, encouraging Spock to continue with his report.

"Consequently, I have been able to conclude that the energy field not only forced the Enterprise out of the vicinity of Adalous 4, it actually obstructed the space between the ship and the planet."

"Meaning what?", McCoy asked impatiently.

Spock sighed again. For a man who was preoccupied with the transporter, the doctor knew very little about the machine's functionality.

"As the transporter beam always takes the direct and shortest way to carry molecules from A to B, Doctor, it must have travelled through the energy field in order to reach the surface of Adalous 4 to the spot my calculations had intended."

McCoy nodded slowly as he pondered the implications of Spock's findings. They sounded plausible. And it could mean good news, at least where the young navigator was concerned.

"This means Chekov probably didn't make a mistake after all when he transmitted the coordinates to the transporter. The energy field messed them up."

"This is the most plausible explanation at the moment, Doctor. However, we can only be sure beyond the reason of a doubt when the transporter computer's memory banks have been fully restored and the actual coordinates the ensign transmitted can be confirmed, and not just replicated by the repeat functionality we used to transport the probe."

"I see."

McCoy pressed his lips. He was relieved to hear that there was some hope that Chekov wasn't to blame after all. But what did all of this mean? Spock's findings were quite something.

McCoy took another sip of brandy and leaned against the table as he contemplated that strange energy field. After a few quiet moments during which the Vulcan focused his attention back on the computer screen, the doctor voiced his thoughts.

"We might not know what this energy *is*, Spock, but maybe we know what it *wants*", McCoy mused quietly.

Spock raised his eyebrows.

"*Wants*, Doctor?"

"You said, it prevented the Enterprise to enter the space between us and the planet. It seems like the energy field protected this area of space from us penetrating it. Maybe Jim was right after all that there was some unknown intelligence involved."

Spock nodded slowly as he pondered McCoy's interpretation.

"So far, the data only confirms that we were seemingly obstructed from entering that area of space. But your and the captain's interpretation is built on the assumption that the energy field appeared at that precise moment in the time-space continuum for a purpose. Such purpose would indeed indicate some form of intelligence. However, we have no concrete proof of this at this moment."

McCoy sighed and slumped into the chair next to the Vulcan.

"Of course I'm only guessin', Spock. Maybe it was just a goddamn coincidence that this energy appeared when we passed through that space!"

Bones took another sip from his glass as his thoughts started to drift off.

"Who am I to always understand why something happens out here?", McCoy asked no one in particular as he directed his glare towards the empty table in the middle of the conference room.

Even though Spock was focused on the computer, the shadow that suddenly clouded the doctor's face didn't escape him.

Every time Bones lost a patient he asked himself that same old question - *why?* Was death just a random occurrence he couldn't control or did it have a purpose, a higher meaning? And what if he was able to actually save someone? Was that just a coincidence as well, albeit a lucky one, or was there a deeper meaning behind it? If he only knew the answers to those questions. But would they make life any easier?

Spock seemed to sense the doctor's desperate thoughts somehow because he finally took his eyes from the computer screen and turned towards his colleague.

"To explain '*why something happens*', Doctor, is my responsibility as chief science officer. Don't burden yourself with questions even I can't find answers to at the moment", Spock said without the usual tone of arrogance in his voice. Instead, his characteristic aloofness had been replaced by... empathy? Could it be?

Don't turn all human on me all of a sudden, McCoy thought to himself. *That pointy-eared hobgoblin, always good for a surprise*. Bones smiled and gently shook his head as the dark thoughts from a moment ago were pushed to the back of his mind. If he wouldn't have been so desperate to make sense of Spock's report, he wouldn't have let the Vulcan get away with such an unashamed display of his human half. But this was not the time for their usual battle of insults.

McCoy leaned forward to search Spock's face for further clues to help him make sense of what he had told him so far. The Vulcan's face was as rigid as usual but Bones believed he could see frustration in his eyes.

"Spock...let me try to sum up what you told me, all right? Are you sayin' because we don't really know the exact nature of that energy field, we also can't know for sure what happened to Scotty and his men when they were transported through it? That they might not be dead after all...?"

Spock nodded slowly, his voice controlled but gentle.

"Indeed. Their deaths can't be confirmed and their fate is again unknown to us."

McCoy stared at the floor. This uncertainty was gradually becoming unbearable. But Spock wasn't finished yet with his conclusion.

"However, the Hoffmann 7 probe has also been transported through the energy field."

"You mean, there is a chance that it could still reply?"

McCoy felt a ray of hope warm his heart; hope for Scotty, Brown and Monet but also for Chekov.

"I'm currently checking our sensors which are focused on the particular area in space where the energy has last occurred. To give a precise answer to any of your questions, I first need to understand the exact conditions of the field."

McCoy refrained from further questions because he felt that Spock had to focus on his task and he didn't want to distract him. He would have to remain patient.

The doctor put his drink down, suddenly wide-awake and his recent desire to get some sleep, forgotten.

A few quiet minutes passed during which no word was spoken. Finally, McCoy could no longer hold back the question that had been nagging him since Spock had started his latest scan.

"Spock...the energy field has disappeared hours ago. Why are you still observing the empty space out there?"

Spock didn't look up from the computer, his eyes fixed on the screen.

"It's not 'empty', Doctor. For 1.29 hours I have been detecting very similar energy fluctuation readings to those we received 1.30 hours before the impact with the field. At the time, I attributed them to a recent meteor impact on Adelous 4's moon..."

The Vulcan's eyes suddenly seemed to flash with recognition as some readings changed dramatically on his computer screen.

"...I was mistaken."

Spock's hands moved into hurried action as his fingers flew over his keyboard. His usually upright posture stiffened even more, signalling McCoy that something significant was happening. He leaned forward to get a better view of the computer screen.

"What's going on, Spock?"

"Doctor, as I have predicted, the energy field has just reappeared at precisely the same geographical coordinates as before. I request you give me time to conduct my sensor scans. We finally have the opportunity to analyse the energy field sufficiently."

McCoy quickly wiped over his tired eyes. His body felt incredibly exhausted, but his mind was wide-awake. The astro-physical readings and data on Spock's computer made little sense to his physician eyes, but he was able to interpret at least some of the large amount of data the Vulcan was processing. McCoy didn't dare to interrupt Spock's analyses even though curiosity was killing him. Judging from the readings, he

realised it was a good thing the Enterprise was maintaining a safe distance from the energy field that had reappeared between the ship and Adalous 4. Another collision with the field could prove to be fatal. But as it didn't move and remained fixed to exactly the same spot where it had appeared before, there was no immediate danger they could collide with it again.

The minutes went by as McCoy watched the Vulcan with growing concern. Spock's dark eyes got even darker, a frown appearing on his forehead. Bones knew the FO well enough to understand that he was deeply troubled. He couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"Goddamnit Spock, talk to me!"

Spock took a deep breath. He didn't seem to be sure what to make of his findings but McCoy disregarded his hesitation. He put his hand on Spock's arm, forcing the Vulcan to react to him.

"What is out there?"

His frown deepening, Spock finally turned around to face McCoy. The doctor could not remember to have ever seen the first officer look so obviously baffled and concerned. To a neutral observer Spock would have appeared as calm and composed as usual, but Bones had known him long enough to read the Vulcan's subtle signs of worry: the slightly tilted head, the quieter pitch of the deep voice, the negligence to hide obvious concern from his eyes.

"Doctor, the measurements of the energy field indicate a breakdown of all physical laws known to us. This leaves only two possible explanations as to the nature of what we are confronted with. The energy field is *not* a Black Hole because we are not attracted by it. This leaves only one option..."

Uncharacteristic hesitation was another sign that the Vulcan was deeply concerned.

"A *wormhole*, Spock?", McCoy whispered, his eyes flickering with shock and disbelief.

As his dark, dead-serious eyes were conveying more than a thousand words, Spock had to nod just once.

McCoy grabbed his drink and downed it in one massive gulp.

Hopes and Fears

Hopes & Fears

Just as Spock and McCoy were taking a moment to digest the FO's groundbreaking discovery, a very excited Lieutenant Uhura called from the bridge. She was working the Gamma shift with Sulu when they detected the energy field as well. Unable to raise Mr Spock in his quarters, Uhura finally managed to track him down in the conference room, only to find that the first officer was already aware that the mysterious energy field had reappeared. Spock ordered her to call Captain Kirk and all key personnel to an emergency meeting. He had to inform them of his discovery immediately and they urgently needed to discuss how next steps.

As Spock briefly summed up his discovery for Uhura, the communications officer didn't attempt to hide her joy and reinvigorated hope.

"Mr Spock, if the probe has really been transported to another galaxy through a wormhole, it could take longer for the probe's signal to reach us. Scotty... and the landing party..." Uhura's voice broke, strained by her mixed emotions.

"Yes, Uhura, Scotty and his men might still be alive after all", McCoy joined the conversation from his seat next to Spock, his gentle Southern drawl soothing Uhura and Sulu's worries. Just as the doctor was following the conversation next to Spock, so did the helmsman who was standing next to the communications officer's station. Sulu exchanged a worried look with his friend – could they dare to hope?

"Even if we do receive a signal from Lieutenant Commander Scott, Lieutenant Brown and Lieutenant Monet, which would confirm that they are still alive, it doesn't mean that we will ever be able to retrieve them."

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Bones' knowledge of astro-physics was rudimentary, but the implications of Spock's baffling discovery were obvious even to him. The doctor was on his way to Kirk's quarters to pick him up for the emergency meeting which the first officer had scheduled at 0500 hours. Carrying a flask of freshly brewed coffee for himself and the captain, Bones hurried towards the turbo-lift that would carry him up to deck 5.

On his way to Jim's quarters, the doctor recalled what he knew about wormholes. Granted, his knowledge on the subject was limited. However he was *very* familiar with one of the most striking Starfleet tales known, which happened to concern this mysterious phenomena.

In 300 years of humanoid space exploration only one apparent encounter between an observer and a wormhole had been recorded on file. But the story of this strange occurrence was more of a Starfleet fairy-tale than proven scientific fact.

150 years ago Captain Amir Azar was transporting provisions between Earth and Vulcan with his freighter, the *Mercury*. The crew consisted only of himself, a pilot and an engineer. The two Federation control outposts on Vulcan and on Earth registered the Mercury's sudden disappearance halfway into the journey. But no attack had been detected and no wreckage was ever found. Furthermore, there had only been seemingly insignificant abnormalities in the space-time continuum in the vicinity where the freighter had disappeared. At the time, those abnormalities had been attributed to a recent solar flare.

Wild conspiracy theories followed the Mercury's mysterious disappearance, including tales about abduction by Vulcan dissidents, a Romulan act of terrorism and Klingon pirates. None of those theories were ever proven. After two years of reviewing the case over and over again, Starfleet finally stored the incident in their 'unresolved' file and ended their enquiry.

Shortly after, Azar reappeared on Rigel 7, literally out of nowhere.

Bones knew this famous piece of Federation folklore so well because one of his tutors at the Medical Academy had been a trainee doctor on Rigel 7 at the time and had encountered Captain Azar personally. This popular tutor, a man already well into his 80's, often shared his personal memories of Azar's incredible story with his students.

The man that had turned up at the Starfleet control post on Rigel 7 was unrecognisable. Always known for his calmness, his precision and reliability, Amir Azar had changed significantly. His neat appearance had been replaced by the look of a tramp - ragged clothes, long hair and a full beard. The change in his character was even more disturbing. Azar was aggressive, angry and extremely nervous. Furthermore, he seemed to have lost his touch with reality completely. However, he was in relatively good physical health, as he claimed that while being lost for several months, he had survived on a diet of fruit and vegetables. As the Mercury was stocked with enough oxygen reserves and a freight of several hundred tons of Terran vegetables and fruit, Azar's story was believable up to that point. It was the second part of his story that lacked credibility.

The captain claimed that the Mercury had entered some kind of energy field that had suddenly appeared in front of them en route to Vulcan. At first they had crashed into the field, and then after a few more rocky encounters, they had seemingly drifted inside it. An excellent navigator with extensive knowledge of the wider astro-geographical space including the Local Group (*see footnote 1*), Azar claimed that they found themselves in the Andromeda Galaxy, 2.5 million light years from Earth, when they exited again. He identified the galaxy with 100% certainty due to the constellation of certain stars, which he recognised to be part of this neighbouring galaxy of the Milky Way.

Bones had always listened in wonder when his tutor told them this amazing story. They discussed the case often - had Amir Azar been traumatised by some unknown event en route to Vulcan that resulted in mental disillusion or was he actually telling the truth, although it seemed illogical? Even with today's technological advancements it would take a starship that was travelling constantly at Warp 8, 98 years to reach the Andromeda Galaxy. And no starship in this galaxy was capable of travelling at such speeds for that duration of time. Azar could not have been right. His story became even more tragic when he insisted that his two shipmates had committed suicide when they realised where they had ended up, not able to cope with the knowledge that they would never be able to return home. Azar claimed that he was close to killing himself, too. But he came to the rational conclusion that if he had *somehow* ended up in this galaxy, it could *somehow* be possible to return to his own. Furthermore, his love for his wife prevented him from giving up. According to Captain Azar, he never gave up hope that he would

see her again and stayed alive.

After supposedly drifting several months in space on the edges of the Andromeda Galaxy, the energy field the Mercury had encountered appeared again, seemingly out of nowhere. According to Azar, the ship first crashed into the field, and then drifted inside it, like it had done before. This time though, the field appeared to be far hotter than before and the colossal energy heated the freighter up so significantly that the interiors of the ship caught fire. Seeing no possibility to survive the situation, Azar opted to beam himself into empty space as a way of painless suicide.

He re-materialised on Rigel 7.

Bones had always belonged to the group of students in his class that believed that if such traumatising events had really occurred, they could have changed a man's character as fundamentally as in Amir Azar's case. He somehow didn't believe the man was acting or making up stories. However, Azar's astro-physical claims couldn't be confirmed. Many scientists believed that Azar had indeed been trapped in an unknown area in space - but in the Milky Way galaxy. However, there was a small group of scientists from all over the Federation who took Azar's claims serious and analysed them further. But there was no data to support his story, just the captain's personal accounts. Bones' tutor recalled how Azar always told his story with a desperate voice and with fearful eyes, appearing like a man tormented by an incredible trauma. But no scientist was able to confirm his claims to be true. Wormholes were deemed theoretically possible. But until this day, their existence had never been proven.

The sad irony of Azar's story was that because of his changed character, his wife divorced him and he lived a lonely life at Rigel 7's medical facility until he died an old and lonely man. Until his last breath, the captain maintained that his story was true.

McCoy shook his head in amazement as he remembered the sad ending. He was just entering the corridor that was leading up to Jim's quarters. The doctor wasn't surprised to see Spock and the captain were already coming his way. The first officer must have had the same idea and stopped by Jim's quarters to pick him up for the meeting. Grinning, McCoy bounced on his toes as Kirk smiled warmly at the flask in his hand.

If Spock has any common sense, he got us some doughnuts, McCoy thought, smiling to himself. But of course, the Vulcan hadn't. Kirk interpreted the grin on the doctor's face as a reaction to his own longing look at the flask.

"Good thinking, Bones", he said with a nod towards the flask as the three of them entered the turbo-lift.

"Someone 'round here has to keep an eye on what's essential", McCoy chuckled, his eyes not leaving Jim's face. Spock just lifted an eyebrow.

While they rode towards deck 1, Kirk directed a meaningful look towards McCoy and Spock.

"I have recalled Chekov on duty. He is attending the emergency meeting."

McCoy nodded, his support for the captain's decision reflected in his eyes.

"I want to keep the ensign involved throughout this rescue operation", Kirk continued.

McCoy was more than just a little relieved that Jim called what they were doing a 'rescue mission'. His thoughts returned to the start of this long night when he had been lying in his bed, wide awake and disturbed by dark thoughts of what had happened to Scotty, Brown and Monet and the resulting implications for the young Russian.

Due to the unclear circumstances of the incident, he doubted Starfleet would actually punish Chekov in legal terms should the three missing men be confirmed dead after all. But due to his crucial role during the event, he could face degradation and could end up with a desk job in the lower regions of Starfleet headquarters. And if that wouldn't be punishment enough for the young man, his guilt, justified or not, would possibly torment him for the rest of his life. That thought alone was enough to enrage the doctor again. It reminded him how angry he had been with Spock when he had left his quarters to retrieve the brandy from the conference room. In typical Vulcan manner, the blasted elf had then managed to distract him from his anger with a revolutionary scientific discovery!

But that was then and Bones still had to pick a bone with the FO.

When they hurried down the corridor towards the conference room, he couldn't help but give Spock his piece of mind regarding his treatment of Chekov. The Vulcan had just stated that the chance of receiving a Hoffmann 7 signal from another galaxy lay between 89.87 and 128.40 to 1. McCoy felt a strange urge to laugh out loud and cry at the same time. Their chances were extremely slim, they knew that already. So why on earth did Spock have to be so goddamn accurate all the time by translating the realities they were confronted with into cold, harsh data.

"I regret, Captain, that I haven't been able to conduct a more precise calculation in such a short period of time." Spock was strutting along the corridor determinedly, his head tilted slightly towards Kirk who was walking in the middle with his two friends at his side.

"Your calculation is precise enough to leave at least a little room for optimism, Mr Spock", Kirk replied with a small smile, "and this is more than I dared to hope for only a few hours ago."

And goddamn Jim for always appreciating Spock for being...Spock!, Bones raged in his mind.

The CMO knew he was going to lose his temper, but in all honesty, he just didn't care anymore.

They were about to turn into the short side corridor that was leading toward the conference room, when McCoy quickly got in front of his superiors and blocked their way.

"Forget your blasted numbers for a moment, Spock! I wanna know why you haven't apologised for insisting to put Chekov on heavy duty on his first day?", McCoy fixed his eyes on the Vulcan who met his glare without blinking.

Kirk knew what the CMO's icy expression meant. He wouldn't back off until he would get some kind of admission from Spock. The captain looked on with undisguised concern but decided to stay out of the discussion for the moment.

"Why would I apologise for a logical decision, Doctor?", Spock didn't back off an inch. He calmly clasped his hands behind his back, "Indeed, it would be illogical to do so."

The calmness in Spock's voice made McCoy feel his control gradually slip away. *You cold-hearted, green-blooded son of a...* The doors of the turbo-lift opened and Lieutenants Kyle and Mendelson passed them with a nod as they headed towards the conference room. Bones bit his lip and Spock walked on, following the officers towards the meeting room. Kirk gave the doctor a scolding look and followed his FO.

But McCoy couldn't suppress his anger any longer. He rushed after Spock, stepped in front of him again and put a hand on the Vulcan's broad shoulder, which stopped Spock and Kirk in their tracks, just outside the conference room.

"You cold-blooded hobgoblin, can't you stop thinking about logic for just a damn minute?", McCoy spat out. Spock didn't move an inch and stared straight through the CMO, as if he was transparent. Only his slightly raised eyebrow indicated that he was listening.

"It was *you* who insisted to hand the navigator's post to the boy on his first day, even though we had just embarked on a difficult rescue mission! And now look what happened!"

"Doctor McCoy, may I remind you that I acted out of necessity."

Spock now fixed his eyes firmly on the CMO, a look that was totally controlled unlike McCoy's raging glare and the doctor had trouble holding the Vulcan's gaze.

Kirk had seen this dark look only a few times on Spock's face before. Usually it was bestowed upon an enemy they were encountering, as a means to intimidate him. Even with their constant bickering, he had never seen Spock direct that look towards McCoy. The Vulcan was getting dangerously impatient with the CMO.

"And may I also remind you, that there is still the slight chance that Ensign Chekov hasn't committed a mistake after all, that his coordinates were correct but were interfered with by the wormhole. He would therefore be free from any guilt. In this light, I suggest you do not longer judge the ensign's capabilities. If you would clear the way now, the Captain and I are scheduled to conduct the emergency meeting that also requires your presence."

Spock tried to walk around McCoy but his enraged opponent wouldn't let him. He kept his hand firmly pressed against Spock's left shoulder. Kirk watched on with concern. If Bones wouldn't stop this senseless debate, he would have to interfere any second now.

"I'm not judging Chekov, I'm judging *you*, Spock", every word was accentuated in the doctor's thick Southern accent, "Not your ability as a science officer, but your *personal* judgement!", McCoy matched Spock's dark look with an ice-cold stare, refusing to give in.

Spock exchanged a quick look with Kirk. The Vulcan was not at all bearing any blame and maintained his aloof posture. Jim read in his FO's eyes that he would not debate the matter further. A moment of deafening silence past between them.

Kirk took a deep breath, preparing himself to order his CMO to control his temper. But then Lieutenant Uhura stepped out of the conference room.

"Captain, the meeting can commence, we're all ready."

Kirk shot a quick, sharp warning look at McCoy before turning to Spock with a more encouraging look. Bones' hand dropped from the Vulcan's shoulder. Whenever Kirk was forced to use his razor sharp 'no nonsense' look to shut the doctor up, he knew he had no other option but to give in. At least for the moment.

Jim sighed a silent breath of relief, but his eyes maintained their serious expression. He turned to his communications officer who was waiting by the door for a reply.

"Very well, Lieutenant, so are we."

The captain turned on his heels and entered the conference room. McCoy and Spock followed quietly.

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At 0505 hours the meeting consisting of Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Uhura, Sulu, Lieutenants Mendelson and Kyle commenced. Chekov had also been ordered by the captain to attend even though the navigator wondered why. What on earth could he contribute to this meeting? He had failed them all.

Without a word, Pavel took his seat next to Sulu and stared at the floor.

But then he lifted his head in surprise. Just before the meeting started, Captain Kirk came over and quickly summed up Spock's recent findings that indicated that, after all, he had probably transferred the correct coordinates to the transporter computer but that they had been interfered with by the wormhole. Kirk wanted to break those encouraging news to the ensign straight way, even before Spock started his report. But Kirk also reminded Chekov that the incident would only be fully resolved, and his responsibility regarding the disappearance of the landing party confirmed or denied, when the transporter computer banks had been fully repaired.

Pavel allowed himself a small sigh. He agreed with Captain Kirk that this were promising news indeed and vowed to be of assistance in recovering the missing men to the best of his abilities. But as Kirk took his seat next to Spock and started the meeting, Chekov withdrew into his tormented mind again. Deep down inside his heart he knew, regardless if he was proven to be responsible for what had happened or not,

that he would only be able to sleep in peace again if the three men were found alive.

At 0525 hours, Mr Spock finished the report about his baffling discovery that the energy field in the local vicinity of the ship was a wormhole. The attending officers had exchanged surprised and amazed looks throughout his report.

Everyone was allowed to ponder for a moment the implications of Spock's discovery. Kirk felt it was comforting to know that the puzzle was starting to take shape. At least they were beginning to understand the power they were confronted with.

Then, just as he wanted to direct the discussion towards possible ways of action in the light of this new development, Lieutenant Riley called from the bridge. Kirk knew immediately that something had happened. The young Lieutenant didn't even attempt to control his emotions as he *shouted* into the com unit.

"Captain, Hoffmann 7 has replied! It just signalled us the officer numbers of all three landing party personnel *plus* the brand-new turbo-lift programming code only Mr Scott and myself are familiar with!"

For a few seconds, one could have heard a pin drop in Conference Room 2. Then jubilation and cheers erupted as officers hugged one another or pat each other's shoulders, accompanied by a cacophony of laughter and exhausted sighs of relief.

With unseeing eyes, Chekov slowly turned to Sulu who had just exchanged a strong hug with Uhura. The helmsman could read the desperate question in his friend's eyes: *What now?*

I Here's a little background information: Andromeda is the largest galaxy of the so-called 'Local Group' which consists of the Andromeda galaxy, the Milky Way, the Triangulum galaxy and about 30 other smaller galaxies. Andromeda is a spiral galaxy and takes its name from the constellation Andromeda.

Due to the enormous size of the Milky Way – a diameter of 100.000 light-years - nearly all Star Trek episodes and movies are set in our 'home' galaxy. As a guide to the relative size of the Milky Way, imagine if our solar system was reduced to the size of a US quarter (approximately 2.5 cm in diameter), the rest of the Milky Way around it would cover an area of 3.286 million square kilometres- the total area of India! Fascinating indeed!

Where No Man Has Gone Before

Where No Man Has Gone Before

As he rushed down the corridor that was leading to the science department, Kirk noticed a strange feeling in his guts. The last few hours were finally catching up with him. The Hoffmann 7 probe had replied and they knew that Scotty, Lieutenants Brown and Monet *had* re-materialised. But *where* the three men had ended up was written in the colloquial stars. It was also concerning that Scotty hadn't send a follow up message, which made Kirk wonder if they were unable to do so because they were incapacitated or if the probe had malfunctioned after the initial message had been sent.

Jim's intuition was telling him not to wait for a second message. If Scotty had deemed it necessary to warn them not to follow, he would have communicated this in his first message. But Kirk also knew that Scotty knew him too well. The CEO was well aware that Kirk would ignore such a warning anyway. The captain was not one to abandon crewmembers, not as long as there was hope to rescue them. He wanted to get help and support to the three men *now*.

Kirk's legs seemed unusually weak as he struggled to maintain his fast pace. After the longest of days and the shortest of nights, during which he only got two hours of sleep, the captain felt exhaustion in every fibre of his body. McCoy's famous brew of Columbian coffee had only had a momentary effect on his metabolism and he had been wide-awake and alert during the emergency meeting. But the worry over the missing men exhausted the captain more than any sleep-deprivation. Kirk decided to ignore his tiredness. Sleep had to wait until further notice. But he would allow himself a quick breather, Jim decided, as he leaned against the corridor wall, the emergency meeting still fresh in his mind.

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2 hours earlier

Lieutenant Riley's news had made everyone in the conference room smile again. Even Spock had allowed himself an audible sigh of relief.

At the meeting, Kirk had agreed to Spock's proposal to send a second landing party to the coordinates of the Hoffmann 7 probe and the three missing men. Everyone present agreed that time was of the essence. If the men were injured, they'd be in urgent need of medical attention. If the probe had malfunctioned after the first message had been sent, they'd never receive the landing party's coordinates unless it was repaired or another form of communication could be established.

As there was no confirmed incident of anyone being transported to another galaxy through a wormhole before, Spock theorised that, in all likelihood, the three men were somewhere within the Milky Way galaxy. Although, he also noted, just because there was no evidence of something never having occurred before, didn't mean that it *couldn't* occur at all. Most importantly though, Spock concluded, logic dictated that even if the landing party had found themselves in another galaxy, the fact that Scott, Brown, Monet and the probe had been transported through the wormhole and had been able to communicate back, meant that there was at least the *possibility* that this process could be reversed and the men could be beamed back. All that was required for such an attempt, was that the Enterprise would receive the coordinates of the men's location.

Beaming anything, let alone a human body, to another galaxy was impossible, that much was certain. But if it turned out that the landing party had indeed ended up in a galaxy other than the Milky Way, they would have proof that beaming through the intergalactic '*shortcut*' a wormhole provided, was possible. As long as the wormhole was present and didn't disappear again, either temporarily or for good. So, time was of the essence to act and send a rescue team to Scotty, Brown and Monet's aid before this shortcut vanished again.

Jim knew that he had to agree to a second landing party. They had the opportunity to send a rescue team after them and it was logical to do so. But they had no idea what awaited them on the other side. Or if they'd ever return. It was incredibly dangerous and the idea to send more men into the unknown, made Jim shudder inside.

Just as Kirk started to voice his agreement to Spock's suggestion to deploy a second landing party, McCoy interrupted him and volunteered for the mission. As chief medical officer, his participation was essential. Kirk bestowed his friend with an unreadable look but before he could respond, Spock volunteered as well, arguing it was logical that he should be part of the landing party due to his technological and scientific knowledge. If Hoffmann 7 had been damaged and Mr Scott was incapacitated, he would be able to repair the probe. Or, alternatively, modify their communicators to attempt to send messages through the wormhole back to the ship.

Jim knew, if someone would find a way back for the two landing parties, it would be his first officer.

With a quick wave, Kirk delayed the discussion about personnel until they had discussed the actual plan. Pressing his lips together tightly, McCoy crossed his arms at the captain's reluctance to agree to his offer to volunteer. Spock raised an eyebrow toward his CO and mirrored McCoy's reaction perfectly by crossing his arms in the same, stubborn manner. United against their captain, Spock and McCoy's expressions send a clear message to their mutual friend: 'You might not like it Jim, but we'll go anyway!'

Kirk privately wondered how two as fundamentally different people as his friends still managed to gang up on him. Looking at the stubborn expressions on their faces - McCoy's open and angry, Spock's subtle and perplexed - Jim realised that his CSO and CMO were united by their extreme pig-headedness. They had more in common than they would ever admit.

Spock's proposed rescue plan outlined the following: Like before, Lieutenant Kyle would use the automatic repeat function of the transporter and the second landing party would be beamed directly to where the probe had been when it transmitted its message back. The missing men would most likely be nearby.

After both landing parties had reunited and assessed the situation, all men would then come to an agreement if beaming back through the wormhole was deemed possible and safe from where they were. This cause of action required that they were able to communicate their

coordinates back to the ship, either via the probe or through other available means. Spock and Kyle's current assumption was that as the beaming process had worked one way through the wormhole, nothing at this moment in time suggested that it couldn't work just as well the other way. But such a judgement could only be made from the other side when conditions in that location had been analysed. Due to the damages to the transporter, it was only possible to beam out but not to beam anyone back right now. But Kyle and Spock had concluded that only a few more days were required to repair it fully so the men wouldn't have to hold out for long.

The other scenario Spock outlined, concerned the possibility that the men determined that it wasn't safe or possible to beam back through the wormhole. In that case, if the landing party was located in this galaxy and at a retrievable distance, they would communicate their intentions back to the ship so that either the Enterprise or the nearest Federation outpost could retrieve them. So far so good. It was at this moment during Spock's elaborations, that Kirk asked his FO to pause.

Looking grave and determined in equal measure, the captain ordered that if the men would find themselves trapped in another galaxy, or if they encountered any other situation that made rescue or a return journey impossible, it would be Mr Spock's decision as commanding officer how to proceed under such circumstances. The FO would be in command and make the decisive decisions, however hard they might be. Kirk made clear that he trusted the first officer without reservation and that he was certain that he would always act with the best interests of the missing men in mind.

McCoy frowned at Kirk's clear words, but remained silent. He trusted Spock implicitly when it came to scientific or technological matters. But when it came to emotional aspects of such a risky and uncertain mission, he wasn't so sure. And the possible situations Spock had just outlined left a lot of room for a lot of different emotions, Bones concluded privately.

Even though Kirk had initially delayed his decision regarding personnel, when the discussion turned to the subject at the end of the meeting, he didn't have to think about it for long. He wanted to keep the landing party as small, but also as strong and efficient as possible. Mr Spock as Chief Science Officer and Dr McCoy as Chief Medical Officer *were* the obvious choices. He did not like it, but both his friends were essential personnel for such a mission. But Jim didn't dislike the idea to send Spock and McCoy into uncertainty just because they were his friends. There was also another reason. He would have to have a word with them before they left.

Jim was convinced that the third and final member of the rescue party could only be Pavel Chekov. From his own experience, Jim intuitively knew that the young man would want to give *everything* to rectify any possible mistake he might have made.

When Jim shared his decision with the other officers at the meeting, the ensign looked up at his captain, wide-eyed. It was the first time that the Russian had lifted his head since the meeting had started. Kirk underpinned his order with a small, encouraging smile and Chekov replied with a heartfelt "Yes, Sair". Kirk detected surprise but also sincere gratefulness in the navigator's eyes, which confirmed to him that he had made the right decision.

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After the emergency meeting, Spock and McCoy headed towards the science lab while Lieutenants Kyle and Mendelson went back to the transporter room to continue with the repairs. After a quick visit to the bridge, Kirk also headed towards the science department to oversee the preparations of the rescue party.

When the captain entered the lab he was greeted by McCoy's passionate protest. The doctor deemed a third landing party member unnecessary. Kirk managed to silence his friend by giving a convincing reason for his decision.

"Bones, we need a navigator out there with excellent knowledge of space geography. Star mapping is one of Chekov's specialist areas of expertise. Plus, I know that he is dying to come along, the boy wants to redeem himself!"

McCoy could only sigh and shrug his shoulders at this. Of course, Jim was right. But he didn't have to like it anyway. At this moment the coms unit beeped and Lieutenant Kyle contacted them from the transporter room with significant news.

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While Spock and McCoy were packing their backpacks with as much scientific instruments, nutrition and water, medi kits and emergency blankets they could possibly carry, Chekov was busy in the library next door. He was transferring as much astro-geographical data onto his tricorder as possible and also packed his own backpack. When he finished, he allowed himself to sit down for a moment and reflect on what just had happened.

Mr Spock and Captain Kirk had just informed him that Lieutenant Kyle had managed to repair a part of the transporter computer bank. As a result, Kyle had been able to prove, beyond any doubt, that Chekov had transferred the *correct* data to the transporter after all and that it could be confirmed that it was the wormhole that caused the interference and transported the landing party to their unknown destination.

"You are not at fault, Pavel", a smiling Kirk had told him. The captain had stood opposite him and empathetically squeezed both of his shoulders.

Why didn't he feel any relief then? It hadn't been his mistake, and yet his actions had directly led to the men going missing. Despite Captain Kirk's protests at his opinion, Pavel believed that being only *indirectly* at fault, was *still* being at fault.

So, all he could feel right now was eternal gratefulness towards Captain Kirk that he had chosen him to be part of the rescue party. And he vowed not disappoint him again. This was his chance to make up for it all.

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After Spock and the captain returned from the library where they had shared the good news with Chekov, McCoy couldn't help but remind both of them of his previous concerns.

"In any case, the kid shouldn't have been anywhere near the bridge on his first day!"

Kirk put a hand on the doctor's arm, an eager glint in his eyes.

"We've been through this, Bones. If Chekov is ever to learn how to function under pressure, he needs to be given the opportunity to do so. He needs to be given the chance to make mistakes. We can't protect him from that. And we can't protect him from feeling guilt either, may it be justified or not."

McCoy could tell from the captain's passionate voice and fiery eyes, that he was speaking of experience. The CMO smiled gently at his friend and nodded.

The doctor's gaze suddenly drifted off, as he seemed to remember something in his distant past, a past even Jim didn't know much about. This time it was the captain who knew that McCoy was speaking from personal experience.

"I think I know what you mean, Jim. Guilt can be a man's undoing... Sometimes you wish to make a million other mistakes, just to undo this *one* mistake."

McCoy seemed to talk more to himself, getting quieter with every word. But not too quiet for Vulcan ears though.

"That is an illogical observation, Doctor", Spock said dryly as he put additional tricoder accumulators into his backpack.

"Call it illogical, Spock. I call it human!", McCoy blurted out, back to his grumpy, irritated self.

Jim couldn't help but feel extremely annoyed that his friends insisted to argue in his presence until the last possible moment. It was one thing that they seemed to have decided to make each other's lives a misery, but testing their CO's nerves until breaking point was another.

Bones didn't even wait for the Vulcan's reply and quickly disappeared into the medical lab that was next to science lab. Several hypos had to be prepared. God knew what condition Scotty and his men were in.

Irritated at Spock's unnecessary comment at McCoy's personal declaration, Kirk shot an annoyed glance towards his first officer.

Spock just raised an eyebrow and closed his bulky backpack.

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30 minutes later, James Kirk headed down the corridor towards the turbo-lift that would take him to the transporter room on deck A. The time had come. In a moment, they would beam the youngest crewmember and his two best friends to an unknown destination where unknown dangers of an unknown world awaited them.

It's a good thing, Chekov is coming along, Jim told himself. The youngster's eagerness and determination would hopefully direct the focus of the two senior officers.

As the captain walked towards the turbo-lift, he slowed down involuntarily, not even noticing that he was doing so. He was dreading to see his men walk up the transporter platform. Jim always felt restless if he couldn't be part of a landing party. But with the dangerous wormhole just outside his still damaged ship, he could not leave the Enterprise and her crew alone. It was always difficult to send men onto a dangerous mission but to send them to a totally unknown destination and situation was outright painful.

Jim shook his head as if to get rid of his dark thoughts. To distract himself from his worries, he reflected on what had just happened in the science lab. A soft smile lightened up his eyes. He recalled McCoy and Spock's stubborn faces when he had finally managed to ask them to make a promise after they had finished packing their backpacks. As he entered the turbo-lift and was transported down toward deck A, Kirk remembered every moment of that difficult conversation vividly.

30 minutes previously

Spock and McCoy headed for the door, ready to go to the transporter room and to get the rescue mission underway as quickly as possible when Kirk called them back.

"One moment, Gentlemen. I'd like to have a word with you before you leave."

Spock and McCoy exchanged a quick look and turned around to face their CO.

"Yes, Captain?", his expression all innocence, Spock clasped his hands behind his back and waited patiently for Kirk to continue.

McCoy frowned and his impatience was evident in his voice.

"A great time to have a chit chat, Jim. Can't it wait?"

Kirk took a deep breath, seemingly searching for the right words to begin his speech but he needn't have worried. Leave it to his friends to get the conversation under way. Spock glanced sideways at the doctor who was nervously bouncing on his toes.

"I'm sure the Captain has a logical reason to delay us for a few moments, Doctor."

"I really wish you'd have to pay me a credit every time you say that blasted word! I could retire tomorrow!"

Kirk sighed and held his hands towards his friends as if he was pleading with them.

"That's the reason why it can't wait, Bones!"

McCoy frowned and Spock looked puzzled.

"What in blazes is that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think, Doctor?", Kirk shook his head in frustration.

Suddenly feeling very tired, the captain sat down at one of the small tables in the lab and gestured McCoy and Spock to follow suit. When they hesitated, he encouraged them with a gentle smile.

For a moment McCoy forgot his worries about the imminent mission. The last 24 hours had left a toll on all of them. And Jim Kirk was no exception. He looked exhausted. But at the same time he seemed to have something important on his mind that couldn't wait. And the doctor had a suspicion what it was that troubled his captain so much that he deemed it necessary to delay them. This would not be fun.

Reluctantly, Bones sat down opposite Jim. Spock hesitated for a moment but sat down as well.

"You know what I worry about most regarding this rescue mission?", Kirk said with a heavy sigh he didn't make an effort to suppress.

McCoy frowned, while Spock lifted his right eyebrow – it was unusual for the captain to admit he was worried, even less so to speak of what troubled him. Spock offered some assistance to Kirk who still seemed to struggle to find the right words.

"There are a lot of unknown factors that could complicate this mission and that can't be defined before we embark. Hence, they are in the realms of speculation, Captain. Therefore, I propose not to worry about them before they occur."

McCoy bit his lip at this; he instinctively knew that Spock was on the wrong track here, and deliberately so. The Vulcan disliked talking about their difficult relationship just as much as he did. That much they had in common.

Bones knew that Jim had the utmost confidence in himself and Spock; that they would give their best to return to the ship safely with the three missing men. He was sure that the captain wasn't worried about their professional abilities.

He also knew that Spock's attempt just now to put Kirk's mind at ease had been good intentioned. The Vulcan, in his unique and probably only way possible to him, had tried to convey optimism to Jim, but also to him. Bones feared that his own agitation wasn't escaping the sharp senses of the man next to him. Nor the man opposite.

The CMO harrumphed several times, crossed his arms and stared grumpily into the void, unable to look at the captain.

Jim crossed his hands calmly on the table in front of him. He bestowed a gentle smile on Spock.

"In principal, I agree with you, Mr Spock. But unfortunately I can already think of one complication that will occur for certain."

Jim looked from one to the other, like a father looks at his unruly children, hoping that a mere look will make them realise their faults.

Spock knew that Jim had to be referring to some kind of emotional issue and he calmly folded his hands in his lap. Being half-Vulcan, half-Human, it was a great challenge for him to deal with emotions sufficiently. Consequently, he had come to the logical conclusion a while ago to trust his sensitive commanding officer in such matters. No matter how complex or difficult the circumstances, if need be, Jim would always give him useful advice on how to deal with emotions. The Vulcan's eyes remained fixed onto his friend's face, calmly waiting for him to continue.

Bones had understood Jim's hint perfectly well too, with the result that he got even more irritable. The captain was treating them like misbehaving children! How on earth could Spock remain so calm and collected! This was about the Vulcan as much as it was about his own good self.

"If you're referring to me and Mr Hobgoblin here, I can assure you ..."

"That the Good Doctor will give in to the logic of the situation and assist me in rationally finding a way to safely return the landing party to the ship. And ourselves", Spock finished the sentence poignantly.

The captain nodded and smiled even though his CMO's angry face turned a dark red. Jim quickly reached over the small table and touched his friends' arms.

"Spock, Bones, I want you to promise me something."

He sounded gentle, concerned, but determined at the same time.

"I can't ask you to promise that you will return safely to the Enterprise, as I can't ask you to promise something you might not be able to keep. But there *is* something I know that both of you *can* do, that will increase the chances of a successful mission significantly."

Spock took a deep breath that to his dismay must have been audible to the captain and the doctor. He privately admitted his awe at Jim's ability to always voice his deepest, most personal concerns when it was necessary, when it was *logical*, to do so.

Bones' eyes held Jim's pleading gaze, not looking away this time. He knew that whatever the CO would ask of him now, he was willing to promise. It wasn't so much a matter of obeying a captain's order, but of honouring a friend's trust. But it wouldn't be easy.

"You have to promise me, that you will work together to the best of your abilities and do what you seem to be incapable of most of the time but I *know* you aren't..."

Jim stared at their stony faces, their stubbornness expressed by Spock's raised eyebrows and McCoy's pressed lips.

"Get on for crying out loud!", Jim blurted out. Why was such a simple request so difficult to voice?

The embarrassed silence that followed gave the CO a moment to reflect on his wish. He usually didn't mind his friends' constant bickering and lively, quick-witted banter. On the contrary, more often than not it made him smile. Sure, sometimes he had to put his foot down and end their otherwise endless discussions, as neither his FO nor his CMO would ever back down. But if they wouldn't argue at any given opportunity, something would be missing from life aboard the Enterprise. Somehow this simple fact of their lives seemed to reassure them, and it sure as hell reassured him.

Jim knew that Bones argued with Spock to prove his point that emotions were *necessary*. McCoy felt that the science officer wasn't doing himself or anyone else any favours by suppressing his human half. And Spock never got tired to confront Bones with his illogical behaviour. The Vulcan believed it was his duty to remind the doctor that he was suffering from a *regrettable* lack of rationality.

But Jim had always suspected there was an additional reason for McCoy and Spock's relentless arguments. A good reason. Why else would they jump at any opportunity to exchange their own brand of pleasantries? Why, despite their apparent strong dislike for one another, would they regularly seek each other's attention, even presence? The two of them probably weren't even aware of a subconscious motivation themselves.

Jim suspected that the other reason why Spock and McCoy argued all the time was because they both were too stubborn and too proud to admit that their *nemesis* was actually a *friend*. To themselves, to one another and to everyone else as well. Including their mutual best friend. But by arguing all the time, by playing their 'game' that enabled them to even gang up on him at times, they were able to express their own brand of *affection* for one another without the need to call it that way.

Jim had the pressing feeling that this rescue mission would provide both of his officers with new insights about one another. This intuition didn't unnerve him, what did was his regret that he couldn't be there to guide them through such a process that surely would not be free of complications and challenges.

His friends' reaction to his request was nothing less but typical: Both of Spock's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline, he looked slightly baffled, innocent even. Spock was amazed that the captain could have directed such a request as 'getting on' towards him, as he always valued co-operation as a logical requirement for any successful mission.

McCoy on the other hand just crossed his arms, and moved uncomfortably in his chair. He didn't say a word, punishing Jim with his refusal to give a reply to his request.

Those two must be the most stubborn guys on this side of the galaxy, Jim thought to himself. *Apart from myself of course*, he noted privately with ironic self-critique.

Seeing Jim's soft smile, Bones' anger at his captain's talent to constantly ask the impossible of him, dissolved, and he risked a sideways glance at Spock. To his surprise the Vulcan looked in his direction and their eyes met. McCoy got the impression that he could detect anticipation in the FO's eyes. Uncharacteristically, Spock seemed to wait for him to speak first.

Unfortunately, Bones felt hoarse in that precise moment for some reason. Must be the Saurian 'medicine' he had downed at regular intervals during the last 24 hours.

"Of course we can *get along*, Jim", Bones finally managed to mutter and he nodded in Spock's direction, "I just think it's usually easier for both of us not to."

The CMO shrugged his shoulders apologetically. Somehow he wasn't surprised when Spock nodded in agreement.

"An accurate observation, Doctor."

"Thanks, Spock", McCoy said with no trace of irony.

Jim had to smile again at the fact that the only thing Spock and Bones seemed to agree on was that they *disagreed*. But he knew that both of them understood his point. He looked at them expectantly. They still owed him a promise. Spock cleared his throat and answered in an uncharacteristic quiet tone.

"I promise, Jim."

"Me too, Jim. I promise. Don't worry about us."

Bones returned his captain's benevolent look with a small smile. Spock slowly nodded at Jim, his lips straight but his eyes shining brightly.

Now, Jim Kirk was ready to let them go.

The Cube

The Cube

"Chekov, get down!", Spock shouted with urgency.

The ensign quickly dropped onto the concrete surface while Spock pushed himself and McCoy towards the smooth steel wall of a building the size of a small space-dock. The three men narrowly avoided being decapitated by the shuttlecraft that had appeared out of nowhere and sped past their heads. It was white, rectangular and completely soundless and just hovered above the ground. Chekov could feel his hair move in the stream of air as the craft flew past him, only one and a half meters above the ground.

The trio had just re-materialised and were still gathering their senses. They had put down their heavy rucksacks to take in their surroundings of what appeared to be a 'city' of sorts, made entirely of steel and concrete. All the roads met at right angles and disappeared in straight lines towards the horizon in each direction. A few shuttlecrafts were flying just above the highways towards unknown destinations. The spaces between the roads were filled with gigantic square and rectangular shaped grey constructs, some of them as tall as skyscrapers. The bright light coming from a white sky high above was hot and powerful.

The environment appeared industrial but with one striking difference to other alien cities the landing party had encountered before: there was no sign of life whatsoever, no windows or doors in the buildings, no road-marks or traffic lights on the roads and most importantly no living and breathing soul as far as the eye could see. Not even the slightest hint of any flora, fauna or organic substance.

Just after they had materialised, Spock tilted his head to his right. When McCoy noticed the fast approaching shuttlecraft in the corner of his eye as well, he had instinctively reached out towards Chekov, determined to pull him towards the wall. But the ensign had been standing about 1.5 meters away from them and he would have not reached him in time. Alert as always, Spock had quickly alarmed Chekov to get down and pulled a protesting McCoy back towards the wall of the metal building. The shuttle then rushed past at high speed and the three of them turned their heads, watching the alien craft disappear out of sight towards the horizon.

McCoy helped Chekov up who looked slightly embarrassed and was busy putting his uniform back in order.

"You're all right, Chekov?", and with a quick look towards Spock, "I would have pulled you towards the wall but Mr Spock had other plans."

Spock raised an eyebrow but didn't react further. He was already studying the interesting readings on his tricoder.

McCoy's angry look towards Spock didn't escape Chekov. The young officer scratched his head as if he wanted to make sure his hair was still where it was supposed to be.

"Yes Doctor, I'm fine. I didn't hear zat ting coming."

"Well neither did I, but it seems Spock, with those Vulcan ears of his, did."

His eyes still fixed on the tricoder, Spock raised his eyebrow again.

"Fascinating." The FO lifted his head to look towards the horizon. The shuttle had completely disappeared from sight now.

McCoy turned around to confront the FO with a stern glare. The doctor could still feel a slight tremble in his bones. Those first moments in this strange world had certainly been something.

"Is that all you gotta say after we were nearly decapitated?"

"I was merely commenting on the fact that whoever, or whatever has steered the craft we have just encountered, didn't react to our presence."

"What did you expect - a loud, beeping horn to scare us out of the way?"

"Doctor, as I'm talking to you, I will spell out my logically attained assumptions. A '*beeping horn*' would indicate a life form or a computer that was able to detect us. However, there was no sign that the craft or the force that commands it was perpetuated with our presence."

McCoy opened his mouth to protest but Spock continued speaking unfazed.

"This observation results in three possible scenarios: One - those aircrafts are not designed to warn any life-forms on this planet because there aren't any; two - the aircrafts can detect life-forms but they are deemed unworthy of being warned; three - the crafts are unable to detect our presence."

McCoy crossed his arms and stubbornly glared into the distance. Chekov had listened intently to his superior's assessment of the situation while undertaking readings on his tricoder.

"Sair, I'm not certain of course, but maybe we should consider option One? I'm detecting no life forms whatsoever on zis planet. Neiter of humanoid, alien, plant or micro-biological nature."

Spock nodded, his eyes still intently reading his tricoder.

"Very well, Ensign. I can confirm your readings", the Vulcan lifted his head to look directly at Chekov, "However, there is no need for expressing *uncertainty* once a logical conclusion has been drawn. According to the data we have attained so far, option One *is* the most rational explanation."

Chekov nodded attentively, just noticing in the corner of his eye how Dr McCoy directed his eyes skyward. The young Russian sighed quietly and continued his measurements. Obviously the doctor didn't share his enthusiasm and gratefulness towards Mr Spock's willingness to share his flawless insights with them.

Chekov's tricoder readings were spectacular as he detected no life at all on the planet, not even on the microscopic level, but only concrete, steel and other hard materials. And – a gigantic amount of energy that appeared to be stored in the cube-like constructs.

Despite such fascinating readings, Pavel found himself looking up from his tricoder to check what his superiors were doing. McCoy was now conducting his own readings, using both his tricoder and a bio-scanner. The doctor stood with his back to Spock, who was focusing on a calculation on his tricoder. The FO then turned around to face his colleagues and shared his fascination about the density of the colossal building next to them, quoting the exact number to five decimals. Furthermore, Spock confirmed Chekov's findings that the cubes contained enormous amounts of energy. Pavel deemed their discoveries to be incredible but McCoy commented with just a shake of the head.

"I'd rather have you comment on the '*fascinating*' fact that Scotty and his men don't register on our tricoders, Spock!"

"Doctor, patience is also not one of your virtues. Ensign Chekov was right in so far that there is no life *on* the planet's surface. I've only just started a long distance scan of its interior."

Chekov looked from the FO to the CMO, how they stood with their backs to one another, not favouring the other with a look. Surprised, Chekov realised that just 15 minutes into their rescue operation, he was already concerned about Mr Spock and Dr McCoy's conduct towards one another and its possible negative influence on their mission. Chekov had been immensely grateful to Captain Kirk to send him along, convinced that he wanted to give him the opportunity to redeem his guilt, even though he had been proven not to be responsible for the landing party's disappearance. But the captain wouldn't be the great commanding officer he was, if he had not been aware of Pavel's inner turmoil. He *still* felt some guilt because, after all, it was him who had initiated the beaming process. Yes, the process had been interfered by the wormhole but *he* had initiated the chain of events that led to the men's disappearance. So, *indirectly* he was responsible.

But now Chekov also had the feeling that there was another reason why Kirk teamed him up with the two senior officers.

Could it be possible? Here he was, the *Enterprise's* youngest crewmember, baby-sitting the 2nd and 4th highest-ranking officers on landing party duty?

McCoy's next comment did nothing to ease Chekov's mind and it only strengthened his suspicion about Captain Kirk's motivation to send him along.

The doctor put his hands on the younger man's shoulders with a solemn look on his face.

"Don't let Spock spoil you with his logic, Chekov, there's so much more to life than... ." McCoy couldn't finish his sentence as Spock pushed them into a one-meter wide, one-meter deep, rectangular cavity in the gigantic metallic building behind them. A second later, a dozen shuttlercrafs just like the previous one rushed past them. The cavity was just wide and deep enough to enable two men to face one another and Spock sheltered McCoy and Chekov with his body as he stood on the threshold. Momentarily, the Vulcan could feel the cold airflow the crafts were leaving behind at the back of his neck.

A few moments of astonished silence passed between them before Chekov was able to speak again.

"Zank you, Mr Spock", the ensign croaked as he gasped for air.

"What the heck was that?", McCoy grunted, shifting from one foot to the other. He was stuck between a solid metal wall and Chekov, with Spock just to his right.

Chekov looked up. The cavity wasn't very wide or deep, but it was as high as the building that was approximately measuring 150 meters in height. He looked at his feet and noticed that instead of standing on concrete-like ground like before, they were now standing on the same metallic surface like the walls of the building. Chekov looked at his tricoder for confirmation.

"A convoy of 12 shuttle crafts has just passed us, Doctor. It was convenient we were able to seek shelter in a cavity in this rather dense construct", Spock replied, never too busy to state the obvious.

"Mr Spock, look", Chekov pointed at their feet, "We are now standing on ze same metallic material ze whole building is made of."

Spock took a few more readings on his tricoder and raised his eyebrows.

"*Whole* is an appropriate term, Ensign. This construct is made of a solidified material that is unknown to our data banks but it shares molecular similarities to your Terran tungsten and it is not hollow inside, but solid. Therefore, it's not a building. And all its dimensions are exactly square. 150x150x150 meters."

Hit by a feeling of claustrophobia, McCoy had just wanted to suggest to return to the street, when Spock's observation made him blurt out in astonishment.

"This massive thing's a giant *cube*?"

"I believe I have just said...", the Vulcan didn't get to finish his sentence.

An observer on the opposite side would have watched on in wonder as the three men suddenly descended into the ground at breath-taking speed. The floor of the cavity they had been standing on was functioning like a lift as it rapidly lowered itself into the ground. Only a human scream remained above ground as it echoed between the gigantic cubes that flanked the highways.

Three's a Crowd

Three's a Crowd

The descent was so rapid that Chekov thought he would faint. When it started, a short scream had escaped his lips. But as they disappeared into the darkness below, he didn't have the energy to strain his lungs just a second longer despite the strong urge to give in to his panic. He felt paralysed.

Chekov had experienced a similar feeling once before when he had been stuck on a malfunctioning turbo-lift on the Federation space-dock in Earth's orbit. Shaking, he leaned his back against the metallic wall behind him and gave in to the dizziness that clouded his mind.

When the descent had started, McCoy had had the presence of mind to get hold of Spock. The moment he had felt movement under his feet, he grabbed the thin shoulders of the Vulcan and pulled him inside the cavity, that had turned into some kind of 'elevator' in the blink of an eye. There were walls around the small space they were in on three sides, but behind Spock the space was open and Bones could feel cold air brush his face.

They descended below the planet's surface at great speed, reminding McCoy of the incredible fast turbo-lifts aboard the Enterprise. This movement felt smooth but much faster. A distant, mechanical sound accompanied it. The sudden darkness around them added to McCoy's sense of disorientation. He lifted his head to see the square of light above become smaller and smaller until it was completely gone and total darkness engulfed them. It was then that the descent suddenly stopped as abruptly as it had begun and their bones were rattled by the sudden halt. The 'lift' that had transported them here, seemed to merge with another construct behind them as they heard a loud 'click'. Chekov slumped towards Bones and he knew instantly that the Russian had fainted.

"Chekov!", McCoy padded his cheeks with some force and after a few moments the ensign came to.

"I'm OK, Doctor. I tink", Chekov answered with a shaky voice. McCoy put his arm around the young man's shoulders to steady him.

"I gather you haven't sustained any injuries either, Doctor?"

"I'm fine, Spock. And you?"

The soft beep of a tricoder being switched on was the only sound detectable apart from their breathing. The dim light of Spock's tricoder lit up his face just enough to give the Vulcan a ghostly appearance in the total darkness. He was studying the readings.

"Thank you, Doctor, I'm also in good health. It appears we have descended into an open space below the surface of this planetoid. The elevator-like object we are in has connected with a construct of large proportions. I suggest you don't move as there is a sharp drop just behind me, to a depth of 152.3 meters. I don't want to distract you with my estimates of the dimensions of the overall precinct we're in, but it roughly equals the size of your Terran moon."

Spock's tone was a calm as usual, only the speed of his words hinted at his amazement. If there had been more light, Spock would have seen two wide-open mouths. Chekov and McCoy moved as far back inside the 'elevator' space they were in to allow Spock to move closer and further away from the edge. He only gained 50 cm, but the Vulcan concluded this was a sufficiently safe distance.

When McCoy finally found his voice again, he didn't make an effort to hide the concern in his tone.

"Good God, what the hell is this, Spock? And more importantly, how we're gonna get back up? Our rucksacks are up there! Without them we won't last long."

"Doctor, I don't need to tell you how long humans can survive without nutrition or water."

Spock could have elaborated about Vulcan superiority when it came to survival, but he deemed it wise to refrain from referring to it at this point.

"But I agree that the loss of our instruments and supplies is unfortunate. May I enquire as to what equipment each of you is carrying?"

"Only my tricoder and phaser, Mr Spock. Both appear to be functional", Chekov still sounded shaken, but at least his voice was back to its normal volume again.

"Emergency medi-kit, tricoder, bio-scanner and phaser. All intact as far as I can see", McCoy was checking his equipment with the help of Chekov's tricoder light.

"I carry a tricoder, phaser and the long-distance communicator. Apart from the latter, my equipment appears to be fully functional", Spock completed their assessment.

Only now, after the initial excitement, Bones noticed how cold it was down here. The complete darkness that surrounded them wasn't only scary it was also icy. He could hear how Chekov's teeth started to chatter. McCoy already regretted not having their rucksacks at hand. He knew it had been a good idea to pack those emergency blankets. But of what use were they now? His bio-scanner indicated a temperature of 3 degree above Celsius. Due to the confined space they were in, they hadn't noticed straight away how cold their new environment was. He also noted that while his and Chekov's body temperatures were still normal, Spock's metabolism was already working at a higher rate than usual. The first officer's body was adapting quicker to its new environment as it was more sensitive, but also because the cold was more harmful to Vulcans than it was to Humans. *That's where the superiority ends*, McCoy thought grimly. He sincerely hoped they wouldn't have to spend too much time in this dark and freezing space.

"My readings indicate a very large construct in our vicinity of which the object we're now located on, is a part. However, I'm only getting incomplete readings as, regrettably, my tricorder seems to not function at full capacity after all. But from what I can gather, this construct bears similarities to a *clockwork*. Of colossal proportions. Fascinating," the Vulcan didn't seem fazed by the harsh circumstances they were finding themselves confronted with.

"Un-be-li-va-ble", Chekov pronounced each syllable; if it was due to the cold, the young man's amazement or both, McCoy wasn't too sure.

Baffled by Spock's findings, the CMO raised an eyebrow and nodded, but realised Spock couldn't see him.

"Spock, that's great, but..."

McCoy pondered how he should phrase what he needed to say without immediately provoking the Vulcan's stubborn defence mechanisms.

"I hate to point out what's obvious. It's very cold in here", McCoy ended his sentence.

"It's *freeeezing*, Doctor. I feel like I'm back in Siberia", Chekov blurted out as he continued with breathing warm air onto his clenched hands.

The darkness prevented McCoy to give Spock a stern look so instead he turned his head towards the Vulcan and raised his voice.

"Even our Russian here is feeling it. At that temperature it won't be long until your body will shut down into survival mode."

"3.34 hours to be exact at the present temperature. However, my body will not '*shut down*', Doctor. Instead, I would initiate a deep meditation to stabilise my temperature and body functions. I'm not going to burden you with the Vulcan terminology but in the colloquial sense you could call this kind of meditation a *hibernation trance*", Spock explained with a calm and even voice.

"I don't care how you describe that Vulcan hocus-pocus of yours, you will fall into a *coma*, Spock!"

Despite the cold, Bones felt the blood boil in his temples. The Vulcan's unwillingness to accept his own vulnerability was one of his most annoying traits. Unfortunately, Spock shared this attitude with Jim Kirk who also believed to be indestructible. It was no wonder that Bones was irritated most of the time, those two were constantly giving him reasons to be concerned about their health. He was their CMO, that was his job. But he still felt that despite claims of the exact opposite, they didn't seem to be concerned about *his* well-being at all, the well-being of his nerves to be exact.

A small sigh escaped Spock's lips, "In *humanoid* medical terms your description would be accurate, Doctor, but compared with Vulcan physiology..."

"Mr Spock, Doctor!", Chekov cried out as suddenly the construct they had found themselves on, started to move horizontally towards the right. Instantly, McCoy reached out for Spock's shoulders again to make sure he wouldn't fall backwards but thankfully, he found the Vulcan to be steadfast on his feet. The movement was accompanied by a fairly loud, mechanical sound from far below, like the humming of a gigantic machine. It was similar to the sound that had accompanied their descent. Spock noted privately that if the sound corresponded to the mechanism that operated this movement, it wasn't loud at all if put into context to the colossal size and mass of the construct.

"Fascinating", the FO's eyes were fixed on his tricorder display.

"What is it, Spock?"

"We're turning towards a construct to our right that is also turning towards another construct on its right, with a few dozen similar objects in this row undergoing a simultaneous movement. They are all moving towards a larger construct opposite, apparently to connect with it."

As his sharp Vulcan eyes had now adapted to the dark and combined with the dim light of their tricorder displays, Spock could see the puzzled looks on McCoy and Chekov's faces.

"As stated previously, this whole, gigantic mechanism bears similarity to a clockwork that was used in your ancient Terran clocks", Spock offered to help his companions to understand the process.

Chekov nodded but the word *clockwork* somehow made him feel uncomfortable.

Suddenly, McCoy felt extremely agitated. Since they had arrived on this strange world he hadn't felt that scared. Bones had listened intently to Spock's analyses and as he pictured the Vulcan's descriptions in his mind he had come to an unsettling conclusion.

"A clockwork needs cogwheels, Spock", the CMO animatedly padded the wall behind him, "Don't tell me, the construct opposite we're moving towards is the wheel and we're going to encounter its cogs?"

"I'm afraid this seems to be an appropriate assessment. We are moving towards a gigantic round construct. The wall behind us appears to be a spatial link to lock with this object", Spock admitted with a barely suppressed sigh.

"We have to get out of here!", Chekov cried out. He was annoyed as soon as he had said it. How could he allow himself to be so scared? He had to maintain composure. He was a Starfleet Officer on a rescue mission. Mr Scott and his men relied on him to remain calm. Pavel took a deep breath and tried his best to breathe evenly. McCoy's reassuring grip of his shoulder was helping as well.

"Spock, how long?", McCoy was surprised how calm and collected he managed to sound. There had to be a way out of this mess. Panic wouldn't get them anywhere.

"Approximately 7 minutes. I'm afraid I can't give an exact time as I haven't been able to calculate the exact distance yet. My tricorder seems to be experiencing some kind of interference."

Spock's tricoder was flickering and only now did McCoy notice that his own instruments had switched themselves off into standby mode.

"I have detected a colossal energy source approximately 1000 meters below us which seems to interfere with our instruments' readings and functionalities."

The Vulcan switched his tricoder off and on. A small, relieved sigh escaped him as the steady, dim light of the instrument once again lit his face.

"Ok, any suggestions how we get out of here before becoming mash?"

"Yes, Doctor", Spock replied and Chekov released an audible sigh of relief, "My environmental scan indicates that in approximately 5 minutes we will pass a large, solid and flat platform. The passing will last about 60 seconds. The platform will be approximately 2 meters away from where we are right now."

"Are you saying, we have to *jump*?", McCoy hated the idea, but not as much as being pressed to a pulp inside a colossal clockwork.

"Affirmative. I also suggest, as the space in here is too confined to take a sufficient run up, that I will assist both of you by pushing you towards the plateau."

Confronted with deafening silence Spock felt the need to add, "Vulcans are significantly stronger than Humans."

"And what about you, Spock? Who will give you a push?", McCoy tried hard to control his anger at the FO's implied self-sacrifice but he knew he was failing at it.

"As I just said, Doctor, I'm much stronger than you and the Ensign are. Therefore, I will be able to jump much further without much of a run up. It is therefore logical, that I go last."

McCoy grunted. If they had the time, he would give Spock his piece of mind regarding how sick he was of his Vulcan arrogance. But they hadn't.

"I suggest you will go first, Doctor, then Mr Chekov. You might be able to catch his hands and pull him onto the platform in case the Ensign doesn't succeed to cover the distance completely."

Chekov thought that Mr Spock had a great talent for describing uncomfortable circumstances rather practically.

"What is below the platform, Mr Spock? I mean, how far would we fall?", Chekov asked quietly.

A short pause from his superior indicated his answer wouldn't be pleasant.

"At that point, it will be approximately 255.2 meters to the surface below us, Ensign."

"Oh", was all Chekov could say to that. He tried to remember how he had done at school in ancient Olympic athletic disciplines. They had practised long-jump but he couldn't remember if he had been any good at it. What did it matter anyway? He had to be good at it *now*!

"You're giving us a lot of approximates, Spock. Should we worry about that?", McCoy asked. The question was nagging at his mind ever since the Vulcan had informed them that their instruments were being interfered by that unknown energy source. It wasn't promising that his question was followed by another relatively long pause before Spock replied.

"I'm afraid it would take more than the time we have left to calculate the exact distances with the current interference our instruments suffer and due to the time it takes the tricoder to precisely measure all surrounding areas and objects. Approximates will have to suffice. It also means, that you have to jump as *far* as you can, Doctor."

"Figures", McCoy mumbled. He suddenly felt a weird feeling in his stomach. The thought of jumping towards a platform he couldn't see, across an abyss he couldn't see, wasn't exactly pleasant. But it was their only chance.

"Doctor, I suggest you hand me your equipment. You as well, Ensign. I'm better prepared to jump with baggage", Spock said calmly and held out his hands towards them.

McCoy couldn't even smile at the fact that he had just caught the Vulcan making an illogical suggestion.

"Spock... I don't like sayin' this, but in case...in case you shouldn't make it, neither will our instruments then."

If there would have been more light, Bones would have seen Spock's raised eyebrow.

"Of course", Spock replied quietly and withdrew his hands.

What followed were a few, quiet moments where the frightening darkness and the horrible cold were tormenting their alert senses. Then Spock raised his voice, sounding calm and confident.

"60 seconds until we start passing the platform. I suggest you get ready to jump, Doctor."

The Abyss

The Abyss

Bones was focusing all his senses on the darkness ahead. But it was incredibly difficult to focus on something you couldn't see. He decided that it would make more sense to concentrate on his body, his legs and arms, to prepare himself for the jump. He had about two large strides to make, a rather short run up, but it would have to do. Then, at the threshold of the cavity, Spock and Chekov would give him a strong push. The space in the cavity was extremely limited and confined, however, there was just enough room to allow for such an *'operation'* as Spock had put it. Bones wished he would have had more opportunity to prepare for the jump, but the space, or rather the lack of it, just didn't allow it. He would literally have to jump the gun.

The doctor had to smile as Spock started to count backwards from ten like they were engaging in some sporting competition. *Nine, eight, seven...* he would have to catch the edge of the threshold with his right foot, that would give him the leverage to push himself into the air; *six, five, four ...* and stretch his arms forward in case he wouldn't jump far enough and would have to catch the edge of the platform opposite...

Three, two, one.

"Jump!"

Chekov and Spock shouted out simultaneously and McCoy took two large strides. He hit the edge of the cavity with his right foot just as Spock had advised him. He jumped forward, with all his strength, feeling Chekov to his left and Spock to his right as they pushed his torso forward. His strength combined with theirs, catapulted the doctor into the freezing air. Moving his arms like a long-jumper, Bones was surprised that he had the time to notice that it was even colder outside, compared to the cavity he had just left behind. And then he felt a solid surface beneath his right foot. McCoy pushed himself forward, dropping on all fours onto the platform.

Everything had happened so quickly that he didn't even have time to think about the abyss he had just crossed. His hurting bones and freezing limbs didn't leave him in any doubt that he was still alive.

"Made it!", he shouted out, as much to himself as to Chekov and Spock on the other side. He held up his tricoder that was shining dimly in the darkness to give the young Russian some orientation.

"Come on, Chekov, what you're waiting for?"

The ensign turned towards Spock who nodded at him, his stony face being lit by his tricoder. If his superior officer was indeed worried, Pavel privately noted, he wouldn't get such an impression from his face. Like usual, the Vulcan's features were rigid and emotionless.

"You will do the jump just like Dr McCoy has demonstrated, Ensign!", Spock sounded uncharacteristically sharp. It was an order. An order Chekov was more than eager to fulfil.

McCoy positioned himself impatiently at the edge of the platform, his tricoder around his neck so that the navigator could see him, his arms stretched towards him.

Chekov decided that he would be scared later. He took two large strides and pushed himself off the edge, assisted by a powerful push from Spock. While flying through the air Pavel saw that McCoy and the platform were moving away too rapidly and slightly upwards as well. He wouldn't make it.

BANG. Chekov crashed against the side of the platform with full force. Thankfully, McCoy was already lying on the floor, leaning over the edge, as he had seen that the youngster would probably not make it. The CMO had hoped he would catch Chekov's arms. Then, with the ensign's assistance, he could easily pull him up onto the platform. But unfortunately fate had different plans.

The doctor *had* managed to catch the Russian's left hand, but the boy wasn't reacting. He dangled above the abyss lifelessly, prevented from falling to his death only by McCoy's strong grip around his left wrist.

Bones knew instantaneously that Chekov had crashed his head against the side of the platform and was now unconscious.

As there was nothing to hold on to or to get a grip on, McCoy had to use all his strength - not only to hold on to Chekov but also to somehow keep himself on the smooth surface of the platform. Due to the ensign's dead weight, the doctor was slowly but steadily being dragged over the edge.

"Spock!"

Bones shouted as loud as he could. He wouldn't make it without Spock's help. And neither would Chekov. Just a second later, he felt a rush of air next to him as the Vulcan dropped onto the platform with an elegant shoulder roll. The FO had watched Chekov's unlucky collision and knew instantly that McCoy would have only seconds to hold on to the young man.

Spock got hold of the navigator's other arm and with combined strength they pulled him up and to safety a few meters from the edge. McCoy immediately started assessing Chekov's injuries, his scanner running over his head and body. Spock was checking the readings on his tricoder. It was still pitch black, but as all of their instruments were in use, the dim light they were emitting enabled them to see one another's faces.

McCoy's scanner was flickering due to another interference and he cursed the instrument with a flow of obscenities. The scanner seemed to have taken note and was suddenly stabilising itself again. The doctor continued his assessment. Spock watched on with concern. The CMO shook his head impatiently as he had to wait for a moment until his scanner and tricoder would present him with the result of their readings.

"Where the hell are we, Spock?", he took the moment of inaction to enquire about the platform. Despite the adrenalin rush, Bones felt incredibly tired, annoyed – and angry. Why did landing party duty always have to be such a pain in the ...?

"The platform is approximately 160 square meters in dimension. About ten meters to our left is a larger construct that is hollow inside. This structure is of similar size to some of the cubes above ground, but it contains separate spaces within it, which, I recommend we consider as a place to shelter in", Spock explained with a composed voice.

Bones nodded, never failing to be amazed at the Vulcan's impressive ability to make quick assessments within seconds. His own readings were coming through now and he frowned at his tricoder. This wasn't good. Not good at all.

"Spock, Chekov's got a severe concussion. I need to administer the brain-stabiliser to reduce the haemorrhage. Can you give me some light?"

Spock knelt down at the ensign's right side and used his own and Chekov's tricoder to assist. McCoy's eyes were fixed on the navigator's head and he conducted the task with total concentration. Spock knew it was a delicate undertaking that demanded exact precision from the CMO.

"I need to adjust the stabiliser exactly above the haemorrhage, otherwise I could cause more damage than good", Bones explained as Spock held the lights even closer. The FO noted how the doctor was successfully stopping his hands from shaking in the cold, while performing the difficult task. Although Spock would often decry his methods and skills during their regular arguments, privately he trusted him to successfully perform demanding tasks in tough circumstances. His father Sarek owed his life to McCoy's ability to operate under severe pressure.

The doctor carefully put the scanner on Chekov's forehead, just above the left eye, while reading the measurement on his medi-tricoder at the same time.

"Done!", McCoy looked up at Spock, "He should be waking up in about 12 hours or so. But he will be extremely dizzy for a while and not able to walk for at least another 12 hours."

Spock nodded. It hadn't escaped Bones that the FO had put his hand around Chekov's wrist the moment the lights of his tricoder weren't needed anymore. His index and middle finger rested on the ensign's wrist and Bones wondered if this was one of his Vulcan voodoo healing techniques. But he refrained from inquiring about it. Whatever it was, he was sure it couldn't cause Chekov any harm.

"Spock...", McCoy wasn't quite sure how he could put this, "What worries me most is the temperature."

Bones was making an effort not to chatter with his teeth too loudly. Now that he had treated his patient, he could allow himself to shake freely again and to put his arms around his own torso. It was incredible cold. 10 degrees minus now. Instinctively, he knelt as close to Chekov as possible to give him some protection from the freezing cold around them.

"Chekov's head will be just fine, but as his body functions are working on reserve so to speak while he's wearing the scanner, he could, and very likely will, develop hypothermia", McCoy elaborated on his previous statement.

"Can the ensign be moved?", Spock asked calmly, but Bones felt that he could detect genuine concern in the Vulcan's voice.

"Yes."

"I suggest we move over to this 'building' of sorts. My measurements state that the temperature is two degrees warmer inside it."

McCoy agreed and they carefully moved Chekov to the nearby construct. They sheltered behind the wall of the first entrance they could find. Bones couldn't feel the temperature difference, it was still freezing, but he took Spock's word for it.

"I suggest you hold the ensign close, Doctor. Your own body temperature will function as a source of warmth."

Spock didn't need to tell McCoy that, he had already thought as much and was pulling Chekov into his arms. The navigator was still warm, but his body temperature was dropping to 36 degrees as the doctor noted to his dismay. He looked towards the stoic Vulcan with open concern, "You better sit next to us too, Spock. Your temperature is down to 31 degrees."

While he kept an eye on Chekov's readings on his medi-tricoder, Bones was also keeping a close eye on his superior's body functions. If they wouldn't be careful, he would soon be surrounded by two unconscious officers.

Spock just raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. He sat down next to the others and drew his long legs towards his chin, wrapping his arms tightly around them.

He just needed a moment to think. There must be a logical way of action. He had faced similar perilous and complex situations before. Why was this situation different and why was it so difficult to think straight all of a sudden? As Spock focused his energy to control his bodily functions, he knew the answer, but he wasn't allowing himself to admit it.

A distant but *piercing* scream, coming from the depth of the abyss, made Spock and McCoy lift their heads simultaneously. Unmistakably, it had been a human scream and it had send chills down both their backs, only adding to the harsh cold they were already feeling.

There was no doubt about it. They both knew this voice. It was unique amongst the 430 crew aboard the Enterprise: A *Scottish* voice.

Alone

Alone

Jim Kirk was pacing the length of his quarters for what seemed the hundredth time. At first, he had decided to focus on counting his steps just to regain some calmness in his mind. He had stopped counting at 31 and admitted to himself that patience wasn't one of his virtues.

The Enterprise had been maintaining a wide orbit around Adelous 4 for exactly 35 hours now, at a safe distance from the wormhole that was still located between the ship and the planet. Repairs of the ship's computers and transporter were making good progress and were nearly completed. This was the good news. However, the sensors were now detecting some fluctuations in the composition of the wormhole. Also, the sensors had observed that it had slightly changed its size, and seemed to momentarily shrink before expanding again. This troubled Kirk, as Spock had predicted that the wormhole could disappear again at any time, which consequently would close the pathway back for the two landing parties.

It also increasingly worried Jim that Spock hadn't been in touch yet via the long distant communicator. Judging from the time it had taken the Hoffmann 7 probe to respond, any message that the second landing party (hopefully) had arrived safely and (hopefully) had reunited with Scotty, Brown and Monet should have come through by now. But it hadn't. That only left a few possible options. And none of them made the captain feel any less concerned.

When Spock had packed the long distance communicator and other instruments into his rucksack earlier, he had explained to Jim that the conditions in the wormhole on the Enterprise's side allowed them to send a probe, signals and even people through without any apparent risks, as far as he had been able to determine from the measurements he had taken. But this didn't mean that conditions on the *other* end of the wormhole would allow the same actions to be possible in reverse, although the FO believed that it was highly likely that they would, since they *had* received Scotty's message from the other side. So, Spock concluded that a small risk remained that sending messages with the long distance communicator, and beaming back, from the other end might not be possible after all. However, the FO and Kirk had agreed that it was acceptable to take this small risk when attempting to save the missing men.

Considering all of this, it meant that there were only a few possible reasons why they hadn't heard back from Spock yet: Either reverse communication wasn't possible with the long distance communicator after all, it was malfunctioning or it had been damaged, the second landing party were incapacitated *or* - there was no one alive to send a message.

Kirk banged his flat hands against the wall and reprimanded himself for dwelling on such negative thoughts. Yes, these were all logical possibilities, but it wouldn't help anyone if he allowed himself to act and react upon suspicions instead of *facts*.

Another worry on Jim's mind was that they hadn't heard from Scotty and the first landing party again after their first message. The possible reasons for this were nearly identical to the scenarios he had just contemplated in regard to Spock's radio silence: Maybe the Hoffmann 7 probe was now damaged or malfunctioning, Scotty, Brown and Monet were incapacitated... or ... there was no one left to send a message.

Jim had to sit down for a moment. He felt as if life itself was being sucked out of his body, out of his mind, out of his soul. He was stuck here on the Enterprise, so helpless. So powerless... But somewhere deep inside of him, Kirk still felt the power of command control within himself. He *knew* that this power would leave him last, if indeed, it would ever leave him at all. And being in command also meant that right now, he had to remind himself that there was no reason at all to lose faith. They had to give the men *time* to hopefully re-establish contact with the ship in the near future in one way or the other. If Hoffmann 7 or the long distance communicator had been damaged, Jim was certain that his brilliant CEO and FO's would be able to repair them.

Jim stared at the entrance door to his quarters opposite the table he was sitting at. It was late evening now. This was the time when either one of two things would usually happen: Either Bones would make an appearance with a nightcap (occasionally with Scotty in tow) or Spock would drop in for a quick game of chess just before bedtime.

Kirk forced himself to direct his thoughts elsewhere. He revisited the moment an hour or so ago when he had realised that right now, there was nothing else to do for him on the bridge. Uhura had walked towards his chair and pleaded with a quiet voice that he should get some rest. She would inform him immediately should there be any contact from any of the landing parties or any other important developments. Her concern touched him, but Jim could only reward her kindness with a weak smile as he got up and left the bridge.

Three hours had passed since then. But still not a peep from either of the landing parties! Jim was getting restless again and he got up. He resumed with pacing up and down the length of his quarters. Instead of counting his strides again, this time only a single number was dominating his mind. *Six*.

Six men were out there. Six men who had trusted him with their lives. Who believed in him implicitly, that he would find a way to help them. To rescue them. But the bitter truth was that right now, he was totally helpless and couldn't do *anything* for them at all but wait for them to make contact.

Jim had been in many similar situations before where the fate of crewmembers on landing party duty had been unknown to him. What made this mission even worse was the fact that three of the missing men he considered friends. And among those three were the two closest friends he had ever known.

And then there was Chekov. The ship's youngest crewmember. Initially, Jim had been convinced that it was the right decision to send the ensign on the rescue mission. But now, in the quiet of his quarters, Kirk realised that his mind was conflicted and that he had been influenced by a struggle of interests within himself when he had made that call. The truth was, that such a young and inexperienced ensign like Pavel Chekov shouldn't be sent on such a dangerous and challenging mission so early on in his career.

Jim stopped next to his bookshelf and leaned towards the antique piece of furniture. As another wave of exhaustion was washing over him, he

thought back to the moment when he realised he had made a mistake.

Shortly after the second landing party had left, he had found himself sitting in the captain's chair, staring at the navigator's console. Lieutenant Riley, who was covering for the Russian, manned Chekov's station. As Jim stared at the back of Riley's head, he started feeling remorseful. He felt guilt about the decision he had just made. But also guilt regarding a distant past, a time he never voluntarily thought of. **1**

It had been *his* idea to send Chekov on this rescue mission. Sure enough, the ensign's special areas of expertise qualified him to come along. But the *real* reason Jim decided to send the youngster along was that he actually believed he was doing the young man a *favour*. So that the ensign wouldn't be tormented by guilt in the future due to his unfortunate involvement regarding the disappearance of Scotty and his men. Even though they had been able to confirm that Pavel hadn't made a mistake, he had still performed the crucial actions that had led to the men's disappearance. So sooner or later, feelings of guilt would catch up with the young Russian, of this Jim was certain. But now it looked like that maybe there wouldn't be a *later* for Ensign Chekov. And it would be Jim's fault.

Alone in his quarters, Captain Kirk had to grab the shelf to steady his exhausted body.

Had he unconsciously projected his *own* feeling of guilt, albeit of a different nature and attained due to a very different experience, onto the ensign?

Had he projected his *own* desire to redeem himself onto the navigator?

Had he intended to show Chekov a way to deal with his guilt, to protect himself from the pain that Jim was certain would torment the young man in the future?

Had Jim offered the ensign a way to escape the dark abyss that was a guilt-ridden soul, an escape route he was still seeking for himself?

Overwhelmed by the realisations that were tormenting his tired mind, Jim had to lie down on his bed. Only then, as he finally allowed his body some rest, did the captain realise he was breathing heavily and that his face was soaked with sweat.

What troubled Jim most about his realisations was that they *had* to be true due to a simple fact. Even though they were both experiencing guilt due to totally different experiences and circumstances, their guilt shared one, defining characteristic.

It was *undeserved*. They were both innocent.

Chekov and himself were suffering from a perceived guilt that was actually not justified, but had inflicted itself inside their souls after a traumatic experience. And both experiences had to do with the loss of life. In his case, a very significant loss of life which he survived, in Chekov's case, the possibility of potentially having contributed to the death of three men.

Bones would have been proud of my psychological self-assessment, Jim thought as he closed his eyes.

With a loud sigh, Kirk allowed himself to just lie there for a moment. He didn't even bother to take his boots off; he knew he would be back on the bridge with the others in just a moment. Jim understood if there was *one* thing he could do now, it was to give strength and hope to his crew. While he was allowing himself the luxury to lie down for a minute, 423 men and women aboard the *Enterprise* were worried about their six missing shipmates. Furthermore, Jim was well aware that just like himself, officers amongst the bridge crew were also deeply worried about *friends*. Uhura was close to Scotty, so was Sulu. The social helmsman had also managed to befriend Chekov in a short time. Riley was good pals with Scotty's young assistants Brown and Monet. And they all cherished their logical First Officer and grumpy Chief Medical Officer.

What is this ship without those two, the captain wondered in the painful silence of his quarters.

What if they didn't come back? Until this very moment, Jim had never felt so incredibly lonely aboard his ship. He shuddered.

He put his arms around himself, suddenly feeling very cold. His quarters were comfortably warm at 24 degrees Celsius, yet he was shaking like a leaf. Jim closed his eyes as his thoughts drifted back to Spock and McCoy. God, how he hoped they were all right.

Whatever dangers they might have encountered, Jim Kirk prayed that at the very least, Spock and Bones hadn't been separated and were facing them *together*.

1 *The personal guilt Kirk is thinking about here regard his traumatic experiences as a teenager when he survived Kodos the Executioner and his genocide. In the past, I have come across a few fan fiction stories that explore this crucial point in Kirk's life, sometimes referring to or hinting at the fact that he is suffering from survivor's guilt. When writing 'Alone' I realised that this back-story has influenced Kirk's feelings and behaviour in this story, especially towards Chekov. Of course, there's also the guilt Kirk carries that are explored in the second season episode 'Obsession'. But as Peak Of Fools is taking place before the events of that episode, and before Kirk realises that he also carries undeserved guilt regarding the events on the USS Farragut, his thoughts in this chapter mainly relate to him surviving Kodos. But it's also fair to say that unconsciously, the Farragut events will have influenced the captain's behaviour in this story as well, although at this moment in time, he would not be able to recognise this as clearly as he would do after the events of 'Obsession'.*

The Order of Command

The Order Of Command

He was on the *Peak of Fools*. But this time it wasn't summer, it was winter, and the snow was four meters thick. And he was buried beneath it. He didn't mind so much that he had difficulty breathing, but the cold burned into his skin and seemed to separate the limbs from his body. He was trapped and he would freeze to death. Father wasn't with him. No blankets, no hot tea with honey, no goggles that protected him from the blinding white around him. In a way he felt relieved that Father wasn't with him. He wouldn't have to suffer the way he did. But how he wished not to be so very lonely. He felt an incredible wave of self-pity wash over him as he realised he would have to face death on his own.

But would he really?

Pavel could feel a warm hand that was taking his own hand and held it tight. Suddenly, the snow was gone. Only darkness surrounded him now. It was a bitter-cold darkness though and he had no intention to come back to the surface of his consciousness, as he knew somehow that the cold that awaited him there was even more severe. But the warm hand indicated to him that at least he wasn't on his own like he had been in his nightmare. Or had it been a vision? Maybe he was really trapped by ice and snow. Maybe not on the Peak of Fools, but maybe somewhere else. His head hurt terribly and he just couldn't remember where he was and what had happened. And he didn't want to wake up just yet to find out.

Chekov was tossing in McCoy's arms. All the doctor could do was to watch the young man suffer from physical, and very likely, mental discomfort. The brain-stabiliser was firmly in place on the Russian's forehead and would remain there for at least another hour until his brain readings had been fully stabilised. McCoy mentally kept his fingers crossed that his medical instruments would continue to function without interference. Spock's tricorder had flickered a few times earlier on due to the massive power source the Vulcan had detected somewhere far below them, somewhere in the depths of the abyss they had crossed earlier. But since they had taken refuge within the large metal construct on the platform, the instruments seemed to work a little more reliably again. Unfortunately this didn't apply to the phasers who appeared to have lost all their power due to that unknown energy source. If only they had worked, McCoy noted grimly, they would have been able to heat up the metal walls surrounding them and turn them into makeshift radiators.

They were within a building of sorts and according to Spock it consisted of dozens of rectangular rooms on four floors. The whole construct had about the size of a medium sized Starfleet office building on Earth. The rooms were all empty as far as they had detected from their tricorder readings. They had eventually settled in the middle room on the ground floor, as this was the 'warmest' with 3 degrees above zero.

The doctor held his patient's hand, hoping that the navigator would notice his presence. Bones squeezed his hand slightly and a peaceful smile appeared on Chekov's face. The medi-tricorder readings stabilised somewhat and the CMO breathed a sigh of relief. The ensign was developing pneumonia, there was not much he could do about it under those circumstances, but at least his brain functions were stabilising and the concussion was under control.

Bones focused on Spock now who was sitting next to them.

The Vulcan had pulled his legs close to his body, his arms wrapped around them tightly. In the faint light that the brain-stabiliser emitted, Bones thought he saw Spock rocking gently. Of course, that was a logical thing to do. Movement resulted in the body producing energy, and energy gave warmth. He would be pacing up and down the room himself, if he didn't have to stay close to Chekov to provide him with at least a little body warmth. Good God, what would he give for a double, no a triple, shot of Terran brandy! Or even better, Saurian brandy! At least, that would warm him comfortably from the inside. And it would do Chekov some good as well. Spock of course would reject an alcoholic beverage with healing powers even under such severe circumstances. Bones wondered if the Vulcan had already began his meditation that would prepare his body for the hibernation trance he would have to adapt if they didn't get out of here somehow. But he didn't see their escape from that freezing hell happen any time soon, with Chekov immobile for at least 10 more hours, Spock weakened and their instruments not functioning properly. Nevertheless, Bones would attempt to do precisely that and find a way out of this hostile environment.

For the moment though, the CMO scrutinised Spock closely, as much as the dim light allowed him to. The science officer looked calm and composed, even relaxed, but the doctor had the uncomfortable impression that Spock's lips had turned a dark green, a clear indication that he wasn't far from that 'Vulcan hibernation something.' McCoy wasn't very good at remembering Vulcan terminology and he had forgotten the actual term Dr M'Benga had once explained to him. But he knew that 'calm and relaxed' didn't necessarily mean a good thing with Spock. He remembered how the Vulcan had once adapted a healing trance after he had been badly injured on Deneva by the parasite that had killed Jim's brother Sam and his wife Aurelian. Spock was tucked in under a blanket on the biobed in sickbay, and even though he was tormented by pain, there were moments during his self-inflicted healing trance when he looked totally calm. But Bones had been aware that the Vulcan was enduring unimaginable pain. Thankfully they were able to cure him soon after.

He didn't like to think back to that occasion. Before they had found the cure, the helplessness he had felt while watching Spock be in such unbearable pain, and also the guilt of having caused him temporary blindness, had threatened to overwhelm him. He hated to be helpless. It was the worst feeling a doctor could experience when dealing with a patient. At least Spock wasn't in pain right now. But the consequences of a hibernation trance could also be severe. Vulcans could survive in minus zero conditions in their self-inflicted hibernation state for a few days. But Spock would then need significant aftercare to fully regain his body functions and to recover from the strains his body had to endure. But if they didn't get out of this icy hell in time and find a warmer environment, there was not much he could do for Spock. Unfortunately, Bones had only carried a basic medi kit on his belt when they had descended below the planet's surface.

McCoy took a deep breath and urged himself to think in a constructive way. As soon as Chekov would regain consciousness, after the brain-stabilising process had been completed, he could leave the ensign for a while to explore this building and the platform it was situated on. Maybe a more hospitable place was closer than they dared to hope and he was eager to find it. And once Spock and Chekov were recovering in the warmer environment he would hopefully locate soon, he would go off and look for Scotty, Brown and Monet.

After they had heard Scotty's horrible scream coming from the bottom of the abyss, Spock and McCoy had called out to the chief engineer and his men. But unfortunately the platform had continued to move on for about 20 more minutes until it had finally come to a halt at what appeared to be a wall in the unbelievably colossal space below the planet's surface. They hadn't received a reply but thankfully Spock had managed to store Scotty's coordinates on his tricoder. Bones planned to take the FO's tricoder and get as close to those coordinates as possible to at least establish voice contact with the Scotsman.

But first things first. His tricoder readings of Spock's metabolism and body functions hadn't changed since he had first measured them after he had treated Chekov. They showed that his temperature had decreased to 29 degrees, which was significant but not life threatening yet. However, the readings weren't sufficient to indicate if he was already in meditation to achieve the hibernation state. He would have to ask Spock to really ascertain his exact condition. Of course, he would never choose to tell the doctor how he was feeling, voluntarily.

Annoyed, Bones shook his head as he contemplated such stubbornness, but one look at Spock made his irritation disappear. The Vulcan's face wasn't peaceful anymore, his eyes were still closed, but he frowned as if in discomfort. McCoy quickly checked his tricoder readings again and realised that his temperature had dropped another degree to 28. This had to stop! Bones was about to move over to him when the FO suddenly jumped up and started to pace up and down the room with quick, long strides, rubbing his arms.

"Doctor, I apologise for my momentary... absence. I seemed to have fallen asleep", Spock exclaimed, sounding as calm and collected as usual.

"Asleep? I hoped you were getting into that Vulcan hibernation trance of yours, Spock!", McCoy replied grumpily. He didn't like the fact that his superior was obviously fighting against his nature.

"That would be an illogical way of action, Doctor. According to my recent tricoder readings, Mr Scott and his men are in a not too distant proximity. 1.34 kilometres from here to be precise. However, there is a significant height difference of 255.2 meters between them and us that needs to be overcome. Furthermore, Ensign Chekov requires a warmer environment to recover. And then there is the important task of finding a way to get back to the ship. Surly, you can understand that my total attention is required to address those matters."

Sometimes McCoy wondered if Spock liked to hear himself speak, just like some horribly obnoxious Humans did. He knew some of that kind at Starfleet headquarters. But knowing that the science officer was selfless and actually quite modest (despite a normal degree of Vulcan arrogance) Bones regarded such notion to be most likely untrue.

McCoy checked his medi-tricoder again. Relieved, he noted that Spock's temperature was back to 29 degrees. Obviously, the movement did him good. But he wouldn't be able to keep his energy up for much longer and his metabolism would eventually collapse under the strain of the cold. Spock certainly wouldn't be able to do all - or any - of the things he had just mentioned.

If he would have been able to get up, Bones would have confronted his FO who had now turned away from him, studying the walls of the room. He had to stay seated on the floor, as Chekov needed to be kept warm at all times. Spock of course was aware of this and hence his green-blooded shipmate could just walk away from their developing argument. So, the doctor decided to try another way of reasoning. He took a deep breath and calmed himself down before he spoke again.

"Spock...", McCoy said gently, making no attempt to disguise his concern, "your body temperature is now at 29 degrees. It will decrease several degrees more in the matter of hours and then your condition will become life threatening. I know that you are aware of this."

Spock still stood with his back to the doctor, seemingly ignoring his words. McCoy didn't let such obstinacy disrupt his attempt to make him acquiesce.

"I therefore suggest you start to meditate now to attain the hibernation state as soon as possible. Chekov will soon come to and is stable. I will be able to leave him on his own for a bit. I'll explore this building and..."

At this, Spock turned around and took a few quick strides towards a startled McCoy, coming to a halt just in front of him. He knelt down so that the light of their instruments enabled them to see each other.

"Doctor, it is logical for you to remain with your patient. If there are any complications with Ensign Chekov's recovery I would not be able to assist, if I were in a state of hibernation. I'm however in total control of my bodily functions and don't require a hibernation trance", Spock explained with composure, but with a clear sharpness in his tone.

McCoy gritted his teeth. Of course, he had considered it a small possibility that there could be complications with Chekov, but it was a better option to take a small risk than to let Spock freeze to death *for certain*.

"I would also not be able to assist Mr Scott, Lieutenant Brown and Lieutenant Monet. I would become a burden and make it impossible for you to complete the tasks ahead. I would not awaken from this state until I would be brought into a warmer environment", Spock ended his logical analyses of their predicament.

"But you'll freeze to death, goddamnit!", McCoy blurted out.

That much for calmness. The control Bones had briefly managed was slowly but surely slipping away from him.

"I can assure you that I don't plan to do so, Doctor. I will hasten my exploration of this location to hopefully find a warmer environment, or some protection against this cold, so that I can continue working on the tasks I have just outlined to you."

At this, Spock got up and turned away from the CMO again. He walked towards the opening in the wall that led to the room to their left which was lying between the room they were in and the platform. McCoy was just about to shout an insult after the Vulcan referring to the shape of his ears and the colour of his blood, when Spock suddenly stopped in the opening between the rooms and leaned towards the frame. For a moment all the doctor could do was to look on in horror as Spock started to shake violently and just about managed to stay on his feet. The incident was made visible by the dim light of the FO's tricoder that flickered as his body shivered violently. McCoy carefully laid Chekov down on the floor and rushed towards the Vulcan. The shaking had stopped and Spock seemed to regain control over his body again. He

straightened up and lifted his head, his gaze fixed on the room ahead and the darkness outside on the platform that lay behind it.

"You're in no condition to go back out there, Spock!", McCoy pleaded, his voice displaying more concern than actual anger towards his superior, "Let *me* go and you stay with Chekov. You don't have to get into a full trance, maybe just a little rest will be..."

At this Spock lifted his hand to signal McCoy to stop talking. The FO tilted his head slightly as if he was listening out for something.

"I've heard some faint sound as if a giant motor has been switched back on. I also detect some movement, Doctor", Spock explained with a weak but controlled voice.

Now, Bones could feel it too. The platform started to move again. And as if on cue, Chekov started to toss on the floor. McCoy quickly rushed back to him, his medi-scanner already in his hand before he even reached the ensign. Spock fixed his gaze on his tricoder.

"The platform is moving back towards where we have been earlier on, Doctor. In 19.44 minutes we will reach the point where we have detected Mr Scott's voice from below."

Even though McCoy registered the good news Spock had just told him, he was completely focused on Chekov. The readings on his medi-scanner told him that they had a bit of a problem.

"Spock, Chekov's waking up. It's too early. Goddamnit!"

McCoy injected the young Russian with half a hypo of Jozamine, a sleeping formula, while at the same time readjusting the brain-stabiliser's electronic impulses to support the Russian's unconsciousness.

Spock slowly walked towards them and McCoy noted out of the corner of his eye that he was making an obvious effort to maintain a straight posture. He came to a halt next to them and carefully lowered himself down. Bones knew that the Vulcan was fighting to stay awake and maintain control over his movements, his body probably urging him to switch into the hibernation trance mode as soon as possible.

"Spock, why don't you rest here for a bit? Chekov's stable again. I've readjusted the stabiliser and he's back to full unconsciousness. But I don't know how this could have happened. I've just checked the stabiliser's functions a few minutes ago. Unless there was another interference, of course", McCoy remarked quietly, feeling concern for his two shipmates in every fibre of his body.

How on earth could he help them under such hostile conditions? If the freezing cold, malfunctioning equipment and the darkness weren't enough, he was also up against Spock's stubbornness. And this could turn out to be the most dangerous 'condition' McCoy would have to deal with. He shuddered at the thought of what Spock would do if he failed to convince him to see reason and protect himself. Bones had to succeed; this was an argument he just had to win! For everyone's sake. Unfortunately there was one ace Spock could pull out of his sleeve and then the trouble for Bones would really start.

"We are moving back towards the disruptive energy source below us, Doctor. It's still about two kilometres beneath this platform, but us getting closer to this source could significantly impact functionality of our equipment."

"Your tricoder still seems to work properly though", McCoy noted, a little reassured that at least something was working all right.

"This appears to be correct, at least for now", Spock replied, "In any case, it is logical that you stay with Mr Chekov until he regains consciousness, as it is probable that the stabiliser will malfunction again since we are moving closer to the disruptive energy source", the FO remarked, the satisfaction about the incontestable logic of his statement evident in his tone.

Bloody logic, McCoy shouted out in his mind. What on earth was logic worth when it endangered a man's life? *Nothing!* That was the answer. It was worth nothing! But he had to remain calm not to push the Vulcan too far. For he knew that Spock would do *everything* to go ahead with his plan if he did not succeed to convince him otherwise.

"As Chief Medical Officer I'm reminding you that it is my responsibility to safeguard your well-being, Mr Spock. Also, it would be extremely dangerous for all of us if you become immobilised. Even if we find Mr Scott and the others, we still depend on your knowledge and expertise to help us get back to the Enterprise."

McCoy did his best to remain reasonable and to his dismay he had already played his only ace. An ace he knew Spock had up his sleeve as well. And he feared the Vulcan would use it.

Rank.

"And *my* duty is to use that knowledge and expertise to complete this mission successfully. Time is essential, Doctor. I cannot afford to rest. In 10.05 minutes we will reach the point above the abyss again where we have detected Mr Scott's voice. In the remaining minutes, I will prepare myself to establish communication to the missing men, to eventually retrieve them. Rest is not an option. If you will excuse me now, Doctor, I will return to the edge of the platform."

At this Spock got up, slowly but determinedly, and walked away.

"Wait a minute, goddamnit!"

In an instant, McCoy was back on his feet and got in Spock's way, preventing the Vulcan from leaving the room.

"It's *illogical* that you risk your life and therefore risk all *our* lives, too!"

He literally spat the words at Spock. Bones didn't care anymore if he would provoke the Vulcan to enforce his decision, by pulling the ace he had already wasted.

"As I have tried to make you understand before, I am under control of my bodily functions and I can assure you that I will remain alert until it is safe and appropriate for me to rest. Your constantly expressed scepticism regarding my assertions is bordering on insubordination, Dr McCoy. As your superior officer, I *order* you to remain with Ensign Chekov and no longer hinder me from fulfilling my duty", Spock replied, his words spoken in a much harsher tone than he usually allowed himself to use during one of their countless arguments.

McCoy totally ignored the second half of Spock's statement. He had already known that it would come to this and that his superior would play the rank card on him. However, the Vulcan's arrogance regarding his abilities was infuriating and the doctor's anger was finally getting the better of him.

"*Control*, my ass! What about that seizure a moment ago? Where was your great, Vulcan control then, Mr Spock?", McCoy shouted out, his tone sharp and unforgiving.

Bones had the feeling that for a split second Spock had been taken aback by his remark. But only for a split second. He quickly regained his determined demeanour, his posture straight, his chin lifted, his gaze cold and strict. There was a reason why the man was First Officer, McCoy noted grimly to himself. Aside from the scientific responsibilities that Spock thrived on and referred to as his main motivations for having joined Starfleet, the Vulcan was also a brilliant *soldier*, a tactician, as he was proving to the doctor now. Spock chose to come back with a question, attack being the best defence.

"And while I'm incapacitated, who is going to retrieve the landing party, heal the Ensign, guarantee my well-being *and* at the same time find a way to get us all back to the ship? *You*, Doctor?"

In the dim light of the tricorder that was hanging from Spock's shoulder, McCoy could detect the Vulcan's undisguised, cold glare towards him, his head up high and posture perfectly still.

Bones felt uncontrolled rage boil inside him, so strong and livid that he felt a nauseous taste at the back of his throat.

"*You Vulcan son-of-a-bitch*", McCoy replied quietly, accentuation every single word, his voice rough and hoarse from all the anger that he felt boiling inside. But whatever happened now, he would have to somehow control that anger. That was *his* duty towards Chekov, Scotty, Brown and Monet.

Aside from his choice of words, the harshness in McCoy's tone left no doubt to both of them that this had developed far beyond one of their usual arguments. This had turned into a fundamental battle of wills and control.

A battle Bones knew he would lose, but by God, not without showing Spock what he was made of.

"Go on and freeze to death out there, Spock! But don't expect me to come after you before it's too late. I've got a patient here who *wants* to live and I gonna use what medicine I got left on him!"

At that, McCoy turned around abruptly. He sat back down next to Chekov, taking the ensign's hand again.

If he would have bestowed his superior with another look, and if the lighting conditions would have been better, the doctor would have seen a rare emotion reflected in the Vulcan's eyes.

Hurt.

Spock turned on his heels and left the room without looking back.

Cold

Cold

The cold seemed to be everywhere. All around him and inside of him. There was no way to escape it.

About an hour ago Spock's tricoder had malfunctioned again as he was getting closer to the colossal energy source that had been interfering with their instruments. Just before the tricoder had switched itself off, it had indicated the temperature was 3 degrees above zero. Spock estimated that an hour had passed since then and that the temperature had fallen at least another 2 degrees.

Since the First Officer had started his descent towards the bottom of the abyss, every fibre of his body was urging his mind to sit down to initiate the hibernation trance. He needed to start the trance as soon as possible before it was too late and he wouldn't have the strength anymore and collapse.

But there's still time, Spock told himself. Not yet.

I mustn't give in to my urge. I have control over my body and mind, I have control over my mind and body, Spock was silently repeating over and over again. Five lives were depending on his functioning, on his ability to find a way out of this dark, freezing vastness that was filled with unknown machines and energies.

He had to summon all his mental strength just to keep on walking. His mind was still alert but he was battling exhaustion, as severe as he had never experienced before. As a Vulcan he had learned at a young age to suppress his human emotions, urges and desires. Therefore, it had become his habit to automatically favour his Vulcan half whenever he felt a battle between his mother and father's genes erupt within himself. And right now his Vulcan half was warning Spock that if he wouldn't initiate the hibernation trance soon, he would collapse and fall into a coma just like Dr McCoy had predicted. A coma his mind wouldn't be able to control. He would never regain consciousness again because either he would have to be treated immediately in the state of the art medical facilities on the Enterprise or a Vulcan healer would have to reawaken him. As neither option was available, falling into a coma would mean certain death. However, if he was to initiate the hibernation trance, he would be able to control his bodily functions and his subconscious survival mechanism would keep him alive for several days. So why wasn't he obeying what his Vulcan logic was dictating him?

There's still time. I can go on.

Something at the depth of his soul was stopping him, preventing him from allowing himself even just one minute to slow down and relax. His behaviour was illogical because soon he would collapse. Spock couldn't deny it any longer - it seemed like this time, his human half had the upper hand and was dictating his actions.

Spock was climbing down the steps he had discovered at the edge of the platform. They were leading down towards the bottom of the abyss where he had detected Mr Scott's voice 2.25 hours ago. While he descended down the stairs, slowly and carefully, he couldn't stop himself from searching his mind for answers why he was acting illogically. The doctor had been right. He wouldn't be of help to anyone if he was to fall into a coma. And die.

The Vulcan forced himself to ignore his inner turmoil and focus on the task ahead instead. He had been very fortunate to discover those steps. And it was also fortunate that the platform wasn't moving at the moment. Spock knew that the plateau would have to remain where it was until he had reached the bottom, retrieved the landing party and returned back up to the top with them. The steps were leading up from the bottom of the abyss and weren't attached to the platform. So if the plateau above moved again before they had reached it, they would be cut off from the doctor and Ensign Chekov. And without functioning tricoders it would be nearly impossible to localise them again in the planet's gigantic sub-surface space. Without the tricoder he was also not able to analyse what awaited him at the pitch-black bottom of this space. Right now, he only knew that he was gradually coming closer to his destination.

The steps were about a meter high and it took Spock some effort and strength in his weakened condition to overcome them, one at a time. He realised that he was forcing his frozen limbs to obey like some kind of stubborn robot whose batteries were running low but who insisted to move on. At this thought, the Vulcan halted abruptly. He suddenly knew why he didn't allow himself to initiate the hibernation trance. And the answer shocked him. The reason was... *Fear.*

Illogical as it was, he was experiencing fear and the emotion prevented him from starting the trance.

Spock walked on stubbornly, taking the next step just as determined as the previous ones, but slower.

He was scared that he would let his shipmates down. That they would perish because of his failure to control his mind and body. That would be unacceptable to the captain but also to himself. He was aware of the great danger that if he was to rest only for a moment, it was likely that his body, his survival instinct, would automatically initiate the hibernation trance that would incapacitate him to save the others. He would remain in hibernation until he would be taken to a significantly warmer environment. But the tricoders hadn't indicated any area below the planet's surface that had a temperature above 5 degrees. In any case, Spock wouldn't allow himself to become a burden to the others. *He* was in charge and it was his responsibility to save them, not the other way round. And while he remained conscious there was at least a chance that he would fulfil his duties just in time before he would eventually collapse.

But his Vulcan half continued to plead with him to do the logical thing and rest and do his best not to initiate the trance, arguing just like McCoy had done a few hours before. Back then, the doctor had surprised Spock by displaying a rare ability to assess a situation logically: if Spock was collapsing into a coma he wouldn't be of any use to anyone. But the FO understood now that he had no other choice but to accept that his human half had, for once, gained the upper hand. And his human instincts told him to take his chances: He had to try and finish the task; he was the only hope his men had and the fear to let them down spurred him on.

Spock took a deep breath and continued his descent. He had estimated that he was three quarters down the steps and would reach the bottom of the abyss in about 10 minutes.

He wasn't really surprised by his human emotions. They had always been a part of him but during years of thorough practice he had managed to control them. And on the rare occasions when control was failing him, he simply suppressed them. But he was surprised that his fear and worry for his shipmates had made it *so easy* for him to disregard his Vulcan half. Usually it was *easy* to suppress the human part of his being because it was illogical and unworthy of a Vulcan to let his actions being dictated by emotions.

As Spock was analysing his motivations to carry on, he suddenly realised that he was feeling another human emotion deep down in his heart; an emotion that was closely inter-linked with his fear: *Relief*.

Relief about being too scared to give in to his body's urges because his intuition told him that even though he was acting illogically, he was doing the right thing. The situation demanded that he walked on down those stairs. Step by step, meter after meter. As Spock was recalling Scotty's terrible scream in his memory, his already shaking body shook even more. The chief engineer and his men were very likely in immediate danger. Without noticing, Spock quickened his pace.

Even though this suppressed part of his character was telling him that he was doing the right thing, Spock was deeply ashamed that he was such a slave to his emotions. However, the soft and gentle voice of his mother's heritage whispered to him that Jim would have been proud on his ability to behave like a Human in situations that warranted so.

Jim... Spock was convinced that if the captain would have been here with him right now, he would have helped him with putting his feelings into perspective. While Spock felt like he was committing a sin against his Vulcan heritage, Jim would try to convince him that he was doing his *Human* heritage proud by acting out of compassion for his crewmates. In fact, Spock was well aware that he was acting with the motivation that underpinned all of Captain Kirk's decisions - he was acting out of *concern* for the men under his command. He wondered if 14 months at Kirk's side had made him too lenient, too uncontrolled.

Captain Kirk had a negative influence on me, his Vulcan half stated coolly in his mind. *But such a thought is illogical*, his human half countered quickly, *for how can it be that a trait I admire in my captain, I despise for myself?*

Spock sighed and as he climbed down the next step he remembered the last time Jim had acted out of concern towards *him*. When he had demanded of Spock and the doctor to promise to get along. *Jim's promise ...* He had already broken that promise.

Spock suddenly stopped and drooped. He had broken the promise he had given his captain and friend. He was not only unworthy of being a Vulcan, he was even unworthy of a Human, as he wasn't able to obey a simple moral ritual of his mother's people - the promise. Of course, McCoy had also broken that promise, but what could have been expected from such an impulsive and irrational individual like the CMO? The quiet, soft voice in his mind reminded him that Jim had deemed the doctor capable to keep such a promise, otherwise he wouldn't have asked it of him. His judgement of McCoy was therefore unjust. Spock had just risen his right eyebrow at such a surprising conclusion when he heard a soft moan nearby. He stepped forward and realised that no more steps were following the last one. He had reached the bottom.

Spock stood still in the pitch-black, icy cold that was surrounding him. He was concentrating all his energy on his hearing senses. Where had that moan come from? There - he heard it again. Soft and distant. Approximately 21.5 meters to his left.

Spock took off into that direction.

"Mr Scott?"

No answer.

"Lieutenant Monet, Lieutenant Brown?"

No answer.

"Commander Spock here. Please make yourself known, if you're able to."

Spock tried hard to sound confident and composed and not to reveal the concern he was feeling. He also suppressed the chattering of his teeth. If the men were nearby and alive, he had to convey control and composure in front of them. He was here to rescue them.

"*Spock...*"

A hoarse, quiet whisper, 10 meters ahead of him. It had been just one word, but the FO had no doubt who had spoken it.

Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott was alive.

"I'm here, Mr Scott, I shall reach you in 3.1 seconds."

Spock quickened his pace and rushed towards the soft voice. His senses were so sensitive towards warmth in his present condition, that he noticed the two bodies that emitted some energy before he could detect them in the dim light of his tricoder. The instrument was still not working properly, but at least the display light was operational and helped him to identify Mr Scott on the floor.

Spock stopped and knelt down next to the CEO who was lying in a foetal position on the cold ground. Instinctively, Spock reached for Scotty's hand to comfort the engineer who appeared to be injured.

"Mr Spock! I'm mighty glad you're here", Scott said quietly, responding to Spock's gentle squeeze of his hand.

"Are you injured, Commander?", Spock asked in a calm tone.

"I think apart from a decent bump on ma heid, A'm daein fine!", Scott explained as he tried to sit up. He managed to do so when Spock assisted him and gently pulled him up. The Vulcan was well aware that lying on the cold ground for too long was dangerous for the Human.

"But I think me lads weren't that lucky", Scotty exclaimed, worry and fear evident in his voice. "Mr Spock, Whar are they? I just came too and only remember how we git doon here but not whit happened efter that? We wis stannin on a square platform on that weird planet's surface when we suddenly started tae doun. And then the platform suddenly stopped and we fell aff and... I dinnae remember anymair. But the probe..."

"If you're well enough for the moment, Mr Scott, I shall try and ascertain what happened to Lieutenants Brown and Monet", Spock interrupted, "You can give me an account of what else has happened when we have confirmed their conditions", Spock said in controlled but quiet tone.

Even in his confused state, Scotty noticed that Spock was making an effort to sound controlled. Also, he had been concerned when the FO's ice-cold hand had touched him. He knew that the Vulcan's handshake was usually much warmer than a Human's due to his different metabolism. He also knew that Spock found the general temperature of 22 degrees aboard the Enterprise quite chilly and required a warmer environment in his quarters. He had personally adjusted the temperature in the First Officer's personal spaces to 37 degrees. He wondered how the Vulcan was coping in such freezing conditions.

"Aye. You're right, Mr Spock. Dona worry 'bout me, I'll be fine, I just need a moment to come to me senses. But please look for me lads. I think they're nearby", Scotty replied, also making an effort to sound calm and collected as not to trouble his superior unnecessarily.

Spock had already moved to his left to explore the closer vicinity.

"Yes, Mr Scott, Lieutenant Brown is right next to you", Spock announced as he touched the engineering assistant's face. He had recognised the young man due to his curly hair.

"He is unconscious but none of his limbs seem to be broken", Spock continued as he checked Brown for external injuries.

Scotty sighed a breath of relief. He shifted towards the injured Lieutenant and put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"What about Lieutenant Monet, Spock?"

"I don't think he's nearby as I don't detect any more sources of heat in the vicinity", Spock said as he stood up and walked on, "I shall check further down the..."

The Vulcan was silenced by a thud as he bumped into a lifeless form on the floor. He lowered himself down to inquire further.

"What is it, Spock? Have you found Louis?"

"Yes", Spock replied solemnly as he took his hand from Lieutenant Monet's neck, "I'm sorry, Mr Scott. The Lieutenant is dead. He appears to have broken his neck during the fall."

"Oh no! No, no. Good Lord. Me poor laddie...", Scotty blurted out as he held his hands before his face. He realised Spock wouldn't see the tears that were building up in his eyes anyway in the darkness they were in. He lowered his hands again, putting them back on Brown's shoulders.

For a while they sat quietly, each tormented by their own demons. Spock felt that anything he would say would be inadequate to help Mr Scott cope with his grief. So he simply sat down next to Brown and the Scotsman and checked the young engineering assistant's pulse again. Satisfied, he noted that it was slow but steady.

The FO was also pleased the fact that he hadn't collapsed yet. He would have to tell Mr Scott as quickly as possible how to get to Dr McCoy and the ensign before it was too late.

"That blasted planet! What in the name o' God happened, Mr Spock?", Scotty cried, abruptly ending the silence between them and preventing Spock from saying his bit. "I mean, reet away it was obvious to us that we didnae end up on Adelous 4 and when the Hoffmann 7 probe arrived, I knew we'd gotten oorsels into some mighty mess. Why else would ye've been forced to send a probe, and not a landing party after us?"

Spock was surprised that he had forgotten the probe for a moment there. His concern for the three missing men and his own struggle to stay conscious had obviously weakened his ability to think clearly.

In a few sentences Spock now summed up the recent events for Scott who was listening intently. If there would have been light, the Vulcan would have seen the CEO's baffled face as he shared his knowledge about the gigantic space they were in and the strange machinery and energies it contained.

"Well, the scream you heard was me all right", Scotty chipped in, "I tried to fix that damn tin can. The bloody machine gied me a belter o' a shock when I touched it", Scotty explained as he shook his head, exhausted, "It had appeared next tae us just before we started to descend into this ice-hell. Ah'd managed tae send the first message above ground but then duin' the first bit o' the descent, it started to smell funny and we saw some smoke coming out fae the bottom. Probably some cables had burned through duri' the transport. When the platform halted jist a wee bit efte, I quickly wanted to send anither message but instead the tin can decided to fry me. Then we gaed doon further until a' a sudden the platform stopped again, but this time so abruptly that we fell aff. I heard poor Brownie scream when we thumped tae the floo'r but then me mind went as black as everything else."

At this, Brown started to move and Spock gently took the injured Lieutenant in his arms.

"He is struggling to regain consciousness, Mr Scott", Spock said quietly, well aware that he on the other hand was struggling to stay conscious.

The Vulcan knew that it could only be minutes now until he would fall unconscious. Thankfully he had already managed to inform Scott of everything that had happened and how they could get to the location of Dr McCoy and Ensign Chekov.

"Whit can we dae for the lad?", Scotty said with clear fear in his voice. Spock pulled Brown closer and carefully placed his left hand onto his face.

"I will try to assist the Lieutenant in his endeavour through a mind meld", the FO explained calmly. Scotty gasped for air but before he could express his concern for Brown and Spock, the latter continued.

"When Mr Brown is conscious again you will then proceed to reach Dr McCoy and Ensign Chekov. That is an order, Mr Scott."

Scotty didn't like the Vulcan's monotone tone. Spock usually sounded neutral, but the way he sounded right now made the Scotsman shiver even more. If a dead man could talk he would sound like the First Officer, he realised solemnly. What the hell was going on?

"Spock, I dona like this. Not one tiny bit!"

"I have no time to argue your preferences, Mr Scott. You will obey my orders." The last words were said with the Vulcan's usual sharpness when he was demanding obedience of his officers. Then he fell silent and Scotty knew that he was focusing on his mind-meld. He ordered himself to shut up and leave Spock to it, not daring to interrupt his delicate Vulcan healing powers.

After a few quiet minutes where Scott could only vaguely detect the movement of Spock's fingers on Brown's face, the young assistant engineer suddenly regained consciousness.

"Lieutenant Delroy Brown reporting on duty, Sir", the young man said in a hoarse but otherwise controlled voice. Scotty had to smile to himself. Spock had possibly bossed the lad around during the meld and *ordered* him to wake up. And Brown just replied to his superior as it was customary.

"Sir? Why is it so dark...and so freezing cold?", Brown's voice was shaky from the cold and he sounded baffled.

Scotty squeezed the officer's shoulders encouragingly. "It's all right, I'm here, Del. So is Mr Spock. Are ye hurt?"

"Mr Scott! Boy, am I glad to hear your voice", Brown sounded relieved to hear his superior next to him, "Apart from a bump on the head, I don't think I am, Sir. Mr Spock just asked me the same thing."

Scotty had to grin again. The boy was blissfully unaware that he had just been subjected to a Vulcan mind-meld. The First Officer probably remained silent for the moment to give the young Lieutenant a chance to fully come to his senses.

"I just got a bit of a headache. But apart from that I think I'm all right", Brown continued, "Where's Louie?"

Scotty sighed and was looking for the right words to explain to Delroy that his best friend was dead as suddenly a thud interrupted the silence. Scott immediately knew what had happened and reached out with both arms into the darkness next to him.

"Mr Spock!", Scotty cried out. He reached down and touched the Vulcan's icy cheeks. He had collapsed to the floor. The CEO shook him gently, then more fiercely, pleading with him to wake up. But his efforts were to no avail, the FO didn't move an inch.

Scotty felt desperation creep into his heart and soul. What the hell was going on? Had the cold made Spock collapse or had he omitted to mention an injury? That would figure, as the Vulcan never spoke of such perceived shortcomings like injuries unless he was pressed to do so. He put his cheek towards Spock's mouth and noticed his faint, very slow breathing. Scotty's heart skipped a beat. The Vulcan was alive.

But just about.

Irish Stew and Brandy

Irish Stew and Brandy

A steaming cup of tea with a shot of Terran brandy. Hot pancakes with maple sirup. A boiling pot of Irish stew. A mug of creamy hot chocolate.

During the estimated three hours since Spock's disappearance into the darkness outside, Bones had been busy with imagining what food and drink he would devour if they'd be lucky enough to get back to the Enterprise. Usually he would have disregarded such thoughts as unnecessary mind-games that would only increase the desperation one felt in a bleak situation such as this. But then Chekov had woken up after the brain-scanner had managed to heal his head injury faster than anticipated and they started to chat. McCoy suspected that his initial diagnosis of the navigator and the estimated length of the healing process hadn't been accurate due to the interference most of their instruments were experiencing from the energy source below. But thankfully this obstruction hadn't applied to the brain-scanner and McCoy assumed that it had to do with its mechanics. While tricorders, communicators and phasers operated with an electro-magnetic energy circuit, the brain-scanner drew his energy from a dilithium batterie. But the strange energy Spock had detected about 1000 meters below the plateau they were currently on, appeared to interfere with electro-magnetically powered instruments only. Bones was incredibly thankful - Chekov owned his life to such fortune. God knew, they hadn't had much luck with anything else since they had arrived on this strange planetoid.

So when the Russian had regained consciousness a few hours previously, their conversation somehow had quickly turned to food and drink. *Hot* food and drink to be precise. While the doctor was sitting right next to the ensign to provide him with some body-warmth, they had talked about their favourite meals and beverages. Chekov kept insisting that vodka was by far the better choice compared to brandy when it came to warming oneself in the cold. Soon after, he had fallen asleep and McCoy was grateful that the young man was able to get some rest.

His mind still occupied with stew and brandy, Bones now had to think of the new diet he had put Jim on recently. The captain had somehow managed to gain a few extra pounds, despite his physically demanding duties and his regular work-outs in the gym. A broad grin appeared on the CMO's face. *It probably has to do with his unscheduled late night snacks he's secretly having in his quarters when I'm not around*, Bones thought and chuckled quietly. *Jim...* The smile slowly disappeared from his face.

He had made a promise to Jim before he left the Enterprise.

McCoy bit his lip. It had only taken him a few hours to break that promise. If he thought of it, he hadn't even tried to keep it. But to be perfectly honest, Bones admitted to himself, he had simply *forgotten* the promise since they had arrived on the planet.

Consciously forgotten it ...

Of course, Spock was just as guilty as he was thanks to his goddamn stubbornness and Vulcan arrogance, but did this make his own behaviour acceptable? Of course it didn't. Bones shook his head, his forehead in a deep frown. Blaming Spock couldn't distract from the fact that he had broken a promise he had made to his friend and captain. What kind of pal was he that he hadn't even tried to keep it?

McCoy recapitulated the last few hours since their arrival on the strange planetoid. Fair enough, they had been under immense stress and the circumstances were far from cosy. But it was amazing how easy it was for the Vulcan to unsettle him, to unnerve him, to *piss him off* to the extent that he would consciously forget about the promise so that he wouldn't need to obey it. And *obey* was the appropriate term for he had not just broken a promise but disobeyed a direct order from his CO.

Bones crossed his arms and frowned into the darkness in front of him. Everyone else on board the Enterprise managed to tolerate the First Officer's strange quirks and behaviour, why on earth couldn't he? The CMO shook his head, wondering. Of course, due to the nature of their jobs as the respective heads of their departments they couldn't really avoid one another and had to work together a lot. But Jim, who had to work with Spock *all the time*, got on better with him than anyone else did.

Maybe Jim is more tolerant, a quiet voice in Bones' head suggested. Mmh. Maybe. He had never considered himself as intolerant towards other species, such a notion was foreign to him and he despised it in others. But that wasn't really the point. Jim was also more *patient* and Bones was well aware of this.

With a deep sigh, the doctor concluded that he wasn't intolerant towards people or certain species, but rather intolerant towards certain character traits and behaviour patterns of some individuals. Spock's stubbornness annoyed him just as much as Jim's pig-headedness. The captain's pretended invincibility was just as irresponsible as Spock's inclination to constantly risk his neck for others on landing party duty. But McCoy was of the opinion that the Vulcan had *more* annoying character traits than anyone else aboard. Above all, he was infuriated by Spock's aloofness and cold-heartedness. He just couldn't believe that the guy was supposed to be half-human.

Nothing wrong with logic, McCoy mused. But having logic as the first and only point of reference in life was a bit sad. And it probably would make one very lonely.

Bones hadn't even realised that he was kneading his lips while he was having this rather illuminating insight.

Lonely.

Thinking of it, Bones realised that apart from Jim, Spock was rather isolated from the rest of the crew. Of course, the First Officer was highly respected by everyone aboard the Enterprise. But when it came to his personal contacts, to socialising and undertaking communal activities in his free time, Bones had difficulty to think of anything that didn't include Jim. Uhura had told him that once or twice Spock had shown her how to play on the Vulcan lyre, an activity that was of huge interest to the musical Communications Officer. But apart from that he couldn't think of any other occasions where the Vulcan had willingly socialised with any crew members. Of course, the job didn't leave much opportunity for hobbies and the like, and many of the crew simply chose to rest in their free time, especially during stressful missions.

However, since McCoy had been onboard, there had also been some periods with free time which he always aimed to use constructively.

But in actual fact, Bones admitted to himself, he didn't have that many friends on board either apart from Jim. It weren't many, but at least he had a *few* friends: Scotty with whom he regularly shared a drink or two of whiskey, Christine Chapel who he enjoyed discussing his medical research with, Uhura and Sulu with whom he sometimes shared a late-night coffee in the cafeteria when they all were working the Gamma shift. So yes, he only had a handful of friends on board, but Bones had always known that when it came to relationships it definitely was about quality not quantity. But Spock... his only friend on board was Jim and the Vulcan just didn't do spontaneous socialising like Bones and the others did. Hence, Spock's character and behaviour was obviously isolating him from his Human colleagues. And Bones didn't blame them.

Or did he?

Wasn't it true that actually *he himself* was spending quite a bit of his free time with the FO? Bones would often join Spock and Jim in the captain's quarters for a good-night drink after their obligatory evening of 3-dimensional chess on a Wednesday and Saturday - Spock would have a cup of herbal tea while he and Jim would indulge in something more potent. Didn't they share most of their meals together in the cafeteria? And what about the regular occasions when he asked Spock for some advice regarding his medical research or when the First Officer approached him to discuss the captain's general medical status or well-being? And during the botanics workshop Sulu was hosting a little while ago, where they had to work in pairs when dissecting some flesh-eating plants, he had teamed up with the Vulcan who was also taking part.

Thinking about it, Bones realised that in actual fact he was spending *most* of his free time with Spock in one way or the other. The doctor rose an eyebrow as he grasped that this was rather a lot of contact with someone he apparently disliked so much.

McCoy sighed. There was no denial, for all intents and purposes, it would only be fair to describe Spock as a *friend*. Maybe not such a close friend as Jim - and who could be anyway - but a friend nevertheless. He had never met anyone who could irritate him as much as Spock. But it was also true that he had never met anyone as loyal, intelligent or trustworthy as the Vulcan. Plus, they shared many professional, scientific interests. And most importantly - they shared the same best friend.

McCoy grimaced in the darkness as the realisation hit him. The FO had become a friend during the last year. But he doubted that Spock felt the same about him. The Vulcan also never got tired of exclaiming that the contact he had with Bones was always out of necessity. He was far too irrational, emotional and passionate for Spock's logical and controlled nature and the Science Officer never got tired of making this irrefutable fact known.

In conclusion, Bones doubted that Spock was able to establish and maintain friendships with anyone apart from Jim with whom he seemed to share a special connection. A bond that was naturally nurtured by the close contact and special trust a First Officer and captain usually shared. Friends or no friends, in any case Bones decided that if he should see the Vulcan again, he would try harder to obey Jim's promise. At least for the rest of this mission.

The Disruptors

The Disruptors

Scotty was mighty glad that Spock had told him the location of McCoy and Chekov *before* the Vulcan had collapsed. Otherwise they'd be in an even bigger mess than they were already in. They had to reach the platform high above them at the end of the staircase. And they had to reach it fast. They had to get to the top before the gigantic construct would be moving away again like it had done before when the doctor and the FO had heard him scream the moment the Hoffmann 7 probe decided to turn on him. Scotty had no idea when - and if - the platform would return again to the top end of the staircase. All he knew was that he, Del Brown and Spock were at the bottom of a very long and steep stairway that was leading to their two shipmates and friends above.

It had only been a few minutes since Spock had fallen unconscious but Scotty felt he had already wasted enough time. They had to act quickly - he and Brown had a patient to deliver to Dr McCoy.

The CEO hastily attached the inoperative Hoffmann 7 probe to his belt and got hold of Spock's instruments that were flickering due to the mysterious energy source the FO had told him about. It lay somewhere hidden in the deep darkness below them. In the dim light the Vulcan's instruments were emitting, Scotty could see Brown's worried face. He didn't need to tell the lad what to do. A serious nod in his direction was enough to set them in motion.

The Chief Engineer got hold of Spock's shoulders and slowly proceeded up the stairs backwards while the Lieutenant carried the legs of the unconscious man. Due to the darkness and the uncertainty about Spock's exact condition they tried their best to be as careful as possible. Even though the Vulcan was of slender built his tall stature made him quite heavy and they had to pause every other minute or so to catch their breaths.

Brown was fulfilling the task eagerly even though Scotty could detect tiredness and fear that was clearly reflected on the young man's face. Like Scott, Delroy had recovered rather well from their fall and resulting unconsciousness. Apart from feeling very cold, a slight dizziness and hurting limbs the two of them were in pretty good shape all things considered, Scotty decided. Which unfortunately couldn't be said of Spock. He wondered what the devil was wrong with the Vulcan? Was he injured? Exhausted? Had the cold gotten to him? He thought that exhaustion could be excluded, as he had never experienced Spock suffering from such a mundane condition like being tired. They had been on much longer and just as challenging missions before and the Vulcan never seemed to get tired, regardless of the difficult situations they were finding themselves in. Due to his specific metabolism and energy preserving techniques, he could go without sleep for days, even under very tough conditions.

A few months ago Scott, Spock, McCoy and 4 others had crashed with the Galileo shuttle on a planet that was inhabited by hostile savages. For several days, they had faced a fight for survival while at the same time they had to repair the severely damaged shuttle to hopefully get them back to the Enterprise. Scotty had worked extremely hard, trying out every conceivable way to repair the Galileo. Sometimes he had rested, maybe just an hour or two, but even a tough Scotsman had to have a little nap now and then to regain his energies. But Spock... the FO hadn't slept, or even just rested for a minute during those dramatic days. Dr McCoy had tried several times to convince the stubborn Vulcan to rest. Spock of course had just raised an eyebrow and then reminded the good doctor that their predicament demanded his full attention and that compared to humans, Vulcans were physiologically superior anyway. Naturally, McCoy did have a word or two to say in return. One word gave the other and in the end the FO and CMO weren't talking at all and the atmosphere inside the stranded shuttle was nearly as hostile as it was outside, where gigantic spears would be thrown at them at every opportunity. It had been incredible difficult for Scott to maintain the peace between Spock and the other officers who doubted his leadership abilities. Especially McCoy had criticised Spock's decision making during that fateful mission as it was entirely based on logic. But in the end it was the Vulcan's logical choice to try the last remaining opportunity they had to hopefully get the Enterprise's attention and burn off the remaining fuel. This decision saved the lives of all five survivors.

At those unpleasant memories, Scotty frowned to himself while they were having another brief break. He heard Brown's heavy breathing but apart from that only eerie silence surrounded them. In any case, Scotty sincerely hoped the doctor would be able to do something for Spock. If they were lucky enough to reach him and Chekov in time.

"You're all right there, laddie?", Scotty asked into the darkness behind him, knowing that his young assistant was just a meter or so away.

"Yes, Mr Scott. But I'm concerned about Mr Spock. What on earth is wrong with him?"

Scotty sighed loudly.

"I wish I knew, Del. Either he's injured or he cannae cope with the cold. Maybe both. You know that Vulcans cannae survive for long in below freezing temperatures as their metabolism cannae function properly?"

"Yes, I heard that before but I thought it was some kind of myth. I mean, it's strange anyway. I've never seen Mr Spock struggle, he's always the strongest of us all", Brown exclaimed, bewilderment and concern in his voice.

"Aye. He's usually a tough feller, ain't he? But I..."

Scotty's words got stuck in his throat as suddenly he felt strong vibrations beneath his feet. The staircase had started to move to its right. At significant speed.

Scotty lowered Spock down on the step Brown was standing on and ordered his young assistant to hold on to the Vulcan. He obeyed dutifully, but Scott could hear in his shaky voice that the boy was terrified. And so was he. They had only covered about half of the staircase and were still about 130 meters away from the plateau above them. And then it was another 100 meters or so to the construct where according to Spock, McCoy and Chekov had sought shelter in. As their communicators were being interfered by the energy source below, there was of course no

point trying to contact the two men.

Until now Scotty hadn't deemed shouting out to be of any use as they still were too far away from the others. But even though his tricoder was constantly switching itself on and off he had managed to at least estimate that they were moving away at about 20 miles per hour from the platform above. Scotty had to try to alert McCoy to their presence so that he would know that they were still alive. Wherever he, Brown and Spock would eventually end up, he knew Leonard would come looking for them.

"McCoy!", Scotty shouted out, "Doctor McCoy! Can you hear us? It's Scotty here!"

He paused and in the dim light of his tricoder he could see that Brown looked up hopefully, listening for a possible reply. But there was no sound, apart from a distant, mechanic humming noise that was probably linked to the movement of the staircase.

"McCoy!", Scotty tried again, "Leonard, can you hear us?"

No reply.

"We're moving away from the platform at great speed, Spock is here with..."

The words got stuck in Scotty's throat as all of a sudden the staircase was breaking up between the steps Brown and Spock were on and the one he was standing on. The movement was soundless and the Scotsman only noticed as he had just put his right hand on Brown's shoulder below him, to give the young Lieutenant some moral support. But suddenly he could feel his assistant moving away from him and a cold flow of air touched Scotty's face.

"Del!", he shouted out and tried to reach over to the young Lieutenant but his hands only touched cold air.

"We're moving away!", Brown cried out, a hint of panic in his voice.

Judging from the volume of his voice, Scotty estimated that Del and Spock were already too far away from him to reach them with a jump. Probably five meters or so. He hated the thought that the few of them that were stranded and still alive on this godforsaken planet would be split up yet again. The inexperienced Del Brown alone with an unconscious Mr Spock was not an encouraging thought at all.

"Keep talking to me, laddie, so we know how far away we are from one another!", Scotty shouted across the gap between them.

"All right, Sir! I will do that", Brown replied, his voice a little more steady than before. Scotty reckoned that they hadn't moved away from one another much further, as the movement of his side of the staircase had stopped.

"I'm not moving anymore, Del. What about you?"

"We have stopped as well. Just now. I think I heard..."

Brown's reply was harshly cut short as suddenly some kind of object ascended upwards from below at great speed and came to an abrupt halt in the gap between the two parts of the now divided staircase. The sudden appearance of the object made Scotty's heart miss a beat and he stumbled backwards, crashing down onto the step behind him. He ordered himself to stay focused and he turned back towards the strange thing that was now between him and the others. It looked a little like the exteriors of a turbo lift, cigar shaped, but probably twice as large as the lifts aboard the Enterprise. The object radiated a white light that even though it wasn't very strong was quite hurtful to his eyes that had gotten used to the complete darkness that dominated the space below the surface of the planetoid. Scotty was about to shout out towards Brown when the object opened up, just like the automatic lift doors did aboard the Enterprise.

The CEO could hear the deep voice before he could see its owner who was radiating bright, white light that engulfed everything in the vicinity. Scotty immediately closed his eyes and held his arms before his eyes but even then he could still feel the bright light burn into his head and mind.

"*Why you come to disrupt work?*", the deep, strong and loud voice asked in a not very friendly tone.

The bright light seemed to be burning into Scott's brain and body, he felt like he was being set alight alive. It was one of the most disturbing sensations he had ever felt in his life. He wasn't sure if he would live long enough to actually see the being that was speaking to him.

Combined with his exhaustion and the concussion he had suffered during his fall earlier on, the fear was too much even for the brave Scotsman. He suddenly collapsed towards the being opposite him, unconscious.

Scotty didn't notice anymore how the tall creature caught him just in time before he could roll over the edge of the steps and drop down into the abyss.

Ghosts

Ghosts

“Doctor McCoy!... Doctor McCoy, please wake up!”

Bones suddenly awoke from a deep sleep. He had rested peacefully, no nightmares had disturbed him, no memories of recent events had clouded his mind. He felt at home in this most pleasant state, just floating gently, existing without fears for the future or regrets of the past. If he could, he would stay here as long as possible, in this safe haven that was sleep. But a scared voice, a young voice, that sounded too familiar to ignore, urged him to wake up and he was compelled to open his eyes again.

As he only had awoken a few moments ago as well, a big long yawn escaped Chekov as he gently shook McCoy's shoulders. The doctor sat up slowly and reluctantly. After having spent hours without water in freezing conditions, he had to clear his throat before he was able to speak.

“What is it, Chekov?”, he asked quietly, still drowsy from the deep sleep that had mercifully engulfed him until a few moments ago.

“Look!”, Chekov exclaimed, excitedly moving his right arm around to make his companion aware of their surroundings.

“What in the name of ...”

As McCoy finally came fully to his senses, the realisation hit him like a bucket of ice-water. They were in a completely different place than before and he had no idea how they'd got here.

They were lying on the floor of a large room with white walls, comparable to the Enterprise's engine room in size. The space was dimly lit and didn't feature any furniture or anything else for that matter. The most striking feature however was the temperature. Bones estimated the climate of their new environment to be around 10 degrees Celsius, which felt amazing, and most welcome, after the freezing cold they had endured until now. Instinctively, Bones reached for his tricorder which he assumed must still be flung around his shoulder but his hand only reached into thin air. With dismay, he realised that his tricorder, and his medi-kit, had gone. As he was looking around on the floor, with faint hope that his belongings might be laying nearby after all, he met Chekov's eyes. He was relieved to see that the ensign looked relatively calm, with some healthy colour having returned to his face, however worry was still clearly detectable in his eyes. The doctor responded with an encouraging smile as he continued looking for his belongings.

“I zink whoever took us here must have taken our instruments, Doctor. Mine are gone as well”, Chekov sighed.

McCoy abruptly halted his search. Suddenly, the memories of what had happened flooded back into his mind.

They were sheltering in the dark space, Spock must have been gone for four hours or so. Bones had just assured Chekov that his haemorrhage had been sufficiently healed by the brain-stabiliser and that he should be able now to get up again and take a few steps. Keen to walk around for a bit just to attempt to warm himself up, Chekov then readied himself to slowly get up. With a long sigh of relief he had thanked the doctor for his great efforts. Bones assisted him with standing up and had just wanted to reply that there was nothing to thank him for, that this was his job, 'cause after all he was a doctor even though for some reason unbeknownst to him he had to keep reminding folk of this, when suddenly an overbearing, bright light was filling the area they were sheltering in. They had covered their eyes with their arms and had turned away from the light, to shield themselves as best as they could and be protected from the glowing energy the unknown source was emitting. The heat and brightness soon became unbearable and after a few moments that seemed like an eternity, Chekov fainted. Before Bones was able to help him, a powerful dizziness overcame him as well and he remembered how his body just slumped to the floor. And then his mind had turned black.

And now they had awoken here, in this strange, sterile room, with their instruments gone. But where in blazes was *'here'*? And who or what had taken them here? And why? And most importantly - where were Brown, Monet, Scotty and Spock?

Bones' mind was racing now. He frowned and shook his head, as if to shake off all the troublesome questions to which answers seemed so far out of reach. He noticed that Chekov still looked at him with a worried expression, as if he was hoping for an explanation of some kind from his superior, but he just didn't have any answers for the boy. This rescue mission not just hadn't gone to plan - this excursion had reached a whole new level of not going to plan! Since they had arrived on the surface of this weird planet and were involuntarily marooned in its even weirder world beneath, answers had been in frustratingly short supply. Finding themselves in yet another strange and unexpected environment, to his great annoyance Bones only had more questions on top of those they already had had, when they set off from the Enterprise.

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It had arrived just in time to catch one of the Humans before he would fall from the staircase into the abyss. How inconvenient that these disruptors had appeared in the *range*, where their work was conducted overseeing the *Egnaro*. A place unsuited for any other life forms but themselves, let alone humanoids. Now, it was its task to pick all of the disruptors up and put them into the transport vessel so that they wouldn't cause anymore interferences within the *Egnaro* with their electronic devises.

Usually, it was just seamlessly, and skilfully, floating between the spaces of the range, but the unwelcome visitors made a facilitation of appropriate transport necessary and the material transportation device came in handy for this purpose.

Now, in order not burn the man alive it had just caught, a reduction in its energy levels was necessary. It dimmed its bright aura as far as it was possible to maintain its presence. It would still be of an intensity unpleasant to those that had come to disrupt, but it wouldn't damage them.

Scott was carried by the light-being without any effort whatsoever. Silently, it moved forward, a beam of bright energy, although slightly dimmer than when it had just appeared, seemingly flowing through space. It carried the man into the lift-like object it had appeared in seconds earlier. Scott was gently lowered onto the ground inside before the being turned towards the two remaining disruptors on the other side of the separated staircase. It was aware that both of them were unconscious as well, the other Human from shock from being confronted with its

overpowering energy and the other male, who it deemed to be of Vulcan origin, from severe hypothermia. It carefully lifted both of them up one by one and also carried them into the elevator-like vehicle. Inside, it removed all of the electronic devices the men were carrying and put them into a small container that looked like a steal cube. Then the vehicle's doors closed and descended as quickly below into the abyss as it had appeared.

The two parts of the staircase moved back towards one another and locked again, not leaving even a trace of a crack behind.

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"Ahhh, you're blinding me! Don't blind me, please", Del Brown cried out, his voice fearful.

The cry from his young assistant awoke Scotty from his unconsciousness. Lying on thunse ground, he turned his head to his right from where the noise was coming from, but due to the bright light that engulfed them, he couldn't see anything. He shut his eyes tightly and held his arms up to protect himself from the piercing energy around them. The only thing Scotty was sure of at this stage was that he and Brown were confined in a space alongside the light-being. Although it appeared not as unforgivingly bright as on first sight, the alien form still hurt their eyes with its perfect white presence. Furthermore, the strong heat it was emitting, although welcome at first after the freezing conditions on the platform, was equally unpleasant as he noticed how he started to sweat under his uniform.

The Scotsman also realised how thirsty he was. It must have been hours now since he last took a sip from his flask, when they were still on the planet's surface and just after he had sent a message back to the Enterprise via the Hoffmann 7 probe. When they had suddenly descended below the surface and fell onto the platform, rather than protecting his flask, he had instinctively put his hands around the probe which was attached to his belt. When he had come to later, he noticed that the flask must have come loose from his belt, but thankfully the probe was still there. He had then tried but failed to send another message because the bloody thing decided to thank him for protecting it by going all short circuit on him!

Scotty reached for his belt, certain to feel the probe, but to his great annoyance it wasn't there anymore. And neither was the tricorder and small toolkit he had carried. He wondered if their captor had something to do with his missing belongings. What was certain though was that they were moving downwards at a rapid pace – the sensation was all too familiar and reminded Scott of the turbo lifts on the Enterprise. What wasn't certain though was their destination. And yet far more troubling to the CEO was the question as to what had happened to Mr Spock.

"Spock!"

No answer.

"Mr Spock, are ya with us?"

"Ahhh, my eyes. It hurts so much."

The only sound apart from his own breathing, were the continuous moans from Del just next to him, Scott realised with dismay as his calls for their First Officer remained unanswered.

"Ya need to calm yarself, laddie. Protect yarself as good as ya can from this light, son!"

"I am, Sir. If I could close my eyes any tighter I would. It still hurts. And it's so unbearably hot in here", Brown exclaimed, sounding a bit too stropy for his own and his superior's liking, "I just want it to stop, please!"

Scotty wasn't pleased in the slightest to hear a hint of panic in Del's voice now. But could he blame the lad? The dizziness he had experienced on the staircase before seemed to take hold of his body and mind again as well and he wasn't pleased about it one bit. What if he would fall unconscious again, not knowing where Spock was and unable to help fend off his young assistant's oncoming panic attack? The fear of losing his bearings again only made Scotty feel more panicked himself now. He realised he was in danger of losing control of the situation if he wouldn't snap himself out of it rapidly.

And yet... what where they panicking about? Yes, he didn't know where Spock was, what the alien wanted from them, where they were going and if they'd ever find Dr McCoy and Chekov - but wasn't it true to say that apart from the discomfort the bright light and heat was causing them, they were unharmed and what's more, they were still alive! If this energy thingie would want them dead, surly they would be dead already?

Scotty had to smile to himself as he realised that their First Officer's logical approach to predicaments at all times had seemingly rubbed off on him as well - although, of course, being a hands-on engineer made him fairly rational to begin with by nature. But it was the memory of Spock's infallible ability of logical thinking and decision making, even during the most challenging of challenges, that now served as a welcome reminder for Scott to remain focused and rational. And yet there was something else entirely, the Scotsman realised in this moment, something he could feel deep inside his bones, something Mr Spock would for sure discard as irrational if he'd ever had the chance to tell him about it – his *intuition* told Scotty that although he didn't know what this light-being was, if it was alive at all or just some kind of robot or machine, he *felt* that it wasn't malignant. But as it always is the case with human intuition, Scotty couldn't be *certain* of it.

He noticed that Del had moved right to the edge of the lift-like construct they were in, no doubt to face the entirely black exterior outside, in order to get some respite from the bright light inside the vehicle. This seemed to have had the hoped for result since the lad had seemingly calmed down now and Scotty could only hear his assistant's heavy breathing.

Suddenly, the movement stopped as they seemed to have reached wherever it was they had been moving towards to. The vehicle's doors opened and a wide, black plateau opened up in front of them, not too dissimilar to the one they had been stranded on when Spock had encountered them. How big this plateau was in reality, Scott was unable to ascertain as the light their alien companion emitted only lit approximately a radius of 50 meters around them.

Relieved to have some dark space ahead of them that would offer them some relief from the alien's bright, burning aura, both Scott and Brown

stumbled out of the vehicle onto the platform with a couple of eager strides, their arms still in front of their tightly shut eyes.

Scotty didn't dare to turn around again and face the being's blinding whiteness which engulfed them now from behind as it was following them onto the platform. Instead, he made sure he spoke as loud and calmly as he could. This thing had talked to them before in Standard, when it had called them *'Disruptors'*, so he assumed it would be able to understand him.

"There was a third man. Ar friend, where is he?"

There was no reply but Scotty felt some movement to his left side. He dared a brief glimpse downwards past his arm and realised that the being had lowered Mr Spock on the ground next to him. So the Vulcan must have been with them in the transport vehicle all along!

Scotty knelled down next to the FO who was still unconscious but his closed eyes told him that he was most likely alive... or at least that was the assumption he preferred to make at this point.

"Thank you", Scotty said loudly, not far off from shouting. He wanted to make sure their captor understood his gratefulness not just for bringing Spock with them, but well, just in general for not having decided to kill them yet and fry them like a haggis on Burns night.

Del joined his boss' side, kneeling down next to Spock as well.

"Is he alive?"

Scott could detect relief and concern in equal measure in Brown's voice, who clearly was as glad as him for not having been separated from their superior after all. He didn't know how to respond, but he didn't need to anyway.

"Yes", came the reply from a loud, deep, calm voice behind them, "Vulcan still alive".

Still... Scotty's heart sank but before he could get despondent again, he was distracted by his surprise that despite the volume and low frequency, he didn't deem the being's voice to be threatening. If anything, it reminded him of his great-uncle Donny he had visited once or twice as a young child in Aberdeen. All Scotty could remember of those visits was that his uncle had a long, white beard and claimed to be 135 years old. And his voice. Despite his frailty, great-uncle Donny still possessed a strong, deep and calm voice. The kind of voice Scotty thought he would never hear again in his life. Until now.

"It would be extremely kind of yas, if ya could turn down those lights of yas. If ya wouldn't mind. They're a wee bit too strong for us. We need to have a good look at ar friend", Scotty exclaimed in the politest tone he could muster while he was searching for Spock's wrist in order to measure his pulse. How he wished Dr McCoy was here with them now.

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They were disruptors. Yet their sole purpose so far seemed to be to display concern for one another. Just like the other two. So it was conceivable that disruption wasn't their purpose. But before their intent could be clarified for certain, the injured amongst them had to recover. Until then, their true agenda couldn't be ascertained with certainty as all but one were Humans, driven by emotion and not by true necessity and therefore unreliable in action and judgement.

The Human with the brain injury was nearly fully recovered now despite the primitive, and interfering, instruments that the older Human had used on him. The Vulcan was another matter entirely though. He had already departed with some distance between them now, and yet it was him they wanted to communicate with most, in order to achieve full, unclouded, clarity about the true reason for their visit. But the *Strah-leus'* dictate was to exist for one, sole purpose and therefore, even if they'd be in possession of the knowledge of Vulcan healing, they could not help the one that had begun departing. The disruptors had to be reunited.

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To his great relief, and somewhat surprise, Scotty noticed that even though their captor didn't answer him, its energy emissions dimmed down significantly. So much so, that he and Brown were now able to, for the first time, to really see its actual size and shape.

The light-being was about 2.5 meters tall and had a ghostlike appearance, without any detectable limbs and no facial features. It was wearing what looked like, and for the lack of a better description, a white robe which reminded Scotty of an ancient Terran children's book he had been given for his 5th birthday. The book told the story of a white, little ghost that haunted a Scottish castle in the Scottish Highlands. This being could have been the little ghost's taller brother. Similar to the feelings he had as a child when reading the story - intrigue on the one hand, on the other suspicion due to the mystery that surrounded the ghost's origin and motivations, Scotty couldn't claim that he felt threatened by this creature, but at the same time he was far from feeling comfortable in its presence.

Before he was able to examine Spock more closely at this now bearable level of light, the ghostly figure picked up the First Officer and carried him with its white robe like a child might carry apples in her apron.

"Follow!"

Scotty and Brown exchanged a surprised look and quickly followed the alien who floated further ahead onto the wide plateau. After covering 100 meters or so in a straight line, they reached a wall and entered a long corridor of sorts whose bright, shiny walls appeared to be made of a white metal.

While they followed their strange companion down the corridor, Scott tried to communicate again, asking who it was, where it was taking them and what had happened to their instruments and the probe. But it was to no avail. Their captor seemed to be a ghost of few words and appeared to only communicate what it deemed to be absolutely necessary. Therefore, Scotty decided that, for now, he would have to ignore his curiosity regarding what the alien had meant when it stated that they were *'disrupting their work.'*

As Bones started to examine Spock, the Chief Engineer continued his account and explained that soon after having materialised on the planet, they had suddenly found themselves ascending below the surface at great speed. In the process, they fell onto a platform from some considerable height which killed Monet. All this had happened thankfully *after* Scotty had been able to send the messages through the Hoffmann 7 probe and secure the small machine on his belt. But unfortunately their strange captor appeared to have taken all their instruments from them, including the probe. Chekov responded that his and the doctor's instruments had disappeared as well.

McCoy could hear his crewmates speak but he didn't pay much attention. In his mind, he was cursing that giant light-bulb for having taken his instruments and medi-kit away. He was forced to examine Spock with his hands which was completely insufficient considering the state the Vulcan was in. While he checked for the FO's pulse, Chekov filled in Scott and Brown about their own adventure so far.

Spock's pulse was far too faint for McCoy's liking. He cursed their captor again, but what difference did it really make? Their instruments had been malfunctioning anyway for the most part since they had arrived in this godforsaken place.

Bones ordered Chekov, Brown and Scotty to sit down around Spock, who they had just moved away from the entrance. The men sat in a circle around the Vulcan so that he could benefit from their body warmth.

Chekov now reached the point in his account where Spock and McCoy had to decide what to do next after he had bumped his head and fallen unconscious. The young Russian's account reflected the 'edited' version Bones had told him later: That Spock hadn't heeded the doctor's advice to venture out into the cold alone but that he did so anyway. Bones was more than grateful that the ensign hadn't been awake to witness their massive argument and therefore couldn't give a full account of it. Not that he needed reminding of it in any case.

Although they now were in a somewhat warmer environment than before, he estimated Spock's body temperature to be at around 26 degrees Celsius or less. He was highly doubtful that his temperature would rise again as he estimated the temperature in the room to be around 5 degrees, which for a Vulcan was still relatively cold. The First Officer's metabolism had slowed down significantly and Bones was certain that he was in a coma now because of his slow and very light breathing. He assumed that the Vulcan hadn't managed to begin his hibernation trance, because if he had, his body temperature and breathing patterns would be much closer to normal. Sadly, there was nothing he could do for Spock without his tricorder and medi-kit. At least the temperature was more favourable now, but Bones feared that it was too late for Spock to benefit from their new and more hospitable environment.

Wasn't this just typical? Just as they all were reunited, they were about to lose another man. If they would ever make it back to the ship, how on earth would he be able to explain Spock's absence to Jim.

Bones shook his head and rubbed his chin. It was *his* responsibility that the Vulcan survived. If Spock couldn't return to the Enterprise, he also had no right to come back.

Suddenly the guilt about what he had said to Spock when they saw each other the last time washed over him. McCoy just stared at the floor. He would make sure not to allow himself to shed a single tear. Who would he be crying for anyway? Spock? Or for his own guilt-ridden self? He should have stopped the Vulcan from wandering into the freezing darkness when he had the chance... and yet, then they might have never encountered Scotty and Brown again, especially since Spock seemed to have aided Delroy's recovery from his concussion with a mind-meld, even though he himself was in mortal danger. The boy probably wouldn't have survived otherwise, in the freezing cold and with no medical attention. That was also just typical... typical Spock! Well, it looked like the Vulcan's tendency to consider himself invincible would not have to trouble him for much longer.

The doctor felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. He quickly wiped his hand over his face and looked up. Scotty looked at him with compassion. They exchanged a grave look.

"Isn't there anything ya can do for the poor devil, Doctor?"

Bones slowly shook his head and stared at the still form of their commanding officer, surrounded protectively by his subordinates.

"I wish I could, Scotty. But I can't do anything without my instruments and my medi-kit. That goddamn ghost thing!"

As if on cue, the door opened and the being re-appeared in the entrance. The figure floated there for a few moments without moving or speaking. Bones had the impression it was watching them, maybe unsure as to what it should do next. He decided he wouldn't wait for it to make the first move.

McCoy jumped to his feet and approached the alien, stopping only a few meters in front of it.

"Our friend is dying! Give me back my instruments and my medical kit so that I can help him!"

No reply. Bones didn't have the patience to wait for one to come.

"It'll be your fault if he dies! Please let me help him!", he shouted out, not making an attempt to hide his exasperation.

The being, who, like when they had seen it last, had been emitting light at a bearable level, was suddenly pulsating and then started to radiate more light. But it still had no reply for McCoy who stepped even closer now, despite the heat getting stronger, waving his hands in front of the ghost-like figure.

"Goddam it! Do I have to get down on my knees and beg you, you stupid, mutated light-bulb!", McCoy spat out, his voice razor-sharp and hoarse with anger.

Despite the desperation they all were feeling, Scotty couldn't help but smile at the doctor's impulsiveness. When nothing seemed to make their captor talk to them, what harm could it do to become a little impatient. He knew the feeling. Although he was well aware that the Enterprise's engines would never speak back to him, he still liked to give them a good shouting to whenever they weren't performing to his liking.

“Who gives you the right to decide over this man’s fate? Who are you? Answer me, goddamit!”

The light intensified and it quickly became evident to all of the men that their host was turning up its radiation close to the painful degree it was emitting when they had first encountered it, if not more. The doctor for all his good intentions, seemed to have provoked some kind of reaction from the alien, by directing his uncontrolled anger at it. The being seemingly responded to McCoy’s outburst by intensifying the energy levels it was emitting.

The men put their arms in front of their eyes and Bones took a few steps back towards the others, as the pulsating figure of light was raising the room temperature by at least 40 degrees, glowing much hotter now than they had ever experienced it before.

“Please help... our friend”, was all the CMO managed to mutter as he was confronted by the heavy heat that filled the whole room now and he was forced to withdraw back towards his friends.

But then the light-being just turned away and disappeared again down the corridor, leaving a very hot room behind, its white walls glowing with heat.

McCoy dropped to his knees next to Scotty, exhausted. Sweaty and with red blisters on their skin like if they had suffered from a strong sun-burn, the men were taking quick and sharp breaths.

“I don't think ghost laddie has understood ya special brand of diplomacy, Doctor”, Scotty managed to say after a few moments when he had finally regained his breath, hoping to lift the mood a little. Before Bones could reply, Chekov's panicked voice interrupted them.

“Doctor McCoy!”, Chekov pointed at Spock, the young man's eyes darkened with worry. While they’d been distracted with protecting themselves from the overpowering glowing alien, their attentions had momentarily been diverted from the Vulcan who still lay motionless next to them.

Bones quickly turned back towards Spock. The sight made him nearly tremble despite the heat.

Only a few minutes ago, the Vulcan’s face still had been of slightly greenish skin colour. But now...

Spock was as white as *snow*. Like he had turned into a ghost himself, Bones thought as his heart sank. If anything, shouldn’t the sauna like conditions the creature had left them in, be to the Vulcan’s advantage? And revive his bodily functions? Or was he being unreasonably hopeful, hadn’t he already concluded that Spock was dangerously close to passing the point where he could ever be revived?

Bones got hold of Spock's hands to measure his pulse and leaned over his mouth to feel if any air was still escaping his lungs.

Chekov, Brown and Scotty just stared at their CMO and held their breaths. The unnatural whiteness of Mr Spock’s face was a shocking sight. The silence was deafening.

After a few moments that seemed to last an eternity, Bones finally looked up, his desperate eyes wildly searching something to focus on. Scotty leaned forward and put his hands on his friend’s shoulders, to help him focus on his face.

When McCoy’s eyes finally met his, Scotty was confronted with the gravest expression he had ever seen on another man’s face.

“Dead. *Spock's dead.*”

The Harvester

The Harvester

An observer in the Milky Way galaxy who'd skim the edges of its closest neighbour Andromeda with a mapping sensor, would eventually come across two solar systems that lay side by side. In the more sparsely populated of the two, she would have to increase the strength of her sensor in order to detect the dim, dying star at its centre. This system was the home of a small yellowish planet called SHE-BE. However, once the observer would turn her focus on the neighbouring system, she would have to dim her sensor again as the star at its centre was 1000s of times bigger and hotter. One planet circling this much brighter star, was ochre coloured, barren D-JMA. A large area populated with colossal, black, concrete-like cubes, hundreds of meters in dimension, wound itself around the equator of the planet like a belt. The constructs were so tall that they were visible from space.

As a new day dawned over D-JMA, its bright sun illuminating the pathways that weaved through the monotone landscape of cubes, those sterile highways would begin to come to life as the industrious labourers of the ancient Strah-leus race started their shifts. Like a busy swarm of Terran bees, the *harvesters* would emerge from a handful of smaller cubes on the edge and float along the highways to eventually disperse to their places of work, some within the tallest cubes overground, and some, disappearing underground at certain designated spots.

This enormous industrial estate had been built for a sole purpose. The cubes were massive storage devices that harboured the energy from D-JMA's bright star. And the harvesters had one sole purpose: maintaining this colossal power station and facilitating its undisrupted operation at all times.

The Strah-leus were light-beings and photons their only source of 'nourishment'. The massive cubes were their 'granaries'. They relied on a steady provision of colossal amounts of energy, to nourish and sustain their species. But the sun of their home planet SHE-BE, in the neighbouring solar system, was nearing the end of its life and had done so for thousands of years, threatening them with inevitable extinction. Consequently, their daily energy needs had to be supplemented from a source off-planet in a different solar system with a younger and brighter star than their own. 22300 years ago a group of engineers had set off from SHE-BE to build an energy harvesting station on D-JMA that would guarantee a regular supply of energy to meet the need of its people beyond the death of their star. The energy harvested was compressed into crystals and transported back to SHE-BE in shuttles in regular intervals.

The powerful energy field aura that surrounded each Strah-leus being was integral to their existence, comparable to the function of blood in a human body. On the extremely rare occasion that a Strah-leus had encountered a different life form, they would be forced to dim their auras as not to damage or exterminate the other being. Nearly all of such encounters had been short-lived, as many species weren't able to survive in the presence of a Strah-leus beyond minutes, even if their opposite had dimmed their aura. As a consequence, very early on in their existence several billion years ago, the Strah-leus agreed on a set of just two fundamental rules that their species would be governed by. The first one dictated that in order to not harm other life forms, they were forbidden from seeking out alien life and consequently space travel was prohibited, with the exception for the purpose of energy harvesting on other planets.

The second commandment that the light-beings had to adhere to, was to prioritise the survival of their race at all times and in everything they do. For an outsider from a different world, having just two laws to adhere to, would appear to be severely insufficient considering they were supposed to guide the existence of a whole species. While the Strah-leus themselves were the first to concur that they were a rather simplistic, inward-looking race, they'd also insist that this was the only way their kind would survive until the end of times.

The Strah-leus' ingenuity hadn't stopped with converting the surface of D-JMA into a gigantic energy pantry. They were well aware that the time would come that D-JMA's sun would also start to dim, just like the star of their home planet, and the massive storage devices above ground would one day become insufficient to provide their species with enough nourishment. The Strah-leus had to come up with a plan B, a plan that eventually would make them independent of any star, or any other energy source for that matter. So, they had started to build the *Egnaro*, a clockwork like construct beneath D-JMA's surface. Underground, they had discovered a unique physical reality that made possible a construct that for eons had evaded the greatest thinkers and scientists on Earth, on Vulcan, or any Federation planet and beyond: A perpetual motion machine. A device that was able to create energy indefinitely without using energy.

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The harvesters didn't mind monotony. On the contrary, they strived on it because monotony, living each day exactly like the previous and the one that would follow, meant that they could never be distracted from fulfilling the purpose all Strah-leus had to adhere to: To prioritise the survival of their species at all times. Day after day, back home on SHE-BE, their *v-chas*, what other intelligent life forms might refer to as 'communities' or 'friends and families', relied on the harvesters to oversee their energy industry's operational functionalities on D-JMA. Consequently, if there was something the harvesters weren't fond of in the slightest, it was to diverge from their monotone working rituals. *Disruption* was most unwelcome.

If his kind would have shared the human notion of luck, today would have been the day when *Ro-n-do* would have certainly deemed himself to be most unlucky. Not long after his working day as shift supervisor in the Egnaro, where he was responsible for the smooth execution of operations at all times, had started, disruptors had infiltrated the industrial estate. To make matters worse, their electronic devices were interfering with the mechanics of the gigantic clockwork and threatened to halt operations. Unfortunately, it fell to

Ro-n-do to deal with this rarest of emergencies.

Other life forms were extremely uncommon in the solar system D-JMA was located in. The only occasion when the Strah-leus had to deal with unwelcome disruptors before, was when a flock of *Sparfinches* (a kind of space seagull that migrated between planetoids containing H₂O) had been diverted off-course during a solar storm and found themselves stranded on D-JMA. Panicked, the confused bird-like creatures had dug themselves underground to escape the scorching sunlight on the planet's surface and nestled themselves inside some cavities between the Egnaro's cogwheels. During his training to become an energy harvester, Ro-n-do was fortunate to be taught by experienced chief harvester

After a little while, Ro-n-do returned to the resting area to check on the Vulcan's status, confident to find him recovered. It was easy for him to assess the intruder's energy levels as, through the eons, the Strah-leus had developed a skill to measure temperature and radiation levels of all objects. But when Ro-n-do returned, he was not at all content with what he found.

The Vulcan's energy levels hadn't increased. On the contrary, his temperature was now even lower compared to when he had picked him up on the staircase. The harvester feared that the Vulcan had now reached the threshold that if he were to cross it, he would not be able to return. Hence, Ro-n-do concluded that in order for the creature to be saved, his energy levels had to be restored more significantly than he had originally deemed necessary. But by how much and how quickly those levels had to be elevated, he was not to know, as like the rest of his species, he did not possess the knowledge of Vulcan physiology. Killing this most rational of intruders with an incorrect action would jeopardise a satisfactory resolution of this unfortunate incident. The uncertainty made Ro-n-do not act at all.

He lingered in the doorway for a moment as he pondered how to proceed. But he didn't get a chance to muse for long. As it was now evident that the man the other disruptors referred to as *McCoy* had not been able to help the Vulcan, Ro-n-do later mused at the end of this longest of days, that he should have anticipated the typical human response that followed. Despite the harvester's limited knowledge of facial expressions, as McCoy approached him, he correctly identified the look on the man's face as an emotion Humans call *anger*.

McCoy came to a halt opposite, pleading for assistance to help the Vulcan he referred to as '*friend*'. Ro-n-do could not be sure of the word's exact meaning. Strah-leus did communicate with one another but they did so sparsely and with limited vocabulary, and only when it was necessary and served their overall purpose.

McCoy pleaded with him in an impressive manner that must have costed the Human a significant amount of energy. Ro-n-do marvelled at such determined preoccupation with the irrational purpose of expressing displeasure. The Strah-leus didn't know disagreement, or differences in motivations and purposes, because of the set of laws that had governed their existence since the beginning of time. Their most imperative principle, to always prioritise the survival of their race, did not allow for even a hint of diverging opinions or motivations.

And yet, as he was confronted with the furious Human in front of him, Ro-n-do experienced a sensation he had never and could never have felt before. His energy levels started to fluctuate, reflected in pulsations in his aura, as he marvelled at the sensation. While all Strah-leus were bound to one another by their commitment to guarantee their species' survival, a fundamental tie other life forms might refer to as duty or loyalty, he had not deemed it possible to recognise, and even share, those qualities with any alien species, least of all irrational Humans. But McCoy seemed to be in service of his compatriots, just like Ro-n-do was in service to his *v-chas*.

Recognizing such kinship in nature was a most peculiar sensation. Elated, Ro-n-do felt his aura pulsate all around him. While he had been reluctant to act out of concern of killing the Vulcan, his new-found insights encouraged the harvester and he ordered himself to overcome his trepidation. This was another unknown concept for a species that adhered to strict, monotone behaviour patterns day by day - Ro-n-do decided that he had to *take his chances*.

Ro-n-do concentrated on the energy he had currently stored within himself. He heated up his aura significantly until the room was glowing at a temperature he deemed appropriate for the intruders to survive in, based on the knowledge the Strah-leus had obtained from the observation of the human spacecraft.

He left the glowing room and vowed to return soon to see if the Vulcan's body temperature had finally been restored to a healthy level after spending some time in a much hotter environment. The harvester felt the same sensation he had only ever experienced at the end of a successful shift within the Egnaro: he was *pleased* with himself.

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Chekov took a deep breath and ordered himself not to let his emotions overpower him. Being reunited with Mr Scott and Lieutenant Brown had made him feel truly happy again for the first time since he had arrived on the Enterprise, which now felt like an eternity ago. Finding their CEO and his assistant alive, had filled Pavel with hope that maybe this unfortunate situation he was partially responsible for, would reach a happy conclusion after all. But seeing the devastation on Dr McCoy's face as he finally looked up from Mr Spock's motionless body, made all those hopes evaporate in an instant. With their FO gone, what chance would they now have to ever return to the ship. As the doctor seemed to shrink, head bowed, eyes closed, while Mr Scott helplessly kept squeezing his shoulders, his face also grimacing in pain, Pavel realised that the two men weren't just grieving their First Officer. They were grieving a *friend*.

Scotty knew that nothing could be done and that it would fall to him now to do everything in his power to get those men back to the ship. The order of command naturally put him in charge now, but the CEO didn't have to remind himself of that. Rank was the last thing on Scotty's mind. Having lost Spock was a blow that he wasn't sure that any of the men present would ever be able to compensate for. If they'd ever make it back to the ship alive, they'd have to serve under a captain who not only would share their grief, but who would be defined by it for the remainder of his career, of that Scotty was certain. He owed it to Captain Kirk to bring back the surviving men who Spock had given his life for in his attempt of rescuing them. But the utterly despondent look on Leonard's face frightened him. The doctor looked like he was withdrawing into himself. For a man known for his unabashed display of emotions, especially during situations that necessitated the most focus, Lenny just seemed to disappear in front of his eyes like a snail into its shell. Scotty feared that he wouldn't be able to count on his friend to help them get out of this alive and back to the Enterprise. And neither could he rely on the two youngest crewmembers that had found themselves stuck with them in this desperate situation. Scotty sighed heavily as he glanced over to Brown and Chekov whose faces reflected the emotion he fought so hard of suppressing: hopelessness.

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This wasn't his time. He had been unable to transfer his *katra*, his knowledge and essence of spirit. He had undertaken a mind melt with a concussed Lieutenant Brown to order him to regain consciousness and assist Mr Scott in finding Dr McCoy and Mr Chekov so that they could find a way back to the Enterprise together. He knew that he would fall into a coma imminently and that this was the last action he could take before the freezing cold would fully immobilise him. But even if he had wanted to, the *katra* could not be transferred to Brown - it would kill the young, unprepared and injured man.

Spock was not prepared to part with his katra. All his instincts told him that this wasn't the moment to do so, nor was Delroy the person that was destined to receive his essence. For there was only one person he'd trust, he'd honour with carrying his katra. And this person was out of reach, possibly in another galaxy even. Therefore, he was certain that his time hadn't come.

And yet, he had reached the furthest depth in murky darkness just above the bottom of the sea where all journeys eventually end. It was so incredibly dark, cold and lonely here. While his body slowly but surely was closing down all its functions, Spock, with the last remaining strength he had to control his flesh and mind, remained floating just above the bottom, commanding himself not to hit the ground: He wouldn't let death welcome him. He had sucken to a depth he had never reached before and he wouldn't want to ever return to until, *irrevocably*, his time would eventually come one day. And Spock knew at the depth of his soul, that when the day came, his katra *would* be preserved to be stored on Mount Seleya until the end of times.

This isn't my time. Spock was convinced of this. He still needed time to fulfil the vows he had made, the duties he had to fulfil, the goals he had to achieve and share the gift of his presence with those that he valued most. So he clang on, uncertain for how much longer he could command his body to not fully shut down. His soul was desperate to return to the surface yet his body was frozen, trapped so close to the bottom of the sea of death. He was not ready to cross the final frontier.

Warmth. It was all he required to return to the surface. All he needed was a buoy that would lift him back towards the faint light so far above him, which hit the surface that separated life from death, and which he could see in the distance.

And then his prophecy that this wasn't his moment to depart forever, that had kept him in reach of the living, was fulfilled when suddenly he could feel some warmth again, engulfing his body and mind.

Spock started to slowly, but steadily, float upwards, faster and faster, as the warmth around him turned into heat, restoring his bodily and intellectual functions, towards a white glowing light. *Life.*

A Glass Half Empty or a Glass Half Full

A Glass Half Empty or a Glass Half Full

It couldn't be true. It wasn't possible. This wasn't supposed to have happened.

How will I tell Jim...

He had always mocked Spock for his apparent belief to be invisible. And yet, hadn't he bought into that misguided conviction himself? Before they had set off from the Enterprise, Bones expected that any member of the two landing parties could end up dead on this mission, including himself, but Spock... nah, not Mr Spock. He'd outlive them all with that superior Vulcan body and mind...

How will Jim ever get over it... And me? Well... I...

Bones just wanted to stop thinking. To stop feeling. He had failed Jim, hadn't he? He had failed the Enterprise... Sarek and Amanda... how could he call himself a doctor? He hadn't been able to do anything for Spock. He wasn't worthy of his title.

Bones anticipated the dark well of grief and guilt to swallow him up at any moment now. Would he fight it? Did he even have the strength left to fight? *The others...* he mustn't fail them as well...

Movement. It couldn't be. But he *had* heard it. He was certain of it.

A quiet noise coming from where Spock was lying reverberated like an explosion in McCoy's ear and he instantly turned back towards the Vulcan.

"Doctor, Mr Spock is moving!", Chekov cried out, awaking Scott and Brown from their own dark contemplations.

Before any of them were able to say anything else, Spock was sitting up slowly and blinked his eyes a couple of times. He sat up straight, a look of disorientation flashing on his face. Then, he turned to McCoy who had knelt down next to him, ashen-faced.

"Dr McCoy...", Spock cleared his throat which felt dry and a little itchy, "are you quite all right?"

Now it was the CMO's turn to clear his hoarse throat.

"Am I quite alright...?"

"Mr Spock!"

Overcome with joy, Chekov grabbed the FO's right arm and squeezed it tightly. When his gesture was met by a raised eyebrow, the ensign quickly let go of his superior's arm, ordering himself privately to gain composure. Mr Spock had risen from the dead! Or maybe he hadn't been dead after all... Chekov mused. In any case, did it matter? He was alive, and by the looks of it, well.

Scotty and Brown were equally overjoyed and gently patted the Vulcan on his back who endured it with a slightly puzzled expression. McCoy got hold of Spock's left wrist to measure his pulse. To his astonishment, the Vulcan's heartbeat was nearly normal again and the regularity of his breathing appeared to be only slightly below average.

"I shall be damned!", was all the doctor managed to mutter. All eyes were on him now, Brown, Chekov and Scotty clearly expecting some kind of explanation for what had just occurred.

Spock started to stretch some muscles in his upper body, moving his head from left to right and back.

"Judging by your reactions, I appear to have just woken from a long and deep sleep", Spock offered as a way of explanation.

"*Sleep...*" McCoy grunted, feeling how his own body and mind came back to life, too.

"If you want to call it like that, Mr Spock, be my guest!"

"As far as we could tell, ye were *dead*, Mr Spock!", Scotty chipped in, his head slightly tilted, his eyes shining with amazement and relief.

At this Spock rose both eyebrows before a dark shadow clouded his face.

"Yes, I see. My predicament would have appeared to you rather final I suppose."

Spock had been back amongst the living for only five minutes or so and Bones already felt that irritation was overtaking his feelings of relief and amazement with incredible speed.

"Would you care to explain what the devil is going on, Mr Spock? You were dead a few minutes ago! Unless my fingers" – at this the doctor held up his index and middle fingers of his right hand, gesturing how to take someone's pulse – "are malfunctioning!"

A heavy sigh escaped Spock, quickly followed by a small yawn. McCoy didn't take his eyes off the FO so no movement or gesture would escape him. He was certain that the Vulcan wasn't firing from all thrusters yet, otherwise he wouldn't have allowed himself to show even the smallest signs of exhaustion.

"Doctor, your lack of understanding of Vulcan physiology and practices has led, unsurprisingly, to rather hyperbolic conclusions. Evidently, I wasn't *dead*."

McCoy was about to respond with some expletives but thought better of it. He had been so disturbed by Spock's condition that maybe he had been sloppy in his final examination of the Vulcan. But he would swear on his pop's life that there *hadn't* been a pulse or breathing activity when he had examined Spock for what he had thought to be the last time.

"Zat ghost ting, Mr Spock – it heated up ze room, and zen you came to", the CMO's confused face hadn't escaped Chekov who was keen to help explain what had just unfolded.

"Fascinating", Spock lifted an eyebrow and the dark shadow that had clouded his face disappeared, "Indeed. A significant rise in temperature must have revived my bodily functions." Turning to McCoy: "Which indicates that I was able to initiate a *hibernation trance* after all. This also explains why you weren't able to detect a pulse, Doctor. It would have been too weak for your human fingers to detect."

Here we go again... Spock reminding us of our human inferiority, Bones thought darkly. His brush with death didn't appear to have changed the Vulcan in the slightest, he concluded grimly.

"That '*ghost thing*' you are referring to, Ensign, must have been able to measure my body temperature and deemed it necessary to revive me by heating up the surroundings. A most welcome intervention", Spock mused, a hint of astonishment audible in his baritone voice.

I'll be the judge of how welcome an intervention this was, Bones thought sarcastically, a small smile flashing across his face.

"Clearly an entity of high intelligence", the Vulcan concluded with a satisfied expression.

"Well, Mr Spock, I know I speak for all of us, it's good to have you back. From wherever you have returned from", McCoy had stood up to move his tired bones, and also to keep an eye on the Vulcan, who was still sitting on the ground, from a vantage point, "I advise you take it easy for a while until you're fully stabilised."

Spock did exactly the opposite and got up, scanning the area for his instruments.

"Doctor, I seem to have misplaced my tricorder", Spock deliberately ignored McCoy's last statement while the doctor watched on with a displeased frown.

"That thing took away all our instruments. They're all gone", Brown explained, sounding rather resigned.

Bones was just about to admonish Spock for not obeying his advice, when the subject of their conversation appeared by the entrance.

The ghost-like figure lingered for a moment, before tentatively floating a little closer, and then stopping again. It hovered about 10 meters away from the men who finally were able to take a closer look at the being. It was in the dimmest state they had seen it in, still bright, but not painful anymore for humanoid eyes. The white 'robe' it appeared to be wearing seemed to consist of pure light. Other than that, there were no other remarkable features to discern apart from the creature's size, which was around twice as tall as a grown man.

Spock emerged from behind Scott, Brown and Chekov and stepped in front of them, while McCoy watched on from further back.

As Spock stepped forward, he seemed to detect a short flicker in the energy aura that surrounded the entity. He wondered if this was a reaction to finding him recovered. As the being didn't react further and just remained where it was, he deemed it sensible to take the initiative.

Bones kept a close eye on Spock. When the FO first got up, he had noticed that he was slightly wobbly on his feet. But now, he looked tall and steady again, like his usual self. He faced the alien with his hands clasped behind his back in typical Spock manner. He explained the circumstances that had led them here, stated their peaceful intentions and queried if the being was able to understand them.

The entity's aura briefly seemed to flicker again. But it gave no answer. Bones wondered if Spock had overloaded the alien with too much information. He decided to bring its attention back to the basics. Confident, he stepped forward and came to a halt at Spock's side.

"McCoy. My name is Mc - Coy", he declared with a steady voice, accentuating each syllable, "Do you have a name?", he added softly with his arms stretched out towards the light-being to show openness.

No answer. Spock appeared to acquiesce to the doctor's approach.

"Spock. My name is Spock", the FO offered.

At this, a deep, calm voice filled the room.

"Words limited. I *Ro-n-do*."

Scotty, Brown and Chekov exchanged surprised looks. McCoy turned to Spock with an amazed expression. The Vulcan's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline.

"Can you tell us where we are, *Ro-n-do*?", Bones deemed it best to cut to the chase. But no answer again. The doctor pressed his lips.

"We need to return to our starship. Can you assist us in doing so, *Ro-n-do*?", Spock added.

"Disruptors. Leave."

Bones frowned. Why was he getting the feeling the ghost-creature preferred talking to Spock who now turned his head slightly towards the doctor and spoke quietly.

"Fascinating."

Bones whispered back, “Not sure if we’ll get much out of him, Spock. And I get the feeling he prefers talking to *you*.”

“Naturally”, the Vulcan responded with a self-satisfied expression which resulted in the frown on McCoy’s forehead getting even bigger.

“Well, maybe you can convince your new pal here to help us get out of here and back to the Enterprise!”, he growled, trying hard not to raise his voice.

“Indeed, Doctor, that is my intention. I wonder if our host would be inclined to agree to a mind meld, since his communication abilities appear to be limited.”

McCoy grabbed Spock’s left arm at this, so that he was forced to turn towards him.

“Spock, you just woke up from a *coma*! And now you want to mind meld with this creature? God knows what he could do to you. He might fry your brain in an instance!”

“Do you have any better suggestions, Doctor?”

Bones bit his lip. That blasted hob-goblin. Back from the dead for half an hour and already ready to potentially sacrifice himself again. Ro-n-do seemed nice enough so far, but they all had witnessed the amounts of energy the being was capable to generate in an instant. And Spock was still frail from his near death experience. But as he *didn’t* have a better idea, McCoy acquiesced and took his hand off Spock’s arm.

“Since there appears to be a significant language barrier which needs to be overcome in order to understand one another, I suggest an ancient practice of my people to communicate by connecting our minds. It is neither dangerous nor is it harmful to you. May I proceed, Ro-n-do?”, Spock spoke confidently and without hesitation. If the Vulcan was still in recovery from his recent brush with death, it certainly didn’t show, McCoy noted privately.

When the creature didn’t react, Spock started to approach slowly but determinedly. The other men exchanged concerned looks with one another and watched on with bated breaths. Spock came to a halt in front of Ro-n-do, whose aura was still dimly lit and who remained still and seemingly unfazed.

“I will now attempt the mind meld. Its sole purpose is to achieve an understanding of one another”, Spock explained calmly, “Please allow me to touch you and explore which is the most appropriate point to connect our minds.”

Spock waited for a few moments. Ro-n-do didn’t offer a response but appeared to be anticipating his touch so he reached forward with both hands. As the alien was around twice the size of the Vulcan, he reached into the energy aura at its sides. The moment they connected, the ghost like figure seemed to shrink and bend forward slightly so that Spock was able to reach into the aura above its upper body.

Bones wasn’t surprised to see that Spock didn’t seem to be negatively impacted by the mind meld. Ro-n-do had appeared receptive to the FO so far and seemed to welcome the joining of minds. Secretly, he admired the Vulcan’s guts. This was not the first time that he had undertaken a mind meld with a species utterly different to Vulcans or Humans. And he never seemed intimidated by the prospect to do so. On the contrary - Bones knew that Spock welcomed such connections as it offered him unprecedented insights. The Vulcan always strove to learn from, and form an understanding with, alien species. On several occasions his determination to connect with what at first appeared to be fundamentally different and often extremely hostile life-forms, had saved their backsides. And had at times led to very welcome, and surprising, outcomes. With a little smile, Bones fondly remembered the amazing Horta creature. He hoped that yet again Spock’s communication talents would yield equally positive results as they had done on Janus 6.

“D’ye think this thingie can harm Mr Spock, Doctor?”, Scotty asked quietly as he leaned towards McCoy, both men’s eyes fixed on their FO.

“I think it definitely could. But I don’t think it will, Scotty. Otherwise it wouldn’t have helped him. And by the look of things, it appears to welcome the opportunity to communicate”, McCoy responded softly.

The four men watched on while Spock, his hands now resting in the aura around Ro-n-do’s top half, appeared to be in a deep conversation of sorts. Bones couldn’t detect any signs of discomfort on the Vulcan’s face. On a few occasions when Spock had melded his mind with an unknown species, it had appeared to be a painful experience. If anything, Bones felt he could detect a hint of astonishment on the Vulcan’s face. The raised eyebrows definitely indicated as much.

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Chekov couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so curious. He was an inquisitive person by nature, otherwise he wouldn’t have ended up in Starfleet, but the events of the last two days or so had taken his curiosity to new levels.

He was sitting on the floor with the others, opposite Mr Spock. The mind meld with Ro-n-do had lasted quite a while and the FO needed a moment to rest, as his body was still slightly weakened from the coma. After the mind meld, the alien had left and they were alone again in the large and still very warm room. A quick back and forth between Mr Spock and Dr McCoy had followed, the latter urging the former to rest. The Vulcan had complied and sat down, resting his back against the warm wall. He was now sharing his knowledge with the others who listened attentively.

Chekov’s mind was racing, eager to finally get some answers – where were they, how had they ended up here, what was this light-being, and most importantly, how would they get back to the Enterprise? Whenever he exchanged a look with McCoy, Scott or Brown, he sensed that the other men were also desperate to get answers to the same questions. Thankfully, Mr Spock gave a full account of everything he had learned.

Spock gave a detailed description of the race Ro-n-do belonged to, called the Strah-leus, and their energy harvesting operations on this planet they referred to as D-JMA. With astonishment, the men learned that the physical conditions below the planet’s surface had allowed them to construct a perpetuum mobile machine, called the Egnaro.

Spock took a deep breath before he continued. What he would reveal now would be the most consequential part of his report.

The limited knowledge the Strah-leus had been able to attain about Vulcans and Humans stemmed from an indirect encounter with Captain Azar and his transporter ship which had found itself lost in D-JMA's local vicinity approximately 150 years ago. The Strah-leus highly sensitive long-distance communication and scanning devices, which they usually used for data and communication transfers to their home planet in the neighbouring solar system, had picked up increasingly desperate transmissions from Captain Azar to Starfleet. After his two crew members committed suicide, they observed how Azar started to study accounts saved in the ship's computer library of how the highly logical Vulcan race had dealt with similar seemingly desperate situations. Intrigued, the Strah-leus were able to copy those files with their long-distance scanner. Since encounters with other species were extremely rare they deemed it prudent to study this incident as closely as possible in order to assess if possible future encounters could pose a threat to their operations on D-JMA. The files they obtained from the ship's library included audio and visual accounts of Vulcan starship captains that had faced, and survived, existential peril.

All of the men were familiar with the famous Starfleet tale of Captain Azar that now was confirmed not to have been a tale at all but an *account*. A few moments of silence followed as Scott, McCoy, Chekov and Brown digested what this shocking revelation meant: They had indeed, in all likelihood, ended up in a different galaxy – the Andromeda galaxy!

Thanks for breaking the news gently, Spock, Bones thought sarcastically. Would they ever be able to find a way home now? He looked around to get a sense of how his shipmates were taking in this crushing news. Scotty just nodded like he had feared as much. Chekov looked amazed and worried in equal measure. Brown was gazing into the distance with a forlorn stare. All Bones was able to say was that he regretted that Captain Azar had never been vindicated while he was still alive.

Before anyone could get too despondent at what this meant for their prospects of returning to the Enterprise, Spock quickly continued with his account. Ro-n-do had explained to him that by studying the Captain Azar incident, the Strah-leus recognised that they share similarities with the rational Vulcan species but not with the irrational Human race. Hence, they had concluded that it was best to exclusively liaise with him.

McCoy grimaced at this point, but his wonder at what Spock was reporting stopped him from commenting further.

Spock summarised that the Strah-leus were exclusively concerned with the survival of their kind. Consequently, their main purpose now was to bring this situation to a satisfying conclusion for all involved so that they could continue with their energy harvesting operations undisturbed. Hence, Ro-n-do had overcome his initial fear to involuntarily worsen Spock's condition and decided to restore his bodily functions by heating up the room. To protect the men from the Strah-leus' powerful energy auras, Ro-n-do would be their sole contact during their time on D-JMA.

"Despite their obvious differences to Humans, Doctor, Ro-n-do recognised a kinship in your display of duty and loyalty when he witnessed your attempts to help me", Spock concluded his report. The Vulcan turned his head towards the man who was sitting opposite.

Bones frowned at this unexpected revelation and even more so at the fact that Spock had chosen to share it.

"Well, Spock, what can I say? Maybe this experience will help you with ridding yourself of your prejudices."

"Prejudice is inherently illogical as it doesn't serve a constructive purpose, Doctor. But if you're trying to suggest that I will now fundamentally change my conclusions about human behaviour, I must disappoint you. Ro-n-do and his kind share Vulcans' conviction that Humans are inherently, but not *exclusively*, irrational and controlled by their emotions. This leaves room for unexpected discoveries to occur, like Ro-n-do experienced earlier, when he realised that even you, Doctor, are able to display pleasantly surprising behaviour patterns, however rarely they might occur", the First Officer retorted with a somewhat pleased expression.

McCoy shot a glare in Spock's direction and was just about to respond when Ro-n-do returned, followed by a small, floating, transport craft that came to a halt next to the Vulcan. To everyone's relief it carried all of the missing instruments, including the damaged Hoffmann 7 probe.

"We will now return to the planet's surface with our host", Spock explained coolly as he handed back the instruments to each of the men, "Ro-n-do will take us to a spot at a safe distance from the Egnaro where our instruments will no longer interfere with the machinery and be able to operate normally again. There, we will also find our rucksacks which we involuntarily left behind earlier, which Ro-n-do kindly retrieved for us. We will be able to assess our circumstances and, all being well, devise a plan on how to return to the Enterprise."

Chekov felt the wonderful sensation of relief wash over him. Finally, he would be able to help with evaluating their situation and assist Mr Spock with formulating an action plan on how to return home. The moment had come on this rescue mission when he could make himself useful. The young Russian felt how his determination made him feel hopeful for the first time since they had set foot on this strange planetoid.

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After travelling back to the surface in an elevator with Ro-n-do, the five men found themselves on the fringes of the gigantic industrial area, just behind one of the smaller cubes on the very edge of the estate. All they could see in front of them was a flat desert that sprawled to the horizon. Ro-n-do had used the little transport shuttle craft that followed him like a puppy to retrieve Spock, McCoy and Chekov's rucksacks from the spot where they had initially materialised on the planet's surface. The light-being positioned itself a good few meters away from the men, making himself available to converse with Mr Spock again at any time to help him with evaluating the overall situation. Ro-n-do was shining a little brighter now, but still at a level that was bearable for the landing party. As the sun was about to set and the temperature was getting noticeably cooler, the being provided some welcome warmth. McCoy distributed food and drink provisions to Scott, Brown and Chekov. The three men sat down quietly on the dusty ground, grateful to finally be able to have something to eat and drink.

Before Bones allowed himself to devour a much needed protein bar, he approached Spock who was standing nearby, taking readings on his tricorder which he pointed towards the white dessert sky above him.

"Spock, you need to eat and drink something, too. Can't this wait?"

“Since we don’t know how long it will take us to return to the Enterprise, or if it will be at all possible to do so, we need to save our supplies. I don’t need to remind you that Vulcans require far less nourishment and fluids than Humans. It is therefore logical that I refrain from replenishing myself at this time, Doctor”, Spock responded calmly, but with a hint of irritation. He didn’t take his eyes off his tricorder once and appeared to be in deep contemplations regarding the readings he was obtaining.

Bones felt too tired, too hungry and too thirsty to argue. He had been ready for quarrelling with Spock but as exhaustion was threatening to overpower him, he decided he would have to let the Vulcan be for the moment. Once he had rested and gathered some strength again, he would see to it that Spock would do the same.

McCoy sat down next to the others. While he was eating, he kept an eye on the FO. The Vulcan was using the different tricorders and instruments they had brought along to undertake a wide range of measurements. From time to time he would reestablish the mind meld with Ro-n-do, evidently to confirm and discuss his discoveries. Bones knew Spock well enough to notice that he seemed impressed by the conclusions he was able to draw from communicating with the light-being. He was obviously in the process of making some major discoveries. McCoy decided to give the Vulcan more time to draw his conclusions as he wouldn’t react kindly to being interrupted by unwelcome reminders to rest. Now wasn’t the time for arguing, Bones decided. The priority was to get out of here and back to the Enterprise and they relied on Spock to make this a reality.

Meanwhile, Scotty, after having refreshed himself with some very welcome snacks, focused his attention on the long distance communicator. After about 20 minutes, he turned to the doctor, Brown and Chekov with visible frustration.

“I cannae get it to work. It seems to function just fine, but I cannae receive a response from anywhere, let alone the Enterprise!”

“I shall be able to explain why that is the case, Mr Scott”, Spock approached the men, and to Bones’ relief, he sat down next to them for a well-deserved rest.

“Aye. I’ve hoped ye’ll be able to shed some light onto this, Mr Spock”, the CEO replied.

Spock took a deep breath before he started with his report. There would be a lot for the men to process.

“Gentlemen, as we have already anticipated, this planetoid is indeed located on the outer edges of the Andromeda galaxy”, the FO explained, “When I conversed with Ro-n-do he was keen to point out that the Strah-leus suspect a connection between our appearance and Captain Azar’s within, from their perspective, a short time period. For eons they have encountered no visitors on this planet apart from some displaced space seagulls that were led off course by a solar storm. And yet, since the Egnaro has become operational and increased their energy production capabilities by a thousandfold, two such incidents have occurred. I was able to measure that the machine is producing far more energy than the Strah-leus are currently able to harvest and store. As a result, they are producing colossal amounts of superfluous energy that is released into the atmosphere. During the 300 years the Egnaro has been operational, this *waste* has formed a dense energy cloud 29,090 km above the planet. When the right physical conditions are met during intense solar storms this region in space is experiencing every 70 years, a *wormhole* appears within this waste cloud. Although the Strah-leus were suspecting that this ‘*cavity in space*’, as they call it, might be connected to their energy production activities, they didn’t seem it worthy of further attention as it doesn’t present a threat to their operations.”

Spock paused to give the others an opportunity to speak. The men exchanged amazed looks.

“I’m nae surprised that this Egnaro is working kinda’ *too well*”, Scotty mused with a bewildered look, “What a shame that we cannae replicate it as the physical conditions of this place don’t exist anywhere in our galaxy. Imagine the warp speeds we’d achieve with unlimited energy supplies!”

The Scotsman shook his head in wonder. Bones had to smile at the dreamy look on their CEO’s face. No doubt Scotty was imagining the impossible scenario of the Enterprise’s engine room being equipped with a mini-Egnaro.

“Since it produces the rather inconvenient byproduct of a *wormhole*, it’s a good thing that it can’t be replicated, Scotty”, McCoy chipped in. There was a good reason why the physics of their world didn’t allow for PMMs to exist.

“Aye, Doctor! *Oh ye seekers after perpetual motion, how many vain chimeras have you pursued? Go and take your place with the alchemists*”, the Scotsman recited with a long sigh.

“Leonardo da Vinci, 1494. Very apt, Mr Scott”, Spock responded after having raised an eyebrow first.

“You still need to explain why we can’t use the long distance communicator, Spock”, Bones could sense from the rather impatient looks on Chekov and Brown’s faces that it was time they focused on the most pressing matter. He could feel how he was becoming more restless by the minute himself. It was great to gain a better understanding of the strange and unique world they had found themselves in, but at the same time, it made him yearn to get home to their own reality as soon as possible.

“I won’t bore you with the details, Doctor, but to summarise, the specific composition of our wormhole means that only the Hoffmann 7 probe is able to send compatible electro-magnetic radio waves that are able to penetrate through to the other side. Regrettably, our long-distance communicator is not able to transmit on the specific frequency required”, Spock concluded as he turned his head towards Scott.

“Aye. We’ll fix that tin can, Mr Spock. Thankfully you and Mr Chekov brought a nice set of tools with ye’s.”

“I suggest you, Mr Brown and the ensign focus on the repair, Mr Scott, while I shall endeavour to calculate our exact coordinates which are required for the Enterprise to beam us back. Time is of the essence, gentlemen, as we don’t know when the wormhole will disappear again.” Spock switched his tricorder back on to continue his calculations. Scotty, Brown and Chekov quickly followed suit and got to work on the Hoffmann 7 probe.

Bones knew he couldn’t be of much help to his shipmates right now and he hated feeling useless. When Spock looked up momentarily from his tricorder, he noticed the rather forlorn look on the CMO’s face.

"I suggest you get some rest, Doctor. If your assistance is required, we will let you know."

Bones could feel how exhaustion was washing over him again. Spock was right. The best thing he could do at this moment was to rest.

"Once you're done, Spock, please do the same", was all McCoy was able to respond as tiredness was quickly overpowering him. He leaned his back against the wall of the cube they had been sitting in front of and closed his eyes.

The only audible sounds while Spock, Chekov, Brown and Scotty were busy with the tasks at hand was the humming of their instruments and Dr McCoy's gentle snoring.

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When Bones awoke he was disorientated for a moment. He was still leaning against the cube wall. But now he was surrounded by darkness. He could hear someone breathing next to him and he turned his head – Brown and Chekov were also leaning against the wall, evidently in a deep sleep. He looked around to get his bearings. Ro-n-do was no longer around and the only light sources he could make out were a few small glowing rocks nearby that had been heated up to provide some warmth and a couple of tricorders and torches a few meters away from him - Spock and Scotty were still awake and were engaged in a quiet conversation.

McCoy got up and a long yawn escaped him as he stretched his limbs. He noticed a small red light at the horizon which was slowly becoming bigger, gradually illuminating the dessert in front of them. The sun was rising. Bones felt rested and he was keen to find out what the others had been up to in the meantime. As he walked over to Spock and Scotty, he could see that they were still engaged in repairs of the Hoffmann 7 probe.

"What's going on? How long have I been asleep?", McCoy asked as he sat down next to his shipmates.

"Morning, Doctor", Scotty mumbled while he appeared to solder a sheet of thin metal at the top of the small probe. He was deeply concentrated and didn't look up as McCoy sat down. Spock was providing some light with a small torch.

"4.5 hours, Doctor, to be precise", Spock responded, his eyes fixed on the probe and Scott's fingers, "I take it you are rested and refreshed?"

"Thanks, Mr Spock. I am. I could kill for a cup of freshly brewed coffee though."

"Aye, me too", Scotty looked up with a satisfied grin. Spock responded with an appreciative nod. Whatever the chief engineer had just done, it appeared to be to both men's satisfaction.

"You two don't look like you got any rest, though", McCoy noted while he was checking the remaining food provisions in one of the backpacks. He took out two energy bars and held one each towards Spock and Scott. The Scotsman took it with a grateful look while Spock didn't move.

"Come on, Spock. You gotta eat something!", McCoy growled under his breath, keen not to wake up Brown and Chekov.

Scotty nodded in agreement and directed an encouraging look towards the Vulcan. A small sigh escaped Spock's lips but he took the bar. Bones thought he was detecting gratefulness in the FO's eyes. He gave the two men a few minutes to eat before impatience and curiosity finally got the better of him.

"Care to fill me in what's going on?", McCoy nodded towards the probe, "Have you been able to repair it?"

"Yes and no, Doctor", Spock responded and Bones detected another small sigh from the Vulcan, "We successfully repaired the short circuit the probe suffered after Mr Scott had sent the first message back to us on the Enterprise. We were then successful in sending another message to the ship to confirm that all of us apart from Lieutenant Monet are still alive." Before the FO could continue, he was interrupted.

"And then the bloody tin can decided to fry itself again!", Scotty cut short Spock's report. The Vulcan raised two eyebrows.

"I doubt a non-sentient machine can make such a decision, Mr Scott."

"And I'm telling ya it can, Mr Spock! It's a spiteful little thing, probably holding a grudge because I kept it in storage for so many years and we never used it!", Scotty shook his head, shooting angry looks toward the innocent looking probe in front of them. While Spock looked unimpressed Bones had to smile. He was convinced that Scotty truly *believed* every word he just said. For his friend, the Enterprise with all her engines and instruments was a *living* being just as much, and maybe at times even more so, than the next woman or man.

"A highly illogical assessment, Mr Scott. Some of its sensitive components got indeed '*fried*' as you've put it during the beaming process. And earlier, the sending of another message evidently overloaded its processing unit." Spock explained dryly.

"If our lives didnae depend on that dagone thing, I'd happily overload its processing unit voluntarily!", the CEO spat out with conviction.

McCoy chuckled at this. How refreshing that, for once, Scotty was having to deal with Spock's inability to share human frustrations.

Hearing that they had been able to send a message to the Enterprise to confirm that the five of them were alive was wonderful news and Bones happily let the relief about such progress wash over him. With delight he listened to Spock and Scotty's further exchanges about their differing beliefs regarding Hoffmann 7's true motivations. But then it suddenly dawned on him that he hadn't asked the most important question yet. The doctor held his hands up to interrupt the back and forth between the FO and CEO.

"What about our coordinates though? Did we manage to send those before it broke down?", McCoy suddenly felt anxiety rearing its ugly head again. If they hadn't, and the probe was continuing to play up, their prospects of returning home were bleak.

Spock and Scott turned quiet and Bones immediately sensed that something wasn't right.

“Yes, Doctor, we did. Our exact coordinates were transferred alongside confirmation of the surviving landing party members.” Spock explained slowly. Bones could tell right away that he was choosing his words carefully and this didn’t bode well. This wasn’t all. Spock was holding back some vital information.

“So, when can we expect to be beamed back, Spock?”, McCoy didn’t care if he sounded anxious and irritated because he was!

Spock and Scott exchanged a serious look and Bones could detect dread in both men’s eyes.

“I think it’s time now to wake up the laddies”, Scotty sighed and got up. Bones watched him walk over to Chekov and Brown. What in blazes was going on?

McCoy could see clear concern in the Vulcan’s eyes and was shocked that he didn’t even attempt to hide it.

“Doctor, we are able to send one more reserve emergency message before the probe will shut down for good and become irreparable. This final message will convey the time we will agree on for the Enterprise to commence the beaming process. It will also communicate the odds I’ve calculated for us to be successfully transported back through the wormhole.”

“Which are?”, McCoy felt the blood rush to his head now.

Spock looked at him with such a serious expression that Bones felt his heart sink.

“There’s a 50% chance that beaming back to the Enterprise will be successful.”

“So the other 50% mean...?”, Bones didn’t dare to bring the thought to an conclusion.

“Certain death.”

To Be or (maybe) Not To Be

To Be or (maybe) Not To Be

Ro-n-do returned shortly before midday to be with the five visitors and assist them in their endeavour of leaving the planet. The Vulcan Spock had initiated another melding of their minds during the early morning hours to discuss his latest findings. As it turned out, the prospects of the men returning to their spaceship alive lay at only 50 percent. Spock had prepared him that the men could react with emotional expressions of anger, desperation and fear and to do so would be human in nature. The Vulcan had requested Ro-n-do's presence in case he would be able to contribute anything to the discussions that would soon follow once all of the men were awake. After a short visit to the Egnaro, he had now returned, eager to oblige and stand by with any assistance he was able to give. There was little the Strah-leus were able to offer, but it was in their interest that the visitors left and never returned. And they would strive to do everything in their power that the men could do so unharmed.

Spock was standing in the morning sun, soaking up the welcome heat, feeling his body being reinvigorated and strengthened. Ro-n-do, his aura still dimmed as to not burn his guests, was hovering a few meters to his left. To his right, about 10 meters away, Scott, McCoy, Brown and Chekov were seeking out the shade of the cube to shelter from the scorching sunlight. The men were in deep discussion. So far, none of his shipmates had displayed any of the possible emotions he had forewarned Ro-n-do of. However, Spock was well aware that their shock was still fresh. Soon he would have to seek agreement with his companions and decide at which time beaming should commence.

While Mr Scott, Lieutenant Brown and Ensign Chekov had been busy with repairing the Hoffmann 7 probe during the night, Spock had assessed the wormhole above the planet. The long-distance tricorder he had packed in his rucksack came in handy for this purpose. In addition, Ro-n-to shared insightful data with him which the Strah-leus had received during their energy transport flights, that were regularly going past the wormhole on route towards SHE-BE. After analysing both data sets, Spock had been able to form a conclusive, but troubling, picture of the wormhole's current state.

As he had explained to his crewmates, the *encouraging* news was that beaming back to the Enterprise via the intergalactic shortcut of the wormhole, was indeed *possible*. However, due to unpredictable and completely random energy fluctuations within the wormhole, there was only a 50% chance that beaming back to the ship would be successful. Hence, there was a probability of 50% that they would not survive.

McCoy had scolded him for delivering such shattering information with so little emotion. Thankfully, the doctor refrained from further outbursts since he was now distracted with processing this hugely consequential finding. What McCoy didn't know, and naturally, wouldn't even deem possible since he always underestimated his human half, was that Spock was deeply affected by what he had to reveal to his men. The good doctor might not consider it possible, but he felt *torment*.

His body was still weakened from the recent hypothermia induced hibernation trance. While engaged in his calculations regarding the wormhole, Spock had succeeded in shutting down any memories of the pain his spirit had to endure when he came face to face with death. But at this very moment, he allowed himself to feel torment because he wasn't able to provide a safe way back for his comrades. He would only allow himself to endure this pain for a few seconds, Spock thought as he soaked up the rays of sunshine. He took a deep breath. He would now return to the others to agree on a time for the beaming to commence. Then, they would communicate the agreed time to the Enterprise via the Hoffmann 7 - their last possible message before the probe would shut down for good.

"Mr Spock!"

The Vulcan turned his head. McCoy was animatedly waving at him, bellowing him over to join him and the others in the shade.

"If beaming is too dangerous, why don't we use one of the Strah-leus' transport shuttle crafts to fly through the wormhole? It worked for Captain Azar, didn't it? So it could work for us!", impatient to share his idea with Spock, McCoy walked towards him with large strides. The doctor was looking hopeful and the Vulcan could see the same sentiment was reflected on the faces of the other men.

Spock came to a halt, facing his crewmates. McCoy was slightly bouncing on his toes, a trait that usually reflected his impatience. All eyes were on him to respond.

"I'm afraid, Doctor, that using a shuttle craft would also leave us with only a 50% chance of survival. It makes no difference if we fly or beam through the wormhole - the energy fluctuations mean there's *always* only a 50% chance of coming out the other end unharmed", Spock responded calmly and matter-of-factly. The hopeful look was wiped off McCoy's face. Brown and Chekov looked equally deflated. The men had obviously gained some hope from the doctor's idea. Scott seemed the most composed out of the four men and he nodded at Spock's explanation.

"Aye. In other words, Mr Spock, both'r landing parties an' Captain Azar were simply *lucky* to have survived travelling through the wormhole before. But as they say - luck eventually runs out!", the Scotsman sighed audibly at such sombre conclusion.

"Correct, Mr Scott. Although I don't prescribe to the notion of *luck*, you are essentially right. We, and Captain Azar and the Mercury, simply happened to travel through the wormhole at moments where conditions for surviving such a journey were met. Due to quantum fluctuation in the energy field within the wormhole, those conditions can never be accurately predicted beforehand or measured at the time of travel. I wasn't able to come to these conclusions while still aboard the Enterprise, as I wasn't in possession of any long-term observational data of the wormhole. However, the Strah-leus have gathered such data over the last 200 years since the wormhole first appeared, as they fly past it nearly every day with their transport crafts. To summarise, all we ever *can* and *do* know is that there is a 50% chance of survival."

"It's like trowing ze dice", Chekov chipped in with a frustrated shake of the head.

McCoy started to pace nervously up and down, seemingly chewing over what this all meant. He eventually came to a halt opposite Spock.

“So, that’s it. We can’t stay here because the Strah-leus want us gone. And the planet couldn’t provide for us anyway with no food sources. But by agreeing to beam back, we all might sign off on our own death sentence!”, McCoy looked piercingly at Spock, as if the man who had simply outlined their predicament was also responsible for it.

“I wouldn’t phrase it like this, Doctor, I’d rather…” Spock started before he got interrupted.

“How would you phrase it, Spock?”, McCoy growled back, “even you can’t deem it *logical* to take a 50:50 chance of dying!”

“You’re mistaken, Doctor. There’s no alternative. As you have just summarised, we can’t stay here, so all that is left for us to do it to attempt beaming back to the Enterprise. Indeed, it would be *illogical* not to take the only valid option available to us, even at a 50% chance of dying, as remaining here would mean 100% certainty of death”, Spock coolly responded.

McCoy just shot him a dark look and crossed his arms. Spock raised an eyebrow at the doctor’s defiance. *He can’t accept that like usual, my logic is sound*, Spock mused privately. *And maybe he will die without ever having learned to trust my logic*. At this dark thought, a shadow fell over Spock’s face and he turned away from the men to stare at the horizon and the yellow, glowing desert in front of them.

The group had been so engrossed in their discussion and private thoughts about their predicament, that they had totally forgotten about Ro-n-do who was still hovering nearby. Now, the ghost-like figure quietly approached and came to a halt only a few meters from the men. Scott, McCoy, Brown and Chekov jumped when the being’s loud, deep voice disrupted their contemplative silence.

“Go! Gulls!”

The men exchanged surprised looks and Spock’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. He had become accustomed to being the sole communicator with their alien host and was taken aback by Ro-n-do’s choice to address all of them now.

“Do you think he’s referring to those space gulls you’ve mentioned, Spock? That got lost here once?”, McCoy frustrated expression had changed to intrigue.

“I shall endeavour to find out, Doctor!”

Spock stepped in front of Ro-n-do and after a brief moment of acknowledgment he reached into his dimly lit aura. After a few minutes, the Vulcan withdrew his hands and nodded at the creature to show his gratefulness for allowing another joining of their minds.

When the FO approached his shipmates, Bones could immediately tell from his slightly amazed expression, that he had some interesting news for them. The men awaited what he had to say with bated breath.

“Ro-n-do has made a fascinating proposition. After he became aware of our predicament, he consulted his superior who, as it turns out, was tasked to deal with the Sparfinches at the time. He transported the creatures to a nearby planet which the Strah-leus are familiar with, as they have to travel past it when transporting the energy crystals back to their home world SHE-BE. As this planet is hospitable to the spacegulls, contains water and bio vegetation, doesn’t contain other life forms other than the peaceful birds, and shares a similar breathable atmosphere to D-JMA, Ro-n-do and his elders concluded that we would be able to spend the remainder of our lives there, if we don’t want to take the risk of attempting to beam back to the Enterprise. They offer to give us one of their transport crafts to travel there. The journey would take two days.”

Brown, Chekov, Scott and McCoy briefly murmured amongst themselves, expressing their shock and surprise. Spock privately noted that the men appeared to be baffled and troubled by this idea in equal measure. He harrumphed to regain their focus. He concluded:

“I agree with the Strah-leus’ assessment that survival appears to be possible on this planet.”

“Zat means, maybe ve don’t have to trow ze dice at all?”, Chekov mused as he searched his companions’ faces for answers, relief brightening his features.

McCoy looked thoughtful, and deeply troubled, as he summarised:

“So, we have two options now. Option 1 - To travel to this planet and spend the remainder of our lives there. Option 2 - to attempt to beam back to the Enterprise through the wormhole with a 50% chance of dying.”

Scott and McCoy exchanged a serious look, the gravity of the situation all too clear. Brown looked confused while Chekov appeared relatively at ease and relaxed. In an instant, Spock concluded privately that although the new available option offered some form of relief to the men, they could not afford to waste a lot of time pondering their situation and that he would have to make a clear recommendation.

“I strongly recommend option 2, gentlemen.”

Spock had raised his voice a little to command the men’s attention again. He stood tall, his features even more serious and rigid than usual. Before he could continue, McCoy spoke up.

“Shouldn’t we at least give some thought to option 1, Spock?”, McCoy said as he stepped in front of the others so that they could all see him. The men were listening attentively to what their CMO had to say.

The Vulcan crossed his arms, slightly tilting his head. He was listening and expected the doctor to explain his reasoning. Bones was all too willing to comply.

“I’m a doctor, Spock, and I will always strive to find ways to preserve life. And option 1 appears to guarantee that, unlike option 2.”

The Vulcan looked unimpressed and he briefly furrowed his brow. Spock’s apparent dismissive attitude enraged McCoy instantly.

“If you prefer to take your chances to have your molecules spread across multiple galaxies, be my guest! But don’t you dare ordering us to do

the same! At least grant us the dignity to decide our fate for ourselves!”

At this, Spock, for a split second, looked taken aback, before the serious and rigid look returned to his face. Brown, Chekov and Scott nodded and murmured in agreement with the CMO.

Spock admitted privately that whatever he would respond to McCoy now, it would be crucial in how all of this would play out. He couldn't deny that the doctor had made a compelling argument, and so would he.

“Very well, Doctor. You made your case and I can see the other gentlemen appear to be in agreement with you”, at this he looked at Brown, Chekov and Scott. The three men nodded and the CEO added confidently: “Aye, ye gotta let us decide for ourselves, Mr Spock!”

The FO continued unfazed.

“But I am in *command*. It therefore falls to me to *remind* you that Captain Kirk has clearly stated that should we find ourselves trapped and confronted with an seemingly insurmountable predicament, it will be my decision how to proceed. It is our *duty* as Starfleet officers to attempt to return to the Enterprise to fulfil our obligations. We have taken an oath that we will always faithfully discharge our duties. And our responsibilities lie with the Enterprise and its captain.”

Silence.

Jim. Of course. *How could I forget about Jim*, Bones remonstrated with himself privately. Had fear of possible death made him momentarily forget his captain, his best friend? His *brother*.

Bones felt like he needed a few moments to himself. Without acknowledging Spock further, he turned on his heels and walked away until a safe distance lay between him and the others. Where they couldn't see the despair on his face.

Scotty looked deeply affected by Spock's reasoning. The FO was right of course. It was their *duty* to attempt to return to the Enterprise. It was *his* duty to return to his ship, to continue looking after her, to tend to her every needs. No one knew her like he did. The captain would surely be at a loss if he didn't return. But those odds... who could be blamed for not wanting to take such a risk?

Scotty looked around, wondering how the others were feeling about this. Especially the two laddies...they were only half his and the doctor's age, they had so much more living to do. They had a guaranteed life on that unknown planet a short space shuttle ride away. A life on the Enterprise was only certain at 50%. Oh, what a right pickles they were in!

Chekov exchanged a grave look with Del. Suddenly, he felt so ashamed. He stepped away from the group, his head bowed. He had felt such relief at the thought that he wouldn't have to play Russian roulette after all. And now Mr Spock had reminded him of the oath he had only sworn a few weeks ago. His oath to Starfleet, the duty to his captain and mission. His life waited for him on the Enterprise. But maybe it would have to wait forever if he wasn't going to make it.

Pavel wondered what his parents would be saying to him right now if they had the chance. He was sure that mother would urge him to choose certain survival. But father? He wasn't too sure. Wouldn't he agree with Mr Spock that nothing could take precedent over his duty as a Starfleet officer?

And what would Captain Kirk suggest they do? Wouldn't his first concern be the well-being of his men? He stole a glimpse towards his comrades. Dr McCoy looked like he was miles away, deeply in thought, pacing up and down in the shade next to the cube.

At this moment, Pavel recognised that the doctor and Mr Spock *both* were right. They weren't involved in mortal combat in defence of the ship, so Mr Spock had no right to order them to commit suicide with a 50% probability. As the doctor had stated, they all should be granted the dignity to decide their own fates. But the FO hadn't actually *voiced* any order yet. Just his reasoning. Which probably meant that the corresponding order would follow soon. Would he obey it? Or would he plead with Mr Spock to allow them to choose their own destinies with the possibility to start a new life on a strange planet in an unknown galaxy? But what kind of life would that be?

Marooned in a strange world with only some Sparfinches as company, Pavel thought grimly as his heart sank. It would be so incredibly lonely. Or would they be able to manage just fine if a few of them, or maybe even all of them, were going? But he couldn't know how the others would decide if they were given a choice. Would he even consider this option if no one else came along?

Chekov shook his head as if he tried to shake off any dark thoughts. What a solitary existence it would be. But he also didn't want to die... Suddenly, Pavel realised tears were running down his face and he quickly wiped them away, but some had already hit the dusty ground next to his feet. *I must have started crying ages ago*, he conceded, his heart aching as it never had before.

Delroy's mind was racing. What on earth was he supposed to do? He was desperate to hear what the others were thinking. Who was to say that they couldn't be rescued from that planet eventually? Maybe Captain Kirk had already formulated a plan to retrieve them somehow that was safe. Of course, as Mr Spock had informed them, the Enterprise was currently not able to communicate back via the probe as its communication computers had been severely damaged in the first encounter with the wormhole. At the moment, the ship could only receive messages from the landing party. But the captain still had more information and resources at hand than Mr Spock. Maybe the FO had made a mistake in his assessment of the situation although he doubted it. The Vulcan had never made a mistake to his knowledge.

Del had never felt intimidated by his own mortality before. But now that he was faced with a choice between certain life and a 50% chance of dying, he realised that the concept of death was very scary indeed. He stole a glimpse at his mentor. The decision Mr Scott would make, would be the right one, of this he was sure. Well, *if* Mr Spock would even allow them to make that choice, that was. Del wasn't too sure. The Vulcan hadn't moved from his position, and he seemed to keep a close eye on all of them, although they all stood several meters apart from each other now, each lost in their own worlds.

Del turned towards the CEO and took a few steps in his direction. But the Scotsman looked to be deep in thought and he decided that this wasn't the moment to talk to him yet. He needed to give the man a chance to think first.

Bones was leaning against the cube's cold wall. The sun was high above them now and the shade the square structure provided was slowly but surely disappearing. They'd have to seek out shelter from the scorching sunlight on the other side of the cube soon. He squinted, trying to make out the horizon beyond the barren desert in front of him. He could see the straight line where the yellow dust met the white of the sky; a thin line that separated the soil from the glowing firmament above. Bones took a deep breath as he closed his eyes, tightly shutting out the bright light.

A thin line between certain life and a 50:50 chance of death. And Spock wanted to push them towards the latter. He took a deep breath that quickly turned into a cough. The air was heavy and dusty, this wasn't a place they could linger in for too much longer, that much was certain. They would leave D-JMA and the Strah-leus behind soon. That was all he could be sure of.

Bones couldn't get the look on Spock's face out of his mind when the Vulcan had reminded them of their duty. To their ship and captain. The FO had spoken with confidence and conviction as he always did, but he knew him well enough to also notice a subtle difference in his voice and demeanour, which he was sure no one else had picked up on. There had been a hint of *urgency* in Spock's voice.

At first, Bones had been surprised, shocked even, that the Vulcan had disregarded option 1 right away. It wasn't like Spock at all to just come down on one side of a tricky and complex argument. He usually would assess all pro and cons and arise at the *logical* conclusion after having given considerate thought to all aspects. And wasn't it the most logical conclusion, that they would choose *certain* life? Wouldn't that be the option Jim would want them to choose as well?

And yet, the Vulcan's argument was compelling. Yes, it was their duty to attempt to return to the Enterprise. They all fulfilled crucial roles on board, even the two young men amongst them had unique skillsets and knowledge and they had a vital role to fulfil on the ship.

That I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office... Bones remembered how elated he had felt when he proudly recited those words all those years ago.

Did the predicament they were in absolve them from this oath? Could any situation ever free them from this oath? But wouldn't Jim agree with him that, at the very least, the men should be able to decide for themselves when faced with a 50% chance of dying? And still, Spock was clearly on one side of the argument and hadn't even considered option 1. Everything the Vulcan had said indicated that he would eventually order them to attempt beaming back to the Enterprise. And Bones thought he knew *why*.

Spock can't bear the thought that Jim might not see his men, his friends again, knowing how much grief and pain it would cause him. But that's not all is it? It works both ways, doesn't it?

Spock can't bear the thought of not returning to the Enterprise and seeing his best friend again. His only real friend.

His *only* real friend?

Hadn't Bones come to the realisation only hours previously that Spock, in actual fact, was *his* friend as well? He couldn't deny that they chose to spend a surprising amount of time with one another outside the realms of their daily duties. Plus, they shared their best friend which automatically tied them together, especially during perilous times when Jim needed them most. Not that either of them would voluntarily or openly admit to any of this.

It was true, Bones conceded, he had never referred to Spock as a friend before, not even to Jim and definitely not to the Vulcan himself! Granted, Spock had *once* described him as a friend when he invited him to attend his ill-fated wedding ceremony on Vulcan. Bones had been honoured to be invited, but Spock hadn't been himself at the time and he soon started to wonder if their relationship had really evolved since then, as their constant arguing and bickering indicated the opposite to be true. They just couldn't agree on most things and always seemed to approach a problem from opposite directions - just like it was the case at this moment.

Logic - emotion, rationality - intuition, cold constraint - passion.

How fortunate that they both shared the best friend. Because Jim had a natural talent in always finding the right balance between their opposing views.

Jim. Hadn't they both promised him to get on? To work together? Hadn't they both broken that promise?

Bones bit his lip, angry and annoyed with himself. Yes, he was at fault. But so was Spock. He couldn't allow the Vulcan to order them to take their chances. This was *not* his decision to make.

He snorted out in frustration as the realisation hit him – Spock was making an *emotional* decision. The Vulcan couldn't bear the thought of Jim having to deal with the loss of five men, two of those his closest friends. And just as much, the FO could not entertain the idea to see his best friend again either. And so they all were condemned to go down the same route.

Bones felt how the anger inside him was starting to grow again. What he would give to return to his life on the Enterprise and see Jim and everyone else again! But maybe this could and would never happen. He should be allowed to decide about his fate himself. He would *not* grant Spock that power.

McCoy looked over to the others. Ro-n-do was still lingering nearby, no doubt waiting in anticipation what the men would do next. Scotty was talking to Brown, the young man listening attentively to what his superior had to say. Chekov stood a few meters away from them, seemingly lost in his own thoughts, just like he was. And Spock? He also kept a distance from the others, but Bones could clearly tell that he was keeping an eye on all of them. *He wants to know what we are thinking. I'll help him along!*

The CMO approached with large strides, looking determined. And angry. Scotty had just explained to Brown that a conversation amongst the whole group was necessary for himself to form an opinion on their predicament - but this depended on Mr Spock's next action. Would he order them to attempt beaming back to the Enterprise? Or would he acquiesce to Dr McCoy and let them all make the choice themselves?

Speaking of the devil, Scotty thought as he saw the doctor square up to Spock. There was no need to indicate to Delroy to be quiet - his assistant and Chekov had already fixed their gaze on their two senior officers, watching with bated breaths. They all knew that the outcome of the argument that was about to follow would be immensely consequential for everyone present.

McCoy came to a halt opposite Spock, who looked at him expectantly, eyebrows raised.

“You need to let us make our own decisions, Spock! You can’t order us to throw the dice!”, Bones was trying his best not to raise his voice, he had to win this argument for all their sakes.

“Doctor, I anticipate that you will all naturally come to agree with me and that there won’t be a need for me to order anything”, Spock responded, calm as ever. But McCoy saw that glint in the Vulcan’s eyes that told him he had his guard up. *He won’t give in*, Bones thought, disheartened. It was time to confront Spock with some truths he had a feeling the Vulcan wasn’t quite admitting to himself yet.

“You know, Spock, it really doesn’t give me any pleasure sayin’ this, and God help me have I been waiting for the opportunity to do so, but you’re making an *emotional* call! I thought I’d never see the day, but congratulations, you’ve finally done it and exactly at the wrong time!”, McCoy snorted.

Chekov, Brown and Scott exchanged a tense look with one another. They certainly hadn’t expected... *this*.

Spock’s head was slightly moving backwards at his statement and Bones knew instantly that he was taken aback. He wouldn’t give him the chance to respond...yet.

“And I understand why, and believe me, I get it! It breaks my heart, too, just to think about how Jim would feel if none of us were to return. He’d not be the same man than the one we’ve left behind.” Eyes fixed on the man opposite, it didn’t escape Bones that Spock had taken a short, sharp breath. *Bullseye!* He quickly continued.

“But the Captain’s resilient, he survived trauma before and he’d find a way to go on again. And if any of us choose not to attempt to return, he, of all people, would understand! You *know* that Jim would trust you, would *expect* of you, to at the very least consider option 1 as this would be the *logical* choice to make! If we could communicate with him now, he’d implore us to consider choosing certain survival. And then he would order us to make this decision individually. *Jim* would grant us the dignity to decide our own fate.”

Bones searched the Vulcan’s eyes for clues but the fact that his face was completely stoic now, not even a raised eyebrow, was proof that he would not admit that what he had just said was the truth.

Rather than addressing McCoy, Spock stepped forward, facing Brown, Chekov and Scott. The Vulcan stood tall and spoke with a loud voice. He clearly was keen to say something impactful and he nodded briefly towards Ro-n-do who was still nearby, closely observing them.

“Gentlemen, as Starfleet officers, it’s our duty to Science and all lifeforms in our galaxy, that we seek to return with our knowledge about the Strah-leus and their groundbreaking technological advancements. It would be a wasted chance of immense proportions if we would not endeavour to share with our world, our knowledge of the existence of such an advanced species. If we don’t attempt to return to the Enterprise, this knowledge will be lost, possibly for ever.”

McCoy had to smile. Even for Spock’s standards, who was known for his talent in omitting facts rather than lying, this was a poor attempt of obfuscation. Bones wasn’t buying it, and judging by the reserved looks on Brown, Chekov and Scotty’s faces, they weren’t either. McCoy exchanged a serious look with the Chief Engineer and he sensed that his friend was sharing his insights into Spock’s motivations.

“Just admit it, Spock”, the doctor now held his hands pleadingly towards his FO, “this is *your* convenient truth that you’re telling yourself in order to justify *your* choice. And you do have a point of course, so you are free to make your choice accordingly. But I think it’s time for you to own your human heritage and admit that you’re making an *emotional* decision! By God, those men deserve such honesty from you, if you are going to force us to play Russian Roulette!”, Bones passionately gesticulated towards Brown, Chekov and Scotty who were listening quietly.

Spock took his eyes from McCoy’s determined face to scan the expressions of the remaining three men. He had served with Humans long enough to understand that what he saw on Chekov, Brown and Scott’s faces was *empathy*.

They feel for me. Because he made them understand.

Spock turned his eyes back on McCoy, piercing him with a cold stare.

“I have no choice in the matter, Doctor. What exactly is it you want me to do?”, cool, guarded, defiant, “That I absolve you of your duties and the oaths you’ve sworn?” Now arrogantly, aloof: “I’d never perceived you to be susceptible to cowardice.”

Scotty took in a short, sharp breath. Before he could intervene, McCoy had grabbed hold of Spock’s upper arms. *Fire* meeting *ice*. The doctor was nearly spitting his words.

“This isn’t just about saving *Jim* from potential grief, is it? This is about *you*, Spock! *You* can’t bear the thought of not returning to the *Enterprise* and never see the *one* person again that is calling you a *friend!*”

Not even the steady desert breeze was making a sound anymore.

With a few quick steps, Scotty had reached the doctor and gently put his hands on his shoulders. The Scotsman stole a glimpse of the Vulcan’s face and was stunned to see that for a brief moment there was a mix of emotions he had never seen him display before: hurt pride, shock and embarrassment even. But the moment was gone as quickly as it arose. The FO took a determined step back, just as Scotty’s pacifying touch of McCoy’s shoulders made the doctor drop his arms.

The CEO watched helplessly as the doctor and the first officer walked off in different directions. The Vulcan back into the glowing sunlight, the doctor in the opposite direction to lean against the cold wall of the cube.

Spock slightly raised his head towards the sky, closing his eyes and welcoming the pleasant heat the powerful star above was emitting.

It wasn't the first time he had encountered these emotions. On the contrary, he had done so more often than he cared to admit. But there was no denying, his mother's heritage was responsible for the fact that, right now, he felt these highly unwelcome sensations yet again. Embarrassment. Shock. Hurt.

For all the flaws he perceived Dr McCoy to have - impulsiveness, irritability, a most unwelcome tendency to insubordination at the most inconvenient times, to name a few - inability to judge character wasn't one of them. So, Spock concluded, maybe he shouldn't be perplexed by the doctor's uncanny ability to detect his inner turmoil, even when no one else was able to see through the permanent guards he had put up to protect his *emotions* from prying eyes. Maybe even Jim wasn't capable of such insight into his private world.

But the realisation that McCoy seemingly was able to see deeper inside his soul than he *himself* appeared to be able to, was an insight Spock allowed himself to be justifiably perplexed by. For the doctor had spoken the truth he hadn't been able to formulate himself.

Spock took a deep breath and focused all his senses on exploring what was lying at the depth of his soul. And what he found was a clarity of emotions that he couldn't remember to have felt before: Yes, he wanted to spare Jim from potential grief of losing close friends and crewmen. And – yes, he also wanted to spare *himself* from the grief of not being able to return to the one place he truly called home: The Enterprise. Where the only true friend he had ever known resided.

The doctor was therefore correct in his assessment. Spock had permitted himself to being guided purely by *emotion*, when the grave situation they were in necessitated that he shouldn't disregard the logical solution - to seek out a life on the nearby planet. What's more, McCoy was also right in his conclusion: The only correct way for him to handle this situation - ethically, emotionally *and* logically – was to *allow* each man to make his own decision about his fate. This is what Jim would do also.

Spock felt strangely invigorated by such clarity of thought. His mind truly had been clouded by his emotions for once. What irony that of all people, it had been Dr McCoy who had reminded him not to cast aside logic and provided him with the correct plan of action. He would have to forgive the doctor that he had chosen to share those insights in front of their shipmates, rather than just consulting him in private.

But apart from the unpleasant but fleeting sensation of feeling uncomfortable, there had been no reason for the CMO not to confront him with the truth and Spock was grateful that he had done so. For even before Mr Scott had gently implored McCoy to temper himself, he had already seen in the doctor's eyes that he regretted having been so brutally honest with him in front of the others. Spock knew that it hadn't been McCoy's intention to make him feel uncomfortable, he simply expressed what needed to be expressed. *And I reacted in a very Human manner by insulting him for having spoken the truth I was in denial of.*

Spock turned around and discovered McCoy sitting with his back against the cube. The shade would soon disappear as the sun was reaching its highest point. The FO allowed himself an audible sigh. His next steps were clear to him now, the outcome anything but.

Bones held his head in his hands, resting his elbows on his raised knees. The cold metallic wall behind him offered some welcome freshness. The air was getting hotter by the minute. He would have to get up soon and walk to the other side of the cube where the shade would reappear according to the wandering midday sun.

You have a talent for making things worse, don't ya feller, he thought while shaking his head in frustration, *how's this going to help the situation now?* Even though he didn't look up, McCoy could sense that Spock was still standing still like a statue in the scorching sun, about 20 meters away from him and the others who had also taken cover in the little shade that was left on this side of the cube. They would have to regroup somehow soon. An apology would have to be uttered. Bones closed his eyes as if shutting out the world around him would make the feeling of guilt that was nagging inside go away.

Why did he have to kick the man while he was going through such turmoil? They all were... but he had needlessly embarrassed Spock in front of Scotty, Chekov and Brown when he confronted him with the truth the Vulcan had obviously been in denial of. He should have done so in private and in a more compassionate way, the doctor admonished himself. Instead, he had let his emotions run riot yet again, just making everything worse.

And, he had broken the promise he had made to the captain *again*.

He was supposed to be working with Spock, not against him. What bitter irony that the moment Bones realised as clearly as never before that the FO, after all, was capable to be guided by his *emotions*, he *criticized* him for it. It was him, out of everyone else aboard the Enterprise, who had always scolded the Vulcan most, for his apparent coldness of heart.

How difficult and draining it must be to always suppress such a big part of one's identity, when, evidently, that very part is far more powerful than even the Vulcan himself had been aware of. For Bones was certain that he had stunned Spock with his insights, as he obviously had been in denial of how much he had been guided by his own emotions. Accusing him of cowardice in return was just a helpless attempt on the Vulcan's part to distract from the fact that Bones had hit the nail on the head. He didn't blame Spock for lashing out in such a human manner. As they all had been reminded of just now, he was only (half)human after all.

Bones got up and beckoned Chekov, Brown and Scotty to follow him around the corner of the cube. There they would find shade again. The three men picked up the rucksacks, instruments and remaining provisions and followed McCoy. The doctor was relieved to see that Spock was walking over as well, followed by Ro-n-do who was gently floating through the hot midday air.

The men regrouped on the shaded side of the cube where they found shelter from the scorching sun above. A few meters away, the ghostlike figure of Ro-n-do seemed to await whatever would happen next.

McCoy, looking slightly guilty and uncomfortable; Scott, alert and with anticipation clearly shining in his eyes; Brown and Chekov, concerned frowns on their young faces - they all waited for their commanding officer to speak first.

As Spock approached the men, he was certain of what he would tell them. But as he walked through the hot, dusty desert towards the cube, another realisation hit him: He himself would need the time he was about to grant his subordinates to come to a decision.

For Spock asked himself - had he really made up his mind to go for option 2 and attempt to beam back to the ship? Didn't he have responsibility towards any of the men who should decide to seek out the nearby planet? Wouldn't they need his support when starting a new life there? He couldn't just abandon them, could he? Spock slowed down his pace - this decision had to be made logically - and emotionally. For this, he also would need an appropriate amount of time.

Spock reached his crewmates. He nodded towards each of them individually, his voice calm as ever, warm even.

"Dr McCoy; Mr Scott; Mr Brown; Mr Chekov - you will each decide which option you deem appropriate. I won't order you to choose one way or the other."

Bones let out a sigh as the relief washed over him. *Thank heavens, he has seen sense!* Scotty, Brown and Chekov exchanged equally relieved looks.

"I will imminently send our final message to the Enterprise which should reach it according to my calculations in 3.25 hours from now. In it I will communicate the fateful choice we all have to make. I will instruct Captain Kirk to commence beaming 2 hours after receiving our message and to set the transporter for 5 persons, so that everyone who chooses the attempt to beam back will be caught by the transporter's range. Consequently, we have 5.25 hours to decide how we want to proceed. I can't allow us more time to come to our decisions, as we need to consider enough provisions for anyone who wishes to travel to the nearby planet.

This is the most difficult decision most of you, maybe all of us, have ever had to make. You might wish to make your verdict privately, or in conversation with others. The choice is yours. Once I've sent the message, I shall meditate over my own fate", at this he looked at McCoy with no hint of blame, "as contrary to your conviction, Doctor, I haven't attained clarity yet which action to take myself." Facing all of them again, "I wish you all find comfort in whichever option you might choose for yourselves."

At this Spock walked over to one of the rucksacks and retrieved the Hoffmann 7 probe. His shipmates were stunned at the openly displayed kindness that had shone through in his words.

What lay ahead of them would be 5.25 dark, menacing, scary, unsettling, disturbing hours. But they were free to decide for themselves and there would not be any blame bestowed on anyone for the way he'd decide for himself.

Bones felt endless relief, content even, that Spock had acquiesced. He sensed there was more to be said between them, and that the time would come soon, very soon even, in the next 5.25 hours to be precise, but that right now, they all had to search deep within themselves for anything and everything that would guide them towards deciding one way or the other.

Which path would each of them choose?

For Each A Road

For Each A Road

1 hour and 24 minutes.

Jim Kirk's eyes kept wandering back to the classic Terran clock from the early 20th century that was displayed on the wall of the arboretum. Sulu had purchased the antique a few months earlier from a jumble sale on Star Base 2. Rather than hanging the clock in his own quarters, the socially minded helmsman decided that the beautiful wooden piece should be accessible to all. Sulu felt that the clock fitted perfectly into the environment of the arboretum, where it could serve as a reminder for the passage of time which applies to all life-forms, including botanic life. Kirk agreed – nothing lasted forever. Hence, even though impatience threatened to overwhelm him at this precise moment, the next hour or so would pass as well.

As the captain was wandering through the many displays within this colourful and vagrant place, he admitted to himself that he had sought his favourite sanctuary onboard in order to seek distraction and calmness - but, he was failing miserably on both accounts.

1 hour and 22 minutes.

38 minutes ago they had received the third, and final, message from the landing party. The overwhelming joy he and the rest of the bridge crew had felt when they received another message, quickly gave way to shock once the code, in which the Hoffmann probe communicated, had been deciphered by Lieutenant Uhura. Jim remembered how his communication officer's gentle features had turned into a deep frown and the relief in her eyes was replaced by worry.

Kirk stopped next to some lilac roses. His favourite flower. The fragrance was sweet but not overpowering. He breathed in deeply, his nostrils widening as they welcomed the calming scent. The tranquillity of this environment, as compared to the hustle and bustle of the bridge, allowed him to analyse his own thoughts without distraction. His *emotions*. For they were so deeply conflicted. Of course, he hoped for all five men to return to the ship in a little over an hour from now. Or didn't he? But of course he did ... but *should* he?

Jim had to sit down. He felt very tired all of a sudden. The shocking revelation in that final message, that his missing men might choose to gamble between life and death, hadn't been the only depressing development in the last few hours.

After Lieutenants Uhura and Kyle, and other dedicated crew members, had worked tirelessly around the clock to successfully restore most of the Enterprise's computers and the transporter, Kirk had ordered another full sensor check of Adelous 4. As the wormhole's energy levels had fluctuated at a much lower level at that time, the ship's sensors were able to work at nearly full capacity again. It was then that they made the grim discovery: As feared, the Cassiopeia had crash-landed on Adelous 4 and was destroyed. Sadly, there were no survivors.

Even though the cause of the crash could only be confirmed with certainty once it was safe again to beam down to the planet's surface to conduct a full investigation, no one aboard was in any doubt that the nearby wormhole had played a part in the transport freighter's demise. The much smaller ship, equipped with only rudimentary shields, would have been far more severely impacted by the wild energy fluctuations of the wormhole than the Enterprise. There was no doubt in Kirk's mind that the Cassiopeia experienced a dramatic instrument failure due to the interference by the wormhole and, as a result, the transporter vessel then crashed.

But there had been some good news after all. Sulu had successfully identified three containers with dilithium crystals that had survived the freighter's impact on the planet. Lieutenant Kyle used this discovery as a welcome opportunity to test the newly restored transporter and successfully beamed the three containers aboard. At least the Enterprise's energy resources had now been replenished and they would be able to drop off the remaining crystals at the nearest star base. It had been a positive development in an otherwise dire 48 hours or so, but it was far too insignificant to calm the captain's restless mind.

Yes, it was true that all things considered, he was relieved that Spock was allowing the men to each decide their own fate, rather than issuing a life or possible death order on their behalf. This was of course the most humane decision the FO could have made - it was morally and ethically the right thing to do.

However, Kirk strongly suspected that Spock favoured the logical option to seek out certain survival on that foreign planet, rather than take a 50% risk of dying. McCoy on the other hand would probably be guided by his emotions and prefer the gamble in trying to return to the Enterprise, rather than choosing a lonely life, an *inhumane* life, isolated on some planet in a different galaxy, out of reach of ever being rescued.

And yet, although Bones probably favoured attempting to return, Jim was convinced that the doctor would have advocated for the men to be able to decide for themselves, which, of course would go directly against Spock's instinct to only consider the logical option. Consequently, Jim wondered if an argument between his two friends had preceded Spock's decision to allow the men to rule over their own fates. Maybe he would never find out.

But what if Spock, as Jim expected, was now trying to influence the others to make the logical choice? Would his shipmates be easily persuaded? Or would the fear of never seeing another human face again outside of this small group of men be greater than their fear of playing Russian Roulette? Which option would be the lesser evil in the eyes of Bones, Scotty, Brown and Chekov?

Another thought entered Kirk's mind and he couldn't help but chuckle. The thought of spending the rest of their lives together in such isolation surly wouldn't be appealing to Bones, nor Spock! So yes, the doctor would most likely choose to take his chances, whereas Spock, begrudgingly, would probably try to convince him to make a logical decision for once in his life and choose certain survival.

Jim shook his head as he remembered the unique dynamic between his two best friends. Yes, in normal times their constant bickering was usually endearing and often a welcome source of entertainment for himself and the crew. Their shipmates at times might shake their heads in

exasperation whenever they found themselves witnessing a classic Bones-Spock disagreement, but they would always do so with a smile on their faces. Because the crew, like himself, understood that behind the banter lay mutual respect for one another, maybe even friendship, but this was something both men would never admit. For what united them was their extreme stubbornness and refusal to openly acknowledge that they actually 'enjoyed' the constant arguing, however tiring they both claimed it to be.

A gentle smile appeared on Jim's face. He had long suspected that Spock and Bones must harbour at least some level of affection for one other and the only way they could express as much, was by giving each other attention through arguing. He wondered if they were aware of this. And if they would ever have the chance to find out if they weren't.

Kirk's eyes wandered back to the clock. *1 hour and 10 minutes*. He sighed heavily. Paradoxically, this hour seemed to be passing at light and at snail speed at the same time.

So, this was the dynamic between his two best friends during normal times. But times were anything but normal and they were now in a life or possible death scenario, alongside three men that were valued and cherished by all. The lovable and deeply respected miracle worker, his young, talented assistant who had a promising career ahead of him, possibly succeeding Scotty one day as CEO - and Pavel Chekov, the youngest crewmember, bright and conscientious and who they all felt responsible for.

Jim's heart sank at the thought that Bones and Spock might spend the final hours of their lives being at odds with one another regarding the fateful decisions they all would have to make now. So maybe, the captain thought, it would have been better if *he* would have embarked on the rescue mission instead of Spock. There would have been far less potential for conflict between himself and Bones. Plus, if they would have decided to seek out a new life on that planet, at least he and the doctor, for the most part anyway, would have gotten on just fine.

What a desperate situation! It unsettled Kirk that he was rattled by so many conflicting emotions. Usually, he would just hope for his men to survive *somehow, anyhow*. And yet, deep down, he hoped that they would all attempt to return to the ship - and would succeed in doing so. But wasn't that extremely selfish of him? Shouldn't he instead hope that all five men would seek certain survival?

Jim shook his head. The sad truth was, that if in *1 hour 5 minutes* no one would materialise on the transporter platform, they would never know what had transpired. Lieutenant Kyle had explained to him that, in that case, due to the nature of the energy fluctuation within the wormhole, they'd never know if the transporter beam had logged on any of the men in the first place. The only way they could be certain was if some, or all, of them were successfully beamed back. So, it was possible that he wouldn't even be granted the comfort of knowing that his men had sought certain survival and that this was the reason why no one had returned.

Jim felt tears well up in his eyes and he tried to suppress them with all his might. He had to stay strong for his crew. He could not give in to his dark thoughts. He wouldn't have to wait for much longer until he'd find out if he'd ever see his men again or not. His two friends.

Jim hated to admit it, but he recognised why he was feeling as if he was being torn apart - he was hoping that all of the men would take their chances and go with the option which Bones was most likely to advocate - and attempt returning to the Enterprise...

...to him.

Kirk experienced a feeling that was so foreign to him, that he had rarely, ever, truly felt: Selfishness. It was an unfamiliar sensation and he hated it. His crew always came first before his own needs and desires. *Always*. And yet, here he was, desperately hoping that his men would play Russian Roulette, with only a 50% chance that he'd see them all again. Shouldn't he instead wish for them to seek out survival on this far away planet on the edges of Andromeda?

Jim felt incredible *guilt* wash over him and he let it happen without trying to stop it. He should feel guilty. He was being selfish. It was not becoming of a starship captain.

58 minutes.

Kirk angrily wiped away some tears that had dared to escape his eyes. He couldn't remember having felt so desperate before... and he had felt true desperation several times in his young life already. He had experienced his fair share of tragedies and he wondered if this would be another one he would have to deal with. Because deal with it he would. No matter the outcome. He would always go on.

Bones and Spock would want me to go on ... he wouldn't dishonour his friends' wishes. They would want him to survive and continue to strive in his career.

He would go on surviving. But it didn't mean that he would go on *living*.

The Shots You Don't Take

The Shots You Don't Take

Soon the local star would set behind the horizon. The late afternoon sunshine was most welcome. The light was warming his weakened body and calmed his overactive mind.

Spock was kneeling in the open desert, about 100 meters from the edge of the energy harvesting estate where his shipmates were lingering in the shade of one of the cubes. Ro-n-do was nearby, a silent companion to the men during those fateful hours.

When Spock had left the others earlier, he observed that while Mr Scott and the doctor were sitting by themselves, each searching for answers in solitary, Ensign Chekov and Lieutenant Brown were engaged in a quiet conversation. Spock was grateful that the two youngest members of the group were consulting with one another, rather than solely focusing on what their superiors and mentors were having to say on the matter at hand. Instead, at least for now, Chekov and Brown were relying on their own truths and the wisdom only the young possess.

And wisdom they possessed plentiful. After Spock had told the men that they had just over five hours to make their decisions, the ensign had focused intensely on his tricorder for a few minutes. Then, Chekov suddenly blurted out a remarkable suggestion. Spock had been pleasantly surprised that, rather than giving in to the bleakness of the situation, the navigator had used his time productively and analysed the data they had obtained about the wormhole. Chekov explained that he had worked on his calculations in between rest periods overnight and that he finally felt confident to share his conclusions with Ro-n-do and the group.

With a wide, excited grin, the young Russian outlined how he had calculated the exact amount of the superfluous energy the Strah-leus produced on a daily basis, which had created, and was feeding, the wormhole in D-JMA's local vicinity. Furthermore, he had analysed the molecular structure and components of the proton-like energy the Egnaro was emitting. The ensign had calculated that by building just 94 new cubes of the largest size, but with a slightly altered molecular structure in the iron-based material that was used for the constructions, *all* of the superfluous energy could be stored from now on and none would escape into the atmosphere anymore. Consequently, within months, the wormhole would cease to exist as it wouldn't be fed the energy anymore that made it possible in the first place.

After double checking the calculations, Spock had commended the young man for his excellent proposal. Chekov had blushed and shrugged his shoulders, stating that he was just doing his duty.

Ro-n-do had also reacted positively to the proposed action plan. He was grateful for such a practical solution and indicated that the Strah-leus would be keen to implement it as it was in their own, and everyone else's, interest that no one would ever get lost in this area of space, or on D-JMA, anymore.

As Spock had walked past the men to seek out the heat of the desert a short time later, he felt how their eyes were following his every step. He was well aware that they craved his guidance, his wisdom, his sterile logic to help them make a decision. But he had already reminded them that this was an individual choice they all had to make and that he himself wasn't sure yet which path he would take. They had accepted his response. In line with a rather pragmatic suggestion by Dr McCoy, it was decided that they would spend the first couple of hours individually (with the option to seek out others, as long as the person would agree to a conversation) to form either a clear, or at the very least vague, opinion regarding their individual preferences. Then, they would reconvene as a group and use the remaining hours to share their thoughts with the aim to support one another so that each man could reach a decision. Spock ensured his shipmates that he would rejoin them at that stage of deliberations at the latest.

He knelt on the dusty ground, his fingertips touched, his thumbs crossed. He had found the perfect spot for deep meditation. D-JMA's sandy wastelands reminded Spock of the deserts of his home planet. The sunbeams that were caressing his skin reinvigorated his body and mind. They would bolster the strength he needed in order to achieve clarity.

Now, in this relaxing pose, Spock was able to accept that his close brush with death had weakened his body more than he had realised at first. He was grateful that what was lying ahead of him wasn't a physical but a mental challenge. The argument with McCoy had further drained his energy reserves. It had been testing, surprising and revealing in equal measure.

They hadn't had much time left, but it would be enough for Spock to decide. He was well practised in meditation over complex issues. Logic dictated that he would focus on the most pressing issue first. He would be able to address any secondary considerations once he had attained an answer to the most important question.

Spock focused on what lay at the depths of his mind. The warm sunshine and the gentle sound of the desert breeze provided all the soothing he needed to reflect calmly and logically on the most crucial question he had to find an answer for – option 1 or option 2?

He was now able to admit that he was torn, tormented even, over how he should choose. Should he attempt to fulfil his duty towards his captain and friend, to the crew of the Enterprise and towards Starfleet? Or, if any of the men decided to seek out the planet that would provide them with a certain future, should he go with them, to aid them in their survival and help them build a new life in an unknown world? Would the doctor be amongst those that decided to embark on this journey?

Spock raised an eyebrow. It was intriguing that he was asking himself that question. Did it matter if McCoy would decide to do so? Did it really matter what the other men decided to do? Should their decisions influence his own?

Before he had left the others behind to commence his meditation, Spock hadn't been able to detect from McCoy's stony face which way he would decide. The CMO had appeared to him to be in deep thought. Why was he preoccupied with where the doctor's mind was at, why was he wondering what conclusions he would draw?

He realised that should McCoy not decide the same way as he would, and Spock were to live, he would *miss* the doctor's insights that had

helped him understand his inner turmoil and emotions much better.

Fascinating.

He would *miss* the CMO, as illogical this might seem at first glance. They were so profoundly different in personality, in their approach to life, in their outlook, it had always been easy for Spock to overlook and disregard anything they *had in common*. They both were men of Science, albeit with different specialities of expertise. And of course, they shared the same best friend. But beyond that, Spock realised, was so much more they shared, as this rescue mission had clearly revealed.

They both had a deep sense of duty and loyalty - to each other, to their captain and to their shipmates. They would sacrifice their lives for one another, like Jim would sacrifice his for theirs. They both strove to preserve life (even if Spock, in this particular instance, had at first completely disregarded the option that would definitely preserve all their lives). Despite their stark differences in personality, they both possessed the capability of insight into each other's motivations and reasoning.

As Spock pondered all those commonalities, he noted that they also applied to Kirk. It was only logical to conclude that, therefore, he should also consider McCoy to be a *friend*.

Through his studies of human behaviour and Terran historic art forms such as novels and movies, Spock had learned that Earthlings had the capability, the urge even, to find friends where they least expected them and often formed such bonds with people completely different in character to themselves. Naturally, there wasn't a comparable emotional bond Vulcans were nursing between each other, so Spock was still learning in this regard.

Hence, if this mission had taught him anything new, apart from the amazing discoveries they had made where the Strah-leus were concerned, it was the fact that he could count McCoy as a friend. The doctor had been mistaken. Spock didn't have one friend, but *two*.

Consequently, it was only logical that he was concerned about which decision McCoy would make. Just as he would be concerned about which option Kirk would choose, if he had found himself in this situation instead.

Spock needed to focus. His decision could not be clouded by his concern for individuals, particularly his friends. His duties and loyalties regarded so many people.

The thought that this could now mean that he'd leave all, or some, of the men to their own devices, tormented him. As much as he respected their professional capabilities, the unknown world that would await them presented him with too many unfavourable variables concerning their possible destinies. He took a deep breath and ordered himself not to indulge in contemplating those scenarios at this moment.

He had a duty to fulfil towards his captain and friend. He also carried immense responsibilities for the rest of the Enterprise's crew who were currently missing their First and Science Officer. He also, crucially, had to fulfil his oath towards Starfleet. Last but not least, he also had duties to fulfil towards Science in general, which were of importance not just to Starfleet, but the Federation on a whole. All of those duties had to be considered when making his choice.

He didn't fear death. He had come so close to the final barrier only hours previously. There was nothing to fear about the natural chain of existence that applied to all life. Being born meant embarking on the path that, irreversibly, lead towards death. What he did fear however, was leaving behind an *incomplete* life. He was relatively young, there was so much more he hoped to accomplish, so many more obligations he needed to fulfil for the common good. For it was logical that, if given the choice, he would always strive to serve the many, not the few.

Spock breathed in deeply. The hot, dusty air wasn't troubling his Vulcan lungs. Soon, the sun would set and the temperature would drop. He no longer required the warmth of the local star to fuel his mind and body. His decision was made.

He got up, straightening his uniform and dusting off the sand from his trousers. He would now communicate his decision to the others. They needed to know - not to influence their choices - but because he owed them such transparency. He would not change his mind so it was logically, and emotionally, appropriate to communicate his decision to the men, so that they could make theirs, in full knowledge of how their First Officer had decided.

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They had about two hours left. Soon, it would be time to reconvene and talk as a group. Scotty, Brown and Chekov were sitting nearby, calmly talking to one another.

To any uninitiated onlooker, McCoy mused, the scene would appear to simply show three friends chatting and watching the sun set behind the horizon.

After Spock had told them how he had chosen a few minutes earlier, Bones had opted to sit by himself again. He wanted to come to a decision soon. Not just for his own peace of mind but also for his shipmates' sake. *If they know what I'll do, it might help them to find the right paths for themselves*, he pondered.

He couldn't help but think that his, and Spock's decision, would be crucial for the others to make up their minds. If you started a new life on some strange planet, you'd rather do so with a logical and pragmatic Vulcan and a Chief Medical Officer at your side, wouldn't you? McCoy didn't like the fact that Scotty, Brown and Chekov's fates should depend on his own choice, but he couldn't change reality. He was the surgeon amongst the group, so having him as company on that strange new world would always be preferable.

But what was there to decide?

Bones sighed. He shook his head as he stared at the dusty ground in front of him. The truth was, there was no decision left to make.

He had made it the moment Spock told them that he would attempt to return to the Enterprise.

McCoy couldn't help but smile. He had been worried that he'd be torn by indecision over which option to choose. But the moment Spock had spoken, he knew which path he'd walk down on.

He would follow the Vulcan.

Bones was surprised, a little shocked even, at his reaction to Spock's decision. He instantly had known that he would choose the same option. All the indecision, all the pros and cons, the considerations for Scotty, Brown and Chekov ... none of it mattered anymore. He would do like Spock.

Could he have ever made a different choice? He doubted that Spock would have ever opted to go to that planet, but he didn't doubt that the FO had given it at least some serious consideration during his meditation. Spock had thought it all through, but the Vulcan's connection and loyalty to the Enterprise and its captain, to his life that awaited him back on the ship, was too strong. Spock just had to take his chances.

And the same goes for me.

Furthermore, the thought of being marooned in a galaxy that would be out of reach from the Milky Way once the wormhole had disappeared - even with three companions he respected and also regarded as friends (especially Scotty) - but *without* Spock, for some blasted reason, seemed unbearable!

It was funny, really. Until a few minutes ago the thought of being stranded on the planet *with* Spock had also been unbearable! Bones chuckled. Despite the trepidation he felt, he just had to smile at this amazing conundrum. *Wasn't it all just fascinating?*

McCoy walked over to join Spock, Scotty, Brown and Chekov. He didn't beat about the bush.

"It's option 2 for me, too", the CMO declared with a steady voice.

Scotty, Brown and Chekov nodded, respect reflected on their faces. Spock nodded once in acknowledgement. Bones felt that he owed his comrades an explanation about how he had arrived at his decision.

"You'll always miss 100% of the shots you don't take, my dear old pop-pop used to say. We don't know what exactly awaits us on this planet... maybe we'll get stricken by illness, maybe we'll lose our marbles in each other's company...", at this McCoy glanced at Spock who in response just tilted his head slightly, accompanied with raised eyebrows.

"... but this way, I at least will have a 50% chance of getting the best outcome possible! And I will take this chance, because if I don't, I would probably spend the rest of my days regretting not having taken it", Bones concluded with a soft smile. He felt at peace with his decision and he sincerely hoped that Scotty, Brown and Chekov would be able to achieve the same.

Both of Spock's eyebrows had by now disappeared into his hairline. McCoy could tell that he seemed to be impressed by his statement. *Probably because he recognises that my decision has been informed by logic and emotion in equal measure*, he mused.

"Please excuse us, gentlemen. The doctor and I will give you some space to further consider your own positions", Spock addressed Scotty, Brown and Chekov. His superior looked at McCoy expectantly and now it was his turn to raise an eyebrow, surprised. The Vulcan clearly had something on his mind. Bones followed him until they were a good few meters away from the others.

"If I were fully human, I would now take the opportunity to thank you", Spock exclaimed casually to Bones' amazement.

"Thank me? I'm afraid you'll have to elaborate on that, Spock."

"Such a conclusion was rather surprising to myself as well, Doctor", the FO teased.

"Make your point, Spock! As much as I enjoy getting you to admit things, and I'm clearly getting better at it, we really don't have the time for that right now, do we?", McCoy's warm tone was softening his obvious impatience.

"Very well. This might be as surprising for you as it was for me, but I am somehow comforted by the thought that if I were to die in 1.45 hours, it will be alongside you, Doctor, and not on my own. Although, of course, that isn't the outcome I desire for either of us ..."

Bones was too baffled at Spock's undiluted display of emotion that he forgot to interrupt the Vulcan with the customary sardonic remark pointing out such a slip-up. So, Spock was free to continue uninterrupted.

"... I had hoped that you would decide against seeking out the planet. Had you chosen option 1, I wouldn't have been able to follow you, or anyone else who might choose the same fate. Understanding this, filled me with torment", Spock's eyes had steadfastly met the doctor's during his confession of sorts, but now they glanced towards Scotty, Chekov and Brown. Bones could clearly see the anguish in the Vulcan's eyes he had just spoken of.

"Well Spock, I guess I have a surprise for you up my sleeve as well. You've finally managed to render me speechless!", McCoy gnarled as he pressed his lips.

That blasted Vulcan, always good for a surprise until the last possible moment!

Spock wasn't finished yet.

"It might appear convenient to claim so, but it is factual: It was my *human* half who spoke out-of-bounds earlier and for that I do apologise. I *have* never, and if we are to survive, I strongly doubt I *would* ever, think of you as a coward, Doctor. In reality, you are the exact opposite of a coward."

Bones felt like something was stuck in his throat. Maybe the dusty air was finally getting to him. He harrumphed and coughed a little. After all the mad, unexpected and truly baffling things that had transpired in the last 48 hours or so, maybe it shouldn't really be a surprise that Spock not only had just apologised to him, but he had praised him and also revealed that he *cared* about what would happen to him. And the Vulcan had refrained from falling back onto his usual caveat that any concern he might be displaying was solely regarding the professional role the doctor fulfilled on the Enterprise.

McCoy took a deep breath, before a long sigh escaped him.

“And I'm sorry that I've embarrassed you in front of the others, Spock. That wasn't called for”, he responded quietly. He still felt ashamed about having exposed the Vulcan's vulnerabilities in front of Scotty, Brown and Chekov. Maybe now that he had been able to apologise, his guilt could finally abate a little.

Spock just nodded once in acknowledgment. Both men held each other's gaze for a few moments.

McCoy was first to speak again as his mischievous grin returned.

“Who would have thought, Spock, in what could turn out to be our final hour, you finally openly admit to, *and* embrace, your human side. There's a heart inside there somewhere after all!”, at this he pointed towards the Vulcan's torso with a wide smile before turning serious again.

“If things don't work out, I shall be honoured to die alongside a *friend*”, Bones concluded gently.

“The feeling is mutual, Doctor”, Spock replied and the warm glow in his eyes didn't make any more words between them necessary. What they had finally been able to acknowledge to themselves, and to one another, didn't need any further explanations.

A few moments later, they were joined by Scotty, Brown and Chekov. Sensing that something crucial was about to happen, Ro-n-do also came closer now so that he could hear what was being said.

Spock and McCoy turned towards their three shipmates, the gravity of the situation reflected on the faces of all five men.

“Mr Spock, Doctor - the laddies and I have made 'ar decisions, too”, the CEO explained with composure.

Bones and Spock exchanged a quick, serious look. They both couldn't bear the thought of saying farewell to their crewmates and yet, maybe it was inevitable.

Scotty's typical grin and cheeky twinkle in his eyes returned. Brown and Chekov smiled contently as the Scotsman exclaimed confidently:

“*Aye, time tae head home, gents!*”

Peak of Fools

Peak of Fools

The disruptors had turned into *guests*. The Strah-leus hadn't had many opportunities to be hosts and practice hospitality during their long history. And yet, the light-beings understood that every visit would have to come to an end eventually and the moment would arise to bid farewell.

Ro-n-do was hovering in front of the five men, his dim aura slightly flickering. Their visit had been a steep learning curve for him, he reflected privately.

Earlier, Mo-n-ihl had responded with delight about the young harvester's progress report which summarized how he had dealt with the unexpected guests, and how the plan to return them to their ship was developing. When Ro-n-do shared Ensign Chekov's highly logical, yet fairly simple, plan which outlined how they could reduce the energy surplus and close the wormhole forever, Mo-n-ihl had been delighted yet further. The supervisor shared the data and information Chekov had compiled, which explained how exactly the new cubes needed to be built, with the Egnaro's engineering committee of which he was a member. They responded with relief and enthusiasm that a fairly simple solution had been found to prevent any unwelcome intruder events in the future, at least as far as the wormhole was concerned. It was estimated that their unwanted neighbour in D-JMA's local vicinity would disappear within months once Chekov's plan had been fully implemented.

As he scrutinised the men opposite, who were looking at him with evident gratefulness, Ro-n-do felt that unfamiliar sensation again he had experienced several hours earlier after he had heated up the break room to revive First Officer Spock: He felt *pleased* with himself. Mo-n-ihl had communicated a similar sentiment to him earlier. Just before the harvester had left the Egnaro to be with the men during their final hours on D-JMA, his supervisor had approached him until their energy auras slightly overlapped for a moment. Comparable to a human pat on the shoulder or applause, such gesture was a clear sign of approval, especially from someone in a senior position directed towards someone of lower status. Ro-n-do's aura had flickered briefly and he had to use quite a bit of willpower to dim it down again as to not let his excitement about such praise overwhelm him. He then quickly took his leave from his mentor, before he could be deemed to be immature in his uncontrolled enthusiasm.

During their final connection of minds a few minutes ago, the light-being had communicated the praise he had received from his superior to Mr Spock, who in return, had shared the welcome news with his crewmates after the mind-meld had been completed.

Furthermore, the Vulcan had also been able to put their minds at ease regarding Lieutenant Monet's body which was stored in a safe location below the Egnaro. His remains would receive a burial with all honours that the Strah-leus usually only awarded to their own kind. The Humans and the Vulcan had voiced regret that they were not able to take their fallen comrade with them. They had decided that Louie Monet deserved to be buried in a way so that he could be honoured. The men didn't want to take the risk that if they were to die during the transportation process, Monet's molecules would just disappear into the ether amongst their own particles. It would be an undignified end Louie didn't deserve and they weren't prepared to take such a risk, especially since a much better, and honourable, alternative existed. If they were to survive, they would be able to communicate to his grieving relatives and friends that Louie was the only Human, or any alien life-form for that matter, who had ever received a burial with all honours by the Strah-leus species. Del Brown mused that whenever he'd look at the night sky again, regardless on which planet he would find himself, he'd seek out Andromeda in the firmament, and remember his friend.

Monet's remains were to be taken to SHE-BE. There, he would be laid to rest on a gigantic furnace of sorts in a large hole in the ground, located in the centre of the planet's largest desert. The furnace would convert his remains into pure energy which would be stored for eternity underneath in the ground. At the next burial, Monet's energy, amongst the energy remains of billions of departed Strah-leus before him, would be used to 'cremate' the next dead body. And so the Lieutenant's remains would become part of the circular process of energy cremation the light-beings had practiced and celebrated for eons.

The last outstanding issue Spock and Ro-n-do had conversed about during their final mind meld, was the Strah-leus' interest in the now defunct Hoffmann 7 probe.

Although, strictly speaking, the visitors were not allowed to leave behind any alien technology, as this could be construed to be in breach of the Federation's Prime Directive, Spock had agreed to listen to Ro-n-do's pleas, who was speaking on behalf of Mo-n-ihl and the Egnaro's engineering committee. They had expressed hope that one day their species would develop the skill to repair the probe.

As of now, the Hoffmann 7 was beyond repair in light of the insufficient tools Spock and the others had brought with them. It was also beyond repair as far as the men's technical skills were concerned. However, the committee deemed it logical that maybe at some point they'd be able to develop the necessary tools and skillset to repair the probe. This was unlikely to happen anytime soon though, especially since the Strah-leus race on a whole, aside from the arguably more scientifically curious energy harvesting engineers, currently didn't put much effort into developing communication abilities between planets other than D-JMA and SHE-BE. But Mo-n-ihl and his colleagues didn't want to rule out that their species would overcome their general indifference towards alien life one day – and Ro-n-do shared the same hope.

If anything, the harvester mused, his fascinating encounter with Human and Vulcan representatives could potentially lead the Strah-leus to eventually question their own ignorance. In the future, the light-being speculated, his kind might develop some form of 'curiosity' that would allow their brightest minds to have a look at the damaged probe again. Even though the wormhole would no longer exist at that point, he didn't deem it beyond his species' capabilities, that they could repair *and* alter the probe to be capable of interstellar communication. What's more, Ro-n-do was certain as to who the first message should be directed at: The United Federation of Planets.

At this point, Spock had paused the mind meld in order to consult with his crewmates. After the men had talked quietly amongst themselves for a short while, the Vulcan reestablished communication with Ro-n-do who was pleased to learn about the following plan of action: The Vulcan offered that they could simply 'forget' the damaged Hoffmann 7 probe. Since it was for all intents and purposes damaged beyond repair, such 'oversight' would be neglectable.

Spock ended the connection of minds with expressing his heartfelt thanks for Ro-n-do's efforts in not only saving his life, but for his attempts to save the lives of all five men.

Now, irretrievably, the time had come to bid farewell.

After Spock had shared with the others what he had discussed with Ro-n-do in their final mind meld, the five men stood quietly for a few moments. They nodded towards their alien friend, appreciation and gratefulness reflected on their faces. The harvester increased his energy levels slightly and made his aura sparkle momentarily – the equivalent of a Human applauding and shouting to show appreciation. The men noticed and watched on in awe as the usually white, glowing light that surrounded Ro-n-do started to sparkle with golden, blue and orange fluctuations. It seemed as if their host was putting on his own little firework display in their honour. The amazing spectacle lasted only a few seconds, but all of the men knew in that moment that should they live beyond the next few minutes, they would never forget the remarkable sight.

Spock now turned to McCoy, Scott, Chekov and Brown. The Vulcan's eyes were expressing so much at this moment that no words were needed: hope, dread, concern, anticipation. His shipmates nodded in acknowledgement, their eyes mirroring his own emotions.

The time had come to throw the dice.

Spock noted how calm his companions were, as if they all believed that good fortune should grace them one more time.

Silently, the men got into position on the pre-arranged coordinates not far from the nearest cube: Scotty, Spock and McCoy at the front, Chekov and Brown just behind them.

This is the logical conclusion of everything that has come before. There is no fear and if there shall be grief, my mind won't be burdened knowing of it. If there shall be joy, I need not fear expressing it. Amongst friends, fear is illogical.

So that's it. Our lives in the hands of the blasted transporter and that bloody wormhole! What a life you've lived, old feller! And if there's more of it, it will be even more magnificent and beautiful. Thank you dear Universe for letting me exist. And live, and maybe die, amongst friends.

Aye, let's get on wi' it! I cannae believe I feel so calm. I cannae wait tae get back tae the Enterprise. I just know we will. It's where I belong. Where we all belong. All roads always lead back home, as gran used tae say. And she wis always right!

Poor Louie. I wish he'd made it this far... he'd also would have tried to get home. If we make it, I guess I'll have to work for two now. Mr Scott won't let me rest much if we get back, I reckon. And why should he? I'm ready for whatever needs doing. God, I've never been so ready to get back to work.

Tis has been so beautiful. I'll never forget tis world and Ro-n-do. I'm so glad I was able to come along. I tink I really helped the Strah-leus. I'm so glad, I did. And helped everyone else by making sure no one gets stranded here ever again! I've made up now for everyting, I guess. Vat's tis bright light? Is tis the sun raising above the Peak of Fools? Am I dying... ?

As Ro-n-do watched the men de-materialise in front of him, he wondered if he'd ever be able to communicate with them again. Or if any of their, or his, descendants would be able to. The thought brought upon a sensation of deep melancholy. The five humanoid forms were slowly fading away in front of him. Until nothing remained. Just air and the gentle desert breeze.

For a moment, Ro-n-do's aura exploded into a bright ring of red, burning fire. Then it dimmed again to its normal level and the light-being disappeared between the cubes.

If any of Ro-n-do's kind would have witnessed the brief explosion of energy within his aura, they would have comforted the harvester, like Humans would comfort a crying youngster.

Eternal Fruit

Eternal Fruit

Jim Kirk had been pacing up and down the transporter room for the best part of 15 minutes. He had arrived extra early, around 20 minutes before the arranged time when the beaming process would be initiated and, hopefully, bring his five crewmen home.

Lieutenant Kyle kept an eye on his tense CO who seemed to be checking the time every 30 seconds or so. The captain obviously didn't realize that asking the time didn't make it pass any more quickly. And yet, the officer could understand his superior's nervousness, for he felt exactly the same. Everyone aboard the Enterprise did.

The last few hours had been challenging to say the least. The transporter expert had double and triple checked the functionalities of the machine and its computers to ensure that, at least from their end, the transportation process would go as planned. All was working as it should and Kyle felt strangely confident that this incident would reach a happy conclusion for all involved. Not least for their captain who not only was waiting for five men to return, but, as all aboard the ship were acutely aware of, his two best friends.

The Lieutenant wasn't sure what warranted his hopefulness. He knew the odds were 50:50 and he usually wasn't prone to exuberant optimism. But right now, 7 minutes from the all or nothing moment, he felt strangely positive. Maybe he just believed that they deserved a happy ending after the rollercoaster of emotions they had all experienced during the last 48 hours. The news of the missing Cassiopeia, the powerful and damaging encounter with the wormhole, the disappearance of the first landing party, the uncertainty about the fate of the search party, the sad confirmation of the Cassiopeia crew having perished, and the shock when they learned that potentially none of the men would ever make it back to the ship. The crew had weathered many a storm in the last two years or so, but Kyle couldn't remember such a tense and uncertain period like the last couple of days.

"Time, Lieutenant Kyle?" Captain Kirk swung around as he reached the far side of the room and continued pacing in the other direction. The impatience, and worry, in his voice was undisguised.

"6 minutes 31 seconds, Sir", Kyle responded.

At that moment, the doors opened and Nurse Chapel and Dr M'Benga entered, carrying medi-kits. Kirk had ordered them to be present, just in case any of the men would need immediate medical attention – should they materialise in the first place, that was. The captain noted grimly that the concern on both their faces probably matched his own tense expression.

Several of his crew, Lieutenants Uhura and Sulu amongst them, had requested to be present in the transporter room at this moment. But Kirk had denied their requests. He wanted to keep onlookers to a minimum - should the unspeakable happen and none of the men were to return, he wanted to spare those crewmembers from the trauma of being present at that tragic moment.

Kirk approached the two medics, an encouraging nod towards M'Benga and a friendly squeeze of Nurse Chapel's shoulder at the ready, to hopefully alleviate their fears a little. How he wished that there would have been someone aboard who would do the same to him right now, someone who could calm his nerves and make the pain inside his cramping stomach go away. But the two men who were most likely to alleviate such worry, were currently not aboard the ship. Kirk glanced at the clock on the transporter console. If luck would be on their side, they would be in 4.28 minutes.

Would all of the men return? Maybe only some of them? Could he blame any of the men for seeking out certain life on that distant planet?

Deep down, Jim believed that Bones and Spock would attempt to return to the ship. And he couldn't envisage a scenario where Scotty would decide differently. He doubted that Brown and Chekov would seek out life on the planet if their three superiors decided not to.

Yes, the more he pondered all possible scenarios, the more Jim was convinced that either all men would return, or none. If nobody returned, he would never know what choice the men had made. The most tragic scenario was if they attempted to return home, but failed. And yet, if nobody returned, he would never know for sure if this had been the case and maybe that was a blessing.

If they don't come back, I can always imagine that they are living a happy life on that planet, Jim pondered in an attempt of comforting himself.

Somehow, that thought made him smile. Imagining how Bones and Spock were marooned together on a strange planet was no doubt a fascinating thought, to say the least. The captain pressed his lips as not to chuckle, which he deemed highly inappropriate at this moment. But the thought of Scotty, Brown and Chekov soon getting exasperated with his friends' constant quarrelling was somehow amusing to him. As the old Terran proverb went, Spock and Bones continuing to quarrel even when marooned together on a distant world, would be *'as certain as death and taxes.'*

The madness of the situation, and all the bearable and unbearable variables it brought with it, filled Kirk with a strange feeling of amused exasperation. There was nothing he could do now anyway, so he might as well just throw his hands up and laugh at the craziness of it all. If he would have been on his own in the transporter room, Jim mused, he'd probably do exactly that!

"1 minute, Sir", Lieutenant Kyle said quietly.

Dr M'Benga and Nurse Chapel exchanged a tense look. A small sigh escaped Kirk. Mercifully, he had been distracted by his own meandering thoughts during those last few minutes that had made time pass far quicker than he had hoped.

The captain positioned himself behind Kyle at the transporter console. He'd keep one eye on the Lieutenant's hands and one eye fixed to the platform. Within seconds they would know if they'd see their five comrades again.

“10,9,8 “, Kyle did his best to sound as calm and collected as possible.

My brave men, you've served gallantly until the end... we'll never forget you...

“...7,6,5”, Kyle's fingers lied steady on the transporter knobs, ready to initiate the beaming process.

Scotty, my miracle worker... Pavel and Delroy, so young...

“...4,3,2”

Bones, Spock – please don't go where I can't follow.

“1!”, Lieutenant Kyle pulled down the knobs on the console and initiated the beaming process.

He just wanted to fall to his knees and cry out all the pain, sorrow, exhaustion and shock he had felt during the last 48 hours or so. But Captain Kirk was frozen to the spot behind the transporter console. The moment Lieutenant Kyle had initiated the beaming process, it had become instantly clear that the transporter beam was catching on to *something*.

Something... someone... was clearly caught in the beam and ready, eager, determined to be returned to the ship.

Lieutenant Kyle pushed the knobs down further, increasing the power of the beam to maximum. Everyone present could now clearly see that *five* humanoid forms were slowly materialising on the platform.

Jim held his breath. He wouldn't breath again until he was certain that his men had safely returned.

No, this wasn't the Peak of Fools. And he hadn't died. This was the bright light of the transporter room... which he had been briefly blinded by only a few days ago for the very first time... the Enterprise's transporter room! He was alive. They had made it. Somehow, luck had been on their side again!

Pavel Chekov turned his head to see Del Brown next to him on the transporter platform. In front of them, Mr Spock, Mr Scott and Dr McCoy.

And ... *exhale*. A long breath escaped Jim Kirk's lungs. There they were – all five of them! They looked stunned, exhausted, overwhelmed with relief, but very much *alive*!

Dr M'Benga and Nurse Chapel were the first to approach the new arrivals. The two medics greeted the men halfway up the steps to the transporter platform, scanning them for any internal or external injuries and asking them to confirm their condition. All of them stated that they were well.

After this initial exchange had transpired, the men slowly came down the steps and congregated in the middle of the room. As the shock of realizing that they were still alive slowly faded, they exchanged relieved smiles with one another and with Dr M'Benga, Nurse Chapel and Lieutenant Kyle, who had stepped forward from behind the transporter console to greet them.

Captain Kirk watched all of this with a soft smile. He was grateful for these few moments as they allowed him to let all the worry and exhaustion slip away from him ... there was nothing he needed to hold on anymore. He felt palpable relief but even more so, he simply felt *happy*. In fact, he could hardly remember another occasion where his heart had been filled with so much joy.

Mr Spock was the first of the landing party to realise that the captain was present in the room. After having confirmed to be in good health to an overjoyed looking Nurse Chapel, Spock turned towards Kirk, who stood behind the transporter console, still and silent.

“Captain! The landing party has returned in good health. I take it you and the rest of the crew are in good health, too?”

Only now Bones realised that Jim was standing at the back of the room. He had been so stunned when he found himself alive and well on the transporter platform that he hadn't noticed much around him during the first few moments. Nurse Chapel and Dr M'Benga had surrounded him and the others immediately. He obediently told them that he, and the whole group, appeared to be well. A thorough check of Spock was in order of course, but Bones deemed it sensible to wait with such a proclamation until the initial moments of euphoria had passed. He would conduct Spock's medical himself but he would request Dr M'Benga to be present in order to benefit from his expertise regarding Vulcan physiology.

Spock's exclamation seemed rather clumsy, and yet perfectly adequate and appropriate, McCoy noted privately. It was the first question that was on his own mind, too. As he was slowly but surely calming down, now that they were all safe, his biggest concern was for the captain and the rest of the crew. He sincerely hoped that there hadn't been any more nasty encounters with the wormhole and that Jim had gotten through the whole ordeal unharmed, physically and mentally.

Kirk stepped forward, coming to a halt right in front of Spock, and a wide, soft grin appeared on his face.

Jim grabbed hold of Spock's thin shoulders. As his smile grew wider and wider, he ordered himself not to hug his First Officer – he sincerely wished to do so, but he knew the Vulcan wasn't fond of any overtly human emotional reactions. Instead, he just gently squeezed his shoulders.

“Spock! ...all is well. The crew are well. I am, we all are...” at this, the captain glanced over to Chapel, M'Benga and Kyle, “so happy to have you all back.”

The warmth in Kirk's eyes was radiating over his whole face now and it was met by an unguardedly relaxed and grateful nod from Spock. Witnessing this happy exchange, made Bones' heart sing. They were *home*.

Jim now turned to Scotty, shaking the Scotsman's hand with a lot of might while putting his other hand firmly on his shoulder.

“Scotty...!”

“Captain! I sure am happy to see ya’s!”

“And we are happy to see you, Mr Scott! The *Enterprise* has missed you!”

“Aye. And I have missed her, you can take my word for it, Sir!”, Scotty got misty eyed and Jim’s smile got even wider, if that was even possible.

The captain now turned to Del Brown and Pavel Chekov. He enthusiastically patted their shoulders.

“Welcome home, Lieutenant... Del! Welcome home, Ensign... Pavel! I can’t tell you how glad I am to have you both back!”, Kirk exclaimed, his tone still warm, but serious now.

Bones had to gulp. Yes, they’d been through hell and back. But he didn’t even dare to imagine how hard this period must have been for Jim. He knew that his captain and friend must have struggled, while their own fates had been written in the stars of a distant galaxy.

“Thank you, Sir. So are we. Ready at your service!”, the eagerness was audible in Brown’s voice.

“Zank you, Ceptein. It’s good to be *home*, Ceptein”, Chekov’s sincerity at calling the *Enterprise* *home*, a place he had only known for a few days, didn’t escape those present.

Jim now turned to the CMO. Last but not least. *Bones* ...

No words were necessary in that moment. Kirk and McCoy exchanged a hearty hug.

Jim held on tight to the doctor’s slim torso.

“Jim...”, Bones’ gentle voice was finally reaching the captain’s ears after what had felt like an eternity.

“If you squeeze me any harder I might have to report to sickbay after all with a few broken ribs!”

Kirk slowly, reluctantly, dropped his arms. He took a step back to have a good look at the doctor. He looked exhausted but markedly calm. His whole demeanour seemed to radiate tranquillity. Well, they all were content in that moment, that much was certain. But something about his friend seemed different... like he was at peace. Of course, he would be, now that they were safe and had survived. But something in Bones’ eyes told him that everything was well, everything was as it should be. Hadn’t he detected a similar, undeniable tranquillity in Spock’s eyes earlier?

McCoy directed his warmest smile at Jim, which he only reserved for those dearest to him, or for those in the biggest need of comfort.

“It’s good to be back, Captain!”

Kirk nodded, and so did Brown, Chekov and Scotty. It sure was!

“But I have to say I’m disappointed about your welcoming committee, Jim. I at least expected a glass of Saurian brandy to cheer our miraculous return!”

“Aye!”, Scotty agreed vociferously.

“Your fondness for alcoholic beverages surly wasn’t on the forefront of the Captain’s mind, Doctor. He’ll be more interested in hearing our report on the events that transpired on D-JMA.”

“You ever heard of the term ‘*party-poop*’, Spock?”

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow.

“I haven’t, Doctor. No doubt you’ll entertain me by explaining the terminology.”

“Oh, that is easy - it’s what *you are*, Spock. You are a party-poop! Or *killjoy* would be an alternative term.”

Chuckles all around. M’Benga and Chapel exchanged a smile - how good it was to have those two back! Always good for some light relief.

Kirk’s soft smile reappeared. He looked from his FO to his CMO. Some things never changed, and for that he would be eternally grateful. And yet... as he witnessed the broad grin McCoy directed towards Spock and the hint of amusement in the Vulcan’s eyes who, uncharacteristically, let the doctor seemingly have the last word on this occasion, Jim instinctively knew that something *had* changed.

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First stop sickbay. Under Captain Kirk’s watchful eyes, the landing party underwent a thorough examination to make sure all of them were in good health and no intergalactic bacteria had been beamed back on board.

McCoy explained to Dr M’Benga that he should be the first to undergo his examination as he wanted to conduct Mr Spock’s medical himself. This raised not only eyebrows amongst the medics, but it also piqued the captain’s curiosity.

Jim sensed that Bones had his reasons to insist that he, as CMO, should conduct Spock’s examination. But, for now, he deemed it sensible to refrain from ascertaining why the doctor insisted on this. Kirk was sure that the exact reasons would be made known to him during the debrief at the latest. But first things first. Medical assessments, hot steam showers, a decent meal and several hours rest would be on the men’s

schedule before the debriefing would take place the next morning.

Dr M'Benga conducted a thorough examination of Dr McCoy while two other doctors examined Brown, Chekov and Scotty. Nurse Chapel meanwhile, started Mr Spock's examination by taking blood samples. Once McCoy's assessment had been concluded - he was in good health apart from signs of exhaustion - he took charge of Spock's medical.

As Bones asked Spock to lie down on the bio-bed and walked around it to retrieve some additional scanning instruments, his eyes met Kirk's.

He knows something serious has happened to Spock... I better put his mind at ease...

McCoy briefly, and gently, touched Kirk's upper arm. He spoke quietly:

"Nothing to worry about, Jim."

The CO nodded, appreciating his friend's encouraging words. He trusted his CMO implicitly. If Bones said, he needn't worry, he wouldn't.

Kirk stuck around a little while longer before leaving for the bridge.

The Enterprise was on route to Starbase 3, the nearest base in this quadrant, to deliver the intact dilithium crystals that had been successfully retrieved from Adalous 4. He would see his five intergalactic travellers again soon enough, in around 10 hours' time, for the debrief. The men deserved a hearty meal, maybe a drink or two in Bones and Scotty's case, and a good rest. Hell, he did, too.

Jim looked forward to sleeping easy again for the first time in days. Finally, he could allow his mind and body to rest. But not before checking all was well on the bridge and informing an overjoyed Uhura and Sulu, and the rest of the ship's palpably relieved crew, that their shipmates had arrived safely and were now recuperating.

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Kirk had just lied down, ready to get comfortable in the land of Z's, when his door buzzed. A quick look at the monitor on his bedside table revealed that McCoy was standing outside his quarters. Surprised, Jim swung his legs around and sat up. He called the doctor to come in.

"Hope I'm not interrupting your rest, Jim. I thought I better let you know personally that all is well with Spock, too. The final blood results have just come back. Apart from some medium level of exhaustion, he's in good health."

Kirk nodded appreciatively.

"Thank you, Bones. That's reassuring to hear. But what about *your* rest? I thought you'd be tucked in nice and comfortably by now!", Kirk responded with a grin, but he sounded slightly admonishing.

McCoy sat down at the table in the middle of the room.

"Well, I've showered, I've eaten, I had a good natter with Christine, M'Benga and everyone else in sickbay... all that's missing now before it's shuteye time, is waiting for me over there in that lovely wooden cabinet of yours", McCoy exclaimed with a twinkle in his eye.

Jim had to chuckle. Of course! He knew the doctor much preferred to drink in company, than on his own. And by god, couldn't he do with a drink or two himself! He fetched the finest bottle in his possession and two nice glasses.

Bones' eyes lit up as the captain put a bottle of 150 year old Saurian brandy in front of him.

"Now look at that! One could get the feeling we've got something to celebrate!"

"You tell me, Bones!"

They exchanged a chuckle while Kirk poured the drinks. He raised his glass, and so did McCoy.

"Good health, Bones. I'm glad you're back. More than you'll ever know."

A shadow flashed across the CMO's face.

"There really is such a thing as *luck*, Jim. I never believed in it. I do now", Bones raised his glass as his smile returned, "to five lucky bastards!"

"To five lucky bastards", Jim responded with a soft smile.

They both took a healthy sip, enjoying the burning sensation as the cloudy liquid was making its way down their throats and into their stomachs.

As they both settled into their chairs comfortably, Jim bestowed the doctor with an inquisitive look.

"Care to tell me, what happened to Spock, Bones?"

At first it seemed that a long sigh was all the response Jim would get. McCoy didn't look like elaborating. All of a sudden he looked extremely tired, as if he could fall asleep any second.

"Bones? What is it?"

"I'd rather have Spock tell you himself, Jim. There's so much to tell you... all I can say is that it was a close call."

Kirk nodded. He understood. He could only imagine what those men had gone through. All would come out in the wash soon enough during the debrief. What mattered was that the landing party had returned safely. Nothing else was of major importance at this moment in time.

“It’s ok, Bones. We’ll talk about everything soon. I think you really should get some rest now.”

Kirk caught McCoy’s yearning look towards his bed. Before he could say anything, the doctor had gotten up from his chair.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

Jim smiled. How could he say no to any of the surgeon’s requests right now? If Bones decided to walk out of the room with the bottle of Saurian brandy in his hand, he wouldn’t have stopped him. And he wouldn’t stop him from lying down on his bed to finally get the sleep he so deserved.

In that moment, the door to Kirk’s quarters buzzed again. *This is turning into a nice little party*, Jim thought amusedly as he saw Spock standing outside. He asked him to come in.

The first officer tilted his head slightly as he saw McCoy getting comfortable on the captain’s bed.

“Oh, hello Spock! Don’t mind me, gentlemen, but please leave me some of that good stuff. Something tells me I might need another glass after our debrief later”, the doctor mumbled and with that he closed his eyes, turned around and ... fell asleep.

The Vulcan’s eyes came to rest on the bottle of Saurian brandy and the two empty glasses.

“Spock! Can I offer you a glass?”, Kirk said with a glint in his eyes. He kind of knew already what the answer would be, but it was only polite to offer his FO the same courtesy he had bestowed on his CMO.

“I usually don’t partake as you’re well aware, Captain. But I think the occasion calls for me to break with tradition for once”, Spock exclaimed.

Now it was Kirk’s turn to raise an eyebrow for a change.

“Well, I’ll be damned...”, some drowsy mumbling reached them from the sleeping area.

“I thought you were asleep, Bones!”, Kirk hollered back, unsuccessfully attempting to suppress some laughter.

“I am! Leave me to it, will ya?”

The captain turned back to his other guest.

“Very well, Spock.”

Jim poured the Vulcan a small glass, much less than he had poured into McCoy’s glass earlier. He didn’t want to knock his already exhausted FO out. He poured himself a larger glass of course - who knew when the opportunity would arise again that Spock would be willing to have a drink with him. He raised his glass, talking quietly as not to disturb the doctor’s sleep any further.

“To good health, Spock! I’m glad you’re here.”

The Vulcan nodded in acknowledgement. He hesitated for a moment before he raised his glass.

Jim sensed that Spock was thinking about what to respond. It also didn’t escape him that the Vulcan briefly glanced over to his bed where Bones was now evidently fast asleep, as the sound of gentle snoring was filling the room.

Could it be that he detected a hint of relief in Spock’s eyes? Like he was reassured that all was well. That his captain was well. That the doctor was well.

Kirk hoped that this was a sign that the complex relationship between those two hadn’t suffered during their absence. Maybe the opposite was the case, maybe it had *improved*. He would find out soon enough, of that he was certain.

The Vulcan raised his glass, his voice calm and confident:

“So are we, Jim.”

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Kirk had managed to sleep a few good hours on his small sofa. The peeping of his alarm had just awoken him. He noted that McCoy was still occupying his bed, snoring peacefully, while Spock was sitting still like a statue at the table, his hands folded in a prayer gesture. The Vulcan was in a deep relaxation trance and had maintained exactly the same posture since soon after they had toasted their return.

Kirk checked the clock next to the sofa - the debrief in Conference Room 2 was scheduled in 30 minutes. Apart from Mr Spock, Dr McCoy and the rest of the landing party, he had requested the presence of Lieutenants Uhura, Sulu and Kyle, Lieutenant Mandelson who had acted as chief engineer during Scotty’s absence, as well as Dr M’Benga. Jim had requested the doctor attend the meeting as he anticipated that there would be some revelation as to what exactly happened to Spock during the rescue mission. Hence, having an expert in Vulcan physiology in attendance was prudent, Jim had concluded.

He walked over to his bed and gently touched the doctor’s shoulders.

“Bones, wake up. It’s time for the debrief”, Jim said not too loudly.

“What is it, Dr McCoy? Do you have anything to add?”, Kirk asked inquisitively. He had noticed the look on Bones’ face gradually becoming more and more irritated as Spock was reaching the end of his report. And he had a pretty good idea as to why that was. The First Officer still hadn’t clarified what exactly had happened to him that had made McCoy very eager to conduct a full medical on him after their return.

Spock raised an eyebrow and turned his head towards the doctor. Bones wasn’t sure what to make of the Vulcan’s look. He seemed tense, and yet somehow curious at the same time, as to what his response to Kirk’s question would be.

Bones shifted uncomfortably in his chair. All eyes were on him. He noted privately that maybe before all of this, he would have happily taken the opportunity to tell Jim *exactly* what had transpired, down to minute detail. And give him his piece of mind about Spock’s ignorance of his medical authority and pig-headedness. How, in a way, he had risked all their lives, while, well, trying to save their lives... But what good was it to rehash old arguments? If he did so, he’d have to admit that he also didn’t obey Jim’s order and dishonoured the promise he had made shortly before they left.

McCoy sighed. He was obliged to give an accurate account of what had happened. *Honesty is the best medicine...* He decided to be factual but, for a change, leave out any unnecessary emotional judgments.

“Yes, I do. Mr Spock failed to mention that he nearly died”, the doctor sounded more exhausted than exasperated.

All eyes now turned to Mr Spock. Dr M’Benga gasped audibly. Jim looked quizzingly at his FO who didn’t look like elaborating. But there was no need as McCoy continued with his account.

“Due to the low temperature I strongly advised Mr Spock to initiate the Vulcan hibernation trance as I feared that if he didn’t, he’d fall into a life-threatening coma from which I’d be unable to awake him while on the planet. He decided against my advice to rest, in order to go and look for Mr Scott and Lieutenants Brown and Monet. Shortly after locating them, he initiated the hibernation trance after all. Thanks to Ro-n-do significantly heating up the room where we were held, Spock’s bodily functions were restored. But just before this occurred, I had presumed him dead, as I couldn’t detect any vital signs at that point anymore. Thankfully, Spock awoke from his trance soon after”, he concluded his recollections.

A small, hardly audible, sigh of relief escaped Spock at that point, only audible to Kirk who was sitting next to him. The captain’s eyes hadn’t left McCoy’s face during his account. The doctor sounded uncharacteristically formal and factual. As baffling as his story had been, Jim was more concerned with what he *hadn’t* said.

“Fascinating”, Jim observed, bestowing a surprised look at the man next to him who tried his best to look unfazed.

“I mean not only is it fascinating what happened to you, Mr Spock. I also find it fascinating that you failed to mention any of this in your report”, Kirk added. There was a hardly detectable smile on his face, but the admonishing tone was clear for all to hear.

Bones exhaled audibly. He really wasn’t in the mood for Jim to make a song and dance about Spock’s tendency to omit crucial bits of information he deemed to be unimportant, that in actual fact often were the most important parts of a story. He just hoped they would get this debrief over with as soon as possible. No doubt, Jim would pester him with more questions privately and the moment would arise when he would have to come clean and reveal *everything* that had happened. Including his own nasty turns against Spock.

“I didn’t deem it to be crucial information for the purpose of this debrief, Captain”, Spock replied matter-of-factly.

Jim now turned his attention back to McCoy, looking at him expectantly. As no further elaborations were forthcoming from his CMO either, he decided to use a different tactic to get the full picture.

“I see. Dr McCoy, am I correct in assuming, that Mr Spock’s reluctance to comply with your medical advice, would have let to, shall we say, some significant protestations from your side?”

Here we go, Bones thought as his heart sank. Jim wasn’t in the mood to wait for all the juicy details. And why should he? It was his right, no, his *obligation* as captain of the Enterprise, and as their friend, to get a full account of what had transpired. And not just the bits Spock and himself had picked to share.

“What do you think, Jim? Of course it bloody did!”

So much for sticking to the ‘calm and collected’ gameplan, Bones ... Interestingly, he felt more annoyance at the captain than at Spock at this moment.

Uhura exchanged an intrigued look with Sulu. She could see in the helmsman’s eyes that he also felt that more must have transpired than what had been shared with them so far. She stole a glimpse at Scotty, Chekov and Brown. Surly, they must have witnessed most, if not all, of what had occurred between Spock and McCoy? Scotty just quietly mumbled something inaudible to himself. Chekov looked at his two rescue mission companions with some empathy. Brown impatiently crossed his arms, looking like he felt that it was time to conclude this debrief.

“On a few occasions during this assignment, the Doctor and I had diverging opinions regarding certain aspects of the mission, Captain. But I can assure you that any disputes were resolved satisfactorily”, Spock added helpfully.

Bones shot the Vulcan a quick, appreciative look. *Thanks, Spock. I couldn’t have summarised it better... and more understatedly if I tried*, he thought sarcastically.

Jim looked from Bones to Spock – the former looking slightly exasperated, the latter his usual calm and confident self. Whatever they weren’t telling him right now, he’d have to get it out of them in private. For the purpose of this debrief, nearly everything of importance had now been recorded, he was certain of that. There was no need to add anything that regarded the impact of the mission on his officers on a personal level that could be of interest to Starfleet. The only aspect that still needed to be explored was the wormhole itself, and more importantly, its future.

To his CMO and FO's relief, Kirk now turned his focus onto the wormhole and the findings Spock and Chekov had made on D-JMA.

Spock began his summary by stating that they had come very far in understanding the extremely rare phenomena that was at the heart of their recent adventure. From suspicions early on that they might be confronted with an intelligent force, to understanding its highly volatile and unpredictable energy fluctuations on both entrances, to Ensign Chekov's brilliant solution of how to make it disappear, their understanding of the wormhole had come a long way. He also noted his belief that Captain Azar's story had now been proven to be correct. Rigel 7, the planet he had re-materialised on, was Adelous 4's closest planetary neighbour and it was logical that the wormhole's exit 70 years ago was located close to where it was positioned currently.

The FO made a point of praising Chekov's simple, yet insightful solution of how to make the wormhole vanish once and for all. The Strah-leus had been very appreciative of the plan. And so would any future space traveller in the local vicinity, assured in the knowledge that they couldn't accidentally be transferred into another galaxy anymore.

Captain Kirk and the other attendees had listened attentively. Everyone shared the relief that the wormhole soon wouldn't present any danger anymore. The CO thoughtfully rubbed his chin as he thought out aloud:

"The parallels to our own human history are quite striking. The Strah-leus' problems regarding damaging waste from their energy production, reminds me of the extreme pollution on a recently industrialised Earth during the 20th and 21st century, when mankind relied heavily on damaging fossil fuels."

"Before Humans refocused their efforts on facilitating the survival of their species and begun to sufficiently protect their home planet", Spock added poignantly.

Kirk now turned towards the young navigator.

"Mr Chekov!"

"Yes, Ceptein?"

"You've conducted yourself with a high level of professionalism and have displayed some brilliant ingenuity – and doing so while recovering from a serious head injury. Thanks to your superb insights, the wormhole will no longer pose a threat to the Federation and Starfleet. Or the Strah-leus. Nor anyone else for that matter. I will therefore add a note of recommendation to your file."

Smiles on all of the attendee's faces appeared (minus Spock, but the Vulcan nodded in approval). Sulu turned towards his friend and noted bemusedly that the navigator's facial colour had turned bright red.

Jim softened his tone and bestowed an encouraging smile on the youngster.

"Well done, Pavel. I hope you can now comprehend that there's nothing you should feel guilty for. Nothing whatsoever."

Chekov had to clear his throat before he was able to speak. His mouth felt very dry all of a sudden, and his head seemed to be burning. Maybe he had caught too much sun on D-JMA?

"No, Sair. I mean, yes, Sair. I know I've done my best. And tank you, Sair", Chekow stuttered. There was so much more he wanted to express - the bravery of his comrades, his gratefulness of having encountered Ro-n-do, his gratitude towards Dr McCoy for having healed his head injury - but it would have to wait as he suddenly felt very tongue tied for some reason.

"I second the Captain's remarks, Ensign. As your departmental overseeing officer, I will also add a recommendation to your personal file."

All Pavel could muster was a shy nod. Such praise - first from the captain, and now from Mr Spock - was almost too much to bear. He felt obliged to voice his gratitude towards his most senior officers. He mentally pulled himself together, took a deep breath and ordered himself to speak as calmly as possible.

"Zank you, Mr Spock. And zank you to Mr Scott, Lieutenant Brown and Dr McCoy. Witout all of your support, I don't know how I'd survived. Witout Dr McCoy's care I tink I wouldn't have lasted long", the Russian said quietly as he nodded appreciatively towards the doctor.

"Don't mention it, Pavel. That's my job. You're a tough little feller and I hope you now feel that you've passed your first test on this mission with flying colours!", the CMO replied with a generous smile.

"I do, Doctor. I really do. I don't tink I was ever so scared in my life but if I could experience it all again, I would!", Pavel Chekov beamed, his voice confident again, the red blush slowly disappearing from his face.

In that moment, Jim Kirk came to realise that he'd found a crewman in the young Russian that would serve with him until the end of his career.

Just as Kirk was about to conclude the debriefing session, engineering officer Mendelson, who, so far, had remained mostly silent, leaned forward in his seat.

"Out of curiosity, what happened to the Hoffmann 7 probe? I know it's defunct, but did you just leave it behind?"

Spock raised an eyebrow and exchanged a quick look with Mr Scott who just crossed his arms and put on his innocent *'I'm not sure what you are talking about'* face. Chekov and Brown did their best to suppress a grin. Kirk noticed the men's reluctance to elaborate, so he turned towards Spock, with an expectant look.

"Good point, Mr Mendelson. I had nearly forgotten about the probe. Mr Spock?"

“As stated, the Hoffmann 7 probe is defunct. Therefore, we didn’t see any issue in leaving it behind.”

Kirk could tell from Spock’s scarce response that there was probably more to it. Everyone in the room knew what concerns lied behind Mendelson’s question. But since the probe was defunct, there wasn’t anything else to add to the mission report, Kirk decided.

The captain ended the debrief by praising everyone in attendance. The landing party 5 for their bravery, resilience and ingenuity, and the other officers for their persistence and professionalism in never giving up on their missing shipmates. Kirk ordered Lieutenant Uhura to send her report to Starfleet within the hour, including his strong recommendation to close this sector of space for the next six months. After that period, he recommended measurements should be taken again on local energy fluctuations. If the wormhole had disappeared by then, the area could be opened up again for all space travel.

As Jim stepped into the corridor, where Chekov, Scotty, Mendelson and Brown were chatting animatedly, he caught up with Spock and McCoy before they disappeared to get some more well deserved rest. He instructed them to meet him at his quarters later in the evening. Bones and Spock exchanged a knowing look. Their friend’s curiosity would have to be quenched.

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Around 8 hours later, McCoy and Spock arrived in Kirk’s quarters. He had ordered some more herbal tea for the Vulcan and another glass of Saurian brandy, served in his most treasured chalice, was waiting for Bones. They got comfortable around Kirk’s desk. Before either of the visitors could have a sip of their preferred beverage, the captain cut right to the chase.

“So, what else was happening down there that you haven’t told me about yet?”, Kirk asked, intrigued.

“Down there, Captain?”, Spock played innocent.

“You know what I mean, Spock. Down there in *Andromeda!*”, Jim shot back with an impatient look, but his eyes were shining warmly.

Bones took a small sip from the Saurian liquid. He didn’t feel reluctant anymore to give Jim an account of what they hadn’t quite told him yet - this was a private conversation between friends and it meant that he wouldn’t have to go on official record stating that he believed Spock acted recklessly in defying his medical instructions. Yes, it wouldn’t be comfortable to admit to his own wrongdoings, especially when it came to disobeying the captain’s order he had given them just before they had sat off. But he was well aware that he wouldn’t manage to hold back vital information from Jim forever.

“I believe we have already accounted for everything of importance during the debrief, Captain”, Spock offered, rather unhelpfully.

“Not *everything*”, Kirk responded with an eager look.

Bones sighed. It wouldn’t be easy for Jim to get Spock to talk about their arguments. The master of omitting was at work again. It would fall to him to let the cat out of the bag.

Kirk crossed his arms, still looking expectantly at his First Officer.

“If you are referring to the Hoffmann 7 probe, Captain, all I can add is that the Strah-leus requested for it to be left behind, despite its current state. Since it is defunct, I didn’t object to their request as no regulations would be broken by doing so. For the purpose of transparency though, I have to note that the Strah-leus have speculated that one day their technological advances might allow them to repair, and alter, the probe and make it capable of intergalactic transmissions. My understanding is, there are some inquisitive minds amongst them, that deem it possible that their race will one day develop curiosity towards other species and might favour contact with the Federation.”

“Aha”, Kirk commented dryly, leaning back in his chair. There wasn’t much point pursuing Spock at that moment, Jim decided, so he directed his inquisitive look at McCoy instead who sighed deeply.

“I’m sorry, Spock. Sooner or later Jim will get to the truth anyway, so isn’t it just logical to get it over with *now*?”

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow but refrained from commenting further, which was more of a surprise to the captain than to the doctor. Intrigued, Kirk looked from one to the other.

“The truth is, Jim, and forgive me that I didn’t want to put this on the official record earlier, both Spock and I disobeyed the last order you gave us before we left”, McCoy said, regret clearly audible in his voice.

So, I was right... of course there were arguments. Jim was glad that Bones admitted to it.

“We both broke our promise to you. We *didn’t* get on for the most part. And neither of us did make much of an attempt to do so. Until the very end, when circumstances forced us to get over ourselves and find common ground on how to deal with the difficult choices we had to make.”

Spock was listening attentively, the fingertips of both hands meeting in front of his chest, the contemplative gesture indicating that McCoy’s words were making him reflect.

“For that I’m incredibly sorry, Jim. I did let you down in that regard. And at one point, I was in danger of letting the whole landing party, including myself, down as well”, after a heavy sigh, “And for that I’m sorry, too. I said some pretty harsh things to Spock in the heat of the moment... you know how I can be at times...”

Oh yes, I do... Jim thought with exasperation and bemusement in equal measure.

“There were things that needed to be said at the time, but I should have told him privately and not in front of the others. I have apologised to him for that.”

Bones paused. Jim was listening intently, his eyes serious and focused. The doctor thought that he couldn't blame his friend for being mad at him. But he knew Jim well enough to understand that his sense of fairness would forbid him to already admonish him... first, he'd have to hear Spock's side of the story as well. Which would be interesting to hear, but Bones trusted the FO to respond in kind and match his own openness by refraining from his usual obfuscation.

"One thing though that I'm not going to apologise for is that I tried my damned hardest to prevent Spock from nearly killing himself. He disobeyed my medical orders to rest to protect him from falling into a hypothermia induced coma, by pulling rank on me. So that was that", Bones looked over at Spock, who was still staring ahead into the void.

"You know how *he* is as well, Jim... always ready to sacrifice himself. If he had died, we wouldn't be sitting here now", McCoy ended his confession with a defeated look. He wasn't proud on a lot of it, but it had happened, and it couldn't be changed.

A gentle, small smile appeared on Jim's lips as he nodded appreciatively towards McCoy.

"Thank you, Bones. I can't imagine how difficult all of this must have been for you... for both of you. I know you always had each other's, and the landing party's safety, on your mind. Of that I have no doubt. Thank you for your honesty", Jim now turned to the FO who had just let a small sigh escape his lips, the first sound he had made in minutes.

"Spock?", Jim intoned softly.

The Vulcan lowered his hands and rested them in his lap. He looked from the captain, to McCoy and back at Kirk. His voice sounded calm, but uncharacteristically quiet.

"The Doctor has given a truthful account. We are both guilty of having disobeyed your order, Jim. Of having broken the promise we gave you. I also would like to offer my sincere apology for that."

"Accepted", Jim replied, empathy shining in his eyes.

Spock now glanced at McCoy and Kirk thought he could detect regret in the Vulcan's expression.

"Furthermore, I'm also guilty of having directed unjustified accusations against the Doctor. He had confronted me with some truths I hadn't been prepared to admit to myself yet. But once he had done so, I was able to give the only possible order to the landing party that was morally, emotionally *and* logically sound - that each man should make the final choice for themselves. I'm grateful that Dr McCoy possessed such clarity in emotional *and* logical insight at that moment, to lead me to this conclusion. We own our lives to it."

Bones had to have another sip of brandy... a healthy sip. He wasn't used to Spock's praise. Would this be something he would have to get used to from now on, he wondered as he swallowed the burning, yet soothing, liquid. Probably not... *hold your horses, old boy!*

Now it was Kirk's turn to raise an eyebrow. Spock praising and agreeing with Bones? The doctor admitting to his own hot-headedness and apologizing to Spock? ... what in heavens was going on? Yes, they'd been through hell and back together, but did it explain such a fundamental change in their relationship? Spock and Bones had been in life and death situations before, and yet they always seemed to come out of them unchanged, still suspicious of each other and constantly questioning the other's motives or behaviours.

"Thank you, Spock. Thank you, both. Admitting to one's mistakes is never easy. Neither for a Human, nor for a Vulcan, or a half-Vulcan/half-Human, I should imagine", Kirk stated, expressing his empathy for what they had gone through with a kind smile.

"But being able to do so, has always been a quality in my book, which more often than not is outweighing the shortcomings of having committed the mistake in the first place. Like I believe applies in this situation as well", Kirk concluded empathetically.

Spock never ceased to be impressed by Jim's inherent wisdom that always seemed to strike a unique balance between emotional and logical considerations. As he looked over at McCoy he could tell that he shared his appreciation of their superior's words.

Bones raised his glass, silently indicating a toast to what the CO had just said. Jim responded in kind, raising his glass as well.

After he had taken a sip, Kirk shook his head, a bewildered smile on his features.

"Admitting mistakes is one thing, but you two agreeing with each other, *praising* each other even... you both must have come to some insights during all of this!"

Spock understood that the captain was still baffled about what they had just told him. He felt inclined to be even more forthcoming to help his friend understand. He looked over to the doctor who responded with a bemused smile that seemed to say '*Go on Spock, you tell him!*'. For emphasis, McCoy crossed his arms and looked at him expectantly.

Since he had broken the promise he had made to Jim before they left, Spock deemed it prudent, that he should make up for such transgression now. And the only logical way to do so, was by offering something of equal significance in return. He would do something, he very rarely did. He had only ever done on a few occasions in his life. And usually, it had occurred with *only* Jim present. But now he would, and could, include the doctor: He would - voluntarily - talk about his *feelings*.

Spock took a deep breath before he started to speak. His words came out slower than usual, as if he was weighing up every syllable, but he spoke with conviction.

"At first, I hadn't been aware of being guided purely by my emotions when I intended to order the men to attempt to return to the ship. Unlike Dr McCoy, I had completely disregarded the logical solution to the conundrum we faced - to seek out certain life on the planet the Strah-leus had suggested to us. My strong preference was to attempt beaming back, and, I was prepared to enforce my personal preference onto the others. I wanted to protect you, our captain, from potentially grieving your men should our lives have been lost in the process. The Doctor

made me aware of this, and more. I wanted to protect myself from losing and grieving the life I have here, on the Enterprise, grieving my purpose, my future. My friendship with you, Jim.”

Kirk had to take a deep breath. He hadn't expected such an emotional admission by Spock. What's more, he realised how wrong his initial assumptions had been - he had assumed that it would be McCoy who would be steered by his emotions and advocate attempting to return to the ship while Spock, naturally, would support the logical choice of seeking out the planet and certain survival. And yet, he had assumed *correctly* that it was Bones who had helped Spock to make the only humane and ethically sound decision - to not come down on either side of the argument, but let all of the men decide for themselves which option they wanted to take. It was a baffling revelation, which made him see his two friends in a new light. He thought he knew them better than anyone else, and yet here he was, realising that there was still so much more to learn about them.

Jim smiled benevolently at Spock, expressing his gratefulness for his openness. Before he had a chance to think of what to respond, it was Bones' turn to continue with unexpected revelations, his words concluding his and Spock's admissions, truly coming full circle.

“As you can imagine it was child's play to get Spock to admit any of this, Jim”, he grinned amusedly, “but I've must have done a good job, because he now has told you as well - without me having to threaten him to pull those pointed ears of his if he doesn't!”

Spock's eyebrows shot up into his hairline but he remained silent.

McCoy turned serious again. This wasn't easy, but it needed saying in front of Jim. He couldn't let a Vulcan outdo him in emotional honesty.

“Truth is, Jim, the moment Spock told us that he'd attempt beaming back to the ship, I knew that was the only option available to me as well. And for exactly the same reasons he has just given. My life is here. Serving on the Enterprise, under your command. My duty is to you as our captain, to the crew of this ship, to Starfleet. Hell, what would you have done without me, without my constant good advice?”, Bones managed a brief smile before turning solemn again, “My friendship to you means the world to me, Jim. I didn't want to miss out on it, just like Spock wasn't prepared to miss out on it either.”

Jim nodded. He understood. All too well.

“And, believe it or not, because I still struggle to comprehend it myself with the best will in the world - choosing a life on that unknown planet *without* our pointed eared friend, for some, bizarre reason, would never have been appealing to me.”

“Naturally, Doctor”, Spock shot back, dead-pan as ever. Jim broke into a wide smile at this. Thank God, they hadn't changed *that* much after all!

Rather than indulging the Vulcan like he usually would at this point, Bones felt there was one final thing to say before everything could go back to normal.

“For a *friend* he truly is, Jim. I know that now”, he added quietly, but sincerely.

Spock responded with a slow, confirming nod, his eyes conveying without hesitation that he felt the same towards the doctor.

Jim reached out across the desk, gently touching an arm of each of his friends, his eyes shining with affection. But before he could be overwhelmed by all the emotions that flooded his heart in that moment - joy, relief and gratefulness - he quickly poured Bones, and Spock, another glass of Saurian brandy.

“Gentlemen, if this doesn't call for another toast, I don't know what does! *To friendship!*”

“*To friendship*”, Bones echoed contently while he lifted his glass.

Spock hesitated for a moment before he followed suit. He was about to break with his custom to not drink alcohol for the second time in the space of only a few hours. But it was a worthy occasion to do so.

“The author eludes me at this moment, but I believe he was of Terran origin, who said:

A fool, who doesn't nourish friendships, for its fruits are eternal.”

Clink – the sound of glass on glass as three brandy chalices meet.

The End

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