Iron

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by SLWalker

Summary

(2267) - After it became clear the direction everything was heading and that there would be no other possible rescue, Spock had quickly but calmly implemented a plan and then proceeded to-- *remove* Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott from Argelian custody.

With a phaser.

Notes

I have many Opinions™ about how things played out in Wolf in the Fold, but one thing I've always appreciated was that Spock was the only senior officer who didn't waver once on supporting Scotty. So, this is a canon divergence that supposes that they never got back to the *Enterprise* to find out that Jack the Ripper was using our poor engineer as a murder puppet, and that sentence was passed before they could do anything to stop it. Also, you can thank -- or blame -- DaraOakwise for prompting this. And also, this is written for Gen Prompt Bingo, Round 24: Torture.

Chapter 1

The shuttlecraft smelled overwhelmingly of blood, a sharp iron stench that activated some primitive instinct that the human side of his heritage insisted meant *danger.*

Fortunately, his ability to quell that instinct with reason and logic remained intact, though Spock would acknowledge that he would be hard pressed to explain his *actions* through the filter of either of those things. Absconding with a shuttlecraft and a convicted murderer after sabotaging one's own ship would -- did -- require stretches in rationale that he was relieved to defer to some less-critical time.

The course he had set for Rigel IV, on the other hand, was a willful eschewing of any logic whatsoever; he would be expected to evade on a parabolic course, so Spock aimed like an arrow right for the world and set the *Galileo II* for its best possible speed, counting on his sabotage of the *Enterprise* to give them enough running room to escape capture.

He had kept current up to the minute from the *Enterprise's* command chair with the events on Argelius II as they unfolded, once he was aware there was trouble. He had also made several pertinent suggestions about how they might go about their investigation in a more scientific manner than via the empathic abilities of Prefect Jaris's wife Sybo, but the administrator, Hengist, was relentlessly insistent that the investigation remain on the planet's surface.

And then Sybo was murdered as well.

After it became clear the direction everything was heading and that there would be no other possible rescue, Spock had quickly but calmly implemented a plan and then proceeded to-- *remove* Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott from Argelian custody.

With a phaser.

Spock had arrived, he believed, in the metaphorical nick of time; Hengist and three other contracted administrators had harried Scott back into the corner of the cell they were planning to execute him in, jabbing at him with antique bladed weapons, and it was only going to be a matter of time before they managed to overpower or fatally wound the man. Had they been trained law enforcement professionals with experience in handling prisoners, likely there would have already been a very different outcome; as it happened, though, they had failed to account for two things:

The first being that Scott couldn't be expected to sit politely through execution via slow torture; the administrators, clumsy and ill-prepared and no doubt mistaking his prior willingness to submit to the investigation as passiveness, didn't count on him fighting back. If Spock truly believed Scott was guilty of the crimes he was accused of, he would have found considerably less satisfaction than he did in the fact that all of Scott's wounds were defensive or offensive in nature thus far, and that even backed into the corner, his teeth were bared and he was clearly prepared to fight to his last breath.

The second thing they had failed to account for was that Scott had a colleague of seventeen years watching who could recognize a grave miscarriage of justice in progress and would act on that.

(Something about Hengist's demeanor had unsettled Spock greatly as he approached the cell behind them; the would-be executioner seemed almost gleeful, which seemed at odds with the horror he should have been feeling. At least-- he seemed gleeful all the way up until the phaser beam hit him on heavy stun, with his accomplices following him into unconsciousness quickly thereafter.)

"The timing of this operation leaves very little margin for error, Mister Scott," Spock had said, putting his phaser back on his belt and pulling out the two communicators he had brought with him; he was not surprised that Scott stared at him blankly, doubtless caught off guard by the sudden change of circumstance. Instead of awaiting an answer, Spock flipped open the first communicator and turned the dial to emit the prearranged signal bridged to one of the cargo transporter platforms on the *Enterprise's* main hangar deck, then held it out. "Take this."

Scott did, seemingly on reflex, and then vanished into the transporter beam; Spock used his own communicator to activate the second platform and followed. From there, it was a simple enough matter to herd Scott into the *Galileo II*; Spock took advantage of the deck officer's confusion to order the bay cleared and depressurized, and commanded the doors open himself from the shuttle's console.

By the time any word arrived from Argelius II that something had happened, they were gone.

Now, ten hours out from Rigel IV at current speed -- the fastest they could go and make it with their fuel -- he set the autopilot and turned to see to his crewmate.

Scott had stayed in the back section of the shuttle and had made no move whatsoever beyond that, once they were aboard. Instead, sitting against the bulkhead with knees drawn up and elbows resting on them, he was holding his head with both hands.

He was still bleeding sluggishly from a number of defensive wounds on his forearms, red tunic sleeves shredded to ribbons, gold braid stained. No less telling, his knuckles were barked open and swollen, too. The pain from those injuries had to be considerable, but aside an intermittent shudder, he was as still as a statue.

Spock silently retrieved the first aid kit and the general use tricorder from the storage compartment, but purposefully scuffed his boots on the thin carpet of the shuttle's deck before sitting cross-legged in front of Scott, though he didn't reach out yet.

It would not be the first time one of them had to perform first aid for the other. It was also not the first (or fiftieth) time they had been in dire circumstances together.

It wasn't even the first time they had broken the law in concert, for that matter; the last time was when they had coordinated in taking Captain Pike to Talos IV. Spock had intentionally shielded Scott from any suspicion, knowing the engineer's record had enough black marks in it to

put his life and career at considerably more risk, but they had both worked together on that, driven on by their long association and trust in one another and by their deep and shared loyalty for Pike.

(It didn't fail to occur to Spock that this would be the second time that he will have chosen a course of action that Jim Kirk would feel as a betrayal; another concern he would have to defer, though a-- *considerably* more difficult one.)

"We are currently nine hours and fifty-four minutes from Rigel IV," Spock said, more to break the silence than to convey the information, as he opened up the kit. It was a standard field kit and not nearly as extensive as was needed here, but still more than the one originally equipped. After their crash not quite a year before, Scott had insisted on every shuttle having an expanded selection of emergency supplies aboard, enough for eight people for a week; now, his foresight would hopefully benefit him. "Is your head troubling you?"

He didn't expect an answer to the question; its primary purpose was to see if Scott could -- or would -- engage even so far as acknowledgement.

It didn't seem, at first, that Scott would rouse out of whatever dissociative state he was in, but even as Spock activated the tricorder, he lifted his head out of his hands, though he more seemed to look *through* Spock at first.

Spock waited, patiently, letting the tricorder take readings; long moments passed, but eventually the engineer managed to pull his focus back in enough for eye contact and ask, "What--?" in a dry whisper.

"I had said that we're nine hours and now fifty-two minutes from Rigel IV. And I asked if your head was troubling you," Spock repeated, looking down at the readings; despite the amount of blood the man was wearing, and a number of medically significant lacerations -- and other peripheral issues -- Scott wasn't in any immediate danger. Spock looked back up again, raising one eyebrow slightly. "Is it?"

"I don't--" Scott cut himself off and looked around, moving as if on a delay between his decision to and actual ability. "How--"

Spock waited again, this time for clarification, but when none came he explained, "Argelius II is a very recent addition to the Federation and is still in the period of legal transition from their own laws to new ones which adhere to the Federation's Universal Sentient Rights framework. I am left to assume that the legal attachés who did the bulk of the work on the world's admittance failed to audit their current laws far enough back. Thus, this-- barbarism still stood as law."

Unfortunately, none of that seemed to be an answer; at least, not one the wounded engineer was looking for. He shook his head, gaze wandering the shuttle before he looked back at Spock again; despite it being a struggle, he said, "I thought that was-- that they'd--" Clearly frustrated with the difficulty of communicating, he bared his teeth, head ticking to the side, then managed to ask, "Did the captain send ye?"

"No," Spock admitted, because lying would serve no purpose and was something he preferred to avoid. "However, if everything goes as I planned, he should be filing for an injunction with the Federation's sector courts as we speak. While fleeing will complicate your acquittal, it shouldn't ultimately preclude it."

Spock had left that as an instruction, one he specifically tied to the release of the *Enterprise's* computers, that they call and file for that on Scott's behalf; he didn't believe either Jim or McCoy had suspected that the time between sentencing and execution was nearly nonexistent, else he might have tried approaching them about it before taking the course he did. No doubt, as Spock was rescuing the *Enterprise's* chief engineer, they had been wracking their minds searching for a solution; he believed they would have worked it out eventually.

Given timing, they would have come up with an answer for a corpse.

That seemed to finally crack through the mental fog Scott had been in. His expression was one of a dawning but unmistakable horror. "What did ye do? Did ye--" He blinked a few times and then made to get up (to go where, Spock couldn't begin to guess, so he reached out and caught Scott by the upper arms to stall the attempt), and when he wasn't able to, he went back to staring at Spock, wide-eyed. "--ye broke me out? With a phaser?!"

"A regrettable necessity," Spock answered, by way of reassurance, letting go once he was certain that the man wasn't going to try to stand again. At least, not before first aid was performed.

"I might have murdered two people." Scott again went to do something inadvisable -- this time reaching for his head -- and again Spock stopped him. "Why would ye *do* that? *Risk* that?"

The *hurtterrorconfusionconcern* was so intense, where their skin met, that Spock had to stifle a grimace. "Two," he echoed, in query, managing to keep a steady tone despite the emotional bombardment. He ignored the two questions Scott asked; the answers weren't currently pertinent. Or, more accurately, they were entirely pertinent but could also be deferred. "Not Sybo?"

"No." A clear beam of *certainty* there was a relief, cutting through the maelstrom. Scott shook his head, finally letting the tension out of his arms. "There was somethin' else. Between us. I tried to get to her, to help, but somethin' awful was in the way, and then it was gone and I caught her as she was fallin'--" The engineer cut himself off again, looking at his bloodstained hands, *shock* and *horror* returning as the predominant emotions.

Though, it would have been impossible to determine what of that blood was Sybo's and what of it belonged to Scott himself.

But the fact of the third murder being committed by some unknown entity was a decidedly interesting development. Spock let go of Scott's hands, then turned to unpacking the first aid kit. "Did you tell the investigators this?"

From most people, he would have expected an affirmative answer; from Scott, though, Spock wasn't surprised at the head-shake for a response. He wondered, as he pulled on gloves, whether Jim and McCoy had been expecting the man to self-advocate under those conditions and didn't care for the realization that they very well may have.

That they didn't realize how unlikely that was, and therefore advocate for him.

Something to contemplate another time.

"This will be unpleasant," he warned, offering his own hand out, relieved for the barrier the gloves provided but also wishing that there was more he could offer his colleague, in terms of support.

Scott gave over his left arm, looking more lost and exhausted than anything else, shaking his head once again -- this time seemingly only to himself -- before retreating back into silence.

The first aid kit wasn't in any way extensive enough, but it was better than nothing; Spock would have preferred access to a tissue-regenerator, given the depth and nature of some of those wounds, but instead he had to make do with more mechanical means. The most important thing was the sterilizing beam; even then, though, he was concerned about contamination. Antibiotics would be a necessity, after they landed. Beyond how deep some of those cuts had gone, Spock doubted that the ancient instruments intended to execute a man had been sterilized before the attempt to was made.

Scott sat through it silently, for the most part; Spock was not surprised by that, either, having never known him to react much outwardly to being wounded. Occasionally he would flinch and pull back, dragging in a shorter and sharper breath, but mostly he just endured.

His tunic, badly damaged, was balled up and set aside, leaving him in his black undershirt. The tunic being evidence, perhaps, if it was needed.

Once he was bandaged as well as he could be, given the limited tools and supplies, Spock had inflated one of the emergency air mattresses, pulled out all four of the blankets, and had ordered Scott to rest; privately, Spock was concerned about the lack of any pushback. Or, really, much of any reaction. But he returned to the pilot's seat nonetheless, planning ahead for how they would approach Rigel IV, particularly if a subspace warning had gotten ahead of them.

It was a little less than two hours after that when Scott spoke; in the silence of the shuttle, his quiet voice carried: "I beat a Klingon to death with a spanner, once." There was a pause, then he added, "And if I were put back in time, and had to do it over, I'd still do the same again. If I was able to do that, Mister Spock--"

He didn't finish that sentence, but his voice had pulled tight by the end of it.

Spock hadn't known that. But even hearing it now, for the first time, he felt no fear; he could immediately glean at least some of the context, and felt he knew enough of this man to extend the benefit of the doubt beyond that.

He took a moment to order his thoughts, and then he asked, "Do you remember when you stopped me, outside of the briefing room, during the incident with the Romulans? What you said there?"

There was a brief, no doubt confused pause, then Scott answered, "I said that we should save a sample o' that shielding from Outpost 4, send it back to HQ and have them run a comparison on their sample o' the *Enterprise's* hull plating from that attack back in '55."

Spock nodded; Scott had indeed started with nearly those exact words, and Spock had readily agreed, having already thought of the same himself. But that hadn't been the end of the conversation. "What did you say after that?"

There was a very long several moments, then Scott said, barely above a whisper, "I said that I don't know if I have it left in me, to fight another war."

It had been a close and *valid* reminder of what Spock's suggestion that they attack the Romulans might mean, not only for the Federation, but for individuals. Including one person he'd known for a very long time, and who had not gotten through the last war unscathed.

Spock had not changed his course then, but he had marked that moment in memory as something vital he must not lose sight of, and as an equally important insight into the thoughts of the man who said it.

"Should you somehow prove to have a murderous streak in you that I've been unaware of these past seventeen years, Mister Scott, I am confident in my ability to defend myself," Spock said, without turning away from the console. "But I don't believe that you do, and I value your life far above a barbaric, outdated law being applied after a disgrace of a trial. Now, I suggest you make another attempt to rest while the opportunity remains; nothing will be easier once we land."

It was an answer to the two questions Scott had asked earlier, but one that went far beyond them, too.

There was another period of silence, albeit shorter, then Scott just said, "Thank you."

They didn't say -- nor need to say -- anything else.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Landing on Rigel IV was complicated and made no less so by word traveling ahead of them.

Argelius's government had issued a very broad-reaching arrest warrant for Scott; that was not too surprising, and even if Jim did file for an injunction, the Federation court would have wanted him held in custody. Coming out of warp meant picking up the Federation's public broadcast, which Spock had intentionally routed to come up on the console for reading, thinking it would be both unkind and unwise to make Scott have to listen to it. The engineer had been hounded enough for one day; a reminder he was still being hunted seemed pointless and cruel.

Notably, though, there was no word in that broadcast whatsoever about Spock or the shuttle he'd taken.

None of the three administrators he'd stunned had seen him, but Spock knew instantly that his not being mentioned was a choice Jim Kirk had made. And one he would not be able to keep making indefinitely.

Spock did not assume, of course, that they were not being *looked for*. Just that it had not become a formal hunt by the *Enterprise* to encompass both he and Scott, and that so far, Jim was shielding his career, his identity and his actions from both the Argelians and their own superiors.

Rigel IV occupied a somewhat loose place in the Federation's structure; it was not a member world, but parts of it were under Federation oversight. Other parts were an economic free-trade zone. So, it was one of the relatively few places where Orion traders and Klingon market buyers could be found on one archipelago, and where Starfleet had recruitment offices and the Federation had embassies on another.

The lines, of course, blurred sometimes. As they often did.

Landing the shuttle was its own challenge; Spock had not had time to take less conspicuous clothing or to access his accounts and transfer credits to physical credit chips. Landing in Federation territory with a Starfleet shuttle would require him to signal identification and his purpose, but landing in the free trade zone would attract a great deal of unwanted attention and might result in a stolen shuttlecraft.

There was no easy answer, but decisions had to be made. So, reluctantly, he roused Scott -- he doubted the man had been more than dozing, but still regretted the disturbance -- and asked if there was any quick way to modify the shuttle's engine signature enough to confuse orbiting sensors. It only took Scott about fifteen minutes of tinkering to do just that; he used the shuttle's own sensors as something of a scrambler.

Spock aimed for the nightside and then promptly brought the shuttle down in a (very quiet and controlled) crash landing into the ocean.

"Why're we scuttlin' a shuttlecraft?" Scott asked, just incredulous enough that Spock was pleased the man was engaged for the moment, given that was a very transient state right now.

"To evade the inevitable pursuit for as long as possible," Spock answered; he had already packed everything that could be of use to them into the waterproof survival tote bag. All that was left after that was to leap, puncture the air bladders holding the shuttle up with a survival knife, and make for shore. "There's no wilderness left on this world within which to hide it, absent the ocean."

The water here wasn't deep; deep enough, five and a half meters, but not so much so that the *Galileo II* would be unsalvageable. Spock had set the shuttle's emergency Starfleet beacon to activate in two standard days, which was the amount of time he estimated it would take to get him and Scott hidden, accounting for possible setbacks. The salt water wasn't going to do anything particularly kind to the shuttle's electronics, but it would be repairable. In the meantime, they were in the middle of a kelp forest, which would further hide it from prying eyes.

It *was* a fairly long swim to land on the beach, but the sea was warm here, and the waterproof tote bag would also act as a life preserver if they needed a rest.

"Take this," Spock said, passing the tote off to Scott, who stood at the side hatch looking beleaguered. A fair state for the man to be in, Spock thought; the past standard day had been hard on the engineer, and that after recovering from injury for weeks before it. "Are you capable of swimming?"

Scott did as he was told, clutching the tote in bandaged arms spotted red while he looked off as if in thought. Then he said, a little clumsily, "Rafts. I shoulda added rafts to the survival gear."

"Can you swim?" Spock asked again, patiently; while time was counting down to when the *Enterprise* -- far faster than one of her shuttles -- came into orbit, he felt no need to rush a wounded and dazed man.

"Aye." Scott shook his head, hard enough that it was obviously an attempt to clear it and not a negative answer; he winced and then

straightened up. "Not sure how fast I'll be, though."

"Speed isn't required," Spock answered, opening the hatch; outside, the night air was balmy and the sky was clear above. The primary moon illuminated the calm sea surrounding them and their path to shore; the second one further out was an ocean moon itself and added dynamic colors to the environment that Spock could find pleasing even in this situation. "That tote will also serve as a flotation device. Should you run out of stamina, it will hold your head above water," he added, turning back to the engineer.

All Starfleet officers and enlisted had to be able to swim; it was part of their Basic Training, the six month course that every direct enrollment went through regardless of future position. Spock knew how to swim before that thanks to his mother, though it wasn't something he enjoyed. He had struggled with it initially, even in Basic, but now was proficient enough for this. Moreover, though, he had stamina his human colleague didn't even in peak condition, thanks to his Vulcan heritage.

"Boots," Scott said, after a moment of looking at Spock; he set the bag aside and sat down to pull his service boots off, then his socks, jaw knotted visibly at asking that much work of his forearms.

"I hadn't considered that," Spock admitted, following suit, as the shuttle bobbed gently in the mild swells. Once they had gotten them off, he took the tote long enough to pack both pairs of boots and socks in it, then pushed it back over. "Are you ready?"

"I don't know," Scott answered, after a beat, as both of them sat like matching chess pieces; the same team, the same postures, mirrored.

Spock looked at their feet, pale tinged pink and pale tinged green, then looked up and asked what was probably the more important -- maybe even most important -- question: "Do you trust me?"

In all their long years as shipmates, he'd never asked Scott that before; had never before needed to. They certainly trusted one another professionally, and there were layers where that had grown roots into their more personal lives regardless of intention, but the kind of trust he asked for now was well beyond that.

It was a deeper and altogether more dangerous kind.

He also knew, on some level, that he might be the only person still left aboard the *Enterprise* who *could* ask for it.

They regarded one another for a moment, Spock hanging on the end of the question mark, and Scott weighing it carefully. But then Scott just blinked and nodded once and said, "Aye, I do."

Simple words, but heavy. Spock nudged the tote over further and said, "Jump, I'll be right behind you."

"Do you remember," Spock asked, as they swam, "that mission to retrieve the downed probe pieces from Olara SR4?"

Their forward momentum was halting, but the tide was with them right now and would be for several hours. The stretch of beach they would land on, if all went according to plan, was quiet enough that it would not be watched closely, and even if someone spotted them, they might look like nothing more than people preferring to swim at night. There was a free-trade town beyond the scattering of residences there, then an array of other settlements along a road stringing between archipelagos like a necklace chain between jewels, which would eventually culminate in them landing in the free city Ahiri, which bordered the Federation city of Thanov.

Spock had not studied Rigel IV extensively, and he knew that he wasn't going to be able to ask much more of his colleague than getting to land and under some sort of cover, but he did have an understanding of how to move around rougher areas and elements thanks to Captain Pike. And he did have enough information in the shuttle's computer banks to plot their evasion strategy.

"The one where ye broke yer leg," Scott answered, hanging onto that survival tote and not making much in the way of forward progress right now. "And almost froze to death."

Spock hummed an acknowledgment. "If I remember correctly," and he did, "the freezing was mutual, in no small part because you dove into the river after me."

Scott pried his eyes open, pulling his chin off of the tote that was barely holding him up right now. "And we still didn't find six percent o' the damned thing."

"Indeed. I remember the paperwork we were subjected to because of that six percent." Spock treaded closer; the moon was low enough now to have turned a rich golden color. "More accurately, though, it was five point eight nine four percent."

That got a surprised little laugh out of Scott, who then shook his head with a hint of a grin. "Leave it to you to have worked out the exact percentage we missed of a probe that was scattered across sixteen klicks, Mister Spock."

Still, the laughter seemed to rally the engineer, who readjusted his grip on the tote and went back to kicking; even considering how merciless the past day had been, though, Scott typically had a kind of dynamism about him that was only rarely repressed, a kind of driven energy that manifested in anything from regular overwork, to the way he would rock from heel to toe and bounce slightly on the balls of his feet when otherwise stationary. That same dynamism wasn't in evidence *now*, though, and Spock was concerned by that fact.

It could very well have been exhaustion, but if Spock were to lend any credence to intuition, he would venture it was something more malevolent at work on his colleague.

"It was fortunate that Chief Barry was willing to take on programming the scanners to ascertain that the five point eight nine four percent we didn't find was all inert. While the advanced alloys were considerably beyond the native population's development, their chances of finding them were minuscule," Spock continued, keeping pace with Scott.

"Aye. She saved us havin' to go back and find the rest of it." Scott heaved out a breath. "Have we even gotten any closer to shore? It doesna seem like it."

"We have. I could tell you with reasonable accuracy how far, but I would not be able to go into fractional percentages."

"No, no. I'd rather ye didn't." A beat. "What has ye bringin' up that mission, though? It was what, twelve years ago?"

Spock nodded agreement without offering a more precise amount of time; still, the answer was a little more complicated than he might have intended when he did bring it up, so he didn't give it right away, choosing instead to analyze it.

He remembered the agonizingly painful shock of falling into a river when the bank gave way further back than it would have been expected to, landing amidst chunks of ice being chased by a rapid current. He remembered his leg getting trapped in a fork of some submerged obstacle and the spiral fracture that came of the torsion there, vicious enough to break even dense bones grown in higher gravity. He remembered clinging to the boulder that was holding the obstacle there, but also holding his head above the water.

Given Vulcan memory, all of that was recalled easily and with clarity, but the part which carried an emotional resonance wasn't any of those.

It was then-Lieutenant Scott, assistant chief engineer of the *Enterprise*, taking only moments to eye the bank, eye the current, drop his pack and gear, and then leap into the river after Spock, landing in a tangle of branches and then, once he could breathe again, breaking free of them to come downriver to where Spock was trapped.

He did this despite Spock's shouted attempt to order him not to; while they were the same rank, it was Spock's mission and command. Both at the time and later, Spock chose to believe that Scott simply hadn't been able to hear him over the roar of the water; both at the time and later, he harbored a secret suspicion that Scott had indeed heard him and just outright ignored the order.

Spock remembered the wrenching pain as the engineer managed to get him loose, some of that by strategic kicking, but given the other option was drowning, or freezing and then drowning, Spock could hold no judgment for it. And he remembered the teeth-chattering apologies, and the way the engineer towed him to shore, fighting the current, even though Spock was only able to help him when they reached the bank.

They both barely got out of it with their lives. But of the two of them, Scott was the one who had had hypothermia and had survived it in the past, and while he was struggling and stumbling, he not only got them out of the water, but then went back for his pack, brought it back and managed to set up the emergency shelter and heating elements in the trees despite nearly useless hands, just enough to get the two of them through until they could warm up and recover.

They stayed huddled, shivering close together, though with no skin contact, which would have been too much for Spock in that context; by the time morning came, they had finally stopped shivering enough to doze and try to recover some energy.

Spock's leg was swollen and deeply painful, but he was able to endure the following first aid. Then Scott had spent the day with him drying clothes, setting up their regular, more elaborate camping setup and heaters and bridging the larger shelter to the emergency one, rather than forcing Spock to move from one to another. He kept a tricorder running to warn them if anything or anyone came in proximity and he slept intermittently between chores.

The day after that, the engineer had taken up the mission again solo, heading out and bringing back pieces of the probe, bringing back water for purification as needed, and never complained once about the doubled workload. For his part, Spock made their food and made Scott cups of hot tea from his own stock, which was quietly appreciated; after that, different small tea collections became a gift they exchanged every year on the anniversary of them first boarding the *Enterprise.*

Aside injury and a leap into the river, though, that mission was unremarkable. One of many, many away missions they had together, sometimes just them, often part of a larger group.

"I knew that I wouldn't die there," Spock said, finally; it roused Scott again, who was swimming but clearly taxed, and who may have forgotten he'd even asked the question. "Even when I was in the river, clinging to that boulder, I knew that I wasn't going to die because I trusted that you would do everything in your power to prevent it."

There was a quiet snort there, after a long moment where Scott was no doubt absorbing that. "That's givin' me a fair bit o' credit there, Mister Spock. Especially since I'm pretty sure I made that leg worse by kickin' it free."

Spock could hear the twelve years past apologetic wince in Scott's voice as he talked about it, too. Yet it still didn't change the facts. "I made a full recovery, Mister Scott; the transient pain was necessary." He thought, then just finished, "I don't know if I can keep you from all harm in this, but I will do everything in my power to prevent it just the same."

It was not their usual method of communication, but it was sincere and truthful nonetheless. And after another pause, Scott just said, quietly, "I know."

It was gratitude, not necessarily agreement, but it was enough for now.