

## World On Fire

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## World On Fire

by [lah\\_mrh](#)

### Summary

When history is altered so that James Kirk died on Tarsus, only Spock remembers the way things should be. With the Federation now at war with the Klingons, he must figure out what has happened and get his captain back before all hope is lost.

### Notes

Originally posted in 2014. Inspired by The Sarah Jane Adventures episode "Whatever Happened to Sarah Jane?"

2246

*A young boy, barely thirteen years of age, lies bleeding on the ground. Another boy bends over him, tears streaming down his face as he presses his hands against his companion's chest. "Come on," he whispers fiercely. "Please. You have to... you can't leave me like this. We're a team."*

*The first boy doesn't respond. He's cold all over, and everything is becoming fuzzy round the edges. Even the pain is almost gone. I'm dying, he thinks with a last spark of fear. This is what dying feels like. He wishes that he could see his parents again, tell them he loves them, say goodbye. He wishes he'd never come here. But most of all he wishes he wasn't dying. I'm only thirteen, he thinks desperately. It isn't fair.*

*He says it out loud, blood bubbling between his lips. "It isn't fair."*

*"No, it is not," says a voice. For a moment he thinks it's his friend, but the other boy seems frozen in place, his expression caught mid-sob. Something moves in his peripheral vision, and he turns his head to see three beings, inhumanly pale and clad in long silver robes, staring down at him.*

*"It is not 'fair'," one of them says. "Life seldom is. But we can make yours a little fairer, if you wish." He – she? – tilts his head. "We can save you," he says. "But it will come at a price."*

*The boy stares at him, wondering if he's serious. But what do I have to lose? he thinks darkly. "I don't care," he blurts desperately. "Help me. Stop this."*

*The three of them continue to stare. "What would you give us in return?" the leader asks.*

*"Anything."*

*"Even your friend?"*

*The boy's heart seems to stutter for a moment, and fear shoots through him, clouding his mind. All he knows is that he wants is to live, and these beings can make it possible. "Yes," he whispers desperately. "Please."*

*The beings glance at each other, then, with a nod, the leader raises his hands.*

*A second later the world shifts, and suddenly he is pressing bloody hands to a wound, while his friend lies there dying. He swears he sees recognition in his friend's eyes a second before they go blank.*

*He looks around, but the beings – whatever they were – are gone. He looks down again at his friend's lifeless body, then gets up and starts running.*

*He doesn't ever look back.*

\* \* \* \* \*

2269

Vulcans don't celebrate birthdays. When Spock was very small, his mother used to celebrate his; she would buy him gifts and make his favourite meals, and once even baked a cake. But his father disapproved, and Spock began to realise that no other Vulcans engaged in the custom, and after that she stopped trying.

His birthday became like any other Vulcan's; an arbitrary date upon which his age increases by a year, that has little to no relevance to his everyday life. And it stays that way for more than thirty years until, three point six years into their five year mission, he enters his captain's cabin for a routine game of chess and finds himself confronted by a brightly-wrapped package and a cupcake with a candle in it.

"Happy Birthday," Kirk says, smiling.

"Vulcans do not celebrate birthdays," Spock replies, still staring at the desk with its tiny cake. He was not aware Kirk even knew when his birthday was. He has certainly never told him.

"Yes, I know," Kirk says affectionately. "But humans do." He steps forward, spreading his hands and giving Spock an almost pleading look. "I thought perhaps you'd consider humouring me, just this once?"

Spock runs through the list of reasons why he should say no; there is no logic to such a celebration, he has not celebrated his birthday for more than thirty years and sees no need to start now, if he capitulates to Kirk's request it will only encourage him to do more things like this in the future....

But saying yes will make Kirk happy, and all of Spock's logical arguments fall apart around that one fact. "Very well," he says, and Kirk's smile grows almost blinding.

"Wonderful," he says, and reaches out to touch Spock's arm. "And don't worry, I haven't planned anything elaborate. Just a quick acknowledgement, and then we can move on to chess."

He motions to Spock to sit down, then picks up a lighter and lights the candle. "Traditionally you're supposed to have one for each year," he says, as the candle begins to burn, "but I couldn't find enough candles." He grins and adds, "Besides, I was afraid I'd set off the fire suppression systems."

"One is more than sufficient," Spock assures him. "And I am expected to blow it out?" He has vague memories of his mother encouraging him in such an endeavour.

Kirk nods. "You're supposed to make a wish first, but you can skip that part if you want."

Spock considers it, but decides if he is going along with this ritual he may as well go all the way. He searches his mind for something he could wish for, and finally decides on wishing that Kirk would be more careful during landing parties. His captain has, at times, an appalling lack of concern for his own safety.

"I wish that my captain would stop throwing himself recklessly into danger," he states, then obediently blows out the candle.

Kirk frowns at him. "That wasn't exactly what I meant," he says.

Spock studies him innocently. "You asked me to make a wish."

For a moment Kirk looks as though he is going to argue, then he shakes his head and begins to laugh. "All right," he says, "I'll try to be more careful. But only if you do the same." He tilts his head, studying Spock. "I'm not the only one who 'throws himself recklessly into danger'."

"I have no idea what you mean," Spock replies, and Kirk grins.

"Of course you don't," he says, then shakes his head. "Anyway, we seem to be getting sidetracked." He picks up a small package wrapped in gold paper and hands it to Spock. "Can't have a birthday without gifts."

It is heavier than Spock expected, and he turns it over in his hands, measuring the weight of it. "You did not have to do this," he says.

"I know," Kirk says, "but it's something I was planning to give you anyway. This just seemed like a good opportunity." He nods at the package in Spock's hands. "Open it."

Carefully Spock peels off the paper and then a layer of packaging material to reveal a small glass cube. It feels warm to the touch and he examines it closely, searching for any opening or power source. He finds none.

"Where did you get it?" he asks, glancing up at Kirk.

Kirk leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "Remember our last mission? Tarrania? On our last day, one of the priestesses there took me aside and gave me that. She wouldn't say what it was for, just that it was a gift and I should give it to the person I trusted most." He smiles and adds gently, "That's you, if you hadn't figured it out."

Warmth blooms in Spock's chest at the words. "I am honoured," he says. "Thank you."

Kirk shrugs, still smiling. "Don't mention it." He stretches and sits back in his chair. "So, chess?"

Kirk wins the first game – *what, you think I'll go easy on you just because it's your birthday?* – and they are a good half-hour or so into the second when he lets out a yawn.

At the second yawn, Spock suggests finishing the game off tomorrow.

Kirk stretches his arms above his head and nods. "Maybe you're right," he says. "Bones has been complaining about my sleep schedule."

He pushes his chair back and stands. Spock does likewise, and they just stare at each other for a moment before Spock picks up his tiny cube. "Thank you for this," he says, hoping Kirk will understand he is not just referring to the gift.

From Kirk's smile, he understands perfectly. "You're welcome, Mister Spock. I'll see you for breakfast tomorrow?"

Spock nods. "Indeed." He tilts his head in acknowledgement before heading through their shared bathroom and into his own cabin, leaving Kirk alone to rest.

Once back in his own rooms, he places the cube carefully on the bedside table and allows himself a brief moment of fondness. Perhaps there are merits to celebrating one's birthday after all, if one has a friend to share it with.

\* \* \*

*Two weeks later*

Spock watches with a frown as Kirk moves his bishop directly into the path of one of Spock's knights. He has grown used to Kirk's somewhat illogical method of play, but his past few moves have gone past 'illogical' and into 'not even trying'.

"Your mind does not seem to be on the game, Jim," he says.

Kirk blinks, looking slightly confused, then looks at the chessboard as if seeing it for the first time. "Oh," he says. "I'm not giving you much of a challenge tonight, am I?" He rubs his hands over his face. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. I just can't seem to concentrate."

Spock studies him with mild concern. "Perhaps you are fatigued," he suggests.

Kirk shakes his head. "I don't feel tired, more... restless." He frowns. "If I tell you something, do you promise to keep it to yourself?"

"Of course," Spock replies.

Kirk sits back in his chair. "I've been having these dreams," he admits. "Nightmares, really." He shudders suddenly, and Spock reaches out instinctively, laying a hand on his arm and squeezing gently.

"Tell me," he says softly.

Kirk gives him a grateful smile and sits up a little straighter. "I dream we're at war with the Klingons, and we're losing. Planets falling to them, one by one, and they're getting stronger, while we get weaker. And then they go after Earth." His smile becomes a grimace. "The Federation in chaos, billions of people dead and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

Spock's instinct is to reassure Kirk that it is only a dream, but his friend is a rational man and will already know that. Instead he asks, "When did the dreams start?"

Kirk frowns. "A few days ago." He shakes his head. "I don't know why they started now. We haven't encountered the Klingons in months."

"I find there is rarely any logic to such things," Spock says. "But if these dreams are disturbing your rest, I know of some Vulcan meditative techniques that may help."

Kirk gives him a grateful look. "Thank you, I'd appreciate it. If I go to Bones he'll just give me pills, and I don't want that."

Spock nods. His own experiences with the doctor's various medications have been less than positive. "Would you like to start now?" he asks.

Kirk nods, glancing at the chessboard. "Doesn't look like I'm going to win this, so by all means, Mister Spock." He flicks over the white king and stands, spreading his hands with a smile. "Teach me your techniques."

Spock puts on some incense and indicates Kirk to sit down on the floor. Kirk does so. Spock sits down opposite so that their knees almost touch and experiences a moment of intense affection as he looks at Kirk. He has not meditated with another person since he was a child, but far from feeling like an imposition, this feels... pleasant. There is a rightness to it that he would not have expected.

He pushes the thought aside and takes a deep breath before beginning to take his friend through some of the meditation techniques he was taught as a child.

He has to adapt them slightly to account for human physiology, but Kirk proves to be an excellent student, and quickly grasps the basics of what Spock is trying to teach him. They practice for an hour, and by the end of it Kirk seems much happier and much more relaxed than he was when they started. "Thanks, Spock," he says. "I feel much better now. I'll try out your techniques again before I go to sleep and see if they help."

He yawns suddenly, covering his mouth with his arm. Spock raises an eyebrow. "I believe the saying is 'there is no time like the present'," he

says.

Kirk shakes his head. "All right, all right," he grumbles good-naturedly. "I guess I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Jim," Spock replies.

With a final smile, Kirk leaves. Spock extinguishes the incense and begins tidying away the chessboard. His gaze falls on the small glass cube Kirk gave him for his birthday. He still has not figured out what powers it, but every test has indicated that, whatever it is, it is benign. Spock reaches out and brushes it with his fingers. For him the value of the gift is not in what it is as much as what it represents; that, of all the people in the universe, he is the one Kirk trusts the most. It is the most precious gift Spock has ever been given, and he hopes that someday Kirk will give him the chance to repay it.

He pulls his hand away and finishes tidying up, then sits down at his computer, intending to get in a few hours of work before retiring.

\* \* \*

At 0200, Spock retires for the night. At exactly 0252 and seven seconds, unnoticed by anyone on board, the universe *shifts* and the cube on Spock's desk turns solid black.

\* \* \*

Spock wakes up the next morning with the strange sense that he has forgotten something. He cannot imagine what it might be; Vulcans have eidetic memory, and the only times Spock has forgotten anything has been when he has been ill or received a head injury, neither of which, to his knowledge, has happened recently.

He goes through his morning meditation, taking the opportunity to check his system for any anomalies, but finds nothing amiss. Afterwards he checks through his schedule for the week, his inbox, and his to-do list. Finding no anomalies there, either, he reasons that if by some strange event he has forgotten something, it cannot be that important.

He showers and dresses before making his way to the mess hall for breakfast. He orders fruit and toast, as usual, takes a seat in the far corner, as usual, and pulls out his PADD to check through the latest reports on Klingon activity.

Gradually the feeling of having forgotten something begins to fade, and by the time he rises to go to the bridge Spock has put it completely out of his mind.

Captain Ellison is already on the bridge when Spock arrives. "Good morning, Commander," he says.

"Captain," Spock returns, before making his way to his station. He does not see the point of superfluous greetings, especially ones that are demonstrably untrue. With the war the way it is, there are very few 'good' mornings nowadays.

They are currently en route to a colony on the borders of Klingon space. The colony was founded a good two light years from the neutral zone, but the Klingons have taken so much ground over the past few years that it is now in imminent danger of being overtaken.

The *Enterprise's* job is to protect the colony until reinforcements can arrive to assist in evacuation. Or, at least, that is the official story. What no one except the senior staff is aware of is their other purpose for being there – unknown to the Klingons, the colony is a research base for new weapons, and they are to keep those weapons out of Klingon hands by any means necessary.

Spock has tried very hard not to think about the implications of that statement.

Even at Warp Six, they will not reach the colony for another five point seven hours, but preparations keep them busy. Spock spends the time researching all the information they have on the colony and the surrounding area, running simulation after simulation in order to best create a plan of defence.

When he has run through all the simulations he can think of, he goes over them with Captain Ellison and Mister Scott, making adjustments in accord with their comments and suggestions.

"Well, gentlemen," Ellison says grimly, when they're finished. "Let's hope this works, shall we?"

Neither Spock nor Scott reply; they all know the consequences of failure. Scott goes back to his engines, and Spock and Ellison return to the bridge. They will be reaching the colony within the hour, and they should be there to greet the colonists when they arrive.

They are all on alert as they drop out of warp, wondering if the Klingons will have beaten them there. Thankfully, Spock can detect no other ships in the vicinity. It seems that for once random chance has operated in their favour. It is not a situation he is accustomed to.

"Hail the colony," Ellison orders, and a second later the leader of the colony, Doctor Stevens, appears on the viewscreen. She is around fifty standard years, dark brown hair just starting to turn grey with age.

She gives them a tired smile. "Captain Ellison, I presume. Thank you for coming."

"I only wish it were under better circumstances," Ellison returns. "May we beam down and meet with you?"

"Yes," she says, "of course. I'll send you the coordinates of our meeting hall."

"Then we'll see you in a few minutes," Ellison replies.

Doctor Stevens nods and signs off. A few seconds later, Uhura reports that the coordinates have come through.

"Send them down to the transporter room," Ellison tells her. "And call Mister Scott up to the bridge." Standing, he turns to Spock. "Mister Spock, you're with me."

They beam down and, as promised, arrive in the meeting hall to be greeted by Doctor Stevens and several of her staff. "Gentlemen, welcome," she says, then gestures them to follow her. "If you'll come with me, we can talk privately in my office."

Spock and Ellison exchange glances before following. Once they reach Stevens's office, she locks the door and turns to them with a grim look on her face. "Let's cut the bullshit," she says. "I know the stakes here, and all I can say is whatever plan you boys have thought up to keep the Klingons from taking this planet better be pretty damn fantastic, because I also know what I'll have to do if it fails."

Ellison takes a long, slow breath and nods. "Mister Spock?"

Spock steps forward and begins laying out the plan they have concocted, occasionally referring to diagrams and pictures on his PADD. Stevens listens, then makes a few suggestions of her own. When they are all satisfied, she sighs and shakes her head. "We'd better hope this works," she says.

She goes off to organise her staff, and Spock and Ellison beam back to the Enterprise to make their own arrangements.

"Do you ever wonder if it's all worth it?" Ellison asks, as he pulls out his communicator to call for beam up. "I joined Starfleet to help people, not... this."

It is a question Spock has asked himself many times, but it is not one he expected Ellison to voice. The captain has always seemed accepting of the militaristic turn Starfleet has taken, and it is a position he and Spock have clashed on in the past. "We do what we must," he says.

"Yes," Ellison replies. "We must all do our duty."

There is a tone to his voice that Spock can't identify, and he is oddly relieved when Ellison flips open his communicator, signalling that their brief conversation is over.

\* \* \*

Back on the ship, Spock begins organising beam up and accommodation for as many of the colony members as the Enterprise can hold. Mister Scott and his staff are helping to rig up a force field over that part of the planet, but Spock is uncertain it will stand up to the might of the Klingons, and pushes hard to find places for as many people as possible.

He finds his mind wandering back to Ellison's words as he works, wondering what he could have meant by them. Spock and Ellison have developed an effective working relationship over the years, but they are not close, and Spock is used to finding human thought processes confusing and illogical. But somehow this seems different, almost as though he is missing something. He is reminded of the feeling from this morning, of having forgotten something, and is disturbed. He does not like not knowing things.

Still, time is of the essence, so with an effort he pushes the thought aside and applies all his concentration to his work. He can puzzle over his captain's behaviour later, if there is time.

(He doesn't quite succeed in convincing himself he meant *when*.)

\* \* \*

It is two hours past the official end of Spock's shift when he finally gets off duty. Things have gone as well as could be expected – they've beamed up as many non-vital personnel as they can, and the force field is in place to protect those left behind. They are as prepared as they'll ever be, and there is still no sign of the Klingons.

Spock makes his way back to his quarters, intending to shower and then meditate for a while. He has needed to meditate more and more recently as the war with the Klingons causes him to do things that go against his beliefs as a Vulcan.

More than once he has considered leaving Starfleet, but imagining his father's reaction if he were to return home always stops him. He has little to keep him in Starfleet, but he has even less to look forward to if he goes back to Vulcan.

Spock sits down at his desk to remove his boots, but he has barely unfastened the first when his attention is caught by something on the desk. It is a small cube, perhaps two centimetres in diameter, and it is solid black.

Spock stares at it, frowning. It seems oddly familiar, and yet he is certain he has never seen it before. He has no memory of acquiring it, and no way of explaining how it has ended up in his quarters. Still frowning, he reaches out and picks it up.

And freezes as he is overtaken by memories.

*-The new captain materialises on the transporter platform with a smile. He seems impossibly young, and Spock wishes, once more, that Captain Pike had not decided to step down, that Number One had not left for command of the Exeter. He is at heart a creature of habit, and does not relish having to become accustomed to a whole new captain, especially one who is a stranger to him. Still, he pushes down his reservations and steps forward. "Welcome aboard, Captain."*

*-He is playing chess against the computer when the new captain appears beside him. "Mind if I play?" Spock is too surprised to turn him down. Kirk does not win, but he comes closer than almost anyone Spock has ever played. When he immediately challenges Spock to a rematch, Spock is intrigued enough to agree-*

*-The captain is grieving the loss of his friend. Spock does not fully understand the emotion, having never had a friend of his own, but he knows Lieutenant Commander Mitchell was important to Kirk, and he has a sudden urge to try and ease Kirk's pain. "I... felt for him too," he says, in*

*response to Kirk's amendment to Mitchell's record, and is rewarded with a warm smile. Perhaps he might have a friend after all-*

*-He is hiding in his quarters – he would like to call it meditating, or reviewing events, but in truth it is hiding – unwilling to deal with the loss of control caused by the Psi-2000 virus. Rationally, Spock knows that he is not responsible for his actions, any more than Sulu, or Chapel, or Riley, but it does not make the memories less unpleasant. The door buzzes and he attempts to ignore it, but it buzzes again. Answering it reveals Kirk, asking if he would like a game of chess. It isn't until halfway through the game that Spock realises this is Kirk's way of trying to reassure him, and the realisation helps in a way meditation and logic could not-*

*-Spock's blood is burning, a green haze forming in front of his eyes. The woman that was meant to be his has rejected him, has picked another to fight against him. His body screams at him to kill the interloper and claim what is rightfully his, but the challenger is friend, brother, and his mind rebels. He fights with everything in him to resist the call of his biology; believing, even in the grips of the fever, that saving his life at the cost of his friend's is a cost too high to bear-*

*-He is pulling at the bars, trying to get out, get to Kirk. His friend is in danger and he is trapped, helpless. Doctor McCoy chatters in the background but Spock ignores him until the doctor presses him against the wall and forces him to listen. The rant hits home, effortlessly exposing and targeting Spock's weak points, until... "You wouldn't know what to do with a warm decent feeling." And something in Spock alights, because on that, at least, the doctor could not be more wrong-*

*-The Tholians are building a giant web of energy around the ship to entrap the Enterprise, and Spock cannot stop them, cannot reason with them. Logic tells him to take the ship and leave, before they are trapped for good, but Kirk is lost in the interphase and the idea of leaving him behind is unthinkable. McCoy scolds him for being insufficiently emotional and Spock has to fight not to respond that emotion is precisely the problem. No matter what happens he will save Kirk, logic or no logic-*

*-"What does your telepathic mind tell you now?" The woman in front of him bears little resemblance to Captain Kirk, but Spock reaches out and finds a mind so familiar, warm and welcoming, that it cannot belong to anyone else-*

Spock comes out of the memories and drops the cube as if it has burned him. He feels ill. Kirk. How could he have forgotten Kirk? Somehow the universe has changed, taking with it the best friend Spock has ever had, and he did not even realise it.

The last memory comes back to him. *You are closer to the captain than anyone in the universe.* If that is true, how could he have forgotten him so completely?

Spock's gaze drops to the cube, and he notices it has turned clear. He wonders if this is why the Tarranian priestess gave Kirk the cube, why she told him to give it to someone he trusts. Well, whatever the reason, he is grateful. Something is deeply wrong here, and he intends to fix it.

Forgetting about his shower, he turns on the computer and begins to research.

He starts with the Starfleet database, but a search for "James Kirk" brings up only one result, a man who retired from service in 2196. Possibly an ancestor, but certainly not the man he is familiar with.

Expanding the search to "Kirk" brings up thirty-two results, among them "George Kirk" and "Winona Kirk (née Davis)"; Kirk's parents. But, try as he might, Spock cannot find any record of Kirk himself.

Moving away from the Starfleet database, he expands the search to the entirety of the Galactic Web. "James Kirk" brings up several million results, and he frowns before attempting to whittle them down. "James Tiberius Kirk" does better, giving him a birth announcement in a Riverside paper. Curious, Spock clicks over to the paper and searches for any other references.

The very first headline gives him his answers, the stark words standing out against the screen; *Thirteen-year-old killed in colony tragedy.*

Spock clicks through and reads the short article, swallowing hard as he reaches the end. Kirk has never told him the details of what he survived on Tarsus, but it appears that, in this reality, he was not as lucky.

A horrible wrongness spreads through Spock. Kirk cannot be dead. It is unthinkable. He would... he would *know* if Kirk were dead.

That thought centres him. He would know. Closing his eyes, he reaches for the golden thread in his mind, the one that shouldn't exist but neither he or Kirk ever wanted to get rid of. To his immense relief, it is still there, albeit blocked somehow.

Spock opens his eyes. Kirk is still alive. Somewhere. And if Kirk is still alive there is hope that things can be put back the way they were.

He shuts the computer off and considers his plans. If he's going to find out how to fix this, the first thing he's going to need is help.

He picks up the cube and heads out of his quarters towards sickbay.

Sickbay is almost deserted when he arrives, everyone busy resting up while they still can. Spock makes his way through to McCoy's office and taps carefully on the door.

"Yeah, what?" is the grumpy reply.

"It is Spock," Spock replies. "I wish to speak with you."

The door slides open to reveal McCoy sitting at his desk, working. He does not look happy.

"What do you want?" he asks tersely.

Spock steps inside, letting the door close behind him, and clasps his hands behind his back. "I wish to ascertain whether you have any memory of a man called James Kirk," he says.

Part of him hopes to be called an idiot and told that *of course I know who Jim is, are you crazy?* But it doesn't happen. Instead, McCoy frowns. "Doesn't ring a bell," he says. "Why, should I?"

"Yes," Spock says bluntly. "Doctor," he continues, before McCoy can respond, "would you perhaps do me the favour of holding this for a moment?" He holds out the cube.

McCoy stares at it with suspicion. "Why, what is it?"

"Nothing that will harm you, I assure you."

McCoy gives him a dubious look, but takes the cube. Spock watches him carefully, but nothing happens.

"Why're you looking at me like that?" McCoy asks. "What is this thing anyway?" He turns the cube over in his hand, examining it.

"It is not important," Spock says, firmly suppressing any sense of disappointment. "You are certain you do not know anyone called James Kirk?"

"No," McCoy says. "Why? Who is he?"

He has put the cube down on his desk, and Spock picks it up, weighing it in his hand for a moment. "A friend," he says.

McCoy snorts. "You don't have any friends." Spock is used to McCoy's jibes and pointed comments by now, but the doctor's obvious bitter dismissal is still surprising to him. Evidently Kirk's absence has had an effect here as well.

"No," Spock says softly. "It appears I do not." He steps forward, steeling himself. "Doctor," he says slowly, "what would you say if I told you the universe had been altered? That the world is not the way it should be?"

McCoy stares at him. "I'd ask whether you've been getting into Scotty's hooch. What the hell d'you mean the world isn't the way it should be?"

Spock tilts his head. "I mean what I said, Doctor. I believe the universe to have been altered, possibly by persons or beings unknown. In the world I am aware of, there is no war with the Klingons, and James Kirk is captain of the Enterprise."

"That's ridiculous," McCoy tells him. "Jacob Ellison is the captain, and has been for the past four years. Before that it was Chris Pike, and before that Robert April. I don't know who this Kirk guy is, but he's never been captain."

"That is because in this universe he died at the age of thirteen," Spock says. "I believe this to be, if not *the* point of divergence, then at least a consequence of whatever was."

McCoy studies Spock with the wary look of one confronting a wild animal that may attack at any moment. "I'd accuse you of playing some kind of joke on me, but far as I know Vulcans don't play jokes. But I hope for both our sakes you're not serious, because the last thing this ship needs right now is its second in command apparently having some kind of breakdown."

"I am not having a breakdown," Spock tells him. "I would be willing to back up my claims, if you would allow me." He raises a hand.

McCoy recoils, his reaction as intense as if Spock had whipped out a phaser and threatened to shoot him. "Don't you dare!" he all but snarls. "Keep your damn Vulcan voodoo away from me or I swear you'll regret it."

Spock lowers his hand. "I intended only to share my memories with you, Doctor, so that you may see for yourself."

McCoy stands, hands braced on the table, and glares at Spock. "No," he says. "Not a chance. And I'm done humouring you. You have ten seconds to get out of my office before I have you committed."

Spock stands there, unsure how to react. "Doctor--"

McCoy cuts him off. "Ten," he begins in a clipped tone. "Nine. Eight."

Realising the choice has been made for him, and with no wish to be confined to sickbay, Spock leaves. It appears he will have to handle this situation alone.

\* \* \*

Back in his room, Spock paces back and forth, trying to figure out what to do next. The world is wrong. The world is *wrong*, and Kirk is missing, and he is the only person who is aware of it, which means he is the only person who has any chance of fixing it.

Finally he realises that getting worked up will accomplish nothing, and his best option at present is to meditate and attempt to bring himself back to a calmer state of mind.

He lights some incense and lays out his meditation mat, then sinks down to the floor, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. He concentrates on shutting out all outside distractions, focusing inwards until everything fades away and he is left with nothing but his own tangled thoughts.

He starts by identifying and cataloguing his emotions. Fear, for both Kirk and himself; frustration that McCoy would not believe him; anger at himself for failing to adequately make his point; intense curiosity at what could have possibly caused the universe to change so completely. All of these are brought out, examined, and filed carefully away.

When he is calm again, all emotions safely under control, he allows himself to prod carefully at the link to Kirk. Still there, still silent.

Or so he thought. Just then he feels a disturbance in the link, followed by a very faint, *Spock?*

Spock's eyes jerk open in shock. That felt like Kirk. Heart pounding, he focuses all of his energy on the link and sends back, *Jim?*

The response is slightly stronger this time. *Spock!*

Spock firmly suppressed the joy that threatens to overwhelm him. It is vital that he keep a clear mind. *Jim*, he sends back, *where are you?*

*I don't know. But it's dark, and I can't move. It feels like the time I got trapped in Tholian space.* The thought is accompanied by a surge of emotion, but Spock is not surprised. It was a deeply stressful and unpleasant time for both of them. *I'm so glad you can hear me. I've been so alone.*

*What is the last thing you remember?*

*Going to bed, in my quarters. I don't know how long ago that was. How long have I been gone?*

*I am not certain*, Spock admits. *It has been two point one hours since I noticed your absence, but I estimate it could have happened any time between our chess game last night and 0715 this morning.*

*I take it you don't know who could have taken me?*

It is only then that it occurs to Spock that Kirk likely does not know the full scope of the situation. *No, Jim, and I am afraid the situation is more complicated than you realise. I cannot explain it, but somehow I am the only one who remembers you. Even the computer banks state that you died as a child.*

*You're saying I don't exist?!* The words are accompanied by such a wave of shock and disbelief that Spock has to draw back in order not to become overwhelmed.

*Not exactly. If you did not exist we would not be having this conversation. I am saying the universe has altered, and as yet I am unsure how to put things right.* A memory comes back to Spock. *Do you remember the incident with the Guardian of Forever? I believe a similar situation resulted from my failure to save myself.*

There is silence in response, and for one, heart-stopping moment, Spock worries that the connection has been lost. But then, almost wryly, *Maybe, but I can assure you there are no people from my childhood bearing a striking resemblance to either of us.*

A conclusion that Spock has already come to. From the little Kirk has told him about Tarsus, it seems like his survival was due to nothing more than his own ingenuity and stubbornness. He is certain Kirk would have mentioned any unusual adult assistance.

*So if no one remembers me, who do they think is the captain? You?*

*No. The captain is a man called Jacob Ellison.*

Kirk's reaction to his words is unprecedented. *Jacob Ellison? You're certain? How old is he?* The questions come thick and fast, confusing Spock with their intensity.

*Around thirty-five, I believe*, he sends back. *Why?*

Kirk's mind-voice is almost frantic. *It's him. It has to be him. He's the key. He-* Kirk cuts himself off suddenly, fear surging through the link. *Something's coming. I can feel it. Help me, Spock. I-*

The link cuts off mid word, setting Spock's heart pounding. *Jim? Jim!* he sends back, as strongly as he can manage, but the connection has gone silent. Not broken – and Spock is endlessly grateful for that mercy – but blocked in some way that he can't break through.

Shakily, he uncurls himself and goes to sit back in front of his computer, still listening intently for any sign of Kirk. There is none. It appears his only option now is to try and act on the few pieces of information Kirk was able to pass on before something stopped him.

He turns on the computer and begins looking for information on Captain Ellison.

As before, he begins with the Starfleet database. But unlike before, his search immediately bears fruit. Jacob Ellison has a long record, filled with medals, and commendations, and the distinction of being the youngest captain in Starfleet history. It appears he has taken over Kirk's life in more ways than one.

Spock starts at the beginning and reads through the entire file, looking for anything that might help him uncover the truth.

Some time later he closes the file, forcing down a wave of frustration. Apart from his record bearing a disturbing resemblance to Kirk's, there is nothing about Ellison that would confirm Kirk's belief that he is the key.

Spock sits back in his chair, thinking. Kirk's reaction implies that he knew Ellison. Perhaps researching that connection would give him the information he needs.

Renewed, Spock dives back into the archives, and it isn't long before he finds a connection. Ellison's mother, a Commodore Roberta Ellison, once served as Chief Navigator on the USS *Endeavour*. The captain of which was one George Kirk. According to the information Spock has found, George and Roberta were friends, and it is not out of the realm of possibility that their sons were similarly acquainted.

A little more digging shows that he was correct, and turns up a picture of a young James Kirk and a young Ellison with their arms around each other. But it also appears that there are no pictures or descriptions of the two families together past Kirk's death.

Following what Kirk would refer to as a "hunch", he brings up the list of survivors of the Tarsus IV massacre and searches for Ellison's name.



Sure enough, he gets a match. Evidently the strain of one of their sons surviving and one not was too much for the friendship between the two families. Spock wonders briefly if that was the case in his own reality.

Spock pauses briefly, considering, then brings up a different list, one he has consulted before, during the situation with Anton Karidian. Last time there were nine names, including James Kirk. This time there are still nine, and Spock feels no surprise at the revelation that the ninth name, instead of James Kirk, is Jacob Ellison.

Spock sits back in his chair and thinks over what he has learned. Fact: The James Kirk of this reality is dead, having died on Tarsus at the age of thirteen. Fact: The Jacob Ellison of this reality was also on Tarsus and has taken Kirk's place as one of the nine people who had the dubious privilege of seeing Kodos in person and living to talk about it. Inference: The change that created this timeline occurred on Tarsus and involved Ellison surviving instead of Kirk.

Frowning, Spock continues. Fact: The path of Ellison's career bears a startling resemblance to that of Kirk's. Fact: Kirk is somewhere unknown and being menaced by a being or beings, also unknown. Inference: This situation was not an accident.

In which case there is a good chance that Ellison is aware of the situation, and possibly responsible for it. Conclusion: He must confront Ellison.

Decision made, Spock turns off the computer and stands. As he once told Kirk, there is no time like the present.

"Captain" Ellison is not in his quarters, but it doesn't take long for Spock to track him down to the observation deck.

Spock hesitates for a second at the door before going in, struck by a memory. One of the first conversations he and Kirk ever had took place here, the result of a chance meeting. Up until then Spock had been dubious about the admiralty's choice of commander, but the look on Kirk's face as he looked out at the stars and talked about the beauty and wonder of the universe touched something deep inside Spock and made him want to get to know the other man better. It is not a decision he has ever regretted.

Spock suppresses a sigh and pushes the memory away. He is here for a reason; to find out Ellison's role in all of this, and use that information to get Kirk back. If he is going to save his friend, he cannot allow sentimentality to interfere. Bracing himself, he steps forward and enters the room.

Ellison is staring out at the stars, his hands clasped behind his back. He turns as Spock approaches. "Ah," he says. "Spock. You know, I was just thinking about you."

Spock raises an eyebrow. "Indeed?" He wonders if perhaps Ellison has been monitoring him. If so, the element of surprise will have been lost.

But all Ellison says is, "Yes, I have some ideas for the colony I'd like to run by you."

Spock stares at him, but his expression doesn't change from mild interest. Aside from the stress lines on his forehead, which could be caused by the importance and volatility of their mission, there is no sign he is hiding anything, let alone the disappearance of a celebrated Starfleet captain and associated massive changes in the timeline.

A lesser man might begin to doubt himself, but Spock has made a decision and intends to see it through. "What do you know of James Kirk?" he asks abruptly.

Ellison's expression flickers. It's barely noticeable – a fraction of a second at most – and if Spock hadn't been watching carefully he would have missed it. As it is, he catches enough to avoid being fooled by the look of blank confusion that crosses Ellison's face. "Nothing," he says with a shrug. "Why? Who was he?"

Spock fixes him with a look. "I believe you know very well who he was," he says. "He was, and *is*, the captain of this ship, a position you have usurped."

Ellison gives a short laugh. "Listen, Spock, I think you should go see McCoy. You're obviously not feeling well."

"I am fine," Spock tells him. "More so than you will be if you proceed in feigning ignorance." He stares at Ellison. "You were on Tarsus IV," he says, and holds up a hand as Ellison starts to respond. "James Kirk was also there. According to the records, he died on Tarsus."

"A lot of people died on Tarsus," Ellison replies bitterly.

"Yes," Spock agrees. "But James Kirk was not meant to be one of them."

Ellison's eyes flash with anger. "Oh?" he asks sharply. "And who are you to say who was *meant* to die? What makes this James Kirk more deserving of life than anyone else?"

"Nothing," Spock replies. "I do not seek to determine who is more deserving. I seek only to restore the timeline, and I believe that you are the key."

Ellison snorts. "Me? That's ridiculous. Everything you're saying is insane."

"I do not think so," Spock says. He takes a step forward, lowering his voice intently. "I understand why you are reluctant to admit to it," he says, allowing a note of compassion to enter his voice. "From what I have inferred, were the universe the way it should be, you would be dead, and if that is the case, I have sympathy for you. But surely you must understand that your life is not worth the many lives that have and will be lost because of James Kirk's absence."

He turns to the stars, studying them almost absently. "You spoke of protecting the colony," he says. "Were the universe the way it should be, there would be no need to protect the colony from the Klingons, as we would not be at war with them."

He glances at Ellison and adds, "This is not the way things should be, and I believe you know that. Please, help me to put things right."

Once again, something flickers in Ellison's eyes, but then his expression hardens. "I'll say this one more time," he says, "I don't know what you're talking about. And if you don't stop talking nonsense I'll have you locked up."

"That is unfortunate," Spock tells him. "I had hoped I could convince you to work with me. It would make everything so much simpler." He gives Ellison a hard look and adds, "But make no mistake; with or without your help, I *will* set things back the way they were."

With that, he turns and strides out of the room, mind already at work on a new plan. He meant what he said to Ellison; he *will* fix this mess and get Kirk back, even if it is the last thing he ever does.

He just has to figure out how.

\* \* \*

Back in his quarters, Spock sits down at his desk to think. His – admittedly unlikely – hopes of convincing Ellison to yield to logic and help him have been dashed, and he is at something of a loss for how to proceed.

He closes his eyes and reaches out along the link, trying once more to make contact with Kirk, but is blocked as he has been every time before. Whoever has Kirk, they appear intent on keeping him isolated and unable to communicate.

Concern for his friend flares up, and Spock pushes it down, taking a few deep, calming breaths. He reminds himself that, if nothing else, the lack of change in the link means Kirk is still alive, and that, logically, if his mysterious captors were going to kill him, they would have done it by now. Therefore he is unlikely to be in any immediate danger.

The information does not eliminate his concern, but it allows him to push it down enough to think. It would help, he thinks, if he had some idea of what he was dealing with.

The cube on the edge of his desk catches his eye and he frowns. The Tarranian priestess who gave Kirk the cube must have done so for a reason. Could she have known what was going to happen?

Spock's gaze falls on his computer. Contacting the Tarranians to ask is, unfortunately, out of the question; any response would take at least a week, by which time the Klingons may well have blown them all into space dust. But perhaps there is another option.

Tarrania is a Federation planet, which means there is a decent amount of information about it in the databases. He remembers skimming through some of said information before they arrived at the planet, and he seems to recall there was a rather detailed section devoted to cultural artefacts and rituals. It is possible that it will contain some information on the cube and its function.

Sure enough, a brief search turns up an artefact that looks distinctly like the cube currently at his elbow. According to the databanks, it is known as a Xat-taian, or Cube of Remembrance.

The information speaks mostly of its current use in assisting with memory problems such as amnesia and dementia, but there is an associated legend about a warrior who disappeared one day and was forgotten by all except his wife, to whom he had given a Xat-taian as a wedding gift.

According to the legend, the wife, keeping faith when all around doubted her, tracked the demon who had stolen her husband away to his home and demanded that he release him. The demon, intrigued by her courage, said that he would return her husband, but only if she brought him another life in exchange. Without hesitating, the wife offered her own life, and the selflessness of this act overpowered the demon and allowed both her and her husband to go free.

It is not a complete parallel for his own situation, but there are enough similarities for Spock to wonder exactly how much of the legend is based on truth.

Unfortunately that is the extent of the information the databanks contain on the cube. It isn't a tremendous amount of help, but it at least reassures him that he is on the right path. Spock taps his fingers on the desk absently. He would gladly offer his own life in exchange for Kirk's, but that does not seem to be an option.

He sits back in his chair to think. So far his research has not given the answer, approaching McCoy proved to be a complete failure, and reasoning with Ellison even more so. Not for the first time Spock wishes he could speak with whatever beings have kidnapped Kirk and ask them their reasoning; why they have done this and what they intend to gain from it. Attempting to outwit an enemy that is completely unknown to him is difficult bordering on impossible.

With a sigh, Spock turns back to the computer and prepares to resume his search for information. But before he can even put fingers to keyboard, he feels a spark come alive in his mind, accompanied a second later by a burst of pain, fear and desperation.

Spock digs his fingers into the desk, wavering under the onslaught. But he bears it gladly when Kirk's mind-voice breaks through the mental static. *Spock? Can you hear me?*

Spock's heart soars. *I hear you*, he sends back quickly. *Are you unharmed?*

*More or less.* Before Spock can question further, Kirk continues, *Listen, I don't know how much time I have before they catch on, so let's cut to the chase.*

It is an unfamiliar idiom, but it is not difficult for Spock to deduce the meaning. Obediently, he sets his concerns about Kirk's safety to the back of his mind. *I spoke to Ellison*, he tells Kirk. *You knew him, did you not?*

*Yes*, Kirk replies. *We were friends, once. Before he died.*

*On Tarsus.*

Yes. Pain radiates from Kirk's end of the link. *That's the key, isn't it? They've changed it so he lived and I died.*

*I believe so, yes. Ellison denied any involvement in such a plot, but I suspect he is lying.* Curious, Spock adds, *Have you managed to learn anything from your captors?*

*Not much. They don't really interact with me – apart from before when they stopped us from talking they've mostly stayed away. They wear these long robes and hoods so I don't even know what they look like.* Kirk's frustration comes through clearly.

Spock is about to reassure him when the red alert sirens begin to wail. "Red alert! Red alert! All hands to battle stations!"

Years of service on a starship has given Spock an almost Pavlovian response to the sound of a red alert siren, and he is halfway to the door before he realises he is moving. With dismay, he realises his link with Kirk has once gone dormant, likely a result of his concentration being broken. It appears he is on his own.

He makes his way to the bridge, arriving just a few seconds after Ellison. The lieutenant commander in charge of beta shift – Rodriguez, Spock's memory informs him – moves out of the centre chair as they approach. "Three Klingon ships have entered the solar system, sir," she says. "They appear to be heading for the planet."

"Raise shields, and move to intercept," Ellison orders, slipping into the centre seat.

Spock takes up a position just behind him, a step or two back from where he would stand if Kirk were in command. Now, more than ever, he wishes that Kirk were here. Now that he knows most of what is going on, he has concerns about Ellison's ability to handle this situation without bloodshed. His stomach twists as he remembers the dark look in Doctor Stevens's eyes when she spoke of their options. The price of failure, here, is far too high.

"Captain, they're hailing us," the beta shift communications officer states.

"On screen," Ellison orders.

The Klingon who appears on the screen is not one that Spock has seen before, with a bushy beard and an imperious scowl on his face. "I am Captain Warg, of the Klingon Empire," he tells them. "You are trespassing in our territory. Leave now or be destroyed."

"This is *not* your territory, and we will not leave without our people," Ellison replies.

A slow, cruel smile spreads across Warg's face. "I wonder," he says, "what on this ball of dirt could be so important to the Federation that they would send a starship to protect it?"

Ellison sits back in his chair, feigning aloofness. "It is a simple colony, nothing more. To us, all life is worthy of protection."

Warg barks a laugh. "We shall see." With that the screen goes blank.

"Keep us between them and the planet," Ellison barks. ""And contact Doctor Stevens. Make sure she knows what's happening."

"Aye, sir."

Spock raises an eyebrow in spite of himself. For someone who in reality did not live past the age of thirteen, Ellison is a surprisingly competent leader. But the hard part is still to come.

"Captain, they're hailing us again."

"On screen."

Warg appears again, still with the cruel smile. "Your 'simple colony' is protected by a class five force-field. Would you care to explain that?"

Ellison shrugs, but Spock can see his shoulders tense. "The planet is prone to violent storms and earthquakes. The force-field is to protect against them."

"Ah," Warg says, nodding. "And the fact that it prevents anyone from scanning to see what you are doing down there is just a side effect, yes?" His eyes go hard. "That planet is ours, storms and all. If you do not remove your people immediately, we will have to take it by force."

"Even if we agreed, there are more than a hundred people on the colony. We have no way of accommodating them all, not without another ship."

Warg smiles, showing a mouthful of pointed teeth. "That, as you humans say, is not my problem." He laces his fingers together, looking smug. "You have two of your minutes to decide, then we will open fire. The choice is yours."

Once again the screen goes blank.

Spock's internal timer immediately begins counting down the seconds. *One hundred twenty, one hundred nineteen, one hundred eighteen, one hundred seventeen...*

"Doctor Stevens reports they're as ready as they'll ever be," the communications officer says.

*Ninety six, ninety five, ninety four...*

"Good," Ellison replies, then turns to the navigation console and adds, "Target the main ship, ready phasers to fire on my mark." He chews on a thumbnail and says quietly, "We're not going down without a fight."

*fifty two, fifty one...*

"Phasers armed, target laid in."

*Ten, nine, eight...*

The hail comes on 'two', mildly upsetting Spock's sense of order. "On screen," Ellison orders.

"Well?" Warg asks them. "Have you made your decision?"

"Go to hell," Ellison tells him.

Warg smiles. "Ah, I was hoping you would say that." He turns and makes a sharp order in Klingon. Spock recognises it as the order to fire.

"Fire phasers!" Ellison yells, as the ship shakes with the impact.

"Firing!" Lieutenant Harris looks over his instruments and adds, "Direct hit. Looks like their shields are damaged."

"Target their weapons systems, fire at will."

"Yes, sir."

But one ship against three is not the best odds, and as the lieutenant locks on to the first ship, they are hit by a blast from another.

"Shields down to eighty-two percent!"

"First ship weapons system is disabled," Harris reports.

"One down, two to go." They are hit by another blast, harder this time, and Spock has to grab the handrail to keep from falling.

"Sixty-eight percent!"

Harris looks down at his instruments. "Captain, the third ship is breaking away. It's heading for the planet."

"Move to intercept, but keep firing."

Unfortunately, the split in their attention allows the second ship to get several hits in. "Shields down to twenty-six percent and falling! We can't take much more of this!"

Trying to fight on two fronts is difficult, and despite their best efforts, the third ship gets past them. "Captain, the third ship has fired something at the planet," Harris reports.

"What is it?"

"Unknown, sir."

The communications officer speaks up then, "Sir, Doctor Stevens is on the line. She says...." She trails off briefly before continuing, "She says the last blast knocked out their power and she has no choice but to go to plan Z."

Spock swallows hard. Plan Z: self-destruct, under the thinking that it is better to destroy their work than have it fall into the hands of the Klingons. And Doctor Stevens and what is left of her staff will be collateral damage. A 'necessary sacrifice'.

Ellison's hands clench into fists, and Spock steps forward. "You can still stop this," he says. "But you must act *now*. Before it is too late."

The silence after he has spoken seems to last for eternity. Spock holds his breath, wondering if, even now, Ellison will argue.

The ship rocks with another hit, and alarms begin to blare. "Shields critical! Damage reported on decks seven and eight!"

And with that, the barrier breaks. "You're right," Ellison whispers. "If this is the price of life then I don't want it." He raises his eyes to the ceiling and yells, "You needed me to agree to this, right? Well, I take it back! You hear me? *I take it back!*"

For a moment nothing happens, aside from the rest of the bridge crew exchanging worried glances. Then everything aside from Spock and Ellison suddenly freezes in place.

Spock has a moment to observe the Klingon ship frozen in the act of firing, before three beings appear in front of him. They are humanoid, with pale skin and androgynous features, and are clad in long silver robes.

They turn as one to look at Ellison. "You realise what you are saying, do you not?" one of them asks him. "What it is you will be giving up?"

Ellison nods firmly. "I understand. And I don't want to die, but Spock's right. My life isn't worth the lives of all the people on the planet down there, all the people on this ship." He shrugs, managing a smile. "And hey, at least this way my death will mean something."

The alien beings turn to each other and converse briefly in a language Spock has never heard before. When they turn back, there is a look of almost surprise on their faces. "We may have underestimated your species," the leader says eventually. "From what we observed, self-

preservation is an extremely strong instinct, and not easily overcome."

Ellison shrugs again. "Yeah, well, as a friend of mine once said; the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

Something in Spock aches at that, and he wonders what Ellison's understanding of their relationship really was. He steps forward. "May I ask; why put us through all this? Was it merely a test?"

The three of them seem to notice him for the first time. "Not merely," the leader says. "But if it were, rest assured that you would have passed."

He turns back to Ellison. "Your bravery is to be rewarded. We will do as you ask."

He raises his hands, and the world shimmers. Spock closes his eyes against a rush of nausea, and when he opens them the aliens are gone, along with Ellison, and the world has unfrozen.

Spock's gaze flickers to the viewscreen, to find that the Klingons are gone. Before he fully realises it, he is moving, striding over to the science station and asking the ensign on duty if he can use the console for a moment. The young woman steps aside, and Spock quickly accesses the computer systems.

Everything seems to be back to normal. They are not at war with the Klingons, there is no secret weapons base disguised as a colony, and James Kirk is captain of the Enterprise.

Spock has barely had time to read that statement when the door to the turbolift opens and he turns to see Kirk standing there. "Mister Spock?" he asks quietly. "May I have a word?"

Spock turns to the ensign beside him, and says quickly, "Thank you, Ensign. You may recommence your work." He is striding away before she can respond.

A second later he is in the turbolift, and Kirk is ordering it to the deck with their quarters. The moment the doors close he turns, reaching out and clasping Kirk's shoulders to make sure he is really real.

"You remember, right?" Kirk asks. "That wasn't just some horrible nightmare I had?"

"Unfortunately not," Spock tells him. "Although, as we were the only ones to notice the change the first time, it seems likely that the same will be true now that things have changed back."

Kirk sighs. "Maybe it's better that way," he says, as the lift arrives at their floor. "I'd forget it all too, if I could."

There are things Spock wishes to say to that, but as they are no longer alone, he refrains. Instead he follows Kirk out of the turbolift towards his quarters. When they get there, Kirk unlocks the door and waves a hand for Spock to enter before him.

Spock does so and is relieved to see that Kirk's quarters look exactly the same as they always have. Kirk sits down at his desk, and Spock does likewise. For a moment they just stare at each other, then Kirk says quietly, "I guess we should talk about what happened."

"What did they do to you?" Spock asks.

Kirk shrugs. "Not much, actually. They did some kind of mind-probe thing that gave me a major headache, and they didn't exactly seem thrilled at the idea of us communicating, but other than that they mostly left me alone." He shudders. "Mostly I just remember darkness and the fear that I was going to be trapped there alone forever."

"Not alone," Spock replies, and Kirk smiles, more genuinely this time.

"No, not completely," he agrees.

Spock allows his expression to soften at Kirk's smile, basking in the feeling of having his friend back, alive and whole. But in the back of his mind he knows that the situation is not quite over – much as he suspects they would both rather avoid discussing that other reality, it must be dealt with before they can move on.

"Jim," he begins hesitantly, "would you tell me about Jacob Ellison?"

Kirk's expression falls, and he looks suddenly very tired.

"I understand if you do not wish to talk about it," Spock adds.

Kirk shakes his head. "No, I want to." He snorts and adds, "Well, all right, that's a lie. But I'm *going* to."

He sighs heavily and begins, "Jake was born just a few months before me, and we knew each other pretty much our whole lives. His mom was a friend of my dad's. They met when they served together on the *Endeavour*, a few years after I was born, and our families would often meet up when the ship was on leave. Jake and I hit it off pretty much instantly. He lived in San Francisco, and of course I was in Iowa, so we didn't see each other that often, but we sent each other messages. First through our parents, and then as we got older, we became pen-pals."

Kirk shakes his head. "Even though we only saw each other a few times a year at most he was one of my best friends. We talked about everything. And we were both adamant that we'd go into Starfleet as soon as we were old enough."

He pauses briefly, then continues, "I'd just turned thirteen when he commed me out of the blue, saying he'd heard about this exchange program for gifted students, and that we should apply for it. I read the stuff he sent me and it sounded incredible – the chance to spend a semester living on another planet, learning skills we'd never learn in ordinary school." He snorts. "Well, you know how well that turned out, but back then I

thought it was the best thing ever. I begged my parents to let me go, and Jake did the same with his. Eventually they agreed.

"There was no doubt in either of our minds that we'd be chosen, and of course we were. And so a few months later we said goodbye to our families and boarded a shuttle that would take us to our destiny."

"Tarsus," Spock puts in quietly, and Kirk nods.

"The very same." He takes a breath and continues. "It took us over a week to get there, stuck in a shuttle with six other kids. It was pretty boring, but the thought that we were travelling to a whole other world was enough to – mostly – keep us from complaining. Can't say the same for some of the other kids, though."

He shakes his head slowly. "You can imagine what a relief it was to finally get there and step out onto solid ground. Jake picked up a handful of dirt just to feel it trickle through his fingers.

"We were taken to the house we'd be staying in and told to pick a room and a roommate. Obviously Jake and I chose to room together. After that, we got to meet the rest of the kids. Aside from the eight of us from Earth, there was an Andorian, two Deltans, and a Megazoid. It was the first time I'd ever properly interacted with aliens, and it was kind of a revelation." He shuts his eyes and grimaces. "Back then I thought I'd never be able to remember all their names. Now I can't forget them."

Spock reaches out and touches his hand briefly, and Kirk gives him a grateful look. "Anyway, we settled in, and at first it was great. We went to school with the local kids, and then in the afternoons we helped out with things like gardening and tending to the animals. To be honest, it wasn't all that different from what we'd do at home – especially for me, since I grew up on a farm – but the fact that we were on an alien planet was enough to make it seem like an amazing adventure."

He shakes his head slowly. "We were there for just over three weeks when the first crops started failing. At first it didn't seem like a big deal, there were other crops, and plenty of food already stockpiled in bunkers. But the blight spread to other crops, and then to the stockpiles, and within a week almost all of the food was gone.

"Jake and I didn't realise how bad it was, but we knew something was wrong, especially after the rationing kicked in. The adults tried to pretend nothing was wrong, but after the second or third time they stopped talking the minute we entered a room, it became pretty obvious that they were hiding something from us. One of the other kids – Lyta, her name was – hacked the security system, and that's how we found out what was really going on."

He pauses, as if gathering strength. Spock gives him a moment or two, then probes gently, "What happened after that?"

"We confronted the adults with the evidence, and they broke down and admitted it – that the crops had failed, that the food supply was limited, and that the governor had called for help but no one knew when it would get there. They still tried to sugar-coat it, reassure us that everything would be fine and all we had to do was sit tight and not panic, but I'm not sure any of us really believed it.

"The rations seemed to lessen every day, and as they did people became violent. Rioting, fighting, looting.... The police tried to keep order, but they were far outnumbered and barely made a dent. We were scared to go outside, but by then school had been cancelled so we didn't have to."

He takes a long slow breath, then adds bitterly, "It was two weeks after the crops started failing that Governor Kodos made his grand announcement."

Spock watches, but doesn't interrupt as Kirk continues, "He told us he'd come up with a plan to save the colony, to make sure there would be enough food to last until help came. You can't imagine the relief we felt, hearing that. If we'd only known." One side of his mouth twitches upwards. "He told us that we'd need to make sacrifices, that the weakest members of society would be seen to first. Anyone who fit certain categories – age, health, disability status – was to report to the meeting hall."

Spock takes a breath, hesitating to ask a question he has always wondered about. "Were you...?"

Kirk smiles harshly. "Was I on The List? Is that what you want to know?"

Spock nods, already regretting his decision to ask.

Kirk tenses, but shakes his head. "No." He lets out a long slow breath and slumps back into his chair. "None of us kids were. We weren't from there, we had homes and families; people who would raise hell if something happened to us. Most people there weren't that lucky. Including one of our guardians, Gila. She suffered from anaemia, and was pretty badly affected by the lack of food, so when we heard the news the others convinced her to go. Even us kids joined in. We thought we were helping her."

"It was not your fault," Spock tells him.

"Yeah, I know that, but it doesn't change anything." Kirk shakes his head. "Anyway, the other guardians got worried when she didn't come back, and one of them went out to look for her. They sent us to bed, but that wasn't about to stop us. Lyta hacked the feeds again, and found footage of the whole thing. Kodos's speech, the guards with their phaser rifles opening fire, people falling, dying." He closes his eyes briefly. "No kid should ever have to see that."

One side of his mouth twitches upwards. "I know now that Kodos wouldn't have dared touch us, but back then we were convinced that he was going to kill us next, unless we left. Twelve kids of various ages, from various planets, all far too aware of our own intelligence... I think that was the first time we ever agreed on anything. We didn't even discuss it, just grabbed whatever we could and ran. We split up pretty quickly, thinking it'd be less conspicuous. More than a dozen kids running around would've gotten attention we didn't need. Jake and I took one group, and Tom and Deena took the other. We agreed we'd meet in the woods if we could, but it didn't end up happening.

"I found out later that they got caught, but they didn't go down easy. Tom lost his left eye in the struggle, and all he would say about it was that I should have seen the other guy. They spent the rest of the disaster locked up in Kodos's estate, imprisoned but safe from harm. In a way they were better off than those of us who managed to escape." He shakes his head slowly. "I wonder sometimes how things would have been different if we'd been in their group, but I guess there's no point dwelling on things that can't be changed."

He is silent for a moment, before continuing, "The rest of us made it to the woods and hid out there. We had some food, but not much, and it quickly ran out. We managed for a while after on berries, and small animals we managed to catch, but soon those were gone too. After that we tried sap from the trees, and even grass, but eventually we realised we'd have to go find food. Me and Jake had the most training in fighting and self-defence, so we volunteered.

"The streets were deserted when we got there. It was like a whole different world from the one we'd left. We broke into a couple of houses that looked abandoned, but they were pretty much bare." He swallows hard, gripping his hands together. "The third house we broke into wasn't abandoned. We were going through the cupboards when the owner – or someone anyway – interrupted us. We took one look at the rifle he was carrying and ran. He shot at us, but we managed to get away. At least, that's what I thought."

His eyes are haunted when they meet Spock's. "We made it all the way back to the woods before Jake collapsed. Adrenaline, I guess. Turned out one of the shots had hit him in the chest. I tried to stop the bleeding, but it was too late. He died, right there in my arms, and I couldn't save him."

"I grieve with thee," Spock says solemnly, and Kirk gives him a grateful look.

"I think you know most of the rest of the story already," he says. "We managed to hide out until Starfleet arrived, and those of us with families went home. I made sure they found Jake's body, took it back to his parents. It was the least I could do." He shakes his head. "I never forgot him, you know? I joined Starfleet partly because it's what he would have wanted. I wanted to help people, to save them, because I couldn't save him."

He wipes his eyes, where moisture is gathering at the corners. "I've never told anyone that story before," he says. "Not completely."

"I am honoured that you would choose to share it with me," Spock tells him.

Kirk shakes his head slowly. "I still can't really believe all this," he admits. "Jake was my best friend, and to think he'd make a choice like that... But he was a *child*. We both were. If I'd been in his position, dying and given the chance to live, can I honestly say I wouldn't have made the same choice?"

"I do not believe you would have," Spock says.

Kirk smiles briefly, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "I wish I was as sure," he says. He closes his eyes briefly, looking weary. "Do you think that's why they did it?" he asks. "Why they picked that moment to change? To show that we really weren't all that different? He would've had the same life I did, if he'd lived."

Spock wants to argue, to tell Kirk exactly how important he is, and how badly awry their universe went without his influence, but he suspects it would not help. Instead he simply says, "I do not know." He hesitates, then adds, "I feel you should know that in the end Jacob Ellison acted with honour, and willingly sacrificed his life so that others would live. I believe he was, at heart, a good man."

"I hope so," Kirk replies.

There is silence for a moment, then Kirk shakes his head as if throwing off the thoughts, and says brightly, "So, Mister Spock. I never thanked you for saving my life."

"You do not have to do that," Spock tells him. "My part in the proceedings was minimal."

Kirk gives him a smile – the first genuine one since he returned, even if it's tinged with sadness. "Just let me be grateful, okay?" he says.

"Very well," Spock replies solemnly, and is gratified when Kirk breaks out in a laugh.

"You don't make things easy," he says, then reaches out and lays a hand on Spock's arm. "I mean it, though," he continues earnestly. "Thank you."

Spock meets his gaze, allowing himself to feel the gratitude and relief that his captain – his *friend* – is finally back where he belongs. "You are welcome, Jim."

\* \* \* \* \*

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*A young boy, barely thirteen years of age, lies bleeding on the ground. Another boy bends over him, tears streaming down his face as he presses his hands against his companion's chest. "Come on," he whispers fiercely. "Please. You have to... you can't leave me like this. We're a team."*

*The other boy doesn't respond at first, his face a mask of pain and fear. When he does he only manages three words, "It isn't fair." Blood bubbles between his lips, and even at thirteen his friend knows that's not a good sign. He presses down more firmly on the wound and watches as his friend's eyes seem to focus briefly, staring at something behind them. He shakes his head, suddenly, and the first boy whirls round, ready to attack, but sees nothing. When he turns back to the other boy he sees his eyes are glassy, his chest still.*

*Out of sight, three beings in grey robes watch the display with interest.*

*The boy glances round, then, working quickly, covers his friend's body with leaves and branches, tears still running down his cheeks. When he has finished he whispers, "Goodbye, Jake," then turns and disappears into the trees. He does not look back.*

*The beings watch until he is out of sight, then direct their attention briefly to the leaf-covered body of one Jacob Ellison. It is rare for anyone to decline their gift, even to save the lives of others. These 'humans' are intriguing, and clearly require more dedicated research.*

*They glance at each other, then turn as one and vanish into the wind.*

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