

## Hot Springs

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### Summary

One day, just at the start of spring, Spock suggests that he and Kirk leave the garden for a while and go for a walk instead.

It was the perfect spot, Spock said — the only issue was how to get there, and what exactly it was 'perfect' for. Jim walked behind, a sunhat pulled low over his brow, his fingers tight on the brim to stop the breeze from carrying it away. He wasn't sure he'd even need it: the sun was pale and cool, and just this morning the grass had been tipped with frost as far as the eye could see. But better safe than sorry.

Spock walked ahead of him along the edge of the field, still brown and overgrown with dead weeds from the year it spent empty, waiting for the soil to heal. There were machines to handle that sort of thing, but by quiet mutual agreement, Jim and Spock had largely eschewed them — not out of a discomfort or hatred for new technology (quite the opposite, as Spock had all the latest manuals open for study on the kitchen table), but out of a love for the physical, the hard work, the time spent together beneath the sun. To the north, rolling hills fell over each other, soft and green from the latest rain, and there was a crisp scent in the air — the smell of cold river water and budding trees, of spring.

They pushed through the wheat field, the furrows soft beneath their boots. They skirted the edge of the forest, where spiceberries glimmered on empty brambles, a spark of color where the foliage hadn't started to grow back yet post-winter. Little clumps of snow clung to the ground here and there, where the sun couldn't reach it — in the shadows of fir trees, on the dark side of an abandoned barn. But birds sang in the trees, and the first few insects of the spring were starting to chirp and rub their legs together, and every now and then the soft earth gave way to squelching mud that sucked at Jim's boots and threatened to pull him down.

"Do you mind if I ask a question, Mr. Spock?" he called ahead.

The 'Mister' made Spock glance over his shoulder, obviously amused, careful not to show it. The glint in his eyes gave him away. "Ask away," he said.

"What exactly is it you want me to see?" Jim asked. He looked pointedly at the picnic basket hanging from the crook of Spock's arm, but Spock pretended not to see that pointed look, rendering it pointless.

"I believe the Terrans say ... you'll know it when you see it," Spock said.

A smile tugged at Jim's lips. He rolled his eyes as soon as Spock's back was turned, but he followed alone, keeping his head on a swivel — watching for anything interesting. Early mushrooms, furry critters darting their heads out of burrows to watch them pass, rare trees coming up as saplings. They'd walked perhaps a little over a mile — and his calves were starting to really burn — when Spock stopped and waited for Jim to catch up.

"Tell me what you observe," he said when Jim came to his elbow.

"Observe?" Jim raised an eyebrow, his eyes shifting around. They were in the old fruit orchard at the base of a hill; he could hear the river on the other side, knew from experience that he could expect a certain number of native wildflowers in this area during the summer. He pricked his ears, but all he heard was the bubbling of water, the faint buzz of...

Jim cocked his head. Spock gave him a guarded look. And there it was, sweet and natural and barely-noticeable to him after so many years ship-side, burning his nostrils with ozone and engine grease. The scent of honey.

"Bees," Jim said. "Already?"

Spock almost smiled. "This planet's bees are hardier than others we've visited. And there's one other factor to take into consideration."

"Oh?"

Spock reached out, his fingers curling around Jim's, a familiar spark of warmth. He led Jim through the trees, where last fall's unpicked apples had turned to mush and left a sickly-sweet scent in the air. Up the hill — to the patch of sunlight — to the hyper-fertile ground just north of the river — to the cup-shaped blossoms that blanketed the ground, all of them too early but indisputably blossoming nonetheless in brilliant shades of red and orange and purple.

"What—?" Jim said.

"You have yet to visit this grove in winter," Spock said, and now, damn him, there was that telltale quirk of the lips. "Might I make an unscientific statement, Jim, based fully on anecdotal evidence and, as you might call it, gut instinct?"

Jim put his hands on his hips, staring around at the abundance of flowers, at the fat blue-gold bees that buzzed from one to the next. "Go ahead," he said.

"I suspect you have not scanned this particular stretch of land," Spock said. "Is that correct?"

"That's correct," said Jim. He touched one of the flowers, its petals velvet-soft against his fingers. "Why? What have you found?"

Spock set the picnic basket down. He removed a blanket from inside it and unfolded it with a flick of the wrist, all studious casualness as he spread it over the ground. Uncorking a bottle of champagne, he said, "I have planned for a picnic first, Jim, and a nap to follow, and then when the sun is high, we can watch the bees. You can sketch them; I can study them. We can proceed back home to the garden with a specimen or two, and build a new home for them—"

"Spock," Jim said.

"It's nothing, Jim," said Spock innocently. He took a sip of champagne and let the bubbles rest on his tongue for an agonizing thirty seconds before he spoke. "Only a hot spring. The entrance is approximately five meters to the northeast of you. Its heat allows the flowers to grow." And then, even more innocent than before, "I scanned the water for toxins. It's clean."

Jim's mouth went dry. He stared at Spock, at his long-fingered hands and tall, narrow frame, all bundled up in cold-weather clothes. A hot spring. A warm, clean place to swim even when the air was cold. His clothes on the bank, all tangled up with Spock's — Spock's naked body against his beneath the water, that flash of skin, of heat, of—

Jim unbuckled his belt, and on the picnic blanket, Spock hid his smile in his champagne flute.

The picnic could wait, he supposed.

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