

HEARTS GUARDIAN

A STAR TREK STORY IN THE ALTERNATE UNIVERSE

THE THIRD STORY
IN THE
SO PLEASING A THING
TRILOGY

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Prologue

The woman standing in the middle of the field considered the planet on which she currently resided as the hind end of space.

It wasn't very remarkable. It contained no grand, sweeping vistas, or any craggy, majestic mountains, or colorful, luminescent atmosphere. No, it was mostly blue skies and green earth, and not a very bright blue or green at that. Not that she was complaining. It served a purpose and that was fine by her.

The other settlers, her co-inhabitants of that world, might have told someone that they settled there for those simpler attractions alone, but their reasons for making such a long, tedious journey were far more complicated.

Many might have come to escape the overwhelming complexities of an old life, or to reinvent themselves, or, as the woman always thought of as her reason, as a place to forget and to disappear... even if in that moment of that very day, disappearances were not at all possible.

"Penny!"

The woman looked up from her tilling just in time to see the young Denobulan male approaching on his bicycle down the long, dusty lane. She had absolutely no idea where he had obtained such an antiquated conveyance and she had absolutely no intention of asking him; for questions of a prying nature were just about the only things that were frowned upon here.

"Penny!" he called again, waving vigorously, momentarily losing his balance.
"Penny!"

She casually waved in return. Moving her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun at her back, she turned and spared a brief glance towards the front door of her cottage. She expected to see at least one or possibly two figures of the individuals she shared the cottage with standing there, come to see what all the commotion was about. The arrival of the colony's only doctor just happened to coincide with the end of the rest interval and she knew that they'd be up shortly.

Dropping her hand, she returned to the tilling of her crop: strawberries. Come early summer she'd have bushels and bushels of them, enough for everyone in

the settlement and more than enough for one of her companions. He'd make himself sick if she'd let him; strawberries had always been his particular favorite.

However, the third dweller of the cottage was completely the opposite. He detested the red berries, having chosen peaches as his favorite, but peaches were hard to come by and the young saplings they had brought with them to the planet and planted in the small orchard had yet to bear fruit. However, she was a thoughtful provider and had planned ahead enough to have a few of the jarred variety stored in her long-term stasis unit.

"Penny!"

The doctor was now at least seventy-five meters away and just by the speed of his peddling, she determined that he had something especially interesting to share.

Doctor Kulix was her most frequent and faithful visitor, always willing to share a bit of gossip from the settlement station or any bit of news that drifted in on the random supply ships that called in at Omicron Ceti VI two or three times a year. And that was only if and when a ship made it out that far. Even the fastest freighters took six or seven months to reach them way out on the edges of the galaxy. But the last shipment of farming equipment and supplies was some ten months ago and they were long overdue. If a freighter was currently in orbit, that would be news enough in itself.

"Penny, Penny! You'll never believe it; not in a million years. The freighter Hercules has arrived."

She nearly laughed when Kulix had trouble with his breaking, He satisfied himself by bringing the bicycle to a screeching halt by dragging his feet long the lane. Having stopped and letting it drop to the ground, he picked up his medical bag and ran the last few meters, hopping over plants and the random toy, before reaching her and grasping her arms to steady himself and his breathing.

"Kulix, just look at you," the woman beamed, noticing the fine mist of perspiration glistening on his facial ridges as he panted heavily trying to find his voice. She thought to help him out.

"No, no, don't tell me, let me guess: Leila and Sandoval have finally admitted that they *like* each other." This was their private little joke, speculating between themselves that Leila Kalomi and Elias Sandoval were having a torrid affair. It was something to amuse themselves with when they were bored, they both knew it wasn't true, of course, as Leila and Elias hardly ever spoke casually.

He was finally able to reply.

“No, no–this is – much–much more important; you will never believe it!”

He then moved his hands up to her shoulders. Looking into her eyes he squeezed tightly as if trying to transfer some of his strength to her, knowing that the news he carried would be of particular interest. He went on haltingly, thinking it better to dispense with the bad news all at once.

“The planet Vulcan–it is no more–it has been destroyed.”

Penny, as if she had not heard him at all, continued to smile. For a moment she thought it was some rouse that she was meant to follow along with, but the Denobulan never teased her; he had no talent for it.

Releasing the gardening implement in her hand, she allowed it to drop to her feet before she jerked away. “That’s not funny, Kulix, not to me.”

“I swear, I do not lie; not about this, never about this.” Reaching into his medical bag slung around his body he pulled out a portable data tablet. “Look here. It is all there. Destroyed by Romulans nearly a year ago. All are dead... the Vulcan people and planet are no more.”

Glancing at the screen before her, she saw the listing of documented accounts yet she did not *see* them. Snatching the device from his hands, she stared down at the screen, numb, scrolling with her thumbs at all of the news reports and casualty figures, only to go numb again when she saw an account of the number of Starfleet vessels destroyed, destroyed along with their temporary crews composed almost entirely of Academy cadets.

Looking into Kulix’s eyes, her wretched face told a story all it’s own. “It isn’t true; it can’t be true; please tell me it isn’t true.” But she could already see the tears filling the doctor’s eyes; Denobulans where such a tender, soft-hearted species; he could never lie to her.

“The destruction and subsequent battle was confirmed by the captain of the Hercules. I am sorry, Penny, but it is true.”

She turned back to the door of the cottage then, sensing the presence of two others, two little Vulcan children, who, having sensed a disturbance in their mother’s very soul, had rushed to the door.

She couldn't look at them at that moment, it was all too much. The only thing she was able to do in that moment was to slowly drop to her knees, open her mouth, and let out a long, silent scream before the world went black.

Chapter 1

“By my calculations, you have watched this program exactly forty times. This viewing will bring that total up to forty-one.”

They had been an official couple for over a year now and an unofficial one well before that and yet she never seemed to grow tired of his need for precise calculations and had actually found them quite endearing.

Until tonight.

“You know, Spock,” said Lieutenant Nyota Uhura to her superior officer and lover, “sometimes I think you haven’t a romantic bone in your body. I’m really not in the mood for your calculations or your complaints tonight.”

Uhura removed the data chip from the box and carefully inserted it into the vid-viewer. If she wanted to watch *Pride and Prejudice* everyday for a year it was her business; Spock could go and meditate for an entire century for all she cared.

She flopped down ungracefully on her bed and bunched her pillow up underneath her chin and waited for the first appearance of Fitzwilliam Darcy.

When Spock made his response, his tone was unhurried and mild-mannered and just as smooth and easy as it had always been.

“I am merely stating a fact, Nyota. The current shift schedule requires us both to be back on duty at 0800 hours. That gives us exactly twelve hours to spend time together. I do not find it acceptable to sit for five of those hours watching human males riding on the backs of domesticated animals, attired in wet shirts.”

Nyota rolled her eyes heavenward.

“Newsflash, Spock: that glorious wet shirt scene doesn’t make an appearance until almost one-hundred and seventy-nine minutes in and he doesn’t actually wear the wet shirt while riding on the horse.

Spock tilted his head slightly which usually indicated that he had the beginnings of a hypothesis to make.

“Why is it when I formulate a precise calculation it is considered complaining and when you formulate one it is an important statement of fact?”

“You know what? Some popcorn would be great,” she mumbled distractedly, her eyes having already focused on the handsome actor playing Mr. Darcy riding across an open field with his friend, Mr. Bingley, in hot pursuit.

“I am leaving, Nyota.”

“That’s nice sweetie,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand that Spock interpreted as a way to shut him up. “I’d like some lemonade, too.”

Spock raised an eyebrow and stepped to the door. When it made its customary “whoosh” sound Uhura’s head popped up off the pillow.

“Spock,” she exclaimed incredulously, “what, you’re leaving?”

“Yes, Nyota. I am leaving.”

“But, why?”

“Clearly you have other activities that require your attention this evening.”

“But, I thought—I thought that you were going to pop some popcorn and watch this with me?”

“If I gave you that impression you are sadly mistaken.”

Something in his tone and in his stance now had her full attention. She sat up.

“Why are you so angry?”

“I am a Vulcan; I always endeavor to avoid anger.”

“Spock, it’s me, remember; I’m looking at you right now and I can always tell when you’re angry.”

“I am not angry!” he said, his volume increasing only slightly.

She huffed. “OK, you’re *displeased*, then.”

“Your inattentive behavior towards me when coupled with your devotion to this particular choice of viewing material is highly illogical. If, after a time, you feel that you can pull your attention away, I will be in the recreation room on deck four playing three dimensional chess.” Spock walked to the door.

“Well, at least come back and give me a goodnight kiss before you leave.”

Spock stood still for a moment, debating with himself before complying; Nyota always asked him to do the most unconventional things, but her illogical requests often led to pleasurable consequences.

She waited patiently, watching for his turn and that first, reluctant step forward.

And accordingly he did turn, stepped forward once, and paused at the very end of her bed. Now he did his own bit of waiting; she would need to come halfway, he surmised, this was an equal partnership, after all.

Only after watching him make his move did she grin broadly. This was why she loved him so much: he was never one to act on impulse; he always carefully considered each of his actions and always expected the appropriate reaction; and yet, when he arrived where she had led him he was like putty in her hands.

“Computer,” she said while scooting to the edge of her bed, “on mute.”

Nyota rose up to her knees and he leaned forward, giving her a quick, perfunctory kiss on the lips. He leaned back slightly and gazed at her. One slanted eyebrow rose slowly, signaling that the next *reaction* to his *action* was hers to make.

Slowly and carefully, she placed her hands on each of his shoulders, sliding them up until they were around his neck. Pulling him towards her, she hugged him tightly, making cooing noises into his ear while nuzzling her cheek against his neck.

Spock permitted her to engage in this form of human contact when he was in her arms; he had always found such activities acceptable and Nyota did derive a great deal of satisfaction from it herself. And yet, after thirty seconds, the cooing noises had ceased and her body had grown oddly still.

“You are watching it again, aren’t you?” he asked.

Chapter 2

Spock spared Nyota a quick glance and thought that her eyes looked red. He knew that folding his arms across his chest was the only way in a room full of people to communicate his dissatisfaction with her current physical state. Unfortunately, at that moment she wasn't looking in his direction in order to recognize the gesture; she was far too busy drawing unintelligible markings on her data tablet's screen.

She was tired, inattentive, and unfit for duty and he knew he ought to reprimand her for it. He would let the issue slide for now; the grief he would receive from her if he took the time to issue the report was not worth the trouble.

Spock swiveled his chair back towards the Captain's direction. Kirk and McCoy had been exchanging the usual prickly and touchy barbs back and forth since entering the conference room. It was a fairly common occurrence of late and the subject varied rarely.

Old Miss had, apparently, accomplished a defeat of something called *Tech* by engaging in some ritualistic sporting event's semi-final, invariably leaving something or someone called a *Sooner* "in the mix". Apparently, from his vocal effusions, Kirk favored the *Sooners*, equating them as the natural representatives for farm boys everywhere.

Spock had no opinion of *Sooners*, *Old Miss*, or *Tech*, he just wished that someone else would win as it was the only way to ensure that peace once again reigned on the Enterprise for the next month or so.

His hearing, being what it was, caused him to glance at Nyota once again. This time she was attempting to suppress a yawn. She was obviously fatigued and given her evening activities he was hardly surprised. At the second yawn, a somewhat more violent reaction, Kirk noticed her, too.

"Long night?"

Kirk had directed the question to his communication's officer, but his eyes were gleaming brilliantly in the direction of his science officer.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Uhura said, straightening up in her chair, her eyes now visibly brighter than they were a moment ago. "I got caught up in an old film last night."

Kirk frowned, clearly unconcerned that his communications officer was tired, more disappointed in the fact that he no longer had a reason to tease Spock all day.

"I expect my officers to be in top form, Lieutenant; make sure it doesn't happen again," said Kirk, in one of his random barks of command, consisting mostly of bark and not very much bite.

"Yes Captain, of course."

He dipped his head, and dropped his voice to a playful whisper. "What was it, spy, car chase, or alien attack? Please tell me it was an alien attack movie, I love it when they pop out of some guy's chest."

This time he was looking directly at Spock, smirking. Spock wasn't going to dignify that reference with a reaction.

"No, Captain," she said, rolling her eyes, "It was the film *Pride and Prejudice*. Want to borrow it sometime?"

Kirk winced. "Girl movie; no way!"

Spock paid absolutely no attention to their discussion; Nyota and Kirk had such an odd sort of relationship: at some times hostile and antagonistic and at other times deeply professional and courteous.

Humans.

Sulu and Scotty sauntered in, deep in their own spirited conversation.

"Aye, Laddie, but your fancy auto-saber is no match for a fine Scottish Claymore; properly sharpened, I can hack a man to bits without even building up a sweat."

Sulu's face reflected his aversion to the term "hack a man to bits" causing Scotty to laugh loudly and smack him on the back. As the last of the senior officers to enter, they all took their designated seats around the triangular table.

Kirk, sitting at the top of the blunted point, his hands clasped in front of him, glanced around the table fondly. To the untrained eye, Kirk may have merely appeared happy, but to those who knew him well, they knew that his face showed all the pride in having the best starship and the best crew in the entire fleet.

Spock and Doctor McCoy naturally flanked him on either side, almost as two disparate sides to his personally, both equal to aggravating or invigorating in their own unique ways. Next to McCoy and working around the table back towards Spock, came Engineer Scott, Communications Chief Uhura, Security Chief Dickerson, Helm Chief Sulu, and Operations Chief Carstairs. Kirk looked left then right to ensure he had everyone's attention and began the briefing.

"A few hours ago Admiral Komack contacted me for a very special mission. We are to proceed to the planet, Vulcan II, now to be officially known hereafter as Rau-Tor Vuhlkhanu."

Spock nodded while translating. "Vulcan People's Haven. Appropriate."

"Our task once there," continued Kirk, "is to mark, what the Vulcan's call, La'tasa Shahnan, the end of the Vulcan period of morning."

Everyone, with the exception of Mr. Spock gaped back at him. Whether it was disbelief or shock or a combination of the two, Kirk didn't know, but he chose to continue, nonplused.

"Given our role in the events of fourteen months ago, the Vulcan High Command have made a request for the Enterprise specifically. I have been asked to be Starfleet's official representative at the memorial ceremony."

Many had already planned to pass the observance quietly and in their own private way. And now, the reminder of those sad events affected everyone gathered around the table, with several of them doing their level best not to turn towards Spock, with the exception of one.

They all cared for him, she knew, but she cared for him that much more. It was no secret that they were lovers, but no one could know about the much deeper, near telepathic bond that had been forged. She could always sense his distress, even when he took care to hide it carefully away from the rest of the world. Only she could see the small flicker of grief that burned at the back of everything that he did each day.

Kirk continued. "Given the Enterprise's role in the rescue of the *Katric Ark, the Vulcan elders, and subsequent battle, the Vulcan High Command has asked for the Enterprise's presence specifically. Thoughts, gentlemen."

You could have heard a pin drop.

"Right!" said Kirk when no one said anything. "Mr. Sulu, have Mr. Chekov lay in a course for Haven and you will take us there at warp factor one."

Hikaru Sulu's forehead creased. "Warp one, sir? But at this distance that will take us nearly —," he did a quick calculation in his head, "nearly a week, sir."

Imprecise calculations always compelled Spock to speak. "It will take the Enterprise exactly 6.582 solar days at warp factor one to reach Haven."

Kirk shrugged his shoulders, "Well, you heard the man, Mr. Sulu, 6.582 solar days."

The helmsmen began to protest. "Sir, surely—"

Kirk was already making placating gestures with his palms effectively cutting off Sulu's entreaty.

"I know, Mr. Sulu," Kirk said calmly, "I am well aware that we can be there tomorrow if we wished; however; given the contact that we had with the refugees of Vulcan and the delicacy of the feelings of everyone involved, I would like to take it nice and slow; give the crew a chance to think things over a bit; get used to the idea of what we are doing and why we are going there; understood?"

"Aye, sir; of course. Sorry, sir."

Kirk turned his glance to his operation's officer. "Mr. Carstairs, the Vulcan High Command would like the landing party that they will be initially interacting with them to be kept as small as possible to keep from overwhelming the main city's infrastructure and limited resources. However, they are not without compassion and they have seen to it that shore leave facilities have been arranged on the northern continent of the planet, a far more hospitable climate to the majority of our crew. You will oversee all arrangements on that end, if you please."

Carstairs nodded while writing a few notations on his computer tablet. Kirk turned to his Communication's officer.

"Lieutenant Uhura—"

"Sir."

"I want you down on the planet with me. Although we know that most members of the High Command do speak English, you never know what other issues we may face and my Vulcan is rusty, at best. I'll need a translator and I want it to be you. Plan to be away from the Enterprise for several days; appropriate dress uniforms, that sort of thing, etcetera. I will also need help with my speech."

Her eyes widened with mischief, the small beginnings of a playful smile forming. "Do you want me to write your speech, Captain?"

"No, no. I'll write it; I want you to work with me over the next few days to help me perfect my Vulcan."

She blinked. "You're giving your speech in Vulcan, sir?"

"Way to show confidence in your Captain, Uhura."

"No, no, sir, I meant—" she sat up straighter, suddenly serious. "I only thought that you would prefer—" she glanced fleetingly at Spock then back to Kirk knowing that Spock was the most logical person to assist the captain with any Vulcan translations, especially with a speech that was more than likely to be given to Spock's own father. Her Vulcan language skills were good, but his were obviously, much, much better.

"Bones," Kirk said, loudly, cutting off the rest of her sentence, "I want you down there with me as well. I want you and your staff to be ready to assist the Vulcan's with any and all medical issues. I'm sure they have things well in hand, but I believe it would be a nice gesture to offer; make certain they have everything they need in the way of medical supplies and equipment."

McCoy nodded, his eyes showing that his brain was already working on what could possibly be required.

"Mr. Scott, several of the Vulcan Council members expressed an interest in touring the ship. We will host a small reception aboard while we are in orbit and I want the Enterprise in top form; anything that you're currently behind with, any loose ends, needs to be completed during this time."

Scotty scoffed, looking highly offended. "Of that you cannae have no worries, Captain. I'll leave no stone unturned; if there's a panel to be scrubbed, it will sparkle enough for your own granny can eat off of!"

Kirk lifted his hand and made a stopping gesture, indicating to Scotty that he could take it down a notch.

"Mr. Dickerson, that goes for those under you as well. In the next several days I want security drills, I want spit and polish, I want, I want—hell, you know the sort of thing I want; just make it so."

"Aye, sir."

“Alright, you all have your assignments.” He tapped the surface of the table smartly. “That will be all, gentlemen, and lady. Dismissed.”

Kirk half rose out of his seat, until he noticed that Spock had swiveled around smartly in his chair to face him.

“Captain?”

“Yes, Mr. Spock.” Kirk already knew what his first officer was going to ask, but he played along.

“And I shall be doing what, exactly?”

“I’m glad you asked.” But Kirk, ready for him, snapped his finger and headed for the door. “But we’ll have to talk about it later.”

Chapter 3

Leaving the briefing room, the bridge officers all moved to their stations. Nyota and Spock never conversed on private matters while on the bridge as they had chosen to keep their private and professional lives separate long ago. Yet today, after the extraordinary announcement by the captain, Spock could almost sense Uhura's eyes on him every so often, letting him know that she wanted to talk.

So, it was eight hours later at the end of their shift, when, instead of her going directly to her own quarters as she usually did, she followed him back to his.

The door whooshed to a close upon her entrance and she spoke immediately. Her voice was gentle, but direct.

"Do you want to talk about what the captain said today?"

He stood in front of his food dispenser entering the code for tea.

"I am fine, Nyota."

She crossed her arms and took two steps further into the room.

"Aren't you the one who's always saying that the word 'fine' has variable meanings?"

When he did not respond to her attempt to get him to speak on his feelings, she tried another avenue. She reached out and touched his shoulder in a gesture of sympathy.

"I only think that the captain--"

"--has his own agenda." He sighed but went on. "It does not take an advanced degree in psychology to see that the captain is concerned with how I may react and has chosen not to include me in any of the preparations for the visit to Haven. Not only does he put the mission in jeopardy by not including his first officer, but his logic is flawed; he forgets, I am a Vulcan; I endeavor to control my emotions so they do not control me."

"He cares about you, Spock, we all care. I am sure the captain doesn't want you to feel--"

As Spock stiffened at the word “feel”, Nyota thought it best to course correct.

“It’s been over a year since the Vulcan people went into seclusion. They haven’t asked for the Federation’s assistance in all that time, so none of us know what to expect once we get there. For the first time in your life you may witness your people in a somewhat diminished state, possibly struggling to rebuild a life after so many have been taken from them. You’ll also be visiting a planet for the first time that you have no familiar bonds with, no home, no ancestral lands. That won’t be easy.”

“As I said, Nyota, I am fine and nothing else needs to be said on the matter. You and the Captain have no need to be concerned with how I will react.” He quickly glanced back at her for the first time since her entrance and then returned to the tea preparations.

She nodded her head. “OK, so you’re fine. But, do you mind if I talk about my feelings on the subject, because I am *not* fine.”

He nodded.

“As you wish.”

Setting the teacups on the coffee table, Spock proceeded to remove his blue service tunic. but kept the black undershirt on. He then assumed his customary position on his sofa that he knew was always most conducive to Nyota for talking.

With his own back pressed into the back of the sofa, Spock laid down on his side and Nyota laid down beside him, pressing her back into his chest. She snuggled in closely while he brought his left arm around the front of her. She grabbed his arm with both of her hands and stroked his wrist with her thumbs. She was completely silent for nearly ten minutes, obviously thinking and working out all she wanted to say. He waited patiently, knowing that it was always best to let her initiate any emotionally charged conversations.

“I know that life must continue and that it’s not logical to wallow in sadness forever, but I’m human, I can’t help it.”

She kissed the back of his hand almost as if offering an apology for dismissing the logical arguments that he could possibly have, first. She was silent for a few more minutes and when she spoke again, Spock immediately knew that she was on the verge of tears.

“I’ve been thinking about Gaila and Selkek all day.”

Here her voice broke and she sniffed loudly; Spock tightened his embrace while kissing the back of her head to encourage her to continue.

“Gaila knew what enlisting in Starfleet meant, but Selkek, sweet, wonderful Selkek: he never hurt anyone. And when I think about Selkek, I can’t help but think about how Jenusia just disappeared into thin air with no explanation to me or her parents. And then there’s Turok and Solev—and sweet, beautiful, Amanda.”

Spock made no comment on those mentioned, now gone. He remained silent for a time. And yet, when he did finally speak, his voice was soothing and deep.

“Their memories will live on in your heart.”

Her grip then tightened; she had a more delicate matter to bring up.

“And even though he wasn’t your friend, nor mine, I can’t help but think about Stonn and T’Pring.”

Nyota sniffed loudly once more, not so much for any one person’s lost, but just by the sheer weight of it all pressing down on her heart.

“Shhh. You did not receive the appropriate amount of rest last night and I can sense that you are very fatigued.”

“It’s just—we have all been through so much.” She released Spock’s wrist and ran a hand over her wet eyes. “So much...”

“With your current emotional state,” added Spock, “you are experiencing distress of the highest degree. I can help you relax if you wish. Close your eyes.”

“Spock—”

“Close your eyes,” he whispered into her hair.

She closed her eyes then and Spock placed three of his fingers to the side of her face.

“My thought to your thoughts, my mind to your mind.” He did not actually speak the words aloud, but she could hear them none the less. A second or two later she was a lone figure standing in a field full of purple wildflowers. She wore a light blue garment in some sort of flowing, diaphanous fabric. The wind was blowing gently while a stringed instrument, barely indistinguishable from the sound of the breeze itself, played softly in the background.

"Nyota." A gentle, familiar, melodic voice was calling her as if on the wind itself.
"Nyota, where are you?"

"I am here, beloved; I am here."

"Then call to me and I will come."

"Then come, my love."

In the distance, on the gentle rise of a hill, the figure of a man appeared. He was on horseback, a large, black, powerful looking animal at his command. He was clad in riding breeches, polished black boots, and wore a white lawn shirt, open at the collar.

And it was Spock.

"You are so good to me," she whispered.

"I know," he whispered back.

Chapter 4

Her eyes opened and she looked around sleepily.

“Computer, time.”

But it was not the computer who answered.

“The time is 0504 hours, Nyota. I have made tea.” Spock sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Thank you,” she said groggily while sitting up to take the offered cup. She then looked around, trying to remember how she’d dressed in her nightgown and got in the bed.”

“You missed dinner last evening, therefore you must be hungry; your breakfast is on the table.”

She reached out and stroked his cheek with her free hand.

“Did I ever tell you how much I adore you?”

“Frequently and vociferously,” Spock replied, while leaning into her touch.

“And don’t you forget it, Buster.”

She leaned forward to kiss him.

When she had finished, he leaned back and replied, “I shall endeavor to remember that always.” He then bent over in the opposite direction and began to put on his boots.

“Where are you going so early?” she whispered.

“Mr. Scott wishes to discuss the warp engine manifolds before we report for duty,” he responded, just as quietly.

“At five in the morning?” She asked, her voice tinged with incredulity.

“We thought it best to proceed early. Mr. Scott is determined to have the ship ready for the Captain’s inspection sooner rather than later.”

“Well, I guess we can’t damn him for his enthusiasm.”

Spock turned to face her, raising an eyebrow.

“Indeed.”

“Indeed,” she smiled as she reached out to run her fingernails through his hair. “There; perfect, as always.”

As her hand moved away, he seized her fingers.

“Nyota, I spoke to my father while you were sleeping.”

“Oh?” she blinked once and took a quick sip of tea. “How is Sarek?”

“His health is always excellent.”

“Spock, *how* is your father?”

Spock sighed deeply before answering.

“His loss continues to affect him in ways that I am certain only I can see.”

She tilted her head to the left and nodded; he didn’t need to explain any further, she already knew exactly what he meant; she saw just such a look in Spock’s eyes from time to time.

“I hope you gave him my regards.”

“Yes, of course. He asked after you most particularly.”

“Did he?” she asked in surprise, knowing that Sarek rarely acknowledged her, if ever.

She gently stroked Spock’s cheek with the back of her fingers.

“I hope you told him that I am doing my level best to keep his son extremely happy.”

“He said that, in appearance, I seemed very well.”

“Well, I guess that means my work here is done,” she teased, playfully, making a move to leave his bed. He caught her arm.

“Nyota.”

His solemn tone compelled her to turn. “Yes.”

“This evening, I wish to speak with you on a serious matter.”

“Oh,” she said, knowing that his speaking to his father and speaking to her so seriously soon after could not be good. She felt her pulse quicken.

“Nyota—”

She was agitated.

“He still wants you to leave the Enterprise, doesn’t he? He wants you to join him on Haven.”

“Nyota—”

“Does he?”

“Nyota, surely you know by now that my life is here on the Enterprise—with you.”

“Well, what then,” she asked, “What do you want to talk about tonight?”

Some sort of switch seemed to go off in his head and Nyota immediately knew that it was time for him to assume the mantle of his Vulcanism. He stood.

“It is now 0509 hours. I must leave you now if I am to meet with Mr. Scott at 0515 hours. Will you be able to meet me in your quarters at 18:00 hours this evening?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, reaching up to touch his sleeve. “Have a good day. See you at lunch?”

He nodded crisply, moved toward the door, and was gone, leaving Nyota to wonder what was going to happen at 18:01.

Chapter 5

“Red alert, this is a red alert! Captain Kirk to the bridge; all senior officers’ report. I repeat, this is a red alert; this is not a drill!”

The turbolift door to the bridge swished open revealing Kirk.

“Report, Mr. Chekov.” He said, moving to take his chair.

“Keptain, priority one distress call from the Gamma II Research Station.”

Kirk turned to Spock for confirmation.

“Spock, I thought that Gamma II was an unmanned communications relay station.”

Spock was still bent over his long-range scanner when he replied.

“Correct, Captain. The station captures, relays, and archives all Federation communication’s traffic within this quadrant. It is programmed to signal a priority one distress call in the event of atmospheric or planetary disturbances. It is difficult to tell at this distance, but I believe the readings I am receiving are seismic in nature.”

“Very well,” said Kirk, turning back to the tactical officer. “Stand down from red alert.”

“Aye, Keptain.”

“Compute course and speed to Gamma II.”

“On our present heading, if we proceed to Gamma II at warp six we can be there within thirty minutes, Keptain.”

Lay in a course.”

Aye, sir.”

“Mr. Sulu, warp six.”

“Aye, sir.”

Kirk swiveled his chair to address the first officer once more.

"Put together an away team. I want Giotto and we will need a geologist; Rawlins if he's available, and someone from communications: what's that new Ensign's name, Keller, Kelso?"

"Ensign Kelowitz, sir."

"Yes, Kelowitz, let's give her something to do for a change."

Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Unfortunately, Ensign Kelowitz is currently unavailable. And *he* is on the sick and injured list, I believe."

"Well, find someone else; I'll meet you all in the transporter room in thirty; you have the Con, Mr. Spock."

"Aye, sir."

As the turbolift doors swished to a close, Spock turned back to his station. He knew better than to turn in the opposite direction. He could feel Nyota's eyes boring into the back of his head and he was certain that she wore an expression on her face that said that she was going down to Gamma II or his life would be made extremely difficult if he failed to acquiesce to her demands. He did not look up as he spoke.

"Lieutenant Uhura, would you please contact Lieutenant Palmer."

"Palmer?" she asked.

Only he was able to detect the mildly indignant tone buried deep within her reply.

"Yes, Lieutenant Palmer; or did you have someone else in mind to relieve you from your duties on the bridge."

Chapter 6

The landing party of five materialized just outside of the communication facility's main entrance and as if to greet them the ground rumbled vigorously beneath their feet.

Uhura glanced up at the adjacent rock face and took note of the transmission emitter towers. One of them was dangling precariously over an outcropping of boulders.

"That's why we couldn't retrieve the archive automatically."

Kirk followed her eyes upwards and nodded.

"Giotto, let's get those signal boosters set-up, and let's make this fast," said Kirk, gesturing that they should proceed forward, "I have a bad feeling about this."

Ensign Monteverdi Giotto, as the lone red-shirted security officer, set up the two boosters before taking point. He was followed by Kirk and Uhura. Spock and Lieutenant Rawlins stayed near the entrance for a moment taking additional scans with their tricorders.

"Captain," Spock called out, "our readings indicate an increased likelihood of tectonic disruptions within our general vicinity. I would recommend that we stay on the surface no more than eight point four minutes."

Kirk acknowledged his science officer with a nod.

"Rawlins, you stay here and monitor the quakes. Call out if things start to get hairy; Spock, Uhura, Giotto: you're with me."

The archive was built into the side of the mountain and was separated from the outside entrance by a heavy plated glass door. Giotto keyed in the entrance code and the door instantly slid aside. Once inside, Uhura got straight to work. Her communication's tricorder was set atop one of the consoles and angled towards the two signal boosters outside while she flipped open her communicator and contacted the ship.

"Enterprise, this is Lieutenant Uhura. Do you read me?"

“Loud and clear, Lieutenant,” came Chekov’s Russian accented voice. “You may proceed with the data transfer when ready.”

“Copy that.”

Putting her communicator away, she made a few minor adjustments to her equipment and began the transfer. “Captain, the transfer has begun. Estimated time required: eleven minutes.”

Spock, entering the facility at the moment, looked up sharply at the Captain when he heard how much the Lieutenant’s time varied from his safety margin.

Kirk spoke to Lieutenant Uhura calmly while looking at Spock. “Just do your best, Lieutenant. Get as much of the data as you can.”

“Aye, sir.”

Spock moved to a nearby console and began inspecting it for damage. Another rumble quaked beneath their feet.

“The planet is trying to tell us something, I believe,” said Kirk smiling to which the first officer merely replied with a raised brow.

Giotto, who was inspecting several cabinets, beckoned the Captain over. “Captain, these look like a few of the old-style log data chips; there aren’t too many and I’ve looked in the other cabinets; perhaps we should take this back with us as well.”

“Good idea, Cupcake, I’ll give you a hand.”

Uhura glanced back and watched as Kirk and Giotto removed three small log boxes from the cabinet. Just then, there was another violent quake causing some of the ceiling tile gave way, breaking off into a fist sized chunk and landing squarely on Kirk’s head.

Kirk stumbled forward and had to brace himself on one of the cabinets. The other three people in the room were just about to rush to his aid when he held up his hand.

“I’m fine, no harm done, I’m—” his eyes crossed slightly and went a tad unfocused. While his speech slurred, a small trickle of blood streamed from a cut that was hidden by his hair-line. Seeing blood, Spock instantly sprang into action and flipped open his communicator.

“Spock to Enterprise. We have a medical emergency. Captain Kirk has been injured. Have medical team standing by in the transporter room.”

Naturally Kirk had other plans.

“I’m-Spock, fine, Spock. I’m—”

Spock, ignoring the captain’s garbled speech, turned to Uhura. “I think we are done here, Lieutenant.”

Uhura had her own plans and plead her case directly to Kirk. “It will just take a few more minutes, Captain.”

Spock would have cut her off, if not for the Captain’s voice cutting through the din of sudden rumbles and loud, cracking noises.

“You have two minutes, Lieutenant, and no more. I’ll take—I’ll take—” Kirk shook his head once as if to clear it “— Rawlins and Giotto with me. Spock, you stay—stay with Uhura. Get back up to the ship if things deteriorate more than they have already.”

Spock watched as Giotto helped Kirk through the door and then spoke into his communicator once again.

“Spock to Enterprise. Lock onto the Captain, Ensign Giotto, and Lieutenant Rawlins and beam them aboard. Lieutenant Uhura and I will remain to complete the data transfer. Energize.”

In a swirl of lights reflecting through the glass door, Kirk and the others were gone. Spock now turned all of his attention onto the other figure in the room. His voice was tender, yet firm.

“Nyota.”

Thinking that she could speed things up, the fingers of her left hand moved rapidly over the controls of the console while the fingers of her right hand made minute adjustments to the tricorder. She had heard him, yet she could not bring herself to heed him. If there was any chance to download all the data, now was not the time to stop, to respond, or to look up.

“Nyota. We must go.”

His tone, though measured, was now slightly more elevated. She knew very well that for him it meant concern.

“Now, Lieutenant.”

“I just need another minute, Spock.”

Spock moved forward and glanced down at the console himself. Seeing that nothing she was doing would significantly increase the transfer speed, he spoke again and much more seriously.

“Lieutenant Uhura, you will cease what you are doing; that is an order.”

“I’ve almost got it—just one more—.”

In that very moment, the floor shook angrily and Spock saw it all in a flash. The cave’s jagged stone roof was beginning to push through the ceiling tiles and give way. He lifted his arm to protect his head as a large rock fell just to the left of him. Then, a pipe in the far wall burst. Smoke and some sort of noxious smelling gas was venting into the room and would most likely begin to suffocate them both in seconds. In an economy of motion, Spock grabbed Uhura’s tricorder, slung it over his shoulder, and flipped his communicator open.

“Mr. Scott, now if you please.”

Spock then reached around the console and pulled Nyota tightly to himself, just as the caves roof began to rain down shards of rock and tile, crashing in large piles just inches away from their feet. At so abrupt an action, Nyota’s face registered a momentary look of objection and she would have resisted and stepped out of the transport beam altogether if they had not suddenly begun to dematerialize.

Once safely back on the transporter pad on board the Enterprise, Spock finally released the breath that he had not realized he had been holding.

Nyota, on the other hand shrugged away from him angrily.

“Just what do you think you were doing?” she yelled. “That data was very important; all I needed was another thirty seconds.”

His tone was deceptively calm. “You did not have thirty seconds, Lieutenant.”

Defiant, Uhura turned her back to him, stepped off the pad, and something carefully contained inside of Spock suddenly snapped.

Stepping down from the pad himself, he grabbed her by the arm to spin her around to face him. Feeling her resistance, he deftly moved to the front of her and grasping her by both shoulders tightly, he shook her soundly, twice.

“I said, you did not have thirty seconds!”

At the uncustomary livid tone coming from Spock’s mouth, everyone inside of the transporter room grew silent as if noticing that the two officers had returned for the first time. Everyone looked up and stared. Giotto’s flared his nostrils and straightened his spine. Scotty’s mouth gaped wide. McCoy, bent over Kirk, stopped treating the wound on captain’s head and looked over. Even Kirk, still slightly stunned by the rock that had hit him in the head, looked on in disbelief.

Uhura was just as shocked as everyone else, even more so when she realized that Spock’s apparent anger was directed entirely at her. That’s when she noticed his heavy breathing, the wild look in his eyes, the beads of perspiration on his brow, and the patches of dirt smudged on his forehead and cheeks. He was in the grip of a powerful emotion, an emotion that she recognized all too late as an emotion that he had experienced in just such a similar situation once before.

The apology was immediately on her lips; however, he did not give her a chance to speak it for Spock turned sharply towards Kirk.

“Captain, I would like to bring Lieutenant Uhura up for disciplinary action. Charge one: disregarding a direct order. Charge two: failure to follow that direct order. Charge three: failure to follow a direct order from a superior officer. Charge four: Insubordination.”

Kirk’s eyes widened as each and every infraction was recited. He had only been off the planet for a minute himself and in that short amount of time his XO had come back on board and looked as he wanted to blow a gasket.

However, before he could respond, the medical team burst through the door pushing a gurney and McCoy was pushing him down on it hoping to finally whisk him away to sick bay.

“He’ll have to get back to you on that, Spock” said McCoy tersely; “the Captain has an appointment with his doctor.”

Kirk waved a bloody hand in a languid gesture that seemed to convey to everyone that he would hear it all once he regained a certain level of comprehension.

Spock, rather than be put off by the fact that the Captain wasn't taking him seriously, saw his duty and his opportunity. He pivoted and faced the security officer.

"Ensign Giotto, please escort Lieutenant Uhura to the brig."

Uhura blinked.

Giotto blinked. He and Uhura were friends – they'd known each other since the first day at the academy – they'd even dated casually for a few months in their first year. He couldn't very well take his good friend to the brig. He turned to the Captain for guidance.

Kirk grimaced and reaching out with his hand, he got hold of the door frame to prevent the gurney from leaving the transporter room.

"Sheesh!" he grouched, lifting himself up slightly, "Listen, Spock, I think you need to take it easy. And Cupcake, confine her to quarters." At Uhura's widened, disbelieving eyes and open mouth, he added, "For now."

And just as Kirk was wheeled down the corridor, the realization of all that had occurred finally hit him. He would once again have an angry Vulcan on his hands, and probably an even angrier communication's officer. He slapped his hand against his forehead and slid his open palm down his face.

Chapter 7

The next morning, Spock stood stiffly in front of the door leading to the hearing room. He was wearing his dress blue uniform; in disciplinary proceedings, such as these, it was expected. He should have known that Kirk would do the unexpected.

“Captain?” he said, his eyes traveling over Kirk’s everyday gold utility tunic.

“Look, Spock,” said Kirk sighing tiredly, “I get it, I really do; but—.”

Kirk paused as a few curious crew-members passed them in the corridor. He then led his first officer over into a quiet alcove and lowered his voice accordingly.

“Do you really want to go through with this? I’m sure Uhura knows that what she did was wrong and is beating herself up about it more than we ever could. But an actual *formal* disciplinary hearing—I don’t think it’s the right move to make in this situation.”

Spock, avoiding Kirk’s eye, merely stared straight ahead as he replied.

“We will need two additional officers above the rank of lieutenant to sit on the tribunal. Since I am the officer involved, I must recuse myself from the proceedings in order to give testimony. You may choose to summon those officers of sufficient rank from the following list: Lieutenant-Commander Montgomery Scott, Lieutenant-Commander Andrew Carstairs, Doctor Leonard McCoy, Doctor Anne Mulhall...”

“Spock,” interjected Kirk, cutting off the flow of names he was perfectly familiar with, “I don’t think you’re hearing me.”

“I beg to differ, Captain, my hearing has always been excellent.”

Kirk took a step forward.

“All I’m saying is, if you do this, your relationship with Uhura may never – what am I saying – it *will never* recover.”

Spock said nothing and just stared off into the middle distance and Kirk got the sneaking suspicion that this was just what his first officer had in mind.

“Oh, sheesh, Spock! Don’t do it this way – not this way – not-”

He was cut off by the approach of a security officer escorting Lieutenant Uhura. She too was attired in her dress uniform. Kirk pressed down the front of his gold tunic, knowing that he was under-dressed for the occasion.

“That will be all, Flanders.”

Ensign Flanders beat a hasty retreat, glad that she was not required to standby and watch the carnage unfold.

The three officers now stood facing each other. Uhura looked beseechingly at Spock, but when he made a point to avoid her direct gaze, she turned her head slightly in order to look from the first officer to the captain. Kirk, sympathetic and doing a terrible job of hiding it as he should do, looked from Uhura to Spock.

Spock, wanting to avoid the emotion that the two humans were exuding, pivoted smartly and was the first to enter the room. He seated himself on the opposite side of the table and glanced up and watched the others slow entrance.

When the door shut itself behind them, Spoke spoke in a low, deep voice. “Shall I summon the other officers myself, Captain, or will you?”

To Kirk, the timbre of Spock’s voice registered in his brain as superior nonchalance. Kirk’s patience finally left him.

“No! Listen Spock, this is how we are going to play this: I am going to sit down and mediate this conflict–because that’s just what this is: a conflict–not a matter to drag Starfleet rules and regulations into, all right? First, I will hear your side of the story and then I will hear Uhura’s side of the story and then you two kids are going to kiss and make up!. Do I make myself clear?”

Uhura had the good sense to actually look ashamed. The Captain was correct: this was a conflict more personal than professional and she silently berated herself for the thousandth time for using her private relationship with Spock to try to influence him for her own professional gain.

Saving the entire communications archive, in hindsight, was rather ridiculous. She could have simply accomplished the very same thing by requesting the back-up logs from the Starfleet vessels that passed within range of the station for the last six months. Yes, more tedious work to reassemble it all, but the less dangerous option both in body and soul.

“Lieutenant Uhura committed a serious breach of Starfleet regulations by not following a direct order. She endangered herself, the success of the mission, and she callously disregarded the position she placed the both of us in.”

“OK, Spock, I get it. Just come out and say it, will you: you’re angry with her.” Kirk turned to Lieutenant Uhura, who had remained on the periphery of their discussion, silent, mortified, and watchful. “Help me out, will you! He’s your boyfriend, for goodness sake and I’m sure you’ve made each other mad lots of times before this. You have to know the sort of thing you need to say.”

To Uhura, this was uncharted territory. Previous disagreements were usually minor and all on her side. She and Spock had had differences of opinion before, but Spock always took the high road and kept himself above it all. Deep down inside of herself she knew that this time she had definitely gone much too far.

“I am sorry, Spock, I really am.” She wrung her hands, but seeing it and knowing that they could see it too, she quickly placed her hands on her lap.

“You know how I can be – retrieving that archive pushed every single one of my buttons. I will not let myself get so carried away again; I promise.” She then lifted her right hand from her lap and reached for his hand that was stretched out on the top of the briefing table. “I put myself in danger and I know that the occurrence down on the planet reminded you of the day that your mother was–.

Spock looked up sharply in anticipation of all she might say in front of Kirk. He immediately snatched his hand away.

“Lieutenant Uhura,” said Spock, his voice cool and disapproving, “Might I remind you that you are the one who is on review today and not myself. Please refrain from entering information into evidence that has no bearing in today’s proceedings.”

“I only wanted to – I thought – yes, of course, Commander.” She looked away.

Kirk, even though he knew that the Lieutenant was not the type to burst into tears while on duty, could sense, just by the bewilderment in her eyes, that she was struggling valiantly to keep her emotions in check. Other than his own mother, Uhura was the strongest person he knew and it ticked him off a little to see how easily she was growing upset.

“Spock,” he said, his voice tight, “This is mediation only, no *evidence* will be taken at all.”

Spock said nothing in reply and Kirk found this stoic indifference of his in this instance just as irritating as if his order had been questioned.

"As a friend," he turned and looked pointedly at Uhura to reassure her of that fact, "to both of you, this is what I am going to suggest: Make an appointment to talk to the ship's counselor."

He saw Spock's slow blink, the only outward sign of his distaste for such a suggestion.

"I think the only problem we have here is two people who need to re-evaluate the boundaries of their personal and professional lives. You two kids have been doing well in keeping your interactions separate up until now. What remains to be seen is why now; what has happened to cause Uhura to disregard a direct order. And I'm not saying you did it to be mean or disrespectful. I know you, Uhura, this is not you."

Uhura nodded; she knew it wasn't her either.

"Good, I think we're done here, then." Kirk flicked his wrist. "Right, dismissed." Kirk arose and walked towards the door, only to recollect something and double back. "Oh and Uhura, you are no longer confined to quarters." He then did an about face and smiled. "And you really need to come to the rec room tonight. McCoy and Scotty whined like babies all night long and kept urging me to release you so you could come sing for us all."

Uhura stood, smiled slightly, and quickly glanced at Spock, before saying, "May I take a rain check, Captain?"

Kirk nodded; he understood.

"Very well, then. Only next time," he said pointing straight at her, "I want to hear all my favorite songs. No one can sing in Altairian better than you."

She smiled a little more broadly. "Putting in your requests, now, eh, Captain?"

"Let's just say, I'm getting them in early, Bones and Scotty have already decided between themselves what your repertoire will be. What can I say, they missed you."

"It's only been one evening."

"Well," he said laughingly, "Stay out of trouble and none of us have to be deprived again."

Spock, who had been sitting and listening quietly, had heard enough of their lighthearted banter. He stood abruptly. His voice was uncharacteristically hard.

“Since neither of you choose to take this matter seriously, it leaves me with no other alternative. It has become increasingly clear to me that colleagues can not give one-hundred percent to their duties upon a Starfleet vessel, while giving one-hundred percent to a personal relationship and maintain an efficient, cohesive, and productive association upon that same vessel. Therefore, from this moment forward, I would like it known to you, Captain, that my personal relationship with Lieutenant Uhura is hereby at an end.”

Uhura’s heart and eyelashes fluttered wildly. It had so come out of left field, that she was having difficulty in comprehending just what Spock was saying.

“W-What?”

“I believe I made myself perfect clear, Lieutenant. I do not wish to remain in a personal relationship with you. The nature of our dealings with each other, you must agree, has always been teetering upon the brink of the illogical and the unsuitable.”

“What? What do you mean, Spock?” said Uhura, clutching at her heart as if that would keep it from pushing out of her chest.

And, as if requesting a plate of food at a restaurant, Spock continued on matter-of-factly.

“I am a Vulcan. I require a much more suitable mate. Nothing remains to be said. I must go.”

Kirk said nothing, he simply stared at his friend in a state of complete loss.

Uhura now panicked and utterly confused, walked around the table, reached out to him, and gripped his arm.

“Wait a minute, Spock. What do you mean? We’re going to talk about this, right?”

“The time for talking is over; the time to return to duty his here. If you will excuse me, Captain, Lieutenant,” said calmly, carefully extracting his arm from Uhura’s grasp, “My presence is required in the lab.

And with that, he briskly walked pass the two stunned humans, through the door, and out into the corridor. And Kirk and Uhura, perplexed and unblinking, stared after him, long after the door had whooshed to a close.

Chapter 8

Spock would never be considered particularly loud. His movements were concise, yet silently elegant, his actions crisp and smoothly deliberate, and his voice, both soft and deep had always been calm and reassuring.

And yet his very presence did have a certain resonance which was easily missed when no longer about. The tea set which usually sat on her table gently steaming and perfuming the air with his favorite Vulcan brew, now appeared cold and long forgotten. His lyre was also gone, missing from the corner which was its usual home, and his meditation robe had been removed from the hook on the back of the bathroom door and with his absence from her quarters all was eerily still.

She noticed all these missing things the moment she entered her quarters, barely an hour after her hearing, and it was this new kind of silence which hurt the most.

The day following the hearing, after a sleepless night, Uhura had sent a voice message asking him for time that evening to talk over their issues.

His response: a curt, five-word text message:

Talking both illogical and impossible.

The day after that, a desperate, late-night buzz to his door; she knew he was within, but it went unanswered.

And, a day later, a mere glance across the bridge during their shared alpha shift was followed by her unexpected and inexplicable reassignment to the beta shift.

The day before their arrival at the Vulcan planet of Haven, the Captain requested Uhura's presence in his quarters to go over the schedule and to review his speech. He needed to sort out some of the trickier Vulcan pronunciations and phrases before he stood before the Vulcan High council.

As usual, Uhura was punctual and thoroughly prepared. However, Kirk had another concern that he wished to address with her before they began. He nodded towards the sofa and when she sat down primly and rigidly on the edge of it, he looked at her askance.

"Are you sick or something?"

"No, sir."

"I haven't seen you on the bridge."

"No, Captain; yesterday was my usual day off," she replied, taking her computer tablet out of her work bag and placing it on the top of his coffee table.

"I know it was your day off yesterday, but I'm talking about today; you weren't on the bridge."

Uhura blinked; she had assumed that the captain knew. It took everything that was within her to answer him unemotionally.

"I am assigned to Beta shift now."

The Captain just stared at her as if he had a question on his lips, but she deftly changed the subject.

"The Vulcan's have transmitted the final itinerary and I've been going over it carefully. We will need to move the reception on board the Enterprise back one hour to compensate for the length of the High Council's usual weekly meeting."

But Kirk's mind was far from the Vulcan itinerary.

"Beta Shift? Since when?" he asked, looking at her narrowly, seeing the stylus quiver in her hand.

"Since today," she said with false brightness before immediately moving on to what had brought her to the Captain's quarters in the first place. "Shall we go over your speech now?"

She refused to lift her eyes, but she could feel Kirk's glare. To look up, she thought, would do nothing but reveal the weakness she was certain was in her own eyes. She would remain professional; she would not complain.

"Captain, I thought that we could take a look at this part of the speech where you talk of the Federation working in harmony with the Vulcan council. I thought we could replace the expression *krilan-vo'ektaya* with *kril'es*, it means virtually the same thing, but it would be so much easier for you to pronounce."

But Kirk was hardly finished.

"I hope you didn't switch shifts because of Spock."

"No, Captain. Of course not." She just swallowed and pressed on. "And this word here, *rish-tor*, when you pronounce it, you should put an emphasis on the "rish" sound to state the Vulcan's unique ability to battle back from adversity."

Kirk said nothing and simply stared at Uhura until his suspicions fully formed in his mind.

"Son of a bitch!" he spat, reaching across his desk and angrily pounding the comm switch. "Kirk to Operations."

"No, Captain, please," she cried, alarmed that the Captain had guessed her real predicament so quickly. Uhura had tried to reach over to stay his hand but he was too swift for her. The comm screen blinked to life.

"Operations. Carstairs here."

"Carstairs," said Kirk, livid. "Until further notice, Lieutenant Uhura is permanently assigned to Alpha shift. Is that understood?"

"But sir, Mr. Spock--"

Uhura tried to interject again, "Please Captain, don't--"

Kirk effectively cut them both off with his bark of command.

"I know perfectly well who makes the crew assignments on the Enterprise!" he snapped. "Would you kindly remember that I am still the Captain of this vessel and I can make changes when I wish, wherever I wish. Is that understood, Mister?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, of course sir. Sorry, sir."

Kirk didn't want to hear any apologies.

"Kirk out!" he said, slapping at the off switch.

Uhura was mortified. She couldn't look at him so she just sat there, staring down at the carpet, quietly, listening to the captain's ragged breathe.

When he finally got a hold of himself, Kirk finally spoke, though, a little harshly.

"You should have come to me!"

"No Captain, I couldn't," she whispered, turning her head away.

“Why not?”

She shut her eyes tightly. “Haven’t I caused enough trouble as it is?”

Kirk’s nostrils flared and his mouth formed a grime, dissatisfied line. He wanted to curse, shout, or punch someone, preferably his first officer.

“Look at me, Uhura; look at me.” When she did not comply, his voice grew stern. “Lieutenant, look at me!”

She winced, but slowly opened her eyes and turned towards him.

“You *should* have come to me-!”

“Captain – I-.”

“-as your friend.”

“No, Captain-”

His brows lifted. “We’re not friends?”

Her rigid postured seemed to slump slightly and her face contorted into a wince of absolute pain.

“Uhura,” he said, sadly, his voice lowered. “I don’t know why, after all this time, I still have to convince you that I am your friend. Other than Bones, out of everyone on this crew, you and I-we have the most in common, the most history together. We have shared many of the same friends, these same friends who were lost to us-and yet – I never understood why-you never turn to me for help or to share-.”

Her agitation was great and her hands flexed nervously.

“But Captain, don’t you see; I can’t talk to you-not about this. It’s far too personal. I always had Spock to – I just miss – and now I have – no one.”

Kirk, watched her for a moment. Seeing the lost look in her eyes, sensing where her thoughts had now strayed, and the immanent breakdown that was sure to come, he was out of his chair, sitting down on the sofa, and had her in his arms,

“You have me. I know I can never replace Jen or Gaila. I miss them too. ”

"I'm sorry, Captain," she said, sniffing lightly, "I know I have let you down so much this week. I don't know what has gotten into me lately."

Stroking her back, he sighed. "I'll tell you exactly what has gotten into you lately. Your Captain announces that this ship and crew are going to the new Vulcan home world, which can only serve to conjure up all of our collective pain and sorrow... pain and sorrow, I might add, that everyone was hoping to forget. Then, one of my most promising young lieutenants, who has lost the most out of all of us—" here Uhura drew back, ready to protest, "—the *most* of us," Kirk emphasized before continuing, "feels that she, once again, has something to prove."

"Again?"

"Yes, again. She wants to prove to her captain that she is capable of handling any situation. She wants to prove to her boyfriend that she is just as indestructible as she thinks him to be. She feels she needs to prove to the crew that she isn't asking for any special treatment. And, she also feels she needs to live up to the memory and sacrifice of all her lost friends." He flashed her a saucy grin. "Stop me when I've said something that isn't true."

"None of that is true."

"Oh, isn't it? You don't want to prove to me that you are capable?"

"Well, yes—I mean, I don't want you to think that I'm not doing all I can to be the best. I only want to show you that I deserve my position here on the Enterprise."

He was incredulous here.

"Uhura, if you didn't deserve a spot on the Enterprise, believe me, you wouldn't be here."

"But I thought I was only here because Captain Pike placed me in my position."

"So, from that, you concluded what? That I hadn't gotten around to removing you?"

"Something like that."

Kirk scoffed impatiently.

“Uhura, you should hear yourself right now. It’s ridiculous! You are my chief communications officer because you are smart and resourceful and you speak about a million languages that half the people in Starfleet, which includes myself, can’t even begin to understand. I don’t know about you, but who is going to get me out of a jam when I say an inappropriate word to a Kazarite dilithium trader?”

“The Kazarites don’t speak with words, sir, only in clicks and whistles.”

Here he laughed. “See! You’ve saved my ass already.”

Despite her low spirits, Nyota laughed slightly. Kirk pulled back and caressed her cheek and heartfelt compassion was reflected in his eyes.

“There, isn’t laughter better sadness? See, you haven’t thought about the Vulcan for the last five minutes.”

Instead of the humorous moment he was hoping to create, the lighthearted atmosphere was immediately broken. Uhura reached out and gripped Kirk’s sleeve, laid her head upon his shoulder and began to sob.

Kirk started to rock her back and forth, cursing himself for his unfortunate slip of the tongue.

“My actions—I can hardly think of them.”

“Shh,” said Kirk, smoothing her hair, “there’s no need to bring it up again.”

“I can’t help it. I keep thinking about what Spock told me of the Katric Arc cave on Vulcan, collapsing all around him and his mother. And there I was in that archive on the planet, the roof collapsing in on top of me. He must have felt—he must of thought—. How could I have been so careless as to remind Spock of the day his mother died?”

She cried even louder now and bitterly. Kirk managed to grab a few tissues from the table.

“You didn’t do it on purpose,” he said, handing them to her.

“But you don’t understand, I’ve always pushed him too far—even from the beginning. I made him take me on as his T.A., even though I could tell he didn’t want to. I made him reassign me from the Farragut to the Enterprise when he knew it was playing favorites. I made him take me down to Gamma II just because I knew I could.”

Kirk snorted. "Damn Uhura, maybe I should make you the first officer."

"Captain—" she whined, looking up and seeing the sparkle of mischief in his eyes.

"I mean, come on Uhura, I had no idea he was so whipped." At her look of protest, he quickly added, "-which tells me that he would do anything for you. Clearly, the guy loves you—not that he would probably ever say the words. I guess what I'm trying to say is, there's hope. Perhaps not today, or tomorrow, but soon. Let him be mad for now.. I give him another week, and if he hasn't come around by then, I could always sick Bones on him."

That had the desired effect; she laughed a little louder and wrapped her arms around his neck."

"There now, that wasn't so hard, said Kirk, stroking her hair. "See, we can be friends."

She pulled back and wiped at her cheeks. "It would be taking advantage, Captain."

"It's Jim," he said. "And you let me worry about who I let take advantage of me, Uhura."

"It's Nyota," she said, smiling weakly.

Kirk smiled in return, reaching out with his thumb to remove the tears from her face that she had missed.

"Nyota."

Chapter 9

During their nearly week-long journey to Haven, Spock took great care to keep out of Lieutenant Uhura's way. On the occasion when her glance had caught his eye across the bridge, he found it effective to simultaneously calculate the spatial displacement of the Enterprise at the speeds of sub-light, impulse, and warp five as a way to block out the unsettling ruminations of his mind resulting from the disquieting expression in her eyes.

However, these particular equations, he rapidly estimated, merely engaged one-fourth of his brain, leaving the remaining three-quarters open to outside influences.

He soon realized that he could easily fill this portion with the exercise of recalling each crew-member's name, rank, and serial number, although he became thoroughly dismayed with his lack of control when he found himself pondering a certain person's name when he reached the "U's".

He soon recollected that he could turn his mind to his interest in botany, only to sink further under the weight of disappointment when he suddenly remembered how Uhura delighted in the roses that he had cultivated in her honor.

He finally found some relief in turning his mind exclusively to mentally cataloging all the holo-images that the geology department had taken since the start of their five year mission.

However, as much as these contemplations occupied his senses, he found it quite troubling that both the captain and the doctor continually hinted around the subject of his former relationship, with the Captain doing all the hinting and the doctor feeling it quite unnecessary to hint at all.

"Sheesh, Spock, it's been a week," snapped McCoy, continuing their contentious breakfast conversation in corridor just as they both exited the mess hall. "Don't you think you've made the poor girl suffer enough."

Spock said nothing and turned right at the end of the hall just as McCoy turned the usual left as if making his way towards the bridge. It was after walking several paces that McCoy realized that he was quite alone. "Son of a--," he spat, before turning around to catch up with the first officer, picking up his rant exactly where he left off, his Georgia patois getting more marked the longer he talked.

"You know, I never knew that Vulcan's could hold a grudge for so long. Where I come from forgiveness is the better part of valor or didn't they have time to teach you that when you were learning calculus at the age of two?"

Spock stopped abruptly.

"Vulcan's do not generally make a practice of offending others whereby the need for forgiveness would ever be required."

"And they say that Vulcan's never lie either; well here's proof," said McCoy, his voice dripping with sarcasm. McCoy gestured towards him with an exasperated wave of the hand "I'm tired of trying to figure out what your problem is."

"Problem doctor?" said Spock, evenly, raising an eyebrow. "I do not believe that I currently *have* a problem."

"I stand corrected; you're right; you don't have a problem, that's because *you* are the problem! You green-blooded, selfish, unfeeling--"

"Excuse me doctor, but I need to check in with the geology lab before the start of duty."

Spock turned to enter one of the labs while McCoy turned back, mumbling silently to himself all along the way.

At the sound of the door swishing open, Lieutenant Rawlins glanced up and grimaced when he saw the first officer enter his lab. It seemed as if Commander Spock was making the geology department his own special project in recent days.

Several of the technicians glanced up from their work as well, all wishing they could make some sort of escape.

"Mr Spock," said Rawlins, both his jaw and voice tight. "How may I help you *this* morning?"

Whether or not he could sense the lieutenant's impatience, Spock didn't show it and merely carried on as he would any other day,

"Lieutenant Rawlins, I believe that I have discovered a flaw in your filing system."

"Flaw?"

“Upon review, I have discovered that two of the holo-image files have been mislabeled.”

“Oh?” Rawlins furrowed his forehead while rolling his chair from his desk towards another work station. He punched in his access code to bring up the appropriate screen. “Which?”

“File 77452-AG8-DD994 and file 77452-AG8-DD995. I believe the images have been reversed.

Rawlins keyed in the numbers manually, bringing up both images on the large central viewer screen. Both images were virtually identical: two different images of a sandstone rock formation with the time-stamp clearly stating that second image was taken three months ago at 1:52 pm in the afternoon and the first image having been taken exactly three seconds later.

“I see what you mean, sir. I can’t image what could have possibly happened,” said Rawlins, doing everything in his power to keep his eyes from rolling.

“See that it is corrected immediately.”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

Spock thought he heard a chuckle from the other end of the room and upon turning he saw crew-members Juko and Spinelli studiously looking through their microscopes.

Rawlins knew exactly who had laughed. Spinelli had been making insensitive comments for the last several days about Vulcan overachievers and their need to get laid. Rawlins knew he should put the crewman on report, but, having witnessed Spock’s displeasure with Lieutenant Uhura firsthand and thinking him unduly harsh to her, he didn’t have the heart to check Spinelli and actually agreed with him wholeheartedly.

“Was there something else, sir?” said Rawlins, shooting a quelling look down the room.

“No, there is nothing more. Carry on, Lieutenant.”

With one more glance down the line of workstations, Spock exited the lab. And when he rounded the corner that would take him to the turbo-lift, he ran right into Lieutenant Uhura.

Attired in her dress uniform, she was standing before the turbo-lift doors, her head bent down as she read something on her computer tablet. He straightened his body automatically and came to stand slightly behind her to wait for the lift.

He said nothing but he couldn't help but smell her perfume. The aroma of rose and orange had somehow reached out to him as if they were tentacles of a multi-armed creature, wrapping around him, enfolding him, and beckoning to him like that of a siren's song.

He closed his eyes momentarily to center himself and when he opened them he found her looking at him. When she quickly turned away he had not realized that he had also tightened his fists behind his back until he felt the loss of sensation in his right hand. He immediately began calculating the stress and load factors of the dilitium matrix at warp one.

At last the lift came, and to his dismay it was empty. He had at least hoped for other occupants as he knew full well that the lieutenant would use their few moments of privacy together to make her case for forgiveness once more and his hypotheses proved true as soon as the doors had closed on them.

"Spock, please."

Each night alone in her quarters had been sheer agony. She thought of ways to make it right, replaying the scenes from the planet that fateful day over and over again, and she was tortured endlessly over all the things that still remained unsaid. Before going down to Haven that morning, she saw this as her final chance.

"Won't you talk to me," she said softly.

Spock hardened his heart and if possible, stood up even straighter, yet when he spoke his voice was composed.

"You will address me as Commander, Commander Spock, Mr. Spock, or Sir. You will not address me so casually again. Is that understood, Lieutenant?"

His tone—that cool, calm, collected tone of his—she more than anyone knew what was really behind it. She reached out and pressed the ALL-STOP button.

"Spock, I get it, you're still angry with me." Desperate, she stepped forward. "Believe me; I'm angry with myself. I understand exactly what I did wrong and why it upset you so much. If there was a way to go back in time and do it all over

again, I would. I would give anything for your forgiveness. Spock, will you please forgive me? Please.”

Tears streamed down his cheeks throughout this confession, She had even reached out and touched his chest, hoping that in feeling her touch, he would take her into his arms like he always did, and comfort her.

However, the only thing Spock did was to step away and release the ALL-STOP button.

Uhura’s face crumpled but she knew she had to keep it together for within seconds she would be on the bridge. Wretched, she looked down at the floor. She had one final thing to say. She lowered her voice.

“I figured out what you wanted to talk about the other night. You were going to ask me to marry you, weren’t you?”

She had her answer in his silence. She bravely continued, her heart breaking.

“I would have said yes.”

--

Kirk was handing over the daily fuel consumption report when, upon the opening of the lift doors, he noticed the two of them stepping off of the turbo-lift together. McCoy, who was standing slightly to the rear of Kirk, turned around himself. For a fleeting moment, both men thought that finally, the two had come to some sort of armistice, but it was not to be. Spock’s face was as stony and impassive as ever and Uhura’s eyes were red, just as they had been every single day that she had come on duty.

As Uhura moved to the Communications station to give a few last minute instructions to her replacement, Spock moved to stand alongside the Captain’s chair.

Kirk did not acknowledge his first officer. In fact, he was right sick of Spock at the moment. Spock could stand there and wait for an eternity for all he cared. However, Kirk did have a plan to carry out and carry it out he must.

Back home in Iowa, Kirk remembered his uncle’s method for teaching him a lesson and in his estimation Spock needed someone to “learn him.”

Spock, obviously feeling that he had stood in silence at the captain’s chair long enough, finally spoke.

“Any final instructions, Captain?”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Spock, there you are. As I am going to be down on the planet for the next few days, there are several *little* things I want done in my absence that must be completed before we host the reception on board the Enterprise in three days time. I know you want to go down to the planet and visit your father, but I’m afraid that must wait a few more days. This is very important. I have made a list.”

Without looking, Kirk extended his left hand and his yeoman placed a computer tablet there. The tablet contained a list of twenty tasks... twenty completely useless tasks. This he handed to Spock.

Spock studied the list for several seconds before bringing disbelieving eyes level with the captain’s.

“This first item...” Spock tilted his head to pose a question. “You wish me to re-inspect every single one, Captain?”

A small, smug smile graced Kirks lips as he blinked once and only once.

“Is there some... difficulty, Mr. Spock?”

Clearly amused, Doctor McCoy snorted softly to himself.

“No, Captain. However, this third task will require me to climb through every Jeffries tube throughout the ship and only after, I might add, the engineering staff disengages the thermal coupling from each individual capacitor from the console on the engineering deck.”

“And this is a problem because-?” said Kirk, bemusedly.

“Captain, there are forty-five capacitor’s on deck two alone.”

“Then there is no better time than the present to get started. Bones,” exclaimed Kirk as he swiveled smartly in his seat to face the doctor. “You ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, Jim.”

Kirk stood up from the command chair and turned to his chief engineer.

“Mr. Scott! I believe that Mr. Spock is going to be rather busy for a while; you have the bridge.” He slapped Spock smartly on the arm. “I’ll be sure to give your father your best. Bones, Uhura, you’re with me!”

Chapter 10

The landing party beamed down to the middle of an expansive courtyard. Arranged in a semi-circle, the area surrounding them consisted of several large, black, monolithic stones which towered over their heads. Beyond the stones, at a short distance away nestled in a valley there appeared to be a settlement. This group of buildings were modest and serviceable befitting the Vulcan circumstances, but this new place, this town was by no means half the size of a city such as Shi'Kahr on the Vulcan home world.

Scans of the planet upon approach proved that the population of Haven, or rather, *Rau Tor Vuhlkansu*, as they would call it whilst living amongst the Vulcan people, was somewhat larger than the ten-thousand inhabitants previously thought. This was hardly surprising considering the general reports within the Federation suggesting that many Vulcan's living and working on other planets had rejoined their people.

Uhura, acting in the instance as Kirk's protocol adviser due to her familiarity of the Vulcan language and her knowledge of the finer points of their customs, reflected for a moment on the detailed schedule that they would be expected to follow on their first day on the planet.

They had been told that they were to be greeted by several members of the Vulcan High Council, followed by a visit to the newly constructed Hall of Vulcan Thought, were, the Captain, as Starfleet's official representative, would give his Speech of Condolences. Following that somewhat solemn gathering, they were to be immediately shown to their lodgings. Once settled there, they would receive a mid-day meal, a rest interval, and after, they were to be taken on a tour of the compound.

While she was going over this list in her head, she happened to glance in McCoy's direction. The doctor appeared, not surprisingly, agitated, showing, even for himself, early signs of impatience and restlessness. He tugged at his collar, began mumbling about the heat and the dust, lamented over the need for spit and polish, and finishing his soliloquy with the observation that he was a doctor not a diplomat.

"What did you say, Bones?" asked Kirk, who hadn't been listening at all because he was far too busy looking about himself at the planet that was the new home to the diminished Vulcan people.

"I said, it's a little hot; makes my uniform feel like a noose around my neck!"

“Vulcans prefer it on the hot side, Bones; you know that. Besides, it does look a little like their home world: desert-like, though not quite as rocky. I wonder where everyone is?”

Uhura, who had been silent and a little on edge for reasons she kept to herself, took a step forward and nodded across from the transporter platform towards a shield-like structure.

“You will need to announce our arrival by sounding the gong, sir. The reception committee will only approach when they hear its call.”

Kirk did as he was bid, and moments later began looking in all directions, waiting.

“Our hosts approach, I can hear them,” said Uhura, turning towards a stone archway on the right and mechanically straightening her dress uniform.

“I must be getting old,” replied McCoy, “I don’t hear a thing.”

Then, as if carried on the wind, he heard them, the first strains of distant bells, or something very similar, ringing in answer to their summons. As the sound grew louder and louder by turns, McCoy sidled up next to Uhura and asked, “How does that Vulcan salute go again?”

Uhura held up her right hand, third and fourth fingers splayed into a v-shape.

McCoy tried to copy her, only to give up seconds later. “That hurts worst than the uniform!” he exclaimed, testily.

Uhura glanced to the captain and watched him closely while he put on his serious face, the one he saved for times such as this, which she knew meant that he was concentrating on his own Vulcan greeting in his head.

A few minutes later, the procession finally entered. Four large Vulcan males carrying what looked like large shafted blades and dressed in the silver uniforms of the council guard, buffeted the entire group of elaborately attired individuals who the landing party took as members of the High Council. One of the individuals, an older female dressed and veiled in black, who was carried in a elevated chair by two bearers, lead the way. She was followed by Sarek himself, who was followed by younger male and a young female.

An introduction of the elderly female was hardly necessary, for she was easily recognized and well-known throughout the galaxy. She was T’Pau, the the head of State, tantamount to Queen as one would say in the earthly vernacular.

Vulcans, to most uninformed or uninterested off-worlders, appeared on the outside to be a patriarchal society as it was the males who made up the vast majority of diplomatic or scientific postings. However, when anyone cared to take investigate further and to study their customs, which wasn't very often, it was quickly proven to be the exact opposite, and T'Pol, as their leader, was commonly referred to about the Federation as all of Vulcan in one package.

Sarek, Spock's own father, with his years of diplomatic experience, was now the head of the Vulcan government and when the bells stopped ringing suddenly, it was he who was the first to come forward to the group from the Enterprise to offer the official greeting.

Uhura swallowed involuntarily. She wondered at the kind of reception she would receive from the former ambassador. Sarek had known for a while now that she and Spock had a romantic relationship, or rather, that they once had one. And even though Spock rarely spoke about his father other than casually mentioning his health, she was totally in the dark if Sarek looked upon *her* as the reason that his son had not rejoined his people.

"Captain Kirk," said Sarek in English while bowing his head slightly, "You are most welcome here amongst us."

The Captain took one step forward. "Administrator Sarek, we are honored to be invited," Kirk said in perfect Vulcan, his hand raised in greeting. "We come to serve."

If Sarek was surprised by the excellent pronunciation of the young captain, he did well to conceal it. He now raised his own hand in return.

"Your service honors us. " And, without missing a beat or acknowledging the two others from the Enterprise, he turned. "Permit me to name my companions, Captain." Sarek stepped aside to reveal those behind him. He nodded to indicate the elderly woman on the litter. "This is T'Pol, Matriarch of the Vulcan people and the keeper of the Katric ark."

"Yes, of course, ma'am; an honor," said Kirk, straightening first and then bowing low in deference the person before him.

T'Pol nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

"We welcome thee to Rau Tor Vuhlkansu, Captain Kirk."

Sarek then indicated the other Vulcan male. "And this is the Vice Administrator, Somec."

The male, who looked entirely too young to hold such an elevated office, now stepped forward.

"Sir, an honor," replied Kirk, bowing again.

Somec nodded solemnly and he, along with T'Pau turned curious eyes to Kirk's companions and waited silently. Kirk had naturally expected an introduction of the young female, but then, with none forthcoming, he made his own introductions.

"Please allow me to introduce two of my senior officers. This is Lieutenant-Commander Leonard McCoy, the Enterprise's chief medical officer."

Somec nodded politely, but T'Pau, seemingly unconcerned, had turned to the human female.

"And thee are called?"

Uhura blinked, startled to be addressed directly by T'Pau herself.

"Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, ma'am."

T'Pau raised one eyebrow slowly before she spoke.

"Yes," she drawled, "we have heard thy name before."

Uhura, if she didn't know any better, would have sworn that T'Pau was voicing clear disapproval of her person, if she could even make herself believe that Vulcan's could express something like disapproval. T'Pau then turned her gaze back to the captain.

"I do not see Spock among thy party, Captain Kirk. It displeases me to see his exclusion here today."

Kirk turned on his most charming smile.

"I am sorry, ma'am; but as my first office, Commander Spock has the command of the Enterprise in my absence. Not to worry, when his obligations permit, he will be able to beam down. Furthermore, he will be at the reception which we have arranged on board the Enterprise in a few days; you may depend upon seeing him then."

T'Pau stared blankly at Kirk, clearly unaffected by his boyish smiles or his charm. But Sarek came to his son's defense.

“Of course. My son has his duties. We must understand.”

Kirk nodded politely. But Sarek wasn't finished.

“We are pleased that you were able to accept our invitation. Every Vulcan has a debt to the Enterprise that we can never repay.”

Kirk merely shook his head and replied sedately. “Talk of repayments is unnecessary amongst good friends, Administrator Sarek.”

“Nevertheless, many have expressed interest in making the acquaintance of the crew of the Enterprise. Even now, many have gathered in the Hall of Vulcan Thought to greet you.”

Kirk bowed to acknowledge the compliment.

“And after the rest interval,” continued Sarek, “there is much we wish to show you of our new home. I hope you will allow me to show you personally, Captain.”

Kirk smiled, “I would be delighted.”

“And Doctor McCoy,” said Sarek, “if you find it agreeable, our Medical Administrators wish me to express their interest in allowing them the opportunity to review the new healing facilities with you.”

McCoy's face lit up with enthusiasm, no doubt pleased in the chance to be away from diplomatic protocol and formal etiquette for the rest of the day.

Sarek then turned a cautious eye towards Uhura, this being the first time he had even looked her way.

“Lieutenant Uhura, after your rest interval, you will be escorted by another.” Uhura looked toward Somec for conformation, but Sarek obviously had other plans, and nodded towards the young Vulcan female who, up until that point had been silent and unobtrusive in the background. She now came forward and bowed her head.

“This is she who is my aide, T'Lin.”

T'Lin had long black hair that fell past her waist, and she was extremely pretty, with delicate features. She also seemed far too young to have such a position, even by Vulcan standards, but then, on a planet now with so few, aides of any age were probably difficult to come by.

Sarek spoke again. "T'Lin will see to all your needs for the rest of the afternoon, Miss Uhura.

Uhura got the distinct impression that she was being dismissed, passed off to an underling that nobody had even bothered to introduce until it became necessary. Kirk however, sensing her distress, threw her an encouraging smile as they all turned and followed after the procession. As they walked, she began to speculate again just what Spock had communicated with his father, for clearly Sarek did not wish her to be a member of his private tour with Captain Kirk. She hated to admit it, but she was more than a little hurt by it all.

Chapter 11

Kirk stood on a high perch overlooking the gathering of Vulcan citizenry who were looking upwards at him. This was a little disconcerting at first, but as the oration progressed and his words flowed from him with ease and assurance, the three humans finally relaxed into their surroundings.

The speech was given entirely in the Vulcan language and it wasn't particularly long. But its sentiments of both grief and hope were given and received in both solemnity and sincerity.

When it was over, no one applauded. McCoy, following along on the universal translator, for a moment looked very much like he wanted to clap, but Uhura, who sat beside him just to the side of Kirk, stayed his actions with a slight touch of her hand.

Uhura, even though she had heard the words countless times during practice sessions with Kirk, still found it moving and had to hold herself together as best as she could to keep from crying.

After the speech, a brief interval of introductions were made, which ended with their separation. The Captain and Doctor McCoy were led elsewhere by Sarek along with a whole host of presumed Vulcan luminaries following behind. Uhura was left standing on her own.

T'Lin, who had been shadowing her silently and unobtrusively in the background now approached, bowed her head, and simply held out her hand to lead the way leaving Uhura with no option other than to follow.

Their destination was a house, a simple earthen structure, a short distance away. When they entered, they were greeted by a cool waft of air that was more than welcome to the human unused to the stark contrast of temperatures outdoors. Uhura had no opportunity to glance around at her surrounding for T'Lin quickly moved to the staircase forcing Uhura to keep up.

T'Lin, still silent, led her up to the top level of the home and stopped outside of a closed door. Only then did she speak. Her soft, delicate voice, polite, speaking in the crisp English of a person not used to speaking the language.

"It is now the rest interval. I will return for you in one Earth hour. You will find a meal awaiting for you inside. You are advised to dress comfortably and informally. Your official duties are ended for the rest of the day."

T'Lin then bowed again, but before she moved off, Uhura began to voice her concern. It was one thing for Sarek's aide to give her the day off, quite another thing being an officer of the Enterprise.

"Captain Kirk might need me to--"

"Administrator Sarek will see to all of your captain's requirements."

There was just enough of the Vulcan superiority of manner to not gainsay T'Lin. Uhura chose the path of least resistance and decided to take matters into her own hands once she was rid of her guide.

T'Lin, coming to the conclusion that the human female had nothing more to say, moved off again, down the stairs, and out of sight.

Uhura put her hand on the door latch and took a deep breath before entering. They had all come down to the planet prepared to be given, due to the Vulcan's status as refugees, a very basic set of quarters. Yet, when Uhura opened the door, she immediately saw that in her case that was not to be so. She was given a very comfortable and pleasant room.

Glancing around, she saw several of her personal items already placed on display. It seemed that somehow her cases, which had been beamed down with her, had been whisked away from the beam-down site and now everything was put away.

On the outside of a wardrobe that contained her various uniforms and clothing that she would need for her stay, someone had purposely hung a modest dress of blue and green, adding to it a long diaphanous veil of the darkest blue. It was not one of Uhura's possessions, yet it seemed clear that it was expected of her to use it to complete the outfit.

The chamber had a high, comfortable Terran-style bed with a lightweight white quilt covering it and two large and plump pillows on top. At the right of the bed was a nightstand with a collection of books to the side and a lamp. She picked up one of the books: a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, a copy of a language primer written in ancient Vulcan, and a small volume of Andorian poetry completed the neat pile on top.

On the left nightstand was a plate of fruits, both Terran and Vulcan, flat-bread, along with what appeared to be something very similar to cheese. There was also a carafe of water and a glass. Whoever had prepared this room certainly knew her taste and she could not help but be a little flattered.

She walked towards the set of windows and threw them open. A warm breeze fluttered the sheer curtains and a pleasant floral scent from the garden below filled the air. She observed that she was in a housing complex of some sort and that the homes here, though modest, were on somewhat of a larger scale than the houses that she could see in the distance.

These particular houses were arranged around the perimeter of a large communal garden of some considerable size. The garden was filled with a variety of plants and flowers and she looked forward to exploring it more fully in the days to come.

Recollecting herself and knowing her duty. She removed her communicator from her belt and flipped it open.

“Lieutenant Uhura to Captain Kirk, please come in.”

Kirk answered on the first beep.

“Kirk here.”

“Captain,” said Uhura, hesitantly, “is everything alright?”

Kirk laughed. “Everything is fine, Lieutenant, why do you ask?”

“Where are you and the doctor now?”

“We’ve been set up in quarters at the Vulcan Military Garrison. Where are you?”

Uhura hesitated. It was strange for her to be in what appeared to be in a private home, while the captain and McCoy were more or less in the barracks.

“I am lodged in a home in a large housing complex. There is dense vegetation outside of my window. At a distance of approximately ten kilometers there appears to be a large mountain—”

Kirk’s laughter stopped her cold.

“Lieutenant, we are not on an away mission nor are we in the business of reconnaissance gathering. We are the Vulcan’s very honored guests. Stop being a Starfleet officer for a moment and relax.”

“But my guide—she told me that I was not needed for the rest of the day—I thought it best to see what your orders are.”

"My orders are for you to enjoy yourself. While Bones tours the hospital, I have been invited to review the flight academy and the dock yards where they are constructing a light-cruiser that Sarek says will be capable of transwarp. General Tovon himself is leading the tour personally. I have always wanted to meet him."

She sighed deeply. "Then I guess you don't need me after all."

"You know that is not true. You are always needed, you are just not needed now. Enjoy your own tour and we will talk in the morning. Kirk out."

She snapped her communicator closed and huffed. However, knowing that she would be soon collected by T'Lin to begin her tour, she quickly ate a few pieces of the fruit, refreshed herself in the adjoining bathing chamber, and donned her dress. As soon as she fastened the last button, the door chimed.

"Come."

T'Lin entered and bowed. "I hope you have found everything to your satisfaction, Lieutenant Uhura."

"Your home is pleasing," said Uhura. "I thank you for allowing me to share it with you."

"This is not my dwelling place, Lieutenant Uhura," said T'Lin, matter-of-factly. "I live in another area of the settlement."

"Oh? Then I must be allowed the opportunity to meet and thank my host."

In the Vulcan fashion, T'Lin tilted her head and looked at her quizzically. Uhura was very familiar with that particular gesture.

"You are already acquainted with your host, Lieutenant Uhura."

Uhura stared at T'Lin blankly for several moments.

"I am? I'm sorry; I don't understand."

"Administrator Sarek directed the fitting up of these rooms himself for your personal use."

Uhura's brow furrowed. "Sarek?"

"Did you not know? This is Administrator Sarek's own home?"

Uhura's hand flew to her temple. She gasped and looked around the room with new eyes. Of course, it all made sense now: the Terran furnishings and the reading material; obviously Amanda Grayson, though gone, had left a lingering impression upon her husband's manners and treatment of guests in his home. She was very touched and just a little bit sad, especially with the way things now stood between her and Spock.

T'Lin continued. "The Administrator also desires me to say that he wishes your company for dinner this evening, that is, after you return from your tour of the compound this afternoon."

"Oh," was all she could manage past the sudden lump in her throat.

"Shall we go? Your guide awaits you at his home."

"Oh, I thought—I thought you would be leading me on my tour."

"No, other arrangements have been made."

T'Lin glanced at the head wrap lying off to the side and back to the Lieutenant. "The tu'ruth is a gift from Administrator Sarek. It will mark you as being under his protection."

"His protection?"

"Since you belong to this house during your stay; it marks you as a member of the Administrator's household. I am told that the Lady Amanda, though human, veiled herself in a similar manner on Vulcan. We all understand that the Administrator's son—"

Uhura flinched and saw where all the conclusions were leading. She finally had her answer: Spock had not informed his own father where things now stood. It was up to her to put a stop to it all before things got out of hand.

She interrupted. "Please thank the Administrator for his kind attentions, but convey to him that such gifts are—unnecessary. I am flattered that he wishes to have me as his guest, but I urge him to speak with his son and perhaps after that event, he will wish to make other arrangements."

T'Lin's expression remained neutral. Uhura hoped that Sarek's aide understood what she was endeavoring to make her understand without actually having to say the dreaded words out loud.

T'Lin merely held out her hand to urge her in the direction of the staircase. Only then when they reached the first floor did she get a good look around the main room.

For there, on the desk in the far corner was a series of holo-images. In the middle was a image of Amanda smiling softly. Uhura recognized it immediately as the same image she had seen in Spock's home back on earth, taken during that time she had last visited her son. Spock must have shared it with with his father considering that Sarek's own possessions were now all gone.

She quickly turned and caught up with T'Lin who had moved outdoors. Once they reached the house's entrance gate, T'Lin nodded to a house at the very end of the path.

"Your guide awaits you there."

Uhura bowed wondering why the guide did not come to meet her. Yet, she put these thoughts aside as she traversed the hundred or so meters. As she walked along, several Vulcan's on the path nodded to her in greeting. She nodded right back, careful to be as polite and as emotionless as possible.

That was, until she saw a group of ten Vulcan children running in the direction of a large, open field. They were playing a type of game involving a round hoop approximately twenty centimeters across which was being tossed into the air and being caught at the end of a long staff. The game itself, though puzzling as to its rules, was not what astonished her at first, it was the fact that some of the children, thought not all, were laughing... actually laughing.

The gardens at the opposite end of the complex were slightly more colorful and showy than the gardens adjacent. Clearly her guide's tastes leaned towards the vibrant. She could just make out a male figure bending at the waist in order to smell a flower blossom. But when he righted himself there was something very familiar about his carriage: the finely chiseled jaw, the noble slant of the brow, and the delicate curve of his ear all marked him out as someone she knew well-very well- and had thought dead.

She stopped on the dirt path and released a strangled cry. The figure stood tall, turned and fully revealed himself to her when he stepped through the plantations. However, before he could bow in greeting, Uhura had taken off in a run, barreling towards him, her arms open wide to receive him, all the while sobbing loudly at the same time.

Her body slammed into his and her arms had him around the neck so tightly that he was at a lost on how to breathe.

“Selkek,” she cried.