

# COLLABORATION

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"I guess what I'm trying to say is that our relationship might have gotten a little too comfortable," Kirk managed, feeling like the proverbial Judas with his back turned and his head slightly bowed. "We've been bonded for almost a year, Spock, and we were lovers for six months before that. And... well... I guess I was expecting a... miracle." The word tasted bitter on his tongue. He always expected miracles. It wasn't fair.

Spock assimilated the conversation which had led them to this point, recalling that Kirk had expressed a need to talk. It was, after all, why they had chosen the remote forest regions of Altair for their three-day leave. He struggled to remain calm, his eyes fixed on the large picture window through which the autumn-colored trees stretched their limbs skyward.

"You are... dissatisfied with our physical relationship," the Vulcan surmised presently. It had taken Kirk over an hour to come to that now-obvious point.

Kirk sighed heavily, his eyes closing as he stood in the center of the room feeling positively miserable. "I'm not dissatisfied with you, Spock," he said quietly, his hands tightening in frustration. Then, forcing himself to turn and meet his companion's eyes, he tried not to let his fear of hurting the Vulcan's feelings sway him from what he knew could become a serious problem. "It's simply that we don't seem to have a lot of time for one another," he tried.

Spock considered that, reading the anguish in Kirk's eyes, the pain in his voice. They had been standing in the middle of the rented cabin's living room for over an hour, carefully choosing words as if they had only recently met. With that knowledge, he moved to sit on the plush L-shaped sofa which faced the windows. Then, with a gentle smile, he held out one hand to his companion, slightly relieved when Kirk reluctantly accepted it.

"You're not... angry?" Kirk wondered, releasing the breath he'd been holding as the firm heat of Spock's hand drew him down to sit at the Vulcan's side.

Spock squeezed the human's hand gently, then slipped one arm around his companion's back, urging him down until the golden head rested in his lap. Absently, he ran his fingers through the silk-smooth hair, well aware of its soothing affect on the other man.

"There would be no purpose to anger, Jim," he murmured, his gaze going once more to the thick forest which had begun to grow misty with the coming of nightfall. "If there is a problem, it has been my experience that it is more easily solvable with understanding than with anger."

Kirk smiled very faintly. He felt completely safe and secure with Spock; and the Vulcan's fingers running through his hair and gently massaging his scalp took some of the tension away. "I feel like a shit for even bringing it up, Spock," he said, meaning it. "I mean, sex with you is more fulfilling than it's ever been with anyone."

Spock's brows narrowed slightly. Humans could be such imprecise creatures. "But... you are bored?" he inquired.

Face darkening, Kirk grew silent for a long moment, listening to the call of a nightbird as it settled into the thick branches of a tree just outside the cabin. "'Bored' is too strong a word for what I'm feeling," he decided at last. Then, frustration increasing, he released the breath he'd been holding with a sigh. "I dunno. Maybe I'm just... tired."

Spock continued stroking the other man's head, recalling the excruciating schedule the Enterprise had followed for the past six months. It had been hectic and trying, though no moreso than other times. "Is it that something is missing?" he asked quietly.

Without thinking, Kirk said what had been on his subconscious mind for over a month. "Yeah," he breathed heavily. "What's missing is feeling."

At that, Spock jolted internally, a moment of panic overtaking him. "You no longer... love me?" he asked, forcing himself not to allow terror an angry reign.

Kirk sat up abruptly even as the Vulcan asked the question, his eyes widening as realization struck him. Their eyes met and shakily held. "No, no," he protested. "I mean, yes. I mean, I do still love you Spock," he managed at last, turning side-ways on the couch and curling his right leg underneath him as he reached out to grip the Vulcan's shoulders firmly. "I love you more than anything, more than I've ever loved anyone." He paused, his own words coming back to him. "I think what I mean is that I haven't been feeling much of anything lately."

Spock tried to accept the human's words, relying on the ever-present strength of their bond to complete the assurance he couldn't quite reach on an intellectual level alone. "I do not understand," he said at last, experiencing a soul-deep inadequacy to cope with the complexities of human emotions.

Sighing again, Kirk tried to put his feelings - or lack thereof - into words. "It doesn't have anything to do with us, Spock," he explained, hoping it was an accurate statement. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that maybe I've gotten... well... complacent." His cheeks heated as he understood what that meant. "I've got the galaxy at my fingertips, command of a starship, and someone who cares more about me than I care about myself," he added, squeezing the Vulcan's shoulder to punctuate his words. "And... it isn't enough." He hated himself.

For a long time, Spock didn't reply. Then, very carefully, he reached out to slip one hand behind Kirk's head, drawing it down to his shoulder and placing his other arm around the broad back. At the very least, his intuition told him that the human was being truthful: the problem had little if anything to do with their personal relationship.

"Apathy?" he wondered.

Kirk blinked, once again gazing into the thick forest with its multitude of secrets. The last rays of sun bleached color from the trees, leaving them as muted shades of black and gray. "Yeah," he conceded, feeling no spark of confirmation nor emotional twist of denial. "'Apathy'." He rolled the word off his tongue, tasting its deadly flavor.

"Do you know why?" Spock wondered.

Kirk thought about it for only a moment, then shook his head. It annoyed him to realize that his problem was nothing more than a bad case of apathy. "Dammit," he swore to himself, "I've seen more, I've done more than most people in this galaxy ever dream of! And... it's not enough."

Spock's brows tightened. "You have a great curiosity, Jim," he pointed out. "And the greater that curiosity, the greater the potential for boredom."

Kirk winced, not liking that word, but accepting its current place in his life. "Maybe you're right," he admitted quietly. Then, taking a deep breath, he smiled just a little. "Did you know, Spock, that back on Earth - and probably on a few other planets as well - there are stories being written about us?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I got a letter from Peter last week, and he was telling me about a couple of his college buddies who are studying Arts & Humanities at the university near where I grew up. Anyway, he went on to say that there are a lot of things being written about us."

"I do not find that surprising, Jim," Spock offered. "The Enterprise's missions are of historical importance. It is logical that they be documented for future generations."

Kirk frowned. "That's not what I mean, Spock," he clarified. "I'm not talking about historians or scholars. I'm talking about fiction."

Spock's interest piqued. "Indeed," he commented. "For what purpose?"

Kirk shrugged. "Entertainment, I suppose."

"Did your nephew send transcripts of any of these 'stories'?" Spock inquired.

Kirk shook his head. "No, but he said he would if I was interested." He chuckled lightly. "He told me about them, though, said some of them are... well... downright personal." Despite himself, his face darkened. "Sure, Nogura and a few others at Starfleet Command know about

our bond, but it's not exactly common knowledge otherwise." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "Peter said that most of the stories are your average action-adventure yarns - you know, new missions of the Enterprise and stuff like that." He paused again. "Some of them are more... personal. About you and me."

Spock's brows lifted. "Speculation into our private lives?"

Kirk nodded. "That's what Peter said," he confirmed. Then, feeling just a little better, he grinned mischievously. But he sobered as another thought struck him. "Luckily, he's a pretty open-minded kid."

"He is hardly a child now, Jim," Spock commented. "It was my understanding that he has already completed two years of college."

Kirk shrugged again. "He's a kid," he countered knowingly.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if he's not a kid," Kirk decided, "then that means that I'm getting old. And since I'm not getting any older, Peter's still a kid."

"Illogical," Spock commented, nonetheless relieved at Kirk's lifted spirits. "At any rate, I am curious as to what would prompt the writing of fiction concerning our private lives, Jim," he added, returning to the subject at hand.

Kirk thought about it for only a moment. "Boredom," he decided. "Or maybe it's a way for the writers to explore their own feelings. Also, there are a lot of people back on Earth who can't do what we take for granted -- either personally or professionally. There are a lot of starry-eyed kids who just won't be able to get into the Academy. Or even if they do, they might not make it through the training." It was a sad thought, but one he acknowledged as true. Only 2% of those entering the Academy ever made it to active starship duty. The rest either dropped out, were assigned to ground posts, or placed in the Reserves. "Maybe those people write just for their own entertainment," he considered, "or maybe it's their imagination that keeps the dream alive for those who will make it." He paused as another idea manifested. "It might be interesting to read a few of them," he said quietly.

"Why?" Spock wanted to know, slightly uncomfortable at the prospect.

A light smile touched Kirk's lips as a fond memory returned to him. "When I was a kid, I used to read everything about the stars that I could get my hands on -- didn't matter whether it was fact or fiction. Sometimes I think it was the fiction that made me want to keep trying though," he added. "All those stories about alien civilizations, the interaction of humans and aliens..." His voice trailed off. "You know, Spock, the first thing I ever heard about Vulcans was in a work of fiction called **WHEN LOGIC FAILS**. I don't recall the author's name, but I must've read that book a dozen times when I was between 10 and 17."

One brow lifted. "I am not familiar with the work," Spock replied, almost grateful.

Kirk grinned. "It wasn't exactly a professionally published book," he explained. "There are a lot of small presses on Earth -- people who appeal to a small audience with specific interests."

"How did you come to be in possession of such a book?" Spock inquired, intrigued despite himself. Anything to do with Kirk's past was fascinating to him.

Searching his memory, Kirk eventually came up with the answer. "One of my cousins had been visiting over the holidays," he recalled at last. "She left the book on the table one morning and... well... when she went back to get it, it had conveniently disappeared - into my room, as I remember."

Spock blinked. "You stole your cousin's book?"

Kirk shrugged. "It wasn't exactly the kind of thing a ten-year-old boy would have been allowed to read," he explained defensively. "It was basically one writer's attempt to explore the... er... pon farr." He wondered if he were getting in over his head, then reminded himself that this was Spock: the man to whom he'd sworn his soul and sold all his secrets. "Anyway," he hurried on before the Vulcan could interrupt, "it turned out to be a beautiful story about a man named Sabin and the woman he had been betrothed to at age seven." He sighed fondly. "It wasn't the romantic angle that got to me - because the book wasn't written to be romantic at all. It was the fact that these two characters were basically thrown together when Sabin went into his first pon farr at around age 28. They didn't know each other, and they both had to rely on Vulcan logic to save their lives."

Spock's brows narrowed. "The female's life would have been in no danger," he pointed out reasonably.

Kirk frowned. "She didn't like Sabin," he explained. "She didn't want him."

Spock flinched, recalling his own disastrous pon farr with T'Pring. "Continue," he urged hesitantly.

"I can't remember all the details," Kirk said quietly, "but I do remember that they had to learn to like one another before they could... er... go to bed."

"Fiction does tend to take certain liberties," Spock commented. "During the pon farr, the 'feelings' of the bonded couple hold little importance. Love does not play a role in such cases."

Kirk nodded. "That was the point," he agreed. "In the story, when Sabin finally took T'Jiena, it was a very violent rape. But they were bonded fully during the act, and when it was over, they had to learn to deal with what they did have."

"Which was?" Spock inquired, trying not to squirm.

"Nothing," Kirk replied, recalling the story in vivid detail. "Because they were Vulcan, they couldn't even hate each other, they couldn't have their bond dissolved without reason; so they had to find things to like about each other."

"Why?"

Kirk smiled wistfully. "Because it wouldn't be very pleasant living with someone you barely knew, someone you didn't even care about. Anyway," he added, "in the end, they discovered that logic wasn't enough to hold them together. They had to learn to love. But more than that, the author postulated the idea that most Vulcans learn to love after their first pon farr with their bondmate. They just don't talk about it the way humans do - maybe not even with each other." He paused briefly, mentally re-reading the well-worn pages of his cousin's stolen book. "The whole point was that love is a universal concept - not just a Terran concept; because, in the end, they both leave Vulcan on a Federation Science Vessel where they're serving with several other couples of different races. Terrans. Andorians. There's even a Romulan couple on the ship on some cultural exchange program. Anyway, Sabin and T'Jiena learn that they do love one another, just as the other couples do. But because they're Vulcan, they never speak of it even among themselves." He hesitated for a moment, then added softly: "They take their love to the grave that way - in silence."

"Then... by human standards, the book does not have a happy ending," Spock surmised.

Kirk frowned. "I never really thought of it that way," he said after a moment's contemplation. "To me, it was a representation of an alien lifestyle, and I guess I just sort of accepted it for what it was."

"You are a unique individual," Spock observed.

Another smile toyed with Kirk's lips, but quickly faded as he returned to the original point. "Anyway," he said, his tone contemplative, "for all we know, Sabin and T'Jiena could have been real people at some time, maybe even someone the author knew or knew about. The writer wanted to tell their story - maybe for the same reason that people write stories about us." Somehow, despite the deeply personal nature of those stories, Kirk felt somehow flattered. "Oh, maybe they weren't called by those names, and maybe they weren't even Vulcans."

"If such were the case, what would be the point of the story?" Spock inquired.

Kirk shrugged. "Maybe the only point was something the writer needed to work out for himself... or herself." He smiled faintly as another thought manifested. "Or maybe the point was to inspire somebody."

"To do what?"

"I dunno," Kirk confessed. "To go to the stars, maybe. Or to think about love as a universal concept rather than as some feeling we humans often try to believe we hold the patent

for."

Spock considered that. "I can accept the concept of fiction," he decided aloud, "so long as it remains fiction. However, when living individuals are written about in a speculative manner, it is possible to confuse fantasy with reality."

Kirk grinned again. "You're worried about somebody speculating on our love life, aren't you?" he stated as a question.

Twin brows shot up and hid beneath black bangs which were in need of a trim. "Such 'stories' could be a source of embarrassment should they fall into the hands of Starfleet Command," he replied, mentally cringing at the thought of some desk-bound admiral reading the alleged details of his personal relationship with his captain.

An admonishing frown was Kirk's initial response. "Nogura would probably love it," he thought realistically. "Hell, he's always going out of his way to point out what 'heroes' we are to the public. To his way of thinking, the more glorified we appear, the better his Public Relations Department looks. And the better the P.R. looks, the better Starfleet looks--."

"You are attempting to convince me that our relationship would be accepted as 'normal' by the population as a whole," Spock interrupted.

Kirk met the other man's eyes quizzically. "Why shouldn't it?" he asked. But he didn't wait for a response. "Spock," he murmured, "the people of my planet often spend their entire lives in search of love. And though there are still a few isolated pockets of prejudice back on Earth, the general attitude is one of terrible romanticism. It doesn't matter that you're Vulcan and I'm human."

"Or that we are both male?" Spock wondered, having studied Earth history thoroughly. Though homosexual relationships had been common, even honored, on Vulcan, they had been met with fear and often violence in Earth's history. Such attitudes, Spock acknowledged, did not change with a single generation or even several generations.

Kirk sighed softly. It wasn't anything he hadn't considered. "We're talking about a very vocal minority, Spock," he said. "Only a fool would turn his back on love just because it happened to be someone of the same gender. Those are the same fools who spout religion as an argument against homosexuality, the same fools who used to enslave a black man just because he was black." He shook his head softly. "Back in the 20th Century, they were called bigots or rednecks and, luckily, they're a dying breed."

Spock contemplated that in momentary silence, then brought the conversation back to the point at hand. "You seem untroubled by the fact that stories such as you have described are possibly an invasion of privacy," he stated, more for the sake of discussion than anything else.

"How can they be?" Kirk replied. "The people who write them don't know us. And from what I understand, the stories are usually very positive and... well... loving." He shrugged,

wondering why he was trying to defend something he'd never read, why he even felt a need to defend it. "I guess it's important to me that people have something to dream about," he offered presently. "And if we can inspire someone to have that kind of a dream, I don't see any harm."

Spock sighed softly. "I suppose it is not common for well-known figures to become the object of idle speculation," he conceded.

A smile touched Kirk's lips. "It's the price one pays for glory, Mister Spock," he said with mock-arrogance. The Vulcan's arms were warm and secure around him, and though he hadn't realized it, the sense of apathy he'd been feeling had lessened to a considerable degree.

"What type of stories are these, Jim?" Spock wondered, attempting to gain a better understanding of an admittedly surprising discovery.

Kirk shrugged. "The only thing Peter said was that some of them are love stories about you and me - stories which tend to put us in all types of situations."

"Such as?"

Kirk felt his cheeks heat just a little. "I dunno," he said, trying to shrug it off. Then, as a stray idea started to form, he snuggled deeper into the Vulcan's embrace. "I guess some people are curious about how we might handle the pon farr, for example; or what we might be like if we'd been born in Pre-Reform Vulcan."

"Much like A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT," Spock presumed.

Kirk's brows narrowed. "Huh?"

Stroking the human's back fondly, Spock extrapolated. "A work of fiction from your own 20th Century," he explained. "It seemed to be an attempt to place a contemporary character in a non-contemporary setting in order to explore the differences between one century and another." He paused. "Interesting, but hardly productive."

Kirk frowned disapprovingly. "Not everything needs a purpose, Spock," he pointed out. "Some things are just... well... fun to read."

Spock allowed a faint smile to manifest for Kirk's benefit. "You enjoy the attention these stories generate," he stated.

Kirk's mouth opened to protest, but he closed it abruptly as the truth hit him. "Maybe," he conceded at last. "But I also think that anything that might inspire someone to go to the stars, or inspire someone to do anything good, has its place."

Spock didn't attempt to argue, realizing that the human was sincere in his repeated statement. The giant star Altair had long since set, leaving the room bathed in soft light which

was filtered into the living room through wooden slats dividing it from the kitchen. A multitude of soft shadows played on the floor and walls, accented by the gently rushing wind which toyed with chimes hung near the window.

"What bothers me," Kirk said impulsively, pulling Spock back to reality, "is that I don't think anyone who hasn't been in space can ever really understand the boredom. It's not something that can be captured on paper."

A quizzical expression took up residence on Spock's angular features. Once more, their conversation was back at its beginnings. "Please explain," he urged tenderly.

Leaning his head against Spock's shoulder, Kirk's eyes closed. "I'm not sure I can," he said truthfully. "It's like what we were talking about earlier - the apathy problem." He paused, wondering if he should even bring it up again. Then, deciding it was too late, he sighed heavily. "When I was a kid, all the stories I read were about the excitement of space exploration: the mysteries, the pull of the stars, the love affairs along the way, the 'wonder of it all'." He smiled wistfully. "And sure, that's all a part of it. But the thing we spend the most time doing - even on a mission - is waiting." He let out a gentle breath. "I just wonder if any story can capture that... or why anyone should even want to try."

Spock pondered Kirk's words in thoughtful silence for a very long time, listening to the gentle tinkle of chimes in the wind. A few drops of rain pattered against the window pane, creating a sense of coziness in the room. In the rhythm of that rain, the Vulcan felt himself being lulled toward one possible solution.

"Is it conceivable," he began, "that the problem you have been experiencing could be attributed to the fact that our personal life is seldom separated from our professional lives?"

Kirk's brows narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Spock sought words to explain. Despite the fact that they'd been together for almost two years, it was still sometimes difficult to speak so openly of their relationship. But he forced himself to make that sacrifice, understanding full well what was at stake. "When we are on the Enterprise," he began, "we share the same duty shift for the most part; we spend most of our off-duty time together; and we sleep together in the evening."

Kirk considered that. "I don't consider that a problem, Spock," he said, meaning it. "If you're trying to put forth the idea that absence makes the heart grow fonder, it's not true in this case - at least not as far as I'm concerned. I don't want to be apart from you!"

Spock stroked the other man's back in gentle reassurance. "Nor do I wish to be separated from you, Jim," he murmured tenderly. "My point, however, was that perhaps there is no clear line of delineation between our off-duty hours and our on-duty hours. Even when we are not on active duty, we are still the captain and first officer of the Enterprise."

Kirk forced himself to think about it realistically despite his instinct to deny it. In the

end, he could only shake his head. "If that is it," he said, "I don't see anything that can be done about it."

Spock's brows lifted. An idea crossed his mind which he was sorely tempted to ignore. And yet, feeling Kirk's restlessness and dissatisfaction through their bond was sufficient motivation for him to reconsider. "Are you inclined to be more satisfied with your professional life when your personal life is gratifying?"

At that, Kirk felt himself flush. "Spock," he protested, "it's not that I'm not satisfied with you! I am!"

Grateful for that reassurance, the Vulcan stroked Kirk's back fondly. "I know, Jim," he murmured. "That was not the purpose of my question." He paused, then asked again: "Are you generally more content as a whole when you are content as a man?"

That question, Kirk thought, was almost worse. He chose to answer it before it got any deeper. "Yeah... I guess so," he said, trying to dredge up specific incidents. "I think it's human nature. When you're in love, everything else seems to go right, too." He shook his head, then rephrased. "But it's more than just love, Spock. I am in love with you - so much that it scares me sometimes. It's just that I'm starting to wonder if I'm taking you for granted. I'm starting to wonder if our love-making has become just another part of our daily routine." He didn't want to say it, but realized it was something he couldn't deny any longer.

Spock analyzed the statement quietly. "Then we must endeavor to alter that routine," he surmised.

Kirk sighed heavily. "How?" he asked rhetorically. "Like you said, we're still the captain and first officer no matter what we do."

Spock's features tightened as an answer formed in his mind. "Not necessarily," he ventured.

Something in the Vulcan's tone caused Kirk to stiffen -- though not in a negative way. Rather, it was the kind of emotional excitement which left his blood singing. "What are you getting at?" he wanted to know.

"Imagination," Spock said very softly, his own face heating as the idea took form and shape in what had previously been a void of confusion. "If it is possible for a writer to avoid dealing with less interesting matters, it should certainly be possible for us to do so as well."

"But Spock!" Kirk practically howled. "I'm not disinterested in you!"

Spock calmed his mate with a gentle shushing sound. "There is no need to keep repeating that, Jim," he assured the other man. "I do not doubt your commitment nor your sexual interest in me. Indeed, the fact that we make love approximately 35.9 percent more than the average couple is an indicator that neither of us has lost interest in the other."

Kirk tried to accept that, terrified of ever hurting Spock's feelings. "I'm still not sure I see what you're getting at," he said, returning to the original point.

Very gently, Spock let his hand come to rest on the side of Kirk's face, making his intentions clearer with a touch. "In the mind, we are only who we are, Jim," he explained. "In the mind, there need not be the 'baggage', if you will, of our professional lives. If we wish, we can be king or pawn, master or slave, even man and woman, if you choose."

Kirk's face heated, his throat going suddenly dry. "F-fantasy?" he gulped. "Are you suggesting that we... er... fantasize together?" It seemed downright incestuous, but somehow compelling.

Spock tried not to let his own Vulcan inhibitions sway him. "There would be no harm in it," he pointed out. "And if it would make you happy, I would have no objections."

For once, Kirk found himself without words for several minutes. The rain was coming down more steadily, hypnotizing him as it ran in rivulets down the clear pane of the window. His heart pounded and, ridiculously, he felt like a virgin: vulnerable, scared, inexperienced.

"Shit, Spock," he said at last, "maybe I'm just a prude, but I never thought I'd need to fantasize with you. You are my fantasies. You have been since long before we became lovers."

Deeply gratified, Spock bent to touch his lips to the top of Kirk's head. "Then there should be no problem," he pointed out. "Since I will obviously be with you in these fantasies, we will still be together - but in circumstances other than those which are a part of our daily routine."

Kirk took a deep breath and dared to ask: "Such as?"

Becoming more relaxed with the conversation, Spock held him closer. "The possibilities are limitless," he replied, rubbing Kirk's back in a motion which was as soothing to himself as it was to the human. "We have, after all, the entire physical universe from which to choose -- as well as a completely untapped universe within our own minds."

Kirk caught himself actually thinking about it on a conscious level. It wasn't an easy thing to do, for in one corner of his mind, he couldn't cope with the fact that even Spock and the Enterprise and the stars weren't enough. "I feel like I'm coercing you into doing something you may not want to do," he said quietly.

"Jim, you forget that mental stimulation is as vital to a Vulcan as it is to humans," Spock returned. "I had not considered it previously, but since you have mentioned it, our sexual life has indeed become a part of our routine on the Enterprise. If that continues, we run the risk of losing the uniqueness which brought us together initially."

Kirk frowned. It wasn't something he'd considered before. "What do you mean?" he

repeated.

"Simply that we should not allow our personal and sexual lives to become so entangled in our professional careers that one cannot exist without the other." He paused briefly, collecting his thoughts. "In short, we cannot depend on remaining in Starfleet indefinitely; and if we have come to accept our personal time only as secondary to our careers, it is possible that we would not know how to function without both."

It was, Kirk conceded, an unnerving possibility. More than that, the intricacies of psychological potentials were boggling to his mind. And he had to admit that Spock's idea was a novel one - one which had intriguing personal points as well as practical reasons.

What surprised him was when his stomach clenched in sudden anticipation. It occurred to him that he hadn't had that reaction for almost a year and, encouraged, he propped himself up on one elbow with a mischievous grin. "So what do we do?" he asked impulsively. "Write out a script or something?"

Spock gave a disapproving glance of response. "Through the meld, all we need do is arrive at a mutually agreeable situation. Our minds will create the setting and any necessary background information, and we will, essentially, be transported into our fantasies - much like a vid-scanner has the ability to reveal dreams and allow one to re-experience them."

Kirk blinked. "In other words, if we decided, for example, to put ourselves back in the time of Pre-Reform Vulcan, we'd actually believe we were there?"

Spock inclined his head in agreement. "We would be there, in a manner of speaking - just as a person experiencing a dream is an active participant in his dream. The difference is that our bodies will be as much a part of this 'dream' as our minds."

Kirk pondered that at length. "Well, as long as we don't take a long hike in our fantasy and walk our real bodies off a cliff, I suppose that's a good selling point."

Spock smiled faintly. "Where would you like to go?" he inquired.

Kirk's mouth opened, then closed again. "Now?" he gulped incredulously. Somehow, he'd created his own safe fantasy by telling himself it was all just idle speculation.

Spock's brows lifted. "We are alone," he pointed out. "And we have come here for rest and recreation. In our case, I believe the recreation will lead naturally to the rest."

An admonishing grimace silenced the Vulcan. "I'm not much of a writer, Spock," he warned.

"You don't have to be," the Vulcan countered. "Once we initiate the meld, you will not even know that any of this exists. We will, in essence, create each moment wherever we go just as we create each moment in our conscious reality."

For some reason, that type of abandon appealed to Kirk - more than he might have cared to admit. "What if... what if we wanted to experience a first-time situation?" he wondered, stomach clenching again. "Does the fact that we're already lovers make that impossible? And... while we're at it, am I completely perverse for even asking?"

Spock smiled openly, bending to brush his lips to his bonded mate's forehead. "You have always been perverse, Jim," he reminded the human. "And no, the fact that we are already lovers does not preclude the possibility you have suggested." He paused, then added softly: "I, too, have considered what it might have been like to meet you under different circumstances; thus your suggestion seems... quite fascinating."

Feeling just a little more relaxed, Kirk lifted his head, asking silently to be kissed. When Spock complied, he knew he would do anything to maintain the special magic which had always flowed like electricity between them. If that meant temporarily divorcing himself from his own past, from Starfleet or even from the Enterprise, it would be a willing compromise. It would also be a very healthy diversion, he suspected.

As their lips finally parted, Kirk was breathless, his eyes bright with anticipation as he took the Vulcan's hand and reverently kissed each fingertip in turn. "Where would you like to go?" he asked seductively, playfully.

Spock considered that in momentary silence. "So long as I am with you, I have no preference."

Kirk frowned again, mock-seriously. "C'mon, Spock," he urged. "You've already admitted that you've thought about what it might be like if we'd met under other circumstances."

A long brow lifted. Spock squirmed internally for a moment. "I am not certain the circumstances I have imagined would be entirely... agreeable to you," he returned evasively.

Impulsively, Kirk bit the hand which rested on the side of his face, lifting his eyes to find a startled expression residing on the Vulcan's features. "Anything that brings us together would be agreeable to me, Spock," he pointed out. Then, recognizing at least part of the hesitation, he added: "Look, if you don't want to tell me about it... then just surprise me."

Through the bond, Spock sensed Kirk's sincerity - and the human's building desire. For himself, he'd considered a multitude of possibilities under which they might have met had things been different in their lives. And though it wasn't logical, he found such speculation enjoyable, stimulating.

"Very well," he murmured at last, gathering his courage around him like a protective shield. Then, with a slightly chagrined smile, he added: "The next time we do this, however, you must surprise me."

Kirk grinned, feeling good about himself and about this new direction. "Like two writers

collaborating on a story, eh, Spock?" he teased warmly. "You write the first chapter... and I'll write the next." He could live with that. At least that way, they'd be equally guilty of bringing their previously only-imagined fantasies into some semblance of reality.

Spock nodded his agreement, drawing the human into his arms. Then, bending to leave a lingering kiss on his companion's lips, he placed his hand on the side of Kirk's face and allowed their minds to flow together.

The library of infinite possibilities opened.

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The Academy campus was green, Jim Kirk observed, strolling at a leisurely pace toward the public transporter station located in a nearby building. And yet, despite the clean fresh scent of Spring which lingered in the San Francisco air, he felt particularly uneasy.

A light drizzle of rain sprayed across his face, but he scarcely noticed until he absent-mindedly ran his fingers through his hair. Curls. Loose golden curls which tightened in the rain, leaving him with that 'pretty-boy' look which hadn't hurt in advancing his early career. Still, he didn't have to like it.

As he approached the low-lying building and slipped quickly through the doors, he tossed the heavy load of books and computer tapes into a vacant seat and took a moment to consider where he was going in such a hurry. Throughout the day, he'd been unable to concentrate, found his mind wandering toward far-flung stars and the gentle purr of a starship's engines rather than addressing the more immediate issues - such as passing the Kobayashi Maru test for which he was scheduled the following week.

Sighing heavily, he looked around the room and found it sparsely populated with students in transit to or from classes. Then, chancing a glance at his own workload which he'd dropped in the adjacent chair, he found himself staring at the Encyclopedia of Physics Terms which sat ominously atop the stack of intended studies for the evening.

The uneasiness returned.

Spock of Vulcan was perhaps the best teacher at the Academy; and though Kirk had little use for the intricacies of physics and calculus, he had to admit a definite respect for the man who taught those classes. Or, he amended, the man who had taught them. When he'd arrived for class that afternoon, a new professor had stood in Spock's place, dutifully informing the students that their former teacher had taken an indefinite leave of absence.

It seemed... incongruous. The completely logical physics professor had seemed to enjoy his work. And, Kirk recalled, Spock had often taken his own time to assist students in need of extra help, had even left an open invitation for students to visit him at his nearby home should a need to do so ever arise.

Kirk suspected most of the cadets were too terrified of the mysterious Vulcan to ever consider it. But for himself, he'd been in the position of needing the extra help on more than one occasion. And, though he wouldn't have believed it at first - after hearing the typical stay-away-from-Vulcan jokes - he'd found Spock's hospitality to be most gracious. The Vulcan seemed to enjoy teaching; and after the first couple of times, Spock had actually invited him back for what he'd referred to as 'a more lengthy discussion of physics as applied to the command of a starship'.

Now, irrationally, Kirk found himself feeling guilty over the fact that he'd never managed to find enough time to drop in on his mysterious professor for such a discussion.

Frowning, he glanced at his personal chronometer, then at the stack of books and disks which stared up at him from the adjacent seat. If he wanted to remain at the top of his class, simple math informed him that he had a minimum of 6 hours' work to complete that evening. And if he wanted to remain at the peak of his youthful confidence, he reminded himself that he'd also promised to call Ruth once that work-load was completed.

Still, the uneasiness continued to gnaw at some distant thread of his intuition, leaving him to wonder if his feelings were simply hurt. It occurred to him that, over the years, Spock of Vulcan had undoubtedly taught thousands of students. He was no different, he told himself. His grades were no better, and perhaps not as good across-the-board as any potential valedictorian in the Command Section; thus it made little sense that the physics teacher should have taken his valuable time to indulge in something as meaningless as saying goodbye to one student.

With that thought as an excuse, Kirk gathered his books and disks, wishing he'd had the foresight to grab a backpack. Then, stepping up to the transporter, he programmed the coordinates which would take him to his apartment, trying to ignore the sense of hurt which teased through the peripheral layers of consciousness.

The red digital read-out blinked up at him. The books were bulky, heavy, demanding. Ruth would be waiting with her typical 'reward' at the end of the day.

Abruptly, almost without conscious volition, his finger punched the cancel button, returning the board to its 'Ready' status. Then, setting the burden of homework aside for a moment, he dug into the pocket of his jeans, withdrew his personal transporter-coordinates directory, and quickly found the desired entry.

In moments, books back in his arms, he materialized in a public square less than a block from his professor's apartment. Perhaps with good justification, he felt like a compulsive idiot... or like a schoolboy looking for some kind of acknowledgement from a favored teacher.

He wondered idly if he'd also developed a schoolboy's crush.

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The meditation stone had worn thin.

Kneeling before the mantle of the fireplace, Spock gazed into the orange flames which licked hungrily at the sacrificial logs. In his hand, clutched absently between the thumb and third finger, he toyed with the meditation stone which had been a gift from some long-forgotten student years before. Though normally cool, the smooth rock now held heat: the heat of his body, perhaps even the heat of his mind.

In an effort to quell the approaching flames, he forced his entire concentration into that stone, attempting to force the sickness from his body into the anonymity of the rock itself.

A stone should not burn, he told himself. It was neither oxygen nor fuel nor spark. It should not burn.

Nor, he thought, should he.

With T'Pring's death on Vulcan almost a year before, he should have been freed from the time of mating. But now, light-years from home and with no one to return home for, he accepted that his hybrid nature was unpredictable in that manner also.

The fires had come quickly this time, with little warning and no apparent stimulus. With his only other previous pon farr, the catalyst had been obvious: T'Pring's infidelity during his absence had triggered the chemical responses in his body. Even on Earth, with their minds linked only by a fragile thread, he had known, had been drawn back to Vulcan by his body's demands and his mind's rebellion.

And in the Arena of Challenge, he'd taken Stonn's life according to tradition and in the accepted manner of combat. There was no shame in it and, logically, there should have been no guilt. At the time, there hadn't been. And yet, after he had taken T'Pring to his bed chamber and subconsciously punished her for her infidelity, the guilt had returned to haunt him. It had eventually driven him away from Vulcan forever, back to the Academy, where his students had little interest in his sordid past, and didn't seem to mind that his estranged wife had recently taken her own life, naming him as the reason.

If anything, it made them more attentive; they listened studiously, as if trying to comprehend the nature of all Vulcans simply by studying him. What surprised him somewhat was that he didn't mind their curiosity. Rather, it almost amused him; and over the years, he'd learned how to develop a rapport with his students. They did, of course, complain about his more-than-average assignments; but in the end, they left his classes with statistically more knowledge than the students of other professors. And that, Spock acknowledged, was his sole reason for teaching.

Finding his mind a little more at ease, he glanced at the chronometer which sat atop the fireplace mantle. It informed him that his afternoon "appointment" would soon arrive.

His face darkened with shame. Yet he accepted that, under the circumstances, his alternatives were severely limited. And when one of the other faculty professors had discreetly

suggested that his life might be worth more than his dignity, he hadn't bothered to deny his condition nor to justify the suggestion with a response.

He had done the only thing he could do which might save his own life with a minimum of disgrace and rumor: he'd called the number left on his desk by a student - a student who had quite obviously taken his classes for personal reasons rather than for professional requirements.

Soon, if that student arrived, he would begin to teach once more.

His lesson would be on the physical properties of fire.

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It was less than a minute later when the door chime sounded, drawing Spock from his unsuccessful meditation. As he went to answer it, he considered making some convenient excuse, passing his call off as a practical joke by some third party. In an atmosphere such as the Academy, it would certainly be possible.

And yet, as he opened the door, his resistance lessened. The familiar face gazing up at him was slightly round, with soft planes and bright green-blue eyes. Blondish curls framed the delicate features, the hair slightly damp from the steady drizzle which was so common in San Francisco.

Stepping back from the door, Spock inclined his head in greeting, both relieved and sorry to see that his summons had worked. It was not the type of solution he would have sought, and far from the type of lover he would have preferred under such circumstances. Still, with his body demanding release, he reminded himself that his mind would have to be content to wait for a more suitable bondmate. With T'Pring, he'd proven to himself that he didn't require affection or even tenderness for mating.

"It's good to see you again, Mister Spock," the soft voice said, calling him back to reality. "Though I must admit I'm a little surprised that you kept my number."

Spock barely heard. It had been a mistake. He knew it. But knowing it wouldn't change it now. "Please come in, Ms. McGuire," he said stonily, closing the door as she stepped further into the room. Then, noting her obvious nervousness, he added: "May I offer you something to drink?"

The young woman nodded quietly, smiling with a soft warmth. "Yes, thank you. Brandy would be nice."

One brow lifted. She obviously did not know him well. "I regret that I have no brandy, Ms.--." He stopped himself there. "Ruth," he corrected, considering the pending intimacy of the circumstances. And, he told himself, she obviously knew why she'd been invited here. Rumors on campus had it that she was quite popular with the faculty, though she allegedly had a preference for some of the more aggressive upperclassmen. "I have herb teas, mineral water, or

a variety of juices," he added, disliking the necessity for small talk and social amenities. "Do you have a preference?"

Ruth nodded, slipping gracefully into a plush chair which sat near the fireplace and placing her small bag on the table. "Mineral water would be fine," she murmured.

As Spock turned toward the kitchen to pour the water, it occurred to him that he was not particularly nervous. Rather, he found himself feeling more disconnected from reality that he could ever recall. His body cried out for release, yet his mind remained distant, almost weary.

He poured the drinks quickly, then returned to the living room, handed one to what logic labeled as his 'whore', then sat down in an adjacent chair. Across the distance, their eyes met; but before he could think of some appropriate place to begin their meaningless conversation, the door chime sounded once again.

Brows narrowing quizzically, he glanced toward the mantle chronometer. No guests were expected, and with news of his indefinite leave having been announced at the Academy, it seemed unlikely that either faculty or students would interrupt his privacy.

He sighed inwardly, excused himself, and stood to answer the door. What surprised him was that the image on the vid-cam monitor revealed one of his current students. A brow lifted and, instead of ignoring the summons or using the intercom to send the young man away, he opened the door and stood gazing down at one of the most promising young cadets at the Academy.

Illogically - almost embarrassingly - he was sorry he had other plans for the evening. Kirk was young, vitally alive, intriguing; and one day, Spock knew, he would make an excellent starship commander.

His blood sang. His heart raced. He stepped away from the door.

"Please," he said, his voice lowering into what he recognized as a shamefully seductive tone. "Come in."

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Kirk stood dumbfounded in the rain for only a moment longer. For some reason he couldn't immediately identify, his stomach clenched as he gazed up at his mysterious teacher, his mouth opening just a little as he sought some explanation for his unscheduled visit.

As he stepped into the living room, however, his attention was immediately diverted from the possibility of offering an explanation to the necessity to demand one of his own. There, wearing the dress she had worn on their first date, with a garland of tiny purple flowers fixed in her hair, was the woman who had sworn herself only to him.

His jaw dropped and, staring back and forth between the two of them, he blinked. "R-

Ruth?"

Face darkening, the woman glanced away, seemed to plot some quick course of action, then reached for her bag and stood up with a deceptive smile. "Actually, Jim, I was just on my way over to your place," she said, her voice more tense than normal. "I just stopped by here to deliver some transcripts from that expedition on Aldeberan to Professor Spock." She smiled that deceptive smile of hers. "I got off work a little early," she added much too quickly. "Ambassador Shiliv was called to a meeting, and asked me to deliver the transcripts myself."

Kirk's brows lifted. He saw that reaction mirrored on the Vulcan's face. And, abruptly, he found himself growing weary of Ruth's lies. It wouldn't be the first time she'd "just dropped by" on a member of the faculty; and regardless of his feelings for the woman, he knew he'd been making excuses for her too long already.

Still, he felt awkward, uncomfortable... uninvited. He shook his head, negating her words with a gesture of his hand. "You don't have to explain, Ruth," he said, his tone more clipped than he'd intended. "I should have called first," he added, turning his attention to his respected professor. "Please forgive me for the intrusion, sir," he added, then turned toward the door with as much dignity as he could muster.

Spock's brows lifted as he turned first to Ruth, then to Kirk. Without thinking, he placed one hand on the young cadet's shoulder, stopping him just before he reached the door.

"Please... wait," he requested, his brows tightening slightly as their eyes met. He looked once more to Ruth. "I was not aware that the two of you were acquaintances," he commented, quickly releasing Kirk's shoulder as he realized that his own telepathic shields were at a pathetic low.

Ruth stared at the floor, then shifted weight from one foot to the other. Kirk squirmed also, re-adjusting the load of books and disks which were precariously balanced in his arms.

"We've been... friends for a long time," Ruth said at last.

Internally, Kirk rebelled. It almost seemed she was trying to deny their relationship. He didn't pursue it, seeing the writing on the wall. Instead, he turned his attention to his teacher once more. "I've interrupted your afternoon," he said, trying to remember his manners. "I really should go."

But once again, Spock found himself unable to permit the young man to leave. Instead, he frowned as his attention shifted momentarily to Ruth and he caught himself wondering why he'd invited her to his apartment to begin with. A moment of anger attributable to his advancing condition caused his jaw to tighten. He could easily sense the hurt and confusion which emanated from Kirk and, feeling unnecessarily protective, he searched his mind for alternatives.

"Perhaps you should both go," he suggested presently. "Obviously, you have much to... discuss."

At that, Kirk's lips pressed tightly together. His stare locked with Ruth's. In her eyes, he read fear, embarrassment, even contempt. Unconsciously, he squared his shoulders, never breaking the stare. "Actually," he said, more to her than to his professor, "I don't think there's anything we need to talk about."

Ruth looked away, then abruptly slipped past him, stopping just long enough to open the door. "I'll call you next week, Jim," she murmured, attempting to play the innocent, wounded party with a flourish. Then, lifting her eyes to Spock, she added: "I hope you'll find the transcripts helpful, Professor."

Before Spock or Kirk could even think to stop her, she slipped through the door, leaving the room drenched in a suddenly thick silence and the scent of her perfume.

For a split second, Kirk felt himself lean toward the door, felt his natural curiosity and compassion threaten to chase him into the rain after her. But as he glanced briefly at the other man standing with a perplexed expression in the center of the room, he felt himself waver.

Spock's brows lifted curiously as he studied the human, wondering why he had chosen this particular afternoon for a visit. His own awkwardness with the situation left him momentarily speechless.

It was Kirk who eventually broke the stillness. "I... er... guess I picked a bad time," he offered lamely, torn between his supposed love for Ruth and his current anger with her. "Maybe I should go, too."

Spock didn't argue. Suddenly, the awkwardness settled within him. "Yes," he said very quietly. "Perhaps that would be... best."

Kirk nodded, fighting the urge to kick himself for dropping in uninvited. He started toward the door, reached for the knob, then turned impulsively back to the Vulcan. "Have you... known Ruth long?" he asked with an inner sigh.

Eyes closing for a moment, Spock shook his head curtly once. "She was a student of mine several semesters ago," he explained. Then, meeting Kirk's gaze, he tried to offer his honesty. "I was not aware that you knew her."

A wistful, almost embittered smile touched Kirk's lips. "I guess I didn't," he said, meaning it. He turned again to leave, but once more his curiosity overtook him. "Were there any transcripts?" he asked.

The question stung, and Spock flinched inwardly. Despite the fact that it was an indirectly personal question, he forced himself to respond truthfully. "No," he said very quietly. "There were not."

At that, Kirk nodded in silent confirmation to himself, reaching once again for the door

knob.

"Please... wait," Spock said, surprising even himself with his abrupt request.

Kirk found it a hard request to obey, but even more difficult to ignore. His throat was tight with emotion. For some insane reason, he'd convinced himself that Ruth would be different with him. He'd known she had a "past", but in his quest for some sort of personal fulfillment, he'd told himself that it wouldn't - couldn't - matter.

He stopped with his hand on the knob, his back to the Vulcan. "I don't want to intrude," he said quietly.

Spock shook his head, realizing only in retrospect that Kirk wasn't looking at him. Impulsively, he stepped to the side until the human looked up and met his eyes. "I presume you came here for a reason, Mister Kirk," he pointed out. "I would, of course, understand if you wished to follow Ms. McGuire to talk, however."

Kirk's brows tightened. His eyes closed as his lips pressed together and his hand dropped from the door knob. "Like I said before," he replied. "I don't think Ruth and I have anything else to say to each other - at least not right now," he added. It also occurred to him that he didn't want to be with Ruth anymore than he wanted to be alone. He looked up at last, meeting the pained dark eyes.

For a moment, he put his own problems aside, realizing that the situation must be every bit as uncomfortable for the Vulcan as it was for himself. "I heard that you're taking an indefinite leave," he said quietly, not wanting to pry, but unable to completely squelch his natural curiosity. He shrugged, trying to portray an air of confident nonchalance he was far from feeling. "I know it's none of my business really, but... is everything... all right?"

Spock's brows lifted as his cheeks heated. For a single instant, he had the feeling that this perceptive human could see right through him, through his facade of normalcy, through his pose of utter dignity. He considered giving the customary response, telling Kirk that all was well. And yet, as he thought about it in a fraction of a second, he realized it would never be accepted. And, he also realized that he could use a friend. They both could.

The fire would simply have to wait.

He sighed in a most unVulcan manner, then looked up once more. "Those books must be heavy," he commented. "I would be honored if you would put them down and stay for dinner, Mister Kirk."

Kirk frowned, his jaw dropping just a little. His stomach clenched again. There was something in the Vulcan's demeanor, something in the compelling aura which wouldn't allow him to refuse. There were also practical reasons for staying, he reminded himself, not the least of which was that he didn't want to create hard feelings between himself and his most favored teacher. What had happened with Ruth wasn't Spock's fault, he reminded himself. It was hers.

And maybe his own for being so youthfully blind.

Impulsively, he nodded, offering a smile as he deposited the arm-load of books onto a nook-shelf by the door. "I'd be happy to stay, Professor," he decided at last.

Spock nodded absently. "Very well," he said, grateful for the company. He turned toward the kitchen, aware of Kirk's footsteps following. "Please, though," he added, "remember that I am no longer a professor. My name is Spock."

Kirk blinked. It wasn't the response he'd expected, yet the soft-spoken tone was anything but admonishing. Rather, it was almost pleading. A frown creased his forehead once more as he stared at the other man's retreating back. "All right," he agreed quietly. "On one condition."

"Which is?" Spock inquired, stopping at the long bar area in the kitchen and meeting the bright green-gold eyes.

Kirk shrugged with a grin as he felt himself beginning to relax. "That you remember you're not a professor." He paused, watching the slanted brows lift. "My name is Jim."

Spock's lips curved up just a little. "I shall remember that... Jim," he agreed. Then, finding himself infinitely more comfortable with the human, he set about preparing a small but elegant meal. In the back of the refrigerator, he found a bottle of wine which had been there since the day he'd moved into the apartment. The exuberant faculty members had presented it to him at his reception when he'd first signed on as a teacher with the Academy: a house warming present, they'd called it.

Until that moment, his house had never seemed warm.

Now, suddenly, it radiated with heat.

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Pushing his plate aside, Kirk leaned back in the chair, patently amazed to find Spock such a delightful conversationalist. Throughout the dinner of steamed vegetables, rice and assorted cheeses, they had talked on a variety of subjects, never once venturing near the topic of physics. Now, with three glasses of the expensive wine under his belt, Kirk found himself growing bolder.

"You didn't eat much," he commented, indicating the Vulcan's plate.

Spock glanced down. The wine had taken its toll on him as well, loosening the normal Vulcan restraints. "I have not been particularly hungry of late," he explained, finding Kirk's presence a welcomed one. The human was quick-witted, intelligent and pleasant - a nice contrast to the nervous students who sat in his class and practically trembled at his admittedly intimidating countenance. He took another sip of the wine, finding it actually pleasant. "Are you still hungry?" he inquired, side-stepping just a little. "There is more, if you wish."

Kirk shook his head with a smile. "I've eaten more tonight than I have in weeks," he said. "The cafeteria food isn't exactly identifiable, and I don't usually take the time to cook at my place, so...."

Spock nodded, feeling somewhat dizzy. "Would you care to sit in the living room?" he asked, grateful for the temporary reprieve his body had given him. With Kirk, he was remarkably relaxed, at ease. It was as if the human projected a calming effect which cooled even the fires of pon farr.

At that question, Kirk glanced nervously at the chronometer on the kitchen counter. "I really should be going," he said politely. "I'm sure you have better things to do than entertain me." He smiled graciously, rising from the chair. "I wouldn't want to over-stay my welcome, so to speak."

Spock's brows lifted at the curious expression as he stood, finding himself pleasantly dizzy, as much from the effects of the alcohol as from the chemical imbalances in his body. "In all honesty, Jim," he said very quietly, "I have enjoyed this immensely. I do, however, understand that you undoubtedly have other commitments."

For a moment, Kirk was sorry their time together was ending. He glanced guiltily toward the stack of books he'd left by the front door. And yet, as he thought about it, he turned back to the Vulcan. "You will be returning to the classroom, won't you?" he asked presently.

Spock flinched inwardly, rolling the wine glass between his fingers as he went from the kitchen back into the living room, once again aware of Kirk's footsteps following behind him. "I... do not know," he said at last, very softly and with as much honesty as he could manage.

Kirk's eyes widened, then narrowed. An inexplicable moment of panic whispered through his mind. He stood looking at the Vulcan's back for a long time and, quite suddenly, comprehension flooded through him like a rushing river. He felt his face pale, then forced himself to remember that this man was his friend now. And, quite obviously, he was a friend with a rather severe problem.

"Shit...," he said to himself. Then, damning himself for the word which often slipped out, he sighed heavily. "You... invited Ruth here to... help, didn't you?" he asked.

Startled by the question, Spock turned to meet the other man's eyes. His mouth opened, then closed again. Then, seeing no need to deny it, he nodded curtly. "Yes," he confessed. "It seemed, at the time, a logical alternative."

Kirk swallowed, his stomach clenching with fear. "'Alternative'?" he pressed, surprising himself with his busy-body attitude. "To what?"

Spock's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. His eyes closed. It occurred to him that he could easily ask Kirk to leave with no harm done. After all, he reminded himself, they barely

knew one another. And yet, the order refused to manifest in reality. He stood utterly still in the middle of his living room, gazing at the dark maroon carpeting for a very long time.

Sensing the other man's reluctance to answer, Kirk took a step forward. Anger darted past his conscious mind and, for a moment, it threatened to break free. What confused him was that he had no genuine cause to be angry. "Alternative to what?" he repeated at last.

Spock looked up, meeting the demanding stare as he made his decision. "You are in Command training, Jim," he reminded Kirk. "As a candidate for Command, you have obviously been exposed to instruction in Vulcan customs. What you have not formally learned, you have undoubtedly figured out for yourself." He paused, letting that sink in. "I am... unmarried."

Kirk blinked again, the color draining from his face. He'd had the usual instruction in Vulcan customs at the same time he'd studied Orion customs, Andorian customs, Altairian customs, and so on. And he'd heard the usual jokes about Vulcans and their biological mating cycle. But for some self-serving reason, he'd had it firmly imbedded in his mind that he'd never have to deal with it, would never even know someone who would have to deal with it.

"Then... you'll die," he said at last.

Again, Spock flinched. He remained standing only a moment longer, then went to the long sofa which stretched across the width of his living room. Sitting down, he continued to roll the wine glass through his fingers. "There is perhaps still time to find a suitable... partner," he said, attempting to be rational, forcing himself to be honest. He didn't know why, yet he knew it was important. "I regret that Ms. McGuire turned out to be an acquaintance of yours."

Kirk's brows narrowed. He started to offer some appropriate response, then simply stood staring at the other man. Since the moment they'd sat down at the dining table, Kirk hadn't given a moment's more thought to Ruth. In fact, he'd found himself so completely fascinated with Spock that he hadn't thought of anything else. It also occurred to him that he'd been filled with a sense of foreboding throughout the afternoon - from the precise moment that he'd learned of the Vulcan's leave of absence.

"I... don't want you to die," he said at last, feeling for the first time since entering the Academy that he had a real friend. It didn't seem to matter that, until this evening, they'd only known one another as teacher and student. What mattered was that, now, they had become friends - with the type of natural rapport which often bound people together for life.

For a moment, that thought terrified Kirk, yet he forced himself to think rationally, understanding that his new friend may not be capable of rationality.

When Spock didn't respond, he took a step nearer, gazing down at the bowed dark head. "You said there's still time," he pressed, seeing his own impatience demonstrated. "Let me help."

Spock glanced up sharply, his face darkening to olive. He wanted very much to simply agree, to take this seemingly-willing young man to his bed chamber and bury himself in the

supple body and agile mind. And yet, realistically, the thought horrified him. He shook his head adamantly. "You do not understand, Jim," he murmured. "I could seriously injure you."

Kirk blinked. "Wh-what?" he stammered. When he'd offered his help, he'd meant to offer his support, his willingness to comb the entire city if necessary to find some suitable partner for his friend. And yet, obviously, Spock misinterpreted his intentions, taking them several steps further.

What surprised Kirk even more than the Vulcan's comment was his own reaction: abruptly, without rational cause, he found himself considering it in very serious and real terms. In the course of a single evening, he'd come to care more about this man that he'd cared about Ruth during the six months he'd known her. And part of Command training included a crash course on intuition.

In that moment, his intuition told him it was right. Without a past together, without a lengthy acquaintance, without the formality of a proper courtship and long romantic evenings together, Kirk's intuition told him it could work.

Still, it was hard to listen to the voice of psychic insight when his practical mind was scrambling away in protest. Not because of the fact that Spock was Vulcan. Not because he was male. Not even because he was a teacher. Rather, Kirk knew, his hesitation - his fear - stemmed from the fact that Spock was one of the most powerful and influential men he had ever had the privilege of knowing.

In a word, translated to simple English, the Vulcan was intimidating.

And yet, when he forced himself to remember the career for which he was bound, he took a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he made his decision.

"Is there... someone else you could go to?" he asked.

Spock shook his head. Though his body granted him occasional reprieves from the shameful desire, those interludes were growing less frequent. By morning, he knew, he would have no alternative. Still, the idea of taking a possibly martyred victim left him cold. "Leave me," he said, trying to believe he meant it. "It is best that I am alone now."

A large part of Kirk wanted to accept those words and flee. Yet the more typically human part held his feet rooted to the floor. He looked at his teacher for a very long time, not surprised that he could find beauty in the sharp angular features, not terribly ashamed that such beauty was quite capable of creating a physical response within his own body.

"I won't leave you like this, Spock," he said at last. "I thought we were friends."

One brow lifted. "If you remain here, Jim," the Vulcan pointed out realistically, "that friendship shall not survive this night."

Kirk met and held the threatening black eyes. "I don't believe that," he said very quietly, his heart pounding, his legs trembling with the effort to hold up his own weight. "Except that if I do leave, you will die." He paused to let that sink in, then added: "Dead men don't have any friends, I suppose."

Spock flinched. Kirk would make an intriguing chess partner. And his own body was weakening. But he didn't break the stare which held them together. He chose a more logical approach - one which would hopefully appeal to the young man's sense of reality. "You are undoubtedly aware of the Academy's regulation governing the fraternization between faculty and students, Jim," he pointed out. "Additionally, you are aware that Command training leaves the student open to a variety of character tests at any given time - tests which are given without warning, and without the student's knowledge that it is a test." He paused, giving Kirk time to consider that. "Suppose everything which has occurred this evening is a test," he then suggested. "If you persist in your current course, you could find yourself permanently expelled from the Academy, with no further hopes of pursuing your goal of becoming a starship captain."

For a moment, Kirk almost wavered. But as he stared into the threatening black eyes, his own confidence overcame any doubts. "Part of Command training is also to recognize the difference between fantasy and reality, Spock," he countered. "This isn't a test."

"Why?"

Kirk shrugged, growing more comfortable with his position, and more intrigued with the possibility of becoming even closer to this powerful and perhaps dangerous man. "For one reason, you've already said you're no longer a professor at the Academy," he pointed out. "And you would never agree to be a part of such a test even if you were," he decided quietly. "And for another reason, even if you did agree, you're not that good an actor."

Spock's brows shot high.

Kirk offered a gentle smile, then moved to sit on the sofa at the other man's side - not near enough to accidentally touch, but near enough to confirm his next statement. "Another part of being a good commander is learning to trust your intuition," he explained. Then, more softly, he added: "Maybe I'm wrong, but I think it was intuition that brought me here this afternoon." His cheeks pinked just a little with his own admitted arrogance. "Even though I didn't know you very well - or maybe not at all - I felt that something was wrong. You're not the kind of person who takes an indefinite leave of absence without good reason."

Acutely aware of Kirk's nearness, Spock was near to admitting defeat. This human was among the most promising Command candidates at the Academy; and despite their difference in age and acquired knowledge, the Vulcan knew he had more than met his match. And yet, considering Kirk's approach, he considered another aspect of Command training. Poker. Bluffs. Strategy. If nothing else, it was an intriguing game - one which gave him something to think on other than the building demands of his own body.

Turning to face Kirk and curling one long leg underneath himself, Spock engaged the

other man in a contest of wills, calling the possible bluff which had been put forth. "Very well," he said quietly. "Since you are here, and as you have no apparent reservations, I accept your offer of... assistance."

Kirk's stomach clenched. He held his breath as their eyes remained locked together. It occurred to him that he may be in well over his head, but he also understood that it was too late to back down. He didn't want to back down. He nodded curtly, then rose from the sofa and held one hand down to the other man.

Spock's brows lifted, the color draining from his face as he glanced at the offered hand. His world turned upside down. "You are serious, aren't you?" he mused, as much to himself as to Kirk.

The human nodded, starting to breathe again. There was something terribly compelling about this Vulcan - something which had drawn their lives together. "I'm very serious," he said, meaning it.

Spock tried one last-ditch effort to free himself from a situation he didn't truly want to be freed from. "If we... do this," he said haltingly, "there is a possibility that our minds will become... linked. If that should happen," he warned, "it could seriously jeopardize your career."

Kirk stopped to think for just a minute. "How?" he asked at last, not withdrawing his hand nor his offer.

Lowering his eyes, Spock took a deep, trembling breath. Kirk's scent was perilously wonderful; the human's aura all but mesmerizing. "Should we become linked too deeply, we will not be able to be... separate." No longer interested in bluffs or poker, he spilled the truth into the air. "We would be drawn together even beyond our own ability to control."

For a very long moment, Kirk remained silent, though he made certain that his hand never trembled. Nor did his voice when he spoke. "You're qualified for a Science Officer's position on a starship," he said at last.

Spock blinked, brows climbing high. He knew he was cornered, yet there was no instinct to turn and fight. He glanced once more at the out-stretched palm, felt his own hand straining to reach for it. "You do not even know me," he said very quietly.

Kirk's lips pressed into a gentle, reassuring smile as he looked down at the bowed head. "I know enough," he said. "I know that with you I can feel something - something I've never felt before." He held his breath again. "I won't lie to you and tell you that it's love. But I can't lie to myself and say it isn't, either." He paused, letting the Vulcan absorb that at the same time he tried to assimilate it for himself. "When you weren't talking about physics in class, you always said that the best way to learn something is by doing." He swallowed, trying not to tremble. "I may not know everything about you, Spock, but I know I'd rather learn with you in my life than without you. Maybe that's why I came here tonight... I dunno. All I'm sure of is that when I heard you were leaving indefinitely, I felt like I'd lost something very important to me."

Spock considered that in elongated silence. He had to admit that he had held a certain fondness for Kirk as well and that, when making his decision to take an indefinite leave, that particular student was the one which crossed his mind. And though he would have been hard-pressed to admit it, even Vulcan's most prominent scientists had verified the existence of natural rapport between two people. The difference was that those Vulcan scientists preferred to call it 'rapport' rather than labeling it for what it was. Love....

He tried not to consider that angle just yet, reminding himself that, if he proceeded with the thought in his mind to accept Kirk's proposal then and there, the potential for love or even friendship could quickly be destroyed. He forced himself to think logically - which Kirk seemed to be far more capable of at that moment than he was himself.

Finally looking up to meet the imploring green-gold eyes, he nodded his consent as he took the hand being held down to him. It was cool and surprisingly firm, matching his own Vulcan strength easily. "You are a unique individual, Jim," he said, rising to stand at the other man's side.

Kirk's cheeks heated just a little. He was scared to death, but not about to let it show. "I like to think so," he said confidently. Then, growing more serious, he inclined his head toward the staircase which would undoubtedly lead to the secluded bedroom. "Come on," he urged gently, squeezing the Vulcan's hand. "Let's go upstairs before we both change our minds."

Spock sighed heavily. His legs felt weighted, his vision slightly blurry from the effects of the alcohol he'd consumed and the fever which was consuming him. In Kirk's hand, he sensed confidence and respect as well as a genuine human desire.

In his condition, he had no alternative but to respond.

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It happened without resistance, Kirk noted, realizing that his mind was quickly being affected by the telepathic emanations from Spock. He wondered fleetingly what had drawn him here, what force in the universe could have made him forget so quickly about Ruth, what madness had devoured him which made him a willing - indeed, eager - partner to a man whom he hardly knew.

The one thing he was certain of as they entered the upstairs bedroom was that the emotions he was feeling were good ones. His stomach continued to clench in pleasant anticipation; and he understood it was more than lustful desire which made his breathing come in shallow panting breaths.

Spock's living arrangements were surprisingly ornate he observed as they entered the room and the Vulcan discreetly closed the door behind them. A large bed was draped with a royal blue comforter in the center of the room, and the walls were decorated with a mixture of Vulcan artifacts and Terran paintings - mostly Asian, Kirk noted. The only other furniture in the

room consisted of a small nightstand on either side of the bed and a book case which ran the length of the room, but rose to a height just under the large window. Outside, through that window, Kirk saw that the rain had picked up; the lights of the city were glistening like diamonds in the sun; and the Pacific Ocean glimmered like a black star in the distance.

Taking just a few moments to orientate himself both mentally and physically, Kirk stared out at the serenity, taking it into himself before he turned once again to face the Vulcan.

What surprised him was that his new friend was trembling visibly, the dark head lowered, the beautiful hands clenched into tight fists. No longer the intimidating teacher, Spock appeared vulnerable, fearful... and excitingly handsome.

Ignoring the thought which reminded Kirk that he'd never been with a man, let alone a Vulcan, he forced himself to recall that Spock was a living being, first and foremost. Gender had nothing to do with it and, with that knowledge, he went to the other man's side, abandoning everything except his human compassion.

Their eyes met, and as Kirk smiled gently, he noted that Spock's lips parted to speak, a foreboding expression in the dark eyes.

Almost without thinking, the human placed one fingertip against the other man's mouth, silencing him as he shook his head in silent negation. "No more worries, okay?" he said.

Spock's brows narrowed, his body trembling at the sensation of Kirk's finger pressed to his lips. The sane part of his mind cried out in denial against what was to come, yet the burgeoning animal which lived within silenced those protests. He knew, quite simply, that he was lost.

Without fully understanding what he was doing, he drew the human into his arms, burying his face against the soft warm neck and inhaling the intoxicating scent of cologne and natural male musk. It was his last coherent memory, for at that moment, he willingly gave up any pretense of civilized thought.

Kirk felt himself crushed against the Vulcan, their bodies pressing so tightly together that it was easy to discern the bulging erection which strained against Spock's tight-fitting black jeans. To his own surprise, that discovery didn't frighten him, didn't even begin to threaten his own masculinity. Rather, it excited him beyond comprehension. The knowledge that Spock would allow him this close, would allow him to help, overshadowed any other considerations and he found himself falling helplessly into a dark cavern of need and desire.

Within moments, they were naked together, though Kirk had little recollection of how they came to shed their clothing. It seemed a trivial, unimportant detail. Lying on the bed together, safe for the moment as the storm built its strength, he stroked the lean muscles of the Vulcan's back, running his hands over the sharp planes of flesh and bone, through heated valleys and across cool mesas.

At the same time, he was aware of Spock's hands exploring him as well, fingertips gripping and yearning, arms constricting to hold him close. Their mouths came together quickly, crushing with such intensity that Kirk gasped aloud. A hot tongue probed his mouth, igniting him further despite his expectations to the contrary.

Always before, he had been the aggressor, the instigator. Now, in this almost mystical, out-of-time experience, it was pleasant to have the tables turned.

The rest was largely a blur. He felt his body turned in the bed, his legs manipulated until his thighs were parted as he knelt in open invitation. Needful hands massaged his bare buttocks, and thick oil which smelled of coconut and papaya was applied to the entrance to his body. It startled him somewhat when one finger probed deeper, lubricating him internally as well; though he was forced to acknowledge that the sensation was amazingly pleasant. His own organ throbbed with desire as it protruded from his uplifted pelvis, the tip occasionally brushing the smooth blue satin of the thick comforter.

Then, quite suddenly, Spock's arms were around his waist and chest, the Vulcan's burning shaft probing him, then burying itself deep into his body with a single, merciless thrust.

For a moment, tears stung Kirk's eyes, causing him to gasp at the intensity, causing him to wonder what insanity had led him to this moment. And yet, even as that thought manifested, he felt a hand settle on the side of his face, soft fingertips gathering his tears as they moved into position for a meld.

His eyes closed. He was at a cross-roads, remembering the Vulcan's prior warning. If their minds became too deeply linked....

For a reason he could not even begin to understand, he wanted this man at his side forever. And the only thing he had to lose, he knew, were the Ruths and the Debbies, the Janices and the Sandras. All he had to lose was all he'd had before: nothing. No one.

"Yes," he whispered, his body buffeted by the powerful thrusts which shook him and left him trembling. "Please, Spock... all of you," he implored, kissing the palm of the hand which waited as if for permission on the side of his face.

When the Vulcan complied with his wish, Kirk heard his own voice cry out, felt his chest constrict, his arms and legs collapsing beneath him. Spock's weight came down hard against his back as the other mind took him; and in the safe sanctuary of the meld, all pain diminished to be replaced with joy, delight, well-being.

In that meld, Kirk saw the stars for the first time - through Spock's memories, he witnessed the awe-inspiring blackness of space, the burning brilliance of a thousand suns strewn haphazardly into the void. He was there for a moment. Alone at first. And then with Spock at his side.

Physical and spiritual selves blended among the stars and, when Kirk could breathe

again, he became aware of a deathly stillness which had settled in the deepest part of his soul. He was at peace, though still driven to seek a childhood dream of the stars. And now, more than ever, he had a reason to continue that quest.

In another moment, he felt life re-instate itself as Spock began thrusting once more, filling him with burning flesh and with a vision which burned no less intensely. He was aware of the Vulcan's rasping breath blowing warm against his neck, and of the increased pumping of the other man's hips as the thick alien organ penetrated him time and again.

Now, flat on his stomach with his hips lifted slightly, his own organ was buffeted against the smooth silkiness of the comforter, causing his needful desire to multiply as the sensation of fullness brought him to the peak of satisfaction.

Then, in a startlingly quick moment, Kirk felt Spock stiffen, the powerful arms gripping him more tightly as a sharp intake of breath ripped the stillness. The Vulcan thrust once more, burying his maleness completely within him; and as they clung together on the edge of madness, a warm river exploded deep inside.

Eyes clenched tightly shut, Kirk raised his hips higher, needing the fulfillment which came with knowing Spock had found release within his body and within his mind. For a few long minutes, they remained that way; then, following the Vulcan's lead, Kirk lay flat on the bed as the softening organ withdrew to leave him empty but ultimately content.

A moment later, he was rolled onto his back, and looked up to meet the fiery dark eyes which smiled down at him with quite obvious satisfaction. Spock stroked his chest and abdomen, slowly working his way down to the shaft which still protruded from his groin.

Without words, without breaking eye contact, the Vulcan bent to kiss one nipple, then the other, marvelling at the sweet moisture which clung to Kirk's chest. Spock knew now what had been missing in his life, what had been missing when he had mated himself to T'Pring nearly seven years in the past.

Compassion. Companionship. Perhaps even the love which Vulcans chose to call rapport.

It was a delight to touch Kirk, to observe the multitude of possible responses, to listen to the human's gasps of pleasures and cries of delight. And, Spock knew it would be every bit as much of a delight to experience Kirk's power moving deep within him.

Lifting himself carefully, he straddled the human's hips, their gazes locked together as he began slowly lowering himself onto the eager shaft which rose up to meet him. Kirk was generously endowed, Spock quickly discovered, the thick organ stiffening and lengthening as he pressed his body lower, allowing it to enter him until he was completely filled.

Then, very gently, his buttocks came to rest against Kirk's pelvis, their eyes and spirits locked together by the joining. For a long time, they remained that way, unmoving, until

gradually Kirk began to thrust with need.

Leaning forward, Spock rested his hands on either side of the human's head, his lips bending to brush the soft mouth, his tongue delving into the cool/warm recesses of the other's mouth. The position caused his hips to lift slightly and, in another moment, Kirk began a steady thrusting rhythm as the green-gold eyes closed and the golden head arched back onto the pillow.

A stray thought informed Spock that they had both sacrificed their innocence and their social positions in this joining. No longer were they student and teacher. Instead, they were transformed beings - each made whole by the other's presence, each giving up his role to the other's lead. Either could lead. Either could follow. And Spock conceded that he would have no difficulty following this powerful young man even to the farthest stars and beyond.

He remained still, allowing Kirk to take him completely, delighting in the sensations as the generous shaft penetrated and withdrew until they were both breathless. He could feel the human in his mind as well as his body; and through that recently formed link, he understood that there would be no regrets for either of them.

With that knowledge, he rested his hand on the side of Kirk's face once again, gazing down into the bright eyes as they opened to study him with a quizzical expression. Then, with a delicate upward curving of his own lips, he bent to place a lingering kiss on the other's mouth as their minds came together once more.

Instantly, Kirk gasped, his hips thrusting upward to seek the same completion of flesh that his mind had already found. His organ stiffened, then spasmed in a violent release, his hands digging into the mattress as unconsciousness threatened from all sides.

Spock experienced the vertigo as well, not surprised to discover another powerful ejaculation being pulled from his own suddenly-erect organ. In the mind, he understood that it was a mirrored reflection of Kirk's release: experienced in his own body through the dual consciousness found in the meld.

For a very long time, neither moved, each clinging to the other as the spasms slowly lessened and time started forward once again. Then, very carefully, Spock lay down at the human's side, their lips meeting in the aftermath of joining.

Kirk accepted the kiss fully, his lips parting to receive the tongue which probed him with utter efficiency. But now, he knew, rather than a kiss of needful passion, it was an expression of tenderness, compassion, perhaps even love. In his mind, he could feel Spock's presence like a long-lost twin, curling safely into his dark spaces and leaving light in his wake.

The human sighed heavily, one hand moving absently up and down the other's back. "We're... together, aren't we?" he asked.

Spock nodded. "Yes."

Kirk's eyes closed, his lips pressing together. In the aftermath of passion, the future seemed uncertain, though not terribly frightening. "Will you... go with me?" he asked at last, needing an answer.

Spock's brows narrowed into a sleepy expression. "Go with you?" he murmured, more content than he could ever recall being. "Precisely where is it that you wish to go, Jim?" he inquired, lulled toward sleep by the persistent patter of rain on the roof.

Kirk held him closer, thinking absently of the stack of books and tapes he'd left downstairs. Tomorrow, his life would get back to some semblance of normalcy; yet he knew intuitively that it had been forever changed. "Out there," he said, inclining his head toward the window and the stars which weren't even visible through the clouds. "Will you go with me into the darkness out there, Spock?"

Spock smiled very faintly, impressed as always by this young man's dreams, knowing full-well that Kirk would one day realize those childhood aspirations. "I will go with you, Jim," he promised. "Into that darkness... and even beyond if you wish."

Sighing pleasantly, Kirk drew the dark head down against his shoulder, mentally sealing those words into his future. Tomorrow, he would deal with the consequences this night could potentially bring.

But for the moment, he was content to rest. Somehow, somehow, they would sail the stars together. They would, he told himself, become legends. And one day, far in the future perhaps, stories would be told of this night.

He smiled to himself.

One day, they would become the heroes of which legends were made. Together, he knew, they would have little choice in the matter and, in the morning, he had every intention of making it so.

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That same smile still lingered on Kirk's lips as he returned to reality to find himself on Altair, tucked safely away in a secluded mountain bungalow, even more safely sheltered in the arms of his first officer.

For a moment, the world spun and wavered, threatening to dissolve into a shattering of some distant star's heart. Then, with a quiet tenderness, the real James Kirk emerged from the threads of their collaborated fantasy.

He found himself gazing up into the sable eyes, caught the hint of a smile toying with the corners of the Vulcan's lips. Wrapped in one another's arms, teetering on the edge of the bed, Spock was actually smiling.

Kirk's forehead tightened to a quizzical grin. "What?" he asked.

Spock shook his head, trailing one fingertip down Kirk's cheek with fondness. "I have often wondered what kind of person you would have been during your years at the Academy," he mused.

Kirk's smile grew. "And?" he urged.

Spock kissed him gently, then with greater passion. "You were... an exemplary student," he decided eventually pulling away and moving his hips in a suggestive fashion.

Kirk grimaced good-naturedly, the stickiness of their life seed binding them together. "You were a... gifted professor," he returned, licking the slope of an elegantly pointed ear. "I'm just glad you weren't a writing teacher."

Spock's brows lifted into twin question marks.

Kirk shrugged. "Some of your twists can get nasty," he said, recalling the added angle of Ruth McGuire. "By the way, why did you do that?"

Stroking Kirk's face, Spock left another kiss on the moist lips. "Perhaps I wanted to make you... jealous," he suggested.

Kirk frowned admonishingly. "Over Ruth?" he mused, shaking his head. "I had her figured out from the start," he said, recalling his relationship with the older woman. "She was one of those women you could sleep with, though, and never run the risk of falling in love." He shrugged. "I guess it was safer that way."

Spock considered that. The rain was still falling, gently caressing the roof and lulling him into a sense of security which bordered on the profound. "You can, of course, retaliate at any time you wish, Jim," he pointed out.

Kirk grinned, nibbling the other man's lips. "I can think of at least a thousand situations I'd like to explore, First Officer," he returned.

Spock's mouth protruded just a little. "Only a thousand?"

Lying back on the bed, Kirk stared at the skylight, watching the rivulets of rain crease the plexiglass. "Off the top of my head, yes," he agreed. Then, propping himself up on one elbow, he broke into a mischievous grin. "But after all, Spock, we've got a lifetime ahead of us - and several more lifetimes - whole universes, in fact - stored in our imaginations."

Spock's lips curved upward as a feeling of relief washed over him. "Then... you are no longer... bored?"

Kirk blinked, wondering for a moment what the Vulcan was referring to. Then, as the

memory returned, he sighed heavily, wondering how he could ever be the least bit apathetic where his relationship with Spock was concerned. And yet, there was something to be said for imagination. He sighed heavily.

"I dunno," he lied in his best actor's voice. "Maybe I am still bored... just a little." He blinked several times as their eyes met, pretending innocence.

Spock's brows lifted. "I believe we have found the cure," he commented. "However, it is possible that several... treatments will be necessary to completely control the problem."

Kirk grinned. "Who says I want a cure?" he asked rhetorically, crawling into the Vulcan's arms which opened to receive him. "Besides, Spock," he pointed out, "a good writer always leaves room for a sequel."

Spock pondered that for only a moment, wondering if some writer would one day capture the essence of this particular night on paper. The thought almost unnerved him, for he knew that, according to Kirk's sources, a few might try.

A faint smile toyed with his lips.

His consolation came with the knowledge that no one would ever believe it.

THE END