

STYX AND STONES

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Originally published in the short story collection, STYX AND STONES

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In many selfish ways, he had hoped Kirk would go first - not only so the human would be spared the pain of separation and a severed bond, but because Spock knew that he could not have continued without his beloved.

If Kirk had gone first, they would have been quickly reunited, the Vulcan reasoned, for simple logic informed him that his own lifeforce would have terminated the moment he sensed the human's crossing from physical life into whatever reality of oblivion was to come next.

And yet, Fate had not seen fit to grant him that simple wish.

He recalled little of the accident, suspected there was little *to* recall. It was a simple mission – or should have been. He and the captain were to transport Ambassador Kariva Shamar to the surface of Shivon XI to begin diplomatic procedures. Routine. Well planned by both Federation representatives and the Captain of the *Enterprise*.

What no one could have foreseen was the electrical storm which erupted spontaneously on the planet. Obviously, Spock thought, lightning had struck the shuttle repeatedly, shorting out the thruster controls and destroying the manual override capabilities.

The rest seemed trivial. As the shuttle's pilot, he had been killed instantly when the surface of Shivon XI seemed to fall from the heavens like a great ball of rock, crushing the fragile metal shell of the shuttle.

The ambassador, however, as well as Captain Kirk, had not fared as well. In the rear of the shuttle, they'd been spared instant death; though Spock now realized that the word 'spared' hardly seemed appropriate.

Ambassador Shamar was left a cripple, with no one who cared enough to risk enough to get her to Talos IV.

And as for Kirk...

Jim had lain in a coma for precisely four years, sixteen days and nine point seven minutes – if, Spock thought absently, his time sense had not been disrupted by the long fall into darkness and his subsequent resurrection... here.

He glanced only briefly at his surroundings. The river on whose banks he stood was wide and long – extending far beyond his ability to discover its source or its destination. The water was crystal clear in parts, muddy in others, and had the odd ability to change color completely for no discernible reason.

Sunlight streamed through a bank of thick white clouds, pressing warmth against his cheeks.

He felt no heat. Instead, there was only the cold dark emptiness which had followed him into this peculiar new life. Despite repeated efforts, he had been unable to call his beloved to him, had been unable to see anything through the void-black womb which had held Kirk prisoner.

Apparently, he surmised, the comatose condition had sealed Jim's mind away from him,

making it impossible to find the human even with the unusual 'gifts' Spock had discovered since his re-birth. He could travel through time and space, it seemed, he could even 'visit' Kirk's hospital room at the Starfleet Rehabilitation Center on Centauri VI. He would walk and talk – to himself, he realized sadly – or he could sleep in the noonday sun, even partake of the wide variety of fruits, dates and nuts which grew abundantly in the nearby tropical jungle.

He could not, however, retrace his journey back to Jim.

His eyes closed and, wearily, he slumped to the ground, folding thick warm wings across his body as he drew his knees to his chest. The pale green feathers glistened with natural oils in the sun, and with an absent-minded action, he smoothed a disheveled flight-feather back into perfect order.



The wings, he recalled, had mysteriously grown from his back when he had thought of a need for aerial surveying of his new world. It had begun with what he'd thought an irritation of some sort; and, unable to see himself in any type of reflective surface, he had not understood what was happening until the transformation was completed.

Then, one morning, he'd awakened from a restless slumber to discover himself wrapped within them, shielding himself from the cold as another man might have drawn a blanket about his shoulders.

He could even fly, he had discovered.

The expanse of this strange new world was at his fingertips. Yet there was no life within him.

Jim was lost. And even the wings of a guardian could not shield him from whatever dream he was living

in the darkest regions of his unconscious mind.

There was one other thing Spock had learned to do and, dropping his head into his hands, the pale soft wings trembling as his shoulders heaved, he began to weep.

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His eyes opened into whiteness.

The first thing James Kirk became aware of was that his world was barren, like the terrain of a desert untouched by human footsteps... untouched by Vulcan footsteps. Small wildflowers might occasionally bloom, but with no one to appreciate their fragile beauty nor their delicate scent on the gently rushing wind, they lasted but a moment in time.

Spock?

Only the white silence answered with its roar of rushing waters. His body felt oddly heavy, useless. His hands did not obey his command.

His last conscious thought was of something being wrong. Terribly, irrevocably wrong. Was it a week ago? A month? Longer?

He trembled violently, feeling his heart patter irregularly against his ribs. It occurred to him that he was in no pain; yet as the details of the shuttle crash returned to him, he also understood that *not* to be in pain was theoretically impossible. He'd felt the impact, watched the

shuttle fall in slow motion. He'd tasted blood and fear as they mingled together.

And somewhere in the chaos, he'd reached blindly for Spock's hand. Their fingers had touched, held for a moment, then slipped apart. He'd groped in the darkness after that, searching blindly for his bonded mate's touch. For an instant, it had been there – a warm coolness which had surrounded him, powerful arms that had held him, cradling him, calling him away from the pain and into the welcoming darkness.

He remembered smiling. It was over. All of it. The worrying about Death, the running from it, the flirtation they'd both had with it for years. Just like that, from one moment to the next, it was over.

And then, like a child ripped from its mother's breast, he was without Spock. A lifetime of promises unfulfilled. An eternity of separation remaining. A hollow, horrible, aching loneliness where happiness had dwelled before.

Spock... Oh, Spock... where are you?

There was no response, not even an echo of the bond which had once held them together. His heart beat faster and, in a wordless cry, he began to scream.

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"Nurse! Get me a hypo of diluted pentothalaline! He's coming out of the coma, but he's going to die of a dog bite if we don't mow the lawn!"

"But, Doctor. If we administer another injection, the horse will always fly faster than Ophelia!"

"Dammit, nurse, I said move! His mental circuits are overloading! The brain can't handle the sudden influx of thoughts after this long a period of hibernation. If we don't sedate him right away, the third man on the right will go straight on till morning."

"The moon is made of green cheese, Doctor Bacchus. And all the stars are here with your sedative."

"There. It's quieting him. I want a nurse in this room at all times. The minute he starts regaining consciousness we'll try to bring him out of it slowly, give him time to adjust to the blue moon and butterfly sitting on his shoulder."

"Doctor?"

"Yes, Nurse Chapel?"

"Captain Kirk and Mister Spock were bonded. I'm sure Doctor McCoy must have mentioned it to you when he was here to check the locks on the lamp. And kisari batlick coma today, can but no see less than more."

"Getting him out of the coma was the easy part, nurse. Four years is a hell of a long time for a mind to sleep. But getting him through the next four days will be the difference between chessmen and pearl divers. And, lika betrushu mon cabba saat regarding that personnel file? We need McCoy here."

"No can cabahash, quietly, Doctor. Doctor McCoy quit the service after what happened to Mister Spock and the Captain."

"It's too bad we won't have better news for Captain Kirk when he drives the limousine through Altairi Square, Nurse Chapel. You say he and Mister Spock were bonded?"

"Yes, Doctor. According to Vulcan legends, Captain Kirk *should* have died with Spock because of their link."

"In a lot of ways, I'm sorry he didn't -- for *his* sake."

"And for Spock's, Doctor. They made it work until last night when the ocean turned wrong-side out and monijiri taukahoma litta berini."

"Maybe you'd better take this assignment yourself, Nurse. You're the only person on this Starbase Captain Kirk might remember at all. He's going to need a friend, especially now that Spock won't be here for him. I understand they were quite a team."

"Yes, Doctor. They were."

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'Were'.

The word clattered through Kirk's mind, or through what was left of it. Past tense. Always past tense. 'Were'. 'Had been'. 'Might have been'.

Spock...?

For a moment, Kirk thought he felt the familiar presence near him, the brush of fingertips on his face, the caress of a warmer-than-human-hand over his cheekbones, fingers running through his hair.

Memories came and went. Moments spent together in love or in occasional anger. Times of sorrow and joy. Promises made. A union formed. Love-making under a low-branched tree on Cassieous while the crew frolicked nearby, unaware of their presence.

The dangers they'd shared. The comfort they'd found in one another.

We had a good life, Spock... a very good life....

Now, intuitively, he knew that time was over. Instinct alone was sufficient to tell him that his bonded mate had gone on to some new existence or some ancient oblivion without him. He didn't need the strains of incoherent conversation to confirm it, for the knowing came from the deepest part of himself, from his soul which ached and yearned and cried to be free of the flesh which bound it.

The memories came again. Long walks on a beach where no footsteps had ever creased the virgin sands. Spock's research projects long into the night. The *Enterprise* wrapped around them like the arms of a third lover.

We had it all, Spock... all of it and then some. We had the stars, we had life itself, didn't we? Spock? Spock...? ...I even had you. I held you in my arms, didn't I? And you held me. Do you remember kissing my tears away the first time we made love? Do you remember that? You thought you'd hurt me... and in reality I was crying for joy.

Spock...? Tell me you remember.... Please...?

There was no answer. Instead, he listened to the empty white silence, to the rushing roar of a mighty river which soothed him with its sound. It occurred to him that the banks of that river were not far away; and a single light shone in the distance like some beacon to lost ships.

Spock?

The light, Kirk thought, could be a that of a lighthouse. Then, struggling against the current which closed over his head, he began to swim for that distant shore without realizing how he'd come to be in the deepest part of the river.

Never once did he look back.

If he had, he might have seen Christine Chapel starting to weep bitterly. He might have seen the Starbase doctor struggling in vain to hold the life in his body, to keep his very spirit from escaping.

He might even have heard his own voice sigh out the last sound it would ever make.

"Spock...."

Instead, he continued to swim, suddenly aware of how very warm this river really was. Its waters were calm now, and sweet on his tongue as his a few drops splashed onto his lips. Tasting them, he stopped for a moment in his swim to drink, considering absently how silly the action was. He was hardly thirsty, yet the waters of this river filled him with new life, perhaps even with new blood, compelling him to swallow more.

What surprised him was when he began to laugh like a boy skinny-dipping in a forbidden sea. The loneliness was gone, replaced with the stuff of life itself; and, without knowing *how* he knew, he understood that he had undertaken some profound journey into some mysterious new world.

The air was warm and pleasantly dry. A scent of honeysuckle drifted past him in the night. The light near the shore cast a thousand glittering diamonds over the clear, calm surface of the river.

Then, quite suddenly, a sound broke the stillness, causing Kirk to lift his eyes skyward. It was the sound of wings splitting the air.



Spock stood in the warm river waters, watching the human splash playfully. They had survived the emotional reunion, though barely, the Vulcan thought with a fond smile. Now, less than 24 hours later, it was as if they had never been apart.

Within a few minutes, Kirk was ready to leave the river, and moved to his mate's side, gazing up at the perfected angular features and the satiny black hair which fell to the middle of his back. Aside from a torn loin cloth made of a raw cotton-like substance, Spock was nude, his arms and chest bare, his legs long and lean. Kirk was still not used to the magnificently tapered wings which grew from the Vulcan's back, yet the pale green coloration reflected light onto the olive-skinned face, bathing the other man in an almost incandescent glow.

For himself, Kirk had realized only within the past hour that he had brought nothing into this new life with him and, rising from the river, he watched clear, cool drip from his fingertips, forming into rivulets as it cascaded over his legs and penis.

He permitted himself a smile as he leaned on the Vulcan and felt one protective arm slide around his back. They had spoken little since the morning and, absently, he understood that there was little need of conversation. Still, the ordinariness of speech lured him as they walked together toward the shore. There was still much to adjust to and, taking advantage of mundane capabilities, he sighed heavily, pleased with the sound of his own voice.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again, Spock," he murmured as they reached the shoreline and sat together on the warm tropical sands. It was the first thing he'd said when the Vulcan had carried him from the river the previous evening and, now, he couldn't stop repeating it. "I.. I thought I'd imagined everything: you, the *Enterprise*... all of it."

Spock took the other's hand, holding it tenderly as if courting the human for the first time. A shy, tentative touching. Then, almost unconsciously, he draped one protective wing over Kirk's back, delighting in the pleasant sensations which flowed up into his back through the nerve receptors. "I, too, feared that I had lost you, Jim," he said, recalling their frantic, desperate reunion of the night before. "When I heard your laughter in the river, I believed myself mad."

Kirk offered a wistful smile, resting his head on the Vulcan's shoulder as the sun dried his body, leaving warmth and security in its wake. "I'm glad it's finally over, Spock," he said at last,

as much to himself as to the Vulcan.

Spock needed no explanation. "Now that we are together, I have no regrets either, Jim." It was a relief not to have to worry for Kirk, not to concern himself or his mate with schedules and dangers and the dance with Death. It was, illogically, pleasant to be dead.

Silence filled their paradise for a long moment. "Where do you think we are?" Kirk asked presently.

"Unknown."

"Do you think we could leave?" Kirk re-thought that. "I mean, do you think we could leave if we *wanted* to?" At that moment, he didn't particularly want to.

"Unknown."

Sighing contentedly, Kirk closed his eyes, grateful simply to have Spock at his side. "You don't think we'll get... bored?" he asked.

"A possibility," Spock conceded, absently stroking the human's back in a well-remembered familiar fashion. "However," he added, "there seem to be an unlimited number of possibilities for entertainment."

Kirk grinned. "Oh?"

A long brow lifted. "I was not speaking particularly of *physical* entertainment, Jim," he admonished in a fond teasing fashion. "However, that is also a factor to be considered – at length."

A gentle chuckle parted Kirk's lips and he reminded himself for the millionth time just how fortunate he was, how fortunate he had been throughout his life. "We had it all," he said, repeating words which had rattled through the last remnants of his conscious Earthly mind. "We really had it all, Spock."

Very delicately, Spock left a kiss on the human's neck. "We still do," he pointed out, amazed at how rapidly they had fallen back into their comfortable pattern of loving once the separation had ended.

Kirk smiled wistfully, arching his neck as the Vulcan's kisses traveled over his shoulders then back again. Still, his curiosity took precedence even over the beginnings of physical arousal. "I just wonder why we're... here," he said, indicating the terrain with a gesture of his head. "It's like no place I've ever even *imagined* before."

"Nor I," Spock commented, wondering if it were a rhetorical statement. "But it is, at the very least, sufficient for our purposes."

Kirk nodded, the sun and Spock's gentle ministrations lulling him into a slight yawn. It occurred to him that there *was* a structure on the opposite shore and, gazing at it from across the river, he pondered it at length. "There must've been someone else here sometime, Spock," he mused. "I presume you've checked out that building over there." He yawned again, not surprised to discover that it didn't really matter. They were, after all, together.

"I built it," Spock said with seeming disinterest.

Kirk blinked, lifting his eyes to meet the glittering dark gaze. "You... built it?" he asked disbelievingly.

Spock inclined his head, bringing their lips together in a light kiss. "With stones from the river," he explained, recalling how he had occupied his time in the four years, sixteen days and some-odd-hours of their separation. "The sand on the opposite bank is of a much finer texture. When mixed with sap from the branches of a particular tree in the forest, it forms a workable grout to hold the stones together."

Kirk discovered that he was only half listening. The sun and his mate were having their

way with him and both had always been symbols of great inner security. His eyes closed and, happily, he snuggled deeper into the Vulcan's embrace.

"Do you *want* to leave?" he asked, surprising himself with the question.

Spock considered it, found he had no concrete preference. "Do you?"

Kirk shrugged. "Can we?"

"Unknown."

It seemed unimportant. "What if we just stay here? I mean... we can't very well repopulate this world on our own."

"That would seem unlikely," Spock commented, appreciating as always Kirk's undaunted sense of humor.

Kirk frowned thoughtfully. "Adam and Adam?" he asked with a suggestive smile.

Recognizing the reference, Spock lifted an eyebrow. "We could, of course, garner many years of pleasure *attempting* to create offspring."

The smile returned to Kirk's face, yet he was beginning to discover that his immediate pleasure came just from being *with* Spock. It didn't matter what they were doing, and he reminded himself that they appeared to have all of eternity to do it. "We've stopped aging, haven't we?" he asked, once again changing the subject.

Spock nodded. "So it would seem. As a Vulcan, I am quite conscious of my body's metabolism. And though we appear to have physical form," he added, stroking Kirk's inner thigh to punctuate his statement, "the vibratory level of our molecules is quite different than that of our former selves."

Kirk sighed happily. "Always the scientist, Mister Spock."

"Of course, Captain."

For a long time, neither spoke. Kirk drifted into a light doze more than once, marveling at the sense of peace and contentment which filled him. When he opened his eyes once more, he found his hand absently stroking the soft perfection of a long, tapered wing as a stray thought came to him. "You always *were* my guardian, Spock."

"But hardly an angel," the Vulcan returned, following the human's thought-patterns perfectly. "Indeed, I believe Doctor McCoy would have been the first to point out that I more accurately resemble your Earth legend's description of Satan."

At the mention of McCoy, Kirk felt just a twinge of remorse. "Poor Bones," he murmured. "I wonder what' he's doing now...."

Tightening his arm around Kirk's back, Spock pressed one fingertip to the human's lips. "He is following his destiny, Jim," he whispered reassuringly. "Just as we have followed ours."

Somehow, the explanation felt right. McCoy's life had its own path and, despite their friendship, he had to walk that path alone now. Kirk sighed again, and silence fell over them for nearly an hour.

As the soft blue sun slipped lower on the horizon, Kirk opened his eyes once more, pleased to find Spock's head resting on his shoulder, the warm dark eyes studying him fondly.

"You know we'll have to explore this place, Spock," he decided aloud, his curiosity rising once more.

"I have done so to some extent," the Vulcan replied. He gave a brief geophysical description of his discoveries, ending with: "The river extends hundreds of miles in either direction. There are tributaries coming down from the mountains to the East, yet I have found no seas or other large bodies of water."

Kirk considered that. A river that went nowhere, whose only purpose seemed to be to

divide two divergent land masses. On the East bank, where they now rested, the vegetation was tropical, the climate moderate: cool enough for a human, warm enough for a Vulcan. On the West bank, the terrain was more harsh, the temperatures more varying according to Spock's explanation.

"The best of both worlds," Kirk mused to himself.

"I beg your pardon."

Kirk shrugged. "Maybe that's all it is," he ventured. "This place, I mean. Maybe this is just an extension of what we believed during life."

"Please explain."

"I'm not sure I can," Kirk replied truthfully. "All I know is that we always had the best of everything, Spock. I always tried to give you Earth's best ideas... whatever that means," he added. "And you always gave me the most that Vulcan had to offer. Despite our differences, we made it work."

Spock didn't bother pretending modesty, seeing no need to do so. "Yes," he murmured. "We made it work quite well."

Kirk smiled again, understanding it just a little better. "So... maybe that's what this place is," he repeated quietly. "Sort of a symbolic sanctuary." He yawned sleepily. "Or something like that...."

Spock's lips curved upward. "Your journey has been tiring," he noted lovingly. "Come. I believe you will find the house comfortable despite its lack of amenities." He stood, stretching arms, legs and, lastly, wings. They trembled pleasantly, then folded against his back. "Our bed is one of soft, non-irritating mosses; and the pillows are petals of a somewhat large flower... filled with down."

Kirk's heart filled. His eyes closed and, allowing his mind to wander, he imagined this beloved companion collecting the rewards his own body had shed to make a place for them to sleep.

He had no words to say, understanding full well that Spock could easily read his thoughts as tears filled his eyes. He took the Vulcan's outstretched hand, allowing himself to be helped to his feet as the weariness of his travels caught up to him at last. They had frolicked in the river. They had held one another throughout the day. They had loved through touch and without touching.

Now, for awhile at least, it was time to rest.

Walking hand in hand with the Vulcan, Kirk went to the river's shore and stood gazing for a long moment toward the opposite bank where a stone house stood half-built. And as they waded together through the thigh-deep water, Kirk couldn't help smiling just a little.

Their lives were over, yet only just beginning. In the morning, he told himself, they would discuss the future. In the morning, they would carry more stones from the mighty river and build a home which would withstand the test of time. They would catch fire in an earthen jar and place it in the hearth. When the sun rose, they would make love. And again when it set.

For ever. And ever.

By the time they reached the far bank and stepped hand in hand onto the shore, Kirk was already planning eternity. But he stopped long enough to glide into the arms which opened to him, lifting his mouth to accept the kiss that waited for him on Spock's lips.

As one powerful wing closed protectively around his mate, Spock held Kirk to his chest, his hands playing up and down the smooth planes of muscle and bone.

At the shoulder blades, soft as the petals of a rose, a faint scattering of down had broken

the surface.

Spock smiled, gently stroking the new growth, smoothing it into place. His own wings were those of a gull – graceful, functional, even beautiful by Terran standards. Kirk's would be... different. The wings of an eagle.

Kirk wasn't terribly surprised by the Vulcan's discovery, reveling in the pleasant sensation as Spock smoothed the new growth into place. Here, in this mystical place, it seemed natural, right, good.

He looked up into the warm dark eyes, smiling as he placed a kiss on the Vulcan's lips and nestled into the security which waited for him under the protective covering of down. Somehow, he had no doubts that they could share eternity together without ever looking back.

In the morning, he told himself, flexing his own newborn wings, they would take their first flight together into this strange and wonderful unknown.

And, already, he had a star in mind.

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