

Three equal sides
a series in 11 parts and 27 years
by mazaher, 2009-2010



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part 1. Wondering

summary

Body language prevents a skirmish and leads to unexpected realizations.

note to story

*To all K/Sers: are we really, *really* sure that there can't be any K/S in ST:XI unless S/U is first disposed of? Uhura comes in as no. 18 in my (provisional) chronological list of female heroes of all times. Only so many in 3500 years... I can't afford the waste.*

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Uhura

I was there, on the fourth planet in the Zeta Atlantis system.

I was there when the Atlanteans swarmed out of the bush and confronted us, their treble pairs of bluish hands armed with primitive but deadly slings and spears.

Under the Prime Directive, we could not use our phasers.

I was there when the Captain and Spock stepped up as a single man to shield me, holding the slender mining hand-probes as they would weapons at the ready, tips on the ground, handles oblique across their chest, hands calmly poised. Unthreatening, yet firm. A quiet reminder of an impassable boundary around the three of us.

They didn't need to speak to each other, not even to look.

They moved in sync, single-minded and clear in their intent.

It was then that I understood two things.

That they were in love.

And that I loved them both.

I picked a few shards of stone and stepped up to their side.

We stared the Atlanteans down and managed to get back up in one piece.

But now I wonder...

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Kirk

She's tough, Uhura. She's taught me some hard lessons from the very beginning.

Gals can talk back to you, and send you yelping back to your corner.

Gals can fight-- I saw her deliver a mean left hook and a meaner right jab. Good that she didn't sock *me*.

Gals do choose whom, and if, and when, and how.

Gals know their job as well as you do, even better, as they don't get so easily distracted by any male bullshit flying around.

Gals have balls-- well, their equivalent.

Think back to it, it was just a tad humbling to see her come up at our side, ready to do her bit in the probably coming, and totally unladylike, fight with the Atlanteans.

Luckily they could read our body language and thought it better to retreat for the moment, allowing us to beam up unseen.

Since then, I've given the episode a lot of thought.

Checklist:

I love Spock. We are friends; more, we are *t'hy'la*.

I know he loves me, in a way.

I also know he loves her, in **that** way.

And she loves him.

May it be that I love her also?

I wonder...

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Spock

Fascinating.

When I chose to enlist in Starfleet, I knew I was due for many discoveries. In truth, I was especially attracted by astrophysics and its mathematical implications.

But it turned out that the most disconcerting phenomena appear to be found in the field of xenoethnology.

I'd never before considered the feasibility of a relationship among three partners.

However, recent observations have brought the topic to my attention.

I love Lt. Nyota Uhura and I have reason to be certain that she loves me.

She is quite conversant with her own wishes and desires, has strict standards of evaluation for her relationships, and is very efficient implementing them in order to get what she wants, if at all possible.

That given, she has chosen to offer comfort to me in my grief in an eminently acceptable way.

She has earned my gratitude, and she has not abused it in any way.

I also love my Captain, James T. Kirk.

I have found that under his *hybris* (ancient Greek has a remarkable density of meaning sometimes) he is a deeply honorable person, as capable of compassion as he is prone to reckless action.

I am inclined to believe my affection is reciprocated, although I'm uncertain about what exactly in my person may be deemed worth of his regards.

After the incident on Zeta Atlantis IV, I have also come to suspect that Lt. Uhura and Capt.

Kirk may not be indifferent to each other; that his is not a pointless flirt; and that her opinion about him is changed in the same way and to the same effect as mine.

Wondering is not a mental activity usually performed by Vulcans.

But now I wonder...

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part 2. Getting nearer

summary

After-dinner reflections among friends.

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Kirk

The mess hall is slowly emptying after one more almost-festive, pre-Christmas dinner time. Bones sat with us, drank too much, and just now staggered to his feet on his way "Off to bed, I guess". I turn to watch as Scotty duly plots an interception course, grabs his arm, steers him to the exit. It seems they'll make it safely to their respective quarters as an efficient, although slightly swaying, team.

I turn my eyes back to Spock and Uhura, who sit facing me on the other side of the table.

We're chatting of nothing important, comfortable enough not to want to get up yet.

How beautiful they are together. How they fit each other.

While going on about Altairian vowels and their symbolical meanings, Nyota has put her hand on Spock's, her first two fingers curled in the hollow between his thumb and palm. Without looking at her, Spock has unobtrusively slid both their hands under the table, where I suspect they're exchanging more, and more passionate, Vulcan kisses.

I'm happy for them. Really. One can't but be happy watching such a beautiful thing as two people in love. I should go now and leave them alone, but I don't want to. I want to bask in their light for a little longer.

Outside, the space is so dark.

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Spock

It is unusual for me to give mind to such parameters, but tonight the realization dawns on me that I feel almost happy.

Here I am in the nearly empty mess hall, in leisurely after-dinner conversation with my Nyota and my Captain, and I feel warm, contented and sleepy, like those few times as a small child when my father was away, and I was allowed to curl on the couch between Mother and I-Chaya, our le-matya.

Nyota has taken my hand in hers and silently accepted that our exchanges take place below the table. I am enjoying this giving and receiving, yet something is missing, or rather slightly wrong. I sense conflict within myself. On one hand, I don't wish for the Captain to witness too obvious signs of affection which are not directed at him. On the other, I can see that the relationship between Nyota and me makes him feel, for some reason, serene and ...safe, as much as it does us.

I don't want to deprive him of this feeling.

I used the adjective "my": my Nyota, my Captain. Standard is often unsatisfactory: what I feel is not that they belong to me, but that I belong to them.

To them both.

::

Uhura

Jim Kirk is an acquired taste.

Looking back at that first time we met, I can't believe how blind I was about him. I only saw his brashness, not his desperation.

We had to cross hell for him to let his vulnerability show through. But he was right about the Kobayashi Maru test: you can't simulate fear. You can't drill for death, your own or someone else's. When the moment comes, either you are ready or not. He was, and he made the whole crew ready too, no question.

Now he is sitting on the other side from us, and he is totally aware of how Spock and I are making out under the table, but he is not jealous nor embarrassed.

He's happy.

I see it in the way the corners of his lips pull his mouth into the beginning of a smile, although his eyes remain so dark with loneliness.

I wish I could ease the loneliness.

It's puzzling how he manages to make us all motivated, cheerful of comforted, as the occasion requires, without asking anything in return to fill the void his eyes reveal.

His sensitive attitude has been essential in helping Spock manage his loss. I have seen how Jim can show compassion without being patronizing, and humor without being superficial. He's given Spock a link with reality and a sense of proportions in his grief.

The Captain helps everyone, but who helps the Captain?

I wish I could.

I wish we could.

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part 3. Sharing

summary

Uhura takes decisive action.

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Spock

Nyota is a strong-willed woman. Only five point three minutes ago, we were sitting in conversation with the Captain in the mess-hall. Five point one minutes ago, I felt disquiet through her fingers sliding on mine, then decision, like a tangled thread being smoothed out, then happiness and a question: /Will you?/

/Yes,/ I answered, not knowing to what I was assenting. Trusting her, her sharp human mind as well as her warm human heart.

She stood up, without leaving my hand. "Let's go," she said, holding the Captain's eyes, and she strode out of the room, her shoulders squared, her step bold, us following her on each side.

We didn't ask her where we were going.

::

Uhura

None of us planned this.

Just minutes ago we were in the mess hall, an after dinner like so many others for three officers of the Alpha shift bridge crew.

But there was a moment when I felt something like a wave rising up among us, something powerful and smooth curling up and cresting and then rolling over.

I know Spock felt it. My fingers tingled in his.

I know Jim felt it too, from the way he looked up at us then, like we were the cherished memory of something he had lost.

Suddenly I could not stand the waste anymore.

"Let's go," I said, and stood up. I held Spock's hand and Jim's eyes. They both stood with me and followed. Out of the mess hall, along the corridors, in silence at a brisk pace to my door.

"Come," I said, and palmed it open.

Spock strode in with assurance, but I had to take Jim by the hand and tug a little before he let me lead him in. He tenses when he's in doubt, and he was tense now, shoulders too straight, mouth tight. I hugged him before kissing him. His mouth softened but remained close. He is still holding his breath and trying to glance at Spock above my shoulder, so I kiss his eyelids and he breathes out.

I take his right hand in mine, kiss the palm, put it on Spock's shoulder. Spock passes his arm around my waist and begins nuzzling Jim's neck.

::

Kirk

I can't believe what's happening, and I don't care. Be it a dream or a hallucination, whatever rude awakening will be worth the run. I was standing outside their delicate bubble of love, looking in, and suddenly I am invited inside with them, between them, warm with their warmth, bright with their light.

I feel Spock's hot breath on my neck and close my eyes for a moment. I hear the sound of a long zipper-- he slides open Nyota's dress and I watch as she slips out of it, then he pulls off his tunic and touches the lapel of my jacket, asking permission.

::

Spock

I am surprised. I expected Jim to behave in a seductive manner, like I've known him to do in the past in similar situations, but he doesn't. As soon as my touch on his outer upper garment suggests it, he undresses quickly, unselfconsciously, in a matter-of-fact way.

I can't help grazing with my fingers his naked shoulder, so pale and smooth, and I have his answer.

Seduction among humans is a bluffing game, like poker; one is expected to lie. But this is not a game for him. This is serious, and he's not bluffing.

I meet his eyes and I feel a stab of pain at how he is allowing us to see him, naked inside and out.

He doesn't **believe** he can be loved by us.

He doesn't believe he can be loved.

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Uhura

Men. Left to their own devices, they'd have taken years before acting on their feelings. How much time would have gone wasted. But instead we are here together, and I know there is joy waiting for us. I know we can give him the same joy we have, and receive more back from him.

I was right taking this risk. He's left his mask outside the door, and he's here, really here with us. Not the bold image he wears on the bridge, but a kid who is allowing us to see how much he doubts himself. He's worried about not being good enough-- but there's no "enough" he must be. Himself is all we want.

Spock is touching his shoulder, sliding his hand lower along his arm. With the other he reaches for my ponytail: he likes grasping it and sliding his fingers down. He pulls me nearer now, and we share a closed-mouth kiss.

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Kirk

What's astonishing is the silence. No words are said, yet how well we seem to be understanding each other. My palms on Nyota's lean sides. Spock's hand on the nape of my neck, scratching gently. Nyota pulling us both down to the floor, on something giving I don't look at. I feel my own erection growing, and at the same time I feel her excitement, and I know that if only I looked I would see Spock's, but I don't need to because it comes to me right through the tips of his fingers. I'm melting and I hope I'm never going to congeal again.

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Spock

Jim's body feels like a le-matya's. He's lean, and muscled, and his skin slides smoothly on the tough limbs beneath. Wild and a little bit dangerous, not like the tamer sehlats. We of the Surak clan only keep le-matyas as pets. Or we used to. I stroke him along his sides, and he rolls under my hands, until I stretch myself above him and we roll together.

Now Nyota lays down behind him, stopping us against her body, and she passes her arms under both his, caressing his chest. She leans forward to kiss me. Our three pairs of legs get tangled, the warmth is growing.

I close my eyes and feel like I am bathed in Vulcan sunlight.

I want this to last.

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Uhura

So here we are. Three in a bed. Or rather, off a bed-- these bunks are regulation-single, but my tatamis for jiu-jitsu practice make for a comfortable floor. We are knitted into a ball of arms and legs and bodies, like a nest of kittens. I have no idea how we'll manage the technical details of having sex by three, but none of us seems to care just now. There will be time for everything. Even Jim, who always seem to have the devil on his heels, has relaxed and slowed down.

This is good, this is food for our different hungers, and it is going just as it should.

Not *citius, altius, fortius*: faster, higher, stronger (guys always strain too much), but *lentius, altius, dulcius*: slower, deeper, gentler. It is so with and between women... not because we break-- we are built for the tough business of giving birth-- but because it feels better, for longer.

We each feel known, and loved, and none of us is lonely now.

I want this to last.

::

Kirk

This definitely isn't what was on my mind when I enlisted.

I joined Starfleet when I had already abandoned my teenage quest for something --someone-- to belong to. I wanted adventure, and competition, and command, and sex.

Or so I thought.

Now I find that I was wrong.

This, I never quit wanting. And now that it has found me so long after I had tired of searching for it, the least I can do is finding the courage to name it-- love.

I want this to last.

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part 4. Sleeping

summary

The aftermath.

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Uhura

They are sleeping now.

They are curled on each other, happy, spent.

My own contentment is as deep, but I can't sleep yet.

Maybe because I'm a woman. After coupling, a male's biological task is done for the moment, a female's is just beginning. I am not pregnant and neither plan to be, but millions of years of evolution are throbbing in my cells. My body is relaxed, yet attentive and fully awake.

I stretch on my side next to Jim, my head propped on my hand propped on my elbow. I can feel Spock's heat come pleasantly up to me from the other side of Jim.

I untie my ponytail and let my hair fall down across my shoulders.

Their breathing is discordant, Jim's faster by 1/6. As the minutes pass, it slows down fractionally while Spock's picks up slightly, until they fall into the same rhythm.

There are chats and soft laughing between women after making love, and the absurd, intimate talk of exhilaration, but I don't miss it just now.

I love them.

I watch them sleep.

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Spock doesn't like to sleep with me.

My human dreams leak out to his mind, confusing the neat plot of compensations Vulcan dreams must follow to balance the fierce self-control of their waking hours.

The few times we tried it, neither of us slept well.

He is very aware of what he perceives as my expectations as a human partner, and he was quite apologetic the next morning.

I'm not certain my kisses reassured him.

For some reason, his explanations reminded me of one thing I heard when I was small.

There were rituals done by the village mama when the wind-spirits got hold of someone. She was an old woman with a young smile. She had beautiful lips, much like Jim's.

One time she called me in, asked me to watch.

I remember it was a stifling evening, the storm that had been brewing for days not yet condensing. The house was dim. A man I didn't know was sitting silently at the table. She lighted a dark red candle, so dark that it was almost black.

She said: "Always three: one to do, one to help, one to watch. The one grounds the three. Or the spirit will sweep the two off".

I don't remember exactly what happened. There was incense being burned, words pronounced in a language I didn't understand, and a mirror reflecting nothing. Surely no blood was shed.

When she finished, the rain was beginning to fall in big tepid drops.

The candle had turned bright vermilion.

Whatever demons the Vulcan mind keeps enslaved by force of reason, perhaps need a team of three to release at last.

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Jim has been having a bad dream. He groaned faintly and muttered something I couldn't catch. He frowned and looked like he tried to move, but couldn't. His arms and legs twitched. Spock was wide awake in a moment. He looked up at me, his eyes unreadable, then down at Jim.

He began to stroke his head, lightly combing his fingers through his short hair, from temple to nape of neck. A methodical, hypnotical motion, the palm of his hand passing lightly across his cheekbone with each stroke.

Jim has quit groaning and relaxed his frown.

Now, without waking, he slips an arm around my hips. Spock rolls over and snuggles next to me on the other side, pressing his length to my back.

He passes his arm over my side, sliding it along Jim's.

I'm held between Jim's warm body and Spock's hot one.

I fold my legs up in a curl, allowing their longer legs to twine.

There are no demons in this nest now.

I feel loved.

I fall asleep.

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part 5. Learning to touch

summary

Learning can happen in dreams.

note to part 5.

The fighting owes something to the feints made by Richard B. Riddick (Vin Diesel) face-to-face with the flying predator lizard in David Twohy's film Pitch Black (about 1:37 to 1:38 minutes through) as well as to capoeira fighting as described by Jorge Amado. See also this vid: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwG7JwXtUSI>

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Kirk

She is sleeping.

I woke up when she uncurled from between us and stretched long and wide on the tatami, belly down, her beautiful legs and shapely feet slightly open. One arm is flexed under her cheek, the other in front of her nose.

I watch her and something trembles inside me.

I had been dreaming of Tarsus IV-- again. But this time the dream did not jolt me awake a moment before the end, as it usually does. It was sort of washed away, like blood in running water.

I watch her sleep, and the gift of waking up to *her* floods me with happiness.

Spock also wakes up with an imperceptible start, as though he's been touched.

He blinks once and then he puts his splayed hand on the small of her back. Without waking, she arches and presses back. She mumbles something in contentment.

Spock looks at me and I see one of his smiles, only made of a touch of tension at the corner of his lips. It is not a proprietary smile. It's a welcome.

I realize I have been holding my breath and I release it in what probably sounds like a sigh.

Spock stretches his other hand to me and I take it, curling my fingers across his. My tips touch his palm.

He closes his eyes.

And I see.

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I see a village square, empty under a rage of midday sunlight. Cicadas sing loudly among the leaves of one giant tree. A man walks across the square. Not yet middle-aged, his stride confident. As he comes nearer, I see he is blind, irises gleaming dull silver under his eyelids.

//You expressed curiosity in regard to her style of fighting. She informed me she meant to tell you about this//.

A swarm of children rushes toward the man, taunting him, baiting him to chase them. He turns swiftly around, one outstretched arm and fingers brushing heads, chests, backs in what would be a deadly move if he had a weapon in hand— but he doesn't, and the kids scatter screaming, half-frightened, half-delighted.

All but one. A girl lunges forward as the man turns back on himself, and grazes his unprotected side with her fingertips. He faces her and crouches, mimicking her move as she feints to the left and parrying her lunge to the right, stopping just short of touching her right shoulder. They go on in silence for a while, a mortal combat slowed down to a strange, oblique dance where touch has no place. A lesson without words.

Then the two are sitting in the pool of shadow falling like heavy water from the crown of the tree.

"I don't suppose you'll ask me about the tree," I hear the man say, his voice a low rumble.

"I want to ask you about fighting," the girl replies. "I want to fight like you".

"Then you should ask me about the tree," he smiles.

"Tell me, please, about the tree," she pleads.

"The trick is in the roots," he says. "They keep the base firm, while the upper part flexes and bends. That's the way to fight".

The cicadas drown all else.

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I blink as I realize Spock has left my hand and is now shifting his up Nyota's spine to reach the nape of her neck. His fingers nestle at the root of her hair, rubbing gently. I roll back down alongside her, still caught in the blaze of the African sunlight. Spock moves across, gives my hip a little push, asking for me to shift a bit further, and stretches between us, laying himself down precisely straight. I'm supine, they're prone, the three of us in a neat row of naked bodies on a tatami in officers' quarters on a Federation starship in the middle of the Alpha quadrant in the middle of the galaxy in the middle of ...nothing that has a name. He slides an arm across Nyota's back, then he turns to look at me and slowly moves the other hand across my belly. He watches me to see if I'll stop him. I don't. I find myself smiling as I look into his eyes so round and dark with... What?

For the first time, it's not sadness.

For the first time, he seems surprised by joy.

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part 6. A dream of three

summary

Spock is not alone anymore.

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Spock

I was dreaming.

Vulcans need much less sleep than humans, therefore most of our sleep is REM. We need to compensate for our waking control.

My dream is often the same. Like the grain of grit inside a crystal, around which the solution coalesced, there is a core event in each life, giving it its structure. To know the core is to know the essential of oneself. The crystal keeps developing into new formations accreted to the core, but the core gives the crystal its form from the inside.

My core structure is difference.

I'm a half-breed.

In the whole universe, there is no community of beings like me to support me.

I am alone.

I have been loved and hated– like everybody else. I still am. But it's a little different, because *I* am different.

This difference makes everything feel like a fight.

I hate fighting. It's the ultimate negation of community.

Yet fight I must, if nothing else to affirm to myself that even I, the mongrel, have a place in the order of things.

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I was dreaming, and my dreams went backwards in time.

I was once again sitting in my room at Starfleet Academy. Students of many races came in to ask me questions about my lessons or deliver their tests. I didn't have them sitting across the desk. I gestured them to sit at the side. Yet I remained separate. None of them was alone like I was.

I was once again standing in front of the Council board in the Vulcan Science Academy. They sat behind their high benches, looking down. I wore the sweater my mother had knitted for me. I turned my back on them when they showed me how much they wished they could turn their back on me, and once again, I was alone.

I was among my schoolmates. I was at the same time a child and an adult, and so were they, in the illogic of dreams. They spoke out their contempt for my mother and me and at the same time they didn't speak, but it was loud all the same. They surrounded me, a compact group against the intruder. One with no group of his own. One with no companions. They watched me and they didn't see me, but their sight robbed me of my own and I could not look back at them. I felt myself disappear under their accusing eyes. The-One-Who-Should-Not-Exist. The-One-Who-Doesn't-Exist.

The same, always the same.

I was dreaming, and I could not breathe.

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But this time something changes in my dream. There is a touch on either side of me, and there, in the middle of the circle of hate, at my sides, now there are two others. I take a breath, and I raise my eyes, and there they are, my Nyota on my right, my Jim on my left. My comrades, my companions, my mates. Together we look the enemy in the eye and tighten in a group of our own, and who can resist us?

I wake up, and they are here. Jim is stroking my face in long passes, from my temple down my ear and cheek and chin, his eyes unusually shining. Nyota holds my arm tight on her chest and grazes her lips along my fingers. Her cheeks are damp.

I feel my breathing calming down, my heartbeat slowing. I roll on my back, pick their hands and bring the fingers to my lips, then stretch them open and put them on my face, covering my eyes. I smell the minute scents on their palms, listen to their human hearts deep inside their chests next to me, and finally I know.
I am not alone anymore.

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part 7. It is not blood, and I will sing for you

summary

An away mission gone wrong.

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It looks like blood.

Two figures are coming closer through the mist of fine snowflakes tossed by the wind, and there is a dark stain on the left leg of the thermal overall worn by the shorter of the two.

Lt. Uhura has to remind herself to breathe.

She fine-tunes the focus on her binoculars and looks again.

They're still half a mile away and the colors are bleached by all the snow, but she can see the taller man is half-supporting, half-dragging the other.

Her orders are to stay where she is (the only place where the transporter can lock co-ordinates on this godforsaken planet) and call for beam-up as the away teams come back. For how things have turned out, she is also doing triage on the injured. She has a phaser rifle and a tripod, but nothing shootable has appeared until now, only vague shadows at the edge of her field of visibility. She needs to see better.

Ninety more seconds. She adjusts the binoculars again, takes a breath and prays for the wind to calm down for twenty seconds. Or just ten.

Nearer, they come nearer. She can see now that the taller figure is hobbling lamely on, pushing forward the other with his knee, all the while holding his arm around his back and under his right shoulder. The stained leg drags on the ground. But they're near enough at last that she can see. It's not blood. The color is that of the tamed iodine of the emergency kit. So Jim is wounded, but probably not bleeding to death. Yet.

She drags up the zip of her own overall from below and pulls out the communicator she stuck in her panties' waistband to keep it warm enough to work. Not for the first time, she thanks her late grandmother for such practical advice. She had been in Oil War XI, the one fought in Antarctica. 'Use that zip,' she used to say. "The boys unzip it to pull their dick out when they take a leak, you can use it to pocket electrical equipment quickly next to your skin, without freezing to death.'

She flips the cover open.

"Uhura to Enterprise. Chekov, prepare to beam up three on my signal in about two minutes.

Alert Sickbay: the Captain is injured, right leg non-functional. By how he's walking, Spock may be injured too."

The communicator slips again inside her clothing, and she is leaning over the low ledge of the snow-bound crater, her finger on the phaser trigger.

Almost there.

But there is something snaking its way from the edge of her field of vision under the surface of the snowfield, like a small wave, a **dark** wave, coming on straight at the two hobbling men, and all of a sudden there is a wide open mouth, and teeth. Lt. Uhura feels an ice-cold trickle of adrenalin down her back. She forces herself to inhale, then locks the air in her lungs, and shoots twice.

The blasts slam into the being, which rolls back up and to the side, reminding her of redskins in old-fashioned XX-century horse-opera movies.

Maybe they made it.

She leans out, one arm stretched, the other braced against the rock.

"Take my hand before we get much older, *Captain*," she says.

"I plan on getting very much older, *Sally*," he breathlessly manages to quip.

With a grunt, she pulls him in while Spock hauls him from behind, then collapses on himself in a ball just outside the ring of stone.

Jim is barely breathing; she lays him down with his shoulders against the inner slope of the crater and picks out the communicator again.

"Chekov, beam up the Captain, now. Spock and I will follow next, on my signal."

She stays to check that the beaming works right, then she's rolling herself out next to Spock.

"Hey, where are you hurt? Hey, breathe! Talk to me."

He doesn't move, just whispers.

"Third and fourth left ribs. Punctured lung. The Captain... lower right tibia shattered. Emergency bandage..."

"Come on in, so we can beam up. Can you stand?"

It seems he can't, not really, so she drapes him on her shoulders and crawls over and inside on all fours. He's heavy.

"Chekov, *now*!"

Nothing happens.

"Chekhov!"

Only static.

"Damn, they lost us. Spock. Spock! How is it going with you?"

He tries to answer, but his words are lost on a hiss of pain.

"Come on, hey, breathe! Like that, fine, take it easy but don't stop."

She cups her gloved hand in front of his nose, to shield it from the bitter, dry cold and ease his respiration.

"Listen, I'll sing to you, ok? Nice and slow. You just keep breathing in time."

*Legate, I heard the news last night
My cohort ordered home,
By ships to Portus Itius
And thence by road to Rome...*

Her voice is low and soft, and Spock's spasming gasps ease into a more comfortable rhythm.

*I marched the companies aboard,
The arms are stowed below.
Now let another take my sword,
Command me not to go.*

Spock's eyes slid close, but she feels he's not fallen asleep, just focusing.

*I've served in Britain forty years
from Vectis to the Wall
I know no other home than this
nor any life at all...*

One more breath, another, and he manages to speak.

"Loving you is so selfish of me-- a gift I give myself," he whispers.

"You know one thing about love? It goes around," she answers.

The shimmer of the transport cuts her short.

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endnotes

The song: words by RUDYARD KIPLING, *The Roman centurion's Song*, 1911; music by Leslie Fish. There is a half-quote in here from THE WHO, *Baba O'Riley* (1971): "Sally take my hand... let's get together before we get much older".

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part 8. Invisible / Flame / Place. A triple ni-var

summary

A triangulation to define coordinates.

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Spock to Kirk

Hidden in the darkest night
Hooded in the darkest robe
Holding yourself
Silent serious and still
Over the edge of nothingness,
Even then
You cannot make yourself invisible
Unless you close your eyes so blue.

::

Kirk to Spock

The muted blue of your tunic
The pure black of your hair
The hardness of your frame
Your silence, your calm words
Contained by a steel boundary,
Not even this
Can disguise what you are,
Pure flame forever burning.

::

Kirk and Spock to Nyota

You are the need we cannot sate alone.
You are not what our mothers were
You are not what a daughter may ever be
Not a sister, and much more than a friend.
You are the other, the equal, the different
Another taste of tenderness and strenght
And of a wisdom we singly do not have.
You are the roots of us.

::

Nyota to Spock and Kirk

I am myself.
But, being myself, I need
A place to turn to, to find my contours.
You are the place I reached at last,
Where I can rest at peace.
You deliver me to myself
So I may give myself.
I want you,
and I want you.

part 9. Priorities

summary

The hurdles of the heart. Kirk's pov.

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Dedicated to anon-j-anon, who will (maybe) read, and (maybe maybe) smile, because our voices are so different, but I hope these people's smiles, she'll recognize.

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Priorities.

Whose needs come first in any given situation.

This was a problem at the beginning.

Priorities are a problem in relationships of two. With three people involved, belonging to two genders and two species, things can get complicated at an exponential rate.

How did we manage, you ask?

Well, one of us is a touch telepath. One of us is a linguist. One of us fancies himself pretty good at reading non-verbal language.

We had our share of disagreements. Individual values had to be, well, re-evaluated. Different sensitivities must be accounted for.

We found out that a good test for which needs can be safely postponed is how the postponing makes each one of us feel, not the next day but the next week.

We found out that any one of us is ready to sacrifice for the others on the spur of the moment more than we, as lovers, can collectively stand to.

We are learning our limits. Only then we can learn how to expand them.

Take me, for instance. I am terrified of making mistakes. Not seeing the obvious, or misunderstanding it. Giving the wrong orders, or giving the right ones too soon or too late.

Once we all recognized the problem, the both of them began searching for ways to give me input without making me feel inadequate. As for myself, I am trying to learn how to remember at all times that we are a team.

They seem to be the faster students.

Spock suffers, almost physically, when his quarters are messed with. Things must remain where he puts them. His clothes folded just so, the stylus on the desk perfectly parallel to the PADD. It took me a while to understand the reason of his oh-so-subtle frown whenever I picked up a stylus and twirled it in my hand while talking. He worried about where on the desk I would let it fall this time.

I am working on building a habit of putting everything back exactly where it belongs. He is working on trusting me to. He's even practicing with asymmetrical arrangements of items on his desk, although most of them look to me suspiciously like applications of *sectio aurea*.

As for Nyota, she knows by heart where everything goes, and picks up after me when I've been careless. So I don't mind occasionally picking up after her when *she*'s been careless.

Nyota can't stand not being taken seriously. Although she's perfectly at ease with her own body in every state of dress (or undress), she is annoyed with Starfleet uniforms for female crew because they leave too much of the arms and legs uncovered. "It takes at least four seconds for most humanoid beings to focus on what I'm saying," she told me once. "Thank God, Spock belongs to the minority."

I have introduced a policy of optional unisex uniforms for all crewmembers... then I had to introduce a policy of optional unisex hairdressing, to get even with the guys.

The results were surprising.

Scotty's ponytail is quite a sight.

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part 10. The merits of bleach

summary

Rescued by Dr. McCoy.

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Despite being gelatinous when at rest, the Lirrni have the ability to develop at will remarkably strong hands.

Fingers grab the hair on my forehead and pull my head back just so, exposing my vulnerable throat.

Such violence in a simple gesture.

They want dilithium. All the dilithium we have, and we are too far into the Beta quadrant to manage getting home with no dilithium and no warp.

They have taken the three of us hostage, Jim, Nyota and me, and given us partial nerve blocks through some sort of telekinesis I am unable to prevent.

They have blown up the *Fermi* shuttle without any warning (four crewmembers were killed, two injured) and issued an ultimatum.

They're threatening to destroy the ship and take the dilithium anyway if we don't surrender it. While they wait for Scotty to answer (12.83 minutes to go), they are using us as specimens in a lesson on xenobiology.

Combat xenobiology.

"See how the whole front side is soft and unprotected. It's a result of gravity, which explains why the same body design is found on two different planets. It is also much older than their erect station; it served originally to protect them from predators attacking from above".

The universal translator seems to work well with their liquid half-consonants.

"Once their front is exposed, there is a choice of deadly points... one is this," and what feels like a fine, sharp nail passes quickly across my throat. I hear Jim gasp and a moment later I feel a trickle of blood down my neck and into the jugular dip. It doesn't hurt, not much, but the sudden, vicious yank up and back on my hair does.

"One inch deep, and they're dead in less than 90 seconds".

The being leaves me and I shudder, because I can see the wobbling, translucent globe turning now toward Nyota.

"They wrap cloth on themselves most of the time. It can be an impediment," the being goes on, and *something* is cutting Nyota's dress and her underwear beneath, from neck to hem of skirt, then snatching it off her from behind, bra and panties and all, leaving her naked. Her face is set, her jaw tight, her eyes steady and unblinking on the being in front of her.

I look at Jim and I can see he is coldly furious, but neither one of us can even move or speak voluntarily.

"Once you get rid of the clothes, another good blow is this," and I see a thin red line quickly run from her genitals up along her belly, across her navel, between her breasts, and up to her neck.

"Cut from bottom to top for best penetration".

Nyota is trembling slightly. Is it fear, or rage?

"Slicing them open is not the only option," the voice goes on. "You can also do this," and in a whirl the being smashes into Jim, taking his breath away. "Enough force will crush their chest and squeeze their heart, or after they fold forward you can cut their throat, like this," and a small gush of blood sprays down.

Jim manages somehow to draw himself straight, and he's bleeding enough that Nyota looks at him and pales, but not so much as to pose a serious danger.

'I'm fine,' he mouths to her.

But the being goes on: "Sometimes you may want to hurt them before killing them off," and now my left arm is taken and stretched and it feels like my fingers are being broken, one bone at a time. My perception must be altered, because each bone seems to be broken repeatedly. The pain is bewildering. I struggle to focus and I try to brace against the dizziness by counting mentally in fives.

Seventeen seconds are left before the allotted time elapses. Seventeen seconds are a very long time to pass with this pain, a very short time waiting to know if we will live.

But only three more seconds have passed when my communicator, stuck somehow into the being's body, chirps twice, and Scotty's voice comes through.

"Beaming dilithium down as requested in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...", and Jim is frowning because the rule is no bargaining, but then there is the shimmer of the transport beam and instead of dilithium crystals a fine mist materializes... smelling of chlorine.

"Bleach! don't breathe!" Jim is shouting, while the round globs of gelatin hiss and spit under the corrosive shower. They shiver and deflate, pierced by millions of tiny holes. Suddenly we are able to move again, the beam is locking on us, and after a moment we materialize on the transport pads on the ship, facing a smiling Pavel and a scowling Leonard.

The scowl deepens when he throws a dark look at the blood lines traced on our bodies. He seems about to throw up.

Jim tries to distract him.

"Bones, *bleach*?"

"Oh, shut up, Jim. The Lirrni are shapeshifters, their aminoacids must be unstable. Lots of free radicals... biochemistry 101. Fucked by oxygen. Ha!"

"But, I say, *bleach*?"

"What's wrong with bleach? It's saving lives since WW1."

Leonard wraps a blanket around Nyota, who is picking up my left hand.

"Have a look here, they seemed to be breaking his fingers... Spock's been hurt the most."

It turned out that my hand was not actually broken, the telekinetic nerve block didn't have lasting effects on any of us, and the skin wounds healed soon, leaving behind thin white scars. They seem to be distracting to Jim, who traces them with his fingers rather obsessively when we are in bed, or out of it.

I have a dislike for medical procedures, but I have asked Leonard to erase the scar from my neck. I believe Nyota is going to do the same. I cannot but acknowledge my wish that Jim will also have his scar erased. It reminds me too closely that out there there are no rules of law, and that life is not fair.

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part 11. Double portrait at 52

summary

What makes Kirk go on.

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*Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

The Pillars of Creation.

This is how they used to call them, back in the late XX century, when they first began imaging them from Earthspace through the Hubble telescope.

To him, they've always looked like ancient trees with leaves of stars.

There are few great trees in Iowa-- just endless flat cornfields, and a crabapple here and there.

Whenever a mission brings the Enterprise around here, and it's not a question of life or death, he makes time to drop out of warp and stop for a ship's hour or so. He does not give explanations.

*My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.*

Here is where Spock died, ten years ago.

He knows it's not quite true. In deep space, outside a planetary frame of reference, space moves and time is neither linear nor cyclical. The universe expands, so the place where it happened is not *here* anymore, and warp speed plays havoc with synchronising the timekeeping to whatever is outside the hull of the ship.

In deep space, each event is unique and forever.

So this is not the place and this is not the anniversary.

He stops anyway.

Autoimmune haemolysis, Bones had said. His mixed genes lack instructions about how to go on producing viable copper-based blood cells after a certain age. His genetic makeup is a minefield, he had said. I wonder what it was that triggered the self-destruct mechanism. I wonder how the other Spock managed to avoid it. It may have been the food, or radiation, or stress levels. That nasty common cold he got on Christmas shoreleave on Earth. We'll never know, he had said.

The discovery was made during a routine check-up.

It was only to be expected, Spock had said, his voice quiet and clear. The problems involved in my conception were numerous, and not all were expected to solve themselves. I am relieved that my father is no more and will not have to witness this unwelcome development.

He had paused for a while, then added,

It would have been even harder on my mother.

He didn't mention her again in the following months, while his blood gradually turned from green to red.

Like autumn in his veins, Bones said with tears in his eyes, one night after the fifth straight bourbon. His Vulcan copper-based haemoglobin is dying off, and the iron-based human variety can be seen underneath. I wish it was enough to keep him alive and breathing.

It was not enough for that, but it was enough to keep Spock pain-free until the very last. The Captain took personal care that the very last didn't last long. Bones wasn't there: they could never do that to him.

*He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

It was my birthday when Spock died.

It is his birthday today.

He has made it known to the crew that he doesn't welcome celebrations.

There is no-one on board anymore with whom he would feel like celebrating.

Scotty is designing the prototype of a new class of starships, capable of warp 16 and equipped for non-humanoid crews. He agreed to leave the *Enterprise* only if they allowed him and Keenser to try all his new gadgets on the test model.

Sulu is now the Captain of the *Linnaeus*, and Chekov is his Science Officer. They survey lifeforms on class M planets in the Beta quadrant.

Nyota left after the mission to Gligliss in the Theta Leonis system. The Gligliss had just joined the Federation and abolished their traditional caste system. She stayed on to help with the Ministry of Education's teaching plan for the orphaned children of the former lowest caste.

You call them son and daughter, but they are not your children, he had remarked.

They are sons and daughters of somebody who's not here for them, she had replied. The best part of wisdom is knowing when you've had enough. Stay here with me?

He couldn't. Spock would have known why.

Each of us chooses his or her own limitations.

Choosing means limiting oneself to one path, but if the choice is right, the path brings expansion and growth.

My path is with the Enterprise.

Bones had retired five years ago, to be a grandfather in Georgia.

I missed my daughter growing up, he said. I won't miss my nephews.

It is the Captain's birthday.

He's fifty-two today.

On the whole, he doesn't feel he has much to complain about how he's aging, making up with experience and ingenuity for whatever loss of sheer physical energy.

But his shoulders ache in the evenings, after a bad day.

He wakes up during the night more often than he used to. He stares at the ceiling for a while, then he falls thankfully asleep again.

His hair is still mostly in place and only slightly grizzled, but it's much darker than it used to be. Curiously, his eyebrows are still fair-colored. It makes his eyes shine bluer than ever. If old pictures are to be trusted, his grandfather looked the same. He wonders if his father would have also, had he had the time.

Now he's twenty years older than his father got to be, and he feels every one of his years.

Sometimes they feel more like eighty.

He's more alone than he ever was.

He used to feel a bit overwhelmed at times, like, yes, this is what he wanted, but all the same it was a bit too much.

By now he's seen the ins and outs of command, the good parts, the bad parts, and those he'd prefer to forget. He's alive, he's the Captain. He still feels like it's all a bit too much.

After having seen so many deaths (Spock's death), after having been injured and patched up so many times (there are things that cannot be patched up-- like his heart, for instance), he's not feeling so fearless anymore.

In every moment of his days and nights, his own mortality is a certainty... and a lure.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

He wonders what really makes him hold up. If maybe Nyota was right after all. He wonders what fuel, apart from the sheer inertia of habit, still makes him go on.

This hour he's passing, standing still in deep space as much as it is possible to stand still in deep space, watching the Pillars of Creation from the deserted observation deck, and celebrating an anniversary that doesn't exist, gives him his answer.

He gets by on his sense of duty, like he always did.

Even his worst mistakes came out of a sense of duty. As he kept watch inside himself and understood better what his duty was due to, his mistakes grew less and less.

There is a job to do, it's important, and he knows he can do it better than most.

He doesn't know when, or even if, he's ever going to feel his work is finally done.

In the meantime, he's going on.

*But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

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endnote

Poem by ROBERT FROST, *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*, New Hampshire, 1923.

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