

Senses. A ni-var

by athens7 (as Capt. J.T. Kirk, font: Courier New)
and mazaher (as Cdr. Spock, font: Verdana)
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Note to series:

A ni-var is a Vulcan term denoting a literary composition describing the same thing, event or series of events from two different points of view. A suk-ni-var ("grand" ni-var) is a formally stricter variety of ni-var, it consists of 24 triplets in free verse about the twelve elements of a totality, alternating POVs.

Endnote numbers make reference to the whole series, not to each story or chapter.

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1.Touch

summary:

Touch, taste, sight, smell, sound. Parallel paths winding, intersecting, and finally coming together. All begins with the sense of touch.

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1.1. Spock

"Seat of the pants."

Human idioms are fascinating.

Four simple words, fourteen characters in Standard, to mean the complex concept of kinesthetical proprioception (two composed words, twenty-seven characters).

I am familiar with a few such expressions from listening to my mother's conversation, but this one does not count among them.

I first heard the words pronounced by the Captain. Mr. Sulu was expressing uncertainty about the feasibility of a tight veering manoeuver the Captain had asked him to try during a drill.

"Just fly by the seat of your pants, Mr. Sulu," he said. "It'll work." (It did).

I spent 6.9 off-duty hours researching cultural databanks in order to gather sufficient information for a precise definition of the usage. I discovered that it applies not only to activities, like horseback riding, motor-biking and sailing, where the middle part of lower body clothing for bipeds is actually involved, but also to endeavors like hang-gliding, where it is most assuredly not.

I also learned from the Captain's personal files that he engaged in the first two pastimes as a boy in Riverside, Iowa, and in the latter two as a cadet at Starfleet Academy.

I then attempted experimenting with the idiom in conversation. I was unsure about my level of competence, so my first try happened in relative safety, during an evening chess match with the Captain in his quarters.

"You seem to be moving your Knights by the seat of your pants," I said.

He looked up at me sharply for a moment, then his eyes melted in soft laughter.

"You may say so, yes," and he moved one of them into check. I noticed he squirmed a bit on his chair. The seat of his pants was definitely involved.

Since then, I find my attention often attracted to the region in question. The way he sits on the command chair. How he points his feet to push and turn it toward one or the other of the bridge crew. How he sometimes swivels it side-to-side for no apparent reason. How and when he crosses his legs-- never in an emergency, only when the shift is uneventful and there is a lack of need for his directions.

(I suspect being momentarily redundant may be making him self-conscious.)

I find myself watching him, his weight flowing down gracefully along his spine, down his arms and legs, in the artificial gravity of the ship. I watch how he slouches at times, how he draws himself up when something unexpected happens, how his shoulders tense, or relax and lean back.

I seem to feel the sensations myself.

Someone wrote that Vulcans are very much aware of our bodies (1). Until now my own awareness had been theoretical, like data received from a bioscan. A simple human idiom has been enough to precipitate a process of materialization of such abstract awareness. It seems I am becoming almost as much aware of the Captain's body as of my own, and of both in a tactile, corporeal way which was until now quite foreign to me.

I find the experience enriching, if sometimes distracting.

I have not the faintest idea where this experience may be leading me.

Note (1): DEANNA GRAY, *Interview with a Vulcan*, winner of the KisCon 2001 Contest Zine, now at <http://ksarchive.com>

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1.2 Kirk

I've always been a touchy-feely kind of guy. Since I was a kid, I had this unrestrainable need to touch everything, anything I could reach, to have something solid under my hands. I needed to *feel* (the fact that when I was four I nearly died of anaphylactic shock because I tried to eat a live wasp didn't discourage me in the slightest).

Not a surprise that I discovered the joys of masturbation so early in my childhood.

I think that this kind of "lunatic idiosyncrasy that makes me stickier than an Andorian octopus" (as Bones once described it while jabbing an invisible hypospray into my neck just because I had tried to grope him in his bed after I'd passed the Kobayashi Maru) is one of the many and unfathomable reasons I so constantly attempt "to break my neck in every and all suicidal sports man could think up since the dawn of times" (again, the Doctor's words).

I swear that I don't have suicidal tendencies, like too many people believe. I'm a simple adrenaline-junkie, and I have been since I was thirteen and I jumped out of a racing car two seconds before it crashed in a canyon.

Right after that last -so to speak- domestic incident (or more probably because of it), Frank sent me to Tarsus IV, where I spent most of my time riding six-legged horses. Then, after two years, I came back to Earth and promised that I would never ride an animal again.

But I missed the riding and all that came with it, the wind slapping in my face and filling my lungs, the sight of the sky and the earth blurring and melding before my eyes, so I built myself a motorbike. It wasn't exactly the same thing (no life breathing beneath me, no heartbeat synchronizing with mine, no hoofs wildly stepping on the grass, now replaced by the metallic hum of the engines and the whirl of the wheels), but it was enough.

"You seem to be moving your Knight by the seat of your pants", Spock said. I jerked my head up and I stared at him for what I'm afraid was a very rude amount of time.

I could do nothing else but laugh, while a strange, warm feeling was uncurling in the pit of my stomach.

Spock. S'chn T'gai Spock.

A mesmerizing, smooth sequence of vowels, occlusives and sibilants that the tip of my tongue executes in a frantic dance against my palate. This name keeps echoing in my mind and I can't stop it.

I remember reading somewhere that to name a thing is to own it, but this rule doesn't seem to apply to Spock at all.

My Vulcan Sphynx. Will I ever be able to solve your enigmas?

It is so strange and fragile, this relationship of ours, that I don't dare to call it friendship yet.

There are times when I feel that the affinity between us is so intense that my heart sings for the beauty of it, finally I let myself believe the words of the other Spock, and I just know that this man will be one of the most precious things of my entire life.

And then, all of a sudden, he becomes a total stranger and I am painfully aware of his being alien; I feel frustrated and angry, because it seems that between us there's a space so wide that I'll never be able to cross it.

He observes me, constantly, unceasingly, while we play chess in my quarters or his, while we eat in the mess-hall, when we are on duty on the Bridge. He tries to be subtle about it, but I know better.

He studies me with the same single-minded intensity that he reserves for the most delicate of his experiments, or the most entangled stream of data.

Sometimes that look of utter concentration reminds me of Sam, hunched over his beloved Konus College, completely engrossed in the study of eukaryotic cells.

Spock is probably the only person in my life who's capable of making me feel self-conscious. Really, it's kind of pathetic how important his opinion is becoming to me. Yes, of course, his opinion always matters: he's my First Officer, and I have to listen to every word he says about a given situation or a strategy or just anything. But I start to realize that its importance goes far beyond our jobs.

I - just... need to know that I have his approval. I don't know if this could have something to do with my Oedipus complex or other shit like that, and frankly I don't want to know; it is already crappy enough as it is.

As days go by, marked by the raising and dimming of the lights in this artificial world of ours, I find myself more and more transfixed by this man. I said that he watches me, but now I must confess that the staring is mutual. It is not just physical attraction (although I would be a hypocrite if I denied that). The fact is that I am a bisexual hedonist: I love women and making love to them, but for the male body I have a kind of reverence that is very akin to that of the ancient Greeks. And Spock... well, Spock is far too easy to admire. He is perfect, but not in the sense that his features are flawless, quite the contrary: he's skinny and lanky, his nose is too big, his lips are too thin, his traits are angular and stern. But when you stop focusing on the single details and look at him as a whole, you suddenly realize that in front of you stands one of the most graceful creatures in the entire Milky Way. His movements are as fluid as flowing water, his manners are a king's, his knowledge knows no bounds, and his mind is sharp and awe-inspiring (and sometimes too much inside the box for my tastes, but I hope that in time my bad human influence will change that); when he plays the lyre or runs an analysis with his beloved computers, he reminds me of a Tolkien's elf disclosing the secrets of this Universe.

I'm here, aboard this sleek Silver Lady, to boldly go where no one has gone before, and yet, at times, I have the impression that the undiscovered country is right there in front of me, sitting on the other side of my desk, considering his next move.

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1.3. Spock

I am considering my next move.

In more than one sense, I am feeling perpetually in check. My fingertips graze the smooth surface of a Rook, and my mind jumps off course, imagining a different touch on a different smooth surface.

Such out-of-control reactions are unacceptable, but my quandary is in a measure understandable. I have a solid, if small, base of knowledge to help me find my way through the labyrinth of these unaccustomed emotions. My mother's loving example and my father's willing acceptance of my human half have effectively lightened for me since childhood the sometimes intolerable weight of Vulcan disapproval for too many facets of my mindset and attitude, including my propensity for analysis of emotions.

When I was a youngster, I used to keep such a realization under cover, even to myself; but since declining the offer of the Vulcan Science Academy, and most especially after meeting with my older counterpart, I have no qualms about acknowledging the unique advantage both my parents have been for my global education.

It seems I am indeed already more comfortable with myself than the Ambassador was at my age, at a time that is when he was effectively, if painfully, excluded from contact with his family.

So I should be able to face myself and assess the situation according to c'thia, the sense of reality as it is.

But I can't. Or rather, I don't dare.

When James T. Kirk bounded into my life, he brought with him a peculiar brand of unrest. His mere presence blurs the boundaries between the possible and the impossible. The Kobayashi Maru test was supposedly impossible to solve, yet he solved it. Surviving out of a pod on Delta Vega was supposedly impossible, yet he did. He saved Mr. Sulu with an impossible manoeuvre. He beamed on a starship at warp speed. He made me lose control in anger. He saved the Federation, if not my planet of birth.

There is a saying on Terra: "Everybody knew it couldn't be done. Then along came an idiot who didn't, and he made it." The saying is illogical. I have gathered ample proof that J.T. Kirk, my Captain, is anything but an idiot.

At first, this distorting effect of his on the contours of reality only seemed to puzzle me at an intellectual level.

In retrospect, I have come to believe that my attitude when I confronted him during his trial for hacking the Kobayashi Maru test was the result of an ill-conceived attempt at making him admit that what he had done was indeed impossible, and as such it was --it *had* to be-- irrelevant within the parameters of consensual reality.

I had to acknowledge in the following few days that at the time I was prisoner of a much too narrow concept of c'thia.

What's worse, a different layer has been added of late to my as yet unsolved intellectual distress.

I have to confess to myself that the correct term to define the nature of such a layer is "yearning".

What if the idea I used to hold of the boundaries of what is possible should be revealed as flawed?

An overwhelming number of things which I had judged as impossible, may turn out to be very much possible instead.

What then?

Have I wasted my life so far in a fruitless attempt to rationalize my self-denial by defining as "impossible" those desires and needs I am too coward to pursue?

On the brink of such mental precipice, my human half seems to overtake my Vulcan habits and turn them upside down.

I feel... No. Yes, c'thia does not allow for dissimulation: I do feel like I always lived in semi-darkness, and now I am suddenly out in the sunlight.

I am terrified.

I used to efficiently find my way in the comforting darkness by the soft touch of my fingertips, and I was content to do so. Now I am trapped in a nightmarish reversal of Plato's tale about the cave: from the quiet world of noumena, mere surfaces with no individual depth, I have

been thrown out in the exciting sharpness of view, and my senses are flooded with unaccustomed input. All at once there is a whole new level for me to incorporate in my perceptions.

I feel the warmth of the sun on my hand, and I am scared of the light as much as I yearn to touch it.

Sweet like warm honey, golden as a swarm of buzzing bees.

But bees can sting: they will die to defend the hive.

What do I do now?

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1.4 Kirk

Note: lyrics from DEPECHE MODE, *Sweetest perfection*, in *Violator*, 1990.

There's no way I'm going to survive this. It is utterly, humanly impossible. We're playing chess in my quarters, I'm winning, Spock is annoyed and is wearing a grimace of dislike (or at least its Vulcan equivalent, this meaning that his brow is slightly furrowed and his mouth is just barely curved downwards) while his eyes study avidly the board.

And then, all of a sudden, he takes the Rook he won earlier for his Bishop with a savvy exchange and starts stroking it (a honest-to-God absent-minded gesture that has nothing to do with a logical, energy-saving coordination of body movements), the thumb deliberately tracing its small plastic shape, the indented tip, and for a fraction of second I let myself imagine that it is not a Rook, but my... my...

Dear gods in Romulan hell.

Then our gazes meet and I freeze.

I stop and I stare too much, afraid that I care too much.

He knows what's going on in my mind. He *must* know, because I feel that my entire soul is held in my eyes. I should look away, right now, but I can't, I never could even if my life depended on it (I'm sure I'll drop dead to the floor any moment now, my heart can't beat this fast for very much longer).

Eventually he looks away - is it me or are his cheeks a shade of green darker than usual? - and at least for today my sanity is spared.

What's the fucking problem with me? A starship captain is not supposed to have not-so-subtle erotic fantasies about his First Officer's hands and what said hands touch; I'm sure there must be a sub-section in the regs about it, something related to decency and mental sanity. But, Freud have pity on me, I just can't help it. I mean, am I the one to blame if Spock's hands are one of Mother Nature's finest works of art? They're so pale and delicate that they seem made of glass and yet I know they could easily break my neck with a move more rapid than a butterfly's beat of wings. They're beautiful, always: when they're folded behind his back, when they hold a PADD, when they're steepled - signaling that their owner is dealing with a particularly complex train of thought.

Every time that my eyes rest on Spock working with his computers or playing the lyre, I can do nothing but stare helplessly, shamelessly, as those slender, skilled fingers dance on the buttons or pluck the strings.

I'm pretty sure that Michelangelo's hands weren't that dexterous when he painted Adam's Creation.

Crap, I'm doing it again.

It shouldn't be this hard. I won't deny that I have a very healthy, very active libido, but I'm not fifteen, for God's sake.

Maybe it depends on the fact that sexual attraction is just a part of the problem, and that something like this has never happened to me before.

Of course I've been in love before --well, sort of, but none of my juvenile, Iowan crushes could ever compare to this, whatever *this* is.

It is slowly becoming an obsession, an infection of body and mind that reminds me very closely of that relentless compulsion that made me finish Academy courses in three years instead of four.

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Gods, the Academy. It seems like those days belong to another reality. Okay, poor choice of words here, but the fact is that sometimes I doubt that the Spock I know now and the android I argued with at the Kobayashi Maru trial are the same person (and maybe in a sense they aren't).

Rarely I've felt as frustrated as I did in that occasion. No matter how hard I tried, he just... wouldn't understand. Like everybody else, he saw only what he wanted to see and tried to dismiss me as an annoying and momentary interference in his preordained system.

On the outside I wore my usual mask of the cocky, arrogant brat, but inwardly I wanted to scream at him.

Was he fucking blind? Was he really convinced that the purpose of my cheating was rescuing a simulated ship? Why, just why couldn't he see that what I was fighting against was *him* and everything that he represented in that den of self-assured conformists, hypocrites and old braggarts?

I had achieved to sabotage what was considered an unbeatable test designed by an A7 computer expert, and the only thing he had to say was that I had failed to understand the moral lesson behind it. As if acceptance of death could be taught in a lecture room. I wonder how many cadets thought about the Kobayashi before exploding in space under the fire of the Narada.

But I digress. The point is, he couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand him.

And the events that followed the trial certainly didn't help us in overcoming our divergences.

We just... kept missing each other.

How ironic that the only moment I felt that Spock was really seeing me was when he was squeezing the life out of me with his perfect hands.

Anyway.

Some weeks ago I finally saw why he looked so different from all others even in his reproach: it took me a few weeks to realize that he wasn't judging me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness or some conventional sense of morality, but as a consequence of the fact that in his eyes what I had done was simply impossible, and he couldn't find a way to set my actions against the background of the established parameters of his reality. He was so openly, honestly frightened by this, that I wonder why it took me so long to see it. His attitude towards me has changed during these months, and I can't help but admire him for the effort he must be putting in overhauling his beliefs so drastically.

I used to be so embittered and full of rage then, and now everything's changing. I can't say I'm reaching the peace of the senses (and I'm not entirely sure I even want it), but finally I feel like I'm doing the right thing.

Why then this utter terror when I think about my feelings for Spock?

Because they're unhealthy, they're foolish and I hate myself for having them.

Because they make me weak and wavering, and I never waver: I'm James T. Kirk and if I want something I take it.

and I hardly dare to touch, for fear that the spell may be broken.

I am on the edge of the abyss and I try to resist its pull, but it's all useless; it will swallow me and I will be lost.

Where will this end?

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1.5 Spock

I see that my thoughts have moved from a consideration of proprioception (the Captain's as well as mine) to that of the sense of touch as ingrained into skin and fingertips.

He has such beautiful hands. Small and fine, but strong and muscled. I watch him use them and wonder at the different ways he touches. I see his fingertips steady and precise on delicate instruments. I see them become hard, efficient weapons in combat. I see them play

around as they accompany his conversation in the mess-hall, how he grabs a fork and draws a picture on a paper towel to show to Leonard across the table.

I imagine how they would feel...

But he's always on the move, move, move. At times I experience difficulty focusing on his position: like a muon, one can only perceive where he's been from the effects of his presence, but never actually catch him in any given place or moment.

Except that one time in the dock, during his trial about the way he had beaten the Kobayashi Maru test.

My memories go back to that turning point again and again.

He looked **caught**. Unyielding, undefeated, but caught. The tension in his shoulders ought to have alerted me to the fact that he felt he was in the right, and he also felt he would never convince us --convince **me**-- that he was. Yet he would not concede. He would accept a punishment he deemed unjust.

He frightened me.

My attitude toward him in that occasion was unacceptable. I looked down on him, when I had perfect awareness that I was by no means his superior, either intellectually or ethically. I used his father for emotional leverage, when I knew very clearly the issue was not relevant to the matter of discussion. I spoke to him like the Head of the Vulcan Science Academy spoke to me when they offered me a teaching position. But he didn't respond as I did. He would not have left. He would have paid the price of his being different, because his commitment was then, and has been since, stronger than mine.

I was standing apart from him in that occasion. I have been near him since. I have touched him. I brought him down with a neck pinch. I hit him hard enough to send him flying, I tried to strangle him. The moment stretches in my mind to an endless duration. It was his flesh under my hand, his cool, taut human flesh, so filled with his young life.

And I was trying to hurt him, maybe even kill him.

What then? what void, what black hole would have formed where his life didn't pulse anymore? It could have devoured me whole, like Vulcan itself was devoured.

I tried to kill him. Yet sometimes I receive the impression that he feels unsure and wishes for my reassurance. I overheard Leonard mutter once to himself that "Life 'til now has done nothing more than kick the son-of-a-wandering-bitch around, it's high time somebody takes some care of the kid for a change". But how can I give reassurance to him, when everything I believed I knew is swept away by his mere presence?

He touches. Objects, people, he touches and likes it. It is not only a way of getting to know what he touches in the three-dimensional scheme of reference which includes depth, weight and texture. I believe he is at the same time trying to push forward and find the boundaries of the possible, those boundaries he's constantly pressing against and so often breaching.

Or is this only an imagination of mine?

When danger is present, my immediate reaction is to try and be found impeccable. Prepared, informed, alert, my thoughts in good order, my affairs settled, my intent well-defined. He raises a dust storm instead, so as not to be found and better deal his blows. I face possible death like I would an omniscient judgment, in which I expect to be absolved because I am not guilty. He faces it like a combat, and if death is ever found to fight unfairly, so he is ready to do in his turn.

My memory goes back to that time before being transported on the Narada, when Nyota came to me to say goodbye, and nobody was there to say goodbye to him. He was alone, as he had always been: alone in life, alone in probable death.

I have since learned he knew at the time how the loneliness of his counterpart had in his later years found comfort in the presence of mine. The memory of my Jim, standing there at my side trying not to stare as I allowed myself to sink into the warmth of Nyota's emotions, and knowing he would very probably never get old enough to have anything like that for himself, makes me shiver.

Wishing that the past could change is illogical, but I am in this regard illogical enough to wish things had been different then.

Once again, it is c'thia to bring me back to myself.

I realize with shame that I have been, as humans say, "beating about the bush".

My mind has been far away, lost in a chase after insubstantial ideas as it is even too prone to doing. I have forgotten that the thread of my reflections had a definite starting point in a peculiar human idiom. I have forgotten that the main topic of such reflections was the sense of touch, instances of its activation by the Captain's daily activities and my tactile reactions to them.

I have fled from their physical implications and gone on an abstract diversion which has led me to seek refuge in the philosophical speculations so familiar and comfortable to my mind.

But all the while I have been here, sitting across my Captain in his quarters, engaged in a game of chess, and I must be wearing an especially blank expression, because he's watching me curiously.

His eyes are darkened by a slight frown. He looks worried.

My gaze lowers to the Rook I am holding in my hand, the weight of the polished plastic suddenly present to my touch, and I am finally aware of what my next move is going to be.

"Permission to speak freely, Captain," I ask.

"You don't need any further permission, Spock. Especially off-duty in my quarters. Same goes for the 'Captain' stuff. I *have* a personal name, you know. Actually I have two, but I'll be grateful if you'll forget about the second."

He's trying to reassure himself against this undercurrent of tension. Or is he trying to reassure me?

"Thank you, James," I begin, and then I add in a hurry, before my Vulcan half can catch up: "I wish to touch your hand."

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1.6 Kirk

I'm James T. Kirk and I never waver. I never over think, I never over analyze, I act. I see something I like, I go and get it. My body is the tool of my will, and I use both to bend and reshape reality when it doesn't meet my approval. What gives me the right? The fact that I want to do so.

We are our own masters and we are responsible for our destiny, alternative realities notwithstanding. This life is most probably the only chance we get, and I want to take from it everything it has to give, without shackles hindering me. We are dancing stars born from chaos, and the Universe is our playground.

"Eternity is a child moving counters in a game; the kingly power is a child's" (2). I want to become that child.

Never take for granted the values they teach you. Be always prepared to confute, to deny, to change, to rebuild. Never listen to those who tell you what you can or can't do. Nothing is impossible before you try it.

Obviously this philosophy of mine is applied also to the (far too many, in Bones' opinion) almost deadly situations I have to deal with while doing my job. It's not that I'm not afraid of dying, quite the contrary. But I've known for a long time (since I was fourteen, to be precise) that fear can prove to be a very powerful weapon if you learn how to control it.

It is not easy but sometimes, when you find yourself completely on your own, your emotions are all that you've got.

The point of this little soliloquy would be that I always manage to keep my cool and find my way out of any desperate situation.

And so, why now I find myself utterly paralyzed by terror and I can't think of nothing to save my ass?

"Thank you, James" Spock says after I've just reminded him for what I'm sure was the ninety-sixth time that when off-duty titles and other shit like that can go to hell (well, not exactly the words I used but that's the idea). Besides, is it normal that I shiver when he calls me like that? Methinks not.

And then he adds in a rush: "I wish to touch your hand."

My lungs must have stopped supplying oxygen to my brain, 'cause I'm no longer able to think.

"I... um... What?"

"If you are amenable, I would be quite interested in partaking in a form of physical contact by the means of our hands."

Now I'm certain that at least my Vulcan sphynx is as nervous as me; typical of Spock to sound like a food replicator installation guide when he's under pressure.

"I... see." Thus spoke Kirk, twice in a row winner of the Dialectics competition held annually by the Philosophy Club of Starfleet Academy.

Spock's frown speaks volumes about his own insecurity and embarrassment in this moment.

"I had been led to assume that this type of manual interaction is considered by human social conventions a standard feature of the relationship between two... friends. Did I misinterpret?"

I can't decide which makes me more hysterical, the fact that he describes a handshake as a 'type of manual interaction' or the fact that he's just called us friends.

"No, no, you didn't misinterpret anything. It's just that, you know... this um, request of yours kind of comes out of the blue."

An eyebrow raises.

"I fail to see the connection between the color of my uniform and the..."

"Never mind. I meant to say that it is unexpected. But it is not... unwelcome."

"Ah." Pause. "Shall we proceed, then?" His expression is an impossible mixture of shyness and challenge.

"Make yourself comfortable, Commander." I grin, and I lay my hand on the desk, spread wide and palm down.

"Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much" (3)

He gazes at it for ten, endless seconds, then, so slowly that I suspect we'll start travelling backwards in time, he lifts his left hand and rests it on the desk with the result that his fingertips barely brush mine.

"Which mannerly devotion shows in this"

His hand starts inching nearer.

We both take a breath, hard and clear like a hammer on a church bell.

He stretches out the index and the middle finger, while keeping the ring finger and the pinky folded inwards, and drags them along the back of my hand, starting from my wrist 'til he reaches my fingertips. He repeats this over and over again.

It's a movement so soft and ethereal that it seems like he's not touching me at all.

It's a caress as gentle as spring breeze, that soothes my fears and whispers promises of eternity.

He scrapes my knuckles with his nails, glides over my phalanges, outlines the veins, charts the joints, establishing some kind of hypnotic rhythm that enchants both of us.

I feel something moving across my skin, a tingling sensation that extends to my forearm, reaches my shoulder, 'til it's impossible for me to keep still.

"For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,"

I awaken from my torpor and I draw my hand back.

Spock's words of protest die on his lips and are replaced by a surprised gasp, as I mirror his weird gesture with my left hand, and I start mapping the same patterns all over his palm.

The flesh under my pads is so smooth and cool that it feels like I'm sweeping my hand over the face of water.

A roaring sound keeps pounding in my ears, and I suddenly realize that they're our heartbeats.

Finally, I spread my palm and I join it to his.

"And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss"

Our fingers intertwine and clasp tightly.

Our eyes meet and what I see is a reflection of my soul, is the heaven's door.

His eyes are so warm, so round, so confused and almost feverish. His lips are slightly parted and his eartips are as green as musk.

Our hands part unhurriedly.

I try to catch my breath, I clear my throat, I open my mouth then I close it.

It's Spock who breaks the silence, speaking in a tone that's only a pale imitation of his usual confident one.

"I... thank you, James. It was... an interesting experience."

"No shit, Sherlock" I mutter.

He doesn't comment.

"I suppose... it is time for me to retire to my quarters. I apologize, but I feel rather fatigued."

I nod, without looking at him.

"I bid you goodnight. I will see you tomorrow on the Bridge."

And he leaves, just like that.

What's the fuck just happened?

Note (2): HERACLITUS, fragment DKB52.

Note (3): WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*, act I, scene V.

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2.Taste

summary:

Touch, taste, sight, smell, sound. Parallel paths winding, intersecting, and finally coming together. Taste is a shared pleasure.

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2.1. Spock

I bid him good night. Then I left.

I am still researching in my mind which Standard adjectives may best describe the experience I termed as "interesting" to my Captain. He answered with an attempt at humor that induced me to think he felt my acknowledgment was understated.

I was quite aware that it was.

"Overwhelming" is nearer to being an acceptable translation of the Vulcan "plo-sposhan-ahkh", almost-like-a-war-beginning (4).

And in war with myself I have been indeed since the moment I crossed the door from the Captain's quarters and found myself in the corridor, alone, with an unfamiliar warm feeling on my hand which had nothing at all to do with its actual surface temperature.

I almost ran to my own quarters.

The first thing I did once the door swooshed closed behind me was to lick my palm and fingers.

The taste of the Captain's own skin, of Jim's skin, salty and a little wet and a very little oily, made me shiver in the most unbecoming way.

When I was growing up, I was often shamed for my susceptibility to synesthesia. The spontaneous links formed between present sensation, especially gustative and/or olfactory, and past events or situations, was openly despised as one among my many mongrel traits: an instance of the peculiarly human, illogical inability to separate the here-and-now from knowledge of other regions of spacetime.

I had free access to a wide choice of Terran literature for the first time while completing my courses at Starfleet Academy, and at an early date I happened on an overlong and somewhat boring, but for some reason at one time famous, work by one Marcel Proust, who rhapsodized about which memories were unleashed when spoiling a perfectly acceptable cup of tea, by soaking into it a remarkably stodgy sample of baked food and then partaking of the result (5). Since then, I had to admit that the customary Vulcan attitude to synesthesia has its merits.

All the same, analysis of the impact taste has on my awareness has been, and still is, something of a forbidden pleasure for me, in which I indulge in secret. The keyword here, Leonard would comment, being "pleasure".

Yet what I saw in Jim's eyes --so blue, so serious-- when our fingers clasped and we looked at each other, makes me think the unthinkable.

Maybe there are pleasures we can share.

It is the ship's evening, 20:33.

I have invited my Captain to dinner.

The Captain and I are in my quarters, seated on opposite sides at my desk.

I have set the temperature of the room at 27.5 °C, that is 3.5 °C less than my lowest comfort point, while within the highest comfort point for the Captain.

I have added a thermal layer under my tunic.

The desk I have freed of any moveable implements, in order to use it as a dinner table and, later, as a base for the 3D chess set.

We have each selected our preferred food from the replicator.

I have chosen klitanta k'forati-mun (kleetanta with forati sauce) and kreyla bread, and a Terran fruit salad as dessert.

He has selected chicken nuggets with a double dose of fried potatoes, seasoned with ketchup, and a small green salad. The smell of the cooked poultry meat is slightly distasteful to me, but I have already resigned myself to the fact that life in this universe mostly survives by devouring itself.

Jim is now busy eating his salad. He wears a slight scowl, and when he catches me staring at him, he raises his face and begins an exaggerate munching motion, his lips narrowed and protruding, mimicking a Terran rodent I believe is called a rabbit.

"See what I have to live on. Bones will have my head if I don't stuff myself up with grasses like a rabbit *before* I'm even allowed any real food".

I have the impression that he considers food a safe topic for conversation. It is far from safe with me, but at the moment I think it prudent to follow his lead.

"Dr. McCoy's recommendations are sometimes well-founded, and it seems that indeed a consistent habit of eating fresh vegetables is advantageous for human health in the long term. May I however ask you the reason for your choice of preferred food?"

Unexpectedly, he blushes a little, and lowers his eyes for a moment. He raises them again with a half-laugh.

"Fried chicken and French fries are the first thing I learned how to cook. My brother Sam taught me how to de-frost them directly in the pan, with plenty of oil on a hot flame. We de-frosted a lot when we were home alone. Frank was often out --my stepfather, the less said about him the better-- and mother... well, she wasn't around much either".

Again his eyes trail down to his plate, and he pushes the last of his salad around with his fork. Perhaps I was wrong believing food is a safe topic for him. I read about the relevance for the development of human personalities of satisfying food bestowed on children by older relatives. Were there no mother's pancakes or grandmother's pies for him when he was a child?

He has finished his salad. He now spears a chicken nugget and four ketchup-soaked fries on his fork.

"And you," he asks brightly. "What's that stuff you're eating?"

He opens his mouth wide and fills it with food. The empty fork retracts, then stops mid-air as he munches, as though he has forgotten it there. He is looking at me with curiosity.

"Kreyla bread is a basic accompaniment to most Vulcan dishes. It is made with kheh grain meal, sometimes mixed with a portion of mashya tuber meal. Whenever her vegetable garden yielded a satisfying crop, my mother used to add a modicum of Terran sesame or cumin seeds. The latter I found particularly appetizing. Kleetanta is a sort of bean which is reaped, dried, crushed and soaked in salted water until it melts into a dense gelatinous substance. It is then cut into small cubes and stewed in a sauce made by boiling fori leaves until they become very tender, then passing the leaves and liquid through a mixer, turning it into a thick broth. Kleetanta has almost no taste by itself, but it enhances the effect of any added ingredient, especially forati sauce."

Jim stares into my plate, then looks up at me.

"And, you like it?"

"It is a nutritious, healthy food."

"But, do you *like* it?"

"It is... traditional."

"Hm." He sounds unconvinced. "May I have some?"

The fork in his hand comes suddenly to life, hovering above my plate, waiting for my permission. I nod. The fork comes down, pierces a cube of kleetanta delicately, then pushes it around gathering a layer of sauce. It is then turned carefully on itself, preventing the semiliquid sauce from dropping on the tabletop, and it quickly disappears with its load into his mouth.

He closes his eyes for a moment as he savors it.

"Not bad," he says. "it doesn't taste like celery. I hate celery. Want a French fry?"

Note (4): Most Vulcan words and phrases come from *The Vulcan Language Institute Reclamation Project*; for further details about the matter of this report, see in particular the page at http://www.stogeek.com/wiki/Vulcan_Food_and_Dishes.

Note (5): MARCEL PROUST, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1, *Du côté de chez Swann*, Paris: Gallimard, 1919, pt. 1, *Combray*.

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2.2 Kirk

"Want a French fry?" I ask him, pushing my plate in his general direction. Spock looks at it with just the slightest trace of suspicion; then, he gracefully raises his fork, pierces two fries, dips them in the ketchup and finally eats. Each movement is careful and composed, as if part of a ritual.

He chews thoughtfully, in utter concentration, as if analysing every single nuance of taste, and finally swallows.

"They are... rather satisfactory."

It takes me less than a second to translate.

"Aw, you like it, don't you? Actually I had the impression that you preferred salty tangs."

He lifts an eyebrow. Ops, maybe I've said too much. (Did I sound like a stalker?)

"In fact, Captain, your statement is correct. Vulcan tongue has such a shape so that we are predisposed to better perceive salty flavors, while our papillae are not particularly adequate for appreciating sweet foods."

"Wait, what? You're sayin' you can't enjoy chocolate and other toothsome munchies like that? That's too bad... you don't imagine what you're missin'."

"I confess, I am growing increasingly interested in the secret gustative pleasures held by this 'chocolate' you humans seem to be so fond of. You are not the first one who brings it to my consideration: Nyota has told me in more than one occasion that, not being able to taste chocolate, I am 'missing one of the greatest sensorial experiences a living being could ever have'."

I can see that he instantly regrets having mentioned her, but this doesn't stop me from asking: "So, um... is it all good between you two? I mean, I thought that lately on the Bridge..."

"I find that I am not amenable to this topic at the present time." he says curtly, cutting me off.

He's embarrassed, and he's already putting on the cloak of his Vulcan coolness, but I can't let it happen, not when he was just starting to open up, so I add hastily: "Hey, it's alright, there's no need to talk about it. It's your business, and it was stupid of me to pry."

A strange silence heavy with implications and unasked questions ensues, giving me some minutes to reflect.

Really, just what was I thinking about when I accepted his invitation? And to his quarters, none the less! It's been only two days since what in my mind I got used to call 'the manual intercourse occurrence', and we both act as if it never happened. But how could I ever forget that look of longing and disbelief, that subdued undercurrent of thoughts and sensations going through my nerves, the

aching feeling of the hand that had touched his, curling around my cock, the sour taste of my semen mixed with the sweet flavor of his skin...

Crap, this won't do. I had better divert my thoughts pretty quickly, or else I might have to explain to my prim Vulcan First Officer why his Captain is sporting a sizeable hard-on while having dinner with him. Well, then let's focus on the fact I still feel weird when having dinner with someone sitting at my same table. Problem is, the majority of people sees meals as a moment when family or friends get together and everyone shares his thoughts and what it's happened to him during the day, but for me it was never like that.

Winona was often away, repairing engines on spaceships headed towards the furthest corners of the quadrant, and the scattered times she would finally get to spend shore leave on Earth she certainly had no time to waste with pots and burners, as she would be too busy quarreling with Frank over my last bravado (she would beg him to have patience and he would yell that he hadn't married her to take care of the kids she was too scared to bring up on her own; and the morning after, more often than not, she would have already left).

Ah, Frank, the good ol' bastard. Just the thought of him doing something as domestic and nice as cooking pancakes for me or for Sam makes me laugh, in a very bitter way. He wasn't a bad person, not really, he just sucked at being the father; but in retrospect, who could blame him? That wasn't the life he had bargained for, and the only way he knew how to vent his resentment was to treat us like shit.

So you see, for the entire duration of my childhood I've practically had to run on leftovers and frozen food. We ate in the living room just for Christmas or other special occasions (obviously my birthday wasn't among them); during the rest of the year, my bed was my dinner table. Once I tried to build a synthesizer, but I only accomplished setting the kitchen on fire.

As for many other things, this too got worse after Sam left. From then on, it became a habit of mine to spend entire days without eating out in the fields and then come home in the middle of the night just to eat a sandwich stuffed with all I could find in the fridge and drink a glass of water.

Then I went to Tarsus IV and came back and developed a kosher eating disorder. But I'd prefer to skip this part.

When we first met, poor Bones was shocked to take in just how crazy my diet was and he decided to embark on the desperate mission to change it; against all odds, he's pretty close to success, he and his lettuce leaves be damned.

My train of thought is broken off by the soft sound of Spock clearing his throat.

"Jim... I suppose I owe you an apology for my previous burst."

"Spock, no - "

"Please, let me finish. I repeat that I do not wish to talk about Nyota, at least for now. But in spite of this, I promise that I will always endeavor to answer your queries, in any manner I will be able to."

At these words, a small place inside me that I had forgotten lit like a candle. I smile and I stretch out my hand to pat his forearm: it's the lightest of brushes, but it's like I've just touched an uncovered high voltage cable.

"Thank you, my friend" I return, and I hope that he can tell how much I mean it. Now the least I can do is to bring the conversation back to safe topics.

"Actually, there's something I've always been curious about."

"You may ask."

"Right, so: how exactly does vegetarianism work for Vulcans? Or should I say veganism?"

" 'Veganism' is the human term that best translates this particular aspect of Vulcan philosophy."

"Okay. So I always thought, surely Vulcans are not vegans for the same reasons that humans are. I mean, most humans choose vegetarianism in sign of protest against the barbaric methods in which animals are still bred and exploited in spite of the ever-increasing spread of replicators, and because of the impact that slaughterhouses have on the environment. But one can't apply these motives to your species; you never developed a food industry like ours, for once. So, what are your justifications?"

"Your analysis is essentially correct. You see Jim, vegetarianism has been for centuries a deep-rooted trait of the Vulcan nature in which cultural, ethical

and philosophical reasons mingle, but it has not always been so. Prior to the time of Surak, Vulcans were omnivorous (6), exactly like humans. Today, only outcasts and small cultural sub-groups –commonly referred to as the 'V'tosh ka'tur', the Vulcans without logic-- practise the eating of meat. Partly, Vulcans reject meat because it reminds us of our savage past, of the ancient times when we ran the risk of self-annihilation. 'Kup-fun-tor ha'kiv na'ish du stau? Dom nam-tor vohris nem-tor ha'kiv', Surak wrote. 'Can you return life to what you kill? Then be slow to take life'. But Vulcan veganism is not founded solely on the respect of all life-forms, because in a strict scientific sense we all feed on death, including vegetarians; it is also about managing natural resources in the most favourable and efficient way for everyone. If refraining from animal products does not compromise our health and conjointly co-operates to preserve the equilibrium of the environment, then it is only logical to be vegetarians."

Gods, I could listen to him lecturing for hours.

Spock looks at me with a raised eyebrow and barely-concealed amusement, and I realize that I've been staring for the past two minutes. I rouse myself and I try to look like I was doing it intentionally.

"Well, thank you Commander," I say, displaying my most charming grin. "That was really enlightening."

"Ask and it shall be given you, Captain." (7)

Wish it were so simple. "I'll try and keep that in mind."

Note (6): All information relative to Vulcan vegetarianism and Vulcan sentences is taken from *VegPeace.org: Vegan Raw Recipes Health Nonviolence Ecology - Vulcan Vegetarian* at <http://vegpeace.org/vulcanvegan.html>

Note (7): Matthew, 7:7.

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2.3. Spock

The Captain and I have been practising IDIC.

After the first meal we shared in private, we have consumed no less than four dinners, two lunches, and one breakfast together during a three weeks period, alternating location between his quarters and mine.

We are conducting an in-depth comparative study of Terran and Vulcan cuisine, with digressions on Andorian, Enaran and Maun-Ki influences on styles of nourishment in the Alpha quadrant (8).

We are also exploring each other's tastes.

"Ask and it shall be given you", I told him, on impulse, at one point of our first evening together.

I was hoping that he would ask, so that in turn I could give.

"I'll try and keep that in mind," he answered.

I was approaching consumption of my fruit salad, when a sudden imbalance in the pre-mixer chamber tuning was notified shipwide by Mr. Scott. The emergency repairs took 72.5 hours (Mr. Scott said something about the need for Starfleet to choose our dilithium providers more wisely, in order to prevent what he called "grit in the gas" to "clog the carburator"). 3.4 hours after the repairs were completed, Jim asked me to dinner in his quarters.

My hope had been fulfilled.

"Why don't we choose each other's food this time? Just for a laugh," he said after our mutual greetings. "I want to know more about Vulcan food. And maybe you will allow me to bring a few more Terran dishes to your attention...? Although I'm sure you already know many of them, since..."

He stopped abruptly.

"Captain... Jim, you must not worry that mention of my mother displeases me. On the contrary, her life and personality being remembered fondly and often, is in a measure comforting to me. And yes, I am agreeable to sampling the Terran dishes you may care to

recommend. By agreement between my parents, our family menus were closely Vulcan-oriented. There is much I don't know about Terran food."

He chose for me a rather flamboyant vegetable mix he called "cajonata", made with fried eggplant, celery and tomato cubes, sliced onions, capers, pine-nuts and olives, seasoned with vinegar and basil leaves. I liked this very much, and appreciated that he didn't allow his personal displeasure with celery to influence his methods of research.

I conservatively selected for him plomeek soup and htorl crisps with spicy favini butter. He tasted the first spoonful carefully, gulped the second with rather more abandon, and then asked me for permission to dip his buttered crisp into the soup.

"Most Vulcans do dip their crisps into plomeek soup. Only a minority, to which I belong, prefer to keep their tastes separate."

"You know, Cupcake --that's Mr. Giotto-- says plomeek tastes like baby food. He calls it plasmomilla. But I really like it. It's only bland at first try, but then it unfolds a sort of subtle aftertaste, like... pumpkin, and rice flour cream with milk. And a touch of almonds."

He blushed.

"I hope I'm not saying anything offensive. Rice cream, with a drop of honey, is a long-standing favorite of mine. You may call it comfort food. Do you have comfort food on Vulcan?"

"Vulcan nutrition is chosen according to a physiological evaluation of the body's needs. The needs of the mind are filled through meditation."

"But states of mind and physiology are known to influence each other. You know, there's a story told about what you may call an obsolete Terran deity, the Buddha. He was fasting and meditating in the shade of a tree, and had gone so long without food as to forget he was even hungry, but despite his efforts, his meditation was not going at all well. A woman happened to pass by; she had pity of this very thin man immersed in meditation and, careful not to disturb him, left at his feet a bowl of yoghurt and honey. After a while, the smell from the bowl roused the Buddha from his meditation. He realized he was very hungry, and ate up the contents of the bowl. Then he sat back again in the lotus position, and suddenly discovered that on a full belly he could meditate very much better indeed."

"A fascinating tale, which however would not be willingly considered as evidence by the Vulcan Science Academy."

"I don't care a damn for the VSA's opinion. I care about yours."

I am made speechless when he looks at me like that.

Since then, we have tasted many other dishes: gespar and porridge, b'ltarr and pizza, t'mirak rice and black wild Canadian rice, mia-zed, noodles, Andorian tuber root (we both like it) and Enaran algae puffs (neither of us likes them).

We have taken morsels from each other's plates.

Our fingers have occasionally touched.

We have shared the pleasures of exploration, taste, touch, and companionship.

As disgraceful as it is admitting this, even only to myself, I am becoming as addicted to his nearness as a moth to a light.

I am twice guilty: of greed, for never having enough of him, and of cowardice, for not having returned on the topic of the severance, at her request, of my former relationship with Ms. Uhura.

*It seems there is nothing *I* can, personally, do for you. I wish there was, but what you need, anybody can give you. I don't see any other way out than quit needing you myself, OK?*

How can I tell my Captain that there is indeed something only one person can do for me, one special person I do need, and that he is that person?

Note (8): Information about xenogastronomy, here and further below, mostly comes from the data banks at *Memory Alpha*, category *Food* (<http://memory-alpha.org/wiki/Food>). Maun-ki and htorl crisps: personal communication by a certain aged Vulcan-Terran hybrid informant who prefers to remain unnamed.

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3. Sight

summary:

Touch, taste, sight, smell, sound. Parallel paths winding, intersecting, and finally coming together. See, look, watch, stare, shut your eyes.

3.1 Kirk

Somebody please stun me.

I didn't enlist for this kind of shit. I'll never get out of here alive, not a chance. I mean, why nobody ever tipped me off to the fact that handling a berserk Romulan from an alternative future is better than overseeing one of these power pantomimes that we persist in calling diplomatic meetings?

Really, I'll never figure out how all these stuffed peacocks manage not to choke on the gibberish they stick restlessly in their big mouths.

My point is, if all this fooling around was to serve some other purpose aside from the expansionistic ambitions of the Headquarters brass and the thirst for higher profits of the business sharks then I would put up with it more than willingly. But this is not the case. Instead, what I'm doing here today on Le-pe-sheth in my capacity of Starfleet Captain is having a share in a straightforward, up-front genocide that has been going on for decades.

You see, the Mavrosians are (or maybe it's more correct to say that they were) a small humanoid race of farmers and breeders who led their existence on this godforsaken planet peacefully and monotonously, every day the same as the one before, their lives marked just by the perpetual succession of the seasons under an amber yellow sky.

Then, almost half a century ago, they abruptly found themselves dragged into a civil war that probably they'll never be able to fully comprehend.

Ever since the day the Lefkosians, in a desperate escape from their doomed star, descended from the clouds and seized Le-pe-sheth, Death has been prowling through these lands with its aeonian sickle constantly at work. Not spring water, but blood and sweat and tears shed by both the factions now sprinkle the fields and time flows chanted by the burials and the explosion of the bombs.

Although now the Lefkosians are the official owners of the planet and are distinctly superior under the technological and economical aspect, the Mavrosians never gave up what should be for all intents and purposes theirs: in their refuges inside the mountains, they put together a Resistance that until now has been impossible to tame; they train all their children in using at least one weapon, they ambush and set up assaults, they blow themselves up, displaying a savage determination they didn't even know to have.

In all likelihood they would have stopped only when skulls and debris had been all that was left.

But one month ago some strategy brainiac back at Headquarters noticed that Le-pe-sheth is located in a particular corner of the quadrant where the Fleet is unforgivably exposed to Klingon raids. Negotiations were opened and after a few days an arrangement was made: starting today, Lefkosians are the newest member of the Federation. The construction of the shining Starbase 40 will bring them sky-high incomes; and finally they will be able to subdue the Mavrosians, with Starfleet's tacit permission.

What can we say? We're truly sorry, but the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, so deal with it.

That's all, folks.

Really, I've never considered myself to be an idealist or a stargazer who dreams about universal harmony and heaven on earth for everyone but goddammit, why have I to be always right in my cynicism? Why the residents of this galaxy don't surprise me, once in a while?

Jeez, I'd better cool it and think of something else, otherwise how will I manage to deliver my crafty speech in which I express all my satisfaction with the fact that the Federation has been enriched with such a honorable member?

Let me see. Bones is engaged in what seems to be a rather engrossing debate with a distinguished Betazoid surgeon about the possibilities offered by establishing

an empathic link with the patient during an organ transplantation. So, no help from that front.

The rest of my senior officers is scattered across the room, totally oblivious to their Captain in need. Wait a minute, one (the most important one) is missing. I can't see... oh. Oh.

Finally I've found what I was looking for. How in this entire Universe (and in the other one, too) is it possible that he makes me catch my breath even when he's ten meters away?

He's standing slightly aside, exchanging now and then some polite remarks with the few ones bold enough to approach him and more in general showing off all his patrician upbringing. Dressed in his silken deep blue uniform, with his legs spread widely apart, his shoulders straight and firm as cathedral pillars, his chin daintily raised, the right hand exquisitely holding a goblet while the left hides behind the back, his gaze piercing as an eagle's, he's quite simply something to die for.

The best that two worlds have to offer made flesh. A daemon who descended from his throne to humiliate us miserable earthworms.

Eventually he catches on my scrutiny and his eyes shift by an imperceptible fraction to meet mine: the atmosphere crackles with static a flow of energy made of unvoiced thoughts and remembered sensations and echoes going non-stop back and forth between us --

-- something fundamental in the fabric of the universe (of my being) switches and then repositions planets rearrange their orbit stars collapse and die and are born again gravity pulls me and stretches me and redefines the limits of my body everything that is not him disappear in the background of my perception like a slowly-fading dream and I am not here anymore we are not here anymore /where do we go now? follow me/ his coffee-colored eyes lull me and take me adrift in an ocean of silence and noise and light the ebony of his eyebrows of his hair the ivory of his skin the crimson of his lips fill my vision /oh now I can see you/ I remember I know him /I know you/ I know everything everything and I am lost -- I am home.

...

I slowly release the breath I've been holding for the past minute and take another one, while my cheeks and the back of my neck feel like they're on fire. And this happens. every. fucking. time.

Maybe I should suggest his wearing a pair of very dark sunglasses. But from the sparkle in his eyes, I'd say that he felt it too, or at least some part of it. Finally he manages to regain some presence of mind and raises an eyebrow signaling puzzlement (one day I'll write a manual and I'll entitle it "101 ways to tell what your Vulcan wants", and it'll made me rich).

I wink at him, and the first eyebrow is immediately followed by its companion. I grin and I lift my glass in a wordless toast.

He mirrors my action, and I can see that the right angle of his mouth is slightly but unmistakably upturned.

His eyes then move to my left and I am suddenly aware of someone tapping my shoulder and calling repeatedly my name.

The dreaded hour has come, but somehow I don't care anymore. The sooner this mess is done with, the sooner I can be with him.

I'm on my way to the small stage, the Lefkosian president and the ambassadors with their staffs slightly ahead of me when something (the need to see him one last time?) makes me turn to the left. It's then that I notice a man rushing towards us with one hand inside his jacket.

I'm on president Noshar one second before the man pulls out the gun, but it's not enough.

The first bullet grazes my left temple and sticks in the arm of the Earth ambassador's assistant.

My left shoulder takes the second one (damn, right in the blade).

But it's the third bullet that really hurts, because it aims straight at my spleen and if I had to go by the stab of pain I feel in my side then I'd say it's just smashed it in a thousand meaty atoms, the little bastard.

The fourth and the fifth break into pieces one of the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, because by then Giotto's men are on the assailant and half a second later he's stunned and handcuffed.

It's funny how I'm hyper-aware of every detail, every movement, the world around me expanding and slowing down as if we were underwater or in a wormhole.

I realize I'm collapsing to the ground. I try to speak, but the words die on my lips as a sharp exhale of agony.

I try to stay at least on my knees, but my body doesn't agree. I continue sinking and there's nothing keeping me afloat.

Finally I drop on my side, blood flowing copiously from the holes in my body from my forehead and my vision turns red, I can count the ruby droplets framing my eyelashes.

Distantly, as if coming from a great interval in space and time, I can hear people screaming moving all around me (is that you, Bones?) words without meaning pounding my ears barks sirens (red alert? the ship... is in danger) hard floor beneath me (why am I on the floor? and why is it so wet?) a metallic taste in my mouth convulsions running through my writhing body clutching my muscles but this doesn't matter nothing of all this matters because because what's really important is... is that everything is becoming black and I can't see him. *I can't. see. him.*

I reach the bottom of the well, at last. Lights go out. Hide underneath the covers. I feel tired, so tired. Time to sleep, Jimmy.

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3.2 Spock

Le-pe-sheth is an obnoxious planet, and for once I do not mind being of a same mind with Dr. McCoy, who pronounces the name with a peculiarly acute intonation in the final "e".

I am watching the Captain at the other end of the crescent-shaped buffet table, observing his increasing levels of boredom, frustration and anger: boredom at the intense repetitiveness of Lefkosian conversation, frustration at our hosts' imperviousness to discussing the plight of the Mavrosians while engaged in their favorite occupation of imbibing their sulphidric national drink, anger at the ongoing genocide and Starfleet's disinterest in putting an end to it.

It is curious how things seem to take a visually sharper definition around the Captain. My eyes slide lazily over the pastel-colored hangings, the pearl-and-gray patterns on the tabletops, the faded indigo of the ceremonial clothes worn by the Lefkosians, but they snap to attention as soon as they reach him and fix on his uniform. The golden braid on the sleeves, the red trim around the collar and down the seam. His black trousers with their knife-like crease. The glint of the crystal glass in his hand. His eyes, turning now to look at me, blue with exasperation, or...?

He is not breathing.

For a whole minute he does not breathe, and an unusual buzzing in my ventral region seems to suggest that it has something to do with my presence, but I am not sure.

Then he does take one breath, then another, and although he is showing signs of moderate vasodilation, he appears to be no less clear-minded than his usual. He easily reads my puzzlement bordering on worry, and he raises his glass, reassuring me that all is well.

I have never known such thankfulness as what I feel every time he goes out of his way to reassure me that all is well.

The Lefkosian Master of ceremonies comes to call him to perform his part in the proceedings. I follow him with my eyes as he crosses to the other side of the hall and steps up the platform where he is going to deliver his speech. So light, his gait. He moves like a flame in the wind. I look at him and keep looking at him because --as it always happens-- I cannot do otherwise. But it is a mistake.

Suddenly there is a firearm (an antique handgun) and the bullets are flying (ogive-shaped bullets, with a shiny yellow tip), and the Captain is throwing himself toward them, irreparably. Time is running in slow motion, but I find I am even slower than the pace time is keeping. I cannot stop the Captain, I cannot stop the bullets, I cannot stop time, the warning I am shouting is too late. I can only watch as bullets meet flesh with a scrape, then a punch, then a slap.

I watch, and I see the bullets entering, and I feel them as though they were piercing my own body.

Our Security is efficient in capturing the killer, but only a small part of my mind is required to monitor their intervention. The rest, the major part, is all eyes.

My eyes are filled with Jim's shape dropping down, on his knees, on his side, then supine, blood oozing from his scalp next to his left temple, spurting from the front of his shoulder in pulsating gusts, pooling out from a hole in his chest a ta'al's breadth above and to the front of his left hipbone.

My eyes draw me across the hall to him like a winch, counter the press of people running for the exits.

I jump I am on the platform and Leonard has unbuttoned the Captain's jacket and shirt and now he is ordering me in his cutting emergency voice to press with the heel of my hand between his collarbone and first rib, to staunch haemorrhage from the subclavian artery while he tries to stabilize the wound in his chest. I slide my hand under the back of the Captain's shoulder and press with the other from the front, and all I see is blood, soaking his jacket in cruel mocking of the red trimmings I found so fascinating, wetting the floor in a slippery puddle, drenching my hands trembling on this smooth beloved body, *Jim's* body, profaned by these wounds, and pearling his eyelashes in a spray of minute droplets.

His eyes are closed.

He cannot see me.

I cannot see him.

I only see red blood.

::

3.3 Kirk

Here I am again --

*-- stuck by this river
always failing to remember*

why I came

came

came

I wonder why I came here --

The water is frozen. It doesn't flow.

A beach of jagged stones. Sand of steel under my bare feet.

There's light, so much light, but there's no sun.

The sky is made of ice and there's no horizon.

A breeze of stardust is blowing, caressing my face like a tender mother.

Peace. So much peace. But --

-- something feels wrong.

And then.

A sudden hush across the water (9).

A drop falling.

A presence.

*I feel something -- creeping inside my skull
like water trickling through the cracks of a rock.*

Is there anybody out there -- beyond the threshold -- ?

It is me.

Who are you? Give me your eyes so that I can see you.

You do not need them.

*Wha - wait. -- Yes, you're right. I know you. But - I can't remember your name.
It is of no importance. You will remember, as soon as you leave this place.*

The breeze dies.

*But... where should I go? I can't find my way back.
Look at the sky.*

*I raise my eyes. It's a ship, the most beautiful I've ever seen, shining and
crystal-clear, and it's sailing.
No. No. I should be on board.
You must leave if you desire to reach it.*

Clouds gather. A storm is coming.

*But -- there's pain outside. It's not a nice place.
Do not fear, bright one. I will be there as well, always by your side.*

The sky cracks. Chunks of ice tumble to the ground.

*Is that a promise?
Yes. Yes, I promise.*

The river melts; water pours out and floods the beach.

*In that case... lead the way, my Virgil.
Follow me.*

*The sky explodes
the noise resounds in the hollow lands
ripples wrinkle the surface of my consciousness
splinters of slowly increasing awareness needle my dimming slumber.*

Open your eyes.

...

*I open my eyes. And all I see is white.
It takes me a full minute to realize that what I'm staring at is sickbay's
polished ceiling.
The lightest rustle makes me turn to the left, and ocean blue meets earth brown.
Of course. I should have known.
His uniform is rumpled, his bangs are slightly disheveled and he seems like he
could use some good sleep. In other words, he's gorgeous.
"Welcome back, Captain."
"It's good to be home Commander, but... don't misunderstand me, I feel like crap."
But I'd take all the bullets and the phaser blasts of this universe to be
granted the privilege to see Spock's face right now because at my words his eyes
lit and shimmer his shoulders relax his entire body seems to come to life after
a long period of lethargy and then he... he *smiles*.
He fucking smiles (I can even catch a glimpse of his teeth) and it's like
someone's just injected me a hypo of molten lead, I can feel it flowing in
spurts through my veins, filling them 'til they'll burst, reaching my brain
cells and dissolving them.
A seed planted a long time ago in my chest (during the Kobayashi Maru hearing?
On Delta Vega? On the Narada? In the other universe? Before the Big Bang?) grows
and blossoms and twists all around my heart shaping an inescapable cage and I
know.
I know that his breath is my soul and that I am his. My bones, my teeth, my
hair, my organs and everything beyond. It all belongs to him.
He can hate me, he can eat me,
he can leave me, he can kill me,
but this impossible, indisputable axiom will never decay.
Even if he'll never want me; even when I'll be gone from this reality and my
ashes will be swept out by the winds of our dying Sol, it will be so.*

I'm James T. Kirk and I'm in love with S'chn T'gai Spock.

Note (9): THE CURE, *A Strange Day* (from the album *Pornography*, 1982, 2005).

::

3.4 Spock

I have been blind.

43.8 hours the Captain has been in a coma after he was shot, and I have been unable to see. During said lapse of time I have functioned as Acting Captain. I have made sure the Enterprise was safe in geostationary orbit. I have co-operated with restoring order on the scene of the attack, and with bringing to a delayed, subdued conclusion the programmed ceremonies. I have given my witness to the competent officers, and reported to Starfleet. I have interacted with members of the Enterprise crew and with the Lefkosian authorities. I have remembered all names and charges correctly. I have operated computers and communicators. I have walked rooms and corridors, sat in chairs, stood waiting in sickbay during the two successive, difficult operations the Captain needed in order to try and begin repair of his life-threatening injuries. I have navigated without mishap around living beings, furniture and fixtures. All this I believe I have accomplished with acceptable efficiency.

Yet I have been blind.

Until now, I had never given thought to the origins and significance of the illogical Terran idiom, "being blinded by grief". But now I do, and I find it is not illogical after all.

Light impacts my optical nerves through the pupils, patterns form on the retinae and are interpreted by the brain, my body takes the appropriate actions, but the sense of what I see and the sense of what I do have lapsed into irrelevance.

I am now sitting in sickbay, next to the biobed where the Captain, where *Jim*, is laying completely still.

The sheet on the bed is white, his face is white, the walls, the floor and ceiling are white. All is white, and I do not see. I cannot even remember.

My mind knows that there was a time when the world had not yet been reduced to this whiteness, but all I can see now is a blank, and even the shape of Jim's body, limp under the cover as though emptied of his pulsing life, seems to dissolve in the white light.

I do not know anymore if I am awake or asleep, if this is reality or the worst dream I ever had. I close my eyes against all this blinding white.

And I hear the faint blink of eyelids opening.

I look, and by the forked roots of Mount Seleya, Jim's eyes are wide open, and I see again.

For sight is not seeing if I can't see him.

For there is no color if his blue eyes are closed.

For I am nothing if he doesn't look at me.

"Welcome back, Captain," I say, and I am welcoming back at the same time my sight and myself.

My heart is swelling with something hot and human that I cannot contain and that splits my lips apart in an undignified smile, but I do not care, because I feel like the day I came back from *kahs-wan* and I finally knew who I was.

I am S'chn T'gai Harold Spock, son of Sarek and son of Amanda (10). I am a Vulcan and I am a Terran. I am First Officer on board the U.S.S. Enterprise, NCC 1701. And I am in love with James Tiberius Kirk, my Captain. My Jim.

Note (10): The name Harold was first mentioned by Jane Wyatt (Amanda Grayson) at the Creation 20th-anniversary Trek Con held in Boston in 1986. See <http://memory-alpha.org/wiki/Spock> and <http://www.ex-astris-scientia.org/inconsistencies/culture1.htm>.

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4. Smell

summary:

Touch, taste, sight, smell, sound. Parallel paths winding, intersecting, and finally coming together. Following their noses from carnage to paradise.

4.1 Kirk

"You're waiting for a train, a train that will take you far away. You know where you hope this train will take you, but you can't be sure. But it doesn't matter -- because we'll be together." (11)

Do you know what I hate most about being injured? The majority of people seem to think that it's the forced inactivity. Don't get me wrong: I hate to be tied up to a bed and treated like a four year old child with measles. I'll admit it, I've always been kind of hyperactive, but honestly I don't know what to do with it. I just know that to stop is to die, so I keep moving. Move move move stop take a deep breath start again. My entire life is based on this principle. And yet, it's not the immobility.

It's the odor of blood.

No matter how many showers I take, how much soap I use. It pesters me for days and it just won't go away. It stays there, etched in every single pore of my skin, soaking my hair to the roots with dark invisible viscous plasma, saturating my tongue with iron, making my fingers twitch.

Sometimes, in a vain attempt to alleviate it, I picture myself going to the operating room and taking a surgical laser: layer after layer I peel away everything, the epidermis, strata and capillaries with all their Latin names, the dermis and all its tissue and glands, but I don't stop there, oh no, I go deeper and deeper down until I reach to the hypodermis and beyond that, to the muscles the nerves the bone.

I'm a gaping pulp of rotting meat and body fluids and still I can smell it.

This time it is no different.

I'm sitting on the bed, waiting diligently for Bones to officially dismiss me. I stretch my hand and bring it under my nose and inhale. Yes. Still there. Exhale.

The door opens and Spock is there on the threshold, ready to escort me to my quarters.

(inhale) - I get up - (exhale) - and go towards him - (inhale) - and

and

the blood is not there anymore

for a moment clean recycled air and then

his scent fills my nostril and wreaks havoc with my brain

and I see/I smell

reminiscences of a world that is no longer

precious pearls hidden in a helicoid shell

red grains of sand that gather and

arise in hurricanes that sweep away the carcasses of the le-matyas and the

k'karees and challenge the Forge in an everlasting battle for survival and

carve the DNA of the universe on the face of Seleya and

shape the Llangon Mountains in harsh sinuous peaks that rise and shoot up

towards the orange sky to

catch halos on T'Khut - and -

hot dry winds shaking the thin branches of the g-teths scattered along the

plateau of Tai-la

and

ambered drops of resin and sandalwood burning in the pot

and

milled leaves and theris-masu sliding down my throat in a velvet caress

and

the pungent tang of pel-ta'ruk oil as he cleans the chords of the lyre

(exhale)

See, this is the power that this man has on me.

If he notices my little internal delirium, he doesn't show it.

And while we exit Sickbay and begin our synchronized walk to my quarters, someone whispers: "Remember tonight, for it is the beginning of always."

Without any conscious effort, my mind goes back to that fateful night in Riverside, Iowa.

I think of that directionless, egotistic rookie that always yearned for something more, something else that he couldn't define, and used his father's ghost to suppress it.

I think of the beer I drank and the words Pike told me.

I think about the fact that when I stepped out of the Hella Bar and looked up, the sky never seemed as dark and terrifying and promising as it did in that moment. I swear that I could taste the stars on the tip of my tongue, but it was just for a second and it left me wanting, needing more.

I think about that final ride to the shipyard on my loyal Lucille, the scent of damp grass and freshly made harvest soaking the wheels. I remained there in silent contemplation of the shuttles 'til the first lights of dawn. A chance to watch, admire the distance, find the new perspective. A change of scene, with no regrets.

This -what Spock and I are going to do- is the next stage, in the never-ending labyrinth of chosen paths, roads not taken, never really healed wounds, burning coals and searing ice marked by the light rhythm of bells that is my - everybody's- life.

Why then

am I trembling and I feel like a compressor is running in mad circles over my lungs?

We are in front of the door. And then we are inside and I know that from here, there will be no coming back.

But - I can't look at him. James T. Kirk, the cockiest captain in Starfleet, galactic latin lover, can't bring himself to make the first move.

Then he reaches out and I finally see. Not an abyss but the ocean is standing in front of me, and I can hear him calling my name from the other coast.

I let myself fall and he touches me in the shadow of a fading doubt.

Note (11): CHRISTOPHER NOLAN, *Inception* (2010).

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4.2 Spock

He smells like apples.

My olfactory receptors are different from human ones, in that they are eminently suitable for tracking water-soluble chemicals in the dry air of a desert environment, so as to facilitate detection of water sources.

In comparison with Vulcans, humans emit a much larger quantity of water-soluble chemicals. I am therefore very much aware of all the Captain's smells: sweat when his body is cooling overheated muscles, adrenaline secreted in anger or in fear, blood, urine, tears.

But his basic smell, the constant under all others, which beacons at me whenever I am in his presence, is the smell of apples.

Red Stark, sweet but slightly acidic, crisp when bitten.

I have never been more aware of his tantalizing tang than now, standing in front of him just inside the closed door of his quarters.

He has been released from sickbay and ordered rest for the next two shifts. I have accompanied him here and should by all means be taking my leave, but I cannot utter the words, nor can my eyes leave his.

I am beginning to find some sense in the old, old human legend of the Earthly Paradise and the forbidden fruit.

It is said to have been an apple.

A Red Stark apple.

In this silence between us, I am becoming aware of his uncertainty. His eyes, which held mine, now leave me and wander. He looks down and to his left, then back to me. His mouth tenses, as though he is about to speak, but he does not. The tip of his tongue appears instead, then he bites on his lower lip and looks down again.

Uncertainty. Silence. And all the while a ...desire underneath, just shy of reaching out for my own.

So it is I who touch him in the end. Or is it the beginning...?

My hand moves to the lapel of his jacket, to the place where only 5.3 days ago it was pressing against the pulse of his artery, trying to staunch the red blood gushing forth from his very heart.

As I touch him he looks up, and he is all *here*, like he is during a fight to the death. But if this is a fight, it is not to the death. It is a fight for both our lives.

My fingers graze the fabric, then the palm goes up to stroke his temple. I comb through his hair, reach the nape of his neck, then I lower my hand.

Slowly he unbuttons half of his front seam, not leaving my eyes. His gaze is steady, serious, intense, and so keenly focused on my reactions that all that is left of me are my eyes to watch him and his smell to fill me. Apples, and his arousal growing. I wonder if he can smell mine.

My hand now slides under his lapel, touching his skin, the scar an angry pink, the healing tissues slightly risen.

His skin cool, soft, pale.

His fingers reach for my top button, his eyes asking permission.

I nod.

His fingertips smoothly slip the button from the hole, skim down to the next one, slip that free also. With both hands he opens the neck of my jacket, then he slides them upwards from the edge of my undershirt along the sides of my neck, cupping my head below my ears in a gentle, firm hold. I can't prevent myself from leaning back into the touch and moving into it, but he retreats his hands and quickly opens the rest of his buttons.

He is standing square in front of me, his chest bare, his scent flooding me like memories of delights I never knew, and he watches me with an unspoken question in his eyes.

"Yes," I breathe, and I divest myself of my upper garments.

"Yes," he answers, and I see joy flashing in his eyes as he shrugs out of his.

He comes nearer. He raises his hand and he strokes down the top of my head, my bangs, my brow, my nose, my lips, my chin, in a blessing without words. I throw my head back, exposing my bare neck to his touch in surrender.

He smells of apples, and I am in an orchard in Eden.

::

4.3 Kirk

I kneel and begin to undress him.

And he lets me, standing still in front of me

so soft and submissive

keeping his eyes closed

as if trying to memorize every sensory input, every caress

I bestow upon him.

The scent of his alien sex

sends my nerves in overload

I want to taste it swallow it

I want to know

I'm completely out of control

the oxygen in the entire ship couldn't keep my brain functioning.

then he finally looks down at me

and in my almost-lysergic haze

all I can think about is

how much of me is exposed to him?
and the answer is
not enough not enough never enough.

so I rise and I tear away
these hateful final barriers
I want to strip down to the bone
for him for him only for him.

I call him to me with my touch my smell
and he comes
and we join seamlessly
like two lips of the same wound
our foreheads colliding
transparent glass surfaces
where our souls lean out and greet each other
our lips finally meeting
in countless little kisses that are
messy and sloppy and uncoordinated
and try to cover every square centimeter of our skin

in a way not at all romantic but who fucking cares.

And then we are
rolling on the floor crushed against the desk and then finally wrapped in the
sheets
and all I can see is
the black of his pupils constantly dilating and contracting
of his fine hair sliding between my fingers
a pointed tip
the blinding white of his neck
the smoothed angle of a hip
the dark green hue delicately suffusing his chest and his cheekbones
and my ears roar
with his sighs and my imprecations and our panted prayers
and the mix of our sweat and our arousals gives off
a scent that is intoxicating and stifling and nearly unbearable.

I feed my will to feel this moment urging me to cross the line

and then his hands are everywhere
he grips me shatters me fractures me cuts me into little pieces disassembles me
and builds me anew
strangled entangled locked together
marching under marble arches
crossing the distance
filling the gaps

but soon his touch turns into a worship
too intense and innocent to bear
so I push him away
and lay down on my back
and spread myself wide
(not enough not enough never enough)
"Open your eyes. Look."

take me take me take me
make me disappear so that you can be all that I am
this is the way step inside.
"I'm yours. Won't you take me?"

And as always
he obeys me

runs his hands over my stomach my pelvis my inner thighs
in ethereal strokes that liquefy my muscles
dragging slowly but inexorably
toward my center
circling, preparing, asking permission

withering our perceptions
embracing the lust and the desire
seeking the connection.

and when he moves in me
and I around him
and the Universe with us
to the rhythm pounding wildly in the chest and in the side

(dancing on the edge of the cliff
witnessing the beauty
to swing on the spiral
of our divinity)

every breath we draw is Hallelujah.

::

4.4 Spock

It is not Eden.

The snake gave Eve a choice.

But I do not have a choice, because once Jim has touched me at last, he does not stop.

I look down and watch while his fingers fumble with the fly of my trousers.

When he pushes them down, and follows them, and crouches in front of me, I close my eyes
and just allow myself to feel.

Be touched.

He taps my boots, one at a time, for me to pick my feet up and allow him to pull the boots and
socks off.

Nobody pulled my boots off my feet after I turned three.

He slides my trousers down, together with my pants, over my naked feet, and off.

My smell diffuses around him. I hear him breathing harder.

He stops, I open my eyes.

He is still crouching, fingertips pointed on the floor, and raises his face up to look at me.

He is so beautiful, etched in the half-light, his smooth muscles rippling under his skin in
anticipation. He realizes suddenly that I am naked in front of him, and he is not, so he stands,
quickly heels his own boots off, then his socks with the agile tips of his toes, and all the while
he works on his trousers, and a moment later he is also naked, standing straight and poised
like a lirpa four inches apart from me.

His hands move again, raised palm forward to my chest, and there is only a moment of
hesitation before they they irresistibly, blessedly, come on and touch me.

I shiver.

The scent of him, the unique mixture that he oozes just now, is different from any scent of his
I ever breathed. This is the scent of the first time we are standing, naked, in front of each
other.

I cannot hold myself under control anymore. I shift forward, filling the gap between us, filling
the gap in my soul, our bodies now touching all along the length of us from shoulders to groin,
like two hands joined in prayer.

The tips of our toes touch, then he slides his feet forward to cover the tips of mine.

His toes are warm.

His hands are warmer.

We begin moving, and somehow it seems that whatever we do, we move in accord, every
touch met and answered, every catch of breath the twin of another, his taste on my tongue as
I lick behind his ear and mine on his as he nibbles on my fingers.

We are too near to see each other.

We are trying to sink into each other.

All I can catch are glimpses of him, the curve of a biceps, the indentation between the collarbones, a flash of blue when he turns his face, a flash of white when he cannot help smiling one of his wide, young smiles of happiness.

We roll we stand we step to the bed and I sniff him all over, learning him anew in smells. I bury my nose in the cumin-scented sweat under his armpit. I trail the clean salted perfume of his fine sparse fleece down from his belly to the deeper animal scent of the hair around his sex. I lose myself in the wonder of this blind landscape, and all the while he is pushing, pulsing, crawling and sliding and pressing nearer for something.

What?

I do not understand, I am so lost in smells.

But then he leans back, and I feel abandoned; he rolls back, and I fall after him, along the track his scent is leaving between us, but he stops me, one hand pressing on my chest.

"Open your eyes," he says, and his voice is rough. "Look," and it breaks a little.

I look. He is supine in front of me, under me, watching me with an intensity of desire I never saw before. He pulls his knees up to his chest, opens his legs, showing his filled-up penis and his puckered anus.

"Spock. Please. I'm yours. Won't you take me? I want you to take me."

For a moment I feel what he asks is absurd.

Then his breath catches, and I am released.

I am free.

Free to take and to give, to release myself from my loneliness and him from his wait.

I have never been as much myself as I am now, blessed by our mingled scents, while I move in him and he moves around me, and I feel -I do feel- that he is also, at last, himself.

We have together come to the truth of us.

And if this took the breaching of the god-given decree that the living must suffer, all I can say is, it is worth it.

All I can say is,

Hallelujah.

::

4.5 Kirk

I would never have guessed that Heaven was in the Captain's quarters on Deck 5 of the starship Enterprise.

My consciousness comes back to reality slowly, unhurriedly, like a swimmer breaks the face of the sea after diving from the highest shore, and I find that Spock and I are laying naked on my bunk, on our left sides, that his right arm is wrapped languidly around my waist - the fingers brushing my navel and toying lazily with the hair - and that he is sprinkling my shoulder and my nape with hundreds electric pecks, tasting flickers of tongue and hungry nibbles. The smell of orgasm and mingled semen permeates the sheets and the floor and the walls and I've never felt so alive.

"You are awake." A murmur that glides sleekly inside my ear, warm and sensuous like nectar pouring in a goblet.

How am I supposed to listen to him lecturing on the Bridge from now on, without exploding at the memory of his voice in these moments?

"...Hmm... another five minutes."

A light, amused puff that makes the hair on the back of my neck rise.

"I confess, I was becoming preoccupied. You have remained unconscious for an almost alarming amount of minutes. Precisely -"

"Wait just a moment, you smug Vulcan!" I exclaim outraged, turning around to face him. "By any chance are you insinuating that I -"

But whatever I was about to say dies on my lips because... because, if I already firmly believed that Spock under normal circumstances is something to die for, obviously I had never seen him in the aftermath of sex. It's not the ruffled hair or the sight of his bare collarbone. It's the red, soft satisfaction

swelling his thin lips, the faintest (but definitely there) wrinkles of contentment surrounding his eyes, the... the peace shining on a face usually so careful in hiding its inner truth, that make my heart stutter.

"You did not complete your sentence, Jim" he breathes, the damned teaser, while his hand leaves my stomach and starts inching nearer toward my groin.

"I - oh... I can't remember..."

"Then it was irrelevant."

Dammit. Dammit.

Ten minutes and an embarrassing quantity of moans on my part later, I'm a quivering bundle of drained nerves that doesn't even remember his name.

"I - I think we need some tissues" I manage to gasp at last.

I haven't even finished saying it, that he's already returning from our bathroom with a damp towel.

He sits again on the bed beside me and starts wiping my stomach and my abdomen.

"Spock, just what you think you're doing? I'm not an invalid!"

"The good Doctor agreed to your release only after coercing me into promising that I would assure myself you would have not undertaken any superfluous strain. He even demanded I use the old ritualistic expression 'cross my heart'. Now I am merely attempting to contain the damage."

"I would never define what we did 'superfluous'."

"Do you desire to open a debate with him on the subject?"

"Geez, that would be pretty awkward, wouldn't it? No, I'd rather not."

At a certain point, the towel disappears but the massage doesn't stop.

"... Gods, if you go on like this you'll have to pick my remains up with a spoon."

"My sincere apologies, Captain. But I find I am not able to keep my hands off your person."

"Then don't, Commander. Don't." (half seduction, half plea)

He stares at me with a look that could burn through duranium. Then he stretches on top of me, his forearms resting on my chest, one hand gently enveloped around my neck, the other delicately holding the left side of my face.

His fingers, long and slender like stems of a rare flower, begin a tender and timid exploration of every feature, every line, every imperfection, brushing my eyebrows, outlining my nose, skimming over my eyelids, hesitating for just the tiniest of fraction on the faint mark left by the Mavrosian bullet; and then, shyly but unmistakably, they set in an arrangement that I recognize at once and that makes boiling ice coil around my bowels.

No.

"Jim..." he starts, tense and trembling like I've never heard him before, a child that knows that it's a dangerous question, but can't stop himself from asking it anyway.

No no no no no. Why are you doing this to me? To us? Why can't we be already satisfied? Don't ask me this, please. Don't make me hurt you.

"... would you allow a meld?". His voice lowers bashfully on that final word, as if he couldn't believe his own audacity.

I don't answer. But he hears my rejection just the same. The pain rising like a wave in his eyes is a blade twisting inside my own heart. He looks at me, hurt and disoriented, as if he had a sudden stranger in front of him. My words simply don't compute; I can almost see that prodigious brain racing compulsively for an explanation, dissecting every detail of the question and all its plausible implications, and then finally reaching the wrong conclusion.

Fuck, fuck, why did you have to ask? I don't want to do this... but you give me no other choice.

"Is it your previous experience with the Ambassador the cause of your reluctance?"

"..."

I turn my eyes away.

He lets out a sigh and starts to rise.

No. I must be strong. For him.

I grab him by the wrist.

"Yes... and no" I swallow finally.

He sits again, but doesn't reply. He simply waits. But I can see that at least a part of the pain is now replaced with a strange sort of curiosity and... yes, hope.

I rub my eyes tiredly.

"It's... it's just... Spock, I don't really know if you'd like what's inside here. It's pretty much a mess" I manage lamely.

I should know better by now. Really, I should. Because after these words Spock doesn't rise. He doesn't insult me or go away with ill-concealed disappointment. Instead, he pins me down to the bed, cutting my breath, piercing me with a gaze full of calm affection and something else, some kind of... amused exasperation?

"Why do you keep doing this to yourself? Why this ceaseless self-doubt, this harshness? I wish to meld with you because I want to show you how beautiful you are. You have so many great qualities and yet you constantly hide behind a facade of arrogance and self-sarcasm --"

"Listen to yourself. You know, there's a certain irony in being reprimanded by a Vulcan about the negative aspects of hypocrisy."

Just how much have I to hurt you before you'll leave me? And already I miss you. He raises an eyebrow and his lips twitch.

"Your strategy has been uncovered a long time ago, Captain. It will not work. Not with me, not this time. You must understand this: there is absolutely nothing in your mind that could change my regard for you."

"Isn't it illogical to formulate a theory before having actual data, based on an assumption that you can't demonstrate?"

"Jim, will you trust me?"

I snort.

"... now, that's cheating, Commander."

"I had a very good teacher. Do not deny this to me. To us. Let us ride this spiral until its end, my Jim, and we will go where no one has gone before." Have I already mentioned that I'm completely, irrevocably his?

I look at him with a pale ghost of my customary grin and I raise my chin, offering myself to him.

"Then do it, if you dare."

He resumes the position; if I weren't so busy in keeping my trembling under check, I'd notice that his hand is just barely shaking.

"My mind to your mind..." he chants.

"... my thoughts to your thoughts." I reply, an echo of another time, another place with a person that was the same and yet was not willowing across the threads of my memory.

Then --

We are One Creature.

Everything that is real is inside us and everything inside us is real
light exploding in a cloud of silver birds and sunlit wings
framing in billions and billions of splinters water droplets and red sparks --

-- he takes me by the hand and leads me through
labyrinths of coral caves and white giant stars and submarine depths
and spirals of solar flares --
-- our consciousness stirs and stretches and rises towards the unnameable beauty
the ultimate enigma --
everything is so new and yet it's always been here, so plain to see.

This eternal moment belongs to us and us alone
feel it feel it feel it in your bones in your blood in your brain down to the
last neuron
along the electric patterns and in the drift of the stars
take it in your chest envelop it in your arms thrust it in your heart
pierced transfigured devastated reborn from here to eternity
we walk we run we leap forward flying twirling bending
as wide as the universe the multiverse and our virginal minds
floating in the primordial broth.

A clarity of vision
where there is no contradiction
just the beat of life
and death
and truth
inside me
inside us
spiraling out
and still.

We

are

all in One

one in All.

::

4.6 Spock

The Captain is asleep and I am watching him breathe.

I have witnessed the process by which the over-emphatic image under which he presented himself has mellowed along the months into a softer look, a kinder touch.

He used to be brash in front of others and hard, too hard, with himself. Now he is quietly confident when on shift, and slightly more relaxed in private.

Is it the effect of his growing experience and self-assurance as Captain of the Enterprise? Or may it be... May it be that the way I look at him has had an influence?

I do wish he were gentler with himself.

He treats both his body and his soul with the same demanding harshness too many others employed with him in the past, regrettably including me. He internalizes their voices, just as there was a time when he was used to acting out their expectations of him: the kid who ran from home, the joy-rider, the young offender, the bar brawler. The cheater.

I know.

I read his file when he was indicted for hacking the Kobayashi Maru test.

I read what was written there, and what wasn't.

That's not what you are, Captain.

You are the one I love, my Jim to whom I belong, whose half-sweet, half-salted scent now fills my nostrils and the whole of myself as I hold you next to me, skin to skin, and breathe you in while you sleep.

We coupled. We melded.

I still cannot believe that he could bring himself to give this much to me.

He was afraid that his mind was not fitting to be seen, that it was not the best of him, not worthy of me.

But he was so wrong. His innermost self is the most precious gift he could ever give me, because he only ever gave it to me, and it is beautiful. It is *him*.

He won his fear that I would reject the truth of him, and he plunged into the meld like he dived head-first out of the shuttle, speeding toward the surface of Vulcan at 10,00457 m/s² (12). He knows nothing of how he helped me win my own fear that he would not find, in the truth of me, sustenance enough for his mind and his heart.

Yet I found the courage to ask, and he had the courage to answer with a challenge: "Then do it, if you dare".

And I did.

I confess I have no idea where such courage came from to me, unless from the dancing shadows his light casts upon my soul.

We took the risk, we dived together, and we are the better for it.

There are not many beings who can step up to the experience of a meld with such depth and grace.

Where I need to grasp actual details and crawl from one to the next, he soars. He is so conversant with his lush inner landscape...

Mine is a desert: will it be such forever?

If so, he is the oasis.

Now, like two hands whose fingers are threaded together, we can rest in each other as we could not alone.

The Captain is asleep, and I am embraced by the scent of us.

Note (12): My estimate. Encyclopedical sources (Memory Alpha, Memory Beta, Wikipedia) only mention a slightly "higher surface gravity" for the planet. JAIN, *Speed*, at <http://jain.livejournal.com/117327.html>, suggests 16,7 m/s, which seem a bit too much. Such a value would indeed impede human functions more markedly than the measure reported both in canon and fanon, where average temperature on the surface and a thinner atmosphere figure much more prominently as typical Vulcan hardships for humans.

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5. Hearing. A suk-ni-var

summary:

Touch, taste, sight, smell, sound. Parallel paths winding, intersecting, and finally coming together. The sounds of bliss.

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For the blind presumption in his inflection
as he thrashed me with my father's name,
I bite into my hand because yes, I wanted to punch him.

For the sound of his voice,
thick with unacknowledged emotion when standing for trial,
I hope I will have time to make him forget.

For the panic he could not keep out of his voice
as he tried to back away from me flinging his mother in his face,
I would vivisect my own tongue.

For the pounding of his strong heartbeat
when I was strangling him,
I wait for the day when I will feel forgiven.

For the way he halted and looked at me
as he explained why we would not make it,
for the first time I felt that he trusted me.

For the calm strenght in his words
when he offered to rescue his enemy,
I know his compassion is greater than mine.

For the mix of pride and contentment shining in his eyes
when he walked in and asked me permission to come aboard,
I still wonder what I've done to deserve that act of faith.

For the quiet, knowing smile and the happiness in his eyes
when I stood up to see if he still wanted me on board,
I will die rather than neglect my service.

For the impossible synchronization of our heartbeats
while we run for our lives,
I know that the galaxy will be ours.

For the sound of our footsteps along the corridors,
marching in unison,
I get up from bed at ship's morning.

For how the note lasts
when he plucks the final string,
I know what the revolution of planets must sound like.

For the way he listens, really listens
when I play ralah-tanaf on the ka'athyra,
I want to learn new tunes.

For how he slightly pauses before he resumes speaking
whenever his planet is mentioned
I want to dive in a black hole and reshape the continuum.

For the triumph ringing in his voice when he shouts "Checkmate!"
and then looks up to see if I'm offended,
I do not wonder at how he fills my mind.

For how his right eyebrow raises
in silent comment of my latest joke,
I swear that I can hear him laughing.

For the sound of his sneeze (Vulcans don't sneeze)
and for his hushed thanks when in the Human way I say "Bless you",
I am filled with unpremeditated happiness.

For the choked "I am functional" he manages through gritted teeth
when he's severely injured,
I hate our job with all my being.

For the way he says my name
when he is concerned for me
My heart misses a beat.

For how his usually even tone rises
when he reproaches me for my recklessness
I ache because I can't promise him what he asks me.

For how his breath catches when Leonard's fingertips
gently touch the edges of his latest wound,
I want to keep him safe always.

For being allowed the sight
of him combing his hair in front of the mirror,
my eyes burn with an unshed tear of joy.

For the scent of his skin I smell on the towel
When he showers before me
I do not need to burn my Vulcan incense.

For how he exhales my name
as he reaches the climax in my arms,
I know he is my truth divine.

For the way he makes love to me until
I forget my own name, and so I cling to his,
I know he is the logic of my being.

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