

◦ TEMPORAL ARCHIVE

THE CITY BEYOND FOREVER

A Fan-Fiction Story

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Prologue

The ring of stone stood alone on the plain, and centuries moved across its surface like weather.

MANY JOURNEYS TO YOUR PAST ARE POSSIBLE. LET ME BE YOUR GATEWAY.

"A time portal," Kirk said.

"More precisely, Captain, a mechanism through which any period of history may be observed. And, it would appear, entered."

McCoy folded his arms. "Then let's make very sure nobody does."

Kirk almost smiled. "For once, Doctor, we agree." He raised his communicator. "We'll leave this one for a full science team. Uhura, mark it with a buoy and have them beam us up. I want a report to Starfleet before we break orbit."

"Aye, sir."

The transporter room took them, and set them down, and it smelled the way it had always smelled, of ozone and floor polish. Kirk stepped off the pad already thinking about the next thing, easy, unhurried, and went out toward the bridge without looking back.

The rest of the landing party moved off the pads so the remaining security team could be materialized; it was not usual to move seven people in a single transport. And as Lieutenant Galloway, the last of the team, took shape on the pad, McCoy turned to watch the door close behind the captain.

Then he turned to Spock.

"Where do we go from here?"

Spock did not answer at once.

"Nowhere, Doctor," he said. "He should never know."

PART ONE: THE HAND THAT OPENED THE DOOR

Chapter One

New York City, 1930

The truck did not stop.

That was the thing he came back to, for forty years, in the small hours, lying beside her and listening to her breathe. It did not brake and it did not swerve and it never knew. It went through the space where she had been at about thirty miles an hour with its chain drive rattling and a boy on the running board smoking a cigarette, and it turned left at the corner and was gone, and nobody in it ever found out that it had been the most important vehicle in the history of the human race.

He was on his knees in the road with his arms around her.

She was saying something. He could not hear it. His hearing had gone wide, the way it did in a fight, everything at once and all of it too far away.

She was saying his name. She was asking if he was hurt.

He looked up.

Ten feet away, on the sidewalk, in the cold light of a Manhattan afternoon in the first winter of the Depression, two men were standing very still.

One of them was tall and dark and terribly calm, and he had already begun, and there is no other word for it, he had already begun to go thin. Not transparent, like a ghost. Thin. Like a photograph of a photograph. Spock was entirely there. He had shape and edges and weight, and he was looking directly at Kirk with an expression of perfect comprehension and no reproach at all, and he was less than he had been three seconds ago, and getting less.

McCoy was not calm. McCoy had his hand out, reaching, going faster than Spock was going, his mouth moving around a word.

And then Spock raised his hand. Palm out, fingers parted, held up into the freezing air for perhaps a second and a half. He did not say anything.

And then they were not there.

For about two seconds, kneeling in the middle of a road with his arms full of a living woman, James Kirk could not remember either of their names. He could not remember that he had ever had friends, or served aboard anything, or come from anywhere. There was a white nothing where a life had been, and in it there was a street, and a woman, and the smell of exhaust, and a man's hat lying in the gutter that belonged to nobody.

He heard himself make a sound. He would rather have died than make it again.

And then the world stopped.

It did not stop the way a heart stops. It stopped the way a phonograph stops when the power fails: everything simply ceased to advance. The crowd that had begun to gather stood with its mouths open in the middle of forming words. A pigeon hung six inches above the curb with its wings apart. A page of newspaper hung in the air like a thing on a wire. The light did not flicker. The light held.

She did not stop. She was still in his arms, warm, breathing, staring around her at a world gone rigid, and her hand closed on his coat.

"Jim," she said. "Jim, what is this?"

And a voice that was not a voice, a voice he had heard once before, in a canyon, on a dead world, on the far side of a great many years, came up through the paving stones and through his knees and arrived in the middle of his chest.

THEN YOU MUST DO IT INSTEAD.

That was all.

The pigeon completed its wingbeat. The newspaper hit a lamppost and wrapped around it. Somebody in the crowd finished a word and it turned out to be "lady," and a man came out of a doorway with his hands full of flour, and the world resumed, without comment, as though nothing had occurred.

James Kirk knelt in the middle of Twenty-second Street in the year 1930 with the woman he loved alive in his arms, and understood in one

piece, like a bone breaking, what he had done and what it was going to cost.

"Jim." Edith Keeler had both hands in his coat now, and her face was very white, and she was not frightened. He would learn, over the next four decades, that she was almost never frightened, and that this was not courage exactly but something more useful: a kind of enormous practicality that declined to make room for panic on the grounds that panic never got the dishes done. "Jim, look at me. Where are your friends?"

He opened his mouth. And there he found the first of the several thousand things he was never going to be able to say, and he said instead the only true sentence available to him.

"They've gone home," he said.

She searched his face. "And you."

"No."

"Jim."

"No," he said, and got up, and helped her to her feet, and she was so much smaller than she had seemed thirty seconds ago and so much realer, and the whole world had narrowed to the single fact that she was standing in it.

He got her onto the sidewalk. Somebody handed her the hat, and she thanked them by name, because she knew everybody's name and would for the next forty years.

There was a crowd now. There is always a crowd. A woman was telling Edith, at length, that the driver ought to be horsewhipped. A man in an apron was explaining to another man in an apron exactly what had happened, in a version that was entirely wrong.

Nobody looked at the piece of sidewalk where two men had been standing. There was nothing there to look at. No scorch, no gap, no absence. The world had closed over them the way water closes, and a man in a cap stood exactly where Spock had raised his hand, picking his teeth.

Kirk stared at him.

"Jim."

"I'm all right."

"You are not all right. You have gone the color of a dishcloth and you are standing in the road."

"I'm all right, Edith."

"You will come inside," said Edith Keeler, "and you will sit down, and I will make you a cup of tea, and you will not argue with me about it, because I have just been very nearly killed and I intend to be insufferable about it for at least an hour."

And she took his arm.

And that was how James Tiberius Kirk walked away from the end of the universe: on the arm of a woman in a gray coat, up Twenty-second Street, past a man picking his teeth, into the rest of his life.

Chapter Two

The planet had no name. It had a number, six digits long, assigned by a survey drone in the previous century that had passed within four light years, taken a spectrograph, recorded nothing of interest, and gone on.

Montgomery Scott had been standing on it for nine minutes.

He had counted. That was the sort of thing a man did, at a certain point, when the alternative was to think, and he had passed through the thinking about four minutes ago and come out the far side into a flat gray country where he simply counted things: the seconds, the columns he could see, the number of times Lieutenant Galloway walked the same forty-meter perimeter without being told to.

Nine minutes since the captain and Mister Spock went through. And the world had gone.

That was how Scotty thought of it afterward, and he never found a better way. Not changed. Gone. He had been standing on this plain, looking up at a sky with a ship in it, and then the sky had been empty and the communicator had gone dead, and the three of them left behind had stood in the silence and the silence had gone on and on.

Uhura sat on a fallen column with her arms around her knees. Every thirty seconds or so she opened her communicator and listened, and there was nothing in it. Not static. Not the hiss of an empty channel. Nothing, a nothing so complete it did not even sound like absence, and after the fourth time Scotty had asked her to stop doing it in front of him.

She had not stopped. She had moved eleven meters away and gone on doing it where he could not hear.

They had beamed down six. The captain, Mister Spock, Scott, Uhura, and two of security: Lieutenant Galloway, and an ensign named Brandt, twenty-two years old and three weeks aboard. Brandt stood the whole nine minutes on that plain, and went through every part of what the rest of them went through, and beamed up with them when it was over. Whatever it was that happened to the five happened to him too, in exactly the same

measure. He was the sixth of them, and he was there for all of it.

Galloway stood at what would have been a post if there had been anything to post to, phaser holstered, hands behind his back, eyes moving across a horizon that had not changed in ten thousand years. Nobody had told him he could stop.

"Mister Scott," Uhura said, at last.

"Aye, lass."

"How long do we wait?"

Scotty did not have an answer for that. He had been not having one for some time. "We wait," he said.

She nodded, and did not ask again.

* * *

The ring of stone in the middle of the plain went white, and threw two men out of it like a body coming up out of water.

They hit the ground hard. McCoy came up on his hands and knees, retching. Spock came up in a single motion that was not quite a stagger, and turned, and looked at the portal, and did not look away.

Galloway got to McCoy first. "Doctor."

"Get off me."

"Doctor, are you..."

"I said get off me!" He got up. He was gray, and there was blood on his mouth, and Scotty realized after a moment it was because he had bitten through his own lip and did not appear to know it.

"Where's the captain?" Scotty said.

Nobody answered him.

"Mister Spock. Where's the captain?"

Spock did not turn around. "Guardian," he said. His voice was level, and stripped, with nothing behind it. Scotty had served with the man for two years and had never once heard it come out of him like that. "GUARDIAN. WHERE IS HE."

HE IS WHERE HE CHOSE TO BE, said the Guardian of Forever.

McCoy made a sound.

"You threw us out," Spock said.

YES.

"Why?"

BECAUSE YOU WOULD NOT HAVE COME. AND YOU WOULD BOTH HAVE CEASED. AND IT WOULD HAVE BEEN FOR NOTHING. HE WAS NOT COMING EITHER.

"Send us back."

NO.

"Send us back." Spock walked toward the ring, fast, and Galloway moved without being told and put himself between the Vulcan and the stone, and Spock stopped, because he was Spock, and because the alternative was to strike a subordinate. "You will return us to the instant of divergence. You will place us on that street, and I will remove him from it myself, and you may have your history back exactly as it was."

NO.

"You have already permitted a passage. Three. There is no principle by which you permit three and refuse a fourth."

THAT IS PRECISELY THE PRINCIPLE, said the Guardian of Forever.

"Then show us the hour," said Spock. "Not the century. The hour. Name a date and I will give you coordinates to nine decimal places."

I WAS MADE TO OFFER THE PAST IN THIS MANNER, said the Guardian of Forever. I CANNOT CHANGE.

And that, for two years, was the wall. Not a refusal. A limitation, stated by a thing that did not lie, in the flat voice of a mechanism describing its own manufacture. It offered the past the way a river offers water: all of it, in order, at its own rate, and never the one cup you asked for.

The plain went quiet.

I HAVE CORRECTED ONCE. I WILL NOT CORRECT A CORRECTION. A DOOR THAT OPENS EVERY TIME A MAN

REGRETS SOMETHING IS NOT A DOOR. IT IS A JAILER.

"He is one man."

HE IS ONE MAN. AND YOU ARE ASKING ME TO UNMAKE A LIVED HOUR TO RETRIEVE HIM. AND THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER YOU WILL ASK FOR TWO.

"There is no one who comes after us."

THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEONE WHO COMES AFTER YOU. THAT IS WHAT A UNIVERSE IS.

McCoy pushed past Galloway. "Then you tell me." His voice had gone to pieces. "You tell me what I'm supposed to do, because I'm the one who did this. I put the drug in my own stomach, I ran through your door, and that man went in after me to fix it. He went in after me. He is down there because of me, and you are standing there like a rock."

I AM A ROCK, said the Guardian of Forever.

McCoy stopped as though he had been struck.

I AM A ROCK, AND I HAVE BEEN A ROCK SINCE BEFORE THIS SUN CONDENSED OUT OF DUST, AND I HAVE WATCHED A GREAT MANY THINGS ASK ME FOR MERCY. I HAVE NOT ALWAYS REFUSED. I AM REFUSING NOW.

AND I WILL TELL YOU WHY, DOCTOR, BECAUSE YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE HERE WHO HAS ASKED ME A QUESTION AND NOT AN ORDER.

IF I OPEN THAT HOUR AGAIN, THEN NO HOUR IS REAL, AND NOTHING IN THIS UNIVERSE COSTS ANYTHING AT ALL. THAT IS NOT A KINDNESS. IT IS THE END OF EVERY MEANING THERE HAS EVER BEEN.

The wind moved across the plain in silence.

"Then history is broken," said Spock.

HISTORY IS CORRECTED.

Spock stopped. He stood in front of the ring with his hands at his sides, and Scotty watched something move behind his face that he had no name for.

"Say that again."

HISTORY IS CORRECTED. THE WOMAN DID NOT BUILD WHAT SHE WOULD HAVE BUILT. THE WAR CAME WHEN IT WAS MEANT TO. YOUR FEDERATION STANDS, AND YOUR EARTH IS GREEN, AND NOT ONE SOUL ON IT IS IN ANY DANGER.

"That is not possible."

IT IS ACCOMPLISHED.

"Explain it."

HE STAYED, said the Guardian. AND HE STOPPED HER. AND IT TOOK HIM THE REST OF HIS LIFE, AND HE DID NOT ONCE PUT IT DOWN.

McCoy said, "Oh, God." Quietly. The way a man says something at the bottom of a stairwell after a long fall.

"Then he is alive," Spock said.

HE WAS.

"Show me."

NO, said the Guardian of Forever. NOT TODAY. YOU WOULD GO THROUGH.

And Spock, who had not told a lie since he was seven years old, said: "I would not."

YOU WOULD. AND SO WOULD THE DOCTOR. AND SO, I THINK, WOULD THE ENGINEER, AND THE WOMAN, AND THE ONE WHO HAS STOOD BETWEEN US FOR NINE HOURS AND HAS NOT SPOKEN ONCE. GO HOME. YOUR SHIP IS IN ORBIT. IT HAS BEEN THERE THE ENTIRE TIME.

Uhura got to her feet. "Sir." Her voice was not steady. "There's nothing up there. The channel's been dead for nine minutes. There's no ship. There is no anything, sir, and I know what nothing sounds like."

OPEN IT AGAIN, said the Guardian.

She looked at Spock. Spock nodded once. She opened the channel.

And a voice came out of it at once, clear and strong and entirely unbothered, a voice none of them had heard in a very long time, a voice that two of the six people on that plain had never in their lives expected to hear again.

"Landing party, this is Enterprise. Do you read? This is Captain Christopher Pike. Landing party, respond."

Nobody moved. The Guardian of Forever said nothing at all.

And then Lieutenant Galloway, who had not spoken in nine minutes, said, quietly, to no one in particular:

"Who?"

Chapter Three

New York City, 1930

The worst thing that ever happened to James Kirk was the next morning.

He had prepared himself for something. Some kind of arrival, some sense of a door closing behind him, some marker in the world to say that he had crossed a line. He had made a decision that ended a universe, and he expected, at some level below thought, that the universe would acknowledge it.

He woke at half past five in a room he had been living in for six weeks: fourth floor, back, over the alley, a bed and a chair and a washstand and a window that looked at a wall. He had taken it in November for three dollars a week from a woman who had made him fill out no forms and asked him no questions.

He lay in the dark and listened to the building. Somewhere below, a pipe knocked. Somewhere above, a child cried and stopped. Out in the street a horse went past, unhurried, and a man said something to it in a low voice, the way men talk to horses at half past five in the morning.

And nothing was wrong.

That was the whole of it, and it went into him like a spike.

Nothing is wrong. The world has not noticed. I reached out my hand yesterday afternoon and pulled the twentieth century off its foundations, and the milk still came.

He got up. He shaved with a razor he had bought in November, washed in cold water, put on the same shirt he had worn the day before, and went down.

She was already in the kitchen. She was always already in the kitchen. He had come down at five, and at four, and once, in December, at half past three, and found her at the stove in a cardigan with her hair down, and she had looked at him and said, "You can't sleep either," and made him coffee and not asked him a single question about it.

"Good morning," Edith said.

"Good morning."

She was doing the flour, measuring it into the two big enamel bowls that would become, in about four hours, the only meal two hundred men would eat that day. She did not look up.

"You're limping."

He stopped. "It's nothing."

"You went down on that street yesterday like a sack of coal with a hundred and thirty pounds of me under you, and you are limping. Sit down. I'll look at it after."

"Edith."

"Sit down, Jim."

He sat down.

And that was the moment. Not the street. Not the voice in the frozen air. Here, on a kitchen chair at six in the morning in a basement on Twenty-first Street, watching a woman measure flour:

I am going to sit in this chair every morning for the rest of my life. Nobody is coming. She is going to ask me to peel the potatoes in about four minutes. And I am going to do it. And I am going to do it again tomorrow, and in 1940, and in 1955, and there is no ship, and no bridge, and no crew, and nothing at the end of this except more of it.

He put his hands flat on the table.

Edith looked up. She looked at him for a long moment, with the scoop in her hand, and Kirk, who had spent his adult life being looked at by people who wanted something from him, found he had no defense at all against being looked at by somebody who did not.

"You lost them," she said.

He did not answer.

"Your friends. The doctor and the tall one." She set the scoop down. "They did not go home, Jim. Or if they did, you are not going with them. You knew it yesterday in the street, and you have been sitting on it for fourteen hours, and it is eating you alive."

"Edith."

"I am not asking."

"I know."

"I have never asked you anything." She picked up the scoop and went back to the flour, and her voice did not change. "Not where you came from. Not why a man who talks like an officer is sleeping in my back room for three dollars a week. Not why you flinch at the radio. Not why, your first night in this kitchen, you looked at my ceiling as though you had never seen a ceiling before in your life."

She tipped the flour into the bowl.

"I am not going to start now. But I want you to know that I have noticed, and that I am not a stupid woman, and that when you decide to tell me, I will be here, and I will not be surprised."

Kirk sat with his hands flat on the wood.

"Peel the potatoes," said Edith Keeler.

And he did. Forty pounds of them, on a kitchen chair, with a paring knife and a bucket between his knees, the skins coming off in long spirals, his hands very steady, thinking about nothing at all.

It took two hours and ten minutes.

He did it again the next day.

Chapter Four

The transporter room of the Enterprise smelled the way it had always smelled, of ozone and floor polish and, faintly, of the coffee somebody on beta shift kept illegally in a locker under the console.

Five people materialized on the pad. And Christopher Pike was standing in front of them.

He was leaning on the console with his arms folded, in gold, his hair going gray at the temples, weathered and easily impatient, and he was alive, and he was standing, and he was fifty-two years old, and there was not a mark on him.

Montgomery Scott made a noise.

"Report," Pike said.

Nobody said anything.

"Somebody report. You've been down there nine minutes, my sensors have been returning nonsense the whole time, and I'd like to know what I'm looking at before I write it up."

Spock did not move off the pad.

"Mister Spock." Pike straightened. "Are you injured?"

"No, sir."

"Then get off my transporter and tell me what happened down there."

Spock stepped down, slowly, and stood in front of a man who had been dead to him for eleven months, and looked at him. Pike frowned.

"Spock?"

"Captain," said Spock. "Where is Captain Kirk?"

Pike's frown deepened. "Who?"

There is a particular sound a room makes when nobody in it is breathing.

"Sir," said Uhura. "Captain James Kirk. The captain of this ship."

Pike looked at her. "Lieutenant," he said, not unkindly, "I've been the captain of this ship for thirteen years."

* * *

Doctor Leonard McCoy sat on the edge of a biobed in his own sickbay for an hour and eleven minutes without moving.

It was his sickbay. That was the obscene part. Every instrument was where he had left it. The diagnostic panel over bed three still had the flicker he had been complaining about for six months and Scotty had been promising to fix for five. His coffee cup was on the desk, his initials scratched into the ceramic with a laser scalpel in a fit of pique in 2266, because somebody in engineering kept taking it.

His name was on the roster. His service record was intact. He had graduated Ole Miss, been divorced, had a daughter named Joanna, and come aboard this ship in 2266. Under Captain Christopher Pike. There was a commendation in his file, signed by Pike, dated four months ago, for his work during an outbreak on Ariannus.

He remembered none of it.

He remembered a man named Jim.

He got up eventually and went to the wall panel and typed in a name.

NO RECORDS FOUND.

He typed it again, letter by letter.

NO RECORDS FOUND.

He typed it a third time, and stood with his hand flat on the panel, and read those three words for a long time. Then he went into his office and closed the door and sat down and put his head in his hands and did not come out for four hours.

* * *

At the end of the four hours he came out and did the only thing he could think of to do. He opened a medical file.

PATIENT: KIRK, JAMES T.

There was no such patient. The system generated the file anyway, because the system did not care, and it gave him a blank form with a blinking cursor, and Leonard McCoy sat down and started typing.

Blood type: AB-negative. Rare. Two donors on the ship and I am one of them.

Allergy: retinax V. Cannot use it. Needs correctives and is vain about it and will not wear them where the crew can see.

Old fracture, right clavicle, Academy, unset for two days because he did not report it.

Scar tissue, left flank, Tarsus IV. He was thirteen. He has never once talked about it and I have never once asked and I have looked at it in this sickbay eleven times over two years and said nothing.

Sleeps four hours. Claims five.

Blood pressure runs high and he knows it and he lies to me about the coffee.

He typed for two hours. Then he saved the file, and encrypted it, and gave it a name that was not a name, and sat back and looked at it.

And then he put both hands over his face, because he had just understood what he had done, which was to write a medical history for a man who did not exist, in the hope that if he wrote down enough of it, some part of the universe would be obliged to account for it.

"You damn fool," said Leonard McCoy, out loud, to himself, in an empty office.

He did not delete it. He never deleted it.

Twenty-six years later an admiral of the Federation Starfleet with a bad back and a worse temper would find that file on an archived data core during a refit, and sit alone in a storage bay for two hours reading his own handwriting about a man he had by then known for twenty-eight years, and he would not be able to explain to anybody, including himself, why his hands were shaking.

Chapter Five

Nyota Uhura went to her quarters and sat on the edge of her bunk and did not turn on the light.

After a while she got up and went to the shelf above the desk, where she kept the things that were hers, because in a life spent inside a metal box the things that are yours become important, and there are never very many of them.

A photograph of her mother. A lyre. And a small carved wooden bird from a market on Argelius, which she had bought on shore leave in 2266, in the rain, laughing, with a man who had insisted on haggling for it in a language he did not speak and had gotten cheated and been delighted about it.

She picked it up.

It was still there. The bird was still on the shelf where she had put it, and she could still feel the grain of it under her thumb, and there was still the small chip in the tail where she had dropped it in a corridor in 2267 and sworn in Swahili and been overheard.

She could remember the sentence exactly.

Lieutenant, that man just sold me a chicken, and I want you to know that I have never been happier.

She could remember the rain, and the awning, and the smell of the market, which had been fish and rope and something sweet. She could remember laughing so hard she had put her hand on his arm.

She could not remember his voice.

She sat down on the floor with her back against the bunk and the bird in her hands and tried, deliberately, the way she would work a corrupted signal, to recover it. She could not. She had the words. She had the rhythm, and the exact place where the joke turned. She could have transcribed it into any of thirty-seven languages.

There was nothing behind it. There was no sound.

Nyota Uhura, who had pulled human voices out of ion storms and subspace static and the wreckage of dying ships, who had once identified a distress call by the shape of its grief, sat on the floor of her quarters with a piece of carved wood in her hands and understood that she had lost the one signal that had ever mattered to her.

And she cried, for the first time in six years, for about ten minutes, with the lights off.

Then she got up, washed her face, and got out a padd.

And she wrote:

ENTRY 1. He bought a wooden bird on Argelius and he was cheated and he was delighted about it and he said, Lieutenant, that man just sold me a chicken and I want you to know that I have never been happier.

She looked at it.

I cannot hear him say it anymore. I am writing it down before I lose the words too.

She saved it.

She sat in the dark for a while. Then she wrote:

ENTRY 2.

Chapter Six

They told Pike everything.

It took four hours, in the briefing room, door locked, recorder running, and Spock did it because Spock was incapable of doing anything else. He did it exactly and in order, beginning with a hypospray and a bridge that had bucked under a wave of temporal distortion, and ending with a street in 1930.

Pike listened without interrupting. He was good at it. He sat with his chin on his fist and did not move for four hours, and when Spock had finished he sat for perhaps thirty seconds more.

"Show me the personnel file," he said.

"There is no personnel file, Captain."

"I know. Show me the one you remember."

Spock hesitated. "I do not understand the request."

"You've got a man in your head. He commanded this ship. You say he was my successor. Three of my officers apparently loved him, and he does not exist. So sit there and tell me about him. Not the temporal mechanics. Him. What was he like."

The room was silent.

And Spock found that he could not begin. There was no protocol for it, no line of report, no efficient formulation. He sat with his hands folded and could not produce a single sentence about James Kirk.

"He cheated at chess," McCoy said.

Everyone turned. He had not spoken in four hours. He was slouched at the far end of the table with his arms folded.

"No," he said, after a moment, as if correcting the record. "That's not right. He didn't cheat." He turned a stylus over in his fingers. "He'd talk. The whole game. Ask you questions, tell you some story about somebody's sister on Rigel, and you'd think, this man is not even looking at the board. And then he'd take your queen."

He was quiet for a beat.

"I thought for about a year it was a technique. Something he did to rattle you. It wasn't. That's just how he thought. Out loud, at people, all the time, and if you weren't there he'd think out loud at the ship." He looked up. "He never stopped talking and he never told you a damn thing. Loneliest man I ever met, and he was never alone one minute in eleven years, and I only worked that out this afternoon, sitting in a sickbay I've apparently been standing in for a year and a half without him."

Nobody spoke.

Christopher Pike sat at the head of the table for a long moment.

"All right," he said, and stood up. "I believe you."

Scotty's head came up. "Sir?"

"I said I believe you." Pike walked to the port and looked out at a planet with no name. "Five officers came off that surface with the same internally consistent account, and not one of you contradicts the others. Mister Spock does not lie. Mister Scott hasn't the imagination. Lieutenant Uhura does not make mistakes. Lieutenant Galloway has said four words to me in three years and all of them were true. And Doctor McCoy has been sitting at my table looking like a man at a funeral."

He turned around. "And there is a hole in my ship. I have felt it since you came off that pad, and I cannot put my hand on it, and I have been in command of this vessel for thirteen years and I know what she is supposed to weigh."

"Sir," Spock said. "There is one thing you are entitled to understand, though I am not certain I understand it entirely myself."

"Go on."

"Six of us remember a history this universe does not contain. Everyone else aboard, yourself included, remembers only this one. I have considered why. At the moment the past was altered, the six of us were standing within the Guardian's field, on the surface, causally attached to the event. The change passed over us. It rewrote our records, our biographies, the cells of us, into this timeline. It did not reach what we were carrying."

"Your memory."

"Our memory. We are, in the most precise sense, the only witnesses in the universe to a thing that no longer happened. The ship was not in the field. You were not in the field. So you do not carry it, and cannot, and I would not wish it on you. There is a sixth, Captain: an ensign of security named Brandt, twenty-two, three weeks aboard, who stood in the field and carries exactly what we carry, and is one of us."

Pike absorbed that. "So what do you want?"

"We want to go back," said McCoy. "And take him out of it."

"And the thing on that planet has refused."

"Categorically," said Spock. "And permanently. I have examined its reasoning, sir, and I regret to report that it is sound."

"Then what am I supposed to do with that, Mister Spock?"

And Spock said, "I do not know, sir." He said it quietly, with his hands flat on the table, and he was thirty-six years old, and he had never said those four words in that order to a commanding officer.

Every person in that room heard it.

Christopher Pike looked at his science officer for a long moment.

They had served together for eleven years, four months, and five days. Spock had come aboard as a lieutenant with a fresh commission and a great deal of theory, and Christopher Pike had given him the science station and then, more usefully, left him alone with it. In all that time neither of them had ever once been required to explain himself to the other, and neither had developed the habit.

"Then we'll find out," he said.

Chapter Seven

The name came up on the fourth day, in the mess, over breakfast, and it was Sulu who said it, without the slightest idea what he was doing.

"Commander Mitchell's putting in for the Constellation."

Spock did not move. He was sitting at the end of a table with a bowl of something he had not touched, because he had discovered in the last four days that he could not reliably remember whether he had eaten, and had begun, out of pure system, to sit in front of food at the appropriate times whether or not he intended to consume any.

"Say that again," he said.

"Sir?"

"The name, Lieutenant."

Sulu, who had served under this officer for two years and had never once been spoken to in that voice, put down his coffee. "Gary Mitchell. Exec on the Republic. He's putting in for the Constellation. It's all over the yard traffic."

* * *

McCoy came into the mess a few minutes later and found four people at a table in silence, one of them a Vulcan with a padd, one of them Scotty with his hand over his mouth.

"What," said McCoy.

Nobody answered. He read the padd over Spock's shoulder.

MITCHELL, GARY. Lieutenant Commander. Executive officer, U.S.S. Republic. Current status: active. Fitness: excellent.

"He's dead," McCoy said.

"He is not dead."

"Spock, I signed the certificate." His voice went up. "Jim wrote the letter himself and then sat in my office for four hours and didn't say a word, and at the end of it he said, 'He was my friend for fifteen years, Bones,' and

got up and went back to the bridge. So how is that man alive?"

"Because we never went to the barrier," said Uhura.

She had not touched her food either.

"That's it, isn't it, sir. The galactic barrier. In the history that happened, the Enterprise crossed it in 2265, under Captain Kirk, and nine people died and Commander Mitchell was one of them. In this one we didn't go. Because there was no Kirk to take us."

* * *

Spock set the padd down. "There are others."

"How many?" said Scotty.

"I do not know. I began three days ago and I have not stopped. Hear all of it before anyone speaks."

He did not look up.

"Gary Mitchell is alive. Elizabeth Dehner is alive; she published a monograph last year on isolation psychosis in deep-space crews, and it is, I am told, very good. Anton Karidian is alive, touring the Federation with a company of actors, performing Macbeth to excellent reviews, and his daughter is nineteen and no one still knows she is protecting her father.

"Nine crewmen of this vessel who died between 2265 and 2267 are alive. I have the list. I am not going to read it out in a mess hall.

"On Eminiar VII a man named Anan Seven is still administering a computerized war that has run for five hundred and three years, and the disintegration chambers are still running, because there was no Kirk to break the machines. How many walk into them, this year and every year? I cannot give you that number and I will not pretend to.

"On Beta III they are still praying to Landru. Six thousand years of a machine wearing a dead man's face, and the Festival still comes, and the Body is still absorbed, and no one on that world will ever be permitted to invent anything, or refuse anything, or grow. That civilization does not fall. It simply never becomes.

"On Janus VI the miners went on breaking open silicon nodules, and the Horta went on killing them for it, and neither side ever learned what the other was. There were more than three thousand eggs in that chamber. A species that had been alive for longer than ours was exterminated in a mine shaft by frightened men, and no one in the galaxy will ever know it happened.

"And on a planet with no name, three hundred children who had been alive for three centuries are dead, because the vaccine was never synthesized, and there was no one there to hold them while it was done.

He stopped.

"And there is a colony that is not anywhere," he said. "Nivalis. Forty families. It failed in its second winter, and no ship came, and there is no record of it, because there was nothing left to record. I found it by the absence of a supply manifest that should exist and does not. I do not know how many others like it there are. I have no way to know.

* * *

Nobody spoke for a while. Pike had come in ninety seconds earlier and stopped inside the door and not announced himself, and nobody had noticed him.

And then Galloway, who had said perhaps a dozen words in three years, said:

"Sir. Permission to ask a question."

"Granted."

"How many are alive?"

Spock looked up. "Lieutenant?"

"You've named six people. You've said nine crewmen. You've said Eminiar, and Beta III, and a mine on Janus VI, and children with no planet to their name." Galloway's voice was flat, the voice of a man making a report. "And you're going to take that back. That's the operation, sir, and I've stood at doors for two years listening to officers not say it in a

sentence, so I'll say it in one. We are going to go back and undo two years of a universe. And Mitchell dies. And Dehner dies. And nine of our own people. And a great many strangers walk into a box, or go on kneeling to a machine, or get burned out of a rock they were born in. And they are alive right now, sir, this morning, while we eat. So I'd like to know the number."

* * *

Spock did not answer at once. There were forty people in that room, and most of them had stopped talking.

He stood up. "Lieutenant. Come with me."

* * *

They went to the observation lounge. Spock locked the door. Neither of them sat, and the starfield ran past outside.

"You have asked the correct question," Spock said, "and you are the only person aboard who has asked it, and I am aware of what that says about the rest of us. You want a number."

"Yes, sir."

"I cannot give you a number." Spock did not look away. "I have tried, eleven times, and every method I use produces a figure I do not believe. Eminiar and Vendikar alone I cannot bound. Beta III I cannot bound, because I am not counting the dead there, I am counting the lives that are never lived, and there is no arithmetic for that. It is a great many. It is more than this ship has ever saved in one place. And I want you to hear me say that I do not know it, rather than have you believe I did the sum and found it acceptable."

Galloway did not move. "And you're going to do it anyway."

"Yes."

"Why?"

And Spock said: "Because you have counted the living, Lieutenant. Carefully, and honestly, and you have brought me a number. Now count the others. How many people died in the last two years, in this universe, who would not have died?"

Galloway opened his mouth. And stopped.

"You cannot," said Spock. "Neither can I. We can see the people who are alive because Kirk fell out of the world, because they have names and records and we knew them. We cannot see the people who are dead because he fell out of the world, because in this universe they never came to anyone's attention. There was no Enterprise where an Enterprise was needed. Were there deaths for the want of it? I cannot know. No intervention, so no record of one, and no catastrophe on the books, because nobody went to look. Four hundred times, in two years, a starship did not arrive somewhere. Nivalis is one. I cannot count the rest.

"That is what an erased man leaves behind. Not an emptiness. An invisibility."

He put his hands flat on the table.

"So the arithmetic does not close. It has never closed. I am not going to decide this on the arithmetic."

"Then on what, sir?"

"On the difference between the two histories, which is not the same thing as the difference in their dead." Spock was quiet a moment. "Edith Keeler does not merely change lives. She changes whether the future forms at all. Her movement keeps a nation out of a war three years too long, and in those three years a man in Berlin finishes something, and there is no Federation, no Earth worth the name, no one of us ever born. That is a divergence of the whole civilization.

"Kirk's absence is not that. It is a variation inside a future that still arrives. Pike commands instead of Kirk. Mitchell lives, and others die, and the century is different in ten thousand particulars, and it still reaches the Federation. It is a real world, and a good one. And it exists only because one man walked out of history and put his shoulder against a door for forty

years to hold it shut.

"And I find that I cannot draw pay in it, and eat in it, and call it a life."

The starfield went past.

Galloway stood on the other side of the table for a while.

"Permission to speak freely, sir."

"Granted."

"That's the worst reason I've ever heard."

"Yes," said Spock.

"And it's the only one that's any good." He came to attention. "I'd like it noted that I asked, and that you answered, and that you didn't lie to me, sir, which is more than I've had from anybody in nine years." He turned for the door. "I'll be at the back."

Chapter Eight

New York City, December 1930

He went back to Twenty-second Street.

He went on the third day, alone, and told her he was going for cigarettes, which was the first lie he ever told her, and it was so small and cost him so much that he stood on the corner for ten minutes afterward with his hands shaking.

He walked the block four times, slowly, on both sides, looking for a seam. For a mark. For some thinning in the world where two men had been standing when it took them.

There was nothing. A fruit stand, a barber's pole, a hydrant, a grating breathing warm air up out of the subway, and a place on the sidewalk about four feet from the curb where Spock had raised his hand.

He stood on it, in the cold, with the city going past on both sides, and closed his eyes, and knew he was doing something foolish, and did it anyway.

"Guardian," he said.

Nothing. A man went past and glanced at him and kept going.

"Guardian. I know you can hear me. You spoke to me in this street, in that hour, and you did not have to, and a thing that speaks when it does not have to is a thing that is listening."

Nothing at all. Two blocks up a newsboy was calling something, and the words did not carry.

James Kirk stood on a piece of sidewalk in New York with his fists in his coat pockets, and said:

"Please."

And then:

"I'll do it. I'll do whatever you want. I understood you in the street and I have understood you every hour since, and I'll spend the rest of my life doing it. But take me with you when I'm finished. Just let me see them

again. At the end. Not now, I'm not asking for now. Forty years from now, fifty, when it's done and she's gone and it doesn't matter anymore, open the door for four seconds and let me look at them. That's all. That is the only thing I am ever going to ask you for."

The wind came up Twenty-second Street and went past him.

He stood there another twenty minutes. Then he opened his eyes and bought a packet of cigarettes he did not smoke, because he had said he would, and walked back to Twenty-first Street and threw them in the ash can in the alley before he went in.

"Did you get them?" Edith said.

"They were closed," said James Kirk.

And that was the second lie.

* * *

He went back six more times over the next four months, at odd hours, and stood on the same square of sidewalk and spoke to a rock on a dead planet four hundred years in the future, and it never answered him, and by the spring he had stopped asking for anything and was simply going there to stand.

The last time was in April. He did not say anything at all. He stood on the spot for about a minute and a half, then nodded, slightly, the way a man nods at a grave, and walked away, and never went back.

That was the day he understood that he lived here.

Chapter Nine

Starfleet took nineteen hours to answer. The answer was four lines.

The planet was designated a Class One Temporal Hazard, to be quarantined at a radius of one light year, effective at once, enforced by beacon and by treaty. No vessel was to approach it. No research authorized. No further contact of any kind, by any party, in perpetuity.

The Enterprise was to withdraw and proceed to her next assignment, a routine survey of an ore-bearing system nine days away at warp six.

And the report submitted by the science officer of the Enterprise, concerning an officer named James T. Kirk, was noted, was appreciated, and was filed.

* * *

"Filed," said McCoy.

"Yes."

"They filed him." He was on his feet. "A man walked into the past and gave up his whole life to hold this rotten universe together, and there is not one human being in eight hundred billion who knows his name, and Command read the report and put him in a drawer."

"They do not remember him."

"That is not an excuse."

"It is not an excuse," said Spock. "It is an explanation. There is a difference, and at this moment it is the only difference available to us, and I would ask you to hold onto it, because I am holding onto it with both hands."

McCoy stopped. They were in the corridor outside the briefing room, and crewmen were going past in both directions, all of them pretending very hard not to look.

"I'm sorry," McCoy said.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"I have everything to apologize for. I put that hypo in my own stomach, Spock. My hand. There is not one event in this whole catastrophe that does not start with my hand, and every one of you has been careful for four days not to say so, and I would take it as a kindness if somebody would."

Spock looked at him for a long moment.

"Doctor. There is not one event in this catastrophe that does not begin with a console overload on a bridge you were not standing on, during a distortion wave you did not cause, on a mission you did not order, in a sector we were sent to by an admiral who has never heard of any of it."

"That is not..."

"It is precisely the same argument, and you may have it, and I am not going to permit you the other one. I have run out of officers."

McCoy stared at him. And then, unsteadily, he laughed. It was not much of a laugh. It was the wreck of one.

"You've run out of officers."

"I have four. One of them is you. And I intend to keep all of them."

* * *

The Enterprise went to warp at 0600 the next morning.

Spock stood at the science station and watched the planet with no name go off the aft screen. Uhura sat at communications and did not look at the screen at all. Scotty was in engineering with his hands on a core that was working perfectly and would go on working perfectly for the entire nine days, and he hated it.

And Christopher Pike sat in the center seat of the Enterprise, whole and alive and fifty-two years old, and gave the order.

"Warp six, Mister Sulu. Take us out."

"Aye, sir."

The stars stretched, and the ship went. And behind them a ring of stone stood on an empty plain under a sky full of daylight stars. And four hundred years and one impossible fracture away, a man of thirty-four in a

shirt he had worn the day before carried a pot of soup up a flight of stairs for a woman who was going to change the world and would not be allowed to.

He would do it again tomorrow.

He would do it for the rest of his life.

Chapter Ten

New York City, January 1931

The mission fed two hundred men a night in a basement on Twenty-first Street, with a boiler that did not work and a ceiling that dripped and a budget of nothing, and it did it with three volunteers and a woman who knew every name.

Not most. Every one.

Kirk had counted once, over a month, out of a kind of appalled professional curiosity, and made it to a hundred and eighty before he stopped, because he had realized what he was doing, which was quantifying a thing in order to avoid feeling it.

She knew that Dutch Vandermeer had a daughter in Rochester who did not write, and asked after her every week, and Vandermeer always said "Nothing yet," and she always said "Well, there's still the post," and he always laughed, and it was not a joke, and both of them knew it was not a joke, and it went on for years.

She knew that Solly Marks kept kosher when he was starving, and so on the nights there was meat she made him a separate plate of something else, without comment, and had been doing it for two years before Kirk noticed.

She knew that a man named Ellis had been a schoolteacher, and gave him the register to keep, because a man who has been a schoolteacher and is now nothing needs, more than food, to be handed a book and a pencil and told that it matters.

Kirk had commanded four hundred and thirty souls. He had known their names too, and had been quietly proud of it, in the way a man is proud of a discipline. He watched Edith Keeler do it for six weeks and understood that what he had been doing was a technique, and what she was doing was not.

He could not stop his mind working. That was the thing exile had not touched. He would be standing at the end of a long table with a wet rag in his hand and catch himself, without meaning to, running the room like a

ship: who was failing, who was carrying more than he let show, which volunteer would break first and how to spread the load before it happened. He caught himself at it and did not entirely stop. It was the only muscle he had left that still knew its own strength, and he used it in a soup line, on nobody, and it was better than not using it at all.

And he listened. That was the part nobody had assigned him and that he could not have stopped doing. He listened to two hundred men who had nothing talk about the weather and the shape-up and the Dodgers and whether a foreman at Pier 9 could be bribed and by how much, and every so often one of them said something that went into him like a nail.

A man named Coyle said, in February, apropos of nothing, "I ain't been touched in two years."

Nobody responded. It was not the kind of thing that got responded to.

"I don't mean a woman," he said. "I ain't been touched. Nobody's put a hand on me in two years. That's the thing gets you."

And Dutch Vandermeer, without looking up from his bowl, reached over and put his enormous hand on the back of Coyle's neck for about four seconds, and took it away, and went on eating.

And nobody said anything at all.

James Kirk turned around and went into the kitchen.

* * *

On the nights she talked, he sat at the back.

She stood on the second step of the stairs, and she was not a good speaker, in the sense that a good speaker is a person who has learned to make a room do what he wants. She had no rhetoric. She did not build. She had none of the little machinery of pause and rhythm Kirk had heard in a hundred wardrooms and had, God help him, used himself.

She explained.

She stood in a basement with a boiler that did not work and told two hundred starving men that they were standing at the start of the most

dangerous century the species would ever have. That the machines were coming, and would not care. That the world was about to become unimaginably rich and unimaginably clever, fast, faster than anyone in that room was ready for. That the atom would be split whether they approved of it or not. That men would leave the ground, and then the sky, and then the world itself, and go out among the stars, and that this was not a fantasy, it was a schedule.

And that not one hour of it would matter unless they learned first how to feed each other.

And they listened. That was the part that put ice into him, sitting at the back with his cap in his hands. Men who had not listened to anything in two years but their own stomachs sat in a wet cellar and believed her.

Because she was right.

She was right about the machines, and the atom, and the stars, and she was right, completely and catastrophically right, about the only question that mattered.

And she was eleven years early.

And that was going to kill everybody.

Chapter Eleven

The Enterprise surveyed an ore-bearing system for nineteen days.

It was good work, the kind Starfleet did four hundred times a year and never made a documentary about: a survey team, a spectrograph, a set of core samples, a report that would sit in a database until a mining consortium decided whether it was worth the freight.

Christopher Pike ran it beautifully. He ran everything beautifully. He was, Spock was forced to observe over those days, a magnificent commanding officer: better organized than Kirk, more patient, considerably less likely to do something in the last four seconds that would take the science department a week to explain.

And the ship was wrong.

Spock could not have defended the statement in any forum. He tried once, privately, to build a defensible version of it, and abandoned the attempt after ninety minutes because every element dissolved under examination. The bridge was correctly manned. The chain of command functioned. The crew were efficient and well led. Morale, by every metric Starfleet had ever devised, was slightly better than under Kirk, because Pike did not take the kinds of risks that get people killed.

Slightly better. And the ship was wrong, and he could not stop feeling it, and it was the most illogical experience of his life to that point, and he told no one, because there was no one to tell.

* * *

He found Scott in engineering at 0300 on the eleventh night, doing nothing. That was the alarming part. Montgomery Scott was sitting on a crate in front of the warp core with his hands hanging between his knees, not working, not drinking.

"Mister Scott."

"Aye."

"It is 0300."

"Aye."

Spock came and stood beside him. The core ran, making the sound it always made, a vast contained hum a man stopped hearing after a week aboard and heard again the moment it changed.

"She's runnin' perfect," Scotty said.

"Yes."

"Eleven days. Nothin' broken, nothin' out of tolerance. I havenae had to shout at anybody in a week and a half." He rubbed his face with both hands. "D'ye know how long it's been since I had a core that didnae need me?"

Spock said nothing.

"He was hard on her. He'd take her past the redline without askin', and he'd do it knowin' he was doin' it to me personally, and I'd be down here cursin' his name at a coil, and I'll tell ye honest, Mister Spock, I was never happier in my life than at those moments." He looked at the core. "And now she's perfect. And I sit here."

Spock stood beside him and did not say anything, because there was nothing to say, and because he had come down at 0300 for a reason he had not permitted himself to examine, and the reason was that he had not wanted to be alone.

"Mister Scott," he said at last.

"Aye."

"When we return to Starbase I intend to file a request for computer time. A substantial one. For a purpose that has nothing to do with any mission this vessel has flown or is likely to fly."

Scotty looked up. "Ye're goin' after him."

"I do not know. I have no method. I have no theory. I have every reason to believe it is impossible and that I will spend a very long time discovering it."

"Aye. But ye're goin' after him."

Spock did not answer.

"Right." Scotty wiped his hands on a rag he did not need to wipe them on. "Then ye'll route it through the secondary banks, not the main core, because the main core reports usage to Starfleet every ninety days and the secondary doesnae, and I've known that for eleven years and never told a livin' soul."

Spock looked at him. "Mister Scott."

"Dinnae thank me."

"I was not going to thank you. I was going to observe that you have just confessed a serious breach of regulations to a senior officer."

Scotty grinned. It was the first time anybody on that ship had grinned in nineteen days.

"Aye," he said. "I have. What are ye goin' to do about it, sir?"

Chapter Twelve

Lieutenant Galloway was thirty-one years old, had been in Starfleet security for nine years, and had never once been mentioned in a dispatch.

He was good at his job, in the way men in his line of work are good at it, which is that nothing happened to the people he stood next to. He had been on forty-one landing parties. He had lost one man, in 2266, on Kappa Fornacis, and had written the letter himself and had not been asked to.

Nobody talked to him. That was not a complaint. He would have found the idea that it was a complaint very strange, and if you put it to him he would have said, truthfully, that a security officer who is being talked to is a security officer who is not watching the door.

But he had been on that plain. He had stood on it for nine minutes and watched a Vulcan come apart, and he had gone back to a ship where a dead man sat in the chair, and he had gone to the armory and cleaned his phaser and racked it and signed the log. And then he had gone to his post.

And nobody had asked him anything. For three weeks nobody asked him anything. He kept the watch in a universe where his captain had never existed, and nobody had told him to, and every night at 0100 he wrote a line in a personal log that Starfleet permitted and no one ever read.

Day 19. Nothing to report.

Day 21. Nothing to report. Doctor McCoy has stopped eating in the mess. He eats in his office. Somebody should say something to him.

Day 22. Nothing to report. I have not said anything to him.

Day 26. Nothing to report. Mister Spock has requested computer time on the secondary banks. Those banks sit behind a security lock and I am the officer of record for it, and he came to my station and stood there and did not ask me for the code. I gave it to him. He did not ask why. I would not have been able to answer.

Day 31. Nothing to report. I have realized something and I am putting it here because there is nowhere else to put it.

There are six people in the universe who know that Captain Kirk existed. Four of them are extraordinary. The other two are Brandt and me, two security men who were only ever standing where we were told, and who remember anyway. We do not talk about it much. There is not much to say. But he knows that I know, and I know that he knows, and on the bad nights that has turned out to be worth more than I would have guessed.

I have thought about this and concluded it is not a coincidence. It is a fact about the door. Everyone who was standing in front of it remembers, and Brandt and I were standing in front of it, because standing in front of things is our profession.

I do not know what use I am going to be. But I was there, and I remember him, and if it comes to it I will go.

Nothing further to report.

Chapter Thirteen

New York City, February 1931

He understood it in a kitchen, on a Tuesday, with a knife in his hand.

He had been peeling potatoes for three months, and had gotten so good at it he could do it without looking, and this was the trouble, because it left the whole of his mind free.

She was across the table doing the register with Ellis, going down a column of names, and she said, without any particular emphasis:

"There's a room on Fourteenth Street. Twice this size, and the boiler works, and the man wants forty dollars a month, and I do not have forty dollars a month."

Ellis said something.

"Not from Sorkin," Edith said. "Sorkin has already given us more than he has. No. What I want is to go and stand in front of the Board of Aldermen, and take a hundred of these men with me, and sit them in that chamber in their own coats and be looked at." She turned a page. "They're going to build a subway to Queens. Sixty million dollars. And there is not one alderman in this city who has ever been in a room with two hundred men who have not eaten. I have decided that is the whole problem, and that I am going to fix it."

And James Kirk sat with a knife in his hand and a potato half peeled and felt the whole of the future arrive on top of him like a building coming down.

There it is. That is the first sentence. It is starting now, this afternoon, in this kitchen, over a column of names, and she does not even know she is doing it. She will take a hundred men to the aldermen and it will work, because she does not build and she does not perform, she explains, and one of those men will remember it for the rest of his life. In two years a newspaper column. In four, a committee. By 1936 a movement, the most persuasive and completely correct political argument anybody makes in

that entire filthy century, and it reaches the White House, and it keeps this country out of the war three years too long. And in those three years a man in Berlin finishes something. And there is no Federation. No Enterprise. No moon landing, no ship, no crew, no Bones, no anything. Not a worse future. None.

He put the knife down, carefully, on the table, which was a thing he had learned at the Academy, because a man about to lose control of himself should first put down whatever is in his hand.

"Jim?" said Edith.

"I'm all right."

"You've gone the color of the wall."

"I'm all right."

He got up and went out into the alley and stood in the cold with his back against the brick and his eyes shut.

* * *

THEN YOU MUST DO IT INSTEAD.

He had told himself for three months that he did not know what it meant. He had let himself believe it was ambiguous, that it might mean live a good life, or make it right somehow, or any one of a hundred soft and survivable things.

It meant none of them. It meant: her death was never the point.

He had been told that Edith Keeler had to die, and he had believed, because he was a soldier and soldiers are stupid in one particular direction, that what mattered was the dying. It was not the dying. It was the movement. The universe did not need her heart to stop. It needed her silent, and death had merely been the cheapest available method, and he had refused the cheap one, and so now there was only the expensive one, and the expensive one had to be paid by hand, in installments, every day, for the rest of her life.

By him.

He was going to have to take it from her. Not once, in a single terrible conversation he could brace for and be ruined by cleanly. Every day. In the small hours, in the kitchen, in a hundred conversations about aldermen and rooms on Fourteenth Street, for forty years, and she was going to fight him, and she was going to be right, and she was never going to stop being right.

He was going to have to be the thing that stood in her way. He, personally. The man she had taken in and fed and given a room to. The man she loved. He was going to be the hand on her chest for the rest of her life, and one day she was going to wonder about it, and one day she was going to hate him for it, and she would be correct to.

James Kirk stood in an alley in Brooklyn in February of 1931 and understood, finally, what he had bought. He had thought he was buying a life with her. He had bought forty years of standing between a woman and the only thing she was for.

And he was going to do it.

That was the part that finished him, standing in the cold with his eyes shut, and it was the truest thing he ever knew about himself, and he never told anyone, not her, not in forty years:

He was going to do it, and he was not going to leave. He was going to hold her back from the whole purpose of her life, and stay, and be loved for it.

And there was a word for that, and he knew the word, and he made himself say it out loud, into the freezing air, once, so that at least one human being in the universe would have said it:

"Coward."

Then he went back inside and picked up the knife and finished the potatoes.

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO: THINGS I MUST NOT DO

Chapter Fourteen

New York City, February 1931

He stopped her on a Thursday, and it took eleven minutes, and it was the easiest thing he ever did, and he was sick afterward in the alley.

The aldermen were meeting on the fourth of March. She had it worked out: a hundred and forty men who had said yes, a letter from a minister on Lexington, and Ellis drafting a statement in the register in a beautiful copperplate hand.

And she came up to Kirk in the kitchen with the whole of it on her face and said:

"I want you to come."

"To the aldermen."

"You're the only one of them who doesn't look like he's asking for anything." She was almost laughing. "Jim, you stand like a man who owns a building. I have watched you carry soup for three months and never once been able to make it look like you were carrying soup. If you walk in there behind me, they will look at you and think, that man is somebody. And then they will look at the rest of us."

He put down the pot.

He had known this was coming since Tuesday. He had lain awake two nights building it, in the dark, the way he had once built a firing solution, and he had it ready, and he was going to use it, and he already knew exactly how it would work.

"When?" he said.

"The fourth."

"Which chamber?"

She stopped. "I don't know which chamber."

"You'll want to find out. And how they seat the public gallery, and whether they can close it. Because if they can close it, Edith, then you are going to walk a hundred and forty starving men across this city in March,

in the cold, in their own coats, and stand them on the steps of City Hall while eleven men in a warm room vote not to let them in.

"And then it's in the papers. Not the way you want. Not, two hundred men who have not eaten went to City Hall. It will say, mob at City Hall. Somebody will write that phrase, and everybody will remember the last time they read it.

"And then Tammany looks at you. Not the way you want. They will look at you the way a man looks at something that has come into his kitchen. Because you will have taken a hundred and forty men out of a soup line and put them on a set of steps, and a woman who can do that is not running a mission anymore. She's an organizer. And there is a short word they use for organizers in this city, in the newspapers, and once it is on you it does not come off."

Edith Keeler stood in the middle of her own kitchen with her arms at her sides.

"They would not," she said.

"They would."

"On what evidence."

"On the evidence that you are a woman with no husband, no money, and no church behind you, feeding two hundred men in a cellar and telling them the world is going to change."

The boiler ticked.

"And the mission closes," he said. "That's how it ends. Not with a fight. Somebody makes a call about the fire code, and there's a man at the door on Monday with a piece of paper, and it's all perfectly legal, and Dutch Vandermeer does not eat. For a subway to Queens."

He picked the pot back up, because his hands had begun to shake and he needed them doing something.

"You'll spend the only thing you have on eleven men who have already decided, and lose the room on Twenty-first Street to buy a conversation you are not going to win. That's the arithmetic. I'm sorry. But that is the arithmetic."

* * *

It took eleven minutes.

He watched her take it in, and turn it over, and test it, and look for the hole, and not find one, because there was not one, because every word of it was true.

That was the thing he had understood, lying awake in the dark: he did not have to lie to her. He never had to lie to her. The world was full of perfectly true reasons not to do the right thing, hundreds of them, lying about on the ground waiting to be picked up, and all he had to do was pick one up and hand it to her, and she would do the rest herself, because she was honest, and an honest person cannot ignore a true objection.

That was the weapon. It worked for forty years.

"You're right," Edith said.

"Edith."

"No, you're right. That's what's so awful about it. You are right, and I have been thinking about that room for three weeks like a girl thinking about a dance." She sat down. "God. Ellis has written half a page."

"I'll tell him."

"You will not tell him. I will tell him." She put her hands flat on the wood, then looked up, and her eyes were bright and furious and entirely dry. "But I will tell you something, Jim Kirk, and I want you to hear it, because I am going to be sensible for the rest of the afternoon and I would like four seconds of not being sensible first.

"They are going to build that subway. And it will cost sixty million dollars. And every man in that cellar will be dead of nothing at all, in a doorway, in about six years, and there will be a train.

"And I was going to say so. In a room. Out loud. To their faces. Once." She went out to find Ellis.

* * *

Kirk stood in the kitchen for perhaps four seconds. Then he went out through the back into the alley and was sick into the ash can, quietly, thoroughly, for some time.

Afterward he wiped his mouth and looked up at a rectangle of gray sky between two buildings.

"That's one," he said, to nobody.

Chapter Fifteen

They began meeting in Scott's quarters in the fourth week.

There was no discussion of whether to meet. No proposal, no vote, no moment at which anybody said, we should do this. Spock simply arrived at 2200 on a Thursday with a padd, and found McCoy already there, and Uhura came in eleven minutes later without knocking, and Scotty poured six glasses of something and put one in front of Spock, who did not touch it, and one in front of Galloway, and one in front of Ensign Brandt, the other man from that landing party, who took the same chair every Thursday and drank from the glass exactly as often as Galloway did.

Galloway looked at it. "Sir, I'm on at 0400."

"Ye're on at 0400," Scotty agreed, and did not take it back.

Galloway sat down and did not drink it and did not move it, and neither did Brandt. And the two glasses sat in front of the two of them at every meeting for the next two years, full, untouched, and Scotty poured them both every time and never said a word about either.

"Right," said Scotty. "Who's got anything."

Nobody had anything.

"Mister Spock?"

"I have eliminated four approaches."

"Which four?"

"Controlled slingshot, direct. Controlled slingshot with a stellar mass under one point four solar. Transporter-mediated displacement using the Guardian's residual field as a carrier. And an approach involving deliberate replication of the original distortion wave, which I abandoned after nine hours because it requires a source of chroniton radiation that does not exist within four hundred light years and would, if it did, sterilize this vessel."

"Four," said McCoy.

"Four."

"In a month."

"In twenty-six days, Doctor."

"And that's progress."

"That is four fewer things to try, which is not the same as nothing. And if you intend to make that face at me every Thursday for the foreseeable future, I would ask you to at least vary it."

McCoy did not smile. Nobody smiled.

They sat in an engineer's quarters at 2200 on a Thursday with a bottle and six glasses and a padd, and it went on for fifty minutes, and at the end of it they had exactly what they had come in with. Then they got up and went to their quarters and got up in the morning and did their jobs.

They did it again the next Thursday. They did it every second Thursday for two years, and it was, for four of the six of them, the only thing they lived for, and not one of them ever said so.

* * *

It was McCoy who ran the histories, in the end, because it was the one part of the work that needed no physics.

He did it the way Spock had taught him to, years before, on another impossible afternoon, when a twentieth-century pilot named Christopher had been sitting terrified in their sickbay and the only question that mattered was whether the man had left a mark on the world large enough that pulling him back out of it would tear something. Spock had gone into the records that day and come back with an answer: the pilot himself was no one, historically, a footnote with a clean service file. But his son, not yet born, would one day command the first Earth-Saturn probe, and that was a thread you did not cut. They had put Captain Christopher back that day with enormous care, exactly where they had found him.

So McCoy knew the method. He simply turned it on a different man.

He searched for James Kirk. Not the one he knew; the other one, the one who had fallen into 1930 and stayed. He searched every history the Enterprise carried, which was all of them, and he found nothing. No James Kirk of any weight anywhere. No inventor, no founder, no name in any

index that mattered, in any field, in the whole of that century.

He found the woman, once he stopped hunting for greatness and started hunting for its absence. Edith Keeler, who in one version of the world had built a movement that bent a nation, had in this one run a mission on Twenty-first Street for a single year and then, in the summer of 1931, simply closed it and walked away, and married a man of whom the record had nothing whatever to say, not a birthplace, not an origin, not so much as a middle name, and disappeared into a quiet life in Brooklyn.

And he found the son.

There was one. Samuel Kirk, born 1935. And there was exactly one line about him anywhere in the whole of the machine, in a casualty roll that somebody had digitized a century and a half after the fact and no living soul had ever opened: killed in action, Korea, July of 1953, aged eighteen. No wife. No children. Nothing after him at all.

McCoy sat with that for a long time. Then he carried it to Spock.

"There is no Jim in there," he said. "Not anywhere. The most important man I ever knew, and history has not got so much as a hole where he stood, because he was careful. He was so careful. He spent forty years being careful, and he changed nothing that lasted, and the boy died before he could change anything either. There is not one Kirk left down there to alter so much as a bus timetable."

Spock looked at the record for a long moment.

"Then it is safe," he said, and his voice was perfectly level. And McCoy looked at him, and understood that this was the worst news either of them had ever been handed, and that it was at the same time the exact permission they had spent two years waiting for, and that the two things were one thing, and always had been.

Chapter Sixteen

Pike called Spock to the ready room in the sixth week.

He did not offer coffee this time. He sat behind the desk and did not get up, and there was a padd in front of him that he did not need, because he had all of it in his head, and he let Spock stand a moment before he spoke.

"Every second Thursday," Pike said, "at twenty-two hundred, five of my officers go into Mister Scott's quarters and do not come out for an hour. The same five. The doctor. The engineer. My communications officer. My science officer. And a security lieutenant who has not had a social engagement of any kind in the three years I have known him." He looked up. "And lately a sixth. An ensign. Brandt."

Spock said nothing.

"I have commanded this ship for thirteen years, Commander. I know what it is when people who came off the same landing party begin meeting in the dark and telling no one. I have seen it twice. Once it was a mutiny. Once it was a handful of good officers who had decided, together, quietly, that they were the only sane ones left aboard. Both times it ended in a funeral."

"Sir..."

"I am not finished." Pike stood. "I know what you are doing. You are trying to find a way to bring back a man who does not exist. On my ship, with my people, on time that belongs to Starfleet. You have been at it for six weeks, and you will go on, if I let you, until it kills one of you or all of you."

"And I am the captain. A captain who watches six of his best people fold their grief into a cell, and does nothing, is not a kind man. He is a negligent one."

"So I am going to give you an order, Mister Spock, and I am going to give it once. It stops. The meetings stop. The computer time stops. All of it, tonight. You go back to being the finest science officer in the fleet, and you let that man rest, because wherever he is he is at peace, and you are not,

and I will not stand here and watch you take five other people apart chasing him into the ground."

The ready room was very quiet.

And James Kirk was not in it, and had no idea it was happening, and would live his whole life and die without ever knowing that a man he had never met stood up on a starship four hundred years in the future and ordered the end of the only effort that would ever be made to bring him home.

And neither man on either side of that desk yet knew the thing that would one day make the moment unbearable to remember: that the order Christopher Pike had just given, out of decency, out of care for his crew and his ship and his own conscience, was an order to keep his own legs. Pike had carried the knowledge of the chair for years, and had made his peace with it, and did not yet understand that it had lifted off him because the dead man had fallen out of the world, nor that to bring the dead man home was to call it back down on himself. Spock did not understand it yet either. It would be the better part of a year before he ran the projection that laid it out in front of him, alone, at 0400. On this night, in the sixth week, they stood in their separate ignorance, one man ordering the end of the search and the other accepting the order, neither yet grasping that they were bargaining over the same man's spine.

"Yes, sir," said Spock.

Pike looked at him for a long moment, and something moved behind his face that Spock could not read, and then he sat back down.

"Dismissed," he said.

* * *

The meetings stopped for exactly one cycle.

On the second Thursday after the order, at twenty-two hundred, Nyota Uhura did not go to Mister Scott's quarters. Neither did the doctor, nor the engineer, nor anyone. Spock sat in his own quarters with the lights up and a

book he did not read, and kept the order, because he was a Vulcan and it was an order and he had said yes.

And at twenty-two hundred on the fourth Thursday he got up, and went down to deck four, and lifted his hand to knock on Montgomery Scott's door, and it opened before his knuckles reached it, because they were all already inside. Nobody had told them to come. Nobody had needed to.

Scotty poured the glasses. He poured six, and set two of them, full, in front of the two men from security, and no one said a word about the order, then or ever, because there was nothing to say about it that weighed as much as the fact that they had come.

From that night, everything was covert.

They stopped using the science lab except as cover. The real work lived on the secondary banks and stayed there, behind a lock held by a lieutenant who had already decided where he stood. They met at shifting hours and came by different routes, and never let two of them be logged together in a corridor without a reason. What had been grief became a conspiracy, with the shape and the discipline and the deniability of one, because a captain had made it one with a single order, and six people had looked at the order, and looked at each other, and chosen the man who was not there.

* * *

Christopher Pike knew inside the month.

Of course he knew. He was the captain. He knew it the way a captain knows the weight of his own ship. He knew the meetings had resumed, and knew they had gone quiet, and knew that somewhere down in his secondary core a Vulcan was still, patiently, illegally, reaching for a dead man.

And on a Thursday in the third month, walking the ship at twenty-two hundred because he could not sleep, Christopher Pike came down the corridor on deck four and saw the light burning under Montgomery Scott's door, and heard, very faintly, the particular sound of people who are not

speaking, and stopped.

He stood there a while.

Then he put his hands behind his back, and kept walking, and did not knock, and never, in all the time that came after, gave that order again.

Chapter Seventeen

New York City, March 1931

He told her on a Tuesday, in the rain, on the roof, because it was the only place in the city where nobody could hear them.

He had rehearsed it for four months. He had a version that was gentle and a version that was clinical and a version that began "I need you to sit down," and in the event he used none of them, because she got there first.

"You're going to tell me you're leaving," Edith said.

The rain came straight down. There was no wind.

"No."

"You have been building up to something since Christmas, Jim, and there are only so many things a man builds up to." She had her arms wrapped around herself. She would not take his coat. She had never once taken his coat. "So say it, and let us both stop pretending we don't know what tonight is."

"I'm not leaving."

"Then what?"

And he found that four months of preparation had gone, and there was nothing left in him but the flat truth, for which he had never had any talent.

"I need you to stop," he said.

She blinked. "Stop what?"

"All of it. The mission. The talks. The whole thing. I need you to walk away from it, and close it, and never build it again, and I need you to disappear so completely that history does not remember your name."

The rain came down. Edith looked at him for what felt to him like a geological age.

"Why."

"I can't tell you."

"Jim."

"I can't tell you." His hands had begun to shake, and he put them in his pockets. "I would give anything. I would give my hands. I cannot tell you."

"You can't tell me why I should burn down the only thing I have ever done that mattered."

"Yes."

"You are asking me to look at Dutch Vandermeer and Solly Marks and two hundred men who have nothing, and tell them that the one place in this city where somebody knows their names is closing, and give them no reason, and never speak again. And you cannot tell me why."

"Yes."

"Because?"

"Because if you don't," Kirk said, "everything ends."

"That is not a reason. That is a threat with the numbers taken out."

"I know."

"Then give me the numbers."

"I can't." He heard himself nearly shout it, and brought his voice down with an effort that felt physical. "Edith. If I tell you why, you will not believe me. And worse, you will begin to build a defense against it, and it will be intelligent, and it will be persuasive, because you are the most persuasive person I have ever met, and I have met a great many. And you will convince yourself. And then you will convince me. And then it will be too late for everyone who has ever lived."

She stared at him. And then, very quietly, "You're mad."

He shut his eyes.

"You are, aren't you," she said, and now there were tears on her face, and she did not appear to have noticed them, and the rain would have hidden them anyway. "Something happened to you. In the war, or on a ship, or in whatever it is you will not talk about. And it has gone bad in you. And I did not see it, because I did not want to."

"Edith."

"Don't."

"Edith, please."

"I have spent my whole life being told to be quiet by men who could not tell me why. Ministers. Aldermen. My father. Every one of them had a very good reason, and not one would say it out loud, and I have made a life out of not being quiet."

She stepped back. "And now you."

And then she stopped. And Kirk watched her face change, and knew, before she said it, exactly what was coming, and knew he had no answer.

"The aldermen," she said. "You stopped me going to the aldermen."

"That was a true argument."

"I know it was a true argument." She was shouting now, on a roof, in the rain, and there was nobody in that city to hear her. "That is exactly the trouble, Jim. It was true, every word of it, and I have gone over it eleven times looking for the place where you were wrong, and there isn't one. And it has taken me until this minute to understand that a man can hand you nothing but true things and still be steering you.

"How long."

"Edith."

"How long have you been steering me?"

And James Kirk, standing on a roof in Brooklyn in March of 1931, in the rain, with the woman he loved four feet away, said the truest thing he had said since he came into that century.

"Since the first day," he said.

She did not move.

"Since the first day I met you. I have not had a conversation with you, in four months, that I was not steering. Not one. I have managed every word out of my mouth since I understood who you were, and there has not been an hour of it I have not hated, and I am telling you because you have caught me and because I will not add lying to it."

Edith Keeler looked at him.

"Get out," she said.

* * *

He did not follow her. She went through the stairwell door and did not slam it, which was worse, and he stood on that roof for an hour and forty minutes in the rain, and then went down and out onto Twenty-first Street.

And he stood on the sidewalk and looked up at the lit window on the second floor where she kept her room, and watched her cross it twice, carrying things. At ten o'clock she put the light out.

He was still standing there at midnight, soaked through, when the street door opened behind him.

She had a bag in her hand. She had her coat on. She stood in the doorway of the mission with the rain coming down between them and looked at him for a long time.

"I don't believe you," she said.

He nodded.

"I want that understood, Jim. I want it on the record, whatever record there is. I do not believe you. I think you are ill, and I think you need help I do not know how to give, and if I am wrong I will spend the rest of my life apologizing." Her chin came up. "I do not believe a single word of it."

"I know."

"And I am going to do it anyway."

The rain came down. He could not speak.

"Because I have looked at your face for four months, and tonight, on that roof, I saw something I have never seen on a living man, and I have seen a great deal. You are certain. I have met certain men. They frighten me and they are always fools. But you are also sorry. And I have never met a man who was that certain and that sorry at the same time, and I do not believe a lie can do that to a face. I think only a truth can. I think you have seen something."

The rain came down between them. She was quiet for a moment, and when she spoke again her voice had changed. "I am going to tell you a thing I have never told a living soul," she said. "All my life I have known things that were coming. Not seen them. Known them, the way you know a storm before the sky does anything at all. That men will lay their hands on

a power that can burn a city to the ground or light one forever, and will have to choose which, and soon. That we will go up off this Earth. That there will be feet standing on the face of the moon, and I will be dead long before it happens, and it will happen all the same. People have laughed at me for it since I was a girl, and I learned to say it to no one. And I am standing here in the rain looking at you, Jim, and I have the feeling now, this minute, the very same one, and it is pointed straight at you. I do not believe you. But I sense you. And I have not once in my life been wrong about a thing I sensed."

She came down one step.

"So I will do it. I will close the mission. I will burn the papers. I will stop speaking, and disappear, and let two hundred men believe I lost my nerve, and some of them will never forgive me, and one of them is Solly Marks, and I will carry that for the rest of my life."

She came down another step.

"And I am not doing it because I believe you. I want you to understand that until the day you die. You did not convince me. There is no argument here and there never was one."

She stopped in front of him. The rain ran off the brim of her hat.

"I am doing it," she said, "because it is you asking."

She put her hand flat on his chest.

"And God help us both, Jim, because that is the worst reason in the world, and I have never been more certain of anything in my life."

Chapter Eighteen

The Enterprise flew for six months.

She went to Alpha Carinae and mapped a nebula. She carried a Tellarite trade delegation to Vega and was very nearly involved in a war over the seating at dinner. She lost two crewmen at Beta Aurigae, in an accident, on a survey, in a cave, and Christopher Pike wrote both letters himself and did not delegate it and did not talk about it.

And on the second and fourth Thursday of every month, at 2200, six people sat in an engineer's quarters and had nothing.

By the third month Spock had eliminated nineteen approaches. By the fifth, forty-one.

He kept the list on the secondary science banks behind a lock a lieutenant had given him without asking why, and it was the most rigorous work he had ever done, and it was a monument to failure, and he added to it every day. He came off an eight-hour shift, ate, went to the lab, worked six hours, slept three, went back on shift. He did this for six months.

At the end of the sixth month he was, by any Vulcan measure, in a condition his mother would have recognized at once and his father would have declined to discuss. He had lost four kilos. Twice, in a corridor, he had been unable for some seconds to recall the name of a junior officer he had served with for two years.

Nobody said anything.

Christopher Pike said something. In the corridor outside the science lab at 0340 on a Tuesday, in an off-duty jacket, arms folded, not raising his voice, not making it an order.

"Mister Spock. Go to bed."

"With respect, sir, I am at a critical stage."

"You've been at a critical stage for six months."

"Then it has been six months of criticality, sir, and I have no wish to interrupt it."

Pike stood in the doorway a while. "Spock. What happens if you find it?"

The console hummed. "Sir?"

"What happens if you find a way. What do you actually do?" Pike came into the lab. "You come to me. That's the answer, isn't it. You come to me with a method, and you ask for a ship, and the ship is mine, and I say yes or I say no. And I want you to know that I already know what I am going to say."

Spock turned around.

Christopher Pike stood in the middle of a science lab at 0340 in an off-duty jacket with his hands in his pockets, fifty-three years old, and there was not a mark on him.

"You do not have all of the information, Captain," Spock said.

"No. I don't. And you do. And you've had it for six months and you haven't given it to me, and I have decided not to ask, because I know exactly what kind of information a man keeps to himself for six months."

He turned to go. At the door he stopped.

"Go to bed, Commander. That's an order. You're no good to him dead."

Chapter Nineteen

New York City, June 1931

She closed the mission on a Thursday.

She did it herself, and she would not let him come. She stood in the basement in front of two hundred men with her hands folded and told them the mission would not open again on Monday, and that there was no money, which was a lie, and that she had lost her nerve, which was a worse one, and that she was sorry.

She did not cry.

They did not shout. That was what finished her, that night and for the next thirty-nine years. They did not shout. They sat in a wet basement with their caps in their hands and took it the way men take a thing they have taken before, and one by one got up and went out into the street, and some said goodnight to her, and some said thank you, and one of them, an enormous Dutchman named Vandermeer who had a daughter in Rochester who did not write, stopped in front of her and took her hand in both of his and said, "You'll be all right, Miss Keeler," and went out.

Ellis gave her back the register. He did it without a word. He had kept it two years in a beautiful copperplate hand, and had written a page and a half of a statement to the Board of Aldermen that would never be delivered, and he closed the book and set it on the table and put the pencil on top, squared, and went up the stairs.

Solly Marks stayed until the end. He was a small man, perhaps fifty, perhaps sixty, and he had been coming for two years, and he kept kosher when he was starving, and she had made him a separate plate on the nights there was meat and never said anything about it.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs with his hat in his hand.

"Miss Keeler."

"Solly."

"It ain't the money," he said.

She did not answer.

"You got a face on you like a woman at a funeral. And it ain't the money. I been broke my whole life. I know what broke looks like on a person, and that ain't it." He looked at her a while. "All right." He put his hat on. "You don't gotta tell me. You been the only one in this whole city knew my name. Whatever it is, I figure you got a reason, and I figure you can't say it, and I figure that's the worst thing that ever happened to you."

He went up two steps and stopped.

"So I'm gonna say one thing and then I'm gonna go, and you ain't gotta answer. Whatever you traded us for, I hope to God it was worth it. Because you fed me for two years and nobody else in this city did, and if you needed something that bad, then it must have been the whole world."

And he went up the stairs.

* * *

James Kirk stood at the back of the empty basement with a mop in his hand.

She had told him not to be there. He had gone up to his room at six and stood at the window for forty minutes, then come back down and stood at the back, behind the boiler, in the dark, and watched all of it.

She sat down on the bottom step, slowly, the way a person sits when their legs have stopped being reliable, and put her face in her hands, and stayed there a very long time.

She did not make a sound.

Kirk stood behind the boiler with a mop in his hand and did not go to her, because he understood that he was the last person in the world with any right to.

And a small voice at the back of his head said, quite reasonably:

You could tell her. Right now. She is sitting on that step with nothing left, and you could go over and sit down beside her and tell her the truth, all of it, the ship and the street and the voice in the frozen air, and she

would believe you. She would believe you tonight. She would believe you tonight because she has nothing left to defend.

He stood there for a long time with the mop in his hand and did not move.

And then Edith Keeler took her hands from her face, wiped it once with the heel of her palm, stood up, picked the register up off the table, and went upstairs to bed.

And James Kirk mopped the floor of an empty basement at half past ten at night, alone, in the dark, and did it thoroughly, and did it well, and put the mop away.

Chapter Twenty

She did not speak to him for nineteen days.

She was not cruel about it. That would have been easier and they both knew it. She said good morning. She passed him things at the table. She asked him, on the fourth day, whether he had eaten, and on the ninth, whether his back was troubling him, and both times he said no, and both times she nodded and went on with what she was doing.

She simply did not talk to him.

He had not understood, until then, how much she had talked to him. It had been the medium he lived in, four months of it, a running commentary of a woman thinking out loud in a kitchen: the boiler, the aldermen, the price of onions, whether God was a useful idea and whether it mattered if He was, a boy named Whitey who would not give his name.

And now the kitchen was silent, and he sat in it, and peeled potatoes for a mission that was closed, out of habit, because he did not know what else to do with his hands, and she let him.

On the eleventh day he found her in the empty dining room with a pencil, taking measurements.

"Edith."

"The Costellos want a room," she said. "Six of them in two rooms on the third floor and the boy is sick. If I take the boiler out and put a partition here, there's twelve by fourteen and a window."

"You're going to let it."

"I have a building, and no mission, and I have to pay for the building somehow, and I am not going to sit on a floor of empty rooms in this city in this year and call myself a Christian." She wrote a number down. "So I am going to be a landlady."

She did not say it bitterly. That was the thing that took the top of his head off. She said it the way she said everything, flatly, practically, a woman reading a repair estimate, and went on measuring.

And what she built, over the years, in that building, was not nothing, and Kirk watched it happen and never once said so. She could not run a movement, so she ran a house. She took the Costellos, and then the widow Ferraro, and then a man off the docks with a bad leg who fixed the plumbing in place of the first month and stayed nine years. She kept the rent low enough that people could breathe and high enough that nobody had to be grateful, which is a harder line to walk than anyone gave her credit for, and she walked it without appearing to think about it.

She taught the Costello children to read at the kitchen table three evenings a week, because the boy had missed a year sick and was ashamed, and by the time he was twelve he was ahead. She wrote letters for people who could not, and read letters to people who would not admit they could not, and she did it without ever once making it a kindness.

It was a smaller country than the one she had meant to change. But she governed it well, and the people in it were fed and warm and known by name, and Kirk understood, watching her, that he had not made her small. He had only made her local. And a great deal of the good in the world is local, and gets no column and no committee and no place in anybody's history, and happens anyway, in buildings, because a woman decided it would.

* * *

On the nineteenth day she came and sat down opposite him at the kitchen table at eleven o'clock at night, put her hands in front of her, and said:

"I have decided something and I am going to tell you what it is."

"All right."

"I am not going to ask you again."

He did not say anything.

"I have spent nineteen days doing nothing but this. I have gone over every conversation we have had since November. I have worked out, I think, most of the places where you steered me, and there are more than

you would believe, and some are so small I would never have seen them if I had not been looking. You talked me out of writing to the Times in December. You talked me out of Bellevue in January, and I have thought about that one for four days and I still cannot see how you did it, and I was there.

"And I have concluded that either you are the most patient and elaborate liar who ever lived, and you have spent four months dismantling a soup kitchen for reasons I cannot imagine. Or you are telling the truth. And if you are telling the truth, then it is a truth so large that a man will stand on a roof in the rain and let a woman call him mad rather than say it. And I have tried for nineteen days to think what could be that large, and I cannot, and I have decided that this is because I am not able to.

"So I am not going to ask again."

"Edith..."

"I am not finished." He shut his mouth. "I am not going to ask again, and in exchange, you are going to stay."

The clock on the shelf ticked.

"That is the arrangement. That is the whole of it, and I have thought about nothing else for nineteen days, and it is the best I can do. You do not tell me. And you do not leave. Because I will not do this twice, Jim. I have given up the only thing I ever built, for a reason I do not know, on the word of a man who will not give me one, and I have done it, and it is done, and I am not going to spend the rest of my life wondering whether he is coming back."

She put her hand flat on the table between them.

"So you stay. You stay in this building, for as long as I am in it. And if that is not something you can promise me, then get up right now and go out that door and never come back, and I will manage, and I have managed before."

Kirk looked at her hand on the table.

And he understood that she had just proposed marriage to him, in the only language available to two people who could not tell each other the

truth, and that she had priced it exactly, and that it was the most honest transaction he had ever been party to in his life.

He put his hand on top of hers.

"I'll stay," he said.

Edith Keeler let out a breath she had, by the look of her, been holding for nineteen days.

"Right. Good. Then you can help me with the partition, because Ellis has gone to Newark and I am not paying a carpenter."

Chapter Twenty-One

The bar on Starbase 11 was called the Fleet, which was less a name than a failure of imagination, and Leonard McCoy had been in it for five hours.

Spock found him at a table in the back. "Doctor."

"Go away."

"I would prefer not to."

"That's a hell of a thing for a Vulcan to say. Prefer." McCoy did not look up. "You want to sit down and drink with me. Have a conversation about our feelings."

"No. I want to take you back to the ship, because you are due on duty in nine hours, and because you have been in this establishment since fourteen hundred, and because I have been in the doorway for six minutes watching you not drink that."

McCoy looked at the glass in front of him. It was full.

"Yeah," he said.

Spock sat down. They sat. The bar was loud, forty officers and a band that was not good, and behind them a table of engineering ratings was singing something obscene about a Klingon.

"I can't do it," McCoy said at last. "Five hours trying and I can't do it. And I have been drinking for thirty years, Spock, and I have never once had trouble picking up a glass."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't get to." He pushed it away. "Because I did this."

"Doctor."

"No. You've been letting me off the hook for eight months. You and Scotty and that poor girl. And you do it very smooth and I want you to stop." He looked up, and his eyes were red and entirely sober. "I put that hypo in my own stomach. Nobody made me. There was a wave and a console and I went over sideways with the thing in my hand, and I had it in my hand because I hadn't racked it, because I was in a hurry, because I'd been in a hurry for six weeks and I hadn't slept."

"And a man is in 1931 tonight because of it. He is in 1931 tonight, Spock. Not dead. Not a memory. He is out there right now, in a room, in a city, and it's the middle of the night for him too, and he's lying awake, and he's thinking about us.

"So don't tell me about console overloads. And don't tell me it was a chain of causation with no author. Because I am the author. And if you take that away from me, then there is nobody left who is sorry."

The bar hummed.

"You are wrong," Spock said.

"Don't."

"You are wrong, and I am going to say why, and then I am going to take you back to the ship." He folded his hands on the table. "You believe that if you accept the blame, something is being paid. It is not. Nothing is being paid, Doctor. He is in 1931 whether you flagellate yourself or not. And you have discovered what a great many men discover, which is that guilt is a comfort. Because guilt has the shape of an action. And there is no action available to us. And so we would rather have the shape."

McCoy stared at him. "That is a hell of a thing to say to a man."

"Yes. And you have been waiting eight months for somebody to say something to you that was not kind, because you cannot stand any more kindness. And I am your friend. And so I have said it."

Leonard McCoy sat in a bar on Starbase 11 and looked at a Vulcan across a table for a long moment.

Then he picked up the glass and poured it out on the floor.

"All right," he said. "Take me back to the ship."

* * *

They walked back through the docking level at 0200, past the great windows, the Enterprise hanging outside in the light, and neither of them said anything for a long way.

"Spock."

"Doctor."

"When you say 'my friend.' Do you mean me?"

Spock did not break stride. "Do not be tiresome," he said.

And Leonard McCoy, for the first time in eight months, laughed out loud.

Chapter Twenty-Two

New York City, June 1932

They were married on a Saturday morning by a clerk at the courthouse who had done nine of them already that day and would do six more before lunch.

It cost two dollars. There were two witnesses, because the law required two: Mrs. Ferraro from the second floor, who wept, and a man named Abe Sorkin who happened to be in the corridor and whom Edith had known for four minutes and who was, by the time they reached the steps outside, apparently a friend of the family.

She wore a blue dress. It was not new. She had cut the collar off it and sewn a different one on, badly, on purpose, because, as she pointed out on the way, a person ought to be able to see where a thing has been repaired.

They had been in the same building for nineteen months and had not touched each other once. That was not a decision either of them had made. It had simply become true, in the way things become true between two people who have agreed not to say something, and it had gone on so long that neither of them any longer knew how to end it. And in the spring of 1932 Edith Keeler had solved the problem the way she solved every problem, which was directly.

She had come into the kitchen on a Tuesday and said: "We are going to have to get married, because Mrs. Ferraro has been telling the Costellos that we already are, and I have been letting her, and it has gone on for a year and I am tired of it."

"Is that a proposal?" Kirk had said.

"It is a notification," Edith had said, and gone out to see about the boiler.

* * *

The clerk asked for his name.

And James Kirk stood at a wooden counter in a courthouse in the summer of 1932 with his hat in his hands and understood that he had come, at last, to the final door.

He could give a false name. It would be sensible. It would be the correct operational decision, and he had been trained for fifteen years by the finest institution the human race had ever built to make correct operational decisions, and the correct one was to lie. He had a dozen names available. He had built a life out of nothing in the winter of 1930, and there was a clerk on Chambers Street who would make him a birth certificate for forty dollars.

He turned the argument over in about two seconds, the way a man turns a coin.

If you put your real name in a public register, you are a man from the future writing himself into the record. You do not know what that touches.

And then:

And if you do not, there is no document anywhere in this world that says I was here. Not one. I will live eighty years and die and there will be nothing.

He looked at her. She was standing beside him in a blue dress with a badly sewn collar, chin up, in a corridor that smelled of floor wax and cigarettes, thirty-four years old, looking at him with an expression of such enormous and undefended patience that he could not breathe.

"James Tiberius Kirk," he said.

The clerk wrote it down without looking up.

And that was the whole of it: nine letters and a middle name, in blue ink, in the marriage register of the City of New York, filed in a box, on a shelf, in a basement, in a building that would stand for another ninety years, and that no living soul would ever have any reason to open.

* * *

Outside, on the courthouse steps, in the sun, Edith Keeler took his arm.

"Tiberius," she said.

"Don't."

"Tiberius."

"My father had a sense of humor," Kirk said, "and no sense at all."

"I am going to use it, at moments of my own choosing, for the rest of my life."

And she did.

And she was buried with the right to.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Uhura kept the record.

It became, over the first year, the thing she did instead of sleeping. She had a padd she did not carry with her and did not leave lying about. She had encrypted it twice, with two systems, and memorized both keys and written neither down.

There were, by the summer of 2268, some three thousand entries.

She knew what that was. She had done the count once, late, and looked at it, and understood that a person does not produce three thousand of anything in a year without it having become a compulsion, and she had decided she did not care. Some of the entries were long. Most were not. They were the kind that only accumulate when a person has decided to catch everything and does not permit herself to judge what matters, because that judgment is precisely the thing she no longer trusts.

He could not spell "necessary." Ever. He spelled it four different ways in one report, and Mr. Spock corrected all four, and he wrote "STET" in the margin, in capitals, and Mr. Spock did not know what to do about it.

When he was thinking, he touched the arm of the chair. Two fingers. Left hand. He did not know he did it.

He hated formal dinners and went to all of them.

He read poetry and was embarrassed about it. He kept a copy of Paradise Lost with a broken spine, and there were notes in the margins, and the notes were arguments.

He was frightened of being ordinary. I am putting this here because I do not think anybody else noticed, and because it explains almost everything about him, and because if I do not write it down it will go.

* * *

She showed it to McCoy once.

He read for a long time, standing, at the end of a shift, in the corridor outside her quarters, and did not say anything, and when he had finished he handed the padd back and stood there for a moment.

"How many?"

"Three thousand."

"How many can you still see?"

She did not answer.

"Nyota."

"Nine hundred," she said. "Maybe. Some of them I can only read. I can read the words, and I know I wrote them, and I know they are true, and there is nothing behind them anymore."

McCoy nodded slowly. "That's how it goes. That's exactly how it goes with the dead ones, and I want you to know that, because you're going to think there's something wrong with you and there isn't. That's just what a person is. You keep the sentence and you lose the voice."

"I don't want to lose the voice."

"No," said McCoy. "You don't."

He put his hand briefly on her shoulder and went off down the corridor.

And Nyota Uhura went into her quarters and sat down and opened the next entry and wrote:

Doctor McCoy says you keep the sentence and lose the voice.

I am recording this because I do not want to lose Doctor McCoy either.

Chapter Twenty-Four

New York City, 1935

His first son was born in a walk-up on Nostrand Avenue at four in the morning on the ninth of April, during a thunderstorm, and Kirk was not there, because he was on a night hatch at Pier 14 unloading Brazilian coffee, and by the time the message reached him and he ran the nine blocks in the rain it was over and the baby was asleep.

Edith was sitting up against the pillows with her hair stuck to her forehead and an expression of enormous, exhausted, entirely private satisfaction, and when he came through the door soaking wet with his cap in his hand she looked at him and said:

"Well. He has your ridiculous chin."

He could not speak.

He had commanded a starship. He had faced boarding parties, and watched a world burn from orbit, and made the kind of decisions a man makes at 0300 with nine seconds left, and had made them cleanly, and had never once frozen.

He stood in the doorway of a rented bedroom in Brooklyn in 1935 and could not move and could not speak.

"Jim," she said, more gently. "Come and look at your son."

* * *

They called him Samuel, for a brother who would not be born for three hundred and eighty years, whom Kirk would never see again, and who was, in the strictest possible sense, at that moment both dead and not yet conceived.

He wrote the name in the front of a ledger that night, in a small furious hand.

Samuel George Kirk. 9 April 1935.

And underneath it, because he could not help it, because he was who he was:

He is real.

* * *

He sat up with the baby that night, because Edith could not, and because there was nobody else.

He sat in a chair by the window in the dark with a six-hour-old infant on his shoulder, and the storm went over, and the rain stopped, and the sky over Brooklyn went from black to gray to a kind of dirty pearl, and the child slept.

And James Kirk sat in the dark and did the arithmetic.

He will be six in 1941. He will be seventeen in 1952 and there will be a war on in Korea and he will want to go. He will be twenty-seven in 1962 and if the missiles fly he will be in this city and I will be able to do nothing at all. He will be thirty-four in 1969 and men will walk on the moon and he will watch it on a television and I will be sitting next to him and I will not be able to tell him what it means. He will be sixty-five in the year 2000. And he will die, probably, somewhere around 2020. And he will be dust for two hundred and forty years before I am born.

He shifted the child's weight, very carefully, and the child made a small sound and did not wake.

And in three hundred and thirty-two years a woman will hand me a personnel file on the bridge of a starship, and I will not know, and I will never know, that the officer whose name is on it is not descended from this boy. Because none of this is going to be in it. None of it.

He looked down at his son.

"You are real," he said, out loud, in an empty room, at half past five in the morning.

And then, because there was no one to hear him, and because he had not said it out loud in five years, and because he had reached, that night, some

final wall inside himself and gone through it:

"My name is James Tiberius Kirk," he said, to a sleeping infant, in a rented room in Brooklyn in 1935. "I was born in Riverside, Iowa, in the year two thousand two hundred and thirty-three. I commanded the starship Enterprise. I had four hundred and thirty people under my hand and I knew every one of their names."

The baby breathed.

"And this is my son," said Kirk. "And he is real. And that is the whole of the report."

He sat there until the sun came up.

Chapter Twenty-Five

New York City, 1937

He left the docks in the spring of 1937, when his back began to go, and opened a radio repair shop on Flatbush with money that had taken six years to save and that Edith had counted, twice, on the kitchen table, in coins.

It was the correct trade for a man in his position, and he had chosen it with the same cold clarity that had once let him choose a firing solution. Radios were the highest technology the twentieth century had that he could touch without destroying anything. They were vacuum tubes and copper and solder and patience, and he understood all of it so completely, so far beyond the level of any human being then living, that he had to slow himself down on purpose, every day, the way a strong man learns to shake hands gently.

He was very good at it. He was, in fact, the best radio repairman in the borough of Brooklyn, and within two years the best in the city, and he did not know it and would not have cared, and people came from three neighborhoods over and did not know why except that Kirk fixed it and it stayed fixed.

He could diagnose a set from the doorway. He could hear a failing capacitor across a room. A man would come in with a console radio on a hand truck and start to describe the fault, and Kirk would say, "It's the second filter, and your ground is bad, and somebody has been at this with a screwdriver," and the man would stare at him, and Kirk would say, "Tuesday," and go into the back.

And it delighted him, and that was the thing exile could not reach. He would never command anything again, and he had made his peace with that in an alley in 1931, but a hard problem was still a hard problem, and a man who has run a starship does not stop enjoying the moment a dead thing comes back to life under his hands merely because the dead thing is a Philco. He whistled in that shop. He argued, cheerfully and at length, with

salesmen who did not know a tenth of what he knew and would have fainted if they had. He kept the boys of the neighborhood at his counter with stories, half of them true, about ships, which they took for the merchant marine, and he never once corrected them.

He charged very little. He charged nothing at all if he thought they had nothing, and he was extremely good at telling, and he was never once wrong, and Edith found out about it in 1938 and said absolutely nothing and went on doing the books as though the numbers made sense.

And every day, in the back of that shop, with a hot iron in his hand and his glasses pushed up on his forehead, James Kirk sat looking at the guts of a console radio and knew that he could build a transistor.

He knew what it was. He knew what it did. He did not know precisely how to dope the germanium, because he had been a starship captain and not a semiconductor engineer, but he knew enough. He knew enough to take fifteen years off the twentieth century.

He could have walked into Bell Laboratories in 1938 with a sketch and a stammered explanation and changed the world. They would not have believed him. They would have thrown him out. And one of them, some quiet man in the third row, would have gone home and thought about it, and gone into the laboratory on Monday and tried something, and that is all it takes. That is genuinely all it takes.

And the world was on a schedule.

* * *

He kept a notebook.

It was a cheap black clothbound thing, bought at a stationer's on Church Avenue in November of 1936 for eleven cents, and he kept it in a locked drawer under the workbench for thirty-four years, and it had a title, which he wrote on the first page the day he bought it and never revised.

THINGS I MUST NOT DO.

The first entry was written in the back of the shop before the shop was a shop, when it was still an empty room with a broken window and a rent he could not afford.

1. Do not tell anyone what you are.

The second was written the same evening, and he sat and looked at it a long time before he wrote it.

2. Do not keep this notebook.

He kept it anyway. He knew, writing entry two, that he was going to keep it anyway, and he wrote it anyway, because he was a man who had spent his adult life writing accurate reports and he was not going to stop merely because there was nobody to read them.

There were, in the end, one hundred and ninety-five entries.

7. Do not mention the transistor.

14. Do not mention the jet engine to anybody at Wright Field, and do not go to Wright Field, and do not go to Dayton.

22. Do not correct the newspapers. Not even in your own head. It is a habit and it will show on your face.

31. Do not tell Sorkin to sell in September of 1929. It has already happened. I keep forgetting that it has already happened. I do not know what that is a symptom of and it frightens me more than anything else in this book.

44. Do not warn the men on the Reuben James.

61. Do not enlist. (See separate entry, at length, October 1941.)

94. Do not tell Sam anything. Not one word, not one hint, not one story about a ship. He is two years old and he already watches your face.

One entry appeared three times, on three separate dates, in three different years, in handwriting that got steadily worse: Do not tell Edith about the polio vaccine.

Sam Kirk had a friend on the second floor, a boy named Dominic Costello, and in the summer of 1944 Dominic Costello got polio and never walked again, and he was seven years old, and James Kirk carried him up the stairs to his mother's apartment twice a week for eleven years and never

said one word about it to anybody, ever, including his wife.

104. Do not.

105. Do not.

106. You did not. Well done. Go home.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Mister Spock. A word."

It was 0230. Spock had been in the science lab for nineteen hours, which was not unusual, and had been running the same class of simulation for eleven of them, which was, and he looked up from a console covered in failed solutions to find Christopher Pike in the doorway in an off-duty jacket with two cups of coffee.

He held one out. Spock took it.

"You don't drink coffee," Pike said.

"No, sir."

"Hold it anyway. It gives your hands something to do." Pike sat on the edge of a laboratory table, against three regulations he had written himself. "How long has it been?"

"Sir?"

"Since the planet."

"Fourteen months, sir. Four days."

Pike nodded slowly. "You've been in this lab three nights a week for fourteen months. You've filed nineteen requests for computer time on subjects that have nothing to do with any mission this ship has flown, every one of them approved, none of them approved by me. I gave you a direct order to stop, Commander, in the sixth week, in my ready room. You kept it for one fortnight. And I have known, every day since, that you were disobeying it, and I have chosen, every day since, to let it happen."

Spock said nothing.

"I have a hole in my ship," said Pike. He turned the cup slowly. "You told me that fourteen months ago. There was a man who was supposed to have this chair, and I believed you, and then you all went back to work and I flew this ship to nine systems and told myself it was over. And it is not over. And I know it is not over because I feel the hole every single day, and I cannot put my hand on it, and it is driving me out of my mind."

He looked up. "So I am going to ask you a direct question, Commander, and I want a direct answer. If you find a way. If you get him back. What happens to me?"

The lab hummed.

Spock stood with a cup of coffee he was never going to drink in a hand that did not move.

* * *

He had run the projection nine weeks earlier.

He had run it in this room, at this console, at 0400, alone, and he had known before he ran it what it would say, and he had run it anyway, because he was a scientist and did not permit himself the luxury of not looking. It had taken him four days and drawn on eleven separate sources, and it was the most competent piece of predictive historiography anybody in Starfleet had ever attempted.

In the corrected timeline, James T. Kirk assumes command of the Enterprise in 2265. Command of a Constitution-class vessel is transferred from Captain Christopher Pike, who is promoted to fleet captain. Fleet captains conduct inspection tours. Inspection tours include Class J training vessels. There is a baffle plate.

The projection went on for nineteen pages, and Spock had read all of them, and then read them again, and sat perfectly still in front of the console for one hour and forty minutes.

Probability that the injury to Christopher Pike does not occur in the corrected timeline: 0.4 percent. Probability that it occurs: 99.6 percent. Nature of injury: irreversible. Ambulatory function: nil. Verbal function: nil. Cognitive function: unimpaired.

Cognitive function: unimpaired.

That was the line. Spock had looked at those three words for a very long time, and discovered that a Vulcan can be sick, and that it does not feel like an emotion, it feels like a fact arriving too fast to be absorbed, and he had

gone to his knees once, briefly, beside the console, and gotten up again, and told nobody, and never told anybody, for a hundred and six years.

And then he had deleted the file. Completely, at the root, purged the buffer, overwritten the sector. It was the first time in his adult life he had destroyed a finding, and he had known exactly what he was doing, and had done it anyway.

* * *

"I do not know, sir," Spock said.

Christopher Pike looked at him.

And Spock, who had been raised on Vulcan and educated at the Academy and had spent his life inside an architecture of exactness, discovered that a lie does not feel like anything at all when you tell it. It goes out of your mouth like any other sentence. It is only afterward, in the two or three seconds afterward, watching the other man's face accept it, that you find out what you have done. And by then it is a thing that has happened.

"All right," Pike said.

He put the coffee down on the console, stood, stretched, rubbed the back of his neck the way a tired man does, and went to the door, and stopped there.

"Spock."

"Sir."

"You're a bad liar," said Christopher Pike.

And he went out.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

New York City, 1941 to 1945

He tried to enlist in January of 1942.

He was forty-six, which was too old, and had a bad back, which was disqualifying, and had no birth certificate, which was fatal, and he stood in a recruiting office on Whitehall Street for two hours with a form he could not fill in and walked out again.

That was not why he did not go. He could have gotten around all of it. He had gotten around worse. He could have built a birth certificate in a week and knew which clerk in which office would have done it for forty dollars.

He did not go because of entry 61.

He had written it in October of 1941, two months before Pearl Harbor, in handwriting that was still, at that stage, quite good, and it was the longest entry in the book, four pages, and the only one written in the second person.

Do not enlist. You know where every division is going to be. You know the dates. You know the 29th goes in on the left at Omaha and what happens to them in the first twenty minutes, and the name of the town they cannot take for six weeks. You would not be able to stand it. You would open your mouth. You would say one thing, to one sergeant, on one night, and it would be small, and it would be correct, and he would live. And the man who was supposed to be standing where he stood would not be there. And a war is four hundred thousand men standing where they are supposed to be standing. You are not able to watch men die and say nothing. You never have been. It is the worst quality you have as an officer and it is the only thing about yourself you have ever liked. You proved it on Twenty-second Street. So do not go where the dying is. Stay in the shop.

* * *

He stayed in the shop. He fixed radios for four years, fast, for women who were listening for a name, and did not charge them, and there was a card in his window from 1942 to 1945 that read, in his own small furious hand, NO CHARGE FOR SERVICE FAMILIES, and Edith took it down in September of 1945 and did not throw it away, and it was in a drawer in that apartment when she died.

He listened to the news every night at six. He knew what was coming, the way a man knows the words of a song, and he sat in the back of a radio shop on Flatbush Avenue with a hot iron in his hand and listened to Edward R. Murrow describe, in that magnificent unhurried voice, a thing James Kirk had known about for twelve years and had not stopped and had not tried to stop.

* * *

Halina Kosinski's boy went in 1943.

She brought Kirk her radio that spring, because the tubes had gone and she could not afford a new one, and she needed it, she said. She needed it particularly now.

He fixed it in forty minutes and told her it had been a loose wire and charged her nothing. And she stood in his shop with the radio in her arms and did not go, and he waited, because he had learned to wait, and after a while she said:

"He's in England."

"That's good."

"Is it?"

And James Kirk, who knew her son was in the Quartermaster Corps in a depot in Wiltshire, and knew what that meant, and knew, with something close to certainty and not quite certainty, that the boy would come home, looked at a woman whose face was breaking.

"He'll be all right, Halina," he said.

And he watched her decide to believe him. He watched a woman take a sentence from a man she trusted and put it inside herself and close over it, and she was going to carry it for two years, and it was going to hold her up.

She went out. And he went into the back room and put both hands flat on the workbench and stood there a long time. Because he had said it. He had told a woman her son would live, and he had been right, and it had cost nothing, and it was the most reckless thing he had done since 1930, and he had done it because she was standing in his shop and he was so tired.

He put it in the notebook that night.

121. Do not do that again.

He never did.

* * *

The lists came out in the papers. Every week. Column after column, small type, name after name, borough by borough, and the whole city read them standing up in the street outside the newsstand, because nobody wanted to be sitting down.

James Kirk read them every week for four years. He did not know a single name.

He had commanded four hundred and thirty souls, and lost men, a great many, and written every letter himself, in his own hand, because he believed a man who would not write the letter had no business giving the order. And he stood on Flatbush Avenue in 1944 with a newspaper in his hands, reading four hundred names of boys he had never met, and understood he was going to do this every week for the rest of the war, and that not one of those names would ever mean anything to him, and that this was the deal he had made.

A man who has traded the future of the human race for one woman on one street does not also get to be the man who carries everybody.

He carried them anyway. He read every list, every column, every week, for four years, and never skipped one, and Edith found him at the kitchen

table at midnight more times than she ever mentioned, with the paper open and a cup of coffee gone cold at his elbow, reading names.

"Do you know any of them?" she asked him once.

"No."

"Then why?"

And James Kirk, who had spent his life in the company of an answer he could not give to anybody, said the only true thing available to him.

"Because somebody should," he said.

* * *

In August of 1945 the news came on the radio at six o'clock in the evening.

Edith was at the sink. Sam was in the yard. Kirk was at the kitchen table with his hands flat on the wood, and he had been sitting like that for about ten minutes, because he had known since the first of the month, and known the city, and known the date.

The announcer said a name. A city. A single aircraft.

Edith turned around from the sink with her hands still wet. She did not say anything. She did not have to. It was item six on a list she had read at this table three years earlier and burned in that stove, and she had known the month, and had done the arithmetic in 1942 and been doing it every day since.

She crossed the kitchen and stood behind her husband's chair.

And she put two fingers on the back of his neck.

That was where it came from. Thirty-eight years of a small unconscious gesture, a hand on a neck in passing, worn and private, the thing that would one day undo a Vulcan through the Guardian of Forever. It started in a kitchen in Brooklyn on the sixth of August, 1945, at four minutes past six, because a woman could not think of one thing to say to a man who had known for fifteen years.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Enterprise flew for another year. Spock eliminated one hundred and eleven approaches.

He had developed, by then, a private and indefensible habit he never disclosed: he had begun to think of the failures as offerings. There was no ledger. There was nobody keeping score. The universe did not owe him a solution in exchange for a hundred and eleven documented negatives, and he had spent his professional life demonstrating that no universe with a conscience existed. He went on thinking it anyway, at 0400, at a console, and the thought never varied.

I am doing everything. I want it noted that I am doing everything.

* * *

And on the second and fourth Thursdays, six people sat in an engineer's quarters around a bottle and two untouched glasses.

The meetings got shorter. McCoy noticed it first, in the eighteenth month, and said nothing for six weeks and then said it all at once.

"Fourteen minutes," he said.

"Doctor?"

"That's how long we were in here last time. Two years ago these things went ninety minutes and I had to be thrown out. Last month we did fourteen minutes and Scotty was asleep."

"I was not asleep."

"You were asleep, Scotty."

"I was restin' my eyes and thinkin' about a coil."

"You were asleep," said McCoy, "and I am not blaming you, and that is the whole point. I want somebody in this room to look at me and tell me we are not, all five of us, quietly letting him go. Because that's what this is. It doesn't look like a decision. Nobody stands up and says, well, that's enough, I'm off. It looks like fourteen minutes. It looks like people who

used to be desperate turning up out of politeness. And I have watched a lot of families do this, and I am telling you as a physician that it always looks exactly like this, and it never once looks like giving up, and it is always giving up."

The room was silent.

And then Nyota Uhura said: "Six thousand and eleven."

Everybody turned.

"That's how many entries I have. As of last night. I wrote sixty-one this week. I write between forty and eighty a week and I have done it every single week for two years and I have not missed one." She looked at McCoy. "So don't."

"Nyota..."

"Don't you dare tell me I'm letting him go." Her voice did not rise, and it was worse than shouting. "I am the only person in this room who has to sit eleven meters from that chair for eight hours a day. Doctor, you have a sickbay. Mister Scott has an engine. Mister Spock has a laboratory and a problem. Lieutenant Galloway has a corridor, and Ensign Brandt another. I have a station on the bridge. And I sit at it, in a room with a man in the chair who is not him, and I do my job, and I say 'Aye, sir,' and I say it to Christopher Pike, and every one of those times has cost me something I do not get back.

"You want to know why the meetings are fourteen minutes, Doctor? Because we've run out of things to say. Not out of wanting. Out of sentences. And you have confused the two, and accused four people who love him of quitting, and I want an apology and I want it now."

Leonard McCoy looked at her for four seconds. "You're right," he said. "I apologize."

"Thank you."

"I'm frightened," said McCoy.

"I know," said Uhura. "So am I."

And she sat back down, and Scotty refilled her glass without being asked, and nobody said anything else for a while, and the meeting went on

for two hours.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

New York City, October 1947

Her name was Anna Kosinski. She was seven, she lived on the third floor, and she was, by universal agreement of every adult on Nostrand Avenue, an absolute menace.

She rode a bicycle two sizes too big for her with a fanatical disregard for the concept of braking. She had chalked a hopscotch grid on the sidewalk outside the radio shop and defended it against all comers, including a delivery van. She had once come into the shop and asked Kirk whether the radio could hear her back, and when he said no, she said, "Then how does it know what to say," and he put down his soldering iron and had no answer for four seconds, which was a personal record.

She was Halina Kosinski's granddaughter.

In October of 1947 she began to bruise.

* * *

He knew what it was before the doctor did. That was not difficult medicine. He stood in a stairwell on a Tuesday looking at a seven-year-old with bruises she could not account for, and a nosebleed that would not stop, and a pallor that had come up on her in six weeks like a tide.

Acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

In 1947, in the city of New York, the finest hospital on the planet could offer Anna Kosinski a bed, a transfusion, and eight weeks. The survival rate was not low. It was zero. It was one of the very few diseases in the whole grim catalogue of that century about which the medicine of 1947 had nothing to say except a date.

And James Kirk sat in the back of a radio shop with a hot iron going cold in his hand and knew one thing, and did not know a single one of the things that would have made the one thing useful.

He knew that his own century did not lose this child. He knew that somewhere down the long years it stopped being a sentence and became a hard thing that children came through, and grew up, and grew old, and forgot. He did not know how. He was a starship captain and not a physician, and the cure, when it finally came, was not one drug but many, found by people whose names he had never learned, across a span of years he could not have marked on a calendar to save his life. He knew the destination. He did not know one step of the road, nor the year it ended, nor the name of a single soul who walked it.

Someday. Long after her. She had eight weeks.

* * *

He tried to write it that night, at the workbench, after the shade was down.

He got as far as the salutation. Then he sat with the pen over the paper and reached for the thing he meant to put beneath it, the gift, the one page that would buy a seven-year-old her whole life, and found that there was nothing in his hand. He knew that it could be done. He did not know how it was done. He had no drug to name, and no dose to give, and no man to send it to, and no year to promise. He had a certainty with no cargo in it. He sat for an hour, and in the end he wrote four words, and looked at them a long time. They were: It becomes curable. Wait. And they were true, and they were worth nothing, because he could not say when, or how, or to whom, and any doctor then living who received an unsigned note telling him to wait would go on doing precisely what he was already doing, which was everything he could, against a thing that did not yet have an answer.

He looked at the four words for a long time. Four hours, in the end.

* * *

He did not know what it changed. That was the entire objection, and it was enough, and he tried all night to get around it and could not.

He had one data point. One. He knew that this timeline held, because he was in it, and it was 1947, and it had held. The Guardian had told him one thing: that a woman must not make an argument in 1936. It had not given him a schedule. It had not told him which of the boards around him were load-bearing.

And there was this, which was worse. He did not truly know that he would be helping at all. He had one data point, and it was himself: he knew this timeline held, because he was standing in it, and it was 1947, and it had held. He did not know which of the boards around him were load-bearing. Change one year, one death, one child who lived who had not lived, and by 1962 there was a different set of human beings alive in different rooms, and thirteen days in October when the whole species stood at the edge, and no way on earth to know whether the thing that had brought it back from that edge was still there in the new arrangement.

Alter the composition of the human race by four hundred thousand people over fifteen years, and you are rolling that dice again.

And Anna Kosinski was seven, and rode a bicycle badly, and had asked him how the radio knew what to say.

* * *

He burned the four words at four in the morning, in the sink at the back of the shop.

He watched it go, and he did not cry, because he had discovered some years earlier that there is a place past crying and that he lived there now.

Then he opened the black notebook to the next clean line.

195. You had nothing to give her.

He looked at it. He put down the pen and got up and walked around the shop twice. Then he sat back down and wrote, underneath, in handwriting that had gone entirely to pieces:

Her name is Anna. She is seven. I am a coward and I have arithmetic instead of a soul.

* * *

Anna Kosinski died on the ninth of January, 1948, at Kings County Hospital, and Kirk was there, because her mother had nobody and her grandmother was seventy-one.

He carried the coffin with three other men from the building. It weighed nothing at all. That was the thing he had not been ready for. He had braced for the grief and had not thought about the weight. Four grown men carried a box down four flights of stairs and out to a car in the snow, and one of them had commanded a starship, and it was like carrying an empty crate, and he had to stop on the second landing, and Sam, who was twelve and watching from the door of the apartment, saw his father stop.

He never forgot it. He asked his mother about it once, in 1954, when he was nineteen and angry about everything, and she said, "Your father is carrying something," and he said, "That's not an answer," and Edith Keeler said, "No. It isn't. And it is all you are going to get, and one day you will understand why, and I hope to God you never do."

* * *

That night she found him sitting on the floor of the shop with his back against the workbench and the notebook open in his lap.

She read it over his shoulder. All one hundred and ninety-five lines. Every entry, every year, twelve years of a man's handwriting getting worse, in silence, standing behind him in her coat, in the dark, in a shop that smelled of solder.

She read it to the end. Then she sat down on the floor beside him, in her good coat, on the filthy linoleum, and took the notebook out of his hands and closed it.

"You are not a coward," she said.

"Edith."

"You are the bravest man I have ever met, and you have made the worst life I have ever heard of. And I have decided, on the whole, that I would still rather have you than the world."

"That is a terrible thing to say."

"Yes. It is. And I have thought about it very carefully. And I mean it. And I will not be saying it again."

She got up, held out her hand, and pulled him up off the floor of his own shop, a woman of fifty-one pulling a man of fifty-two up off the linoleum with both hands, and they stood there.

"Come home," she said.

Chapter Thirty

Spock found it on a Tuesday, at 0410, in the science lab, in the twenty-sixth month.

He had not been looking for it. That was the part he would find, afterward, most difficult to forgive. He had been running a routine analysis of the Guardian's residual emission spectra for a paper he had no intention of publishing, out of the sheer inability to leave a data set alone. He had been half thinking about a chess problem.

And he stopped. He sat perfectly still in front of the console for four minutes. Then he said, out loud, to an empty laboratory, in a voice that did not sound like his own:

"We have been asking it the wrong question."

* * *

He called them at 0500. They came, all four, in various states of undress and fury. Scotty was actually carrying a boot. They crowded into the lab and Spock did not apologize and did not explain and simply began.

"The Guardian of Forever is not a time portal," he said.

Silence.

"Say that again," said Scotty.

"It is not a time portal. It has never been one. We have called it one for twenty-six months. Starfleet calls it one. The term is wrong, and because it is wrong we have spent two years trying to solve a problem that does not exist."

He put an image on the screen, a densely folded spectrum that went on and on.

"When it showed us Earth's history, it did not show us a recording. It offered us passage. When Doctor McCoy went through, he did not travel to 1930. He entered 1930, which was, at that moment, extant. And when the captain altered it, the Guardian did not erase the previous version. It moved

it."

McCoy sat down.

"Underneath," said Uhura.

"Underneath," said Spock. He turned around. "The correct analogy is not a recording that has been overwritten. It is a painting that has been painted over. The earlier work is still present. It is beneath the surface. It has not been destroyed, because destruction is not an operation this object performs. Because it is not an editor. It is an archive.

"It holds every state that has been lived. Not every state that is possible. That distinction is critical, and I want every person in this room to hold it, because if we get it wrong we will die. It cannot show us a world that never was. It cannot generate. It has no imagination. It remembers. And it remembers everything, and it will remember it forever.

"And we have spent two years asking it to correct history, and it has refused, every time, and correctly, and told us why, and we did not listen. We never once asked it to show us the past. Which is the only thing it has ever offered to do."

Scotty put the boot down. "Mister Spock. Are ye tellin' me that the door to the old universe has been standin' open this entire time?"

"I am telling you it has been standing open for twenty-six months. And telling us so in plain language. And we did not hear it, because we were asking it for a miracle, and it was offering us a filing cabinet."

Chapter Thirty-One

They took nine hours to find the flaw, because there had to be one, and there was.

It was McCoy who said it. "It doesn't help us."

"Doctor..."

"No, listen, because I've been sitting here nine hours letting you two get excited, and somebody has to say it out loud. The old universe is down there under the floorboards. Fine. You can open the door and look at it. But Jim isn't in the old universe, Spock. Jim is in this one. He's in 1948, in the timeline that actually happened, the one we're standing in, and going down into the layer underneath does not get you within four hundred years of him."

"That is correct," said Spock.

"Then what in God's name are we celebrating?"

"We are not celebrating, Doctor. We are locating the lever."

Spock went to the board.

"You are entirely correct. Captain Kirk cannot be retrieved from 1948. He cannot be retrieved from 1930. The Guardian will not open those hours. They have been lived, and to unmake them would be a correction, and it will not perform one. But that is not the only door.

"In the timeline that was overwritten, there is a bridge. Aboard this vessel. Six hours before Doctor McCoy administers cordrazine to himself."

McCoy went very white.

"That bridge is a lived hour. It is fully present in the record. And it is not being corrected, because it has already been unmade. It is a dead layer. And the Guardian will open a dead layer, because opening a dead layer is not an alteration. It is a reading."

Nobody moved.

"And if somebody is standing on that bridge," McCoy said, and his voice had gone.

"Then the console does not overload," said Spock. "And you do not go over. And the hypospray is not in your hand. And the drug is not administered. And you do not run for the transporter room. And you do not go through that portal. And there is no man in 1930. And there is no Edith Keeler. And there never was."

"And the whole thing never happens," said McCoy.

"The whole thing never happens."

The silence in that laboratory went on a long time.

And then Montgomery Scott, who had not spoken in nine hours, said, quietly, from the back of the room:

"Aye. And what happens to Captain Pike?"

Chapter Thirty-Two

Nobody answered him.

Spock stood at the board with his back to the room. Uhura looked at Spock. McCoy looked at Uhura. Galloway, by the door, looked at all of them.

And Montgomery Scott, who had asked the question because somebody had to, and because an engineer's whole profession is asking what happens to the part nobody is looking at, watched three officers not answer him and understood.

"Ye know," he said.

"Yes," said Spock.

"How long have ye known?"

"Fourteen months."

Scotty sat back. "Say it," said McCoy.

Spock turned around.

"In the corrected timeline, Christopher Pike is promoted to fleet captain within two years of the transfer of command. In that capacity he conducts an inspection of a Class J training vessel. There is a baffle plate failure. There are cadets on the other side of a bulkhead, and he goes through it, and he gets them out."

He put his hands behind his back.

"He survives. He is not killed. He is burned across the whole of his body and sustains catastrophic damage to the central nervous system, and he does not recover, and he does not die, and he lives for a very long time. He cannot walk. He cannot speak. And his mind is entirely unimpaired.

"He is in that condition because he chose to be. He does the arithmetic, and goes through the door, and saves eleven cadets, and pays for it with his body, knowingly, and does not hesitate. And there is not one officer in this room who is surprised.

"And in this universe he is fifty-four years old, and asleep two decks above us, and whole. And he is whole because James Kirk fell out of the

world."

* * *

"So that is the arithmetic," Spock said. "I will state it plainly, and then I will ask for your views, and then I am going to decide, because it is my decision, and I am not going to permit any of you to take it from me.

"If we do nothing, this universe continues. It is a good universe. The war ended on time. The Federation stands. Christopher Pike commands this ship, and will command it another decade, and will retire to Mojave and ride horses and be happy. And James Kirk is a radio repairman in Brooklyn who will die in about 1973, and be buried, and be mourned by his family, and never once be known by anybody who understood what he was.

"If we act, then history is restored. And James Kirk gets his life, and this ship, and the whole of it. And Christopher Pike burns.

"Those are the two doors. There is no third. I have looked for a third for fourteen months, with everything I have."

"Jim," said McCoy.

"That is not an argument, Doctor."

"The hell it isn't." He was on his feet. "I did this. My hand. My hypospray. And every day we leave him down there, I am the man who erased his best friend. You can call that emotional if it makes you comfortable, but it is also true, and you have not answered it in two years."

"It is true," said Spock, "and it is not sufficient. Because Christopher Pike did not administer that drug either. And if the standard is that a man may not be spent for another man's accident, then the standard protects him too. And it protects him more, because he is here, and he is real, and he is asleep two decks above us, and I have taken his coffee out of his hand."

McCoy stopped. Nobody said anything.

"You want to know what I think?" said Scotty. He had not moved from his chair. "I think ye're all askin' the wrong man. Ye're standin' here workin' out whether ye have the right to spend Christopher Pike, and it's a fine

debate, and I've enjoyed it. And the man himself is asleep two decks up, and not one of ye has thought to go knock on the door."

"We cannot tell him," said Spock.

"Why not?"

"Because he would say yes."

The room went absolutely still.

"He would say yes, and he would say it in under four seconds, and he would not require a briefing, and he would not ask what the cadets' names were. And every person in this room knows that. Which is precisely why not one of you has suggested asking him. We have not been protecting him from the knowledge. We have been protecting ourselves from his answer."

Nobody said anything at all.

And then Nyota Uhura, who had not spoken in four hours, said:

"Then do not go to him for permission."

Spock turned. "Lieutenant?"

"You are all talking about consent as though it were a shield. As though if he says yes, it's clean, and if we don't ask, it's murder. And it is neither. It is the same act either way. It costs the same man the same body. And the only thing his permission buys is that you get to feel better about it."

She looked at Spock. "You don't get to feel better, sir. That's the price. You are going to condemn a good man to a chair, and you are going to do it because it is right, and you are going to carry it alone, and you are not going to be allowed to feel clean about it, not even if he gives you his blessing, because a blessing does not unspend a man. That is what command is.

"You told me that. Or he told me that. One of you told me that, sir, and I wrote it down, and there is no attribution, and I cannot remember which of you it was. And I have decided it does not matter, because it is true either way, and because both of you would have said it."

* * *

Spock stood in the middle of the science lab at 0400 and looked at his officers.

McCoy, on his feet, gray, twenty-six months without a full night's sleep. Scott, in a chair, with a boot on the floor beside him. Uhura, standing. And Galloway, by the door, who had not been asked and had not spoken, and who was watching him, and who nodded, very slightly, once.

"Very well," said Spock. His voice did not change at all.

"We will take the ship. And we will tell the captain."

END OF PART TWO

PART THREE: A READING, NOT A CORRECTION

Chapter Thirty-Three

He worked it out at 0300, alone, and it took him four minutes, and he had been avoiding it for fourteen months.

That was the shameful part. Spock sat in the science lab on the last night before they took her out, with the whole of the arithmetic laid out and a decision made and an operation planned, and understood that he had spent fourteen months refusing to ask himself one question.

What happens to Christopher Pike afterward.

Not the injury. He had established the injury, in nineteen pages of the most competent predictive work he had ever done, and deleted it, and lied about it to the man's face. But he had never once gone past it. He had let the projection end at the chair, because the chair was unbearable, and a mind carrying something unbearable will do a great deal of rigorous work in every direction except the one that hurts.

He spent the four minutes now.

Fleet Captain Christopher Pike, maintained at Starbase 11 in a life-support chair. Unable to move. Unable to speak. His mind entirely intact. For the rest of his natural life. Duration unknown. Estimated between eleven and thirty years.

And then, sitting alone in front of the projection of a man in a chair, Spock remembered that he had already done it.

Not would. Had. In the world he still carried, the one this universe was entirely certain had never happened, Christopher Pike had burned on a Class J training vessel and had not died of it, and Spock had gone to Starbase 11 and stood in front of the chair and looked at what was left of his captain, and had then done a thing he had never once been able to explain to himself.

He remembered the night exactly, the way he remembered everything. He remembered the vault, and his own hand, and the file he had no clearance to open.

TALOS IV. GENERAL ORDER SEVEN. NO VESSEL UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE SHALL VISIT TALOS IV. THE PENALTY FOR VIOLATION IS DEATH.

And underneath it, in a survey report dated 2254: The Talosians are capable of generating illusion of a fidelity indistinguishable from reality, sustained indefinitely, responsive to the desires of the subject. Subject Vina, a survivor of the Columbia, is severely disfigured and has been maintained by them for eighteen years in a state of apparent physical wholeness. She is aware that it is illusion. She has elected to remain. Captain Pike declined their offer.

He remembered reading it, in a world that no longer existed, and he remembered the one thing about that night that had never afterward made sense to him.

He had not been able to say why he was doing it. Not to Starfleet, which tried him for it. Not to the court, which he declined to address. Not to himself, at 0300, in the dark, with his hand on a file that carried a death penalty. There was a world where the broken were made whole, and there was a woman on it who had chosen to stay, and Christopher Pike had said no to them once because he still had legs. And Spock had looked at a man in a chair and had known, with a certainty that had no argument under it, that he was going to break the highest order in the fleet and put him on that world. He had done it. He had never known why he was so certain. It had sat in him for years like a stone he could not name.

He put both hands flat on the console. And there it was. He examined it with the whole of his training, and found, at the bottom of it, the thing he had been afraid of.

He named it now.

He named it, and did not flinch.

It was for this. For a night exactly like this one, fourteen months into a search nobody had authorised, in front of a projection of a chair, with a decision in front of him that could not be carried by any man alive unless the answer to it had already been built. He had built it. He had built it

years ago, at enormous cost, without understanding, and it had been waiting in his own memory the entire time.

He closed his eyes.

It changed nothing in the arithmetic. Christopher Pike would still burn, and sit in a chair, and be conscious for years, and would choose it again in front of him if anyone were fool enough to offer him the choice. Spock would not be permitted the comfort of having spared him a single hour of it.

He opened his eyes. He wrote nothing down, because he had a memory that had never failed him. He simply held it.

But the chair was not the end of the sentence. That was the thing. When he put James Kirk back into the world, he would not be condemning Christopher Pike to a box. He would be returning him to a life that already had its door built into it, cut by his own hand, in a history that no living person but six remembered. Whether that was the universe quietly arranging its own affairs through him, or simply a man doing the correct thing twice and only understanding it the second time, Spock did not know, and found, examining it with everything he had, that he did not require the distinction.

He got up and put the room back the way he had found it, because the discipline of small correct actions is the only floor a man has when everything above it has gone.

And at the door, at 0340, Spock of Vulcan stopped, and stood a moment in the dark, and said out loud, to an empty room, the only prayer he ever made in his life, and it was not addressed to anything:

"I will put it right. Both of them. It will take me years, and I will not be forgiven, and I find that I have stopped asking to be."

Then he went to bed, and slept for four hours, and in the morning they took the ship.

Chapter Thirty-Four

They took the Enterprise out on a Thursday, out of spacedock, at 0340, during a refit.

It was, Scotty said afterward, the easiest thing he had ever done, and he said it with an expression that made everybody look away, because what he meant was that it had been easy, and that this was the part that would keep him awake.

The ship was in dock for a nacelle overhaul. Skeleton crew, forty-one aboard instead of four hundred and thirty. Pike was planetside at a strategic conference and not due back for nine days. The dock's own controllers had authority over her moorings and would have caught it in under ninety seconds.

Except that the dock's controllers took their traffic authorizations over a subspace channel. And the woman monitoring that channel had spent twenty-six months learning to make a channel say exactly what she wanted and nothing else.

"Yard control confirms departure window," said Uhura, in a voice of complete calm, into a comm circuit she had invented eleven days earlier and which did not exist. "Enterprise cleared for spacedock egress under Priority Two, Admiral's discretion. Code follows."

The code followed. That was the thing that had taken her eleven days. It was not a forgery. It was a valid Priority Two authorization, generated by the actual Starfleet cryptographic system, using an actual admiral's actual key, and the reason she had it was that in 2266 a communications officer had spent a very boring week in a very boring relay station on Deneva writing down, for no reason at all, the precise sequence of handshakes by which flag authorizations were issued, because she had been bored and wanted to see how it worked.

She had kept the notes for three years, out of pure professional magpie instinct, and dug them out on the second night after Spock said the words, and built a key out of them.

"Yard control acknowledges," said yard control.

"Moorings released," said the dock.

"Ye're a terrifying woman, lass," said Montgomery Scott.

"Yes, sir," said Nyota Uhura.

* * *

They were three light years out before anybody in the Federation knew the ship was gone.

By then Scotty had done something to the warp core that Starfleet would spend eight months failing to reproduce and eventually classify, and the Enterprise was making warp eight point six with forty-one aboard and no captain and a quarantine buoy nine days ahead of her.

Spock stood at the science station and did not sit in the center seat. Nobody remarked on it. He gave orders from his own station for the first eleven hours of an unsanctioned voyage, and the four other people who understood exactly why did not say a word.

At 0400 on the fourth day the intercom whistled.

"Bridge to Mister Spock."

"Spock here."

"Sir," said Lieutenant Galloway, "you had better come up."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Brooklyn, 1951 to 1957

The roof came first, in the summer of 1951, on a night so hot that nobody in the building could sleep, and half of Brooklyn was up on its roofs in undershirts looking for a breath of air.

Sam was sixteen. He came up to find his father standing at the parapet with his head back, looking at a sky that over Brooklyn in 1951 had perhaps a dozen stars in it and a great deal of light.

"What are you looking at?"

"The places," said Kirk.

"What places?"

And James Kirk, who had spent twenty years not saying things, stood on a roof with his son and said a true thing sideways, because sideways was the only way he was ever allowed to say one.

"Up there. There are places up there, Sam. Not lights. Places. Worlds, with weather, and ground you could stand on, and horizons. And people are going to go to them. Not soon. But they are going to go, and they are going to build ships to do it, and the ships are going to be beautiful."

Sam looked at him. "How do you know?"

Kirk was quiet a moment. Then he gave his son the truest answer he had, wrapped so that it could pass for a father talking.

"Because I want it to be true," he said, "more than I have ever wanted anything. And a man who wants a thing that badly is either a liar or a witness. And you will have to decide for yourself which one your father is."

They stood on the roof a while longer, not talking, and down in the street somebody's radio was playing, and the heat came up off the tar, and a plane went over, low, its lights blinking, on its way to Idlewild. And Kirk put his hand for a moment on the back of the boy's neck, the way his wife did to him, and did not know, because a man is not permitted to know such

things, that he had just been given the last easy summer either of them would have.

* * *

Sam wanted to go to Korea in the spring of 1952.

He was seventeen, and the war was two years old, and he came home one afternoon with his jaw set in a way Kirk knew, because it was his own, and said he had been down to the recruiting office on Flatbush and they had told him to come back with a parent's signature.

Kirk was at the workbench with a radio open in front of him. He did not put the iron down.

"No," he said.

"Pop."

"No."

"You don't even know why I want to go."

"I know exactly why you want to go," said James Kirk, and that was the trouble, and he could not say the rest of it, which was: because you are seventeen, and you have never been afraid of anything, and there is a thing men your age carry that has no name and no cure except to be spent, and I have watched it spent, in numbers, on ground I could describe to you meter by meter, and I would rather cut off my hand than sign that form.

He said none of it. He said, "Because I have a bad feeling about that particular war, and I am your father, and no."

And Sam, who was seventeen and furious and right about a great many things and wrong about this one, did the worst thing he could have done, which was to look at his father for a long moment and say, quietly, "You're a coward," and go upstairs.

Kirk sat at the workbench with the iron cooling in his hand.

Edith came in from the kitchen. She had heard. She always heard.

"He'll forgive you," she said.

"I know."

"You will not tell him why."

"No."

She stood behind him and put two fingers on the back of his neck. "He is going to hate you for a year, Jim. And then he is going to turn eighteen, and he will not need your name on anything, and he will go anyway. You know that. And you are going to let him, because there is no version of this where you bar the door, and you have stood in enough rooms to know it."

Kirk did not answer, because there was no answer, and because she was right, and because the thing he had a bad feeling about was not the war in the newspapers. It was a date he did not have. That was the last cruelty the century had saved for him: he knew everything, and he did not know this. He had memorized a war he was not in, and his own son's name was written in no book he had ever read.

* * *

Sam turned eighteen in the April of 1953, and needed nobody's signature, and enlisted on a Tuesday and did not tell his father until it was done.

They had eleven weeks of letters. The war was ending; everyone said so; the talks at Panmunjom were down to the shape of the table. Sam wrote from Fort Dix, and then from a troop ship, and then from a place he was not permitted to name, in his mother's careful hand, cheerful, full of the wrong reassurances.

He was killed on the eleventh of July, 1953, sixteen days before the armistice, in the last serious fighting of that war, on a hill whose number Kirk learned from a telegram and was never afterward able to stop knowing. The histories, when they mentioned it at all, called it a minor action on a position of no strategic value.

The telegram came on a Thursday. Edith took it at the door, because Kirk was in the back of the shop, and she stood in the front of the shop with it in her hand for a moment before she went to him, and in that moment she aged, all at once, the way people do, and did not stop.

He did not weep. That was the thing Edith could not forgive the world, afterward: that her husband, who had wept at radios and at strangers and once, silently, over a bird carved from a bar of soap, did not weep for his son. He went very quiet, and very careful, and very kind, and he stayed that way, and she understood, because she understood him past the reach of the word, that he had gone to the place beyond crying, and had moved his things in, and did not intend to come back.

He wrote it in the black notebook, at the workbench, in a hand that had gone entirely to pieces.

Sam is dead. He wanted to go to a war, and I could not tell him why he should not, and he went, and the thing I feared came for him on a hill I had never heard of, sixteen days before it stopped. I knew that four hundred thousand men would stand where they were meant to stand. I did not know that one of them was mine. I have arithmetic instead of a soul, and it did not have this in it anywhere.

And underneath it, after a while, in a slightly steadier hand, the truest and most terrible line in the whole book:

He was real. Nobody will ever know it but me. And one day, not even me.

Edith found him there, on the floor of the shop with his back against the workbench, the way she had found him once before, over another child who was not theirs. She sat down beside him on the filthy linoleum in her good coat and took the notebook out of his hands and closed it, and she did not tell him that he was not a coward, because they were both too old now for things that were not true.

"He forgave you," she said instead. "On the ship, before the end. He wrote it in a letter I have not been able to give you, and I am going to give it to you now. And then we are going to go home. Because that is what is left, Jim. There is home, and there is me, and there is the going on, and there is nothing else, and it is going to have to be enough, because it is

what there is."

And James Kirk put his face against his wife's shoulder, on the floor of a radio shop in Brooklyn in the summer of 1953, and did not weep, and she held the back of his neck with two fingers, and they stayed there until it was dark.

* * *

The beep came on the fourth of October, 1957, and James Kirk heard it in the back of his own shop, on a set he had built himself, because he had known the date for twenty-seven years and had made sure, that evening, to be somewhere with a good antenna and nobody to see his face.

It was nothing. That was the thing about it. It was a thin, patient, mindless tone, twenty-odd megacycles, on and off, on and off, coming down out of the sky from a polished metal ball the size of a beach ball, with four whip antennas and no purpose whatsoever except to be up there and to say, to anybody listening, I am here.

And half the world heard it and was afraid.

And James Kirk sat in the back of a radio shop on Flatbush Avenue and listened to the first man-made object ever to circle the Earth go over, beeping, at eighteen thousand miles an hour, and put his face in his hands. Not because he was afraid. Because it had started. The schedule had started, and it was on time. Everything she had told two hundred starving men in a cellar in 1931 was true, and was beginning, on time, exactly as he had always known it would, and he was the only person on the planet who was not surprised, and there was no one, no one at all, that he could tell.

He closed the shop early and walked home under a sky he could not see for the lights, with a thing crossing it that he could not see either, and let himself in, and Edith was at the table with the paper open to the front page, which was black with it.

She looked up at him.

"It's yours, isn't it," she said. "This one. This is one of yours."

He sat down across from her. "It's the first one."

"The first of what?"

And James Kirk looked at his wife across a kitchen table in Brooklyn in October of 1957, and for one moment, one only, came closer to telling her than he had come in twenty-seven years, and then did not.

"The first of all of it," he said.

And Edith Keeler reached across the table and put two fingers on the back of his hand, which was not where she usually put them, and left them there, and did not ask, because she had promised, on a night in the rain in 1931, that she never would.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Galloway asked him on the second day out, in a corridor, on deck five, at 0200, standing in the right place at the right moment with no fuss.

"Sir. May I have a moment."

"Lieutenant."

"In the restored timeline, am I alive?"

Spock stopped.

"Lieutenant..."

"It's a simple question, sir."

"It is not a simple question."

"Yes, sir, it is. It has two answers, and you know which one, because you have spent two years reading the record of a universe I was in, and I am in your list of nine, or I am not."

Spock did not answer.

Galloway nodded slowly. "Right."

"Lieutenant."

"No, sir. It's all right." His voice did not change. "I've known since the mess hall. You said nine crewmen are alive who were not, and that you weren't going to read the list out in a mess hall, and you said it looking at the table. And a man does not avoid looking at somebody's face because of a stranger."

The corridor hummed.

"When," said Galloway.

"I am not going to tell you that. And I want you to understand this is not a kindness. If I tell you when, you will count. And you will not be able to stop, and it will be in your face on every landing party, and Captain Kirk will see it, because he sees everything, and he will ask, and you will lie to him, and you will lie badly, because you are an honest man and you have had no practice. And I am aware that I have just made a decision about your life without your consent, and I have done it once already this week to a better man than either of us, and I am finding that it becomes easier, and

that is the most frightening thing that has ever happened to me."

Lieutenant Galloway looked at his science officer for a while.

"Sir. Can I tell you why I gave you the code?"

Spock said nothing.

"You came to my station in the seventh month, and stood there eleven seconds, and didn't ask. And I want you to know what I was thinking, because I've never told anybody. I was thinking: that man is going to spend two years of his life trying to bring back somebody who never once said my name."

Spock's head came up.

"He didn't. Captain Kirk. I was on forty-one landing parties with him and he called me Lieutenant, and he was decent to me, and he'd have taken a phaser bolt for me without breaking stride, and he did not know my name. That's not a complaint. That's what a security officer is, sir. You are the man in the doorway, and the doorway does not have a name.

"But I stood on that plain for nine minutes. And I watched a Vulcan come apart trying to get him back. And a doctor bite through his own lip. And a woman sit on a rock listening to nothing. And I thought: whatever that man was, he made those four. And if I can't be one of them, I can hold the door for them. That's why you got the code."

He came to attention.

"So I'd appreciate it if you'd get on with it, and not tell me when, and let me stand at the back and do my job. And, sir. When it happens. I'd take it as a kindness if you'd remember that I knew."

Spock looked at him for a long moment. "Lieutenant. What is your first name?"

Galloway's face did something. "Michael, sir."

"Michael Galloway. I am going to live approximately a hundred and forty years. I am going to remember this conversation, in this corridor, at this hour, in complete detail, on every one of those days. And when it happens, I am going to be there. And I am going to say your name."

* * *

He did.

It was on a planet with a yellow sky, in 2268. One day, on a world that had torn itself in half a thousand years before the Federation had a name for it, a starship captain named Ronald Tracey would stand in a doorway with a phaser in his hand and burn Lieutenant Michael Galloway out of the world in front of them, and Kirk would watch it, and Spock would watch it, and there would be nothing whatever that either of them could do about it. Spock did not know that yet. He would not know it for another year. He only knew, standing in a corridor at 0200, that he had made a promise.

And Spock knelt down beside him on the ground and closed his eyes with two fingers and said, quietly, so that nobody else on that landing party heard it:

"Michael."

And James Kirk, standing four meters away with his hands at his sides and his face perfectly still, said, "What did you say?"

And Spock said, "Nothing, Captain."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Christopher Pike was sitting in the command chair.

He had a cup of coffee. He was in uniform. He had, as far as anybody could later determine, been aboard the entire time, and had spent four days in his own quarters reading, and had come out this morning and walked onto his bridge and sat down. And the skeleton crew had gone to their stations without a word, because he was their captain.

Spock came out of the turbolift and stopped.

"I have been aboard since before you cleared dock," Pike said, without turning around. "I let you take her out. I wanted to see whether you would actually do it, and whether you would do it cleanly, and you did both, and I am not going to pretend that did not tell me a great deal about all of you."

Spock said nothing.

He turned the chair around. "So let us dispense, first, with the idea that you have stolen my ship. You have not stolen anything. You could not have taken this vessel three meters off those moorings if I had not wished it, and I wished it, and that makes this mine. I want that understood before another word is spoken on this bridge."

Nobody moved.

"Now. You have spent fourteen months building, in secret, in a hand that shakes toward the end of every session, a very careful proof of a thing I have known for six years."

Spock's head came up. It was the only time on the whole voyage that anyone saw him do it.

"You did not know that. You could not have. It is in no record you could reach." Pike stood. "A long while ago, before I ever had a Vulcan science officer, I was shown my own future. The where of it does not matter and I am not going to put the where of it in your log. I was shown a training vessel, and a failed baffle plate, and a bulkhead with cadets on the far side of it, and I was shown exactly what it makes of a man to go through that door and bring them out. I was shown the chair. And I was offered,

then and there, the chance to arrange a softer life. And I looked at it for a long time, and I said no, and I came home, and I have carried it every day since, and I made my peace with it, the way you make peace with a debt you have already agreed to pay."

The bridge was silent.

"And then, about two years ago, it lifted."

"Sir," said Spock.

"It lifted, Commander. I cannot put it better than that. A weight I had carried for years was simply not there one morning, and I did not know why, and it should have been a mercy, and instead it sat wrong in me for months, the way a room sits wrong the day a clock you long ago stopped hearing finally stops. So I did the thing I do. I looked into it."

He came around the chair.

"There is no baffle plate in my future now. There is no cadet cruise, because in this version of things I am given this ship, and I keep it, and I never go where that accident is waiting. So I pulled the record of the cruise that now never happens." His voice did not change, and that was the unbearable part of it. "There were eleven cadets behind that bulkhead, Commander. I have their names. In the world where I burn, they are grown, and forty, and troublesome, and alive. In this one, the comfortable one, the one where I am whole and well and command a fine ship, they were nineteen years old when they died, because the man who was meant to be standing in that corridor was four sectors away in a center seat, being happy."

Nobody breathed.

"So do not offer to tell me how long I am in the chair. I have known longer than you have. What you have brought me, Commander, without intending to, is the one thing I did not have before, which is a reason to walk back into it that is larger than duty. Eleven of them. And a man in Brooklyn I never met, who is, as far as I can make out, the reason any of us are standing on this deck at all."

"And I want it understood, in my own voice, on the record, before we reach that planet, why I am doing this. I am not doing it for James Kirk; I never met the man. I am doing it because for two years I have commanded a ship that came to me across the body of someone who was lifted out of the world, and eleven children paid for the comfort of it with their lives, and I did not know, and now I know. A life you would hand straight back the moment you learned what it had cost is not a life. It is a bill that someone else paid in the dark. I am going to go and settle it."

He sat down in the command chair. "Mister Sulu. Maintain heading."

"Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Uhura. When we cross the quarantine line, broadcast a full statement of responsibility to Starfleet Command. Over my name. Over my authority. Stating that the officers of this vessel acted under my direct order, that I initiated this operation, that the decision to take this ship was mine, made before a single officer aboard lifted a hand, and that any inquiry is to be directed at me and at me alone."

Uhura's hands went still on the board. "Sir."

"Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir." Her voice cracked across the middle. "No problem, sir."

"Good. Because in about five days I am going to be asked to do the single most expensive thing anybody has ever asked a man to do, and I have decided that if I am going to do it, I am not going to do it as a passenger on my own ship."

He drank.

"Warp eight point six, Mister Spock," said Christopher Pike. "Let's go and get your captain."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Brooklyn, October 1962

The worst thirteen days of James Kirk's life were spent in a kitchen.

He had commanded a starship in wartime. He had stood on a bridge with the shields down and a cruiser closing at flank and nine seconds on the clock, and he had never been as frightened as he was for thirteen days in October of 1962, sitting at a kitchen table on Nostrand Avenue with a radio on the counter, doing absolutely nothing.

Because he knew. He knew how it came out, the way he knew the alphabet. And he sat there for thirteen days with the knowledge in him like a swallowed coin, and every hour a very quiet, very reasonable, entirely insane voice at the back of his skull said:

But you have never been here before. This is the corrected timeline, not the one you memorized. You know what happened in the world where she died. You do not know what happens here. You have no idea whether the man on that submarine is the same man.

* * *

He did the arithmetic on the second day, at four in the morning, on the back of an envelope, and then he burned the envelope.

Changes I have made to this timeline that I know of: one woman does not die on 21 November 1930. One peace movement is not built. Two hundred men do not eat at Twenty-first Street after June 1931. One boy was born who would otherwise not have been, and is dead in a war in Korea, and leaves no one behind him. Halina Kosinski believed for two years that her son would live. I have repaired eleven thousand radios, better than the man who would otherwise have repaired them. Every one of those is a stone dropped in a pond. And in nineteen days, or nine, a submarine officer in the Atlantic is going to be asked to launch a nuclear

torpedo. And I do not know his name. And I do not know whether he was ever born.

* * *

She found him on the fourth night at the window in the dark, fully dressed, at three in the morning.

"Come to bed."

"In a minute."

She came and stood next to him and looked out at the street, and the street was empty, and there was a light on in exactly one window across the way, and somebody else, somewhere, was also not sleeping.

"They have been at the market all day," she said. "Buying tinned things. Mrs. Ferraro has forty pounds of flour and no plan. Kathleen Sorkin has taken the children to her sister's in Vermont."

"Yes."

"Jim." She did not look at him. "Do we live?"

He did not answer.

"I have not asked you a single question in thirty-one years. Not one. Not about the war. Not about Anna Kosinski. Not about the sound you make in your sleep, or the drawer you keep locked, or why you would not enlist when every other man on this block went and you were the only one who was not afraid. I have never asked, because you told me once you could not tell me, and I decided to believe you, and I have kept that bargain, and it has cost me more than you will ever know.

"And I am asking now. One question. Once. Ever. Do we live?"

The clock on the shelf went on doing what clocks do.

And James Kirk, who had spent thirty-one years standing on a beam in the dark, closed his eyes and made the only calculation of his entire life that he never afterward regretted.

"Yes," he said.

She did not move. "Say it like you know."

He opened his eyes. "I know. It ends on the twenty-eighth. There's going to be a broadcast, and it's going to be short, and it's going to sound like nothing, and it's going to be everything. And there's a man on a ship out there, Edith, and nobody is ever going to know his name, and he is going to say no. That's the whole of it. One man in a metal room saying no. We live. Everybody lives. This one, we win."

And Edith Keeler stood at a window in Brooklyn in the middle of the night at the end of the world and let out a breath she had been holding for four days.

"Then come to bed," she said.

* * *

He lay awake until dawn. He lay awake until dawn on every one of the remaining nights, and on the night of the twenty-seventh he did not go to bed at all, because on the twenty-seventh, in the world he had memorized, a Soviet submarine designated B-59 had been depth-charged by American destroyers, out of contact with Moscow, with a nuclear torpedo aboard and two of the three required officers voting to launch it.

He sat in the kitchen from midnight until six with the radio off. He did not know the man's name. He never found it out; it was not released in his lifetime, and would not be for another forty years. And James Kirk sat in a kitchen in Brooklyn on the twenty-seventh of October, 1962, in the dark, and said, out loud, to a man he could not name and could not reach and could not help:

"Please."

And at six o'clock the sun came up.

And on the twenty-eighth there was a broadcast, and it was short, and it sounded like nothing. And Edith came into the kitchen and found her husband with his head in his hands, and she did not ask, and she put two fingers on the back of his neck, and stood there a long time.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Enterprise ran for five more days.

They were, Pike said afterward, the best five days of his command, and he said it without irony, and everybody who heard him understood exactly what he was telling them.

He ate in the mess. He had never done that. He sat down with a table of engineering ratings on the second night and asked them what they thought of the ship, and one of them, a nineteen-year-old named Diaz who had never spoken to a captain in his life, told him, at length and with feeling, that the port turbolift was slow, and Pike listened to all of it and thanked him and had it fixed. He went down to engineering at 0200 and sat on a crate with Scotty and talked about nothing. He played chess with McCoy, badly, and lost, and complained about it.

He went to the observation lounge on the fourth night and found Uhura there with a padd, and she stood, and he told her to sit, and sat down opposite her.

"What is it?"

"Sir?"

"You've carried that thing for two years, Lieutenant. You take it to the mess and don't open it, and you have it with you right now."

Uhura looked at the padd. "It's him. Everything I could remember, and everything the others could remember, and they mostly don't know they've told me. Six thousand entries."

Pike nodded slowly. "May I?"

She hesitated a long moment. Then she handed it to him.

* * *

Christopher Pike read for forty minutes, in silence, with the stars going past outside, and every so often he stopped and went back and read something again. At the end he handed it back.

"Thank you."

"Sir, if you have questions..."

"No." He sat back and looked at the stars. "I have commanded this ship for fourteen years. And I have been quietly telling myself, for two years, that whatever this man was, he could not have been better at it than I am. That's an ugly thing to say out loud."

"Sir..."

"It's an ugly thing to have thought, Lieutenant, and I have thought it perhaps four hundred times, and I want to be honest about it with somebody before the end of the week." He turned back to her. "He isn't better than me. He's worse. Objectively. He takes risks I would never take and gets away with them because he is lucky, and one day he will not be lucky, and he will lose people, and it will be his fault, and he will know it."

Uhura did not answer.

"And I have just read six thousand entries, written over two years by an officer who has never once complained, in a hand that gets worse toward the end of every session, which tells me you were crying and did not stop writing. And there is not one entry in there about a battle."

He stood up. "There are four hundred and thirty people on my ship, and if I fell out of the world tomorrow, they would grieve, and they would be right to, and in about eighteen months they would be fine. Not one of them would spend two years in the dark writing down what my voice sounded like."

He went to the door. "Sir," said Uhura. He stopped. "You are a very great captain."

Christopher Pike stood in the doorway with his back to her. "I know," he said. "That's what makes it interesting."

Chapter Forty

Brooklyn, 1968 to 1969

In the January of 1968 he was seventy-two years old, and he was watching the evening news.

He watched it every night, the way he had once read status reports, out of a discipline he had never been able to put down: an old man in a chair with the sound turned low so as not to wake his wife, taking the temperature of a century he was not permitted to touch.

And on an ordinary Thursday a man in a grey suit at a desk said that there had been an incident. A rocket, launched that afternoon on what had been described as a routine orbital test, had carried, it now appeared, a nuclear device. And the device had detonated, harmlessly, at a great height, more than a hundred miles up, in a flash that several observatories had recorded and several governments were declining to discuss. There had been no damage. There had been, the man in the grey suit said, choosing his words with care, no injuries, and no explanation.

James Kirk sat very still in his chair.

Because he knew that flash. He had been there for it. Not here, in a chair in Brooklyn, an old man with a blanket over his knees, but in a room on the East Side of this same city, in this same year, on a mission that had folded time back on itself and set him down in an apartment he had no business standing in, arguing with a man in a dark suit and a woman who typed very badly, while a rocket that should have ended the world went up over the Atlantic.

He had stood eight feet from the man and watched him reach into a launched warhead from half a world away and take it apart in the sky, on purpose, at the last possible second, and he had never fully understood how it was done, or whom the man answered to.

Gary Seven. The name came up out of thirty-eight years of dark like a body surfacing.

He is here. He is in that apartment this afternoon, in this year, doing the thing I stood in the room and watched him do. And I am not there. I was there and I am not there, because I fell out of the world in 1930, and everything downstream of me is a different shape, and there is no Enterprise in the sky tonight and no man from the future standing at his elbow. And it happened anyway. Somebody drove that man to reach up and catch it with no one behind him, and I do not know who, and I am the only person alive on this planet who knows there is anything at all to wonder about.

He got up, very quietly, so as not to wake her, and went down to the shop, and unlocked the drawer, and wrote in the black notebook for the first time in years, in a hand that shook, and not from age.

The bomb over the ocean tonight was the one I watched him stop. He was here without us. I do not know how it happened without me in it. I have spent my whole life certain that I was a stone dropped in a pond, that every single thing I touched moved. And tonight the pond moved without me, exactly on schedule, and I cannot explain it, and I am not going to sit here and pretend to myself that I can. Some of the schedule is not mine. Some of it was never mine. I do not know whose it is. And that is the first genuinely new thing I have learned in thirty-eight years, and it has come far too late to be of any use to anybody.

He locked the drawer again. He went back upstairs and sat down beside his sleeping wife, and did not sleep, and in the morning he did not speak of it, because there was, as ever, no one to tell.

* * *

Eighteen months later they put the television on the good table, and moved the good table into the middle of the room, and there was nobody in the apartment but the two of them, and it was enough, because it had been enough for a long time.

It was a Zenith. Black and white. Nineteen-inch screen. He had repaired it six times himself, and it ran better than it had any right to, and it was the one thing in the house he would not let her throw out.

It was ninety-three degrees. Every window was open. Down the block a dozen radios and a dozen televisions all carried the same broadcast, so that the whole hot street seemed to breathe with a single voice, and the stoops were empty, because everyone was inside, watching.

He had known the date for thirty-nine years. He had written it down in 1932 on a sheet of paper in a lawyer's safe on Court Street, item ten of eleven, and burned it in a kitchen stove in 1942, and never once forgotten it. He had thought about this night for four decades, and believed that when it came he would feel something enormous.

And it came. And it was a small grey picture on a nineteen-inch screen, and a man came down a ladder very slowly, and the picture was terrible, almost nothing, a ghost in a white suit on a grey field, and a voice came from a quarter of a million miles away and said a sentence that somebody had plainly worked on.

And James Kirk did not feel anything enormous. He felt something small, and precise, and it went in just under the sternum:

It is the wrong ship. It is the wrong ship and the wrong century, and there are three of them instead of four hundred and thirty, and they have gone a quarter of a million miles instead of nine light years. And they are going to put a flag on it. A national flag. On the moon. And in a few days they will come home, and it will be over, and nobody will go back for fifty years. And it is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. And Sam should have lived to see it.

He sat in a chair by the window in Brooklyn, seventy-three years old, and wept, silently, without moving, without making a sound.

Only Edith moved. She got up out of her chair and crossed the room and stood beside him and put her hand on the back of his neck. Two fingers. The way she had done it for thirty-eight years. She did not say anything.

He put his hand up and held her wrist.

"We went," he said. Very quietly.

"I know."

"Edith. We went."

"I know. You told me we would. In 1932. Item ten." Her hand tightened. "You were early. That is all that was ever wrong with you."

And they sat a while, the two of them, in the light of a small grey moon on a nineteen-inch screen, in a room that had held, once, a boy who drew rocket ships with far too much fire coming out of the back and signed his name to them in enormous careful capitals. The room was quiet now, and would stay quiet, and they did not speak of him, because they never did, because there was nothing to say that the silence was not already holding for them.

Chapter Forty-One

"IT IS NOT A CORRECTION," said the Guardian of Forever.

"No," said Spock.

"IT IS A READING."

"Yes."

The wind came across the plain in silence, as it had two years ago, as it had for a hundred and twelve million years.

There were seven of them standing in front of the ring: Spock, McCoy, Scott, Uhura, Galloway, Ensign Brandt, and a starship captain who had brought his own ship here against every standing order, knowing precisely what it would cost him, and had done it, by his own account, because he had found that he could not do otherwise.

"I HAVE BEEN WAITING," said the Guardian, "FOR TWO OF YOUR YEARS, FOR SOMEONE TO ASK ME THAT."

"You could have told us," said McCoy.

"NO. IF I TELL YOU WHAT TO ASK, I AM NOT A DOOR. I AM A HAND ON YOUR BACK. I WILL NOT DO IT."

"Then tell me why it is permitted," said Spock. "You will not alter a lived hour. And yet you will let us stand inside one and pull a relay."

And then, because it had been sitting in him for nine days and this was the last hour in which saying it could still matter, he said the rest of it.

"You told us, two years ago, that you were made to offer the past in this manner and could not change. We took that for a refusal. It was not. It was a specification." He did not raise his voice. "You are not a window onto one history. You are an aperture onto a manifold. Every hour you have ever shown us was one state out of an uncountable number of them, and you offer them in the order and at the rate you were built to offer them, and that you genuinely cannot change, any more than a river can be asked to run at a different speed. But we are not asking you to change the manner. We are asking you to select the state. Those are not the same request, and I do not believe anyone has ever put the second one to you."

The plain was silent.

YOU ARE THE FIRST, said the Guardian of Forever.

"BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT BE ALTERING A LIVED HOUR," said the Guardian. "THE HOUR YOU MEAN TO ENTER IS NOT LIVED. IT WAS UNMADE WHEN YOUR CAPTAIN CHOSE THE WOMAN. A DEAD LAYER IS A RECORD, AND A RECORD MAY BE READ. YOU FIVE NEVER LEFT THE OLD WORLD. YOU STOOD IN MY FIELD WHEN IT TURNED, AND A PIECE OF EACH OF YOU IS STILL FASTENED TO WHAT WAS. THIS IS NOT A SECOND WISH. IT IS AN OLD DEBT THAT WAS NEVER PAID."

Spock inclined his head.

"Show us the layer beneath," he said.

And the surface of the ring clouded, the way a window clouds in winter, from the inside, all at once.

* * *

They had braced for a bridge. What they got was an apartment.

It was small, and warm, and on an upper floor. Late afternoon light came slanting through a window with an iron fire escape beyond it and lay in a long gold bar across a rug that had been good once. There were bookshelves on every wall, floor to ceiling, badly built and overloaded, sagging in the middle like tired shoulders. A radiator ticked.

An old man sat by the window in a brown jacket with his back to them, reading. He was reading slowly, with a strip of newspaper for a bookmark held ready in his left hand, and the light was on the side of his face and they could see nothing but white hair, badly cut, and the corner of a jaw.

And then a woman came in from another room with two cups of tea. She was perhaps seventy. Her hair was gray and pinned up and coming down at the back the way hair does at the end of a long day. She moved through that room the way people move through rooms they have lived in for decades, without looking, her hip knowing the corner of the table

before she got to it.

She set one cup down at the old man's elbow and said something they could not hear. And as she passed behind his chair she put two fingers on the back of his neck, briefly, without breaking stride, without either of them acknowledging it in any way.

* * *

Leonard McCoy turned around and walked eleven paces out onto the plain and stood with his back to all of them. Nobody went after him.

"That's her," said Uhura.

"Yes," said Spock.

Christopher Pike stood at the front, quite still, and looked at an old man in a chair by a window.

"Is that him?"

"That is Captain James T. Kirk. He is seventy-four years old. He commanded this vessel for two years." Spock did not take his eyes from the window. "What he has done with the forty since, I cannot tell you. There is no record of it anywhere. A woman closed a mission on Twenty-first Street and married a man the century never troubled to write down, and that is the whole of what history has to say about him."

Pike did not move for some time. "He looks happy."

Spock did not answer.

"Spock. He looks happy."

"Yes," said Spock. "He does."

And on the other side of four hundred years and one impossible fracture, the old man put the strip of newspaper into his book, and closed it, and set it on the sill. And reached, without looking, for the hand of the woman standing beside him. And she gave it to him, without looking either, the way you hand a thing to a person who has stood in the same place for forty years.

"Close it," said Pike.

"Sir?"

"Close it, Commander. Right now." His voice had not changed. "Because I have been standing here ninety seconds, and I have already started building an argument for leaving him there. And it is a good argument. And I want that window shut before I finish it."

"Wait," said Uhura. The portal had begun to cloud. "Sir, wait. Don't close it. Turn it. Show us the room."

"Lieutenant..."

"Show us the room, sir."

And the Guardian of Forever, without being asked twice, turned.

* * *

It was a wall.

The wall of an ordinary front room in an ordinary apartment in Brooklyn in the spring of 1970, with bookshelves floor to ceiling, sagging in the middle. Astronomy, a great deal of it. Mathematics, far beyond the century, annotated and argued with. Medicine, a whole shelf, the spines broken on every one.

And in every gap between the books, and over them, and pinned directly to the plaster where the shelves ran out:

Drawings. A child's. All of them a child's, and all of them old, the crayon gone chalky with the years. Crayon suns with faces. A purple horse. A rocket ship with an enormous amount of fire coming out of the back, drawn by somebody about six. A single stick family under a rainbow, three figures, and one of them very tall and given, with tremendous care, a tiny scribble of white hair.

Every one of them signed, in the enormous, laborious, triumphant capitals of a child who has just discovered that his name belongs to him and means to make full use of the fact. The same name, over and over, on every one. SAM.

And photographs. A wedding in 1932, a woman in a blue dress with a badly sewn collar, laughing at something outside the frame. A boy of about twelve in a baseball uniform, scowling. A young man of seventeen in a uniform that was not a baseball uniform, grinning, his cap at an angle his father would have made him fix. And, framed and alone on the shelf where the others clustered, a folded triangle of flag behind glass, and beside it a single telegram, and beside that a photograph of a bare brown hillside somewhere very far away that no one in that room but the old man could have named.

* * *

Nobody on that plain said anything for a long time.

"How many," said Christopher Pike.

Spock could not answer.

"Commander. How many."

"None, sir," said Spock. And because that was not an answer a man could leave hanging in the air, he gave the rest of it, in the flat voice he kept for the things that cost him most. "We looked. Doctor McCoy and I, for the better part of two years, in every record the Federation holds. There is no James Kirk anywhere in the history of this world. There is a woman who ran a mission on Twenty-first Street and then, in the summer of 1931, walked away from it, and married a man of whom the record knows nothing at all, not where he was born nor where he came from, and kept a quiet house in Brooklyn for forty years. They had one child. A son. He is on that wall. His name was Samuel Kirk, and he was killed in Korea in the July of 1953, at the age of eighteen, and he left no children. The line ends with him. There is no descendant. There is no contribution. There is nothing down there that the history books will miss, and nothing they will feel when it is gone. We made certain of it. It is the only mercy in this entire undertaking, and it is a terrible one."

The wind went past in silence.

"And when we do this," said Uhura.

"THEY WILL NOT HAVE BEEN."

* * *

Leonard McCoy sat down on the ground. He did it without any particular drama. He simply stopped standing, and sat down on a rock on a dead world, and put his hands over his face.

"His name is Sam," he said.

Nobody spoke.

"I knew before we ever ran a record. He had a brother named Sam, back where we come from, back up the line, and he loved him past all sense, and I always knew that if that man ever had a son he would give him that name and dare the world to say a word about it. So there is a Sam Kirk down there. And he grew up in that apartment, and drew those rockets, and put on that uniform, and his father knew the shape of every war on the whole planet and could not tell him the one thing that would have kept him home. And the boy went, and got himself killed sixteen days before it ended. And his father did not weep, because his father had run out of that a long way back."

"He is nineteen years in the ground down there, and his mother and his father are old, and they are alive this afternoon, in that apartment, in the light. And in about six hours they are not going to have been."

* * *

"Doctor," said Spock.

"Don't."

"Doctor, I am going to say something you will not want to hear, and I am going to say it anyway, because it needs to be in the air of this place before we do this, and I will not permit any of us to do it while looking at a wall."

He turned around and faced them.

"That old man, and the woman, and the boy on that wall are not the cost. They are one line in it." He turned around and faced them. "There are people alive this afternoon on Eminiari, and on Beta III, and in a mine on Janus VI, and on a dozen worlds I have not found yet and never will, who will not be alive when we are finished. I have not seen their faces. There is no wall anywhere with their drawings on it. And I want one more thing understood before anybody speaks. How many men have lived like Gary Mitchell in these two years? How many have opened their eyes at the edge of the galaxy and found themselves holding that much power, with no one aboard who knew them well enough to grieve and still do what had to be done? I cannot count them either. Nobody can. That is the shape of the thing we are weighing, and it has no faces in it at all." He was quiet a moment, and looked at the wall. "It is not a scale. You cannot weigh three faces you have seen against a number you cannot even estimate, and read the result off the beam, because the instrument is broken, and it has always been broken. I want that understood before we do this. And then I do not want it said again."

He turned back to the portal.

"I am not going to pretend I am doing this for Eminiari. I would be lying, and you would know it. I am doing it because the other world is not true. It is good, and it is real, and it exists only because one man walked out of history and held a door shut for forty years. And I find I cannot leave him there to hold it. That is all the honesty I have. It is not very much."

* * *

Nyota Uhura stood looking at the wall.

"He looks happy," she said.

"Lieutenant."

"I am the one who is going to do it," she said. "I am the one who is going to walk down that corridor and put my hand on that relay. Not you."

Not the doctor. Me. So I want to look at him first. The way he is now, before I take it. Show me the old man in the chair."

And the Guardian of Forever, without a word, showed her the old man in the chair.

She looked for eleven seconds. An old man in a brown jacket in a chair by a window in the sunlight, a closed book on his knee, his head tipped back, laughing at something his wife had said from the other room, wholly and simply happy, in the last afternoon of the only life in which he had ever been permitted to stop.

"All right," said Nyota Uhura. Her face did not change. "Close it. I have seen him. I will carry him. Let us go to work."

* * *

Christopher Pike stood in front of a ring of stone on a dead world with his hands at his sides for a long moment, then took a breath and let it out.

"All right," he said. "Show us the bridge."

Chapter Forty-Two

The problem was self-collision, and Spock had solved it in nine days, and the solution was standing in the room and did not know it yet.

"Every one of us was aboard," he said. "During the relevant six hours, every one of us who stood on that plain was at a duty station on that ship. Mister Scott in engineering. Doctor McCoy in sickbay. Lieutenant Galloway on deck five. Ensign Brandt in the security office on deck three. Lieutenant Uhura and myself on the bridge.

"A reading cannot contain a reader who was written. If any one of us enters that layer at that hour, we collide with ourselves. The collision is not survivable, and it is not survivable for the layer either. It would tear. And a torn layer is a wound, and it would bleed into the one above it forever, and I have modeled the consequences and I am not going to describe them."

"Then nobody can go," said Scotty.

"Somebody can go." He turned. "The prohibition is spatial and temporal, not personal. What cannot happen is that a person occupy a location in which that person is already recorded. What can happen is that a person occupy a location in which they are not. Lieutenant Uhura was on the bridge, at the communications station, for the entire watch. There is a record of her there, and she cannot go to the bridge. She was not in the port auxiliary junction on deck seven."

Nobody spoke.

"The console that overloads is the helm station. It overloads because a relay in the port auxiliary junction fails under the temporal surge and dumps the entire forward load through the helm board. That junction is nineteen meters from the bridge and one deck down, in a corridor that was empty, at that hour, for forty-one minutes. I have checked it against the duty roster, the sensor log, and the maintenance schedule, eleven times. It is the only place on that ship where a living person may stand in that hour without being a paradox. And the relay can be pulled by hand."

McCoy said, "Then send me."

"You were in sickbay, Doctor. Eleven meters from that junction, and moving, and your movements are not fully recorded, and I will not put you in a corridor you may walk down."

"Then send Galloway."

"Lieutenant Galloway was on deck five, with a patrol route that passes within nine meters of that junction at the relevant minute."

"Then send Scotty."

"Mister Scott is the only living human being who can hold this vessel inside the Guardian's field for the eleven minutes required, and if he is in a corridor in 2267 then all of us die in 2269, and I would rather not."

"Then you," said McCoy. "You were on the bridge with her. If she can stand in a corridor she was never in, so can you. Why is it not you, Spock?"

Spock had been waiting for the question, and did not pretend otherwise.

"Two reasons, Doctor, and the first is arithmetic. Lieutenant Uhura's station logs traffic. Mine logs me. The science console writes a continuous instrument record, timestamped to the tenth of a second, for every second of that watch, and I was at it without a break for the entire six hours. There is no gap anywhere in that hour into which I could be absent, and the moment the record shows a science officer who is not where the record says he was, the layer tears. Lieutenant Uhura has a gap. It is forty-one minutes long and it is in a corridor on deck seven. She is the only one of us the record leaves room for."

"And the second reason?"

"Somebody has to conduct this from here." He said it without any weight at all, which was how they all knew. "Mister Scott holds the ship inside the field. I hold the aperture open onto a layer that does not want to exist, for eleven minutes, by hand, and if my attention breaks for four seconds she does not come back and neither does the hour she is standing in. I am not able to do that from a corridor in 2267. If there were any arrangement in which I could go in her place, Doctor, I would have found it. I have looked for it for nine days."

And Nyota Uhura, who had understood four sentences ago, said: "It's me."

"Yes," said Spock.

"Because the only place on that ship I wasn't is a corridor on deck seven."

"That is the operation."

* * *

He told her the second reason an hour later, alone, in the observation lounge, with the door locked.

"There is a second reason it must be you. I did not give it in front of the others. I am going to give it to you now, and then you are going to have an opportunity to refuse, and nobody will ever know you were asked."

Uhura sat down.

"The dead layer is not a place. It is a signal. A coherent record of a lived state, held in a medium we do not understand, underneath a louder and more recent record. When you step into it, you will be inside both. You will be receiving two histories at once, at full strength, and they will be equally real, and one of them is false, and there is no instrument in the universe that will tell you which."

"And I'll have to know."

"For eleven minutes. While the ship you are standing in tells you, with every wall and every sound and every face, that you are wrong."

He folded his hands. "Vulcan discipline cannot do this. I spent nine days establishing it, and it was not a pleasant nine days. Vulcan discipline functions by suppression. It resolves conflicting input by silencing one channel. If I go into that layer, I will silence one of them, and I will not be able to control which, and I will perform the operation perfectly. And I may perform it in the wrong universe.

"You do not suppress. You separate. You have spent your entire professional life holding two signals at once and refusing to lose either of

them, and you are the only person aboard who has ever been trained to do it. And it is not a metaphor, Lieutenant. It is the literal content of your qualification."

Nyota Uhura sat very still. "You're telling me I'm the only one who can hear him."

Spock did not answer for a moment. "I am telling you that you are the only one who will still know which voice is real."

* * *

She sat in the observation lounge a long time after he had gone. Then she took out the padd, and unlocked it, and opened a new entry.

ENTRY 6,012. I am going to see him tomorrow. I have wanted this for two years, and I have just been told I am going to be within ninety seconds of him and am not permitted to go and look. I want to write down, before it happens, what I intend to do. I intend to walk down that corridor and pull that relay and come home. I intend to not go up to the bridge. I am writing this because I do not entirely trust myself, and because if I am reading it afterward then it means I did the right thing.

She looked at it. Then she wrote:

If I do not come back, somebody give this to him. He will not know what it is. Give it to him anyway.

Chapter Forty-Three

Brooklyn, 1970

It was an ordinary Tuesday.

That is the whole of it, and it needs to be said plainly, because there was nothing else about it. It was an ordinary Tuesday in the spring of 1970, and James Kirk was seventy-four, and he got up at seven, which was late for him, because his back was bad and because he had begun, in the last two years, to be tired in a way that did not go away when he slept.

He shaved. He made the coffee, because he always made the coffee, because he had done it every morning for thirty-eight years and was insufferable on the subject. He read the paper. He fixed a toaster for Mrs. Ruiz on the fourth floor, at the kitchen table, in about eleven minutes, and refused to take anything for it, and she left a whole tray of something on the counter as she went, and Edith found it and said, "That woman is going to kill us both," and ate three.

He went out at ten and walked to the shop, which he had sold in 1966 and which was now a laundromat, and he did this most days and had never once explained it to anybody. He stood outside it for about four minutes. Then he walked to the library and returned two books and took out three. He came home. He read in the chair by the window until about two, and slept for forty minutes without meaning to, and woke with the book on his chest and was annoyed about it.

In the afternoon the Ruiz baby came up, because her mother had an appointment and there was nobody else, and she was four months old and her name was Rosa, and he sat in the chair by the window with her along his forearm and looked at her for two hours.

She could not do anything. That was what he told people, over and over, for the entire four months of her life, with an enormous and entirely unfeigned delight: she cannot do anything. She could not sit up. She could not roll over. She could not focus on a face further than about eight inches

away. She was, in every measurable respect, the least capable human being he had ever met.

"You are useless," he told her, in his front room, in the sunlight, on an ordinary Tuesday. "You are absolutely no use to anybody at all."

Rosa blew a bubble.

"Yes," said James Kirk. "Exactly."

* * *

At six o'clock Edith made supper. They ate at the kitchen table, the two of them, because the Ruiz baby had gone back down to her mother, and they talked about the boiler, which had been failing for eleven years and which he had rebuilt four times and which was going to have to be replaced, and about the Costello boy, who had children of his own now and still came by on Sundays, and about nothing much at all, the way two people talk who have said everything there is to say and go on talking anyway, because by then the talking is the whole of the point.

She said the thing about the boiler that she had been saying since 1961. He said the thing he always said back. She laughed.

He did the dishes. She dried, because he washed too slowly and she had never been able to stand it, and they had been doing it in that order in that kitchen for thirty-eight years, and neither of them had ever once discussed it.

And afterward she went into the front room and turned on the lamp and picked up her book, and he stood in the kitchen doorway a moment and looked at her.

She was seventy-two. She was in the second chair by the window with her feet up on the low stool, in her cardigan, reading glasses on the end of her nose, hair almost entirely white now, frowning at a page, a pencil in her hand because she wrote in books and always had and it had appalled him for four decades.

"Stop hovering," she said, without looking up.

"I'm not hovering."

"You are hovering in my doorway, and it is very unnerving, and I have asked you not to do it since the Truman administration."

He came in and sat down in his chair. He picked up his own book, and found his place, and did not read it. He sat in a chair by a window in Brooklyn on an ordinary Tuesday evening in the spring of 1970 with a book open on his knee, and looked out at the fire escape and the water tower on the building opposite and a rectangle of sky going pink, and listened to his wife turn a page.

And he thought, the way you think a thing you have thought ten thousand times:

This is it. This is what I bought. Four hundred and thirty people. A ship. Nine hundred worlds. A galaxy with my name in it somewhere. And I traded all of it for a kitchen and a boiler and a woman who writes in books. And I would do it again. God help me, I would do it again tomorrow, and I would not even have to think about it.

Edith Keeler turned another page.

"Jim," she said.

"Mm."

"You are not reading."

"I am reading."

"You have had that book open on page ninety-one for twenty minutes, and you have not moved, and I can see you out of the side of my eye, and you are doing the thing."

"What thing?"

"The thing," said Edith Keeler, "where you sit in that chair and look out that window and think about whatever it is you have never told me."

The lamp hummed.

And James Kirk, seventy-four years old, sitting in a chair in a room in Brooklyn, on an ordinary evening in the spring of 1970, said:

"Yes."

"Well," she said. "Carry on. But do it with the light on. You'll ruin your eyes."

And she went back to her book. And he sat there.

And that was the last evening of his life.

Chapter Forty-Four

She stepped through at 0600 and the ship was alive.

That was the thing nobody had prepared her for and nobody could have. It was not a recording. It was not a memory. She was standing in a corridor on deck seven of the U.S.S. Enterprise, and the deck was humming under her boots, and the air smelled the way it had always smelled, and forty feet away somebody laughed.

And she was home.

That was the assault. She had braced for horror and got homecoming, and she went down onto one knee against a bulkhead with her hand flat on the wall and had to fight, with her whole body, not to weep. Two years of a wrong ship and a wrong bridge and a wrong captain, in a universe that was perfectly good and had a hole in it exactly the shape of a man. She had lived in it and done her job and told herself she was managing.

She had not been managing. She found that out in about four seconds, kneeling in a corridor on deck seven, with the true history running through her like current.

Eleven minutes. She got up.

* * *

The junction was thirty meters aft. She walked it. She did not run, because running draws eyes, and she was in uniform and she was a lieutenant and she was, to any crewman she passed, entirely unremarkable.

She passed two of them. One nodded and said, "Lieutenant," and she said, "Ensign," and did not break stride and did not look at his face, and therefore did not find out that he was a man who would be dead in nineteen months on a planet whose name she would never learn.

The intercom whistled. She kept walking. And a voice came out of the wall.

"Bridge to engineering. Scotty, I've got a spike on the helm board. Is that you playing with my ship again?"

* * *

Nyota Uhura stopped in the middle of a corridor on deck seven of the U.S.S. Enterprise and put both hands flat against the bulkhead.

She had forgotten.

That was the obscenity of it, and it went through her like a blade. She had spent two years building an archive of six thousand entries to hold onto a man, and it had not worked, because you keep the sentence and you lose the voice. And she had lost it. And here it was. Warm. Amused. Absolutely certain. Eleven meters and one deck away, in a chair, in a room she could reach in ninety seconds.

Sir. Captain. Sir, it's me. It's Nyota. And you don't know it yet, but in about four hours you are going to walk through a door, and you are not coming back. And everything you do for the next forty years is going to be right. And it is going to cost you everything. And there is not going to be one single person there to see it. Sir, please. Please just say something else.

* * *

The intercom clicked off.

Nyota Uhura stood in the corridor with her hands on the wall and her eyes shut, and she was crying, and she did not have time for it, and she did it anyway, for four seconds, which was all she permitted.

Then she opened her eyes and walked to the junction and opened the panel.

* * *

The relay was fourth from the left, third rank, and it was hot. It was already beginning to fail; she could see the discoloration in the casing where the surge would find it in about six minutes, and she got both hands on it.

It did not come. She braced her foot against the frame and pulled, and it did not come, and she pulled again and felt something tear in her shoulder and kept pulling.

And behind her, four hundred years away, on a plain of dead stone, a Vulcan was watching a countdown, and a Scotsman was holding a warp core inside a tolerance of nine percent with his hands actually on the housing, and a starship captain was standing perfectly still with his arms at his sides, waiting to find out how he was going to die.

The relay came out. She went backward onto the deck with it in both hands, and it was so hot it took the skin off her palms, and she did not let go, because if she dropped it somebody might put it back.

She lay on her back on the deck of the Enterprise and breathed.

* * *

Above her, one deck up, the helm console did not overload. Nobody was thrown across the bridge. Nobody's hand went out to a rack of hyposprays that had not been secured. A man in blue did not go down on his knees with a cordrazine ampule in his fist.

Nothing happened at all.

She heard the intercom whistle, distantly, and a voice said something about a fluctuation, and another voice, dry and Southern and irritable, said something in reply. And somebody on the bridge laughed.

And Nyota Uhura lay on the deck of a ship that no longer existed, with a burned-out relay clutched to her chest and both hands ruined, and listened, for four seconds, to the sound of a universe with James Kirk in it.

Then she got up and ran.

Chapter Forty-Five

The layer began to seal behind her.

It did not chase her. That was almost worse. It simply stopped being there, deck by deck, section by section, closing up the way water closes, and she ran forward through a corridor that was becoming true and was pursued by a corridor that was becoming real.

Behind her, the ship went from a place to a fact.

She ran. She ran with a burned relay in one hand and the other streaming blood, and her shoulder screaming, and she went up two decks and forward eleven sections, and she did not look back, because Spock had told her not to and because she had understood exactly why.

And because somewhere behind her, in a room she could have reached in ninety seconds, a man was sitting in a chair and being alive.

The transporter room door was open. The pad was lit. And it was lit because Montgomery Scott, four hundred years and one universe away, was holding a circuit open through the field of an object older than the Earth, at nine percent tolerance, and had been holding it for nine minutes and forty seconds, and had begun about a minute ago to bleed from the nose.

She got onto the pad. The world went white.

* * *

And the last thing Nyota Uhura heard, in the two-tenths of a second before the transporter took her, coming down the corridor she had just run up, from a very long way away, unmistakable, amused, entirely certain, was a man's voice saying:

"Bones, if you tell me one more time that I don't sleep enough, I am going to have Spock sedate you."

She came apart into light.

And that was the last of it that she would ever have.

Spock had told her, in an observation lounge with the door locked, that he did not know what the return would cost, and that he suspected it would cost something, and that he would not lie to her about the shape of it because he did not know the shape of it. He had been right on all three counts. The layer she had been standing in was not a place and had never been a place. It was a record, a coherent state held under a louder one, and the instant the relay came out of that junction the state resolved and the record closed, and everything that had happened inside it had nowhere left to be. A woman had run down a corridor on deck seven. There was no corridor. There was no hour. There was no woman in it. The forty-one minutes she had lived in there did not become a lie; they became something worse, which is nothing at all, and they took with them, gently and completely, every memory she had of living them.

She did not forget Kirk. She had stood in the Guardian's field when the world turned, and that was hers and would stay hers, all of it, the two years and the empty channel and the wooden bird and six thousand entries written in a hand that got worse toward the end of every session. She kept the loss. She kept the search. She kept the man.

She simply never knew that she was the one who had gone in and got him back.

* * *

And behind her, on the deck of the Enterprise, in a corridor on deck seven, a burned relay lay on the floor where nobody had dropped it.

And the universe closed over it.

And there was not so much as a ripple.

Chapter Forty-Six

There was no arrival. That was the mercy in it, if there was one. She did not come back to the plain, because she had never left it.

Nyota Uhura stood on the plain of a dead world in the daylight with a tricorder in her hand and no idea in the world that four hundred years and one closed layer away she had just pulled a relay out of a junction with her bare hands and saved the life of the man standing eleven meters in front of her. Her palms were unmarked. Her uniform was clean. She had never been anywhere.

And there were seven of them on the plain in the daylight, in front of a ring of stone, and it was not a stolen ship's landing party and it was not a mutiny. It was a survey. Tricorders. A routine. Scott was reading the base of the ring aloud in a bored voice. McCoy was complaining about the heat. Galloway stood at the perimeter, alive, watching a horizon that had not changed in ten thousand years, and a little way off stood Ensign Brandt, the other man who had come off that plain remembering, watching the back of the captain's head with the same still face as Galloway, and keeping, like Galloway, the same silence.

And Christopher Pike was not among them. In this history he had never been the captain of this ship, and he was a long way off, being restored, gently and without his knowledge, to the whole of his own life.

And a man in a gold command tunic stood in front of the Guardian with his hands on his hips and his head tilted, the way a man stands when he has been shown something he intends to enjoy being puzzled by.

"MANY JOURNEYS TO YOUR PAST ARE POSSIBLE," said the Guardian of Forever. "LET ME BE YOUR GATEWAY."

"A time portal," said James Kirk.

He was thirty-four years old. He had brown hair and unmarked hands. He was not tired at all. He looked at the ring with open, undisguised delight, and he had never in his life heard the name Edith Keeler, and he never would.

"More precisely, Captain," said Spock, and his voice was steady, and only Uhura, eleven meters away, heard the half-second it cost him to make it so. "A mechanism through which any period of history may be observed. And, it would appear, entered."

McCoy folded his arms. "Then let's make very sure nobody does."

Kirk almost smiled. "For once, Doctor, we agree." He raised his communicator. "We'll leave this one for a full science team. Uhura, mark it with a buoy and have them beam us up. I want a report to Starfleet before we break orbit."

And Nyota Uhura, who remembered every hour of the two years and not one second of the forty-one minutes that had ended them, heard a voice she had spent those two years trying to keep and had lost and was now, without knowing why, hearing again

"Aye, sir," she said.

Her voice did not shake. She could not have said why it wanted to.

* * *

And James Kirk lived.

That is the whole of it, and it needs to be said plainly, because everything the five of them had spent comes down to this one flat fact: he lived, and he did not know, and he never would.

He did not know that he had knelt in a road in 1930 with a woman in his arms. He did not know that he had peeled two thousand pounds of potatoes, or carried a coffin that weighed nothing, or burned a letter at four in the morning, or read four hundred names a week for four years because somebody should. He did not know he had held a woman back from the whole purpose of her life for forty years and been loved for it. He did not know there had ever been a woman named Edith Keeler, or a boy named Sam, who was born in a thunderstorm and buried at seventeen and left no one behind him.

None of it was in him. It had gone where the layer went.

He stood on the plain in the sunlight and grinned at a rock that was older than the Earth, and thought about the next thing, and was, by every measure any instrument could take, a happy man.

And behind him, four officers and two men of security looked at the back of his head, and remembered everything, and said nothing at all. Five of them remembered one thing more. They remembered a woman walking into an aperture that should not have been open, and they remembered what it had taken out of her on the way back, and they remembered that she was standing eleven meters away at this moment with a tricorder in her hand, marking a buoy, and did not know. That was the last thing any of them ever agreed about, and they never had to say it out loud. She had earned the right to be told, and there was no version of telling her that was not simply cruelty wearing the face of a gift.

* * *

The transporter room took them, and set them down, and it smelled the way it had always smelled, of ozone and floor polish. Kirk stepped off the pad already talking, something about the survey log, something about a course for Sulu, easy and unhurried, and went out toward the bridge without looking back.

The rest of the landing party moved off the pads so the remaining security team could be materialized; it was not usual to move seven people in a single transport. And as Lieutenant Galloway, the last of the team, took shape on the pad, McCoy turned to watch the door close behind the captain.

Then he turned to Spock.

"Where do we go from here?"

Spock did not answer at once.

"Nowhere, Doctor," he said. "He should never know."

And that was the whole of the arrangement, and they kept it, all six of them, for the rest of their lives.

Chapter Forty-Seven

They never explained it to him. They could not. There was nothing to explain. In the history that was now the only history, the Enterprise had charted a temporal disturbance, made planetfall, encountered an artifact of immense age which declined to be studied, recommended a science team, and moved on.

That was the log. Spock wrote it. It was accurate in every particular, and it was the greatest lie of his life, and he filed it at 0400 and then sat looking at the terminal for a long time.

Kirk read it and signed it and did not question a word, because his science officer had written it.

* * *

And the six of them remembered everything.

That was the thing the Guardian had not warned them about and would not discuss afterward, and Spock spent nineteen years constructing a theory to explain it and never published one word. They had stood in the field. They were causally insulated. They were the only witnesses in the universe to a thing that had not happened.

So Leonard McCoy went back to his sickbay and knew. And Montgomery Scott went back to his engines and knew. And Nyota Uhura went back to a communications station eleven meters from a man's chair and sat at it for eight hours a day for the next four years and knew.

And Spock stood at the science station and watched James Kirk command a starship, badly shaven, talking constantly, touching the arm of the chair with two fingers of his left hand when he was thinking. And knew.

And so did a sixth. Ensign Brandt, who had stood on that plain and come off it carrying the same impossible thing, and who took the same chair every second Thursday in Mister Scott's quarters, beside Galloway,

with a full glass in front of him that he never touched, an enlisted man of twenty-two in a room of legends, who had earned his place there the only way any of them had, which was by having been there. He never spoke of it outside that room. He did not need to. He was one of the six.

And not one of them ever said one word about it. Not to him. Not to each other. Not to anybody, for the rest of their lives.

* * *

Except once.

It was 2268, three months out, and Kirk was in the officers' lounge at 0200 with a chessboard and no opponent, working through a problem he had set himself and losing to it.

Uhura came in for tea because she could not sleep.

"Lieutenant," he said, without looking up. "Come and tell me why I'm an idiot."

She came and looked at the board. "You've abandoned the bishop, sir."

"I have not abandoned the bishop. I have made a strategic reallocation of the bishop."

"You've abandoned the bishop."

"Sit down," said Kirk.

She sat down. They played, and he talked the entire time, about a diplomat on Rigel and a supply officer he was going to murder and a book he was reading and did not want anybody to know he was reading. And she listened to his voice.

She beat him in nineteen moves.

He sat back and looked at the board. "Where did you learn that?"

"From you, sir," she said.

"I've never played you before."

Nyota Uhura picked up her tea. "No, sir," she said. "I don't suppose you have."

Chapter Forty-Eight

Leonard McCoy found the file twenty-six years later, during a refit, and it should not have existed.

He was an admiral by then, which he hated, and he had a bad back, which he also hated, and he had come down to a storage bay on the orbital dock to sign off on the disposition of a decommissioned data core, because a clerk had flagged an encrypted partition nobody had a key for, and regulations said a flag officer had to look at a thing like that before it was wiped.

He almost signed the form without looking. He was old and it was late and the partition was labeled with a string of characters that was not a name.

Then he looked at the string of characters, and stopped.

Because he knew it. He had made it. He had made it at a desk in a sickbay, in a fit of something he had never found a word for, out of the date of a shore leave and the last four digits of a serial number that belonged to a man who, at the time, did not exist.

He sat down on a crate. Then he entered the key, which he had never written down and had never forgotten, and the partition opened, and there it was, in his own hand, forty years old and untouched.

PATIENT: KIRK, JAMES T.

He read it for two hours.

Blood type: AB-negative. Rare. Two donors on the ship and I am one of them. Allergy: retinax V. Old fracture, right clavicle, Academy, unset for two days because he did not report it. Scar tissue, left flank, Tarsus IV. He was thirteen. Sleeps four hours, claims five. Blood pressure runs high, and he lies to me about the coffee.

Every line of it was true. Every line of it had been true for the twenty-eight years he had actually known the man, in the world that actually happened, the world in which James Kirk had commanded a starship, and been his friend, and driven him out of his mind, and was, at

that moment, three decks up, an admiral like himself, alive, complaining loudly to somebody about the refit.

And McCoy had written it before any of that. He had written it in a sickbay that never happened, for a man who did not exist, in a fit of grief that only he, of all the living, remembered, because he had needed, that day, to make one record in the universe that said: this man was real.

He had encrypted it under a name that was not a name, and buried it in a dead sector, and then the universe had turned over. The sickbay had never happened. The grief had never happened. The file should have gone with all of it.

It had not. It had ridden through, the way the memory had ridden through, because he had been standing in the Guardian's field when the world changed, and some small stubborn part of what he made that day had been fastened to what was, and had come across with him.

There was exactly one physical object in the universe that remembered James Kirk had ever needed saving. And it was a medical file, written by a country doctor, for a patient who was perfectly healthy and three decks up, arguing about a turbolift.

Leonard McCoy sat alone in a storage bay on an orbital dock, an admiral of the Federation Starfleet, seventy-odd years old, and read his own handwriting about his oldest friend, and could not, for the life of him, explain to the clerk who came looking for him an hour after his shift should have ended why his hands would not stop shaking.

He did not wipe the partition. He signed the form that said he had. It was the second false document he ever filed in his life, and he filed it for the same reason he had filed the first, which he could no longer remember filing, and never would.

Then he encrypted the file again, under a different name that was not a name, and carried it forward.

And he never told anybody. Not Spock, who would have understood. Not Jim, who must never. Nobody, for the rest of his life.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The promotion came through fourteen months later. It came the way those things come, in a routine transmission, on an ordinary morning, and Christopher Pike read it in his quarters on Starbase 11 and sat with it for some time.

Fleet Captain.

And an inspection schedule attached, listing among other things a Class J training vessel on a cadet cruise out of Sol.

He put the padd down. He got up and went to the window and looked out at the docks, where a Constitution-class starship was taking on stores, and where a young man of thirty-five with a great deal of hair and a permanently unconvincing air of gravity was standing on a gantry arguing with a supply officer, gesturing with both hands, entirely happy.

Christopher Pike watched him a while, and did not know him, and had no reason to. In this history he had never commanded that man's ship, never sat at a table with five officers who could not explain themselves, never stood on a plain of dead stone and looked through a window at an old man in Brooklyn reaching out without looking for his wife's hand. None of that had happened to him. He had spent the last two years exactly as the record said he had, and the record was the truth, and the truth had a hole in it the size of a life and no edges anywhere that a man could catch his hand on.

He was a fleet captain with an inspection schedule and a good crew behind him and thirty more years in front of him, as far as he knew.

Four hundred and some light years away, in his quarters aboard the Enterprise, Spock read the same promotion notice in the routine traffic, and the inspection schedule attached to it, and the words Class J, and he sat down slowly on the edge of his bunk and did not move for a long time. There was no one he could tell. There was no order he could give, no request he could file, no argument he could make to any authority in the Federation that did not begin with a sentence that would have him relieved

and examined. He had known the date for two years. Now he knew the transmission number.

He did not open a channel. There was nothing on the other end of one that he was permitted to say.

* * *

Fourteen months later, on a Class J training vessel, a baffle plate failed.

Spock was on the bridge of the Enterprise when the report came through, and he read it standing up, and did not move for a very long time. And Nyota Uhura, at the communications station eleven meters away, watched him and said nothing. And James Kirk came out of the turbolift and saw his science officer's face and said, "Spock? What's happened?"

And Spock said:

"Nothing, Captain."

* * *

Three years later he committed mutiny.

He hijacked the Enterprise. He falsified a message from a flag officer. He faced a court martial and a capital charge, and he did it in order to take a burned man in a chair to a forbidden world so that he could live out the rest of his life whole, in an illusion, with a woman who loved him.

And every officer who reviewed the case, and every historian who wrote about it, and every cadet who studied it at the Academy for the next hundred years, called it an extraordinary act of personal loyalty.

It was loyalty. Spock never denied that, even to himself. He had served under Christopher Pike, and admired him past the reach of the word, and would have done a great deal for him on those grounds alone.

But underneath the loyalty was the other thing, the thing no one else could see. For a long time Spock had expected it to be restitution, and had been prepared to carry it as such. It was not. He had put no one in that

chair. Christopher Pike had walked into it himself, with his eyes open, for eleven cadets and a man he never met, exactly as he had always meant to. What Spock carried instead, and never once spoke of, was quieter and much harder to say: that he had been given the rarest thing a man is ever given, which was the chance to make two whole. He had reached back through a dead world and handed James Kirk his life. And he had reached forward, through a forbidden one, and handed Christopher Pike a body, and a sky, and a woman who loved him. Two captains. Both of them. He had done it without being forgiven, and had discovered, somewhere in the middle of the long work of it, that he had stopped needing to be. And there was exactly one man in the universe who knew the whole of it, and he never told anybody, and he carried it, not as a debt any longer, but as the one thing in a very long life that he knew, all the way to the bottom, had been right.

Epilogue

Veridian III, 2371

He had not thought about Idaho in years, and now he could not stop.

It was the smell of it, mostly. A house in the mountains in the morning in the fall: wood smoke, coffee, something frying. And outside, past the window, three horses standing in the mist doing absolutely nothing with tremendous dignity. And her voice, from the other room, saying something about the fence.

Antonia.

* * *

James Kirk stood in a kitchen in Idaho with a coffee cup in his hand and understood, with the perfect lucidity that arrives in dreams and in exactly one other place, that this was not real.

And he did not care. That was the whole of the trap, and he could see the shape of it, and he did not care. Because he had spent his entire life going forward, and had never once been allowed to stop. And here it was: a kitchen, a woman, three horses, and nothing to do.

He had come here from a starship. There had been a ribbon of light. And this was where he had gone.

This is where I went, he thought. Out of everything. Out of eighty years and a thousand worlds and four hundred and thirty people whose names I knew. This is what was in me. A house. And her.

He looked at his hands around the cup. They were not old. There were no scars across the knuckles. No burn the size of a coin near the base of the thumb, no finger set slightly wrong from a break that nobody ever set properly.

They were a captain's hands.

"Jim?" she called. "Are you coming?"

"In a minute."

* * *

And then he stopped.

Because something had happened. And he did not know what it was, and it had happened somewhere at the very back of his skull, in a place he could not reach and had never been able to reach and had never in his life known was there.

He turned around.

There was nobody in the doorway. There was nobody in the hall, or on the stairs, or in the yard beyond the window with the horses in it. The house was warm and the coffee was hot and there was no one there and there had never been anyone there.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen with his cup in his hand.

Somebody said my name.

But nobody had.

* * *

The Nexus is a kind and thorough place. It builds a paradise out of what it finds in a person, and it does not stint, and it does not lie about the material. When it reached into James Kirk for the thing he wanted more than anything, it found a great deal. It found a ship. It found a brother, and a nephew, and a green hill in Iowa. It found a woman named Antonia, and horses, and the smell of a fall morning, and it built them, faithfully, and they were enough, and he loved them, and he would have stayed until the stars burned out.

And it found, at the very bottom, in the place the man himself could not reach, a shape it could not build. Not a face. Not a name. There was no face, and there was no name, because there was no memory. There was only the print of one, the socket where a life had been fitted and then lifted

out clean, forty years wide.

There was a room in that house he never went into.

There was a place at the table the Nexus laid, and did not know why.

There was a woman-shaped expectation in every doorway, and a weight his right hand kept reaching for and not finding, and a feeling, once or twice a day, that somebody who ought to be standing beside him was not.

And he could not name it. And it did not hurt, exactly. It was not grief. It was the impression of grief with the grief lifted out of it, an ache with no wound under it, and he learned, over what passed for time in that place, to stop turning around when it came.

* * *

There was a kitchen in Idaho. There was Antonia. And she was real to him in every way a thing can be real to a man, and he loved her, and it was enough.

James Kirk stood in the doorway of the kitchen with his hand on the frame and looked back, once, at the empty hall.

Then he went out to find her, in the yard, by the fence, in the cold bright morning.

And he never knew.

THE END